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# Locked down and locked out: mothers and UKTV work during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 and the associated government lockdowns in the UK had dramatic impacts on the UK's creative industries. This article explores these impacts on mothers working in UK Television (UKTV), on their ability to work, finances, and mental health. It is based on the largest survey ever conducted of this group. It is argued that the COVID-19 crisis revealed and compounded the long-standing incompatibility between gendered, unpaid care work and the intensity of working patterns in UKTV. This had disastrous effects on mothers attempting to remain within television labour markets whilst also shouldering the overwhelming majority of the burden of additional childcare, with potential long-term effects on gendered labour market outcomes and the diversity of the UK's creative industry workforce. Finally, the article explores Working From Home (WFH) as one possible solution to the problem of combining unpaid care work with the intense working patterns associated with TV work. It finds that, while an important tool through which mothers can manage care work alongside television work, WFH needs to be approached with caution as a policy and practice solution to continued gender inequality.

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## Introduction

2020 and 2021 saw unprecedented changes to life and work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 23 2020, the UK went into full-scale lockdown in a bid to stem the spread of coronavirus. Many were forced to work from home, and for long periods of complete "lockdown", schools and other types of childcare were closed for all but the children of "keyworkers". This put immense strain on parents, who found themselves trying simultaneously to work and care for their children. Some were fortunate enough to qualify for the UK Government's emergency financial relief schemes which provided "furlough" for employees unable to work, and support for some self-employed workers and small businesses.

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Many workers in the creative industries—particularly PAYE freelancers—did not qualify for any government support. To redress this, campaigns were led by organisations such as Women in Film and Television (WFTV) (Nina Bhalla 2020) and BECTU (2020). With productions being cancelled, venues closing and businesses adjusting to new COVID-19 working restrictions, many workers were suddenly left not knowing where their next pay cheque was coming from.

The effects of this on the UK's television and film workers was pronounced. A survey by WFTV found that 96% reported having lost all of their income either temporarily or permanently and that 67% of freelancers in the UK film and television industries reported having received no support from the government (Ben B Dalton 2020). A survey by the Film and TV Charity (2020) over March-April 2020 confirmed that 93% of freelancers in film and television were not working.

Research evidence from the Centre for Cultural Value (David O'Brien, G Owen, M Taylor and S McAndrew 2021) and the Trades Union Congress (2021b) has revealed a picture of widening inequalities and a "retraditionalising" of gender roles, with women shouldering the burden of additional childcare responsibilities and resultant exclusion from labour markets (Gaby Hinsliff 2020). The risk of long-term "career scarring" is compounded for disabled women, single parents, and women from racially minoritised backgrounds. Women were more likely to be furloughed (Women's Budget Group 2020) and to lose their jobs (Lydia Smith 2020). While the long-term effects of these shocks to the economy are undoubtedly multiple and complex, there is evidence to suggest that, when combined with the effects of Brexit and the so-called "cost-of-living crisis", COVID-19 has resulted in a dramatic reduction in women's ability to participate in UK labour markets due to caring commitments, reversing decades of progress (Alexandra Topping 2022).

The research underpinning this article investigated these issues in the television industry. Launched in March 2021, on the eve of UK schools reopening after a third national lockdown, the survey "Locked Down and Locked Out? The Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mothers working in the UK television industry" garnered 523 responses in the month it was active. The survey generated detailed and vivid narrative accounts of the effects of the pandemic and government lockdowns on mothers. These accounts highlight the still-gendered responsibility for bringing up children, and the failure of the UK's creative industries to understand and accommodate for the realities of life for working parents. The research reveals the disastrous, multifaceted impacts of the pandemic upon mothers working in UK television: on their careers, finances, mental health, wellbeing and hopes for the future.

The article first reviews some of the wider literature on work and care work with a focus on the effects of the pandemic. We then outline the demographic profile of mothers working in UKTV, highlighting the continued importance of gender in determining job roles and its intersections with ethnicity and social class. We then discuss what the experiences of mothers during the period can tell us about the effects of the pandemic on these inequalities. Importantly, our findings show how existing patterns of inequality, both broadly in the creative industries and specifically in television, were pushed to the forefront during the pandemic, with mothers predominantly shouldering the additional burdens of childcare. We highlight the effects on working patterns and on mothers' mental health. We discuss the importance of contract status and the distinction between freelance workers and salaried staff in understanding the effects of the pandemic in UKTV.

Finally, we examine WFH as one possible solution to the crisis of care work and UKTV to emerge from the pandemic. While WFH is overwhelmingly popular among mothers themselves as a way to manage unpaid care work alongside the extraordinary intensification of television work, its effects on gendered labour market outcomes and overall equality are dependent on a range of contextual factors, meaning it should be approached with caution within policy.

## **Motherhood, work and COVID-19**

The wider research literature on housework and care work shows that the division in heterosexual households continues to be heavily gendered. For example, The Cranfield School of Management annual report on women on the boards of top FTSE companies argues that the division of power and labour at home “remains problematic” (Susan Vinnicombe, E Doldor, V Battista and M Tessaro 2020) and contributes to continued wage inequality. The report suggests that in the light of widening inequalities wrought by the global pandemic, a voluntary approach may no longer be sufficient to address gender inequality at work (ibid). Despite some shifts in cultural ideologies around fathering, towards the idea of an involved father, traditional gendered roles persist: employers uphold expectations of the ideal worker as one who is free to work all hours and has no obligations outside of work (Natalie Wreyford 2018). Similarly, a study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and the Institute of Education found that during the pandemic, in opposite-gender parent families, mothers were more likely to be spending their work hours simultaneously trying to care for children (Alison Andrew et al. 2020). The IFS survey reported that mothers were looking after children an average of 10.3 hours of the day and also doing an average of 1.7 hours more housework than fathers. Even in families where the father had lost his job and the mother kept hers, men and women still only split housework and childcare responsibilities equally. In all other types of households, the mothers spent substantially more time doing unpaid socially reproductive labour.

