

The Psychological Contract of Women Managers in an Essential Service State-Owned Enterprise during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic



Authors:

Boitumelo W. Makhubele¹ 

Nelesh Dhanpat¹ 

Sesemana S. Makhasane¹ 

Affiliations:

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

Corresponding author:

Boitumelo Makhubele,
bmakhubele@uj.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 07 June 2025

Accepted: 04 Dec. 2025

Published: 30 Mar. 2026

How to cite this article:

Makhubele, B.W., Dhanpat, N., & Makhasane, S.S. (2026).

The Psychological Contract of Women Managers in an Essential Service State-Owned Enterprise during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic.

SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 24(0), a3164.

<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v24i0.3164>

Copyright:

© 2026. The Authors.

Licensee: AOSIS.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Orientation: The fundamental recalibration of the psychological contract (PC) for women managers remains under-researched despite the recognised importance of flexible work and well-being. This study focuses on women managers in a South African essential service state-owned enterprise.

Research purpose: This study aimed to gain insights into the PC of women managers during and post the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Motivation for the study: Radical changes impact PCs. This study explores how COVID-19 reshaped this contract for women managers in essential services, who faced unique compounded pressures in balancing leadership, and intensified domestic roles.

Research approach/design and method: Using a qualitative approach and purposive sampling, data were collected from 16 participants through semi-structured interviews.

Main findings: During the pandemic, participants expected clear communication, support, health measures, and flexible work, but instead faced employer demands for unwavering commitment and constant availability. Post-pandemic, they anticipated guided reintegration but perceived demands for an abrupt return to normalcy. Whilst some participants reported a breach of the PC, citing lack of care and appreciation, others expressed fulfilment regarding job security and flexible work adoption. Consistently, women managers emphasised expectations of equal treatment, professional development, and sensitivity to their unique gendered needs.

Practical/managerial implications: The pandemic exposed a crisis of reciprocity, triggering a shift from relational to transactional contractual terms. Organisations must implement concrete interventions: formalising hybrid work, establishing gender-responsive crisis protocols, implementing recognition systems, mandating transparent communication frameworks, and conducting PC audits.

Contribution/value-add: Organisational crises reshape the nature of the psychological contract while sustaining core expectations, with implications for long-term leadership engagement in essential services.

Keywords: psychological contract; expectations; women managers; state-owned enterprise; employment relationship.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic fundamentally reshaped the world of work, imposing new ways of social functioning and placing unprecedented demands on all employees (Dhanpat et al., 2025; Garzillo et al., 2022). This condition was especially acute within essential services, in which operational continuity was critical for public safety and national stability. For women in management roles within these organisations, the pandemic created a triple crisis: the intensified demands of leadership in a high-pressure environment (Udod et al., 2024), their heightened and disproportionate domestic responsibilities (Ronnie et al., 2022), and the obligation to maintain frontline service delivery. This confluence of pressures placed women managers in essential services at the epicentre of the pandemic's professional and personal upheaval, triggering a critical need to take stock of their evolving needs, expectations, and ultimately, a re-evaluation of their psychological contracts (PCs) (Karani et al., 2022; Ronnie et al., 2022). Vantilborgh et al. (2020) and Jacobs et al. (2020) describe the PC as the unwritten expectations and perceived obligations between the employee and the employer.

Research purpose and objectives

Levinson et al. (1962) and Lopez and Fuiks (2021) acknowledge that when circumstances change, PCs are also altered, and thus the call is to continuously investigate the shifts in these contracts. This study joins other researchers who responded to this call during the COVID-19 pandemic (Löffert & Diehl, 2023; Mekawy et al., 2021; Said et al., 2021). However, the study devotes attention to women managers in essential services who, despite their relatively higher disruption as a result of mandatory workplace presence, have not been studied closely (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). Crucially, whilst existing research catalogues the content of changing expectations, the impact on the core nature of the PC, its reciprocity, and balance is unknown. This study addresses this issue by exploring not just what changed but also how the very terms of the exchange were renegotiated. Whilst some efforts have been made to understand the PC of women in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries (Ronnie et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2024), the research either predates or is restricted to the pandemic and predominantly examines remote-work contexts, necessitating a more comprehensive view of the impact of COVID-19 on essential service workers both during and after the pandemic status. Research in this domain is also noted to be focused on the PC of general employees, and only little and outdated Western research views managers as part of the employer cohort instead of classifying them as the employee cohort, overlooking the PC of managers as employees (Guest & Conway, 2002; Metz et al., 2012; Turnley & Feldman, 1998). Taking cognisance of these under-researched areas, this study set out to qualitatively explore the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the PC of women managers in a South African essential service state-owned enterprise (SOE) and was guided by the following research objectives:

- To explore the expectations of women managers and their perceptions of employer expectations.
- To understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the PC of women managers.
- To identify women managers' own and perceived expectations post the pandemic.

Research context

This study focuses on women managers in a South African essential service SOE. The South African SOE context is uniquely poised to shape PCs. These SOEs operate under intense public scrutiny and are often at the centre of political and economic discourse, creating a climate of job instability and uncertainty despite their size (Mpete & Maier, 2024). Furthermore, as instruments of government policy, they are directly impacted by shifting political priorities, which can cause sudden strategic pivots and resource constraints (Kaunda & Pelser, 2023). For managers within this system, these shifts manifest as a conflict between public service motivation, a strong driver of their PC and the frustration of bureaucratic inefficiency and

political interference (Mpete & Maier, 2024). For women managers, the pressures are often compounded by enduring structural barriers such as patriarchy, limited access to mentorship, and persistent pay disparities that continue to shape the South African workplace (Mabaso, 2023; Mogoai et al., 2024). The tension between a noble mandate and a challenging operational environment forms a critical backdrop to the experiences of women managers in this study.

This study makes three distinct contributions to the PC literature. Firstly, this study addresses the gap in research on managers as employees rather than as employer agents (Metz et al., 2012). Secondly, it centres women's gendered experiences during organisational crisis, responding to calls for more nuanced understandings of how gender shapes workplace contracts (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). Thirdly, and most critically, it examines essential service contexts in which remote work was not an option, creating unique pressures that are absent from existing pandemic-era PC research, which predominantly focuses on remote workers (Löffert & Diehl, 2023; Said et al., 2021). The convergence of these factors, managerial responsibilities, gendered domestic labour, and mandatory physical presence during a health crisis, creates a distinctive case for understanding how organisational crises reshape the PC.

Theory underpinning the study

The social exchange theory (SET), pioneered by Hormans (1958), was used. The SET acknowledges that two or more people in a relationship have tangible or intangible exchanges between themselves (Blau, 2017). Furthermore, the theory emphasises the reciprocal nature of relationships and highlights that the desirable behaviour of one party prompts the actions of another (Haynie et al., 2016; Xueyun et al., 2023). Social exchange theory plausibly underpins the PC, with employees expecting employers to fulfil their expectations and, in turn, aligning with the organisation's expectations. However, a perceived imbalance, as a result of unfulfilled expectations, can strain this relationship and produce undesirable employee behaviours (Topa et al., 2022). For instance, although COVID-19 triggered unprecedented changes, the contrast between how employees conducted themselves and how organisations responded may have shifted the balance and failed to meet employee expectations.

