

Australian Music Business Managers' Views of Working with and Supporting Birth Parents After Career Breaks

Research Article

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Abstract: The career planning and working conditions of music industry workers are largely shaped by the organisations, clients and cultures they work with and within. Music industry workers have been model “gig” workers, often employed under project-based contracts, or as freelancers and sole traders, making job security and hence financial security a key concern for workers in the sector. This is even more challenging for women and gender non-conforming people who have given birth. While the business interests of larger music labels have been accounted for in “portfolio” and “DIY” career development models, the views and interests of small-to-medium enterprises and microbusinesses are not as readily apparent. This paper contributes to redressing this absence through presenting findings of focus groups and interviews with music business managers from Victoria, Australia. While employers generally aim to support birth parents, they view motherhood as necessarily conflicting with music careers and frame the music industries as unfriendly to women. This results in a situation where employers can externalise both the risk of and solutions for the disruptions and the disadvantages having a child creates for women, where women are ultimately seen as responsible for enacting individualised forms of change to advance their careers, and the provision of services to facilitate this is seen as the responsibility of government or music-focused organisations. While such attitudes are indicative of ostensive support for changes to better support returning workers, they also act to legitimise the systemic forms of inequality that face returning workers.

Keywords: career break • career interruption • maternity leave • employers • music

1. The Music Industry Careers Landscape

Although somewhat contentious, the application of the concept of “career” within music industry research has proved fruitful for understanding how workers plan for the future in these volatile industries and professions. Studies exploring the subjective experiences of careers have used the metaphor to explore moments of “liminality” (Canham 2023), as music graduates transition to seeing themselves as “being” musicians, reconfiguring their self-identities in the process. Along these lines, the notions of “career disruptions” or “career breaks” have been valuable for exploring the subjective experiences of identity loss and challenges to ontological security that result from plans being upended (Cannizzo et al. 2023; Swartjes et al. 2023). Such studies have focused largely on the meanings that one’s identity as a music industry worker (whether as musician, festival organiser, promoter, etc.) have for expectations of future work and planning. While music industry work is inherently entrepreneurial, music industry workers’ ideas about their roles are shaped by cultural norms, such as the romantic individualist ideal of the creative artist (Haynes & Marshall 2017). Such subjective evaluations of music industry roles have also been addressed through the concept of career “success” (Hughes et al. 2013), which Zwaan et al. (2010) note can be defined inter-subjectively in terms of a music artist’s “reputation”. Everts et al. (2022) note that the focus on building reputation among Dutch music industry workers aligns ideas of career success with established music industry norms and “milestones”. These interpretivist approaches seek to account for the social meanings of a music artist’s

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experiences and actions and hence identify a multiplicity of career narratives and common discursive tools that music industry workers use to account for their work histories and hopes for the future.

Those researchers seeking to form objectivist approaches to music industry careers focus more directly on large-scale sectoral transformations, such as the digital media revolution, claims about the waning dominance of major music labels and the transformation of the monetisation process behind recorded music, from commodity sales to service provision (Stahl & Meier 2012; Watson 2013; Hughes et al. 2016; Negus 2019). Hughes et al. (2016: 1) claim that the “new music industries” are no longer centred around labels, as the opportunities for music creators to produce their work and access listeners beyond label representation have expanded in a digital, networked media era. The pathways to recognised music careers are hence plural, but common markers of career development have been proposed, such as: gaining access to revenue streams (live performance, merchandise, song publishing, recorded music and sponsorship deals; Morrow, in Hughes et al. 2016: 18); earning revenue from music performance as opposed to other, non-music work (Everts 2023) and achieving a major record label and publishing contract and winning music prizes and awards, through industry showcase festival performances (Thorkildsen & Rykkja 2022: 50). For music artists working with major music labels, the desire to commodify multiple revenue streams from an artist (such as music sales, live performances, merchandise, sync, streaming rights) in 360-degree deals means that artist and repertoire (A&R) managers play a key role in career building. Or, as Bruinenberg (2020: 42) notes, A&R managers contribute to the “vision and identity of [music artists]” as a function of branding. Gatekeepers in music industries extend beyond major labels and may include any number of decision-makers whose personal discretion or social influence may admit or prevent music workers from accessing career advancement opportunities and rewards, including employers, awards judges, venue owners and bookers, A&R managers, music agents, radio producers and hosts, streaming services, publication editors, and other sources of publicity such as music critics. Even other musicians and consumers may play gatekeeping roles in shaping access to career opportunities (Sanders et al. 2022: 37). As Hooper (2019: 137) argues, these gatekeepers manage the channels through which artistic works are converted into marketable products and services.

