Shifts and Turns in Families in Distressful Phenomenon: Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted family life in South Africa, reshaping roles, relationships, and cultural practices. This paper explores the "shifts and turns" families undertook to navigate lockdowns, economic hardship, and health anxieties. Drawing on qualitative document analysis and Walsh's Family Resilience Framework, the study highlights dual outcomes of the crisis: intensified vulnerabilities—such as strained parent-child dynamics, disrupted partner intimacy, increased domestic violence, and the disproportionate caregiving burden on women—alongside adaptive strategies that fostered resilience, cooperation, and reconnection. Families turned to digital technologies, shared responsibilities, and new rituals to sustain cohesion, while cultural losses around caregiving, mourning, and communal life revealed deep psychosocial costs. The findings demonstrate that resilience was unevenly distributed, often mediated by pre-existing inequalities, yet the pandemic also opened opportunities to challenge entrenched gender roles and reimagine family support systems. The paper concludes with recommendations for post-pandemic recovery policies that strengthen social welfare, address gender-based violence, and support culturally sensitive mental health interventions to reinforce family resilience during future crises.

Keywords: *Family resilience, COVID-19 pandemic, Domestic violence, Parent-child relationships, South Africa*

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 disrupted every aspect of social life globally. In South Africa, as elsewhere, families bore the brunt of lockdowns, economic shutdowns, and fear of infection. Restrictions altered traditional caregiving roles, communication patterns, and daily routines. This paper explores how families in South Africa navigated the disruptions brought by the pandemic and the social shift and turns they undertook to survive.

The coronavirus disease, referred to as COVID-19, originated in Wuhan, China, and was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020). The disease (COVID-19) outbreak was associated with seafood in Wuhan city in Hubei Province, China (Bi et al., 2020; Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020). The declaration of the virus as a pandemic led to an abrupt change in various aspects of life. Consequently, the pandemic severely disrupted the social, economic, and health wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. To combat the spread of the disease, public health measures and policies were introduced across local, national, regional, and international contexts (WHO, 2020). For instance, social distancing in public places, isolating and quarantining suspected individuals and the confirmed cases, working-from-home arrangements, imposing government curfews, banning social events, and limiting international travel were some of the early measures undertaken (WHO, 2020). These regulations were perceived to be crucial in combating the spread of the disease and protecting the healthcare systems from being overwhelmed by patients. However, despite the intended benefits of implementing these regulations, the usual way of human life was interfered with, and the day-to-day functioning of individuals, families, and communities was severely interrupted. Multiple new realities emerged, affecting human development's social, health, political, and economic aspects (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). The family as a structure and social unit was not spared in this distressful phenomenon (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). Consequently, human relationships, especially family relationships and responsibilities, were tested, a social phenomenon that prompted the need for this reflection. It is necessary to inform family service practitioners of appropriate interventions during distressing phenomena.

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Contextualizing the environment of a family during the pandemic

Irrefutably, a family is regarded as the basic unit of society. In essence, it is the engine of the community. For the family to function optimally, there must be a cordial relationship between the parents, children, and siblings (Lancet, 2020). Inopportunely, during the COVID-19 pandemic, families underwent a severe 'social test', especially concerning marital and non-marital relationships (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2021). The health, social, and economic pressure to balance the restructured working routines and family life was monumental (Fisher et al., 2020; Griffith, 2020). The shifts in everyday schooling increased and shifted the childcare and children's learning needs entirely to the parents and older siblings (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020). Newly emerged family roles and responsibilities became sources of conflicts, especially in socially fragile families.

Research indicates that the family's ability to respond resiliently to the risks and challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic depends on factors such as the level of education, physical and psychological health, household size, and internal and external support systems (Fisher et al., 2020; Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020). For instance, the pandemic increased the global workforce working remotely (Bick et al., 2020). This shift from the traditional working schedules created a new working culture, affecting families differently. While individuals were quickly readjusting to the new realities, it is plausible to argue that their attention and focus on family relationships were affected. Inopportunely, the adjustment of the home environment to become a working place was alien to some families, especially those from low socioeconomic status (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020). Some areas in homes meant for living or leisure were turned into workplaces, limiting the household's freedom (Shareena & Shahid, 2020). The need to work from home coincided with the time when every member of the family was supposed to be at home (lockdowns). The shifting negatively impacted family members' productivity and comfort, consequently straining family relationships.

