AOSIS

Meaning of work for South African women during the pandemic

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Ashley C. Jacobs[1]
Nelesh Dhanpat[1]
Neo Mamathuba[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Nelesh Dhanpat,
neleshd@uj.ac.za

Orientation: The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted workplaces worldwide, prompting a re-evaluation of the meaning and significance of work, particularly among women who were uniquely impacted by the crisis.

Research purpose: This study aimed to understand the meaning that South African women attributed to their work during the pandemic. Additionally, the research aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 3, 5 and 8), contributing to efforts to improve well-being, promote gender equality and ensure decent work.

Motivation for the study: Understanding how the pandemic altered women's perceptions and experiences of work can provide valuable insights for human resource professionals, helping to create more inclusive and supportive work environments.

Research approach/design and method: A generic qualitative approach was employed, involving 10 semi-structured interviews with South African women who were formally employed both before and during the pandemic. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected.

Main findings: The study revealed that women had individual motivations for their chosen work, with the meaning of work varying among participants. Factors such as organisational and personal challenges, as well as the support received, significantly shaped these meanings.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations need to consider the unique challenges and support needs of women in the workplace, especially in the context of recovery from the pandemic.

Contribution/value-add: The study enriches the body of literature on the meaning of work, particularly focussing on South African women during the COVID-19 pandemic, and informs organisational practices that can better support employees during crises and beyond.

Keywords: meaning; meaningfulness; meaning of work; women; pandemic; SDGs.

Introduction

Work is considered a central role in many people's lives, influencing their identity, sense of purpose and overall well-being (Bauer et al., 2008). The importance and meaning of work have been the focal point of scholars across various disciplines, including psychology (Allan et al., 2019; Dik et al., 2024; Rosso et al., 2010), human resources (Bailey et al., 2019; Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep, 2018) and sociology (Laaser & Karlsson, 2022). This study aims to explore the meaning of work for South African women during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, focussing on how the pandemic has affected their perceptions and experiences. By aligning this research with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 5 and 8, the study seeks to address critical issues related to well-being, gender equality and decent work, providing valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by women in the South African labour market.

Background

The concept of the meaning of work encompasses the significance, value, definitions and beliefs that individuals attach to their work-related activities (Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Rosso et al., 2010). This meaning can vary widely based on demographic factors, personal experiences and socio-economic contexts (Kee et al., 2020). For many, work is not just a means of earning a livelihood but also a source of identity, self-growth and purpose (Kee et al., 2020; Steger, 2017). Understanding the

meaning of work requires a nuanced exploration of how individuals perceive their roles, the value they assign to their work and their contributions within professional environments (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

To understand how women ascribe meaning to work, it is essential to consider the role of gender in shaping work experiences. Historically, gender has been a significant determinant in shaping the work experiences and advancement opportunities available to women (Kee et al., 2020; Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021; Pitsoe et al., 2023). Women have faced numerous challenges and inequalities, including limited access to certain professions, lower wages and underrepresentation in leadership positions (Sinden, 2017). In South Africa, these issues are further compounded by the legacies of apartheid, which imposed rigid social norms and economic disparities (Parry & Gordon, 2021). South African women have traditionally been relegated to lower-level positions, often in administrative or secretarial roles, while senior positions were predominantly reserved for men (Sinden, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the global workforce, exacerbating existing inequalities and creating new challenges, particularly for women (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021; Usher et al., 2020). In South Africa, the pandemic has worsened economic instability, with women experiencing higher unemployment rates and greater job insecurity compared to men (Chitiga et al., 2020).

The SDGs were established by the United Nations in 2015 as a clarion call to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030 (Chams & García-Blandon, 2019). The 17 SDGs address a wide range of global challenges, including inequality, climate change, environmental degradation and promoting individual well-being and social justice (Halkos & Gkampoura, 2021). This research aligns specifically with three SDGs:

- Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being – This goal aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for individuals at all ages. The study examines how the pandemic has impacted the well-being of South African women in the context of their work.
- Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality – This goal seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. By focussing on the meaning of work for South African women during the pandemic, the research addresses issues of gender discrimination and workplace inequalities, contributing to the broader goal of gender equality.
- Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth – This goal promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. This study investigates changes in the working conditions of women and the meaning of work for South African women, aiming to inform workplace policies that promote decent work, especially post-pandemic.

Problem statement

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted workplaces globally, particularly affecting South African women by exacerbating the existing inequalities and introducing new challenges that have altered their perceptions and experiences of work. This study investigates how the pandemic has reshaped the meaning of work for corporate South African women, focussing on changes in their motivations, challenges and support systems. By aligning with SDGs 3, 5 and 8, the study aims to enhance understanding of gender equality, well-being and decent work. The findings will provide valuable insights for organisations to develop more inclusive and supportive human resource (HR) practices, ensuring they are equipped to address the evolving needs and expectations of women in a post-pandemic world.

Literature review

Meaning of work

The nature of work evolves daily and forms an integral part of individuals' lives (Akgunduz et al., 2018; Bendassolli & Tateo, 2017; Fayard, 2021; Van der Deijl, 2024). People attach significant meaning to their work (Tyssedal, 2023) where they spend most of their time (Akgunduz et al., 2018), establish their identities and develop their 'work-life culture' (Bendassolli & Tateo, 2017).

Steger et al. (2012) suggest that while people previously focussed on the monetary value of work, today, they seek more than just earning money. Van Jaarsveld (2004) mentions that because work occupies so much of an individual's day, it becomes almost impossible to separate life from work. The meaning of work can be defined as the coherence between an employee's expectations and their characteristics (Boas & Morin, 2019). Wang and Lee (2009) posit that the harmony between a job and the individual determines the meaning of work. Conversely, if work lacks meaning, the person-organisation fit suffers (Bendassolli & Tateo, 2017). Steger et al. (2012) argue that the meaning of work involves subjective experiences of significance in a job, facilitating individual growth and promoting contributions to the greater good. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) add that the concept of 'meaning' answers important analyses about the significance or purpose of something, intentions or clarity within a context. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) notice that the meaning of work should be based on an individual's identity, dealing with the significance and value they assign to their work.

People work to fulfil basic needs, therefore work becomes a necessity (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Yeoman, 2014). However, it is crucial for individuals to find deeper meaning in their work, rather than merely viewing it as a means to an end (Chaudhary, 2022; Martikainen et al., 2022). Focussing on the relationship between individuals and their work can enhance this sense of meaning, which is often more significant than the type of job they have. Rosso et al., 2010 agree and mention that viewing work as a task, a career or a calling helps build the relationship between individuals and their work.

Steger et al. (2012) state that regardless of an individual's work nature or view, they generally want it to mean something beyond a means to an end. Understanding that an individual's meaning of work is inherently subjective but influenced by different contexts is key (Schnell et al., 2013).

Women and work

Kim (2022) observes that globally, women often face inferior treatment, forming part of a vulnerable group. This has made discussions about women and work a priority. Kim (2022) argues that because of gender roles and discrimination, women usually have lower education levels than men, restricting their economic activity. Sinden (2017) explains that globally, women have faced workplace discrimination and had limited access to the labour force for decades. However, new and improved governmental policies and legislation have enabled women to enter various labour divisions and markets more vigorously (Sinden, 2017). Cotter et al. (2001) suggest that the rising need for women's labour participation could result from the need for more jobs to support industrial growth.

