

# Improving job quality reduces depression and anxiety for women

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New research from academics including Dr. Ludovico Carrino from the ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health has demonstrated for the first time the widely discussed but poorly documented link between job quality, working conditions and mental health for women in UK workplaces.

As this intuitive, causal link has previously seen very little empirical evidence to support it, these results have real-world impact for workers and employers, trade unions and business organizations regarding the ongoing policy debate on creating better jobs in the post-COVID era.

Specifically, the [longitudinal study](#) on female UK workers is the first evidence that improvements in job quality—most notably increased flexibility and autonomy—lead to large reductions in depression and anxiety, which could save the NHS money in future mental health treatments. As women tend to take on more day-to-day household tasks including caring responsibilities and housework, the findings also have implications for creating workplaces that are more accessible to women. The research has also found that different job features matter at different ages for women, and that workplace interventions should be focused in high-demand/low-control areas for best results.

The findings from Dr. Carrino of King's College London and the University of Trieste, together with Professors Michele Belloni (University of Torino) and Elena Meschi (University of Milano Bicocca), published in the journal *Labour Economics*, employed data from over 26,000 [female workers](#) who remained in the same job between 2010-2015 in the UK. They found two major characteristics of jobs have the largest positive effect on mental health; the flexibility to

arrange working times and the degree of autonomy workers have in applying and developing their skills on the job.

"The data used in this study was collected before the world experienced the COVID-19 pandemic," says Dr. Carrino. "Since then, flexible working arrangements have become more common for [office workers](#), however others who are required to work on site or in shops have not benefitted from such improvements to their [work life](#)."

"For example, this study found that if female sales workers could experience the same flexibility and autonomy of clerks, the depression risk would drop by 26% as a direct result. Women who continue to hold responsibility of the majority of caregiving and household tasks would particularly benefit from such improvements. Lower depression for female workers would mean a lower number of years lived with disability, higher personal well-being and higher productivity at work. The Mental Health Foundation has recently estimated that mental health problems cost the UK economy at least £118 billion per year, 5% of UK GDP, mainly caused by lost productivity."

Reflecting on the results, the research team have outlined guidance for employers:

## **Female workers of different ages react to different job features**

The mental health of younger female workers (below 35) was found to be sensitive to job latitude—for example choosing the order of tasks, speed, and work methods—as well as the amount of training, and work intensity.

In contrast, older female workers (above 50) saw better mental health

when they could apply their cognitive skills more freely—for example choosing the complexity of tasks and applying their ideas at work—as well as a better physical environment (including posture requirements and [ambient conditions](#)) and having more flexible working time arrangements.

Professor Belloni said: "Employers should be considerate of the fact that workers of different ages benefit from different dimensions of job quality—different factors are important at different stages of their lives, which informs creating better working conditions."

## **Workplace interventions should prioritize improving the conditions of tougher jobs**

Improvements in working conditions are more effective on some employees than on others, depending on the type of job they have.

Professor Meschi explains that their "study shows that policy and firms should prioritize workplace interventions for workers employed in jobs characterized by both high psychological demands, and low degrees of control on how to meet these demands, for example housekeeping and restaurant services, personal-caregivers, salespersons, cleaners, and machine operators. We find that improving job quality for these workers has a particularly large impact on improving their mental health."

## **Policy relevance**

Referring to the current debate on 'levelling up' inequalities and driving economic recovery and growth across the UK, Dr. Carrino adds that "the labor market is transforming for both younger and older workers. Young female workers have been heavily affected by the pandemic crisis and already faced poorer working conditions before COVID. Older female

workers face longer careers due to the aging process and the pension reforms, while being a keystone of social care in the UK. Our work provides the first evidence that improving working conditions can make a difference for younger and older workers well-being, especially among women in tougher jobs."

## **Methods**

Many workers remain in the same type of job over the years, but their working conditions change. This study analyzed how their mental health reacted to changing working conditions.

The paper used data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study Panel Survey, following 26,000 workers in the UK who remain the same type of job between 2010 and 2015. With the help of a separate database, the European Working Condition Survey, the research team tracked whether their job quality changed, while these workers did not change job.

The European Working Condition Survey suggests that working conditions changed (for the same type of job) in England between 2010 and 2015, partially due to technological progress, or to the economic downturns and upturns. Such changes are often contradictory.

For example, many jobs have seen an increase in atypical working hours (long shifts, weekends shifts) and a reduced control over scheduling arrangements. However, most jobs have seen an improvement in the freedom awarded to workers on how to employ and develop their skills in the job. These changes happened on a large scale, independently from the characteristics of individual workers. The study therefore shows the average change in the mental health for workers who experienced changes in the characteristics of their job, while remaining in the same job.

## Job quality affecting well-being feels intuitive, but evidence has been scant

Previous knowledge on the health effects of working conditions has been largely based on comparing the health status of workers when they move across jobs with different levels of quality. However, this method is not best suited to provide causal evidence because, for example, people who have better [health](#) to begin with might choose to go to better jobs; or because employers might be more keen to hire healthier [workers](#) for harder jobs, under the assumption that they will be better able to cope with the job's strain.

Conversely, this study offers a clear answer to the question on whether job quality affects [mental health](#).

**More information:** Michele Belloni et al, The impact of working conditions on mental health: Novel evidence from the UK, *Labour Economics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.labeco.2022.102176](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2022.102176)

Provided by King's College London

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