Workplace policies around work-life balance and “flexible” working may now be carefully worded as gender neutral, but in the workplace itself it continues to be framed largely as a women’s issue (Shani Orgad 2019; Melissa Gregg 2008). Between February and May 2021 in the UK, 59% of all working women worked part-time, compared to 14% of men (ONS 2021). Although motherhood should not be considered as the only reason for continued gender inequality in creative work (Rosalind R Gill 2014), recent research has begun to unpick the way that the motherhood penalty still works to disadvantage women in the screen industries (Susan Berridge 2019; Tamsin Dent 2019; Anne O’Brien and Susan Liddy 2021). In these accounts, the struggles of mothers working in these sectors is clear, and the utopian ideal of flexible working is called into question (Wreyford 2018).

A range of evidence has emerged that illustrates the negative impacts that additional, unpaid socially reproductive labour had upon mothers’ mental health during the pandemic. For example, in January 2021, a survey by the Trades Union Congress (2021a) reported that nine out of ten mothers said their mental health had been negatively affected by the pandemic. In a survey by *The Telegraph* newspaper for International Women’s Day 2021, almost half (49%) of working mothers said their mental health had been negatively impacted (Rosa Silverman 2021). Within the creative industries, The FTVC conducted a survey on mental

health in the screen sector, *The Looking Glass* (Melanie Wilkes, H Carey and R Florisson 2020), before the pandemic. It revealed a shocking picture of poor mental health caused by labour processes within the sector, such as long hours, insecurity and lack of work-life balance. Our research shows myriad ways these issues were magnified by the pandemic, with negative impacts on mothers cutting across all demographic groups.

## Methodology

The idea for the survey came initially from Natalie Grant, television producer and active member of UKTV sector campaigning organisations *Share My Telly Job* (SMTJ) and *Telly Mums Network*.<sup>1</sup> Grant approached members of the research team after discussions with peer group mothers and understanding anecdotally that they were struggling, while observing that parenting was absent from news and industry discussions about pandemic struggles. The survey was developed and refined in collaboration with these organisations and their communities of television workers. Collaborating with *Share My Telly Job* and the *Telly Mums Network* was fundamental in the swift survey dissemination, so it was completed while the mothers were still experiencing the effects of the pandemic and its associated restrictions.

The survey gathered details of changes to working patterns, home-schooling responsibilities, care obligations and issues related to physical, mental, financial and emotional wellbeing. It was distributed through online networks and on social media, and promoted by groups including the trade union BECTU, the FTVC, the British Film Institute (BFI), SMTJ and the Telly Mums Network. Efforts were made to include the voices of mothers from social groups currently underrepresented in television, such as those from Black and other minoritised racial backgrounds and also disabled mothers, by sharing the survey with groups and organisations that represent and advocate for these communities.<sup>2</sup> The survey was open between 5th March and March 26 2021 and received a total of 523 responses, making it the largest survey of mothers working in UKTV to date. 282 of these also gave us their contact details for follow up interviews. All data has been anonymised.

The survey was made up of 42 questions, some of which had multiple parts to allow for complex responses. In total there were 87 possible questions that could be answered. Twelve of the questions provided us with detailed demographic information including the class, race, sexuality, geographic location and marital status of the participants. Further multiple-choice questions asked about children (e.g., ages, number, disability) and work status (e.g., freelance or employed, job roles, genres). Most of the questions related to the pandemic and its associated restrictions, regarding key concerns such as effects on work, mental health, finances and childcare responsibilities. Eight open-ended sub-questions gave participants an opportunity to provide qualitative data in response to prompts such as “Please tell us more about your employers’ support for your mental wellbeing during the COVID Pandemic (positive and/or negative)”; or “Please use this box to write anything else you feel is useful to our understanding of your experience of working in TV during the COVID Pandemic”. Questions number 40 and 41 – the final quantitative questions—were answered by all

523 respondents, indicating that every participant engaged fully with the survey and answered all relevant questions.

## Findings

Survey participants broadly reflect the demographics of those who work in UKTV. The majority of respondents identified as heterosexual, and 19% identified as LGBTQ+. Most of the mothers were based in London (44%) or the South East (17%), reflecting the difficulty of working in the UK television industry if you live outside these regions. The next largest group was from the North West (9%) and then Scotland (8%). Only 3.4% identified as disabled, with the majority of this group citing a long-standing illness or health condition, learning disability or hearing disability. Just two participants considered themselves to have a physical or mobility disability, echoing pre-identified barriers to accessing work in this sector (CAMEo 2018).

67% reported having a Bachelor's degree and a further 26% a Master's degree or other postgraduate qualification. 23% went to an independent fee-paying school—significantly higher than the UK population as a whole, where just 6.5% attend a private school.<sup>3</sup> The majority of respondents self-identified as middle class (47%), upper middle class (6%) or lower middle class (20%). Our sample reflects the higher social class profile of workers in the cultural and creative industries more generally (Heather Carey, R Florisson, D O'Brien and N Lee 2020).

