



ILERA **AFRICA** 9th Regional Congress

26 - 29 September 2021

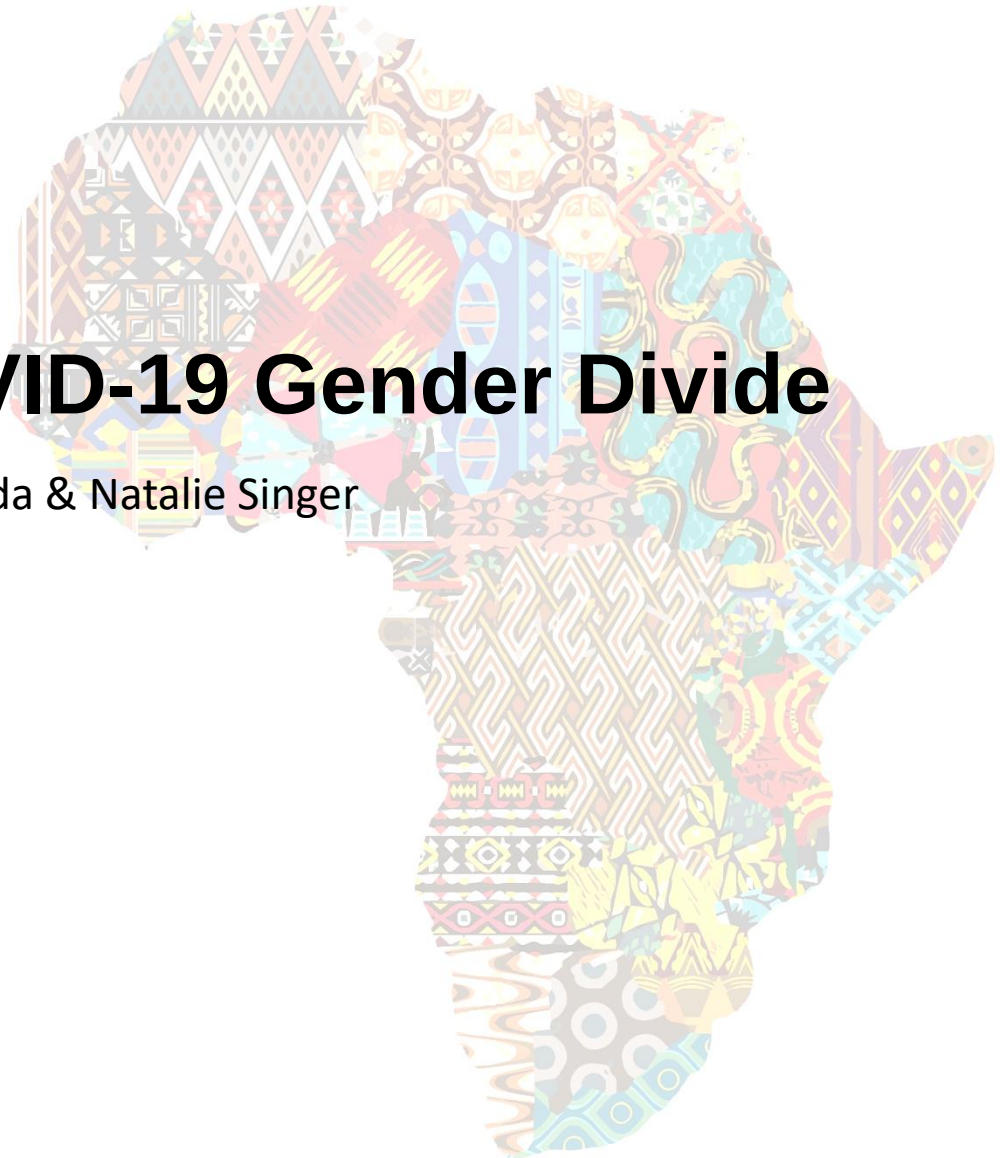


The Great COVID-19 Gender Divide

Presented by Thembi Chagonda & Natalie Singer

Global Business Solutions

www.globalbusiness.co.za



The Great COVID-19 Gender Divide: “Shecession”

Working women have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, whether considering they lost more than double the number of jobs (compared to men) during the period, or the additional burden at home caused by disruptions to education, childcare, illness and others brought about by the pandemic.

