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Who are solo self-employed women? Analysis of the trends and characteristics of solo self-employed women in Ireland 2003-2019

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Solo or 'freelance' self-employment is becoming a more popular form of self-employment in the labour market. In some jurisdictions such as the UK, this growth is being attributed to rising numbers of women – and women with children in particular - seeking the flexibility and autonomy of freelance work as a response to shortages of flexibility in wage-and-salaried employment. Yet little is known about how these trends might be occurring in Ireland and who might be represented in this small but growing cohort of workers. This research uses Labour Force Survey data to explore trends in female solo self-employment in Ireland between 2003 and 2019 and key variables are drawn upon to develop a profile of this underexplored labour market group. The analysis highlights that while growth in solo self-employment rates has been slow and numbers still relatively small, it is increasingly made up of highly educated and professional women in relatively high-paid sectors opting for flexible working arrangements.

Keywords: *self-employment; freelance work; gender; work-life balance; flexible work*

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INTRODUCTION

Self-employment rates in Europe have remained relatively steady since the start of the century, making up 15 percent of the total EU labour force (Fondeville et al., 2015). However there have been increases in share of the self-employed operating as 'solo', 'own account' or 'freelance' workers, as opposed to those who hire employees (Hormans and Marx, 2017; Spasova, 2018). Studies have also noted a rise in part-time self-employment among the highly educated and in highly skilled professional or semi-professional occupations, with growing numbers of female self-employed thought to contribute to these trends (Fondeville et al., 2015; Hatfield, 2015; van Stel and van der Zwan, 2019). Yet research into trends among female solo self-employed specifically is in short supply, possibly because of the long-standing gender gap in participation, with relatively few women involved in self-employment compared to men. However, with work-life balance issues at the forefront of management discourse, with solo self-employment or freelance work growing in popularity and with reason to believe that women might account for a proportion of this growth, research into this often-overlooked labour market group is necessary.

The objectives of this paper are twofold: first, to develop a profile of self-employed women in Ireland including demographic, human capital and working characteristics; second, to analyse trends that have occurred over the sixteen-year period between 2003 and 2019. Comparisons with male self-employed and with wage-and-salaried employees are applied throughout. The empirical analysis is based on observations of frequencies, trends and descriptive statistics provided by the Labour Force Survey. The paper is structured as follows. First, what is known about the solo self-employed in the European and Irish context is discussed. Next, the policy context of Ireland is explored with a focus on self-employment as a flexible work option and work-life balance issues for working parents, particularly mothers. Findings from the data are then presented, with demographic, human capital and working characteristics of self-employed women and changes over time outlined.

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Solo self-employment in Ireland and Europe

Comparing self-employment rates across countries is challenging not least because of the different ways self-employment is defined. Solo self-employment is defined as 'where people work on their own business on their own account' (OECD, 2019) or 'those who work in their own business, professional practice or farm for the purpose of earning a profit and who employ no other persons' (Eurofound, 2019). However, some studies count all self-employed as inclusive of both solo self-employed (meaning without employees) and employers (self-employed hire employees) while others separate the two categories. Self-employment data might also be divided according to industry, with agricultural sectors included or not included depending on their relevance to the analysis (Duggan, 2001; Du Plessis, 2004). The term 'freelancing' is usually used to refer to solo self-employment in non-agricultural, often in professional or semi-professional sectors but inclusive of technical, scientific, arts and creative work – a potentially huge range of activities (Leighton and Brown, 2016). Furthermore, studies concentrating on 'entrepreneurship' as distinct from self-employment might attempt to narrow their definitions further according to factors deemed indicative of entrepreneurial activity such as the intention for further investment and growth (OECD, 2019). Some of these classification distinctions can be difficult to draw and are often, in actual sense, arbitrary (Freedman, 2001). Thus, due to definitional issues and the wide range of activities, socioeconomic positions, demographic characteristics and market or business situations of this group of workers it is difficult to measure the self-employed as a homogenous group. Nevertheless, some trends can be identified from the research literature.

While narrowing in recent years, the ratio of male to female self-employed in Europe is around 10:7, with 9.6 per cent of the female labour force in self-employment compared to 17 per cent of men (OECD, 2019). Withing certain types of self-employment these gaps narrow considerably, with women making up 44 per cent of professional self-employed and 43 of 'freelancers' in the EU in 2012 (European Commission, 2014). The proportion of overall self-employment that is 'solo' or without employees and that which is part-time has also increased, with women more likely than men to be in these categories (European Commission, 2014). Thus, while self-employed women in Europe appear to be situated within professional sectors, a high proportion are opting for part-time work and are less likely than men to hire employees (OECD, 2019). Some studies have linked the rise in part-time solo self-employment in Europe to increased numbers of women setting up their own businesses to obtain greater flexibility in working conditions than might be found in certain sectors of wage-and-salaried employment (Henley, 2015; Hatfield, 2015; IPSE, 2018). In the UK, women have been estimated to account for a substantial proportion of growth in solo self-employment rates between 2009 and 2014 (Henley, 2015; IPSE, 2017). The IPSE report that between 2008 and 2017 the number of mothers working freelance (defined as all solo self-employed in professional, semi-professional, creative or technical sectors) doubled, with working mothers making up 1 in 7 freelance workers by 2017 (ISPE, 2018).

In Ireland, figures from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions showed that in 2016, 1 in 10 workers in the Republic of Ireland were self-employed without employees. The proportion of solo self-employed working part-time was found to have increased by 34 percent between 2008 and 2016, with women representing the majority (51%) of this group (ICTU, 2017). They found that while the majority of full-time solo self-employed had less than degree-level education, among those working part-time 67 percent had degree level education or higher (ICTU, 2017). In terms of industrial sector, 32 percent worked in the agricultural sector and a further one in five in construction. Among part-time solo self-employed however, one in four worked in education and health and the rest spread out across a range of other sectors. Among full-time self-employed, 25 percent were in professional or managerial occupations whereas among part-time self-employed, one in three were working at professional and/or managerial level (ICTU, 2017).

