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CoE-HUMAN • NEWSLETTER

August 2022



CoE-HUMAN FEMALE RESEARCHERS SHAKE UP AND IMPACT THE WORLD OF SCIENCE!!



Dr Pinky Mahlangu



Dr Candice Groenewald



Dr Roisin Drysdale

Drs Pinky Mahlangu, Candice Groenewald, and Roisin Drysdale, three of our female grantees funded by the DSI-NRF, through the CoE-Human, also feature in this celebration newsletter with articles focused on and around important issues related to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

AUGUST IS WOMAN'S MONTH IN SOUTH AFRICA

We pay tribute to more than 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings on 09 August 1956 in protest against the extension of Pass Laws to women.

Women's month is an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on women's achievements, as well as the problems they have faced in the struggle for freedom. In commemorating the important role South African women play in all sectors, including, academia, this month's issue is devoted to celebrating CoE-HUMAN female researchers – renowned and emerging.

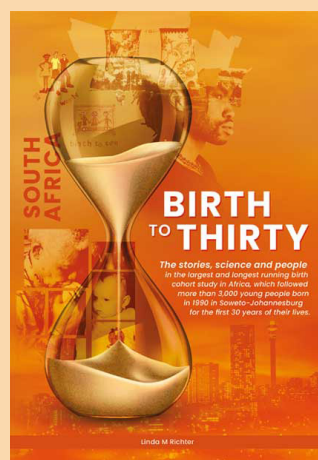
Distinguished Professor Linda Richter



It is our honor to recognize the first Director of the CoE-HUMAN and Distinguished Professor Linda Richter as one of many women pioneers making a tremendous impact on human development during her life-long commitment to science.

Her research among Africa's largest and longest-running birth cohort study located in Soweto-Johannesburg, is described in her new book:

Birth to Thirty: A Study as Ambitious as the Country We Wanted to Create.



The book launch was held at Wits Origins Centre on the 19 August 2022 for the academic community and on the 20 August 2022 at the Wits Health Hub in Jabulani, Soweto for 3 000-plus families who formed the study cohort over the last thirty-plus years.

BIRTH TO THIRTY:

A Study as ambitious as the country we wanted to create,
the stories, the people and the science

The Birth to Thirty (Bt30) study in Soweto is Africa's largest and longest-running birth cohort study. It is colloquially nicknamed as "Mandela's Children" given that the study started with children born just after Nelson Mandela was released from prison. The study intends to keep working with and tracking these families whose lives span South Africa's democratic transition.

The study's first data collection round in 1989/1990 asked the still-pregnant mothers about the conditions of their pregnancy. Data was collected at birth and six months and on a yearly basis from the families, an enormous feat over 32-plus years.

On Friday, 19 August 2022, an academic gathering hosted at the Wits Origins Center served as the book's first launch. On Saturday, 20 August 2022, the second launch, which was exclusively for study participants, took place in Jabulani, Soweto. Professor Lynn Morris, Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research Innovation at Wits University, delivered the opening speech at the first book launch at the Origins Center. "This launch represents over 30 years of the seminal birth of the cohort. It is still considered the largest and longest running birth cohort, covering child health and

development in Africa", said Morris. She commended Prof Linda Richter and her team keeping the study going for such a long time. "It's a very rich source of scientific data. It's the only large, longitudinal study in a low- or middle-income country with a number of closely spaced measures of cognition, growth and personality, across time from early childhood to adulthood within the context of family and broader socio-economic factors". The participants completed more than 22 rounds of data collection. They answered countless questions, gave blood and urine samples, and underwent numerous measurements. "In many ways, as they turn 32, the birth to thirty-ers are at a pivotal moment in their lives, and this book marks the same for the study and we all look forward to its continuous success".

Prof Richter took to the podium and narrated the birth, gestation and tentative conclusion of the study. "The study combines the science, the people, and the stories that make up Bt30 in the book." said Richter. She skillfully places the personal contributions from participants and staff alongside important scientific findings and data trends in their historical and modern contexts. She also shared the challenges encountered when

the study began: "none of us had the experience, staff, time or financial resources to roll out a study of some 3200 children born to the poorly planned geography of Soweto". But with the dedication and ingenuity, she and her team managed to collect quality data throughout the years.

"We've published more than 270 papers, successfully supervised 62 postgraduate students, co-opted and renovated a building on the grounds of Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, employed several staff members for more than 25 years, outfitted an internationally accredited laboratory, installed cutting edge technology and equipment, and to date collected more than 20 million data points on close to two thousand individuals over 22 data collections between birth and adulthood," said Richter.

