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Carrying the work burden of the COVID-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK

Briefing Note 1: Employment and mental health

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wbg WOMEN'S
BUDGET
GROUP

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The study

- Working class women are carrying the burden of the extra physical and emotional labour being generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. These women care for children, sick and frail elderly, clean buildings, cook and serve food, administer institutions and staff shops, while retaining major responsibility for domestic work and caring at home. The Women's Budget Group (WBG) highlighted that 2.5 million of the 3.2 million workers employed in the highest risk roles during the pandemic are women, many in low-paid roles. There is little detailed attention to their experiences and needs and how to urgently support them in their essential work.
- The project is in collaboration with the WBG, the leading independent organisation that deals with the impact of policy on women's lives, and is analysing data from 'Understanding Society', the 'UK Household Longitudinal Study', including vital new information being gathered on the impact of COVID-19.

The data

- The Understanding Society COVID-19 study is a monthly survey of the experiences and reactions of the UK population to the COVID-19 pandemic, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Health Foundation.
- The survey forms part of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), which is a representative survey of UK households and began in 2009. The first wave of the COVID-19 survey was fielded in April 2020 <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/topic/covid-19>

The sample

- All Understanding Society adult sample members aged 16+ and who had taken part in one of the two last waves of the main study were invited to participate and 17,450 participants completed the survey in the first wave in April 2020.
- Our study looks at employed women and men, aged 18-65 (3,700 women and 3,600 men in January/February, weighted results). We also look at those women and men who were employed in the pre-pandemic survey (UKHLS wave 9, collected 2017–2019) to access their class details: with over 900 women and over 700 men in April 2020 in working class 'Semi-routine' and 'Routine' jobs.
- Semi-routine work includes care-workers, retail assistants, hospital porters. Routine work includes cleaners, waiting staff, bus drivers, bar staff, sewing machinists (the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification/'NS-SEC').

Employment and mental health

The topic:

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work. It is generating deep problems for many of the working population in the UK but also impacting in starkly different ways that can narrow or reinforce existing inequalities or create new inequities in working lives. The experiences of working class women are our core interest: how are they faring compared with middle class women and with men overall? For some working class women, e.g. domestic cleaners and non-essential shop workers, the pandemic puts jobs at risk and cuts hours. For others in close contact with customers, clients and patients, it brings work intensification and life-threatening health risks in unsafe work environments. Working class women are disproportionately likely to be employed in frontline roles and so are exposed to the mental and physical stresses of carrying out precarious and risky work in uncertain times. How did women fare overall compared with men, and to what extent were the working lives of employed women impacted differently according to their class? This briefing explores overall patterns in employment and mental health.

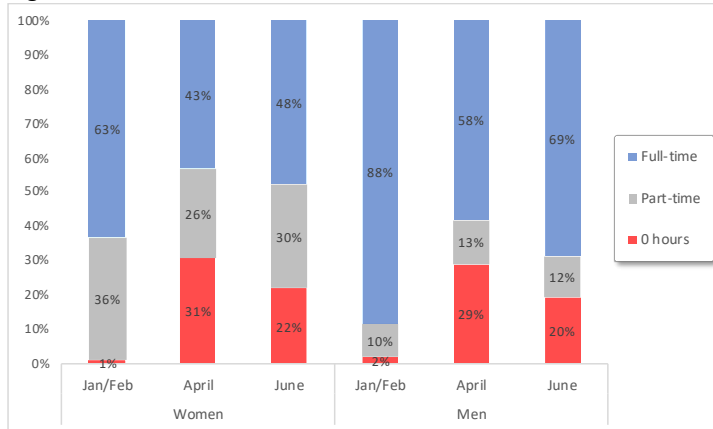
The focus:

- What were the weekly hours worked by employees and the self-employed before the pandemic (in January and February 2020) and after the lockdown in March?
- How often did people work at home before and after lockdown?
- Which employees were furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme?
- Which workers were keyworkers?
- Has psychological wellbeing changed since lockdown and who has been most affected?

See <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/questionnaires>

1. How many hours do people spend at work?

Figure 1a. Hours worked before and after lockdown.



Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65. Hours worked last week in all jobs and self-employment. Part-time hours = <30. Full-time hours = 30+.