From a quality of work perspective, several points about solo self-employment are notable. The self-employed have been found to have lower income levels and higher rates of 'in work poverty' compared to their counterparts in wage-and-salaried employment (Collins, 2015; Hormans and Marx, 2017). Solo self-employment, particularly that which is part-time, has been characterised as precarious: lacking in job security, generating insufficient incomes, lacking access to collective representation, training opportunities and social welfare benefits (Vosko and Zukewich, 2006; Eurofound, 2013; Coen and Schippers, 2019). Tending to be more exposed to market forces than wage-and-salaried employment, self-employment can foster situations of uncertainty with regards to the adequacy and continuation of paid work but at the same time can offer potentially high rewards (OECD, 2019). Studies have shown the self-employed have higher levels of job satisfaction, with increased autonomy over working arrangements and

conditions and self-employed people in Europe by and large freely choose their work status, with only a minority expressing a desire to be in wage-and-salaried employment (Blanchflower and Oswald, 1998; Eurostat, 2017; Hessels et al., 2018).

From limited research into solo self-employment available in Ireland to date it appears that, reflective of the wider European picture, there has been growth in certain types of self-employment, namely part-time solo self-employment in professional occupations and that this could be associated with increased numbers of women taking up this form of work. Yet little is known about these trends or, indeed, about who solo self-employed women in Ireland are. This research therefore uses Labour Force Survey data to address the question: who are solo self-employed or 'freelance' women and what has changed over time for this cohort of workers?

Research into this topic is necessary because of the way in which self-employment and entrepreneurship is promoted as a labour market option for women at a national and EU level. The promotion of self-employment and entrepreneurship and the narrowing of the gender gap in participation are policy priorities in Ireland and the European Union (European Commission, 2012; Enterprise Ireland, 2017). The contemporary economic and cultural climate is one focused on innovation and enterprise and where entrepreneurship is thought to provide benefits to both the individual and to society at large (Acs *et al.,* 2016; Block, O. Fisch, and van Praag, 2017). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) ranked Ireland as the 6th highest in Europe when it comes to 'early-stage entrepreneurship' defined as new business owners and those planning to start a business (Fitzsimmons and O'Gormon, 2017). For women in particular, the dominant policy message and popular narrative is that self-employment can offer numerous advantages, not least the simultaneous fulfilment of individual creative goals alongside the attainment of greater work-life balance and flexibility (Ahl and Nelson, 2006; EIGE, 2014, Quinlan, 2014; O'Callaghan, 2014). By analysing a large national-representative dataset on self-employed women in Ireland, this research highlights the role of women in this growing, complex and heterogenous form of work.

The profile and characteristics of self-employed women: international studies

International research has tended to position the self-employed woman as a secondary earner within the nuclear family, for whom non-financial factors act as incentives (Carr, 1994, Hundley, 2001; Boden, 1999; Georgellis and Wall, 2005; Dawson et al., 2009; Hormans and Marx, 2017). The positive association found between self-employment probability and household factors such as marriage and the presence of children have been interpreted as indicating that work-family considerations factor highly for women, and more so than men (Connelly, 1992; Carr, 1994; Boden, 1999; Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998). High marriage rates among self-employed women and higher rates of self-employment among those with a self-employed spouse, have been thought to point to a situation in which self-employed women have additional financial and cultural capital at their disposal (Bruce, 1999).

Few clear conclusions can be drawn from research into the 'human capital' (education, skills, work experience) of self-employed women. Some studies show that work experience and higher education increase self-employment participation (Carr, 1996), others that self-employment is most likely among those at the very top and very bottom of the educational attainment distribution (Blanchflower, 2000). As mentioned, recent European studies have pointed to significant growth in self-employment among the highly educated (van Stel and van der Zwan, 2019). Among female self-employed, the conclusions to be drawn from international literature are similarly mixed. Devine (1994) and Budig (2006a) found higher educational attainment among self-employed women compared to men while Semykina (2016) found no relationship between educational attainment and self-employment participation for women. Clearer trends are evident in the literature on professional status and sectoral activity however, with studies tending to show self-employed women being more concentrated in non-professional occupations and in lower paying sectors (Hundley, 2001; McManus, 2001; Budig 2006a, 2006b) although there are differences according to marital and parental status (Wellington, 2006; Simon and Way, 2015; Patrick *et al.*, 2016)

Working trends data have shown self-employed women more likely than men to work part-time (Devine, 1994; Carr, 1994; Aidis and Wetzels, 2007) and spend more hours on unpaid domestic and care tasks compared to their wage-and-salaried counterparts (Hundley, 2001: Hildebrand and Williams, 2003). In terms of working time, some studies have highlighted a degree of polarisation, with self-employed women at one end working very few hours and others working very many hours (Devine, 1994; Carr, 1994; Patrick *et al.,* 2016). Polarisation has been linked to a bifurcation between work-centred or careerist self-employed women and more family-oriented women perhaps constrained by caring responsibilities (Budig, 2006a; Patrick *et al.*, 2016).

Other demographic characteristics that emerge from the literature include the tendency for self-employed workers to be older than their wage-and-salaried counterparts (Devine, 1994; Blanchflower, 2000), a crucial factor

that at least partly explains other trends such as higher rates of home ownership (Burrows and Ford, 1998; Dawson *et al.,* 2009). Links between ethnic or immigrant status and self-employment have been found in some studies, with the argument being that lower barriers to entry are attractive to marginalised groups (Clarke and Drinkwater, 2010; Jones *et al.,* 2012), but little is known specifically about gender variations here.

