

Working women in South Africa proved their resilience during COVID. As a result they've enhanced their well-being

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Women around the world have adjusted to new working realities after the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: Kristin Hardwick/Wikimedia Commons

One of the outcomes of the COVID pandemic is that people's working

lives have changed. Working at home and hybrid work have become prevalent, after constantly changing government rules and guidelines.

Globally, employees report many pandemic-related [challenges](#) —loss of employment, lack of career growth, loss of a sense of belonging with colleagues.

Our [study](#) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on working [women](#) in South Africa. We surveyed 402 working women. Most were in the 36–45 years age range, married or living together, and better educated than South African working women in general (44.5% held a postgraduate degree). We looked in particular at work-life balance, well-being and liminality (uncertainty during a time of change).

About half (52%) of the women home-schooled children during the pandemic. Of these, 30% stated they were solely responsible and 31% were mostly responsible for the home-schooling. These results support [findings](#) that working women were forced to rapidly adapt to remote working while dealing with diverse psychological, social and economic impacts on their work-life balance.

The emotional responses of the sample group during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that initial anxiety, fear and a sense of being overwhelmed shifted to optimism in a relatively short period of time. This finding gives encouraging news about safeguarding women's well-being during trying times and steps that can be taken to bolster well-being.

Women's experiences

Well-being is the measure of an individual's coping abilities. In particular it refers to their sense of being able to control their actions, and feeling that their behavior matches their personal values and goals

(often called "authenticity").

Liminality is about passing from one social reality to another. A liminal state occurs when life is in transition and, as a result, uncertainty and confusion replace previously clear and well-established norms and roles. These transitions, while limited in time, are sufficiently uncertain and unclear to result in changes to established or traditional perceptions, beliefs and social role behavior.

What the women told us can be summed up by three themes.

One was that they had to rapidly adjust to a new working environment and to the new reality of home-based work. The transition resulted in a level of complexity never experienced before. They were suddenly required to juggle the various responsibilities associated with this unexpected transition. They were faced with home-schooling, an increase in chores during the pandemic, and conflict with their spouse or partner about chores and finances.

Second, working women experienced complex emotional journeys as a result of the pandemic. Their well-being suffered as a result of the multiple, unplanned changes that they faced—and not by choice.

Finally, women had to set up a home office and adapt to changing working conditions, while coping with the responsibilities associated with being in a relationship and having children. Multiple dimensions of life, which previously could be separately managed to accommodate career choices, now needed to be blended in unexpected ways.

Work-life balance

1. Managers need to be aware of and help women employees to set boundaries. These boundaries will be specific to the individual.

2. Organizational culture needs to adapt and adopt a respect for technological boundaries in a world of hybrid and at-home work. A new "technological" etiquette needs to be defined. Insisting on entering a co-worker's office, interrupting a family dinner or expecting an immediate work response late at night are all considered unacceptable and even antisocial. When it comes to remote work or electronic communications, this behavior somehow is considered acceptable. The "always on" for working women may result in uncomfortable choices between their personal responsibilities and their careers.
3. Information technology needs to be reviewed to ensure that employees have the requisite [remote work](#) hardware, software and technical support to do their work productively.

Well-being

1. While women reported initial anxiety and fear, these feelings subsided quite rapidly. Managers should understand that the "new normal" of work has led to major disruption, and is still resulting in challenges and demands, which need to be explored on an individual basis.
2. Employers should take steps to increase [employee](#) independence and support at "work"—including the special challenges of home working—to enhance working women's mental health.
3. Make flexible working the new norm to ensure that [work-life balance](#) and well-being of working women is enhanced.

Liminality

1. Lead with empathy. Check in with women employees, who have experienced far greater demands on their time than their male colleagues as a result of the pandemic, as to what their job-

- related expectations are.
2. Management will need to take explicit steps to avoid two-tiered hybrid workplaces, with some employees interacting at the office while others are left behind.
 3. Management needs to sustain engagement and integrate remote employees into meetings and social events. Once again, with an emphasis on the special situation of female employees.

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