

'Working from home: opportunities and challenges'. A partial and classed account of the impact of Covid-19 on working lives

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Perhaps the most prevalent account in the media of the new world of work being fashioned in response to the Covid-19 pandemic is one in which workers were suddenly compelled to work fully from home, with each working day newly shaped by endless online calls, the dependable muted-microphone hitches, all brightened by the unruly entry of pets and small children into serious meetings. **This popular framing of the major impact of the pandemic on how and where we work is a firmly classed story.**

Class inequalities shaped work experiences as the pandemic effects rolled out in the UK, with some workers better protected from the negative impacts of Covid-19 but many more severely disadvantaged, fearing for their health, job security and income.

The importance of class for the analysis of pandemic-impacted working lives has been under-examined and too rarely discussed. In our [project](#) we looked at working lives in the face of the extraordinary and shifting burdens of the pandemic. **Our findings show deep inequalities in how Covid-19 affected how we work.**

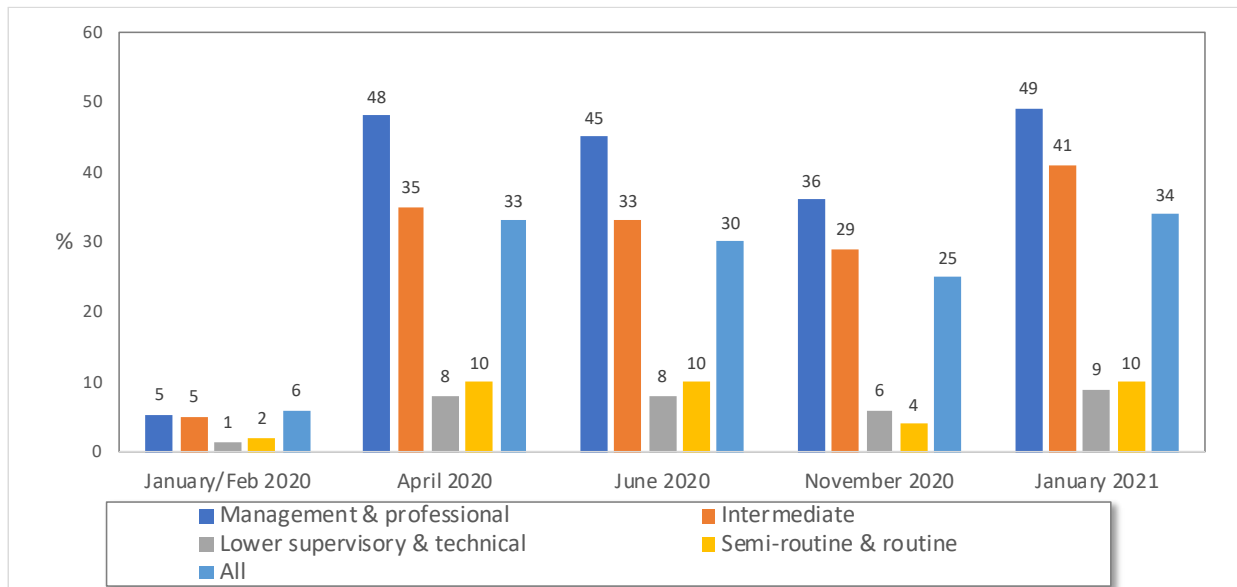
Very few working class people worked from home

Pondering the disadvantages, delights and future potential of the working at home 'experiment' neglects the fact that **most of the UK's workforce rarely or never worked from home after the pandemic hit.** The working from home account prioritises the pandemic experiences of a select group of workers while disguising real class inequity in both who could work from their homes and home-working conditions.

Before the pandemic, only 6% of women workers (and 4% of male) had been 'always' working from home. Levels of fully home-working jumped sharply, to a third of the employed, after the first national lockdown. **Yet home-working was a strongly classed phenomenon.** Around a half of workers in managerial and professional jobs reported that they were working from home all of the time in April (with an additional 24% saying they sometimes or often did so). **The figures for working class workers tell a very different story about pandemic-hit working lives.** Only 10% of

working class women in Semi-routine/Routine jobs were always working from home (only 10% more reported doing it sometimes or often).

Figure 1: Which women were always working from home?



Notes: Employed women aged 18-65.

