‘You Can’t Eat Soap’: Reimagining COVID-19, Work, Family and Employment from the Global South

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Abstract
This article problematises the assumptions regarding work, family and employment that underlie the World Health Organization (WHO)’s COVID-19 guidelines. The scientific evidence grounding sanitary and social distancing recommendations is embedded in conceptualisations of work as skilled jobs in the formal economy and of family as urban and nuclear. These are Global North rather than universal paradigms. We build on theories from the South and an intersectional analysis of gender and class inequalities to highlight contextual complexities currently neglected in responses to COVID-19. We argue that building on both science and local knowledge can help democratise workable solutions for a range of different work, family and employment realities in the Global South. Finally, we propose a research agenda calling for strengthened North–South dialogue to provincialise knowledge, account for differences in histories, locality and resource-availability, and foster greater local participation in policy formulation regarding sanitary measures and vaccination campaigns.

Keywords
COVID-19, employment, gender, Global South, inequalities, work and family

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Introduction: COVID-19 and the Northern universalism–Southern context disconnect

In the face of the deadly coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the World Health Organization (WHO) has issued global sanitary and social distancing policies based on scientific evidence. Policies grounded in science are imperative to address the pandemic; however, the geopolitics of science and medicine are embedded in Northern epistemologies (Hodes and Morrell, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). This science is often presumed to be universal, without consideration of contextual specificities (Hodes and Morrell, 2018). Accordingly, these guidelines fail to consider the material realities of informality (Nyadera et al., 2021; Salamanca and Vargas, 2020), precariousness, underemployment and social inequalities that are most pronounced in the Global South (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Smith and Pun, 2018). We understand the Global South not as a geographical unit but rather as an analytical category of societies that have experienced colonial and/or imperial periods in their histories (Jolly, 2008). These colonial and imperial encounters have given rise to distinct structures and expressions of modernity in which inequalities persist (Fadaee, 2017).

In this Debates and Controversies article, we discuss the consequences of a universal one-size-fits-all response to COVID-19 on work, family and employment in the Global South and argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is an acute example of the imposition of Northern universalistic knowledge onto Southern contexts. In so doing, we respond to D’Angelo et al.’s (2020) call for scholarly work on the impact of COVID-19 on labour markets and work conditions, and for ensuring the study of global processes is truly representative. Specifically, we argue that universal health guidelines are an extremely vivid illustration of Northern perspectives which assume rights, individuality and economic independence, and collide with Southern discourses of collectivity, family, solidarity and interdependence (Button et al., 2018; Smith and Pun, 2018). The guidelines prescribing sanitisation, social distancing and self-isolation, for example, assume Northern-centred nuclear families and skilled jobs in the formal economy as universal notions (Jaga, 2020). Implicitly, they posit that individuals have power over their social and employment realities (Egdell and Beck, 2020) without accounting for unique challenges in Global South contexts such as high informality (Salamanca and Vargas, 2020). About one billion people live in informal urban settlements (Mitlin, 2020), such as townships in South Africa, slums in India and favelas in Brazil. In such settings, following the WHO COVID-19 guidelines is challenging, and alternative approaches to protect vulnerable people from both the health and economic risks of the pandemic are needed. This requires a more contextually nuanced and inclusive understanding of COVID-19’s effects on work, family and employment.

As a way to situate such understandings, we present a Southern lens that draws on a range of perspectives including theories from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012), epistemologies of the South (De Sousa Santos, 2015), Southern theory (Connell, 2007) and subaltern feminism (Mohanty, 2003). These perspectives focus both inward, emphasising people’s agency within local contexts, and outward, relating to how the specificities of the South speak back to the North, thereby enhancing a reflexive practice on the geopolitics of knowledge production (Milani and Lazar, 2017).
Furthermore, we advance the Southern lens by incorporating an intersectional analysis of the gendered and social class impact of the COVID-19 containment guidelines. The Global South has its share of privileged individuals who can sanitise their environment, self-isolate and follow social distancing prescriptions. For example, in South Africa and India, the top 1% of the population owns 86% (Chatterjee et al., 2020) and 81% (Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2021) of the nations’ total wealth, respectively. By contrast, COVID-19 guidelines have resulted in disproportionate threats for women (Al-Ali, 2020) and the urban poor (Wasdani and Prasad, 2020), affecting their capacity to work and care. These inequalities are not exclusive to the Global South, since marginalised groups in the Global North are also disproportionately affected by COVID-19 guidelines (Kantamneni, 2020). However, a Southern intersectional lens surfaces local specificities and may inform responses that consider distinctive needs in diverse contexts.

