



Investigating Women Employees' Experiences of Returning to the Office After Working Remotely Due to Coronavirus: The Case of the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal

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Declaration

I, **Perdita Peters**, declare that this thesis entitled *Investigating Women Employees' Experiences of Returning to the Office After Working Remotely Due to Coronavirus: The Case of the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal* is a product of my own research work and has not been previously submitted for publication, any other degree programme, and/or examination at any university. I further maintain that information obtained, cited, and referenced from research studies authored by others have been adequately and appropriately acknowledged.

Student's Signature :  13 December 2024

Supervisor's Signature:  10 February 2025

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Abstract

This research investigated women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic within the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The pandemic has profoundly influenced women's employment, particularly as they confront the intricacies of reintegrating into office environments. Organisations adapted to the challenges engendered by the pandemic, leading to a scenario where numerous women transitioned from conventional office settings to remote work arrangements. This transformation not only modified their work dynamics but also illuminated persistent issues of gender inequality, work-life balance, and the necessity for adaptable work configurations. COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for transformation, underscoring the disparities in employment experiences contingent upon gender and socioeconomic status, thereby necessitating a comprehensive reassessment of workplace policies and practices.

This study is significant as it highlights the exacerbation of gender inequalities in the workplace during and after the pandemic. The study examined how the pandemic has exacerbated the difficulties related to work-life balance for women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities. By comprehending the elements that underpin the gender gap and executing measures to mitigate them, organisations can strive toward establishing more equitable and inclusive workplace settings. As organisations progress, it is essential to confront these obstacles and utilise the insights gained during the pandemic to develop a more just and supportive work environment for women.

This study used a qualitative research design since it aimed to investigate the experiences of women returning to the office after working remotely. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used for the research. Data were collected from both secondary and primary sources. A case study approach was also employed, focusing on the College of Humanities as a case study. Thematic analysis was used in the study.

The findings show that most women perform the majority of child care and domestic responsibilities. They suggest that having children, poor social support systems, and increased workloads affect women's ability to take promotional steps at work. The findings also indicate that males had more time to excel at career advancement during COVID-19, whereas women

had so many more responsibilities that “climbing the ladder” was difficult. Women with younger children faced more challenges since their children depended more on them. The study highlights the pressing need for institutional reforms and specialised support to confront these disparities and cultivate a more equitable academic space at the UKZN post-pandemic. The ramifications of the findings imply that women in academia may encounter heightened obstacles in attaining equity in employment and advancement prospects in the aftermath of the pandemic.

This study contributes to existing literature on women employees’ experiences during COVID-19 and upon returning to the office after working remotely. It provides insight into the experiences faced by UKZN women employees, particularly in the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, and advises on the development of flexible work policies. The study also provides insight into the implementation of inclusive policies and the cultivation of a societal transformation aimed at achieving gender equity. By addressing these issues, it is possible to progress toward a future characterised by greater equity that acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of women employees.

Keywords: COVID-19, Women employees, UKZN, Gender equity, Gender-inclusive policies

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List of Abbreviations

UKZN:	University of Kwazulu-Natal
COVID-19:	Coronavirus Disease
WHO:	World Health Organization
PPE:	Personal Protective Equipment
STATS SA:	Statistics South Africa

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study aimed to understand the related impacts of going back to work for women employees post the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reflected on: (i) work challenges caused by returning to office spaces, and (ii) possible gender expectations that inhibited women from achieving higher productivity when working from the office. This study built on previous research about women's workplace experiences post-pandemic.

This chapter consists of the introduction, the context of the study, the purpose statement, the background and research problem, and the rationale for the study. It also presents the key objectives and critical questions to be asked. It concludes with a chapter summary.

1.2 Context of the Study

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many changes, expanding successes while reducing limitations in the services offered by women at work. It is evident that the pandemic and its economic aftereffects have negatively impacted gender equality. Pieh, Budimir and Probst (2020) claim that the pandemic continues to have an impact on people's lives and means of subsistence worldwide.

Pieh, Budimir and Probst (2020) state that women may be more likely to want to work from home than men. Additionally, women have found it more challenging to do so, citing higher rates of stress, despair, and the sheer number of hours worked, especially if they have children. This problem arises from their attempts to navigate an unjust role in society and at home while simultaneously pursuing career advancement. It can be stated that women require more flexible work schedules because they have greater responsibilities. The changes worldwide have resulted in the need for readaptation due to the easing of COVID-19-related restrictions, prompting the return to regular office routines. Although the process may seem straightforward for some, many women have found it challenging to reestablish their office roles.

1.3 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg Campus. In doing so it reflects on the work challenges experienced and the possible gender expectations inhibiting women from achieving higher productivity while working from the office.

This study sought to build on previous research on women's workplace experiences post-COVID-19, to contribute to the broader issues of gender and the impact of the pandemic on higher education, and to highlight the exacerbation of gender inequalities in the workplace during and after the pandemic.

1.4 Research Problem and Rationale

Understanding gender dynamics in the workplace is essential for the well-being of an organisation's employees. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges for women employees, such as non-inclusive behaviour and unpaid care work, as they attempted to work from home while undertaking specific gender roles (Hughes, Saunders and Denier, 2022). This study aimed to shed light on these challenges and contribute to the development of flexible policies to address them.

The pandemic caused a significant disruption in higher education by driving a shift to online instruction, which became mandatory during the lockdowns. Since then, the epidemiological situation has gradually improved, but the growing popularity of online learning can be attributed to its ability to offer new learning opportunities (Aristovnik, Karampelas, Umek and Ravšelj 2023). Mental health issues and burnout are now more common in the workforce as employees return to work after COVID-19. Employers should consider implementing mechanisms to reduce stress and anxiety during this transition (Harfoush, 2021).

Women returning to the workplace expect organisations to facilitate their transitions effectively. According to Lunt et al. (2022), employers are focused on providing returning women with manageable workloads and adequate facilities for flexible or remote working. For example, Herten-Crabb and Wenham's (2022) case study in the United Kingdom explored the

challenges faced by women regarding paid and unpaid work, mental health, access to healthcare services, and government participation and consideration of women in 2020. The case study examined the normative and policy-imposed limits that these women faced.

In light of the above, the research problem that this study addressed concerned the reintegration of women employees into the office following remote work during the lockdown periods caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was prompted by the researcher's own experiences as a "remote" worker during the pandemic, as a mother to two young children, and her interest in gender equity. The importance of this topic was further reinforced by her informal conversations with fellow female colleagues, both academic and administrative, all of whom alluded to experiencing challenges working remotely and on their return to the office. It was anticipated that by identifying these challenges (and benefits) associated with both forms of working arrangements, consideration could be given to practical policy amendments that could assist women employees in successfully transitioning back to offices after working from home.

1.5 Research Questions

The primary research question of the study was:

- What are the experiences of UKZN women employees in returning to the office after the COVID-19 pandemic?

The secondary research questions were:

- What were the experiences of women employees working from home during the pandemic?
- How have women employees' experiences been upon their return to campus?
- What are the views of women employees on flexible hours at the workplace?
- What policy recommendations can be made for the workplace based on these experiences?

1.6 Research Objectives

The primary research objective of the study was:

- To investigate the experiences of UKZN women employees in returning to the office after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The secondary research objectives were:

- To examine the experiences of women employees working from home during the pandemic.
- To investigate the experiences of women employees upon their return to the office.
- To determine women employees' views on flexible hours at the workplace.
- To propose policy recommendations that can be applied to future workplace practices.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it focuses on the experiences of women employees returning to the office after working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, no study at the UKZN's College of Humanities has explored the experiences of women employees returning to work post-pandemic. This study analysed the distinct obstacles encountered by women re-entering the workforce in academic institutions, including the confluence of caregiving obligations, mental health challenges, and institutional support frameworks. By examining the experiences of the UKZN women employees, particularly those at the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, the study provides insights and advice on the development of flexible work policies. Furthermore, it sheds light on the implementation of inclusive policies and the promotion of societal transformation aimed at achieving gender equity. The study contributes to the progression toward a future characterised by greater equity and one that acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of women employees.

1.8 Structure of the Study

The study consists of six chapters, structured as follows:

Chapter one introduced the study. It provided the context and purpose of the study. This was followed by the research problem and rationale, and the research questions and objectives. The significance of the study was presented as was the study structure. The chapter ended with a summary.

Chapter two comprises the review of the relevant literature and a presentation of the theoretical framework. Topics covered include gender and the workplace, work-life balance, the impact of COVID-19 on women, women's experiences of returning to work post-pandemic, and the return to work in a university setting. Gaps in the literature are also addressed. The chapter then presents and discusses the three theories upon which the study was constructed, namely, the gender role theory, the adaptive theory, and the theory of gendered organisations.

Chapter three discusses the research design and methodology employed in the study. A qualitative research design was utilised. The chapter outlines and discusses the research population, sampling method and sample size, the data collection instrument (a semi-structured interview guide) and the analysis of the collected data. The credibility and transferability of the study, the ethical considerations, the issue of reflexivity and positionality, and the challenges encountered during fieldwork are discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the demographics of the sample.

Chapter four presents the findings on the varying experiences of women employees at the UKZN working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and upon their return to the office post-pandemic. It discusses how the pandemic introduced considerable obstacles to women's career advancement. The chapter also presents empirical findings regarding women's experiences upon reintegration into the workplace and their adaptation strategies.

Chapter five explores gender-responsive policies for the post-pandemic workplace. It discusses policies that can be implemented to ease the transition. It argues that adaptation strategies for returning to the office post-pandemic require a multi-pronged approach that prioritises flexibility, health and safety, technological support, and employee engagement. Lastly, it discusses essential strategies for establishing a university environment that authentically promotes gender equity and nurtures a sense of belonging for all individuals.

Chapter six concludes the study. It provides a summary of the study and presents its major findings and conclusions in light of the objectives outlined in Chapter one. Policy recommendations that can be implemented at UKZN in the future are proposed. The chapter ends with an exposition of the study's contribution and suggestions for further research.

1.9 Summary

This chapter served as an introduction to the study. Aspects covered were the context and purpose of the study, the research problem and rationale, and the research questions and objectives that underpinned the study. The significance of the study was also outlined and the chapter ended with the structure of the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter two, the literature review and theoretical framework, follows.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced women's employment, particularly as they confront the intricacies of reintegrating into office environments. Organisations adapted to the challenges engendered by the pandemic, leading to a scenario where numerous women transitioned from conventional office settings to remote work arrangements. This transformation not only modified their work dynamics but also illuminated persistent issues of gender inequality, work-life balance, and the necessity for adaptable work configurations. The pandemic acted as a catalyst for transformation, underscoring the disparities in employment experiences contingent upon gender and socioeconomic status, thereby necessitating a comprehensive reassessment of workplace policies and practices.

This chapter reviews the literature on gender and the workplace, work-life balance, the impact of COVID-19 on women, women's experiences of returning to work post-pandemic, and the return to work in a university setting. It also presents the gaps in the literature and discusses theories that guided this study, namely, the gender role theory, adaptive theory, and the theory of gendered organisations.

2.2 Gender and the Workplace

Research demonstrates that patriarchal structures and conventional gender roles substantially obstruct the progression of women within academic contexts throughout numerous African nations. Booysen and Nkomo (2010) elucidate the enduring nature of gender role stereotypes that shape managerial attributes, which can sustain inequitable power relations in professional environments, including academic institutions.

In Tanzania, an investigation by Massawe and Sife (2020) conducted at the Sokoine University of Agriculture over 15 years, exemplifies the ongoing gender inequities in the advancement of academic careers. Notwithstanding certain advancements in ameliorating gender disparities across various sectors, the academic milieu continues to pose significant challenges for women, characterised by considerable deficiencies in employment and promotion opportunities

(Massawe & Sife, 2020). This pattern is similarly observed in other African contexts, wherein women in academia frequently encounter obstacles such as insufficient mentorship, challenges related to work-life balance, and gender discrimination, which cumulatively hinder their representation in leadership positions (Madsen et al., 2017). Furthermore, the occurrence of “leaky pipelines” in academia, wherein women are disproportionately lost at various career stages, has been substantiated by numerous studies. For instance, research reveals that women are less likely to achieve senior academic roles than their male counterparts, even after accounting for productivity and other determinants (Carr et al., 2018). This disparity is particularly accentuated in disciplines such as medicine and engineering, where cultural stereotypes and institutional biases further intensify the obstacles faced by female faculty (Jagsi et al., 2013).

Gender discrimination persists as a widespread phenomenon across diverse sectors and nations, with female individuals frequently encountering elevated levels of discrimination relative to their male counterparts. Another example is a study undertaken at the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz University Hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which revealed that female staff members were more susceptible to experiencing gender-based discrimination than their male colleagues, thereby underscoring systemic challenges that transcend the confines of the workplace and permeate broader societal domains, encompassing health care and education (Elsayed et al., 2022). This observation is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Nally et al. (2019), who assert that organisational characteristics such as cultural dynamics and gender composition significantly impact the strategies that organisations employ to address issues of gender inequality.

A study conducted by Triana et al. (2018) clarifies that the intensity of employee responses to perceived gender discrimination is significantly modulated by national labour regulations and prevailing cultural paradigms regarding gender equality, positing that nations with rigorous gender-equitable policies are inclined to generate milder reactions to acts of discrimination. This assertion is corroborated by the research of Elsayed et al. (2022), which reveals that women employees in Saudi Arabia encounter elevated levels of workplace discrimination when compared to their male colleagues, thereby indicating a widespread phenomenon that transcends cultural confines. Moreover, the ramifications of gender discrimination permeate beyond immediate occupational experiences, influencing broader societal dynamics. For example, Kim et al. (2019) analyse how gender discrimination in South Korea impacts

women's decisions concerning pregnancy and childbirth, implying that workplace discrimination may dissuade female participation in the labour market, thus affecting demographic trends. This perspective is consistent with the findings of Wu (2023), who highlights the significance of corporate social responsibility in advancing gender equality, suggesting that organisations possess the potential to play a crucial role in alleviating discrimination through the implementation of proactive policies.

According to Du (2024), gender disparity within the professional environment is a longstanding challenge that materialises through various manifestations, including discrepancies in remuneration, inequitable advancement prospects, and insufficient representation in authoritative positions. Studies have shown a tendency to favour men for occupations traditionally dominated by males, a phenomenon attributed to gender-role conformity bias. In contrast, no significant inclination is observed for professions dominated by women or those with a balanced gender composition (Koch et al., 2015). This bias plays a role in sustaining the presence of gender disparity within the decision-making mechanisms related to employment.

Gendered practices within the realm of employment contribute to the phenomenon of horizontal and vertical gender segregation, leading to disparities in health outcomes experienced by individuals of different genders (Elwér et al., 2012). Cortland and Kinias (2019) state that apprehensions regarding the reinforcement of unfavourable gender prejudices may hinder the enthusiasm and productivity of women, thus increasing the presence of gender disparities within the professional setting. Women who perceive such inequality are more inclined to abandon their career aspirations and transition to part-time employment (Taka et al., 2016). Hideg and Krstic (2021), note that despite efforts to tackle gender disparity, it remains prevalent within professional settings.

Morgenroth and Ryan (2018) state that to counteract gender discrimination and advance gender equality within the workplace, it is imperative to tackle discriminatory behaviours, advocate for diversity programmes, establish policies regarding parental leave, utilise gender-neutral language, and enforce supportive governmental regulations. Through a comprehensive understanding of the elements that lead to gender disparity and the execution of tactics to confront these issues, institutions can strive towards fostering fairer and more diverse work settings. Furthermore, the concept of gendered organisations serves to clarify the origins and endurance of gender inequity in work environments (Sobering, 2016). According to Arth

(2020), entrenched gender bias is perpetuated by societal establishments that persist in reinforcing traditional gender norms.

Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) point to research showing that when entering the labour market, women encounter discriminatory situations that prompt them to acknowledge discrepancies and dispel misconceptions about women's capabilities in professional contexts. According to Cortland and Kinias (2019), concerns about perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes might hinder women's motivation and performance, thus worsening gender inequality within workplace settings. According to Taka et al. (2016), women who identify gender inequity are more inclined to abandon their career aspirations and embrace part-time work as an alternative.

Efforts have been applied to address gender disparity. However, its persistence remains evident professionally (Hideg & Krstic, 2021). The notion of gendered establishments aims to clarify the roots and continuation of gender inequality within work environments (Sobering, 2016). Additionally, Arth (2020) states that the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by societal organisations further strengthens the institutionalised gender gap. Morgenroth and Ryan (2018) argue that to address gender discrimination and encourage gender equality in professional environments, it is vital to address biased behaviours, support diversity initiatives, implement policies for parental leave, utilise gender-inclusive language, and enforce supportive government actions. By understanding the factors contributing to the gender gap and implementing strategies to address them, organisations can work towards fostering more equitable and diverse workplace environments.

2.2.1 Gender Inequity in the Workplace in South Africa

South Africa had significant unemployment rates even before the pandemic. People 15 years of age and older are covered by StatsSA's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Kniffin et al., 2020). Young women, in particular, frequently face significant obstacles in obtaining satisfactory employment in contrast to their male counterparts. It is noteworthy that males exhibit a greater propensity for transitioning into employment than women, with recorded rates of 6.5% and 4.6% respectively in 2022. As alluded to above, data indicates that young women experience increased susceptibility in the labour market relative to young men. In 2024, the absorption rate for young men was 31.9%, surpassing that of young women, whose rate was recorded at 24.2%. The unemployment rate for young females was estimated at 49.4% in 2024, reflecting a significant rise of 3.3 percentage points from 46.1% in 2004. Overall, women demonstrate

elevated levels of unemployment alongside diminished absorption and labour force participation rates when contrasted with males (Stats SA, 2024). However, these results are hardly shocking given the pervasive economic injustices that South African women must contend with. According to Sonnenschein et al. (2022), women worldwide devote three to ten times more time than men to unpaid caregiving tasks such as cooking, cleaning, tending to children, the ill, and the elderly, as well as voluntary community activities.

Due to gender inequalities and gender stereotypes that designate specific tasks as exclusively the domain of women, women bear a disproportionate share of these obligations. Care work significantly benefits the well-being of people, families, and communities, yet these contributions are frequently disregarded and underappreciated (Sonnenschein et al., 2022). The obligations women bear for this labour also restrict their opportunities to look for and accept more formal, paid jobs. Many women shoulder unpaid care responsibilities on top of their paid employment, a phenomenon known as the “double burden” of work for women (Kniffin et al., 2020).

Like many other governments worldwide, the South African government does not recognise unpaid care work or consider it a significant component of economic activity. This restricts women’s economic empowerment and exacerbates gender inequality in the economy. Research on the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on the careers of women in academia headquartered at South African institutions revealed the depth of these disparities in unpaid care (Kniffin et al., 2020).

Gender disparity within the workplace in South Africa is a complex issue influenced by a combination of historical, social, and organisational elements. The presence of prejudiced beliefs, inadequate skills, and limited knowledge among healthcare professionals, for example, significantly contribute to the inequalities individuals encounter (Müller, 2017). Despite legal mandates requiring organisations to uphold principles of employment equity, racial segregation in workplaces continues to endure in South Africa (Oosthuizen and Mayer, 2019). According to Dosunmu and Dichaba (2019), the enduring racial divisions within workplaces can be traced back to the historical racial stratifications established during the apartheid era, which have led to the development of exclusive social contexts that shape the experiences of individuals based on their race and gender.