The psychological contract

Argyris introduced the PC in the 1960s and conceptualised it as the implicit expectations between management and their subordinates (Bal & Vantilborgh, 2019; Roehling, 1997). Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni later reconceptualised it as the perceived mutual promises and informal obligations held by and between the organisation and its members (Karani et al., 2022; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994). For employees, this concept typically includes support, job security, work-life balance, development, and remuneration – whilst performance, cooperation, and loyalty align more with the

employer (Dhanpat & Parumasur, 2014; Lopez & Fuiks, 2021). When PCs are fulfilled, they tend to lead to job satisfaction, work engagement, and affective commitment (Karani et al., 2022; Yu, 2024). However, when unfulfilled, it can generate PC breaches or violations. Breach occurs when there is a mental evaluation and acceptance that expectations or obligations are unmet, whereas a violation is often triggered by a breach and results in an emotional reaction of betrayal and loss (Dwiyanti & Naimah, 2018; Ronnie et al., 2022). A breach or violation is associated with job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, work alienation, and intentions to quit (Mathebula & Mitonga-Monga, 2022; Mekawy et al., 2021). This study explores whether the pandemic-induced breach led to a more profound re-evaluation of the fundamental terms of the contract for women managers.

The psychological contract of managers

Whilst extensive research exists on the PCs of general employees (see Ngobeni et al., 2022), the PCs of managers remain distinctly under-researched (see De Jong et al., 2021). Compared to other employees, managers generally shoulder a broader range of responsibilities, as the expectations placed on them include greater loyalty, availability, and responsibility for team outcomes (Oorschot et al., 2021). Emphasising the pressured role of managers, Lee and Taylor (2014) highlight that managers occupy a unique dual role: they are both agents of the employer, prioritising organisational goals whilst fulfilling organisational promises to employees themselves, who have their own set of needs and expectations from the organisation. This situation often creates a conflict of commitment, in which managers must prioritise overall organisational duties at the expense of their personal time and well-being (Haricharan, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic acutely intensified these managerial pressures as managers were mandated to ensure organisational performance whilst facilitating and managing the impact of change on their subordinates (Ahlqvist et al., 2023; Olkowicz & Jarosik-Michalak, 2022). Therefore, the expectation of special accommodations and additional support may have been inevitable.

Women managers in crisis: Pre- and pandemic contexts

Women have traditionally and solely been relegated to domestic responsibilities such as raising children, caring for the elderly, preparing food, and planning household schedules (Power, 2020). However, with the implementation of national workplace legislation like the *Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998*, the *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 55 of 2003*, and international initiatives such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 to promote gender equality, women have an increasing presence in the workplace (Bosch & Baritis, 2020; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Moreover, this has contributed to the gradual representation of women in management positions (Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker,

2021). However, researchers argue that the representation is marginal and is not reflective of true parity (Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2021; Mabaso, 2023), with women assuming only 26.5% of top and 37.2% of senior management positions in South Africa (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023).

Although women are slowly populating the workplace, acknowledging that they shoulder more weight in households is imperative (Mussida & Patimo, 2021). It is therefore plausible that life can be more demanding for them, as they are expected to fulfil home responsibilities satisfactorily whilst carrying out their work responsibilities effectively. This is often referred to as the double burden and has resulted in unique work-life balance and health challenges for women (Mussida & Patimo, 2021; Oo et al., 2021). It is critical to note that women's experiences are not monolithic. Factors such as partnership status, number and ages of children, access to childcare, socioeconomic resources, and workplace seniority create varied experiences of the double burden (Mussida & Patimo, 2021). However, research consistently shows that across these differences, disproportionate challenges are faced by women as a group, compared to men (Dinella et al., 2023).

The occurrence and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced and exacerbated the challenges women faced before the pandemic (Adisa et al., 2020; Mussida & Patimo, 2021). During the pandemic, women had to spend more time attending to the needs of their partners and children following the closure of or restricted workplace presence and school attendance (Adisa et al., 2020). Moreover, they were expected to tend to the frequent ill health of family members (Tayal & Mehta, 2022). Compared to that of men, women's physical and psychological well-being is also relatively more compromised. The former occurs as a result of the many hours devoted to multiple roles, whilst the latter is common with the stress of foregoing opportunities as a result of being overburdened at home or overlooked at work (Mussida & Patimo, 2021; Oo et al., 2021).

If we acknowledge the double burden of women and the intensified role of managers, it is plausible that, relative to other women employees and managers in general, the challenges of women are compounded. This finding is supported by Shukla et al. (2023) and Hossny et al. (2022), who indicate that, in addition to their increased household responsibilities during the pandemic, women in management positions had to devote additional attention to their subordinates during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the onset to the tail end of the pandemic, managers were mandated to devise strategies for ensuring continuous productivity, championing change, taking cognisance of and promoting the compromised physical and mental health of employees, and managing reduced workforce capacity as a result of ill health, absenteeism, or presenteeism (Hossny et al., 2022; Shukla et al., 2023). Therefore, women managers were extensively overburdened both personally and professionally.

The psychological contract of women managers and the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic

The research on the PC of managers and women is limited. Accordingly, this study primarily relies on pre-pandemic research concerning the PCs of women and managers as a basis for exploring the PCs of women in management. Research before the pandemic reveals that women faced numerous expectations and perceived obligations from their employers. For instance, women lag as a result of their delayed access to education and entry into workplaces. Therefore, they tend to anticipate learning opportunities from employers (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). This may especially be the case for women who want to maintain or advance their managerial roles. Additionally, women are entering traditionally male-dominated work environments and expect that employers will ensure a more inclusive work environment (McQuerry et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2024). Moreover, they require organisations to be mindful of their uniqueness and seek alternative work arrangements to accommodate women-specific challenges such as being new mothers (Pandita et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2024). Whilst this uniqueness must be embraced, women, after decades of being exposed to inequality, also seek parity in work allocation and remuneration (Dosunmu & Dichaba, 2024; Taylor et al., 2024).

Following the unprecedented social and work changes facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, women prioritised and embraced the value of flexible work arrangements to accommodate their multiple and increased responsibilities (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Ronnie et al., 2022). Although not specifically for women or managers, researchers find that clearly communicated plans for navigating the pandemic, health and security precautions, and assurance of job security were critical for most employees to remain committed and strive towards organisational objectives (Löffert & Diehl, 2023; Sekaja et al., 2022).

Research design

Research philosophy and approach

The research philosophy frames the researcher's mind and provides guidelines about the research methods appropriate for a study (Saunders et al., 2019). Common philosophical branches include ontology and epistemology (Saunders et al., 2019). With women managers' experiences and perceptions at the centre of this study, the researchers adopted a subjective ontological stance which acknowledges that reality is shaped by people and submits that there are multiple realities (Don-Solomon & Eke, 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Accordingly, interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that reality is subjective and socially constructed, was adopted (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In line with the philosophical stances of the researchers, a qualitative research approach was employed in this study.

