

Household Food Basket spikes in April 2021: women raise alarm.

Below we present the key data from the April 2021 Household Affordability Index, and then share our conversations with women regarding how women are responding to food price spikes, how they see the situation of hunger on the ground, and how they see the next several months panning out. These conversations are extremely important now, as women on the ground can see much more clearly and analyse the unfolding situation far more realistically.

Key data from the April 2021 Household Affordability Index

The April 2021 Household Affordability Index, which tracks food price data from 44 supermarkets and 30 butcheries, in Johannesburg (Soweto, Alexandra, Tembisa and Hillbrow), Durban (KwaMashu, Umlazi, Isipingo, Durban CBD and Mtubatuba), Cape Town (Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Philippi, Delft and Dunoon), Pietermaritzburg and Springbok (in the Northern Cape), shows that:

- **In April 2021:** The average cost of the Household Food Basket is **R4 198,93**.
- **Month-on-month** (between March 2021 and April 2021): The average cost of the Household Food Basket **increased** by **R159,37 (3,9%)**.
- **Over the past eight (8) months** (between September 2020 [the first data release] and April 2021): The average cost of the Household Food Basket **increased** by **R342,59 (8,9%)**, from R3 856,34 in September 2020 to R4 198,93 in April 2021.

All Household Food Baskets (Joburg, Durban, Cape Town, Springbok and Pietermaritzburg) increased month-on-month. All Household Food Baskets in April 2021 are at the highest level since September 2020. 36 out of 44 foods in the average Household Food Basket went up. The increases were across the board. Core staple foods, vegetables and meats went up. The monthly spike in April 2021 of R159,37 (3,9%) is the highest we have ever seen.

The food price data in April 2021 were collected **before** the fuel price hike and increased fuel levies came into effect on Wednesday 7th April 2021, and before the new electricity tariff of 15,63% will come into effect. Fuel prices and electricity prices run through the entire economy and the food value chains. The full impact of these increases has yet to come through. **Based on the current upward trend in food prices, we predict that with the increases in fuel and electricity, that food prices will increase beyond 10% for the 2021 term.**

How are women responding to food price increases?

Women cannot absorb the food price increases. Women tell us they now only buy the critical foods. Women tell us they respond to hikes in food prices by shopping around a lot more to seek out the cheapest prices before they commit to a purchase. Women are buying cheaper and cheaper staple foods across more supermarkets. Trolleys are less full and women shoppers are heard saying, "we will just get what we can afford now and see how we cope in the month." Women told us that they are seeing a lot more shoppers, when they reach the check-out counter and the prices are being tallied, asking the teller to wait as they switch out larger volume products for small products even on the basic staple foods. There is also a lot more food being dropped out of the trollies or left at the checkout counters, especially of "children's foods" viz. milk, cereal, polony and in some cases even margarine, peanut butter and jam. The size of the trollies being used has also changed. Mostly women now use the small trollies with two baskets. Some supermarkets have removed the big trollies altogether and repurposed them as security barriers.

In most cases women now purchase vegetables and fruits outside the supermarket, from vendors on the streets, unless supermarkets have special market days or if vegetable combos are cheap. Vegetables from vendors are sourced locally, are of good quality and fresh. They are bought in small quantities. There are also

more vendors selling seedlings on the streets, and many more people are trying to grow some vegetables at home.

Meat purchases have been reduced. Women tell us that when buying 5kg frozen chicken portions, women pull out the see-through bags, hold the bags at arms-length and carefully count the pieces and evaluate the size of the pieces so they can see how many of the pieces can be cut in half. Cheaper cuts of meat are also sought after. Beef bones are bought but women complain that the bones which used to have a lot more meat on them are now nearly meatless. Wors is still a prize meat as it can make a meaty-tasting stew and can go a lot further than stewing beef or chuck. But sometimes wors can be fatty and disgusting so women must find a credible supplier. All women tell us that their families eat much less meat now, and for many, meat has been relegated to the weekend with pockets of a much *origami-cut* chicken pieces and a few cheap meat cuts during the week, or none at all.