Adeleken and Bussin (2022) note that, despite the increase in women's participation in the labour force and the narrowing of the gender pay gap, gender inequality persists. Bosch and Barit (2020) state that addressing the gender pay gap could be facilitated through the adoption of pay transparency mechanisms. The disparity in salaries between genders in South Africa is prejudiced by the separation between managerial and non-managerial roles (Bryson et al., 2022).

The subjective encounters of employment equity within South African institutions provide a variety of perspectives on the discourse surrounding post-apartheid employment equity, highlighting the pressure on organisations to confront historical racial disparities (Oosthuizen et al., 2019). Workplace bullying is a notable concern, with more wide exploration conducted globally (Makgopa, 2024). Research has scrutinised instances of workplace bullying and its effects on gender dynamics within higher education in South Africa (Mangolothi and Mnguni, 2022).

Despite the presence of progressive laws, gender disparity continues to exist in South Africa, where women are disproportionately affected by health and rights infringements (Marx et al., 2018). The occurrence of workplace harassment is widespread across a variety of industries, emphasising the necessity for remedial actions (Mokgolo and Barnard, 2019). Khosa (2023) has argued that endeavours toward achieving gender parity in educational institutions are directed at improving the obstacles to career progression that women encounter (Khosa, 2023).

2.2.2 Work-life Balance

Abendroth and Dulk (2011) and Tkalych (2021) show that many factors, including support from the workplace, support from family, and personal strategies, have been identified in research as influencing the attainment of work-life balance. Achieving a work-life balance is vital for employees' well-being and organisations' achievement. Abendroth and Dulk (2011) state that while providing instrumental support within the workplace holds significance, it may not result in a successful equilibrium between work and personal life. The inadequate equilibrium between work and personal life can be a stress-inducing factor, resulting in adverse health consequences (Lunau et al., 2014). According to Imtiaz and Hossain (2019), demographic variables such as age and gender may influence the equilibrium between professional responsibilities and personal life, indicating the extent of vitality, occupational capabilities, and drive among workers.

Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard (2014) have recommended the implementation of flexible working arrangements as a means to promote work-life balance, offering advantages to both genders, particularly amidst evolving family structures. Additionally, how conflicts and aids (such as flexible working arrangements) are perceived, plays a vital role in impacting the overall satisfaction connected with work-life balance (Grawitch et al., 2013).

Maintaining a commendable work-life balance correlates with heightened job contentment and workplace preferences (Chen et al., 2023). Research has indicated that workers value work-life balance because it facilitates personal time apart from work and prospects for professional advancement (Nassar et al., 2022). Furthermore, Ashtankar (2016) states that the implementation of work-life balance strategies has been associated with improved employee morale, diminished turnover rates, reduced absenteeism, and heightened recruitment efficiency, thus ultimately boosting organisational productivity.

Initiatives related to employee well-being within the organisational setting and the provision of assistance have been recognised as efficacious strategies for mitigating tension and fostering a harmonious relationship between work and personal life domains (Ernawati et al., 2022). Moreover, individuals serving as mentors can assume a pivotal role in offering direction regarding establishing and sustaining a sound work-life equilibrium (Gull, 2024).

The shift to telework during the pandemic has had implications for women's work-life balance, with studies aiming to understand how telework has affected family and work life during the lockdown period (Coban, 2021). The pandemic magnified care needs due to school and daycare closures, further impacting gender relations (Czymara et al., 2020). Women faced increased psychological distress during the pandemic, with various factors such as social support, stable relationships, and less work-related stress playing a role in helping women cope with the challenges (Johnson et al., 2023).

2.3 Gender and Institutions of Higher Education

The landscape of gender and institutions of higher education is multifaceted, revealing persistent inequalities despite efforts to encourage gender equity. A substantial body of literature highlights that the increasing presence of women in leadership roles does not

automatically translate into gender equity within academic institutions. According to Crisp (2020), without a fundamental cultural shift, the mere increase in female leadership fails to address the systemic issues that preserve gender inequity in higher education.

This sentiment is echoed by Monroe and Chiu (2010), who identify the pipeline problem, illustrating that while women may enter academia in greater numbers, they still face significant barriers that hinder their advancement to senior positions. According to a study by Lu (2020), although women educators comprise the predominant demographic among classroom instructors, they constitute merely 40% of head teachers within the United Kingdom, with even more pronounced deficiencies in secondary educational institutions, where the representation of women head teachers dwindles to a mere 38% (Lu, 2020). This inequity underscores an entrenched systemic bias that preferentially endorses male leadership, frequently stemming from cultural paradigms that elevate male decision-making processes (Attom et al., 2021). The implications of such dynamics are profound, as they affect performance and influence women's overall career courses in academia. The concept of managerialism has also been critiqued as a form of discursive masculinity that reinforces existing gender inequities within universities.

In the context of hiring and promotion practices, women remain underrepresented in senior academic roles despite their increasing numbers in the workforce (Gilbert et al., 2021). Efforts to address these disparities, such as targeted recruitment initiatives, have shown promise but are often insufficient without broader societal changes. A study by Lane (2024) indicates that while targeted recruitment can enhance gender equity, it must be accompanied by cultural shifts that challenge entrenched gender norms. Furthermore, the intersection of gender and academic promotions reveals systemic biases that favour male candidates. This is compounded by the findings of Winslow and Davis (2016), who note that despite women's majority enrolment in higher education, they continue to face significant barriers to achieving parity in academic appointments and promotions.

The post-apartheid period has witnessed considerable endeavours aimed at addressing gender inequalities within the realm of higher education; nonetheless, obstacles endure, particularly for marginalised demographics such as black women. The multifaceted interplay of race and gender is instrumental in influencing these experiences, as evidenced by the exploration of how black women navigate through transformation and diversity in higher education (Ramohai, 2019). The demographic shifts among academic personnel further illuminate critical

perspectives on gender dynamics within higher education. Examining the evolving gender composition of academic staff reveals that, despite some advancements in the diversification of the educational workforce, challenges related to gender representation continue to be problematic (Breetzke & Hedding, 2017). The results imply that the academic milieu remains predominantly male-centric, which may obstruct the facilitation of gender equity initiatives (Zhuwao et al., 2019).

2.4 Impact of COVID-19 on Women and the Workplace

2.4.1 Emergence of COVID-19

According to Deng and Li (2020), health officials in Wuhan, China, announced several pneumonia cases with an unidentified aetiology at the end of December 2019. Data released by Chinese health authorities indicated that the outbreak was caused by a novel virus. Initially known as “2019-nCoV,” the virus was subsequently formally designated as SARS-CoV-2, and the illness it produces is referred to as COVID-19 (Deng and Li, 2020). On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a public health emergency of global concern. On March 11, 2020, the WHO advanced the designation to a pandemic. The virus caused severe social and economic disruptions, widespread disease, and an unprecedented worldwide reaction to stop its spread.

In the African context, the initial spreading of COVID-19 manifested at a comparatively gradual pace relative to other global regions, with the first confirmed case documented in Egypt in February 2020 (Gilbert et al., 2020). Nevertheless, by mid-March, the virus began to spread more swiftly throughout the continent, culminating in over 4,300 confirmed cases across 46 nations by the end of that month (Cline-Cole, 2020). According to Inzaule et al. (2021), elements contributing to this accelerated transmission included international mobility, urbanisation, and the complex web of global trade networks, which facilitated the transfer of individuals and commodities.

In South Africa, the first case of the virus was officially recorded on March 5, 2020, involving an individual returning from Italy (Shaw et al., 2021). Governmental authorities responded with alacrity by instituting rigorous lockdown protocols to mitigate the virus’s transmission. Despite these interventions, South Africa encountered a substantial escalation in cases, with

more than 620,000 confirmed instances reported within six months, peaking at over 12,000 new cases daily during the initial wave (Shaw et al., 2021). The elevated population density prevalent in urban locales, combined with socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and insufficient healthcare infrastructure, intensified the crisis, rendering effective containment of the virus particularly arduous (Mabuka et al., 2023).

In collaboration with community outreach initiatives, the South African government endeavoured to inform the populace regarding transmission risks and preventive measures, which proved essential in curbing the virus's spread (Boateng, 2023). However, the emergence of novel variants of the virus introduced additional obstacles in managing the pandemic within South Africa and the broader African continent (Tapela et al., 2022). The persistent mutations of the virus engendered recurrent waves of infections, thereby complicating public health responses and vaccination initiatives (Mabuka et al., 2023).

2.4.2 Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected daily lives, the economy, and public health. Globally, an array of protocols was instituted to curtail the transmission of the virus and safeguard public health. These protocols comprised a diverse assortment of preventive strategies, including the utilisation of personal protective equipment (PPE), stringent hygiene practices, enforcing social distancing measures, and establishing quarantine directives. The execution of these protocols proved pivotal in regulating infection rates and safeguarding the well-being of healthcare professionals and the broader population (Taboe et al., 2020).

Public health interventions, including contact tracing, isolation, and the advocacy of preventive behaviours, such as using face masks and adherence to social distancing guidelines, were essential in managing the outbreak (Taboe et al., 2020). However, adherence to these interventions exhibited considerable variability across diverse communities, shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status and the availability of information (Nwaeze et al., 2021). The pandemic fundamentally transformed the “normal” conditions and frameworks of societies, resulting in what has been described as a “new normal” characterised by modified social practices, heightened inequalities, and shifts in labour relations (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020).

One of the most immediate repercussions was observed in public health systems on a global scale. The pandemic imposed unprecedented pressures on healthcare infrastructures,

culminating in a surge in demand for medical services, hospital admissions, and critical care resources. Numerous nations encountered significant challenges in managing the influx of COVID-19 patients, which led to elevated mortality rates and overwhelmed medical facilities (Blach et al., 2021). According to Leipnik (2021), the pandemic disrupted routine healthcare services, resulting in postponements in treating non-COVID-related health issues, thereby worsening health outcomes.

From an economic perspective, the pandemic instigated a global recession, with substantial contractions in GDP across various countries. Governments enacted lockdowns and travel restrictions to mitigate the spread of the virus, causing widespread unemployment and business closures (Nicola et al., 2020). According to Queiroz et al. (2020) and Kopishynska and Umaieva (2022), the disruptions in supply chains precipitated by the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities within global trade networks, leading to shortages of essential commodities and escalated prices. Kwon (2020) states that as enterprises endeavoured to adapt to new operational realities, numerous sectors, particularly tourism and hospitality, encountered unparalleled challenges, resulting in long-term economic ramifications.

Socially, the pandemic intensified existing inequalities, with marginalised communities disproportionately impacted by both the health and economic ramifications of COVID-19. Susceptible populations, including individuals with pre-existing health conditions, low-income workers, and those engaged in informal employment, faced elevated risks of severe illness and economic distress (Clark et al., 2020; Ataguba, 2020). According to Renjan and Fung (2020), the pandemic produced significant mental health repercussions, with heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress reported globally due to isolation, uncertainty, and economic instability.

Mac-Seing (2024) states that the pandemic incited discussions regarding equity in health governance, with calls for more inclusive policies that cater to the needs of all demographic groups. Numerous governments faced criticism concerning their management of the crisis, particularly concerning the distribution of vaccines and healthcare resources (Benjamens et al., 2020). According to McKibbin and Fernando (2020), the pandemic also prompted a reassessment of public health priorities and the necessity for robust health systems capable of addressing future health emergencies.

2.4.3 Gendered Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has exerted significant and complex effects on women within the global workforce, intensifying pre-existing gender disparities and introducing novel challenges. The consequences of the pandemic on employment, mental well-being, and domestic obligations have disproportionately impacted women, especially those occupying vulnerable socioeconomic strata.

The pandemic has precipitated considerable job losses among women, particularly within sectors characterised by a high concentration of female employment, including hospitality, retail, and health care. Empirical studies suggest that women have encountered higher unemployment rates than men throughout the crisis, diverging from patterns noted in prior economic recessions where men generally faced greater job instability (Abraham et al., 2021; Dang & Cuong, 2021). According to Bussink et al. (2022), investigations conducted in various nations, such as the United States and Italy, underline that women constituted a significant proportion of job losses attributable to the pandemic's repercussions on industries with substantial female representation. Wang (2022) also states that this phenomenon is further aggravated by the prevalence of women's employment in part-time or precarious positions, which are inherently more vulnerable to economic disruptions.

Moreover, Xue & McMunn (2021) and Kabeer et al. (2021) state that the pandemic has heightened the burden of unpaid caregiving responsibilities on women, as school closures and lockdown protocols have amplified the demand for child care and household management. Empirical evidence indicates that women have assumed an unequal share of these obligations, resulting in heightened stress and mental health issues. Xue and McMunn (2021) state that research has demonstrated that single mothers encountered more significant challenges in reconciling work and caregiving during the pandemic, experiencing increased psychological distress in comparison to their partnered peers. This dilemma has been aggravated by the persistence of traditional gender norms, which frequently prescribe that women should oversee professional and domestic responsibilities (Hipp and Bünning, 2020).

The mental health ramifications of the pandemic for women are equally considerable. Research indicates that women are more susceptible to experiencing anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms as a consequence of the pandemic (Xiong et al., 2020). According to Wang (2022), the apprehension surrounding job loss, coupled with augmented caregiving duties, has

engendered a perfect storm for the worsening of mental health among women. Additionally, the pandemic has been correlated with an escalation in intimate partner violence, with women being excessively impacted (Peitzmeier et al., 2021).

The economic pressures and confinement associated with lockdown measures have heightened vulnerabilities, making addressing these issues in post-pandemic recovery strategies imperative. In the realm of workplace dynamics, the pandemic has also unveiled and reinforced pre-existing inequities in employer-employee relations. According to Peters (2021), women have reported feelings of diminished value in their professional roles and encounter more significant difficulties in negotiating work conditions than their male colleagues. The transition to remote work has further illuminated disparities in resource access and support, entrenching gender inequalities within the workplace (Yerkes et al., 2020).

Women, particularly those engaged in informal sectors, have encountered profound economic difficulties due to lockdown measures and reduced business operations. For instance, female market traders in Ghana and South Africa have reported considerable income reductions directly attributable to government-imposed restrictions, paralleling findings from Zimbabwe, where numerous women entrepreneurs were compelled to cease their business activities due to revenue declines (Frimpong et al., 2022). Saloshni and Nithiseelan (2022) state this economic pressure is exacerbated by the reality that women are disproportionately situated in informal employment, characterised by a lack of job security and benefits, rendering them particularly susceptible during economic downturns.

Furthermore, the pandemic has heightened the challenges associated with work-life balance for women, particularly for those with caregiving obligations. Research suggests that working mothers in Nigeria experienced intensified difficulties in balancing their professional and domestic responsibilities due to the confinement policies necessitated by the pandemic (Akanji et al., 2022). This phenomenon is reflected in other contexts, where women have reported increased domestic duties without a corresponding decrease in work hours for men, resulting in heightened stress levels and potential burnout (Clark et al., 2021). According to Rossen (2024), the emotional burden of these additional responsibilities has been considerable, with numerous women feeling compelled to withdraw from the workforce entirely.

Additionally, Cartwright (2023) explains that the pandemic has underscored and often worsened existing gender norms and inequalities within the workplace. Women occupying leadership positions have had to navigate through these challenges while modifying their leadership styles to support their teams during the crisis more effectively. Wang (2022) states that the overarching impact of COVID-19 has been a regression in gender equality, with many women enduring job losses or reductions in work hours, thereby exacerbating their economic vulnerability.

Global labour markets were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Riva et al., 2022). The immediate effects were abrupt and frequently severe. While some workers were furloughed or lost their jobs, others quickly adapted to working from home as offices closed. Many workers, however, were deemed essential and continued to work in hospitals, grocery stores, garbage trucks, and warehouses (World Health Organization, 2020).

While the disproportionate division of household and childcare responsibilities existed pre-pandemic, with women bearing the brunt, often to the detriment of their career opportunities, the pandemic worsened it when households had to take on homeschooling, full-time child care, and navigating frequent closures and quarantines even when schools and childcare facilities were open (World Health Organization, 2020).

The Harvard Business Review's national survey of more than 2,550 working parents found that 20% had to quit or reduce work hours because they could not afford child care (World Health Organization, 2020). Moreover, 33% of participants said that the decision of which parent would quit or work fewer hours depended on who was better at it, not any other objective criteria regarding job stability, income, or hours worked (World Health Organization, 2020). Riva et al. (2022) note that gender roles still loom large in household decision-making. They found that 26% of women stopped working because they lacked child care. Two years into the pandemic, the World Economic Forum's analysis found that the time before gender parity is achieved is no longer less than 100 years (Riva et al., 2022).

2.4.4 Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education Institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially influenced higher education institutions globally, affecting both the academic milieu and the psychological well-being of students. Numerous scholarly investigations have reported these consequences, underscoring the imperative for

universities to evolve in response to the challenges introduced by the pandemic. Among the most significant transformations has been the transition to digital learning modalities.

As educational institutions pivoted to remote instructional formats, the dependence on electronic learning management systems escalated markedly. This digital shift was pivotal for sustaining educational continuity throughout the pandemic, as it facilitated the engagement of students and employees, notwithstanding the implementation of physical distancing protocols. Nevertheless, this transition also entailed inevitable challenges, including issues related to student engagement and the efficacy of online educational platforms (Prajogo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the pandemic has precipitated a significant psychological toll on university students and staff. Empirical studies have indicated that numerous students and employees experienced elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress attributable to the uncertainties associated with COVID-19, modifications to their academic routines, and apprehensions regarding health and safety (Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). For instance, an investigation conducted among university students in Spain revealed considerable psychological distress during the initial weeks of confinement, thereby highlighting the necessity for mental health support services within academic institutions (Odriozola-González et al., 2020).

Likewise, the study by Zhang et al. (2020) emphasised that physical activity could alleviate some of the detrimental mental health effects encountered by students during the pandemic. Beyond mental health issues, the pandemic has also shaped students' perceptions regarding health behaviours, particularly in relation to vaccination. Research has revealed varying levels of vaccine acceptance among university students, frequently influenced by their information sources and their degree of trust in those sources (Qiao et al., 2020; Kazzaz, 2022).

2.5 Gender Issues in the South African Workforce Post-pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted women, especially those employed in precarious sectors such as domestic labour, informal trade, and small-scale agriculture, where job security and access to health benefits are severely limited (Saloshni & Nithiseelan, 2022; Rogan & Skinner, 2022). Women in these positions encountered heightened economic instability as lockdown protocols resulted in job losses and diminished income, exacerbating

their socioeconomic vulnerabilities (Saloshni & Nithiseelan, 2022; Rogan & Skinner, 2022; Strauss et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the pandemic has amplified the dual burden of both paid and unpaid labour for women. According to Harrop (2021) and Carli (2020), caregiving responsibilities at home have compelled women to navigate the challenges of remote work while simultaneously managing household obligations. This predicament has not only influenced their professional pathways but has also precipitated significant mental health issues, with many women reporting heightened anxiety and stress due to the overwhelming demands placed upon them (Abdalla et al., 2022). Moreover, the intersectionality of gender and economic disparities has become increasingly pronounced, with marginalised women bearing the most severe consequences of the pandemic's economic repercussions. This has further entrenched existing inequalities in access to health care and employment opportunities (Sharpley, 2024; Nwosu & Oyenubi, 2021).

