

# Implications of precarious work for equality, health and well-being under Covid-19

Jill Rubery

Work and Equalities Institute

University of Manchester

# Precarious work: how to define it?

Precarious work can be identified along multiple dimensions of the employment relationship

-jobs may be precarious on one dimension but not on others

-some are precarious on multiple dimensions.

Here we focus on precarious work in relation to :

- Wage income insecurity or inadequacy
- Job insecurity
- Working time arrangements that conflict with a good personal and family life
- Lack of access to social protection
- Unhealthy, unsafe work environments(physical or mental)
- Unfair treatment at work( lack of respect, dignity, voice)

The incidence of precarious work is higher in:

- Non standard forms of employment (part-time, fixed term, temporary, casual, agency, zero hours, freelance, gig, solo self employed)
- But also found in full-time open ended employment- (e.g. in outsourced work, low value added markets)

# Precarious work: why is it growing ?

## Demand side factors

- Growth of services with fluctuating labour demands
- 24/7 economy and globalisation
- Public and private sector outsourcing- wage cost competition
- Fiscal Incentives to create low wage jobs/ to use freelance and solo self employed

## Supply side factors

- Increasingly diverse labour supply
- Long working hours in standard jobs plus high childcare costs may limit access for main carers to non precarious work (especially single mothers)
- Young people seeking stable jobs may take precarious jobs to gain access to labour market
- Students combining work and education
- Older workers needing to remain active in labour market due to pension age change
- Those on Universal Credit expected to seek and take jobs even if precarious
- Discrimination limits access to standard jobs – Black and ethnic minority communities, migrants, gender, age etc.

# Implications of precarious work for health and well being – pre Covid

## Physical health

'Being in work, staying in work and returning to work are all associated with improved mental and physical health, provided the work has security, realistic demands and a level of personal control – known collectively as 'good work'.' 2019 Healthcare Professionals' Consensus Statement for Action

## Mental health

Research evidence suggests even stronger impacts of job insecurity on mental than physical health (Benach et al. 2014)

## Health and safety at work

Evidence of poorer occupational health outcomes for precarious workers – varies by type of work e.g. agency workers facing more problems of inadequate safety training, poor quality personal protective equipment (Hopkins 2015)

Tendency towards presenteeism among agency workers for example- less likely to take sick leave (Benach et al. 2014)

# Precarious work and Covid related risks

## 1. Job and income insecurity

Greater risk of job loss- 'low paid twice as likely to have been temporarily laid off during the crisis and disproportionately likely to have lost their jobs'. (IES), those paid below real living wage around twice as likely to have lost jobs and more than twice as likely to be furloughed than those paid above real living wage (Resolution Foundation June 2020 data)

More at risk from cuts to hours ( low guaranteed hours)

More likely not to be eligible for statutory sick pay (TUC estimate 2 million below national insurance threshold)

Greater fear of job loss especially those on furlough ( 3 times more than those working in first phase feared job loss –CIPD)

Greater risk of not being included in furlough- zero hours and freelance etc may just not get any work (i.e. no redundancy process required)

No right to furlough even though allowed by government for childcare reasons (TUC 7 out of 10 mothers had requests refused)

Lack of eligibility for self employment income support scheme ( e.g. short contract PAYE freelancers in creative industries, new self employed )

# Precarious work and Covid related risks

## 2. Risks associated with self isolating

More likely to be ineligible for sick pay- (low pay or irregular employment records, self employed)

Statutory sick pay very low (£95 per week) and less likely to receive employer top ups.

Sick pay not available unless personally sick- not for contact with someone with Covid or caring for self isolating children

Many not eligible for £500 support for self isolating- may not be on benefits but would still lose pay- parents providing childcare during self isolation not eligible

