

# **THE** **GI** **FREELANCER** **BS** **SURVEY 2023**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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**UNDERPAID, UNDERVALUED, UNDER PRESSURE**

Big Freelancer Survey 2023, June 2023

**It is three years since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic – and three years since our first Big Freelancer Survey (BFS). This year's survey paints a stark picture of a freelance workforce 'under siege', facing the perfect storm of a cost-of-living crisis, and the ongoing impact of Covid and Brexit, combined with deeply embedded structural inequalities.**

The clear message from this year's survey is that the freelance theatre workforce feels 'undervalued, underpaid and underappreciated', a feeling that has been amplified by significant funding cuts in the last year. Although many find the work fulfilling, unsustainably low pay is leading to skills shortages in certain roles and work intensification for those who remain, often without adequate – or any – remuneration. There is a widespread sense that the precarious nature of freelance work across the industry has worsened since the pandemic, and that its effects are exhausting, with many describing their working lives as 'unpredictable, unsettling and unsustainable'.

This report presents the findings of a mixed-methods survey of freelance workers conducted in early 2023. It is the third in a planned series of five Big Freelancer Surveys (2020-2025), designed to provide evidence-based insight into how the effects of the pandemic over time intersect with longer-term

issues such as chronic insecurity and precarity. Overall, average earnings for freelancers in the industry are 17.5% below the UK national average salary.

1156 theatre freelancers took part in this year's survey, which highlights a pay-gap between the male and female workforce of 37.4% (regrettably, the data set for non-binary respondents was too small to draw reliable conclusions). Reports of an industry rife with ageism and sexism are further corroborated by data which reveals that the pay-gap widens to 47.7% for freelancers with 21-30 years experience in the industry.

## The report highlights:

- 1. Financial uncertainty and underpayment were the most widely reported concerns across all career stages, regions, and sectors.** Many said that their lives are a 'constant struggle' because of financial precarity, income uncertainty, and underpayment, resulting in a chronic scenario in which many freelancers are living hand-to-mouth due to the constant expectation to work for below minimum wage, for free or for 'ridiculously low pay'.

**2. Work intensification (doing more work for the same, or less pay), and work extension (being required to take on more roles and/or responsibilities for the same, or less pay) were widely reported across sectors and levels of work,** with 64.6% of respondents saying that they have felt under pressure to do more work for the same or less pay in the last year. The qualitative data suggests that this situation has worsened since Covid, due to high numbers of freelancers leaving – or being forced out of – the industry, the subsequent skills shortage, and companies trying to achieve the same work for less money, which is leading to the hiring of low-paid, inexperienced freelancers.

**3. A skills shortage in specific roles and sectors is having an impact on workplace fairness, safety, and workloads.** Producers, stage managers and those in technical roles were identified as being particularly overstretched as a result of this.

**4. Many feel that the past twelve months have been worse than their experiences during the pandemic due to Brexit, the ongoing effects of the pandemic, and the overwork-underpayment bind.** There is a sense that 'building back better' hasn't happened, that lessons

learned during the pandemic have been abandoned, and that the last few years have been a missed opportunity for industry reform. The combination of these factors is driving freelancers to leave the industry, with one participant saying, 'due to Brexit and Covid, the last thirty years of hard work has left me with nothing – no income, no pension, no work, and it seems no future'.

**5. The survey highlights concerns about persistent exclusivity, inequality and inaccessibility.** Many participants referred to feeling frustrated and discouraged about working in an industry in which inclusivity is believed to be 'just a word and not reality', with respondents feeling that there is a lack of meaningful progression in terms of equality. This is reflected in the data on pay, which shows that respondents from a global majority background earn 17.19% less than their white counterparts, and that for those living with medical conditions, caring responsibilities, or from traditionally working class backgrounds the mean income is lower than the industry average (£22,900).

**6. A striking imbalance between the income of male and female theatre freelancers (37.4%).** A closer look at the data provides some possible factors in the existence of this pay gap, for example that more male respondents earned

100% of their income from freelance work (Male: 55.4% compared Female: 49.4%). However, it is clear that this pay gap persists through various methodologies and can only be partially explained by differences in the amount of overall work done by male and female respondents.

**7. 77.9% of survey respondents feel that Brexit has been a source of uncertainty for their work in the industry, with those working in opera, classical music and live events being hit particularly hard.** There is a widespread perception that difficulties in obtaining visas are causing employers to discriminate against those with/without EU passports and the 90/180 day rule means that freelancers are having to turn down work. There is also evidence that UK makers and suppliers are losing contracts to their EU counterparts due to high import costs and slow delivery times.

**8.** Our analysis spotlights specific roles across the industry that are particularly impacted by the issues raised in the report. This includes directors, assistant- and associate directors being expected to do unrealistic amounts of unpaid preparation time; a growing mental health crisis in stage management due to the skills shortage; and costume workers and designers being asked to work multiple roles beyond their job descriptions and contracted hours.

## Recommendations and actions in this year's report include:

- 1.** The introduction and enforcement of fair rates of pay that tackle the disparity between freelance wages and salaried staff in organisations. It is recommended that all projects pay at least the union rate, and that this rate should be treated as a minimum rather than an industry standard. Actual rates of pay need to reflect the skills, knowledge and expertise of those hired, and to be realistic about the number of hours each project involves. Adequate remuneration should be offered for travel and accommodation, and to those working 40+ hours per week.
- 2.** Better systems for recognising the value of the freelancer voice, and for holding organisations accountable. These could include a more organised unionisation of the creative freelance workforce across art forms and sectors, freelancer presence on organisation management committees and boards, and new systems for reporting discrimination in the workplace.
- 3.** Improved accessibility for under-represented groups across the industry. For conversations about inclusion to progress from being ineffectual and largely rhetorical to meaningful action that sees pay gaps eliminated, accessible routes into the arts, and better support for those from under-represented groups working within the industry.
- 4.** A thorough review of funding, including of government funding policy. This should look at how grants are administered, the amount of work that is involved in making funding applications, and whether financial support schemes (eg. government schemes) could better support the freelance lifestyle.
- 5.** A drive to tackle London-centrism in funding policy and provision. A lack of affordable accommodation and travel support for those living outside of London, combined with recurring rail strikes has caused particular stress to the freelance workforce in the last year. The touring allowance needs to be increased to match inflation.
- 6.** The introduction of a general EU/UK work passport or permit so that short notice and short term work is possible again for the creative workforce.

**FREELANCERS  
MAKE  
THEATRE  
WORK**

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