

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

An Exploration and Description of the Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Employment in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the issue of gender inequality in the labour market in relation to greater risks of unemployment and financial vulnerability. The shift to remote work altered responsibilities for domestic labour among partnered couples and single parents, as did the impact of closed schools, childcare centres, and more. Disruptions to economic and social arrangements of South African women were no different than what other women in similar situations experienced in other countries. This study sought to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, with respect to employment, work-life balance and family responsibilities. A qualitative study within a constructivist paradigm, with a multisite, instrumental case study design was used. Data were collected from participants using both a survey questionnaire and a structured interview. A sample size of 172 was sought for the questionnaire and 26 qualitative interviews were conducted, guided by data saturation. Quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS (version 27) for descriptive and inferential statistics. Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews used NVIVO for coding and categorising. Black women, particularly from the informal sector, were found more adversely affected than those in formal employment by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study contributes to understanding the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on women's employment, work-life balance and family responsibilities.

Keywords: employment; work-life balance; family responsibilities; COVID-19; women

Introduction

In many countries across the world, women are suffering multiple and aggravated forms of discrimination in their homes and in their workplaces (Ahinkorah *et al.*, 2021: 1). The heightened gendered inequalities women in our societies and in their workplaces have to endure have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (Yavorsky *et al.*, 2022: 1), with these disruptions of economic and social arrangements of South African women no different (Parry and Gordon, 2021: 795). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the issue of gender inequality in the labour market, in relation to greater risks of unemployment and financial vulnerability, particularly among low- and semi-skilled workers. Women are more likely to be in low paid and/or temporary jobs, with reduced working hours, subjected to child-care and home responsibilities while working from home (combining the demands of work, education, home schooling, and housework, as well as caring for other family members). The pandemic lockdown regulations reinforced the unequal division of domestic labour. Furthermore, the shift to remote work and the impact of closed schools, child care centres and crèches, altered the domestic responsibilities among partnered couples, as well as with single parents, particularly among women (Bundervoet *et al.*, 2022: 1).

Government introduced measures to help families cope with the financial impact of the pandemic; for example, financial support to vulnerable businesses, tax relief, and the COVID-19 Temporary Employee / Employer Relief Scheme (C19 TERS), 2020 (as amended), as a temporary special benefit in terms of the Unemployment Insurance

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Fund (UIF). In addition, government also introduced social relief and economic support packages to assist with parental subsidies, including paid leave. There is, nevertheless, a need for government to allocate additional resources to deal with gender-based violence, the pay gap, hours worked, and career progress influenced by gender stereotypes, as well as career breaks due to maternity, childcare and household care (Channing *et al.*, 2020: 4). The COVID-19 pandemic, the consequent levels of lockdowns, national regulations, and restrictions in dealing therewith, disrupted national economies globally (Casale and Posel, 2020: 1). These affected businesses and workplaces in turn resulted in workers losing income and or jobs, leading to increased poverty and unemployment (Dang and Nguyen, 2021: 1; Uddin, 2021: 9; Duvvury *et al.*, 2021: 2). Odeku (2020: 16069) avers that women-led businesses in the tourism, trade, retail, and hospitality, as well as education, personal care and similar sectors, were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions. The author further contends both formal and informal women businesses were negatively affected and the majority had to close down or be declared insolvent (Odeku, 2020: 16073). COVID-19 impacted women's employment in, *inter alia*, the following ways:

