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

Briefing Note 3: A year on: Working class women and work during the COVID-19 pandemic

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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.

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>
- Our own analysis of the data is ongoing and this Briefing Note may be updated as it proceeds.

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 10, collected 2018–2019) to access their class details. 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').

A year on: working class women and work during the Covid-19 pandemic

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 their working class male peers and 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. Job loss, furloughing and job insecurity all bring the threat and reality of severe financial hardship. Additional housework and childcare responsibilities only add to these stresses, with worrying implications for mental health. 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?

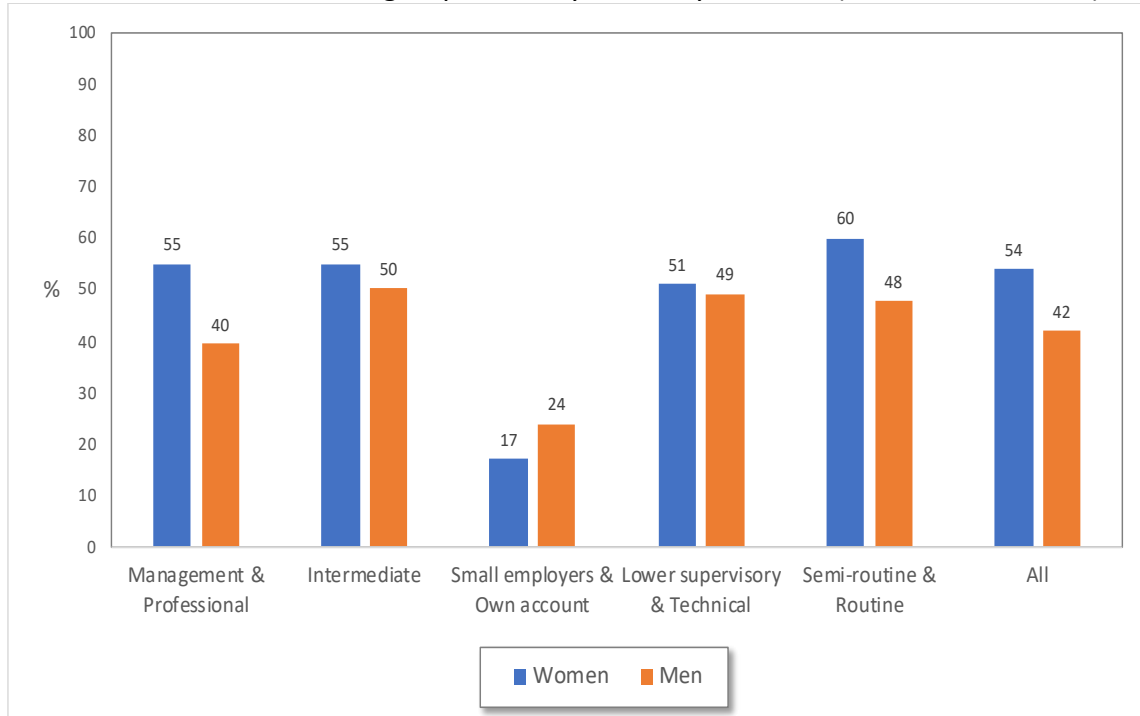
The focus:

This briefing note explores what has happened over the year since the first lockdown in March 2020, in terms of changes to work, financial security and mental health. Specifically, we examine:

- Who are the keyworkers, which sectors do they work in and how does this vary by class?
- Which employees have been furloughed, and which sectors do they work in?
- Which women had their hours cut during the pandemic?
- Which women have been able to work from home during the pandemic?
- How has the pandemic affected finances and financial security?
- How has mental health been affected over the last 12 months?

1. Who are the keyworkers in 2020?

1.1 What % of each class group said they were keyworkers? (asked in June 2020)



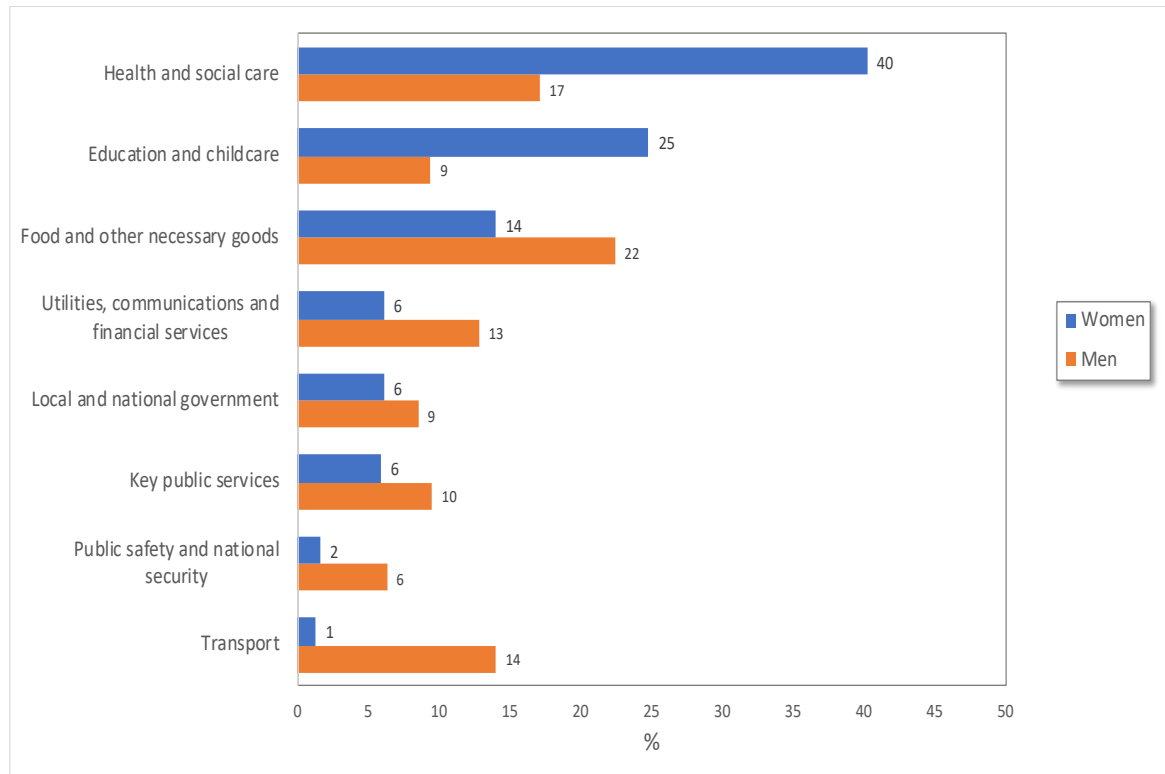
More women than men are keyworkers:

