

STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING HETEROSEXISM IN KOREA

Inaugural Lecture of the Korean Sexual Minority Rights Center.

Seoul, Korea

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draft August 2002

Activists in the Republic of Korea are at the stage where long-range planning needs to be made for most effectively changing the attitudes of government and society. You need to be asking yourselves, what can activists do that will most improve the lives of Korean gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons? I would like to make some specific suggestions that I think would be most valuable, based on my prior research and on the theoretical positions that I explain in the Introduction and the Cross-Cultural chapter that I wrote in my book **OVERCOMING HETEROSEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA: STRATEGIES THAT WORK** (edited by James Sears and Walter Williams, Columbia University Press, 1997), and in my website **OVERCOMING HETEROSEXISM: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES** which you can find at the title page of the **INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN REVIEW**
<http://www.usc.edu/gayreview>

In the new book that Yolanda Retter and I are publishing with Greenwood Press, **GAY AND LESBIAN RIGHTS IN THE UNITED**

STATES, we explore both the successes and failures of this activist movement in the United States since 1950. Understanding this history can be valuable for activists in other nations, who want to benefit from the lessons learned in the United States, and also to avoid making the same mistakes which American activists made.

SETTING GOALS

An activist movement for the rights of sexual minorities was first begun in Germany in the 1890s, but after considerable progress this movement was destroyed by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. After World War II the modern gay and lesbian movement emerged in the United States, in Los Angeles and San Francisco, in the early 1950s. The two leading activist organizations, the Mattachine Society and ONE Institute, both held sharp debates in the 1950s and 1960s about their future goals. All of the activists wanted to reduce prejudice against people who were involved in same-sex relationships, but they differed over the most effective strategies to accomplish this goal. The first faction said that gay people are a separate and distinct kind of person, and the best approach is to build a strong gay and lesbian community to stand up for the rights of this sexual minority. The second faction said that the focus should be on sexual freedom for everyone, and that ANY person should be respected in being able to choose

their mate of ANY sex without discrimination. They opposed the development of a separate gay community, and favored integrating the acceptance of same-sex behaviors into the mainstream of society.

This debate was won by the first group, and from that point onward most gay and lesbian activists committed itself to building a strong gay and lesbian minority. They appealed for equal rights on the same basis as the African-American civil rights movement, which was becoming so influential in the United States at that time. Both movements changed history, and their successes resulted in much new acceptance for gays and lesbians and for black people. But in the process of making a claim for minority rights, they still remained a minority.

This movement for minority rights provoked a vicious counterattack from the majority who saw these civil rights movements as a threat. Looking back on it, I think the worst effect of the gay rights movement was the impact in forcing many people to declare “I am not gay,” and setting themselves as part of the heterosexual majority. Otherwise, many such persons might have been open to a more accepting attitude that everyone deserves the right to choose their own mate according to their own desires. By forcing everyone to make a choice: “Am I homosexual/gay or am I heterosexual/straight?” the gay movement alienated many potentially

bisexual people and many others who might have been supportive. Many reacted against a minority that seemed to be claiming “special rights” for their particular minority group, rather than attempting to overturn sexual repression for everyone.

Activists in Korea are now at the stage that the United States was in during the 1950s. The decisions you make now will affect many future generations. If you decide to follow the minority civil rights approach of the United States gay movement, you will certainly provoke much reaction from government officials and from the general public. However, if you quietly approach the government and offer them a way to avoid another struggle in the public venue of human rights, it might be more effective in accomplishing the ultimate goal.

In other words, instead of trying to “get rights for gay people,” it might be more effective to work to destigmatize childlessness and non-reproductive erotic behaviors for everyone. For example, if someone engages in oral-genital contact with another person, it is less important who the sex of that other person is, than the need to get the police to stop arresting ANYONE for oral-genital contact. The movement for change is thus conceptualized as the right of all people to have the freedom to love

the person of their choice, without opposition from the government or employers or from society in general.

In Austria during the 1980s, gay activists repeatedly tried to organize Gay Rights marches, but each time they were able to attract only a small number of marchers. Most Austrians did not wish to label themselves as “gay” “lesbian” or even as a “sexual minority.” However, when the activists retitled their march as a “March Against Sexual Repression,” they were able to attract a wide variety of people who were ready to declare themselves in favor of sexual freedom, even if they did not wish to attach a minority label to themselves. They could say that they were marching in commitment to their ideals of freedom for everyone, or to assist gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered friends who had suffered from discrimination. The activists were successful only after they had expanded the range of participants beyond those who had a personal identity as a sexual minority.

