

**Official Event  
Plenary Session**

**Human rights cities  
responding to poverty and inequalities**

**CHO Munyoung**  
**[Professor, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Yonsei University]**

It is quite difficult to give a short answer to a grave question 'how poverty and social inequalities impact on the human rights of residents at local level'. There is one thing that I would like to suggest here. Poverty and social inequalities tend to make people fail to recognize the rights of the poor or even feel numbed about the rights. Also, they encourage negative responses over the rights among people. When we search the term poverty on searching engines, then, the first images that pop up are naked and bony children living in Africa. The poverty at our times is displayed with closed-up snap shots of bony bodies of children and figures of 1 out of 5 African populations struggling famine. The poverty, however, is even closer to a prolonged process or even a harsh struggling. The poor that I have met, they were not familiar with the term 'the right', even not able to dare claim their rights, just suppresses their outrage on their own, and often just give up themselves deeming there was nothing that they could do. What matters here is that those kinds of mindset are not innate. Those are the experiences that have accumulated for a long time while weathering and wandering around violent family and streets, moving here and there to reside in institutions such as nursing homes, shelters and prisons that struggle to confine and control the poor, and being deprived of the right to ask questions and check up conditions.

The absence or wear and tear of awareness on the rights are the result not only of an accumulated history of an individual but also of the poverty regime to which he or she belongs. If we view a venue in which a certain subjectivity is formed amid a series of devices such as institutions, laws, knowledge, and technologies are engaged in actors as a regime, then, the awareness on poverty, the formation of senses, the recurrence of poverty experience, and the public discussion on poverty could be practiced while building relations with the poverty regime of a time. In the 21st century, the agenda of poverty has inundated rather than disappearing from the public discussion in Korea. There is a growing diversity in types of participants in the poverty regime and their entanglement has been ever more complicated.

Whenever a new administration inaugurates, central and local governments rush to disclose policies against poverty just like businesses launching their brand-new products. Businesses lead the agenda of 'social contribution', 'social innovation' and 'CSR/ESG' to become 'savior' fighting poverty, but not dealing with the cause' of poverty. Like this forum, there is a growing number of global conferences that bring together officials from governments, businesses, universities, academia, and civil

society in a huge hall to discuss poverty and inequalities. However, the landscape of the regions where the households with low-income family concentrated has not changed that much compared to that of 20 years ago when I just started my research. Public housings at an affordable price still fall short, the amount of the National Basic Livelihood Benefits forces people to lead a life of literally just making ends meet though it has risen.

Jjokbang chon in Dongja-dong located across the Seoul Station is full of actors calling for to response to poverty, most of them, however, do not treat jjokbang residents as humans with as same rights, quality, and aspiration as theirs. People involved in the welfare sector monitor 'dependency' and take a role of judging illicit recipients and local government servants are anxious that an uproar may arise when they visit residential events to greet them. Sponsors coming with supplies to the jjokbang village every holiday are busy taking photos and churches that have sprung up in jjokbang areas are devoted to preaching about the repentance and salvation of individual residents. Landlords charge high rental fees taking advantage of the poor circumstances of tenants while explicitly expressing hatred against them. Sometimes they hire an intermediate manager to avoid in-person contact with the tenants. We have to take a closer look at what perspectives the jjokbang residents could face in the region. Actually, they have landed in the last refuge, so-called jjokbang village, after weathering accumulated experiences of being disrespected. Jjokbang village residents have to be in a long line to receive a free meal or supplies distributed by sponsors. Most of them are those with diseases or disabilities, which makes it to wait in a long line all the more physically painful process.

Citizens who pass them with indifference or offensive facial expressions, and shabby neighbors who join the line together make the waiting process more shameful confirming the misery on their own. Businesses unilaterally provide gifts with no expectation of repayment, churches generously provide mercies and favors, the government makes short-term policies to support, protect, and care jjokbang residents. There is no space for the language of 'rights'. The central and Seoul city government explicitly call the poor as 'the vulnerable'. Ironically, they implement the tax reduction for the rich, outright suppression on labor movement, and 'welfare for the vulnerable' in parallel. In so doing, the governments separate striking workers from those isolated in jjokbang, and they give the name the vulnerable to those who are satisfied with protection provided by the government. Therefore, we

have to ask ourselves what does the right mean for those who have lived bearing with those connections and event getting adjusted to them.

In order to understand poverty issue, we have to see people beyond the poor. As stressed out in my book 『Poverty process』(2023), we have to reflect ourselves what kind of poverty we have raised as an issue and in what way. Indeed, Dongja-dong's resident autonomous organizations, 'Dongja-dong Sarangbang' and 'Sarangbang Village Residents Association', are a living history of community movements that occupy an important trend in Korea's urban movement on poor. The poor who have deeply felt constraint on resources and opportunities throughout their lives, have made it hard to establish 'home as a care network' beyond blood relatives. We are fighting tirelessly calling for the government to expedite the public development projects for jjokbang village that has halted for over 2 years in the face of the opposition from landlords.

'Human rights cities' could not be completed with holding this kind of large scaled conferences. The term 'human rights' could gain vitality itself only when the government concentrates its administrative sources to public housing, public healthcare, public education, when citizens take those movement for granted, when we stop calling the poor 'the vulnerable' whom we have to protect, when coming to terms with an uncomfortable fact that our convenience and desire make poverty sustained.