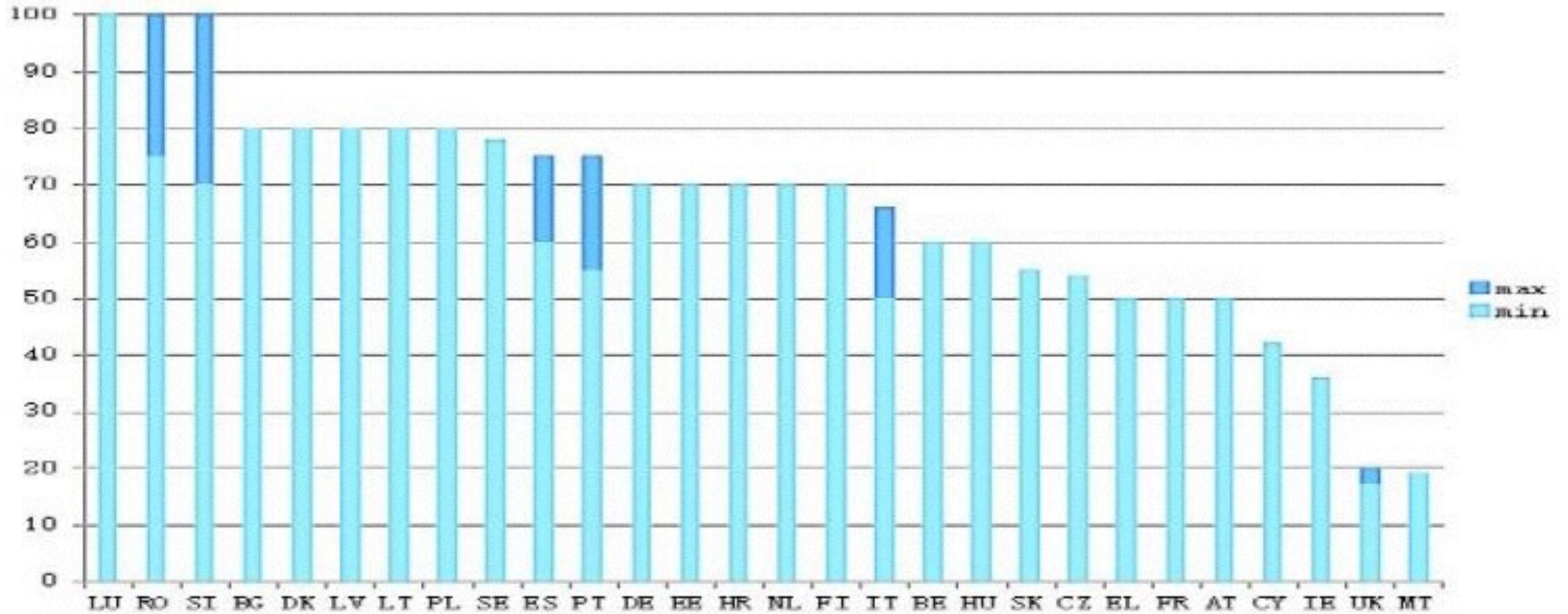
Even if receive sick pay or the £500 may lose income- less likely to have saving resources/ more likely to have debt

Time allowed to arrange emergency care at discretion of employer

No effective job protection even if take unpaid leave (especially if less than 2 years continuous employment with one employer)

### Sickness benefit replacement levels, EU28, 2015

Source: MISSOC 2015.



# Precarious work and Covid related risks

## 3. Health risks

Many precarious jobs (in relation to security, income etc) are front line jobs- some were high risk for health pre Covid, others have become high risk

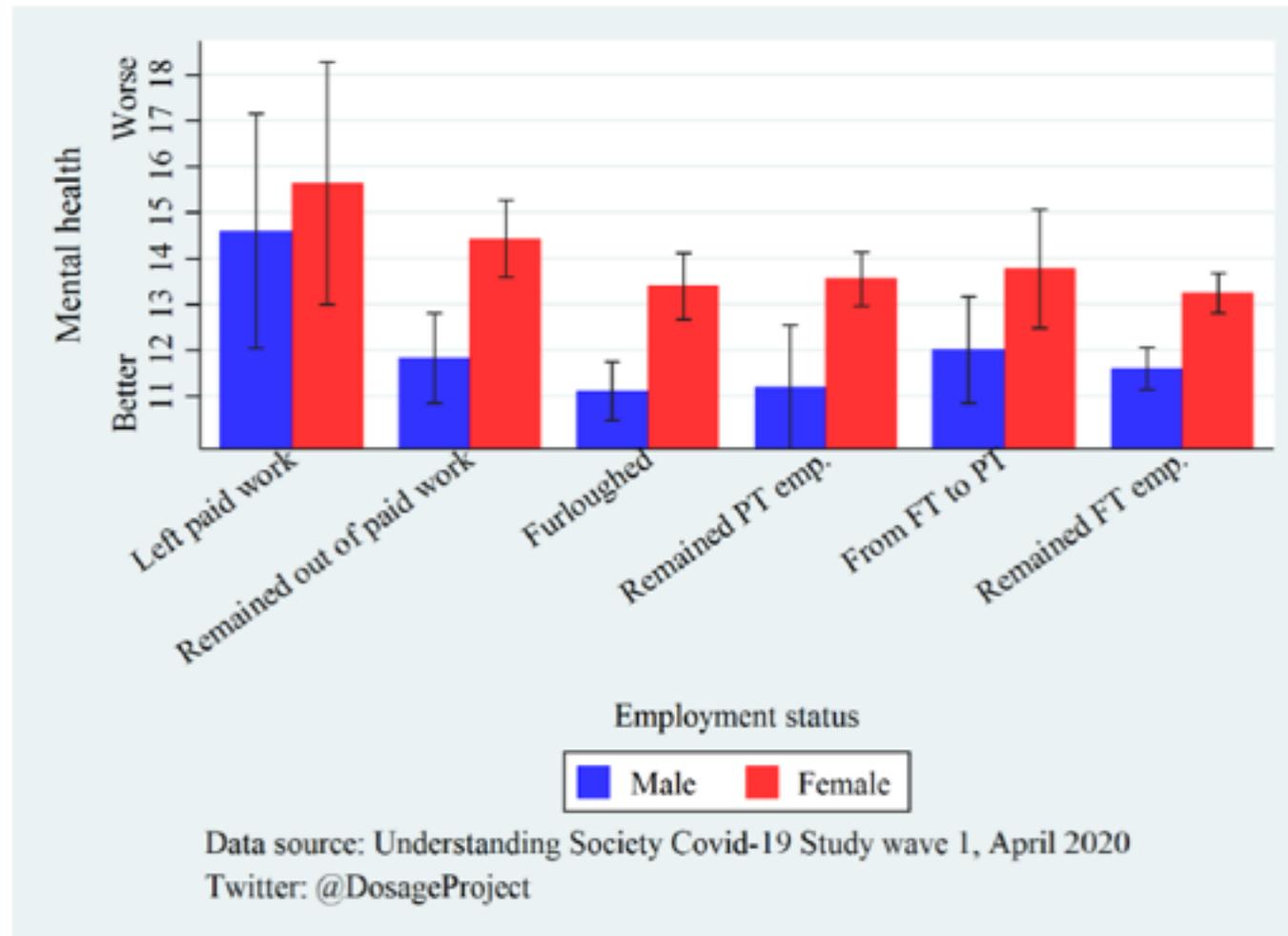
Issues of self isolation mean that colleagues may not be self isolating

