

Evaluating the Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Socioeconomic Status of South African Women

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Abstract

This research was conducted to evaluate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic status of South African women. There is an urgent need for a better understanding of the unique circumstances and provisional assistance of effective support for women throughout the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath considering the level of impact the virus had on women. To achieve the research objective, a literature-based analysis was employed, which provides an in-depth analysis and evaluation of previous literature on the unprecedented nature and trend of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts on the socioeconomic status of women in South Africa. Thus, despite the limited scientific data on the most recent development of the pandemic, the findings revealed that the pandemic has escalated most variables of socioeconomic status of women in South Africa, which include high poverty rates, increased rates of unplanned pregnancy, school drop-out of schoolgirls and child labour among teenage girls, lack of income, decreased financial empowerment, reduced access to conducive healthcare, excessive maternal mortality, and growing food shortages and malnutrition. Thus, as the world continues to search for a reliable vaccine and other preventive measures for the

virus, this paper recommended that policymakers and stakeholders around the globe, and most especially in South Africa, should develop coherent and strategic policies that will incorporate and attend to the socioeconomic needs of women.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, socioeconomic status, women empowerment, child labour, teenage girls, South Africa

JEL Codes: A14, B26, B54, E26

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South Africa ranks 5th among the nations with a high number of Covid-19 infection cases globally (WHO, 2020 & WHO, 2021), and has the highest number of cases in the African continent (Cook, 2020; Mukandavire, et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Covid-19 which was declared as a pandemic on the 11th day of March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) has been ravaging the globe, causing mortality, and overwhelming the public health sector (Mbukanma, et al., 2020). In a bid to control the transmission and the spread of the virus, several measures such as quarantine and lockdowns were enacted; however, these measures come with several implications or consequences (van Gelder et al., 2020). Impacts of the infection have been felt around the globe

in all sectors. If the effect of crises is never gender-neutral, Covid-19 is no exception.

In South Africa, the female gender makes up 51.2% of the total population (Statistics South Africa, 2019), with almost half living in rural areas with no access to basic amenities such as clean water. South African society is known to be highly discriminatory against women owing to its cultural, social systems and religious beliefs (Parry & Gordon, 2020). Also, the society is a patriarchal system (Parry & Segalo, 2017) that believes in the oppression of the women gender, and this is further compounded by the apartheid system prior to democracy (Bower, 2014). However, the achievement of democracy in 1994 saw the nation setting out policies and constitutions that were generally inclusive while

highlighting gender equality and women empowerment programmes to aid the development of women (United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020a).

These steps were further extended in 2014 by the establishment of the women's department by the then President Jacob Zuma. The establishment of the department was aimed at the promotion of human rights and socioeconomic status, and fostering gender equality (Parry & Gordon, 2020; United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020a). Despite all the laid down policies, the gendered effect of most epidemic outbreaks is yet to be addressed by any government policies or any global public health institutions (Wenham et al., 2020). Following the Covid-19 outbreak in South Africa, the impact has been borne by the women, especially those in the informal settlement, who are mostly household heads and caregivers. Although emerging gender difference data populated on mortality and infection rate of Covid-19 globally shows that men have died more and are more likely to suffer severe complications of Covid-19 than women (Dehingia & Raj, 2021; Jinet et al., 2020), studies, however, have shown that during

most outbreaks, gendered norms endanger the women folks who are most likely to be infected because of their role as caregivers within families and as front-line health workers (Isaac, Strydom & Mbukanma, 2022; Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020).

Women are subjected to working long hours at work and carry the burden of looking after the home front. Moreover, post effect of measures taken to curb the spread of the virus, such as the policies that made most employees work from home, has increased the violence against women and the girl child within homes (Nigam, 2020) and new behavioural patterns both negative and positives were identified or rather noticed by household (UN women, 2020). Similarly, the effect of travel restriction caused untold financial constraints and uncertainty for mostly foreign female domestic workers (Wenham et al., 2020), while those that were able to travel long distances to reach their place of employment further expose themselves to the risk of infection (Blouws, 2020). In a recent report by the United Nations, the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across the globe would be felt more by women, owing to the inability of women to absorb economic shock, their limited access to

protection coupled with the majority being breadwinners in a single-parent household (United Nations, 2020a).