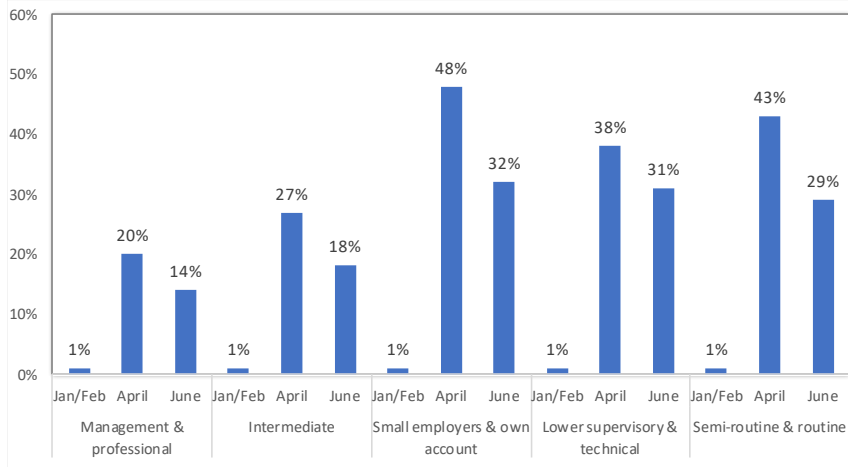
- Lockdown brought a big increase in the numbers of people who were employed but doing no work at all in their jobs (31% of women, 29% men).
- A minority of employed women were working full-time hours by April (43%).

Class

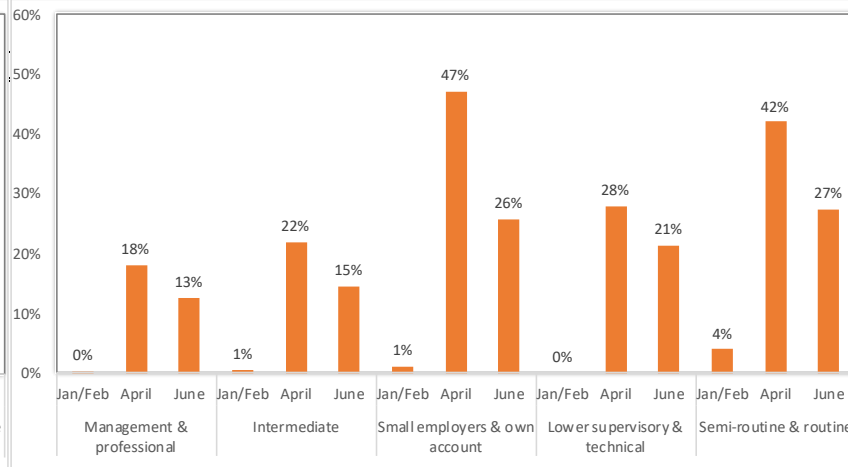
- 43% of working class women in Semi-routine and Routine jobs did no hours of work in April (42% of men) compared with only 20% of women in Management and Professional positions (18% of men).

Figure 1b. Which class groups were doing Zero work hours in their job(s)?

a. Women



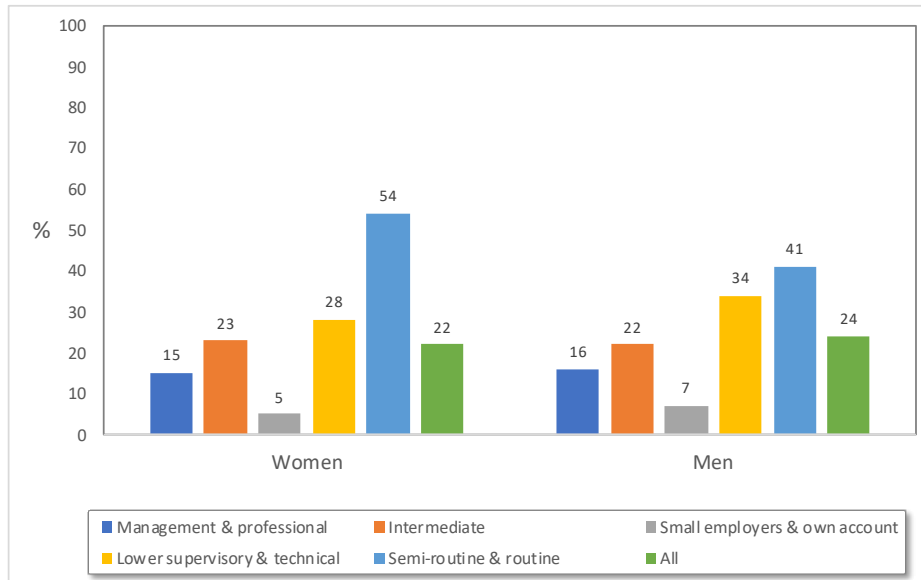
b. Men



Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65. Hours worked last week in all jobs and self-employment.

2. Who is furloughed?

Figure 2. Which employees were furloughed?