South African women and work

Prior to 1994, South Africa was known for its racial segregation and patriarchal norms, which were openly endorsed and normalised (Mosomi, 2019). These norms included the unfair treatment of women in education and employment. Mosomi (2019) explains that South Africa's labour laws in the 1920s and 1930s favoured the notion of the 'male breadwinner', ensuring that women stayed home to manage household duties rather than pursue formal employment.

Moalusi and Jones (2019) observe that post-apartheid, South Africa has implemented policies and legislation to decrease workplace discrimination against women. However, despite these laws, women continue to face barriers in career advancement because of persistent inequalities and unfavourable working conditions. Gender pay gaps and unequal opportunities remain across various demographics and professions (Blau & Kahn, 2020; Ellemers, 2014). In South Africa, the unemployment rate for women was 31.3%, compared to 27.2% for men in the fourth quarter of 2019 (Chitiga et al., 2020). Carrim and Ahmed (2016) highlight that although women have made progress in the workforce, they still face significant challenges and need various forms of support. Women remain underrepresented in top management positions in South African organisations (Carrim & Ahmed, 2016). Addressing gender inequalities at work involves not only employing more women but also empowering them to voice their ideas and drive transformation within the workforce (Sinden, 2017).

Meaning of work for women

Ellemers (2014) argues that women who struggle to find value or meaning in their work are more inclined to re-examine their priorities, often seeking alternatives and leaving their jobs. Therefore, it is crucial for women to attribute meaning to their work. De Sá et al. (2022) highlight the importance of work's meaning for women. They observe that despite challenges, work remains highly significant for them. These challenges include those inherent in certain professions and those from working in male-dominated fields. In addition, the financial benefits of work contribute to the positive meaning women attribute to their roles, providing comfort and financial freedom.

Bharadwaj and Shanker (2019) emphasise the importance of considering a woman's work–life balance, as it affects the meaning she attributes to her work and may influence her decision to stay or leave. They notice that women now play a more significant role in the workforce while balancing career and personal responsibilities. The work–life balance includes managing positive meaning in both professional and personal lives. Jasrotia and Meena (2021) found that the pandemic's new working conditions made it difficult for women to differentiate between paid work and unpaid household duties, increasing pressure and unhappiness. Stats SA (2020) reports that the pandemic negatively impacted South Africans' health, the economy and the labour market. The South African economy was already in a technical recession with slow growth rates before the pandemic (Chitiga et al., 2020; Stats SA, 2020). The COVID-19 enforced lockdown exacerbated these issues, leading to more business closures and higher unemployment rates, especially for women (Chitiga et al., 2020).

Casale and Posel (2020) agree that the pandemic and lockdown affected women more. Lane and Aplin-Hout (2023) found that remote work during the pandemic left women feeling isolated, unsupported and overwhelmed. Chitiga et al. (2020) observe that women, traditionally caregivers, faced increased responsibilities, including domestic chores and homeschooling. This additional burden could affect the meaning women assign to their work. Stats SA (2020) recognises the ongoing disruption the pandemic will cause for organisations and women.

However, only a few studies have examined the pandemic's effects on South African working women (Parry & Gordon, 2021). A Deloitte (2020) study on nearly 400 employed women found that the pandemic significantly affected their health, work-life balance and career progression. Many women viewed the pandemic as a threat to their careers, negatively impacting the meaning of their work. However, 32% of the women surveyed expressed a commitment to remain with their employers for the next few years despite the pandemic's negative effects (Deloitte, 2020).

Research design
Research approach

This study followed a generic qualitative research approach, which enabled the researchers to gather information regarding behaviours, opinions and the socially detailed contexts and experiences of specific participants or

populations (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). This approach was considered suitable for fulfilling the objectives of the research.

Research philosophy

The study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy to gain insight into the nuanced experiences of its participants. With the primary objective of uncovering how South African women perceived and interpreted the meaning of work during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interpretivist approach was deemed appropriate as it emphasised understanding the subjective experiences and meanings individuals attach to their social world (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Ontologically, the research was grounded in constructivism, recognising that the meaning of work was constructed through the experiences of South African women during the pandemic. Epistemologically, the study aligned with interpretivism, asserting that knowledge is derived from the interpretations and meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Matthews & Ross, 2010). This stance was significant as it sought to gather insights directly from women's perspectives on how the pandemic influenced their work, motivations and future expectations. By focussing on their subjective interpretations, the study aimed to capture a rich, contextualised understanding of work during a time of significant upheaval (Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

Population and sample

The sample comprised of 10 South African working women. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggest that qualitative studies can achieve data saturation with relatively small sample sizes. Their findings indicate that saturation is often reached with 9 to 17 interviews, making a sample size of 10 interviews suitable for obtaining comprehensive insights. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling precisely defined the sample population and was employed to intentionally select participants who had relevant experiences and perspectives. Snowball sampling was essential because of the difficulty of physically accessing candidates during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made in-person meetings risky. The women interviewed were selected based on specific inclusion criteria: they had to be professional South African women employed in corporate organisations throughout the pandemic and continuing in this capacity. This criterion was chosen to gain insight into the experiences

of women who navigated the challenges of maintaining professional roles during a time of significant disruption and change, allowing for a focussed examination of how these circumstances influenced their perceptions and meanings of work. Additionally, this inclusion ensured that participants had sustained exposure to the corporate environment under pandemic conditions, providing insights into the evolving dynamics of work, career and personal life balance during this period. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, which occurred with the 10th participant. The demographic profile of 10 women participated in the study are outlined in Table 1.

As seen from Table 1, participants ranged in the age from 27 to 42 years, with an average age of 31 years. The participants' races included black African, white, mixed race and Indian. Three participants worked in the education sector and two were in the travel and tourism sector. The remaining participants represented the insurance, information technology, human resources, arts and culture, and retail sectors. Majority (80%) of the participants were from the Johannesburg region, with one from Cape Town and another from Pretoria.

Data collection method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. All 10 participants were interviewed via the online Zoom platform, as in-person contact was not allowed at the time. The interviews occurred over a 4-week period and lasted for approximately 1 h each, although the duration depended on how much information the participants were willing to share. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, we were able to optimally gather data on participants' personal experiences and their views on the meaning of work during the pandemic (Mack et al., 2005).

Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse and interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). This method requires data on participants' experiences, such as interviews, which were the source of the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). The process followed six steps. Firstly, the transcriptions from the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim, were read and

TABLE 1: Participants' demographics (*N* = 10).

Pseudonym	Age (years)	Racial identity	Industry of employment	Job title	Geographical location
P1	27	Mixed race person	Travel and Tourism	Travel and Tourism Consultant	Johannesburg
P2	30	Mixed race person	Human Resources	Human Resources Practitioner	Johannesburg
P3	28	black African person	Education	Education Project Coordinator	Pretoria
P4	31	white person	Arts and Culture	Research Manager	Johannesburg
P5	35	Mixed race person	Tourism	Marketing Manager	Johannesburg
P6	27	Mixed race person	Education	Grade 1 Teacher	Johannesburg
P7	27	black African person	Retail	Financial Analyst	Cape Town
P8	30	black African person	Insurance	Pricing Specialist	Johannesburg
P9	42	black person	Information Technology	Information Technology Manager	Johannesburg
P10	28	Indian person	Education	Grade 5 and 6 Teacher	Johannesburg

reviewed, with initial notes made. Secondly, the data were examined with an open mind to generate codes. Codes were generated inductively, through manual coding, reflecting participants' perspectives on aspects relating to meaningful work during the pandemic. The iterative process involved constant comparison and refinement of codes to enhance accuracy and reliability. Thirdly, meanings and common themes, along with sub-themes, were identified. In the fourth step, themes were reviewed, refined and named to reflect their true essence and ensure coherence in addressing the research questions. The fifth step involved reviewing and refining the themes to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the data. This included verifying that the themes coherently represented the patterns across the dataset and addressed the research questions effectively. The final step entailed clearly defining and naming the themes to reflect their true meaning. A comprehensive write-up was then produced, weaving together the themes and sub-themes to present the findings in a cohesive narrative. The data analysis involved manual coding of qualitative data to identify recurring themes and patterns. Initially, the raw data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and reviewed multiple times to ensure thorough familiarity with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ensuring data quality

