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The Well-Being and Coping Mechanisms of Female Academics Working From Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown in South Africa

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Abstract:

Most female academics faced challenges while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, including stress, emotional and physical exhaustion. The literature has shown that female academics working from home manage more responsibilities compared to their male counterparts. Female academics must apply several coping mechanisms to manage stress and improve their well-being. The study aims to explore the well-being experiences and coping mechanisms of female academics working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to select 17 female academics, employed by the two previously disadvantaged institutions in Limpopo Province during the pandemic lockdown. The study used a qualitative approach and an exploratory research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to disclose their feelings and thoughts on well-being and the coping mechanisms. Some interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings and online platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The data was analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed that the well-being of female academics is affected by stress, anxiety, disruption by children, and inadequate and improper work equipment. Institutional and social support, as well as personal circumstances, were identified as coping mechanisms for female academics working from home. The findings highlighted the urgent need for targeted support programs to enhance the well-being of female academics and equip them with effective coping mechanisms.

Keywords:

Coping Mechanisms, COVID-19, Female Academics, Well-Being, Working From Home

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a major challenge for organisations as employees all over the world had to work from home. The working-from-home phenomenon was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a shift from physical offices to virtual work. COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus) was officially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020 (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). The countries most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic included the United States of America (USA), Brazil and India (Nyabadza et al., 2020). The coronavirus spread to other countries through international travel and within cities, towns, public places such as churches, schools, and family gatherings, as well as family members sharing spaces (Nyabadza et al., 2020). South Africa recorded the highest number of infections in Africa due to a large population and an economy that provides people from different countries worldwide for trade, conferences and other events (Scholtz, 2023). The pandemic brought about major changes worldwide, including shifts in economies, lifestyle changes, the loss of millions of jobs, primarily among employees, and a new perspective on hygiene, while introducing innovative and unique ways of working and providing goods and services (Obadire et al., 2020). Trade between countries temporarily stopped, several employees lost their jobs, and several non-essential organisations were forced to close, thus increasing the rates of unemployment and poverty in most countries (Obadire et al., 2020). Female employees faced challenges that affected their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown while working from home due to many home and work-related duties. Female employees took care of households, children, the elderly, husbands and attended to work duties with less time for relaxation, which left them stressed and tired, affecting their mental health (Khwela-Mdluli & Beharry-Ramraj, 2020). This is supported by Adisa et al (2020), who argued that high stress levels in female employees are reported in working from home studies, which were exacerbated by endless workloads such as childcare and elderly care. Female academics were not an exception.

The COVID-19 outbreak mandated academics to conduct lectures and attend workshops, conferences, and meetings via numerous online platforms such as Google Meet, Skype, Blackboard and Microsoft Teams (Newlin & Israel, 2021). Historically underprivileged South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were located mainly in rural and high-density areas and distinguished by atmospheres that prohibit good quality teaching and learning due to poor funding and infrastructure, among other challenges (Uleanya & Ajani, 2022). Other challenges that influenced employee well-being and job performance while working from home included poor technological advancement, poor data connectivity, a lack of appropriate learning gadgets, such as laptops for students suitable for virtual lectures, and overpopulated classes (Uleanya & Ajani, 2022). It is imperative to investigate coping strengths and skills to recover from critical situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, and have a healthier

well-being and resilience (Agha, 2020). This paper aims to explore the well-being experiences and coping mechanisms of female academics working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in South Africa. The research questions focused on the participants' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, how their partners, children, and extended family members supported them, as well as the institutional support. The last question focused on the coping mechanisms employed by female academics working from home. The study adds to the little knowledge available about female academic experiences in rural areas where female academics work, and family lives are highly influenced by poor infrastructure, poor network connectivity, little technological advancements, and patriarchy. The study also provides insights and recommendations that can positively influence policy and practical actions by the Human Resources (HR) departments at the two HEIs in Limpopo, SA. Pandemics, epidemics, disasters due to climate change, and outbreaks are increasing, which may necessitate working from home. Female academics may again find themselves encountering challenges that affect their well-being while working from home. Both work-based and family-based challenges faced by female academics require policies and coping mechanisms that guide them, assist them in achieving work-family balance, provide time to study further and to progress while taking up promotion opportunities that facilitate gender equity.