In their personal life, 64% said they were married or in a civil partnership; a further 27% lived with their partner. 4% said they were single, another 4% were divorced or separated and 0.4% were widowed. Regarding parenting, 20% had at least one child under twelve months, and 57% had a child or children of preschool age. The majority – 74% - had school-age children and a further 6% cared for adults over 18 years old and 7% cared for people over 65 years old. 8% had disabled children or children with special education needs, which included autism (3 children), ADHD (16) physical disabilities including cerebral palsy (5), deafness (2), speech delay (3), dyslexia and dyspraxia (12) and learning disabilities (11). Many of these children needed even more support from their carers during lockdown and some required what one respondent described as “1–1 care 24 hours a day”. (Figure 1)

Of those in a relationship, 28% had a partner who also worked in television and 9% had other family members who worked in television. The chart below (Figure 2) shows the age of the respondents, with the majority being aged between 30 and 50, reflecting the age of television workers in general, of whom the majority are under 50 (Diamond 2021) but younger than the general working population, where only 50% of workers are between 25 and 49 (ONS 2021). This is most likely due to the survey being aimed at those with children, and those who felt particularly affected by the coronavirus restrictions—and therefore likely to respond to the survey—being those with younger children. Over 35% reported being the main earner in their household, roughly equal to the 37% who said their partner was the main earner. Another quarter of respondents said that their income and their partner's income were equal.

The majority of survey respondents worked in either an editorial role such as Producer, Director or Researcher, or in a senior management role such as Series Producer or Executive Producer (Figure 3). Only 6% of them reported working in a craft position

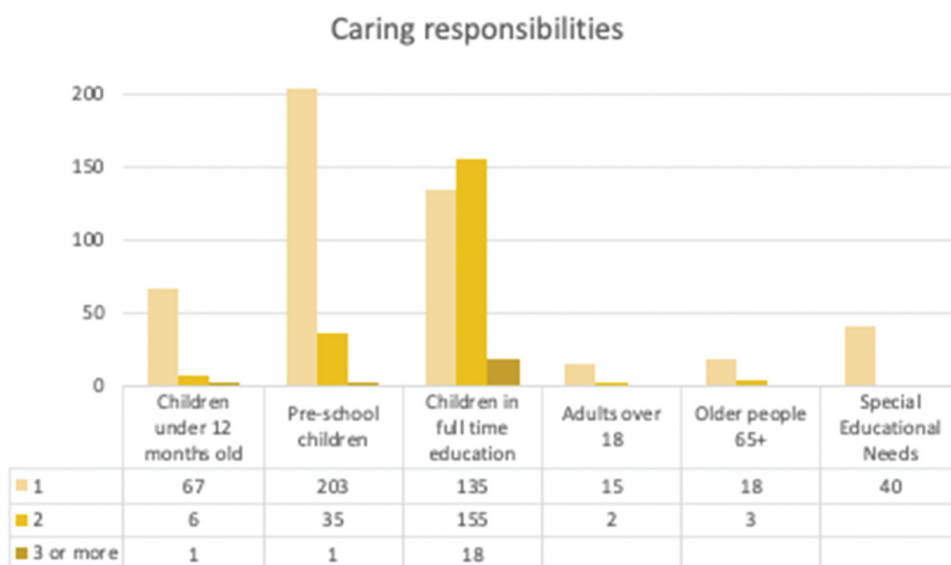


Figure 1. Caring responsibilities.

## Age of respondents

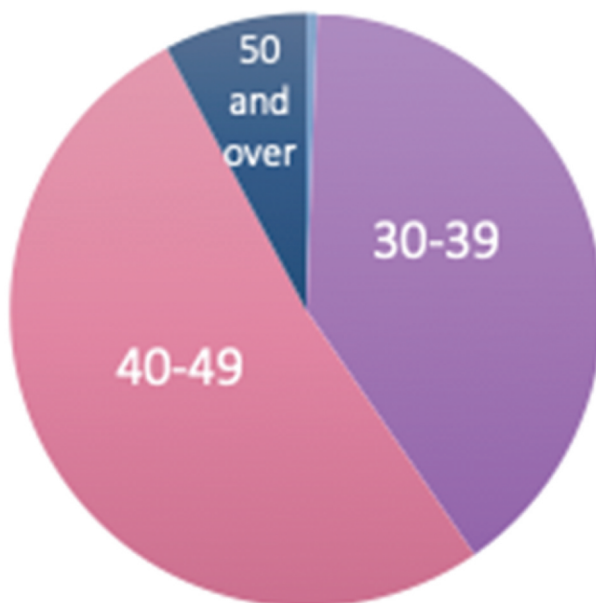
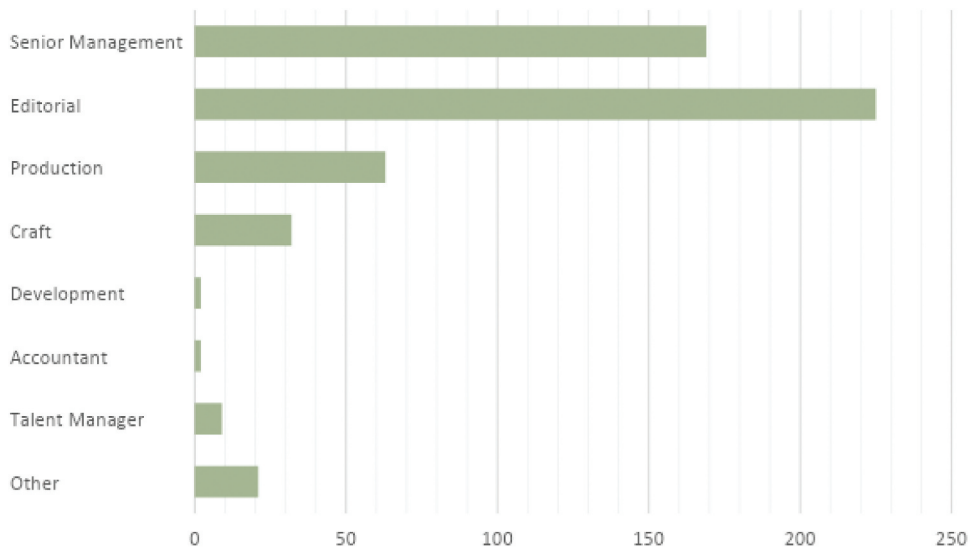


Figure 2. Age of respondents.