Jacobs (2021) avers women and black workers in Louisiana have been particularly adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The author further contends black workers were more likely than white workers to become unemployed during the pandemic. Bowman-Williams (2020: 33) agrees Black Americans, women in particular, are over represented in low wage jobs, with less benefits, and more likely to become unemployed. Jacobs (2021) also discovered the employment rates of lower-income earners dropped by 19.1%, as opposed to high-income earners, whose rate of employment only decreased by 0.1%. Kostina and Bannykh (2021: 1) found the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions had a negative effect, particularly on lower income families, as it increased unemployment and the need for increased government support measures to assist them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dang and Nguyen (2021: 1) further established that women expected their income to be lessened by 50%, causing them to reduce their current consumption and increase their savings. Khwela-Mdluli and Beharry-Ramraj (2020: 16501) determined the negative effect of COVID-19 is the job losses experienced by women, as this posed a threat and a severe setback for the advancement, economic participation and empowerment of women in industry.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in South Africa (SA) (UNDP SA, 2020), and the report by Naidoo and Naidoo (2022: 2) regarding the vulnerability of South African women workers, find "households headed by casually employed, black African women, who had not completed secondary education, had a 73.5% chance of falling into poverty due to the coronavirus lockdown", and are much more financially susceptible than their male equivalents. Dunatchik *et al.* (2021: 194) contend the shift to remote work, as well as closure of schools and child care centres, increased demands on working parents and reinforced the unequal domestic division of labour (Yerkes *et al.*, 2020: 1). Uddin (2021: 7) established that women experienced increased work-life balance challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of their increased role requirements. The author avers organizational, as well as family support and spousal co-operation, are essential for working women's well-being (Uddin, 2021: 9).

Desroches *et al.* (2021: 240) additionally found home-schooling increased conflict between work and family demands during the COVID-19 pandemic, with alcohol abuse also elevated. The COVID-19 pandemic, furthermore, negatively impacted some family relationships, which gave rise to family violence and in some instances, divorce (Orzeata, 2020: 432; Krishnadas and Taha, 2020: 46; Leburu-Masigo and Kgadima, 2020: 16618). In addition, Dang and Nguyen (2021: 1) confirm 24% women were more likely than men to lose their jobs permanently, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jacobs (2021) concurs, finding working mothers with children of school-going age four times more likely than fathers to leave the workforce. Casale and Posel (2020), moreover, reported women in SA that were able to work from home had to manage additional childcare and house work, which made it more difficult to sustain their work performance (Casale and Shepherd, 2021).

Kukreja (2020: 2) contends the unexpected and unforeseen changeover to virtual programs for work and skill development during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the prevailing digital divide. The author further maintains nations with enhanced internet connectivity and hardware gained, while impoverished countries were delayed (Kukreja 2020: 2). Beaunoyer *et al.* (2020: 1) maintain low-income households have less access to the number and quality of technological devices, causing them to more severely suffer the immediate and long-term economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Khwela-Mdluli and Beharry-Ramraj (2020: 16501) found the negative influences of this pandemic outweighed the positive effects of using technology to work from home. Furthermore, Naidu (2021: 1) contends the state and the economy have failed to provide for the workers in India and further

exacerbated existing gender inequities. In addition, Naidoo and Naidoo (2022: 2) aver that working women, universally, suffered a considerable psychosocial inconvenience during the COVID19 pandemic. The authors further contend women experienced multiple stresses, such as loss of employment, reduced income, the risk of COVID-19 infection, working longer hours and gender-based violence (Naidoo and Naidoo, 2022: 2; Casale and Posel, 2020: 1).

Women in SA are important contributors to their families and the broader economy. However, they face numerous and intensified types of discrimination in society. The COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions posed by the government meant South African women were unable to work and provide for their families. Little was known regarding the extent of the impact the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions had on these women. Nonetheless, although both national and international regulations sought to protect women from discrimination and to formalise equality; it was unclear how achievement of these aims were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research explored and described the gendered impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, national lockdown regulations and restrictions, in exacerbating gender inequality, increased risk of unemployment and financial vulnerability of women. A sample of women in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of SA, who were working through the pandemic or who had lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, participated in the study. The research was conducted in the province of KZN in SA, one of nine provinces in the country and the second most populous, with a population of slightly more than 11 million. KZN comprises a multi-ethnic society of Black Africans, predominantly Zulu, as well as Asians, and both English and Afrikaans speaking Coloured and Caucasian people. This province is situated along the south eastern part of SA and has a long coast line, with the largest port in Africa (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023).

