

A close-up photograph of a woman in a grey zip-up hoodie holding a young child. The child is wearing a pink shirt with a cartoon pattern of rabbits and donkeys. The woman's hands are visible, one resting on the child's head and the other near their chest. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a kitchen or domestic setting.

'South Africa's multilevel Shecession'

During the COVID-19 crisis, women shed more jobs and took on more of the additional childcare burden. As South Africa eased out of the stricter levels of lockdown, men returned more quickly than women to their pre-COVID-19 childcare levels. For women in particular, working from home meant striking a balancing act that left many feeling as if they were falling short both at home and at work. Drawing from recent research, HSRC researchers discuss how employers can better support women. By *Candice Groenewald, Zaynab Essack and Andrea Teagle*

Many women struggled to meet work demands while balancing the added childcare and domestic work during lockdown.

Photo: Charles Deluvio, Unsplash

South Africans are mostly supportive of women working, but with some caveats. Women contributing to household income is fine – even desirable – as long as this is [secondary to their roles as caregivers](#). In fact, if a woman has children of school-going age, she should rather not work, according to almost two-thirds of South Africans.

These perceptions, captured by the HSRC's 2017 South African Social Attitudes Survey, are reflected in the gendered nature of work in South Africa. When COVID-19 arrived on our shores, nearly half of the workforce was female. But women tended to be concentrated

in the care sector (where jobs are typically low-paying), occupied fewer managerial posts and were paid less than men for the same work.

With the onset of COVID-19, these gendered divisions deepened at every level and were particularly stark during the peak of the crisis. Between February and April 2020 the country shed 2.9 million net jobs. According to the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile ([NIDS-CRAM](#)) survey undertaken by researchers at Wits University, women accounted for two-thirds of these losses. By June, some women had returned to work; however, women still accounted for

58% of net job losses from February to June.

Black women in townships and rural areas were particularly affected. A study conducted by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) on the impact of COVID-19 across five townships found that 7 in 10 women (72%) spent more on food, compared with 5 in 10 men. And according to the HSRC's Street talk-Asikulume Lockdown Survey, almost 1 in 10 women nationally reported that they skipped meals in response to financial strain.

Speaking at a recent lecture on the gendered COVID-19 impacts, NIHSS

CEO Sarah Masetso noted that while overall income decreased, women's spending on basic goods remained comparatively high. "Women are spending more of their money [than men], taking care of the basics, taking care of the household," she said. Referring to the results from the NIHSS survey, she added that the burden of COVID-19 is not shared equally.

Impact on paid and unpaid work

While the proportion of women in the workplace shrank, at the same time the unpaid work women undertook increased drastically.

South Africa's high percentage of female-headed households partly explains why women disproportionately took on more unpaid work with the closure of schools and childcare services. Almost three in four (74%) women reported that they lived with children, compared with 61% of men, according to NIDS-CRAM. This disproportionate burden is significant because female-headed households are already at a [greater risk](#) for poverty.

In households where men are present, both women and men reported spending more time on childcare. However, as the NIDS-CRAM survey showed, women still took on more of the increased burden.

In April 2020, around 73% of women and 66% of men living with children reported spending more time than usual looking after them. Of those adults reporting a bigger childcare burden, almost 80% of women said they were spending an *extra 4 hours* on childcare, compared with 65% of men. The [second wave](#) of the NIDS-CRAM survey showed that, as lockdown eased, men more quickly reverted to pre-lockdown childcare levels than women did.

The working-from-home balancing act

According to the second wave of the NIDS-CRAM survey, twice as many women as men (roughly 3.4 million women versus 1.7 million men) said

that childcare prevented them from going to work or made work very difficult in June 2020.

To unpack the challenges faced by women who remained employed during lockdown, a team of HSRC researchers led by Dr Candice Groenewald rolled out an online survey to a convenience sample of 58 adults, 40 of whom were women aged 31–57 years. The survey was made up of open-ended questions where the participants could describe their anxieties and concerns about working from home.

Findings revealed that most of the women (70%) struggled to maintain healthy boundaries between their home lives and work. The lack of separation between work and home time led participants to feel guilty when working, and guilty when not working.

"I always feel like I am not doing enough," one woman reported. "I end up working until late. I am on my laptop [and] I never have time for my family. I feel guilty when I am taking a break from work."

Another stated, "I feel like it sometimes takes me longer to complete tasks because I'm not focused. Ending my workday before 17h00 to have dinner ready by 18h00 when my husband arrives home..."

Another participant summed it up: "Healthy parenting is a challenge due to workloads and home schooling." Among the sample of 18 men, three (17%) expressed similar challenges.

Women-friendly work policies

The deep-seated patriarchal beliefs that underlie the wage gap in South Africa will not be shifted easily. However, employers accommodating the demands of women workers can help to make the work environment more welcoming to women, and help to reduce the shrinking of the female workforce during crises.

The psychosocial effects of working from home during lockdown emphasise the need for employers to implement targeted support programmes to promote healthier

work patterns. To support female employees and avoid long-term burnout, employers should prioritise communication approaches and timelines that respect the complexities of women's lives, the authors of the study suggest.

Beyond COVID-19, the choice to work from home can significantly free women so they can attend to their duties; however, men should also benefit from this flexibility to encourage a more equal division of childcare. The findings of this small HSRC survey, while not generalisable, underscore the need for employers to start asking critical questions about their roles in perpetuating (or not explicitly preventing) employee burnout. This is important, for not only women but men too, in ensuring employers consider the different responsibilities women and men have outside of work, while also making room for a shift towards greater equality. In this regard, policies should enable women and men to have a stronger (perhaps more supportive) role in domestic and childcare responsibilities without judgement.

Questions such as 'How do we support women (and men) in their work capacity, without compromising their family life or mental health?' or 'What strategies and policies can we, and should we, put in place that recognise the multiple roles women (and men) play, without judgement?' should be asked.

These ongoing conversations around the experiences of women and men should be open, honest and guided by the aim of finding ways to support women and men effectively through the aftermath of COVID-19 and beyond.

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