**Figure 3.** Job roles.

such as Camera or Sound Operator. Other roles included Accountant, Presenter, Talent Manager, Writer, Head of Post-Production Facility, Reporter, Distribution, Sales and Broadcaster. Craft roles are heavily gendered, with women concentrated in set design, costume and hair & make-up (Diamond 2021). This suggests there may also be a gendered incompatibility between motherhood and certain on-set craft roles (such as lighting), since mothers are absent from these roles.

This demographic profile tells us that mothers working in UKTV during the COVID-19 pandemic are largely white; that they tend to be from middle-class backgrounds; and that they are likely to be in financially equal relationships. This might suggest that it is difficult to be a mother in television without these characteristics and some of the advantages they bestow. It also shows that even with positions of relative privilege compared to many UK workers, mothers working in television were not shielded from the impacts of the pandemic.

Our research sample contained only a small ( $n = 55$  or 10% of the participants) of mothers from Black, Asian and other racially minoritised backgrounds. 90% described their ethnic group as white. This is on a par with the employment of people from these groups at the BBC (9.9%), and slightly less than at the other broadcasters (ViacomCBS is the highest at 14.8%) (Diamond 2021). Workers from racially minoritised backgrounds tend to be employed at slightly higher rates in public organisations and broadcasters, so the percentage that completed the survey may be due to the greater numbers of small businesses and freelancers in the respondent population as a whole. This may be the result of a variety of factors: it could indicate lower participation rates of mothers from racially minoritised groups in the networks through which the survey was distributed. It is likely, however, that this small number reflects the further intersectional barriers that these mothers face when working in UKTV. As a result, there are limitations on what conclusions we can draw about the particular barriers that racially minoritised mothers face. However, these are likely to be much higher than those faced by white mothers. For



example, research from the US finds that working mothers from racially minoritised backgrounds have been more significantly impacted by COVID-19 pandemic than white mothers. They are more likely to be their family's sole earner or to have partners working outside the home. It was also found that Black mothers were twice as likely to be doing all the domestic labour than white mothers (McKinsey & Co 2021).

Within our cohort, mothers from a Black or other racially minoritised group were much more likely to identify as working-class. Almost half (45%) considered their class origin to be working-class, compared to just 23% of the white mothers. They were slightly more likely to say that they felt unsafe at work due to COVID-19 (22% versus 16% of white mothers), and to report having been ill during the pandemic (9% as opposed to 6% of white mothers). As we have already said, the low numbers make it difficult to draw any wider conclusions from these, but they could be reflective of the fact that people from these racially minoritised backgrounds were more likely to be affected by the coronavirus itself (S Stevens and A Pritchard 2020). All this is likely to further limit the opportunities for racially minoritised people to be mothers whilst building successful careers in television, limiting workforce diversity even further. More research is needed to explore the specific intersectional barriers facing mothers working in UKTV.

### The gendered nature of the impacts of the pandemic employment in television

Our survey produced strong evidence of the highly gendered impacts of the pandemic and its effect on television employment. Nearly 70% of our respondents said they had been required to provide home schooling and/or care for a child *while also working* and over half said that this had prevented them from applying for or accepting work in television (Figure 4).

Percentage of women who had to provide homeschooling and/or childcare whilst also working during the pandemic

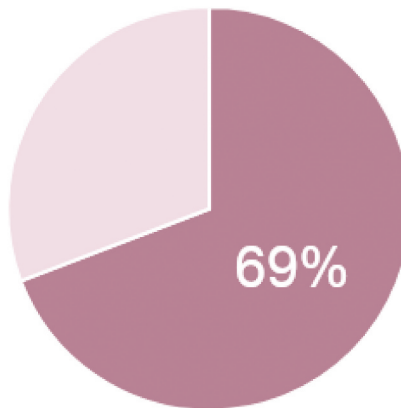


Figure 4. Home schooling and/or childcare.

Who did most of the home schooling and childcare?

