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# Disability by Design: Representation in TV

REPORT OF KEY FINDINGS



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# Introduction

In 2007 Dr. Reena Bhavnani published her UK Film Council-commissioned review of barriers to diversity in the film, television and audio-visual sectors. Disability was one of a number of areas highlighted in her report in which the industry was found wanting, and action urgently required (Bhavnani, 2007). After all, more than a decade had already elapsed since the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) established the principle that deaf and disabled people should be protected by law against discrimination. Why were deaf and disabled people largely invisible within this sector?

The quarter of a century that has now passed since the DDA entered the Statute Book has been a sort of Groundhog Day for the TV industry. Various 'initiatives' and periodic hand-wringing have come at regular intervals, but resulted in little substantial change. In that time, the DDA has been replaced by the more comprehensive Equality Act 2010 intended to protect individual rights and advance equal opportunities more broadly.

The Equality Act 2010 – now the UK's core legal framework for dealing with discrimination – has important implications for television management, covering as it does everything from recruitment practices to pay, working hours, training, grievance procedures as well as more general working practices. It establishes that discrimination can be both direct and indirect; that it is not limited to harassment and victimisation but it can include failure to make reasonable adjustments for deaf and disabled people, and discrimination related to the consequence of a disability.



Yet television employers seem blithely disengaged from many of these responsibilities: a position made possible, in part, by the arms-length and short-term nature of freelance employment. The Covid-19 crisis served to expose how lack of diversity is one of a number of inter-related and systemic industry problems that persist in the UK's TV industry. A recent study of the unscripted television workforce has painted a picture of a sector beset by inequalities perpetuated by poor management and recruitment practices (van Raalte, et al, 2021). Hardly any wonder then that, according to the Creative Diversity Network (CDN), who are charged with monitoring diversity in the UK broadcasting industries, deaf and disabled people continue to be significantly under-represented.

One in five people in the UK are deaf or disabled. Yet deaf and disabled people make up just 7% of television employees (Ofcom, 2020).<sup>1</sup> This is despite broadcasters having inclusion policies as a condition of their licences, and Ofcom having had the regulatory duty to promote equality of opportunity in the broadcasting sector since 2003.

Ofcom's 'light touch' approach to oversight of this area has long been predicated on the idea that *reporting* on equality and diversity through the collating and monitoring of data, is sufficient to ensure that broadcasters fall into line. A short-lived attempt on the part of the regulator to delegate this responsibility to a third-party part-regulatory/part-industry body (the Broadcast, Equality & Training Regulator or BETR) was abandoned shortly before the Equality Act came into force. Only since 2016 has Ofcom chosen to resume its monitoring and reporting on diversity in broadcasting. The focus of its work continues to be research and monitoring (four diversity monitoring reports have been produced to date, the most recent being in December 2020). Hardly surprising then that its research 'has showed consistent under-representation of deaf and disabled people across broadcaster workforces' and 'for there to be improvement, the recruitment, retention and progression of people with disabilities has to become a priority' (Ofcom, 2020).

There's a further reason why this needs to become a priority in this sector. Television is an influential medium. How it operates and the way in which it represents people is noticed. It is formative of public perception. Whilst being uniquely placed to drive change more broadly, however, it has barely begun to put its own house in order. Meanwhile, the day-to-day barriers faced by deaf and disabled people continue to go unnoticed and their stories ignored. As this study reveals, there can be fear of even disclosing a condition or impairment in the highly competitive environment of TV.

*Disability by Design* is an attempt to shed light on the lived experience of deaf and disabled people within the television industry. It is hoped that the insights that this study provides may help to spur some action towards broadcasters and television employers taking their legal duties more seriously. Yet ignorance is not an excuse. The law is clear. And discrimination does not have to be intentional to be unlawful.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been broken down in more detail by CDN's Diamond: The Fourth Cut, which finds that while disabled people constitute an estimated 17% of the national workforce, they make up just 5.8% of off-screen employees in the broadcasting industry; meanwhile disabled people make only 8.2 percent of on-screen contribution, despite constituting around 18% of the UK population. (2020)

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## About our study

**Disability by Design: Representation in TV is an initiative by Deaf & Disabled People in TV in association with Bectu (Unscripted TV: Development, Editorial & Production Branch), Equity, and Bournemouth University's Faculty of Media & Communication.**

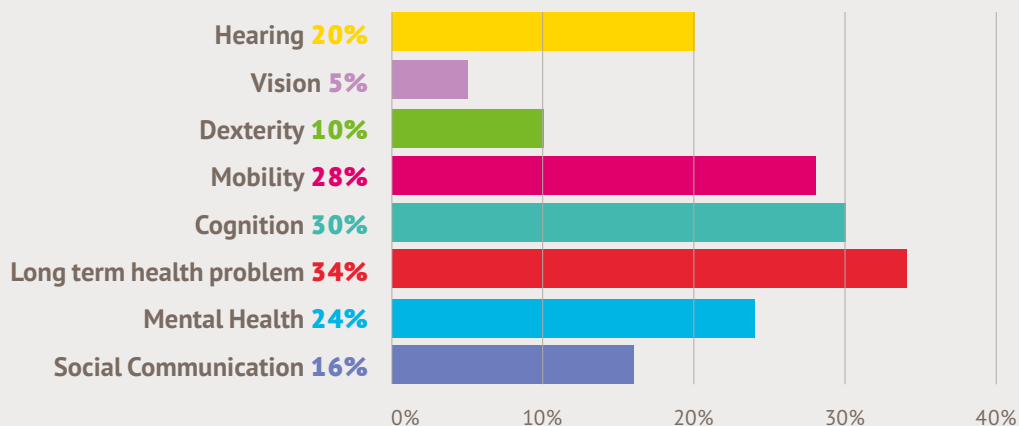
The survey was undertaken between 26th April and 23rd May 2021 and received 223 responses. This report focuses on key findings from the quantitative data, together with brief extracts of people's lived experience.