Variation by jurisdiction is evident. Aidis and Wetzel's (2007) study linked gender differences in part-time working rates to the labour market characteristics of the EU countries studied. They considered that in countries (such as the Netherlands) where relatively high-quality part-time work is more commonly available, women would be less likely to turn to self-employment for working flexibility. In a study by Andersson-Joona (2016) findings were interpreted as being reflective of the particular labour market structure in Sweden, where institutions in place to facilitate the combination of motherhood and work, such as extensive parental leave and publicly subsidised childcare (Andersson Joona, 2012). As a consequence, women did not need to turn to self-employment as a flexible work option since this would be available in wage-and-salaried employment. Hatfield (2015) attributed higher self-employment rates among women in Spain compared to Denmark as indicative of different social policy contexts, with women in Denmark having a stronger attachment to the labour market. This connection between self-employment and work-life balance, gender regimes or family policies arises frequently in the research. After all, the flexibility offered by solo self-employment or freelance work are considered important 'pull' factors, the necessity or desire for which will depend on the policy, social and gender-role context, (Dawson, 2009; Patrick *et al.*, 2016).

Policy context in Ireland: work-life balance issues for working parents.

Despite rapid rises in labour market participation and education of women in Ireland in recent decades, the primary responsibility for unpaid childcare and domestic work still rests on their shoulders (Russell and McGinty, 2008; Loftus, 2009; Fine-Davis, 2011). Expensive and often inadequate childcare options, a cultural disposition towards a female primary caregiver/male breadwinner normative household structure and with demand for flexible working arrangements not meeting supply, the continuation of a career can become difficult for Irish women if they have children (Loftus, 2009; Barry, 2009; O'Hagan, 2015; OECD, 2016). The ability to combine work and family life inevitably depends on the affordability of childcare or the availability of helpful family members and, indeed, grandparent care was the most popular form of childcare in Ireland in 2013 (McGinnity *et al.*., 2013). Childcare costs, tax structures and a desire or preference among many people for time with their children, especially in the early years, means it often doesn't 'pay' either from a financial or a utility perspective for both parents (or one parent in lone parent families) to work full time (Wayman, 2016; Wayman, 2018). Irish women are three times as likely to work part-time than their male counterparts, with 37 percent in part-time employment compared to the OECD average of 25 percent (OECD, 2019).

Self-employment, particularly solo self-employment is frequently presented in both popular narratives and policy discourse as offering a potential solution to work-life balance issues (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2014; O'Callaghan, 2015; Denning, 2020). Lower barriers to entry, the rise of online or 'platform' work, reduced commute time and a greater ability to work from home is thought to enable traditionally marginalised groups such as mothers, ethnic minorities and older workers to access the labour market (Clarke and Drinkwater, 2010; Cooke *et al.*, 2018). The promotion of self-employment as a way to improve the labour market participation of women was included as a policy priority in the EU's 'Strategy for Equality Between Men and Women' 2010-2015 (European Commission, 2010)

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this research is derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for Ireland 2003 – 2019. This is a large-scale survey designed to produce quarterly labour force estimates. A multi-stage sampling process results in a total of 26,000 households surveyed per quarter. Data are weighted to population totals based on the last census and to account for non-response.

Gender (sex) is the primary independent variable of interest, included as a control and to analyse separately (0=male, 1=female). Age group was recoded into seven categories (15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 75+). Household variables included marriage (currently married/not), family status (couple with children, couple without children, lone parent, single). Nationality was coded into three variables (Irish, EU citizen, non-EU citizen).

The most important labour variable is solo self-employed status or self-employed without employees, (1=self-

employed (solo), 0 = employed/waged). Hence, self-employed employers are not included in the analysis. As outlined, clarity around definitions in self-employment is crucial. Tangible and measurable distinctions between self-employed entrepreneurship, solo self-employment, freelance work and even dependent or 'bogus' self-employment are difficult to make and studies take varying approaches to the application and definition of the different terminologies (Freedman, 2001). The CSO defines self-employed as 'working in his or her own business, professional practice or farm for the purposes of earning a profit, even where the enterprise is failing to make a profit' and is divided into those with or without employees. This research is concerned with the latter, and with non-agricultural sectors. Therefore, the definition 'solo self-employed' as identified as a measurable variable in the survey data could encompass all non-agricultural subcontracting, freelancing, tele-working, independent professional practice, small business ownership, entrepreneurship as well as dependent or 'bogus' self-employment. For the sake of ease, the term 'self-employment' is used throughout the bulk of the findings and discussion sections to refer to 'solo' self-employment.

Variables to capture working arrangements and in particular flexible working are part-time work rates, atypical hours (working evenings, nights and weekends), working from home (at least sometimes), citing caring, personal or family reasons for reduced working time and having a second job. Underemployment, or the cited desire for increased working hours which are unavailable, is also included as a working arrangement variable.

Human capital is captured by education, professional experience, tenure (years in business) and industrial sector. Education is re-coded into five categories: Junior Cert (lower secondary) or less, Leaving Cert (upper secondary) or less, post Leaving Cert/Training (third level less than a degree), degree (Bachelors or equivalent), postgraduate/professional (master's level, PhD or professional qualification). Occupation is included in its long (UK-Soc10) groupings and then further categorised into professional/managerial, skilled craft or clerical and services/manual level occupations for the sake of ease of reference. Similarly, industrial sector is analysed both in its long (Nace-Rev2) format and grouped into construction/industry/manufacturing, services, professions, science, technology and finance, health, education, social and community work and 'other'.

Descriptive studies clearly have limitations. As Krishnarao (1961:4) reminds us, the researcher must ensure that 'the description he attempts is useful to the problem studied' and in this case we are examining trends and using the data to find out more about how self-employed women in Ireland work. Motivations or the influence of certain factors on self-employment probabilities which would require regression models or other inferential statistics are beyond the scope of this study. Krishnarao (1961:5) also noted that descriptive studies must take place with detailed consideration to the 'accuracy, objectivity and quantitativeness of the data' and with this in mind, the quality and accuracy of the Labour Force Survey as a source provided by the Central Statistics Office in Ireland is reiterated. That having been said, there are limitations of the survey with respect to sample size and resultant variability (European Commission, 1998). Since this research is concerned with a subsection of the labour market (self-employed women) care had to be taken to ensure sample sizes were large enough to yield reliable estimates. Table 1 displays the sample (n) and populations (N) for the datasets used in the analysis.

