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

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Equalities Committee,
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Why focus on working class women?

Working lives are shaped by gender, class and their intersections. Working class 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. Our findings show that during the pandemic working class women have experienced the worst of both worlds: their paid work was less protected from the negative effects of the pandemic than women in the highest level jobs and they have also been doing more housework and childcare than working class men. This ‘perfect storm’ has led to low levels of life satisfaction and high levels of psychological distress among working class women. The government needs to recognise and support the vital work that these women do, providing them with greater job security, flexibility, financial safeguards and reliable, affordable, high-quality care services.

Our 12-month project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, as part of UK Research and Innovation’s rapid response to Covid-19, was conducted in collaboration with the UK Women’s Budget Group, the leading independent organisation that deals with the impact of policy on women’s lives. We analysed data from ‘Understanding Society’ (the UK Household Longitudinal Study), including vital new information gathered monthly from April 2020 on the impact of Covid-19. Class is measured by using the National Statistics-Socioeconomic Classification (NS-SEC), where ‘working class’ combines ‘Semi-routine’ workers (care-workers, retail assistants, hospital porters, etc.) and ‘Routine’ workers (cleaners, waiting staff, bus drivers, bar staff, sewing machinists, among others).

More than a year on from the first lockdowns in the UK, we found that the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the key, essential but under-valued work performed by working class women. It both exposed and intensified deep gender and class inequalities, with pandemic pressures resulting in further job and financial insecurity, heavier care responsibilities, and real challenges in managing unpaid and paid work.

The impact of Covid on paid employment

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 and/or women working short part-time hours were those most likely to go from positive to no hours of paid work during the pandemic, and even though this proportion decreased over time, class gaps were maintained. Working class women and men were more likely to be furloughed than workers in middle class jobs, but keyworking was also highest among working class women. Female keyworkers disproportionately work in frontline customer- and patient-facing jobs, bringing a greater exposure to health risks at work. Very few working class women were working from home during the pandemic, giving them less flexibility to cope with additional care responsibilities arising as a result of lockdown.

Housework and childcare – all change or business as usual?

There was some optimism that the large numbers of men forced or encouraged to work from home during the pandemic would bring a much-needed re-balancing of unpaid work within the home. More pessimistic assessments predicted an even greater imbalance between men and

women, given women's traditional responsibility for housework and childcare and the greater care and housework demands produced by the pandemic. Employed women were doing much more housework, more childcare and more home-schooling than men during the pandemic, and women's share of housework and childcare grew after the pandemic hit. Mothers were far more likely than fathers to have main responsibility for childcare and home-schooling. Working class women were the women least likely to reduce their hours of work or change their work schedules because of the time they were spending on childcare or home-schooling. Not only were working class women much less likely to be working from home during the pandemic, they also fared poorly in terms of access to good quality flexible working arrangements more generally.

Finances and hardship – who suffered most?

Working class women had the lowest wages of all workers and those living with another adult earner had the lowest household earnings of all groups. Fewer working class women were able to make savings in the previous 4 weeks, when compared with women in other class groups, and over a third were suffering from financial hardship.

Life satisfaction and wellbeing

Male workers reported lower levels of life satisfaction than women before the pandemic but, as the pandemic progressed, life satisfaction among employed women decreased, taking them below men's levels. Levels of life satisfaction among women and men rose and fell according to lockdown, with figures for January 2021 the lowest for both groups of worker. Working class women reported some of the lowest levels of life satisfaction in early 2021. Levels of psychological distress also followed similar patterns during periods of lockdown and de-restrictions, with employed women reporting higher levels of distress than men at all times. Working class women reported the highest levels of psychological distress in November 2020 when numbers started to creep up again during further lockdown measures, but this figure dropped slightly in 2021.

Recommendations

Our findings show that working class women have borne the brunt of the economic impact of the pandemic. Working class women are the majority of those working in the sectors most likely to have been affected by closures and restrictions during Covid-19 and they are the ones who could least afford to lose their jobs, hours and income. Working class women are also the bulk of the workforce behind the services that kept us going throughout the crisis.

The pandemic also shone a light on the inadequacy of our current safety net – public services like social care and childcare, and benefits like Universal Credit and Statutory Sick Pay, were not ready to meet the needs of many.

The government should:

- **Improve safety for workers:** Statutory Sick Pay should be increased to adequate levels and be extended to all workers with no income floor to ensure that those who have symptoms of Covid-19 or are awaiting test results are not forced to go to work in order to feed their

families. This would benefit women in particular as they are the majority of low-paid workers and less likely to qualify for SSP.

- **Stronger safety net:** This pandemic highlighted the importance of social security to alleviate and prevent poverty. The holes in this safety net were also put into stark relief. The cut to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits planned for September should be abandoned to avoid a fall in income at the same time as the coronavirus income support schemes come to an end. Higher benefit rates and more timely payments are needed in general if periods on benefits are not to lead to deprivation and/or unsustainable debts.
- **Stronger rights:** The government must reintroduce the Employment Bill to reduce insecurity for low-paid workers by extending employment rights and investing in strong and effective enforcement.
- **Sectoral support:** Post-Covid-19 recovery needs to include support for hardest hit sectors like retail, hospitality, leisure and tourism, sectors that are important employers of working class women and young people. Training for new roles also needs to be introduced, allowing women to move into sectors which attract government support and helping them to progress in their careers. The government concentration on STEM jobs alone is mistaken, however: other growth sectors will be in jobs dependent on face-to-face relationships, including caring jobs – these jobs currently have the highest growth rates in all countries. STEM-related jobs may increase too, but their growth is likely to be more limited by the growth in Artificial Intelligence. Greater efforts are also needed to break down segregation in the better paid occupations where men predominate.
- **Investment in care:** Urgent funding is required for the early years sector to avoid widespread closures which would have a huge impact on mothers' employment, particularly working class women. Sustainable funding and longer-term major reform are sorely needed for both the early years and the social care sectors. Investment in care would also create much needed jobs and contribute to pushing the economy towards a greener, more sustainable trajectory.
- **Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs):** Under the Public Sector Equality Duty, the government has a duty to have due regard to equality between women and men when formulating and implementing new policies and spending decisions. The uneven impact of the pandemic on different groups makes clear that EIAs should be part of a robust policy- and decision-making process. Given that class was an important divider in the pandemic impact, the UK government should follow the Welsh government's lead and implement the socio-economic duty across the UK.

The government needs to match their 'key worker' rhetoric with proper recognition in the form of living wages, living hours and good working conditions and security, and ensure that working class women are not forgotten in the economic recovery plan.

For more information

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