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Gendered reasons for leaving a career in the UK TV industry

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Abstract

This article concerns gendered sustainability of careers in the UK TV industry. Much academic scrutiny is focused on equality of access and progression, using data secured from those still working in the sector. The research featured here offers a new insight by focusing on career sustainability and exit, reporting on a survey of 80 individuals, both male and female, who left professional careers in the industry to move on to other careers or activities. While quantitative data demonstrates that incompatibility with parenting was the

overwhelmingly dominant factor motivating early exit from the sector for women, the qualitative findings also advance discussions of wider structural barriers and gendered inequalities, embedded in working cultures, practices and attitudes. The article explores the wider perception of a lack of care for the sector's workers, as well as the individual bereavement and identity loss encountered by those who leave.

Keywords

Leaving TV, Television, career exit, gender, men and women, inequality

Introduction

A number of recent commentaries have drawn attention to the challenges of creative careers, some looking specifically at the film and TV industries. Creative labour offers real scope for self-realisation, purpose and meaning; but high levels of casualization lead to feelings of 'victimisation and anger… on the receiving end of harsh and aggressive treatment' (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Detailed exploration of the 'precariat' has highlighted the problems of 'negotiating short-term, insecure, poorly paid, precarious work in conditions of

structural uncertainty' (Gill & Pratt, 2008). In the UK film industry, the problems of insecure employment, long working hours and continual re-recruitment have been well documented (Blair, 2001; Blair, Grey, & Randle, 2001). Other writers have found plentiful examples (Banks, 2007; Gill & Rossiter, 2007; McRobbie, 2002; Paterson, 2002) of freelancers in various creative industries 'pushing themselves to physical and psychological limits… because of their own passion for their work' (Oakley, 2009). A survey by Broadcast magazine in 2011 crystallized the challenges in terms of career sustainability, with only 35% of 550 UK TV freelancers polled expecting their careers to last another ten years, while one in three described career planning as 'impossible' (Parker, 2011).

While much industry and academic research focuses on inequality of career access and progression, the research project discussed in this article was original in its intent to focus exclusively on those who have **left** the UK TV industry; considering unsustainability - career exit – in a comparative study of both men and women. Its empirical approach to a sample of 80 contributors brings significant new quantitative as well as qualitative data to the discussion. In a field of study increasingly concerned with the uncertain (not to mention unjust) nature of work in the creative industries, it is important to explore the factors and the triggers which finally loosen a worker's precarious hold on such a highly prized career ladder. How do media careers appear in hindsight, when the love affair is over? What inequalities exist in the exit from these careers, rather than the progression within them? We need to understand the cost of such an exit, not just to the individual worker, but to the TV industry, to TV audiences, and to society more widely. As those working in the creative industries, the 'poster children of precarity' (Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015) function as forerunners of trends in other industries (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018; Howie & Campbell, 2016), their experiences take on even greater significance.

This was ultimately a gendered study. The particular career barriers faced by women have already begun to be discussed elsewhere. A 2010 Skillset special report noted 'a consistent under-representation of women beyond the age of around 35 in all segments of the workforce, coupled with far fewer women than men working in the industry with dependent children' (Skillset, 2010), leading them to hypothesize that women found their careers hard to reconcile with family commitments – speculation echoed elsewhere (Sargent-Disc, 2011) (Creative Skillset, 2014). A 2011 survey (*AUTHOR REMOVED*) indicated that out of over 1,100 film and TV workers, the gender balance at entry level was 51% female, dropping gradually to 21% of those with more than 20 years' experience. The indicators of a disproportionate rate of exit for women are clear, and recognized not just in academic but in industry circles as well (Campelli, 2014). In November 2017, former BBC controller Jane Root commented that 'Women leave the industry in droves once it's time to have kids... The move to casual rather than staff jobs is driving opportunities backwards for many women' (Broadcastnow.co.uk, 2017). Commentators have identified a 'shortage of relevant data which, we argue, both reflects and contributes to enduring inequalities' (Conor et al., 2015) – a shortage to which this research project set out to respond.

Disadvantages arise not only from parenting commitments, but also from the reliance on informal networks, from preconceptions of gendered roles, long working hours and presenteeism, traditional and new forms of sexism, and from differing gender approaches to self-promotion (Banks, 2017; Banks & Milestone, 2011; Conor et al., 2015; Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013; Gill, 2002; Jones & Pringle, 2015; Taylor & Littleton, 2012).

The survey introduced here builds on a number of notable prior studies. Ros Gill (2014) acknowledges the very real challenge of combining childcare with precarious work in the creative industries, but adds that 'the constant reiterating of mothering as "the issue" is

problematic… what is at issue is far more profound and far reaching than this'. She highlights the new forms of sexism in play: the post-feminist sensibility which renders inequality increasingly difficult to speak about, alongside a labouring subjectivity organized around individualism and entrepreneurialism which is 'as yet underexplored'. As part of a special journal edition on gender and creative labour, Leung Wing-Fai and Keith Randle join Gill (2015) in developing these ideas by exploring female freelancers in film and TV, also looking at parenting incompatibilities alongside the challenges of informal recruitment methods and 'reasonable sexism' which again make inequalities unmanageable and unspeakable for female 'career scramblers'.