The way in which music industry workers’ career development depends on attaining reputation and access to the opportunities that gatekeepers control allows room for gendered norms and discrimination to shape career development in the industry. Since information, opportunities and resources may circulate through informal social connections (or networks), which are largely unregulated, “artistic fields can resemble ‘old boys’ clubs” (Miller in Hooper 2019: 131). Selection biases may enter decision-making through homo-social bonding and personal judgements, as well as more explicit forms of bias through risk-mitigation strategies such as selecting music acts based on the perceived tastes of audiences (Hooper 2019: 139). Navigating the networks of the music industries can be confronting, as the professional biases of gatekeepers are also personal judgements. For musicians, Musgrave (2023) notes, managing workplace relationships is often stressful because economic relationships (such as those with gatekeepers, employers, colleagues, or clients) are often also intimate personal relationships. The potential for mismatch between how one manages personal and economic relationships, and hence how to negotiate that within the music setting, is identified as a potential cause of mental ill-health in his study. The need to engage personally with colleagues, audiences and gatekeepers places women and gender non-conforming people at a disadvantage in the sector broadly. This is, in part, because the presence of gender-based violence and harassment (Support Act 2022; Hill et al. 2024), exclusion (Cannizzo & Strong 2020) and social norms that disadvantage women and gender non-conforming people (Scharff 2018) make negotiating the informal social networks of music industries an unequal playing field and one where the personal is intimately political.

While some contemporary research has traced the contours of gendered inequalities among music business managers and music industry peak body organisations, there is a paucity of research exploring the roles of leadership in addressing gender inequalities. In their survey of senior music industry roles (i.e. executive roles and board members), Music Victoria (2015: 5) found that “*of all the senior positions available across these organisations, only 28% are held by women*” – a finding echoed by Cooper et al.’s (2017) *Skipping a Beat* report. The role of senior managers in reproducing gender segregation in music industry roles has been outlined by Leonard (2014: 130), where recruiting attempting to implement “job-matching processes” may introduce cultural biases – for example, the belief that an A&R job may be more “*suited* for men” – and discourage women from applying for roles with attached biases. The persistence of pervasive gendered cultures and norms is reinforced through denials by decision-makers that the ensuing forms of “structural injustice or prejudice” impacts their business practices or decision-making (Edmond 2019: 79). In this light, a history of policy approaches that foreground the “self-empowerment”, “hypervigilance” and “resilience” of women working in the music industry can normalise and rationalise the self-

responsibilisation of women for affecting change at the individual level, while leading to only marginal improvements for gender equity in the industry (Edmond 2023).

Given the roles that gatekeepers' values, habits and decisions play in career outcomes, as Hooper (2019: 136) claims, researchers need to "*turn our attention towards these music industry gatekeepers and their practices*". The transformation of gatekeeper practices through the growth of music streaming has been documented in studies such as the Newcastle music industry study conducted by McIntyre and Sheather (2013), while others (i.e. Murtaza et al. 2021) have described how gatekeepers perceive the value of music work produced in a digital era. To date, this work has given prominence to the interests of gatekeepers that follow from structural changes to music economies, while less attention has been paid to the role and views of gatekeepers in addressing the social harms produced through labour practices within the industries. These need to be understood in the context of wider trends around parenting and work. Research across the workforce has shown that motherhood is a barrier to career progression, and that the process of returning to work involves complex negotiations of conflicting roles for the new parent, while simultaneously "*maternity leave and return to paid employment are challenges for employers and leaders of small, medium and large businesses, including accommodating and supporting women's work/life responsibilities and roles*" (Gregory 2021: 578). These difficulties are often compounded by discrimination against the returning worker (AHRC 2014), and are exacerbated in creative industries characterised by precarious work patterns (Dent 2020). Focusing on gatekeepers in this specific industry and the way they position themselves in relation to women and GNC people returning to work after giving birth will provide new knowledge on the sector-specific impacts of having children on career progression. To explore these issues, we developed the following research question:

Research Question: What are the views of music business managers towards mothers returning to the music industry after a career break?