Similarly, STATSA 2019 shows that more than 90% of healthcare workers in South Africa are women, emphasising the gendered nature of the health workforce and the risk that predominantly female health workers incur. The impact of Covid-19 can obscure the progress made so far in terms of gender equality, socioeconomic development, and empowerment of the South African woman (United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020). Although SA ranks among the top infected nations, the pandemic came at a time when the economy is in turmoil, and this has a great capacity of setting back the advances made after democracy (Chitiga-Mabugu, et al., 2021). Hence, this paper reviews and evaluates the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic status of South African women to help provide information that will be useful to stakeholders in making decisions and policies that will improve the concerns of women in South Africa.

Motivation and Objectives of the Study

Gender disaggregated data from previous studies have shown critical reasons for

effective support for women during the period of the pandemic, as they are the most vulnerable gender (in a social sense) amid crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the lack of such data negatively affects the level of policy decision-making, supports interventions and increases harm to an already marginalised gender group (UN, 2020a). Accordingly, information on the distinctive nature of women, particularly the ones that live in areas of conflict, was also scarce before the surge of Covid-19. Consequently, increased concern has been raised on the humanitarian and socioeconomic crisis of women over the past decade (Noble et al., 2019).

Similarly, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed women to a more vulnerable situation, as the little attention given to them previously has been shifted to the survival struggle of the state in the Covid-19 pandemic. It, therefore, becomes important to evaluate the level of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has caused on the socioeconomic status of women as it concerns poverty rates, school drop-out rates and child labour among teenage girls, income, financial empowerment, access to conducive healthcare, maternal mortality, and food shortages and

malnutrition. Hence, the objective of this study is to evaluate and reveal the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic status of women in South Africa. It is, however, believed that this study will provide policymakers with the information that will assist in improving the high poverty rate among women, school drop-out, child labour among teenage girls, income, financial empowerment, access to conducive healthcare, maternal mortality, food shortages, and malnutrition.

Review of Related Literature

The global economy, security system, health sector, livelihood, social protection, education, and other various sectors that relate to human existence have been affected by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Foss, 2020), but these negative impacts can be said to be severer on the women by virtue of their sex (UN, 2020b). The novel Covid-19 disease is caused by a severe acute respiratory virus known as Coronavirus (Ekumah, et al., 2020). According to the external situation report of WHO in the African region, cases of Covid-19 infection are on the rise and more deaths are being recorded (WHO, 2020a). The report also states that out of the 114,394 new cases recorded as of the fourth

quarter of 2020, about 68% of this number was in South Africa, making the country the hardest hit in the continent. An important blow of the pandemic was felt in the economic activity of the republic following measures like lockdown, which was a tool aimed at mitigating and reducing the spread of the virus (Modise et al., 2020). It is noteworthy to point out that the South African economy prior to Covid-19 has been under intense strain (Chitiga-Mabugu et al., 2021; United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020a). According to the STATSA (2019), the economic growth of the republic fell from 3% in 2010 to 1.5% in 2019, entering a technical recession by the fourth quarter of 2019. Moreover, the rate of unemployment spiked to 27.3% in the first quarter of 2019 and escalated to 29.1% by the third quarter (STATSA, 2019). The pandemic has been projected to contribute to the decline in the GDP growth of the economy by 5.1 % as against the projections made prior to the onset of Coronavirus, and unless proactive and innovative actions are implanted, the republic would need at least extra 5 years to get back to pre-Covid-19 economy (United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020a). The ongoing pandemic promises a

devastating aftermath on the economy as well as on the socioeconomic status of women in South Africa with no certainty on how it will unfold as the pandemic has disrupted sectors while affecting people directly or indirectly (Chitiga-Mabuguet et al., 2021). Women and the girl child in South Africa and most of the world face more risk because of the pandemic such as school closure, unemployment, lack of access to a safe healthcare system, loss of income, maternal mortality, gender-based violence, unpaid work etc. (Parry & Gordon, 2020; UN, 2020a).

Impact of Covid-19 on Women's Socioeconomic Status

The pandemic's overall impact on South Africans' socioeconomic status, particularly women, is still unknown, but one major source of concern is its impact on the labour market, which is largely populated by women and associated with low-income, insecure work, informal sectors of the economy, no unemployment benefits, limited access to healthcare, and little back-up savings (Danquah et al., 2020). Measures set down to aid mitigate the spread of the virus like the closure of international borders, scale down of human and industrial activities, supply distributions, and global demand meltdown have led to

increased socioeconomic problems of the Covid-19 pandemic (Mbunge, 2020).

