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

Briefing Note 2: Housework and childcare

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Economic
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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 UK 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>
- 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 9) 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 includes cleaners, waiting staff, bus drivers, bar staff, sewing machinists (the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification/'NS-SEC').

Housework and childcare

The topic:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women had the main responsibility for such core domestic tasks as cleaning, washing/ironing and cooking, and they performed the bulk of childcare in the home. The pandemic changed the way we engage in paid work (see our Briefing Note 1), leading to unprecedented numbers working from home, on furlough or suddenly out of a job or at heightened risk of unemployment.

These dramatic and unsettling changes in paid working lives for many offered up unique opportunities for a renegotiation of the starkly gendered division of domestic labour and childcare. At the same time, parents came under intense pressure with the unanticipated responsibility for home-schooling children who were unable to attend early years' settings or schools.

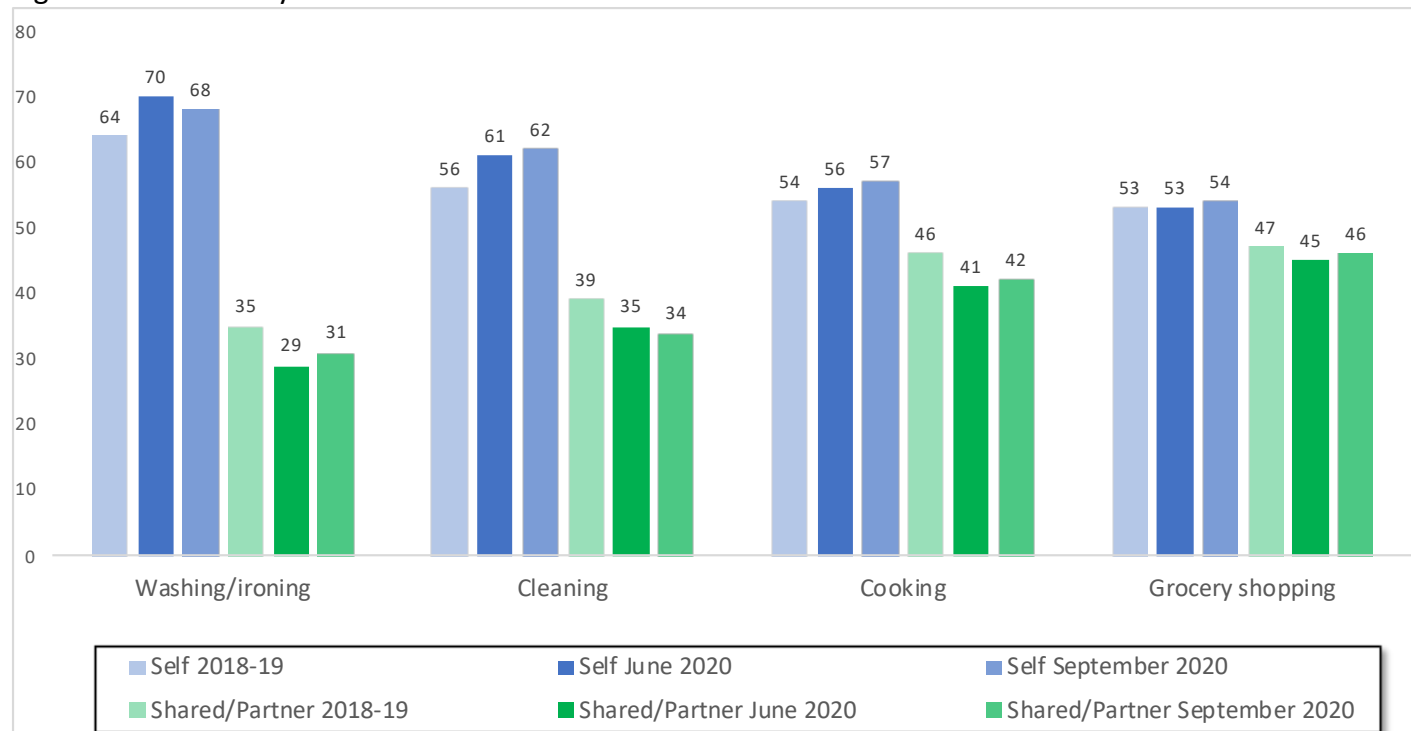
How did women fare overall compared with men, and to what extent were the working lives of employed women impacted differently according to their class? This briefing note explores overall patterns of housework and childcare.

