

Skills development programme for the empowerment of women in rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: Lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The outbreak of COVID-19 culminated in both fortunes and misfortunes to humanity at a global scale. South Africa in particular, has been tested to trust an online digital system as one of the strategies for ensuring social distancing. Many job opportunities were lost, and this has negatively impacted on the South African economy in general, and the household in particular. Most men as the heads of households lost their income, an unpleasant socio-economic change that left many families without means to sustain livelihoods. The most affected people who felt the brunt of COVID-19 induced restrictions to human movement were women. Further, women were not only the carers of the sick during COVID-19 and beyond, but they were, and remain child bearers, rearers, nurturers, as well as workers of unacknowledged, unpaid long hours. Among women, anxiety and stress were epic especially during national lockdown and beyond. It exacerbated gender-based violence, a human strive that left the social functioning of many rural families in a dire state in KwaZulu-Natal. This qualitative study seeks to explore the lessons learnt, specifically focusing on the skills development programme for unemployed women in KwaZulu-Natal at the community level. The Human Capital Theory served as the analytical lens in this study. Data collection was done through document analysis. The findings revealed that the COVID-19 exacerbated gender-based violence and accelerated general unemployment. Most women were fourfold victims in this situation (COVID-19, unemployment, unacknowledged long unpaid labourers, and gender-based violence). In terms of the opportunities, women should benefit through the skills development programme.

Keywords: Financial dependency, Self-reliant, Skills development programme, Sustainability, Women empowerment

Introduction

The world went through a transition period in which all the systems were reviewed and aligned according to the demands of COVID-19. The pandemic short-lived but immediate adjustments had to be instituted to serve lives. Like many countries in the world, South Africa experienced huge economic loss and the loss of human lives. As much as there were a lot of losses, but there were also gains in the process. Gender-based violence was rife during the COVID-19 lockdown period (Mlamla, Dlamini & Shumba, 2021). Most women who were affected by job losses or lack of skills during the peak of COVID-19 and beyond, became financially dependent on their partners. As a result, this contributed to an exponential increase in gender-based violence. In the face of these human strives, skills development programme can help to improve livelihoods by empowering women to be financially self-reliant. The empowerment of women in rural community settings remains a crucial mechanism for their survival and the main source of women's economic and social power. Over and above this, the empowerment of women is an important ingredient to enhancing gender equality and sustainable development. On this note, the introduction of a skills development programme plays a valuable role by creating an enabling environment where women will be in a position to take control of their lives, access resources, and participate in economic activities, and decision making. In this paper, we argue that women's state of vulnerability in South Africa's rural communities increased post-the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, implementation of skills development programmes targeting women in rural communities can be a key action to mitigate the diversity of challenges that emanate from the COVID-19 pandemic that rural women face. The paper reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's socio-economic conditions in rural communities, as well as the consequences of economic dependence post-COVID-19. In addition, emphasis is placed

on the view that women empowerment through skills development programmes constitutes a relevant solution to the socio-economic challenges encountered by rural women post-COVID-19.

Materials and Methods

This paper contains discussions generated from desktop research methodology. Data was collected from UNIZULU library documents and online papers from accredited journals. One government site was used to access recent data as well. The data was collated, compared, and assembled with intent to identify main argumentation and prevent duplication.

Theoretical framework

The point of departure for the Human Capital Theory is that education and training are critical when it comes to the empowerment and development of individuals. Education increases the productivity and efficiency of workers through acquiring the necessary knowledge (Wuttaphan, 2017; Hung & Ramsden, 2021). According to the Human Capital Theory, there is an investment in human capital and that maximises productivity, which enhances economic growth (Rycx, Saks & Tojerow, 2015; Fix, 2018). Human resources constitute an invaluable asset capital that workplaces invest in (Wuttaphan, 2017; Kampelmann, Rycx, Saks & Tojerow, 2018). Hence, when individuals are less skilled within a particular occupational field, they are automatically excluded from entering that space (Hung & Ramsden, 2021). Similarly, Ojha (2019) connects financial dependency with the lack of the necessary skills for women. This author further highlights that financial dependency for women, creates co-dependence and ultimately paves the way for the perpetrators as partners because women depend on them for living. According to Marter (2022), when abusive partners are in a position of power (finances), they easily manipulate and control those financially depending on them. In other words, lack of skills, expose most women to gender-based violence (Mahajan, White, Madgavkar, & Krisman, 2020).