To ensure the study's rigour, Schwandt et al. (2007) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were applied. Credibility was achieved through ongoing communication with participants, fostering a comfortable relationship. Transferability was ensured by providing rich descriptions of the data. Confirmability was addressed by presenting detailed recordings and transcriptions of the data and minimising researcher bias. Dependability, referring to the consistency of results obtained from the analysis processes or data collection instruments (Saunders et al., 2015), was maintained through a detailed account of the processes used in the study.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee in the University of Johannesburg (ethical clearance number IPPM-2021-499[M]). The following protocols were followed regarding research ethics. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study at the start of the interview and their informed consent was obtained. They were made aware that the interviews were audio recorded, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was ensured by protecting their identities, with their responses anonymised in the reporting of the results. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Results

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the meaning that South African women attribute to their work during the pandemic. The findings section of this study presents the thematic analysis derived from participant interviews, uncovering seven primary themes, each encompassing several associated sub-themes. These themes are as follows: (1) Motivation for choice of work, (2) Challenges faced before the pandemic, (3) Challenges faced during the pandemic, (4) Meaning of work before COVID-19, (5) Meaning of work during COVID-19, (6) Support systems before and during the pandemic and (7) Future meaning of work. Each theme provides a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives, offering insights into their motivations, challenges and the evolving meaning of work throughout the pandemic, and includes its associated sub-themes.

Theme 1: Motivation for choice of work

This theme highlights participants' motivation for the choice of work that they are all currently doing. The sub-themes include passion and career growth, working with people and work-life balance.

Passion and career growth

Participants expressed a profound sense of purpose and commitment towards their careers, which are driven by deep-seated passions and a clear vision for growth. They explained how the intrinsic rewards of seeing students evolve from novices to knowledgeable individuals fuelled their passion. For instance, Participant 10 described a lifelong dedication to teaching, underpinned by a love for nurturing young minds:

> 'I always wanted to be a teacher; I love teaching and being around children. It's the most rewarding job, seeing students transform from blank faces to knowledgeable learners by the end of the year.' (P10, 28 years old, Indian person)

Participant 3, on the other hand, initially lacked enthusiasm for project management but found a new direction in education through their academic work. Their dedication to improving the educational system was evident:

> 'I wasn't initially motivated to go into project management, but I am passionate about education. My master's dissertation focused on citizenship education, and I'm committed to using our knowledge and systems to improve education in our country.' (P3, 28 years old, black African person)

Participant 5's shift from tourism to marketing through an internship demonstrates how hands-on experiences can ignite new passions. They shared their journey from discovering an interest in marketing to pursuing it professionally:

> '… when I landed an internship at [*undisclosed*] after studying tourism, I realised my passion for marketing and became more interested in the destination marketing sphere.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Working with people

For many participants, the opportunity to engage with others and contribute to a collaborative environment was a

significant motivating factor. Participant 9 highlighted how important human interaction is for their job satisfaction and personal fulfilment:

'... so working with people is quite important for me as well.' (P9, 42 years old, white person)

Participant 4 spoke about the dual benefits of knowledge exchange and hands-on experiences, reflecting on the personal joy derived from both teaching and learning:

'I love working with the students and doing that kind of research, uhm, and just kind of sharing my knowledge, but also learning from others, uhm, but I think I kind of missed the very more practical hands-on creative side of things.' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Participant 6's early experiences of teaching their younger sister laid the groundwork for their enduring passion for working with children:

'Growing up, I would teach my younger sister what I learned at school, which sparked my love for helping children.' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Work-life balance
Achieving a balance between professional and personal life was a pivotal factor for several participants. The ability to maintain this balance shapes their job satisfaction and career choices.

Participant 9 appreciated the improved work-life balance in their current role compared to a previous position with extensive travel demands:

'Working with this team gives me a better work-life balance compared to my previous consulting role with more travel, and it's aligned with my goal of managing a team.' (P9, 42 years old, white person)

The challenges of maintaining this balance, especially while working from home during the pandemic, were also noticed by Participant 4:

'… uhm, but when you're not seeing people, and you get so engrossed with work, and I think that work-life balance, particularly working from home is challenging.' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Participant 8 highlighted the added complexity of balancing professional duties with motherhood, illustrating how these dual responsibilities have influenced their job satisfaction:

'so there's that element of, I'm a mom, and then I have to balance the two. So, it does sort of negatively impact in that, in that sense …' (P8, 30 years old, black African person)

Theme 2: Challenges faced before the pandemic

This theme highlights challenges participants faced before the pandemic. The sub-themes include financial and resource constraints, trust and social cohesion, communication barriers, increased workload and work-life balance and mental health issues.

Financial and resource constraints
Many participants faced significant barriers related to financial constraints and limited resources, which impeded their ability to progress professionally.

Participant 3 discussed the lack of financial support in their environment, which hindered their professional development:

'Money is also an issue, uhm, and I'm not really sure why, so I say lack of support, I mean financial support, our environment is not conducive for, uhm, for development.' (P3, 28 years old, black African person)

Participant 4 described the competitive nature of securing funding, illustrating how intense competition exacerbates the difficulties faced by creatives:

'You know a lot of competition for funding, which makes it challenging … So, there's huge competition for funding, a lot of creatives feel like they're entitled to funding.' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Trust and social cohesion issues
Issues of trust and social cohesion were prevalent among participants. Participant 6's description of the social dynamics within their team highlights the difficulties in fostering a collaborative environment:

'"Everybody was on their own vibe" … "Everyone had their own cliques; they were not sociable and there was no trust".' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 9 shared the challenges of building trust within teams, emphasising the impact on collaboration and team dynamics:

'uhm, there was a lack of trust. And it is difficult to build trust with one another.' (P9, 42 years old, white person)

Communication barriers
Communication barriers presented another challenge, particularly in remote or geographically dispersed teams.

Participant 5 described the difficulties of managing remote teams across different countries:

'reporting to a boss that's not in the same country as you, having a team that's not in the same country as you, and finding ways to still have a collaborative way of working.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 10 noticed the communication breakdowns within school management and with parents, highlighting how it impacted their ability to perform their role effectively:

'lack of communication within, uh within management in the different schools … sometimes when parents don't communicate.' (P10, 28 years old, Indian person)

Increased workload and work-life balance
An increased workload and struggles with work-life balance were significant challenges.

Participants envisioned growth and positive change as central to the future meaning of work. Participant 2 emphasised the importance of pursuing growth and not giving up despite challenges:

'I had to move to, uhm, more challenging hours … from nine until half past six in the evening.' (P2, 30 years old, Mixed race person)

Others struggled with increased demands and strict work environments:

'having to deal coming from a place where there wasn't that strict rules and strict ways of doing things.' (P2, 30 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 4 highlighted the need to avoid stagnation and continually seek new opportunities for growth:

'feel like it's too much extra work and they resist.' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Theme 3: Challenges faced during the pandemic

This theme presents the challenges faced by women during the pandemic. Several sub-themes were identified, which included the impact on work and livelihoods, technological challenges, psychological and emotional toll.