Population and sample

Non-probability sampling, particularly purposive sampling, was used. This sampling technique enabled the researchers

to establish a suitable criterion to select participants (Sharma, 2017). To participate in this study, participants had to satisfy these criteria: (1) identify as women, (2) be in top, senior, or middle-management positions, and (3) have worked from the time COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 to the tail end and post the lifting of the pandemic status by WHO on 05 May 2023. Participants fulfilling these criteria and of different ages, races, educational levels and marital statuses were allowed to partake in the study.

Data collection method and procedure

To ensure both guidance and participant flexibility during data collection (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), the study used semi-structured interviews. Permission was sought from the targeted SOE for research. Once permission was granted, an email invite was distributed throughout the organisation to allow participants to volunteer for the study. Upon indication of interest and consent by the participants, an appointment was scheduled. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, via Zoom, and via MS Teams between February 2023 and July 2023 and stopped at 16 participants when data saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2020).

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. As shown in the table below, the age range of the participants was between 31 and 61, and most participants (75%) held middle-management positions.

Data analysis

The study used thematic analysis, following the six-step approach of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2023). Thematic analysis identifies patterns in qualitative data, providing insight into participants' experiences and perceptions (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Respectively, the researchers: (1) familiarised themselves with the interview data by listening to the audio recordings and thoroughly reading the interview transcripts, (2) coded the data by examining the responses of all participants per question to choose or formulate descriptive words or phrases representing the participant's expressions, (3) generated initial themes by

TABLE 1: Profile of the participants.

Participant	Age (years)	Marital status	Children	Level of seniority	Ethnicity
1	43	Single	1	Middle-management	African
2	40	Married	2	Top management	African
3	53	Married	2	Top management	Indian
4	61	Single	0	Middle-management	Indian
5	34	Married	2	Middle-management	African
6	46	Married	2	Top management	African
7	52	Married	2	Middle-management	White
8	59	Married	2	Top management	African
9	51	Married	2	Middle-management	African
10	48	Married	1	Middle-management	African
11	46	Single (divorced)	1	Middle-management	African
12	53	Married	2	Middle-management	African
13	42	Single	1	Middle-management	African
14	32	Single	0	Middle-management	African
15	39	Single (divorced)	3	Middle-management	Coloured
16	48	Married	2	Middle-management	African

clustering codes and identifying the broad and common data patterns, (4) developed and reviewed themes through assessing the relevance of the emerging themes, (5) refined, defined, and named the themes by editing the theme names and making sense of the themes in the context of the study, and finally, (6) completed the write-up by organising and systematically presenting the themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Strategies to ensure data quality and integrity

Strategies to promote credibility, dependability, conformability, and trustworthiness were adopted to ensure research accuracy and quality (Stahl & King, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility refers to the alignment between the participant's expressions and the researcher's interpretation and was earned through an in-depth analysis and continuous revisiting of the data (Connelly, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability is concerned with consistency and the attainment of similar results by other researchers and was ensured through stepwise replication, in which researchers analysed the data separately and compared the results (Anney, 2014). Confirmability encourages strategies to reduce bias and maintain neutrality in data analysis and was ensured through bracketing to help researchers refrain from imposing their own views and beliefs (Connelly, 2016). Finally, transferability, which pertains to the applicability of the research findings across similar contexts, was achieved through a thick description in which the research objectives, context, sampling, and data collection methods were detailed (Younas et al., 2023).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management Research Ethics Committee (No. IPPM-2022-691[M]). Thereafter, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights to withdraw without reprisal before obtaining their consent to partake in the study (Akaranga & Makau, 2016). Consent was also requested for audio recordings of the interviews. By starting the interviews on time and actively listening, the researchers ensured that the participants were respected. Confidentiality was also maintained by ensuring that data access was restricted to the researchers and assigning numbers to the participants in place of their names (Saunders et al., 2019).

Results

Five primary themes with associated sub-themes were identified after thematic analysis. The consolidated themes are summarised in Table 2 and are detailed thereafter.

Theme 1: Employee expectations

Participants conveyed the expectations held during the pandemic and upon the return to work post the lifting of restrictions post-pandemic, which centred on three consistent

sub-themes: (1) communication and support, (2) measures to promote overall health, and (3) flexible work arrangements.

Sub-theme 1.1: Communication and support

Participants expected clear, ongoing communication and robust support structures throughout all phases of the pandemic. This situation was evidenced by the following statements:

'Expectation ... sit down with us, tell us what to do ... what this pandemic is all about. ... Instead, we learnt as we went on.' (P1)

Support for managers was also a key expectation, as highlighted by Participant 16:

'The expectation that we had as part of a management was, they support on the pandemic on how to support our employees, so we needed more support from top management and understanding of the impact of the COVID on employees.' (P16)

As COVID-19 subsided and stricter lockdown restrictions were lifted, most employees were expected to resume normal office operations. However, upon returning to work, women in management highlighted the need for organisational support structures to facilitate a gradual and guided transition back into the workplace for both employees and them. This view is evidenced by Participant 10, who noted:

'The employer needs to understand that the change needs to happen gradually with the employees. ... Help our employees to move back into the normal functioning.' (P10)

Sub-theme 1.2: Measures to promote overall health

At the height of the pandemic, expectations that employers would prioritise physical and psychological health were significant. Participants expected stringent safety measures and expressed:

'First expectation was for the organisation to keep all its employees as safe as possible ... the safety of everyone and thereafter, their business on its own.' (P11)

'Expectation was that the premises would be sanitised, that we would have enough PPE [*Personal Protective Equipment*], sanitisers, etcetera, so that we would be safe.' (P7)

TABLE 2: Summary of consolidated themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Employee Expectations	1.1 Communication and Support 1.2 Measures to Promote Overall Health 1.3 Flexible Work Arrangements
2. Perceived Employer Expectations: Sustained Performance and Adaptability	2.1 Continued Commitment to Work 2.2 Availability and Flexibility 2.3 Abrupt Return to Normalcy
3. Positive Experiences and Fulfilled Expectations	3.1 Job and Income Security 3.2 Increased Connection to Work 3.3 Openness to Flexible Work Arrangements
4. Unfulfilled Expectations: Lack of Care and Appreciation	-
5. Enduring Employee Expectations	5.1 Equal Treatment and Fairness 5.2 Professional Development and Empowerment 5.3 Accommodations for Women's Unique Needs

In addition to their physical health, the participants expected the employer to prioritise their psychological well-being. Huppert (2009) and Ryff (2018) described psychological well-being as the state of optimal mental functioning and experiencing of positive emotions. This state was captured by participant 14, who expressed that:

'To provide wellness support ... mental health ... access to counselling.' (P14)

In response to the severe impact and loss of life caused by the pandemic, women in management placed a high priority on physical health and stressed the need for ongoing health precautions and provisions as they returned to regular office operations. They expressed:

'My expectation is ... the workplace should be safe, that we should not encounter unnecessary risks in terms of health and safety.' (P7)

'Yes, for women is to look at the PPE and see if it is user friendly for women.' (P8)

Participants also consistently expected support for their psychological well-being and mentioned:

'Wish there was a postmortem that would, kind or, that would help people in general ... everybody could debrief.' (P6)

Sub-theme 1.3: Flexible work arrangements

The expectation for accommodative work arrangements to ensure safety and work-life balance was prominent during the pandemic and became a sustained expectation even post the pandemic status.

