
Korea's Migrant Workers Find a Voice on Air

An Interview by Tessa Morris Suzuki, Julia Yonetani & Hyun Mooam with Mahbub and Minod Moktan from MWTV

In 2005, the Korean Community TV Channel RTV launched a new initiative: Migrant Worker's Television (MWTV). Unlike some more "mainstream" versions of multicultural broadcasting, this is television made both for and by members of the migrant worker community itself. Indeed, as we discovered, its presenters include undocumented migrants, who run the gauntlet of Korea's Immigration Bureau even as they make and broadcast their programs. MWTV broadcasts weekly news programs in nine languages (Bengali, Burmese, Chinese, English, Indonesian, Mongolian, Nepali, Russian and Tagalog), focusing on issues of importance to migrant workers, news from home countries and explanations of Korean news for foreign residents. It also broadcasts a regular Korean-language discussion program: *The World of Migrant Workers*. AsiaRights staff caught up with two of MWTV's presenters, Mahbub (from Bangladesh) and Minod Moktan (from Nepal). This is what they had to say about RTV's innovative broadcasting project.

ASIARIGHTS (AR) – Can you tell us how you came to Korea, and how you came to be involved in migrant worker activism?

MAHBUB – I first came to Korea in 1999. I worked in a textiles and garment factory, where my job involved pressing film covering onto the fabrics. It was hard work, using a lot of industrial chemicals.

At first I wasn't involved in any activism, but after about three years I started to do voluntary work in the Bangladeshi migrant community, taking up issues like industrial accidents and non-payment of wages. Many migrant workers in Korea work in very small firms, and their bosses sometimes cheat them out of their wages. I became Secretary of the Bangladesh Mutual Association, which dealt with these sorts of social problems. Then in 2002 the Migrant Workers Trade Union was established. It was organized under the umbrella of the Korean Confederation Trade Union (KCTU). We started going to

rallies and demonstrations, and I became busy in the Union, writing publicity material for them and so on.

That was the time when the Korean government was bringing in a new Employment Permit System, which came into force in July 2003. Under the new system, some undocumented migrant workers who had been here for up to three or four years were able to obtain official short-term employment permits, but those who had been here more than five years were all to be sent home. There was a great protest about this. Two migrant workers even committed suicide.

MOKTAN – You see, they want to get rid of workers who have been here more than five years, because they can speak Korean and understand the system. They want to keep bringing in new workers, because it's easier for bosses to control them, and to make them work long hours.

MAHBUB – Yeah. We had a big protest about the new policy at Myeongdong (central Seoul). It went on for almost 400 days. We got quite a lot of support from Korean unions and NGOs and so on. In the end, although the government brought in the new system, they can't make it work. Today there are still about 180,000 overstayers in Korea, but they can't throw them out without causing really bad human rights violations.

A big problem with the Employment Permit System is that it ties workers to a particular workplace. Migrants have a permit to work in one place only, and if they move to another job, they become "illegal".

MOKTAN – But, you see, many people hear rosy stories in their home countries from labor recruiters about the pay and conditions they are going to get in Korea, and then when they arrive here it turns out to be completely different from what they expected. Sometimes they are really deceived, so of course they have to change jobs.

MAHBUB – So what we are demanding is working visas, not employment permits – with a working visa people have the right to change jobs if they need to. The Migrant Trade Union has been demanding working visas all migrant workers.

AR – How about you, Muktan. When did you first come to work in Korea?

MOKTAN – I came on a tourist visa in 1992. I worked in various places, moving around. Then I started making songs about the situation of migrant workers. That was the start of our migrant workers' band StopCrackdown.¹ We've become pretty well known in the migrant community, and even a lot of Koreans know about us. We're making our second album at the moment.

MAHBUB – There are five migrant workers from five countries in StopCrackdown. That makes communication a big problem. They all speak different languages, so they have to communicate in Korean. It's the same for us here in Migrant Workers' Television.

AR – How did you come to be involved in Migrant Workers' Television? Did you approach the TV station, or did they approach you?

MAHBUB – At first it was just a dream for us to make our own TV programs. During the protests about the Employment Permit System, we did a number of interviews, and we organized conferences and seminars. We criticized the way Korean media were reporting migrant workers' issues.

