

Unwed single mothers in South Korea: Increased vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Shinwoo Choi 
Texas State University, USA

Soo-Jung Byoun
Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, South Korea

Eun Hee Kim
I'm MOM: Unwed Single Mothers' Association, South Korea

Abstract

Unwed single mothers in South Korea are a highly vulnerable population in terms of socioeconomic status, lack of social support, and the high level of discrimination that they have to live through due to existing stigma attached to this population. As a result, they are more likely to be living in poverty, and to be socially isolated and less likely to utilize health- and mental health care. The short essay presents the unwed single mothers' increased vulnerabilities during COVID-19 pandemic in terms of childcare, financial crisis, and mental health.

Keywords

COVID-19, discrimination, pandemic, unwed single mothers, vulnerable families

Unwed single mothers in South Korea are a highly vulnerable population in terms of socioeconomic status, lack of social support, and the high level of discrimination that they have to live through due to existing stigma attached to this population (Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs [KIHSA], 2019; Park and Cho, 2019). Influenced by Confucianism, South Korean society emphasizes the importance of the traditional family structure (Park and Cho, 2019; Yang, 2012) composed of husband, wife, and children. Those who do not belong in the 'traditional' norm of the family structure are ostracized and discriminated against. In Korean culture, strong stigma is associated with giving birth prior to marriage, and unwed single mothers are seen as being sexually

Corresponding author:

Shinwoo Choi, School of Social Work, 1 UNF Drive, Jacksonville, FL, 3224, USA.
Email: shinwoochoi@txstate.edu

promiscuous (Tschida, 2016). Thus, they are often cut off from their family members for bringing shame. For these reasons, unwed single mothers experience more discrimination and stigma compared to other single parenthoods such as single fathers (whether divorced, unwed, or bereaved) or single mothers who had been married before (Lee and Limb, 2006). As a result, unwed single mothers are more likely to be living in poverty, and to be socially isolated and less likely to utilize health- and mental health care (Kim and Cho, 2012). Since this population is already a marginalized group, disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic have increased their vulnerabilities

Increased vulnerabilities during the pandemic

Although South Korea's death toll and confirmed cases are much lower than those in other countries (So, 2020), its vulnerable populations are still experiencing the pain caused by COVID-19. In this section, the increased challenges among unwed single mothers will be discussed in the domains of childcare, financial crisis, and mental health.

Childcare

According to a recent survey on parents with young children in South Korea, more than 37 percent of respondents experienced a lack of childcare due to the pandemic (Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE), 2020). Most of the families (73.3%) took care of the children at home, and 24 percent received support from their families and relatives. Furthermore, 47 percent of the vulnerable families experienced a lack of childcare, and this is much higher than the average. In the survey, there were various types of vulnerable families included in the same group, and we do not have precise information on the unwed single mothers' experiences. Nevertheless, we could suppose that they have greater difficulties in childcare than others because they are devoid of family support or social networks.

Financial crisis

Just like many groups, the unwed single mothers in South Korea have been going through a financial crisis since the beginning of the pandemic. For instance, 33 percent of the unwed single mothers reported that financial instability is the most challenging factor in rearing children (KIHSA, 2019). The mothers who are living in poverty are surviving the pandemic relatively well because of their status as welfare recipients. However, the low-income mothers whose income was slightly above the poverty line are hit the hardest due to the changes after the pandemic. Unlike some professionals, their jobs are more likely to be insecure positions and jobs that cannot be done from home. Therefore, a combination of the lack of childcare due to closure of schools/daycare facilities and financial instability has increased the vulnerability of this population. Furthermore, practitioners who work with unwed single mothers report that some of their clients with limited access to the Internet were struggling with the welfare application process. Social security offices in South Korea were closed for a while at the beginning of the pandemic, and the vulnerable population without the equipment or ability to access the Internet encountered significant barriers to accessing support.

Mental health

During the pandemic, unwed single mothers' mental health could be worsened by the burden of childcare and financial status. According to a study with 1247 unwed single mothers, 60.5 percent were highly stressed and the average depression score was 27.1 which is much higher than the

threshold of 16 (KIHSA, 2019). The mothers who suffer from financial instability (i.e. living below the poverty line, unemployed, or working part time) were more likely to be highly stressed and depressed (KIHSA, 2019). Experts are concerned about the possible consequences on the unwed single mothers' children. Poorer parental mental health status is associated with the higher likelihood of child maltreatment (Warren and Font, 2015).

Despite the increasing concerns for the target population, the actual vulnerabilities and impact of COVID-19 have not yet been assessed. Since the current pandemic is an unprecedented event in today's world, there is no tailored protocol to follow. Social work practitioners in South Korea try to keep in contact with their single mother clients through phone calls, emails, and text messages in less formalized ways. This may be the only form of communication for the single mothers with the outer world, and many practitioners relay that their clients are undergoing significant stress due to decreased income, loss of childcare and lacking the usual forms of support. Some of the clients even send pictures of self-mutilation, which can be interpreted as a desperate signal for help.