During the pandemic, participants stated:

'Expectations were that we were allowed to work from home ... rotating in that period.' (P5)

'Flexible options for the organisation ... work remotely ... working, flexi working ... taking a hybrid approach.' (P4)

Post-pandemic, participants anticipated the continuation of flexibility, valuing the improved work-life balance:

'I expected them to maintain ... the working from home hybrid model ... I think they should make women's life easier, the issue of work-life balance ... during COVID, it was easy ... in a sense that at least the person could take children to school, face them while they're working.' (P6)

'... [O]nline, it really helped a lot because it saved time, it saved petrol, it save[s] lot of things.' (P16)

Some participants also expected flexibility as a form of recognition for their efforts during the pandemic:

'So, during the pandemic, because I worked so hard, I even worked overtime. I missed out on certain milestones that my children went through. I still want my time that I invested back then. ... I really expect the employer to be empathetic....' (P2)

Theme 2: Perceived employer expectations: Sustained performance and adaptability

At the height of the pandemic, participants perceived their employers as expecting: (1) continued commitment to work, (2) availability and flexibility, and later, following the lifting of the pandemic status, (3) an abrupt return to normalcy.

Sub-theme 2.1: Continued commitment to work

Participants perceived an expectation to maintain performance despite pandemic challenges:

'The expectations that I perceived that the organisation would have is that for me to continue to perform and meet the organisation's KPI in spite of the pandemic.' (P14)

'The organisation expected us to work as normal ... deliver, but at the same time were at the risk of getting this infection ...' (P9)

Sub-theme 2.2: Availability and flexibility

Participants felt an expectation to be highly accessible and adaptable post-pandemic:

'Employer has now figured out that ... able to give 24 hours of our time ... compromises our personal lives.' (P2)

Sub-theme 2.3: Abrupt return to normalcy

Participants perceived an expectation to abruptly revert to pre-pandemic norms without consideration for adjusted circumstances:

'Employer expects me to be back at work ... fulfil my requirements as expected with minimal disruptions.' (P8)

'Expectations that the employer has right now, it for us to assist our employees in ... moving back into normal duties and functioning as they did before the COVID.' (P10)

Participants felt that this disregarded their need to adjust and further expressed:

'Psychologically, I was used to working from home ... they expected me to go back to normal, run with the things.' (P6)

'I must say, they expected us be light switches ... some parents like myself are single parents and aftercare, transport all those facilities were no longer there ... then the expectation of that then was its business as usual.' (P15)

Theme 3: Positive experiences and fulfilled expectations

Some participants expressed that they were satisfied with the organisation's actions or found joy in their work during and as a result of the pandemic. This outcome is captured in three sub-themes: (1) job and income security, (2) increased connection to work, and (3) openness to flexible work arrangements.

Sub-theme 3.1: Job and income security

Participants expressed gratitude for maintained employment and income:

'I think many of us are very grateful that we still have a job following COVID ... I'm very grateful for the fact that we don't have to worry about where our next meal is going to come from.' (P12)

'From my side, fortunately, nothing changed much. We still, we still earn the same salary. We still have the same benefits.' (P6)

'Despite the country's situation, or the world at large, we can still maintain our families, so I'm just humbled by that.' (P11)

Sub-theme 3.2: Increased connection to work

Some participants felt more engaged and connected to their work:

'In terms of impact ... it taught us we can do more even if we are less and do more even if we are more.' (P14)

'And if I must talk about my level of engagement, I think, after the pandemic, I feel more engaged ... Employees have come to depend on HR a lot more' (P3)

Sub-theme 3.3: Openness to flexible work arrangements

Participants valued the adoption of flexible work policies:

'I could work so many hours and then take maybe an hour or two off if I needed it for personal time or family time. And then I would make up the time later in the evening.' (P4)

'On a scale of 1 to 10 during COVID, I would give maybe a 8 to say they tried, especially, when they accommodated the older people to give them the option to go and sit at home ... it considered the safety of people' (P13)

Theme 4: Unfulfilled expectations: Lack of employee care and appreciation

Although positive experiences were reported, some participants expressed that expectations of care and appreciation were not met, damaging the PC:

'The morale is down ... they do not care they just care about numbers that you are at work ... then you can do whatever that they want ... not looking into what is impacting us or what challenges am I facing as the supervisor.' (P1)

'I'm only good enough when I meet employers' expectations ... but when my expectations are put on the table, then player does not exercise the same courtesy ... so, it has now become a pure contractual relationship.' (P2)

This failure led to disengagement and a loss of trust:

'With my expectations not being met, I feel that if I can resign today and also get another offer, I'll do it, because I feel our managers do not worry about the things we worry about ... the trust relationship is been broken ... I always thought I'm working for the employer of choice ... but, I've lost my faith in the employer.' (P15)

Theme 5: Enduring employee expectations

Participants highlighted longstanding expectations that predated and were amplified by the pandemic, including: (1) equal treatment, (2) professional development, and (3) accommodations for their unique needs.

Sub-theme 5.1: Equal treatment and fairness

Participants advocated for gender equity in treatment and opportunity:

'I think there should just be that fairness across the board towards us, the female counterparts, as same as they are giving the male counterparts. That's it. Not expecting much, just for us to be treated the same and to be paid the same way as they are.' (P1)

Sub-theme 5.2: Professional development and empowerment

To facilitate their professional advancement and improve their competence and confidence in their management positions, the participants expressed:

'I think there's still need to be more empowerment of women, maybe if there could be somewhat, like, you know, any form of empowerment ... If they could be some form of training ... women can be able to qualify for those positions ... grow.' (P12)

'More women in senior management ... allow woman that opportunity. Even if they allow to shadow senior male colleagues and given the opportunity to learn by shadowing them.' (P4)

Participants also noted a need for women to support one another:

'I believe us as women somewhere somehow ... we do not support one another ... we really need the support ... we need to grow and support each other ... we are still lacking there.' (P13)

'That women's forum can also ... that you know that this is the training that comes straight from me, Women's Forum for women.' (P12)

Sub-theme 5.3: Accommodations for women's unique needs

Participants shared gender-specific challenges requiring special accommodation:

'So, for me, if they could be a better flexibility for mothers ... around hours and expectations and you know, children having to go to the doctor, etcetera.' (P7)

'We must be given the opportunity to attend antenatal class as well. Working from home ... and then after we come back from maternity leave, we must work flexible hours, not 8 to 4, so that we can be able to go back and do them, continue with our ... breastfeeding ... crèches on-site.' (P9)

'And I'd say that an employer should incorporate specialty days for women, especially through the – during pregnancy and menstruation because it's very difficult to perform at work during those periods, especially at, say, when you are in the office.' (P14)

Discussion

The following discussion relates specifically to the experiences of women managers in this essential service context and may not generalise to all women managers.