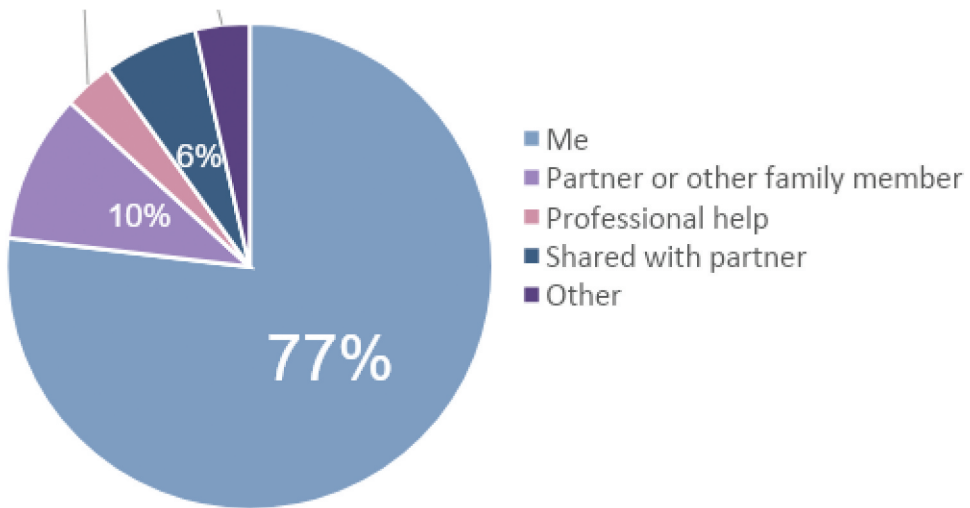


Figure 5. Responsibility for home schooling and childcare.

WHO IS THE MAIN EARNER IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD?

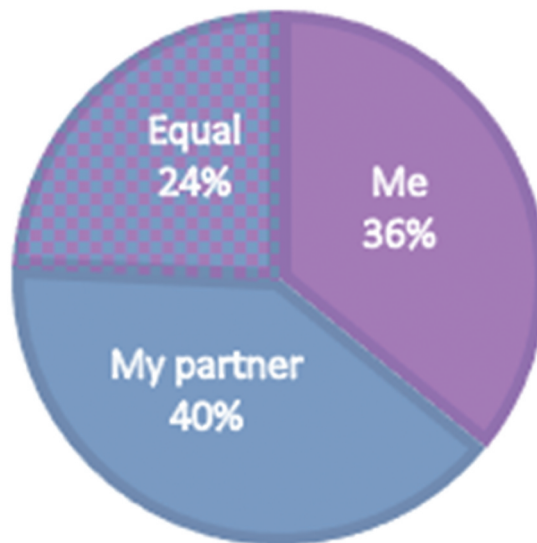


Figure 6. Main earner.

Most strikingly, nearly 80% of the mothers said that they had been responsible for most of the home schooling and childcare in their household, even though there was an almost 50/50 split as to who was the main earner (Figures 5 and 6). Only 6% said they shared the responsibilities with their partner; this included same sex partnerships and situations where it was not shared equally.

During the pandemic crisis, where schools were closed and other kinds of formal and informal childcare were unavailable, the burden of childcare disproportionately fell upon mothers while most fathers continued to work without this additional responsibility. This is the case whether they were primary or secondary earners within the household and demonstrates the continuing significance of unpaid socially reproductive labour to determining gendered labour market outcomes. It is worth emphasising this clear finding: *the burden of additional childcare fell disproportionately on mothers, not fathers, and this was true whomever earned most within the household.*

Over the next sections, we examine the unique challenges that were faced by both mothers who had to juggle work and childcare, and those mothers who were unable to work because of the need to do childcare. The first group had fewer financial worries but were stretched to breaking point to the detriment of their 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 socioeconomic background, as well as disabled mothers.

## The difficulties of juggling work and childcare

With childcare settings and schools only open to the children of keyworkers, and restrictions meaning extended family or friends could not help, children of all ages were at home with their parents during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Babies and nursery-aged children needed constant attention. School-aged children were expected to do their lessons from home with many—especially the youngest—needing constant help and supervision from their parents. This responsibility was highly gendered with women and mothers disproportionately shouldering the burden (Hannah Summers 2020; Topping 2020).

In this section we outline what our data tells us about how mothers working in TV managed the burden of additional childcare alongside the new ways of working during the pandemic. Here, we build upon a strong body of existing research about the ways in which motherhood disadvantages women in the labour market and the specifics of television work, showing the continued relevance of the “motherhood penalty” (Berridge 2019; Dent 2019; O’Brien and Liddy 2021,).

The majority of our respondents were able to find ways to continue working, but their stories strongly echo the wider research on gender and childcare. As one participant put it: “I have done more childcare than my partner whilst still working full time.” With children at home, the mothers described the measures taken to perform their jobs alongside additional childcare. Typical descriptive accounts include:

I’ve been getting up at 5.30 am in order to work uninterrupted for 2 hours before the children get up.

I've been starting work after finishing with the kids at 3pm, downing tools to help sort kids for dinner/bed at 6pm, then starting again at 8 pm 'til midnight-1 am every night. Then back up for school in the morning.

In order to look after my children, I'd end up waking super early so I could work before schooling etc plus I'd have to work really late. Also, my husband took the office, so I was nomadic, working between the living room (which was hard during bad weather when kids stuck in doors), bedroom & stairs.

The survey responses contained many of these types of descriptions: women finding time and places to work around their children's needs. 171 of the participants took the time to fill in the open-ended question to give more details about their struggles with work and childcare. 69% of all respondents said they had been disadvantaged because of COVID-19 and their parenting or caring responsibilities. They described not receiving any "understanding or discussion" from their employers—they were just left to cope, often to the detriment of their career:

There was no allowance made in the production schedule for the fact that I was teaching and caring for a 6-year-old while trying to run an edit from my kitchen table.

Whilst working on a project at the beginning of lockdown, I had a partner with COVID and two children at home who were 1 and 3. The company I worked for did not make any allowances for this situation and so I effectively had to drop out of the role.

Respondent accounts show they were increasingly "left out of it" or judged as "not making an effort" and subsequently feeling like their ideas and contributions were being overlooked.