Adapting and adjusting to the quagmire of lockdowns

Due to the social, health, and economic challenges associated with the pandemic, families had to deal with multiple stressors. In response to these multiple challenges, families had to mediate ways for adaptation (Walsh, 2020) swiftly. This was important to counter the opposing forces against the normal functioning of the family and the community. Moreover, reduced physical interactions with the rest of the family members and other social networks necessitated finding new ways of keeping calm and sane. Perhaps the anticipated and real losses of pre-pandemic ways of life narrowed people's hopes and dreams for the future. These thoughts and assumptions negatively impacted the family system (Walsh, 2020).

However, despite the state of hopelessness and challenges that abound, one had to remain rational about life. According to Gammon and Ramshaw (2020), thinking of a superior, familiar, and stable past can drive happiness and bring hope for the future. Opportunely, recent technological advances have astutely enabled communication and active human connections. The social connections powered by the internet proved instrumental in keeping people calm during the pandemic. Children and young adults have benefited immensely from technology-based leisure and entertainment platforms. Some of the online platforms used by individuals and families to facilitate their adjustment to the quagmire of COVID-19 include online gaming, online movie hubs such as Netflix, social media, that is, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., and virtual conferencing through Zoom and Microsoft Teams (Fisher et al., 2020). Technology has enabled families to consume or reconsider watching old movies, shows, and past sporting competitions, and to connect with friends and family to reminisce about previous live events (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2020). Further, basic home chores such as cooking and baking were turned into leisure activities to remain calm and mentally healthy during strict lockdown periods (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2020). Providentially, these activities contributed to family bonding and encouragement to overcome the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Theoretical Framing: Family Resilience in Crisis

Using Walsh's (2015) Family Resilience Framework, the paper identifies three key recovery components: communication, organization, and belief systems. The framework urges that clear communication and empathetic exchanges enhance cohesion during a crisis. Significantly, a strategic organization enhances

quick adaptability and coping mechanisms. At the same time, the belief systems enable families and individuals to make meaning of the crisis based on spirituality, social-cultural premises, and psychological cognitions (Walsh, 2015).

Essentially, communication under this framework entails clear information, emotional sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and collective family coping strategies during the crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, communication was critical in ensuring the' protection, management, and even treatment of infected persons. Clear communication is critical in demystifying the myth and misconception about the disease, restrictions, and the uptake of the vaccines. The second principle, organization, entails adaptability capabilities, connectedness, and access to social and economic resources. With a disrupted way of life socially and economically, families needed to seek ways to adapt quickly and smoothly to the new realities, such as lockdowns, job losses, reduced revenues, and social engagements. To manage all these changes in a crisis, families require a strong and sustained belief system to bring hope and enhance resilience (Walsh, 2015). These attributes are crucial for the functioning of the family and overcoming multiple challenges during distressful moments such as those presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when these components are disrupted or altered, family resilience will likely be compromised, affecting family relationships.

The families' ability and capacity for resilience in the face of adversity could be determined by pre-existing conditions such as poverty, ill-health of family members, and economic status, among others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Stanley & Markman, 2020). As discussed above, the three key principles of family resilience theory also provide critical insights into how families can succeed or fail in recovering after a distressing phenomenon (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Therefore, the resilience of a family could be attributed to the preserved or enhanced strengths during distressing moments. These theoretical propositions reveal that life-threatening events may motivate people to make shifting decisions about their most important aspects of life and their families. Thus, it provides an analytical framework to explain and understand the dynamics of families' experiences and survivals during and after the coronavirus pandemic.

Methodology

This reflection draws on qualitative document analysis, synthesizing peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and credible reports on family experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper addresses the following pertinent question: What were the shifts and turns of family practices during COVID-19 pandemic?

The data collection process entailed document analysis. Literature on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on social, economic, and health outcomes for families was gathered from journal articles, government, and NGO reports. The following key terms were used in searching for the relevant articles: family relationships during COVID-19, parenting during COVID-19, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence during COVID-19, and copping strategies during COVID-19 pandemic. The literature search culminated in various papers that enabled the analysis of shifts and turns in family practices during the distressful phenomenon of COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper for analysis were selected based on the following criteria: published from 2020 to 2025, peer-reviewed, focusing on COVID-19 impact of family practices, focusing on copping or adaptive strategies for families in distress, focusing on South Africa, as well as other global setting. The Google Scholar database was largely relied on, due to the accessibility of the papers. The analysis focused on generating, interpreting and discussing relevant themes from the selected papers. The synthesized themes are presented and discussed against the research question and the available literature.