An important distinction is to encourage all people to feel comfortable in interacting erotically with a friend of the same sex, rather than restricting the campaign to a minority that identifies as “homosexual,” “gay, lesbian, transgendered,” or even “bisexual.” It is fine that some people accept those identities, but they should not engage in the kind of anti-bisexual prejudice often seen among gay-identified persons in the United States. What is

important is to open up sexual freedom for everyone, no matter what their identity.

WEB SITES AND TELEPHONE HOTLINES

What are the practical implications of this approach? The wording you use to describe your institutions is crucial. For example, both web sites and telephone hotlines are extremely important for people who are searching for understanding their same-sex desires. High priority should be given to establishing and funding both of these resources. Web sites should be expanded to include translations of major writings on the naturalness of same-sex feelings and behaviors. Your web sites should also translate and link to major online resources like the INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN REVIEW <http://www.usc.edu/gayreview> For those persons who do not have access to the internet, translate and print out short summaries of the major reasons for self-acceptance. People have to accept that there is nothing wrong with themselves before they will be able to be open and public in their life.

But rather than a “Gay Hotline,” it would be more influential to have a “Sexuality Hotline” for all people. This does not require someone to attach a “gay” or “homosexual” label to themselves, before making a phone call.

Just be sure that all telephone counselors are trained to be accepting of homosexual inclinations, and can refer callers to counselors who are openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The hotline should have therapists to help those with same-sex attractions to be able to accept themselves without repression. It should have lawyers who can help homosexuals or bisexuals who are being threatened with blackmail. There should be contacts for jobs and housing, as well as people looking for roommates or partners/friends through social group meetings. Lastly, there should be available some accepting parents and relatives of gay people, and referral to a Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter in major cities.

ORGANIZE COMING OUT DISCUSSION GROUPS

Encourage people to accept that there is nothing wrong with their same-sex attractions, and that love in all its forms is a good and positive human emotion. I have found it to be effective to expose people to knowledge about other cultures which have had an accepting attitude toward sexual freedom. For example, see my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH: SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE*.

When they are ready, and are able, encourage people to quietly come out to their families, or at least to express pro-sexual liberation ideas to their

relatives, friends and co-workers. For suggestions on ways to effectively come out, see an essay I wrote at <http://www.jtsears.com/intout.htm> on successfully coming out to relatives and friends.

Research has shown that this one-to-one dialogue, done repeatedly in calm discussions, is the single most effective strategy for long-range change of social attitudes. The person does not have to place a “gay” or “homosexual” label on themselves, but they should be able to be open about their same-sex attractions, feelings, and relationships to their families, friends, and co-workers. It is more important for people to quietly (but repeatedly) express their feelings of sexual liberation to their relatives, friends and co-workers, than any other single activity.

ORGANIZE “PARENTS AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS” (PFLAG) CHAPTERS IN MAJOR CITIES

Family pressure is the leading source of oppression for those with same-sex attractions. PFLAG deals directly with trying to change the attitudes of parents, other relatives, and friends, by having parents who are already accepting of their same-sex children to speak to them. It might be better to rename this organization something other than “Lesbians and Gays” to be

more inclusive of bisexuals and others who do not wish to attach a label to themselves. For example: People for Erotic Liberation (PEL).

ACTIVISTS FOCUS ON LOBBYING THE MASS MEDIA

Social attitudes are greatly shaped by the mass media, especially movies, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and popular books. Whenever there is a negative article in a newspaper or on a TV broadcast, call the editor or director and set up an appointment to discuss why this representation is offensive and inaccurate. Take two or three activists to meet with the editor or director, and discuss the issue calmly. Leave them something to read. One-time meetings often do not have much impact, so try to schedule repeat meetings to slowly move them along. Gently state why they are not doing their job if they do not accurately report the situation on sexual variance. Try to connect with the government officials who are responsible for setting standards on media, and convince them of the need to allow more open reporting on sexual minorities. Volunteer to work with them, to serve as consultants, and to help them do their job more effectively. See the chapters on media activism in **OVERCOMING HETEROSEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA: STRATEGIES THAT WORK.**

Because of the vast importance of the mass media, activists should encourage young people to go into careers in journalism, cinema, television, web design, mass market fiction writing, and other forms of communication which will reach large numbers of people.