The focus:

- How was housework shared between women and men before and during the pandemic?
- How was housework shared by class?
- How much time was spent per week on housework during the pandemic?
- Who was mainly responsible for looking after children and for their home-schooling?
- How many hours were spent a week in childcare or home-schooling?
- Who had access to flexible work arrangements in their workplace to allow them to better manage their multiple demands?
- Whose paid jobs (hours of work and work schedules) were impacted because of the time spent doing childcare or home-schooling?

1. How was housework shared before and during the pandemic?

Figure 1. Who usually does the housework?



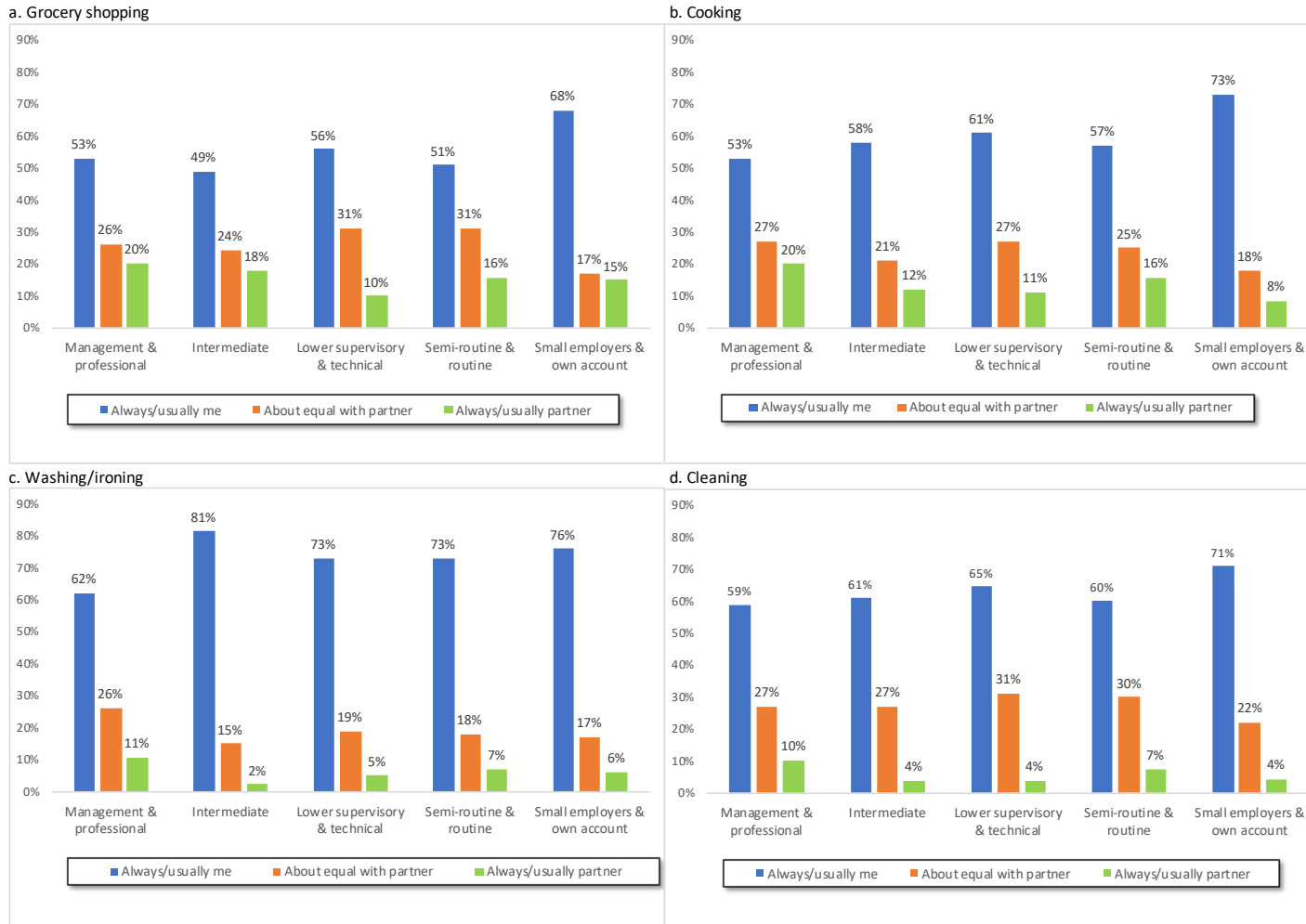
Employed women in a couple. Aged 18-65. Wave 10 UKHLS, June and September 2020.