This report is predicated on the 'social model' of disability, which holds that "people with impairments are 'disabled' by the barriers operating in society that exclude and discriminate against them" (Inclusion London 2015). These physical, communication and attitudinal barriers exclude, disadvantage and discriminate against deaf and disabled people, but can be removed or overcome with appropriate support.



## About our Respondents

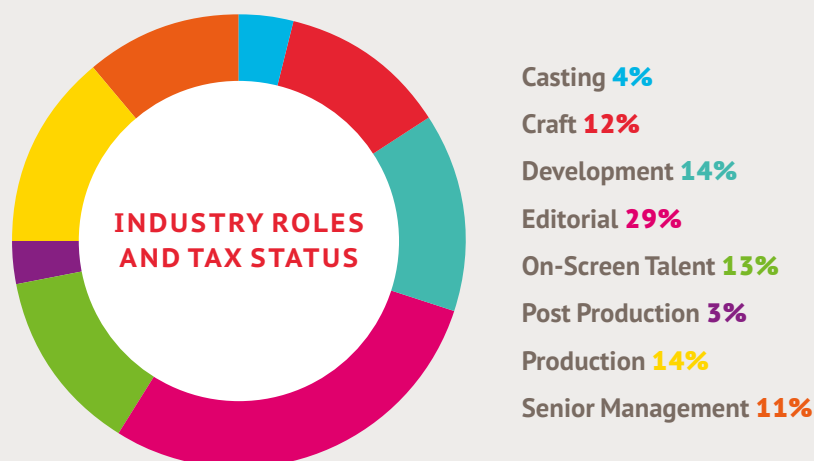
**Nature of disability:** Respondents to the survey reported one or more conditions or impairments related to issues with: hearing, vision, dexterity, mobility, cognition, social communication, mental health, and long-term health problems.



- ▶ The most common condition / impairment among participants was related to long term health problems such as diabetes, cancer, asthma, and epilepsy (34%).
- ▶ 30% of participants have a condition affecting their cognitive ability (dyslexia, learning difficulties and ADHD).
- ▶ 28% of participants experience mobility issues (lower limbs, wheelchair users).

66% of participants do not consider their condition to be visible while 19% have more than one condition.

**Industry roles and tax status:** Respondents worked in a range of roles across television, with the largest single group working in editorial positions.

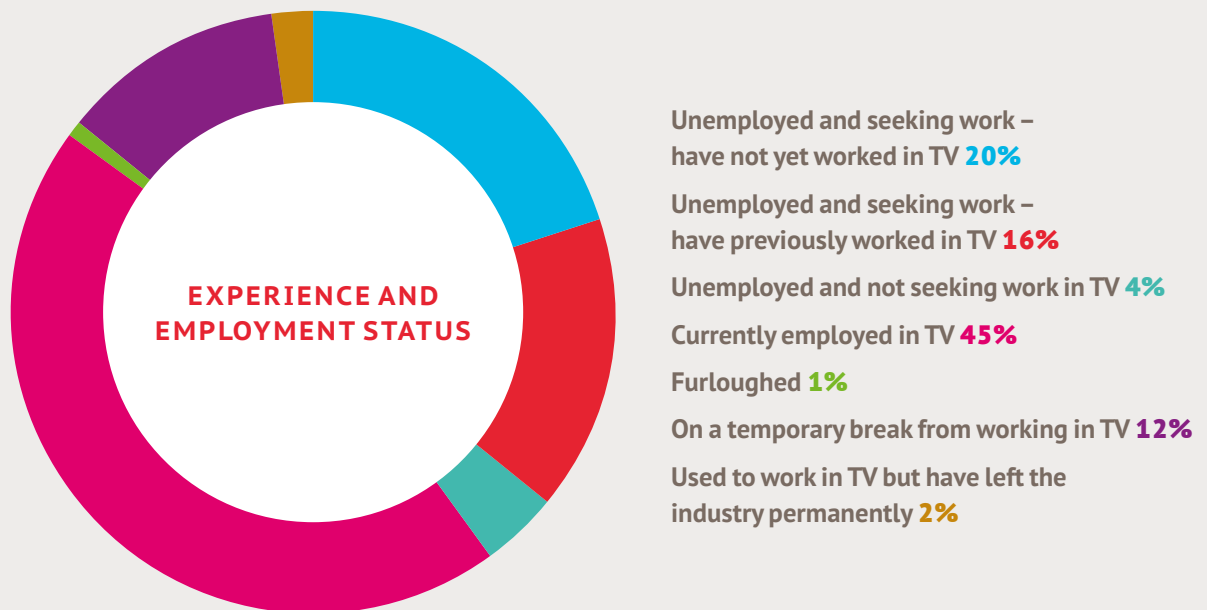




- ▶ The overall number of deaf and disabled people holding Senior Management position is low (11%), and of those 95% are white.