Job loss, fear of job loss and income problems may lead to mental health problems

Health and safety at work more important in pandemic but inspection rate has decreased - 28% decrease pre Covid- checks on Health and Safety mainly through call centres not visits- dependent on responsibility of employer

Many in precarious jobs are at risk due to personal characteristics (Black and ethnic minority communities (though risks more associated with work and social conditions than demographic), those with disabilities or health problems (less likely to be in full-time work, etc. but also less likely to have rights to good sick pay, job protection)

Impact of change in employment status (Jan/Feb 2020 to April 2020) on mental health (controlling for income, age, parenting



**Figure 1.** GHQ-12 mental health scores by employment status, after controlling for all variables in the models.

# The need for responsible employers

UK system relies on responsible employers to provide protections for those in precarious jobs- few rights for the workers as individuals and difficult to exercise/enforce.

Responsible employers need to take action to:

- a) Reduce physical health risks
- b) Reduce mental health risks
- c) Help the protection of children
- d) Promote more equality

The effects of such measures have spillover effects from the benefits for individual workers to the wider community and society- not only in bringing the pandemic to a close but also in reducing future demands on the NHS and minimising harm on future generations.

# a) How can employers reduce physical health risks

Enable staff to self isolate and to care for self isolating children

Enable staff to look after their own health (e.g. attend vaccination clinics at earliest opportunity)

Enable staff to work at home whenever possible (support through loans of laptops, help with costs of broadband or 4G)

Identify problems in relation to travel to work and other risks

Ensure safe working environment

## b) How can employers reduce mental health risks

Recognise that precarious jobs may still be very important to individuals and to their families, especially now few vacancies - wherever possible include them in furlough rather than ending jobs

Minimise job losses (consider sharing work among all staff)- evidence indicates job loss worse than furlough or reduced hours

Communicate expected future plans to staff / discuss their concerns and priorities (i.e try to reduce unnecessary fears but also be honest re future prospects)

Make adjustments to enable continuation of work during school closures or isolation - and communicate that adjustments not going to affect job security of individuals

## c) How can employers help to protect children

Do what is possible to enable fathers and mothers to combine work and care  
– burden is lower on mothers if employers also allow adjustment for fathers

Recognise that a full double shift of childcare and work may not be possible  
and make adjustments

## d) How can employers take action to promote more equality in the Covid impacts

Try to treat all staff the same regardless of whether on standard or non standard contracts

Recognise greater risks for some workers but avoid stereotyping e..g ask single mothers if they want to reduce hours, do not impose

be aware of greater risks to Black and ethnic minority groups but prioritise making the work environment safer for all and enabling self isolation, not exclusion on demographic basis

Open up opportunities for young workers – e.g. join Kickstart scheme and consider them for future vacancies