Findings

In this section, the findings are presented in two ways. First, a perspective of disrupted family dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic; second, the adaptive strategies and family resilience. These two broad

themes are critical in demonstrating the shifts and turns in families during distress, especially in COVID-19 pandemic.

Disrupted Family Dynamics: From Routine to Chaos

One of the landmark impacts of COVID-19 in families was disrupted routes, which impacted relationships, such as parents-children's relationships, intimacy, gender-based violence, and loss of family traditional rituals.

Parent-Child Relationships Under Stress

Families are characterized by three primary types of relationships: partner-relationships (Wife and husband), child-parent relationships, and sibling (child-child) relationships. These relationships are important for developing a nuclear family, an extended family, and the community. Early studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships indicated that relationships are distressing between parents and children and partners (Fisher et al., 2020; Smith & Anderson, 2020). The constraint on the parent-child relationship was attributed to the burden of caregiving placed on parents due to lockdown regulations that led to the closure of schools and work-from-home-related arrangements. School closures and work-from-home measures placed immense pressure on parents. Many families lacked the resources to transition smoothly to homeschooling and caregiving (Fisher et al, 2020; Kajiita et al., 2020). Consequently, parents faced burnout while children experienced emotional displacement, leading to relational tensions (Smith & Anderson, 2020). For instance, the parents had to assume the role of teachers to ensure the continued learning of their children, as well as full-time caretaking, a balance that was difficult to keep. Moreover, the limitation for children to play in social places, especially in the early days of the pandemic, was a distressful moment that compelled parents to find alternative ways for play and leisure for the children (Smith & Anderson, 2020).

Literature indicates that social disruptions in a family system negatively affect marital, parent-child, and sibling relations (Walsh, 2015; Halvorsen et al., 2020). For example, parents who previously depended on caregivers experienced the shift of responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, by being with their children for longer hours than before. Although these shifts might have presented an opportunity to rejuvenate the children-parents' relationships, especially parents who work away from their homes (Ruppanner et al., 2020), they placed the burden of care on parents during an unprecedented health crisis. From a social and health crisis perspective (Walsh, 2015), the relationship between parents and children during COVID-19 experienced considerable social turbulence.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, social turbulence was caused by the abrupt shift and/or the emergence of new responsibilities, especially for male parents. This resulted in undue strain on parent-child relationships (Smith & Anderson, 2020). Previous research reported that economic crisis and natural disasters reduced maternal warmth and caused unfriendly parenting styles (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2015, 2017). Observably, the COVID-19 pandemic-related distress manifested differently in families. In South African families, for example, where some families were already fragile and vulnerable to domestic violence and child abuse, their relationships deteriorated (Fisher et al., 2020). Literature on caregiving shows that when caregivers or parents face high stress levels, their mental and emotional strength is overwhelmed (Neppl et al., 2016; Masarik & Conger, 2017). During the lockdowns, although parents had an opportunity to bond with their children, they were at a higher risk of being punished, yelled at, or spanked (Fisher et al., 2020). This kind of pressure from parents on children could cause harm and undue strain to the initial cordial family relationships. Consequently, parenting becomes difficult, and parents may manifest harshness and coercion towards children, and possibly child abuse practices. These findings imply that overstretched emotional and psychological distress may lead to weakened relationships within the family and society at large.

Partner Relationships: Intimacy Interrupted

Family relationships that encourage bonding are characterized by a unique familiarity, intimacy, and emotionality (Dunn, 2002). These attributes are, however, significantly influenced by the family climate (Jenkins et al., 2012). This means that adverse family circumstances, such as financial stress, violence at home, ill health, and disrupted lifestyle routines, can break down family bonding. Further research shows that unpleasant moments in a family can led to aggression between siblings as well as parents, thus resulting in unhealthy family relationships (Kretschmer & Pike, 2009; Feinberg et al., 2012; Tippett & Wolke, 2015).

Due to lockdown-related regulations to curb the spread of COVID-19, partner relationships were adversely affected. The analysis of available studies indicates that prolonged confinement at home exacerbated emotional strain between partners, with financial anxieties and reduced privacy impairing communication and intimacy, especially for couples already in fragile relationships. Moreover, the continuous presence of children at home due to the closure of schools interrupted parents' intimate attention for each other (Ibarra et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). For instance, some reports indicated that the presence of children at home for long hours and limited opportunities to travel impacted sexual relations between the partners (WHO, 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic presented bouts of psychological apathy, depression, and anxiety, which affect health relationships between partners (WHO, 2020).

