

New research shows how COVID-19 has made life harder for South African women

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Bo-Kaap, Schotsche Kloof, Cape Town, South Africa. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on

[South Africa and its economy](#). During economic crises, women often pay a heavy price and COVID-19 is no exception.

As in much of the world, the commerce, catering and personal care sectors faced closure or witnessed their activities severely restricted to contain the spread of the virus. These sectors employ a large majority of women.

Women are also over-represented in the [health sector](#) and thus more likely to be on the [frontline of the epidemic](#). School closures, meanwhile, led to an increase in women's domestic workloads.

Before the crisis, the situation of women in South Africa was already worrying. Women were more likely to be [unemployed or in lower-paid jobs](#) than men, while the poverty rate for women is [17 percentage points higher](#) than it is for men.

This raises the question of whether the crisis has exacerbated existing gender inequalities in the labor market and increased the vulnerability of South African women.

In a [recent study](#), we examined how the pandemic affected the South African economy and women in particular. We found that women have been more affected than men.

This finding is in [line with other studies](#) that the pandemic causes more [negative effects](#) to sectors that rely on female labor, which leads to [women earning less than their male counterparts](#). As a result, this pandemic has increased vulnerability and poverty for female-headed households more than for male-headed households.

Unequal impacts

We identified and modeled the channels through which the COVID-19 and lockdown measures are impacting the South African economy.

On one side, the economy is affected through international channels: it is harder for South Africa to export because other countries have reduced their consumption of South African commodities. On the other side, the economy is affected through national channels due to lockdown measures: some workers cannot work remotely, only essential sectors are open and other sectors are closed.

There have also been both supply and demand shocks to the economy. On the supply side, there is closure of factories induced by lockdown rules, which in our study we assume caused losses in productivity of 2% to 15%. At the same time, there is a reduction in demand from the rest of the world, which we assume cause reduction of exports by 10% to 15%.

Not all sectors have been affected by the pandemic in the same way—this depends on whether a sector was declared as essential or not and whether it related to exported commodities or not.

This unequal economic impact led to a disproportionate rise in unemployment for women, because they are concentrated in the sectors which were hit hardest by the lockdown measures, including [hospitality and personal care](#).

[The decreased demand for workers results in a drop in wages](#), leading to a reduction in household consumption. Female-headed households faced a bigger decrease in their real consumption, which declines 4% to 5% more than for male headed households, with a subsequent greater increase in poverty among women than among men.

Indeed, the losses in income create an increase in the poverty index by

one percentage point more for women than for men, resulting in a [poverty rate](#) which is higher for female households by 50 to 55% compared to that of male headed households.

How to turn things around for women

The impacts of COVID-19 on women are likely to be more severe than what we have captured in the findings of our study.

In our economic simulations, we ignored the negative impacts caused by women's high workload and pressure or by other psychological or physical impacts, for example, domestic violence.

All these negative impacts can also affect the next generation by catching today's children in a poverty trap. Thus, measures taken today to prevent the worst consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for women could directly support future wellbeing and economic growth.

Government support measures, including financial aid, can help women escape the trap. Offering education and training to women and supporting certain sectors to hire more women could also be helpful.

Affordable services to reduce the domestic burden on women, for example, state-funded childcare, could free up the time for women to benefit from education and to work.

The pandemic has created new challenges for societies and economies. However, in the domain of gender inequality, COVID-19 has only reinforced a problem which has been known for a long time: that [economic crises](#) make life ever harder for [women](#), who were already lagging behind.

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