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Working lives

Vanessa Beck, Vanesa Fuertes, Daiga Kamerāde, Clare Lyonette and Tracey Warren

The Covid-19 crisis will have fundamental impacts on the future of working lives. Daily forecasts predict a depressing picture for the working-age population, both in the UK and abroad. This makes it difficult to identify positive outcomes from the crisis for work, life, and welfare. Poor government planning and decision-making concerning health and economic responses have further added to the problems, rather than resolving them. This is exemplified by the lack of clarity, speediness, and sufficiency of many of the schemes devised to help employees, employers, and those unemployed. Increases in sales and recruitment by tax-avoiding Amazon (+2.53% according to market watch in the first quarter of 2020) provide just one example of the economic and labour market effects of this crisis being unfairly distributed. While online sales and delivery companies, such as Amazon, food production and supply organisations, internet service providers and TV and film streaming companies are likely to be among the big winners from the current crisis, there will also be many losers.

We begin this essay by setting out the predicted outcomes regarding employment, unemployment and underemployment, exploring the effects of the crisis on individuals' working lives, and reflect on issues emanating from the crisis such as the contribution of key or essential workers, the rise in flexible working, and the clear BAME/gender inequalities. We then switch our focus to highlight potential lessons learned from the crisis in order to achieve better work and life arrangements that will benefit individuals and society as a whole.

Winners and losers

As a result of Covid-19, the rise in unemployment globally has been predicted to be between +5.3 million and +24.7 million from a base level of 188 million in 2019ⁱ, considerably higher than the increase of 22 million during the global financial crisis of 2008-9. Similarly, already high underemployment rates are expected to increase since previous crises have shown that a decrease in labour demand translates into wage and working-hours reductionsⁱⁱ. Current figures show that one third of firms that are still operating have reduced hours, with the majority of these reductions taking place in the accommodation and food services sectorsⁱⁱⁱ. Although all industries and sectors will be affected by the crisis, not all will face the same challenges and thus require the same solutions. A substantial number of workers will be able to continue their employment from home. Many others without the possibility to work from home will be left vulnerable to job loss or temporary furloughing. Others, notably those in essential roles, continue to rely on public transport to get them to their place of work where they are exposed to added risk of contracting the virus. Men working in the lowest skilled occupations (e.g. security guards), women and men in social care, and occupations such as taxi and bus drivers, chefs, and sales and retail assistants had some of the highest rates of deaths involving Covid-19^{iv}. There are clear and deep inequalities in what is possible for different occupational groups.

One of the main outcomes of the crisis is the realisation that jobs such as care work (whether in health, care homes or private settings), rubbish collection, public transport, security, cleaning operatives, food transportation and food pickers, among others, are essential. These *key jobs* are usually low-paid and under-valued, in many cases precarious and physically demanding. Key workers were and continue to be most exposed in economic and health terms while being taken for granted rather than recognised, supported, and rewarded. People who were *underemployed or in precarious jobs* before Covid-19 (most often women, younger/older workers, minority ethnic groups, working class and service sector employees) are vulnerable to income loss and layoffs during the crisis and after it. The 'double whammy' of austerity and Covid-19 seems to hit similar groups of people. While a country like the UK hit a record high 76.3% employment rate in 2019 from September to November (the highest since the mid-1970s), it has been evident for some time that an increasing part of that figure is constituted by insecure and insufficient employment (i.e. underemployment). A Trades Union Congress analysis in 2018 showed that one in nine workers were in insecure forms of employment (i.e. temporary, zero-hour, and self-employed earning less than the minimum wage). According to UK Office of National Statistics figures, in the last quarter of 2019 almost one million people had a zero-hour contract as their main job, of those working part-time 10.9% could not find a full-time job. In 2019 16.2% of all employee jobs were low paid^v. Nonetheless, other groups of workers such as the self-employed and those whose jobs cannot be done remotely will soon be similarly affected. For a significant number, missing any amount of their already low-income during lockdown will launch them into poverty and even hunger. The Food Foundation reported in mid-April that three million people were in households where someone had to skip a meal and Trussell Trust figures show an 81% increase in the need for emergency food parcels in the last two weeks of March compared to 2019. In the same period, almost one million people applied for Universal Credit.