2.5.1 Women's Experiences Upon Returning to Work Post-pandemic

The pandemic necessitated an expedited transition to remote work, which, although initially perceived as a provisional measure, has engendered enduring alterations in workplace dynamics and expectations for women, particularly those within the academic sphere. Empirical research suggests that the pandemic has intensified pre-existing gender inequities in the professional environment.

Benhamouche (2023), Barhate and Hirudayaraj (2021), and Adisa et al. (2021) state that women, especially those burdened with caregiving responsibilities, encountered augmented stress and workload as they navigated the indistinct boundaries between their professional and personal lives while engaged in remote work. According to Silva et al. (2021) and Guidetti et al. (2022), the challenges associated with remote work encompassed elevated anxiety and stress levels, which were especially acute among educators who were compelled to adjust to novel teaching modalities while concurrently managing household responsibilities. This predicament was worsened by the prevalent sentiment among many women in academia who reported experiencing feelings of isolation and a lack of support during this transitional period, which adversely affected their mental health and job satisfaction (Alsulami et al., 2022; and Sjöblom et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, these difficulties and the pandemic concurrently fostered avenues for women to reconceptualise their roles within the professional sphere. Studies by Barhate and Hirudayaraj (2021) and Alsulami et al. (2022) demonstrated that remote work can contribute to favourable career advancement outcomes for women, as organisations that adopted flexible work arrangements were able to leverage the positive experiences of their workforce. For example, women who exhibited higher levels of job satisfaction before the pandemic were more inclined to resume full-time work following the remote work period, implying that supportive workplace policies can facilitate a more seamless transition back to the physical office (Gumy et al., 2022). Moreover, the increased flexibility associated with remote work has enabled certain women to balance their professional and personal obligations more effectively, potentially resulting in enhanced career trajectories (Alsulami et al., 2022).

However, the reintegration into in-person work presents an array of challenges. Women re-entering the workplace frequently confront significant readjustment processes, including managing commuting logistics and the heightened potential for exposure to health risks (Silva et al., 2021; Guidetti et al., 2022). Additionally, the absence of adequate support systems for breastfeeding and child care within numerous workplaces has been recognised as an impediment to women's successful reintegration into the labour force (Ndzi & Westwood, 2021). According to Kaushiva and Joshi (2020), Kokubo et al. (2023), and Hodgson (2023), the imperative for comprehensive workplace policies that cater to women's distinct needs, such as flexible working hours and childcare assistance, is paramount in facilitating their return to professional environments post-pandemic.

Research demonstrates that women have been disproportionately impacted by job displacements throughout the pandemic, with empirical studies revealing that they were more susceptible to job loss in comparison to their male counterparts. For example, a study concentrating on India revealed that women were seven times more likely to experience employment losses during lockdown measures and eleven times more likely to refrain from returning to work, relative to their male peers (Abraham et al., 2021).

This phenomenon is mirrored globally, as women are notably overrepresented in industries most severely affected by the pandemic, such as retail and hospitality, as highlighted by the International Labour Organization (Nahar, 2023). Furthermore, the burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities has escalated for women, thereby exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. A

study conducted in Australia by Craig and Churchill (2020) underscored that although men may have assumed a more significant share of domestic responsibilities, this transition did not mitigate the overall increase in unpaid labour for women, who continued to endure a disproportionate workload. This predicament is further intensified by the absence of supportive policies, including childcare provisions, essential for women striving to navigate the dual demands of professional and familial responsibilities.

The deficiency of financial support and family-oriented policies has been recognised as a pivotal factor that could impede women's prospective employment opportunities and economic resilience (Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021). Additionally, Wang (2022) stated that emotional and psychological obstacles have surfaced as significant impediments for women seeking to re-enter the workforce. Women have articulated increased anxiety regarding job stability and future income, particularly those burdened with caregiving duties. Empirical research has indicated that women afflicted with chronic health conditions, such as breast cancer, encountered heightened job insecurity and emotional turmoil during the pandemic, further complicating their reintegration into the workforce (Chapman et al., 2020). The cumulative ramifications of these adversities have culminated in an elevated risk of prolonged unemployment and skill degradation among women (Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021).

The adaptability afforded by remote work, although advantageous in specific contexts, frequently culminated in an increased burden of household responsibilities for women, thus complicating their reintegration into conventional work environments (Alfarran, 2021). Furthermore, the institutional culture prevalent within academic institutions significantly influences women's experiences navigating this transition.

According to Watermeyer et al. (2022), the provision of flexible working arrangements and specialised support frameworks could effectively address the distinct challenges encountered by women. Research indicates that the pandemic has catalysed a reassessment of work organisation within higher education, positing that remote work may enhance social connectedness and trust, which are critical for the professional development of women.

In addition, the experiences of African women in academia are influenced by more comprehensive socioeconomic variables. The obstacles women face in informal employment underscore the precarious nature of the work environment that many women navigate, which

can affect their choices concerning a return to formal employment (Horwood et al., 2020). The necessity for supportive policies that reflect the complexities of women's lived experiences is emphasised by studies advocating for a more equitable framework for work arrangements in the post-pandemic era (Alsulami et al., 2022).

Feng and Savani (2020) note that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures on women's experiences, especially in terms of their reintegration into the workforce post-lockdown, has been substantial. Studies have shown that women when compared to men, displayed decreased levels of work efficiency and job satisfaction during the lockdown period. Moreover, the pandemic has also affected women's participation in sports and physical activities, with a lower proportion of young women returning to sports after the lockdown than men (Thorpe et al., 2023). Gender roles and increased caregiving responsibilities have notably influenced women's decisions regarding their return to work after the pandemic, causing some women to opt out of re-entering the workforce entirely (Chauhan, 2022).

The global health emergency has exacerbated disparities between genders in the workplace, potentially influencing societal perceptions of gender roles and impacting inter-gender dynamics in the future (Reichelt et al., 2020). Women employed in various sectors, such as construction, have faced unique challenges during the pandemic, including changes in employment conditions and caregiving responsibilities following the enforcement of lockdown measures (Oo & Lim, 2021). According to Mitchell and Weldon-Johns (2022), there is a growing realisation that the economic recovery following the pandemic must prioritise improving childcare infrastructure to address inequalities and enhance the involvement of women in the workforce.

The implementation of lockdown measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom has led to an escalation in the household responsibilities shouldered by women, resulting in a surge of conflicting roles influenced by structural and interactional elements, notably conspicuous during lockdown periods (Adisa et al., 2021). Academic women who are also mothers have faced a myriad of challenges amid the pandemic, as evidenced by a significant reduction in paid working hours compared to men and an elevated susceptibility to job insecurity since the commencement of lockdown measures (Harrop, 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic has underscored the gender gaps in time allocation (men provided less time to

spouses/partners and children), with patterns showing increased similarity during lockdown periods (Giménez-Nadal, 2024).

2.5.2 Women's Experiences Working from Home and Expectations Upon Return to the Office

During the lockdown period, some women reaped advantages from remote work, prompting them to anticipate the continuation of this setup. Research has demonstrated that the work efficiency of almost half of women researchers at universities decreased during the pandemic lockdowns; however, approximately a quarter of them exhibited higher efficiency while working from home compared to their pre-lockdown productivity levels (Aczél et al., 2021). Moreover, evidence suggests that women had more leisure time and engaged in more paid work during the pandemic when working remotely (Giménez-Nadal, 2024). Additionally, numerous individuals have proposed that the benefits of remote work, such as heightened work efficacy, reduced commute durations, and improved air quality, will endure beyond the COVID-19 lockdowns (Koogh et al., 2023). This transition to remote work will likely impact women's viewpoints and anticipations regarding their work setups post-pandemic.

The significant factors influencing women's desire for remote work post-pandemic include the advantages of working from home, such as flexibility, reduced stress from commuting, and more time for personal activities. Women have likely developed a preference for continuing remote work in the future due to the positive experiences they encountered during the lockdown, which led to increased efficiency and a better work-life balance. Therefore, it is reasonable to foresee that women will actively support the maintenance of remote work opportunities based on the benefits they have enjoyed during the lockdown period.

Working remotely, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in notable alterations in individuals' management of work-life balance, handling of childcare duties, and coping with stress levels. The abrupt shift to remote work prompted by lockdown measures has produced diverse effects on both employees and organisations.

Li et al. (2022) conducted a study that underlines the apprehension over the increase of stress among employees compelled to work remotely during lockdown and the significance of human resource practices in alleviating this stress. The research highlights the criticality of implementing supportive human resource approaches to aid employees in addressing the

adversities of remote work during lockdown. In addition, Anderson and Kelliher (2020) deliberate on the challenges that have mounted due to mandated remote work during lockdown, particularly concerning childcare obligations, which notably influence the gendered division of labour within households. The study underlines the necessity for organisations to tackle these concerns and assist employees juggling work and familial responsibilities while operating remotely.

Furthermore, the research conducted by Mahlangu et al. (2022) emphasises that the confluence of remote work and the provision of child care amidst lockdowns may lead to heightened stress levels among caregivers, consequently amplifying the susceptibility to domestic violence. This accentuates the importance of organisations enacting initiatives to assist employees grappling with these obstacles while operating in a remote setting. Concerning the aspects of welfare and efficiency, Scholtz (2021) observes that the combination of remote work and childcare duties during lockdown periods in South Africa has had a notable impact on families. The investigation sheds light on the intricate nature and hurdles encountered by individuals striving to juggle professional obligations with childcare responsibilities while working from home, underscoring the necessity for customised support and access to resources.

Overall, the transition to telecommuting amid the period of enforced confinement has brought to light many concerns pertaining to the equilibrium between professional and personal life, the effective handling of stress, and the provision of assistance to staff members juggling numerous duties. Enterprises must recognise these obstacles and devise tactics to improve employees' welfare, efficiency, and harmony in work and personal life, operating remotely under lockdown conditions.

According to Rodrigo and Sara (2022) and the Forum of African Women Educationists (2015), universities can advance gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in society. Gender disparity is still a problem that South African higher education faces today. Frankiewicz (2020), Dibobo, Nkonyama-Ndou and Mncwabe (2022), and Naidoo and Kongolo (2004) show that the pay gap is a measurable indicator of gender inequality. One of the causes of disparities in wages between the sexes is time-off work, where women are typically required to take time off from their jobs to care for their families, including young children.

In South Africa, employers often overlook the trial of being a working parent, single or supported, and working mothers are frequently regarded as less desirable employees. According to Musetsho, Isac and Dobrin (2021) and Mello and Phago (2007), it is worth noting that female employees are significantly more likely to say it is essential for them that their jobs allow more excellent work-life balance and better personal well-being. As a result, companies willing to support parents' personal lives have higher retention rates (Jewett, Pilime, and Richter, 2022).

Lafkas, Christensen and Madsen (2023), Nash and Churchill (2020), and Khwela-Mdluli and Beharry-Ramraj (2020) refer to the increased challenges faced by women in the workplace during the pandemic. They argue that during the global pandemic, women academics struggled with child care and the homeschooling of their toddlers while simultaneously being required to actively engage in employment responsibilities. They further highlight that the pandemic could make women's professional advancement more challenging than it was previously. Their research demonstrates that COVID-19 disproportionately affected women in their everyday lives compared to men.

According to Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2020), Guerini et al. (2021), De Klerk et al. (2021), and Singh and Kaur (2022), there is also increased attention being given to women's experiences returning to work post-pandemic. These studies show that since women experienced some benefits of working from home, this created expectations that this practice would continue on some office days. Specific organisations have adopted flexible hours for their women employees, such as Beam Suntory, a world leader in premium spirits, and Bumble, a woman-founded company (Cole, 2023). In some organisations, the employer receives a partial activity allowance from the state to supplement employees' salary loss due to reduced working hours. Short Fridays is an example of flexible working hours that Beam Suntory has put under their policy. If the employee has completed all tasks for the day by 2 p.m., they may leave the office at that time every Friday (Beam Suntory, 2019).

2.5.3 Returning to Work in a University Setting

The reintegration of personnel into a university setting after the COVID-19 pandemic presents numerous challenges and opportunities. As higher education institutions evolve to accommodate a post-pandemic framework, several key factors shape employee experiences, spatial configurations, and the overarching organisational culture.

The pandemic has transformed workplace dynamics, culminating in the emergence of hybrid work models that amalgamate remote and in-person interactions. Empirical evidence suggests that flexibility in employment arrangements has become a crucial factor influencing employee satisfaction and work-life balance. For example, the freedom to determine work hours has a positive impact on productivity and individual well-being, which is particularly critical as personnel transition back to campus environments (Yang et al., 2021). According to Capuano (2022), the transition to remote work has instigated a reassessment of workplace design, highlighting the need for environments that cater to in-person and remote work preferences. This hybrid model is expected to persist, requiring universities to establish adaptable spaces that encourage collaboration while ensuring safety and comfort (Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy, 2021).

Additionally, the psychological ramifications of the pandemic warrant significant attention. Employees are returning to the workforce with varying levels of anxiety and stress, shaped by their experiences during periods of lockdown and remote employment. The pandemic has underscored the importance of psychologically safe workplaces, essential for building trust and interpersonal connections among employees (Kulik, 2021). This is especially relevant within academic contexts, where staff welfare directly affects student experiences and institutional efficacy.

Furthermore, the need for comprehensive workplace policies that address health concerns and foster a supportive environment is underscored by the assertion that transparent communication regarding safety protocols can mitigate employee apprehensions associated with COVID-19 (Wong et al., 2020). The pandemic has also accelerated the development of digital literacy and the incorporation of technology into pedagogical practices. As emphasised by prior studies, the shift to remote learning has necessitated that employees acquire new competencies to effectively navigate the digital landscape (Hite & McDonald, 2020). This transition not only meets current demands but also furnishes employees with the pertinent skills needed for an increasingly technology-driven workplace (Bayerlein et al., 2021). Consequently, universities are compelled to invest in training and development programmes to enhance digital competencies among their staff, ensuring they are adequately prepared for the evolving educational environment.

Finally, the architectural design of physical spaces within universities must reflect lessons learned during the pandemic. The importance of flexible design in dormitory and classroom environments to bolster resilience against future disruptions is underscored (Dişli & Arslan, 2023). This includes reconfiguring spatial arrangements to facilitate social distancing and improve air quality, which is vital for sustaining health and safety in the post-pandemic landscape. Incorporating ergonomic principles into workplace design is also imperative, as highlighted by research examining the impact of home office arrangements on employee health during the pandemic (Ahmed et al., 2022).

2.6 Gaps in the Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced women's engagement within the labour force, with particular emphasis on academic environments. This situation has been intensified by pre-existing gender inequalities, which became progressively evident throughout the pandemic. A significant deficiency in the existing literature pertains to the distinct obstacles encountered by women re-entering the workforce in academic institutions after the pandemic, encompassing the confluence of caregiving obligations, mental health challenges, and institutional support frameworks.

Empirical studies suggest that women have disproportionately borne the increased burden of caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic. According to Collins et al. (2020), mothers with young children markedly reduced their working hours compared to their male counterparts, escalating the gender disparity in working hours by 20 to 50 percent. This pattern is consistently observed across diverse contexts, wherein women frequently assumed additional child care and domestic responsibilities, which have been associated with elevated levels of psychological distress (Xue & McMunn, 2020; Woodbridge et al., 2021). The difficulties related to reconciling professional and familial obligations have been particularly pronounced for academic mothers, who encountered distinct pressures related to scholarly output and career progression (Harrop, 2021; Brown et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the pandemic has underscored the deficiencies in institutional support structures for women in the academic sector. However, the recognition of gender disparities and advancements toward mitigating the gender gap in academic institutions has progressed sluggishly, with COVID-19 further aggravating these inequalities (Beckwith et al., 2022).

Women have articulated feelings of isolation and a deficiency in sufficient institutional support, which has impeded their capacity to return to the workforce efficiently (Linker & Jones, 2023).

The literature advocates for universities to adopt more comprehensive policies that cater to the specific requirements of women re-entering professional environments, including flexible employment arrangements and mental health resources (Wilson et al., 2021; Uddin, 2021). Additionally, the enduring repercussions of COVID-19, such as “long COVID,” present further obstacles to women’s reintegration into the workforce, particularly in roles that demand significant physical exertion. The pandemic’s psychological and physical health ramifications have been substantial, necessitating a critical reassessment of workplace policies to facilitate women’s reintegration into the labour force (Grazzini et al., 2022; Lulli et al., 2023).

This research endeavour seeks to clarify the experiences encountered by women employees at the university level, specifically within the College of Humanities at the Pietermaritzburg Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, while simultaneously contributing to the formulation of flexible employment policies. The significance of this investigation lies in its emphasis on the intensification of gender disparities in professional settings during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. The research scrutinized the manner in which the pandemic has aggravated the challenges associated with achieving a work-life equilibrium for women, particularly for those bearing caregiving obligations. By elucidating the factors that contribute to the gender divide and implementing strategies to alleviate these issues, organisations can endeavour to foster more equitable and inclusive workplace environments. As organisations evolve, it becomes imperative to address these challenges and harness the insights acquired during the pandemic to cultivate a more equitable and supportive professional atmosphere for women.

The literature exposes notable gaps concerning women’s experiences returning to academic institutions following the COVID-19 pandemic. These gaps include the necessity for a more nuanced comprehension of the interrelations among caregiving duties, mental health, and institutional support and policies.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on three theories that form the theoretical framework. A theoretical framework constitutes a fundamental element of scholarly inquiry that offers a systematic

perspective through which a research endeavour is envisioned and executed. It comprises a constellation of interrelated concepts and theories that steer the research endeavour, facilitating the elucidation of the research question, guiding the methodological approach, and aiding in the interpretation of results.

According to Hernon (2007), William (2024), and Heale and Noble (2019), theoretical frameworks hold significant importance in both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, as they delineate the context necessary for comprehending the interrelations among variables and the phenomena being examined. Without such frameworks, researchers may encounter challenges in consistently defining constructs, resulting in obstacles to comparing and generalising findings across disparate studies (Beccia, 2021). Furthermore, incorporating theory into research enhances the rigour and applicability of empirical inquiries.

These theories can be explanatory facts guiding the viewpoint of a researched social phenomenon. The theories used to guide this research were the gender role theory, the adaptive theory, and the theory of gendered organisations.

2.7.1 Gender Role Theory

Gender role theory posits that individuals adhere to societal norms related to their gender due to external social influences that encourage behaviours consistent with their assigned gender roles (Kidder, 2002). Endendijk et al. (2016) state that this concept finds reinforcement in social role theory, which elucidates that variations in behaviour based on gender originate from the established societal delineations of gender roles, with women traditionally occupying the role of caregivers and men as providers.

Furthermore, gender role theory underscores the expectation for men to demonstrate agentic qualities and behaviours that align with leadership positions, mirroring societal norms regarding gender roles (Lanaj and Hollenbeck, 2015). This aligns with the notion that individuals generally conform to gender roles, resulting in disparities in behaviours like initiating negotiations between men and women (Reif et al., 2019). According to McDermott & Schwartz (2013), the gender role theory offers a theoretical framework for explaining how men shift from traditional gender roles to more varied and inclusive roles, underlining the progression of gender role identities.

Gender role theory studies female and male roles extensively. One significant dimension of the theory pertains to the ramifications of gender segregation within occupational settings. Rijk et al. (2009) identified that women frequently encounter distinct job modifications compared to their male counterparts during the reintegration process into the workforce, thereby reflecting broader societal trends of horizontal and vertical gender segregation. This segregation not only determines the categories of employment that women can access but also shapes the nature of assistance and adjustments they receive upon their return to work following a leave of absence. Such empirical findings emphasise the necessity of incorporating gender-specific experiences within workplace policies and practices.