- 54% of women v 42% of men in June 2020.

Keyworking was highest among working class women (by June):

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

1.2 Which sectors do the keyworkers work in? (June 2020)



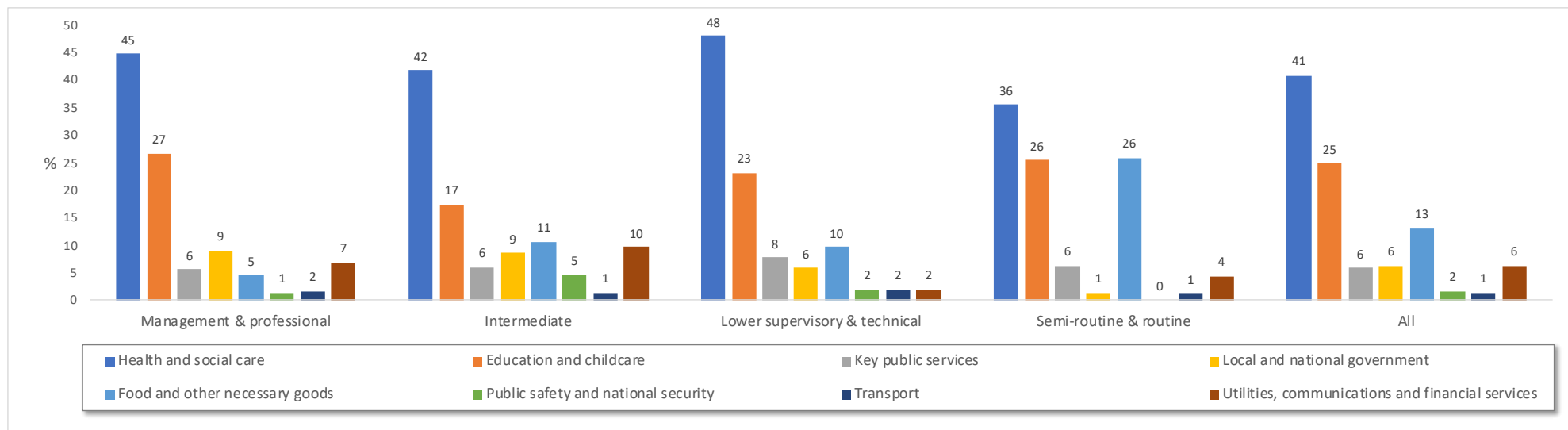
Female keyworkers are disproportionately working in frontline roles which require face-to-face interaction and exposure to health risks:

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

Although more male keyworkers than female are in food and necessary goods (22% men v 14% women), this still represents a substantial proportion of female workers.

Male keyworkers are more likely than female to work in transport, and utilities, communications and financial services.

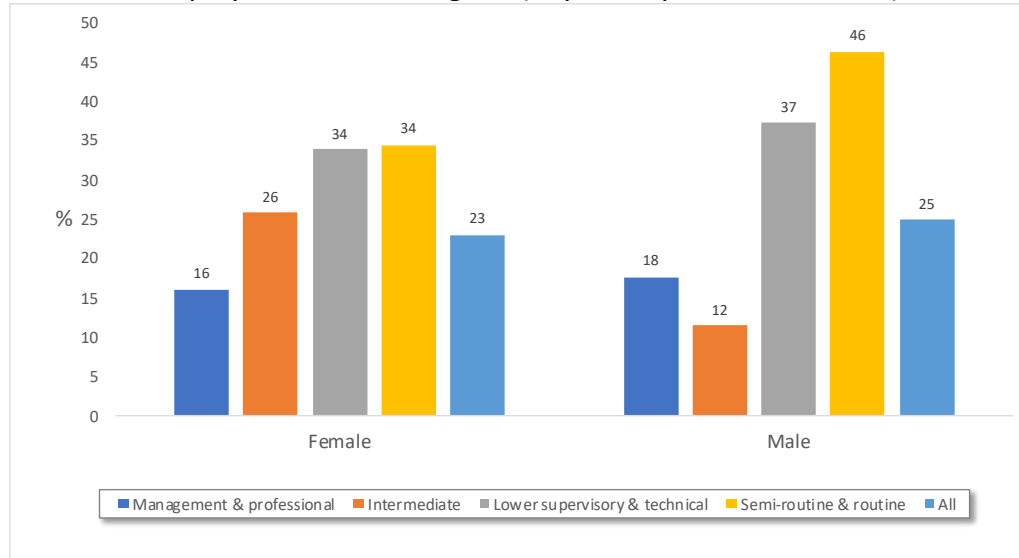
1.3 Which sectors do women keyworkers work in, by class? (June 2020)



- A high proportion of women keyworkers worked in health and social care (ranging from 36% of working class women to 48% of lower supervisory and technical), and in education and childcare (17% of intermediate women to 27% of managerial and professional women and 26% of working class women).
- Lower proportions of working class women than women in higher occupational class groupings worked in local and national government.
- A much higher proportion of working class female keyworkers (26%) worked in food and other necessary goods, compared with other groups.