Methodology

This qualitative study utilised an instrumental case study design (Creswell, 2013), considered appropriate for the phenomenon; women's inequality in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, within a real-life, contemporary setting (Creswell, 2013). This research design allowed the researchers to explore the phenomenon in-depth. Women were conveniently sampled for the survey phase of the research and a purposively selected cohort of women were asked to participate in an interview, using a structured interview schedule. The researchers wished to hear of women's personal experiences in the workplace or from those who lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This sampling strategy was necessary in order to access women who could contribute to the phenomenon under investigation during the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions.

The research focused on understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, national lockdown regulations and restrictions on women, with respect to employment, work-life balance and family responsibilities. The chosen population were women in SA who were employed or who had lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, while participants also had to be above the age of 18 to be included in the study. To ensure all working women in KZN who met the inclusion criteria were represented, the study was open to all women from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds and from all occupational levels. The exclusion criteria were women who were not working or who lost their jobs prior to March 2020 and those below 18 years of age. Data were collected from participants using both a questionnaire and a structured interview. All participants who agreed to participate in the research were asked to complete an online survey questionnaire. The questionnaire highlighted issues important to the phenomenon, further explored through a structured interview. Participants were assured of confidentiality of information provided and indicated their consent through completing the questionnaire/interview. Ethics approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) prior to the data being collected (Ethics Clearance Number: 225/21). The survey questionnaire was piloted with three people who did not form part of the formal data collection, with the questionnaire assessed through face validity for clarity, unambiguous language and ease of understanding the language.

The quantitative questionnaire data were analysed statistically, reporting frequencies, measures of central tendency and any evident associations. Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews was done using a combination of NVIVO and a code book developed from the literature reviewed. This was necessary, as analysis was performed by multiple coders. The coders met frequently to discuss the coding, what was emerging, whether the code book needed adjusting and any other issues that arose in the coding – it was important to have consensus on the emerging codes, categories, and themes. NVIVO assisted with the coding and categorising of data.

The data collection methods were selected in order to collect in-depth information of women`s perceived inequality in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic in KZN. The structured interviews, with open-ended questions, were chosen to collect similar data. Multiple data collectors were used and there was, therefore, the need to introduce a measure of standardisation, but only insofar as the same questions were asked during the interview. The questionnaire and interview schedule were in English, with interviews audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1: Sampling and data collection methods for the different study phases

Phase	Sampling	Data collection
Survey	Convenience sampling	Survey questionnaire
Interview	Purposive sampling	One on one structured interview

Survey data were collected primarily online using Google forms. Interview data were mainly collected online using WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams, whichever the participants preferred.

Quantitative Results

Respondents in this study were mostly Black (n=167, 97.1%), single (n=124, 72.1%), with matric or higher qualifications (n=164, 95.3%). Results are summarised according to the following categories and themes:

Employment

At the time of this study, more than half the respondents were employed in a paying job or were self-employed (n=108, 62.8%). Results show a significant 53.5% were employed in a paying job prior to COVID-19 (χ^2 78.84, df 3, $p < .001$). When asked regarding their current employment status, 50 respondents reported being employed in the same job as before COVID-19, while 36 reported losing their jobs during COVID-19 and were still looking for another job, and 44 reported being unemployed and not looking for work (X^2 21.20, df 4, $p < .001$). The pandemic had a significantly negative effect on respondents` monthly income ($X^2=2.06$, df 171, $p = <.001$).

Job losses

In response to whether they had lost their job because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant 60% (n=103) indicated they did not lose their job because of COVID-19 ($p = .012$). Of those who reported losing their jobs (n=69), a significant 69.5% (X^2 36.73, df 4, $p = <.001$) reported losing their jobs between 1 June 2020 and 17 August 2020 (South Africa level 3 lockdown) and 21 September 2020 to 27 December 2020 (level 1 lockdown). The main reason reported for losing their jobs during COVID-19, was the employer wanting to downsize/restructure or the organisation closed (X^2 29.49, df 3, $p < .001$). A significant proportion of those who lost their jobs during the pandemic did not go to the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) (n=67, 97%, $p < .001$). It is interesting to note a significant 94% (n=65) women who lost their jobs did not receive leave pay ($p < .001$). Furthermore, a significant 99% (n=68) did not receive pension, ($p < .001$) and a significant 99% (n=68) did not receive severance pay ($p < .001$).