Sectors hardest hit by the pandemic are also those which traditionally employ more women, such as hospitality, travel & tourism, personal care services, childcare and education, as well as healthcare. Even within critical sectors such as healthcare, where many women are on the frontline in the fight against Covid-19 pay inequality continues to reinforce discriminatory practices.

Global and local research confirms that women continue to bear the brunt of unpaid work, and with employment recovery expected to remain slow, women are far more likely to remain at home doing this unpaid work as employers opt to hire men who are considered (stereotypically) to be more focused and diligent given their ‘lack of’ burden associated with home and children.

For women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the impact is more devastating. Loss of income, higher rates of Covid-19 transmission, lack of support (traditional beliefs reinforce stereotypical gender roles), and rising instances of domestic violence are just some of the challenges which seem insurmountable.

Societal Challenges

Covid-19 has highlighted that despite being well into the 21st century, outdated traditional stereotypes continue to dominate the decisions taken by individuals when it comes to managing unpaid work within society.

The “motherhood penalty” continues to influence the career prospects of women the world over, and to have determined the decision by many during Covid-19 in regards the decision of who stays home to take care of the children.

Of those in paid work prior to the lockdown, mothers are 47% more likely than fathers to lose their job or quit permanently, and they are 14% more likely to have been furloughed.

Further, those women working remotely were interrupted almost half their time due to multi-tasking required by childcare, schooling, etc. vs. only a third by men in the same situation, creating further gender disparity in stress, & perceived (or real) performance.

And even in families where the man lost their job and the woman continued, there wasn't a material change in the division of household/childcare duties.

Sadly, in families where unemployment, loss of income and stress of being 'locked down' mounted, so too did the rate of GBV. Women bear the brunt of these frustrations mentally and physically and with no real way to escape, often having their reports disregarded by authorities.

Systemic Challenges

Continued pay disparity between men and women often drive the decision for women to reduce hours, quit their jobs or take extended furloughs during the pandemic.

Pay Equity legislation, including that within South Africa, requires objective remuneration frameworks, but does not often achieve the desired results as in practice, women continue to earn less than their counterparts. This is in part due to the confidence gap, continued practices of offering salaries benchmarked off previous earnings, and penalties that any sabbatical period taken, e.g. maternity, can have on future earnings.

We expect women to work like they don't have children and raise children as if they didn't work.



Many employers continue to expect individuals to operate as if work exists independently to everything else, and as a result women particularly find it difficult to set boundaries. This creates additional pressure as they struggle to manage expectations on both sides, and inevitably impacts performance.

Women, especially those with young children continue to report being overlooked for promotion and roles that require additional responsibilities.

Challenging the Status Quo

How can the lessons of Covid-19 be utilised to challenge the status quo and reduce the Gender Divide experienced globally?

- Embrace Results Only Work Environments (ROWE) which enable individuals to manage their own responsibilities within their own circumstances.
- Consciously remove stereotypical gender roles from education (youngest levels) to help drive parity within households and shared burden.
- Empower women with more confidence to say “No!” – establishing boundaries at work and home is critical to sharing the burden.
- Encourage organisations to take more proactive responsibility towards establishing boundaries, e.g.: ‘out-of-hours’ digital detox / discouragement of late meetings
- Challenge outdated HR practices including driving greater pay transparency during recruitment, for example.
- Create awareness of implicit bias and the role that semantics plays in reinforcing gender bias in the workplace. Measures need to be implemented in order to protect women against sexual harassment and violence, as the effects of Covid-19 are likely to affect mainly women. Legislation and regulation needs to be reinforced and effectively monitored to ensure that gender discrimination does not continue in the workplace.