The largest single group of participants described their tax status as Self-employed (43%) with only 10% currently in a PAYE staff position.

**Experience and employment status:** our participants had less experience and lower employment rates than expected across the industry, despite a similar age profile to the workforce as a whole, which underlines the challenges facing deaf and disabled people in television.



- ▶ 45% of participants are currently employed in TV
- ▶ 36% of participants are currently unemployed and seeking work in TV
- ▶ Of these, 37% stated that their current status was a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic

33% of participants have worked in TV for 5 years or less, and 20% are new entrants, citing the lack of access to entry level jobs, and the employment requirements related to their condition or impairment as a barrier to recruitment.

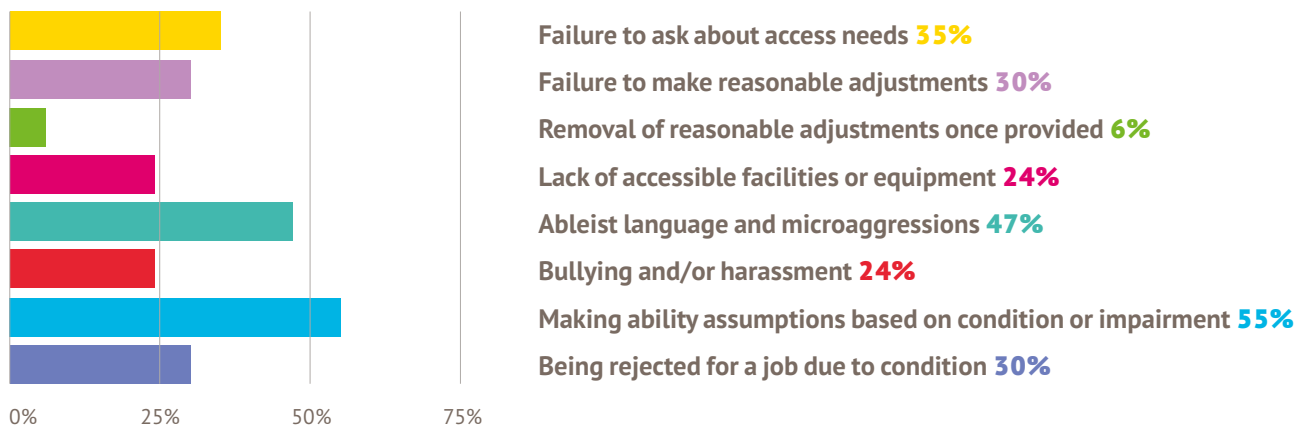
## What we found

**Ableism and discrimination:** 60% of participants reported experience of some form of ableism or discrimination while working or seeking work in the TV industry.

“My experience is that producers in drama do not want to employ disabled people as they consider them a liability.”

“Despite being the biggest minority in the UK and worldwide, we are still bottom of the list when it comes to representation both on and off screen.”

Ableism in the industry takes a number of forms with many participants reporting a range of negative experiences.



- 55% of participants stated that their employer had made assumptions about what they can and cannot do, based on their condition or impairment.

“Before I had disclosed my disabilities I was treated normally by the entire crew, as soon as the PM found out about my disabilities she treated me completely different. Assuming I was no longer capable of completing particular tasks, giving me less work and talking down to me.”

- ▶ 47% of participants have experienced ableist language and microaggressions.

“I experienced a lot of microaggressions, including once having to hear my supervisor ignorantly support eugenics, telling me that disabled people should stop having children so that eventually it dies out like natural selection”.

“...invasive questions such as ‘did your mum take drugs when she was pregnant?’”

“Having a producer walk in, take one look at me, and say ‘You don’t look disabled what’s wrong with you?’”

“I was once told by a senior series editor ‘I’m not having any cripples on my show’”.

**Access and Reasonable Adjustments:** Many participants reported that employers failed to ask about access needs, failed to make reasonable adjustments or even removed reasonable adjustments that had been put in place.

- ▶ 35% of participants reported that employers failed to ask about access needs.
- ▶ 30% of participants reported that employers failed to make reasonable adjustments.
- ▶ 6% of participants reported that reasonable adjustments were removed, reallocated or defunded over the course of a contract.
- ▶ 24% of participants reported a lack of accessible facilities or equipment

“I asked for reasonable adjustments which were not made, so I made an adjustment myself (raising my laptop using books/ folders) and the MD shouted at me and demoted me back to my old area – which he said ‘would be more comfortable for me’. I was livid but I was a lot younger and just cried.”

“On one location-based job, the nearest accessible toilet was a 20 mins drive away so I had to schedule my toilet breaks and ask one of the runners to drive me. And there was nowhere to eat my lunch as the catering bus was inaccessible. Also, I was meant to attend an important foreign location recce, and even though I explained multiple times my access requirements, they weren’t organised, and I subsequently couldn’t attend.”

Junior staff in particular often do not feel able to request reasonable adjustments.

“It’s only because I’m at senior level I feel confident asking for reasonable adjustments. It was much harder when I was at a junior level and I didn’t want to be perceived as a burden to employers.”