Impact on work and livelihoods

Participants shared their accounts of how lockdown measures and closures severely disrupted their work and livelihoods, leading to profound individual consequences.

Participant 4 lamented about the abrupt cessation of work opportunities because of the pandemic:

'uhm, obviously, with lockdown, you know, a lot of them haven't been able to work at all, uhm, projects have been cancelled or postponed.' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

This reflects the sudden and widespread cancellation or indefinite postponement of projects, leaving many women without a stable source of income or employment continuity.

Participant 1 reflected on the widespread closure of services. Her narrative illustrates the ripple effect of these closures, which led to the termination of numerous contracts and further economic hardships:

'During COVID, all the car hire places were closed … so many companies have closed, so a lot of contracts have gone down and closed.' (P1, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 5 highlighted the impact of governmental funding cuts, which had a direct effect on their employment security:

'Our work is dependent from the funding we get from government … we were given no budget for 2020.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

The lack of government support underscored the financial instability faced by many participants during this period, exacerbating their vulnerability.

Psychological and emotional toll

The psychological and emotional toll of the pandemic emerged as a significant sub-theme, with participants describing heightened levels of stress, anxiety and uncertainty.

Participant 9 characterised the experience as 'bizarre', reflecting the unique difficulties of understanding and supporting colleagues in unprecedented circumstances. Her reflection emphasises the complex emotional labour involved in managing both professional and personal responsibilities during a crisis:

'It's bizarre, trying to support people during the pandemic and figuring out their needs as human beings, not just employees.' (P9, 42 years old, white person)

Participant 7 voiced the impact on her personal and professional growth. This narrative captures the frustration and despair of lost opportunities and stalled progress, which many women experienced during the pandemic:

'It set me back, even for like my career progression, it set everything back … So, it's a bit stressful.' (P7, 27 years old, black African person)

Participant 6 expressed anxiety related to potential virus exposure in her workplace. Her account reveals the constant fear and uncertainty faced by those working in high-risk environments:

'The stress of going to school, knowing that I could come home with the virus …' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 5, on the other hand, highlighted the emotional challenge of isolation and the absence of face-to-face interactions. Her statement conveys a sense of longing and the emotional burden of working in isolation, which affected her mental well-being and work engagement:

'I so miss the human interaction at the office … For somebody like me, that was hard, it was hard to deal with.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Theme 4: Meaning of work before coronavirus disease 2019

Sense of purpose

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, work represented a deep sense of purpose for many participants. They conveyed that their professional lives were driven by passion rather than monetary rewards, benefits or incentives. Participants shared that work was about making a difference, helping others and fostering positive impacts.

Participant 6 elaborated that her motivation for work stemmed from passion, stating:

'No, uhm, it was still my passion. I still went to work. I still went for the same reason. I'm still going.' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 8 echoed a similar sentiment, expressing that passion fluctuated based on the surrounding environment:

'… honestly, I think, for me, for me, I have, I have seasons where I'm really passionate, and I love what I'm doing. And it has a lot to do with, with the people and the culture that I am in.' (P8, 30 years old, black African person)

Supporting these perspectives, Participant 9 shared that her work was driven by a sense of direction and purpose:

'Where was I going, and how was I driven? I was always community driven and focused on doing the right thing.' (P9, 42 years old, white person)

For some participants, work was intrinsically meaningful, providing them with a profound sense of purpose. Participant 6 illustrated this by saying:

'So, before the pandemic, being a teacher, the low salary meant it was all about passion. It's not just a job; it's a profession we love and do because we want to, not because we have to.' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Enjoyment

The findings reveal that before the COVID-19 pandemic, work was a source of enjoyment for several participants. They found satisfaction and fulfilment in their roles, which enabled them to appreciate their work.

Participant 1 reflected on her experience by stating:

'Yes. So, while I was doing it, I enjoyed it in the back of my mind, I did appreciate it.' (P1, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 4 shared that the joy she derived from her work gave it meaning:

'I enjoy my work. It gives me meaning and makes me feel like I'm contributing. That sense of meaning has only grown stronger with the pandemic.' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Participant 5 added that the creative aspects of her work were a significant source of enjoyment:

'Finding creative ways to solve problems is what we do. I love and enjoy what I do.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Theme: 5 Meaning of work during coronavirus disease 2019

This theme explores the various meanings that South African women attributed to their work during the pandemic, highlighting the emotional, financial and personal dimensions of their work experiences. Sub-themes include:

Frustration

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants expressed significant frustration and emotional turmoil. The sudden changes in work conditions, heightened uncertainties and the emotional strain caused by the pandemic were common points of frustration.

Participant 5 articulated the frustration vividly:

'No, I wonder if … I think there was a lot of frustration, especially in the early months … and it came out through my conversations.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Similarly, Participant 10 described how the pandemic's pressures led to feelings of demotivation and dissatisfaction:

'There have been times when we felt very demotivated and angry at the situation because of all the pressure … our emotions have doubled up, not everything is as easy.' (P10, 28 years old, Indian person)

Sense of purpose

Despite the pandemic's challenges, many participants maintained that their work continued to provide a sense of purpose and passion. For some, the difficulties intensified their commitment to their roles, encouraging them to find new ways to apply their skills and maintain their sense of purpose.

Participants expressed that work remained a source of purpose and passion during the pandemic. Participant 5 found renewed creativity and passion during this period:

'… there was a particular skill set … I realised there's so much more that had just been untapped … you can find creativity within it.' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 6 shared how her passion for teaching intensified despite limited face-to-face interactions:

'Oh, my word … I think it's still a passion, if not more so now, because we only see our children two or three times a week.' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Theme 6: Support systems before and during the pandemic

This theme explores the various support systems that South African women relied on before and during the pandemic, highlighting the role of family, friends, colleagues and mentors, and the absence of support in some cases.

Family and friends

Before the pandemic, participants relied heavily on family and friends for emotional support. This network continued to be a crucial source of comfort during the pandemic, offering both practical help and emotional reassurance.

Participant 10 reflected on the vital role of her family and friends:

'Uh, being before, I always had that support structure from family and friends …' (P10, 28 years old, Indian person)

During the pandemic, this reliance on personal networks became even more pronounced. Participant 2 highlighted her partner's support:

'Uhm, so before the pandemic, I was still getting the same support from my friend and colleague …' (P2, 30 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 6 emphasised her family's role in her support system:

'Yeah, my family was my support structure. They still are …' (P6, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participants 7 and 8 also mentioned their husbands as key supporters:

'I can depend on my husband who works from home.' (P8, 30 years old, black African person)

'I've got a loving mother, a loving husband, and my boss, who is very supportive …' (P7, 27 years old, black African person)

Work colleagues and organisational support
Work colleagues and organisational support systems played a significant role both before and during the pandemic. Many participants noticed that their relationships with colleagues provided a sense of community and support, which was crucial during times of uncertainty.

Participant 1 described the pre-pandemic support from her managers:

'I think, before the pandemic, we'd have managers who would speak to us and keep in touch …' (P1, 27 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 8 echoed this sentiment:

'The nice thing was that you saw your manager daily, and I had great managers who were always available for support …' (P8, 30 years old, black African person)

During the pandemic, organisational support increased for some, as Participant 4 noted:

'Everyone has been going through their own stuff, but we're all trying and working towards similar goals …' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Participant 10 added:

'… there are people at work who are there for you, and you can feel comfort from your colleagues …' (P10, 28 years old, Indian person)

Theme 7: Future meaning of work
This theme explores participants' views on the future significance of work, focussing on growth and positive change as central elements.