Working from home

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in 43.7% of those sampled (n=45) having to work from home, while 56.3% (n=58) was not required to work from home. Figure 1 below illustrates a significant proportion of 32% (n=33) indicated they worked only in the office or workplace before COVID-19 (χ^2 32.93, df 2, $p < .001$). A significant proportion (38.8% n=40) indicated they worked either from home only or both from home and the workplace (flexi hybrid) during COVID-19 (χ^2 10.13, df 2, $p = .006$).

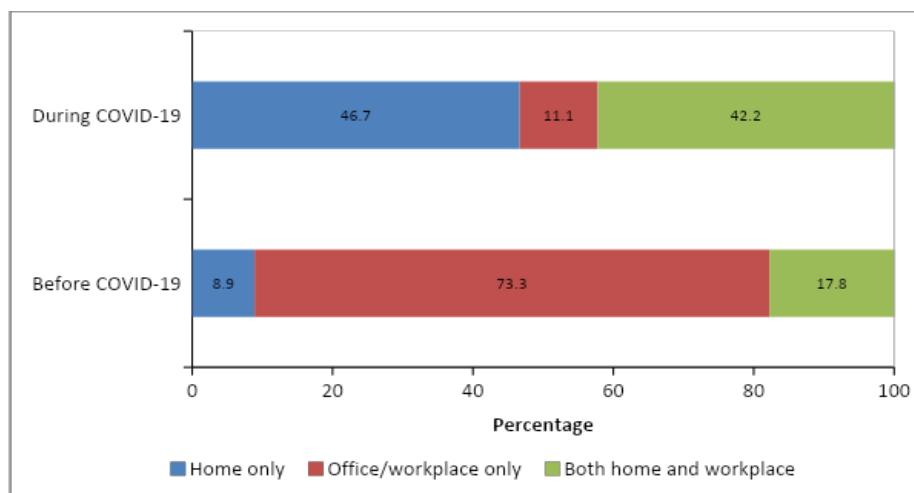


Figure 1: Working from home

Working hours change

Respondents working from home reported working significantly more hours per day on average at the weekend, compared to when working at their workplace (χ^2 14.89, $df = 4$, $p=.005$), which indicates COVID-19 impacted working from home on weekends but not on weekdays.

Job security

The respondents neither significantly agreed nor significantly disagreed to the statement that, as a result of COVID-19, they believed they were more at risk of losing their job (χ^2 3.0, $p=1.0$).

Family responsibilities

The results shown in Table 2 below indicate a significant decrease in shopping ($P<.001$) and a marked increase in housework ($P<.001$) for women who lost their jobs during COVID-19 ($n=69$).

Table 2: Family responsibilities of women who lost their jobs

Construct	n	Mean (SD)	t	df	p-value
Caring for children	60	3.17 (1.55)	.831	59	.409
Caring for other family members	67	3.00 (1.45)	.000	66	1.000
Preparing food for the family	67	3.30 (1.55)	1.579	66	.119
Housework	67	3.70 (1.44)	4.000	66	<.001*
Gardening	51	3.14 (1.37)	.715	50	.478
Growing food	54	3.09 (1.43)	.475	53	.636
Looking after farm animals	46	2.67(1.32)	-1.679	45	.100
Online learning	50	3.22 (1.63)	.953	49	.345
Home schooling	47	3.38 (1.66)	1.579	46	.121
Shopping	66	2.14 (1.41)	-4.966	65	<.001*

* Indicates significance at the 95% level

There was a substantial decrease in shopping ($P<.001$), however, a meaningful increase was noted in caring for children, caring for other family members, preparing food for the family, and housework, as well as online learning and home schooling, for women who retained their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic ($n=103$), see Table 3 below.