Self: Always/'Usually' self ('mostly' in 2020). Shared: About equal with partner/'Usually' partner ('mostly' in 2020)

- Employed women in couples always/usually did routine housework tasks before the pandemic (in 2018-19).
- This intensified further across all tasks (except grocery shopping) during the pandemic: in June 2020, 70% of employed women in couples were mostly doing the washing/ironing and 61% the cleaning.
- September 2020 saw a similar overall picture to June 2020.

2. How was housework shared by class in the pandemic?

Figure 2. Which women did the routine housework tasks?



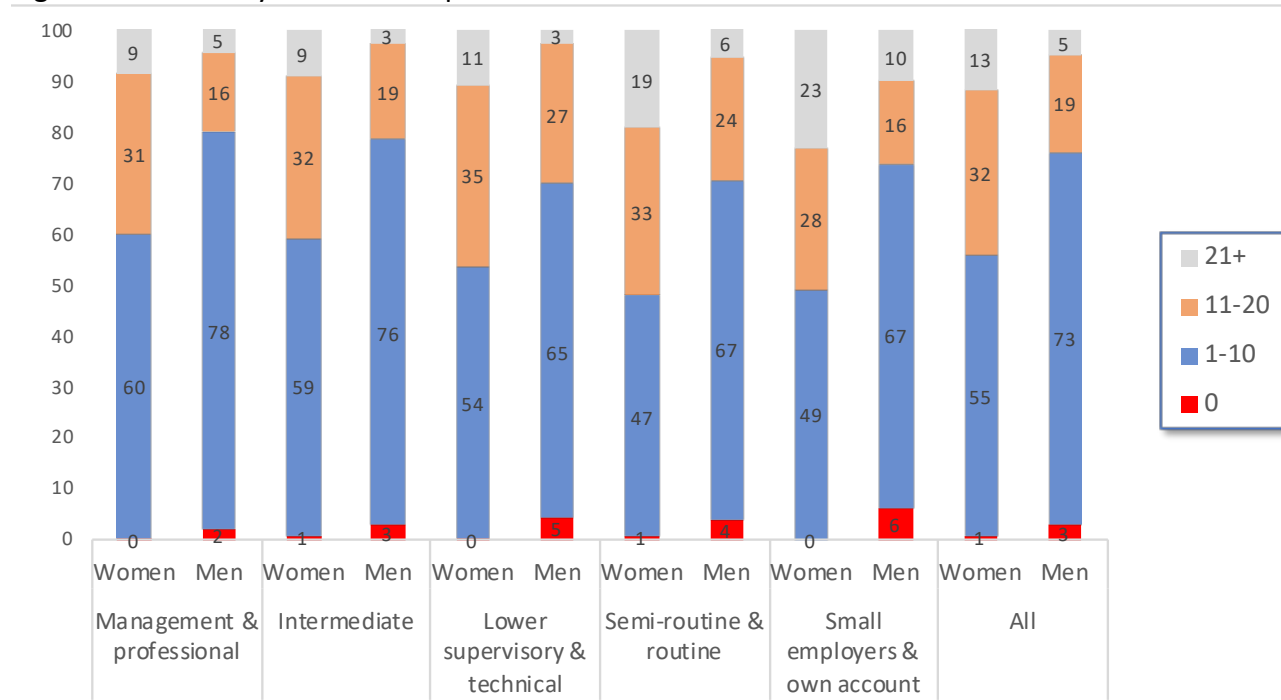
Notes: Employed women, in a couple and living with a partner, June 2020 (aged 18-65).