While those findings are based on interviewees still working in the industries, others have begun to explore the narratives of who have left. Anne O'Brien (2014) interviewed 17 women who had left media jobs in Ireland, and like Gill, showed that that 'pervasive ideologies presenting women as proactively "choosing" to leave work are actually obscuring gender power dynamics amongst media workers' – particularly in relation to gendered work cultures, the informalization of work organization, and restricted ability to take part in networks. Similarly, Tamsyn Dent's thesis (2017) explored interviews with 34 women who either worked or had left work in the creative sector following the birth of a child, likewise finding the link between gender inequality and motherhood to be a smokescreen, 'a framework which allows for concepts of "choice" and "preference" to mask deeply complicated processes of oppression and exclusion' – in particular the finding that women in the sector are devalued by the expectation that motherhood equates to withdrawal from the industry, an expectation stamped on women from day one.

Methodology

The research set out to identify, and to interview, individuals who have left careers in the UK TV industry. This was a difficult group to recruit, since they are no longer accessible via media industry publications or networks associated with their former TV careers. However, a number of TV social media networks and online communities were used through which current workers were requested to contact former colleagues. In addition, an email message was sent to a mailing list of a former community of UK TV freelancers, inviting anyone who had left the industry to come forward. In total 104 individuals responded, out of whom 61 agreed to give telephone interviews, which averaged around an hour in length. Semi-structured interviews were arranged initially around themes including a description of career history, reasons for leaving, and career routes since leaving.

All respondents were also asked to complete a short online questionnaire. This attempted to explore in more quantitative detail some of the themes which had emerged inductively from the qualitative interviews. This established, amongst other things, genre and job role occupied, employment status, subsequent career path, main and secondary reasons for leaving, and what they would change in the industry; with several opportunities to provide written qualitative comment. The questionnaire received responses from 80 participants, of whom 54 had also previously completed a telephone interview.

Questionnaire data was gathered using the JISC online survey tool at onlinesurveys.ac.uk and analysed in Excel. Audio recordings were made of all interviews; interview content was

imported into qualitative analysis software Nvivo, and coded into the themes which had been established before interviews took place, and those which emerged inductively from interviews. In addition, all questionnaire data, both quantitative and qualitative, was added into NVivo, enabling the cross-referencing of both results sets.

The sample of 80 which responded to the online questionnaire consisted of 27 men and 53 women. When still working in the industry, they numbered 17 producer/directors, 26 in other production roles, four directors, and a variety of other lesser represented roles. The high number of participants in production or directing roles is noticeable here, as is the low number of technical craft roles.

50 worked in documentary/factual/reality at the point they left the industry (a disproportionately high number in this type of production), with the next highest genres being entertainment/leisure (20), news/current affairs (15), and drama/fiction (14). They had worked in the industry for an average of 17 years; 58 were freelance when they left.

Limitations

This survey focuses exclusively on the experiences of those who have **left** the UK TV industry. As such, it does not claim to be representative of the experiences of the wider cohort of UK TV professionals, including those who are still working in the industry; the views expressed are therefore understandably skewed towards a negative representation of the

sector. However, they are in many cases consistent with experiences reported elsewhere in the literature as detailed above, relating to the career challenges experienced. In addition, since participants left the industry at various times over the last 15 years, some of the conditions they report may since have been addressed; although a reduced sample of 36 who left the industry more recently (from 2011-2018) shows little variation from the full cohort in reasons for leaving.

Compared to the overall TV workforce (Creative Skillset, 2015), the sample is disproportionately made up of women, individuals in production and directing roles, freelancers, and those working in factual TV. It is plausible however that the sample is more representative of those who leave, than of the overall workforce; existing data suggests that there are compelling challenges facing women and freelancers, while in the past, exploitative employment practice in the factual TV production sector was highlighted within the industry by the TV Wrap campaign in 2005 (Percival & Hesmondhalgh, 2014). The particularly reactive nature of observational programming could also provide an explanation for higher proportions leaving factual TV; a recent industry survey demonstrated the number of female-directed documentaries falling from 36.5% to 26.7% between 2013-16 (Goldbart, 2018).

Findings

After leaving the TV industry, subsequent careers were highly varied. A significant number (16) remained in a sector with skills or knowledge transferable from their previous career, such as archive sales, communication, fashion production, social media management, PR, producing branded video content, radio production, and web producing. Some explored roles which provided an alternative outlet for creativity (10), such as writing, gardening, photography, upholstery, furniture restoring, film-making for charities, and art curation.