Globally, about 60% of women work in insecure informal employment and earn 16% less than their male colleagues. This gendered wage gap causes women to live in poverty when compared to men (Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020). According to STATSA (2018), the South African informal sector employment is mostly traders, and this sector employs more women than men (47.6% of women compared to 30,6% of men). Low-wage workers and SA female-headed households are severely affected by the ongoing pandemic (Cubrich, 2020). The female-headed households tend to be pushed further into poverty unlike the male counterparts as most of the female breadwinners are market traders whom the lockdown threatens their source of livelihood (United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020b). Closure of school and day care centres has added more burden to working mothers as the kids are mostly home and need to be taken care of, and grandparents that would have been an alternative in taking care of the kids are now discouraged as they are more vulnerable to Covid-19 mortality (Savira & Suharsono, 2013). Similarly, women around the globe are

mostly engaged in low-skilled labour such as cleaning and housekeeping, which makes them more vulnerable to the virus as their job description demands touching and contact with objects and humans. Hence, this study evaluates the impact of Covid-19 on key variables of the socioeconomic status of women in South Africa as detailed below.

Education

Education is an essential tool required for the improvement of life quality; it is also a basic human right, which is denied to millions of women and girls worldwide (Somani, 2017). Access to quality education is presented more to men and boys in most African countries and parts of the world (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In South Africa, several factors, especially those linked to permanent or temporal dropout, contribute to the dwindling number of girls in school (Karabo & Natap, 2013). The pandemic has further posed a threat to the education of learners across the globe but more risk to the girl child/women, and this is because when a woman or a girl child is pulled out of an educational system, the chances of returning are minimal compared to the case of a boy child and this reverse benefits of education and possible employment for

the girl child (United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, 2020). Schools were closed following the onset of the pandemic, and this poses a great risk to the safety and education of the girl child.

Following the closure of schools, most institutions of learning set up various e-learning platforms to assist and make sure the academic schedule runs to the closing stages. However, due to financial constraints, especially for those residing in rural areas, there is a lack of access to technology to enable them to participate in remote learning. Most mothers who are breadwinners have lost their source of employment and income due to the economic backdrop resulting from the Covid-19 surge (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Khwela-Mdluli & Beharry-Ramraj, 2020).

Schools in South Africa are more than places where knowledge is disseminated between teacher and learner. For children from disadvantaged families, schools are also places of protection and security; among other aspects, more than 9 million children enjoy 2 meals a day at school as part of the Nationwide School Feeding Programme (NSNP). However, during the Lockout Period and Stage 4 of the

Government's risk-adjusted strategy, the NSNP was suspended. This leaves these children at risk of undernourishment and malnutrition during school closing times. Besides, most individual academic achievements in South Africa are attained in early adulthood, which stabilises socioeconomic conditions throughout generations (Darin-Mattsson et al., 2017). These educational growth and achievements have been tampered with in recent times, especially for women and girl children in South Africa, as Rafaeli and Hutchinson (2020) suggest that the relationship between educational growth and the unrest of the Covid-19 pandemic is negative and has decreased human capital development.

More concerns were, however, expressed on the extended lockdown policy, which exposes women and girl children to a higher risk of unwanted reproductive crises in the likes of rape and teenage pregnancy, thus resulting in a high risk of school dropout victims when schools reopen (Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020). In essence, a similar event occurred in Sierra Leone, where teenage pregnancy increased by 65% and was caused by derailed socioeconomic situation imposed by Ebola. However, the surge of the Covid-19 pandemic has

reminded various stakeholders in the educational sector of the importance of restructuring the educational system in a way to be inclusive of the needs of women and girl children.

Employment

The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) disease also known as Covid-19 has disrupted economies, reduced employment opportunities and caused job losses globally. However, these impacts have been felt more by women. According to the Chief of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Guy Ryder CBE, the impact of the Covid-19 disease could cause the loss of over 195 million jobs globally. In South Africa, reports have shown that about 3 million South Africans have lost their jobs, with women being the most affected (Mbukanma & Strydom, 2021; Parry & Gordon, 2020; Tswana, 2020). Before the outbreak, poverty in SA had been feminized (Kehler, 2001). Women were under represented in top decision-making bodies mostly due to sociocultural factors (Ouedraogo, 2018).

