

COVID-19 IN NIGERIA: IMPACT ON WORK AND WORKERS

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Abstract

The Coronavirus disease, officially called COVID-19 is infecting people all around the World, with over 2% death. The virus which spreads through respiratory means from human-to-human and its negative impact on the health of humans is still been understood by scientists. COVID-19 is changing different spheres of our lives; social, economic and cultural. It is also transforming how, where and when work is done. Like many other countries, Nigeria is experiencing its own part of the change in the workspace, within the family and in the society. The study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work, working and family. This paper adopted a theoretical approach by presenting secondary data available on COVID-19 that improves readers' understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on work. This paper relied majorly on secondary data collected at 4 different times (April/May, June, July and August 2020) through the COVID-19 National Longitudinal Phone survey (COVID-19 NLPS), which was launched by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) with the support of the World Bank to provide information on the impact of the pandemic. The COVID-19 experience on work and family has been overwhelming, coming with its gains and pains. The epidemic outbreak has brought to the fore the need for government to put structures in place to encourage organizations adopt flexible working. Additionally, government should over time develop a framework that supports working people with family responsibilities, both financially (public income support and child allowances) and non-financial (parental leave, creche and other childcare support facilities) means.

Keywords: COVID-19, Nigeria, Work, Working, Lockdown, Remote Work

1. INTRODUCTION

People around the World have been recently infected with a virus, the coronavirus disease, which has been officially named COVID-19 and termed a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO)- (Ohannessian, Duong & Odone, 2020). The spread of the virus from human to human is rapid while scientists are still struggling to understand the virus, the mode of transmission

and how it can be curtailed, managed or eradicated. The reported mode of transmission by international health regulatory agencies is by contact of a person with an infected person, especially someone with respiratory symptoms like coughing or sneezing (Ohannessian, *et al* 2020). As such, the outbreak of the virus has affected many aspects of people's lives in different countries; family, work, businesses, relationships, mental and physical health, to mention a few. The number of infected persons has been increasing across countries and governments have been taking measures to reduce the rate of infections through the introduction of lockdown and the encouragement of self-isolation and social distancing. Many countries have experienced multiple lockdowns due to an increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. It is important to note that despite the outbreak of the epidemic in many countries, its impact on organizations and on families has been felt differently, especially because institutional support received at the organizational and individual levels differ in different countries. It is therefore evident that there is a need to investigate further how COVID-19 has impacted work and the workplace, by investigating the positives and the negatives.

In this paper, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and working in the Nigerian will be investigated. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected work and the workspace? Has COVID-19 been a gain or pain to the work and family sphere in Nigeria? These are some of the questions that will be explored in this study.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The institutional (Pasamar & Alegre, 2015) and the collectivist theories (Hofstede, 2001) will be guiding this paper in the explanation of emerging trends being observed in people management and work arrangement. Sociologists, political and other behavioural scientists have benefitted from the contributions of institutional theorists in explaining and understanding the behaviour of organizations. The arguments of institutional theorists focus majorly on how the activities of institutions are shaped by external factors, including societal shared values and pressure from government through legislations and directives that affect how employers conduct their businesses and manage people. For example, the right granted in the UK to employees to demand for flexible working and the extent to which working families have enjoyed government and employer support in Norway and other European countries is more than the support offered to working families in parts of Asia and Africa. Government make legislations and provide enabling environment for working from home to be successful while organizations, as employers should design jobs and train employees in acquiring competencies required to work from home. The role of institutions in the society cannot be over-emphasized. For example, in Nigeria, flexible working arrangement options were not generally embraced in many organizations prior to the outbreak of

COVID-19 and government didn't give any support or rather, attention to the practice. Literature even suggests managers believe it might not be useful given the peculiarity of African societies, where support from family and friends remain one of the major coping strategies for balance between work and family (Akanji, 2013; Gbajumo-Sheriff & Udobi-Owoloja, 2019). The reality of COVID-19 however suggests otherwise. With the need to maintain social distancing and lockdown, various institutions (the government and employers of labour) are encouraging and enforcing remote working in both private and public organizations.