The increase in people having to rely for the first time on the *welfare system* has highlighted its inadequacy and dysfunctionality; severe limitations already very well-known to those socially disadvantaged groups who have suffered from them for some time. As a result, the UK government has been forced to increase the safety net through a number of measures: such as a £20 a week rise in Universal Credit (still worth just a sixth of average weekly pay according to the TUC), mortgage holidays, support for renters, and agreements with energy suppliers to support the most vulnerable in the crisis. The government's Job Retention Scheme and Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, much more generous than Universal Credit, providing 80% of usual monthly wages (up to a £2,500 limit) for employees furloughed (placed on temporary leave) and self-employed, has slowed the already very high rate of out of work benefit claims. The increase in food bank use and food insecurity is, however, a good gauge of the magnitude of the inadequacy of the government response and the intense strain on a welfare system already undermined before the pandemic hit.

For those workers, so-called 'lucky ones'^{vi} often but not always in professional jobs, that have been able to continue in their *employment from home*, not everything has been positive either.

Around 39% of workers in the UK worked entirely from home in April^{vii}. Given the extended closure of schools, and the reliance on parents to home-school or at least supervise children's studies, home working has turned into a juggling act. As Shortt and Isak's chapter explores, many live in cramped domestic spaces, with no designated space for work, unsuitable heating and lighting, no appropriate desk or chair and poor IT provision, as well as a lack of social contacts. The requirement to work from home during the pandemic also raises the financial burden on individual workers, in terms of potentially paying for enhanced broadband and mobile phone contracts, having to buy office equipment, paying for their own printing and office supplies, as well as paying higher heating and lighting bills over an extended period. While many will welcome the enhanced provision of flexible working in the longer-term, others will prefer to return to a workplace with adequate resources and the opportunity to socialise with colleagues.

The pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on domestic lives as well as paid working, entrenching gender and BAME inequalities. In terms of paid work, there is a clear gender dimension to high-risk, lower-paid jobs, and key jobs, with women more represented^{viii}. Among these are workers and occupations with the most physical contact to others, and with the highest risk of contracting the virus. While a reduction in bureaucracy in the current crisis is welcome, the UK suspending this year's gender pay gap reporting also indicates a lack of attention to those most directly affected by the double whammy. Women's 'double burden' of work is also intensified in the pandemic and their balancing of multiple work demands is made even harder with the challenges of shopping, cooking, caring and home-schooling under lockdown. Evidence shows that women are bearing the unpaid work burden created by the crisis, with the *Women's Budget Group*^x arguing that they are still being expected to juggle looking after children (most of whom are now at home) and work, while, in mixed sex couples, men's jobs are being prioritised over those of their female partner.

Before the pandemic, BAME groups were already most likely to experience unemployment and work in low paying and precarious work, women especially. The UK's BAME workers are concentrated in socially and economically disadvantaged occupations and locations that are being hit hardest by the pandemic, with deaths among BAME healthcare and other essential workers making national headlines. The highest death rates between March and April 2020 were in the ethnically diverse London boroughs of Newham, Brent and Hackney (ONS 2020). BAME key workers include National Health Service staff as well as taxi drivers and small shop owners.

With these occupations and groups in mind (BAME workers, women and those already disadvantaged as a result of lockdown) we now turn to consider the positive lessons learned and how the pandemic crisis can become an opportunity to 'work to live'.