The Human Capital Theory constitutes the best fit for this study. According to Borkowski (2016), for the economy to grow, the supply of skilled labour is critical. In this situation women in resource constrained rural settings cannot compete in the labour market because they lack the necessary skills. Their economic dependence on their partners proves that they are vulnerable because their partners are taking advantage of their plight. This undermines the agency of women, and obviously unfair to this population group. Further, the Human Capital Theory does not consider the social, cultural and other non-material dimensions of life. However, we argue that when rural women are empowered and can compete in the labour market, their social lives as human beings can be enhanced. Their competency in the job market means that they can provide for the basic needs of their families. Therefore, empowered women can provide security and other needs. This enhances a sense of belonging. Additionally, other needs namely security, social, and love are catered for. Further, their self-esteem can be enhanced. When all the other needs are met, self-actualisation is possible (McLeod, 2018).

Methods

This study reports on the findings of a qualitative desktop research conducted to explore the lessons learnt from COVID-19 regarding the empowerment of unemployed women in a rural setting in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The study focused on the skills development programmes (SDP) at the community level. Purposive sampling was employed to sample the relevant printed and online documents to gather data. Both printed and online documents were analysed and interpreted to get meanings. Themes and sub-themes emerged from the collected data.

Results and Discussion

The impact of COVID-19 on South African population

The findings indicated that globally, COVID-19 culminated in positive and negative challenges. . Similarly, South Africa was not an exception. One of the positive opportunities is the dominance of a digitisation system, which replaced the manual hard-paper one and in-person operations (Amirudin, Syamsul, Marnan, Rahmah & Wilopo, 2021). This served as an effective mechanism of reducing or minimising the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled people to think in a creative way in terms of how to harness existing opportunities through innovation especially in the business sector as a new source of income to meet the current and future needs of families (Karunatilake, 2020; Amirudin et al, 2021). Digital systems enabled people to perform, enjoy and receive services from the comfort of their homes. Services such as work, school and shopping are now performed from home setting, something which facilitate quality time with families (Karunatilake, 2020; Amirudin et al, 2021; Blanke-Thomas, 2021).

On the same breath, the negative consequences of COVID-19 have culminated in huge losses to life and employment. Further, incidences of gender-based violence and other human strives increased as a result of frustrations precipitated by lockdown (Karunatilake, 2022; Amirudin et al, 2021; Banke-Thomas & Yaya, 2021). The reports of gender-based violence from the Gender-Based Violence Command Centre (GBVCC) tripled the normal numbers (Ngidi, 2020; Vetten, 2021; Maramela, Motjuwadi, Phadziri & Christofides, 2022). The South African Police Services also confirmed that there were 30 hotspots areas in the country, which were severely affected by gender-based violence (Mbunge, 2020; Anashi, Bekker, Salehi, Millard, Botha & Golpaygani, 2021). KwaZulu-Natal province was not immune from the gender-based violence as there were six hotspots areas identified (Mbunge, 2020). Those six areas are Umlazi, Empangeni, Ntuzuma, Osizweni, KwaMashu, and Inanda. This is not surprising, given that the province is alternatively known as the rape capital in South Africa (Mbunge, 2020; Ngidi, 2022). This has led to the President of the Republic of South Africa to declare gender-based violence as the second pandemic (Mlamlala, Dlamini, & Shumba, 2021). The incidences of women and children murders are extremely high, and worrisome. The loss of employment led to women's financial dependency on their abusive partners to meet their basic needs (Ewing-Nelson, 2021).

The high number of gender-based violence has culminated in the development of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based violence and Femicide (NSP GBVF) 2020-2030. The NSP GBVF (2020-2030) consisted of six pillars. These are as follows: Pillar 1: Accountability, Coordination and Leadership.