Literature Review

This section focuses on the literature reviewed, the model, well-being and working from home; coping mechanisms, organisational, social, and family support; as well as empirical literature.

The Job Demands-Resources Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is a framework in occupational health psychology that explains how job characteristics impact employee well-being and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model is a well-being model which attests to how high levels of demands, such as time pressure, workload and long working hours, can result in ill health, such as stress, strain, burnout, and ultimately low job performance (Taris & Schaufeli, 2014). Too many job demands have led to occupational stress and poor job performance, resulting in reduced productivity (Khalid, 2023). Coping mechanisms are needed to manage stressors that come from job demands. Job resources can be psychological and physical support employees receive to perform better and enhance well-being (Khalid, 2023). Coping mechanisms such as self-efficacy and resilience are job resources that increase motivation and job engagement and, in turn, job performance (Taris & Schaufeli, 2014). Other examples of job resources include supervisor coaching, clear job descriptions and reasonable responsibilities, access to resources and opportunities, and support from colleagues and management (Van Niekerk & Mhlanga, 2024). Lack of organisational support leads to occupational stress (Khalid, 2023).

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Well-Being and Working From Home

Well-being is a multifaceted concept encompassing both subjective and psychological aspects of a person's life. Employee well-being could be defined as the condition of the employee's physical and mental health, including both life and work experiences (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Female employees' well-being was more affected by working from home compared to their male counterparts. For example, a study conducted by Oakman et al., (2020) on the mental and physical health of employees working from home in ten countries (USA, UK, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil, SA, and Belgium) in government sector, academic, technology, financial sector, logistics and telecommunications revealed that women were more affected by working from home compared to men. The study further pointed out that support offered by organisations was limited (Oakman et al. 2020).

Women were engaged in several home and work tasks, which created work-family conflict, especially those with young children who were solely dependent on adult care and needed their parents when schools and daycares were closed (Adisa et al., 2020). Kundra et al. (2023) studied female professional employees working from home in India during lockdown and found that childcare predominantly remained a female responsibility. Their study found that female professionals with young children were negatively affected in terms of job productivity compared to those without children at the time (Kundra et al., 2023). Fathima et al. (2020) also argue that most organisations do not provide childcare facilities, which affects the well-being of young academics. On the other hand, working from home resulted in higher job performance due to the warmth, affection and emotional support provided by family members (Kundra et al., 2023). Kundra et al. (2023) explained that traditionally the Indian women are accustomed to multitasking effortlessly, even before the pandemic lockdown; thus, performing dual roles in the pandemic had no significant impact. In the South African context, working from home presented organisational loyalty, productivity, happiness, and work–family balance, according to Scholtz (2023). In turn, organisations had the advantage of working with more engaged employees who are more productive, and reduced office expenses attached to working on-site (Scholtz, 2023).

Coping Mechanisms

COVID-19 virus and the lockdown affected people in various ways, and coping was required to manage stress and maintain healthy well-being (Al Miskry et al., 2023). Coping mechanisms are an attempt to control emotions, behaviours, cognitions, psychophysiology, and environmental factors when encountering stress because of world challenges (Morales-Rodriguez & Perez-Mamol, 2019). Cancio et al. (2018) describe coping mechanisms as an ongoing process of controlling emotional and behavioural forces to balance the demands that exceed the resources one has. People use coping mechanisms to minimise stress effects or sources and modify the emotional situation of a person (Cancio et al., 2018). Personality also determines the coping mechanisms applied in challenges; however, a person

may change mechanisms to suit the type of stressor encountered at a particular time, which may require a different mechanism from the ones the person normally uses (MacIntyre et al., 2020). For example, a person who usually takes alcohol as a coping mechanism may encounter a different stressful event that requires them to seek support. Problem-focused coping is when one seeks actions that change the situation causing stress, for example, attending counselling or seeking family support (Forster et al., 2021). Emotion-focused coping is when one tries to reduce stress by understanding the situation by expressing emotions, self-blame, and many other factors. This results in poorer health outcomes because of failure to confront the root problem (Meyerson et al., 2021). Thus, emotion-focused coping mechanisms have a negative effect on psychological adjustment, anxiety, and depression, while problem-focused coping mechanisms enhance performance and well-being as they allow one to seek solutions (Forster et al., 2021).