In understanding contextualized differences amongst countries, Hofstede (2001:13) operationalized culture as the collective programming of the mind and developed a model that explained the contextual nature of culture using six dimensions; power distance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs short orientation and indulgence vs restraint. Of relevance to this study is the collectivist dimension which was explained by Hofstede as a mental programming based on a value shared by the majority of people belonging to a particular group or category (Hofstede 2001:150). Collectivism implies that the interest of the group predominates that of the individual. Collectivism provides a framework that encourages us to take a second look at contexts. In Nigeria, a collectivist society where face-to-face communication/interaction and doing things as a group are valued, the embrace of technology and remote working during COVID-19 might dilute the need for collectivism at this crucial time. The relevance of the two theories rests on their ability to recognize and explain how cultural differences affect structures and relationships within and outside the workplace.

2.1 COVID-19: The impact on work in Nigeria

Amadasun (2020) provided evidence that COVID-19 has indeed impacted social work in Nigeria. He explained this further by demonstrating that COVID-19 has further worsened the living conditions of the most vulnerable people within the society. Aladejebi (2020) in his study of 360 Small and Medium-sized enterprises in Nigeria on the impact of COVID-19 on small businesses in Lagos State, Nigeria found out that reduction in sales or work activity had the highest mean amongst all the criteria used in the measurement. Additionally, Aladejebi (2020) that many of the business owners were not paying their employees full salary. Findings from these studies suggest that inadequate support from the government as an institution has increased the negative effect of the pandemic on businesses, especially because the Nigerian business environment is dominated by informal businesses (Awofeso & Irabor, 2020).

3. METHODS

This paper adopted a theoretical approach by analysing secondary data available on COVID-19 with the intention of bringing out the relevance of understanding the impact of COVID-19 on work. In addition, challenges, gains and possible solutions are also documented. This paper will rely majorly on the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring reports released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), an agency charged with the responsibility of providing data and information on socio-economic statistics relevant to the Nigerian economy. NBS releases reports from time to time on various sectors of the Nigerian economy on issues surrounding Gross Domestic Product (GDP), unemployment, household income, household consumption, inflation, consumer price index amongst other indices. The Nigeria COVID-19 National Longitudinal Phone Survey (COVID-19 NLPS) forms part of the World Bank efforts at supporting developing countries in gathering data about COVID-19. COVID-19 NLPS is a monthly survey that gathers data from households to understand the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on households. The first report was released in May (called the baseline) and subsequent reports were released in June (round 2), July (round 3), August (round 4), September (round 5) and October (round 6) 2020.

The COVID-19 monitoring report covers issues relating to employment, unemployment, working situation of working adults and how COVID-19 pandemic has affected employment in various sectors of the Nigerian economy. The beauty of this report is that it provides information of different sectors of the Nigerian economy and how COVID-19 has affected households and respondents' movement within jobs. It also provides deep insights into the status of respondents that were unemployed at the start of COVID-19 and their economic activities in subsequent months as the realities and challenges of the pandemic were felt at the micro and macro levels of the Nigerian economy. A major challenge of this report however is that in May, June, July and August, the report summarized data on general issues; household income & consumption, employment status, experience of shocks by households and all, however in September and October, the body conducting the research, NBS, sought to delve into more detailed individual-level analysis of people's working status (NBS, 2020h).

4. COVID-19 AND TODAY'S WORKPLACE REALITIES

a. The gains

➤ Embrace of remote working

In the World of work, the Nigerian government and employers as institutions have been putting in place various strategies aimed at reducing contacts amongst employees while working. As at the 26th of April 2021; the total number of confirmed cases in Nigeria was 164,719 (NCDC,2020).With the

infringement of COVID-19 pandemic in our lives, many countries including Nigeria have been encouraging remote working. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the practice of working from home wasn't widely embraced in many workplaces in Nigeria. This was largely due to the collectivist culture and high-power distance values in Nigeria, which values face-to-face monitoring and review between superiors and subordinates (Gbajumo-Sheriff & Udobi-Owoloja, 2019). Another hindrance to the embrace of telecommuting in Nigeria is the inadequate infrastructural facilities (unstable power supply and internet facilities), many a times, companies and households have to provide alternative energy supply to support their activities (Gbajumo-Sheriff, 2016).