A significant number (eight) went on to re-train into care-related roles involving therapy or wellbeing – including a clinical psychologist, hypnotherapist, and Pilates instructor. Seven went into education, such as lecturing; five went on into charity-related work, three retired, and others individually found roles ranging from barrister to IT project manager, from medical secretary to marine quality assurance – some setting up new businesses. Notably only four remained full-time mothers, suggesting that the majority were able to pursue careers in other sectors which were compatible with childcare in a way that the TV sector was not; the withdrawal from TV was not simply about giving up work to be a Mum.

There is some ambivalence in the findings. Respondents had found their time in the industry highly enjoyable. When asked to give a score between one and ten, from one equalling 'I absolutely hated it' to ten representing 'I absolutely loved it', the average was 7.9, with only two respondents giving a score below the mid-point of five. Yet at the same time, there were few regrets about leaving. Asked how life now compares to life in TV, the greatest number (36) selected 'Much better'. In interviews, there were many extremely positive stories of individuals who had found fulfilment in other areas; and the majority confirmed the questionnaire findings regarding being happier in their new lives.
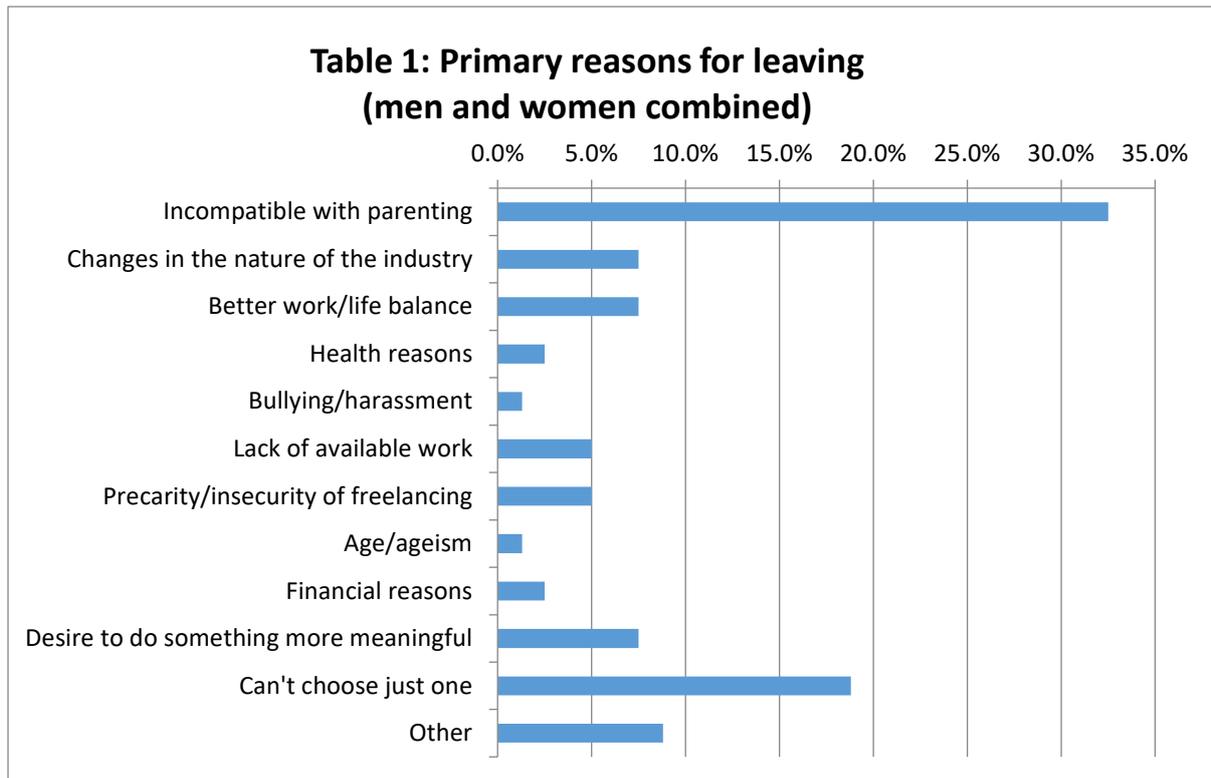
> The process of leaving has been totally empowering – I mean, now, I would never go back – ever. I was offered a job recently and said no; I didn't even think about it. I have a life, and that's what I wanted, and I've got that, and that has been massively empowering… now I'm outside I'm discovering all sorts of skills which I'm fascinated by. (Former producer/director)

> My quality of life is considerably better and I am finally able to commit to things I have wanted to do for years such as volunteering - this is what stops me returning to a job I was good at and enjoyed (Former production co-ordinator)

Reasons for leaving

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they were able to select one single prime reason for leaving the industry (Table 1). The choices offered were the ones that had most frequently arisen inductively from interviews, which took place before the questionnaire, plus an 'other' option.) 15 said they could not choose one single reason, but out of the rest who did, the leading answer by some margin was 'incompatible with parenting' (27, of whom only one was male). Six chose 'Better work/life balance'; six chose 'Changes in the nature of the industry' and another six chose 'Desire to do something more meaningful'. Perhaps surprisingly, 'precarity/insecurity of freelancing' and 'lack of available work' were each only

selected by four respondents (in fact several regretted the loss of a good income after they left).

