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An Interview with Jinki

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Kyoungbok-gung, Seoul, Korea

Jinki: My name is Jinki and I am 21 years old. I tell people that I am a lesbian out of convenience, but I am searching for a word that better suits me. Four years ago I formed *Rateen*, an online community for sexual minority teens, and I am still running it.

Carlos Motta: Do you think the category, lesbian, is not enough to express your identity?

J: My current thoughts on this are whether one can really define one's liking women or being a woman? It's not that I am transgender. I can happily accept the fact that I am physically a woman, and that I really love women. But I don't feel that restricted by the general concept of woman. I am looking for a more appropriate word to define myself...

CM: What is the perspective of the organizations that you have founded?

J: Even in Seoul there is no decent place where sexual minority teens can get together, and it is almost impossible even to meet someone like you in the local areas. So there was practically no base that our culture or activism could stem from. The existing online communities mostly focus on meeting people and dating; after realizing my sexual orientation, I knew these groups couldn't solve my issues.

CM: So what is precisely the kind of work that you want to do with the organization that you are forming?

J: All I ever needed was someone telling me "Yeah, you're okay the way you are". But there was no place that could give me such consolation, so I formed *Rateen*. *Rateen* differs from the existing communities in two aspects: first, everything is organized and run solely by teenagers; whatever orientation, whether you're lesbian, gay, transgender or anything else, we all gather as one; and secondly, we provide shelter for sexual minority teens so that we can share our thoughts and develop our own culture.

CM: Is this only an online platform?

J: No, we meet off-line too. Once a month we do seminars on sexual orientation theories and social issues. And every August 15th [Independence Day of Korea] we hold "Ivan

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Playground." At this annual event we do a lot of things: queer film screenings, open counseling, lectures and recreational programs. People get to know each other and exchange information.

CM: How do you fund these projects?

J: We pay the basic expenses out of our pockets. We never receive participation fees for the seminar; they are held in public meeting rooms and are offered for free. As for the events, the budget is at least 600,000 won [about 600 USD], even supposing that the space rental is free; so it is a small amount, 1,000 or 2,000 won [1-2 USD] is asked for. We supplement that with occasional donations, and sometimes other sexual minority groups give partial financial support.

CM: Is there any help from the local government or the state government to fund the projects?

J: The government regards homosexuality as harmful to minors. There is no way we can get support from it.

CM: What is the motto for the kind of work that you are doing? Is there a precedent group in Korea that has done similar work before that you are following or are you inventing the project as you go along?

J: There was no other teen group that made attempts like ours, as long as I know. Watching the adult communities I thought: "Hey, they're getting together and having fun, why can't we do that?" But what I did is trivial. Every member made *Rateen* what it is now, piece by piece.

CM: Is there a heretical background to the way you are starting to think about sexual orientation and gender identity, is your work in a way influenced by gender theorists, *queer* theory or any other conceptual backgrounds?

J: To be frank, before I realized my identity, I was homophobic. So it was simply impossible to have a theoretical background or influence whatsoever beforehand. I am getting to know them along with my work.

CM: Do you think of *Rateen* as a political platform or do you think of it more as a community outreach program?

J: The latter. It hasn't been long since I have considered politics. I used to think that my identity or myself stood on its own, no matter what political context. But after facing several political issues, such as the anti-discrimination act and youth protection act, I began to think that that is not the case.

CM: What is your ambition with *Rateen*? Where do you want to take this project further as you grow as an organization, but also as you grow as a person?

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J: I never take myself as a leader or guider of *Rateen*. *Rateen*'s future course will depend on what the members want, as a collective. What I personally hope for is that there be a whole variety of sexual minority teen communities. *Rateen* can't be perfect for everyone; surely there ought to be those who need something different.

CM: Do you get a sense that it is a moment in Korean history, that it is able to tolerate such an initiative, and if that is the case, why? Why do you think that you are able to do this today, and that there is a community that is building around the desire to speak up and act on these issues?

J: I can't say for sure, but I think the Internet shifted things to a new level. I don't know how I would have gone through without it. We can meet anybody, anywhere; and some of them will be the ones who proudly express their sexual identities. Their self-confidence passes on to one, and then to another... The change of common perception is not evident, but it is taking place every minute. Compared with the early days of *Rateen*, I feel that this world, at least my part of the world is slightly a warmer place. Won't this change, step by step, spread on to other people?

CM: So in a way, you are saying that Korean society is changing, because your generation is already speaking about things that were not spoken about before. And you are changing your community as well.

J: Yes, at least I myself have changed, and I changed my community. And my community changed other communities...

CM: How do you personally relate to tradition? How do you relate to the idea of family values and to religious integrity and to other things that seem to be so foundational to being Korean?

J: I came out to my family. My mother, at least around me, doesn't make homophobic remarks when we are watching TV shows that treat sexual minorities; nor does she ask me to marry a man anymore. It is not that she completely understands, but she knows those words can hurt me.