Table 3: Family responsibilities of women who retained their jobs

Construct	n	Mean (SD)	t	df	p-value
Caring for children	83	3.63 (1.34)	4.257	82	<.001*
Caring for other family members	92	3.51 (1.44)	3.400	91	.001*
Preparing food for the family	95	3.72 (1.24)	5.650	94	<.001*

Housework	101	3.75 (1.23)	6.158	100	<.001*
Gardening	75	3.11 (1.31)	.705	74	.483
Growing food	74	3.14 (1.37)	.850	73	.398
Looking after farm animals	56	2.91 (1.34)	-.499	55	.620
Online learning	87	3.99 (1.28)	7.201	86	<.001*
Home schooling	75	3.64 (1.41)	3.929	74	<.001*
Shopping	94	2.53 (1.54)	-2.955	93	.004*

* Indicates significance at the 95% level

Work-life balance

When asked to indicate the balance between home and work life, respondents indicated they (n=20, 29.4%) were able to spend more time with their families, as a result of having lost their jobs during COVID-19. Respondents reported a significant decrease in shopping (n=94, P=<.004), however, for women who retained their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a significant increase reported in feeling family life affected their ability to perform work responsibilities properly (n=103, P=<.019). Respondents who retained their jobs reported the balance between work and their personal life changed (n=103, P=<.001) as a result of COVID-19. Nevertheless, they indicated not spending significantly more or less time with their family because of this. Hence, it would appear work life but not family life was affected for those who retained their jobs.

Qualitative Results

The demographic profile of the participants in this study was reported above. These results are based on 15 interviews conducted with the participants; summarised according to the following categories and themes:

Job security

Despite quantitative results indicating respondents did not agree or disagree they were more at risk of losing their jobs, the interview participants reported to the contrary.

The company I was working for at the time was thriving but later lost money and like that we were threatened to lose our jobs and didn't know if we were going to get paid for the next month. The owners decided to sell their whole company and I decided to search for another job (P16).

[...] yes my employment security was threatened because no income was promised and with the company losing money and shifting in management I didn't know if my job was secure or not because the new owner was decreasing staff (P16).

Yes, I was scared that the company might close down and I will lose my Job since the company wasn't making enough money some people stopped working so I was also scared that my boss would tell me to not come to work till further notice and I wouldn't be able to provide for my family (P18)

Those participants employed in the health and education sectors, and in essential services, reported their job security was unaffected. One participant commented more job opportunities were created, because more patients were being admitted, therefore, more hands were needed and working hours increased; as illustrated in the following quote:

[...] it has created more job opportunities for her as I work in the medical sector making it easier for her to transit from being a student to working as a doctor (P2).

The majority, nevertheless, remarked their job security was affected. Some were without income, particularly during the stages of hard lockdown, while others' income was reduced, and some were retrenched. A number of businesses were struggling, so they lived in constant fear of losing their employment. The following quotes indicate some of the challenges related to job security:

My income has been affected because I was retrenched at work due to COVID-19 and I have not found a job since of which it is difficult to find one during this time (P15).

Yes, COVID-19 pandemic affected my job because I had to stay at home for two months without being paid and after coming back to work, our salaries were deducted by 10% (P14).

Yes, the pandemic has affected my job, because at work there were budget cuts and retrenchments and I had to go to work on certain days, so I had to make my budget afresh; there were lots of things I had to cut and take only the important ones like gym, and my child had to cancel swimming lessons, because I couldn't afford to pay anymore, so it definitely did affect my job (P24).

I'm a chef, cake baker and cake decorator. The pandemic affected both my side hustle and my job, proper job. As I have said, we stopped working and we obviously don't get paid. And it is very unlikely to be registered in this industry so that means that you are definitely not getting paid when you don't work. Working with cakes on the side as my side hustle, people cannot go out to celebrate so they don't see the need to order a cake, also most people are more into alcohol. So, we as chefs, cake bakers, we were losing. Our opportunities were denied by COVID restrictions (P8).