Many respondents reported working *more* hours than prior to lockdown, with an associated fear that if they were not available to work, then they would be replaced by someone without childcare responsibilities. It is important to note that this was something already felt *before* the pandemic, becoming increasingly untenable with the additional burdens of childcare. For example:

I didn't feel it was an option for me to go part-time at any point, because the TV industry would look unforgivingly on a woman doing that.

All shows need you to "work above and beyond." Which means they won't make allowances for you to see your family.

Although some staff were furloughed, the majority experience was one of having to conceal the impact of additional childcare on their working day the best they could. Many respondents described being told that they would not be employed if they had "childcare issues" or "home commitments"; one respondent told us that "It had been made clear to me (in the nicest possible way) that this required me to be full time, and if I was not able to commit to that due to childcare issues, then the position would be offered to someone else." Or another: "[The] company verbally told me they were 'only keeping people with fewer home commitments'". It is perhaps not surprising then that, like many working mothers (Torsten T Bell 2020), the mental health and wellbeing of many women working in UKTV suffered greatly during the pandemic.

## The impacts of the pandemic on mothers' mental health

Just before the coronavirus hit Britain, the FTVC conducted a survey on mental health in the screen sector, *The Looking Glass* (Wilkes, Carey, and Florisson 2020). It revealed that poor mental health was already high for film and television workers (87%), with 64% saying they suffered from depression and ten percent saying they had tried to take their own life. The causes given by the survey's participants included long hours, lack of work-life balance, a culture of bullying and feeling like they did not belong. Our research strongly supports these findings, with all these issues described by the mothers in our sample as factors that negatively affected their lives while working in television.

In *The Looking Glass* survey, two thirds of both men and women reported challenges in balancing work with family life and other responsibilities, but women particularly expressed their struggles as a parent, with the unpredictability of work schedules and a lack of flexible childcare options being raised as particular issues (Wilkes, Carey, and Florisson 2020). The mothers in *The Looking Glass* survey shared with our mothers: the stress caused by the pressures of collecting children from childcare and were most likely, by mid-career, to have considered leaving the industry due to concerns about their health and wellbeing. There were increased risk factors registered for freelancers, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled people and those from a racially minoritised groups, suggesting that mothers from these groups face compounded mental health issues. Our research suggests that poor mental health was something that affected all mothers. For example, in our survey, disabled mothers and mothers from racially minoritised backgrounds reported mental health concerns that were in line with the rest of the mothers, but all of the LGBTQ+ mothers said their mental health was either somewhat worse (65%) or significantly worse (35%)—higher than the heterosexual mothers (59% and 26% respectively).

Our data shows that, for women in UKTV, the impact of the coronavirus restrictions on their stress levels and mental health were enormous. This ranged from the very serious and life-threatening, to a general overall experience of exhaustion, anxiety and feelings of failure. For example, our respondents describe the "huge strain" caused by having to look after children whilst working, the anxiety and stress engendered through feelings of failure, panic attacks and other serious symptoms, even suicide ideation:

I quit my job yesterday, I've never quit a job in my life, but my mental health has deteriorated so much over the past 6 months. I felt physically and emotionally drained.

I've started having panic attacks and have developed quite bad anxiety and depression during the past year.

Expected to work most evenings and early mornings to feel I am not letting my employer or kids down. Heightened anxiety when trying to homeschool, work, cook and clean up. Feeling like I am a failure.

Many respondents described the stresses associated with doing the majority of the additional childcare and home-schooling. Issues raised include: the difficulty of concentrating with young babies in the house; the vocal microaggressions from colleagues if they stopped work at 6 pm in order to spend time with their children, even when they returned to work after bedtime; how employers refused to furlough them until they had

reached a point where they had been diagnosed with severe anxiety and stress. They described having panic attacks and depression and feeling “broken,” “stressed,” “struggling” and “suffering” to the point where they considered—or in some cases were forced into—leaving their jobs.

Many respondents found it impossible to discuss their struggles around additional childcare with their employers for fear of being labelled as difficult, “weak,” or not being hired again. Typical comments include:

I found the pressure to continue delivering work to pay the mortgage whilst dealing with home school, childcare and mental health issues in my teenager very difficult to bear. It has affected my own mental health. But as a freelancer in TV, admitting you’re struggling isn’t really an option as they just won’t carry on hiring you.

I was suffering from mental health problems at the time though I didn’t tell them this as I felt it was a sign of weakness.

Amongst the respondents to our survey, 28 mothers told us they had suicidal thoughts during this time. This is a shocking figure that powerfully represents the impacts of the pandemic on mothers.

### Forgotten freelancers

The UKTV workforce is hugely project-based and reliant on freelance workers (Paul Glynn 2020). The BFI estimates that self-employed workers in the film and TV sectors account for 32% of this workforce, nearly double that of the UK working population as a whole (15%).

While the COVID-19 pandemic presented difficulties for all our respondents, the evidence shows a clear distinction in the experiences between those mothers who had staff jobs and those on freelance contracts. This reflects what is already known about the vulnerabilities of freelance workers in television labour markets (Glynn 2020) and how freelance work has been shown to intensify inequalities (Orian Brook 2020). Freelance, project-based work in the screen industries has been shown to be particularly difficult to navigate with caregiving responsibilities, as the hours are unpredictable and incompatible with formal childcare and schooling (Dent 2019; Wreyford 2018).

Over two thirds of the mothers that responded to our survey were self-employed or freelancers (72%) compared to just 22% who were in a permanent role.

