

Performing Precarity in Times of Uncertainty: The Implications of Covid-19 on Artists in Malta

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Abstract

During the current unprecedented times of uncertainty, caused by the global emergency situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers with insecure income, including artists, are amongst the most prone to experience hardship. This paper tackles the shared concerns of artists during the pandemic, particularly on the disruption of their everyday life and their experienced financial loss. Their situation is more deep-seated than just a right to earn a living wage. Herein, this analysis is couched in an understanding of the precarious working conditions of artists in general and within the creative sector, which are more accentuated during such uncertain times.

This paper draws data from an online survey addressed to artists, conducted in March 2020, during a period of increased restrictions on mass events, the normalisation of physical distances and imposed lockdown on various sectors of Maltese society. This survey is used here to inform the recommendations made in this paper – specifically to secure the right for equitable income.

Based on these recommendations which were forwarded to Malta Enterprise, Malta's economic development agency, this paper traces the state's immediate response through the implementation of a series of governmental measures leading to a 'Covid Wage Supplement', as emergency support to assist artists to stay afloat and help the culture sector to withstand the crisis.

Key words: Coronavirus, Covid-19, artist, Financial Crises, Precarity, Pandemic risk, Malta

Introduction

I can't think of any period in human history when people were really certain what to do, had no surprises and no unexpected developments. What is novel is not uncertainty; what is novel is a realization that uncertainty is here to stay... [Therefore], we are challenged with a task, which I think is unprecedented — and the task is to develop an art, to develop an art of living permanently with uncertainty. — Zygmunt Bauman, documentary, *The Trouble with Being Human These Days*, 2013

During the uncertain times of living in the pandemic, the ground has shifted noticeably, in ways that could neither have been expected nor predicted. In the last couple of months, physical social distancing, closure of borders to international visitors, closure of schools and colleges, and lockdown communities became a global form of temporal certainty. The COVID-19 virus, originated in the city of Wuhan in December 2019, had rapidly spread worldwide with continuous increase in the confirmed cases and deaths. This had till now resulted in unprecedented policy challenges on a global level. Governments, worldwide, are taking interventionist measures to control the spreading of the virus and provide an instantaneous safety net for citizens, directly hit by financial loss. The pandemic, is in effect, not only a health crisis but also a major economic shock, leading to the collapse in the prices of bonds and shares, and threatening a deep global recession (Milne, 2020). The scale of economic shock is resulting in a decline of household expenditure, followed by the secondary 'multiplier' impacts of unemployment, loss of incomes or corporate financial distress (ibid.). Yet, the magnitude of economic and health impacts is not the focus of this article. Instead this paper address specifically the impact on the cultural sector and the direct hit on artists.

Measures to restrict mass gatherings and efforts to normalise physical social distance, due to the virus, had direct implications of the whole cultural ecosystem. Economically, the

pandemic triggered a collapse in revenues in various sectors, including the hotel and restaurant industries, tourism, recreation and culture and in global and domestic supply chains (ibid.). Closures of theatres, and cancellation of cultural events stemmed a sudden implosion of the cultural and creative sector, with a consequence of escalating levels of unemployment, especially for freelance artists. It has been reported that at least 170,000 jobs were lost in the film industry in Hollywood and the UK due to the coronavirus¹. Met opera has laid off all its musicians and chorus and Cirque du Soleil has laid off 95% of its staff.

This article explores the shared concerns of artists during these unprecedented times and its implications on the disruption in their everyday life. Such analysis is framed on an understanding of the precarious working conditions of artists in general, often with working conditions that offer no form of protection and are underrepresented by unions or lobby groups. The intensification of the coronavirus curbs, brought to fore common themes on the livelihood of artists. This paper focuses on two of them: First the major shift in their everyday life and wellbeing of artists, and their financial loss experienced. This paper draws on from an online survey held in mid-March 2020 with artists in Maltaⁱ. However, issues and recommendations are general ones and could be applied elsewhere.

Performing Precarity within the 'Freebie' Culture

Pierre Bourdieu (1998) stressed that precariousness at work, is a new mode of domination in contemporary capitalism. More recently, there has been burgeoning literature on the changes in the landscape of work, broadly defined in terms of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000, 2005), information society (Castells, 2000), 'new' capitalism (Sennett, 1998, 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) or risk society (Beck, 2000; Beck et al., 2000). Most of these works, historicizes, maps out geographically and explain sociologically the new work experience, broadly characterised by decentralization and the self-disciplining subjects working on precarious short-term contracts, within a neoliberal economic climate.