The small %s of those saying 'Someone else' did the task are excluded from the Figure (so figures do not add up to 100%).

- Small employers/own account women workers did routine housework more than the other women.
- The partners of managerial/professional women were the men most likely to share or do most washing/ironing (37%). There was also some evidence of their slightly higher involvement than other men in food-related household tasks (e.g. 46-47% shared or mostly did the shopping and cooking).

3. How much time was spent on housework?

Figure 3. How many hours were spent a week in routine housework?



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

- In June 2020, almost half (45%) of employed women spent 11 or more hours per week on housework (24% of men).
- Three quarters (76%) of male workers spent 10 hours or less a week on housework (56% of women).

Class

- Working class women and female 'small employers/own account' workers did the most housework hours. 19% of working class women were doing 21+ hours a week (and 23% of small employers/own account), compared with 9% of managerial/professional women.
- Sixty per cent of female managers/professionals spent 10 hours or fewer a week on housework compared with 48% of working class women (and 80% of managerial/professional male workers).

4. Who was responsible for childcare and home-schooling?

Table 4a. Who had the main responsibility for childcare and home-schooling?

	Childcare			Home-schooling
	2018-19	June 2020	Sept 2020	June 2020
Always/usually me	47	55	51	59
Always/usually partner or shared	53	40	43	26

Table 4b. Which class groups of women had the main responsibility for childcare and home-schooling in June 2020? (% women reporting 'always/usually me').

	Management & professional	Intermediate	Small employers & own account	Lower supervisory & technical	Semi-routine & routine
Childcare	52%	56%	62%	51%	60%
Home-schooling	54%	62%	65%	66%	63%

Notes: Employed women (aged 18-65), living with a partner, with children aged 0-15 in the household for childcare or aged 0-18 for home-schooling, June 2020.