2. Music Industry Employer Focus Group: Methods

To explore the views of music industry business managers towards mothers returning to the music industry after career breaks, we draw on a 2023 intervention project (see Strong et al. 2023). Thirty-nine interviews and three facilitator-led focus group sessions were conducted in order to develop a co-designed (Cruickshank et al. 2013; Steen 2013; Blomkamp 2018) training package for music industry workers. A total of eight persons who manage a business in the music industry (such as an artist management business, events company or music service agency) were interviewed or took part in focus groups, during which they were asked questions about: (1) their experiences in working with women and gender non-conforming people who had returned to work after a career break; (2) the perceived needs of such workers; (3) strategies that their businesses had put in place for such workers; and (4) strategies that they would ideally like to implement and what was preventing them from doing so. While recruitment advertisements did not specify a preference or restriction on the gender identity of participants that would be recruited into the study, all participants identified as women and seemed broadly motivated to help birth parents to resume their music industry careers. Although discussion prompts were open to discussing a range of reasons for career breaks, such as illness, disability, or burnout, participants focussed on maternity and childcare in their responses and discussions. The demographic characteristics of these participants are summarised in Table 1.

Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. After being de-identified, these transcripts were then analysed using an inductive content analysis approach, in order to develop grounded categories of responses to the focus group and interview questions. This iterative process involved firstly identifying "big picture" (Vears & Gillam 2022: 117) themes through participants' responses to the discussion questions, and secondly by then classifying the contents of these themes into more precise subcategories (Vears & Gillam 2022: 121). A quality check was conducted by all members of the research team so that ambiguous coding categories were reviewed and excluded where agreement between research team members could not be reached. The following analysis notes where themes were repeated and suggestive of the presence of discourses.

2.1. Discourse Analysis and Subjectivity

The views and experiences of music industry business managers are analysed here through the lens of discourse analysis. The post-structural approach used here seeks to understand how discourses become part of how humans experience their sense of selves by treating "talk and texts as social practices" (Potter & Wetherell 2002: 48).

	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
30-39	4	50
40-49	2	25
50-59	2	25
Gender		
Cis woman	8	100
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	5	62.5
Asian	1	12.5
South American	1	12.5
Not specified / Prefer not to say	1	12.5
Residential Location		
Inner suburbs of Melbourne	4	50
Outer suburbs of Melbourne	3	37.5
Victoria, outside Melbourne	1	12.5
Business Type		
Sole trader	5	62.5
Employer	3	37.5
Business Description		
Artist management	5	62.5
Events services	1	12.5
Music label	1	12.5
Public relations	1	12.5
Caregiver		
Yes	4	50
No	4	50
Time Since Entering Industry		
Average	22	
Standard deviation	9.7	
Median	18	

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Discourse is only meaningful within social context, so that as analysts of these social actions, we must seek out how speech is systemically patterned in the context of social institutions and norms, the way Potter and Wetherell (2002: 49) have developed in their analysis of “interpretive repertoires” (also see Cannizzo & Strong 2020). Discourses are understood here as not only tools that people use to rationalise, justify, enact and perform actions, but also as communal resources that are developed through socialisation and require social recognition in order to be used in predictable ways. By identifying the patterns in participants’ ways of speaking and thinking about their roles as music business managers and their responsibilities towards employees and clients, we infer some of the “discursive formations” (or “discourses”; Foucault 2003/1968: 412) that enable these speech acts.

The identification of discourses within the speech of music business managers is useful not only to understand the linguistic tools used to navigate social interactions, but also to explore how subjectivity shapes such interactions.

The experience of selfhood – of subjectivity – is both a function of a social system and also an expression of agency (Kendall & Michael 1998). This experience of self is distinct from “identity” in that it is transient and socially specific; or in Foucault’s (in Kendall & Michael 1998: n.p.) terms, “*subjectivity is nomadic, temporary, contradictory, and heterogeneous, while identity is stable, permanent, coherent and homogeneous*”. The study of subjectification (the processes of subjectivity) does not document the solidification of a sense of self, but rather the changing “*relations which human beings have established with themselves*” (Rose 1995: 130). The inferred subjectivities discussed here have taken on their forms due to strategies for acting upon ourselves in order to achieve particular ideals or goals, evidenced through the presence of discourses that reflect broader societal ideals and practices for acting on ourselves – i.e. feminist virtues, business acumen, stoic acceptance. It forms part of a broader challenge of discovering the rationalities of governance through which social order becomes possible. Or, as Rose and Miller (2008: 3) have claimed in the development of their analytics of governmentality:

To understand what was thought, said and done meant trying to identify the tacit premises and assumptions that made these things thinkable, sayable and doable.