The term precarity is generally used in sociology and political economics, as well as in the media (Vosko 2006; Kolleberg 2009), to refer to insecure employment including through self-employed and short-term contracts. Precarious employment is considered as a multidimensional construct, differing across countries and relying on the explicit economic and social structure of the labour market (Benanch et al. 2016; Bosmans et al. 2016, Moscone et al. 2016).

The most common indicators of having precarious employment conditions are related to issues of limited workplace rights and social protection, powerlessness to exercise legally granted workplace rights, employment insecurity, low wages, individualized bargaining relations and overall working environment (Benanch et al. 2016; Edralin 2014; Lewchak et al. 2003). Herein, we explore three indicators of precariousness applied in the everyday life of artists and their working conditions.

First, the precariousness of work within the creative economy, is in part, reflected in the infiltration model of nonstandard employment, defined by subcontracting, outsourcing and other modes of flexploitation. As precarious workers, they have to live in a

limbo of uncertainty, juggling their options, massaging their contacts, never knowing where their next project or source of income is coming from. The resultant cycle of feast and famine is familiar to anyone whose livelihood folds into the creative economy (Ross, 2013, p. 6).

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/mar/19/loss-of-jobs-income-film-industry-hollywood-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-19>

Studying the lives of creative labourers, Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2013) explored the precariousness, insecurity and discontinuation in work due to:

long hours and bulimic patterns of working, by the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play, by poor pay, by high levels of mobility, by passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g. web designer, artist, fashion designer), by an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism, by informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality, and by a profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields. (Gill and Pratt, 2013, p.33)

Artists are habitually considered as an army of freelance and intermittent workers, engaging in casualized, temporary employment and subject to be underpaid or receive late payment. They are frequently subject to being the

least paid of the so-called professions and generally live under the poverty line. Artists dangle between self-employment, casual contract work, artists' grants, and the very remote possibility of success on the art market (a star system that promotes exceptionalism) (Garrett and Jackson, 2016 p.6).

Second, the freebie culture in the arts accentuates artists' degree of precarity. In 2012, an 'art strike' was self-declared by a number of Warsaw art institutions, as a systematic struggle against the freebie culture, to promote better working for artists (Sharp, 2017). The strike kick started discussions on the right for a living wage for artists and resulted in the signing of an agreement in 2014, to guarantee them a minimum wage for artists (Figiel, 2014).

In Britain, the policy framework report published in 2011 by the Arts Council England, had clarified the legal obligations of arts organisations in offering internship opportunities². It has also tackled the issue of unpaid labour within the cultural and creative industries.

More recently, in the beginning of 2020, the Arts Council in Ireland, launched a new policy to facilitate the working and living conditions of artists and ensure that a career in the arts is viable (Falvay, 2020)³. Such measure is aimed to combat the freebie culture of under/non-paid work of artists. The Irish Arts Council chairman stated that this new policy aims to bring fair and equitable pay and bring to an end "the idea that it is acceptable to get artists to work as a 'freebie', or to offer work without proper payment because it might somehow enhance an artist's career." The campaign #PayTheArtist, promotes fair payment to artists through new funding conditions.

Internships, including art-in-residency programmes, exemplify practices of the freebie culture. For Ross Perlin (2011) in *Intern Nation*, internships are structurally designed to fit in with the normalisation of precarious, networked workforce; "What structured training programs were to the bureaucratic firms of the mid-twentieth century, internships may well be to the new network capitalism of firms dealing in intangible goods" (2011, p. 95).

Albeit being relevant platforms for mobility, intercultural exchange of ideas and collaborative work, they are also mechanisms of precarisation (Leban, 2017). The symbolic value of internships is through addressing the 'skills gap' during or after graduation, often

² Arts Council United Kingdom, Internships in the Arts,

https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/internships_in_the_arts_final.pdf

³https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stop-exploiting-artists-with-freebie-culture-arts-council-says-1.4168716?mode=amp&fbclid=IwAR0YPIAaIkkoHDG8LvbVSI4vPFtcfZ8XaSnK7hHGe_17OB_CeWOp8SpSzc

measured by the currency of experiences and exposure. Drawing on from Gary Becker's (1964) human capital theory, Perlin (2011) highlights the contemporary purpose of internships, to accumulate contacts, social networks and insider knowledge in the hope of future full-time employment.