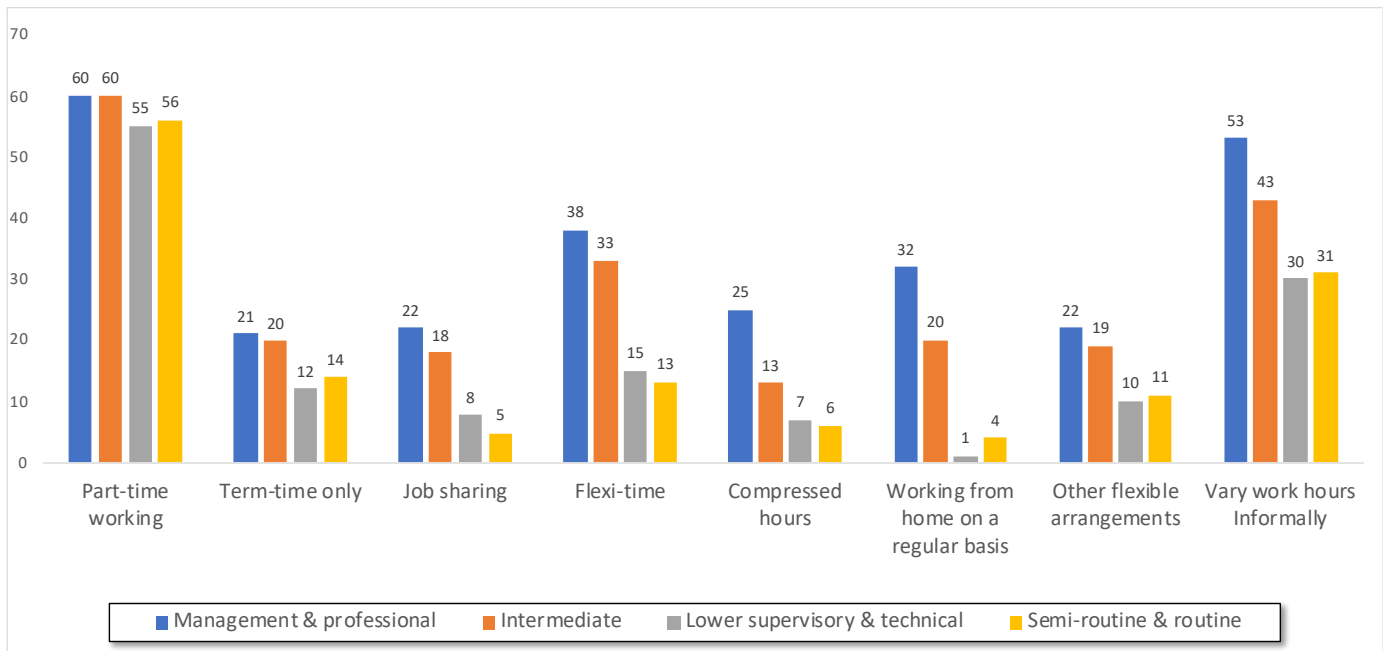
Working from home is not a positive experience for everyone

While many of those who had to work fully from home already had a suitable home office set-up, far more had to make do with working at cramped tables or from sofas and beds. **There were also deep class disparities in who had adequate computing facilities**, with reliable and fast broadband, and printing and office supplies. As the summer months came to an end, inequalities in home-working conditions were intensified by stark variations in the workers' abilities to afford to [heat home work-spaces over an extended period](#).

Very little flexible working is available to working class workers

Working from home is only one of a range of flexible working arrangements available to many workers. Some workers were permitted an increase in the flexible ways of working available to them, e.g. to fit around intensified caring and/or home-schooling responsibilities, but **access to good quality arrangements during the pandemic was, as it had been before, firmly classed**. In June, 38% of managerial/professional women could work flexibly and 53% vary their work hours informally, compared with only 13% and 31% of working class women.

Figure 2. Which women had access to flexible working arrangements in their workplace?

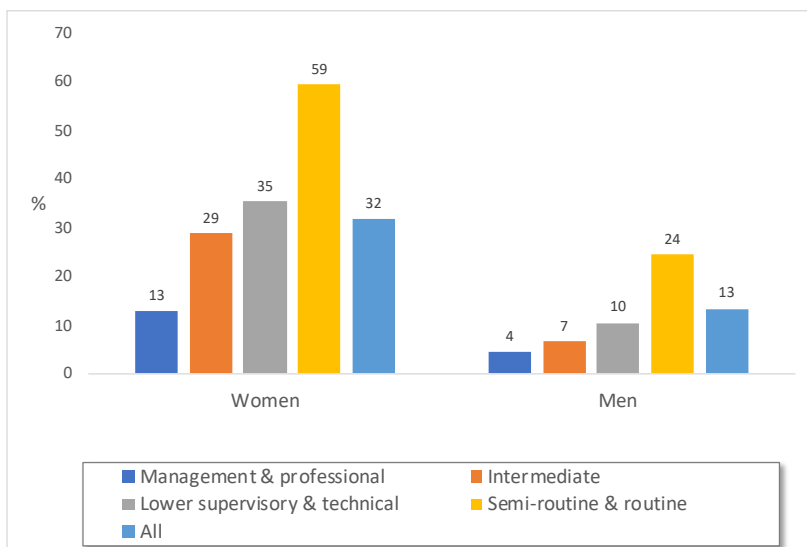


Notes: Employed women aged 18-65. June 2020.

Financial hardship among the working class

Class inequalities persisted in [workers' wages and household earnings](#), **with working class women faring the most poorly**, taking home the lowest weekly wages in our employed sample (Figure 3). Compared with senior workers, far fewer of the working class were able to make savings from their income, building up no financial safety nets. As 2020 came to a close, a growing large minority of working class women said that they were **in difficulties or just about getting by financially**.

Figure 3. Which workers had low weekly earnings?



We need to tell a better story about class, work and the pandemic

‘Travelling to work, in frontline and essential jobs, with very little flexibility to help manage the intensified pressures of living, working and caring through a global pandemic, all the while struggling to make ends meet’. This is a very different account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on working lives to the one featured in the ‘working from home: opportunities and challenges’ debate. It is, of course, a firmly classed story too but it is one that talks to the lives of far more of the working population than does the ‘working from home’ account that took the experience of a minority and relatively privileged group and generalized from it. **The workers’ predicaments summarised here have been largely neglected, not only in the mainstream media.** Without widespread recognition and urgent government support, the traditional ‘backbone’ of the workforce, providing essential care and other services, will be stretched to the limit, with longer-term implications for the rest of society.

Additional information

The project

[‘Carrying the work burden of the Covid-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK’](#) is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, as part of UK Research and Innovation’s rapid response to Covid-19 (Project ES/V009400/1). The ‘Understanding Society’ [Covid-19 study](#) is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Health Foundation. Fieldwork for the survey is carried out by Ipsos MORI and Kantar. Understanding Society is an initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and various government departments, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex. The research data are distributed by the UK Data Service.

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