No going back

As and when we emerge out of the crisis, we cannot and should not rely on market forces to solve the issues of *low-paid, precarious, and under-valued jobs*. Applauding key workers or offering a 'Care' badge as pledged by the UK Government does not provide the support and help required. These jobs are indispensable to society and should be recognised and rewarded as such. The Scottish Government's one-off £230.10 payment to unpaid carers and the 3.3% pay increase to social care staff is a meaningful recognition of their contribution. However, a long-term solution to ensure decent work (as defined by the Fair Work Convention) needs to be advanced. This requires, as a minimum, making the 'living wage' as put forward by the Living Wage Foundation, obligatory not optional. In order to prevent a rise in the number of workers who do not have enough work (i.e. work-time underemployment), the 'living wage' should be combined with a new 'living hours' guarantee to provide enough work for those who want it (16 hours a week is the minimum that the Living Wage Foundation proposes).

New legislation is also essential to improve the security and predictability of working hours and to guarantee suitable work schedules, especially for employees on precarious contracts, with notice periods for any changes to scheduling and financial compensation for cancellations to shifts (as is the case in Ireland). Alongside this, job retention solutions need to be explored. For example, the work-sharing scheme in Denmark or the short-time work schemes across Europe are innovative responses pioneered as a result of the economic crisis^x. Long-term initiatives such as a four-day standard working week, beneficial in terms of productivity gains and firms' savings^{xi}, could be an option to achieve a more equal sharing of jobs. In addition, current discussion in the UK of boosting the Health and Safety Executive to enforce safety and wellbeing at work on the return to workplaces after lockdown are positive, since this could potentially raise awareness and the level of workers' rights around health and safety. Any attempts to downplay health to ensure economic wealth can only work in the very short run since, in the long-term, wealth obviously requires health and vice versa.

Despite their contested nature, flexible and homeworking solutions that would not have been considered before the pandemic have become possible for many more workers. There is no doubt that improvements in IT can contribute to the death of the 'traditional workplace'. A recent survey suggests that half of workers expect to work more flexibly after lockdown^{xii}. Remote working should be a factor in new business models to attract and retain talent from individuals who would benefit from homeworking and a range of flexible working options, such as people with caring responsibilities and/or disabilities. New opportunities for flexible and home working, together with the realisation that domestic and caring work are essential forms of work (albeit often under-appreciated within a patriarchal and paid-work focused society), and the fact that women are often employed in essential jobs that cannot be done remotely, could rebalance women's double burden. Periods of crisis have long been charged with paving the way for rethinking stubbornly gendered work roles. This pandemic, in making women's unpaid work more visible, creates opportunities for sharing the housework and caring load with men. On the other hand, remote working does not need to be, and in some cases should not be, the default position for firms. While selling off expensive office space and enforcing

remote working for all employees could be attractive to hard-pressed organisations, it would also mean there is no turning back, and many organisations and individuals benefit from the opportunity to work – at least for some of the time – alongside other colleagues. Decreased employee wellbeing, loyalty and commitment could result from blanket decision-making by organisations in response to the pandemic^{xiii}.

The consequences of Covid-19 have been made worse by the current insufficient UK *social security system* and years of austerity have weakened public services including the health and care services. Philip Ashton, UN Special Rapporteur on poverty and human rights blamed the high levels of poverty in the UK on austerity policies by the current (2020 Conservative) government. He recently stressed that Covid-19 government measures not only reflect a social Darwinist philosophy but are ineffective due to the harm and misery caused by austerity to individuals and communities, most of which cannot be undone quickly. Lifting of the benefit freeze, upgrading benefit levels to reach a minimum decent income standard, eliminating waiting periods, and increasing accessibility would ease the economic effects and the worry of job losses. In the long-term, the inadequacy of the welfare system needs to be tackled. The government has shown that measures previously considered impractical or undesirable, such as housing those who are homeless or increasing Universal Credit, are not only necessary but also possible. Many have been discussing for some time the advantages and shortcomings of a universal basic income (UBI), the time has come to have a wider debate on how UBI could help build resilient and healthier societies. While there are many types of UBI, research on various pilots have shown the benefits and practicalities of these schemes^{xiv}.