Furthermore, the psychological stress associated with gender role incongruence has been documented across numerous scholarly investigations. Cooper and Tytherleigh (2010) indicated that women occupying gender-incongruent positions face elevated levels of work-related stress, thereby complicating their reintegration into the workforce. This observation is consistent with the research conducted by Calvo-Salguero et al. (2011), who posited that gender role expectations play a crucial role in shaping work-family conflict, particularly in cultural contexts where traditional gender roles are entrenched. The compulsion to adhere to these societal expectations can impede women's ability to effectively manage the balance between work and familial obligations, adversely affecting their overall job satisfaction and commitment.

According to the gender role theory, the distribution of work between husbands and wives is characterised by males specialising in task-oriented conduct and women specialising in socioemotional behaviour.

This theory explains the gendered identity of women in the context of the study, particularly in their adaptation from being mothers at home to being leaders and employees at work. It helped determine the experiences of women employees before the pandemic and helped establish women's experiences when working from home during the pandemic.

2.7.2 Adaptive Theory

Regarding gender roles, the adaptive theory contains the notion that people's behaviours and characteristics are formed by their capacity to adjust to their social surroundings and the expectations of being a particular gender (Bajwa et al., 2017). Gender roles and adaptive theory

highlight how gender norms are dynamic and how people's adaptability shapes and reshapes these norms. A detailed grasp of how people adjust to and influence gender roles can be attained by considering the dealings between social expectations, cognitive processes, and societal divisions of work.

The adaptive theory considers the environment a complex life support system of an organisation, as it consists of events, trends, stakeholders, and competitors that impact the implementation of an organisation's strategy (Besant and Francis, 2005). An adaptive approach to the environment-organisation relationship assumes that organisations actively adapt to environmental changes by identifying and making decisions that shift their strategy, structure, and processes (Sternad, 2012). Sternad (2012) proposed that organisations build specific patterns to guide themselves toward the environment through a series of choices.

A pivotal investigation conducted by Singh and Vanka (2020) elucidates that women re-entering technology professions in India frequently do so to restore their professional identity and self-assurance, indicating that the centrality of work is integral to their decision-making framework. This finding is corroborated by research from Spiteri and Xuereb (2012), who observe that organisational methodologies, including strategic planning and domestic management, substantially mitigate role strain for women rejoining the workforce post-childbirth.

Both inquiries emphasise the significance of adaptability in orchestrating personal and professional obligations, demonstrating how women adeptly navigate their reintegration into the workforce through systematic planning and prioritisation. According to Banning and Griffiths (2014), workplace adaptations, such as flexible working hours, are vital for easing women's smoother conversion back to work (Banning & Griffiths, 2014). The theory worked to trace the adaptive effort and challenges for women employees as they returned to the office. This helped to understand the experiences of women employees upon their return to campus and determine their views on flexible hours in the workplace.

2.7.3 Theory of Gendered Organisations

Acker's research on gendered organisations emphasises that gender is a human characteristic and a social structure that influences organisational relationships and activities (Whitehead, 2013). According to Williams (2012), the study of gendered organisations delves into how

gender shapes and is incorporated into organisational procedures and structures. It asserts that power dynamics, opportunities, and experiences are shaped by gender and that organisations are fundamentally gendered.

According to the theory of gendered organisations, gender patterns such as advantage, disadvantage, control, and identity of employees sustain inequalities within organisations (Whitehead, 2013). The theory contests the notion of gender-neutral workplaces and demonstrates how gender norms affect decisions, how resources are allocated, and how careers are advanced (Nichols, 2011). Martin and Collinson (2002) state that it is essential to comprehend how gender interacts with other forms of inequality to influence people's chances and experiences in work environments.

According to Rodriguez and Guenther (2022), the theory also highlights how gender interacts with organisations' social, political, and economic aspects. Grosser and Moon (2017) state that interventions to advance gender equality and subvert ingrained norms can be created by acknowledging the gendered nature of organisations. To create more inclusive settings, the theory emphasises the need to address power dynamics and gendered disparities.

Gendered organisation theory views organisations as places that (re)produce gender dynamics and gender order. Bringing a gender lens to debates about organisation theory may assist in obtaining the filter through which relational dynamics operate in organisations, as well as in understanding how these dynamics reconstruct the psychological, cultural, and social dimensions that form the organisation as a dynamic, relational, and interdependent structure (Shelley, Morabito, and Tobin-Gurley, 2011).

The theory aids in focusing on how gender interacts with various dimensions of social, political, economic, and technological life; how this is mobilised in organisations; and how organisations create and tackle new and reformulated gender(ed) inequalities. Academic inquiries have built upon Acker's theoretical framework by investigating contexts where gendered dynamics are evident. For example, Coley (2023) scrutinises the policies implemented at Christian colleges and universities, contending that these institutions not only impose gendered housing and visitation regulations but also perpetuate heteronormative ideologies that exacerbate gender disparities. Similarly, Martin (2003) underscores the significance of acknowledging the "sayings and doings" associated with gender in professional

settings, positing that neglecting these practices culminates in a distorted representation of organisational dynamics and employee experiences. This perspective aligns with the idea that organisations serve as arenas for the (re)production of gender dynamics, highlighting the relational dimensions of gender within organisational frameworks (Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022). In this study, the theory helped propose gender-sensitive policy recommendations that could be useful in the workplace in the future.

These three theories complement each other because the gendered role theory suggests that roles are already specialised for men and women, while the adaptive theory suggests organisations actively adapt to change. The theory of gendered organisations assists in guiding policy recommendations. In conclusion, these three theories are equally important in understanding the impact of returning to the office after working remotely due to COVID-19 on women employees within the College of Humanities.

2.8 Summary

This chapter elucidates that, through an exhaustive understanding of the factors that contribute to gender inequality and the implementation of strategies to address these challenges, institutions can endeavour to cultivate fairer and more diverse professional environments. By comprehending the elements that underpin the gender gap and executing measures to mitigate them, organisations can strive toward establishing more equitable and inclusive workplace settings. This chapter also examined how the pandemic has exacerbated the difficulties related to work-life balance for women, especially for those with caregiving responsibilities. As organisations progress, it is essential to confront these obstacles and utilise the insights gained during the pandemic to develop a more just and supportive work environment for women.

Moreover, as employees re-enter academic institutions after COVID-19, these organisations must navigate a complex terrain defined by hybrid employment frameworks, emotional well-being, digital proficiency, and innovative workplace architecture. By tackling these areas, universities have the potential to foster nurturing and efficient environments that support employee satisfaction and productivity. This chapter provided an overview of the literature for the study, addressed gaps, and discussed the three theories that guided the study.

Chapter three follows and concerns the methodology employed in the study.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology employed in the study. It outlines and discusses the research design, research site, population and sampling, data collection procedure, data analysis, trustworthiness and credibility of the research, ethical considerations, issues of reflexivity and positionality, fieldwork challenges, and finally, participants' demographics.

3.2 Research Design

According to Cook and Cook (2016) and Sharma et al. (2023), the design of a study is a critical component in any research endeavour, providing a systematic framework for conducting the investigation. It serves as a detailed plan outlining the methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, thereby influencing the knowledge derived from the study. Selecting an appropriate research design is crucial, as it directly influences the credibility and dependability of the study findings. In this study, a qualitative research design was employed to explore the experiences of women employees returning to the office after working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic within the College of Humanities at the UKZN. Qualitative research is particularly useful for understanding the human condition in various environments and perceived situations (Patton, 2002). The approach was chosen for its flexibility in accommodating a variety of methods, such as interviews and case studies. Moreover, the qualitative research design facilitates interpersonal interaction between the researcher and participants. This was feasible due to the small and manageable sample size employed.

3.3 Area of Study

The study was conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The interviews were conducted at the employees' offices on the Pietermaritzburg Campus. The selection of this specific site being Pietermaritzburg is motivated by various constraints that render it both practical and viable for the scope of the thesis. Primarily, its close proximity to the researcher's location facilitates convenient access, thereby allowing for frequent site visits and ongoing data collection without incurring

substantial travel costs. Considering budgetary restrictions and the necessity to operate within a manageable geographic region, this site presents a distinctive amalgamation of accessibility and abundance in data sources, establishing it as the most appropriate option for the researcher.

3.4 Study Population

The study population comprised women of all races currently employed at the UKZN's Pietermaritzburg Campus within the College of Humanities, who were readjusting to work after spending extended periods working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The College of Humanities employs 40% of the total staff at the UKZN, making it the largest college by staff size, with approximately 356 female staff members. In comparison, the College of Law and Management Studies has approximately 190 female staff, and the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science, employs approximately 300 female staff (UKZN, 2023). The comparison does not include the College of Health Sciences, as it is not located on the Pietermaritzburg Campus.

3.5 Recruitment Strategy

Upon receiving research ethics approval from the Research Office at the UKZN, the sampled participants (see 3.6 below) were contacted and informed of the study's objectives, the procedures involved, and the expectations from them as participants. The list and contact details of women employees within the College of Humanities were obtained from the University's telephone/email directory.

3.6 Sampling Methods, Inclusion Criteria, Sampling Process, and Sample Size

3.6.1 Sampling methods

Purposive sampling and snowballing sampling techniques were used for this research. Both these sampling methods are relevant in qualitative research designs; they allow the researcher to purposively include or exclude participants in terms of the requirements of the study (Robinson, 2014).

Purposive sampling entails the deliberate selection of participants by the researcher, grounded in their particular knowledge, experience, or characteristics that are pertinent to the research inquiry (Rosmalina, 2023; Soebagyo et al., 2021; Tongco, 2007; Palinkas et al., 2013). This sampling method, frequently employed in qualitative research, endeavours to achieve a

profound understanding of a phenomenon (Rosmalina, 2023; Palinkas et al., 2013; Etikan et al., 2016). The size of the sample is generally small, as the emphasis lies on the quality of the information procured rather than the sheer quantity (Rosmalina, 2023; Soebagyo et al., 2021; Tongco, 2007). Purposive sampling may be utilised in conjunction with other sampling methodologies, such as snowball sampling, to access populations that are difficult to reach (Valerio et al., 2016). The intrinsic bias associated with purposive sampling is regarded as an asset, as it permits the researcher to select the most insightful participants (Tongco, 2007). This sampling technique is particularly advantageous when the researcher does not possess a comprehensive sampling frame or database of potential participants (Valerio et al., 2016). The criteria for participant selection must be explicitly articulated and substantiated based on the research aims (Soebagyo et al., 2021; Tongco, 2007; Palinkas et al., 2013).

In the realm of qualitative research, snowball sampling is of considerable significance for examining intricate social networks and interpersonal relationships. Noy (2008) emphasised the necessity of comprehending the hermeneutical aspects of snowball sampling, positing that it yields critical insights into the social dynamics prevalent within particular demographic groups. Moreover, snowball sampling demonstrates notable efficacy in accessing concealed or marginalised populations, a point underscored by Valerio et al. (2016). In the context of this study, this sampling strategy can assist the researcher in accessing networks of women who may possess diverse experiences influenced by their respective roles or individual circumstances. The interconnectedness within social networks fosters a more holistic understanding of the challenges and triumphs experienced by these women, as they can refer a researcher to other participants who either share analogous experiences or may present divergent viewpoints.

Snowball sampling represents a widely utilised technique for sampling in qualitative research, fundamentally characterised by the principles of networking and referral. Researchers typically commence their inquiry with a limited set of initial contacts who meet the established research criteria and are subsequently invited to participate in the study. The consenting participants are then solicited to suggest additional contacts who also satisfy the research criteria and may potentially be inclined to participate, who in turn recommend further prospective participants, and so forth. Consequently, researchers leverage their social networks to forge initial connections, from which sampling momentum emerges, thereby capturing an expanding

sequence of participants. The sampling process generally concludes once either a predetermined sample size or a saturation threshold has been attained (Parker et al. 2019)

3.6.2 Inclusion Criteria

As previously noted, women of all races currently employed within the College of Humanities comprised the population of this study. Specifically, women aged between 23 and 49 years were targeted for selection. The inclusion criteria also required that these women be at a stage in life where they balance domestic or child-bearing responsibilities alongside their professional work commitments. It is in light of these criteria that participants were selected using both purposive and snowball sampling.

3.6.3 Sampling process

Emails were sent to women employees within the College of Humanities whom the researcher considered would meet the inclusion criteria, requesting their participation in the study. Those who responded, agreed to participate, and met the inclusion criteria were selected and subsequently interviewed. These participants were also asked to recommend other female employees who they thought would “qualify” to be interviewed. These recommendations were followed up by the researcher, some of whom agreed to participate. Thus a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling were the methods used in this study.

3.6.4 Sample size

Vasileiou et al. (2018) note that a qualitative sample must be manageable to achieve a successful outcome aligned with the study’s aims and objectives. According to Green and Thorogood (2004), most qualitative researchers who do interview-based studies with reasonably defined research questions find that little new information emerges after interviewing approximately 20 participants from a single “category” with relevant analytical data. Therefore, a sample size close to this, namely, 15 participants, was purposively selected to reach thematic saturation.

Interviews were thus conducted with 15 women who were currently employed within the College of Humanities. The participants were Africans (n= 8), Indians (n= 3), Coloured (n=3) and White (n=1). Of these, nine participants (n=9) were support staff, and six participants (n=6) were lecturing staff. Figure 1 depicts the participants by race group.

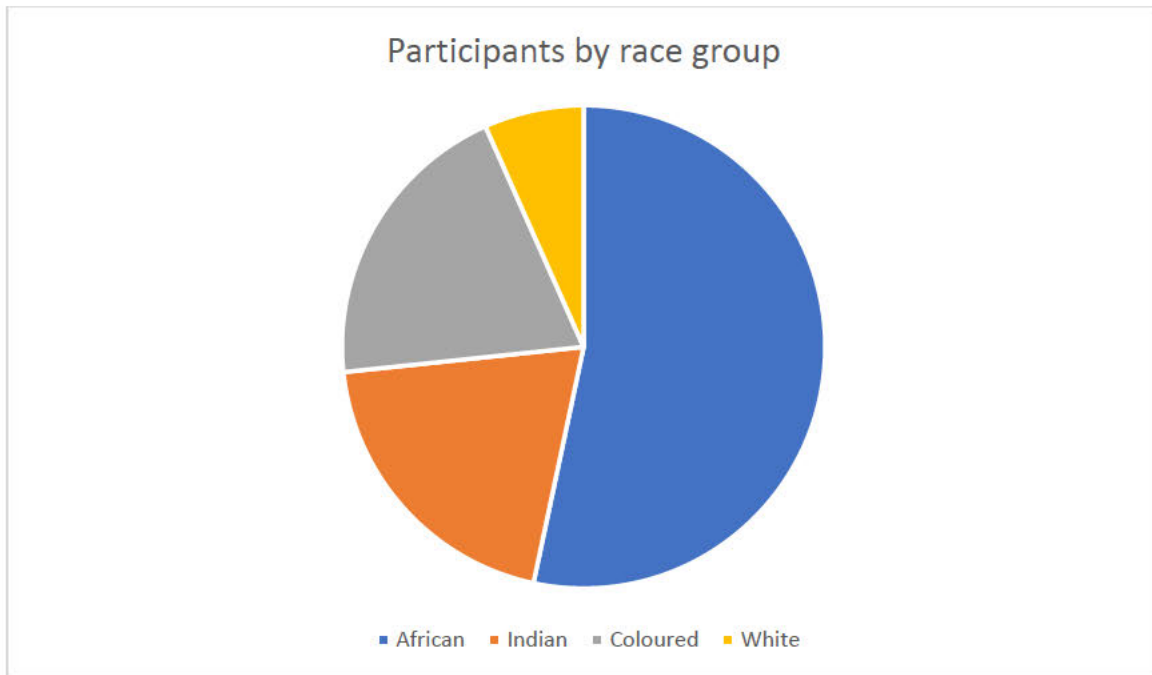


Figure 1: Race Group of Participants

3.7 Study Procedures

Data was collected from both secondary and primary sources. Secondary data was collected from search engines such as Google Scholar, and databases (digital libraries) such as JSTOR. Primary data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 4). The semi-structured interview is often used to collect data for qualitative research. It is focused on a central topic and provides a basic structure ahead of time in that the questions (whether open or closed) are predetermined (Bearman, 2019). Semi-structured interviews have played a pivotal role in numerous studies across various fields. Ercan et al. (2023), for example, employed semi-structured interviews with nursing students to assess the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the effectiveness of structured interview formats as tools for data collection.

The case study was employed as a second method, with the College of Humanities serving as the case study. A case study facilitates the examination of a problem within a specific setting by using a range of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It assists in determining what has worked well, what has not, and what can be improved in the future. Baxter and Jack (2015) emphasise that qualitative case study methodology equips researchers with the essential tools to scrutinise complex phenomena within their respective contexts.

The interviews were conducted after receiving explicit consent from all 15 participants (see Appendix 3). The initial questions explored how participants achieved equilibrium between their professional and personal lives, followed by more focused questions concerning their experiences during and after the global health crisis. Additional questions were posed, as needed, to clarify the participants' original responses.

Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and was recorded using an audio recorder. The recordings were later transcribed into a summary table and stored on a computer. The data from different participants were compared to identify patterns and insights (see Section 3.8 below).

Immediately following each interview, validation checks were carried out with each participant. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, transcripts were played back to the participants for validation of accuracy. Additionally, a synthesis of the analysis was shared with each participant, who was requested to provide feedback on the accuracy and interpretation of the content of the transcript. Participants were informed that if the transcriptions did not accurately reflect the interview content as per their recollection, arrangements would be made to review the recording alongside the researcher and amend the transcription accordingly.

3.8 Data Analysis

According to Junianto (2022), Harfiani (2021), and Amut (2023), a qualitative data analysis process constitutes a methodical approach to the interpretation and comprehension of qualitative data, which is frequently sourced from interviews, observations, and textual documents. This analytical approach is crucial in the social sciences, where scholars endeavour to uncover patterns, themes, and insights from complex datasets. The qualitative data analysis process is characteristically iterative and encompasses multiple phases, including data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion formulation. Data collection represents the preliminary phase, during which researchers gather information via diverse methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. The presentation of data typically manifests in the form of descriptive narratives or thematic summaries, which aid in interpreting the implications arising from the data (Nurmala, 2024; Fathurrahman, 2024; Tiara, 2024). This method empowers researchers to engage in a profound exploration of participants' lived

experiences, rendering it an exceptionally potent instrument for qualitative investigation (Naderifar et al., 2017; Gierczyk, 2024).

Thematic analysis was employed in this study. Thematic analysis constitutes a prominent qualitative research approach that emphasises identifying, examining, and articulating themes within datasets. Thematic analysis can be implemented using both inductive and deductive paradigms, thereby enabling researchers to extract themes directly from the data or evaluate pre-existing theoretical frameworks regarding the gathered data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2014). This study used thematic analysis to explore the experiences of women employees returning to the office after working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, therefore, identified and explored different themes rather than providing a definitive answer to the problem. According to Clarke & Braun (2014), thematic analysis often involves telling an explanatory story about the data in relation to a research question.