In March 2020, the embrace of remote working in Nigeria as a result of the pandemic was sudden. Some multinational companies have made provisions for remote working prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, however not many employees explored this option. In the public sector and in many private organizations, it wasn't initially clear how the pandemic was going to affect work and business activities. Generally, work was structured majorly around minimizing contact among people; limiting the number of workers reporting for work at the primary location daily (different workers have different days of working physically at their primary location while working remotely on other days). However, what was apparent was that many companies including government establishments could not figure out how the remote working was to be structured, what was important was to comply with the Federal government regulation of staying at home. Within the first 4 weeks of the lockdown, employees reported having challenges with accessing some software from home due to security restrictions (Benson, 2020). For example, Benson (2020) documented that after the easing of the lockdown, banks were filled with customers who experienced failed transactions because bank workers couldn't have access to some software needed to resolve customer complaints remotely and banks were not leveraging massively on technology to ease transactions. However, after the first few months of experiencing challenges with remote working, companies are now embracing various technological initiatives that will make remote working more effective.

From March 2020 till December 2020, remarkable progress has been achieved by indigenous and multinational companies in automating their processes. An example is the strength of online platforms to process some banking transactions and the payments of taxes and other levies to government. Working from home is transforming how business is done in Nigeria. Apart from the closure of schools, wearing of face masks and the discouragement of social gathering,

➤ **Reduced stress and more quality family time**

Research evidence have shown that employees in Nigeria spend long time commuting to and from work, partly because workers do not live close to their workplaces and traffic jams is prevalent during employee resumption and closing times (Epie & Ituma, 2014). Traffic during resumption and closing times is common because flexible working isn't a common practice, and everybody gets on the road at the same time. This suggests that with the lockdown, isolation and remote working, workers will spend less time on the road, hence, experience less stress. In the first weeks of lockdown, in March 2020, employees working in Lagos, a commercial Centre in Nigeria, reported lower levels of stress from commuting long distances to work, especially because of prevalent heavy traffic in the city before the lockdown. Also, there were reports of working parents spending more quality time with the family as a result of working from home.

b. The pains

➤ **Reduced economic activities and the resultant job loss**

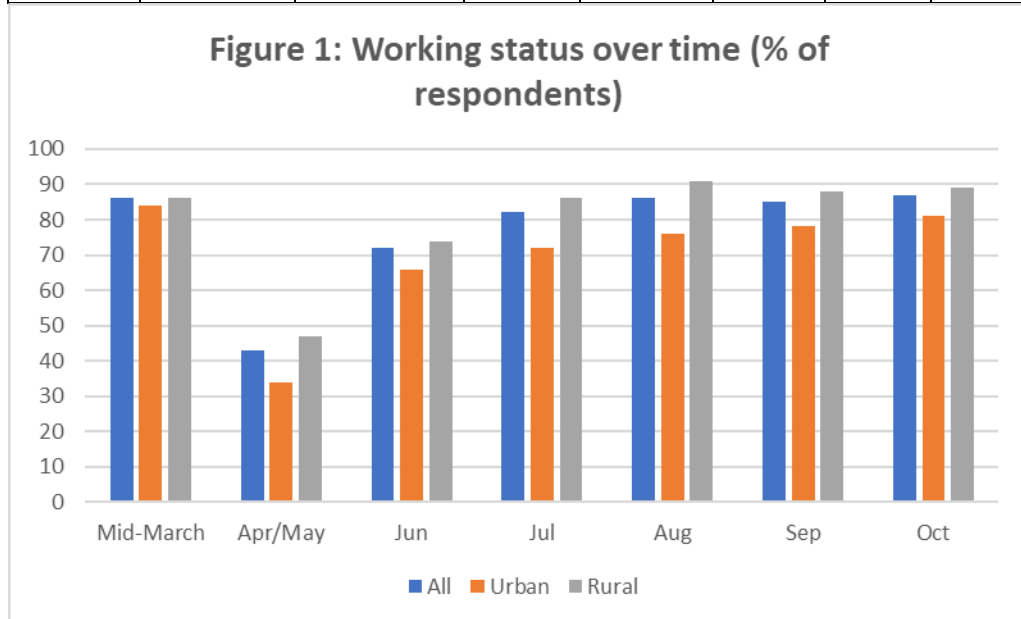
After over 6 months of in and out of lockdown, economic activities in Nigeria have reduced significantly thereby affecting organizations and households adversely. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) reports released by the National Bureau of Statistics in September and October 2020, shows that CPI in Nigeria (year-on-year) in August and September increased by 13.22% (0.4% higher than the rate in July 2020) and 13.71% (0.49% higher than the rate in August 2020) - (NBS, 2020g). This means that households might purchase less goods and services due to inflation, reduced savings, social and economic insecurity. The consequence of this is reduced production/activity levels at the organizational level and a resultant reduction in manpower demand. Reduction in manpower demand will lead to unemployment and underemployment (Briggs & Numere, 2020). Also, at the 2nd quarter of 2020, unemployment and underemployment rates have increased to 27.1% and 28.6% from 23.1% and 20.1% in the 3rd quarter of 2018 (NBS, 2020g). The Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) speculated that unemployment rate in Nigeria could be up to 45% by the end of 2020 from 23.1% in the 3rd quarter of 2018. The National Bureau of Statistics COVID-19 monitoring report round 4 released in October 2020 also suggests some instability in the labour market. For example, 60% of respondents have been in and out of work since the beginning of COVID-19, 34% has been working continuously while 6% have not worked at all since April 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic (NBS, 2020d:4). Apart from the prediction of the trade association and government agencies, organizations have also adopted the strategy of furlough, lay-off and sometimes salary cut to reduce costs. For example, Access bank reduced the

