



OPINION

Covid economic impact on woman-headed families

COMMENT



MARIANNE STRYDOM

WE ARE all part of a family and often our thought patterns and beliefs are based on our experiences within our family of origin.

Families around the world were affected in various ways by the Covid-19 pandemic and in South Africa the impact was often driven by the economic and demographic composition of families.

But what do families in South Africa look like?

In our country, about 11 different family forms are recognised in policy. For example, these family forms include single-parent families, families where grandparents are the head of the family, where teenagers are the head, as well as the multi-generation or extended families.

Although "families" are referred to

in policy, the term household is often used more because it refers to an agreement where people live together and share their resources, which of course makes the nature of the family broader than the traditional family with two parents and their children.

Nevertheless, these different family forms emphasise the unique diversity of families in South African society. Therefore, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the various family forms also differed.

Families where women are the head, were particularly vulnerable to the economic or financial impact of Covid-19.

About 40% of mothers in South Africa are single parents and 60% of children live in families where the father is absent.

Demographically, the largest group of these families are from previously disadvantaged communities where the combination of low schooling and lack of job security has already caused great financial stress before the pandemic, especially in a country where the vast majority of women earn less than

men. Data from the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile (NIDS-Cram) survey (2020) shows that unemployment in South Africa has also hit women harder than men due to the pandemic, as about two million of the three million people who lost their jobs in 2020, were female.

These families where women are the head are not necessarily a single-parent family consisting of a mother and children, but are often part of a multi-generational family or extended family. The multi-generational family is the largest form of household in South Africa. Data released by Statistics South Africa in 2017 shows that approximately two thirds of children in South Africa live in these extended households, while more than two thirds of black elderly people and just under 55% of coloured elderly people also live in these households. In extended households, all the family members are related to each other, but the biological parents of the children do not necessarily live in the household. Grandparents are often the

children's primary caregivers.

Due to the multi-generational nature of these families, most of these households were unable to follow the precautions to protect older family members from Covid-19, as suggested by the government.

According to this, people over the age of 60 had to limit their contact and interaction at all levels. Since the second Covid-19 wave was often driven by teenagers and young adults, these households were very vulnerable.

The prevalence of multi-generational households in the Eastern Cape, for example, has been highlighted as one of the risk factors for Covid-19.

In these families, the income from the elderly old-age pension is also relied on. Given the fact that the largest number of deaths due to the pandemic is in the age group over 60, it means that many of these families have not only lost a family member, but potentially also the only income, in addition to the child allowance in the family.

Families also need support to fulfil the caring role towards children.

Although efforts were made to support families during the deep pandemic, they were limited.

The financial impact of the pandemic on family forms that were already in a financial predicament, severely affected families' ability to care for their children.

The lack of income, the initial cessation of food projects in some provinces, together with the severe contraction of the economy, contributed to the fact that most poor families in South Africa had no defence against the pandemic.

As the pandemic continues, it is important to acknowledge the vulnerability of families in our country. Policymakers need to start thinking of ways in which this vulnerability could be addressed in a sustainable way in the future, especially given the demographics and many challenges facing our people.

**Dr Strydom is a lecturer in the Department of Social Work at Stellenbosch University.*



This article is copyright protected and licensed under agreement with DALRO. Redistribution, modification, re-sale of this is not allowed without prior written consent of the original author of the works.

