# PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT: A CASE OF FEMALE HOUSEHOLD HEADS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIP

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─Abstract ─

A survey of literature indicates unemployment as one of the most important challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa. The country's unemployment rate has been consistently above 20 per cent and this makes finding employment difficult. There is great variation in female labour force participation across the world, with females experiencing a higher unemployment rate than males, and South Africa is not immune from this trend. This research paper is based on the findings of a household survey conducted in the township of Bophelong, South Africa. The aim was to identify the factors that influence unemployment among female household heads (hereafter referred to as female heads). We conveniently surveyed 300 female heads in order to determine their general employment status, and the perceived barriers to getting employment and found that 72 per cent of the sampled population were unemployed. Descriptive statistics and regression were used to assess the relationship between barriers to entry into the workforce and other demographic factors. The results showed that most unemployed female heads within Bophelong perceive that the most prominent barriers are lack of qualifications, lack of experience, lack of skills and failure to conduct themselves properly during an interview. Findings of this study established a relationship

between the demographic factors and barriers to entry into the workforce with female employment status. These findings are important for the formulation of policies to alleviate the seemingly high unemployment rate amongst this segment of the population. These unemployed female heads of Bophelong believe that an improvement in their education levels; personal skills and/or general literacy levels will increase their chances of gaining employment.

**Key Words:** Barriers; education; employment; female; township;

**JEL Classification:** R11; P46

## 1. INTRODUCTION

(International Labour Organization, 2019) estimated that 172 million people globally were unemployed in 2018 and the continued increase in macroeconomics risks has had a negative impact on the labour market of most countries. There is a projection of a further increase in the number of unemployed people to 174 million in 2020. This is alarming, especially for developing countries such as South Africa. South Africa's unemployment is amongst the highest in the developing world with the unemployment rate that has been above 25 per cent for over a decade following the democratic change in 1994 (Chang, 2014). The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) notes the official unemployment rate of 29 per cent for the 2nd quarter of 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2019). The consequences of this high unemployment rate pose significant challenges ranging from diminished standards of living to degradation of societal norms through criminal activities and social unrest.

The consensus is that unemployment is detrimental to the economy of the country but there's little agreement on who should be included in the pool of the unemployed. The question prevails whether to include those that are actively seeking a job but not finding one, those that are in between jobs and/or those that have been discouraged to seek employment (Mohr & Associates, 2015). Statistics South Africa (2019), provides an official definition of unemployment as persons between the ages of 15 and 64; who were not employed during the reference week; are available to work and are actively looking for a job or to start a business within the last four weeks. While the expanded definition includes those persons that are discouraged to seek employment or have other reasons for not seeking employment. Note that these considerations may also include those persons who are moving from one job to another.

Female unemployment is a concern in South Africa, mostly because unemployment rates among females are higher than those among males (Statistics South Africa, 2014). Prominent conclusion on this challenge includes; great variation in female participation and lack of inclusion of unpaid family-orientated labour (Mahlwele, 2009). With the high rates of unemployed females and continued efforts by the South African government to increase the participation of females in the workforce, there are still some traditional stereotypes and attitudes that create barriers to workforce participation by females. These include factors such as labour market segregation, educational attainment and the predominance of temporary contracts among females. Another factor for females leaving and re-entering the labour market is their family responsibility. Some married women do not enter the labour market due to the high income that their husbands earn. These interruptions that women are faced with can lead to skills obsolescence and reduced employability.

Women are overworked, and this has an impact on the entire household (this includes children). Women manage work, the household and the community within which they reside. There is a vast benefit that comes with this responsibility but most of the efforts are not recognised and/or paid for and this in turn leads to diminishing quality of life and decision making and will put their health at risk (FAO, 2016).

The aim of the study reported here was to contribute to empirical literature by analysing female heads' barriers to employment. The aim was to collect data on the perceived barriers to employment by female heads in a low-income area. There is, therefore, a need to investigate why some unemployed female heads are discouraged to seek further employment based on what they perceive to be barriers to finding employment. By identifying these perceived barriers, recommendations and policies might be implemented to resolve them.