2. Furlough in 2020

2.1 Which employees were furloughed (anytime by November 2020)



Working class workers were disproportionately more likely to be furloughed than were workers in management and professional roles:

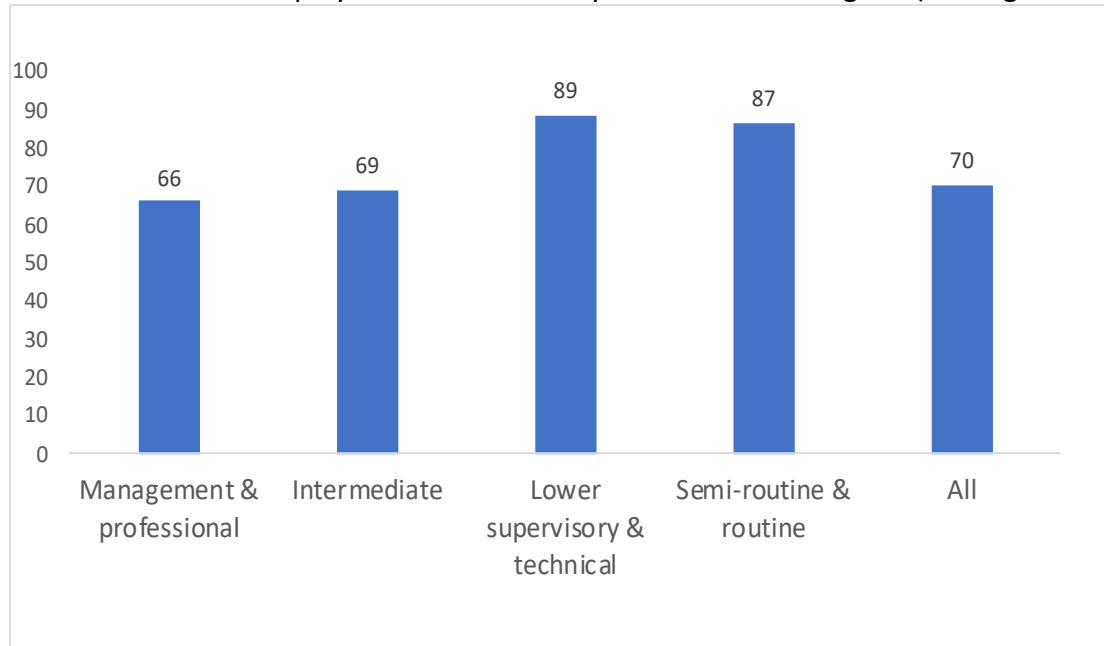
- 34% of working class women (and 46% of similar men) had been furloughed by November.
- Only 16% of women working in management and professional jobs (and 18% of similar men) had been furloughed during the same period of time.
- For both women and men, those working in accommodation and food service activities were most likely to be furloughed (71%), followed by arts, entertainment and recreation for women (46%) and construction for men (45%).

2.2 What % of workers were furloughed, by their Industry (furloughed anytime up to November 2020). Top 5 listed here.

	Women	Men
Manufacturing	45%	40%
Construction	43%	45%
Wholesale and Retail Trade	38%	41%
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	71%	71%
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	46%	29%

Note: 27% of working class women were working in Wholesale and Retail Trade (only 5% of professional/managerial women)

2.3 Which women employees were either keyworkers **OR** furloughed (furloughed anytime by November 2020)

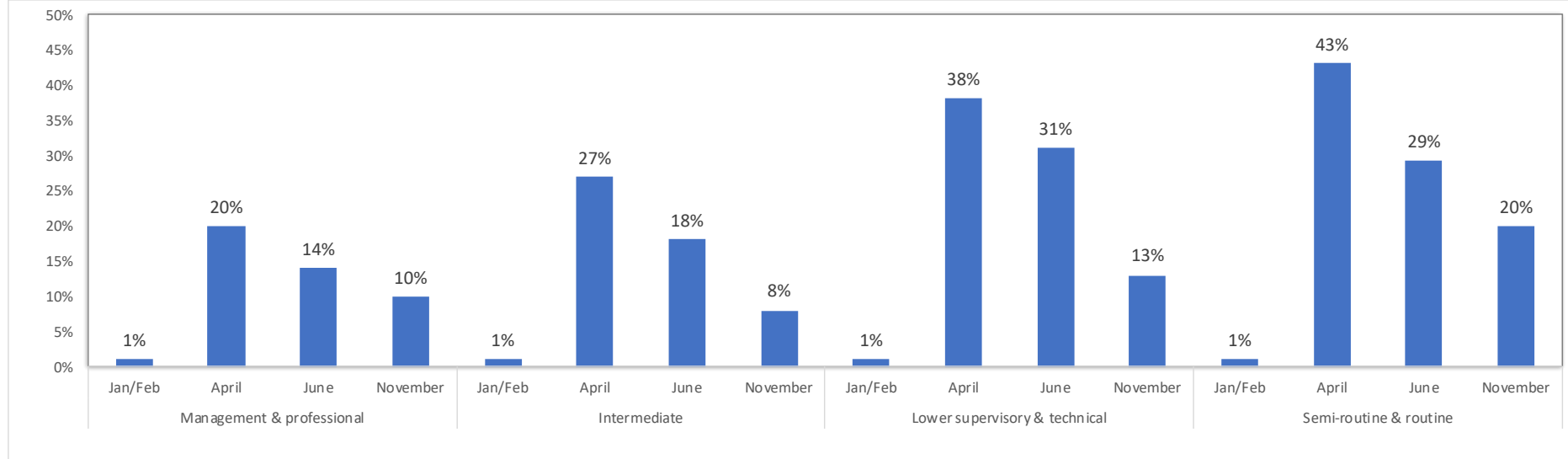


A high proportion of all working women (70%) were either keyworkers or were furloughed by November, but this varied strongly by class:

- Lower supervisory and technical female workers and semi-routine and routine workers (89% and 87%) were more likely than management and professional or intermediate women workers (66% and 69%) to either be keyworkers or furloughed by November.