The freelancer mothers were significantly more likely to have experienced the adverse effects on their employment reported by the other respondents: lack of work, projects cancelled, redundancy, inability to work due to childcare issues. 40% of staff workers said their work had *not* been affected, as opposed to only 8% of the rest of the mothers. This demonstrates the stark difference between those in staff positions and those in freelance positions. Staff mothers made up more than 70% of those who said they did not need any help from the government’s financial provisions—although they were more likely to have been made redundant or overlooked for promotion.

Some of the staff mothers had positive experiences of the pandemic. For example, one respondent told us that: “As an employee I feel like I have been very lucky. I was furloughed for 9 weeks, and my employer made up the additional 20% so I received my full salary.”

By contrast, many of the freelancers suffered enormously, reporting use of hardship funds, and coping for long periods without income. One typical comment described the situation as a career ending: “I’ve worked in TV for 20 years and never been out of work. Since losing my job at the BBC at the start of the 1st lockdown, I’ve found it extremely difficult to find work. I’ve done just 3 very short contracts of a few weeks each during the past year. My basic outgoings total more than my incomings.”

Freelancers—whether mothers or not—were among the worst hit by the pandemic restrictions as well as being most likely to have also been excluded from government support (Max M Goldbart 2020), leading campaigners to dub them “Forgotten Freelancers”.<sup>4</sup> Almost a third of the mothers who participated in the survey had not been eligible for any kind of government support. Freelance mothers in our sample spoke of feeling disposable and undervalued by those that had employed them for many years. For example:

As a non-staff member, I was often called upon to cover for other people because they were refusing to do their jobs, using the excuse of childcare. Because they were staff nobody questioned their demands and yet I, as a single parent, was expected to fill in the gaps as if my children didn’t count.

Many respondents described how the COVID-19 restrictions had exposed television’s problematic reliance on freelance workers, and that this way of working made things particularly difficult for parents:

The pandemic has shown up the shameful way many people are employed in our industry, passing on the risks of employment down the food chain and forcing many to work freelance when it doesn’t suit them, especially at the most junior end.

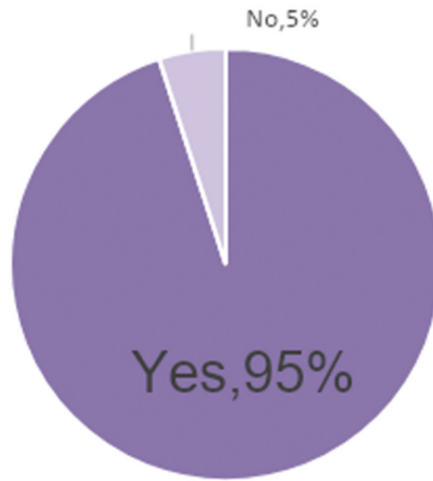
For some, pandemic conditions led to worry about the long-term effects on their careers, with them either considering leaving the industry or feeling pushed out, reflecting findings in the *State of Play* report by BECTU (Richard Wallis and Christa van Raalte 2021).

The effects of the pandemic on mothers’ careers, particularly those on freelance contracts, undermines the diversity of the television workforce and drains a wealth of experience and talent from the industry. Further research is needed to track the long-term impacts of the pandemic on mothers’ careers. (Figure 7)

### **(Over)working from home, motherhood and TV work**

Working from home (WFH) was one of the main ways in which mothers’ employment practices shifted during the pandemic, and 86% of our respondents reported that they had been able to do so. As one of a range of working patterns often included under the umbrella term “flexible working”, does WFH, offer a possible solution to the issues mothers face working in television? While being able to work from home is almost unanimously popular across our sample, the reasons given reveal more about the endemic cultures of overwork that characterise the television industry than they do about WFH itself, with mothers desperate to claw back time for caring responsibilities wherever they can. That said, the evidence shows that more flexible kinds of work would be applicable to solving the problem of television labour practices and motherhood.

## Is working from home something you would like to continue after the pandemic?



**Figure 7.** Working from home after the pandemic.

Nearly all (95%) of our respondents expressed a desire to continue homeworking in some form after the pandemic (figure 7 above). 463 of 523 mothers described how they thought working from home would benefit them. An analysis of this large dataset reveals a group of mothers working intensively with high levels of commitment to their jobs, often putting work ahead of other things in their lives, such as time with family and leisure activities. WFH emerges as a practice that enables mothers in UKTV to make relatively small adjustments to their work-life-balance, often in ways that workers in other industries would take for granted—such as being there at bedtime, feeding infants or collecting children up from their wrap-around childcare, all while continuing to work intensively. One respondent told us that “The hours in TV are relentless and working from home can make it seem more manageable.”

Although many of the mothers used the term “work/life balance” to discuss how WFH would benefit them, their aspirations were not for relaxed evenings, hobbies or free time. Instead, these women seek opportunities of just “being there,” to bathe their babies, put children to bed, join the family for dinner or even just to see their children on weekdays. The benefits are described by one mother: “So I can put my daughter to bed. At the moment I see her for 40 mins in the mornings. It’s not enough.”

By far the most cited reason for wanting WFH was the difficulties faced when managing childcare and work. It was clear that the hours of the school or nursery day caused a huge amount of stress for these women in their non-pandemic working lives, with over half of them highlighting the challenges of drop-offs and pick-ups. Repeatedly, the comments revealed a longing for the opportunity to collect children at the end of the day. One mother described how WFH “allows me to see my children a bit more as I can squeeze in occasional school and nursery drop off and pick up.” We were told that “working from home means I can be there for my daughter when she gets home from school.”