The rest of the article is organised as follows; section 2 reviews the literature on female unemployment and the barriers to labour force participation. Section 3 explains the methodology. Section 4 presents the results and discusses the findings and section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the major factors for an increased rate of unemployment in recent years has been the aftereffects of the global financial crisis that gripped the world between 2007 and 2010. The challenge of unemployment can be traced back to pre-democratic South Africa, wherein certain employment opportunities were

reserved for a few. The democratic transition in 1994 promised employment opportunities and unrestricted access to the economy for the majority (Insight, 2014). While massive strides have been made in many parts of the economy, statistics on employment paints a dire situation. The South African challenge of female unemployment mirrors the global picture.

Before the stages of industrialisation, households were the unit of production and all family members were involved in this production. It continued so even in the early stages of industrialisation where some females worked in their households and in agricultural industries and others found work in the new factories, the mills and manufacturing industries. According to the 1851 Census, this pattern changed. Only 10 per cent of married females were in paid employment because of factors such as the growth of industrial work, which was exclusively for males along with the Victorian ideology that a female belonged in the kitchen (Lawes, 1993). Between 2002 and 2007, unemployment gender gaps were constant at around 0.5 per cent with a higher global female unemployment rate at 5.8 per cent as compared to the 5.3 per cent of unemployed males (ILO, 2012). Regional trends show that in Africa, Asia and Latin America, females had a higher unemployment rate than males whereas in advanced economies, the gender gap was negative, which translated into higher unemployment rates for males than for females (ILO, 2012).

In 2008, the global unemployment rate for females was 6.3 per cent, as compared to the 5.9 per cent rate for males (ILO, 2012). The unemployment rate increased from previous years for both males and females which lead to a slight reduction in the gaps between the males and females. Despite efforts made to alleviate the problem, far fewer females participate in the labour market as compared to males (ILO, 2012). Older workers tend to have longer job searches than younger workers because they have a wide range in wage offers than the young ones (McConnell, et al., 2009).

Basic education and training are one of the most important factors that influence a woman's ability to participate in the economy. Educating females would give them an opportunity to gain some knowledge, skills and self-confidence that they seek in order to participate and develop in the labour market. A recommendation has been made that policy makers develop plans that can encourage young females to participate in educational programs and training (OECD, 2012). Education and training among females are fundamental tools to empowering them and to achieve gender equality and employment opportunities (Statistics South Africa, 2010). There are three constraints that may limit female participation in

education and training. The first one is related to the negative attitudes of some household heads for educating girls rather than to prepare them for future marriages. These households perceive chores around the house as better alternatives to education. Secondly, safety concerns and transport issues are critical in placing children at a school. The final constraint is linked to the negative attitudes that educators and administrators have on females and the value of education in their lives (Eskola & Gasperini, 2010).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Survey Design

This study made use of a structured questionnaire adopted from (Slabbert, 2004) and (Charlesworth, 2010). Each questionnaire was administered to each participant with a cover page explaining the confidentiality of the participant's personal information. A pre-test phase was conducted on 30 female students and employees of the North West University (Vaal Triangle Campus) to test the accuracy, statistical significance and precision on the study before it was distributed to the actual participants in Bophelong Township. Only female students and employees were selected for pre-test to determine the sensitivity of the words used in the survey. A pilot test was also conducted on the target population to deal with any difficulties encountered on the questionnaire. The element of this study is defined as female heads of each household in the study area. The sampling unit is the residents of Bophelong Township, located 60km south of Johannesburg in Gauteng province, South Africa.

### 3.2. Sampling and data collection

This study consists of the non-probability sampling. The participants were female household heads conveniently approached for participation in the study. A sample of 300 females participated in the study. There are sufficient homogenous characteristics within the target population, which makes it convenient for the researcher and less costly. Field workers were employed to complete questionnaires by reading the questions aloud and writing down the answers given by interviewees. In cases where participants could not understand English, the questions were translated in the local languages.