Following the outbreak of the ongoing pandemic, women have been effectively made politically invisible in almost all decision-making processes surrounding

Covid-19 as reported in a study conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in September 2020 (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2020; World Health Organization: Regional Office for Africa, 2020). However, the percentage of women who work as front liners exceeds that of men globally, thereby making women more likely to be infected (Crimi & Carlucci, 2021). Events preceding the outbreak have made most women quit their paid jobs in the labour market and seek more flexible positions offered by temporary employment, so they can juggle taking care of their families, the elderly ones and children who stay home due to school closure (Parry & Gordon, 2020). Due to the economic downturn heightened by the pandemic, most women have been affected by layoffs, dismissals, and redundancies at their jobs, which have further restricted their ability to take care of their families, especially families that are headed by females (UN, 2020).

In the rural area of South Africa, most women, especially black women, are farmers and retail traders in the informal sector. The Covid-19 regulations failed to include them as essential goods and service providers, and as such, these

women were not able to harvest or sell their produce, thereby losing their earnings (Parry & Gordon, 2020). Furthermore, the republic has experienced rounds of layoffs in the service sector, where women are over represented. Evidence has shown that prevention measures such as lockdowns and quarantine during an outbreak can severely affect the economic security and livelihood of women, thereby increasing poverty and food insecurity (UN, 2020b). An instance can be found in the case of about 85% of women retail traders in Liberia that were severely affected following the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2016. From this instance, it can be deduced that the ongoing pandemic would have a prolonged and extremely negative effect on women's labour participation (UN, 2020a).

Income

The pandemic promises an increased income inequality, which would invariably increase the high-income disparities already existing in South Africa (Bhorat et al., 2012). Studies have shown that men globally earn more than female colleagues and South Africa is no different (Government of Republic of South Africa, 2015). Population living in poverty across upper and lower poverty

lines has increased following the outbreak, with more impacts felt by female-headed households, those working in the informal sector, unskilled labours, those with education below secondary level, and rural dwellers. The major population represented in these categories are mostly women (United Nations Development Programme South Africa, 2020b). In the informal sector, most women work as store clerks, grocery store employers, and food service workers, and they earn very low wages.

These low-wage earners comprise mostly women, who constantly put their lives at risk, considering the nature of their jobs, which is mostly house-keeping (Cubrich, 2020). As the level of unemployment increases, following the reduction of economic activities, sources of income for employees reduce accordingly. Consequently, in April 2020, the government of South Africa rolled out a stimulus package programme to support mainly the unemployed. This initiative from the government was aimed at assisting households to meet their financial needs (Chitiga-Mabuguet al., 2021). On the contrary, the initiative has created a perpetual dependency of those set of South Africans who are mainly women on government support. It thus

implies that if, in the long run, this stimulus package programme is suspended, the beneficiaries will face tougher financial crises because of over-reliance on government support.

Healthcare of Women and Girl Children

The impact of the pandemic on the health system cannot be overemphasized as most hospitals in the Republic of South Africa are overwhelmed and stretched beyond their limits (Nyasulu & Pandya, 2020). Challenges crippling the South African health sector include service suspension, depletion, unavailability of supplies like PPE, reduced health-seeking behaviour, and overburden on facilities. The effect of the pandemic on the health of the ordinary South African citizen has been damaging, and this has resulted in increased mortality rate, mental health issues (Schäfer, et al., 2020), and substance abuse; citizens who suffer from other illnesses like HIV or TB have been neglected (Mbukanmaet al., 2020). Although reports have shown that men are dying more because of Covid-19, the health of South African women is affected immensely as most resources are redistributed and diverted.

The diversion of these resources has led to the death of pregnant women who

were in dire need of antenatal and postnatal care but could not have access to proper health care (Mbunge, 2020). A South African woman faces the risk of contracting the virus as the female gender make up more than 70% of the health workforce (United Nations, 2020). According to reports by the WHO, the female-to-male ratio of infected health workers in SA is 1.0 (WHO, 2020), which supports the claim that there are more female workers in the health sector. In addition, due to more attention being given to the Covid-19 pandemic, reduced attention is given to the reproductive health system for women and the girl child, which leads to dire consequences such as increased rates of adolescent pregnancies, HIV, and sexually transmitted diseases (Mbunge, 2020).