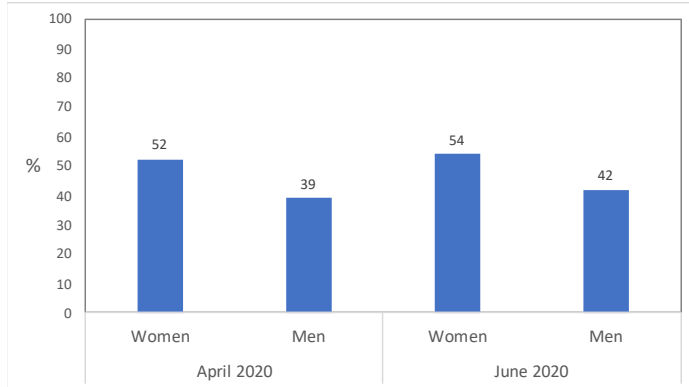
Notes: Employees aged 18-65 in June 2020. Who was furloughed in any previous survey month?

Working class women were disproportionately likely to be furloughed:

- 54% of female Routine and Semi-routine workers had been furloughed by June (41% of men).
- Only 15% of women working in Management and Professional jobs had been furloughed during the same period of time (16% of men).

3. Who are the keyworkers?

Figure 3a. What percentage of women and men reported that they are key workers?



Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65.

More women than men are keyworkers:

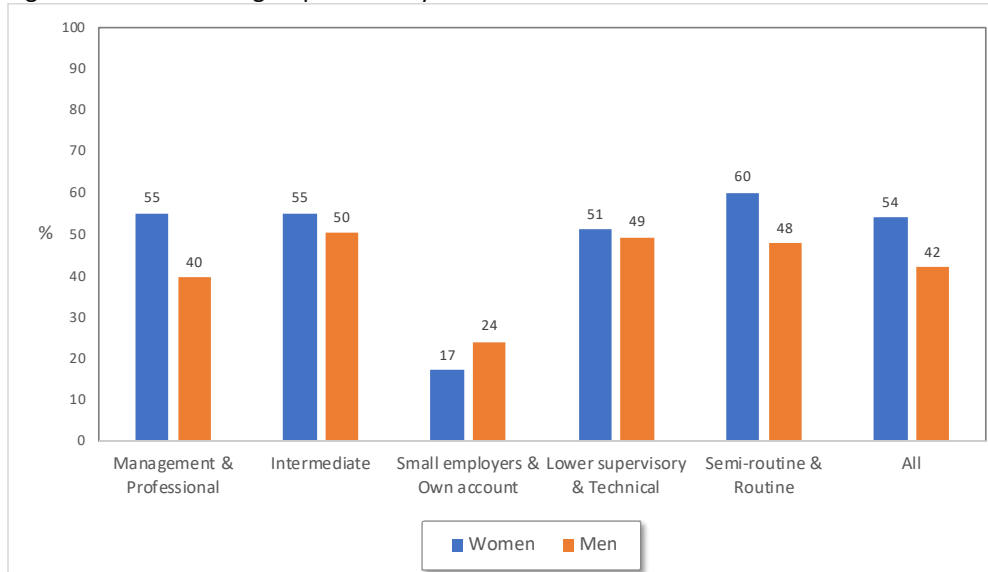
- April: 52% of women v 42% of men.
- June: 54% of women v 42% of men.

Class

Keyworking is highest among working class women:

