



Econ3x3

www.econ3x3.org

A web forum for accessible policy-relevant research and expert commentaries on unemployment and employment, income distribution and inclusive growth in South Africa

Downloads from this web forum are for private, non-commercial use only.

Consult the *copyright and media usage guidelines* on www.econ3x3.org

Subscribe for new research by email: www.econ3x3.org/subscribe

April 2021

Why women have fared worse in the pandemic

Jacqueline Mosomi, Amy Thornton, and Nicola Branson

Women are at far greater risk of losing their income and are more likely to be exposed to the COVID-19 health risk than men because of the type of work they do.

Introduction

A study on gendered occupational work contexts in South Africa shows that the COVID-19 health risk threatens to derail progress made by women in the South African labour market. Using occupational context data from the O*NET Survey (US Department of Labour), we characterize the COVID-19 risk in two key ways: work that is physically proximate enough to make infection likely, and work that requires regular exposure to infectious diseases. These two measures were merged with the Post-Apartheid Labour Market Series (PALMS) data to describe the distribution of risk in South Africa shortly before the pandemic. This was then cross referenced with jobs classified as essential services in the initial stage of the South African national lockdown, as well as with jobs that could feasibly be done from home.

Background

Gender inequality persists in all countries. In South Africa, women are less likely than men to participate in the labour market, and if they do, they are less likely to be employed. If women find employment, on average, they earn lower wages than men. Importantly, though, women have been making progress in the labour market and there is evidence of declining gender gaps. For example, Mosomi (2019) shows that although the median gender wage gap is persistent at above 30%, the mean gap declined from about 40% in 1994 to about 16% in 2014. This is partly attributable to the introduction of minimum wage policies in low-wage industries such as the domestic services sector, where most employees are women. In South Africa, domestic and elementary occupation workers make up 27% of total female employment. Thus minimum wage legislation, although gender neutral, has improved the overall average female wage and reduced the gender wage gap. However, the current pandemic could undermine progress towards gender equality by adversely affecting female employment. Moreover, the nature of the jobs women do makes them more exposed to the risks of contracting COVID-19 than their male counterparts.

The effects of the pandemic

Female employment in South Africa is concentrated in four main sectors: services, trade, finance, and domestic work, most of which have been heavily impacted by COVID19. The services sector employs about a third (31%) of all employed women, while the trade, finance, and domestic work sectors employ 22%, 15%, and 14%, respectively. The health risk nature of the COVID-19 pandemic sets it apart from financial recessions, which in the past have often had unintentional equalizing effects in the labour market, as they have tended to affect male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing, more adversely. Unlike these, the COVID-19 pandemic may undermine access to income for women (and black women, in particular) more than for men, partly because female employment is clustered in the services sector, which has been adversely affected by health safety protocols to reduce infection.

Indeed, a recent report by Statistics South Africa (2020) finds that between the first and second quarters of 2020, more than 2 million jobs were lost in South Africa, with the services sector recording the largest decline (515 000). Other sectors that recorded large declines included the trade sector (373 000), domestic work (311 000), finance (283 000), construction (278 000), and manufacturing (250 000). StatsSA also reports that the largest decreases in employment were in elementary occupations (616 000), sales and services (451 000), craft and related trade (419 000), domestic work (259 000) and clerical occupations (204 000).

Loss of income

The lockdowns prompted by the risks of the pandemic meant that in some periods only jobs defined as essential services or those that could be done remotely from home were permitted. Thus workers who could not work from home, and were not classified as “essential workers” were at greatest risk of job loss. A higher share of employed women (66%) than men (59%) fall within this group (**see Table 1**).