In short, families prioritise the purchasing of critical staple foods. Women are buying cheaper and cheaper and cheaper starches, oil, and sugar of lower nutritional quality. Women are buying less food. Vegetables and fruits are being bought in small quantities on the streets, and less meat is being eaten. Children's lunchboxes are being hollowed out. The response by women to lower nutritional purchases to at least secure the basic starches to ensure meals can be cooked and bellies full have seriously negative nutritional implications and make families more susceptible to common illnesses (illnesses will be more frequent, more severe, and more prolonged) and generally quite miserable as food plays a big role in how bodies and minds function. Women suffer the most out of this ever-worsening situation as (1) preparing for shopping and the shopping itself takes forever and, (2) culinary miracles need to be performed to stretch food out and make it reasonably palatable, (3) women have to sacrifice their own nutritional needs even more stridently to extend the period of better off nutrition for their children, and (4) the stress of making sure there is food on the table doesn't end: it constantly sits at the throats of women and worries women no end.

What does the situation of hunger look like now?

Women tell us that most households are still alright as they are still able to secure the basic core staple foods (albeit of very poor quality) and are therefore able to put food on the table for 3 weeks of the month currently and although a lot of the nutrition has diminished, the energy requirements are mostly still being met.

However, women tell us there are households that are very very hungry but these families are still in the minority. Women are seeing more and more pockets of people particularly larger families and, single women relying on Child Support Grants, and marginalised men with small families, many of whom relied on the Covid-19 Relief grant starting to get hungry. There sense is that these pockets of hunger will continue to expand and coalesce like a thin stream of oil being poured into a bowl of water. Women tell us that what happens is "*that when hunger starts coming in, a neighbour is going to support another neighbour but when both of you start getting hungry and then the third neighbour starts getting hungry and the fourth neighbour starts getting hungry then it starts a horrible ball rolling that you cannot stop.*" This situation scares women very much.

Women are noting that petty crimes in their areas are escalating, particularly housebreakings (which frequently include food being stolen out of fridges and cupboards) as well as of other household appliances and cell phones which can be sold for cash and food. These crimes regardless that they are not intentionally violent, are very traumatic. The deterioration in being able to afford the basic sustenance of life, combined with no apparent government help, is manifesting in people doing, for them increasingly shameful things, which a few years ago they would never have done. These types of small mostly petty crime are condoned amongst those who are suffering the worst. Women confided to us that they feel more unsafe in their homes at night and when walking in the streets. There is a strong sense of distress and anxiety.

How do women see the next few months panning out?

All women we spoke with suggest that the next few months are going to be very difficult. They think that prices of everything (not just food – everything) are extremely expensive and will continue to increase. They are worried about the onset of winter which always makes life worse with the cold, and the darkness, and the incessant blackouts. Women are worried about their children. The rotating school system whereby children go to school for 2 or 3 days one week and then a day or two the next is not working. Children are struggling.

They cannot focus, they cannot build a foundation for the next class, they go to school and learn very little. Mothers are very upset. They say children are not progressing and are losing confidence.

Women are saying that if you had a job before Covid-19 and were able to retain your job after the severe restrictions it has often meant that even now shorter-hours and pay cuts are still in place, and which after transport fare, and paying electricity, families are left with almost nothing to buy food. Women tell us that even if you have a job, there is very little difference between someone with a job and someone without a job now. It is extremely hard to get by now regardless if someone in the home is employed.

Women also said that it is almost impossible to get a job if you were previously unemployed before Covid-19 hit. They say that if you were looking for work before Covid-19, and are still looking for work now, that there is no work available. At all.

Women are extremely angry with the state. They believe government's handling of education during Covid-19 has been disastrous. They find it almost incomprehensible that government only increased the Child Support Grant by R10. They are also very worried for their friends and families who relied on the Covid-19 Relief Grant of R350, even though this amount is so little, it did help. Women do not believe that government cares about them.

Putting this together the sense is very depressed regarding the future. Nobody it seems is sure how the future looks, but nobody imagines it to be better. All women suggested that the next few months will be key to see if they will be able to get through this very difficult period or not. If women do not get through this period, then it is possible that South Africa will not get through this period. Our futures are linked, and right now our future is in the hands of hungry mothers who are doing everything they can to keep from falling apart.

So far government is failing to keep prices down and provide income support. The context is worsening. It seems to women and to us that the state is currently waiting, watching. Each day the state is losing the credibility and the control to govern. The window of time to intervene and plan and manage change is fast narrowing. Government must intervene. If it does not then our future will be decided by hungry men and women, who are telling us in no uncertain terms, that they are barely holding on.