

What will Singapore be like post-Covid-19?

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The issue of inequality reared its head during a discussion at the Singapore Book Fair yesterday, as panellists discussed the challenges society could face in a world changed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The panellists had previously contributed essays to the anthology *Fifty Secrets Of Singapore's Success*, compiled by veteran diplomat Tommy Koh and published by Straits Times Press.

"The 50 success stories remain very important, but what I should do next is edit a new book on the 30 challenges for Singapore," said Professor Koh during the panel discussion livestreamed on Facebook.

"What Covid-19 has done is shine the light on some of our shortcomings. The fact that poverty still exists in this very wealthy country is one. Inequality is another, (and so is) the plight of the elderly, single parents and foreign workers."

The panel, moderated by Straits Times opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong, also featured Dr Kanwaljit Soin, a pioneer in the women's movement; Dr Mathew Mathews, head of the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab; and ST associate editor Vikram Khanna.

The world will be different after Covid-19, said Mr Khanna, who thinks work-from-home arrangements and a certain amount of social distancing may be here to stay.

But he pointed out that social distancing is a luxury many people cannot afford.

"There are people who have customer-facing jobs. What are they going to do? They're going to be at a disadvantage. So I think inequality is in danger of increasing in the post-Covid-19 world."

Working from home is also a luxury for many people, he added.

"There's one other aspect of working from home that hasn't got enough attention. Working from home also means working from anywhere, and also, hiring from anywhere... You could have certain jobs done more cheaply by professionals outside Singapore."

Workers in different fields will be affected by income and job insecurity as a result of Covid-19, said Mr Khanna, who called for a wider social safety net and new kinds of social protection.

"Some such as Nominated MP Walter Theseira have proposed temporary universal basic income. I think that should be on the table for discussion."

Mr Khanna also believes the gig economy will expand, and that technology will play a bigger role in manufacturing.

Dr Soin, meanwhile, reckons Singapore should be less reluctant to look at welfarism.

"We must institute unemployment policies, minimum wage policies, maybe even a universal basic income, less out of pocket expenses for health, more preventive care," said Dr Soin, who was Singapore's first female Nominated MP.

"Another thing we should look at is how care work has to be compensated for, so that many women who look after their elderly parents, or others in the family, are not left high and dry in their old age with less savings and less retirement."

On whether Covid-19 could improve gender equality in the workplace, Dr Soin said the idea of flexible working hours could become more acceptable - and improve opportunities for women if their companies "take an enlightened view".

"The Government also has to make policies that are more favourable to working from home."

On social cohesion in the post-Covid-19 world, Dr Mathews said people around the world are now defining the "other" more clearly.

"This becomes stronger when you are in a crisis - you want to find people you can trust. But sadly, sometimes the lenses that we use are just what is more similar - skin tone, skin colour, physical features, cultural practices..."

"Over time, you've got different groups picking up people you can potentially blame. Covid-19 is a cultural minefield... Right from the start, people were looking for people to blame."

The Singapore Book Fair, which runs till May 25, is organised by Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese Media Group. For more information, visit singaporebookfair.sg. Fifty Secrets Of Singapore's Success is available at stbooks.sg for \$31.15.