3. Workers with zero hours of paid work in 2020

3.1 Which class groups of employed women saw the greatest rise in zero hours work?

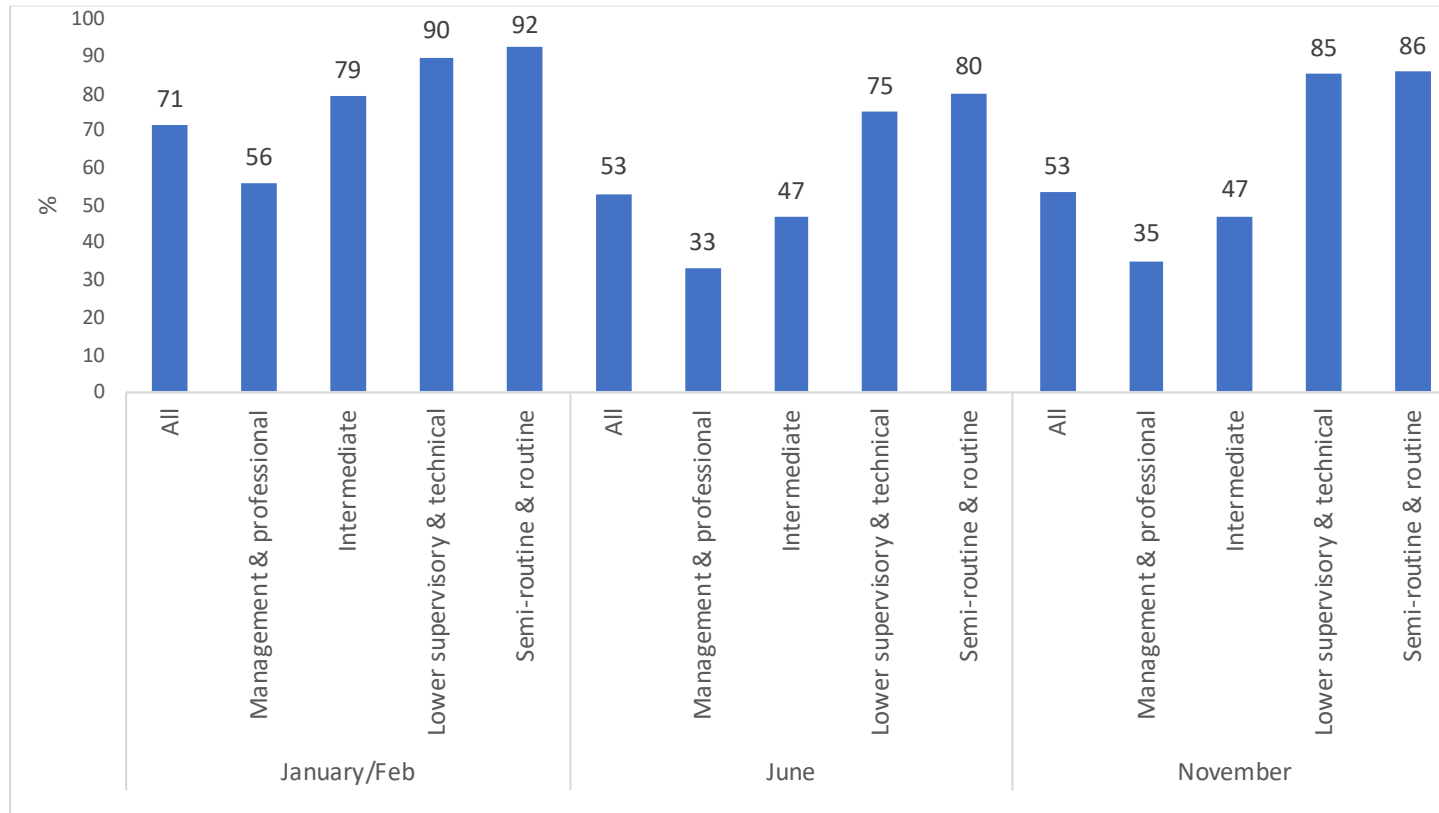


Starting from a very low base pre-pandemic (1% of all women), large class differences emerged in the proportion of employed women who reported doing zero hours of work in their jobs after the first lockdown, and although these figures decreased over time, the class differences were maintained:

- A fifth (20%) of management and professional women reported 0 hours of work in April 2020, dropping to 10% in November
- More than twice that figure (43%) of working class women reported 0 hours of work in April 2020, dropping to 20% in November.

4. Working at home in 2020

4.1 Which women were not working at home?



Employed women aged 18-65. Whether worked at home in the previous 4 weeks.

There has been a big increase in working from home for employed women (and men) since the pandemic began:

- In Jan/Feb 2020, 71% of women 'never' worked from home.
- This dropped to 53% in June (and in November).