"Apart from creating a historic record of the study, my main motivation in writing this book is to affirm the experiences of the participants, to contribute to their memories and ensure that they, their families and their children know what the significant study of Bt30 is, and know what an important contribution their participation has made to science and policy" Richter adds.

BIRTH TO THIRTY:

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Participants experiences

Boitumelo Molete, a second generation (Bt30) participant, relays her experience in the cohort; “I felt important, I felt like I was doing something other children were not doing” says Molete. She talks about how the Bt30 staff were there for her when she went through some of the darkest and most pivotal times of her life. “I thought the data collected from Birth to Ten was useless, but it sparked an interest in research for me and in wanting to know more. I became very inquisitive,” Molete further notes. Molete is a first-generation varsity student in her family and thanks the study for making a positive impact in her life.

Oratile Mbali Mogashoa, a 16-year-old third generation Bt30 participant, is eager to be part of the study. Her grandmother was recruited in 1989/90 and has been in the study since, her father was one of the children born in 1990. Her grandmother has also worked with Bt30 for many years. “I’m really excited to read the book” said Oratile.

The book will be available through Amazon and Takealot and proceeds will fund postgraduate students working with longitudinal data.

For more information about the book, please email Sara.Naicker@wits.ac.za.



Women and children's experiences of domestic violence in South Africa after COVID-19 lockdown

The COVID-19 national lockdown had unprecedented negative economic impacts on families and exacerbated some of the risk factors for violence against women and children. Dr Mahlangu used social media to recruit men and women who were 18 years and older, living with a spouse and/or child in Gauteng province during the lockdown and conducted telephone interviews to understand their experiences and the impact of the lockdown and the link to women and children's experience of domestic violence.

Her findings showed that women more often reported experiences of emotional violence, while experiences of physical violence were mostly amongst children. Furthermore, experiences of violence in the home differed by socio-economic class. Job losses and reduction in earnings resulted in food insecurity which was a key driver of violence in lower socio-economic status (SES) families. While in higher SES families, confinement in the home with spouses was an unfamiliar and difficult experience, associated with conflict and perpetration of violence by men. Participants across socio-economic groups reported high levels of stress with limited psychosocial support available during the lockdown.

The study showed contrasting experiences of lockdown by gender and social class. A major finding of the study is how the lockdown was experienced differently by men and women, and how it became a risk factor for home violence for both low and high socioeconomic groups. Additionally, women in low socioeconomic levels reported conflict in intimate relationships and emotional violence against them in the home during lockdown Alert level 5 in South Africa. Some participants, mainly women, further reported perpetration of physical violence against their children during hard lockdown. Of note, is that very few women reported experiencing physical violence in the study, despite studies globally indicating a rise in physical violence against women during lockdown.

She suggests that structural and social relief measures need to be strengthened to reduce the loss of jobs and income and to address food insecurity during national disasters and that psychosocial support should be provided to men and women to mitigate the mental health impacts.

Mahlangu, P., Gibbs, A., Shai, N. et al. Impact of COVID-19 lockdown and link to women and children's experiences of violence in the home in South Africa. BMC Public Health 22, 1029 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13422-3>



Lives versus livelihoods: South African adults' perspectives on the alcohol ban during the COVID-19 lockdown

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa's national lockdown included a ban on the sale of alcohol. This paper led by Dr Essack and supported through a DSI-NRF grant from CoE-Human to Dr Groenewald describes adults' perspectives on this alcohol ban, focusing on whether they support or oppose this regulation. The aim was to minimise strain on an already heavily burdened healthcare system and ensure availability of beds for potential COVID-19 patients. The South African government announced several limitations on the sale, distribution and transportation of liquor, as part of its COVID-19 Disaster Management Strategy. This included restrictions on the number of people that could be accommodated at onsite consumption premises and restricted accessibility through a curfew on alcohol sales.

Perspectives are framed around the overarching theme of "lives versus livelihoods," presented as support and/or opposition to the ban. Participants who endorsed the ban, as preserving "lives," thought that it facilitated social distancing and therefore limited the spread of COVID-19. Those who opposed the ban suggested that it undermined the "livelihoods" of South Africans, in the context of an already-strained economy.

The South African government lost approximately R635 million a month in alcohol-related taxes, and with potential for unemployment to increase from 30% to 50%, South Africa's alcohol ban has been a topical and controversial issue. Globally, many countries implemented mitigation strategies to flatten the COVID-19 curve; however, the complete prohibition of alcohol was atypical.

Many participants supported the alcohol ban and focused on the preventative nature of this regulation. For example, alcohol consumption could lower inhibition and increase risk behaviours for contracting and spreading COVID-19. Some participants resonated with arguments that "alcohol consumption begets groups and gatherings, which would negate the very foundation of our fight against the current stage of the COVID-19 outbreak – social distancing and home-based quarantine!".