60% of participants were aware of the Access to Work (ATW) programme, but only 38% of those applied for the grant available under this scheme. While in some cases this was because individuals did not feel the need for this kind of support, in others it was because freelancers' contracts were too short or too poorly paid to qualify for the scheme.

“Freelancer and short contracts have meant by the time I’ve applied I’ve moved to another company”

In others it was because the scheme appeared too complex or because it was felt that employers would not commit the necessary effort to take advantage of ATW.

“I applied but the HR at my workplace took so long to respond that ATW closed the case”

In others it was clear that ATW simply isn't designed to support television work.

“They were very rude and stated that because I was self-employed, they wouldn't work with me. After an hour of explaining my situation, they asked me to send them my contract and they'd 'get round to reading it in a month or so'. I didn't think it worth pursuing their services after that.”

**Bullying and harassment:** Bullying is a problem throughout the industry, as several of our respondents pointed out, but many deaf and disabled people experience egregious examples of ableist bullying.

- 24% of participants had experienced bullying or harassment related to their disability.

“TV has such a terrible culture of exploitation/bullying for all employees that there really is very little hope for me ...”

“Having someone from a different department who had seen my CV approach me in an open plan office in front of everyone, loudly proclaiming that accessibility schemes and diversity schemes shouldn't exist because the truly oppressed group is the white working class (I'm not white). Nobody stood up for me.”

“I was working as a prop man/driver and noticed I could hear snatches of my name on the wind – and every time I sharply turned around in the warehouse – people in my team would turn away quickly ... what was happening was no mystery, I remember that sort of behaviour when I was in school – “... kids would love to ‘test’ my deafness” – so they'd call my name from a distance, soft at first- then getting louder and louder until they were all laughing at my not being able to hear it. I was just shocked to discover my entire team doing it, including my superiors.”

“Despite knowing what I had been diagnosed with [was] a lifelong condition, they mocked my cane and limp directly to my face and humiliated me in front of the crew.”

“Someone senior picking up my mobility aid, playing with it and at the same time jokingly saying they thought I didn’t need it and I was faking it.”

**Misconceptions and hostility:** In addition to overt bullying, misconceptions about disability leading to a hostile working environment are an ongoing issue in the industry.

“On my most recent contract, an employee claimed I could be cured [of autism] ... and began following me around, speaking to my colleagues about what I needed to do to cure myself ...”

“My line manager told me to go home and ‘get better’. It made feel that I was only of value to her if I was ‘well’. She did not understand that chronic [illness] means you don’t get better.”

“I was told at the XXX that I was entitled to no support because my illness was not serious ‘like cancer’. I never asked them for any support again.”

“The worst experience I have had was have a hypoglycaemic episode when in studio during an already exhausting 14 hour day ... The series producer came down to speak to me about the script and I tried to explain to her that I just needed a minute to bring my sugar levels back up she told me ‘We don’t have time to sit around and eat sweets’ [and] walked away ...”

**Recruitment:** The overall standard of recruitment in TV is poor, and this is thought to have negative consequences for deaf and disabled people in particular.

“I have been told more than once ‘if we’re interviewing two people with the same skills, but one person needs adjustments we have to pay for, or that will disrupt production, obviously we’ll hire the person who doesn’t need these’.”

► 30% of participants believed they had been rejected for a job due to their condition.

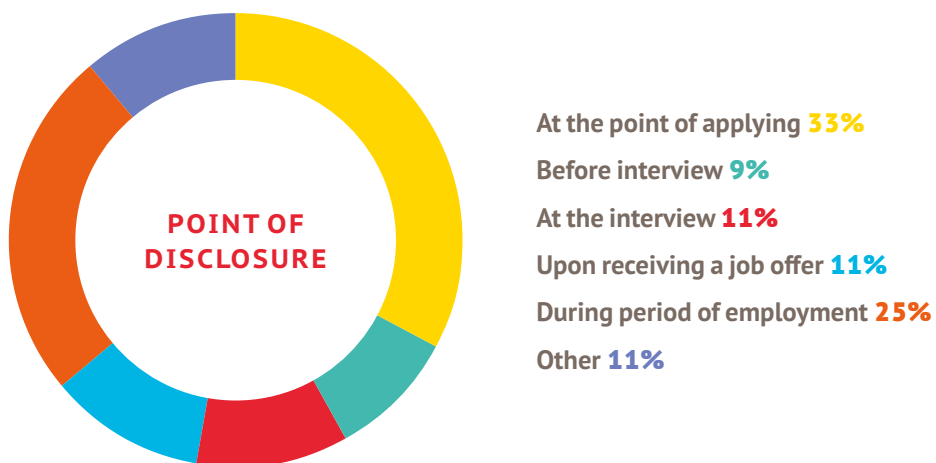
“Once I turned up for an interview for a development job, mainly a desk job, and they told me they wouldn’t have gotten me in for interview if they knew I was on crutches.”

Many of our respondents were reluctant to disclose information about their disabilities during the recruitment process.

- ▶ 32% of participants always felt comfortable sharing information about their condition/impairment, accessibility, or adjustments in the workplace with a majority finding that this was dependent on the context.