Table 1. Sample (n) and population (N) for Labour Force Survey data: Non-agricultural solo self-employment

Quarter, Year	Sample (n) Self-employed (n)		Population (N) Self-employed (N)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Q2 2003	2,125	499	84, 896	20, 632
Q2 2007	2, 502	475	102, 779	24, 738
Q2 2011	1, 330	358	99, 501	28, 501
Q2 2015	1, 196	334	108, 862	30, 983
Q2 2017	875	263	105, 691	32, 301
Q2 2019	828	339	114, 074	48, 012

Source: Labour Force Survey, Ireland

FINDINGS: SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN IN THE IRISH LABOUR MARKET

To provide context, Table 2 presents the composition of labour active individuals by gender from 2003-2019 in all sectors of the economy. The figures show that men's self-employment rates have fluctuated, falling from a high of 17 percent of the labour force in 2011 to a low of 13.6 percent in 2019. Women's self-employment rates, while lower than men's, have experienced something of a slow and steady increase from 3.7 percent in 2007 to just under 5 percent in 2019.

Table 2. Active labour force composition Ireland 2003-2017 ALL SECTORS

	Men					Women				
	2003	**2007**	**2011**	**2017**	**2019**	**2003**	**2007**	**2011**	**2017**	**2019**
Employer	7.6	7.7	6.9	6.2	5.9	2.2	2.4	2.2	2.1	2.2
Solo self-employed	15.0	14.3	17.3	15.2	13.6	4.0	3.7	4.8	4.9	4.9
Employee	76.6	77.4	75.1	77.9	80.0	92.4	92.9	92.3	92.5	92.2
Assisting relatives	.8	.5	.7	.7	.5	1.3	.9	.8	.5	.7
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

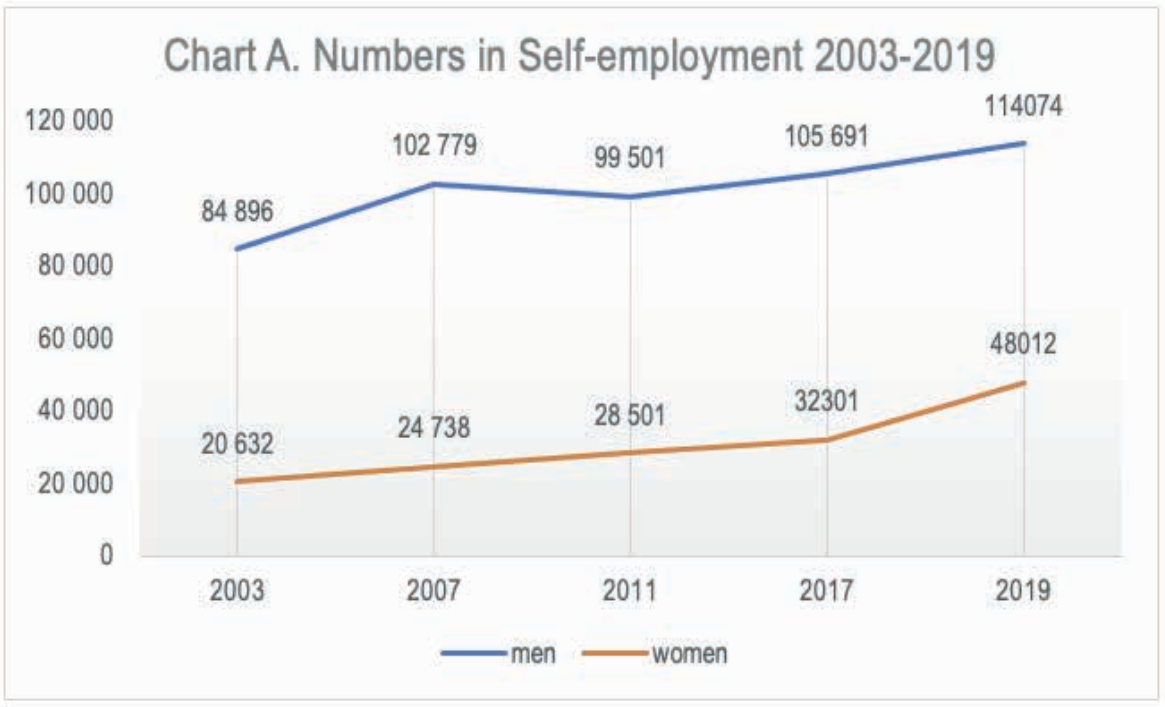
Source: Labour Force Survey Q2 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2017
Labour Force = in work persons
Sample weights applied