### 3.3. Statistical Analysis

The descriptive analysis for this study was performed by using methods adapted from Pallant (2010) using frequency tables to explore and describe the data and to check the reliability of the scale. Thus, the first stage of analysis involved the use

of descriptive statistics to describe the perceptions of barriers to entry into the labour market by females in Bophelong.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Demographic information of participants

#### 4.1.1. Population composition of Bophelong township

The population of Bophelong Township has grown to about 46 089 people and about 14 267 households relative to 37 779 from the Census 2011 survey data. Within the total population of Bophelong, 50.53 per cent are females and 49.47 per cent are males. The Blacks take up about 99.12 per cent of the population and the rest of the 0.88 per cent is taken by Indians, Coloureds and Whites. Within the dominating Black group, 69.39 per cent speak South Sotho (Stats SA, 2012).

#### 4.1.2. Employment status of Emfuleni Local Municipality

The table below reports the employment status of the ELM within the Vaal triangle area in the south of Gauteng. The comparison was made between the two Census years of 2001 and 2011.

**Table 4.1: ELM Unemployment Status between 2001 and 2011**

| EMPLOYMENT STATUS | YEARS | |
|---|---|---|
| | **2001** | **2011** |
| **EMPLOYED** | 93537 | 202543 |
| **UNEMPLOYED** | 63160 | 107555 |
| **UNEMPLOYMENT RATE** | **29.5%** | **34%** |

*Source*: CENSUS 2011

Reports show an increase in the level of unemployment in townships within the Emfuleni Local Municipality (ELM) from about 29.57 per cent to 34 per cent in 2011 (ELM, 2012/3). Within this alarming percentage of the unemployed, the figure below reports that 72 per cent of the female heads in this population were unemployed, 25 per cent were employed and only 3 per cent were self-employed (see figure 4.1 below). This figure shows the employment status of the female heads in Bophelong.

**Figure 4.1: Household Employment Status**
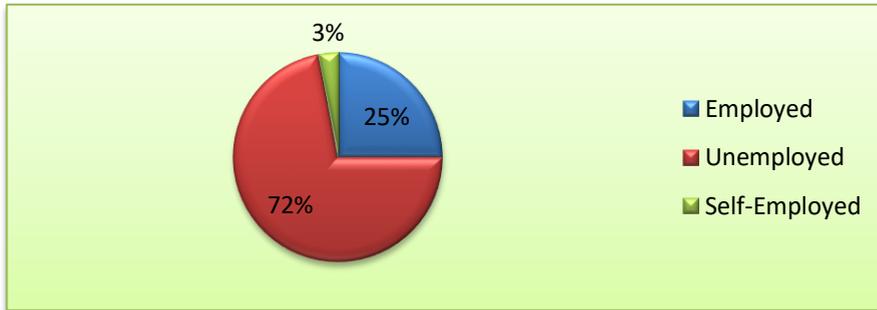


*Source*: Survey Data, 2013

The survey data of Bophelong also shows that the sample population has more participants falling under the age group 35-44 years. The results show that the population of Bophelong Township decreases as they grow older and most do not reach the age of 65 and over. The youngest participant interviewed was 16 years old and the oldest participant was 65 years old and was not seeking employment due to ill health. 50.3 per cent of single females in Bophelong are taking care of children, followed by 21.3 per cent of females who are single with no children. 19.7 per cent of females are partnered and have children within the household. Those living in a shared household have the lowest percentage of unemployment.

The results of the survey show that the highest education level that most females in the sample population have is Standard 8/Grade 10 at 40.3 per cent, followed by the 37 per cent of those who have achieved Standard 10/Grade 12. The females in Bophelong who have achieved higher education degrees are about 0.3 per cent and only 1.3 per cent of the females have certificates or diplomas. Further to these results, 73 per cent of the females in Bophelong require further education, relative to the minority that does not require further education at about 27 per cent.

## 4.2. Perceived barriers to entry into the labor market for female heads

This section describes possible reasons perceived by unemployed female heads of Bophelong to be barriers to enter into the labour market. Table 2 below shows the perceived barriers with the highest level of agreement by percentage of response and relative to the rest. Lack of qualifications, education and experience seem to stand out from the rest of the barriers. Each of the highest agreed barrier is discussed below.