The contributions of this article are thus academic and practical. We first elucidate the impact of COVID-19 guidelines on the lived realities of women and the urban poor in the Global South. Theory built from these marginalised perspectives can benefit work, family and employment practices in the Global South as well as the Global North, where poverty, inequality, migration and precarious work are rising (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Egdell and Beck, 2020). Second, we review the growing calls for context-sensitive research by work–family scholars and explain how incorporating an intersectional approach (McBride et al., 2015) into a Southern lens can prevent over-generalisation and build theory that is grounded in people’s local realities. Third, we offer an agenda for research and practical responses regarding COVID-19’s effects on work, family and employment that meets the needs of people, both in the South and North, whose lived realities remain invisible.

**Northern universalism: The danger of a one-size-fits-all approach to COVID-19**

We argue that a one-size-fits-all approach to COVID-19 is detrimental as individuals experience plural realities. In this section, we explain from a Global South perspective the ways in which COVID-19 guidelines that are gender and class neutral are inadequate. Global South contexts entail socio-economic challenges which precede the pandemic, such as unemployment, poverty, hunger, no clean water, electricity, housing and health-care (Al-Ali, 2020). For example, 844 million people globally lack access to clean water (Guppy and Anderson, 2017). When schools close, children no longer receive their midday meal offered at school by national feeding programmes, as in the case of India and South Africa, increasing food insecurity for families (Azeez et al., 2021; Roelf, 2020). Alternate forms of care emerged out of necessity (Simone, 2001): for example, in Indian slums, some mothers forwent sanitary pads to afford food (Azeez et al., 2021). In these material conditions, COVID-19 hygiene guidelines are untenable for most of the urban poor (Azeez et al., 2021): ‘You can’t eat soap. If you are starving, you won’t buy it’ (Broadbent and Smart, 2020).

In low-resourced contexts, lack of access to electricity, computers/smartphones and the Internet mean that many children cannot participate in online schooling (Nyadera et al., 2021) or enjoy social media entertainment. Without this access, it is even more
challenging for children to isolate in crowded single-room houses, such that many breach containment guidelines by playing with friends outside (Azeez et al., 2021). Families that share households with elders may worry about increased infection risks that breaching containment entails. In India, no internet access prevents the poor from benefitting from health services. For example, the Indian government offered tele-counselling to reduce COVID-induced anxieties, while the informal healthcare that the urban poor depend on closed due to lockdowns (Azeez et al., 2021).

In addition to lacking resources, casual employment makes it difficult for the urban poor in the Global South to adhere to containment guidelines. Casual employment is highly prevalent in many African and Asian, and some Latin America, countries (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2020b) because the labour market supplies workers, including increasingly irregular immigrants, willing to work for extremely low wages, and because of external market pressures (Ram et al., 2016). Globally, about two billion workers are informally employed in low-skilled jobs with low pay and little or no access to social protection and rights at work (ILO, 2020b). Among these are street vendors, and retail-, garment- and domestic workers. These are among the jobs that have been most affected by COVID-19, making the poorest even more vulnerable to the economic effects of the pandemic (Ho and Grandelis, 2020). Many are forced to leave their homes to find work to survive. Garment workers are a sharp illustration of the class and gendered vulnerabilities arising from universal guidelines in Global South contexts. More than a million workers in Bangladesh were sent home without pay when $1.44 billion worth of exports were cancelled due to reduced demand in the locked down North. These workers had already earned inadequate wages pre-COVID, had no savings and an insufficient government-provided safety net (Anner, 2020). Indian migrant workers are another example of the clash between lockdowns and prescriptions of isolation: millions who lost their jobs due to lockdowns fled to their rural villages either by overcrowded public transport, which increased their exposure to infection, or on foot for thousands of kilometres without food or shelter (Choudhari, 2020).