The initial phase of thematic analysis involves becoming acquainted with the data. This necessitates an extensive engagement with the data to achieve a thorough understanding of its contents. Scholars frequently engage in multiple readings of transcripts or notes to attain an in-depth familiarity with the material, which is imperative for identifying significant patterns (Alnahr et al., 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

The subsequent phase entails the generation of preliminary codes. This stage is characterised by systematic data coding, which involves identifying data features pertinent to the research inquiry. Coding can be executed inductively, wherein codes arise organically from the data itself, or deductively, wherein pre-established codes are utilised (Farias et al., 2020; Dawadi, 2020). This phase is vital as it establishes the foundation for developing themes.

Nowell et al. (2017) and Esfehiani and Walters (2018) state that the third phase involves exploring themes. During this stage, researchers aggregate codes into potential themes, which includes categorising similar codes to construct broader patterns. This process may entail using visual representations, such as thematic maps, to help organise and visualise the interrelationships between codes and themes.

According to Sari and Gençöz (2019) and Thériault and Gazzola (2017), the fourth phase involves the review of themes. This process includes refining the themes identified in the

preceding stage to ensure that they accurately reflect the data. Researchers may find it necessary to revisit the data to confirm that the themes are coherent and distinct, which may require the merging or splitting of themes as necessary.

The fifth phase concerns the definition and terminology of themes. In this stage, researchers delineate the essence of each theme and its contribution to the overarching narrative of the research. This phase is critical for ensuring clarity and precision in presenting findings (Sergeant et al., 2022; Cruzes & Dybå, 2011).

The final phase involves the production of the report. This stage entails integrating the themes into a cohesive narrative that addresses the research questions, substantiated by pertinent data excerpts. The report should provide a lucid explanation of how the themes were derived and their significance within the research context (Lanke et al., 2022; Hemming et al., 2021).

By adhering to the systematic stages of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting, researchers can conduct a rigorous analysis that is both insightful and reflective of the data.

3.9 Credibility

When engaging in research, establishing credibility is of utmost importance to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the results. Credibility encompasses various elements, including the practical application of research, fostering a community around the findings, and obtaining external validation through traditional means, such as publication (Billot et al., 2017). To ensure credibility – defined as the accuracy of the information or the opinions of the participants and the researcher’s understanding and depiction of them (Polit & Beck, 2012) – and trustworthiness, triangulation was employed. This involved collecting data from interviews and incorporating it with relevant content from the literature review.

3.10 Transferability

Transferability in research pertains to the extent to which results from a specific study can be extrapolated or generalised to other settings or populations. The importance of ensuring transferability cannot be overstated, as it is fundamental in augmenting the pertinence and practicality of research results beyond the immediate study context (Shenton, 2004). Although

this study focused on a small group of women, its findings may be helpful in other academic contexts similar to the UKZN.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

3.11.1 Ethical Approval

The research conformed to the ethical principles and guidelines as stipulated by the UKZN. Authorisation to proceed with the study was obtained through an ethical clearance letter (see Appendix 1) obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the gatekeeper, namely, the Registrar of the UKZN (see Appendix 2).

3.11.2 Voluntary Participation

Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, and for any reason. The importance of ensuring voluntary participation in research cannot be overstated, as it increases the likelihood of obtaining comprehensive and valuable data, given that participants are more inclined to share information that could significantly contribute to the study (White, 2020) Permission was sought (and obtained) to record the interviews.

3.11.3 Privacy and Confidentiality

While the actual name of the organisation was used, participants' identities were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were utilised for the research participants during data analysis and in presenting the research findings. Safeguarding privacy and confidentiality in research is crucial, as it ensures that the well-being of participants is not compromised by the content of the interviews (Naeem et al., 2013)

3.12 Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity in research necessitates a critical examination and acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality, biases, assumptions, and their impact on the research process and results. It involves cultivating self-awareness of how the researcher's background, beliefs, and experiences might shape the research framework, data collection, analysis, and interpretation

(Berger, 2013; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Peddle, 2021). Engaging in reflexivity enhances the transparency, credibility, and validity of research findings (Palaganas et al., 2017).

Positionality in academic research refers to the stance or viewpoint a researcher adopts in their scholarly endeavours, which is shaped by their social identities, lived experiences, and the contexts within which they function. This concept is crucial in qualitative research, as it significantly influences the entire research process, encompassing aspects from data collection to interpretation. (Holmes, 2020; Soedirgo and Glas, 2020; Kassan et al., 2020). The complexity of positionality is highlighted by the understanding that researchers may occupy the roles of insiders or outsiders, contingent upon the context of their investigation. According to Sybing (2022), insider positionality can enhance access and foster rapport but may also introduce biases that could hamper the data collection process. In this study, the researcher's position as an insider (being employed by the UKZN) helped her in accessing information that an outsider would not have easily obtained. Additionally, having personally experienced returning to the office after working remotely due to COVID-19 enabled her to relate to the participants' experiences. Her positionality and understanding of the topic encouraged the participants to share their experiences. Furthermore, she established a rapport with the participants before conducting the study. The researcher's personal experience as a woman employee returning to the office after working remotely, positively influenced how she perceived the transition, and, as noted, allowed her to easily relate to some of the experiences that the participants had gone through.

3.13 Fieldwork Challenges

Fieldwork, particularly conducting interviews, can present diverse challenges including logistical, ethical, cultural, and interpersonal issues. Such challenges can profoundly impact the integrity and reliability of the collected data, thereby requiring meticulous planning and strategic adjustments by researchers. Two main challenges were encountered by the researcher:

The first concerned cultural norms and expectations that influenced participant behaviour and willingness to participate in interviews. Some participants were anxious about how the information would be used, as certain cultures value family beliefs and traditions and were thus hesitant about discussing certain topics. The researcher was attuned to these dynamics and addressed participants' anxiety by fostering trust and openness during interviews, assuring

them that their privacy would be protected and that their identities would not be disclosed. The participants were also afforded the opportunity to choose an interview method that aligned with their comfort levels and cultural norms. They could choose between telephone or in-person interviews. Ultimately, all interviews were done in person, as this was the preferred method for all participants.

The second challenge concerned interpersonal dynamics. Some participants were initially reluctant to respond to certain questions since the researcher was also a member of staff. This was quickly addressed by the researcher building rapport and trust through empathetic communication, establishing a comfortable environment to encourage open discussion, and reassuring participants that the confidentiality of the interviews would not be compromised.

3.14 Demographics of Participants

The demographics of the participants encompass several factors, including age, marital status, caregiving obligations, and professional positions. The intersectionality of these variables can profoundly affect women's experiences in the workplace, particularly when demographic factors such as marital status and the existence of dependents (caregiving obligations) were critical considerations when selecting participants for this study. As individuals transitioned back to traditional office environments following the pandemic, these factors influenced how employees navigated the transition.

It is noteworthy that the physical office environment significantly impacts employee satisfaction and productivity, with notable variations based on gender and demographic characteristics. For instance, research suggests that women have reported lower satisfaction levels in open office configurations compared to more private workspaces, indicating that the nature of the office environment can influence their overall work experience (Nielsen et al., 2023; Öhrn et al., 2021). Consequently, it is imperative to include participants from diverse office settings to comprehensively understand the impact of environments on reintegration into the workplace.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of flexible work arrangements, particularly for women. Studies show that offering employees autonomy in their return to work, such as selecting hybrid work models, can significantly enhance their job

satisfaction and mental well-being (Brooks et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of capturing a range of perspectives from women across different roles and levels of seniority within the academic institution, as their experiences may vary significantly based on their unique circumstances and the workplace dynamics they encounter. This diversity is reflected in the sample of participants selected for this study, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Participants *Pseudonyms have been used	Age	Family/childbearing Responsibilities	Marital Status	Office Setup	Support/Academic Position
1 Grace	49	Yes	Married	Own office	Support
2 Sindi	42	Yes	Married	Own office	Support
3 April	43	Yes	Married	Own office	Support
4 Daisy	37	Yes	Married	Own office	Support
5 Summer	49	Yes	Married	Own office	Support
6 Phindie	33	Yes	Married	Open plan	Support
7 Beauty	25	Yes	No	Open plan	Support
8 Joy	38	Yes	Married	Open plan	Support
9 Rose	26	Yes	Married	Own office	Support
10 Sally	49	Yes	Married	Own office	Academic
11 Pam	30	Yes	Married	Open plan	Academic

12 Mandy	48	Yes	Married	Own office	Academic
13 Peace	43	Yes	Married	Own office	Academic
14 Penny	28	Yes	No	Open plan	Academic
15 Amy	37	Yes	Married	Own office	Academic

It is evident that the sample comprised more support staff (60%) than academic staff (40%). This was primarily due to the former's heightened willingness to engage in the interview process and their proactive availability. Academic staff, in contrast, were frequently unavailable and often occupied at the times they indicated they would be free for interviews. Despite attempts to reschedule the interviews, their availability remained limited.

However, prioritising interviews with support staff in a scholarly inquiry can yield profound and multifaceted insights that are often overlooked in conventional research concerning academic institutions. The distinctive experiences and contributions of support staff are important for understanding the complexities inherent in higher education and for formulating effective strategies to enhance both academic and support services in the post-pandemic era.

3.15 Summary

This chapter detailed the research methodology employed in the study. It outlined and discussed the research design adopted, namely, a qualitative approach. This was followed by a description of the research population, the sampling method, the sample size, and the data collection method, specifically the use of a semi-structured interview guide. The analysis of the collected data as well as its credibility and transferability were also addressed. The ethical considerations of the study were then presented and the crucial issues of reflexivity and positionality were discussed. The chapter concluded with the challenges encountered during fieldwork and a discussion of the demographics of the sample.

The subsequent chapter, Chapter four, will present the research findings and their analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

Women's Experiences During the Pandemic and Upon Return to the Office

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings on the varying experiences of women employees at the UKZN working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and upon their return to the office post-pandemic. In doing so, discusses work-life balance for women employees at the UKZN during and after the pandemic, mental health and well-being, and gender inequality. Additionally, it examines the strategies adopted by women employees upon their return to work. Gender role and adaptive theories are used to analyse the findings.

4.2 Women Employees' Experiences of Working From Home During the Pandemic

4.2.1 Work-life Balance of Women Employees at the UKZN During the Pandemic

The balance between professional and personal spheres is essential for women to manage familial and occupational responsibilities effectively. The complexities inherent in the contemporary workplace have imposed significant stress on women professionals, as they are compelled to juggle two full-time roles, one within the domestic sphere and the other within their professional setting. Women employees frequently encounter challenges in achieving a harmonious balance between their familial obligations and work commitments (Kansal, 2022)

Mukuze's (2023) study elucidates that women employees at the Midlands State University in Zimbabwe encountered substantial obstacles in reconciling their reproductive and professional responsibilities during the pandemic, mirroring a more extensive global phenomenon. According to Alang and Tran (2022), a considerable proportion of female employees in Vietnam reported challenges in achieving a harmonious work-life balance, with numerous individuals experiencing heightened stress and anxiety resulting from conflicting obligations. This observation is consistent with results from additional research indicating that women frequently undertook supplementary responsibilities during the pandemic, adversely impacting their job satisfaction and overall well-being (Adisa et al., 2021).

The universal implementation of telecommuting amid the COVID-19 pandemic engendered significant transformations in work-life balance during the pandemic. Several participants in the current study recognised that factors such as the work environment, duration of working hours, heightened workloads, and domestic responsibilities adversely influenced their work-life balance.

As noted in Chapter two, research consistently demonstrates that women disproportionately bear the burden of child care and domestic responsibilities, which substantially influences their engagement in the labour market and opportunities for career progression. Empirical evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing disparities, with women assuming an increased proportion of child care and domestic tasks, adversely affecting their career development and overall job satisfaction (Lafkas et al., 2023; Yerkes, 2024). For example, Yerkes (2024) observes that although some fathers augmented their participation in child care during the pandemic, the predominant responsibility remained unevenly distributed, predominantly impacting mothers and resulting in a regression of gender equity in domestic duties.

Furthermore, the phenomenon termed the “motherhood penalty” is extensively documented, revealing that mothers encounter considerable obstacles in career advancement relative to their male peers and even to women who do not have children. McIntosh et al. (2012) emphasise that the age of children significantly influences this dynamic, as younger children are associated with more pronounced career disruptions for mothers. This situation is further complicated by the reality that women frequently experience pressure to reconcile their professional ambitions with familial obligations, creating a complex interaction between their personal and professional identities (Mirick, 2020).

Feierabend et al. (2011) state that a work environment supportive of family responsibilities positively influences employees with childcare duties, thereby improving their job satisfaction and performance. According to Toffoletti and Starr (2016), women typically perceive work-life balance as a tension between familial responsibilities and professional obligations.

The first question asked of participants in the current study concerned whether they felt they had a good work-life balance. Some of the responses (from both support and academic staff) are provided below:

No, I have no balance. I'm a workaholic. It's tough for me to balance family life. I feel it's work-life about 80% of the time. However, during COVID-19, I could put washing on the line once I checked my emails. I could put the food on to cook while I was working and keep watching it while working. (Grace (support), February 2024)

I thought I had an excellent work-life balance until my son asked me to promise him that I would not look at my laptop for one entire day. It was during COVID-19, so I was working from home, but I think I was constantly saying to him, 'I need 5 minutes, please wait.' I didn't realise that he felt working on my laptop was more important than he was until we chatted. I then decided that I would work smart. I involved him more in chores, so if I washed dishes, I asked for help to dry them. If I hung out the washing, he would give me the pegs. That way, I could spend time with him while getting chores done. I then needed time alone while working on my laptop, and he understood me better. I also worked a lot at night, so I was on my laptop when he was asleep. This gave me a good balance. I checked work throughout the day but did many early mornings and late afternoons. This flexibility helped. (Daisy (support), February 2024)

I have the responsibilities of the kids since my husband works close to Durban, and I am closer to the schools. So, I take on everything with the kids. As a woman, you carry responsibility; I'm unsure if it's cultural. I had to continue working and making time to fit in family chores (Sindi (support), February 2024).

Well, it's awkward to balance. I used to feel guilty for taking time from my kids. As an academic, I am flexible and can create time to fetch my kids, for example, but I have no work-life balance. I would like to have working time and time with my kids. For example, I supervised a research student one Friday night, looking at his work and taking my family time. Part of this is being an academic; your 8-4 pm is not constant. So, you are expected to do things after hours, but as a mother, I'm also expected to be a mother to my kids and a wife to my husband, making time for them. It's hard to balance being a mother of 3 kids and having to still cook, clean, and work. Before COVID-19, I could switch off at home, but during COVID-19, I could not switch off (Sally (academic), February 2024)

During COVID-19, there was no balance for me because I had no place to work from. I live in a flat, so my kids watch TV next to me while I work. It wasn't easy (Amy (academic), March 2024)

The findings demonstrate that both support and academic staff participants struggled with achieving a good work-life balance while working from home at the beginning of the pandemic. However, just as they began to find balance, they had to return to the office. Some women noted that they were expected to look after children, which was a struggle to manage alongside work. This suggests that working from home during the pandemic affected the work-life balance of women employees at the UKZN.

The gender role theory asserts that societal expectations and standards govern conduct and obligations predicated on gender – a phenomenon that was especially pronounced during the pandemic. Women, who are often expected to juggle both professional and domestic responsibilities, faced distinct challenges that exacerbated pre-existing disparities in work-life balance. Employees at the UKZN reported diminished levels of work-life balance during the pandemic.

4.2.2 Gender Inequality in the Workplace Experienced by Women Employees at the UKZN During the Pandemic

Notwithstanding the legal frameworks instituted to foster gender equality, such as the South African Constitution and the Employment Equity Act, the advancement towards genuine equality, particularly in leadership positions, has been markedly sluggish. For example, although there has been a notable increase in the number of female deans within South African universities, this development has not resulted in a corresponding significant representation of women in senior management roles, such as vice chancellorships, where only five out of 26 universities are under female leadership (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021).

This inequity underscores the enduring barriers women encounter in pursuing leadership roles despite their growing presence within the academic sphere. The experiences of women academics illustrate a multifaceted interplay of personal, organisational, and societal elements that obstruct their professional advancement. For instance, female principals in secondary education have articulated encountering more significant impediments than their male peers, influenced by a range of factors, including societal norms and institutional prejudices (Moorosi,

2010). This trend is mirrored in higher education, wherein women frequently traverse a challenging landscape that can hinder their professional development.

The experiences of women support personnel within academic institutions are significantly characterised by challenges such as workplace bullying and harassment, which impede their professional advancement and contribute to an antagonistic work atmosphere. Empirical studies demonstrate that harassment continues to be widespread in South African professional environments, including educational institutions, and is frequently associated with broader gender disparities and discriminatory behaviours (Malatjie, 2024; Calitz, 2022). Moreover, workplace bullying has been recognised as a critical concern affecting both academic and support staff, with female employees experiencing a disproportionate impact (Badenhorst & Botha, 2022; Mangolothi & Mnguni, 2022). These elements obstruct women's career trajectories and sustain a culture of inequality within academic organisations.

Issues concerning gender inequality emerged during the interviews. Some participants expressed themselves as follows:

In my opinion, during COVID-19, more work was given to us as women support staff. I remember being called to return to the office during the lockdown to supply paper to staff. I also had health issues, so what criteria were used for me to be that person since we have both men and women employees in our admin team? Why was this request even made since we were all not supposed to be in the office? (Beauty (support), March 2024)

Male students have harassed me. This happened during COVID-19. My family was threatened, and this made me feel so unsafe. This is all because students don't pass. Now, would they have threatened a male academic like this? Regarding academic promotion, if you are not married and do not have children, you have more time to write articles, publish, attend conferences, and so on. This showed during the pandemic (Sally (academic), February 2024).

Gender role theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how societal expectations and norms about gender roles have shaped the experiences of women employees at the UKZN during the pandemic crisis. This theoretical perspective asserts that traditional gender roles govern the allocation of labour and responsibilities, influencing women's professional

progression and personal well-being. One of the most significant repercussions of the pandemic on women employees at the UKZN has been the heightened burden of caregiving responsibilities.

The results of this study indicate that gender inequality still exists among support and academic women at UKN. They reveal that men had more time to apply for promotions during COVID-19, as they had time to publish and attend conferences. This is largely because many women took on additional responsibilities during COVID-19. Women often lacked the extra time needed to publish and engage in additional activities to advance their careers, especially those who had to juggle multiple roles while working from home during the pandemic. Women who did have this opportunity were often those without children or with older, independent children.

4.2.3 Mental Health and Well-being of Women Employees at the UKZN During the Pandemic

Employees across diverse sectors have encountered mental health difficulties resulting from job instability and alterations in working conditions. Sarwar et al. (2020) elucidate that financial strain substantially mediates the correlation between job insecurity and employee well-being, culminating in heightened levels of anxiety and depression.

According to a study conducted by Niekerk and Gent (2021), administrative and service staff at universities in South Africa, predominantly consisting of female individuals, encountered heightened psychological distress in comparison to their academic counterparts. This underscores the distinctive challenges faced by women in supportive positions throughout the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, female academics in Nigeria articulated that the pandemic exacerbated their difficulties in reconciling work and familial obligations, frequently culminating in sensations of being overwhelmed (Adewumi & Duma, 2022). This perspective is supported by research conducted in the United Kingdom, which identified that female academic staff members were particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety as a result of the simultaneous demands posed by professional and domestic responsibilities during the lockdown (Walters et al., 2023).