Organisational, Social, and Family Support

Support is a crucial coping mechanism that assists female employees when working from home. Organisational support, as a coping mechanism, may be in various forms such as communication between managers and employees, financial support for data costs and heating and cooling systems, which enable employees to cope while working from home (Oakman et al. 2020). Supporting employees was necessary, especially for employees who take time to adjust and those who had not invested in office equipment to use at home before the lockdown. Research shows that female academics in HEIs receive limited social support, which is a crucial coping mechanism that limits access to connections and interpersonal relationships, such as material resources, network connections and research grant opportunities (Casad et al., 2020). Akanji et al. (2020) study, which found that social support as an emotional coping mechanism provided a platform for employees to vent and receive advice and succour from colleagues. Furthermore, they shared that support enhances well-being and work-family balance (Akanji et al., 2020). Casad et al. (2020) argued that lower social capital negatively impacts relationships with colleagues and line managers. Female academics may benefit from social networks. However, female academics are sometimes forced to mingle with fellow male academics; otherwise, their opportunities to advance their careers are limited (Casad et al., 2020). Family support was a crucial coping mechanism for female employees working from home. Kundra et al. (2023) studied the role of family support in women professionals working from home during the pandemic lockdown in India. The study reported higher job productivity in women professionals while working from home compared to working in offices (Kundra et al., 2023). This study adds to the knowledge on the coping mechanisms female academics in rural areas apply when working from home. Coping mechanisms differ amongst individuals depending on their characters and the challenges they face (Meyerson et al, 2021).

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Empirical Literature

A study by Carreri and Dordoni (2020) revealed that female academics in Italy were overwhelmed with work and family duties that kept them awake till late. Stress, frustration, fatigue, and a sense of guilt were reported amongst female academics who had young children during lockdown, who found it difficult to balance childcare, child education, work duties and house chores. Carreri and Dordoni (2020) further shared that female academics who had no children during lockdown reported experiencing peace and a happy period that allowed them to reflect on life. These female academics felt that the lockdown period was a break from the busy workdays and the competitive working environment (Carreri & Dordoni, 2020). Single female academics reported feelings of loneliness, and some found relationships online on different platforms, while those whose partners were far away reported missing them (Carreri & Dordoni, 2020). Walters et al. (2022) study found that South African female academics reported feelings of guilt due to failure to give more time to their children, but spent more time on work duties. Female academics reported high stress levels caused by the change in teaching and finding new ways to deliver lectures on online platforms (Walter et al., 2021). Ronnie et al. (2022) found that female academics in SA felt emotionally drained due to working from home. These female academics shared that family members always looked up to them for support and services, which was emotionally strenuous (Ronnie et al., 2002). Female academics also provided emotional support to students who were struggling, stressed, and confused, which added stress, frustration, anxiety and burnout (Ronnie et al., 2022).

The challenges of working from home for female academics in SA included, amongst others, unending work roles or time, loneliness, uncertainty, psychological isolation, and fear, whilst the advantages included new energy levels, saving on commuting expenses, comfort and safety, closeness to family, satisfaction, and better productivity (Iwu et al., 2022). Al Miskry et al. (2021) conducted a study in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which aimed to examine gender differences in stress and coping mechanisms among HEI academics and students. Due to the expectations and roles women were engaged in, women experienced more stress during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown compared to men, which meant that women's and men's coping mechanisms differed. Their results revealed that women applied avoidant emotion-focused and problem-focused coping mechanisms and showed lower levels of stress because of applying these coping mechanisms (Al Miskry et al., 2021).

Methods and Data

A qualitative approach and exploratory research design were employed in the study, which is a non-numerical approach that allows researchers to collect data from participants' natural settings and seeks to delve deeper into the topic being studied (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Non-probability purposive sampling (Johnson et al., 2020) was used to draw a sample of 17 female academics from two HEIs in the Limpopo

Province, South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted involving junior lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers and professors using an interview guide. The interview guide had Section A, which focused on the demographic profile of the participants, and Section B had four general questions related to the study. This allowed the researchers to make follow-up questions to research participants (Tracy, 2020). Some interviews were conducted face-to-face as the researchers visited both institutions of higher learning. However, some participants could not come to the office as they were still working from home. As a result, the online Google Meet platform was used to interview participants working from home. Data was also collected using secondary information such as government policies, rules and reports. Thematic analysis was used; themes and subthemes were induced from the interview data. The findings are reported in a narrative form. The gatekeeper's letter was obtained from two rural higher education institutions in the Limpopo Province in South Africa.

