

COVID-19 and Social Conflicts: Policies from South Korea's experience

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic triggers social conflicts, the collaboration of science, policy, and society can take a role in navigating new opportunities to rebuild better than before the pandemic and to lead the world to put on the right track. The cooperation of those three entities would contribute to the world in developing access on the Internet and digital services, diminishing educational disparity, and reducing hate crimes particularly against Asian. To accomplish these goals, strong partnerships between science, policy, and society field must be organically built.

Introduction

With the advent of the COVID-19 era, the gap of access to and use of digital technology, learning gap, and hate crimes against Asian have increased, and this phenomenon is an essential agenda in resolving post COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has affected of all classes, regardless of level of education, income, and nationality, but this global threat is particularly dangerous for the elderly and the poor in difficult situations in any society. The rich and the poor have risen, and the socially disadvantaged are becoming more alienated. The virus will be conquered one day by the development of vaccines, but the deep social gap and the conflict that will arise here are the dark shadows cast over our future.

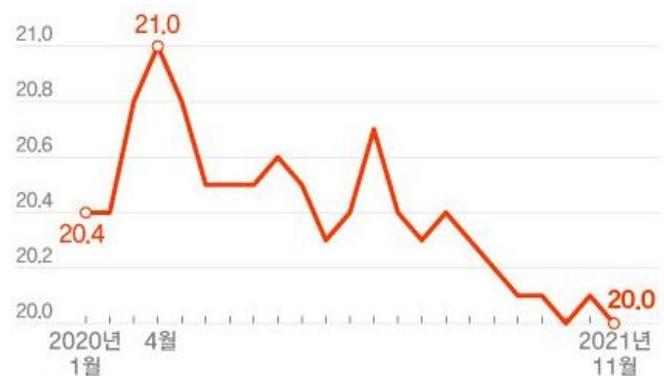
The impact of the coronavirus disease has been particularly far worse to vulnerable people. As the world continues to become more consolidated, producing solutions regarding social conflicts become even more urgent. Collaboration of science, policy, and society sectors entities should intend to work together in the context of reflecting social engagement. This policy brief investigated the impact of COVID-19 on using digital technology including digital health services, education inequalities, and hate crimes, and how Republic of Korea responds to resolve those social conflicts.

Access to and use of digital technology

Even before COVID-19, the digital gap due to the rapidly changing information and technology was a big problem. If the world moves further into a non-face-to-face economy, it will be difficult for people who do not have the skills to use it to purchase even daily necessities. The digital divide issue also applies to

companies. For example, large companies that can work from home avoided the fatal impact, but small companies and self-employed people, who have difficulty in digital transformation, fell into a swamp of stagnation. In the case of South Korea, the number of self-employed people decreased noticeably during the COVID-19 period.

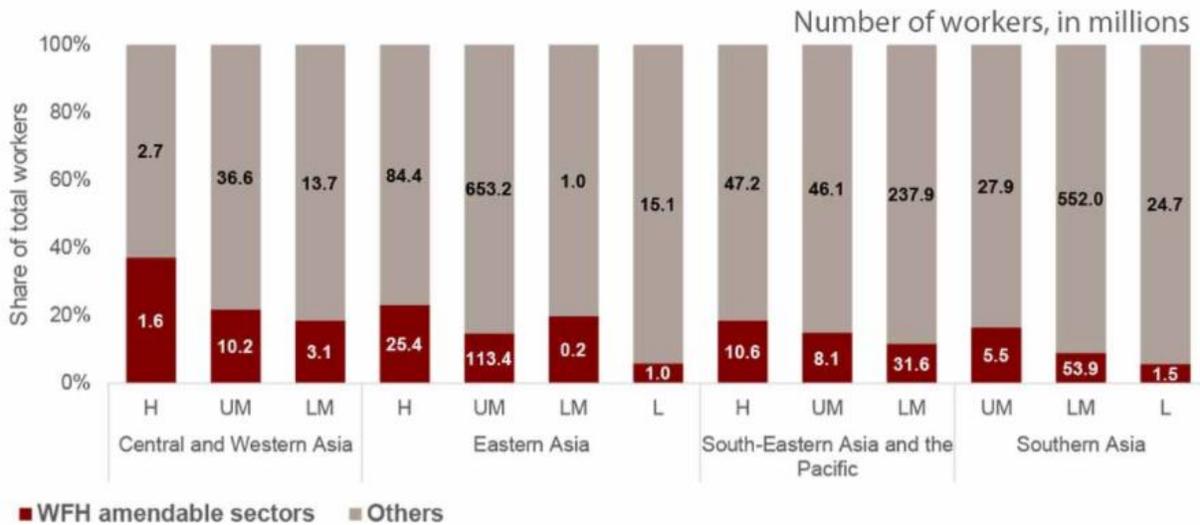
Figure 1. The Proportion of Self-Employed People in South Korea during COVID-19 period



Source: The JoongAng (2021)¹

Dependence on digital technology has been escalated by non-face-to-face online situations such as social distancing. In addition, as almost all information related to COVID-19 was provided through smartphone apps and Internet websites, handling digital technology to some extent is directly related to safety, and income level highly relates to the access of using digital technology (Figure 2). As digital technology quickly settles in various areas of society and the speed of technological innovation accelerates, the digital gap has emerged as a task to be solved ahead of the "With Corona" era.