Pillar 2: Prevention and Rebuilding Social Cohesion

Pillar 3: Protection, Safety and Justice

Pillar 4: Response, Care, Support and Healing

Pillar 5: Economic Power

Pillar 6: Research and Information Systems

All the pillars above are very important to ensuring that gender-based violence is addressed. However, pillar five is the most relevant one. The NSP GBVF (2020-2030) acknowledges that an effective sustainable response to gender-based violence in South Africa depends on a fundamental shift in economic power dynamics that have an adverse impact on women. Further, the NSP GBVF (2020-2030) acknowledges the above point by Ojha (2019) that financial dependency facilitates easy manipulation and control of the victims by the perpetrators of gender-based violence. The NSP GBVF (2020-2023) emphasises that the withdrawal of financial resources is used to manipulate dependent women from leaving the abusive relationships. Economic power is about linking women with economy to change the social position of women in societies (NSP GBVF 2020-2030).

Skills development programme

The democratic dispensation ushered in 1994 gave birth to the Skills Development Act (Act 97 of 1998) as a tool to address the diversity of social issues such as skills shortages, unemployment, and inequality. The main purpose of this Act was to provide a safety net for the poor and unemployed. The twin challenges of poverty and unemployment were created by the former class system (apartheid). According to Reddy, Borat, Powel, Visser and Arends (2017), the goal of the Skills Development Act is to build a skills base. According to Section 2 (1) (e) seeks to empower South Africans, especially the black majority. Its goal is to improve the employment capacity of population groups that were previously denied employment opportunities, and to assist those vulnerable through training and education. Approximately three decades in the democratic dispensation, the country is still battling with the triple burden of unemployment, inequality, and poverty (Francis & Webster, 2019). These challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 (Sinaga, 2020). Most women are without jobs (Opperman, 2022). Often, these unemployed women rely on their abusive partners for their financially needs (Hulley, Wager & Jones, 2023).

The SDP is a learning programme that is occupationally based, provided by an accredited training service provider/s, and complies with any prescribed requirements (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Jali-Khaile (2014) argues that skills development is a process of assisting people to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for building their capacity to do the work they are employed for and to prepare them for future employment. According to the Sullivan (2018), skills development is acquired through all levels of learning and training, occurring in formal, non-formal, informal, and on-the-job settings. Considering that South Africa is a blend of market systems, which is characterised by competition, it is imperative for the unemployed women to have the necessary skills to enable them to compete in the labour market. Emmenegger, Kvist, Marx and Petersen (2015) are of the view that

voluntaristic system enhances class inequality and creates inefficiencies, which disadvantages people without the necessary skills.

Chapter 3 of the South African National Development Plan (NDP) focusses on the economy and employment creation. The objective in this regard is that the unemployment rate should have fallen from 24.9% in June 2012 to 14% by 2020 and further down to 6% by 2030. This requires an additional 11 million jobs (Moyo & Mamabolo; 2014; Omarjee, 2021; Amoah & Finger, 2022). Total employment should rise from 13 million to 24 million. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) 4th Quarter (2020), the unemployment rates for women were 34.3% and the men were 31.0%. Currently, the rates stand at 35.5% for women and 32.6% for men. To be more specific in this regard, in Q4: 2022, 80.6% of women were in a long-term unemployment compared to their male counterparts with 76.1%. The concern here is that as much as the NDP is of the view that by 2020, unemployment will be reduced from 24.9% to 14%, the reality is that the opposite is happening. The above highlighted statistics confirmed the opposite of the NDP in 2020. Although one of the objectives of the NDP priority is on the three key issues, which are raising employment through faster economic growth, improving the quality of education, skills development and innovation as well as building the capability of the state to play a developmental and transformative role, unfortunately the growth of economy is very slow (Mamabolo, 2018). Skills development and innovation that seek to transform the state of women, is a challenge (Pal & Saker, 2023). If the abused women are not skilled to compete in the labour market, obviously their financial dependency on male partners cannot be challenged and addressed. This is particularly important because the supply of skilled labour is critical for the economy to grow (Borkowski, 2016). Similarly, Kring (2017) confirms that social and economic issues go hand in hand, and they are inseparable. This clearly means that if the lack of skills to compete in the labour market is not addressed, gender-based violence will remain a menace.