Table 1: Gender distribution across essential work and working from home categories

	Essential	Work from home	Both	Neither	Total
Men	27.13	10.92	2.90	59.05	100.00
Women	19.57	10.28	3.67	66.48	100.00

Source: Author’s own calculation from PALMS, sample contains employed individuals age 16-65 and all values weighted using sampling weights. The data on essential work and working from home comes from Kerr & Thornton (2020)

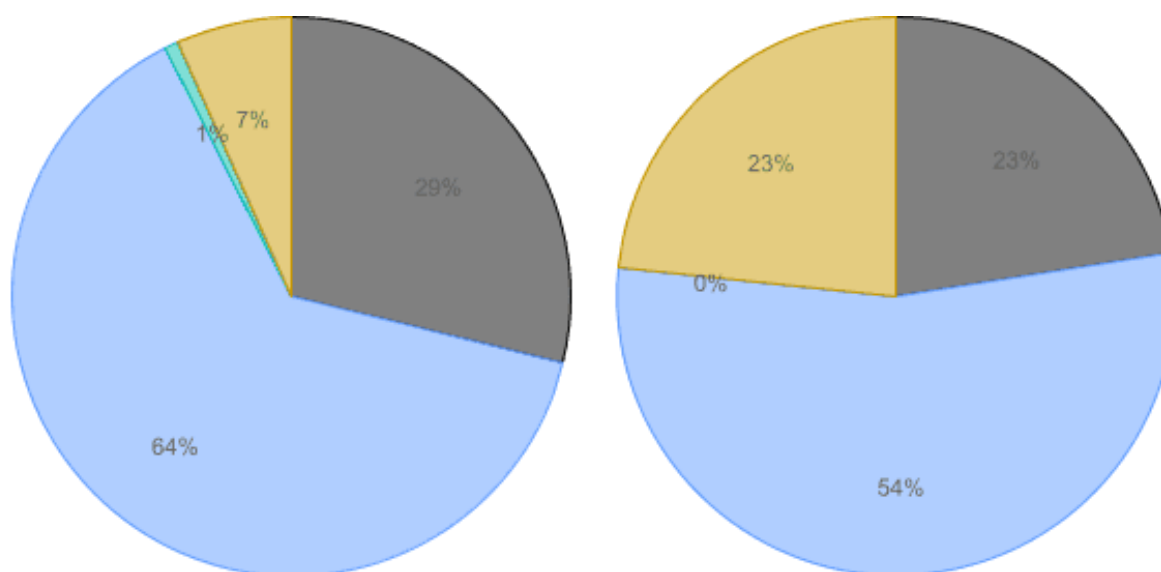
Moreover, more men than women were classified as essential service workers (27% compared with 20%). This is because most occupations in the essential services category are male dominated, including mining, construction and manufacturing labourers, drivers and mobile plant machine operators, agricultural labourers, and protective services. The least vulnerable in terms of job loss are those who could continue working remotely. Men and women are equally represented in this category at about 11% each. This is partly because individuals able to work from home are mostly professionals with tertiary qualifications, and in South Africa a higher proportion of women than men hold these qualifications. But this group comprises a small proportion of the population and, as other

research shows, women are more likely to juggle office work, childcare and housework than men.

Covid-19 health risk for women

Female occupations are 16 percentage points riskier in terms of both proximity and exposure to infectious diseases than men. Some 23% of female jobs are both exposed and proximate, compared with just 7% of male jobs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The distribution of occupational Covid-19 risk factors amongst the employed, by gender, 2017-2019



Source: Author's own calculations using PALMS v3.3

This stems from women clustering in occupations where they work in close proximity with others. For example, aside from making up almost all domestic workers and primary school teachers, women make up 78% of all personal care workers, 92% of home-based care workers, 57% of doctors, 87% of nurses, 76% of medical assistants, and 47% of pharmacists. Thus women who continued to work during the 'hard lockdown' because they were classified as "essential", were - and are - more likely to be exposed to the COVID-19 health risk.

The triple burden

With the shutdown of the economy came the closure of schools and Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres. This meant parents working from home had to juggle office work, childcare and housework. Research shows that social norms and gender roles surrounding housework and childcare persist in our society. Women are likely to spend more time looking after children and carrying out housework. Indeed, evidence from the NIDS-CRAM study shows that women reported spending more hours on childcare than did men compared to men during lockdown.