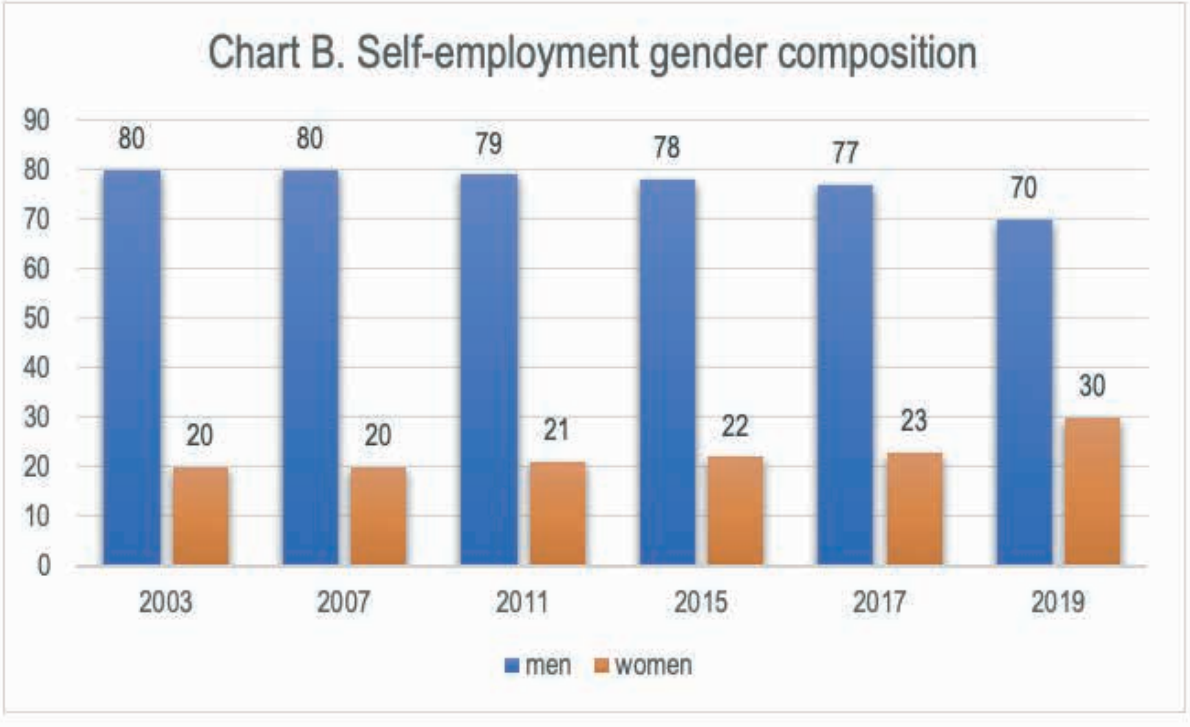
Since the focus of this research is on non-agricultural sectors, Table 3 and Chart A present non-agricultural self-employment rates and numbers from 2003-2019 by gender. Chart B displays gender composition within self-employment. Here we can see that between 2003 and 2019, an additional 27, 380 women took up self-employment in Ireland and the female self-employment rate as a proportion of the overall female labour force has risen from 2.9 to 4.6 percent. As can be seen in Chart B, the gender gap in participation has narrowed, with women now making up 30 percent of the self-employed in 2019.

Table 3. Solo self-employment rates and numbers 2003-2017 NON-AGRICULTURAL SECTORS

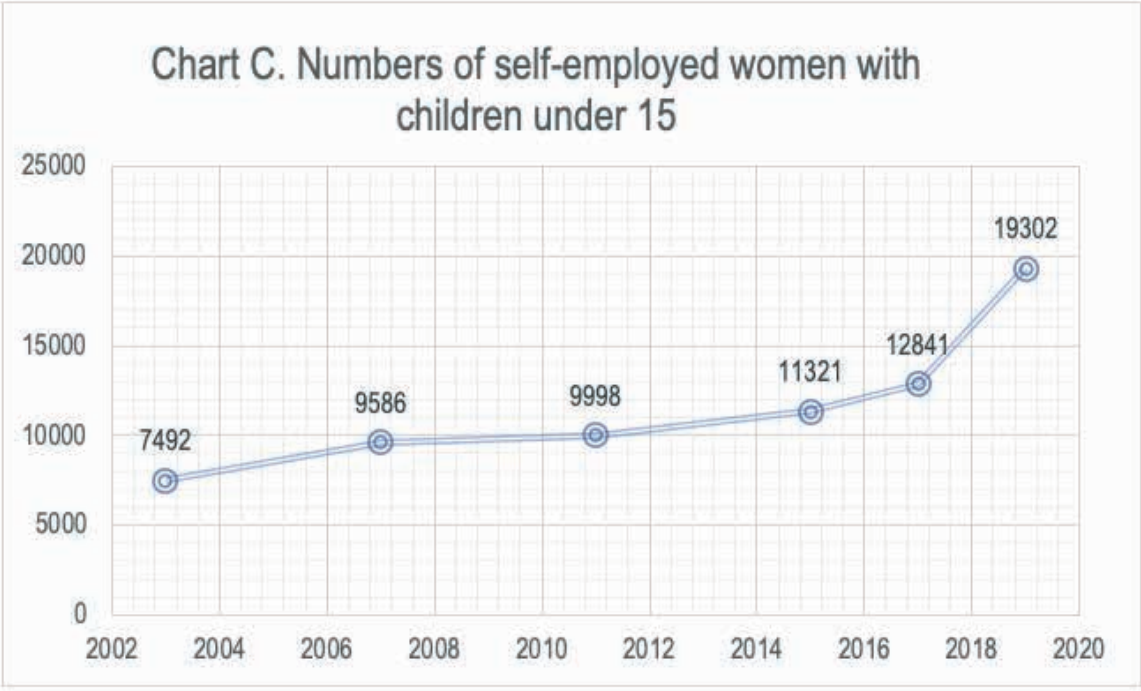
	Men					Women				
	2003	**2007**	**2011**	**2017**	**2019**	**2003**	**2007**	**2011**	**2017**	**2019**
% Self- employed	9.0	9.2	11.4	10.3	9.9	2.9	2.8	3.5	3.6	4.6
Count	84,896	102,779	99,501	105,691	114, 074	20,632	24,738	28,501	32, 301	48, 012
	100%	100%	100%	100		100%	100%	100%	100%	

Source: Labour Force Survey Q2 2003 and 2017
Labour Force = total unemployed and employed persons
"Participation" – at work persons
Sample weights applied





UK studies have found that increases in freelance self-employment have been partly reflective of 'working' mothers opting to set up small businesses (IPSE, 2018). Therefore, looking at the count data from the Irish Labour Force Survey the numbers of self-employed women with young children (under 15) have risen by nearly 12, 000, representing a significant increase in participation by self-employed women with children in Ireland, as can be seen in Chart C.



These data show that working mothers taking up self-employment in the sixteen-year period account for 43 percent of the overall increase. As a proportion of all women active in the labour market, the rates of self-employment for women with children have increased from 2.8 percent in 2003 to 4.6 percent in 2019 (Source: LFS 2003, 2019).