Demographic Information of the Participants

The total number of respondents who participated in the study was 17, all of whom were mothers with children. Respondents held positions from junior lecturers to professors, with their ages ranging from 27 to over 60 years. Senior lecturers, associate professors, and full professors were mostly mothers of teenagers and older children. Seven of the participants were single mothers, one was widowed during the pandemic, while the rest were married.

Results

This section presents the data through themes and subthemes that align with the paper's aim. The themes were developed based on participants' feedback during interviews and the specific issues the paper aimed to address. This thematic approach is justified as it provides a structured and coherent interpretation of the qualitative data, allowing for a focused and in-depth exploration of recurring patterns and critical issues central to the well-being and coping mechanisms of female academics. The analysis begins by exploring the well-being experiences of female academics working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The first question asked participants working from home how their well-being was during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The second question focused on how their partners, children, and extended family members supported them with household chores and childcare during the pandemic period. The third question focused on the type of support offered by the institutions and how it improved their well-being, work duties, and performance. The first three questions are covered in Theme 1. The last question, covered in Theme 2, focused on the coping mechanisms employed by female academics working from home to manage their work and family balance. Verbatim is also used to support the themes and subthemes in a narrative form.

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Theme 1: Well-Being Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

The results show that female academics experienced stress and unhappiness while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Some participants had feelings of anxiety, disruptions by children, improper and inadequate equipment as factors affecting their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Subtheme 1: Stressed and Unhappy

Female academics reported being scared of the virus, which created high stress levels. Many participants reported losing their close family and friends, which made them stressed and unhappy. Participant R said:

I was so scared of contracting this disease that I could not say I was happy. I was always scared even to receive calls, because you'll figure out what the person is going to tell you, whether one of your relatives passed on or what. It was a stressful situation (Participant R).

Subtheme 2: Feeling of Anxiety

The findings revealed that female academics had feelings of anxiety at the beginning of the virus outbreak, and they worried about many things, including their jobs and salaries. Participant D said she worried about her job because she is a single mother taking care of her family. She shared:

I would worry about whether the employer would pay us a full salary while we are not working. It is worse if you are the breadwinner and a single parent (Participant D).

Subtheme 3: Disruption by Children

Female academics who were mothers to young children faced challenges working from home because the children needed their attention. Although spouses stepped in to assist, female academics reported that children still disrupted them. Participant D reported this:

I was attending online, and it took almost the whole day. I have my daughter, who did not understand, as she wants me. The father was sick but tried to help out by calming her. He would request our daughter to come and sit with him while Mummy attends to her school. (Participant D).

Subtheme 4: Improper Equipment

Participants reported challenges with improper equipment, especially in STEM modules that involved solving problems, such as the sciences. Female academics shared that they struggled to teach without these proper gadgets. This is what Participant Q said:

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Teaching statistics requires one to write on the board, and there was no chalkboard. I was so used to writing formulas and exercises on the board. It was not a good thing at all (Participant Q).

Subtheme 5: Inadequate Equipment

Most female academics interviewed felt that institutions failed to provide adequate equipment for teaching and learning during the lockdown. They reported that only minimal equipment, such as laptops, data and stationery, was provided. One participant said:

As soon as they give you a laptop, you see how to survive (Participant E).

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms During the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

The results revealed that institutional support, including counselling, social support, and personal factors, were coping mechanisms for female academics working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in managing work and family balance.

Subtheme 1: Institutional Support

The participants indicated that institutional support to assist with coping with working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was very limited. Programmes and workshops aimed at supporting female academics and on how to manage stressful situations and heavy workload were not provided by institutions. Participant B shared this:

What the university did was to take us through workshops on teaching and learning online, how to use the learning management systems (LMS), and which features we can use so that it's not difficult for us to manoeuvre our work stuff (Participant B).