Inopportunely, the changes experienced during the pandemic threatened some previously unstable relationships among couples. Further, the analysis points to the possibility of partners experiencing a significant loss of intimacy and connection because of the limitation in traveling and participating in outdoor activities (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Communication is a very important factor in any relationship. In the context of a family, couples who experience challenges in effectively communicating and supporting one another feel unhappy (Neff & Karney, 2017). When unhappiness is compounded with the stress of a pandemic, it is more likely to result in separation or divorce (WHO, 2020).

Violence Behind Closed Doors

Globally, the prevalence of gender and intimate partner violence has momentously increased and has become a topical issue in many countries (WHO, 2020). Notably, the COVID-19 lockdowns saw a spike in gender-based and domestic violence across South Africa (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2021). The spike was attributed to victims being trapped at home with their abusers and unable to seek help due to mobility restrictions. Gender and intimate partner-based violence usually emanate from social, health, and economic distress experienced by individuals and households during disasters and pandemics (Usher et al., 2020). An analysis of technical reports, media reporting, and early studies on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families showed increased cases of gender and family violence globally (Kaukinen, 2020; Usher et al., 2020; WHO, 2020).

The incidences of intimate partner violence and other forms of violence at home, directly and indirectly, threaten the wellbeing of families and society in general. Violence and abusive behavior in families are counterproductive in building quality relationships at home and in the community at large. This is because family-related violence affects victims' psychological wellbeing and their ability to have a positive relationship with the outside world (Gulati & Kelly, 2020). The victims, then, suffer emotional stability deficits, which may lead to poor interpersonal relationships. Further, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, gender and intimate partner violence were overwhelming for victims while managing the fear of the disease, and restructuring household routines (Kaukinen, 2020; Women's Aid UK, 2020). Literature on intimate partner relationships highlights that restricted mobility and a lack of economic independence contribute significantly to stress in a previously strenuous relationship (Gupta, 2020; Women's Aid UK, 2020). The minimized protective factors, such as moments of relative freedom when the perpetrator or victim goes to work, or access to support outside the family setup, enrich the controlling tactic used by perpetrators of violence (Gupta, 2020). This implies that some family relationships that were vulnerable to violence before the COVID-19 pandemic were at higher risk of severe episodes of violence.

According to Moreira and da Costa (2020) and Kaukinen (2020), during moments of emergencies and crises, violence among intimate partners increases. During the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, the health and economic shortfalls fueled domestic conflicts and violence against women and children, which negatively

affects the functions and the role of the family in providing care and emotional support (Miller & McCaw, 2019). Inopportunely, family and gender-based violence cause severe psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, phobias, personality disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, eating and sleeping disorders, alcohol and substance abuse, and suicidal ideation, among others (Gulati & Kelly, 2020). The prevalence of violence at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the presence of or against children, is likely to promote the culture of violence into the future (Fazel et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2018). This is because children at the tender age of development learn by observation, and whatever they learn is crucial in different social constructions towards understanding and accepting certain behaviors (Gerino et al., 2018; Miller & McCaw, 2020). Therefore, the quality of family relationships during and post-COVID-19 pandemic could be instrumental in shaping the behavior of children and future relationships within the family and the community at large. This social vice may burden the social care system and weaken the social cohesion fabric of society. Therefore, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic, social welfare systems should strategically endeavor to develop and build stronger family ties, promote cohesion, trust, and instill a strong sense of social control to address the challenges related to gender, intimate partner, and domestic violence in communities.

Gendered Burdens and the Feminization of Care

As schools and childcare centers closed, caregiving duties—often unshared—became overwhelming. Women disproportionately absorbed the increased domestic load. This phenomenon of gendered burdens reveals persistent patriarchal structures in South African communities (Wenham et al., 2020). Fisher et al. (2020) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic affected employment in sectors where women comprise a significant fraction of the workforce. Consequently, women had to be at home and bear the extra and constant care for the children and other domestic chores. Wenham et al. (2020) also argue that despite the availability of other family members at home, traditionally, women take the burden of caring for families around the clock and even extend their care to other relatives, especially those in fragile health conditions. This observation is consistent with the African cultural norms for women offering care roles to children, the sick, and the ageing members of society.

Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women took more household and childcare duties, even in families with both partners (wife and husband), than their counterparts. With the strict lockdown regulations, combined with schools' closure, outsourcing childcare through official networks (e.g., aftercare & day-care) and informal care networks (e.g., grandparents, babysitters, friends) were diminished (Farré et al., 2020). If such a phenomenon continues for a long time, it may slowly weaken household relationships, leading to dysfunctional families.