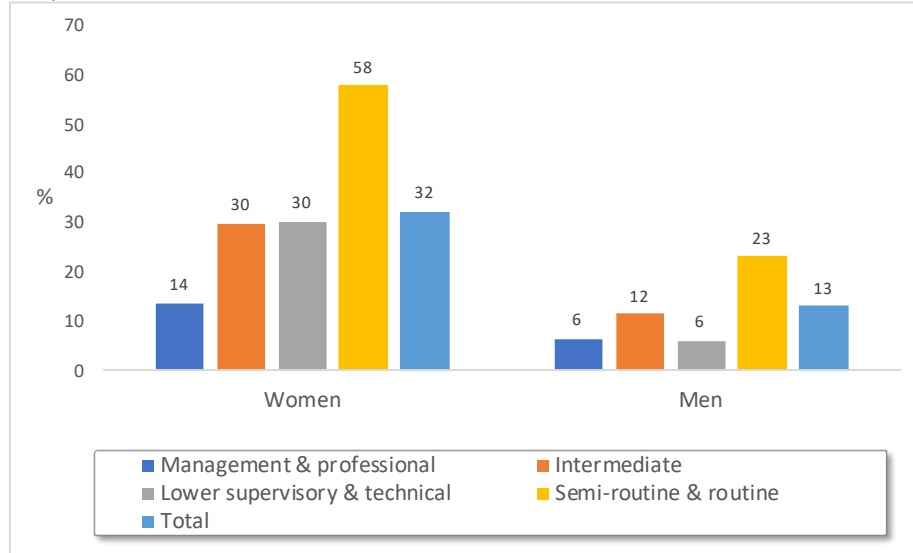
Class

- 80% of working class women were not working from home at all in June (rising to 86% in November).
- Only a third (33%) of professional/managerial women workers were not working from home in June (35% in November).

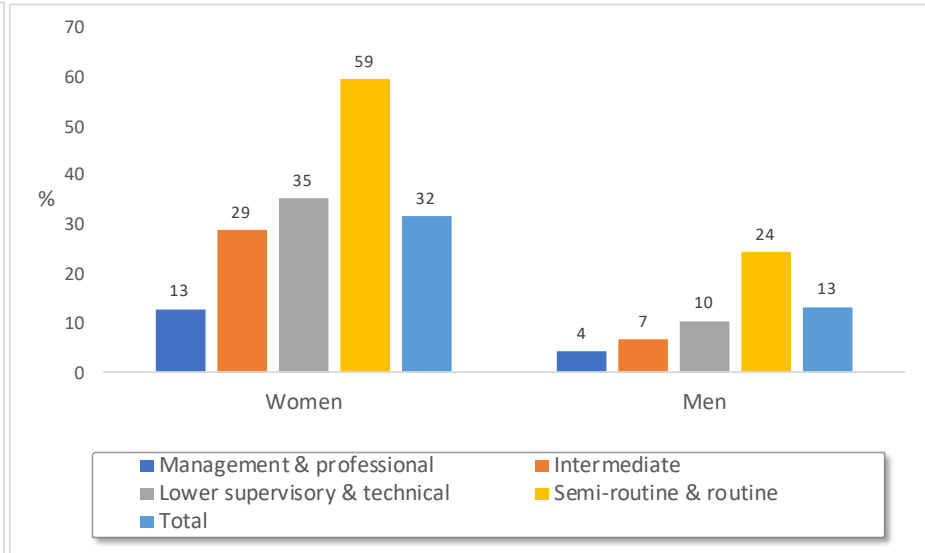
5. Finances in 2020

5.1 Which workers had low weekly earnings in 2020?

a. April



b. November

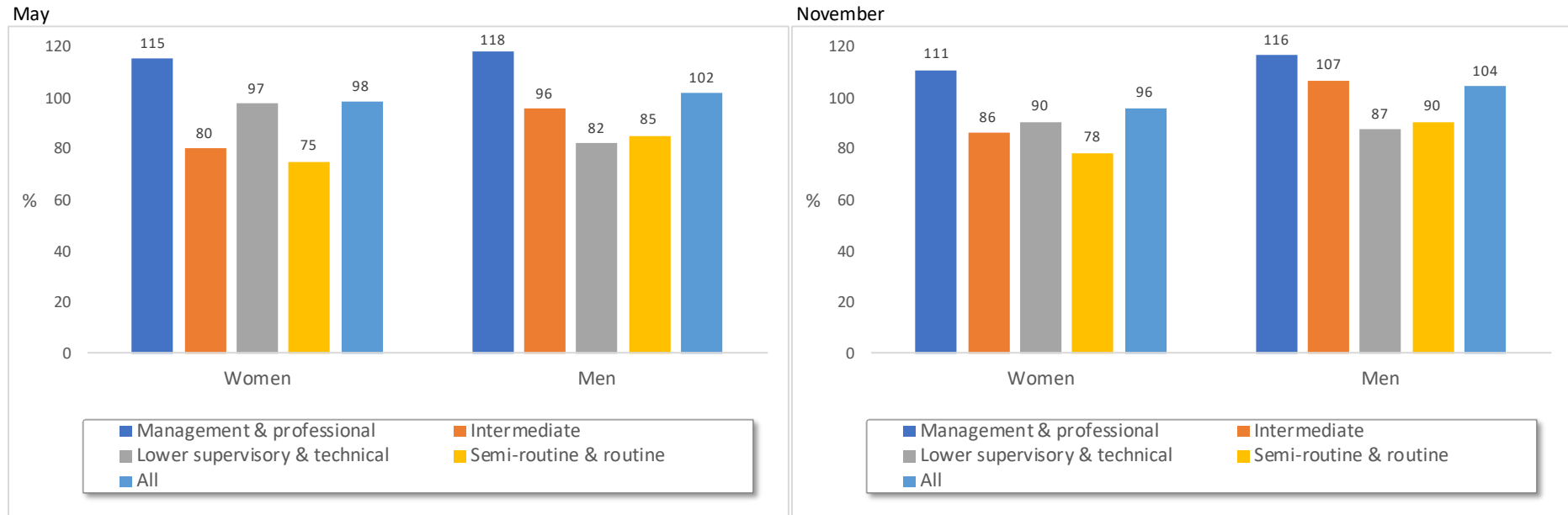


Notes: Employed. Aged 18-65.