However, some participants indicated that the institution did provide support to those who needed it.

I can't remember anything specifically for women, but there was some support in terms of cell phone numbers to contact if you feel you need support, or if you feel you are not coping. It was for all staff members. (Participant K).

Subtheme 2: Counselling

Some participants from two institutions reported that a well-being and counselling centre has always been available, and calls were made repeatedly to attend workshops addressing issues around COVID-19. Participant G had this to say:

We will see emails calling for counselling, which would remind us that we do have a counselling centre there. Sometimes they would ask experts to come and present on COVID, Long COVID and its effects. (Participant G).

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Subtheme 3: Social Support

Problem-solving coping mechanisms included seeking social support from family members and friends. Female academics whose family members were in other locations reported making phone calls to vent, seek advice and for company. Participant C said:

I will sit around with my kids or call my sisters to move myself from that situation if I feel it is giving me stress (Participant C).

Social support was also in terms of female academic family members spending time with participants playing games, taking walks, doing exercises and holding picnics in the garden, amongst other activities. Participant J reported spending time with her family:

During COVID, we could literally, with my husband, jog, go outside and do exercises. We could do that even with the children, fellowshipping, or a game (Participant J).

However, senior female academics, that is, senior lecturers and professors, reported enjoying working from home. Participants reported spending their spare time doing what they enjoyed, such as cooking and relaxing. Participant Q had this to say:

I had an opportunity to spend more time with my family, and I personally enjoy working from home. I would do my work, then cook. I don't really love cleaning the house, but it was clean all the time. (Participant Q).

Subtheme 4: Personal Coping Mechanisms

One participant revealed that she would take alcohol when stressed. Participant B says: *I self-isolate, I drink wine and also use TV to zone out; those are my coping mechanisms* (Participant B).

Some participants listened to music to manage stress. Participant P said music helped her cope when she was stressed…*also listening to music. I like music.*

Other participants reported that they would take short naps when they feel overwhelmed. Short breaks of 30 to 45 minutes were reportedly taken as a coping mechanism. Participant E shared the following:

I took naps in between too often, although I would rather work normal hours.

The findings show that time management was used as a problem-solving coping mechanism. Participants said they would sort their work and plan according to what needed to be completed early. Participant M said:

I would categorise my work and finish what I have to finish, so that I don't confuse myself. I rarely get too frustrated. Plan my work, that's usually how I cope well.

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Discussion

Most of the participants interviewed faced stressful circumstances, which affected their well-being while working from home. This was caused by fear of losing family members, which made them unhappy due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as everybody was locked down. Female academics were stressed with failure to balance work and family responsibilities, which included taking care of the elderly who were sick, household chores and work duties such as online lectures and meetings, which took the whole day sometimes. These findings correspond with prior studies by Walters et al (2022), which found that female academics in HEIs in SA faced well-being challenges such as feelings of guilt, especially for mothers, feelings of anxiety, unending exhaustion, reduced ability to focus, feelings of despair and additional stress. The results show that the well-being of female academics was affected by anxiety due to feelings emanating from worrying about losing their employment and salaries. One participant, a widow, revealed that she was worried about whether they would continue working or their contracts would be terminated because of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

While working from home, female academics pointed out that their well-being was affected by disruptions from children. Most junior academics had young children who attended the daycare centre before the COVID-19 pandemic. Daycare programmes for employees' children at one of the institutions continued operating during the lockdown, with participants reporting that children were given activities online, which briefly kept them away from distracting female academics while they worked. While the concentration span for children is short, their partners would step in and keep the children busy while the mother is working. Prior studies, such as Fathima et al. (2020), argue that most organisations do not provide childcare facilities. The absence of childcare facilities generally affects the well-being of female academics. Improper and inadequate equipment negatively affected the well-being of female academics, according to the results of the study. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, no proper gadgets or work-related tools were provided by the institutions. However, only basic materials such as laptops, data, and limited stationery were received. The findings are similar to those found by Maciotta, et al (2022), which revealed that learning new technological skills and navigating through online teaching and learning added to more stress on female academics whose schedules were full of both household and work chores. The JD-R model attests to how high levels of demands, such as time pressure, workload and long working hours, can result in ill health, such as stress, strain, burnout, ill-health, and ultimately low job performance.

