

## CALL FOR ABSTRACTS FOR CONFERENCE AND SPECIAL EDITION OF SAJHR

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### *THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, INEQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH AFRICA*

The South African Journal on Human Rights (SAJHR) and the SARChI Research Chair in Equality, Law and Social Justice, Wits School of Law, invite abstract submissions for participation in a (virtual) conference and special edition of the SAJHR on 'The Covid-19 Pandemic, Inequality and Human Rights in South Africa'.

Although it is often said that the coronavirus does not discriminate in whom it infects, it is becoming clear that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and of measures to contain it, track well-worn pathways of inequality and disadvantage across the world. Early evidence in the global north, for example, reveals that vulnerability to infection, serious illness and death in the UK and USA occurs disproportionately amongst poor, black and working-class communities. This is attributed both to systemic health inequalities that render these communities more vulnerable, as well as the fact that they predominate amongst the frontline workers caring for the sick or providing essential services.

As the Covid-19 pandemic marches across the globe, and countries and economies shut down, local and global as well as social and economic inequalities are thrown into sharp relief as people lose income and livelihoods, hunger and food insecurity worsens, and education becomes a resource only for those with access. Women bear particular burdens of vulnerability, poverty, increased care for dependents and heightened susceptibility to domestic violence.

Many countries, including South Africa, have put in place severe 'lockdowns' and states of emergency/disaster which have justified a greater centralisation of state power, the increased use of security forces and, in some countries, a growing authoritarianism. Moreover, the legitimate need to track and limit the epidemic has resulted in increased surveillance of people and their movements, including forced quarantine, which have raised concerns of drastic incursions into people's freedoms.

Overall, Covid-19 reflects and deepens social and economic inequalities, and can endanger human rights and threaten democracy. At the same, it has generated new opportunities to address inequalities and advance human rights as it has forced states to reconsider more redistributive social and economic policies to address its dire impact, reduced pollution and carbon levels, galvanised civil society and opened opportunities for change and transformation.

South Africa has been widely praised for its decisive early action in declaring a state of disaster and instituting a national lock-down to flatten its infection curve, avoid deaths and a devastating burden on our health-system and buy time to track, test and contain the pandemic. Yet, from the outset, it was clear that the trade-off between public health and the economy was to have profound, and deeply racialised and gendered, consequences: deepening hunger and poverty, loss of livelihoods, evictions, increased security force abuse and heightened domestic violence, are some of the reported symptoms. Across the country, our centuries-long legacy of deep and systemic, racialised and gendered, inequality and poverty shapes the pattern of the pandemic and its effects.

As the state scrambles to mitigate the economic and social consequences of containing the pandemic, concerns linger about how its power is exercised and about the state's capacity to deliver on its promises and resist corruption. At the same time, new opportunities have emerged for a more inclusive and redistributive economy and society as civil society organises to hold the state to account in addressing poverty, inequality and human rights violations.

We invite abstracts for papers on 'Covid-19 Pandemic, Inequality and Human Rights in South Africa'. Contributors might want to consider one or more of the following overlapping themes, but should not feel constrained by them:

1. How does the pandemic in South Africa reflect, reinforce and/or deepen inequalities and/or violate human rights within and across different groups? What new inequalities has the pandemic brought about, such as inequitable access to technology and online resources?
2. To what extent have the state's responses – in theory and in practice - violated fundamental rights and/or deepened inequalities?
3. How does the intersection of race, space and inequality play itself out in the pandemic, including in the policing of its regulations, ongoing evictions and deepening poverty and inequality? What does this tell us about the continuities between our past (colonialism, apartheid), present (constitutional democracy) and future?
4. In the context of increased domestic violence and care responsibilities for women, what does Covid-19 reveal about gender inequalities, women's rights, the public/private divide and the 'sanctity' of the home?
5. Have the declaration of a state of disaster and/or the various regulations promulgated thereunder been constitutionally compliant and do they constitute a justifiable limitation of human rights?
6. What is the role required of human rights now, in times of crisis and in managing an ongoing pandemic? How might this be different to before?
7. In particular, contributors might want to consider one or more of the following areas:
  - 7.1. Work and labour rights. How does the pandemic change the nature of work and what are the consequences for workers' rights? Are the rights of particularly vulnerable workers (including frontline, healthcare and essential workers) sufficiently protected? What policies are necessary to address unemployment and job losses?
  - 7.2. Vulnerable groups. How are the human rights of vulnerable groups affected, including: women, the elderly, migrants, children, the homeless, prisoners, rural communities etc?
  - 7.3. How are socio-economic rights affected across different groups, including rights to water and sanitation, housing (freedom from evictions), healthcare (including reproductive healthcare), social assistance etc?
  - 7.4. How are cultural rights affected? What does Covid-19 tell us about epistemic justice and indigenous knowledge? What can we learn about the right to science and protection of authorship?
  - 7.5. How are rights of access to information, privacy, etc. affected, for example, how does the new surveillance required by 'tracking and tracing' affect civil and political rights?
  - 7.6. Freedom of expression. How does the prohibition and regulation of fake news and other kinds of information affect human rights?
  - 7.7. Political rights. How does the pandemic and the measures to contain it affect our political rights (association, protest etc)?
8. What does the pandemic mean for our constitutional democracy?
9. Human rights and legal strategies under Covid-19. What has been the role of civil society and/or social movements, as well as Chapter Nine institutions, in holding the state to account and to what extent have/can the courts be used to address inequalities and human rights violations of the pandemic?
10. What roles can human rights play in thinking about and creating a more inclusive, just and egalitarian future for South Africa, as it grapples with current and ongoing waves of Covid-19, and imagines a post-Covid-19 world?

We welcome contributions across different theoretical and methodological (legal, socio-legal and inter-disciplinary) approaches.

Abstracts of 400-500 words should be sent to [cathi.albertyn@wits.ac.za](mailto:cathi.albertyn@wits.ac.za) or [radams@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:radams@hsrc.ac.za) by 15 June 2020. Successful applicants will be advised by 5 July 2020. Final papers will only be due early in 2021 to allow us to research and understand a still unfolding pandemic.

Participants will be invited to present, and receive feedback on, their draft papers in a series of webinars/virtual conference hosted by the SAJHR and the SARChI Chair in Equality, Law and Social Justice early in late-2020/early 2021. We will advise successful applicants further on these details.

Final papers for review will be due end March 2021 for publication in SAJHR in 2021.

All papers will be subject to the SAJHR's processes of peer review prior to publication.

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