In order to achieve these positive outcomes from the crisis —decent work through job, income and hours security, flexible working practices, and a higher social security net— a more active *social partnership approach* is needed. There are many examples to learn from, such as New Zealand's Future of Work Tripartite Forum and the so-called Nordic Model in which social partners share risk and benefits^{xv}. A partnership approach will benefit all actors in society. It will require impetus and facilitation from government. It will also necessitate input from citizens. Perhaps one of the more elusive predictions is the effect that changes imposed on us by Covid-19 — such as having to fit work literally around and within our family-life, relying on social security due to being unable to work, spending more time with our housemates, partners and children, relying on and celebrating essential workers, and performing acts of solidarity by staying at home, wearing a mask, checking on neighbours or volunteering to help— will have on our perspective on working lives. Will Covid-19 create new attitudes, opinions and practices? Will a new perspective facilitate or demand a revised employment and welfare regime built around fewer working hours, enhanced flexible working options, decent work and a social security net that could sustain emergent community support and (national) solidarity and achieve both better work and life after Covid-19?

Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted that low-paid precarious jobs are key for society, that flexible work and homeworking is possible in many sectors, that current welfare policies provide insufficient protection, and that higher levels of social security are possible. Social security measures previously dismissed as unrealistic and impractical have been put in place, showing what is possible if the will exists. The crisis has shown that austerity policies have weakened vital and necessary public services, including but not only health and social care. As we are coming out of the shock of Covid-19 we cannot return to business as usual, because the previous settlement between social actors (i.e. citizens, government, and businesses) did not work in the interests of all. Yet it is in the interest of society as a whole that we strengthen our economic, labour market, and welfare system to enable a sharing of risks and benefits amongst all people. Only then, perhaps, will our recently unstable political system also be strengthened.

ⁱ ILO (2020) COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses. Briefing Note, International Labour Organisation. Available at: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_738753.pdf.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

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^{iv} ONS (2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales: deaths registered up to and including 20 April 2020. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregistereduptoandincluding20april2020.

^v ONS (2019) Low pay and high pay in the UK: 2019. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/lowandhighpayuk/2019>

^{vi} Slaughter, H and Bell, T (2020) Crystal balls vs rear-view mirror. The UK labour market after coronavirus. The Resolution Foundation. Available at: www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/crystal-balls-vs-rear-view-mirrors/.

^{vii} ONS (2020) Coronavirus, the UK economy and society, faster indicators: 30 April 2020. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronavirusstheukconomyandsocietyfasterindicators/30april2020.

^{viii} McQuaid, D (2020) Does COVID-19 discriminate?, HR Review, 1 /4/20. Available at: www.hrreview.co.uk.

^{ix} Women's Budget Group (2020) Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group: Easing Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women, Available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Easing-lockdown-.pdf>.

^x ETUC (2020) Short Time Work Measures Across Europe. Briefing, Brussels. Available at: https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2020-05/Covid_19_Briefing_Short_Time_Work_Measures_30_April.pdf.

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^{xii} Baska, M (2020) Half of workers expect to work more flexibly after lockdown, survey finds, Available at: www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/half-workers-expect-work-more-flexibly-post-lockdown-survey.

^{xiii} Slaughter, H and Bell, T (2020) Crystal balls vs rear-view mirror. The UK labour market after coronavirus. The Resolution Foundation. Available at: www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/crystal-balls-vs-rear-view-mirrors/.

^{xiv} Standing, G (2017) Basic income: And how we can make it happen. Penguin UK.

^{xv} Andersen, TM, Holmström, B, Honkapohja, S, Korkman, S, Tson, SH and Vartiainen, J (2007) The Nordic Model: Embracing globalization and sharing risks. The Research Institute of the Finnish Economy, Helsinki: Taloustieto Oy. Available at: <https://economics.mit.edu/files/5726>.