Moreover, the critical role of social connections within the workplace has been highlighted as a protective mechanism against the deterioration of mental health during the pandemic, as inadequate social relationships can lead to heightened feelings of isolation and stress (Breetzke

& Wild, 2022). Research also focused on interventions designed to facilitate mental health during the pandemic. Kendrick et al. (2023) emphasise the necessity for organisations to prioritise mental health by implementing supportive policies and practices, particularly in response to the unprecedented challenges introduced by COVID-19. Similarly, Hamouche (2020) underscores the importance of organisational initiatives in addressing the specific stressors affecting employees' mental health, advocating for a proactive approach toward mental well-being within professional settings.

The psychological impact of the pandemic on women employees within academic institutions is highlighted by the qualitative research conducted by Knight et al. (2021), which underscores the significance of peer support in alleviating feelings of isolation and stress among both staff and students. The study found that social connections were instrumental in enhancing emotional well-being during periods of self-isolation, suggesting that universities should foster supportive environments to mitigate mental health adversities.

Moreover, according to Askari et al. (2021) and Trumello et al. (2020), the heightened incidence of post-traumatic stress symptoms among women healthcare professionals during the pandemic signifies a broader pattern of mental health decline among women occupying high-stress positions. Similarly, Peng et al. (2022) report that the repercussions of the pandemic on job satisfaction and resilience were particularly pronounced among female personnel in academia, emphasising the need for targeted mental health interventions. The increased occupational stress endured by women during this period has been correlated with a decline in overall job satisfaction and quality of life, necessitating immediate attention from university administrations to address these mental health challenges (Edikpa et al., 2022 Somani, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced the mental health and overall well-being of employees across various sectors, with healthcare professionals being particularly affected. Job insecurity, modifications in work environments, and the erosion of social connections have exacerbated mental health challenges. However, meaningful work and supportive organisational frameworks have emerged as vital components in alleviating these adverse effects.

The theme of mental health challenges experienced by participants during the pandemic emerged in the responses provided by participants. Two responses, both from academic staff, are illustrative:

You know, at the beginning of the lockdown, it was hard. I had a meltdown with no nanny, but it took away a lot of pressure from me once she returned. I kept thinking I would get left behind because I was not doing enough research then. As women, we sometimes work double the hard to prove ourselves. Let's say at the beginning, my mental health was in a total shutdown. Also, I had some personal issues that I was working through, and maybe I was at a place where I didn't give my all to work. In my opinion, males had the chance to use lockdown to be more productive, and women were disadvantaged again. I can say this since my husband is also an academic (Peace (academic), March 2024)

During the initial lockdown, the whole family had to be together, and the load fell on us mothers. This caused stress for us. When we were first asked to return to the office it caused so much anxiety, I was terrified and didn't want to do so in case I tested positive for COVID-19 again (Mandy (academic), Feb 2024)

Being a mother to four kids is a lot. Trying to balance the kids and work during COVID-19 was so hard. I had someone calling me for work and my child screaming and another hungry. The house was a mess, I'm a single mum who needed saving. I collapsed at this time, mentally and emotionally, I shut down. It was so hard. (Joy (support), February 2024)

These responses can be analysed through the theoretical framework of gender role theory, which asserts that societal norms and expectations pertaining to gender roles can significantly influence individuals' experiences and reactions to various circumstances, including crises such as the pandemic. At the UKZN, women employees faced distinctive challenges during the pandemic, exacerbated by traditional gender roles that frequently imposed an unequal share of caregiving and domestic responsibilities on women, thereby impacting their mental health and well-being.

The findings indicate that working remotely contributed to stress for women employees. Participants reported that being together as a family during the initial lockdown created

additional stress. They also noted that personal issues and work-related factors negatively affected their mental health during the pandemic.

4.3 Women's Experiences of Returning to Work After the Pandemic

4.3.1 Work-life Balance of Women Employees at the UKZN Upon Return to Work

The pandemic has profoundly transformed work dynamics, leading to heightened attention to adaptable work arrangements and the psychological welfare of the workforce. Empirical evidence suggests that women, particularly in educational contexts, face distinct obstacles in reconciling their professional and personal duties, challenges that have been intensified by the pandemic (P, 2023; Naz et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the emotional intelligence of women employees is pivotal in their ability to sustain a healthy work-life balance. Research demonstrates that elevated emotional intelligence is associated with improved work-life balance, indicating that university administrations should consider developing programmes to enhance emotional intelligence among their personnel (Naz et al., 2021). This could include training sessions and workshops designed to refine interpersonal skills and stress management techniques essential for navigating the complex interplay of work and family life.

Women's academic difficulties are exacerbated by societal expectations and gender norms, which often impose additional responsibilities regarding family commitments (Ali & Sohail, 2022; Tushabe, 2023). For example, women occupying leadership roles within universities may confront tensions between their professional ambitions and personal duties, resulting in emotional fatigue and diminished job satisfaction (P, 2023; Lalrinzuala & Elizabeth, 2021).

This research examined the experiences of women employees at the UKZN in managing work-life balance upon return to the office post-pandemic. Some of the experiences shared by participants are outlined below:

Even after being back at the office, I still work so much when I'm at home. I feel like work is too much, and the school I work for is enormous, so it is always busy. I don't get a chance to rest or do my studies, and there are too many deadlines for work, so I work even after work. Now that I'm back at the office, my work-life balance is more

complex. My stress is so great because I have to go home and do chores after work instead of fitting them into my day. (Grace (support), February 2024)

Coming back to the office, I feel so overwhelmed, and I am almost depressed. I can't have the flexibility, and managing any part of my life right now is so hard. On top of everything, because academics still have flexibility, they expect work to be done after hours sometimes, and I did that. Still, during COVID-19, I can't manage to work a full day at the office and then again at home after hours with kids, cleaning, and no domestic help. So now I try to balance it out, but it's so difficult. I feel like as we were starting to balance well at home, they asked us to come back to the office (Daisy (support), February 2024)

No balance, being female, how do you do this? You won't have space for the caps we use. As women, we always play different roles: colleague, friend, mum, helper, and so on; we must multitask. I can't balance because people expect me to be motherly, even at work. If someone has problems, they come to me. This takes time to chat. Then I go home and do the office work I should have done. I then get behind with chores. It's never-ending; I'm always tired. (Amy (academic), March 2024)

If you have a family, it isn't easy to make the time for things to qualify for a promotion. Most males get these opportunities despite having families or being married. The women who get these opportunities are often unmarried and don't have kids (Sally (academic), February 2024).

The analysis of work-life balance for women employees returning to the UKZN post-pandemic can be effectively examined through the lens of adaptive theory. This framework helps to understand how women navigate the complexities of balancing professional and personal responsibilities, particularly in the context of the significant shifts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

These findings show that most women bear the majority of child care and domestic responsibilities. The results suggest that having children, poor social support systems, and increased workloads affect women's ability to advance their careers. The results clearly indicate that men had more time to focus on career advancement during COVID-19, whereas

women faced many additional responsibilities that made it more challenging for them to climb the career ladder. Women with younger children, in particular, found it more difficult as their children depended more on them. The study also highlights the value of the UKZN hosting workshops for employees returning to the office post-pandemic to assist with work-life balance and enhance employees' emotional intelligence.

4.3.2 Gender Inequality in the Workplace Experienced by Women Employees Upon Returning to Work

Research demonstrates that women employees within academic institutions encountered significant obstacles following the pandemic, exacerbating the gender disparity in scholarly environments. Moreover, the economic repercussions of the pandemic have disproportionately impacted women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. The study conducted by Fuller and Qian (2021) regarding employment patterns in Canada indicated that parents, notably mothers, suffered more profound job losses and reductions in working hours than their male counterparts. This pattern is further corroborated by the findings of Flor et al., who observed that the pandemic has contributed to an expanding gender divide in employment, particularly within sectors significantly affected by lockdowns and caregiving obligations (Flor et al., 2022).

The implications of these findings suggest that women in academia may face greater obstacles in achieving equity in employment and career advancement in the aftermath of the pandemic. In addition to these challenges, the pandemic has highlighted the need for robust gender equity advocacy within academic institutions. Anicha et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of male employees in championing gender equity, suggesting that initiatives such as Ally Workshops can help create a supportive environment for women. This advocacy is essential, as it has the potential to drive institutional transformations that promote gender equity and address the systemic biases exacerbated by the pandemic.

Utilising adaptive theory, which focuses on the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments, how these changes manifest in the workplace as women return to offices post-pandemic, can be analysed. This study underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms and specialised support to confront these disparities and cultivate a more equitable academic space at the UKZN post-pandemic.

4.3.3 Mental Health and Well-being of Women Employees at the UKZN Upon Returning to Work

Research demonstrates that reintegration into the office environment can intensify pre-existing mental health issues, especially for women, who frequently encounter distinctive stressors associated with their responsibilities in both professional and domestic spheres. The transition from a remote working model back to an office setting may lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety among female employees.

Empirical studies have indicated that extended periods of remote work may culminate in adverse emotional conditions such as depression and irritability, primarily attributable to social isolation and increased workloads (Kutty, 2023). The sudden transition back to an office context has the potential to exacerbate these conditions, particularly in instances where the organisational culture fails to be supportive or accommodating of the difficulties encountered by women, such as the challenge of reconciling work obligations with caregiving duties (Madden et al., 2021). Moreover, the occurrence of workplace harassment and discrimination has been associated with detrimental mental health consequences, including increased levels of anxiety and depression among women (Lipińska-Grobelny, 2023; Kim et al., 2020).

The theme focuses on the mental health challenges women may face, including anxiety about workplace dynamics. What follows are some of the participants' responses regarding their mental health and well-being after returning to the office post-pandemic.

When working from home, I worked 24/7 but somehow managed to make time to assist with homework or drop off at school. Since returning to the office, my stress has been so much because I have to go home after work and do chores instead of doing them during the day. (Grace (support), February 2024)

I used to assist with homework for the kids, but now, being back at the office, I don't have as much time, and it's stressful to the point that I don't spend so much time on homework, and it shows that marks have dropped. (Joy (support), February 2024)

Being a woman, you have to do so much all at once. I'm back in the office since we have no choice, but it stresses me out. I'm so stressed now because colleagues are not the same after COVID-19, and there is conflict, so the beginning was hard, as I was always upset and emotional at work. Finding time to do things in my personal chores,

like shopping or fetching kids, is hard. Weekends are not enough, and I think I waste time sitting in the office when I can balance and do everything from home. (Rose (support), March 2024)

This made everything frustrating. Being an academic, I find the flexibility to work from home there if I am not teaching. So, I don't want to say, but I actually have not returned fully to the office. However, saying that, our workloads have increased and this is creating stress at the moment. Also, some students didn't stick to deadlines during the pandemic, and we had to give extensions since they had system problems. This created more work for us (Mandy (academic), Feb 2024)

It's tough to know that you have to work with depression. Sometimes, you don't want to come to work because of the way you look. Sometimes, you want to talk but can't and don't want to relate to people (Rose (support) March 2024).

The cost of living is so high, and salaries have not increased that much. Petrol costs so much, and suddenly, commuting to the office daily is a struggle concerning the budget. I removed this cost since I was not travelling daily to work. To start now will have substantial financial implications for my family (Grace (support) February 2024).

Adaptive theory underscores the significance of adaptability and responsiveness within organisational frameworks and leadership paradigms, which are imperative for ensuring a seamless transition back to in-person occupational settings. This is particularly relevant for women, who have encountered distinct challenges throughout the pandemic, including an increase in domestic responsibilities and elevated stress levels. Empirical research suggests that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, resulting in elevated levels of fatigue and stress due to the simultaneous demands of professional and familial obligations (Orfei et al., 2022).

The results showed that returning to the office created stress for women employees. Some participants noted that upon returning to the office, they felt added pressure because they could no longer fit in household chores and child-rearing responsibilities into their day, which negatively impacted their mental health and well-being.

4.4 Adaptation Strategies Adopted by Women Employees Upon Return to Work

The study shows that the interrelationship among resilience, emotional intelligence, and organisational support is critical in facilitating successful reintegration. By acknowledging the distinctive challenges encountered by women and implementing supportive strategies, academic institutions can cultivate an environment that nurtures resilience and adaptability, ultimately advancing employee well-being and productivity. Research findings suggest that resilience is a fundamental individual attribute capable of alleviating the detrimental effects of job insecurity and anxiety, which were intensified during the pandemic.

Such supportive measures are particularly crucial for women, who frequently navigate multiple responsibilities, encompassing both professional and familial obligations, often resulting in elevated stress levels (Carli, 2020). Furthermore, emotional intelligence has been recognised as a protective factor that aids individuals in managing the stress associated with the transition back to in-person work settings. A study conducted by Castro (2023) on medical students revealed that individuals with higher emotional intelligence reported diminished apprehension regarding the resumption of face-to-face interactions, indicating that emotional competencies may facilitate more seamless reintegration into traditional work environments. This consideration is especially pertinent for women in academia, who may encounter additional emotional labour stemming from societal expectations and escalated domestic responsibilities during the pandemic (Carli, 2020). The obstacles faced by women re-entering office environments are further exacerbated by structural inequities amplified by the pandemic.

This phenomenon reflects broader patterns observed across various sectors, where women have disproportionately faced the adverse consequences of pandemic-related disruptions, raising concerns regarding burnout and job satisfaction (Jiwnani, 2022). Organisational support, including flexible work arrangements and mental health resources, is paramount to assisting women in effectively navigating these challenges (Rahmadian & Ediati, 2022).

Additionally, the extant literature indicates that resilience can be cultivated through workplace cultures that emphasise employee well-being. For instance, organisations that adopt strategies to enhance resilience among their workforce – such as training initiatives and supportive leadership – can markedly improve employee engagement and performance (Fauzi et al., 2023). This consideration is particularly salient within academic institutions, where the

pressure to sustain high performance can be considerable. An academic participant responded to the issue of adaptation as follows:

I adapt to situations, and there will be no problems; however, I understand that everyone is different, and many people cannot adapt. I feel like going to the gym helps me with stress, and therefore, I adapt better. That's what I think assists me. It could also be that I have a positive mindset about most situations. Staying positive helps you manage situations better (Peace (academic) November 2024).

The women's workforce has encountered distinct challenges, including an increase in household obligations and psychological health concerns, and alterations in workplace dynamics arising from the pandemic. These obstacles have necessitated that women implement various adaptive mechanisms and strategies to navigate their professional contexts effectively.

Below are some of the strategies women employees at the UKZN use, along with their perceptions regarding adaptation upon return to work post-pandemic.

4.4.1 Social Support

One significant adaptive strategy entails the pursuit of social support. Empirical research suggests that women exhibit a greater propensity to engage with emotional and instrumental support from their peers and family members, which is essential for effectively managing the stress and anxiety accompanying the transition back to work in the aftermath of the pandemic (Angelica et al., 2022). This observation is consistent with findings that underscore the critical role of social networks in bolstering psychological resilience among women during periods of crisis (Salami et al., 2021). A study by Gynanti (2023) highlights that spousal social support is vital for married professional women balancing multiple responsibilities, as it enhances their sense of security and motivation, thereby exerting a beneficial influence on their occupational performance and work-life balance. Two support staff participants shared the following:

I think we get things done in my house. We don't question who is responsible for it. We all support each other. We are there present to help each other in all situations, and returning to normal was no exception; my husband is also accommodating. (Summer (support), March 2024)

Our admin group has a weekly wellness walk, a 15/20 minute walk, to relieve stress and support each other after returning to the office. (April (support), March 2024)

Viewing social support through the lens of the adaptive theory framework highlights its significance. Social support, which includes emotional, informational, and instrumental aid, has been empirically demonstrated to exert a substantial effect on women's experiences and outcomes during their reintegration into the workforce following an extended hiatus, such as that prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study shows that the adaptive theory framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how social support mechanisms can facilitate the successful reintegration of women employees at the UKZN post-pandemic. The results indicate that support from colleagues, spouses, and family can make adapting to the return to work smoother.

4.4.2 Mental health initiatives

Considerations about mental health have also assumed a pivotal role in formulating adaptation strategies. Women have indicated experiencing elevated levels of anxiety and depression throughout the pandemic, with these conditions persisting even after their return to the workplace (Buonsenso et al., 2022; Rosenberg & Gallagher, 2022). Consequently, many women have resorted to coping mechanisms such as mindfulness practices and structured periods of rest to alleviate these mental health challenges (Tan et al., 2020; Mittal, 2023). Integrating health-oriented organisational strategies, including mental health support and wellness initiatives, has enhanced job performance and overall employee well-being (Ye et al., 2022).

What follows are some of the comments from participants regarding how they coped with the transition in terms of mental health and well-being.

Meditation keeps me sane (Pam (academic) February 2024).

Once a month, I treat myself to a pamper afternoon. This is my place of rest to rejuvenate for the month ahead (Penny (academic) March 2024).

UKZN has a program called LYRA Wellbeing, an employee wellness program available for us to seek help with counselling or advice on many issues like managerial issues, debt, or being overwhelmed. I have used this service to assist me in adapting to returning to the office (Grace (support) November 2024).

The findings indicate that women employees seek assistance with their mental health issues and need opportunities to de-stress. Some participants suggested team building and wellness days as possible solutions.

Reintegration into the workforce can potentially restore beneficial elements of employment, including social engagement and a renewed sense of purpose, which are essential for psychological well-being. The framework of the adaptive theory underscores the necessity of supportive work environments that recognise and address women's distinct challenges. By implementing flexible work arrangements, promoting psychological safety, and providing specialised mental health resources, the UKZN can more effectively assist its women employees during this pivotal transition.

This research demonstrates that the transition to remote work during the pandemic has significantly altered the dynamics of work-life balance for women. The findings reveal that many women experienced an escalation in domestic responsibilities, which exacerbated their professional obligations. This dual burden has been associated with heightened work-family conflict, particularly for women with children. The pandemic amplified pre-existing disparities, as women frequently assumed an unequal share of household duties, resulting in a decline in their overall well-being.

The findings also indicate that the mental health repercussions of returning to work after the pandemic are significant. Research has shown that women reported elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and depression during and after the pandemic, in contrast to their male counterparts. The study illustrates that the psychological burden of managing both professional and personal responsibilities during the pandemic led to heightened feelings of isolation and burnout, which may impede effective reintegration into the workplace. Additionally, concerns regarding potential workplace exposure to COVID-19 have exacerbated anxiety among returning employees, as highlighted in this research.

A systematic and incremental adjustment process is essential for women re-entering the workplace, as organisations must acknowledge and address the psychological and emotional toll that the pandemic has had on their workforce. Adaptive leadership, characterised by its emphasis on resilience and decentralised decision-making, can facilitate this transition

(Obrenovic et al., 2020; Bajaba et al., 2021). By cultivating an adaptive organisational culture, academic institutions can establish an environment that enables women to navigate their work-life balance more effectively. Furthermore, adaptive performance is critical in understanding how these institutions can better support their female workforce.

This investigation reveals that adaptive performance – the capacity to modify behaviour in response to new conditions and challenges – is vital for project success and the overall well-being of the workforce (Haris, 2023). The UKZN should prioritise training programmes that develop adaptive competencies to enhance their employees’ resilience, facilitating a more seamless reintegration into the professional environment (Haris, 2023). This is especially important for women, who may face heightened work-home conflict during their transition back to traditional office environments, particularly if they have been participating in remote work that permitted more flexible arrangements (Fan & Moen, 2023).