Where 'Low' = less than 2/3 median net earnings for all employed women and men for that month.

- Working women were far more likely than men to have low weekly earnings, compared to the weekly net average each month of the sample, but working class women stood out.
- In April 2020, well over half (58%) of working class women had low weekly earnings, in comparison with management and professional women (14%). These wide class gaps were maintained into November 2020 (59% of working class women, 13% of management and professional women).
- Male workers also showed similar class gaps, with working class men (23% in April, 24% in November) much more likely to have low weekly earnings than management and professional men (6% and 4%).

5.2. Weekly household earnings (mean as % of overall mean for women/men, that month).



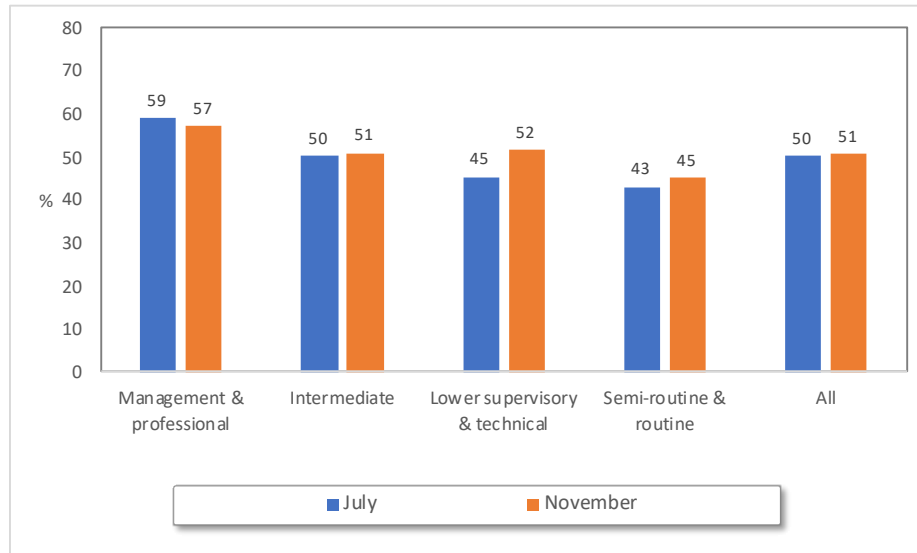
Notes: only workers living with another adult earner (67% of all the workers in November).

Weekly household earnings also varied by class. For those living with another adult earner (over two thirds of all workers in November):

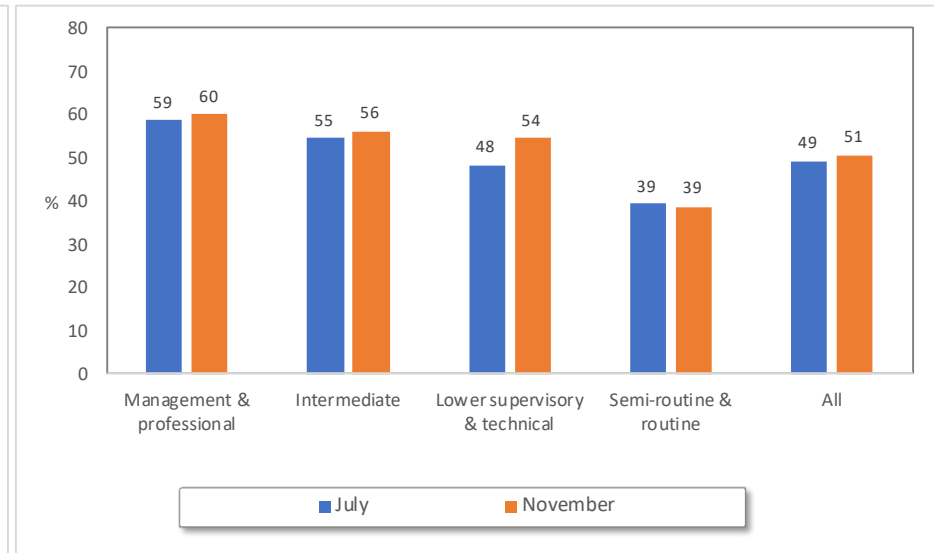
- Working class women and men reported much lower weekly earnings than average (75% and 85% of the overall mean) than management and professional workers (115% for female management and professionals, 118% for similar men)
- These stark class differences in earnings were maintained in November 2020, although there was a slight rise for working class women and men compared with the average (earning 78% and 90% of the overall mean, respectively).