salaries of their staff up to 40% (Business News Report, 2020). The National Bureau of Statistics report on COVID-19 also shows that an estimated 2,736,076 persons or 3.4% of the Nigerian Labour Force did not work during the pandemic. More specifically, in Lagos, a major commercial centre in Nigeria, 13.4% (914,965 people) of residents had jobs but didn't work (NBS, 2020b).

Evidence from the National Bureau of Statistics surveys also suggest that the pandemic continues to limit Nigerians' work opportunities although the Nigerian economy has demonstrated some recovery in the June, July, August, September and October 2020. Table 2 gives more information about the working status of employees from the start of the pandemic till October 2020.

Table 2: Working status of employees from the start of COVID-19 pandemic till October 2020

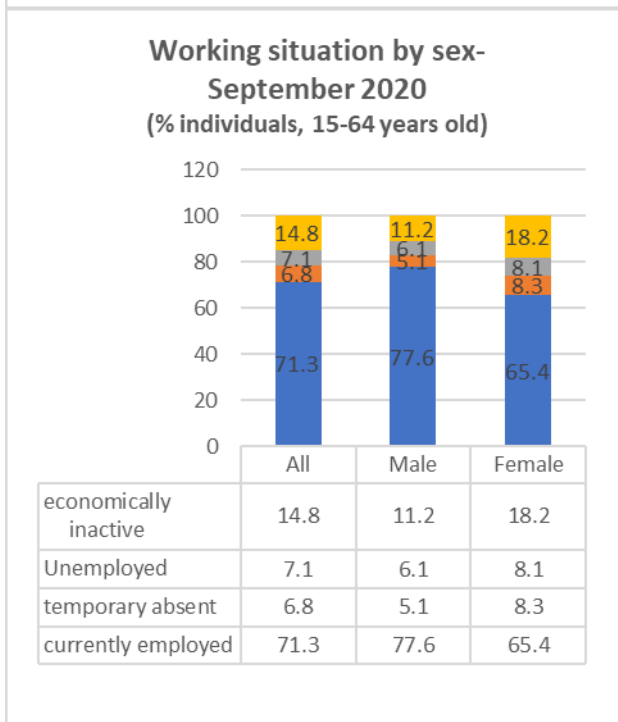
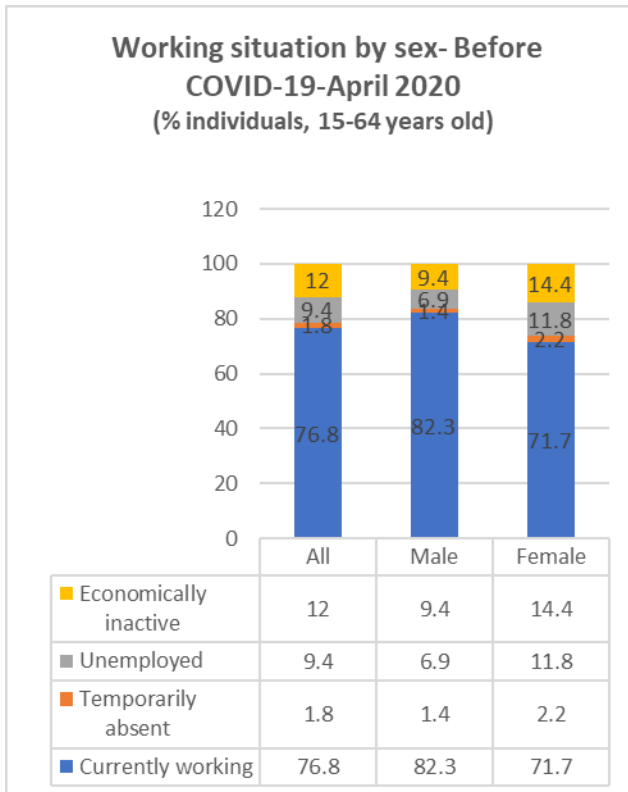
	Before Mid-March	Apr/May'20	Jun'20	Jul'20	Aug'20	Sep'20	Oct'20
All	86	43	72	82	86	85	87
Urban	84	34	66	72	76	78	81
Rural	86	47	74	86	91	88	89