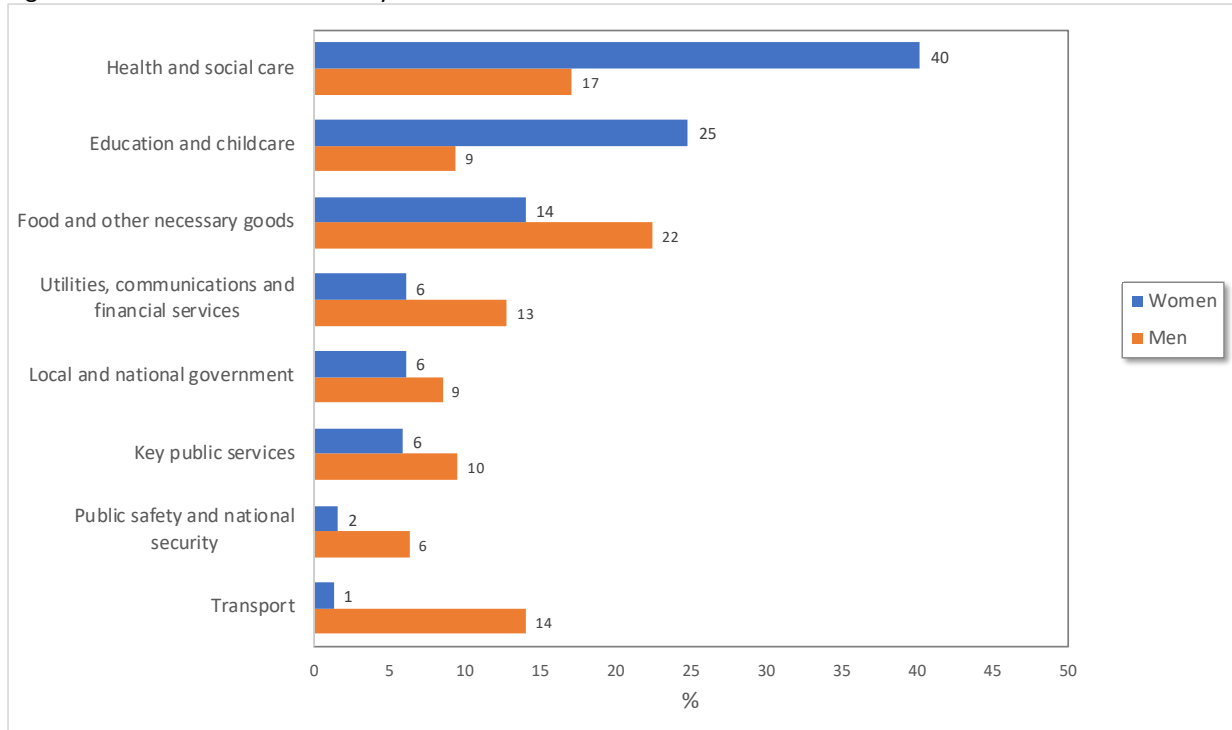
- 60% of women in Semi-routine and Routine jobs are keyworkers.

Figure 3b. Which class groups were keyworkers?



Notes: Women and men aged 18-65. Employed in both June 2020 and Wave i.

Figure 3c. Which sectors do the keyworkers work in?



Notes: Keyworkers aged 18-65. Employed in June 2020 and in Wave i.

Female keyworkers are disproportionately working in frontline roles which require face-to-face interaction:

- Health and social care (40% women v 17% men).
- Education and child-care (25% v 9% men).

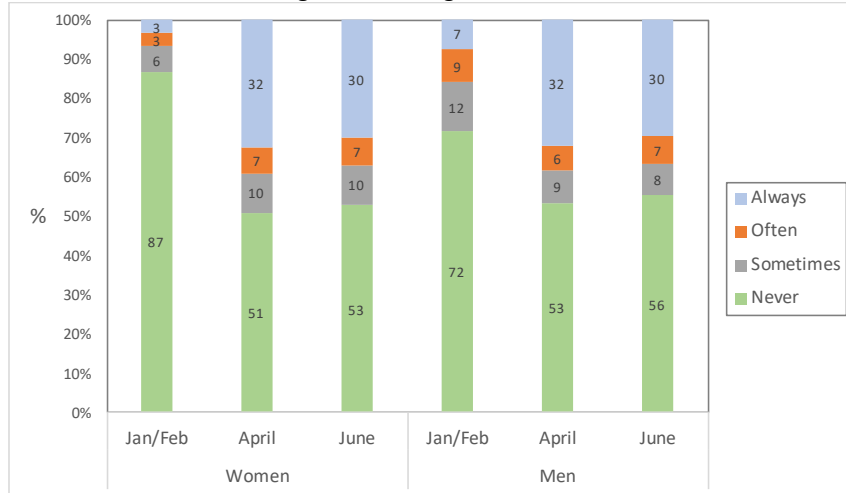
More male keyworkers than female are in production and delivery jobs:

- Food and other necessary goods (22% v 14% women).
- Transport (14% v 1% women).
- Utilities, communications and financial services (13% v 6% women).

There is a greater potential for women to be exposed to health risks at work.

4. Who is working from home?

Figure 4. How much did working from home grow after lockdown?



Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65. Working at home during the previous 4 weeks?

There was a big increase in working from home for employed women and men:

- In Jan/Feb, only 3% of women and 7% of men ‘always’ worked from home.
- This jumped to 32% for both groups in April (30% in June).

Class

- Only 9% of working class women in Routine and Semi-routine jobs were ‘always’ working from home (3% of male).
- Almost half (44% of female and 48% of male) of Professional/Managerial workers ‘always’ worked from home in June.