- ▶ 53% of participants typically choose to share information about their condition/impairment before receiving a job offer, with 33% of participants disclosing information at the point of applying.
- ▶ 36% of participants don't disclose such information until after receiving a job offer or, more commonly, during their contract.



Interview arrangements rarely take into consideration the needs of deaf and disabled people.

“I arrived and the production office was up a flight of stairs and I’m a wheelchair user. I had my interview at the bottom of the stairs. Didn’t get the job. What a surprise!”

If asked, at the point of being invited for interview, whether they needed any reasonable adjustment or access support for the interview itself, 46% of participants said they would feel comfortable sharing this information.

“I’d feel really happy. It’s a great sign when they ask. It takes the emotional labour off me. It shows they are not last minute merchants on the access front ...”

Others do not have sufficient trust in employers due to previous experience.

“In the past I’ve shared this and suddenly they no longer need me.”

Many participants with invisible disabilities are reluctant to share information about their condition at all in case it impacts on their employment.

“I was working an event for a large television company and ... informed the senior employee who was in charge of the evening of my disability. They went away and decided for me that I was no longer able to take part in the rest of the event and very quickly replaced me with someone else.”

**Lack of knowledge and training:** The overall level of knowledge and awareness of legal obligations and responsibilities among employers is low.

- 68% of participants, while working or seeking work in TV, have found that employers are not sufficiently aware of their obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

“I once asked a commissioner why disabled people were not employed and reasonable adjustments were not made, like in other industries, and was told it takes too long to organise and too expensive when they just want to get on with filming”.

“There is absolutely no understanding of Access to Work, I have to consistently educate my employers on disability rights or ableist language and policies”.

Tight budgets and freelance managers are the main factors limiting smaller employers.

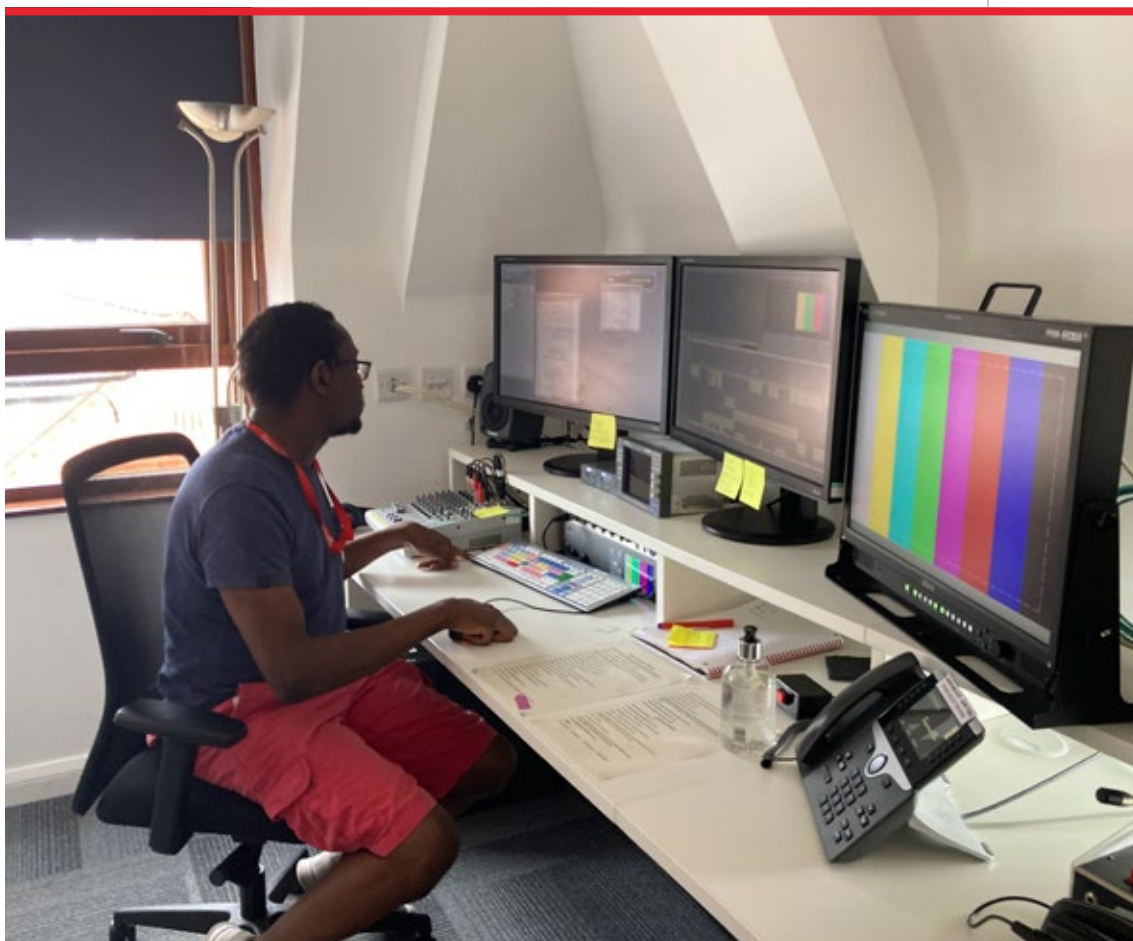
“Smaller companies just panic or think they should leave it to government funded broadcasters to deal with people who are disabled.”