Table 1: Primary reasons for leaving (men and women combined)

Reason	Percentage
Incompatible with parenting	~32%
Changes in the nature of the industry	~7.5%
Better work/life balance	~7.5%
Health reasons	~2.5%
Bullying/harassment	~1%
Lack of available work	~5%
Precarity/insecurity of freelancing	~5%
Age/ageism	~1%
Financial reasons	~2.5%
Desire to do something more meaningful	~7.5%
Can't choose just one	~19%
Other	~9%

Another question provided the opportunity to select multiple secondary factors. 'Better work-life balance' was chosen 34 times, while 'Changes in the nature of the industry' influenced 33. Lack of available work, and precarity/insecurity, were significant secondary factors (30 and 21 respectively), while 'Desire to do something more meaningful' influenced another 22. Although it did not feature as a primary reason for leaving, 'London-centricity/lack of regional work' emerged as a significant secondary factor for 18 respondents; 'desire to change location' affected another 10.

Reasons for women to leave

Gender differences become striking when breaking down the different reasons articulated by men and women for their exit (Table 2). 26 out of 53 women (49%) selected 'incompatibility with parenting' as the single main reason driving them out, as opposed to only one man out of 27 (3.7%). Nine women could not identify a single primary reason, although three of those nine selected parenting as a secondary factor, along with a further seven women who had chosen a different primary reason. Incompatibility with parenting therefore influenced, in varying degrees, a total of 36 out of 53 women surveyed (68%).

Table 2: Primary reasons for leaving
(split by gender)
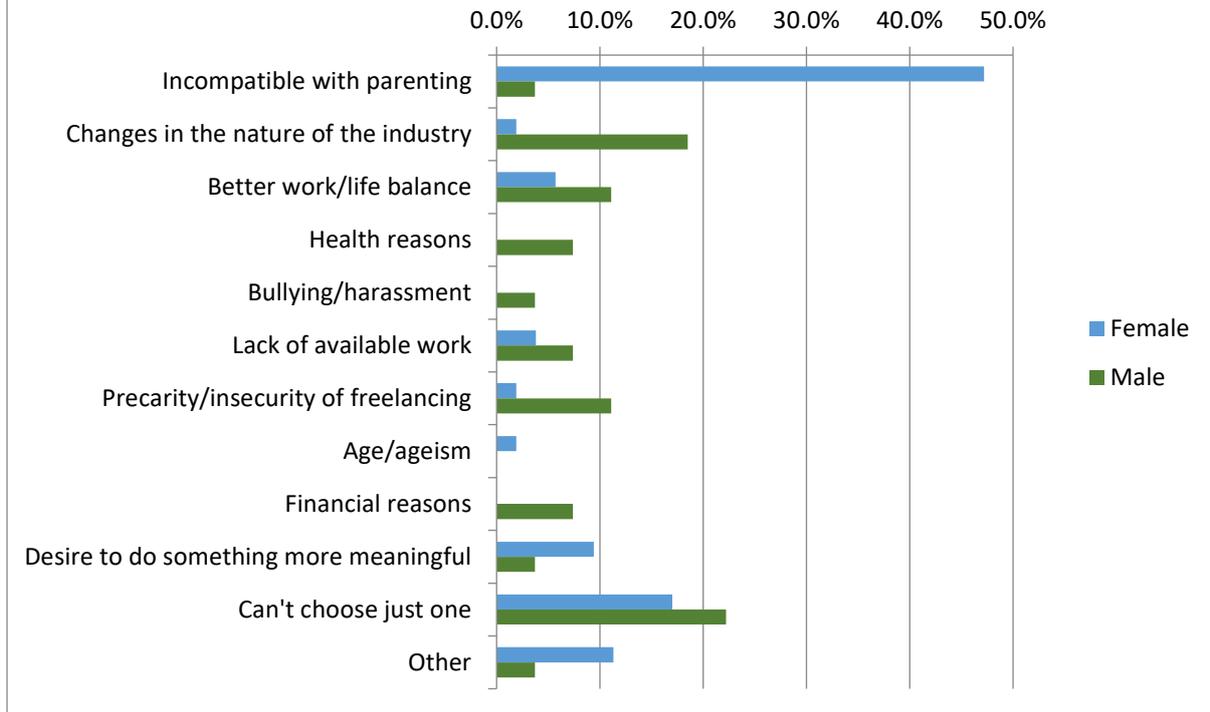
For the 27 men the results were entirely different, as their primary reasons were spread across a wider range of choices, including 'changes in the industry' (chosen by five, 18.5% of men), better work/life balance (three – 5.7%), and precarity/insecurity (also three). Only one chose incompatibility with parenting as a primary reason.