RELIGION

Because Christian religions have traditionally seen sex as sinful, it is difficult to overcome 2,000 year old religious dogmas with logical reasoning. On the other hand, Buddhism has a much more flexible and tolerant attitude toward same-sex love. Despite anti-homosexual cultural attitudes, Buddhism as a religion offers one of the best opportunities for acceptance of same-sex relationships. The Buddhist group that I belong to, the Soka Gakkai in the United States, is now performing same-sex wedding ceremonies, and openly gay and lesbian leaders are respected and accepted. There is an active lesbian and gay Buddhist group in Los Angeles and other cities. Because Korea has a strong Buddhist tradition, I think nothing could be more conducive to the rights of sexual minorities than to encourage a revival of traditional Korean Buddhism. Given the recent importation of Christianity into Korea, within the last century, it would not be surprising to see more Korean young people turning to Korea's native religious heritage.

This revitalization of Buddhism is occurring in China, as well as growth in the Americas.

However, for those Korean people who choose to follow Christianity, progress is even possible in this religion. In the United States many conservative Christian sects have demonized homosexuality as a major sin, but other sects are questioning this condemnation. The Catholic Church and some moderate Protestant groups like the Presbyterians have been torn apart on this issue. But other Christian groups, like the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Quakers, and the Unitarians have made major advances in respectful treatment of sexual minorities. They are rejecting the sexual insecurities as represented in the writings of Paul, and are focusing on the message of love and acceptance in the teachings of Jesus. A close reading of the Bible indicates that Jesus himself was not only non-homophobic, and never once made any statement condemning homosexuality, but seems to have actually been favorable toward same-sex relationships.

Different arguments will have to be made to different people, depending upon their own value systems and attitudes. One method of challenging homophobia does not work equally well for everyone, but several strategies need to be employed. In general, the best approach is to

show people how homophobic prejudice conflicts with their general values (what psychologists call cognitive dissonance). If they are a devout Christian, then quoting the accepting words of Jesus may be effective. If they are a devout Buddhist, quoting the sutras will have an impact. If they are devout fans of Madonna, then pointing out that Madonna is pro-gay and lesbian will have an impact. Whatever the source of their admiration, whether a religious figure or a pop music diva, people tend to adjust their attitudes in accord with the values of that admired person.

This is why the mass media is so important in changing attitudes. I recommend that activists should make a list of the most popular persons in Korea today (movie stars, rock singers, journalistic writers, etc.). Then try to meet them on a one-to-one basis and convince them to be accepting of sexual variance. Once they are accepting, then try to get them to speak out publicly (in interviews and essays in mass market media) in favor of tolerance and acceptance. They do not have to state anything about their own sexuality, only to let it be widely known to the public that they are PRO-gay. When enough widely-admired people speak out in favor of sexual freedom in general, or sexual minorities in particular, then this will influence the attitudes of many people in the general population.

In order to be effective, there has to be a dual strategy of the expression of tolerant attitudes in the mass media, combined with large numbers of sexual non-conformist individuals coming out to their families, friends and co-workers. Again, what is most important that people verbalize and express their support for the idea of sexual freedom and the acceptance of same-sex relationships.

FINANCIAL ASPECTS TO FUND ACTIVISM

It is important to figure out dependable sources of income to fund this activism. All too often, activists themselves have had to pay for the expenses related to their activism. This is not good, because activists need to be supported financially. If activists have to pay for everything, it will only lead to burnout, as they suffer financially. Accordingly, it is very important to cultivate wealthy individuals who may not be activist themselves, but will agree to provide funds for activism. The earliest example of this kind of funding in the United States was Reid Erickson, a female-to-male transsexual who had made a fortune on oil wells. Reid Erickson came to ONE Institute in 1964, and sponsored many research projects that underlay the development of Gay Rights in America. Another example was in 1995 when I persuaded Hal Call (a longtime supporter of

ONE Institute, and the owner of a San Francisco gay erotic theater) to give \$50,000 to support research in Gay and Lesbian Studies. His money helped to pay to bring Wan Yan Hai from China, and Igor Kon from the Russian Academy of Sciences, for a year of research at ONE Institute's International Gay and Lesbian Archives.

It is also important to encourage members of activist groups to leave a bequest for the activist work in their wills. ONE Institute has been funded to a great extent by bequests in wills or trusts. For example, David Cameron was an attorney who was on the board of directors of the Institute for the Study of Human Resources (ISHR), ONE Institute's research foundation. He was not wealthy, but when he died he left his house to ISHR. When the house was sold, it left a profit of nearly \$200,000 for ISHR to use to fund legal research of benefit to gays and lesbians. I myself received a grant from this David Cameron bequest, and I used the money to assist gay and lesbian immigrants who had been persecuted in other nations and who were seeking political asylum in the United States. In every court case where I served as an expert witness, we were successful in gaining asylum for these activists.