“Companies do not train their Freelancers in unconscious bias or how to adequately handle disability applicants, their potential reasonable adjustments or their own requirements under the Disabilities Act. I have never been asked, when being interviewed by a freelancer, if I even have reasonable adjustments that I need, it’s never asked.”

Big players often pay lip-service to equality and diversity but in practice create conditions within which deaf and disabled people cannot thrive.

“I once was taken ill in hospital whilst working on a series for [a major broadcaster]. When I returned they’d sacked me & given my job to someone else.”

“Without more realistic budgets – and this is a broadcaster-down issue – and timescales, it will never be sustainable for disabled people to have a career in television.”



Overall it is clear that the industry is plagued by a fundamental lack of understanding at the top when it comes to disability.

“I don’t think the senior people or execs in the industry GET it and are usually the ones blocking many of us ... Many of the brilliant casting teams bring me in but then are rejected or challenged by the people above them ... I once got an email from a Casting Exec, expressing how ‘gutted and disappointed’ they were and that the ‘Exec Producers just didn’t get it and were reluctant and nervous’. What am I supposed to do with that? It’s exhausting.”

“Assuming disability is a black and white issue with no shades of grey; either you can do the job or you can’t. And perceiving adjustments as inconveniences. For many reasons, TV takes the path of least resistance.”

**Intersectionality:** Our participants came from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and a range of ages, gender identities and sexual orientations (see Appendix for details). While our relatively small sample can make no claim to being representative of all deaf and disabled people in television, it is indicative of the multiplicity of identities that may intersect with that of being a deaf or disabled person – and thus the multiplicity of disadvantages many of our participants encounter.

“[I was] told that I should change vocations because in the real world my disability and skin colour will always be a barrier.”

“[A] series that is meant for disabled people had four out of five stories about white disabled characters and these four were directed by white directors.”

“[In drama], having the attitude of ‘is this too much?’ We don’t have many characters that have multiple layers of diversity ... We need to show people it’s okay to have more than one thing going on.”

**Impact on individuals:** 64% of participants report that working conditions have affected their physical and mental health. Many leave the industry as a result.

“[It] really affected my mental health. I was miserable and pretty alone.”

“It is not enough to simply hire disabled people, the workplace cannot then be hostile for us so that we can’t stay, or don’t feel comfortable.”

“Leaving television was like leaving an abusive relationship. I am still in psychotherapy two years later”.



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## Getting it right

It is important to note that our respondents reported excellent examples of good practice by some television employers. These examples give a sense of what is possible when production companies and the managers who work for them bring a good understanding and a positive mind-set to their relationships with deaf and disabled workers.

The best employers are compassionate, and check in with their employees.

“The best experience I have had was a very informal conversation with the executive producer who simply asked whether I needed anything whilst working for them. When I said no, she said to keep her posted if that changes at all. That was it, simple, empowering and kind.”

- ▶ They take a proactive approach to reasonable adjustments to ensure the employee can work on an equal footing to their peers.

“ATW were unable to provide funding for a piece of equipment which would help me get around set and locations, so amazingly my production company paid for it themselves ... they were fully supportive of my needs to ensure I could perform my job to my full capacity.”

- ▶ They value deaf and disabled colleagues and recognise their positive contribution.

“[My] current job sees my disability as a huge positive. My opinions are valued and asked for. Change is made and acted upon when I make suggestions. Access to Work and access requirements are not awkward conversations to have and just done without a big song and dance made about them.”

- ▶ They promote a positive workplace culture and avoid making assumptions about deaf and disabled colleagues.

“Bosses who ask without assuming what I can or can't do also leads to a much more comfortable workplace where I don't have to worry that I'm being overlooked.”

Unfortunately these positive experiences are still rare for many of our respondents.

“This is the first job (at age nearly 40) that I have ever had where I feel totally included and part of the team!”

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## Ways forward

“What most people don’t know is that it’s very easy to accommodate everyone ...it’s only when people make assumptions that things go wrong.”

The findings of this survey confirm and illustrate some of the problems that the TV industry faces with regard to its legal responsibilities as an employer. Whatever the current interventions or intentions of employers, the voices of deaf and disabled professionals suggest that the issues raised in this report are not being taken seriously enough. There is a clear need for education and some fresh thinking about reform in this important area.

The general levels of ignorance that our respondents encounter in the industry suggests that mandatory training is needed for employers and for anyone, freelance or staff, who has management and recruitment responsibilities, in order to ensure they understand their obligations under the Equality Act 2010. Meanwhile the wider workforce should have access to more general awareness training around deafness and disability to tackle ableist culture and misconceptions of disability.

Although schemes such as Access to Work are available to all industries to provide practical support in the workplace that go beyond reasonable adjustments, the qualitative data suggest that these resources are under-utilised in the television industry. This is often a result of budget and schedules, imposed by broadcasters, that do not allow for reasonable adjustments to be made or additional support to be put in place, prior to starting production. There is a clear need for longer lead times on production contracts, and budgets that allow for ethical recruitment and employment practices. In particular there is a need for advisory and financial support for smaller employers within the industry in order to provide the capacity to comply with their obligations to deaf and disabled staff.