Growth
Participants highlighted growth as a central aspect of the future meaning of work, focussing on continuous development, both personally and professionally. They believed that overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic would ultimately lead to new opportunities for growth.

Participant 2 emphasised the importance of not giving up and striving for growth despite challenges:

'… it has really pushed me to show me that … you need to ask yourself, what is the main thing? What is the goal? Why are you here? Why haven't you given? … at the end, I want to grow. There is a bigger picture, there is a prize … The growth is waiting for you, it will change.' (P2, 30 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 4 stressed the importance of continuous growth and avoiding stagnation:

'I think so probably, I mean, for me, it's, it's kind of all about growth and evolving. And if you're not still pursuing that meaning, and finding ways to make it real and spread that impact, then you become stagnant …' (P4, 31 years old, white person)

Participant 6 discussed growth on both professional and personal levels, emphasising a broader vision beyond immediate job roles:

'Okay, so personally, not on a professional level, so on a personal scale, I would say I do see it changing, definitely growing, uhm, not being in the classroom for the rest of my life, definitely not …' (P6, 27 years old, black African person)

Positive change
Participants expressed optimism about the future, believing that the pandemic would ultimately lead to positive changes and a renewed sense of purpose in their work.

Participant 3 hoped for a better and more rewarding perspective on work:

'… I would want my perspective about … work and the meaning of work to … be better …' (P3, 28 years old, black African person)

Participant 5 reflected on the positive changes prompted by the pandemic, emphasising the need to overcome barriers:

'So, uhm, I think my, my view towards the meaning of work is quite positive … I know that my male counterparts don't need to fight as hard as I do …' (P5, 35 years old, Mixed race person)

Participant 7 believed that the pandemic would lead to a positive outlook on work:

'… honestly, I think, post-pandemic I am going to have to … have a new outlook. The outcome will be positive I believe.' (P7, 27 years old, black African person)

Discussion
This study sought to understand various meanings that South African women ascribe to their work during the pandemic. More so, it further established its alignment in achieving the SDGs, through implications for practice.

Theme 1: Motivation for choice of work
The findings of the study indicated that women experienced passion in their chosen fields, aligning with existing literature that emphasised the importance of intrinsic motivation in career satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). Work motivation has been defined as 'a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual's being, to initiate work-related behaviour, and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration' (Pinder, 2008, p. 11). The findings suggested that multiple motivations led participants to their current lines of work. For some, passion and career growth were primary drivers, which aligns with Bezzina et al. (2013), who found that career advancement, a sense of purpose, passion and achievement ranked highly as work motivators for women.

Working with people was another key motivator identified by participants. Bezzina et al. (2013) similarly found that the opportunity to work with and meet new people was a significant motivator. Kaushik and Guleria (2020) observed that during the pandemic, respondents expressed a desire to continue interacting with others, whether virtually or physically, to maintain morale and motivation. The findings also suggested that organisational benefits served as motivators and positively influenced participants' work perceptions. Damij et al. (2015) found that task efficiency was heavily influenced by motivation levels. Němečková (2017) supported this, finding that benefits were an important motivator, ranking seventh out of 11 job motivators.

Theme 2: Challenges faced before the pandemic

The findings of this study highlight the differences in challenges faced by women at work before and during the pandemic. Al-Ahmadi (2011) identified a prevalent issue among women leaders: a lack of resources, including financial and material support, which can hinder job performance. Similarly, this study found that budget constraints were particularly challenging for women, especially those subordinate to men. Participants also experienced a lack of trust from managers and colleagues. Hungerford and Cleary (2021) agree that this lack of trust can cause individuals to lose sight of their goals and create a negative perception of their work, as reported by the participants. Before the pandemic, participants faced challenges related to transport and commuting to work. Garg and Van der Rijst (2015) confirm that the ability to work from home eliminates the stress of long commutes and transportation issues. Additionally, Matli (2020) noticed that organisational goals often lead to increased workloads for employees, which was consistent with the pressures reported by women in their jobs before the pandemic.

Theme 3: Challenges faced during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to women's work, livelihoods, technological adaptation and psychological and emotional well-being (Augustus, 2021; Dinella et al., 2023; Yavorsky et al., 2022). The findings of this study are consistent with recent research on the pandemic's impact on women's work and psychological well-being. Studies have shown that women globally faced heightened job insecurity (Akuoko et al., 2021), financial instability and increased caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic (Bulog et al., 2022; Dinella et al., 2023; Power, 2020), exacerbating existing gender inequalities (Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021). The shift to remote work and the closure of physical workplaces disproportionately affected women, particularly those in sectors heavily impacted by lockdown measures (Power, 2020). Technological challenges were also a significant hurdle, as many women had to adapt to new digital tools and platforms for remote work without adequate training or support (Jahangir Rony et al., 2021; Kooli, 2022). The findings of the study also highlighted the psychological and emotional toll of the pandemic on women. Research has shown an increase in stress, anxiety and depression among women, driven by the dual pressures of work and increased domestic responsibilities (O'Sullivan et al., 2022; Ruppanner et al., 2021; Yavorsky et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Meaning of work before coronavirus disease 2019

Understanding how and where individuals find meaning in their work is important, as it provides insight into the approaches and experiences that employees have in their roles and workplaces (Rosso et al., 2010). The findings from the study on the meaning of work for South African women before the pandemic revealed a profound connection to intrinsic motivations, such as a sense of purpose, passion and enjoyment. These elements were pivotal in shaping their professional experiences and in maintaining their engagement and satisfaction at work (Bryant et al. 2023; Peethambaran & Naim 2023; Smith et al., 2023). The findings also showed that women found enjoyment in their work, which aligns with research indicating that meaningful work can enhance resilience and help individuals navigate challenging times (Lysova et al., 2019).

Theme 5: Meaning of work during coronavirus disease 2019

Parry and Gordon (2021) noted that the South African government, much the same as many other governments globally, implemented strategies to try and curb the spread and effects of the coronavirus. Some strategies included staying at home and temporarily closing businesses. However, Parry and Gordon (2021) note that these restrictions have caused multiple frustrations among women whose jobs and work were affected negatively by these restrictions. This is consistent with the findings from this study as a number of participants stressed the frustrations of not being able to do their jobs in an efficient manner and not being able to travel to certain places to be able to do their jobs. A study conducted by Jasrotia and Meena (2021) also found that women felt frustrated because the pandemic caused a blur between what was work for them and what was non-work. They had to juggle working from home and doing household chores at the same time, which was not what they would usually do before the pandemic.

Another meaning of work that participants gave for during the pandemic, is similar to what was mentioned about the meaning of work before the pandemic, which was the meaning of work being a passion or having a sense of purpose (Bryant et al., 2023). This meaning of work did not change for the participants from before the pandemic to during the pandemic.

Theme 6: Support systems before and during the pandemic

Support systems emerged as a sixth theme in the study, addressing the factors impacting the meaning of work for South African women during the pandemic. This theme, derived from the fourth research question, highlights the support participants received both before and during the pandemic, and the way in which it shapes the meaning they

attribute to their work. Most participants reported that their family and friends have been crucial sources of strength, enabling them to find joy and meaning in their work. This finding aligns with Adisa et al. (2021), who found that although women faced challenges in their work during the pandemic, support from friends and family alleviated their burdens. Organisational support, from both management and colleagues, was also noted by participants. Mascarenhas et al. (2022) highlight that employees who perceive their organisation as supportive tend to view their jobs more positively. Burke et al. (2006) found that organisational support leads to higher engagement and satisfaction among women. Participants in this study mentioned that support from managers and colleagues helped them cope with the pandemic. However, some participants reported a lack of organisational support before the pandemic. Kee et al. (2020) observe that women often struggle with career progression and meaning in their work when faced with non-supportive supervisors and colleagues.