Social work implications for future virus outbreaks

Social work policy and practice models should be developed for future virus outbreaks in order to protect the unwed single mothers in South Korea. In this section, social work implications at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels are suggested for the following areas of childcare, financial crisis, and mental health.

First, providing support for childcare during a pandemic is essential for any working parents, but it is especially true for unwed single mothers. At the macro level, childcare support should be increased during a pandemic, targeting low-income parents who must go to work. The low-income single mothers are the only breadwinner and caretaker in the household, and they are often trying their best to barely make ends met. If their income before the pandemic did not meet the poverty threshold, they are not eligible for welfare. Without childcare support, this particular population is instantly falling through the cracks, which can threaten their day-to-day survival. The childcare support can take forms of sitters at home or at the childcare facilities. In order to do so, guaranteeing that there are a certain number of childcare facilities that will operate by following the strict health and hygiene guidelines (i.e. maintaining the minimum children to teacher ratio in a large enough space to ensure social distance) is necessary.

At the mezzo and micro levels, developing and delivering virtual interventions targeting the children of unwed single mothers will be hugely important. Providing virtual educational and developmentally appropriate sessions (e.g. music, art classes, and/or book clubs) will ease the burden of childcare responsibilities and support the children's learning at the same time. Experts are concerned that the children's learning and developmental needs will be neglected during a pandemic in marginalized households, which can lead to long-term educational gaps (Burgess, 2020). Therefore, providing such virtual classes will be beneficial in various ways.

Second, providing support to ease the stress caused by the financial crisis of the target population is critically important. As mentioned, the low-income unwed single mothers occupy jobs that may not allow them to work from home. The increased financial burden and lack of childcare add an extra layer of vulnerability, and the most important form of intervention should take place at the macro level. Securing the minimum income during the pandemic as a form of disaster relief will be crucial. South Korea's Ministry of Employment and Labor is developing emergency disaster relief funds to guarantee the minimum level of income for at least 3 months, targeting the individuals who are impacted by the virus outbreak (Gov.Kr, 2020).

Next, at the mezzo level, supporting the unwed single mothers with essential items will be helpful as well. Items such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (i.e. face masks and medical-grade

gloves), free meals, and technology (i.e. laptop, printer, access to the Internet) are suggested. Practitioners recommend that these items should be delivered to the target populations' homes on a regular basis, because unwed single mothers whose children need care have difficulty getting out of their homes to retrieve the items due to fear of exposure to the virus.

Finally, since the unwed single mothers' mental health is at higher risk during the pandemic, several social work implications are suggested. At the macro level, securing funding to develop and implement telehealth is the first step. Throughout the world, utilizing telehealth is highly recommended to take care of the vulnerable populations' various needs (American Academy of Family Physicians [AAFP], 2020). At the mezzo level, social work agencies serving the unwed single mothers can develop tailored telehealth programs to systematically keep in touch with their clients, even during emergency situations. Currently, practitioners try to monitor the mental needs of their clients in less formalized ways. However, due to a lack of formalized systems, practitioners are not mandated to monitor or keep in contact with their clients when the agency is closed due to a virus outbreak. Therefore, developing and implementing a formalized telehealth system to check in with unwed single mothers to provide a sense of belonging will make a difference. Conducting regular check-ups through virtual communications can be used to ensure the well-being of children as well. In order for the telehealth system to be functioning, the necessary equipment (e.g. tablet or laptop) and Internet service should be provided for the families in need. By doing so, unwed single mothers will be better prepared for future disasters in a number of ways by decreasing their isolation. They will be able to stay connected with the world, access the necessary and up-to-date information regarding the pandemic, receive help from social workers virtually, and they will also be able to ask for the help that they need (e.g. online application to receive welfare support).

In conclusion, COVID-19 is an unprecedented event for the people who are alive today. Experiencing a pandemic is detrimental to health, and it was unexpected for everyone, but the impact of a disaster is felt disproportionately (Gabe et al., 2005). It is more detrimental for children, the elderly, people with disabilities, female-headed households, people living in poverty, and immigrants/refugees (Enarson et al., 2006). Among the vulnerable groups, unwed single mothers in South Korea are definitely one of the most marginalized groups in the international community that needs social workers' attention.

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ORCID iD

Shinwoo Choi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9536-4792>

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Author biographies

Shinwoo Choi's research interests are on diversity, inclusion, and cultural competency. She explores the effects of racial microaggressions on immigrants' psychological well-being and the coping strategies.

Soo-Jung Byoun's research interests include family change and family diversity. She is a research fellow at Korea Research Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

Eun Hee Kim is a representative of an organization called the I'm MOM: Unwed Mothers' Association and has been serving the unwed single mothers in South Korea since 2012.