Women sampled were, on average, 12 years younger than the men at the time of the questionnaire; and had spent an average of eight years less in TV. Average age of leaving the industry was 38 for women as opposed to 47 for men. Women who left due to incompatibility with parenting did so on average ten years younger than male respondents. Within this sample, therefore, women evidently had significantly shorter careers, and largely attributed this to the conflicting demands of parenting.

Much attention has been focused on whether women really choose to leave, or in fact are forced out. In this sample, 66% of the female respondents claimed that their exit was 'Voluntary – I chose to leave', while 23% indicated it was 'A necessity – I had no choice' (11% elaborated through an 'other' option). The figure for men was almost identical – 63% voluntary and 22% by necessity. Evidently the majority of respondents perceived their exit as a voluntary act rather than one forced on them, although interview comments suggested this sense of agency may have related more to the decision **when** to leave, rather than **whether** to take a reluctant step which had become inevitable.

The quantitative data therefore provide uncomfortable, if not stark confirmation of the challenge of parenting as the main factor driving women from the industry, while for men it was insignificant in terms of primary reasons for leaving. Qualitative data from interviews however provide a great deal more nuance, and it is through these interviews that other, more structural challenges emerge.

41 out of 61 interviewees discussed family and parenting demands as reasons for leaving the industry, of whom 32 were female. (A small number of men also discussed parenting, although not selecting it as a primary reason.) The challenge was generally a complex one involving long working hours, geography, childcare costs and tough prioritising, but the most commonly used phrase was that mothers felt they 'just couldn't make it work'.

> I realised eventually that the part of the job I really loved was the bit I couldn't do – making films. I couldn't think of any way to put the kids away for a month – and that was never going to change. (Former producer/director)

> It's a very difficult industry when you have children, especially more than one. It's not set up to value or be accommodating to parents. Your main currency is your flexibility – and when you don't have that any more, you are not employable. (Former producer)

The theme of flexibility was pervasive. 'You're meant to be this ideal worker,' commented a former producer/director, 'willing to drop anything and say yes to anything that comes up – and with kids you can't be that person.' Gaps between projects were sustainable without children, but not when childcare had to be planned and paid for. Some saw other mothers attempting to work long hours, who suffered guilt levels as parents which they were not prepared to take on.

At the heart of this inflexibility was the difficulty of working long days, sometimes unpredictably; the 'feast or famine' stop/start nature of freelance project work; and the lack of availability of job share arrangements, or flexible working that would make parenting more manageable. Long hours were frequently combined with descriptions of the career as all-consuming or requiring their 'life and soul'. Especially in factual production, the need to react to real life took priority over everything else: 'It isn't that somebody held the key to a door and wouldn't let me in because I'm a Mum; but if you're filming people's lives, it's quite difficult to have one of your own.' (Former producer/director). Some described missing weddings and family funerals to go on shoots, while for others it was the unpredictable flow of freelance work that was challenging:

> You cannot put your child in nursery, for the amount of money that it costs, not knowing whether you're actually going to be working enough to cover the cost … the nursery isn't interested if I have a month without work. (Former production co-ordinator).

In addition to the logistical challenges, a shortage of women in senior positions translated into a lack of role models which was seen by several women as a powerful disincentive to remain in the industry – 'you can't be what you can't see':

> When I looked around for role models above me… I couldn't see the, I suppose idealistic role model that I was looking for; which was a working Mum who was able to juggle having children and looked really happy doing it... That sort of frightened me. Was it possible – am I going to be the only one? (Former senior producer)

Differences for men

For the men who had left the industry, reasons were much more varied. But while it figured less in their interviews, family concerns were still present, albeit with a different slant. One

producer/director became a parent at 51 and reflected on new priorities: 'Having the screen credit is no longer the be-all and end-all – but will I be around for my son?' Another producer/director described the demands, echoed by others, of working on observational documentaries where 'you are living someone else's life… so you have to cope as a parent with that unpredictability – so you'd get home, but you'd be knackered'. Another in the same role observed that when he and his partner had their first child, 'the feeling had been building up that I didn't want to be in the industry forever, and the baby accelerated the process'. One respondent neatly summed up the priorities expressed by several men: 'I would not recommend the industry to any young person (my children included!) as it destroys relationships, makes family life near impossible, and is physically and mentally draining' (former set decorator and production buyer).