In 2003 I joined MediaAct², because I wanted to try making my own documentary. I met a Korean activist who was involved with RTV. Around that time, in 2004, we had a conference, and during the discussion we said that we'd like to make our own TV programs. When he heard this, the Korean activist said he would introduce us to RTV. Two friends and myself went to a meeting with RTV staff.

To begin with, some people thought it was going to be really difficult. So first of all we just made a one-off, 100-minute discussion program. The MC and all the participants were migrant workers. When that was shown on TV, the reaction was really positive. We got a lot of support.

So then, in April 2005, we started our own program, The World of Migrant Workers. At first there were just four people involved in making the program. Now there are fifteen. But along the way we've lost six people who were deported by the government.

MOKTAN – New people keep joining us, though. And some of the people who are sent back home to Nepal and other places send us news about events in the home countries.

MAHBUB – Initially we broadcast by satellite, through the Skylife channel, but that's a pay system, which costs \$20-30 per month, so only well-off people could see us. But we got some support and donations from Korean viewers. Now we broadcast by cable and through the Internet, so many more migrant workers can see our programs.

AR – How do your programs differ from the programs made by mainstream Korean TV Channels?

MAHBUB – Mainstream channels like KBS and MBC make quite a lot of programs about migrant workers too. But their line always tends to be – “how sad!” “Poor things!” It makes me angry when they look at us that way. Why can't they see that migrant workers make a big contribution to Korea? We're part of Korean society too. We try to reflect that in our programs.

AR – Do you ever get negative or racist responses from your audiences?

MNOO – Sometimes people write to our website saying things like “why don't you go home”. There is also one anti-immigrant chat site in Korea. But it doesn't seem to be all that active lately.

MAHBUB – Sometimes the Immigration Bureau contacts us, wanting to know if any of our presenters are illegal migrants and the like. They try to pressure us. But all the same, I think they know they can't go too far. They're a bit afraid of us too, because we are the media.

AR – Are there controversies within the migrant community about the way in which you report issues?

MAHBUB – Just occasionally. Last year there was a bit of controversy, because the Korean Ministry of Culture organized a Migrant Cultural Festival. This was just at the time when the Ministry of Justice was in the middle of a big crackdown on migrant workers. Immigration officers would come into people's home in the middle of the night. They recruit young officers with martial arts skill so that they can overpower the people

they want to arrest. They sometimes even use riot gas and nets to round people up. The President of the Migrant Workers' Union was arrested too.

Migrant workers who are detained for deportation are sent to detention centers – they call them “protection centers”, but they’re just like prisons really, with high walls and CCTV and so on. Women and children get sent there too, but all the staff – even the ones in charge of women – are male.

And while all that’s going on, the Ministry of Culture is organizing a Migrant Workers’ Festival to show that “we are all one”!

Well, some migrant workers thought it was important to assert their cultural rights. But other people thought, “if we haven’t got the right to work, cultural rights mean nothing”. We were critical of the Festival. We thought it was just an effort to whitewash the situation.

AR – What are your plans for the future?

MOKTAN – We want to make programs that will open Korean people’s eyes to the realities of migrant workers’ lives. But we’d like to make cultural programs too. Migrant workers don’t have many spaces for relaxation and enjoyment, so we’d like to be able to help provide that space.

(Interviewers: Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Hyun Mooam and Julia Yonetani)

TUNE IN TO KOREAN MIGRANT WORKERS’ TELEVISION! Internet broadcasts in English and other languages can be accessed through the site www.mwtv.or.kr (click on the “vod” tab to watch broadcasts)

FACTS AND FIGURES: South Korea has an estimated total of 700,000 foreign residents, of who about 303,000 are migrant workers. Major migrant worker communities include Chinese (including ethnic Koreans from China), Filipinos/Filipinas, Vietnamese, Thais, Bangladeshis, Burmese and Nepalese. In May 2006, the South Korean government announced plans to re-examine its immigration laws and treatment of foreign residents.

¹ The first CD by the migrant workers’ band *StopCrackdown* is entitled *What is Life*. For further information see www.stopcrackdown.com

² MediaACT is Korea's first public access media center, established in 2002. Amongst other things, it provides training in film making and low cost equipment rental to those involved in social activism. For further information, see www.mediact.org/web/eng/eng01.php