CM: Is your story common to the people that are associated with *Rateen*? Are people speaking in their families, talking to their friends and coming out in their circles?

J: *Rateen*'s coming out rate is exceedingly high compared with other teen communities. We share ways to come out to your friends and family without devastating them, but at the same time being very clear and precise about you. Many young people think that coming out will injure others, that it will ruin their entire lives. But they change their thoughts after visiting *Rateen*. Many of them thank us. They tell us that they learned how to be proud of themselves before their parents, and that they now feel respected by them. Families and friends of sexual minorities come to *Rateen* and get information too.

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CM: What is the situation in terms of violence and discrimination amongst teens, in families but also in schools? Is there bullying in schools? Are the members of your communities complaining about being harassed by other students?

J: Still, in many places including homes and schools, violence against sexual minorities are taken as natural. There are truly many young people lingering around Shinchon Park [a park in Seoul where lesbians, especially minors, gather], who are kicked out of their homes after coming out. Having no specific way to earn a living, they are easily led to prostitution. In schools, there is a thing called "Ivan Censorship:" teachers hand out notes and demand students to point out who is lesbian; they judge students as lesbian by their looks—how they dress or how they do their hair—and give detentions for being one; they out students to their parents... These incidents are not rare, really. "F**king homo" is one of the most commonly used names among high school boys. Kids get physically or sexually harassed for being sexual minorities. Of all those news coverage on young students committing suicide due to "poor school grades," a huge percentage of them are actually because of sexual identity problems.

CM: How do the authorities react for example to the issue of suicide? One thing is to deny the existence of sexual orientation, but the other one is ignore that it is as a social problem. Is this a conversation that takes place at an institutional or official level?

J: Most parents don't want to reveal their child's sexual orientation. Six years ago, a boy called Yukudang killed himself; in his suicide note he wrote that he now wanted to come out proudly as gay. The community, which he belonged to holds annual memorials dedicated to, his death. But his parents strongly opposed releasing his real name; so he is still called by his web nickname, Yukudang.

CM: How do you feel as a young person that is trying to be an activist in these circumstances that seem to be so closed and so abrasive to any initiative? Do you think that glass can be broken?

J: It would be impossible to abolish those glass walls at once. Even after the Stonewall riots, though they were a huge incident, no drastic turnover was made. It's just the small changes we feel that give us strength and hope.

CM: How do you envision yourself in the future, maybe 15 years from now? Do you think that you are going to be an activist? I mean you are already an activist, of course...

J: I don't usually refer to myself as an activist. What I do may contribute to the society, but I do it primarily because I want to, and I like to. I just love meeting these people, talking to them... It feels like my being and my life are reduced to simple social acts when I call myself an activist.

CM: I'm interested to come back to the beginning of the interview, just to speak about categories. Amongst the young people that are part of your group, are these categories

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shifting? Are people less interested in calling themselves either gay or lesbian, but blurring these distinctions?

J: The majority of sexual minority teen communities still sort gays and lesbians, like making separate boards. But when somebody questions their identity in *Rateen*, most of us say: "You are just who you are, you don't have to identify yourself." Many of us think that words fail us.

CM: I find this very interesting because traditionally in countries where there is a strong LGBT movement, it is these categories that people use politically as anchors to advance social change. But it seems to me, in Korea, maybe there is a more flexible way, because there isn't a movement that is so ingrained. Does that make sense to you?

J: Well, I think it's more because we are young. Many adult communities in Korea are still very hostile towards transgender, bisexuals or the BDSM community. For instance, some lesbian groups exclude M to F transsexuals. It is quite remarkable that *Rateen* alone keeps this sort of atmosphere.

CM: Do you feel comfortable speaking about sex and different ways of having sex? Can you speak about these things even within your community?

J: There are no authorized places where young people can receive sex education, so *Rateen* really has to speak up. A quite common case among young sexual minorities is that they don't know the proper way to have sex with the ones they love. They can't even imagine how, because all the information they get are based on heterosexual relationships. *Rateen* tries to give teens these tips and inform young people about safe sex.

CM: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about? Something that I haven't asked you about or that you haven't mentioned yet, something that you think is important to come across.

J: I once came out to a close friend of mine, who responded: "Okay, but isn't that just your relationship problem? I don't understand why that takes up such a big part of your life." This made me think for a moment; but whether I am in a relationship or not, whether I am in love with someone or not, my sexual orientation does not change, and just because of that I become excluded from the society. So I told my friend: "Yes it is, in fact, a relationship problem. But not just the personal one that I have with somebody I am in love with, but also my relationship with the world; how I breath along with the world, how I hold hands with it, how I embrace it." It is still difficult for sexual minorities to rent a house, get a job and to wholly enter society. We can't even be the legal guardians when our partners go into surgery. How can this be "just a relationship problem?" It is how I live, how I relate with the whole world.