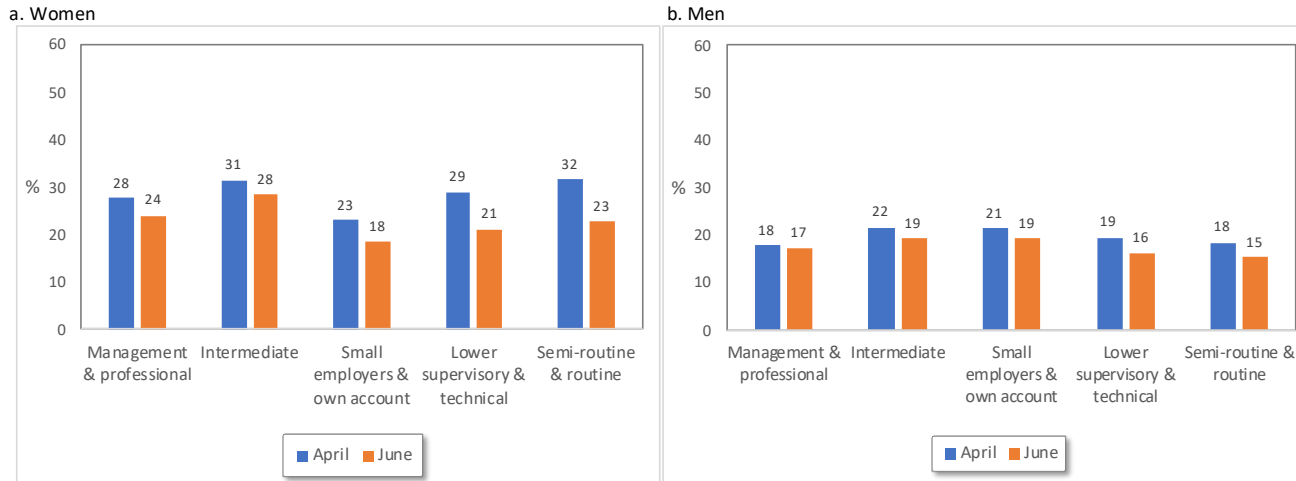
Table 4. Which class groups were working from home?

	January/February 2020						June 2020					
	Management & professional	Intermediate	Small employers & own account	Lower supervisory & technical	Semi-routine & routine	All	Management & professional	Intermediate	Small employers & own account	Lower supervisory & technical	Semi-routine & routine	All
Women	Column %											
Always	5	4	33	1	2	6	44	34	34	14	9	30
Often	9	4	11	2	1	6	11	8	3	4	4	7
Sometimes	30	13	21	8	4	17	12	11	12	7	7	10
Never	56	79	35	90	92	71	33	47	52	75	80	53
Men												
Always	6	3	12	0	1	5	48	43	25	7	3	30
Often	12	3	6	1	1	6	11	7	4	5	3	7
Sometimes	30	19	23	7	6	19	10	6	12	5	1	8
Never	52	75	59	92	92	70	30	44	60	84	93	56

Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65. Working at home during the previous 4 weeks?

5. Mental health impacts

Figure 5. Which workers were less happy than usual?



Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65. 'Less so/Much less' happy than usual, all things considered.

- Women were more likely than men to report being less happy than usual during lockdown.
 - More women than men experienced psychological distress.
 - Levels of distress dropped between April and June.
- Class**
- In all classes, more women were experiencing psychological distress than were men.
 - More women working in Routine and Semi-Routine (41%) than in other jobs experienced distress in April, reducing to 30% in June.

Table 5. Which workers were experiencing psychological distress?

	April					%	June				
	Management & professional	Intermediate	Small employers & own account	Lower supervisory & technical	Semi-routine & routine		Management & professional	Intermediate	Small employers & own account	Lower supervisory & technical	Semi-routine & routine
Women	39	38	29	38	41		30	33	31	37	30
Men	22	29	25	26	20		21	22	21	25	22

Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65. Psychological distress is a score of 4+ in the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12: caseness 4+)

6. Summing up and research round-up

- Lockdown brought a big increase in the numbers of people who were still employed but doing no work at all in their jobs.
- Working class women were more likely to be furloughed than were both women in middle class jobs and men.
- Keyworking is highest among working class women. Female keyworkers are disproportionately working in customer- and patient-facing jobs, bringing a greater exposure to health risks at work.
- Very few working class women could work from home after lockdown.
- More women than men, and slightly more working class than middle class women, were experiencing psychological distress.

Research round-up

This is the first in a series of Briefing Notes which will be released over the coming months:

- Briefing note 1: Employment and mental health.
- Briefing note 2: Housework and childcare.
- Briefing note 3: Changes in employment and financial impacts.

For more information

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Citation

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