Understanding how music business managers view their roles and responsibilities in assisting mothers get back into the music industry workforce is hence aided by a clear overview of practices of subjectification.

3. Working with Women Returning from a Career Break

The support of leaders and workplaces for women and gender non-conforming people taking a career break can be instrumental in their accessing workplace accommodations and more easily transitioning back into their work (Chang et al. 2021). To elicit discussion of employers’ views towards taking leave and managing returning workers, our interviewees were asked about their experiences of both taking leave themselves and of working with women and gender non-conforming people who had taken leave and returned to work under their supervision or as their clients. While all participants could identify an employee, colleague or client who had taken time off work, these workplace associates were the exception, rather than the rule. As one employer highlighted:

Over the years I’ve worked with a number of women in the management business, managing artists who identify as women, and pretty much, without fail, except for one, none of them have had children [and hence taken leave]. The one that has had children, she did take a small career break I think, but has been producing solo work pretty much throughout the time.

The experience of maternity was often conflated with the concept of a career break in discussions, but the meaning of what a “break” entailed became opaque. As noted by the employer quoted above, their client’s “small career break” included the continuation of music work through “solo work”, which requires less coordination with other industry actors (and hence more flexibility in work flow and schedule), but was nonetheless a continuation of work rather than a strict “break”. Throughout the interview and focus group discussions, this opaqueness around the concept of a career “break” allowed the term to incorporate a range of different circumstances and activities, from temporarily leaving the music industry entirely, to scaling back work hours, to terminating contracts with some clients, or other methods of reducing work obligations. This also highlights the way in which it is not always straightforward to think of music-making as “work”, as it is also an activity undertaken for pleasure. It is not clear, for instance, in this anecdote whether the mother on leave made music to further her career or because she *enjoyed* it, or some combination of these.

The looseness in meaning of career “break” was reflected in employers’ discussions of managing their own sense of “career” through pregnancy and parenthood. None of the five participants who were mothers had taken maternity leave during or following their own pregnancies. When asked whether any of their musician clients had taken a career break, one employer noted:

We never had career breaks and I didn’t have a career break at all, but did change [how I worked], so stopped touring overseas and would only play two shows in a row, a week. It changed... their career path and career opportunities. I didn’t ever have an official break, but we just made some space around that. Yeah, definitely big impacts on career.

The concern for “ecareer path and career opportunities” expressed above was a common theme when participants were explaining their own career histories and also a concern for others taking a break. Employers were also concerned for the “professional repercussions” that mothers might experience; that is, how others would perceive their values around the time of their maternity leave. As one participant recalled:

I feel like the decision to actually have children in the first place in music is a difficult one to make because there's a lot of potential cultural repercussions... I delayed having kids... I worked through both of my pregnancies. I worked through to the end. I worked through during labour. I continued to work. I picked up work pretty much immediately after each birth, and continued to work probably harder than I had before pregnancy in order to probably cement my commitment and show that I was still able to commit while being a mother.

The sentiment of being seen as “still able to commit” to music work was recognised by participants as part of a “cultural issue” that needs to be addressed, as an employer noted shortly after the preceding statement was made:

There's got to be some kind of sensitivity training around women having children and their ability to actually commit and continue to work.

Another employer framed this concern for the career development of pregnant workers and new mothers in terms of the ordinary functions of their business, framing the risk of losing touch with the industry as an assumed risk when taking a career break:

some of the realities of taking a break... missing out on training and missing out on decisions that will be happening within the business; businesses like ours can move really quickly over a 12 month period.

This employer reiterated this concern later on when asked, “are there any other concerns you would have with working with or hiring someone who had taken a career break?” by stating that she would look out for “a shift in priorities” knowing that the employee may have “a young child at home” that they might need to attend to rather than work. She noted that this reflected her belief that her own priorities would likely change if she had a child herself. The perception of a tension between “priorities” to motherhood and music work emerged as a discourse through which participants framed their views of maternity and career e“breaks” in the music industries.