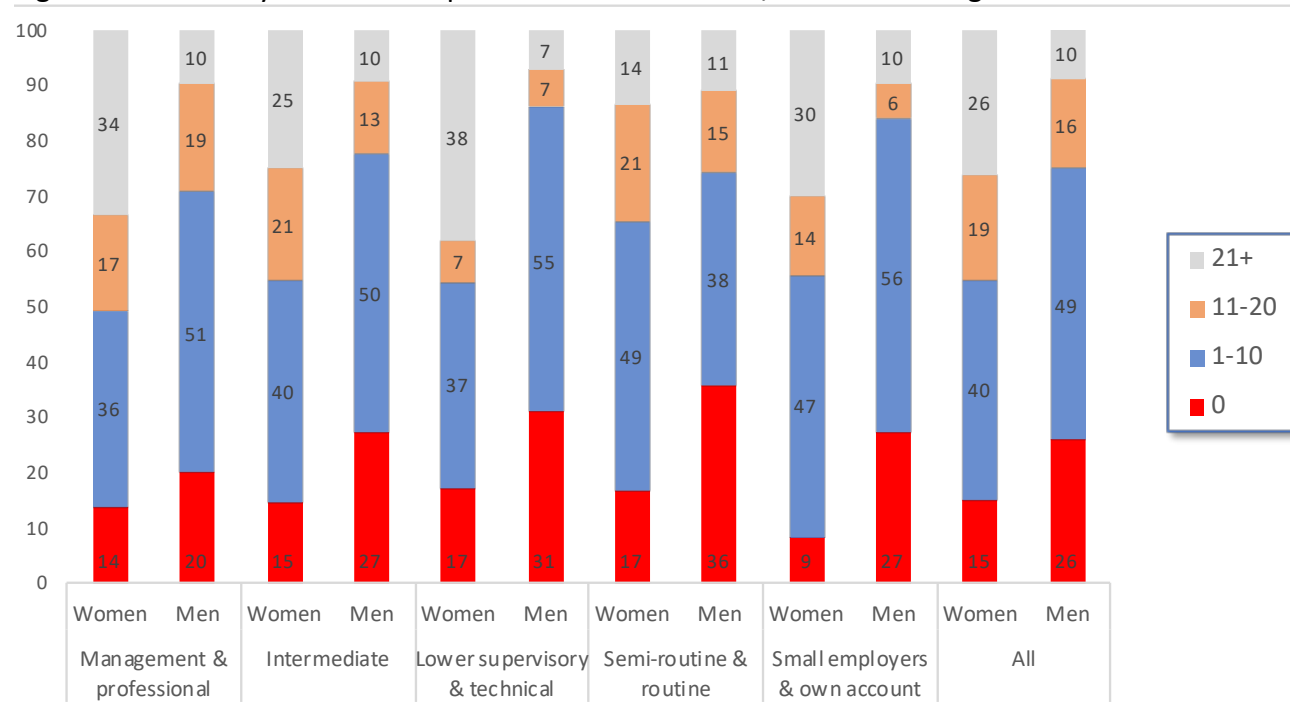
- Women in couples reported having the main responsibility for childcare, with numbers reporting this increasing during the pandemic (from 47% in 2018-19 to 55% of women in June 2020), easing into September 2020 .
- In June 2020, 59% of employed women in couples said they always/usually had main responsibility for home-schooling.
- Childcare was shared or done by the woman's partner in 53% of couples before the pandemic: this dropped to 40% in June 2020, with a slight rise in September 2020.

Class

- Women in the most senior roles were among the group of employed women least likely to report having the main responsibility for childcare and home-schooling (20% within this group reported that the children took their own responsibility, reflecting children's age differences).

5. How much time was spent on childcare/home-schooling?

Figure 5. How many hours were spent a week in childcare/home-schooling?