RO1: To explore women managers' own and perceived expectations during coronavirus disease 2019

The findings indicate that women managers navigated both the expectations common to most employees and the additional aspects inherent to their role. The sub-themes of promoting health and flexible work (Theme 1) emerged as

significant priorities throughout the pandemic. This observation is aligned with findings by Daniels et al. (2022) and Maamri et al. (2021), who reported physical health as a major concern for most employees and acknowledged the increased requests for psychological assistance during this time. A key finding that corroborates existing literature is the emphasis on the need for PPE designed for women's anthropometry (McQuerry et al., 2023; Onyebeke et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the consistent sub-theme of communication and support highlights women managers' unique position as both employees and implementers of organisational strategy, a challenge less acute for non-managerial staff (Udod et al., 2024). Similarly, Ronnie et al. (2022) found that women in academia required clear communication from managerial levels above them during the pandemic. Communication, support, health, and flexible work emphasise the fundamental desire for organisational efforts to match their devotion to organisational duties, a core tenet of the PC (Schalk & Ruiter, 2019).

Conversely, their perceptions of employer expectations (Theme 2) relating to sustained performance, constant availability, and an abrupt return to normalcy shed light on the demanding, inflexible organisational expectations. This situation creates a clear tension between 'give' and 'take' within the social exchange (Blau, 2017). The expectation of unwavering commitment, constant availability, and flexibility reflected a disregard for women's increased personal demands and intensified the already extensive responsibilities inherent in their managerial roles. Additionally, the perception of an 'abrupt return to normalcy' suggested a dismissal of the immense personal and professional adaptations made during the pandemic. This finding is consistent with Ronnie et al. (2022), who noted that women felt overwhelmed by unaltered performance expectations despite their reduced capacity.

RO2: To understand the implications of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic on the psychological contract of women managers

The findings suggest differences and implications of met and unmet expectations; Theme 3 (Fulfilled Expectations) and Theme 4 (Unfulfilled Expectations). Some perceived the provision of job security and openness to flexibility (Theme 3) by the organisation as a successful fulfilment of the PC, reinforcing a relational bond based on mutual loyalty. This sense of gratitude was particularly pronounced given the widespread job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic period and the broader South African context of high unemployment (Daniels et al., 2022; Montenovio et al., 2022; Stats SA, 2023). The reflections by the participants support Sekaja et al.'s (2022) findings that stability was a key priority for employees during the pandemic, and that employees remained thankful and committed as a result. Additionally, the study found that fulfilment was derived from the work itself. This finding is captured in the sub-theme 'increased connection to work' (Theme 3) and aligns with Van Zoonen et al. (2022), who report that despite the negative effects of COVID-19, some

employees used the period to reflect on the significance of their work, leading to greater work engagement.

For others, however, the perceived lack of care and appreciation (Theme 4) constituted a significant PC breach, leading to feelings of betrayal and a strategic withdrawal of goodwill. Participants' descriptions of the relationship signalled a loss of faith in the employer, which typically indicates a contract breach (Dwiyanti & Naimah, 2018). This breach can be explained by the perceived organisational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020); when employees feel their extra effort is not recognised, they reciprocate with reduced commitment and engagement (Mitonga-Monga & Mageza-Mokhethi, 2025). This finding suggests that the pandemic catalysed a strategic recalibration of the PC for women managers, from a relational contract towards a more transactional one. The organisation's actions during this crisis period became a measure for trust and reciprocity, with lasting consequences.

Importantly, the varied experiences suggest that PC fulfilment during crises is not uniform. Organisational actions that prioritised security and flexibility preserved relational contracts for some participants, suggesting that the quality of response to a crisis significantly influences long-term contractual outcomes.

This study advances PC theory by demonstrating that organisational crises do not merely alter contract content but can fundamentally transform contract type. Previous research documented changing expectations during COVID-19 (Löffert & Diehl, 2023; Mekawy et al., 2021), but our findings reveal a deeper shift: from relational contracts based on mutual loyalty to transactional contracts based on formal obligations. This transformation is particularly pronounced for women managers in essential services, whose inability to access flexible work arrangements, a key crisis mitigation strategy, exposed the limits of organisational reciprocity. The study thus extends SET by showing how perceived imbalances during crises can trigger lasting contractual recalibration, with gendered implications for post-pandemic employment relationships.

RO3: To identify women managers' own and perceived expectations post the pandemic

The post-pandemic expectations detailed in Theme 5 (Enduring Employee Expectations) and the sustained desire for flexibility in Theme 1 demonstrate that the pandemic did not create new demands but amplified and gave urgency to pre-existing gendered workplace challenges. The call for equal treatment, professional development, and accommodations for women's unique needs highlights that the pandemic experience was filtered through the lens of gender.

Like other studies and despite the South African legislative measures to counteract this (Bosch & Barit, 2020; Dosunmu & Dichaba, 2024), this study finds that women managers continue to battle against unequal treatment and respect.

This study also highlights that support for professional development remains a significant challenge for women in management. This conclusion aligns with findings that women are often compelled to seek out their own mentors to sustain and advance their careers whilst navigating and countering hegemonic masculinity (Dosunmu & Dichaba, 2024; Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021). Furthermore, the expectation for flexible work arrangements post-pandemic (Theme 1) and accommodation for women's unique needs (Theme 5) suggests that the need to accommodate women is no longer a temporary convenience but a non-negotiable term of the revised PC for women managers. This finding aligns with global trends showing that women often prefer alternative work arrangements (Pandita et al., 2024; Sekaja et al., 2022; Waldrep et al., 2024), a preference further reinforced in the South African context by the prevalent concerns about safety, lengthy commutes, and inadequate public transport. The findings further corroborate research by Taylor et al. (2024) and Howe et al. (2023), who argue for workplace policies that specifically address women's needs or circumstances.

Theoretical contributions and practical implications

The study confirms the established importance of flexible work, well-being, clear communication, and support in the literature and highlights that their collective significance lies in a fundamental recalibration of the PC itself for women managers. This study moves beyond cataloguing expectations to provide a novel theoretical insight: not only did the pandemic alter the content of the PC (e.g. adding hybrid work or wellness support), but also the findings highlighted the strained core principle of reciprocity underpinning the SET. The study's primary theoretical contribution highlights the perceived failure of the employer to acknowledge intensified domestic labour and balance the immense, gendered contributions during the crisis (e.g. commitment, perpetual availability, and management of change and trauma amongst subordinates) with organisational support and accommodation for their unique needs and circumstances. This failure triggered a crisis of trust that catalysed a significant shift in the nature of the contract from relational (built on mutual loyalty, trust, and stability) to transactional (based primarily on meeting formal obligations, as evidenced by participants' statements about their work becoming a pure contractual relationship). To encapsulate this insight, we propose the following conceptual model (Figure 1). This model delineates the evolution of the PC through the pandemic era, mapping the points at which reciprocity was perceived to break down and the resultant contractual shift. This model provides a novel framework for future research to understand the long-term impact of organisational crises on gendered managerial roles, moving beyond the pandemic context.