The NSP GBVF (2020-2030) pillar 5 is very clear that there is a strong relationship between gender-based violence and economic dependence and it seeks to ensure that obstacles to women's economic autonomy are effectively addressed. Further, the NSP GBVF (2020-2030) highlights that

“in 2020, SA committed to 40% preferential procurement for Women Owned Businesses (WOB) in the public sector, and further set out a four-point action plan to achieve this target as follows: (i) establishing an effective institutional framework for delivery in government; (ii) developing and rolling out a capacity building programme for women owned businesses (WOB); (iii) twinning WOB with public sector opportunities and (iv) activating private sector value-chain facilitation for WOB. 1205 out of targeted 5 000 WOBs were reached for capacity development over the 120- day period, with overall targets being compromised by increased COVID-19 restrictions being imposed over December 2020 to January 2021 period. While the national capacity building initiative has been implemented in Limpopo and Eastern Cape provinces, this programme needs to be rolled out to all other provinces.”

The rolling out of the above-mentioned plan has reached only two provinces as stated, which means that KZN is one of the seven that did not receive the necessary attention.

Women Empowerment

In response to the vulnerability stemming from poverty, inequality, discrimination and other social pressures, skills development has been found to be essential for women empowerment (Foster & Gilman, 2015). Thus, skills development is the main source of women empowerment, based on its educative in nature (Boahene, 2021). Education can provide women with the relevant knowledge and skills that they need to participate fully in social, economic, and political affairs in their respective communities. Through effective education, traditional gender roles and stereotypes can be challenged, and ultimately, they can be alleviated (Rosche, 2016). Women empowerment is a critical issue across the globe (Reshi & Sudha, 2022). In seeking to enhance women empowerment, education can play a valuable role in promoting greater gender equality and social justice. In terms of global agenda 2030, sustainable development goal 5 highlights the significance of the empowerment of women, equal rights to economic resources, property ownership and financial services for women (Rosche, 2016).

The United Nations' sustainable development goals cannot be achieved without sufficiently investing in women empowerment. It enhances economic productivity; hence women empowerment remains one of the most prominent mechanisms through which inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction can be achieved. Empowering women in rural communities through skills development sets the ground for women, social, and economic inclusivity. This

on its own will be giving women the ability to fight poverty and reduce financial dependence on their partners, and ultimately lead to better health outcomes such as reducing maternal mortality and improved child's health.

Local Economic Development

As a community-based economic development approach to the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, local economic development must craft strategies, plans and initiatives that will encourage women to work together towards inclusive economic growth and development (Patterson, 2008; Koma, 2012; Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018). As a central component of the local government sector, local economic development must create an environment where women's socio-economic conditions will be improved. In rural communities, local economic development initiatives, especially among municipalities that are located in rural communities, must sufficiently focus on women in their local economic initiatives that are intended for local business retention and expansion. Consequently, this will enable the local economic development initiatives to be effective. Effective local economic development can further help reduce the disparities between the poor and the rich and improve coherence and confidence with which local economic strategy is pursued. Local economic development initiatives must be effective in that they must create an environment for indigenous economic potentials, promote entrepreneurship and business start-ups, business supports, and business linkages.

Conclusion

Women constitute the largest proportion in the general adult population in South Africa's rural communities. Apart from the COVID-19 pandemic and the multifaceted challenges related to it, South African women in rural communities have been marginalised; denied access to sustainable opportunities for decades tracing from as far as the apartheid era. This paper therefore argues that neglecting women empowerment could severely impact on the country's socio-economic development agenda. The argument advanced in this paper is that the provision of skills development programmes is an important avenue, and a sustainable strategy for promoting the socio-economic well-being of women in rural communities.

Recommendations

Local governments must make it their responsibility to conduct needs analysis in their respective rural communities to inform the design and implementation of relevant interventions to provide appropriate skills development programmes and training for women. The local government through their local economic development directorates must develop a post-COVID-19 empowerment models that focus on women empowerment in rural communities. The focus must be on skills development programmes for women, the promotion of entrepreneurship initiatives for women, which must be aligned to the support of small and medium-term enterprises for women, promoting business symposiums, and networking for women.

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