Long hours, working patterns and work/life balance were a significant factor for men, although the connection to parenting was less directly felt. Rather, career sacrifices were described more frequently in terms of relationships with partners than with children, and personal stress levels were more of a driver towards exit. One former director described the need to choose between life and career, since he loved his career and travelled widely to pursue it, but 'my career cost me one marriage'. A former producer said that if he'd stayed in TV, it would have been 'very hard to meet someone who understood the nature of freelancing – freelancing and divorce seem to go hand in hand', but after leaving the industry he met someone and 'managed to make things work'. A producer/director aspired to make high-end documentaries, but 'the only people I knew who were doing that, that was their entire existence… I realised I'd be divorced inside of two years. I felt like at some point it would have a serious impact on my mental health.' A male former production manager said 'it was the hours that killed it for me', and the need to be 'always on', the 'all consuming' commitment, eventually became unsustainable. Although these factors affected women as

well, men tended to see the arrival of a baby as a tipping point in a larger challenge of work/life balance, rather than encountering the stark incompatibility which child caring imposed on mothers.

Instead, 'change in the nature of the industry' was the most often cited primary reason from men (and a secondary factor for some women); interviews revealed frequent disillusion, not only with working practices and conditions, but also around the nature of the content being commissioned and made. Across the 61 interviews, 27 made comments expressing some sort of disillusion. These included references to a lack of innovation, falling budgets, culture changes within broadcasters, oversupply and disposability of freelancers, working conditions, shrinking crews, and lack of individual creative autonomy.

In terms of programming content, the word 'trivial' came up frequently, and there was often a sense of respondents not liking the content they were working on – as well not liking the programming they saw on their own TVs. 'I was spending a lot of time and energy making films that I didn't get into TV to make', said one:

> There are so many factories now churning out mass produced, cookie-cutter type programme documentaries, forced into a dramatic format, all these people desperately trying to make what might be quite interesting stories into boring set narrative shapes to fit around advert breaks etc. – this is Fordism in factual. (Former producer/director)

Structural inequalities

As explored in the introduction, the academic literature on female leavers focuses on attitudinal barriers as well as logistical challenges. This former series producer encountered both:

> I returned to work after having my first child. I had been promised flexible working hours… to return home for childcare. The reality was, it was massively frowned upon by other women from executive level downwards… I paid out so much in childcare and with such a negative impact on my family that I felt I had no choice but to leave the industry. My choice was either never see my kids, or work in production, so I left.

Awareness of a negative attitude towards pregnancy and motherhood (sometimes from women, as in the example above, as well as men) was widely reported within production environments - with maternity viewed almost as a secret, a source of guilt which once revealed would damage career prospects.

> So many women are struggling just to maintain their position if they have a
>
> child. It is the struggle, the secret struggle actually; a lot of people hide it…
>
> It's the massive guilt you carry as well. (Former assistant producer)

> Talk of children, babies, other commitments is really unwelcome … I
>
> remember running into one of my bosses when I was pushing my buggy in the
>
> park, and I felt like I'd been caught out with another man, having an affair.
>
> (Former producer/director)

> I had to leave work at [broadcaster] to look after my poorly son… when I went
>
> back after a couple of days, the director pulled me aside and said to me: "Be
>
> very careful about telling people you have a child – I wouldn't have employed
>
> you if I'd known". (Former director)

There were other anecdotes along similar lines, making it clear that for some women at least,

pregnancy meant 'you are not considered to be a useful worker any more' (former producer).

One interviewee was told by her boss, upon discovering her pregnancy, 'You'll be stepping

down then'; another, on her return from maternity leave, found her contract had been

(illegally) terminated in her absence.

It is important to note that the picture is mixed, and that not all women encountered such

prejudicial barriers. One producer/director, for example, described how two different

employers (both large broadcasters) tried very hard to accommodate her, with financial

support to help her return to work, and concerted efforts to find her a different role that could

fit with parenting; but ultimately, 'I chose to do something new, rather than adapt to a less exciting version of my old job'.

Some did feel a strong sense of injustice. But others were just resigned to a simple incompatibility:

> I don't think anyone should bend over backwards for me because I chose to have children. The job is the job… Some jobs work well and some don't. You do wish you could carry on, but you can't and it's nobody's fault. (Former director)

> Long hours are due to budgets… I completely understand why there are these pressures. I don't feel it is unjust. No one is doing anything maliciously – it's just the way the world and media are changing. (Former producer)

Returning to work

Several barriers prevented women from returning to work after maternity. One was the rapid progression of technology; 'I haven't got a clue about the cameras now,' said one, while another cited the cost of retraining as an additional obstacle in refreshing technical skills.

A more serious obstacle was attrition of contacts and personal networks during maternity. 'Your contacts dry up very quickly – the world moves on so quickly', said a former producer/director, who felt that her ability to pull together a freelance team at speed had suffered from neglecting 'the networking thing… when you're not around, they forget you'. The reliance on networks, especially in a social context, has been well documented (Gill, 2002), and this need for 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001) was confirmed to be a particular barrier for women returners, especially exacerbated if living outside London.