5.3. Which workers had made savings from their income in the last 4 weeks (other than to meet regular bills)

a. Women



b. Men



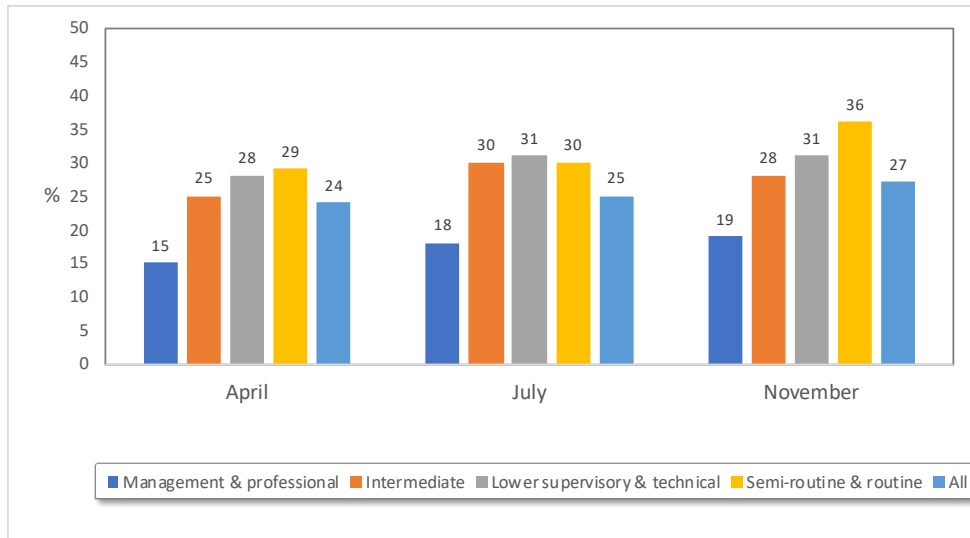
Notes: Employed women and men aged 18-65.

An ability to make savings, and hence build up a financial safety net, also differed by class and these differences were maintained during the pandemic:

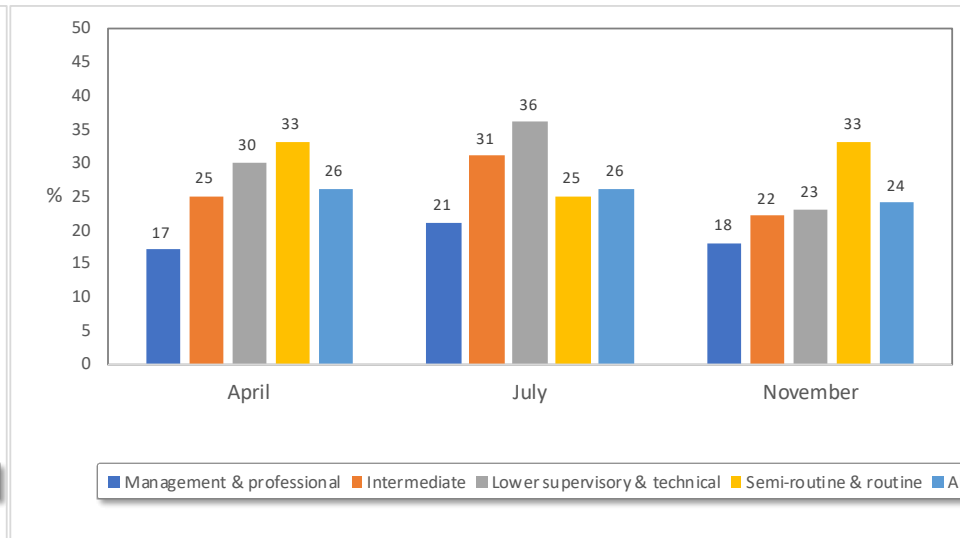
- Almost 60% of management and professional female workers were able to make savings in July (57% in November), compared with only 43% of working class women (45% in November).
- These class differences were even more pronounced for male workers, with 60% of management and professional workers being able to make savings from earnings in November, compared with only 39% of working class men.

5.4. Which workers were in financial hardship?

a. Women



b. Men



Notes: Employed. Aged 18-65. Financial hardship= 'Just about getting by/In financial difficulties'.

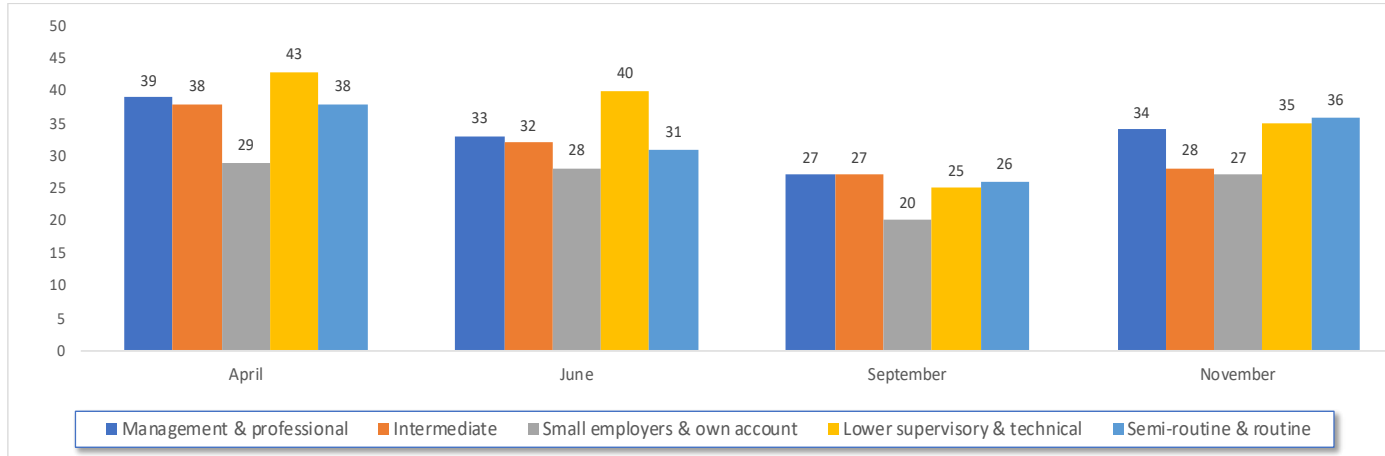
Management and professional workers (both male and female) were those most protected from facing financial hardship during the pandemic:

- Only 15% of female management and professional workers (and 17% of similar men) reported in April that they were 'just about getting by' or 'in financial difficulties' (rising slightly to 19%, and 18% of men, in November).
- In contrast, almost twice the proportion of working class women reported experiencing financial hardship in April (29%), rising to 36% in November. For working class men, the figures were 33% in both April and November (36% of lower supervisory and technical men reported financial hardship in July but this dropped to 23% in November).