However, despite the common discourse of competing priorities, employers’ behaviours towards employees taking maternity leave were not uniform. One of our participants, for example, who owned her own small business, described implementing a broad range of leave provisions beyond those mandated by the Fair Work Act 2009. She described offering “flexible working”, “work[ing] from home”, allowing for indefinite partially paid leave, mental health leave, and in one instance paying for an employee’s vacation after they underwent a major operation. While all participants expressed a desire to assist women and gender non-conforming people to return to work, the provision of assistance beyond what is mandated by Commonwealth law is *ad hoc* and rare, and only described by one of our focus group participants.

Participants were also asked more directly to reflect on any “concerns” that they had about working with clients, colleagues or employees who may take a career break. The focus group facilitator clarified that the purpose of this discussion was to elicit what forms of support employers were concerned about seeking for returning employees. The most discussed response was a concern for the availability of employees and clients on returning from a break:

If it's an artist coming back... where is their career at and what work is going to be needed to rebuild it? Also, the limitations... Limitations for availability, for travel, for access to them. How much are they going to be able to work? They would be my immediate thoughts or concerns around working with someone coming back in with a young child.

Access to childcare, building childcare costs into performance fees, and having nannies or family travel with performers to look after children were all discussed as strategies for music performers. However, participants also acknowledged that not every industry role can incorporate on-site care. “For [sound] techs”, one participant noted, “you can’t really take a child to work” – “it’s not safe... a lot of it depends whether you have family support or not”.

Because each of our participants were senior businesswomen, the impact of childcare was repeatedly linked back to the stability of the business. As one employer cautioned:

A thing I've noticed that young families don't realise is when they start to put their children in childcare, they get sick, and then they get sick from the kids, and then they bring the sickness to work, and then all the staff here, it goes through all of us again.

Although each participant was broadly supportive of integrating mothers into their workplaces (as either employees or clients), many of their concerns with working with returned mothers focused on the potential impact of parents on the day-to-day operations of their businesses.

4. Individualising Strategies for the Structural Problems of Returning Women

Participants continued to weigh up the needs of businesses against the needs of parents when considering ways to support returning workers. When asked what forms of support returning women and gender non-conforming people might need, the most commonly discussed categories of responses were (1) flexible working arrangements, (2) parental leave, and (3) workplace accommodations such as feeding rooms for mothers. Each of these potential arrangements was discussed in the context of potential conflicts between the interests of mothers and businesses. When discussing flexible working arrangement for artist managers, one employer suggested that having a co-worker step in and assist with managing some clients was risky for both the artist management firm and also the person taking leave:

The expectation [of an artist manager] is you are going to be there to do that work and you are going to be there to answer the questions, troubleshoot and do whatever is necessary... and you run the risk of losing your artist's confidence and I don't think that matters how long you've been working with them.

This highlights the way that interpersonal relationships are key to music industry business, as noted earlier. Another participant added that "I've certainly seen a lot of poor examples of people's roles being moved around while they're away" in order to prioritise business needs over the stability of the employee's returning work opportunities. All participants agreed that "money is a big factor" in supporting people taking leave from employment, but were equally cognisant that financial help for employees was not often available to businesses. When asked, participants agreed that a lack of funds to help support workers on leave was the primary factor preventing them from offering the assistance that they believed workers needed.

When considering workplace accommodations to support returning mothers, one employer explained that she had taken her child to events that she worked at and "was thrown out of [her] own shows for breastfeeding in rehearsals". When asked what kind of support would be helpful, she described this as "financial" rather than encouraging employers to offer on-site accommodations:

I think it's financial. Financial [support] is a big thing to be considered because you can't work the same hours with children unless you're working for yourself... You can [choose] actual work times a bit with the baby if you're breastfeeding or whatever.

For her own business, this employer had "set up a nursing room" on-site to accommodate her own workers, but recognised that not every employer would necessarily be able to offer similar accommodations. Having the financial support to self-manage one's own business (and hence work schedule) is prioritised here over what this employer saw as the need for a more systemic change implied by the broad provision of on-site accommodations for breastfeeding parents.

