**Inputs for the oral update by the Human Rights Commissioner at the 45th Human Rights Council** (Republic of Korea, August 2020)

Human rights has been one of the key components in shaping the COVID-19 policies and responses of the Government of the Republic of Korea (ROK). The ROK government’s rights-based COVID-19 approaches include (1) transparent and inclusive access to information, (2) protection of vulnerable groups, (3) social protection measures, and (4) incorporation of gender perspectives.

**Transparent and Inclusive Access to Information**

ROK’s Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act stipulates the public’s right to be informed on the latest developments and responses to outbreaks and infection control. The ROK government has been sharing COVID-19 information with the public transparently and inclusively, in its bid to induce citizens’ informed and spontaneous participation in the government’s counter-COVID-19 initiatives.

* **(Press Briefing)** The government has been carrying out press briefings twice a day on the COVID-19 situation in the ROK, often highlighting its health risks and government measures to counter them, with sign language interpretation for persons with hearing disabilities. The briefings have also been broadcast by *Arirang TV* in English, particularly for foreigners and migrants in the ROK.
* **(Online Information)** The ROK government has created a website dedicated to COVID-19 (<http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en>), whereby related agencies share COVID-19 information including medical facts; statistics on confirmed cases disaggregated by sex, age, and region; press releases; locations of screening stations; and relief packages. Regular press releases that cover a wide range of information, *e.g*., number of confirmed and suspected cases of COVID-19, number of tests performed, regional distribution of confirmed cases, epidemiological links, number of contacts under quarantine, number of discharged cases, and other pertinent statistics, are also provided daily in Korean, English, and Chinese.
* **(Information Service for Foreigners)** To ensure easier access to COVID-19 information for foreigners in the ROK, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) extended the Immigration Contact Center’s telephone counseling service hours to 24 hours. Twenty languages during the daytime and weekdays, and three languages (Korean, English, Chinese) during the nighttime and weekends are available. The ROK government also provides interpretation services for foreigners under quarantine.
* **(Privacy Implications)** The ROK government’s active sharing of COVID-19 information, including the trajectory of confirmed patients to alert and prepare the public, may have privacy implications. To address this issue, the government established guidelines in March to place limitations on the time frame and scope of publicly available information. The guidelines have since been updated to reflect evolving human rights considerations, and the government is regularly monitoring its implementation.

**Protection of Vulnerable Groups**

The weaker parts of our society have been hit harder by the COVID-19 crisis. With a keen awareness of the resulting gaps COVID-19 is widening, the ROK government has taken special care to protect certain groups that have been identified as particularly vulnerable, including migrants, older persons, and children.

**A. Migrants**

* **(Undocumented Migrants)** To prevent undocumented migrants from shunning tests and treatments for COVID-19 for fear of being fined or banned from re-entering the ROK due to their status, the ROK government has been exempting medical institutions from their obligation to report the undocumented migration status of their patients to immigration authorities. The MOJ has been promoting this policy through the regional offices and in cooperation with diverse partners, including the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Korean National Police Agency, the Korea Coast Guard, and foreign missions in the ROK. Furthermore, immigration offices have suspended collecting information and monitoring medical institutions regarding undocumented migrants.
* **(Visa Holders)** To reduce immigration office visits by migrants intending to extend their visas during the peak of COVID-19 when minimizing contacts was critical, the MOJ collectively extended the visas of approximately 152,000 holders in February and April 2020.

**B. Older Persons**

* **(Public Attention to Older Persons)** The ROK government’s twice-daily press briefings and press releases on COVID-19 have consistently focused on older persons’ vulnerabilities and special measures to protect them. For example, the press release dated June 17 elaborates on the results of a study by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on recent clusters in elderly-related facilities and sheds light on precautionary measures to prevent further infections in such facilities. All the press releases are currently available in English at <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en>.
* **(Filtering Respirators and Surgical Masks)** Older persons are categorized as one of the high-risk groups under the Infections Disease Control and Prevention Act, along with children, persons with underlying medical conditions, and pregnant women. According to Article 49-2 of the Infections Disease Control and Prevention Act, a number of local authorities have provided older persons with filtering respirators and surgical masks free of charge.
* **(Nursing Homes and Convalescent Hospitals)** The government and several local authorities have conducted preemptive COVID-19 testing for persons living in nursing homes and convalescent hospitals, most of whom are older persons.

**C. Children**

Children’s right to education has been significantly affected by COVID-19. Following the initial delay of the scheduled opening of school in early March due to rising concerns over the spread of COVID-19 to children, the ROK government is harnessing information and communications technology (ICT) to mitigate the pandemic’s impact on children’s right to education.

* **(Online Opening)** The Ministry of Education decided to open schools online in different stages, starting with the most senior middle and high school students on April 9 and completing with the most junior elementary school students on April 20. The Ministry of Education worked together with the metropolitan and provincial offices of education to lend digital devices to students in low-income households. In addition, 17 provincial offices of education subsidize Internet subscription fees to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure the inclusive participation of all students in online classes. Furthermore, through cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and ICT, and three major telecommunications companies, educational websites such as Korea Educational Broadcasting System can be temporarily accessed for free without data usage.
* **(Phased Opening)** The Ministry of Education announced plans to open schools in four phases, starting on May 20. Given that sporadic cluster infections have continued to occur in the ROK despite the flattened curve, the ROK government is advising schools to combine online and on-site schooling methods, in line with its efforts to find the right balance between diminishing health risks and ensuring children’s right to education.

**D. Rural Residents**

The COVID-19 pandemic is generating an array of legal issues relating to economic constraints, such as contract terminations, failure to repay debts, and nonpayment of wages. Given the particular lack of access to legal services in rural areas, the Ministry of Justice established a team of lawyers (“COVID-19 Village Lawyers”) that provides COVID-19-related legal assistance for rural residents via telephone or email.

**Social Protection Measures**

The ROK government has been seeking to mitigate the pandemic’s impact on people’s livelihoods by taking social protection measures.

* **(Emergency Disaster Relief Fund)** To mitigate economic and social impact on people’s lives due to COVID-19, the ROK government has provided the emergency relief funds for each and every household. The ROK government made available a variety of options for the application process, such as internet websites, banks, and community centers. For those who have difficulties in applying for relief packages due to physical disabilities or age-related challenges, local government officials have visited their residences to help their application. As of June 2020, more than 99.5 percent of the Korean households have received the payments.
* **(Additional Relief for Low-income Households**) The ROK government provided disaster allowances in vouchers for low-income households, between April and July 2020, in order to help those households sustain livelihoods.

**Incorporation of Gender Perspective**

The ROK government is working to incorporate gender perspectives into its COVID-19 policies and responses, harnessing findings from research and studies.

* **(Care Burden)** As the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a heavier burden on care in families, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) has launched a campaign to raise awareness of equal sharing of care responsibilities between men and women. MOGEF also provided home-visit care services and online academic support. When schools were closed entirely due to COVID-19, MOGEF delivered lunch boxes to students relying on free lunch initiatives.
* **(Research Initiatives)** MOGEF is carrying out a series of study forums and gender impact analyses on COVID-19 responses and policies to figure out the particular challenges women face in the COVID-19 context, such as disproportionate care burdens, unemployment, and gender-based violence. MOGEF will continuously strive to incorporate gender perspectives into all of the government's policies and services. End.