Demographic characteristics

This study is henceforth concerned with the just over 48,000 women in solo or 'freelance' self-employment in Ireland in 2019. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the main demographic characteristics in percentage terms. Figures for men and for wage-and-salaried workers are included for comparison.

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of solo self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers 2019 (%)

	Self-employed		Wage-and-Salaried	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
	n=339	n=828	n=6662	n=6286
	%	%	%	%
		Age		
15-19	0	0	3	2
20-29	7	4	20	21
30-39	25	19	27	28
40-49	28	27	26	25
50-59	25	29	17	17
60-65	9	11	5	5
65+	7	9	1	2
		Nationality		
Irish	81	86	84	81
EU*	16	12	12	14
Non-EU	3	2	4	4

	Self-employed		Wage-and-Salaried	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
	n=339	n=828	n=6662	n=6286
	%	%	%	%
		Household		
Not married	29	23	44	43
Married	59	70	49	53
Widowed/Divorced	12	7	7	4
Couple no children	23	22	17	17
Couple with children	47	55	51	58
Lone parent	11	6	15	7
Otherhousehold/single	18	17	16	17
Children under 15	40	35	40	39
Older or adult children	18	25	27	27
No children	42	39	33	34
Home owner	74	78	71	68

Source: Labour Force Survey 2019
sample weights applied

There are some small but notable differences in nationality trends visible in the data. While the self-employed overall are predominantly Irish in 2019, the proportions of self-employed women who were EU or third country nationals are slightly larger than among men or wage-and-salaried workers. To put this another way, while the numbers are small (N=9,014), migrants make up a higher proportion of female self-employed (19%) than within the male group, perhaps pointing towards a tendency amongst EU or non-EU migrant women for this form of work. In terms of age, while the self-employed tend to be older on average than wage-and-salaried workers, self-employed women are younger than self-employed men.

Just under 60 percent of self-employed women are married, and 47 percent are in a couple with children and 40 percent have children under 15. Lone parents make up 11 percent of the solo self-employed. This means self-employed women are around as likely as women in wage-and-salaried work to have children but with higher marriage rates. Self-employed women are more likely than self-employed men, however, to have children under 15. Household trends such as these must be interpreted alongside the confounding effects of age, with self-employed women occupying slightly younger age cohorts than men.

Home ownership was included as an indicator of socio-economic status or household wealth (Dawson *et al.,* 2009). Labour Force Survey data shows higher rates of home ownership among self-employed compared to wage-and-salaried workers. Again, this might be connected to the self-employed concentration in older age cohorts. It may also be associated with the economic position of the households which self-employed people find themselves within, that perhaps has the capital to allow for the riskier venture of small business entrepreneurship or freelance work.

Human capital characteristics and industry/sector

Measuring 'human capital' by education, occupational level and including four sector/industry classifications, the Labour Force Survey data for self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Human capital and sector characteristics of the solo self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers 2019 (%)

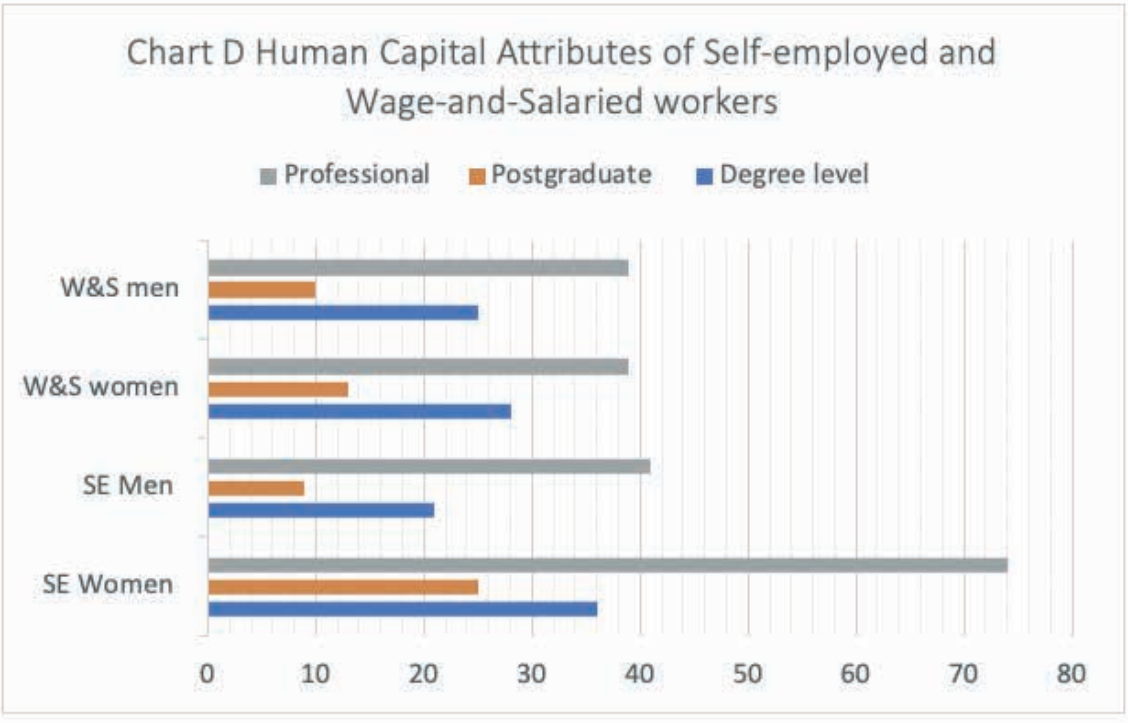
	Self-employed		Wage-and-Salaried	
	Women n=339 %	Men n=828 %	Women n=6662 %	Men n=6286 %
	Education			
< Lower secondary (JC)	7	20	10	15
Upper secondary (LC)	13	21	22	26
Post Leaving Cert/Dip	20	24	22	19
Degree	40	25	31	27
Postgraduate/PhD	20	10	15	13
	Occupation			
Professional/Manager	73	44	29	27
Skilled clerical/craft	6	33	27	18
Services/Manual	18	19	28	28
Other	3	3	15	26
	Sector			
Industry/manufacturing	8	34	9	30
Services	24	36	32	34
Professional/Science/Tech/Finance	31	25	15	19
Health/Education/Social Work	16	3	19	11
Other	20	2	24	6

Source: Labour Force Survey 2019
sample weights applied

Self-employed women are the most highly educated group, with over 60 percent holding degree level education or higher, almost twice that of self-employed men and fourteen percentage points more than women in wage-and-salaried work. Twenty percent of self-employed women have a postgraduate qualification, the highest of all labour market groups.