Figure 2. Workers in Work-from-Home (WFH) Amenable Sectors in Asia



Source: ILOSTAT. Data is ILO's estimates in 2019 using the indicator "employment by sex and economic activity". H = High income; UM = Upper-middle income; LM = Lower-middle income; L = Low-income. Note that some regions do not have countries in all income categories.

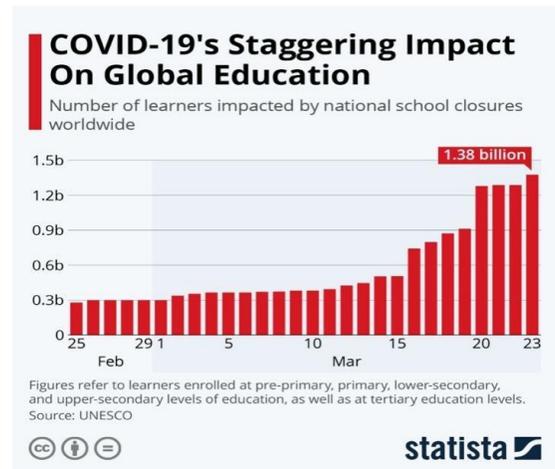
Source: AIB (2020)²

The impact of COVID-19 on education inequalities

World Economic Forum estimated that more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries were influenced by school closures due to the pandemic (WEF, 2020).³ Education inequalities in developing nations are not just a simple matter of poor people being poor, but it also relates to the distribution of wealth and composition of the economy. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating the educational disparity worse than before the pandemic between wealthy and underprivileged people. To elaborate, data from a research center illustrates that national school closures are becoming rising as the pandemic continues (Figure 3).

It is recognizable that countless vulnerable groups are waiting for social support for education from a lot of places through Figure 3. This case clearly identifies improving the education conditions of rural poor populations in disadvantaged areas and to furthermore work to enhance the quality of the education system in developing countries are urgent issues to react. The pursuit of educational equalities through overhauling education policy leads to restoration of the education system and rising education opportunities, which eventually lead to a better world for vulnerable social groups.

Figure 3. Number of learners affected by national school closures worldwide

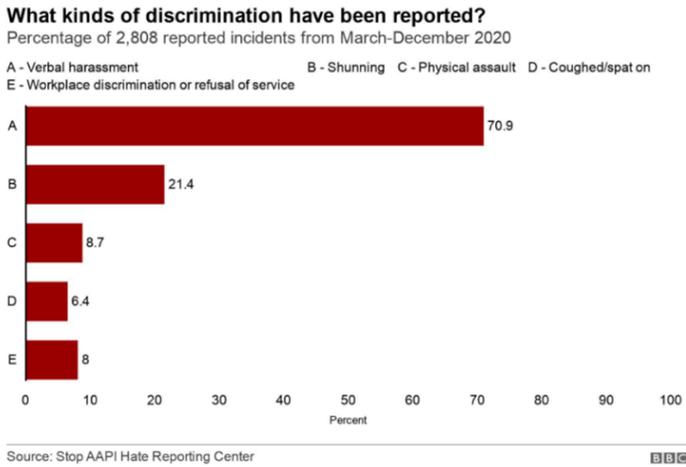


Source: Statista (2020)⁴

Rising hate crimes from the impact of COVID19

Asians have become the target of loathing and hatred in the midst of anxious and fearful pandemic. BBC news highlights that it is tough to determine exact numbers for such crimes and instances of discrimination. Furthermore, as these hate crimes spread, it is easily anticipated that after COVID-19, prejudice and hatred against Chinese and Asians spread in Europe and the United States.⁵ According to the California Department of Justice, the number of reported anti-Asian property hate crime events including arson, burglary, destruction, damage was increased by 55% in 2020.⁶

Figure 4. What kinds of discrimination have been reported? Percentage of 2,808 reported incidents from March-December 2020