The perception of a lack of support from the industry at large was expressed through discussion of a values-tension between the needs of music businesses (and their fiduciary obligations) and the needs of mothers working in the industries. When participants were asked about forms of support that they would like to be able to provide to their employees (and clients) and what was preventing them from offering that support, two key mechanisms came to dominate discussions: extended maternity leave and psychological support. Discussions of extended maternity

leave (beyond that of the parental leave offered by the Australian government, which was 20 weeks of paid leave at the time of writing) were described as unrealistic for both sole traders and their own businesses:

I think a lot of the things that I could think of would hinge around finances. It'd be nice to be able to provide extended maternity leave for women, paid maternity leave, I mean. What? It's 12 weeks at the moment. If you're self-employed, if you're some of us, you never took it in the first place.

I'd love to offer and be able to pay some of my staff to come back or be able to take longer breaks as well. It's that fine line of trying to help and pay where you can, but at the same time, you're running a business and there isn't funding for us to be able to help women.

What participants describe as “finances” and “funding” here are both the limitations in business cash flow and risk-averse norms of minimising business expenses in an industry that has always been precarious for many involved, and is also grappling with memories of the recent financial harms wrought by COVID-19. When asked what might potentially prevent them or other businesses from implementing support measures for women and gender non-conforming people, participants outlined the need for representation in larger music companies. While the participants in this study had experienced raising children and often being the primary carer through their music industry careers, they noted that this was not the case in some larger music organisations where management and executive leadership were staffed by men. As one participant phrased it:

The biggest problem that we find, that's always been the case, is that women are able to talk to other women about the experiences that they've had, but they're not always the decision makers in these groups. I think it's about getting industry buy-in from the top, and actually making systemic changes... it's difficult when you have a conversation, particularly with a male leader who, when you're asking for financial support during your career break, if you are met with the response of, “But I don't need to legally provide you with any of this”.

Although not necessarily able to financially support returning parents themselves, participants agreed on the distinction in values between the business-focused ethics expressed in the above quote (i.e. only providing what is “legally” necessary) and the feminist ethics of providing support for women in the workplace, beyond legal obligations. The earlier-identified discourse of workers prioritising motherhood over career was again invoked here through a feminist ethics. That is, business managers should support returning mothers to pursue motherhood without risk to job security or returning to work prematurely.

However, when pressed to suggest strategies or programs to support workers and clients re-entering the industries, participants were broadly reluctant to suggest that music businesses should take on the task of implementing these programs. For example, one artist manager suggested that “some kind of HR service” was needed to inform returning workers about their rights and legal issues, suggesting that a publicly funded industry peak body (such as the Association of Artist Managers) would need to deliver such a service. Other forms of support described by participants focused less on the kinds of support that would require broad financial restructuring of business interests and more on preparing mothers for re-entering an industry, which was assumed would not be likely to offer them financial support. In particular, the individualistic approach of offering parents and parent-to-be information, counselling and mentorship was raised repeatedly:

I do think psychology sessions, counselling can be helpful in being able to download and actually make sense of your change in life. Particularly when you're coming back from such a momentous event as giving birth, and then dealing with a small child, your lifestyle, particularly in the music realm, it completely shifts overnight.

I think support around transition time is really key. Information and just that cultural shift, I think is really important. The psych sessions or some training around that time would be so beneficial... Mentorships and role models.

These individualistic forms of support were described as more realistic and able to be implemented due to their relatively lower costs (with mentorship claimed to be often provided *pro bono* by women in the music industries). The perceived dominance of business interests over the interests of returning mothers was perhaps best summarised by one participant who described an anxiety that seemed to be recognised by other members of the focus group:

I think there's probably an underlying thought that would go through most people's minds, about feeling replaced. Like, if someone comes in on a maternity cover and is quite good or impressive and makes a mark... I guess, how does that play out when you return?

Discussion of means of supporting birth parents in returning to the music industries was therefore characterised by a continuous balancing of two groups of interests: those of parents and those of music businesses. The resulting descriptions of strategies tended to focus on methods that would require less disruption to business interests. The resultant suggestions place the onus back on the new mother to find ways to manage the situation from an individualised standpoint.