Another strategy to raise money to finance activism is to establish a profit-making activity for the group. For example, in the Netherlands the Dutch gay activist group COC established a gay bar that became very

profitable. COC hired workers and managed the bar, and the profits were used to fund COC's activist work. In New York in the early 1970s, the Gay Activist Alliance rented space in an old Firehouse, and held dances where they charged admission and made a profit. When I was director of the Greater Cincinnati Gay Coalition in the late 1970s in Cincinnati, I rented a rollerskating rink and held gay rollerskating parties. At the time I was editor of Cincinnati's first gay newspaper, so I heavily publicized these rollerskating parties so much that they attracted large crowds of people. The admissions made a profit, which I then used to pay for the newspaper and finance gay activism in Cincinnati. While paying for activist expenses, these kinds of activities also create enjoyable social outlets for gay people, and thus help to improve life for people as well.

LIVE ON LESS

The other aspect of being able to exist in a life of activism is to cultivate a lifestyle of simplicity and frugality. You can accomplish more if you are not swept into the consumerist mentality that requires expensive material goods to feel good about yourself. This is currently the biggest failure of the American gay movement. It is true that "the best revenge is living well" but we need to redefine "living well" to be a lack of stress and

an abundance of happiness in one's life. From the ancient teachings of Buddha and Jesus, philosophers have told us that the key to joy is to reject materialist competition in favor of comfort and satisfaction. We should strive to make money, but then it is important to save and invest that money to help support us in the future. Financial independence is one of the greatest accomplishments of an individual's life, and it is more difficult to accomplish this goal if one's expenses are large. I am very grateful that when I was a student and a graduate student I had to learn to live on very little money. Because I was so devoted to paying for my schooling, I did not have funds to support the many addictions and wastefulness that assails young people today. This frugality later allowed me to save for retirement, so that I can look forward to an independent old age rather than a dependency. I look forward to enjoying my retirement years rather than worrying about money at that time. I will be able to accomplish this only because I have been frugal in my earlier years. If we can encourage young people to save and invest for their future, especially by avoiding the huge expenses of rearing children, we can help to create a financially comfortable community of sexual minorities that will be able to support itself well and support activist causes that make human life better.

AVOID FACTIONALISM

As activism becomes more active, factionalism always rears its ugly head. Activists are often headstrong non-conformists who are extreme individualists (and if they did not have such personalities they probably would never have challenged the status quo so effectively), and it is difficult to get them to agree. As new issues and opportunities arise, people will INEVITABLY differ. It is important not to be discouraged by differences of opinion, but to recognize that this is inevitable. Some people will want to focus on one kind of activities, while others prefer to work on other aspects. This happened in ONE Institute in the 1960s, when the organization split on the question of whether to emphasize the publication of ONE Magazine, or to emphasize the support of research and education. Rather than compromise, activists had a huge battle that involved a long and expensive court case, which crucially weakened ONE and led to the decline of both factions. They put so much energy into fighting against the other faction that they had few resources left for doing the work that was needed both in publishing the magazine and in doing the important educational work of ONE.

Please try to avoid this mistake. The nature of voluntary organizations is that most people leave in disgust when activists spend most

of their energy attacking each other. All the time and energy that goes into infighting, with each faction trying to defeat the other faction, is much better spent in doing both alternatives. If everyone cannot agree on one course of action, then it is better to allow those who favor alternative A to focus on that aspect of the struggle, while those others who favor alternative B to devote their energies to that part. More than one technique is required to overcome heterosexism, and if activists can freely choose which alternatives they can pursue without condemnation by others, then everyone will get more accomplished. What is important is that everyone feel supported. If their particular approach is not working, then by one-to-one dialogue other courses of action can be pursued.

DON'T GIVE UP

In the long run, great progress is happening in the area of sexual freedom in the most progressive parts of the world. As I look at the advances that have been made in the United States since 1950, at the even more liberated stance of the European Union within the last two decades, to the amazingly rapid progress for gay people in China within the last three years, I know that we will succeed. There are important and long-range economic reasons why this is occurring in urban capitalist economies around

the world, and I am confident that ultimately the freedom to love will become recognized as a basic and important human right. The basic principle is that individuals should be able to conduct their own private consensual sexual behavior without the intrusion of government, and without interference from others. In future centuries, human beings will look back on the struggle for sexual rights as an integral part of that larger movement for human freedom as expressed in the American Declaration of Independence concerning the inherent right of individuals to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” What is more central to “the pursuit of happiness” than the freedom to love? That is why, ultimately, our struggle is not just a movement for the rights of sexual minorities, but for the rights of all people to have a free, open and fulfilled life in all respects.