The practical implications of this are significant, and organisations are recommended to not simply offer flexible working policies but also to understand that such policies are

now the primary litmus test for organisational reciprocity and trust. To rebuild relational trust and reciprocity, organisations must implement specific, measurable policies as follows:

- Workplace arrangements need to be formalised through policy and within employment contracts, and not as temporary concessions.
- For employees who are considered essential services requiring physical presence, implement flexible scheduling, such as compressed workweeks or shift-swapping systems.
- Organisational leaders need to establish crisis management protocols that are gender-responsive by creating dedicated support structures for managers with caregiving responsibilities, including emergency childcare provisions, extended leave options, and workload redistribution mechanisms during crises.
- Leaders and managers need to regularly assess perceived reciprocity through anonymous surveys and focus groups, particularly following major organisational changes, to identify and address breaches before they result in violations.

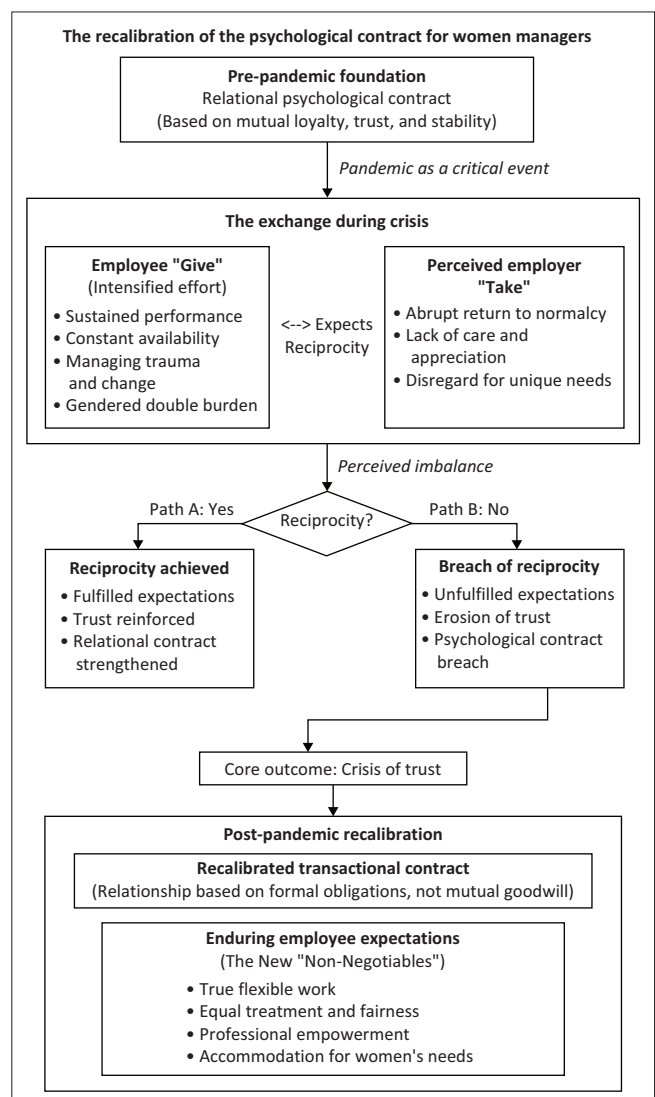


FIGURE 1: The recalibration of the psychological contract.

These interventions must be accompanied by leadership training on gendered labour recognition and genuine commitment from executive levels to ensure implementation integrity.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

The researchers observed a few limitations to be addressed by other scholars. Firstly, the data were collected at the tail end of the pandemic when many individuals had already returned to work. This timing may have reduced the immediacy or depth of participants' recollections about their pandemic experiences. Longitudinal designs could better capture shifts in expectations during and after disruptive events. Secondly, the study relies on women managers' perceptions of what is expected of them. Future studies are encouraged to target both the employer and employees to gain more accurate insights about the expectations of employers. Thirdly, the exclusive concentration of the study on an SOE restricts the diversity of experiences and expectations of women managers. As such, the transferability of the findings is limited. Future research should adopt a more diverse sample of women managers from various industries and sizes of organisations.

Conclusion

The importance of these findings lies not only in recognising these established expectations but also in their broader implications. This study has moved beyond reiterating well-known workplace issues to illuminate a profound theoretical shift. This study reveals that the pandemic served as a critical juncture that exposed the delicateness of reciprocity in the PCs of women managers. The collective experience of performing immense labour, without adequate acknowledgement of personal circumstance or support, and the perceived imbalance resulted in a re-evaluation of the employment relationship. The emergence of a more transactional outlook, as evidenced by participants, is not merely a finding but also a significant new lens for understanding the long-term impact of organisational crises on gendered managerial roles and the post-crisis career engagement of women. Importantly, the focus of this study on essential service managers reveals unique pressures absent in remote-work contexts: the inability to reduce workplace exposure whilst managing heightened domestic demands exceptionally strained reciprocity. Consequently, this study informs researchers and organisations of these evolving and deeply interconnected experiences and expectations, encouraging further enquiry into the topic. More importantly, the study draws attention to the critical importance of devising strategies that rebuild relational contracts based on demonstrated reciprocity, and in doing so, help to fulfil PCs and mitigate against breach or violation.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. The author, Nelesh Dhanpat, serves as

an editorial board member of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this article. The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

CRediT authorship contribution

Boitumelo W. Makhubele: Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Nelesh Dhanpat: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology Supervision, Writing – original draft. Sesemana S. Makhasane: Data curation, Investigation. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data for this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, Boitumelo W. Makhubele.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do 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