5. Speaking as Mothers and Music Business Managers

While supportive of returning birth parents, interviewees were also conscious of the competitive and precarious circumstances of business in the Australian music industries. In 2019, a House of Representatives Standing Committee report acknowledged these circumstances in proposing measures to incentivise the production and use of Australian music (Commonwealth of Australia 2019). The music business managers interviewed in this study are negotiating the dualities of motherhood and management by both identifying moments of conflict between the roles, but also by enacting forms of selfhood that embody both simultaneously. This occurred through the use of two discourses within focus groups and interviews: the self-responsibilising discourse of worker "priorities" and a communal discourse of feminist advocacy. Together, these discourses function to both legitimise key assumptions of contemporary industrial relations (and political economy) within the music industries, while also demonstrating the limitations of equity strategies that prioritise individual agency and buying into a "confidence culture" (Orgad & Gill 2022) as a means of career development for music industry workers.

Discourses and strategies that aim to empower workers to take responsibility for their own career development and life circumstances are culturally enmeshed in a form of societal governance that Dean (2010) and Rose (1999) have described as "advanced liberalism". While liberal political projects have aimed, in various ways, to bring about a free, autonomous individual as the aim and limitation of government, advanced liberalism interprets this freedom and autonomy as achievable only through the appropriate socialisation of citizens, who must in turn learn how to choose freely. Or, as Dean (2010: 193) puts it, in order to act freely, the subject must first be shaped, guided and moulded into one capable of responsibly exercising that freedom through systems of domination. Subjection and "subjectification" are laid upon one another. Each is a condition of the other.

Subjects that are able to be understood to responsibly exercise freedom are those who successfully enact proscribed ("rational") means of risk management in seeking to "*fulfil themselves* as free individuals" (Rose 1999: 166). Dean (2010: 195) notes that subjects who do not enact recognised forms of risk management may be divided from "active citizens (capable of managing their own risk)" and classified within strategies of governance, hence described as "disadvantaged groups, the 'at risk', the high risk", who require intervention and management.

In discussions with music industry managers, the category of "motherhood" in particular emerged as a moment of "risk", an opportunity to demonstrate awareness and agency, and hence subjectify oneself as an "active citizen" in the management of such risks. Studies of music industry internships, graduate employability and career building in the music industries have identified the development of risk-mitigation strategies in the secondary socialisation of music industry workers, usually captured through discussions of "employability" (Frenette 2013; Bennett 2018) and "career building" (Everts et al. 2022). For the interviewees in our study, knowing how to manage one's "priorities", to make reasonable (and risk-averse) decisions, is to express agency. Or, as Rose (1999b: 231) phrased it:

The self is not merely enabled to choose, but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers, and its values. Individuals are expected to construe the course of their life as the outcome of such choices, and to account for their lives in terms of the reasons for those choices.

The constrained choice of balancing "priorities" is hence described by participants as an expression of a "free agent" (du Gay 2007: 68) and one's own values.

In the context of an advanced liberal governmental rationality, participants' invocation of the "financial" or "funding" limitations to assisting returning workers can be understood as a means of reconciling the apparent values-tension between a feminist ethics of supporting returning mothers and a business ethics of risk minimisation.

That is, the responsible music business manager shares in a collective cultural assumption that supporting returning mothers is a potential risk to music businesses and that their agency as business managers is expressed through the minimisation of such risks. This is not to imply that forms of support above and beyond legal requirements are never provided or that risks are never considered. Indeed, one of this study's participants, noted above, proudly described her success in implementing (sometimes financially significant) forms of support for returning parents and employees on leave due to medical issues. What is significant is that, when discussing strategies to help women and gender non-conforming people return to work, the measures that her business actually used were not explored by anyone in the focus groups or interviews.

Instead, participants focused on other sites where a kind of collective agency might find expression: the not-for-profit and peak body sectors. In particular, Support Act (a mental-health and music industry not-for-profit organisation) and the VMDO (the Victorian government's music business development office) were identified by multiple participants as appropriate agents to enact support programs and advocate for better outcomes for returning workers:

Someone like Support Act resonates, who have already done some great work... Someone like Support Act could probably run some [training or self-help] sessions.

I reckon it would be a VMDO thing... it would sit as one of their projects or programs.