Most consistently of all, issues of working patterns were cited as the biggest hurdles for returners – especially inflexibility or length of working hours, lack of part time roles, and inability to job-share. One woman teamed up with another mother and they offered themselves as a job-sharing package, but found no one was prepared to consider them. Another woman won a prolonged battle, after her first child, to have her job as a producer back on a part-time basis four days a week, after she was initially refused anything less than a full-time role - but couldn't face the same battle again after her second child, and left the industry: 'I hoped I had set a precedent here, that it can be possible – but I felt it was a special case rather than the norm – and how dare you suggest that you can do both?' (Former producer)

Participants were asked in both interviews and questionnaires to suggest one thing that would have made it easier to sustain their careers. The highest number of recommendations (26) related to greater flexibility of hours and work patterns, such as remote or home working, while another 15 specifically referenced job-sharing. 15 others recommended less hours, or shorter working weeks. This meant there were 46 recommendations making up the top three themes, all directly related to time, hours and flexibility. Notably eight other comments were

themed by 'don't demonize Mums/be more Mum friendly' and seven referred specifically to balance of work and family life.

Many women expressed concern about what would be lost not just to the industry, but also to TV audiences and society more widely, as a result of women leaving and not returning to production. 'The line of logic is that if people can't work in TV then their interests aren't going to be on TV', said a former producer/director. Some felt they would now develop very different ideas for programmes, or would be drawn to different contributors, determining whose stories would be told on screen.

> It's a shame – there are not many female directors in their late 30s or 40s, if they have children – editorially, not having that viewpoint is a shame for the industry… The more diverse viewpoints you have, in terms of cognitive diversity, and ways of approaching a problem, the better the organisation functions, and the more creative the output is going to be – so if you're missing a section of women – how can that be good? (Former producer)

> Those voices and experiences are not reflected back to us… it is undemocratic and popular culture is failing in providing a service that it should be. (Former assistant producer)

Lack of care

When looking at the views of both sexes, comments about pregnancy and motherhood become part of a wider perception of an uncaring employment culture, with some considering it unacceptably outdated. One participant was advised not to declare a diagnosis of depression, as 'the production company won't look on it favourably'. Ageism was felt by several older freelance workers who reported, not that they were leaving the industry, but that the industry was leaving them – a sentiment echoed several times by those in their mid-fifties and above: 'I have not actually retired, but I have been retired… It's a real shame because I feel I actually have a lot left to give' (former entertainment director).

A large number of respondents of both sexes were anxiously aware of younger people coming through beneath them, knew that they risked pricing themselves out of the market if they charged more money for experience, and considered age as a threat to their own careers – mostly without rancour, but with regret at the loss of that valuable experience to the industry. The flow of young people prepared to work for free was felt by some to be directly responsible for downward pressure on wages. The view of TV as a 'young person's game' was articulated in varying forms by 19 different respondents:

> I'm finding myself hustling alongside 30-somethings who've made a fraction
> of what I've made, who I would have thought I could have beaten hands
> down… They will do it cheaply, work long hours, not complain about the rate,
> **and** be nice to production managers. (Former producer/director)

The awareness of being disposable, as part of an oversupply of casualized workers, and of other people waiting in line to do their job, came up frequently in terms of a culture that was felt to value budgets above individuals, and had no incentive to nurture the careers of freelancers. Some who had left the industry to work in other sectors were able to make comparisons with the employment practices they encountered elsewhere, and were highly critical of the working cultures in TV, feeling the sector 'needs to be hauled into the 21st century':

> TV is literally locked in the dark ages. It pretends not to be, but it absolutely is... I saw appalling work practices, people working unsafe hours, but the culture is that you're just lucky to have a job – that culture is completely wrong. (Former producer/director)

> The contrast with where I currently work now could not be greater – the kind of tolerance about taking time off for a bereavement, in TV I would have not felt confident that there would have been room for that sort of understanding, you'd feel guilty about taking time away. (Former producer)

Discussion and conclusions

Existing literature has already suggested that incompatibility with childcare causes women to leave the industry in disproportionate numbers (Raising Films, 2016; Raising Films Australia, 2018; Skillset, 2010; Wing-Fai et al., 2015), largely based on industry figures, or on conversations with women still working in the sector. This research contributes a significant new dataset to the discussion, confirming an incompatibility with parenting as the dominant factor driving out women who have left, in stark contrast to the experiences of men – who in this sample, left the industry later in life, and for a variety of reasons, amongst which parenting was notably absent, but relationships, work/life balance and general disillusion played a larger part.

Several writers have explored the structural inequalities which underpin, and are masked by, the link between childcare and career exit (Dent, 2017; Gill, 2014; O'Brien, 2014; Wing-Fai et al., 2015). Those barriers are evident here too. Negative attitudes towards mothers were encountered by a significant proportion of women, which turned pregnancy into an expectation of career exit (Dent, 2017), and maternity into a guilty secret – the 'unspeakable' inequality highlighted by Gill (2014). Networking challenges and informal recruitment methods disadvantage female workers and returners (O'Brien, 2014), while several women articulated a mute acceptance of career exit in ways reminiscent of the individualisation and 'reasonable sexism' described elsewhere (Wing-Fai et al., 2015). The sample in this project was high in production and directing roles in factual TV, which may suggest a particular problem with the reactive nature of observational programme-making. But there are also clear exceptions where employers have worked hard to retain and support mothers.