Therefore, female academics needed to apply coping mechanisms to manage their well-being. Participants revealed applying various coping mechanisms during the pandemic lockdown to deal with stressors they encountered. Participants applied both healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Healthy coping mechanisms are problem-solving mechanisms which are meant to solve the problem at

hand. The findings of the study reveal that institutional support for female academics from HEIs was limited as they attended workshops on teaching and learning. Although HEIs also provided programmes for COVID-19 awareness, female academics felt that most of the programmes offered were more technical, focused mainly on delivering lectures on online platforms, how to set exam papers and instructions on teaching and learning while working from home. Specific programmes and workshops for female academics were not provided to assist them in maintaining their well-being and managing working from home, as they often have more responsibilities than their male counterparts. Some participants labelled programmes provided by institutions as a “checkbox” tradition, only conducted to fulfil HEIs’ policies. The results are in line with Khalid (2023), who argued that the lack of organisational support leads to occupational stress. However, a few mentioned that the workshops assisted them in coping with teaching and delivering lessons online. Furthermore, female academics received laptops and data for teaching and learning, although female academics from one of the institutions expressed that the data provided was not enough, and they had to buy more to sustain the month.

Other participants mentioned that being provided with cell phones and receiving emails on mental health issues helped them to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The emails had details of experts and psychologists for counselling, should there be a need. However, the counselling services were provided by each participant's medical aid and not the institutions. On the other hand, some participants reported that no calls were made to attend any counselling or well-being programmes, and they did not know such programmes existed. Previous studies have shown that female academics need institutional support to cope with the challenges at home and work (Fathima et al, 2020). Prior studies have also revealed that female academics receive limited support from HEIs, which hinders access to influential social connections and interpersonal relationships like resources, network connections and research grant revenues (Casad et al., 2020).

The study revealed that female academics, while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, coped through social support. Seeking social support is a problem-focused coping mechanism that attempts to find solutions that change the stressful event (Forster et al., 2021). Social support was sought from family members, helpers and friends who assisted by looking after children, chatting with female academics, helping with house chores, listening to female academics venting and providing advice on how to manage situations during the lockdown. Participants also shared how they spent time with family members when they needed a break from work, taking walks, playing games, gardening, holding picnics in the garden, and even cooking together. Working from home around family provided warmth and peace for female academics. The results are consistent with Akanji et al.'s (2020) study, which found that social support as an emotional coping mechanism provided a platform for employees to vent and receive advice from colleagues. Akanji et al. (2020) further shared that support enhances well-being and work-family balance. Lastly, the findings revealed that female academics

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working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown survived on personal coping mechanisms. Taking walks around the neighbourhood, sipping some wine, taking short naps, listening to music, and watching television were some of the coping mechanisms employed by female academics working from home, which contributed to their well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed female academics to develop time management skills they would not have acquired.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the well-being experiences and coping mechanisms of female academics in higher education institutions in Limpopo Province. South Africa. The study revealed that the well-being of female academics from both IHEs was affected by stress and being unhappy about losing family members, anxiety of losing employment and salaries. Furthermore, the disruption by children, inadequate and improper work equipment, affected their well-being while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The study found that although the institutional support was limited and basically work-related in terms of the delivery of lectures and, to a certain extent, dealt with mental health issues, female academics managed to cope. Social support from family members, activities together, personal coping mechanisms, and taking care of oneself played a significant role in improving the well-being of female academics working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Theoretical Implications

The current study contributes to the body of knowledge concerning the well-being and coping mechanisms of female academics from historically disadvantaged institutions during an unexpected lockdown period. The study highlights specific challenges experienced by female academics while working from home and their coping mechanisms.

Managerial Implications

The IHEs' management, especially human resource departments, should put in place support systems that enable female academics to manage work and family responsibilities while working from home. Workshops, programmes and counselling specifically for female academics are recommended to encourage and advise female academics on how to balance work, family, and well-being. Further, HEIs should consider supporting female academics with proper and adequate work equipment and tools, etc. Finally, the study recommends that higher education institutions should train employees on how to use online platforms so that they are ready to shift from physical lectures to virtual ones when circumstances such as the pandemic lockdown occur.

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