



Locked Down and Locked Out: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mothers working in the UK television industry

Executive summary

Report authors:

Dr Natalie Wreyford, Professor Helen Kennedy,
Dr Jack Newsinger and Dr Rowan Aust

Institute for Screen Industries Research,
University of Nottingham



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 Pandemic and associated government lockdowns have been nothing short of a disaster for mothers working in the UK television sector. The research in this report reveals the multiple impacts across childcare, ability to work, finances, mental health and well-being, and hope for the future.

- Nearly half (49 percent) of survey respondents said they had been unable to accept work due to childcare related issues. Over 55 percent had been part of a production that was either cancelled or postponed and 54 percent said they had not been able to find enough work. Of the 523 people who completed our survey, 29 said they had been made redundant and 61 said they had been let go early from a contract.
- During the pandemic many mothers in TV worked flexibly, often having to manage already gruelling workloads with increased childcare and housework. The continued significance of gendered expectations around childcare combined with a 'lack of care' culture within the industry, made this intolerable.
- Nearly 80 percent of the mothers in our sample said that they had been responsible for most of the home-schooling and childcare in their household, despite the fact that there was an almost 50/50 split as to who was the main earner.
- Many mothers had to juggle work and childcare, while others were unable to work because of childcare. The first group had fewer financial worries, but suffered serious consequences to their well-being and mental health. The latter group suffered more from financial hardship, something that was compounded for freelancers, single parents, those from a minoritised racial or lower socio-economic background, and disabled mothers.
- There was a lack of understanding and accommodation from employers for additional childcare responsibilities and ongoing uncertainty caused by the fragility of the school 'bubble' system. This was felt to be the natural extension of a pre-existing lack of understanding and accommodation for caring responsibilities outside work that characterises the television industry. There is a strong sense among mothers that the industry does not care.
- 61 per cent of all respondents said they have seriously considered leaving the industry during the pandemic.
- The pandemic was difficult for all mothers working in television. However, freelance mothers and those from minoritised racial groups were particularly vulnerable, often with lack of access to furlough and difficulty finding work that would accommodate additional child caring responsibilities. Over two thirds of the mothers that responded were self-employed or freelancers (72 percent) compared to just 22 percent who were in a permanent role.
- Mothers felt they were treated as 'disposable' and often replaced by men or women without caring responsibilities, locked out from careers which have taken years to build.
- Working from home (WFH) has played a vital role in enabling mothers to cope with the demands of additional childcare and the intensive work patterns that characterise television labour. However, while flexible work patterns can play a significant role in helping to prevent mothers from dropping out of the industry, on its own it does nothing to disrupt the gendered assumptions around work and childcare that disadvantage mothers.

The effects of the pandemic on mothers' careers undermines the diversity of the television workforce and drains a wealth of experience and talent from the industry. It is vitally important, however, that these impacts are understood as a result of pre-existing, long term, chronic weaknesses in television labour markets, television work cultures, and wider societal attitudes and organisation around childcare and women's labour. COVID-19 did not create this situation. Rather, it revealed and compounded it up to the point where for many mothers it has become so unbearable that they consider exiting the industry and, in some cases, even taking their own lives.

Our recommendations for policy and practice draw upon this research evidence alongside the now considerable body of scholarship and activism around motherhood and television work to argue that better workplace approaches to motherhood and childcare should be at the forefront of industry and policy as we move towards recovery.



Contact:

helen.kennedy@nottingham.ac.uk

University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham, NG7 2RD

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