- Adeoye-Olatunde, O.A., & Olenik, N.L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358-1367.
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-07-2020-0036>
- Ahlqvist, A., Nurmeksela, A., & Kvist, T. (2023). The COVID-19 pandemic challenged nurse managers' daily leadership work: A qualitative study. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 2023(1), 8191426. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/8191426>
- Akaranga, S.I., & Makau, B.K. (2016). Ethical considerations and their applications to research: A case of the University of Nairobi. *Journal of Educational Policy and Entrepreneurial Research*, 3(12), 1-9.
- Anney, V.N. (2014). Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(2), 272-281.a
- Antwi, S.K., & Hamza, K. (2015). Qualitative and quantitative research paradigms in business research: A philosophical reflection. *European Journal of Business Management*, 7(3), 217-225.
- Bal, P.M., & Vantilborgh, T. (2019). Lifespan perspectives on psychological contracts. In B.B. Baltes, C.W. Rudolph, & H. Zacher (Eds.), *Work across the lifespan* (pp. 455-474). Academic Press.
- Barkhuizen, E.N., Masakane, G., & Van der Sluis, L. (2022). In search of factors that hinder the career advancement of women to senior leadership positions. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 48, 1986. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v48i0.1986>
- Blau, P. (2017). *Exchange and power in social life*. Routledge.
- Bosch, A., & Baritis, S. (2020). Gender pay transparency mechanisms: Future directions for South Africa. *South African Journal of Science*, 116(3-4), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/6772>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and becoming a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Connelly, L.M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Medsurg Nursing*, 25(6), 435–436.
- Daniels, R.A., Miller, L.A., Mian, M.Z., & Black, S. (2022). One size does NOT fit all: Understanding differences in perceived organizational support during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Business and Society Review*, 127, 193–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/basr.12256>
- De Jong, J.P., Clinton, M., Bal, M., & Van der Heijden, B. (2021). Caught in the middle: How and when psychological contract breach by subordinates relates to weekly emotional exhaustion of supervisors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 464774. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.464774>
- Department of Employment and Labour. (2023). *About a quarter of females, sit in the top management level in SA labour market – Employment equity*. Retrieved from [https://www.labour.gov.za/about-a-quarter-of-females-sit-in-the-top-management-level-in-sa-labour-market-%E2%80%9393-employment-equity-\(2\)](https://www.labour.gov.za/about-a-quarter-of-females-sit-in-the-top-management-level-in-sa-labour-market-%E2%80%9393-employment-equity-(2))
- Dhanpat, N., & Parumasur, S.B. (2014). Re-establishing the psychological contract as a precursor to employee retention. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 12(4), 78–90.
- Dhanpat, N., Fransman, K., Mabotsa, T., Ngobeni, L., & Sithole, T.D. (2024). Establishing the job demands and resources of support staff of a mining organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy*, 6(5), 78–95. <https://doi.org/10.36096/ijbes.v6i5.686>
- Diab-Bahman, R., & Al-Enzi, A. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on conventional work settings. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(9/10), 909–927. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-07-2020-0262>
- Dinella, L.M., Evans, K., Levinson, J.A., & Gagnon, S. (2023). Women disproportionately shoulder burdens imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Social Issues*, 79(3), 1057–1087. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12591>
- Don-Solomon, A., & Eke, G.J. (2018). Ontological & epistemological philosophies underlying theory building: A scholarly dilemma or axiomatic illumination – The business research perspective. *European Journal of Business and Innovation Research*, 6(2), 1–7.
- Dosunmu, A.G., & Dichaba, M. (2024). Women and higher education: Access, equity, and opportunities for women in the workplace. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 38(4), 21–45. <https://doi.org/10.20853/38-4-5856>
- Dwiyanti, R., & Naimah, T. (2018). The role of organizational culture factors to psychological contracts (transactional contracts, balance contracts, and relational contracts). *Journal of Advanced Research in Law and Economics*, 9(8/38), 2570–2577. [https://doi.org/10.14505/jarle.v9.8\(38\).06](https://doi.org/10.14505/jarle.v9.8(38).06)
- Eisenberger, R., Rhoades Shanock, L., & Wen, X. (2020). Perceived organizational support: Why caring about employees counts. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 7(1), 101–124. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-044917>
- Freund, D., & Hernandez-Maskivker, G. (2021). Women managers in tourism: Associations for building a sustainable world. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 38, 100820. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100820>
- Galsanjigmed, E., & Sekiguchi, T. (2023). Challenges women experience in leadership careers: An integrative review. *Merits*, 3(2), 366–389. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits3020021>
- Garzillo, E.M., Cioffi, A., Carta, A., & Monaco, M.G.L. (2022). Returning to work after the COVID-19 pandemic earthquake: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(8), 4538. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19084538>
- Guest, D.E., & Conway, N. (2002). Communicating the psychological contract: An employer perspective. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 12(2), 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2002.tb00062.x>
- Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLoS One*, 15(5), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>
- Haricharan, S.J. (2023). Leadership, management and organisational implications for public service employee well-being and performance. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21, 2080. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v21i0.2080>
- Haynie, J.J., Mossholder, K.W., & Harris, S.G. (2016). Justice and job engagement: The role of senior management trust. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 37(6), 889–910.
- Hormans, G.C. (1958). Social behavior as exchange. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(6), 597–606. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222355>
- Hossny, E.K., Morsy, S.M., Ahmed, A.M., Saleh, M.S.M., Alenezi, A., & Sorour, M.S. (2022). Management of the COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges, practices, and organizational support. *BMC Nursing*, 21(1), 196. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-022-00972-5>
- Howe, D., Duffy, S., O'Shea, M., Hawkey, A., Wardle, J., Gerontakos, S., & Armour, M. (2023). Policies, guidelines, and practices supporting women's menstruation, menstrual disorders and menopause at work: A critical global scoping review. *Healthcare*, 11(22), 2945. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11222945>
- Huppert, F.A. (2009). Psychological well-being: Evidence regarding its causes and consequences. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well Being*, 1(2), 137–164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01008.x>
- Jacobs, S., Chrysler-Fox, P., & Van Wyk, R. (2020). Psychological contract breach and its influence on the job embeddedness of professional nurses. *African Journal of Nursing and Midwifery*, 22(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2520-5293/6586>
- Karani, A., Trivedi, P., & Thanki, H. (2022). Psychological contract and work outcomes during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 9(1), 149–168. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOEPP-09-2020-0186>
- Kaunda, E., & Pelser, T. (2023). Corporate governance and performance of state-owned enterprises in a least developed economy. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 54(1), a3827. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v54i1.3827>
- Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A.B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26>
- 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(3), 28–40. <https://doi.org/10.21303/2504-5571.2021.001778>
- Lee, J., & Taylor, M.S. (2014). Dual roles in psychological contracts: When managers take both agent and principal roles. *Human Resource Management Review*, 24(1), 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2013.03.001>
- Levinson, H., Price, C.R., Munden, K.J., Mandl, H.J., & Solley, C.M. (1962). *Men, management, and mental health*. Harvard University Press.
- Löffert, R.M., & Diehl, M.R. (2023). A psychological contract perspective to managing the employment relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic in the aviation industry. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34(15), 3023–3050. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2023.2215387>
- Lopez, P.D., & Fuiks, K. (2021). How COVID-19 is shifting psychological contracts within organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 14(1–2), 45–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.59>
- Maamri, N., Chaib, R., & Benidir, M. (2021). COVID-19 safety measures in companies for employees well-being and business sustainability. *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(3), 6687–6693.
- Mabaso, C. (2023). Exploring gender pay inequality: An inquiry in a South African mining organisation. *Expert Journal of Business and Management*, 11(2), 154–170. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v23i0.2855>
- Mathebula, M.L., & Mitonga-Monga, J. (2022). Organisational support: Associations with psychological contracts and turnover intention in the South African food manufacturing industry. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 32(6), 552–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2022.2121475>
- Matthews, B., & Ross, L. (2010). *Research methods*. Pearson Longman.
- McQuerry, M., Kwon, C., & Poley-Bogan, M. (2023). Female firefighters' increased risk of occupational exposure due to ill-fitting personal protective clothing. *Frontiers in Materials*, 10, 1175559. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmats.2023.1175559>
- Mekawy, M., Elbaz, A.M., Shabana, M.M., & Soliman, M. (2021). Breaking the psychological contract of travel agency employees during the COVID-19 pandemic: The moderating role of mindfulness. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 22(4), 387–402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14673584211054602>
- Metz, I., Kulik, C.T., Brown, M., & Cregan, C. (2012). Changes in psychological contracts during the global financial crisis: The manager's perspective. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23(20), 4359–4379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2012.667432>
- Mitonga-Monga, J., & Mageza-Mokhethi, M.E. (2025). Organisational support as a moderator between emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. *Acta Commercii*, 25(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v25i1.1344>
- Mogoai, D., Banda, S., Letsholo, T., Moloelang, N., & Tshabalala, N. (2024). Challenges experienced by women leaders and how these affect their decision making in organisations. *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives (JPADA)*, 9(2), 193–212. <https://doi.org/10.55190/JPADA.2024.334>
- Montenovo, L., Jiang, X., Lozano-Rojas, F., Schmutte, I., Simon, K., Weinberg, B.A., & Wing, C. (2022). Determinants of disparities in early COVID-19 job losses. *Demography*, 59(3), 827–855. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-9961471>
- Mpete, M., & Maier, C. (2024). Challenges faced by CEOs in executing turnaround strategies in state-owned enterprises in South Africa. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 55(1), a4220. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v55i1.4220>
- Mussida, C., & Patimo, R. (2021). Women's family care responsibilities, employment and health: A tale of two countries. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 42(3), 489–507. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-020-09742-4>
- Ngobeni, D.A., Saurombe, M.D., & Joseph, R.M. (2022). The influence of the psychological contract on employee engagement in a South African bank. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 958127. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.958127>
- Nowell, S.N., Norris, J.M., White, D.E., & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Olkowicz, J., & Jarosik-Michalak, A. (2022). The role of leadership in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. *WSB Journal of Business and Finance*, 56(1), 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.2478/wsbjbf-2022-0006>
- Onyebekwe, L.C., Papazaharias, D.M., Freund, A., Dropkin, J., McCann, M., Sanchez, S.H., Hashim, D., Meyer, J.D., Lucchini, R.G., & Zuckerman, N.C. (2016). Access to properly fitting personal protective equipment for female construction workers. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 59(11), 1032–1040. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.22624>
- Oo, B.L., Lim, T.H.B., & Zhang, Y. (2021). Women workforce in construction during the COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges and strategies. *Construction Economics and Building*, 21(4), 38–59. <https://doi.org/10.5130/AJCEB.v21i4.7643>
- Oorschot, J., Moscardo, G., & Blackman, A. (2021). Leadership style and psychological contract. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 30(1), 43–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416220983483>