Although participants suggested their job security was affected and some lost their jobs there were, nevertheless, a few (23%) whose employment was unaffected and, in some instances, the pandemic created new job opportunities for them, such as in the medical profession. The following quotes highlight this:

After lockdown the company decided to shorten the number of employees since they were not making any profit during lockdown, they can't afford paying all employees. Luckily, I was not one of those employees who were dismissed. To conclude, the pandemic didn't affect my job security and employment (P11).

My employment was not affected, and I still had my job, however I did not work during the lockdown because schools were closed but I did return to work after the lockdown levels were less restricted and continued to work normally (P17).

The lockdown regulations and restrictions didn't affect my income in any way. My income not being affected is due to the fact that I work under the government as a teacher, and nothing was affected because after the lockdown we went back to school as normal (educators) and the kids were separated into groups of smaller numbers because of the regulations. It worked like this, one group today and the other today or one group this whole week and the other one the following week. Therefore, nothing was affected in my line of work only the teaching methods were affected (P7).

Income affected

Half the participants (50%) agreed their income was affected by the pandemic. Some were required to stay at home without income or at a reduced income, whilst others worked from home.

My attendance was strongly affected because now I had to work at home and in our job, it is, no work no pay job. It was hard because sometimes I worked at home because I work in a call centre and also, I work as a drama tutor at a school in my community which takes 2 hours of my time after work, so I usually had more hours at home where I would do the paperwork. It was so challenging. And even the levels we would go to work and on some pandemic levels we would work at home (P19).

A few participants commented the lockdown regulations and restrictions did not affect their income in any way, because some were government employees, whilst others earned income through part-time tutoring.

In some instances, the pandemic had a positive effect on their income, whilst it had an adverse effect in most instances, reducing participants' income. One of the interviewees commented the lockdown regulations affected her, as she was sometimes unable to go to work, because when someone was found positive with COVID-19, they were told to stay at home so the workspace could be decontaminated.

Family responsibilities

Some participants commented on the changes to their employment and working conditions, while others commented on the changes to their child care, which also impacted their working conditions.

There was a change in childcare, but it was not affective, as at first peak of COVID-19 we were not working at all, I had lot of time to take care of my children as I was always at home all the time with my children, so I had lot of time for childcare than when I am working (P1).

My work and child care affected because I am a single mother and I use my income from the business to take care of my child. When I could not make any income, I struggled to put food on the table for my child and I couldn't pay her school fees. I have responded to this by taking my child to government school where there are no fees and that has helped me to save money and rescue my business with that money (P22).

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a negative impact on my work. When it comes to family responsibilities it had indeed affected me because sometimes, I had to neglect my work to do any family responsibilities and house chores (P9).

Majority of parents who are taking care of their family responsibilities experienced increased pressure and erosion to social support. There was a change in family routines and relationship between me and my family (P4).

Yes, it did affect my employment because I was not working on certain days, so I had to spend more time with my little one and not get a nanny and so that helped me and my child bond more even though the circumstances were not good (P24).

There were increased family responsibilities and financial responsibilities during COVID-19, confirmed by some participants who commented their social lives were affected and there was increased family conflict. They reported experiencing greater pressure and erosion of their social support during the various levels of lockdown, particularly during the periods of hard lockdown. A number of the interviewees commented on the increase in domestic and household chores.

Firstly, I do not want to lie, it was great being with my child but obviously how I took care of him before I started working at home and after had changed. It changed both in positive and negative way, on the positive side I got to spend more time with my son, unlike before where I would see him before I go to work and late at night after work, of which most of the time I would come back to find him asleep. On the negative side, taking care of him and having to do my work was difficult, sometime made me wish I had a nanny but how would I pay the nanny (P21).

Majority of parents who are taking care of their family responsibilities experienced increased pressure and erosion to social support. There was a change in family routines and relationship between me and my family (P4).

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a negative impact on my work. When it comes to family responsibilities it had indeed affected me because sometimes, I had to neglect my work to do any family responsibilities and house chores (P9).