A similar picture emerges when measuring human capital in terms of professional achievement. Again, self-employed women show not only the largest concentration at upper levels but the smallest concentration in lower-level service or manual occupations compared to both their male and wage-and-salaried peers. Nearly three-quarters of self-employed women work at professional, semi-professional, or managerial levels. This is almost twice that of both self-employed men and women in wage-and-salaried work. It can also be seen that gender differences in human capital attainment are wider among the self-employed. It is notable that self-employed men and women differ greatly in their levels of educational and occupational attainment while wage-and-salaried workers display much more similar trends here. Chart D below displays gender gaps in human capital attainment for self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers.

Self-employed women primarily work in professional, scientific, technical and financial sectors (31%) followed by services (24%) and health and education sectors (16%). They are less likely than other labour market groups to work in what are generally lower-paying service sectors and the most likely to work in professional or technical activities.



Job and working characteristics

While the working arrangements of self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers will be explored in more detail using a larger sample in the following section, Table 6 displays information on the working arrangements of self-employed women in 2019. Information for wage-and-salaried workers is included for comparison.

Table 6. Working arrangements of the solo self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers 2019 (%)

	Self-employed		Wage-and-Salaried	
	Women n=339 %	Men n=828 %	Women n=6662 %	Men n=6286 %
Working arrangements				
Full time	56	88	69	88
Part-time	44	11	31	12
Atypical hours	70	74	47	54
Work from home	62	44	14	16
Second job	3	3	2	2
Reasons for reduced working time				
Education	3	1	18	38
Disability	1	4	2	3
Caring responsibilities	34	8	25	4
Personal or family reasons	38	38	32	9
Wants full time hours	9	20	12	32
Other	17	29	10	14

Source: Labour Force Survey 2019
sample weights applied

While most self-employed women work full time, a notably higher proportion (44%) work part time than either their male or wage-and-salaried peers. The self-employed are more likely to work atypical hours (evenings, weekends and nights) than waged employees. A notably higher proportion of self-employed women work from home than any other group, with 62 percent working from home at least sometimes. Only a very small percentage of the self-employed overall (3%) have a second job, roughly the same as that of wage-and-salaried workers.

Looking at reasons cited for reduced working time we can see that self-employed women are the most likely to specify caring reasons (34%), notably higher than self-employed men and women in wage-and-salaried work. Counting caring, personal and family reasons together, almost three-quarters of self-employed women cite these reasons. At the same time, self-employed women are the least likely group to cite a desire for full-time work that is not available (underemployment).

Profile of self-employed women: changes over time

Table 7 below presents changes in some of the primary household, human capital and labour market characteristics of the self-employed in the sixteen-year period between 2003 and 2019.

Table 7. Profile of self-employed women: changes over time 2003-2019

	2003 n499	2007 n475	2011 n358	2017 n263	2019 n339
			Household		
Couple no children	23	21	30	25	23
Couple with children	50	62	47	48	47
Lone parent	7	5	6	12	11
Single	20	13	16	14	18
			Human Capital		
Degree level/postgrad education	54	54	62	61	60
Professional/manager	80	73	73	74	73
Work/labour					
Part-time	38	38	42	47	44
Atypical hours	73	69	68	61	70
Work from home	61	42	58	47	62
Caring reasons for p/t	n/a	18	19	41	34
Personal/family	n/a	58	38	27	38
Wants full time hours	n/a	3	15	12	9
Industry/manufacturing	7	9	8	8	8
Services	37	28	31	21	24
Prof/science/finance	29	31	31	34	31
Health/education/social	12	14	11	11	16
Other sector	14	18	18	25	20

Source: Labour Force Survey 2003, 2011, 2017 and 2019
sample weights applied
n/a: data not available

The most notable household composition characteristics is the increase in the proportion of self-employed women identifying as a lone parent household, which doubled in the 2011-2017 period. Otherwise, roughly half of self-employed women live in couple-with-child households in each of the years in question. While household composition

has remained largely unchanged, there have been increases in count numbers of self-employed women with children, as outlined.

Self-employed women became slightly more educated, with the proportions having degree level education or higher increasing from 54 to 62 percent between 2003 and 2011. Interestingly, it appears that self-employed women have consistently been operating at professional occupational levels, from 80 percent in 2003 down to 73 percent in 2019.

Looking at labour market characteristics, self-employed women became more likely to work part-time during the period and the proportions citing caring reasons for doing so increased substantially between 2011 and 2017 from 19 percent to 41 percent. Working from home rates declined somewhat but then picked back up to 62 percent in 2019. It appears that self-employed women have moved away from service sectors and into the professional, scientific, technological and financial sectors as well as towards health and education.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data presented in this paper have identified trends and notable characteristics of self-employed women as compared to their male and self-employed counterparts and over time. First, female participation in self-employment, both as a percentage of the overall female labour force and as a proportion within self-employment, increased between 2003 and 2019. Looking at count figures, the numbers of women in Ireland taking up self-employment rose by over 27,000 in the period in question, with women with children under 15 accounting for a substantial proportion (43%) of this increase. This rise in numbers of self-employed women with children has coincided with notable increases in part-time solo self-employment as well as increases in the proportion of self-employed women citing caring reasons for doing so. This suggests similar patterns as have been identified in studies from the UK, where an increase in part-time, solo self-employment among working mothers has been noted (Henley, 2015; IPSE, 2017).