In addition to social class, gender sheds light on the differential impact of COVID-19 guidelines. Women have been particularly struggling with the guidelines. First, women have the greater share of care responsibilities and are more likely than men to be in low-paid and low-skilled temporary or informal work. Women comprise about 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh, for example. Their increased care obligations during COVID-19, for instance because of school closures, hamper their return to work as factories resume operations (ILO, 2020a). The lockdown therefore strengthened patriarchal gender norms and the division of labour within households and the economy (Al-Ali, 2020). These vulnerabilities are deeper for women-headed households. In South Africa, where women-headed households reach 43%, these women must prioritise employment (Button et al., 2018; Nwosu and Ndinda, 2018). Second, universal COVID-19 guidelines are disproportionately challenging for migrant women, whose numbers are rising because of the growing labour demand of the care economy, including domestic work (ILO, 2021). Mostly, these workers are women who leave their families, including their children, to perform household, childcare and eldercare work in higher-income countries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). About one-fifth of migrant domestic workers work informally in private homes (Gallotti, 2016). With the pandemic, some became barred from the houses they work at, and many have no access to healthcare or social benefits.
Female internal migration is also common in Global South contexts, where mothers seek city employment while grandmothers care for grandchildren (Bank, 2020; Button et al., 2018). Mothers regularly return to rural homes to reconnect to their cultural identity and kin. These non-permanent rural to urban migrations occur in several sub-Saharan countries, such as Senegal, and in Asian countries, including Bangladesh and China (Lyu et al., 2019). Guidelines for social isolation are not effective in managing the spread in these contexts where ‘households and social groups are stretched across space to ensure both survival and social reproduction’ (Bank, 2020).

In the next section, we review recent calls for context-sensitive work, employment and family research and show how a Southern lens with a sensitivity to intersecting inequalities of gender and class opens alternate pathways that could address the inadequacy of universal COVID-19 guidelines.

**Calls for context-sensitive research on work, family and employment**

The trajectory of work, family and employment research is deeply connected to social and economic changes in the North, such as the birth control pill, the no-fault divorce, the increase in female participation in the labour force (Perry-Jenkins and Wadsworth, 2017) and states that can provide social protection to buffer their populations from economic or sanitary crises (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Over the last two decades, the body of work commenting on the narrow Northern geographical scope of studies, and calls for context-sensitive work, family and employment research have grown (Lambert and Kossek, 2005; Lewis et al., 2007). Their effects, however, remain limited. Cross-national research first identified cultural beliefs as influencing work and family role demands, social support, work–family conflict and work–family enrichment (Powell et al., 2009), then pointed out structural factors, such as the level of economic development, public policies offering safety nets to low-income families, the gendered division of labour and family structures (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). However, data collected in a Southern setting tend to be fitted into Northern models. Exceptions are recent studies that highlight Southern intersectional complexities such as widespread paternal absence among black low-income communities in South Africa (Jaga, 2020) and gender inequalities in health stemming from family responsibilities in Chile (Rodríguez and Torres, 2021). These epistemologies provide the Global South an identity of its own, rather than peripheral status (Jammulamadaka, 2020).

**COVID-19 and beyond: A research agenda from the South**

Northern scientific knowledge emphasises quantitative analyses (Hodes and Morrell, 2018). Surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on job losses and economic costs may impose social and moral norms onto marginalised workers who may not have the latitude to comply with COVID-19 guidelines. For example, when viewed from the perspective of Northern-derived COVID-19 containment norms, people from low-income communities who cannot self-isolate, social distance and maintain hand hygiene because of their resource-poor contexts, may be perceived as irresponsible and as spreading the virus. However, they are merely prioritising survival in environments constrained by legacies.
of colonial and imperial encounters. Scholarly, practical and ethical reasons thus call for research that makes visible the intersectionality of class and gender within various levels of contexts and colonial histories and methodologies.