These organisations are reputable within the Victorian music industry for channelling resources from the state government (as well as other forms of fundraising) towards supporting the music industry, as well as having boards and executive teams composed of well-known music industry leaders. The attraction of such an avenue for collective action is that it bypasses the values-tension between feminist and business ethics: these not-for-profit organisations are able to pursue the objectives of supporting returning workers without placing the financial burden on business managers. This ideal of having an organisation that can pursue feminist ethics without the obligations of music business managers was also echoed in the call for "women in music" organisations:

The big dream is that we have our own organisation. Women in Music organisation... to have the protection and the security and the personal, all those qualities that we need to be, when we're talking issues with people and people want to be open and honest and be able to trust.

While the subjectification of music business managers encourages individualised strategies for assisting returning workers (such as self-help, counselling and mentorship), the potential for a more collectivist form of action may become possible through the not-for-profit sector. Such collective action will depend on the emergence of new forms of subjectivity that imagine the role of citizens to be more than self-actualising, individualised units. Rather than "at risk", motherhood and workers taking career breaks would need to be governed as subjects of healthy, developing music industries, rather than an exception to masculine work "priorities".

6. Conclusions

The interests of music industry gatekeepers and music label executives have been considered in past research (Hughes et al. 2016; Hooper 2019). While such studies present the values of music business managers in terms of economic and cultural imperatives (i.e. capital accumulation or enhancing equity in the sector), our study places the conflict between such imperatives at the centre of analysis. A conflict between what we have described as business ethics and feminist ethics does not prevent music business managers from fulfilling their roles or taking principled stances on supporting women and gender non-conforming people in returning to music industry work. Rather, the subjectification of music industry workers as engaging in "risky" decisions through choosing to take a career break allows risk to be externalised, from the music business and onto the worker themselves, while the onus for enacting solutions is externalised to policy and government interventions. Music business managers' uses of discourses such as worker "priorities" help to legitimise this subjectivity, while managers themselves demonstrate their role as responsible business managers. In engaging in such discourses, music business managers may be enacting what Lauren Berlant (2011) described as "cruel optimism": The hopeful desire to support returning workers may actually assist in legitimising limiting their capacity to achieve more equitable outcomes for returning workers.

Participants' expressed desire for top-down forms of intervention into the music industries, through peak bodies and governmental offices, is somewhat reflective of the ambitions of the current federal government's cultural policy, *Revive* (Australian Government 2023) and a UK House of Commons Committee report calling for the expansion of parental leave to music industry freelancers (Women and Equalities Committee 2024). The policy outlines a combination of funding agencies to directly support individuals (such as a Centre for Arts and Entertainment Workplaces and funding for Support Act) and industrial reforms through the nation's Award Wage system (minimum wage for industry sectors) and workplace health and safety laws, as well as changes to grant schemes to incentivise fairer working conditions. The music business managers in this study outlined forms of assistance compatible with the Commonwealth government's approach, which intervenes in the conditions of work of the sector as a whole, rather than relying on individual music businesses to voluntarily and altruistically improve equity and working conditions. It is notable that, while some of the proposed initiatives have implications for people experiencing or at risk of gender-based discrimination, harassment or violence, factors that may differentiate the careers of workers across gendered lines, such as maternity and childcare, are not a feature or focus of the policy. Such an absence may tacitly encourage the ongoing use of more individualised strategies by those taking leave in the music industries, such as seeking out self-help, mentorship, or other programs that focus on the agency of workers rather than collective, structural change.

Gendered inequalities persist in music industry careers beyond the discretionary decision-making of gatekeepers such as those in Edmond's (2019) research who might outright deny that prejudice or structural inequalities impact their particular businesses. The participants in this study are cognisant of the structural issues facing women, mothers and those who take a career break or otherwise fall into a category of risk. Rather than denialism, the disadvantage experienced by these groups is normalised through appealing to a business ethics in which the minimisation of business risks is put in contrast to a feminist ethics of supporting returning workers. In other words, when acting as responsible businesspeople, not everyone can be helped, and hence workers must learn to help themselves. The individualised strategies for assisting music industry workers as responsible and rational free agents are hence themselves promoted as a result of structural features of the music industries' industrial relations and the enactment of a music business manager subjectivity. Conceptualising careers and career breaks within music industries is not reducible to milestones and reputation, but depends on the values, training and capacities of gatekeepers such as music business managers. Whether a person who has taken a career break (for maternity, carework, injury, burnout, or other reasons) can sustain a return to music industry work will depend on the capacity for gatekeepers to either justify the "risks" they perceive or to contribute to a collective project to change the role of their businesses in enhancing equity in the music industries.

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