Regarding demographic profile, it was notable that a higher proportion of the solo self-employed were EU and third country nationals compared to men and women in wage-and-salaried work. While the vast majority were Irish nationals in 2019, the data points to a slightly higher take up of small business entrepreneurship or freelance work among migrant women. In line with previous research (Blanchflower, 2000) self-employed overall were slightly older than their wage-and-salaried counterparts and trends in other factors such as household and marital status are likely to be associated with this difference. However, the self-employed were notably and considerably more likely to be homeowners than wage-and-salaried employees, a factor likely to be correlated with age but also perhaps pointing to differences in the socio-economic position of the households within which the self-employed are situated (Dawson *et al.*, 2009)

The most notable and important characteristic of self-employed women in Ireland that has emerged from the Labour Force Data is their high levels of human capital, both in terms of educational attainment and professional status. Nearly three-quarters of self-employed women in 2019 were in professional, managerial or semi-professional occupations which would appear to be higher than the EU average (European Commission, 2015). Nearly two-thirds had degree level education or higher while a quarter of self-employed women had professional or post-graduate qualifications. These figures are considerably higher than both their male and wage-and-salaried counterparts. Furthermore, self-employed women were active in what would generally be better-paid or professional sectors of the economy, at least in wage-and-salaried work (CSO, 2018). These trends run counter to much of the international research into female self-employment, much of which has positioned self-employed women – and particularly those with children – as active in lower paid sectors of the economy and in non-professional sectors (Green and Johnson, 1995; McManus, 2001; Budig, 2006a; Simon and Way, 2015). Self-employed women in Ireland appear to be in an advantaged position with respect to their educational attainment, professional experience and sectoral activity. It is possible that this points to their socio-economic positioning, perhaps having the financial and cultural capital to embark on more risky self-employed freelance ventures. It may also be reflective of a shift of freelance, consultant or independent contractor working arrangements into an increasing array of professional, technical, scientific or creative sectors (TCD, 2021). The extent to which the high human capital of self-employed women in Ireland is associated with any of these factors goes beyond the scope of this study.

Despite their high levels of human capital, a significant proportion of self-employed women work part-time. This is despite what classical economic theory would assume would be a higher opportunity cost for doing so (Becker, 1964; 1985, Polachek, 2004; Hakim, 2000). Furthermore, the proportion in part-time self-employment increased

substantially in the fifteen-year period since 2003 as did citing caring or family responsibilities. Coupled with high rates of atypical hours and home working among self-employed women, the data points towards self-employed women in Ireland seeking flexibility to work around family or domestic responsibilities. This 'balancing' of dual roles is a common theme in the self-employment literature as outlined, as is the 'compensating differentials' argument whereby women with children compensate for higher risk or poor pay in self-employment with the family-friendliness of flexible working time and conditions (Connelly, 1992; Carr, 1994; Hundley, 2001; Wellington, 2006). What is new here, however, is where Irish self-employed women are situated as regards their human capital, occupation, and sectoral activity.

There are aspects of these trends that would warrant further research. For example, applying inferential methods to examine whether socio-demographic characteristics play a role in the self-employment decision, using longitudinal data to explore the characteristics of women who make the transition into self-employment or gaining insight into self-employment motivations through qualitative approaches. This paper however has made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on female solo self-employed or freelance workers in Ireland. For the first time, key demographic, human capital, and labour-related variables have been analysed to develop a profile of self-employed women and estimate what changes have occurred in recent years. The results have shown that this labour market group have uniquely high levels of education and professional experience alongside a propensity towards flexible working arrangements such as part-time work and home working.

Flexible working, work-life balance, and the ability of families to manage their careers and working lives have been crucial topics in management and employment discourse in recent years. Policies at national and EU level have aimed to improve access to flexible leave arrangements, with the Work-Life Balance Directive entering into force in 2019, extending the rights of parents to request various forms of leave. Yet many sectors have struggled to meet demand for flexible working, with few high-level positions offered on a part-time or flexible basis and with upward career mobility predicated on a full-time, standard-hours norm (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2009). It can be, as Karen O'Reilly points out in an interview with the Irish Times, "impossible to find good quality work with flexible hours in Ireland" (Keogh, 2019: 1). In this environment it is conceivable that women will adopt what O'Hagan (2015: 177) refers to as different 'coping strategies' and that one such strategy may be solo or freelance self-employment. Indeed, the results of this study suggest that there is a significant, growing proportion of the female labour force in Ireland who are taking up self-employment; women with children, highly educated women in professional sectors and occupations and who opt to work part-time, atypical hours, from home.

From a public policy perspective, these findings lend further support to the contention that there is a demand for flexible working arrangements in Ireland which has not been met with supply. The task, however, is to separate that demand for flexibility from its gendered implications. It is important to recognise that flexible working – whether in self-employment or in the wider labour market – while in many ways desirable can help maintain traditional gendered roles, as women use the flexibility to take on more unpaid labour than men (Vosko, 2009; Sullivan and Lewis, 2011; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). It is also necessary to acknowledge the precarious aspects of solo self-employment, with job insecurity, income inadequacy and lack of access to collective representation and social welfare benefits linked with this mode of work in particular (Fudge, 2006; Vosko and Zukewich, 2006; Sutherland et al., 2020).

It is likely that trends towards increased numbers of women in self-employment will continue. From a management perspective, attracting this highly educated and highly skilled cohort will require reflection as to the working conditions in the company, with a view to the availability of remote working, adaptive technology, and flexible working hours (McKinsey, 2015; Staniland, 2018; Fuller et al., 2020). This is in addition to considerations around the management of diverse talent pools and employment relationships (Healy et al., 2017; Duggan et al., 2019). The dramatic changes to working arrangements in Ireland and globally caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 is hugely significant in this context. Already existing trends in the direction of increased remote and flexible working have been dramatically accelerated as whole swathes of the labour force move online in response to pandemic restrictions. The impact that this increased availability of flexible work in waged employment might have on solo self-employment trends for women will be an interesting area for future research.

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