However, the lockdown and the alcohol ban derailed an already fragile economy and as such the ban was vehemently opposed by the industry and contested in court. Some industry partners cancelled millions worth of capital investment in South Africa on account of the ban. Findings show that decisions around whether to support or oppose the alcohol ban were informed by critical reflections on the wider socio-behavioural and health implications of such regulations.

Zaynab Essack, Candice Groenewald, Nazeema Isaacs, Thobeka Ntini, Mafanato Maluleka, Lindelwa Bhembe, Sinakekelwe Nkwanyana & Ann Strode (2022) Lives versus livelihoods: South African adults' perspectives on the alcohol ban during the COVID-19 lockdown, *Journal of Substance Use*, DOI: [10.1080/14659891.2022.2060141](https://doi.org/10.1080/14659891.2022.2060141)



Child Growth during a Global Pandemic

Dr Drysdale compared outcomes of infants born before and during the pandemic to assess the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic's indirect effects, such as the national lockdown, negatively affected infant growth and wellbeing.

Her findings showed that infants born full-term (37 weeks gestation) without birth complications during the first year of the pandemic were two to three times more likely to be born with a low birthweight ($\leq 2.5\text{kg}$) than before the pandemic. Additionally, women who were pregnant during this first year reported difficulty during pregnancy, mainly through increased stress and fear of attending clinics or hospitals due to COVID-19.

On a positive note, her results indicated that the pandemic did not indirectly affect child morbidity, child immunization status, clinic attendance or child feeding practices. Despite the negative impact on birthweight, child growth at 6 months was also not negatively affected. However, increased low birthweight in otherwise healthy infants, could result in a higher number of children not reaching their developmental potential. To further assess the indirect effects of the pandemic, she is following-up and measuring growth and early child development in the infants born during the pandemic.

She currently has two manuscripts from this study, one of which has been submitted, the other is being finalized for submission.

1. Drysdale, RE., Slemming, W., Richter, LM. Food insecurity in families with young infants living in Soweto, South Africa: Impact of the first year of the COVID-19 national lockdown. Submitted to Scientific African.
2. Drysdale, RE., Slemming, W., Momber, D., Said-Mohammad, R., Richter, LM. Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on low birthweight in Soweto, South Africa. To be submitted.

KEY UPCOMING EVENTS & PUBLICATIONS



Quantitative Analysis Training Webinar Series

Working with Wits biostatisticians we developed a six-part webinar series which teaches key concepts in statistical application, using a fast-track method to gain statistical knowledge.

Webinar 3:

Introduction to variance component models,
5 September 2022
(recording to be posted soon)

Webinar 4:

Questionnaire development and factor analysis,
29 September 2022

Webinar 5:

Introduction to metaanalyses and systematic
reviews, 27 October 2022

Webinar 6:

The scientific method and reporting of scientific
research, 24 November 2022

[To view this series click here](#)

To view previous learning resources, visit: [CoE-Human Learning Resources](#)

Publications

1. Drysdale, R. E., Slemming, W., Makusha, T., & Richter, L. M. (2022). Male partners' experiences of early pregnancy ultrasound scans in Soweto, South Africa: The Healthy Pregnancy, Healthy Baby randomised trial. *South African Journal of Child Health*, 16(2), 72.
2. Khambule, I., & Mdlalose, M. (2022). COVID-19 and state coordinated responses in South Africa's emerging developmental state. *Development Studies Research*, 9(1), 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21665095.2022.2098791>
3. Khambule, I. (2022). Territorial Impact and Responses to COVID-19 in South Africa: Case Studies of eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality and KwaDukuza Local Municipality. *World*, 3(3), 513–529. <https://doi.org/10.3390/world3030028>
4. Slemming, W., Norris, S. A., Kagura, J., Saloojee, H., & Richter, L. (2022). Child development at age 5 years: The effects of maternal education, socioeconomic status and early-life growth examined prospectively in a lowresource setting. *South African Journal of Child Health*, 16(2), 111.
5. van Honk, J., Terburg, D., Montoya, E. R., Grafman, J., Stein, D. J., & Morgan, B. (2022). Breakdown of utilitarian moral judgement after basolateral amygdala damage. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(31), e2119072119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2119072119>
6. Watermeyer, J., Scott, M., Kapueja, L., & Ware, L. J. (2022). To trust or not to trust: An exploratory qualitative study of personal and community perceptions of vaccines amongst a group of young community healthcare workers in Soweto, South Africa. *Health Policy and Planning*, czac060. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czac060>