4.5 Summary

This study reveals that the pandemic has introduced significant obstacles to women’s career advancement. In this chapter, the researcher gave a detailed reflection on the experiences of women employees at the UKZN working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and upon their return to the office post-pandemic. Both gender role and adaptive theory were used to analyse the findings. The findings indicate that the pandemic has exacerbated barriers to women’s career progression, particularly in academic environments where mentorship and networking opportunities have been disrupted. The results demonstrate that the gender disparity in work hours has expanded, with mothers significantly reducing their work hours in comparison to fathers, thereby affecting their career trajectories.

Chapter five follows and will discuss gender-responsive policies for the post-pandemic workplace.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gender Responsive Policies for the Post-pandemic Workplace

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores gender-responsive policies for the post-pandemic workplace. The contemporary work paradigm is characterised by an amalgamation of telecommuting and on-site employment, frequently designated as a hybrid work model. Empirical studies suggest that the global health crisis has profoundly transformed the conceptualisations of professional environments, resulting in an increased demand for flexibility and adaptability in organisational policies.

This chapter discusses policies that can be put in place to ease the transition.

5.2 Blended Teaching and Learning

According to Saboowala and Mishra (2020), blended learning creates opportunities for professional advancement among educators, fostering a collaborative environment that transcends geographical limitations. This development is pivotal in advancing gender equity by enabling the exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences. Applying the theory of gendered organisations to blended teaching and learning at the UKZN post-pandemic reveals that while blended learning offers potential for enhancing educational equity, it also requires a deliberate commitment to addressing existing gender disparities. By incorporating gender mainstreaming into blended learning methodologies, creating collaborative spaces, and ensuring equitable access to resources, the UKZN can establish inclusive educational environments that cater to the needs of all women employees.

Blended teaching and learning combines conventional face-to-face instruction with digital learning modalities, thereby providing the flexibility and accessibility essential for supporting women who may encounter distinctive challenges in reconciling professional and personal obligations. The amalgamation of diverse pedagogical strategies cultivates an inclusive atmosphere that can be particularly advantageous for women lecturers, who may need adaptable work arrangements due to caregiving responsibilities or other commitments.

Empirical research indicates that blended learning can markedly enhance the quality of instruction and interpersonal skills among lecturers. For instance, Sayono et al. (2023) elucidate that blended learning can assist lecturers in refining their pedagogical competencies and social skills. However, it is acknowledged that not all lecturers may be able to engage effectively due to disparate levels of technological preparedness. This consideration is especially pertinent for women lecturers who may gain from the flexibility afforded by blended learning, enabling them to manage their time more effectively while concurrently participating in professional development. Additionally, the collaborative essence of blended learning promotes co-lecturing opportunities that can enrich the pedagogical experience for women lecturers. This cooperative framework facilitates a diversity of instructional methodologies and shared responsibilities, which can mitigate some of the burdens experienced by individual lecturers (Perera et al., 2020).

The capacity to distribute teaching responsibilities and resources can engender a more supportive setting, thereby facilitating the reintegration of women into the workforce after a break. Furthermore, according to McCutcheon et al. (2014), blended learning is comparably effective as traditional pedagogical methods in imparting clinical skills, which may be particularly noticeable in disciplines where women are underrepresented.

According to McCutcheon et al. (2014), blended learning can bridge disparities in educational delivery, equipping women lecturers with the requisite tools to excel in their teaching roles while accommodating their circumstances. The significance of technological readiness is similarly underscored in the scholarly discourse, as blended learning necessitates that lecturers possess proficiency with digital tools. It is thus critical that women lecturers who lack the digital skills to engage proficiently in blended teaching receive additional assistance.

According to Ansari (2024), the efficacy of blended learning in enhancing lecturer competencies and improving student outcomes can be especially beneficial for women re-entering the workforce after a period of absence. The capability to modify instructional approaches and effectively employ technology can empower women lecturers, enabling them to flourish in their professional roles and contribute positively to the UKZN.

Pertinent comments of academic participants are noted below:

Online teaching cuts out travel time and costs. A blended approach is needed as it gives us the chance to teach and fulfil other obligations. (Sally (academic) February 2024)

Maybe face-to-face lectures are better, but with technology, you can still see your students, which also works. There are some downsides, but we can make it work. 50/50 will work, we need to learn to adapt (Mandy (academic) February 2024)

Part-time please, hybrid as I need and like my office and also enjoy face-to-face but not 100%. So yes, 50/50 will work best. (Amy (academic) March 2024)

This study highlights the need for flexible learning options that adapt to unforeseen circumstances. As the UKZN moves forward, it is crucial to establish policies that support a hybrid model of education that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with robust online components. This approach is particularly advantageous for women employees and lecturers.

This research indicates that the transition to online education introduces a range of opportunities and challenges for the UKZN. By reassessing and modifying pedagogical policies to incorporate online learning, the UKZN can cultivate a more flexible, accessible, and equitable educational environment. As progress beyond the pandemic is made, it is crucial that the UKZN commits to a hybrid educational model that caters to the diverse needs of women lecturers and equips them for an increasingly digitalised workplace and society.

5.3 Supportive Leadership Approaches

Research demonstrates that the calibre of leadership during this juncture can profoundly affect employees' experiences and their acclimatisation to novel work environments. Firstly, the significance of leadership in augmenting employee well-being is paramount. According to Lundqvist et al. (2022), managerial communication efforts have intensified to assist employees throughout the pandemic, which is crucial for sustaining morale and productivity, irrespective of whether employees are engaged in remote work or resuming office duties. This assertion is reinforced by Graham et al. (2023), who emphasise that both emotional and instrumental support from supervisors are indispensable for telecommuters, positing that analogous support will be requisite as employees transition back to the physical workplace.

Furthermore, the research conducted by Bartsch et al. (2020) posits that effective leadership is essential during crises, as it aids in preserving employee performance, which can be readily applicable to the re-entry into office environments. Moreover, the characteristics of varying leadership styles significantly influence this transition. For example, directive leadership has been proven effective in supervising employees amid crises, as it affords clear guidance and delineates expectations (Gao, 2024).

This is especially pertinent as organisations navigate the intricate challenges associated with returning to the office, where employees may experience ambiguity regarding their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, empowering leadership which promotes employee autonomy and creativity, can cultivate a favourable work environment and enhance job satisfaction during this transitional phase (Cremers & Curşeu, 2023). The organisational culture that emerged during the pandemic will also impact the transition back to the office.

Through the deliberate solicitation of feedback and the practice of introspection, leaders can cultivate a deeper comprehension of the challenges encountered by their female employees, thereby formulating strategies to address these issues. This methodology nurtures a sense of belonging and empowers women to articulate their concerns and ambitions, fostering a more inclusive workplace environment (Caminong, 2023).

Supportive leadership paradigms at the UKZN that prioritise connective, reflective, and empathetic leadership styles, in conjunction with initiatives aimed at mitigating unconscious bias and fostering women's solidarity, are essential for facilitating a successful reintegration of women employees into the office setting post-pandemic. These strategies not only tackle the immediate challenges engendered by the pandemic but will also advance long-term gender equity for the university.

This research states that the transition back to the office after COVID-19 necessitates a comprehensive approach to leadership that underscores communication, support, and adaptability. Organisations can facilitate a more seamless transition and cultivate a resilient workforce by implementing effective leadership strategies that prioritise employee well-being and respond to the evolving work landscape.

When the participants were asked what management could do to support their transition back to the office, some responses were as follows:

They can allow us to take leave when we want, but there are times when it does not get approved, and this creates anxiety. That will assist, mainly because you didn't need to leave at specific times during COVID-19 since we had flexibility. (Beauty (support) March 2024)

They can communicate better. They can understand that we are humans with feelings. They can also introduce everyone to us. We work with people we don't know because of a lack of communication and introductions. (Penny (Academic) March 2024.

They can also lower workloads and take admin away from lecturers because we do a lot of admin, which has become even more evident post-pandemic. (Peace (Academic) March 2024)

The theory of gendered organisations is particularly pertinent in elucidating how leadership strategies can bolster or contest prevailing gender biases as organisations navigate the complexities of the post-COVID-19 milieu. This study shows a need for communication between leaders and employees. It also shows that management can support women returning to the office post-pandemic by approving leave requests and introducing new employees more effectively. Some participants were concerned that leave requests were not being approved, which created anxiety, and others expressed concern that there were no formal introductions when new employees arrived.

5.4 Inclusion of Menstrual Leave

Menstrual leave has been a topic of discussion in the literature. Research demonstrates that menstrual discomfort and related symptoms can profoundly influence daily functioning and attendance in the workplace, resulting in absenteeism and diminished productivity (Leon-Larios, 2024; Schoep et al., 2019). The study by Leon-Larios (2024) points out that a substantial proportion of women endure incapacitating menstrual symptoms that impede their capacity to perform effectively in their professional roles. This indicates that providing menstrual leave could promote enhanced health management and improve workplace

productivity by allowing individuals to recuperate during their menstrual cycles (Leon-Larios, 2024; Zhang, 2024).

However, the implementation of menstrual leave policies is not devoid of contention. Detractors contend that such policies may inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes, depicting women as less competent or productive than their male counterparts (Levitt & Barnack-Tavlaris, 2020; Julijanto & Andrianti, 2022). Levitt and Barnack-Tavlaris (2020) underscore the necessity of confronting foundational societal attitudes and biases related to menstruation to avert potential adverse consequences stemming from menstrual leave. They assert that in the absence of a cultural transformation toward acknowledging menstruation as a natural biological process rather than an obstruction, menstrual leave could exacerbate the stigmatisation of women within the workplace (Levitt & Barnack-Tavlaris, 2020; Julijanto & Andrianti, 2022).

Furthermore, according to Leon-Larios (2024) and Zhang (2024), the efficacy of menstrual leave policies may exhibit considerable variability across diverse cultural and organisational frameworks. For instance, while certain nations and organisations have effectively instituted menstrual leave, empirical data regarding the actual effects of such initiatives on women's health and workplace dynamics remain scant. This lack of empirical evidence underscores the necessity for further investigation to assess the long-term ramifications of menstrual leave policies and to guarantee that they are structured in a manner that authentically fosters the health and welfare of menstruators without perpetuating stigma.

One of the participants noted the following concerning her menstrual cycle:

As a middle-aged woman, I think that working from home, I enjoy relaxing while on my menstrual cycle. As you get older, the pain intensifies after kids, and I would like to have the opportunity to still stay home for that day. Management can assist by allowing this for women who need it. (Joy (support) February 2024)

The response elucidates a complex interaction among workplace norms, gender biases, and the health requirements of employees who menstruate. According to Widayani (2022) and Levitt and Barnack-Tavlaris (2020), the theory of gendered organisations asserts that organisational structures and practices are frequently designed from a male-centric viewpoint, which can

marginalise the experiences and needs of women, especially concerning reproductive health matters such as menstruation.

Based on the above response and the literature it is evident that women would enjoy being at home during their menstrual cycle. The participant also mentioned that menstrual pain is different and more intense after bearing children. By cultivating an atmosphere that prioritises women's health requirements and confronts conventional gender norms, the UKZN can foster a more equitable workplace that accommodates all employees, particularly those who experience menstruation.

5.5 Flexible Work Arrangements

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the imperative for organisations to reevaluate their strategies concerning workplace flexibility. Protudjer et al. (2022) recommend that academic institutions explore flexible working arrangements, including reduced work hours and policies that restrict after-hours communications, to mitigate some of the burdens brought by the pandemic. This aligns with findings from Górska et al. (2021), who document that the pandemic has illuminated the gendered characteristics of academic labour, with women experiencing a far more pronounced adverse effect on their research output and knowledge production than their male colleagues. Beyond productivity and mental health, the criteria for promotions and tenure within academia have increasingly been scrutinised.

Numerous employees have acclimated to remote work, linked to enhanced work-life balance and overall well-being (Siswanti & Muafi, 2020). Consequently, leaders must consider hybrid work arrangements that permit flexibility while fostering in-office collaboration. This perspective aligns with the observations of Andreeva (2022), who notes that employees are increasingly inclined toward hybrid models that reconcile remote and in-office work.

As Supriatna et al. (2021) articulate, the transition to remote work has catalysed organisations to implement adaptive human resource policies that can effectively address health-related issues and the intricacies of managing a heterogeneous workforce. Nevertheless, there exists a potential risk that these flexible arrangements may exacerbate work-family conflict, especially for women who frequently shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities (Ağargün & Turgut, 2022). This dual responsibility may diminish the

prospective advantages of flexible work arrangements, necessitating a meticulous analysis of these policies' structural and communicative aspects within organisational contexts.

The need for more flexible working arrangements was evident in the responses from participants:

Management must give us written consent to work at home on certain days. Some departments still do this, whereas some say it cannot be done. The rule needs to be the same for us all. (April (support) March 2024)

COVID has shown us that it is possible to work from home, so we can work with a hybrid system. Some policy to allow some days in and some days out of the office. We know it works. This will enable better all-round performance in every part of my life. (Grace (support) February 2024)

We, as academics, have always had fluidity when working from home. However, with lectures, I prefer face-to-face, but some online classes will be fine as well. But people think that since you are flexible, you are not doing work, but sometimes you have to prove that you are not on the beach and working. Maybe have the policy structured so all staff has this option, like some days working remotely. (Sally (academic) February 2024)

A policy on hybrid working should be put in place. The days of in-office Monday until Friday 8-16h30 should not be forced upon us today. I understand that academics have flexibility, but we can have one set of rules for all employees (Pam (academic) February 2024)

Participants noted that flexible work arrangements would be welcomed. They also noted that this should encompass all staff and not limited to specific departments. This study shows a need for flexible work arrangements, including remote work and hybrid models. Such arrangements would also allow for a better work-life balance, increase employee satisfaction, and improve employee productivity and mental health. Women who are mothers and have caregiving responsibilities would benefit from this kind of working arrangement as it would allow for a better family care system.

The study's findings suggest that flexible working arrangements could benefit women's professional advancement and work-life integration. The UKZN should strive to establish environments that provide flexibility and proactively assist women in managing the intricate dynamics of professional and familial responsibilities.

The theoretical framework of gendered organisations provides an essential perspective for examining the ramifications of flexible working arrangements for women employees reintegrating into the workplace following the pandemic. This framework asserts that organisational structures are designed in a manner that both reflects and sustains gender inequalities, thereby influencing the differential experiences of policies and practices for men and women. The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for a profound transformation in work modalities, especially with the extensive implementation of remote work and adaptable schedules, which possess the potential to either alleviate or intensify pre-existing gender inequities within the professional environment.

5.6 Ensuring the Psychological Well-being of Employees

The psychological ramifications of the pandemic on employees necessitate a deliberate approach to leadership. Research indicates that employees have encountered heightened stress and emotional fatigue during the pandemic, which can influence their reintegration into the office environment (Collie, 2021). Leaders must thus prioritise the establishment of a psychologically safe atmosphere that addresses these concerns through regular communication and support (Blake et al., 2020).

This study demonstrates that management can assume a crucial function in facilitating this transition through various strategies that promote employee autonomy, guarantee organisational justice, and cultivate a supportive work environment. One of the primary mechanisms through which management can assist employees in reintegrating into the workplace is by providing autonomy throughout the transition process. Permitting employees to re-enter the workforce at their own pace, such as allowing them to attend the office solely for meetings or offering extended hybrid work arrangements, can significantly enhance their perceived autonomy in the workplace. This sense of independence is associated with improved mental health and job satisfaction, as employees perceive themselves as having greater control over their work environments and schedules (Brooks et al., 2022).

According to the participants:

They can send staff for team building; the people who returned after the pandemic are not the same as the ones who were in these offices. We have gone through so much and I think team building and counselling need to be at the top of our priorities. (Summer (support) March 2024)

What about having a gym at the office? This will assist with the well-being of staff and help women who do not have time after work. We could go to the gym and destress at lunchtime. (Joy (support) February 2024)

They can take us out for a wellness full day or half day every second or third month. (April (support), March 2024)

It would be great if each school took a trip and bonded. Not just academics support staff, but everyone bonding and taking time out to de-stress. Also, as a thank you, we appreciate each other. This will assist with our well-being, and we will be less stressed (Amy (academic), March 2024)

Applying the theory of gendered organisations to the psychological well-being of women employees reintegrating into the workplace following the pandemic underscores the imperative for organisations to adopt gender-sensitive policies. By addressing the distinct challenges women encounter, the UKZN can bolster the psychological well-being of their women employees, consequently fostering a more equitable and productive university environment.

5.7 Robust Communication Strategy

Promoting robust communication strategies is critical for sustaining employee engagement and ensuring staff members feel connected to their colleagues and the organisation (Fatima, 2024). The significance of psychological safety cannot be overemphasised in this context. Employees must feel secure in expressing their concerns and challenges about the transition back to the workplace. Managers can foster an environment of psychological safety by promoting open dialogue and providing resources for employees to articulate their needs and experiences

(Sjöblom et al., 2022). This method bolsters individual well-being and contributes to a more cohesive organisational culture that values employee input and encourages collaboration.

In formulating a comprehensive communication strategy for women employees reintegrating into the workplace post-pandemic, it is imperative to consider the distinctive challenges and requirements that this demographic encounters. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed workplace dynamics, necessitating a meticulous communication approach that nurtures trust, engagement, and well-being among returning personnel.

Productive communication is paramount in addressing the psychological needs of employees, particularly women who may have encountered amplified stress as a result of the pandemic. According to Men et al. (2021) and Santoso et al. (2023), transparent and empathetic communication from leadership can significantly enhance employee trust and satisfaction during transition periods. Leaders ought to implement a proactive communication strategy that informs employees regarding organisational changes and acknowledges their concerns and emotional states. This objective can be realised through regular updates, open forums for discourse, and feedback mechanisms that empower employees to articulate their experiences and recommendations (Li et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Furthermore, Kim (2023) states that cultivating a culture of inclusivity and support through internal communication can assist in alleviating feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of belonging among female employees.

Some of the participants commented about communication within departments as follows:

They can communicate better, or maybe it's just my department and not the entire university. (Penny (Academic) March 2024)

Returning to the office, there has been a lack of communication, making you feel like you are not a part of the team or organisation. (Beauty (support) March 2024)

The participants were concerned about a lack of communication within departments. As the UKZN embarks on the journey back to conventional work settings, it becomes imperative to devise comprehensive communication strategies that recognise these challenges and advocate for inclusivity. For instance, organisations might implement systematic check-ins and feedback mechanisms aimed at discerning the specific concerns of female employees, thereby enabling the customisation of their supportive measures accordingly.

The theoretical perspective of gendered organisations asserts that organisations possess an intrinsically gendered nature, thereby shaping the lived experiences and resultant outcomes of employees contingent upon their gender identity. The transition back to the office following the pandemic affords organisations a pivotal moment to adopt communication strategies that are attuned to their workforce's gendered realities. By fostering transparent communication, the UKZN can establish a resilient framework that assists women employees in successfully navigating their reintegration into the professional environment. Such a strategic orientation not only confronts the immediate adversities engendered by the pandemic but also facilitates the UKZN's more equitable organisational culture in the long term. A comprehensive communication strategy for women employees returning to the office post-pandemic should encompass transparent and empathetic leadership communication.

Furthermore, establishing a flexible working group within the organisation may facilitate discourse surrounding hybrid models, ensuring that employee preferences are integrated into the decision-making framework (Brooks et al., 2022). In addition to advocating for autonomy, management must focus on organisational justice. Research indicates managerial behaviours profoundly affect employees' perceptions of equity in return-to-work protocols. When managers exhibit supportive behaviours, it cultivates a sense of care and engagement among employees, which is vital for successful reintegration (Annett, 2023). This aspect is particularly salient in disability management, wherein perceptions of justice can directly influence employees' readiness to participate in the return-to-work process (Annett, 2023).