These are uncomfortable findings, emphasising not only a problem of industry inflexibility, but also of gender inequality that goes beyond the sector. The finding that men's careers appear far less likely to be ended by parenthood indicates that caring for children continues to

be largely undertaken by women. Recognising this risks perpetuating the acceptance of a situation which is itself deserving of feminist critique (Wing-Fai et al., 2015). Further research could help to unpick the intersections with class-related constructions of motherhood (Dent, 2017) which present a viable escape route in terms of identity. Meanwhile, some respondents clearly felt that imbalanced representation in the workforce leads to a lack of female influence on commissioning, production and editorial decisions on screen – suggesting a further societal knock-on effect via the relationship between production and consumption (Goldbart, 2018; Oakley & O'Brien, 2016; Wreyford, 2018).

Respondents echoed the ambivalence towards their work which Hesmondhalgh & Baker identify elsewhere (2011). The majority claimed to love their careers in TV, while simultaneously decrying the factors that made them unsustainable – and ultimately, for the majority, issues of time, in various forms, were behind their reasons for leaving - whether through long working days, 'bulimic' contract work (Pratt, 2000), or a lack of flexible working patterns. Time links inextricably to budgets, and to work-life balance for workers. Many of our respondents were able to make a good living from the industry – which they missed when they left - and in that sense, financial precarity was not as strong a theme as expected.

Within the TV and film sectors, the problem has at least been recognised. The BBC and Sky are partnering with the organisation Women Returners to support women coming back to work after career breaks, while various other organisations, such as Raising Films and Media Parents, campaign to raise awareness and support women returners through tax relief for childcare costs, flexibility of roles and production budgeting for on-location childcare. The level of imbalance revealed by this study suggests the need for more urgent attention to these

requests from policy makers, and perhaps also the potential to mobilize stronger collective resistance at workforce level.

Kelly's mobilisation theory suggests the factors that can trigger such resistance (Kelly, 1998) - some of which appear to be present, such as a sense of collective identity, shared interests, and awareness of injustice. The concern is that this inequality has become, not just unspeakable in Gill's terms, but normatized and accepted within this occupational community (Salaman, 1971) and requires a stronger and more targeted sense of injustice – of a breach of shared values - to tip a sense of inequality into one of indignation, and trigger a groundswell of awareness and action (Weststar, 2012).

The exit of mothers is by far the most acute manifestation of the impact of a wider perception of uncaring employment practices. This sample consisted only of those who have left the industry, not those who found ways to stay; but for this group, the industry failed to keep up with the times in terms of ethical and sustainable management practices. The abdication of employment responsibility from broadcasters to independent production companies, and the subsequent transition to a reliance on a heavily casualized and oversupplied freelance workforce, leads to a strong sense of disposability; of a system that values budgets more than people, and has no incentive to nurture individual careers.

This survey revealed one other striking theme that needs further exploration. Although the majority in this survey were happier after leaving, many had to go through a painful, if not traumatic, process of separation and identity reconstruction. Several – both male and female - used the language of bereavement or mourning to articulate that experience. A similar process has been described in terms of artists' enforced career changes (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016) although the nature of identity loss here is different. In this sample, TV

careers had been hard won, to enter and to sustain, and a key reward was a sense of social status - described time and time again as feeling an immediately heightened interest from others when introducing themselves and their jobs at parties or in social contexts.

The description of that tangible flush of pleasure was usually followed by an admission of its superficiality, yet this was clearly a fundamentally positive element of self-realisation – which was strongly missed after leaving. Some took several years to stop introducing themselves as someone working in TV, while others still regularly dreamed about their production office, or described not knowing who they were without their TV jobs. For some it was akin to a relationship or marriage break-up; the 'Do What You Love' (DWYL) trope is powerful (Conor et al., 2015) but when careers begin as love affairs, and are only sustained by devoting everything to them, breaking up is especially hard to do, and the language of love and loss tinged many transition narratives. There is evidently a correlation between the personal cost of gaining access, and the emotional price of exit: the relationship between the 'passion' so often cited as a pre-requisite to success, in its modern sense of exhilarating love, and the 'passion' experienced on exit – in the word's Latinate sense of suffering.

Beyond the individual cost, the focus on 'project work' in the creative economy has major implications for the future of organisation and resistance amongst the 'new model workers' (Ross, 2009) without the entitlements and security hard won by a previous generation (McRobbie, 2011, 2016). If the 'poster children of precarity' (Conor et al., 2015) do indeed function as harbingers of practices in other sectors, given the widening prevalence of casualization and project-based work elsewhere, the inequalities here – and their normatization - should be of concern well beyond the creative industries.

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