Discussion

The results of this study support findings by Dang and Nguyen (2021: 1), Uddin (2021: 9) and Duvvury *et al.* (2021: 2) that the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequent lockdown levels, national regulations, and restrictions in business operations disrupted the South African economy, as well as affected businesses and workplaces. This, in turn, resulted in workers losing income and or jobs, leading to increased poverty and unemployment in SA. The majority women who participated in this South African study were Black. The results support Jacobs (2021) and Bowman-Williams (2020: 33), who determined Black women were particularly adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they are over-represented in low-income positions that offer fewer benefits and were more likely to become unemployed during the pandemic. In addition, the study results indicate the area of employment that most

affected women during the COVID-19 pandemic, was in the more informal sector, for example, street traders, hospitality workers, waitresses, and domestic workers, who were more affected than those in more formal employment. This was related to issues of lockdown, registration with the unemployment fund and similar social security mechanisms.

The results of this study, furthermore, concur with Kostina and Bannykh (2021: 1), who determined COVID-19 pandemic restrictions had a negative effect, particularly on lower income families, and increased unemployment and the need for increased government support measures during the pandemic. In addition, results from this study are consistent with findings by Naidu (2021: 1) that the South African government and the economy failed to adequately provide for the workers in SA and furthered gender inequities. The findings also concur with Khwela-Mdluli and Beharry-Ramraj (2020: 16501), who contend the job losses experienced by women is a negative effect of COVID-19, because this not only presented a threat to women in industry but was also a serious impediment to their progression, economic participation, and enablement. Participants confirmed their income was negatively affected during the pandemic due to changes to their employment, such as, reduced hours, no work no pay; business operations were affected, and having to close during hard lockdown periods, or close during decontamination of premises when staff tested positive, among others. The findings corroborate the statement by Odeku (2020: 16069) that women-led businesses in the tourism, hospitality, personal care and similar sectors were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions. Findings further support the contention by Odeku (2020: 16073) that women in both formal and informal sectors were negatively affected, particularly in instances where businesses had to close down or be declared insolvent.

The effects on family life were found to be both positive and negative. On the one hand, women tended to have more time to spend with their children, which was a positive, however, the inability to socialise resulted, on occasions, in increased family tension. On the other hand, women were faced with increased responsibilities caring for children and other family members, preparing food, doing housework and assisting children with online learning and home schooling. Uddin (2021: 7) reported similar findings, showing women experienced increased work-life balance challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of their increased role requirements. There was, nonetheless, no evidence in the results of family support, with spousal co-operation noted in some instances but no evidence of organisational support, which Uddin (2021: 9) contends is essential for working women's well-being.

Work-life balance was affected in various ways by COVID-19, in some instances these were positive, such as spending less time shopping and more time with families, and sometimes, women who were working felt their increased family responsibilities and increased dependent care (Munyeka and Maharaj, 2022: 6) negatively impacted their work activities. In other instances, it also resulted in diminished social life and increased family conflict. The results further ratify Dunatchik *et al.* (2021: 194), who contend the shift to remote work, as well as the closure of schools and child care centres, increased demands on working parents and reinforced the unequal domestic division of labour (Yerkes *et al.*, 2020: 1).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of women in employment and particularly those in informal and seasonal occupations, such as street traders and hospitality. The findings of this research confirm the pandemic had a significant negative effect on South African women's monthly income, in particular the informal and low-income earners. The study found the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and regulations impacted South African women's work environment, with many having to work from home or adapt to a hybrid model, which resulted in work hours spilling into weekends. In addition, the findings indicate there were changes to family responsibilities, which included increased time in childcare, home-schooling; and other household tasks such as house work. On the positive side, it was found some women were able to spend more time with their families. Consequently, this study confirmed the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the lives of South African women who participated in this study, in their employment, family responsibilities and work-life balance. It is, moreover, important to include a gender analysis for the readiness and response attempts to improve the effectiveness of financial and social support interventions, in order to promote gender equity goals. Hence, it is recommended there be greater financial and social support at government policy level for women working in the informal sector and those employed in low skilled jobs. It is also recommended employers have a contingency plan to deal with major work disruptions, as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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