Rituals and Loss: The Cultural Cost of COVID-19

Various regulations were implemented across the globe to mitigate the spread and impact of COVID-19. These include social distancing, lockdowns, restrictions on visiting the sick at health care facilities, and limited funeral attendance (Gupta, 2020; Wallace, 2020). Inopportunely, these regulations run against the ethos and practices of many family traditions, such as taking care of the sick, mourning, and grieving. Literature indicates that normal grieving is emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral (Browne et al., 2021; Worden, 2018). When COVID-19-related restrictions were imposed, many hospitalized patients could not be visited, regardless of the diagnosis. Moreover, funerals and burials were held in the absence of all family members- a situation that caused emotional distress (Wallace, 2020). These interruptions may cause family members to be preoccupied with sorrow, including ruminative thoughts, excessive bitterness against certain authorities, and feelings of alienation from social rites (Li, Tendeiro & Stroebe, 2019). This emotional baggage and disenfranchisement may interfere with family relationships in the present and future.

Literature on grieving shows that disenfranchised grief happens when families or individuals cannot grieve normally by upholding social support practices and cultural rituals (Harrist et al., 2019; Pendry, 2007). As a result, unresolved grief, secondary trauma, stress, worry, and fear, and moral distress affect one's health (Li et al., 2019; Pendry, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on family and cultural practices manifested through moral distress, which is characterized by feelings of depersonalization or dehumanization (Fumis

et al., 2017), hampering the potential for good family relationships. This is because the restrictions hampered cultural and spiritual practices around care, mourning, and togetherness, causing emotional wounds and unresolved grief within families.

Adaptive Strategies and Family Resilience

Despite the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families, we also draw positive lessons and strategies of resilience. Therefore, in this section, we focus on adaptive strategies used by families during the pandemic and other resilience-building activities.

Shared Household Responsibilities

The COVID-19 pandemic caused various changes in work schedules, but this setback provided an opportunity for division of labor at the household level. Literature indicates that men (fathers) and older siblings assumed the responsibilities for childcare, homeschooling, and recreation activities at home (Griffith, 2020; Radha et al., 2020). Despite the health distress during this period, the sharing or distribution of domestic labor contributed to a good working relationship within the family and yielded a sense of responsibility.

Therefore, despite all the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps it provided an opportunity to re-examine domestic chores and the gender roles at the household level (WHO, 2020). From this perspective, a continued positive realization of the need to share and distribute gendered roles could change social norms and expectations. Optimistically, this could initiate and promote equal division of labor at the household, enhance the functioning of the family, provide opportunities for family bonding, reshape traditional gender roles, and build cooperative dynamics.

Quality Time and Reconnection

Earlier in this paper, it was reported that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted intimate relationships and family life. However, some families have had pockets of happiness and revival. The COVID-19 pandemic-related regulations allowed family members to be together for long hours. This resulted in rejuvenating, strengthening, and creating a sense of relationship responsibility (Stanley & Mark, 2020). The need for reconnection was attributable to factors such as safety, physical, emotional, and commitment (Stanley & Mark, 2020).

According to Stanley and Mark (2020), these components of safety are vitally important in moments of crisis, especially the emotional component, which is the ability to be calm, to speak and to be heard, to listen, to be accepted, and to work together as a team. These aspects were paramount during the COVID-19 pandemic to support personal and family health relationships. Generally, people or family members need to be supported, loved, and cared for to overcome a moment of crisis (Stanley & Mark, 2020). Therefore, family and partner connectedness are vital for resilience and adaptability during and after a pandemic or life-threatening event. Even in cases where physical connection failed due to lockdown and isolation, modern communication technology proved helpful (Radha et al., 2020). Technology became a lifeline where families turned to social media, virtual meetings, and online entertainment to maintain social connections and emotional balance. Platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp became venues for bonding and support.

For some families, the enforced togetherness became an opportunity to rebuild strained relationships, reflect on shared values, and establish new routines and rituals. This provided an avenue to learn, discover, and improve self-sufficiency and interpersonal skills. With favorable social and economic factors, quality time can be an ample opportunity for parents to initiate and develop strong family relationships characterized by nurturance, guidance, and protection (Walsh, 2015). This is important in developing self-reliance and building personal and family resilience.

