

Korean homosexuals struggle with barriers

By Park Eun-myo
Staff reporter

After years of wavering, Kim Byeong-suk, a 34-year-old part-time graphic designer, decided to come out of the closet and let his close friends know that he is gay.

Although 10 years have passed since, he still has to hide it at work out of fear that disclosure of his homosexuality might result in unfair treatment from his superiors and colleagues.

Kim is one of many gay people struggling to overcome a myriad of legal handicaps and social discrimination in Korea where homosexuality remains an anomaly.

Although there are no official statistics on the number of gay people in Korea, activists estimate it to be somewhere between four and 12 percent of the country's population of 47 million.

"The most serious problem is the lack of social and legal acknowledgement," said Kim whose full-time job is director of "Between Friends," a gay rights group based in Seoul.

He said it was especially hard for him to give up his training to become a pastor, as he could not find a way to reconcile his religion and sexual orientation.

Lee Joo-won, a 55-year-old homemaker and mother of two, says public perception of homosexuality is still negative. "Homosexuality goes against social norms, and Christian principles," she said. "It is also the source of such problems as AIDS."

Her thoughts, however, reflect a common misconception in Korea. As a matter of fact, research shows that the spread of AIDS in the heterosexual population is just as prevalent as among homosexuals.

The issue of homosexuality became a big social controversy two years ago, when actor Hong Suk-chun publicly declared he is gay. He was pressured to leave a children's television show in which he made daily appearance. Later, Hong said when he came out, his parents called and said the whole family



Kim Byeong-suk

should commit mass suicide.

In Korea, being single for too long without apparent reason often results in social discrimination. Family pressure, thus, is another hurdle gay people have to overcome.

In an effort to satisfy family members' demand for marriage, Kim and his partner, a 33-year-old doctor, devised an unusual "triangle" relationship.

According to the plan, Kim's partner will marry one of his female colleagues, who is a heterosexual woman. The two will live together, but will not share the same bed. Kim will live close by and maintain his relationship with his partner.

This marriage of convenience will provide the necessary "married" status in building a successful medical career.

On her part, the female doctor, who seeks freedom from the bondage of marriage, can continue to enjoy her life as a single and devote herself fully to her career.

"This is the next best thing," Kim said. "And it is probably the only way the three of us will survive."

To fight social, legal discrimination, gay people have been pulling themselves together since early 1990s.

Between Friends and a lesbian support group Together, both established in the early 1990s, are working on a range of projects for the

homosexual community, including counseling, operation of online chat-rooms, magazine publications and education about safe sex.

In 1998, they received the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission Award for their achievements.

Now Between Friends and Together are the core members of a six-group coalition, the Lesbian and Gay Alliance Against Discrimination (LGAAD), which was founded in July this year. LGAAD strives for public awareness and better medical care for those who suffer from AIDS.

Gay activism is blossoming on university campuses as well.

"Rainbow Fish," for instance, is a three-year-old student-run club for homosexuals at Chung-Ang University. Named after an exotic fish that inhabits waters off the coasts of Australia and Papua New Guinea, the club organizes special events, such as "Queer Movie Night," to raise awareness and support for gays.

"Younger people are much more aware of their situation," Kim of Between Friends said. "They look for ways to incorporate their homosexuality into their lives."

Online resources play a critical role for young homosexual women and men as they come to terms with their sexual identity, according to advocates. Through information on Web sites, they learn there is nothing wrong with them. More importantly, they also learn that they are not alone.

The flourishing of online resources for homosexuals sometimes result in standoffs with the authorities.

Last year, the owner of the first Korean gay Web site exzone.com, known by his apt pseudonym Exzone, was ordered by the Information and Communications Ethics Committee and the Commission for Youth Protection to post a warning stating that the Web site contained material "harmful" to young people.

Exzone.com was promptly blocked from cyber cafes, schools

and libraries through an Internet filtering software called "Guardian Angel."

Gay rights advocates conducted a 60-day hunger strike in December last year and filed a lawsuit against the government in January, claiming that censorship was in violation of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression.

Foreign media, including CNN and the BBC reported the case, and they drew support from international gay rights groups.

In August, a court ruled in favor of the government. Exzone, rather than giving in and posting the warning, shut down the site to avoid being slapped with fines or a jail term.

Government officials defended their actions were based on the 1999 Youth Protection Law that defines "perverted acts" related to homosexuality, not homosexuality itself, as damaging to young people.

"The site was declared harmful to young people because it was obscene," said Kim Mee-yeon, a senior officer at the youth protection commission. "The key word here is lewdness, not homosexuality."

Nonetheless, the Youth Protection Law clearly defines homosexuality as perversion, as it does incest, sadomasochism and bestiality. The legal code is contradictory since the National Human Rights Law, legislated in 2001, bans discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, advocates claim.

"Sometimes it all feels like an exercise in futility," said Kim of Between Friends, adding that he knows this was just one of many more cases to come.

He and gay rights advocates assume it will take another generation before true equality is achieved.

Yet Kim continues to keep the faith and hopes to grow old with his partner. The difference between him and others is that he has to fight what he calls "great enemies" — bigotry, hate and violence — to make his simple wish come true.

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