Third, another indicator of precarity shared by artists is their lack of representation as a collective. One major setback in Poland to guarantee equitable wage for artists, following the art strike, was the fact that artists were unrecognised as a union (Figiel, 2014). Artists are hardly represented as a group in their contestation of precariat conditions (Gill and Pratt, 2013). The spirit of individualism, commonly shared by artists, makes it difficult to convince them to join together in a group. "Collective bargaining requires an obedient rank-and-file," says jazz critic and music historian Ted Gioia, "but is there a profession more resistant to this than art-making?" (Green, 2019)⁴.

Situation in Malta

Similar to countries like Poland, UK and Ireland, the situation of inequitable remuneration for artists' work resonates to many artists across the world. In Malta, a small island state (122 square miles with a population around half a million) in the Mediterranean Sea, artists also prone to experience under/late payment.

In a study by Toni Attard, a total of 83.7% of respondents claimed that late payment is the norm, whereas 54.5% stated that they currently have pending payments for artistic work invoiced more than 30 days ago (Attard, 2020). A total of 40.7% were awaiting payment between €500 and €2,500 and 35.6% between €100 and €500. The top three debtors are Public Cultural Organisations, private companies and private individuals (ibid.).

The living conditions of artists have considerably aggravated as soon as emergency measures to combat the COVID-19 virus were in place, particularly with the banning of all public gatherings and lockdown of cultural sites like theatres, museums, libraries and exhibition halls. Additionally, all educational institutions, including those offering cultural education were closed down. The Archbishop of Malta also issued a directive to ban all external religious cultural celebrations including those associated with the popular village *fešta*.⁵

The first case of the Covid-19 virus in Malta, was reported on 7th March 2020. Before submission of this paper, there were 227 cases reported, with no mortalities. The public health goals are seeking to extend as much as possible the duration of the pandemic to slow the spread so that the peak is lower and the Maltese health services would be able to better cope.

Numerous artists operate within a freelance 'gig economy', often moving from one gig or project to another. Thus, such measures resulted in cancellations and postponements of events, which had a direct impact on artists' income. The Maltese Government responded through interventionist measures started to address the financial impact of COVID-19 on employees and businesses. In view of this, the Arts Council in Malta and cultural agencies are currently monitoring the situation to respond effectively to the needs of the cultural and creative sector (Debattista and Borg, 2020).

⁴ Green, K. 2019, <https://www.uniontrack.com/blog/artists-unions>

⁵ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/enthusiasts-react-to-churchs-feasts-directive-and-early-stage-decision.780929>

Methodology

Prior to the inclusion of artists in measures to safeguard the self-employed during the pandemic, published on 25th March 2020⁶, numerous artists shared their concerns on the implications of this virus on their work and income on social media. Such concerns were the impetus for us to conduct a survey between the 14th – 21st March 2020.

This paper sets out to explore the concerns of artists on the implications of the pandemic, surrounded by discourse on precarity in artists' employment conditions. An online survey was designed and sent to artists in Malta to measure in detail the impact of the virus on their work practices and livelihood. The survey received 346 responses of which 167 respondents earn an income exclusively from the arts and 138 partially earn and income from the arts. A total of 41 respondents claim that they do not earn an income from the arts and therefore the total valid responses for the scope of the survey is 305.

There are various reasons for using online survey as the research tool and choosing research participants through convenience sample, rather than conducting a full ethnography – what might have been considered as a more appropriate sociological tool to inform the recommendations made. First, online survey is a reliable research method that allows automation and real-time access to instantaneous data, specifically needed during the fast changing times during the pandemic. Second, other research methods, such as face-to-face interviews could not have been conducted because of governmental directives restricting physical contact. It is noteworthy to point out that all ethical procedures have been followed and participants recruited were informed of their rights to remain anonymous.

Respondents came from different artistic sectors, with a large number of respondents working within the music sector (43%) (figure 1). All research participants were specifically chosen because they considered themselves as artists.