Additionally, some participants benefited from mentors and coaches before the pandemic. Burke and McKeen (1996) explain that mentoring provides support and guidance to enhance professional development and career growth. Participants in this study noted that their mentors and coaches helped them stay focussed and maintain a positive outlook towards their work

Theme 7: Future meaning of work

This theme explores the potential future meanings of work as expressed by the participants and relates to the fifth research question on what South African women anticipate work will mean post-pandemic. Ng et al. (2021) noticed significant speculation about the future of work, considering changes such as remote work, job losses, school closures and new working methods brought about by the pandemic. Despite these challenges, instances of positive change have emerged. Participants in this study foresee positive changes in the future meaning of work, aligning with Malhotra (2021), who argues that the pandemic has accelerated organisational changes anticipated for the future and enhanced global collaboration.

In addition, Vyas (2022) highlights technological growth that has enabled remote work during the pandemic. Unlike the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, today's technology allows many employees to work from home. Participants in this study see this growth as contributing to the future meaning of work, with personal growth also being a key aspect. Davidescu et al. (2020) found that organisations must invest in employees' personal growth initiatives to thrive post-pandemic. Flexibility and creating an environment conducive to growth, especially for women, will help employees assign positive meaning to their work.

Implications for practice

The findings on the meaning of work for women during the pandemic provide valuable insights for HR practices. These implications align with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

In terms of SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, it is known that the pandemic has significantly impacted women's mental health (Almeida et al., 2020; Fulcher et al., 2023) concerning psychological and emotional strain, which indicates the need for comprehensive mental health support systems. Human resource should implement regular mental health check-ins, provide access to counselling services and promote work-life balance initiatives to support women's overall well-being, thereby enriching their sense of meaning in their work. Moreover, based on the findings of the study it is essential that organisation creates a supportive work environment through organisational structures and support systems.

In terms of SDG 5: Gender Equality, HR must recognise and address the unique challenges faced by women during the pandemic, such as work-life balance issues. Organisational policies should be developed to provide flexible working arrangements that will support women (Bhatt et al., 2023), and can help women manage their professional and personal responsibilities more effectively, thereby enhancing their sense of meaning and fulfilment in their work. Supporting women's career growth and development is essential for gender equality (Subramanian et al., 2024).

In terms of SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, encouraging women to pursue work that aligns with their passion and purpose contributes to job satisfaction and productivity, aligning to gaining meaning in their work. Human resource needs to remain cognisant by ensuring decent work conditions for all employees, implement programmes that support continuous learning and skill development, and policies and practices that support work-life integration.

Overall, the findings of the study enrich the body of literature on the meaning of work by highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the work experiences of South African women. It offers insights for organisations on how to create future-ready workplaces that are responsive to women's evolving expectations, thereby supporting their engagement, retention and career advancement in a rapidly changing world. Organisations need to consider the unique challenges faced by women and support their needs as they navigate the post-pandemic landscape. This includes organisations adopting flexible work policies, fostering inclusive work cultures that address future work trends and promote sustainable careers for women.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As with most research studies, this study also had its limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small ($n = 10$), which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and

perspectives. As such, future research should consider expanding the sample size to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives. Secondly, the data were collected during the pandemic, therefore post-pandemic experiences are not represented in the findings. In addition, the diverse sample, encompassing women from various employment industries and fields, may result in findings that are too broad and lack specificity. Future researchers could investigate the meaning of work within specific industries. This could provide more detailed and applicable findings for different sectors. Future researchers should also consider exploring how women find meaning in their work beyond the pandemic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of work that South African women gave to their work during the COVID-19 pandemic, its alignment in achieving the SDGs and implications for human resources. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only disrupted the global economy but also magnified existing inequalities, particularly for women in the workforce. The findings indicated that South African women in this study experienced several challenges in their workplaces during the pandemic, which had implications on the meaning that they attribute to work. Ultimately, the women who formed a part of this study revealed that even with the negative effects and challenges brought on by the pandemic, they are hopeful about the future and stated that their meaning of work would only grow in a more positive direction moving forward. Through this research, we hope to inform policies and practices that support the well-being and empowerment of women in finding meaning in their work. More so, the pandemic heightened the importance of re-evaluating HR practices to better support women in the workforce. By aligning with SDGs 3, 5 and 8, HR can create a more equitable, supportive and healthy work environment for women.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. N.D. is a section editor at the *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur* and has no competing interests to disclose.

Authors' contributions

A.C.J. conceptualised and conducted the study. N.M. was the supervisor of the study and N.D. assisted with writing and editing of the article.

Funding information

Data availability

Data that support the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author, N.D., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Adisa, T.A., Aiyenitaju, O., & Adekoya, O. D. (2021). The work–family balance of British working women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Work-Applied Management, 13*(2), 241–260.

Akgunduz, Y., Alkan, C., & Gök, Ö.A. (2018). Perceived organizational support, employee creativity and proactive personality: The mediating effect of meaning of work. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 34*, 105–114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.01.004

Akuoko, P.B., Aggrey, V., & Mengba, J.D. (2021). Mothering with a career during a pandemic; the case of the Ghanaian woman. *Gender, Work, and Organization, 28*(S2), 277–288. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12711

Al-Ahmadi, H. (2011). Challenges facing women leaders in Saudi Arabia. *Human Resource Development International, 14*(2), 149–166.

Allan, B.A., Batz-Barbarich, C., Sterling, H.M., & Tay, L. (2019). Outcomes of meaningful work: A meta-analysis. *The Journal of Management Studies, 56*(3), 500–528. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12406

Almeida, M., Shrestha, A.D., Stojanac, D., & Miller, L.J. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's mental health. *Archives of Women's Mental Health, 23*(6), 741–748. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-020-01092-2

Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., & Tertilt, M. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality (No. w26947)*. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Augustus, J. (2021, May). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women working in higher education. *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 6, p. 648365). Frontiers Media SA.

Bailey, C., Lips-Wiersma, M., Madden, A., Yeoman, R., Thompson, M., & Chalofsky, N. (2019). The five paradoxes of meaningful work: Introduction to the special issue 'Meaningful Work: Prospects for the 21st century': The five paradoxes of meaningful work. *The Journal of Management Studies, 56*(3), 481–499. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12422

Bauer, J.J., McAdams, D.P., & Pals, J.L. (2008). Narrative identity and eudaimonic well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 9*(1), 81–104. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9021-6

Bendassolli, P.F., & Tateo, L. (2018). The meaning of work and cultural psychology: Ideas for new directions. *Culture & Psychology, 24*(2), 135–159. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17729363

Bezzina, F., Azzopardi, R.M., & Vella, G. (2013). Understanding and assessing the work motivations of employed women: Insights into increasing female participation rates in the Maltese labor market. *SAGE Open, 3*(3), 215824401350298. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013502987

Bharadwaj, V., & Shanker, M. (2019). Women at workplace and work life balance: A literature review. *International Peer-Reviewed Journal of Communication and Humanities Researches, 7*(1), 46–59.