Gender-Based Violence

Another devastating effect of the pandemic is that of gender-based violence (GBV) or intimate partner violence (IPV), which is one of the prevalent diseases running not only in the republic but also globally (Johnson et al., 2020). Intimate partner violence is the most common form of gender-based violence experienced by women. In the wake of the lockdown measure stipulated to curtail Covid-19 transmission, the

home became a place of solace and peace, but for some, it turned out to be a place laced with violence, burden, and discrimination (Nigam, 2020). Violence against women and girls is increasing daily in South Africa as the trend of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to grow with the economic downturn, social stresses, and measures to restrict contact and movement (UN, 2020b). Reports have shown that a total of 120,000 calls were received by the SA national helpline from victims of gender-based violence within three weeks of the first lockdown in South Africa (Mbunge, 2020). Access to clinical care services and forensic medical documentation needed for GBV and IPV are hampered by restrictions and stigma revolving around Covid-19 (Johnson et al., 2020).

Policy and Managerial Implications

Socioeconomic status has been addressed in a variety of ways, most often as it concerns the survival of individuals in a given geographical setting. This study was motivated by the effects of Covid-19 on people around the globe. Thus, the policy and managerial implications of this study help in outlining concerns that will help policymakers and stakeholders to make informed decisions regarding improving the socioeconomic status of

women and girl children in South Africa. Accordingly, policymakers and stakeholders in South Africa should consider the following implications:

- a. **Education:** Covid-19 pandemic has forced schools to shutdown abruptly, exposing the high inequality gap between impoverished and privileged students as the learning process moved online. This process has exposed schoolgirls in South Africa to more vulnerability and exploitation as most of them are less privileged, hence unable to communicate their challenges and experience. Thus, a restructured remote learning system should be adopted with the inclusion of face-to-face periodic monitoring and control. This will help in ascertaining the challenges faced by schoolgirls while studying remotely.
- b. **Employment:** It is obvious that the state of the economy globally is in contraction. However, sustainable employment and job creation should not be underestimated in rebuilding the economy. The covid-19 infection trend has lingered, implying that it has come to stay in our environment. As such, policies that will enhance the safety of economic activities should be implemented to sustain the employment of front-line and informal workers in South Africa, which are mainly women.
- c. **Income:** Income as earlier mentioned could come from several sources such as social supports, stimulus packages, salary, and benefits to mention but a few. However, the major concern is that the sources of this income have been affected greatly by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, it is evident that a sustainable economy, employment, and personal income are positively related. As such, in order to assist the already marginalised female gender in South Africa, a long-term policy on income sustainability and support should be implemented.
- d. **Healthcare of Women and Girl Children:** The outbreak of Covid-19 has overwhelmed the healthcare centres in South Africa with numbers of patients infected with Coronavirus. This has caused major neglect and limited access

to good healthcare services for pregnant women and others who are sick. Health is wealth and, as such, for the continued existence of this generation, a structural balance should be maintained to accommodate both Covid-19-infected patients and women seeking healthcare services.

- e. **Gender-Based Violence:** An alarming number of calls were reported from the helpline on gender-based violence in South Africa within the first three months of the lockdown in 2020. These violent actions were mainly perpetuated on women and girl children, making this experience of lockdown and staying at home a horrible situation for them. Thus, to salvage this situation, a continuous campaign and awareness programmes on how families should live in harmony should be initiated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study evaluates the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic status of women in South Africa. A conceptual literature review method was employed to evaluate and reveal the extent the unprecedented virus has

caused women and girl children in South Africa. It was, however, identified from previous literature that the government of South Africa took lockdown measures to control the spread of the virus. The lockdown and safety measures helped in bringing down the infection rate at the beginning of the last quarter of 2020. On the other hand, severe social implications emanated from the lockdown regulation, where most people lost their jobs owing to limitations of economic activities around the globe. Secondly, the review of the literature shows that women's socioeconomic status regarding the exposure of marginalised schoolgirls to remote learning, job losses from front-line and informal workers, which are mainly women, as well as income, have been affected negatively.

Moreover, strained healthcare systems and resources owing to the overwhelming situation of Covid-infected patients were found to have limited women from accessing good healthcare services. It was also revealed that there was a rapid increase in gender-based violence, which was mainly perpetuated on women and girl children. To this end, it was recommended that a restructured remote learning system should be adopted with the inclusion of face-to-face periodic

monitoring of schoolgirls to ascertain their challenges and attend to them. Secondly, a structural economic policy that will promote safe economic activities should be implemented to sustain employment and income. Accordingly, a systematic balance should be provided to accommodate both Covid-

19 infected patients and women seeking healthcare services. And finally, a continuous campaign and awareness programmes on how families should live in harmony should be initiated by the government of South Africa indifferent degrees to reduce gender-based violence.

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