**Contextualise subjectivities within larger heterogenous cultures and structures**

We call for scholars to highlight gendered and class-based intersectional reactions to COVID-19 that are situated within colonial hegemonies and reflect the cultural, ethnic and social heterogeneity of workers’ lives (Al-Doghmi and Salah, 2021; Mohanty, 2003). These can show similarities and differences between workers’ voices, and between state resources and commitment to providing welfare. Regarding female migrant domestic workers, for example, we suggest the following research questions: How do women migrant domestic workers perceive the feasibility of COVID-19 guidelines? What are the specific economic consequences of the pandemic for informal workers? How do they cope with the uncertainty of supporting their families back home (the primary reason why they seek migrant work)? How can welfare provisions be re-evaluated to safeguard migrant workers? Given that most informal workers cannot telework, researchers should also explore degrees, conditions and consequences of employment inequalities between those who can and those who cannot maintain an income in the context of COVID-19. In addition, we urge scholars to incorporate an intersectional focus of these impacts of COVID-19 into research designs, and to be part of more widespread, cohesive policy efforts, relying on interinstitutional cooperation among relevant agencies (Manrique De Lara and De Jesús Medina Arellano, 2020). For example, research on the impact of the pandemic on global value chains can examine the hegemony of men, whiteness and the Global North in manufacturing contexts (Federici, 2004; McCarthy et al., 2020). This would significantly enhance our understanding of how governance mechanisms might be better designed and operationalised for the betterment of all.

**Strengthening North–South engagements to shift dominant epistemologies that privilege Northern perspectives**

An important step in strengthening dialogue across boundaries is drawing attention to unequal power relations between Northern and Southern actors (McCarthy et al., 2020), which arise from ‘the colonial epistemic structure’ of Northern credibility grounded in the historic assumption of Northern superiority (Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020). Equal and productive research alliances between Southern and Northern researchers require that Northern scholars take agency by examining their location, social class and assumptions, challenging terms of cooperation laid down by Northern funders and using their positions, for instance as journal editors, to change research agendas (Collyer et al., 2019; Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020). Northern scholars can also play a role in acknowledging different ways of knowing, questioning who holds expert knowledge and how knowledge is produced. They can acknowledge that the positioning of scientific knowledge as superior has added to inequalities between
science and the public, and between knowledge produced in the North and South (Jaga, 2020). By co-creating knowledge with non-academic social actors, working class communities and Southern scholars, on an equal footing, Northern scholars can produce space for a more open, inclusive and transparent process of knowledge production and thereby ensure that these knowledges are more relevant to local contexts and are not received as Northern impositions. Southern researchers have a role to play too in the active creation of knowledge that contributes to alternate epistemes and agendas. They can frame new research questions, and explore innovations and strengths, derived from local perspectives and needs (Collyer et al., 2019). By incrementally building on these deep insights from multiple locations, scholars will facilitate the emergence of shared theoretical frames across these contexts, offering possibilities to produce both localised forms of practice and generalised forms of theory (Bhan, 2019). Critical conversations about the Northern perspective on combatting COVID-19 could serve as a preliminary step for moving towards multi-site and multi-scalar research projects influenced by fieldwork where actors, movements and debates from the South and North are combined and eventually create globally relevant theoretical frameworks (Fadaee, 2017). This would not only surface and build dialogue around key work, family and employment concepts, but also yield a deeper understanding of overlapping and alternate theories (Van Breda and Pinkerton, 2020).

**Devising COVID-19 responses together with public and civil society organisations**

Decisions made without engaging diverse people on what is practical and implementable have, in many instances, exacerbated life struggles (Mohanty, 2003). We suggest that where appropriate, WHO’s responses show greater awareness of different locational complexities such as under-resourced countries and Southern realities. WHO guidelines can be more flexible and inclusive in their implementation by recommending that states thoroughly engage local communities to fine-tune relevant responses that support their populations, thereby preventing a one-size-fits-all approach. Working with local communities may help not only with sanitary measures but also, crucially, with addressing the vaccine misinformation and hesitancy that currently undermine vaccination campaigns in Global South countries that have been able to procure vaccines. Communities are better positioned than central governments to communicate clearly on how vaccines can help people resume daily activities, build trust towards vaccines and elicit the collaboration of influential leaders such as mega-church preachers (Dzinamarira et al., 2021). While we acknowledge the limitations of some states to implement such responses, WHO could be more mindful of global inequalities, diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts, and intersecting marginalised identities when developing guidelines. In contexts of limited state capacity, as in many Global South countries, civil society could lead responses that complement WHO guidelines to provide relevant services and hold local states to account, as relationships between state and communities may be threatened by power dynamics.