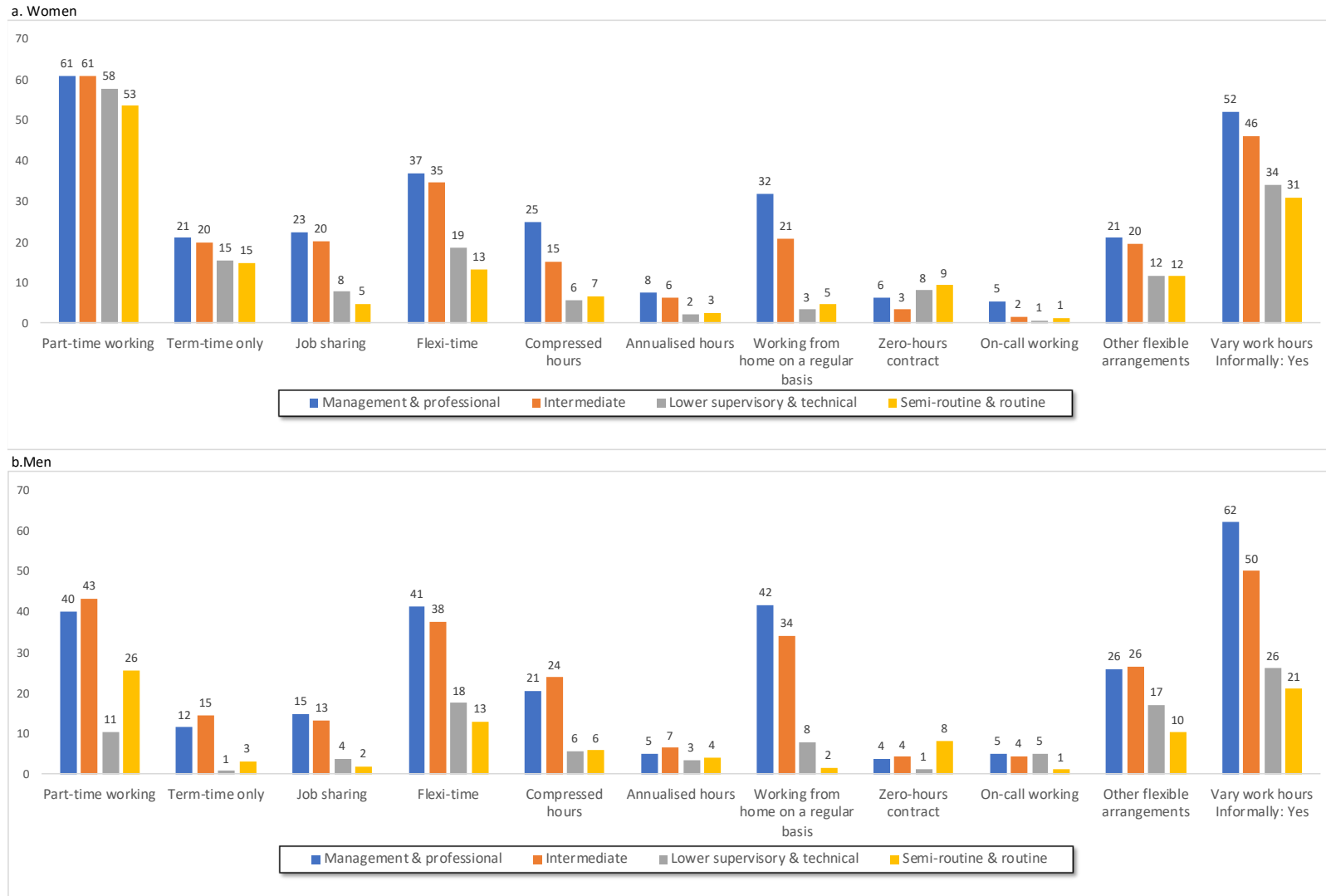


- More employed women than men with children in the house were doing some childcare/home-schooling in June 2020 (85% of women and 74% men).
 - A quarter (26%) of women were doing 21+ hours a week (10% of men).
- Class**
- Women in management and professional roles (and the small number of women in lower supervisory/technical positions) spent more time in childcare/home-schooling than did all the other groups: just over a third reporting doing 21+ hours a week.

Notes: Women and men in couples. Aged 18-65. Employed in June 2020 and Wave i. Children aged 0-18 in the house. N of female Lower supervisory & Technical < 30.

6. Who had access to flexible working?

Figure 6. Percentage of women and men who had access to formal and informal flexible working arrangements in their workplace.