Organisations can enhance their reintegration initiatives and mitigate potential conflicts or retaliatory actions by ensuring that employees perceive themselves as being treated equitably and justly. Moreover, a supportive work environment facilitates the transition back to the office. Employees returning from remote work frequently encounter challenges related to work-life balance and the adaptation to face-to-face interactions. Management can enact informal practices to alleviate workplace pressure, such as training supervisors in family-supportive behaviours that encourage recovery during non-working hours (Barber et al., 2019). Such initiatives can assist employees in more effectively managing the boundaries between their professional and personal lives, thereby enhancing their overall well-being (Barber et al., 2019).

Institutional policies and practices play a crucial role in facilitating or obstructing women's adaptation to returning to the office. Many universities may not have implemented effective strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on women employees, such as flexible work arrangements or mental health support (Stanisçuaski et al., 2021; Chafi et al., 2021). The absence of supportive measures can lead to a perception of inequity within the workplace, further discouraging women from fully engaging in their roles (Sougou et al., 2022).

This study shows that the UZKN should have provided mental health resources, such as counselling services and stress management workshops, to help women navigate these challenges. Additionally, fostering a supportive work environment that encourages open discussions about mental health can mitigate feelings of isolation and anxiety (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). By prioritising mental well-being, universities can build resilience among their female employees.

The UKZN should actively promote these policies and ensure that they are accessible to all employees, thereby fostering an inclusive work culture. Career counselling explicitly tailored for women is another vital component of supporting their transition back to the office. Women returning to work after a hiatus often experience shifts in their self-concept and career aspirations (Chen & Lappano, 2023). The UKZN should offer specialised career counselling services that address the unique challenges faced by women, including those related to self-confidence and career development.

By integrating the theory of gendered organisations with practical support, universities can empower women to navigate their career paths effectively (Greer & Kirk, 2022). This targeted approach not only aids in their professional reintegration but also contributes to their overall resilience.

This study shows that the UKZN can significantly assist women employees in adapting to the return to office work post-COVID-19 by focusing on mental health support, flexible work arrangements, and tailored career counselling. These strategies enhance resilience and foster a more inclusive and supportive workplace environment, ultimately benefiting both employees and the institution as a whole.

As elucidated by Joan Acker, the theoretical framework of gendered organisations asserts that gender transcends being a mere individual trait and is fundamentally integrated within the organisational frameworks, processes, and practices, thereby sustaining systemic inequalities (Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022; Sobering, 2016). In light of the UKZN reinstating in-person operations in the aftermath of the pandemic, it is imperative to formulate gender-sensitive policies that confront these entrenched disparities and cultivate an inclusive atmosphere for individuals of all genders. A suggested policy entails the adoption of gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion methodologies. Conventional hiring practices frequently reflect and reinforce prevailing gender biases, which can be alleviated through structured interviews and blind recruitment strategies that prioritise competencies and qualifications rather than gender-based assumptions (Williams et al., 2012).

5.8 Adopting a Gender-sensitive Framework

The pandemic has illuminated the imperative for organisations to adopt a gender-sensitive framework within their recovery strategies. The disproportionate ramifications of COVID-19 on women necessitate targeted interventions that address the distinct needs of women employees (Adimora et al., 2022). For example, firms that allocate resources toward child care have successfully facilitated a seamless transition back to work for women (Wanniarachchi, 2023; Hite & McDonald, 2020).

The following response from a participant reflects gender-specific challenges:

I feel like if we have access to childcare facilities at work it will lighten the load for us. We fetch them at the same time we finish work and from the same place. It will also be a good idea to have lift clubs within our workplace to fetch kids from school. If employers consider this it will assist us a lot. Obviously at a cost but if they would like to include it in our benefits that would be great. (Phindie (support), Feb 2024)

A gender-sensitive framework for post-pandemic recovery ought to emphasise the distinctive requirements of women, incorporating gender-specific challenges into recovery methodologies. In this manner, policymakers have the potential to establish a more equitable and sustainable recovery that not only mitigates the immediate repercussions of the pandemic but also establishes a foundation for long-term resilience among women and their respective communities.

5.9 Summary

Adapting to the post-pandemic work environment needs a multi-pronged approach that prioritises flexibility, health and safety, technological support, and employee engagement. By implementing these policies, organisations can create a work environment that not only meets the challenges posed by the pandemic but also enhances overall employee well-being and productivity. Applying gendered organisation theory to university policies in the post-pandemic context necessitates a complex strategy encompassing inclusive social events, robust support systems, and comprehensive gender mainstreaming. These strategies are essential for establishing a university environment that authentically promotes gender equity and nurtures a sense of belonging for all individuals.

In Chapter six (the final chapter), conclusions and recommendations based on the study findings will be presented.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the research, the major findings in light of the study's objectives, policy recommendations that could be considered for implementation by the UKZN, and the conclusions of the study. The chapter concludes with the contribution of the study and suggestions for future research.

By engaging with the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants, the research successfully elucidated the experiences of women employees as they transitioned back to the office following a period of remote work necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically within the College of Humanities, UKZN, Pietermaritzburg Campus.

6.2 Summary of the Research

The primary objective of this study was to understand the experiences of women employees at the UKZN returning to the office after the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, the researcher set out to determine how working remotely from home during the pandemic and upon returning to offices affected women's work-life balance, mental health, and well-being, as well as how it affected gender inequity. The researcher discussed adaptation strategies that employees can adopt to ease the transition. Numerous aspects that may inform a gender-responsive policy in the post-pandemic context were included.

The secondary objectives were emphasised during the comprehensive literature review. Furthermore, it was imperative to attain a nuanced understanding by investigating the ramifications for women employees at the UKZN resuming office work in the aftermath of the pandemic. The investigation illuminated the intensification of gender disparities within the workplace throughout and after the pandemic.

Consequently, to substantiate the view that women employees encountered certain obstacles when returning to the office post-pandemic and that prevailing gender expectations impeded women's attainment of enhanced productivity when confined to the office environment, the

researcher constructed a theoretical framework grounded in gender role theory, adaptive theory, and the theory of gendered organisation. This framework facilitated an understanding of how societal expectations and norms regarding gender roles have influenced the experiences of women employees at the UKZN in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptive theory elucidated how women navigate the complexities of reconciling professional and personal obligations, particularly amidst the substantial transformations instigated by the pandemic. Additionally, the theory of gendered organisations offered a critical lens for scrutinising the effects of flexible work arrangements on women employees reintegrating into the workplace post-pandemic.

The introductory section, the background to the study, and the literature review presented in Chapter two drew on existing literature at local, regional, and international levels relevant to the subject matter of the study. Using the lived experiences and perceptions of the study's participants (female employees at the UKZN), the research explored their challenges and adaptations when working remotely during the pandemic and when returning to the office. Additionally, the study assessed gender-responsive policies relevant to the post-pandemic workplace at the UKZN.

This research was descriptive and qualitative. The study employed thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns that emerged from the participant's responses to the research questions which were instrumental in collecting and analysing the requisite data. This methodological approach enabled the researcher to utilise semi-structured interviews in the context of a case study to gather relevant information from the study participants concerning their experiences of returning to the office in the post-pandemic landscape. The successful completion of this process was vital for fulfilling the research objectives and addressing the research questions. The research methodology employed was significant, suitable, and of considerable value.

6.3 Major Findings of the Research and Conclusions

This section presents findings derived from the qualitative research study that sought to investigate the experiences of the UKZN women employees returning to the office post-pandemic. The conclusions are based on the significant findings and, therefore, on the experiences of the UKZN women employees returning to work after the COVID-19 pandemic,

being the key objective of the study. The conclusions are also based on the secondary objectives of the study.

6.3.1 Experiences of Women Employees When Working From Home During the Pandemic

The study demonstrated that many support staff participants did not have a good work-life balance while working from home at the beginning of the pandemic, but as they started to achieve balance, they had to return to the office. Some women noted that they were expected to look after their children, which was difficult to balance with work. This suggests that working from home during the pandemic affected the work-life balance of women employees at the UKZN.

The results of the study indicate that gender inequality still exists among support and academic female staff within the UKN. It revealed that men had more time to apply for promotions during COVID-19 since they had time available to publish and attend conferences. This was evident because most women took on additional responsibilities during the pandemic. Women did not have the extra time to publish and undertake additional activities for career advancement, especially those women who wore many different hats during COVID-19. Some women who had this opportunity often did not have children or had older children who were less dependent.

The results of the study also indicate that the transition to remote work did create stress for some women employees. Participants reported that family togetherness during the initial lockdown created stress. Participants also noted that personal issues and work factors negatively impacted their mental health during the pandemic.

This research demonstrates that the transition to remote work during the pandemic has significantly altered the dynamics of work-life balance for women. The findings reveal that numerous women encountered an escalation in domestic responsibilities, which intensified their professional obligations. This dual burden has been associated with heightened work-family conflict, particularly among women with children, as evidenced by the results. The pandemic intensified pre-existing disparities, as women frequently assumed an unequal share of household duties, resulting in a decline in their overall well-being.

6.3.2 Experiences of Women Employees Upon Return to the Office Post-pandemic

The findings show that most women perform the majority of child care and domestic responsibilities. The results of the study suggest that having children, poor social support systems, and increased workloads affect women's ability to take steps toward promotion at work. The results clearly show that males had more time to excel at career advancement during COVID-19, whereas women faced significantly more responsibilities, making it more challenging for them to climb the "corporate" ladder. Women with younger children faced greater challenges since their children were more dependent on them. The study also shows that it is valuable for the UKZN to host workshops for employees returning to the office post-pandemic to assist with work-life balance and enhance their emotional intelligence.

The study highlights the pressing need for institutional reforms and specialised support to confront the disparities identified and cultivate a more equitable academic space at the UKZN post-pandemic. The ramifications of the findings imply that women in academia may encounter heightened obstacles in achieving equity in employment and advancement prospects in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Some participants reported working constantly, experiencing increased workloads, and facing family pressure while working remotely. However, the results also reveal that returning to the office created some stress for women employees. Some participants noted that upon returning to the office, added pressure arose since they could no longer accommodate household chores and childcare responsibilities into their day, thus affecting their mental health and well-being.

The study shows that the interrelationship among resilience, emotional intelligence, and organisational support is critical in facilitating a successful reintegration. By acknowledging the distinctive challenges encountered by women and implementing supportive strategies, academic institutions can cultivate an environment that nurtures resilience and adaptability, ultimately advancing employee well-being and productivity. Women in the workforce have encountered distinct obstacles, encompassing a rise in household obligations, psychological health concerns, and alterations in workplace dynamics arising from the pandemic. These obstacles have necessitated that women implement various adaptive mechanisms and strategies to navigate their professional contexts proficiently.

The results show that support from colleagues, spouses, and family can make adapting to a return to work smoother. The results also show that women employees desire assistance with their mental health issues and need opportunities to de-stress. Some of the ways participants suggested was to have teambuilding and wellness days. Reintegration into the workforce can potentially restore beneficial elements of employment, including social engagement and a renewed sense of purpose, which are essential for psychological well-being.

The findings also indicate that the mental health repercussions of returning to work following the pandemic are significant. Research has demonstrated that women have reported elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and depression during and after the pandemic, compared to their male counterparts. The study illustrates that the psychological burden of managing both professional and personal responsibilities during the pandemic has resulted in heightened feelings of isolation and burnout, which may impede effective reintegration into the workplace. Moreover, the apprehension regarding potential workplace exposure to COVID-19 has exacerbated anxiety among returning employees, as pointed out in this research.

6.4 Proposed Policy Recommendations that can be Applied at the UKZN in the Future

6.4.1 Blended Teaching and Learning

This study highlighted the need for flexible learning options that adapt to unforeseen circumstances. As the UKZN moves forward, it is crucial to establish policies that support a hybrid model of education that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with robust online components.

This research indicates that the transition to online education introduces a range of opportunities and challenges for the UKZN. By reassessing and modifying pedagogical policies to incorporate online learning, the UKZN can cultivate a more flexible, accessible, and equitable educational environment. As the institution progresses beyond the pandemic, it is crucial that the UKZN commit to a hybrid educational model that caters to women lecturers and equips them for an increasingly digitalised workplace and society.

According to this study, blended learning can bridge disparities in educational delivery, equipping women lecturers with the requisite tools to excel in their teaching roles while accommodating their circumstances. The significance of technological readiness is similarly underscored in the scholarly discourse, as blended learning necessitates that lecturers possess proficiency with digital tools.

6.4.2 Inclusion of Menstrual Leave

This study found that women enjoyed being at home during their menstrual cycle. By cultivating an atmosphere that prioritises women's health requirements and challenges conventional gender norms, the UKZN can foster a more equitable workplace that accommodates all employees, particularly those who experience menstruation.

6.4.3 Flexible Working Arrangements

Study findings emphasised a need for flexible work arrangements, including remote work and hybrid models. This approach will allow for a better work-life balance, increase employee satisfaction, and improve employee productivity and mental health. Women who are mothers and have caregiving responsibilities will, in particular, benefit from this kind of working arrangement as it will allow for a better family care system.

This study suggests that flexible working arrangements can benefit women's professional advancement and work-life integration. The UKZN should strive to establish environments that provide flexibility and proactively assist women in managing the intricate dynamics of professional and familial responsibilities.

6.4.4 Ensuring the Psychological Well-being of Employees

This study shows that the UKZN should provide mental health resources, such as counselling services and stress management workshops, to help women navigate the challenges experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By prioritising mental well-being, universities can build resilience among their female employees.

The UKZN should actively promote policies aimed at the psychological well-being of their employees, ensuring that they are accessible to all staff, thereby fostering an inclusive work culture. Career counselling explicitly tailored for women is another vital component of supporting their transition back to the office. The UKZN should offer specialised career

counselling services that address the unique challenges faced by women, including those related to self-confidence and career development.

The UKZN should prioritise the creation of support systems for individuals encountering gender-based discrimination or harassment. This encompasses establishing precise reporting mechanisms and support services that are attuned to the needs of all genders, particularly those from marginalised groups (Nichols, 2011). By nurturing an environment in which individuals feel secure in reporting incidents without the fear of retribution, universities can dismantle the culture of silence that often shields perpetrators and perpetuates gendered inequalities (Springer, 2019).

Additionally, the integration of gender mainstreaming into all university policies and practices is of paramount importance. This entails evaluating the gender implications of all decisions and ensuring that gender considerations are embedded within strategic planning processes (Baines, 2010). By embracing a comprehensive approach to gender equity, universities can rectify existing inequalities and foster a cultural milieu that values diversity and inclusion at every level (Healy et al., 2018).

6.5 Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to existing literature on women employees' experiences during COVID-19 and upon returning to the office after working remotely. It provides insights into the experiences faced by the UKZN women employees in the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, and advises on the development of flexible work policies. The study also offers insights into the implementation of inclusive policies and the cultivation of a societal transformation aimed at achieving gender equity. Through these findings, it is possible to progress toward a future characterised by greater equity that acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of women employees.

6.6 Suggestions for Future Research

Future inquiries could investigate the psychological health ramifications associated with the transition back to the workplace, especially concerning how occupational settings may be structured to enhance mental health and alleviate stress specifically for women employees. Secondly, the avenues through which academic institutions can assist their women employees

via professional development, mentorship programmes, and adaptable working conditions could be investigated. Such an investigation will be essential for nurturing a more inclusive organisational climate. Finally, the UKZN, the focus of this study, does not represent the other institutions involved in tertiary education in South Africa. As a consequence, the findings of this study and the implications of those findings can only be extrapolated to the UKZN itself and this is to a limited degree (given that the sample of women was not representative of all female employees in the institution). There thus exists much scope for similar studies to be conducted among the broader spectrum of universities within South Africa.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance Approval



23 January 2024

Perdita Honorine Peters (208525427)
School Of Social Sciences
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear PH Peters,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006569/2023

Project title: Investigating women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to coronavirus: The case of the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus University of KwaZulu-Natal.
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 19 December 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 23 January 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 290 8330/4557/3387 Email: hsrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research/Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howare College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix 2: Gatekeeper Approval



2 October 2023

Perdita Peters
School of Social Sciences
College of Humanities
Pietermaritzburg Campus UKZN
Email: PetersP@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Perdita

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

"Investigating women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to COVID-19: The Case of The College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus University of KwaZulu-Natal."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with women from the College of Humanities (Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) on the Pietermaritzburg Campus.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely



Mr MA TUFTS: Director Governance & Administration

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag 854001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 1911 Email: registrar@ukzn.ac.za Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix 3: Consent Form

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 6 February 2024

Dear Participant,

My name is Perdita Peters (208525427). I am a Masters candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. The title of my research is:

Investigating women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to Coronavirus: The Case of The College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The aim of the study is to shed light on challenges faced by women employees at UKZN and will help impact the flexible policy generation to address their challenges. I am interested in interviewing you so as to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter. In order to confirm that you fit within the criteria please confirm if you are

Between 23-49 years

And that you have domestic and child-bearing responsibilities alongside work responsibilities

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about 30 minutes.

- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg.

Email: petersp@ukzn.ac.za

Cell: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is Dr Janet Muthuki who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Pietermaritzburg Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Contact details: email muthuki@ukzn.ac.za Phone number: 033 260 6462

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00006569/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (provide contact details) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

CONSENT (Edit as required)

I(Name) have been informed about the study Investigating women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to Coronavirus: The Case of The College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus University of KwaZulu-Natal by Perdita Peters.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at (provide details).

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Video-record my interview / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Use of my photographs for research purposes	YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Perdita Peters

Investigating women employees' experiences of returning to the office after working remotely due to COVID-19: The Case of The College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus University of KwaZulu-Natal

Gender:

Marital status:

1. Do you feel like you have a good work/life balance?
2. Did you look forward to returning to the office? Why or why not?
3. Do you have more home responsibilities than your spouse?
4. Would you prefer to work from home full-time, part-time or not at all?
5. What changes in company policy would you like to see now that you have returned to work after working from home?
6. What can management do to support your working arrangements since the pandemic?
7. What are your experiences of returning to the office after the pandemic?
8. What were your experiences of working from home during the pandemic?
9. What are your experiences upon your return to campus?
10. What are the personal and work-related forces inhibit you from adapting well to the return to campus?
11. From the above experiences, what policy recommendations can be made and adopted for the workplace in the future?
12. Any suggestions or additional comments?

Appendix 5: Proof of Editing

Athol Leach (Proofreading and Editing)



31 Park Rd
Fisherhaven
Hermanus 7200

Email: [REDACTED] Cell: [REDACTED]

12 December 2024

To Whom It May Concern

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the following Master of Social Science in Gender Studies thesis by Perdita Honorine Peters titled:

"Investigating Women Employees' Experiences of Returning to the Office After Working Remotely Due to Coronavirus: The Case of the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal"

The thesis was edited in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation and overall style. In doing so, use was made of MS Word's "Track changes" facility thus providing the student with the opportunity to reject or accept the changes made.

Please note that while I have checked the in-text references and those appearing in the list of references for consistency in terms of format (the latter as far as possible), I have not checked the veracity of the sources themselves.

The tracked document is on file.

Sincerely

[REDACTED]

Athol Leach
(MIS, Natal)