Many mothers working in UKTV have children who are in childcare until very late every day; in nursery or at wraparound school clubs, often with additional paid child-minders and nannies, or unpaid help from grandparents and other friends and relatives. These arrangements facilitated coping with the long working days in television, plus commute time. The strain of childcare deadlines was palpable, with respondents describing “stressing,” “rushing,” “racing” to get there in time, feeling “burned out,” “worrying,” “upset,” “exhausted.” These feelings were amplified whenever there was illness or an “emergency” that required them to reach the childcare setting unexpectedly. Respondents also talked of feeling “guilty” and “judged” by others they work with, even when they left at the official end of the working day.

Given the clear desire from mothers across all job roles to increase levels of WFH post-pandemic to manage childcare and work, this might seem to be an obvious recommendation—something that has been shown to work within the industry during the COVID-19 crisis and that can be carried into the future of work. However, evidence from the research literature suggests that calls for flexible working patterns that are not accompanied by broader cultural shifts must be approached with caution.

Over two thirds (68%) of respondent mothers told us that having the opportunity to job-share or work part time would help them to balance their caring commitments and their job. However, by far the most common solution offered to mothers during the pandemic was “flexible hours” (84%). This represents the idea that parents can add-in their childcare responsibilities and extend their working day rather than reducing the hours they need to work. It is easy to see how this policy contributes to the stress and exhaustion that our respondents report above. Only 13% were offered a reduction in hours and just 9% were able to do a job-share.

Research shows that some flexible working patterns can enable workers to devote more time towards unpaid socially reproductive labour such as housework and childcare and to fit work around family demands (Claudia Hupkau and Barbara Petrongolo 2020). The evidence accumulated in this report demonstrates how important this is for mothers working in television. However, research also shows that the effects of this upon gender equality in heterosexual households are often uneven or even negative. Women tend to use flexibility—and are *expected* to use it—to meet household demands while men tend to use flexibility to increase their work time and therefore gain an advantage in labour markets (Heejung Chung, H Birkett, S Forbes and H Seo 2021). While flexible work can play a significant role in helping prevent women from dropping out of the industry, in isolation it does nothing to disrupt the gendered assumptions around work and childcare that disadvantage mothers.

Furthermore, the industry contexts and specific kinds of flexible work adopted are crucial in determining the effects on overall hours worked and gender equality. Research by Heejung Chung and Mariska van der Horst makes important distinctions between different kinds of flexible work. Flexi-time (where workers decide *when* they perform a set number of working hours) and remote working (e.g., WFH) are distinguished from “schedule control” kinds of flexible work (where workers decide how many hours they work). Schedule control work results in more hours overall being worked as workers compete to intensify their schedules at the expense of those with caring commitments (2018). In an industry like television, characterised by highly intensive work schedules and hyper competition between freelance workers, the danger is that flexible work patterns increase hours worked and further disadvantage mothers. The adoption of flexible work

patterns needs to be accompanied by an overall reduction of hours worked for it to be effective in achieving more equal labour market outcomes.

Added to this is the stigma and “career scarring” that mothers face when adopting more flexible working patterns (ibid.). Amongst all the high-achieving, hard-working women that completed our survey, there was scant talk of wanting to reduce hours, work part-time or indeed the desire to be “stay-at-home” parents. What is not clear is whether this is something that these women feel unable to talk about. Indeed, when speaking of wasted commuting hours, the women spoke of using that time to work more. This suggests that in television work, it is difficult to speak about working less or putting their lives outside work ahead of the demands of the job.

## Conclusion

Roberta Comunian and Lauren England (2020) have argued that the pandemic did not necessarily create new problems, but rather that COVID-19 exposed the unsustainable nature of work in the UK cultural and creative industries. The impacts of the pandemic on mothers working in UKTV, presented in this article, strongly support this conclusion. The pandemic and associated government lockdowns revealed and compounded the gendered nature of unpaid care work in creating unequal employment outcomes in UKTV. Our research also reveals the human cost of this model of creative labour, with profound negative consequences on mothers’ employment opportunities and mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic shattered the already fragile and precarious networks of support upon which mothers relied to enable them to manage work and caring responsibilities, up to the point where for many it became unbearable. The damage done to individual mothers and to the diversity of the television talent pool should be at the forefront of policy and debate about the recovery of creative sectors.

The research upon which this article is based paints a bleak picture. However, the crisis opened a space for experimentation in which unpaid care work became more visible than before, as mothers struggled to remain within the labour market. Mothers often tried to hide their care responsibilities for fear of negative career repercussions—a clear indication of just how hostile towards women and mothers work in the creative industries can be. The necessities of remote working meant that WFH emerged as one possible solution to the crisis in care work within UKTV. For many mothers, WFH allows them to intensify their working patterns around their care work. While this may allow more women to remain within UKTV, the danger is that this does not challenge the unequal gendered assumptions that have led to mothers—not fathers—shouldering the burden of COVID-19 in UKTV, and possibly any future crises as well. Further research should focus upon the post-COVID patterns of care in UKTV and evaluate different models of flexible work as to their effectiveness within the creative industries’ mode of production to promote enhanced gender equality.

## Notes

1. [www.tellymumsnetwork.com](http://www.tellymumsnetwork.com)
2. [www.tellymumsnetwork.com](http://www.tellymumsnetwork.com)
3. [www.isc.co.uk/research](http://www.isc.co.uk/research).

4. See [https://twitter.com/forgotten\\_2020?lang=en](https://twitter.com/forgotten_2020?lang=en) and <https://www.facebook.com/Forgotten.Freelancers/>

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