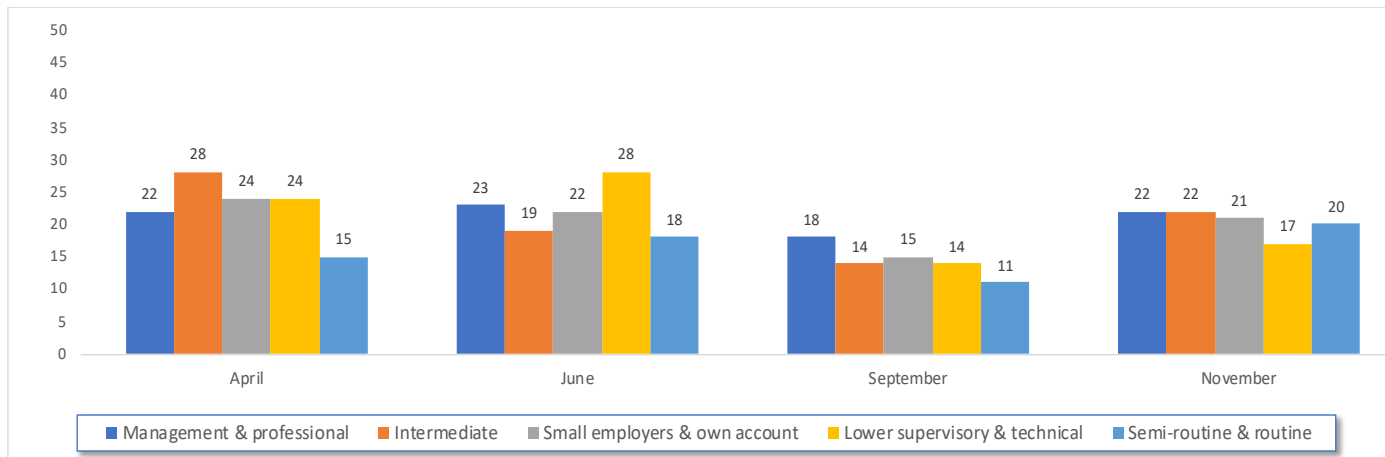
6. Psychological distress in 2020

6.1 Which workers were experiencing psychological distress?

a. Women



b. Men



- More women than men experienced psychological distress during the pandemic.
- Levels of distress dropped between April and September for both women and men, but rose again in November.
- In April, a higher proportion of lower supervisory and technical working women (43%) reported psychological distress than other women, reducing to 25% in September.
- Working class women reported similar levels of distress to other groups of women (apart from lower supervisory and technical, and self-employed) in April (38%) but, after a drop in September (26%), levels of psychological distress among this group rose to be the highest of all class groupings in November (36%).

Notes: Psychological distress is a score of 4+ in the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12: caseness 4+)

7. Summing up

- A year on from the first lockdowns in the UK, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the key, essential but under-valued work performed by working-class women. It has both exposed and intensified the deep gender and class inequalities that, together, impact the women's working lives, with pandemic pressures resulting in further job and financial insecurity, heavier care responsibilities, and real challenges in managing unpaid and paid work.
The pandemic also shone a light on the inadequacy of our current safety net – public services like social care and child care, and benefits like Universal Credit and Sick Pay were not ready to meet the needs of many. The government needs to match their 'keyworker' rhetoric with proper recognition in the form of living wages and decent working conditions and security, and ensure that working-class women are not forgotten in the economic recovery plan.
- Working class women's paid work was less protected from the negative effects of the pandemic than women in the highest level jobs:
 - 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 (see also Briefing Note 1 <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/documents/research/carrying-the-work-burden-of-covid-19/briefing-note-1.pdf>).
 - Working class men (and women) were those most likely to be furloughed.
 - Working class women were also much more likely than other working women to be doing zero hours of work in their jobs, and even though this proportion decreased over time, class gaps were maintained.
 - Working class women were much less likely than women in management and professional roles to be able to work from home, giving them less flexibility to cope with additional care responsibilities (see also Briefing Note 2 <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/documents/research/carrying-the-work-burden-of-covid-19/briefing-note-2.pdf>).
 - In both April and November 2020, working class women had the lowest wages of all workers and, by November, those living with another adult earner had the lowest household earnings of all groups.
 - By November, fewer working class women were likely to have made savings in the previous 4 weeks than other women, and over a third were suffering from financial hardship.
- The mental health impact of struggling to cope with dangerous or insecure work, financial difficulties, and additional care responsibilities due to lockdown and home-schooling (see Briefing Note 2), all suggest a perfect storm which inevitably takes its toll. While women overall reported high levels of psychological distress than men at all time points, working class women reported the highest levels of all groups in November, when numbers started to creep up again during further lockdown measures. The extended national lockdown during winter 2020-21, lifted a year after the first, is likely to have taken an even greater toll on working class women and their families.

Research round-up

This is the third in a series of Briefing Notes which have been released over recent months:

- Briefing note 1: Employment and mental health.
- Briefing note 2: Housework and childcare.

For more information

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- Project website: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/research/carrying-the-work-burden-of-covid-19/index.aspx>

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