Source: NBS (2020e:6)

It is assumed that all those who were working at baseline were also working before Mid-March. Thus, the share of respondents working shown for the before Mid-March period represent upper bounds. Temporary absences were not incorporated.

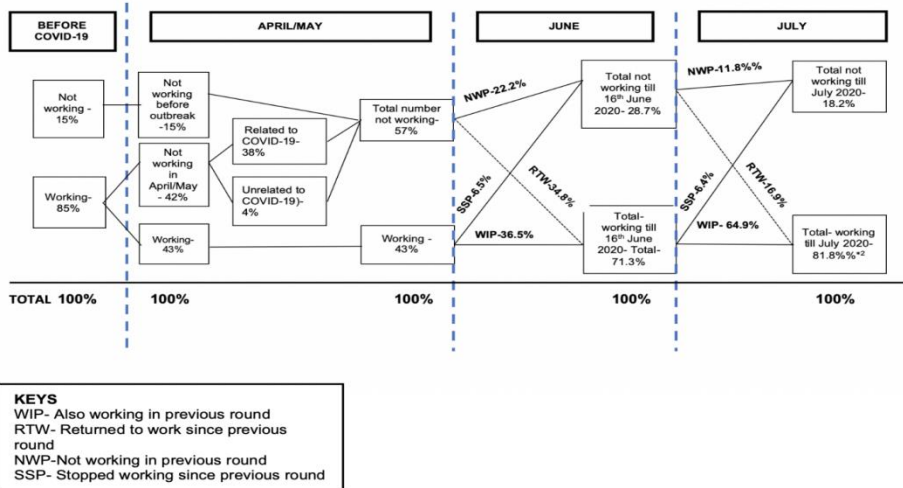
Table 3: Gender and employment status before and during the outbreak of COVID-19



Source: NBS 2020e:5

Table 3, which presents the working situation by sex was only available in the 5th round. The Pre COVID-19 working situation is more in favour of males, with 82% of males being employed compared to 72% of females. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of employed participants reduced amongst males and females although the pandemic affected females negatively more than male participants. For example, when comparing rates in April and September 2020, employment rates for males reduced by 6% compared to 9% for females. The economically inactive working population increased by 19% for males and 26% for females. For the unemployed, there was a decrease for both males and females; however, the report didn't provide more information that accounted for the decrease in the unemployed by gender. For the temporarily absent, there was a 264% and 277% increase among males and females. Overall, statistics show that despite having more employed males than females pre-COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic could lead to increased gender inequality in favour of the male gender. One of the factors that could be attributed to reduced female employment and increased temporary absence in females is school closure and reduced access to childcare support from family and friends (due to lockdown, movement restrictions and social distancing).

Figure 2: Employment position from pre-COVID-19 period to August 2020



Source: Adapted from NBS (2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d).

Table 2 shows that 85% of respondents were working before COVID-19 and this figure was reduced to about half by June 2020 resulting in a sharp decrease in the proportion of working people. By July, more people got engaged in productive activities leading to an increase of 28.3% from the previous month. By July, an additional 10.5% increase in working respondents

was recorded, making the total statistics for working people almost at par with the pre-COVID-19 figure. The continuous increase in the number of working respondents was attributed mainly to the easing of lockdown by the Nigerian government (NBS, 2020d). Despite the increase, figure 1 shows that people's employment status continues to change during the period, implying a level of job instability. Figure 2 shows that the agriculture sector has recovered substantially. Service, construction, transport, professional and commerce has shown some improvements, there has been evidence of opening and closing of businesses during the period. (round 4).