Furthermore, the qualitative data suggests that many employees are not aware of their own rights under the Equality Act 2010 and the ATW scheme. Therefore, there is a need to develop better, industry-specific information for deaf and disabled employees about their legal rights – and perhaps some level of industry-specific information to ATW to help that organisation’s representatives better understand the particular needs and working context of television professionals.

What is clear is that the industry needs to look beyond well-intentioned mission statements and short-lived ‘initiatives’ to its own underpinning structures and practices in order to provide a working environment that allows deaf and disabled people to fulfil their potential. An industry that is not able to do this cannot expect to meet the needs of a diverse audience.

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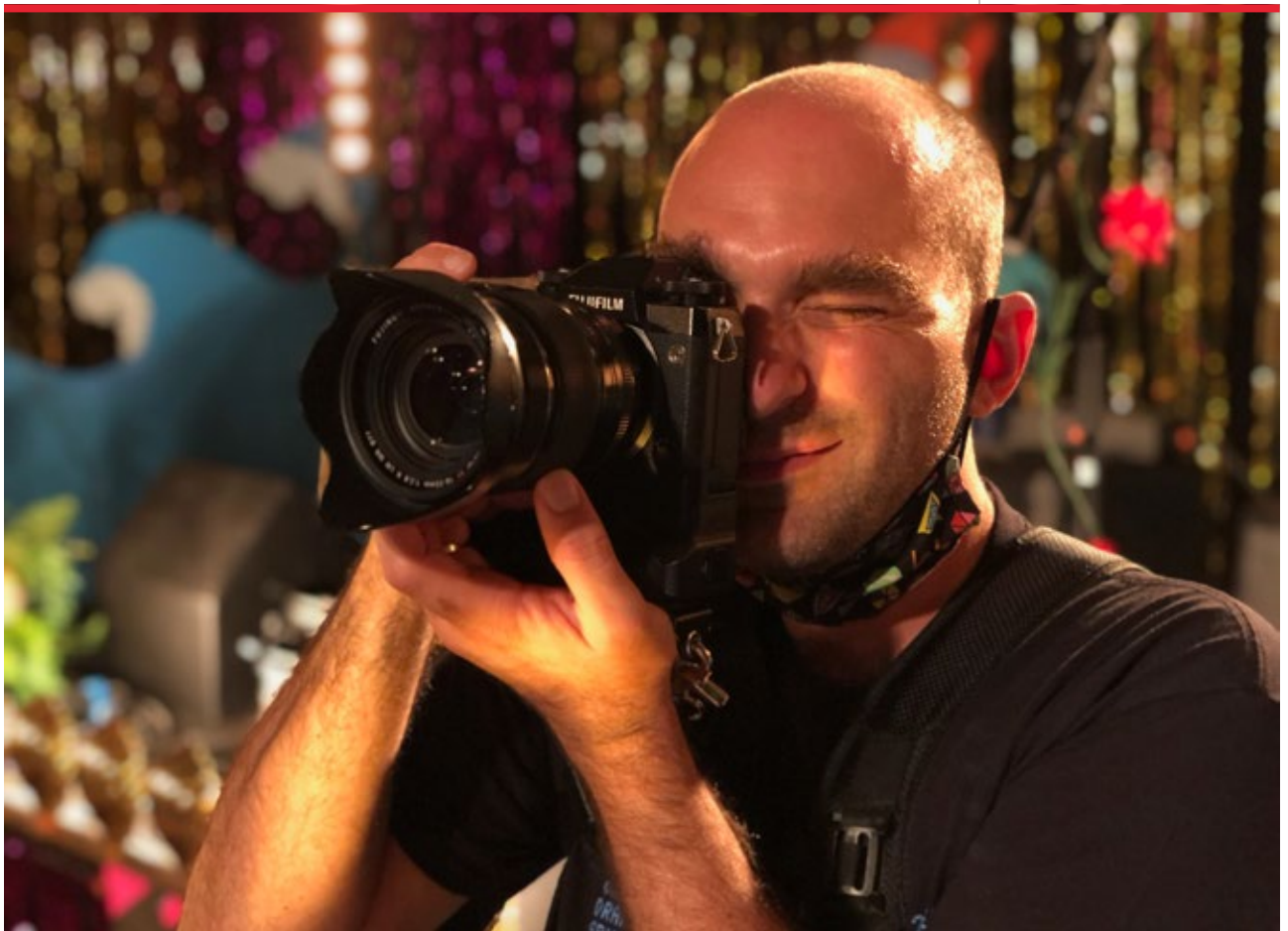
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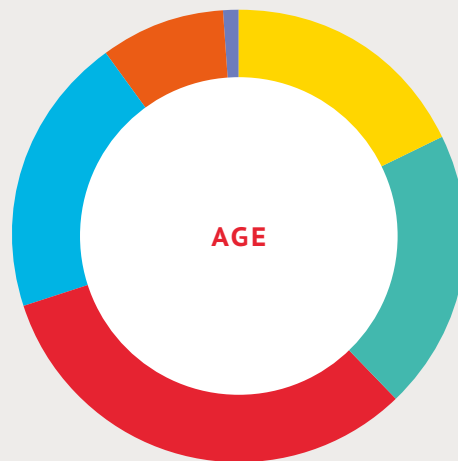
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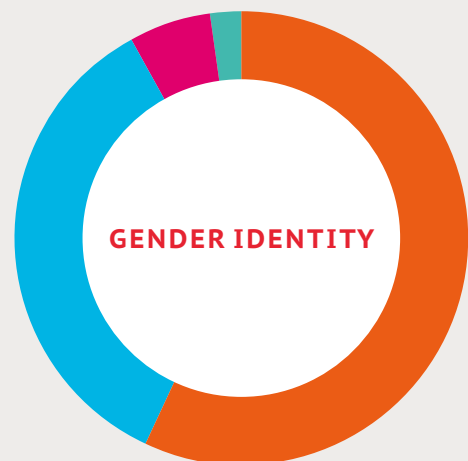
## Appendix:

### Demographic Profile of Participants

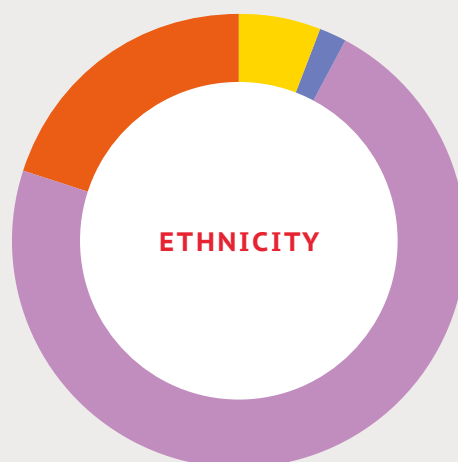


24 and under **18%**  
25–29 **20%**  
30–39 **32%**  
40–49 **20%**  
50–59 **9%**  
60 and over **1%**

Woman **57%**  
Man **35%**  
Non-binary **6%**  
Rather not say **2%**

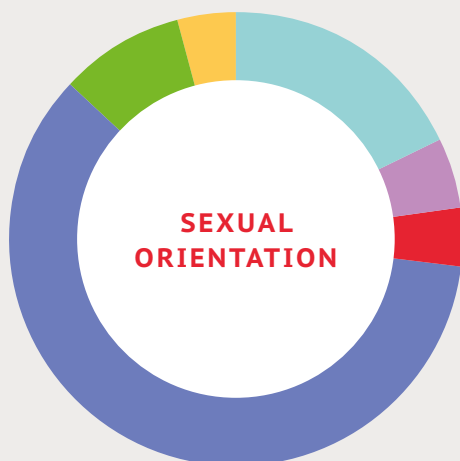


**GENDER IDENTITY**



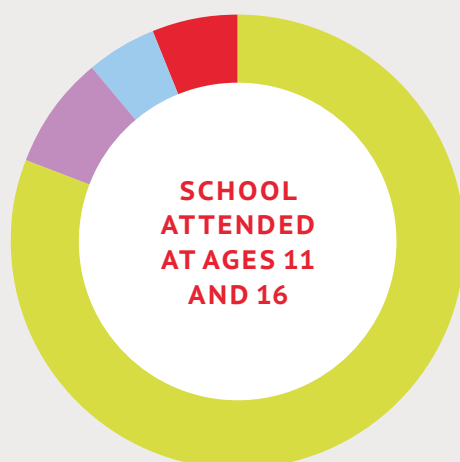
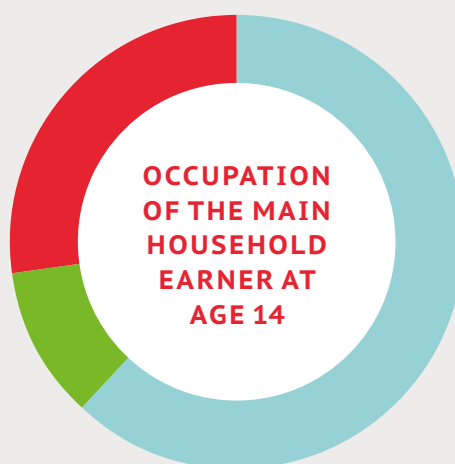
Asian background **6%**  
Black background **2%**  
White background **72%**  
Other background **20%**

**ETHNICITY**



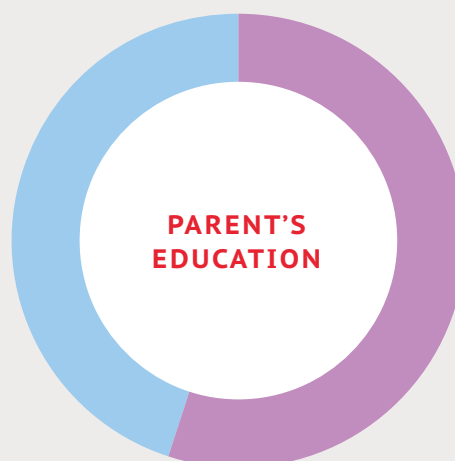
Bisexual 18%  
 Gay man 5%  
 Gay woman 4%  
 Heterosexual 60%  
 Rather not say 9%  
 Other 4%

Professional backgrounds 62%  
 Intermediate backgrounds 11%  
 Lower socio-economic backgrounds 27%



A state run or state funded school 81%  
 Independent or fee-paying school 8%  
 Independent or fee-paying-received bursary 5%  
 Attended school outside the UK 6%

Neither of my parents attended university 55%  
 One or both of my parents attended university 45%



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