The South’s experience of embracing uncertainty and working with highly constrained resources fosters innovative practices. Thus, we argue that Northern practices may be transformed through co-creation in setting work, family and employment
research agendas: in particular, including workers from the urban poor, women and other marginalised groups would challenge established perspectives on who holds expert knowledge and surface multiple perspectives and interventions.

Working with a deeply rooted emic knowledge of local realities, scholars and policymakers can begin reimagining how work, family and employment are experienced globally, beyond the Northern conceptualisations of work as skilled jobs in the formal economy, and family as nuclear. We suggest that important research questions are the following: How can communities, employers and governments facilitate job creation through a local supply chain for unskilled or semi-skilled labour, who have been most impacted by COVID-19? How do caring obligations that arise from the pandemic affect one’s ability to find or return to employment? How can networks of family care enable workers with limited resources to earn and provide? How do employers and employees creatively reshape working arrangements and support with these care networks in mind?

Moreover, interdisciplinary efforts are needed to call out Northern assumptions. For example, to assume that a child and parent exist in a nuclear setting is a myopic oversight; instead, in many instances in Global South contexts, we see contextual movement of children between different people (mothers, fathers, neighbours, grandmothers and employers) who are part of a network of care (Button et al., 2018). Here, relevant questions are: How do we create more inclusive employment and workplace policies by considering the realities of these care networks, from their sense of what is best? Who takes responsibility for caring for and schooling children during school closures, when the main breadwinner must go out and work? What are the implications of COVID-19 on the ability to care when women carry the larger share of care duties? From the North we know that the pandemic may aggravate gender inequalities in nuclear families; for instance, only 25% of women teleworking in France have a dedicated space to work in their home, compared with 41% of men (Lambert et al., 2020). Likewise, in Israeli couples, women’s work was more dispersed in different places of the home and fragmented in time throughout the day than men’s work was (Waismel-Manor et al., 2021). However, the pandemic may affect gender dynamics differently in the South, where family structures are more diverse. Other important questions include: What are the implications of COVID-19 on the well-being of women heading up households and supporting extended families? How do family structures, class structures and cultural values create heterogenous experiences for these women? Some of these experiences might be counterintuitive. For instance, social distancing might relieve some women from social obligations because large family gatherings that require extensive entertaining and cooking are prohibited under COVID-19, which reduces ‘food-work overload’ (Jaga, 2014). These examples show how broadening the analytical lens from which to explore these phenomena can prevent silos in academia and policy-making and provide the basis for better practices for people around the globe.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we challenged the imposition of Northern-driven guidelines on Southern contexts by highlighting some of the implications of the WHO COVID-19 guidelines for
work, family and employment given specific gender and class inequalities in the Global South. We urgently call for the WHO, policy-makers and scholars to ground theory, practice and policy-implementation plans deep within the contexts from which they are derived, to frame relevant and sustainable responses to COVID-19 recoveries, including equitable vaccine access and beyond. While we highlight constraints within the Global South, such as widespread poverty and unemployment, we also show possibilities from the South, including solidarity, alternate forms of care, and innovating within resource constraints, from which the North can also benefit. We urge for the inclusion of local communities in knowledge creation and policy-making and implementation, to reflect lived realities in ways that seek to create more equitable and accurate knowledge and better the human condition.

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Note

1. The major publishers, scholarly journals and scientific societies overseeing scientific research publication processes are headquartered in North America and Europe (Collyer et al., 2019) and conventional metrics for assessing the value and impact of academic research indicate that ‘Northern’ research remains dominant, while ‘Southern’ research remains peripheral (Hodes and Morrell, 2018).

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