➤ **Risk to families**

Nigeria is a society where social protection and government support to working families is not available. As such, much reliance is placed on childcare support from family and friends. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, collectivistic economies like Nigeria have benefitted from these supports hence reducing the pressure on government to provide institutional support. According to Gbajumo-Sheriff (2016), what Nigerians lost in terms of government providing institutional support to working families, it had gained through family support. With COVID-19 and the enforcing of self-isolation and social distancing by the Nigerian government among citizens, it is apparent that family support is no more sufficient as a reliable childcare arrangement, especially in time of crisis. The pandemic debarred the valued collectivist culture prevalent in Nigeria, inhibiting physical meetings and interaction with family. This could lead to the experience of isolation never experienced before in Nigeria.

Although the encouragement of remote working is a win-win situation for employers and employees alike, the absence of government-provided daycare poses another challenge to working families, especially with the continued closure of schools and daycare centers. The insufficiency of alternative childcare arrangement during the lockdown has increased the number of children having to stay with neighbours, friends and other unsecured places, especially when parents have to return to work. A consequence of this is an increase in the number of children that were sexually abused during the pandemic (Ejiofor, 2020). Action Aid Nigeria documented 299 cases of female sexual abuse and about 17% of these cases involved minors between ages 3 and 16 (Ayanda, 2020).

Initiatives to manage COVID-19

➤ **Education and awareness**

There have been various initiatives launched to inform, educate and bring Nigerians up-to-date with the impact of COVID-19 on the social, economic and cultural experiences of Nigerians during the pandemic period. One of such initiatives is the COVID-19 National Longitudinal Phone survey (COVID-19 NLPS), which was launched by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) with

the support of the World Bank to provide information on the impact of the pandemic. This survey has been conducted four times since the start of the pandemic; baseline (April/May 2020) and the 2nd round (June 2-16 2020), 3rd round (July 2020) and 4th round (August 9-24 2020). The information from these reports has been relied on extensively in this paper.

➤ **Government support to business**

From the economic angle, the federal government has designed various initiatives aimed at helping businesses and households to reduce the adverse effects of the pandemic. For example, in September 2020, the Federal government released a support scheme to support self-employed persons, including micro, small and medium enterprises to register for survival fund. Also, it distributed foodstuffs and stipends to low income households in Nigeria as palliatives at the onset of COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. By September 2020, over 3.5 trillion naira has been disbursed to cushion the effects of COVID-19; COVID-19 targeted credit facility- N73.69 billion, Pharmaceutical and health care support fund- N44.47 billion, creative industry financing initiative- N2.93 billion and the Agri-Business/Small and Medium Enterprise Investment Scheme- N54.66 billion (Channels news, 2020).

➤ **Regulatory authority intervention**

To reduce the effects of COVID-19 on the Nigerian banking industry, on May 2, 2020, a special meeting of the bankers' committee made a press release to stop banks from laying-off part-time and full-time staff and where such becomes eminent, approval should be sought from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN, 2020). This pronouncement reduced the tension on employees, although some bank employees still lost their jobs.

From the political contribution to reduce the negative effects of COVID-19 on employers and business owners, some members of the House of Representatives passed the Emergency Economic Stimulus bill, 2020 in March 2020. Amongst other support, the bill provides for a 50% tax relief to business owners who agree not to lay their staff off in 2020. This tax relief was extended to include the suspension of import duties on medical equipment, medicines and personnel protective gears for the treatment of COVID-19. One of the intentions of the law makers was that if the financial burden on employers can be reduced, it could provide employment security for employees and thus further reduce employment and other negative economic effects of COVID-19 on the Nigerian economy.

5. IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The invasion of COVID-19 pandemic has presented Nigeria with yet another opportunity to re-evaluate three (3) issues:

➤ **Social protection system**

In previous studies on the role of institutional support in Africa, support from family and friends has been documented as an individual coping strategy for balancing work and family responsibilities (Epie & Ituma, 2014; Gbajumo-Sheriff & Udobi-Owoloja, 2019). However, lockdown, restricted movement, and social distancing during COVID-19 has exposed the inadequacy of the social protection system in Nigeria either to protect workers during economic crisis or to act as a stimulus for growth through increased demand. Employees were not able to access support from grandparents, siblings or extended families during the period. Government should therefore develop a social security system that citizens can latch on in cases of similar pandemic, natural disasters or economic crisis.

Additionally, government as an institution should encourage organizations to accommodate as much as possible, the flexible working arrangements needs of employees. Also, the pandemic has exposed the inadequacy or the vulnerability of family support as a major childcare arrangement in Nigeria. Just like some EU countries, government should take childcare support as an institutional responsibility.

➤ Work design

To maintain workplace competitiveness and keep up with the dynamic business environment, government and organizations should leverage on technology in their operations. Government, as an employer of labour is still lacking in terms of the use of technology in the discharge of its duties to citizens, many of its processes are still being manually operated. At the organizational level, organizations are experiencing loads of challenges as a result of COVID-19, so, it will be unrealistic for government to use coercive means to enforce remote working. What is more realistic is the gradual introduction and persuasion that could encourage the adoption of remote or flexible working in organizations. Just like the tax cut proposed by the House of Representatives for organizations, similar bills can be developed and introduced gradually. This need therefore places a responsibility on government to initiate a guideline to encourage employers of labour to embrace different forms of flexible working arrangements. Employers usually embrace initiatives that will translate to lower costs, increased revenue and of long-term benefit to the organization. It is therefore important for HR managers to develop and showcase the cost-benefit analysis of adopting flexible working arrangements. Technology can aid HR managers in this aspect by ensuring their companies adopt the Human Resource Information System (HRIS), which unifies all business processes and ensures the regular availability of data to substantiate HR arguments and decisions.

➤ **Mental health risk**

Exposure to COVID-19 infection, its resultant disruption to work, work instability, continued self-isolation and other hindrances that were not part of our everyday life could increase mental health risk to working families (Briggs & Numbere, 2020). In a collectivistic community, where communal living is valued, the negative effect on the mental health of workers could be huge because of self-isolation and social distancing, especially where interaction with family and friends are minimal. Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 has exposed the inadequacy and vulnerability of the Nigerian health system to provide care for its teeming population. It is therefore imperative for government to take a wholesome look at the Nigerian healthcare sector to ensure hospital are equipped with equipment and facilities required to take care of the physical and emotional health of citizens.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Studies on COVID-19 has examined its impacts majorly from the economic, medical and psychologically aspect, forgetting that the society is made up of people who work in different sectors of the economy. As such, the pandemic would have affected work and non-work lives of people. This paper therefore fills the gaps in research by providing more information on the work-lives of Nigerians since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Secondly, Nigeria is a collectivistic society where the family doubles up as a social support group, the physical distancing initiated by government has truncated the networking and family childcare support, thus necessitating the need for government to take social support as a government role.

7. CONCLUSION

Many countries experienced the outbreak of a deadly virus, popularly named the COVID-19 virus. The rate of infection in humans has been increasing at a geometric rate and government around the world have been bothered, and are taking various precautions to safeguard lives. In order to mitigate the undesirable health hazards, the social, economic and cultural aspects of people lives have changed through government legislating lockdowns, social distancing, limited social interactions and work structure re-design. This paper investigated how COVID-19 has affected the economy, work and the workplace. More importantly, it has relied on the institutional theory as a framework to understand the behaviour of institutions at the national, organizational and individual levels. The collectivist theory has also aided our understanding of valued beliefs in different contexts.

The impact of COVID-19 in Nigeria has been mixed; positives and negatives. It has encouraged the adoption of remote working as well as sharing of quality time between parents and their children. On the negative side, unemployment

and underemployment have increased, families are more vulnerable and the gaps in the current role of government as an institution are more apparent. Also, the gaps in gender equality are widening, in favour of men. As a result of all these, there is a need for government to explore various options of assisting working families like provision of childcare support, the encouragement of employers to adopt flexible working arrangements, and the upgrade of the healthcare system to take care of the physical and emotional health of citizens. Despite the negative effects of the pandemic on governments, organizations and households, what it has brought to the fore is also the realization that in Nigeria, technology must be embraced and leveraged upon aggressively in the conduct of business operations.

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