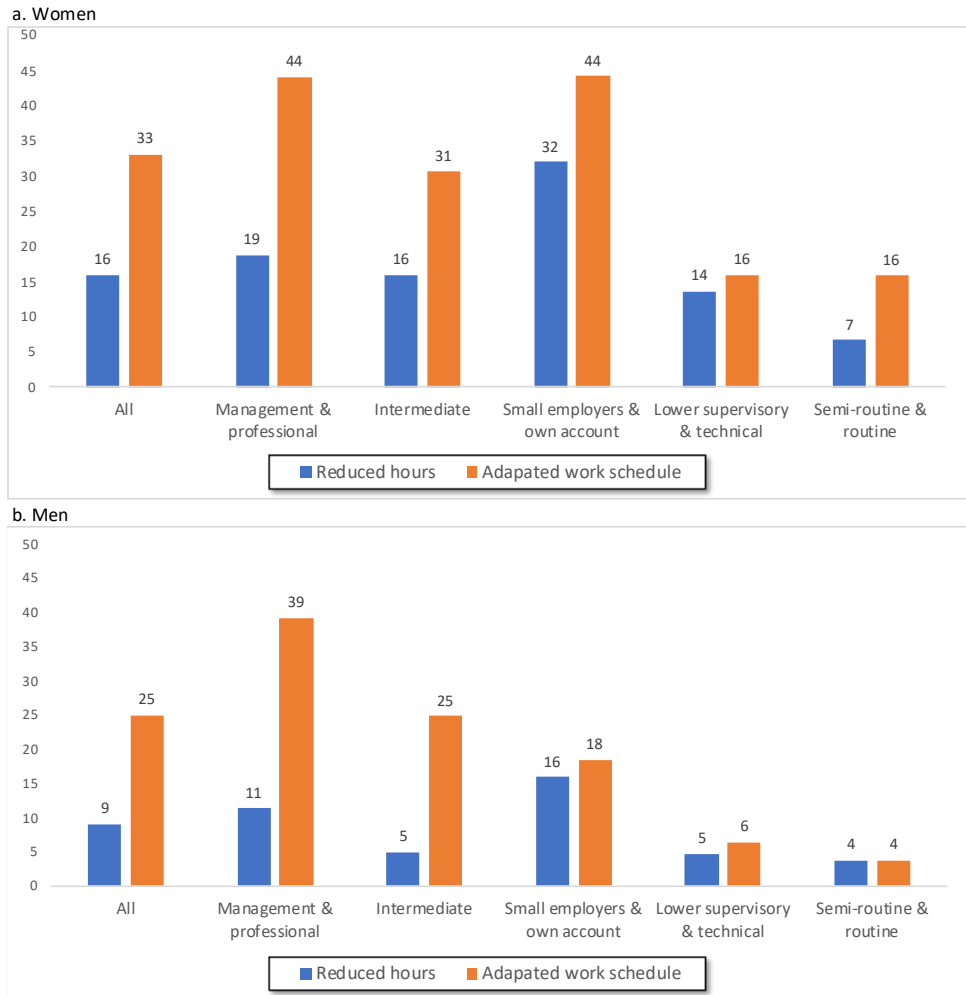


- Working class women and men had the least access to formal and informal flexible working arrangements (FWAs) in their workplaces.
- Among women, management and professionals had the greatest access to most types of FWAs, aside from zero hours contracts.
- Men in management and professional roles had greatest access to flexi-time and being able to work from home or vary their hours informally.

Notes: Employed in both June 2020 and Wave i. Aged 18-65 in June. Excluding the small employers/own account workers.

7. Whose jobs were impacted by the time spent in childcare/home-schooling?

Figure 7. Percentage of parents who reduced their hours/changed schedules because of the time they spent doing childcare/home-schooling.



Notes: Women and men aged 18-65. Employed in both June 2020 and Wave i. Children aged 0-18 in the house.

- Women were far more likely than men to reduce their hours or adapt work schedules because of the time being spent in childcare/home-schooling (by June 2020).
- Class**
- Very few working class women (and even fewer men) reduced their employed hours or changed schedules.
 - Almost half of women in the most senior roles changed their work schedules and almost a fifth reduced their hours.
 - Two-fifths of male managers/professionals also adapted their schedules (11% reduced their hours).

8. Summing up and research round-up

- Employed women were doing much more housework, more childcare and more home-schooling than men during the pandemic.
- 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 did the least childcare and home-schooling hours among employed women and they were the women least likely to reduce their hours or change their work schedules because of the time they were spending on childcare or home-schooling. They fared poorly in terms of access to flexible working arrangements more generally to allow them to better manage multiple demands (Briefing Note 1 showed only 9% of women in Routine and Semi-routine jobs were always working from home in June). In order to manage additional housework, childcare and home-schooling responsibilities, parents need access to good quality flexible work arrangements; unfortunately, this is not the case for many working class women and men.

Research round-up

- Briefing note 1: Employment and mental health (November 2020).
- Briefing note 2: Housework and childcare (December 2020).
- Briefing note 3: Employment and finances (tbc).

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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Citation

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