Table 2 shows results that 15.7 per cent of unemployed females in Bophelong perceive a lower level of education and lack of qualifications to be the highest barriers to finding employment. These females consider that had they studied any further to gain better qualifications, they would stand a better chance of getting paid work. This is in line with findings that the production of qualified graduates and postgraduates plays an important role in alleviating the unemployment problem in South Africa (Fisher & Scott, 2011). Results also show that 13.6 per cent of unemployed females in Bophelong perceive lack of experience to be another barrier to find employment. Employers are sceptical about hiring new entrants who lack not only the expertise to do the job but the life skills to sustain themselves under pressure. They would rather settle for the adults that have the experience both on life skills and work skills (World Youth Report, 2012). Results from Table 4.2 show that 11.7 per cent and 11.5 per cent of the unemployed females in Bophelong perceive lack of knowledge of spoken language and illiteracy respectively, are the barriers that prevent females to find employment. According to the International Adult Literacy and Skill Survey (IALSS), people who are employed generally have higher literacy scores than the unemployed people. People with higher literacy scores are more likely to get employment and those with lower literacy scores found themselves struggling to find employment (IALSS, 2012).

Results also show that 10.6 per cent of unemployed females in Bophelong perceive lack of Curriculum Vitae (CV) writing skill as one of the barriers to find employment and 10.7 per cent of unemployed females perceive lack of knowledge on how to handle interviews as another barrier to finding paid work. About 10.3 per cent of the females perceive lack of access to computers to be another barrier. Only 2.1 per cent of unemployed females in Bophelong perceive their gender as a barrier. Less than 1 per cent of unemployed female heads of Bophelong perceive having a disability, being pregnant or having children, having alternate sexual preferences and being required to work abnormal hours as barriers preventing them from finding employment. Hence, overall findings from descriptive statistics suggests that major barriers to entry into the labour market among the unemployed female heads in Bophelong Township seem to be the lack of qualification, lack of experience, language skills, interview skills and CV writing skills.

**Table 4.2: Perceived barriers to entry into the labour market**

| PERCEIVED BARRIERS | Responses | |
|---|---|---|
| | N | Per cent |
| MY QUALIFICATIONS ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH | 98 | 15.7% |
| I NEED BETTER CV WRITING SKILLS | 66 | 10.6% |
| I DO NOT INTERVIEW WELL | 67 | 10.7% |
| I DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH EXPERIENCE | 85 | 13.6% |
| I AM TOO OLD OR TOO YOUNG | 11 | 1.8% |
| I DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT REFERENCES | 22 | 3.5% |
| I DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS | 36 | 5.8% |
| MY SPOKEN LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE NOT GOOD | 73 | 11.7% |
| I DO NOT HAVE A COMPUTER | 64 | 10.3% |
| READING AND WRITING SKILLS NOT GOOD | 72 | 11.5% |
| I HAVE A DISABILITY | 3 | 0.5% |
| I HAVE CHILDREN OR AM PREGNANT | 5 | 0.8% |
| MY SEXUAL PREFERENCE | 1 | 0.2% |
| I CANNOT WORK THE HOURS REQUIRED | 4 | 0.6% |
| MY GENDER | 13 | 2.1% |
| I AM OVER-QUALIFIED | 1 | 0.2% |

*Source*: Survey Data, 2013

The section has outlined the main perceived barriers to entry into the labour market among the unemployed female heads of Bophelong Township. A further investigation was done on these barriers to confirm any causal effect between the independent variable (employment status) and the dependent variables (qualifications, CV skills, interview skills, experience, language skills, computer skills, literacy levels). The results are shown on Table 4.3 below.

**Table 4.3: Regression analysis results on perceived unemployment determinants**

|  | B | S.E. | Wald | df | Sig. | Exp(B) | 95% C.I. for EXP(B) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Lower | Upper |
| **No_Qual** | -.754 | .348 | 4.697 | 1 | .030 | .470 | .238 | .930 |
| **CV_Skill** | .734 | .325 | 5.110 | 1 | .024 | 2.083 | 1.102 | 3.935 |
| **Interv_Skill** | -.243 | .352 | .478 | 1 | .489 | .784 | .394 | 1.562 |
| **No_Exp** | .187 | .329 | .321 | 1 | .571 | 1.205 | .632 | 2.299 |
| **Lang_Skill** | .173 | .360 | .232 | 1 | .630 | 1.189 | .587 | 2.409 |
| **Comp_Skill** | .158 | .365 | .188 | 1 | .665 | 1.171 | .573 | 2.394 |
| **Literacy_Skill** | -.214 | .371 | .333 | 1 | .564 | .807 | .390 | 1.670 |
| **Constant** | 1.052 | .685 | 2.359 | 1 | .125 | 2.864 |  |  |