Bhatt, D., Sharma, S., & Rana, V. (2023). A study of the remote work-family balance of female hotel managers. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 12*(3), 989–1010.

Blau, F.D., & Kahn, L.M. (2020). The gender pay gap: Have women gone as far as they can? In F.D. Blau & L.M. Kahn (Eds.), *Inequality in the United States* (pp. 345–362). Routledge.

Boas, A.A.V., & Morin, E.M. (2019). Emotional intelligence and quality of working life at federal institutions of higher education in Brazil. *Open Journal of Social Sciences, 7*(02), 255–274. https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2019.72020

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryant, R., Lysova, E.I., & Khapova, S.N. (2023). Calling for a meaningful contribution? Bridging contributing to society with motivation theory. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1186547. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1186547

Bulog, I., Pepur, S., & Smiljanić, A. (2022). Women's overload during the pandemic: Unpaid care work, financial well-being, and stress. *Management: Journal of Contemporary Management Issues, 27*(1), 123–150. https://doi.org/10.30924/mjcmi.27.1.8

Burke, R.J., & McKeen, C.A. (1996). Do women at the top make a difference? Gender proportions and the experiences of managerial and professional women. *Human Relations; Studies towards the Integration of the Social Sciences, 49*(8), 1093–1104. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679604900804

Carrim, N.M., & Ahmed, S.F. (2016). Indian husbands' support of their wives' upward mobility in corporate South Africa: Wives' perspectives. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 42*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v42i1.1354

Casale, D., & Posel, D. (2020). Gender and the early effects of the COVID-19 crisis in the paid and unpaid economies in South Africa. *National Income Dynamics (NIDS)-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) Wave, 1*, 1–25.

Chams, N., & García-Blandón, J. (2019). On the importance of sustainable human resource management for the adoption of sustainable development goals. *Resources, Conservation, and Recycling, 141*, 109–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2018.10.006

Chaudhary, R. (2022). Deconstructing work meaningfulness: Sources and mechanisms. *Current Psychology, 41*(9), 6093–6106. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-01103-6

Chitiga, M., Henseler, M., Mabugu, R., & Maisonnave, H. (2020). *How COVID-19 pandemic worsens the economic situation of women in South Africa*. Unpublished.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12*(3), 297–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Collins, C., Landivar, L.C., Ruppanner, L., & Scarborough, W.J. (2021). COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours. *Gender, Work & Organization, 28*(S1), 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12506

Cotter, D.A., Hermsen, J.M., & Vanneman, R. (2001). Women's work and working women: The demand for female labor. *Gender & Society: Official Publication of Sociologists for Women in Society, 15*(3), 429–452. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124301015003006

Damij, N., Levnajić, Z., Rejec Skrt, V., & Suklan, J. (2015). What motivates us for work? Intricate web of factors beyond money and prestige. *PloS One, 10*(7), e0132641. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0132641

Davidescu, A.A., Apostu, S.A., Paul, A., & Casuneanu, I. (2020). Work flexibility, job satisfaction, and job performance among Romanian employees—Implications for sustainable human resource management. *Sustainability, 12*(15), 6086.

De Sá, J.G.S., Lemos, A.H.D.C., & Oliveira, L.B.D. (2022). Beyond stereotypes: The meaning of work for women in the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro. *Cadernos EBAPE BR, 20*(4), 500–513. https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120210109x

Deloitte. (2020). *Understanding the pandemic's impact on working women: How employers can act now to prevent a setback in achieving gender parity in the workplace*. Retrieved from https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-about-deloitte-understanding-the-pandemic-s-impact-on-working-women.pdf

Dik, B.J., Steger, M.F., & Mercurio, Z.A. (2024). Meaningful work, calling, and occupational health. In L.E. Tetrick, G.G. Fisher, M.T. Ford & J.C. Quick (Eds.), *Handbook of occupational health psychology* (3rd edn., pp. 423–443). American Psychological Association.

Dinella, L.M., Fulcher, M., & Weisgram, E.S. (2023). Understanding women's work, children and families during the COVID-19 global pandemic: Using science to support women around the globe. *Journal of Social Issues, 79*(3), 847–860. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12590

Ellemers, N. (2014). Women at work: How organizational features impact career development. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 1*(1), 46–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732214549327

Fayard, A.-L. (2021). Notes on the meaning of work: Labor, work, and action in the 21st century. *Journal of Management Inquiry, 30*(2), 207–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492619841705

Fulcher, M., Schroeder, K.M., & Dinella, L.M. (2023). How the COVID-19 global pandemic further jeopardized women's health, mental well-being, and safety: Intersectionality framework and social policy action. *Journal of Social Issues, 79*(2), 543–555. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12587

Garg, A.K., & Van der Rijst, J. (2015). The benefits and pitfalls of employees working from home: Study of a private company in South Africa. *Corporate Board Role Duties and Composition, 11*(2), 36–49. https://doi.org/10.22495/cbv11i2art3

Gaudet, S., & Robert, D. (2018). *A Journey through qualitative research: From design to reporting*. Sage.

Halkos, G., & Gkampoura, E.C. (2021). Where do we stand on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals? An overview on progress. *Economic Analysis and Policy, 70*, 94–122.

Harpaz, I., & Fu, X. (2002). The structure of the meaning of work: A relative stability amidst change. *Human Relations; Studies towards the Integration of the Social Sciences, 55*(6), 639–667. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726702556002

Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B.N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine, 292*, 114523. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523

Hungerford, C., & Cleary, M. (2021). 'High trust' and 'low trust' workplace settings: Implications for our mental health and wellbeing. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 42*(5), 506–514.

Jahangir Rony, R., Shabnam Khan, S., Sinha, A., Saha, A., & Ahmed, N. (2021). 'COVID has made Everyone Digital and Digitally Independent': Understanding working women's DFS and technology Adoption during COVID Pandemic in Bangladesh. *Asian CHI '21: Proceedings of the Asian CHI Symposium 2021, 7th–8th May 2021*. Association for Computing Machinery.

Jasrotia, A., & Meena, J. (2021). Women, work and pandemic: An impact study of COVID-19 lockdown on working women in India. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review, 15*(3), 282–291. https://doi.org/10.1111/aswp.12240

Kaushik, M., & Guleria, N. (2020). The impact of pandemic COVID-19 in workplace. *European Journal of Business and Management, 12*(15), 9–17. https://doi.org/10.7176/EJBM/12-15-02

Kee, R.C.S., Othman, W.N.W., Zainudin, Z.N., & Yusop, Y.M. (2020). Factors affecting women's participation in career: A systematic review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 10*(9), 509–521. https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i9/7829

Kim, K. (2022). Assessing the impact of mobile money on improving the financial inclusion of Nairobi women. *Journal of Gender Studies, 31*(3), 306–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1884536

Kobus-Olawale, J., Schachtebeck, C., & Dhanpat, N. (2021). Investigating career progression experiences of women into top management at a South African bank. *EUREKA: Social and Humanities, 3*, 28–40.

Kooli, C. (2022). Challenges of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic for women in the UAE. *Journal of Public Affairs, 23*(1), e2829. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2829

Laaser, K., & Karlsson, J.C. (2022). Towards a sociology of meaningful work. *Work, Employment & Society: A Journal of the British Sociological Association, 36*(5), 798–815. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170211055998

Lane, E., & Aplin-Houtz, M.J. (2023). Informational justice and remote working: All is not fair for work at Home. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 35*(4), 541–564.