Employed women are more likely than men to live in households with children of all ages. Only 38% of employed women live in a household without children, compared with 53% of men. Additionally, the differential between men and women living with children is most pronounced for individuals who were not classified as essential services and whose work

cannot be done from home. This is also potentially the most economically vulnerable group in terms of job and income loss. In this category, women are about five percentage points more likely than men to live with very young children and up to 15 percentage points more likely to live with 7-14 year olds. Thus a disproportionate share of children in South Africa live in households with women who were most vulnerable to job loss during the hard lockdown.

Conclusion

Regardless of where women fall within our classification (essential workers or not; able to work from home or not), they face greater economic and health risks. If women are not essential service workers, the higher levels of proximate work may put their jobs at greater risk of termination. If women are essential, their occupations put them at measurably greater risk of exposure than men. In addition to the job loss and health risks resulting from the pandemic, those women who can keep working either because they are in essential services or able to work from home, still have to contend with disproportionate care responsibilities. With most schools closed and day-care facilities unavailable during much of 2020, parents were forced to juggle care work and office work. The impact of this on productivity and income is yet to be quantified.

Key policy implications

1. One explanation given for the persistent gender wage gap is that women tend to choose “safer” jobs. However, our findings show that, during this pandemic, female-dominated occupations are as risky as male ones. In fact, women have been equally represented on the frontline. Thus there is a need to examine how women’s work is valued.
2. Researchers have long advocated for flexible working hours to shield women from the penalty they suffer due to their dual role in the labour market and at home. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown this issue into sharp relief. One effect has been a reliance on working from home. However the pertinent issue of childcare has not been explicitly addressed. More consideration needs to be given to aligning school pandemic strategies with parental work commitments. The health risks of full-time, rather than part-time, school attendance need to be weighed up against the productivity costs for caregivers. Day-care facilities are a necessity. Some of these costs should be shifted to either government or employers.
3. Lastly, the pandemic has exposed vast educational inequalities in the labour market; workers with tertiary education are most protected from job loss. Today more women than men have tertiary qualifications. Nonetheless, only about 15% hold some form of tertiary qualification and most of the population – women as well as men - face an adverse post-pandemic labour market. Strategies to support female education need to be a key focus of policy.

References

- Casale, D. & Shepherd, D. (2020), 'The gendered effects of the ongoing lockdown and school closures in South Africa: Evidence from NIDS-CRAM waves 1 and 2'. National Income Dynamics (NIDS)-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) Wave 2 Working Paper No. 5
- Casale, D. & Shepherd, D. (2021), 'The gendered effects of the Covid-19 crisis and ongoing lockdown in South Africa: Evidence from NIDS-CRAM Waves 1 - 3. National Income Dynamics (NIDS)-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) Wave 3 Working Paper No. 4
- Kerr, A. & Thornton, A. (2020), Essential workers, working from home and job loss vulnerability in south Africa, Technical report, DataFirst, University of Cape Town.
- Mosomi J (2019a) 'Distributional changes in the gender wage gap in the post-apartheid South African labour market', WIDER Working Paper 2019/17, Helsinki: UNU-WIDER.
- Mosomi, J., Thornton, A., Branson, B. (2020). Unpacking the potential implications of Covid-19 for gender inequality in the SA labour market. Cape Town: SALDRU, UCT. (SALDRU Working Paper No. 269). <http://opensaldru.uct.ac.za/handle/11090/992>
- Statistics South Africa (2013), A Survey of Time Use, 2010. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa (2020), Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Statistical release P0211. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Jacqueline Mosomi** is a Junior Research Fellow at SALDRU, University of Cape Town. Her current research focuses on gender, education, and labour market outcomes.
- Amy Thornton** is a PhD student in the School of Economics, University of Cape Town.
- Nicola Branson** is a Senior Researcher at SALDRU, University of Cape Town. Her work focuses on the economics of education.