- Pandita, D., Gupta, D., & Vapiwala, F. (2024). Rewinding back into the old normal: Why is return-to-office stressing employees out? *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 2024, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-023-09491-0>
- 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>
- Roehling, M.V. (1997). The origins and early development of the psychological contract construct. *Journal of Management History*, 3(2), 204–217. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13552529710171993>
- Ronnie, L., Du Plessis, M., & Walters, C. (2022). Women academics and the changing psychological contract during COVID-19 lockdown. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 940953. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.940953>
- Rousseau, D.M., & Wade-Benzoni, K.A. (1994). Linking strategy and human resource practices: How employee and customer contracts are created. *Human Resource Management*, 33(3), 463–489. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930330312>
- Ryff, C.D. (2018). Eudaimonic well-being: Highlights from 25 years of inquiry. In K. Shigemasu, S. Kuwano, T. Sato, & T. Matsuzawa (Eds.), *Diversity in harmony – Insights from psychology: Proceedings of the 31st International Congress of Psychology* (pp. 375–395). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Said, H., Ali, L., Ali, F., & Chen, X. (2021). COVID-19 and unpaid leave: Impacts of psychological contract breach on organizational distrust and turnover intention: Mediating role of emotional exhaustion. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 39, 100854. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100854>
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students*. Pearson Education.
- Schalk, R., & De Ruiter, M. (2019). Mutuality and reciprocity in the psychological contract: A critical review and analysis. In Y. Griep, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Handbook of research on the psychological contract at work* (pp. 35–62). Edward Elgar.
- Sekaja, L., Tully, C.A., Mahlangu, S., De Freitas, K., Tyelbooi, L.N., Mjojeli, B.P., Mokhehi, M.E., & Mabitsela, T. (2022). Thankful employees: The manifestation of gratitude at work during a pandemic in South Africa. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 941787. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.941787>
- Sharma, G. (2017). Pros and cons of different sampling techniques. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 3(7), 749–752.
- Shukla, B., Sufi, T., Joshi, M., & Sujatha, R. (2023). Leadership challenges for Indian hospitality industry during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 6(4), 1502–1520. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-08-2021-0217>
- Stahl, N.A., & King, J.R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26–28.
- Stats SA. (2023, November 14). Employment surpasses pre-COVID levels in SA. Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16809>
- Tayal, D., & Mehta, A.K. (2022). The struggle to balance work and family life during the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights based on the situations of working women in Delhi. *Journal of Family Issues*, 44(6), 1423–1465. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211058817>
- Taylor, T., Doherty, A., & Kerwin, S. (2024). *Managing People in Sport Organizations: A Strategic Human Resource Management Perspective* (3rd edn.). Routledge.
- Topa, G., Aranda-Carmena, M., & De-Maria, B. (2022). Psychological contract breach and outcomes: A systematic review of reviews. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(23), 15527. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192315527>
- Turnley, W.H., & Feldman, D.C. (1998). Psychological contract violations during corporate restructuring. *Human Resource Management*, 37(1), 71–83. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-050X\(199821\)37:1%3C71::AID-HRM7%3E3.0.CO;2-S](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-050X(199821)37:1%3C71::AID-HRM7%3E3.0.CO;2-S)
- Udod, S., Baxter, P., Gagnon, S., Halas, G., & Raja, S. (2024). Experiences of frontline managers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Recommendations for organizational resilience. *Healthcare*, 12(3), 407. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12030407>
- Van Zoonen, W., Rice, R.E., & Ter Hoeven, C.L. (2022). Sensemaking by employees in essential versus non-essential professions during the COVID-19 crisis: A comparison of effects of change communication and disruption cues on mental health, through interpretations of identity threats and work meaningfulness. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 36(2), 318–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189221087633>
- Vantilborgh, T., Yang, Y., & Du, J. (2020). A temporal perspective on psychological contracts. In *Handbook on the temporal dynamics of organizational behavior* (pp. 118–133).
- Waldrep, C.E., Fritz, M., & Glass, J. (2024). Preferences for remote and hybrid work: Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Sciences*, 13(6), 303. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13060303>
- Xueyun, Z., Al Mamun, A., Masukujjaman, M., Rahman, M.K., Gao, J., & Yang, Q. (2023). Modelling the significance of organizational conditions on quiet quitting intention among Gen Z workforce in an emerging economy. *Scientific reports*, 13(1), 15438.
- Younas, A., Fàbregues, S., Durante, A., Escalante, E.L., Inayat, S., & Ali, P. (2023). Proposing the ‘MIRACLE’ narrative framework for providing thick description in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 160940692211471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221147162>
- Yu, J. (2024). Impacts of psychological contract fulfillment on work attitudes and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic: Mediating role of perceived organizational support. *Current Psychology*, 43(16), 14851–14860. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03746-z>