Lepisto, D.A., & Pratt, M.G. (2017). Meaningful work as realization and justification: Toward a dual conceptualization. *Organizational Psychology Review, 7*(2), 99–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386616630039

Lietz, C.A., & Zayas, L. E. (2010). Evaluating qualitative research for social work practitioners. *Advances in Social Work, 11*(2), 188–202. https://doi.org/10.18060/589

Lysova, E.I., Fletcher, L., & El Baroudi, S. (2023). What enables us to better experience our work as meaningful? The importance of awareness and the social context. *Human Relations; Studies towards the Integration of the Social Sciences, 76*(8), 1226–1255. https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267221094243

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K.M., Guest, G., & Namey, E. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide* (1st edn). Family Health International.

Malhotra, A. (2021). The postpandemic future of work. *Journal of Management, 47*(5), 1091–1102. https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211000435

Martikainen, S.J., Kudrna, L., & Dolan, P. (2022). Moments of meaningfulness and meaninglessness: A qualitative inquiry into affective eudaimonia at work. *Group & Organization Management, 47*(6), 1135–1180. https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011211047324

Mascarenhas, C., Galvão, A.R., & Marques, C.S. (2022). How perceived organizational support, identification with organization and work engagement influence job satisfaction: A gender-based perspective. *Administrative Sciences, 12*(2), 66. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci12020066

Matli, W. (2020). The changing work landscape as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic: insights from remote workers life situations in South Africa. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 40*(9/10), 1237–1256.

Matthews, B., & Ross, L. (2010). *Research methods*. Pearson Education. Retrieved from https://dl1.cuni.cz/mod/resource/view.php?id=243062

Moalusi, K.P., & Jones, C.M. (2019). Women's prospects for career advancement: Narratives of women in core mining positions in a South African mining organisation. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 45*, a1564. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v45i0.1564

Mosomi, J. (2019). *Distributional changes in the gender wage gap in the post-apartheid South African labour market*. WIDER Working Paper No. 2019/ 17. UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research. Retrieved from https://satied.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/SATIED_WP31_Mosomi_March_2019.pdf

Němečková, I. (2017). The role of benefits in employee motivation and retention in the financial sector of the Czech Republic. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja, 30*(1), 694–704. https://doi.org/10.1080/1331677X.2017.1314827

Ng, M.A., Naranjo, A., Schlotzhauer, A.E., Shoss, M.K., Kartvelishvili, N., Bartek, M., Ingraham, K., Rodriguez, A., Schneider, S.K., Silverlieb-Seltzer, L., & Silva, C. (2021). Has the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the future of work or changed its course? Implications for research and practice. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(19), 10199. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph181910199

O'Sullivan, K., Rock, N., Burke, L., Boyle, N., Joksimovic, N., Foley, H., & Clark, S. (2022). Gender differences in the psychosocial functioning of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 846238.

Parry, B.R., & Gordon, E. (2021). The shadow pandemic: Inequitable gendered impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa. *Gender, Work & Organization, 28*(2), 795–806.

Peethambaran, M., & Naim, M.F. (2023). Connecting the dots: Linking empowering leadership, employee work passion, and flourishing-at-work. *Industrial and Commercial Training, 55*(4), 544–557. https://doi.org/10.1108/ICT-10-2022-0079

Pinder, C.C. (2008). *Work motivation in organizational behavior*. Psychology Press.

Pitsoe, O., Schachtebeck, C., & Dhanpat, N. (2023). COVID-19: Experiences of women in the South African banking sector. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147–4478), 12*(5), 114–129.

Power, K. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 16*(1), 67–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1776561

Pratt, M.G., & Ashforth, B.E. (2003). Fostering meaningfulness in working and at work. In K.S. Cameron, J.E. Dutton & R.E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 309–327). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Rosso, B.D., Dekas, K.H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 30*, 91–127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2010.09.001

Ruppanner, L., Tan, X., Carson, A., & Ratcliff, S. (2021). Emotional and financial health during COVID-19: The role of housework, employment and childcare in Australia and the United States. *Gender, Work & Organization, 28*(5), 1937–1955. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12727

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*(1), 54–67. https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020

Saunders, M.N.K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2009). *Understanding research philosophy and approaches to theory development, research methods for business students* (pp. 128–171). Pearson Education.

Schnell, T., Höge, T., & Pollet, E. (2013). Predicting meaning in work: Theory, data, implications. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(6), 543–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.830763

Schwandt, T.A., Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (2007). Judging interpretations: But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation, 2007*(114), 11–25.

Sinden, E. (2017). Exploring the gap between male and female employment in the South African workforce. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 8*(6), 37–51. https://doi.org/10.1515/mjss-2017-0040

Smith, R.W., Min, H., Ng, M.A., Haynes, N.J., & Clark, M.A. (2023). A content validation of work passion: Was the passion ever there?. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 38*(1), 191–213. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-022-09807-1

Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). (2020). *Social impact of COVID-19 (Wave 3): Mobility, migration, and education in South Africa (Report No. 00-80-04)*. Statistics South Africa.

Steger, M.F. (2017). Creating meaning and purpose at work. In L.G. Oades, M.F. Steger, A.Delle Fave, & J. Passmore (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of the psychology of positivity and strengths-based approaches at work* (1st edn., pp. 60–81). Wiley Blackwell.

Steger, M.F., Dik, B.J., & Duffy, R.D. (2012). Measuring meaningful work: The work and meaning inventory (WAMI). *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*(3), 322–337. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711436160

Subramanian, P., Gallant, M., & Pani, P.K. (2024). Empowering women: Navigating work environment challenges with mental toughness. *Gender in Management An International Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-01-2024-0045

Tyssedal, J.J. (2023). Work is meaningful if there are good reasons to do it: A revisionary conceptual analysis of 'meaningful work.' *Journal of Business Ethics, 185*(3), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05205-y

Usher, K., Jackson, D., Durkin, J., Gyamfi, N., & Bhullar, N. (2020). Pandemic-related behaviours and psychological outcomes; A rapid literature review to explain COVID-19 behaviours. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 29*(6), 1018–1034.

Van der Deijl, W. (2024). Two concepts of meaningful work. *Journal of Applied Philosophy, 41*(2), 202–217. https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12614

Van Jaarsveld, Z.G. (2004). *Finding meaning in the workplace (Master's thesis)*. University of South Africa, Pretoria.

Van Wingerden, J., & Van der Stoep, J. (2018). The motivational potential of meaningful work: Relationships with strengths use, work engagement, and performance. *PloS One, 13*(6), e0197599. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0197599

Vansteenkiste, M., Ryan, R.M., & Soenens, B. (2020). Basic psychological need theory: Advancements, critical themes, and future directions. *Motivation and Emotion, 44*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-019-09818-1

Vyas, L. (2022). 'New normal' at work in a post-COVID world: Work–life balance and labor markets. *Policy & Society, 41*(1), 155–167. https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puab011

Wang, G., & Lee, P.D. (2009). Psychological empowerment and job satisfaction: An analysis of interactive effects. *Group & Organization Management, 34*(3), 271–296. https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601108330089

Yavorsky, J.E., Qian, Y., & Sargent, A.C. (2021). The gendered pandemic: The implications of COVID-19 for work and family. *Sociology Compass, 15*(6), e12881. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12881

Yeoman, R. (2014). Conceptualising meaningful work as a fundamental human need. *Journal of Business Ethics, 125*, 235–251. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1894-9

Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M.A., & Sharma, G. (2022). Passion for work and well-being of working adults. *Journal of Career Development, 49*(3), 505–518. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845320946398