Discussion

This paper presents a nuanced shift and turns of South African families during the COVID-19 pandemic, framing the analysis through Walsh's (2015) Family Resilience Framework. The findings demonstrate that while the pandemic intensified family vulnerabilities—manifesting in strained parent-child relationships, disrupted intimacy between partners, increased domestic violence, and the feminization of care—it also prompted adaptive strategies that reinforced resilience, cooperation, and reconnection.

The key finding emerging from literature analysis is the disruptions of daily family life due to school closures, remote work, and restricted mobility (Bick et al., 2020; Edwards, 2024; Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2021; Shareena & Shahid, 2020). These disruptions or shifts created new family roles and redefined traditional gendered responsibilities (Farré et al., 2020; Gayatri & Puspitasari, 2022). However, these same pressures, in some contexts, encouraged more equitable sharing of household duties, enhanced communication, and quality time together (Gayatri & Irawaty, 2021; Jiang et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2023; Vélez-Grau et al., 2024). This duality underscores the complexity of family systems under crisis, in that adversity can weaken and strengthen bonds depending on socioeconomic, cultural, and emotional conditions.

The study's theoretical application is particularly valuable. By aligning observations with Walsh's resilience pillars—communication, organization, and belief systems—it becomes evident that families with clear information exchange, adaptability in routines, and a shared sense of meaning were better equipped to cope (Chen & Yeung, 2025; Chiang, 2025; Stein et al., 2023). Conversely, families with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, health challenges, or unstable relationships experienced compounded difficulties (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2024). This suggests that resilience is not evenly distributed but is mediated by structural inequalities and pre-pandemic conditions.

The findings highlight the escalation of domestic and gender-based violence within families exacerbated by lockdown measures but also reflecting sociocultural realities (Aborisade, 2022; Magwegwe, 2024; Usher et al., 2020). The need to understand the violence in families during crisis is essential given the long-term social and psychological consequences of intimate partner and gender-based violence, particularly on children who witness or experience such events (Gulati & Kelly, 2020; Kaukinen, 2020; Martins et al., 2024; Moreira & Da Costa, 2020).

Notably, the pandemic's often overlooked but profound impact is cultural disruptions such as the inability to perform rituals around care, mourning, and cultural gatherings (Bloomer et al., 2024). The literature analysis has highlighted the dangers of disenfranchised grief and moral distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Mellisa et al., 2024; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2024). The findings highlight how health measures, though necessary, can inadvertently undermine social cohesion and family wellbeing (Browne et al., 2021). However, the findings also point to opportunities for systemic change. For example, though uneven, the increased participation of men in caregiving could be leveraged to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms in the long term (Andrade et al., 2022; Chen & Yeung, 2025). Similarly, adopting digital communication technologies for emotional connection could be integrated into future family support interventions, primarily when physical gathering is restricted (Allsop et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2023). Based on the findings, the paper underscores the need for targeted policy responses in post-pandemic recovery, such as strengthening social welfare systems, expanding domestic violence prevention programmes, and creating culturally sensitive mental health support to reinforce family resilience. Without such measures, the pandemic's negative legacies—such as unresolved grief, gender inequities in care work, and normalized household violence—risk becoming entrenched.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly reshaped the dynamics of family life in South Africa, simultaneously exposing vulnerabilities and fostering resilience. Using Walsh's Family Resilience Framework, the findings reveal that while families struggled with strained parent-child relationships, disrupted partner intimacy, increased domestic violence, the feminization of care, and cultural disruptions in mourning and rituals, they also developed adaptive strategies that promoted survival and reconnection. Technology, shared responsibilities, and enforced togetherness emerged as crucial tools for adaptation, yet resilience was unevenly distributed and closely tied to pre-existing socioeconomic and

emotional conditions. Notably, the pandemic underscored systemic inequalities, with women and children bearing disproportionate burdens of distress and violence.

The paper emphasizes that crises such as COVID-19 cannot be viewed solely as disruptions but as catalysts for social reconfiguration. Positive shifts—such as the redistribution of domestic labor and the increased use of digital technologies for emotional connection—should be leveraged to promote equity and cohesion within families. However, without targeted interventions, negative legacies including unresolved grief, entrenched gender inequities, and normalized violence may persist into the post-pandemic era. Therefore, this study calls for comprehensive policy responses that strengthen social welfare systems, enhance domestic violence prevention, and provide culturally sensitive psychosocial support. Building sustainable family resilience requires addressing immediate vulnerabilities and confronting the structural inequalities that undermine family wellbeing in times of crisis.

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Declaration of Interests

The authors have no conflict of interest in publishing this work

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