*Source*: Survey Data, 2013

The results above show that qualifications have a negative relationship with the employment status from its coefficient of (B = -.754). This implies that the more qualifications a female has, the better the chances of being employed and thereby reducing the rate of unemployment and it is also significant at 0.05 levels. Results above also show that having CV skills has a positive relationship to employment status and is significant at 0.05 levels. A conclusion can therefore be made that the perceived barriers could very well be the actual barriers of employment as most of them are related to literacy levels.

Qualifications, experience, CV skills, interview skills and knowledge of professional language have a strong relationship with literacy levels. Table 4.4 below shows the results of the correlation run between these variables.

**Table 4.4: Correlation between literacy levels and other barriers**

| Correlations | | No_Qual | CV_Skill | Interv_Skill | Langua_Skill |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Literacy_Level** | Pearson Correlation | .782** | .940** | .950** | .990** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | N | 228 | 228 | 228 | 228 |

*Source*: Survey Data, 2013

The results above show a positive correlation between the participants' literacy levels and other perceived barriers. An increase in the literacy level is closely related to an increase in qualifications, language skills, interview skills and CV writing skills. There is a correlation between the variables at a 0.01 level of significance. A conclusion can therefore be made that unemployed females in Bophelong should improve their literacy skills in order to overcome the perceived barriers to entry into the labour market. Conclusions were also made that their perceptions of barriers could very well be valid but mostly dependent on their level of literacy.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study moves towards the core description of unemployment within females by providing the historical background and trends of unemployment in females. Females were household keepers for centuries up to the time when industrialisation began. More females entered the labour market and flourished in the work they do. Married females were bound to stay home to care for children and their elders and did not have the opportunity to seek employment to improve their standard of living by increased income. An explanation to the gender gap in unemployment could be factors such as the segregation of the labour market, educational attainment and the predominance of temporary contractors among females. Factors that stood out in this study were the age, marital status, educational level and location of females as the causes of their unemployment. These factors can lead an unemployed female to skills obsolescence and reduce her employability.

Tradition in the past had forced married females to stay home and care for their households and bare children while males are moving between jobs. This situation would occur mainly in the rural areas. At the event of the husband's death, the wives would lose their main source of income and be forced to work. In some households, both females and males are employed but the females are earning less than their spouses.

Education and training are some of the most fundamental factors that influence a woman's ability to participate in the economy. Plans need to be made to encourage females to participate in programs that improve literacy levels and offer further training. The South African government has invested a large amount of money into educating girls and women and made education for children compulsory. There has been a significant improvement in the literacy levels of women and girls since the post-apartheid government system. A conclusion was also made that once a female has lower literacy levels, it will have an impact on other above-mentioned barriers. A correlation run shows that there is a very strong correlation between literacy levels and other barriers such as qualifications and experience.

Unemployed female heads in Bophelong also gave suggestions on the services that they would like to be exposed to in order to assist them to find employment. The results show that 28.1 per cent of female heads in Bophelong would like to attend CV writing workshops and 20.5 per cent of them prefer the job application assistance in general. A conclusion can then be made that female heads in Bophelong would prefer to be taught skills that would help them seek employment in a proper manner. The community projects that already exist in Bophelong are helpful in keeping the female heads busy with voluntary employment but they should rather concentrate on helping them know how to search for suitable jobs, how to write an appropriate CV, how to conduct themselves in an interview and finally how to prepare themselves for the actual work environment.

Education is the priority objective of the South African government. Improved strategies should be implemented to encourage young girls to pursue further education and training, therefore greater interest to progress will be evident. The government has already placed compulsory education for primary pupils, but less attention is given to the high school girls whose lives are challenged by social factors such as crime, teenage pregnancies and alcohol and drug abuse. In general, policy makers need to put more focus on females who are living in townships and encourage them to participate in the labour force.

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