Source: BBC (2021)⁷

Policy Recommendations from the intersection of science, policy, and society

Promoting policies to strengthen digital capabilities for the vulnerable

The Seoul Metropolitan Government announced a people-centered "Comprehensive Plan for Digital Capability Enhancement" in 2020. In the COVID-19 era, it announced plans to promote four areas to create Seoul without digital alienation. This project was launched based on the public-private cooperation: Seoul Metropolitan Government, KTM Mobile, LG Electronics, and High Plaza work together to develop and distribute smartphone tailored to the elderly. It also operated digital education system such as implementing 1:1 education at certain level. The target group of this project was composed of 200 people aged 55 or older. The Seoul Metropolitan Government is focusing on digital education and device distribution projects for the vulnerable group through continuous monitoring of the digital gap with establishing public and private cooperation governance (Seoul Metropolitan Official Blog, 2020).⁸

Designing and applying social policies to diminish inequities in education affecting vulnerable social groups

The "HTHT (High Touch High Tech) 2021 Global Conference," was convened in 2021, and the ways to build an innovative ecosystem for AI education and edutech was discussed to narrow learning gap due to COVID-19. It was also noted that HTHT has a great effect on parents' satisfaction. According to the survey, it showed that the evaluation started in April last year and a year later showed that 1) maintaining an average of 47

minutes or more of learning, 2) improving an average score of 40 to 84 points, 3) satisfying 97% of parents' satisfaction. It is evident that self-directed learning is possible. The project was started with 258 elementary and middle school students from low-income families in 2020 and expanded the target to up to 1,000 students, including multicultural and North Korean defectors. In the future, it is expected that there will be no students who fall behind due to the widening education gap after COVID-19 by HTHT project.⁹

Hate-crime

Democratic Senator Mazie Hirono and Congresswoman Grace Meng, who were aware of the seriousness of hate crimes against Asians in the United States and the passive response of criminal authorities, proposed the "COVID-19 Hate Crime Act. Through this law, criminal authorities can identify Asian hate crimes that have not been reported through various channels and respond more quickly to incidents. Hotline was also set up for each state to prevent and actively respond to hate crimes, and public campaigns were also planned to reduce prejudice against Asians (Grace Meng, 2021).¹⁰

In the case of South Korea, when COVID-19 spread, some domestic media preferred names such as "Wuhan pneumonia" and "Wuhan Corona," and reported the coronavirus in connection with unsanitary lifestyles and immorality of Korean Chinese. China Town in Daelim-dong, Seoul, regardless of the epicenter of the coronavirus, it is estimated that people who reside in the sector are contagious through unsanitary food. This atmosphere incited conspiracy theories which triggers misunderstanding and prejudice against Korean Chinese.

Conclusion

It is notable that how important considering socially vulnerable groups are to be working toward a more mature civic society. Leading people having an interest in cross-cutting issues specifically relevant to the use of digital technology, education, and hate crime as cultural violence shed light on the response to a future pandemic. When the combination of strong accountability of resolving those social conflicts is realized, the integrated approach can be successful. As can be seen from the current COVID-19 outbreak, the future disease problem requires linkage and cooperation not only with health authorities, but also with various stakeholders from the economy, education, and the environment sectors. Therefore, it is notable that building partnerships from science, policy, and society can contribute to society in preparing for future pandemic.

- ¹ The JoongAng (2021), *Lowest proportion of self-employed people, heavy damage to accommodation and food*, 15 December 2021, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25032441#home> (accessed on 17 February 2022).
- ² Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (2020), *Unequal Disruptions: The Digital Divide During COVID-19*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/media-center/blog/2020/Unequal-Disruptions-The-Digital-Divide-During-COVID-19.html> (accessed on 18 February 2022).
- ³ World Economic Forum (2020), *The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/> (accessed on 26 March 2021).
- ⁴ Statista (2020), *COVID-19's Staggering Impact On Global Education*, <https://www.statista.com/chart/21224/learners-impacted-by-national-school-closures/> (accessed on 28 March 2021).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ California Department of Justice, *Anti-Asian Hate Crime Events During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, <https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/anti-asian-hc-report.pdf> p. 2.
- ⁷ BBC NEWS (2021), *Covid 'hate crimes' against Asian Americans on rise*, 21 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56218684> (accessed on 17 February 2022).
- ⁸ Seoul Metropolitan Official Blog, *Comprehensive measures to strengthen digital capabilities*, 22 October 2020, <https://blog.naver.com/haechiseoul/222123416348> (accessed on 17 February 2022).
- ⁹ Universe News Network (2021), [HTHT 2021] *Contribute to resolving the gap between the rich and the poor beyond education imbalance*, 29 June 2021, <http://news.unn.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=511462> (accessed on 20 February 2022).
- ¹⁰ Website of Grace Meng, *MENG SECURES MILLIONS TO HELP IMPLEMENT HER HATE CRIMES ACT RECENTLY SIGNED INTO LAW BY PRESIDENT BIDEN*, 20 July 2021, <https://meng.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/meng-secures-millions-to-help-implement-her-hate-crimes-act-recently> (accessed on 16 February 2022).