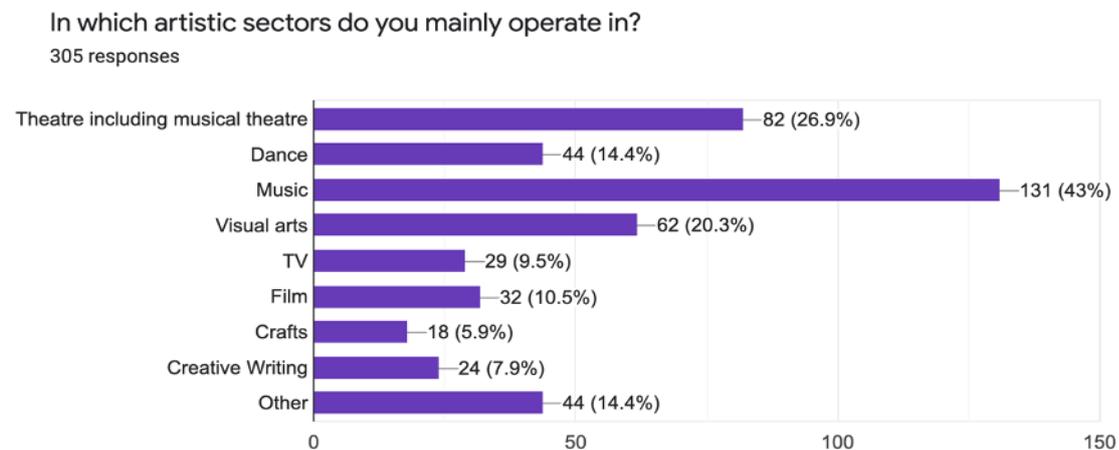


Figure 1: Artistic sector of sample

Research Outcome

Participants voiced their perceptions on various issues related to the inferences of the pandemic on their livelihood and income. The majority of participants (52.8%) maintained that the cultural activities providing them with a source of income were cancelled. In effect, public artistic events, such as performances, exhibitions and concerts are the main source for lost

⁶ <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/news/covid-19-wage-supplement-notice>

income. Herein we focus on two thematic areas extracted from the survey results: The shifts and disruptions in the everyday life and wellbeing of artists, and the financial loss experienced.

Shifts in the everyday life

Zygmunt Bauman's (2000, 2005) use of the liquidity metaphor is effective in the current context, to describe the cultural, economic and social uncertainties experienced on a global scale. The liquefaction is not only in the rapidity and mutability of a virus, but also in the uncertainty of the duration on the pandemic. As a result, there has been substantial shifts in the everyday life of individuals, on a cultural, social and economic level.

In our survey, the total majority of participants (95.7%) of respondents believe that the corona virus is negatively affecting their work. When asked to select the artistic sectors that most represent their work, respondents were given the option to select multiple responses since various artists operate across interdisciplinary practices. The majority of respondents work in music (43%), followed by theatre (27%) and visual arts (20%). There were no significant differences in genre distribution between those whose income comes only from the arts and those earning partial income from the arts.

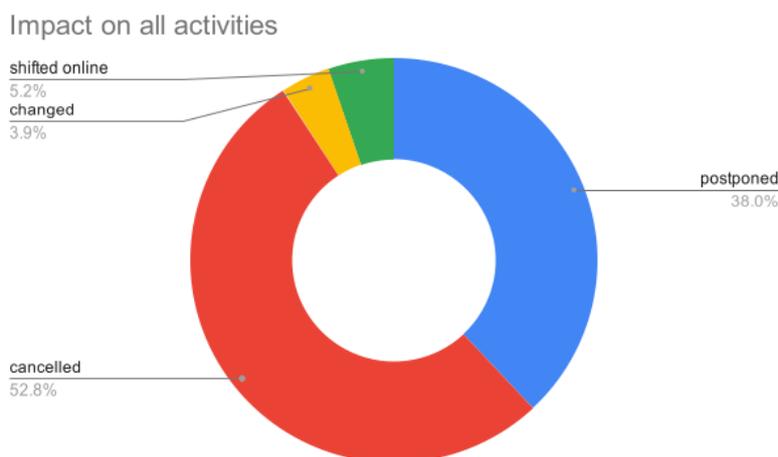


Figure 2: Impact on all activities

A total of 1,317 responses for 7 different categories for activities were captured in the survey, with an average of 4.3 impacted activities per respondent. Respondents claim that more than half of the activities providing them with a source of income were cancelled. A number of events (38%) were postponed, other events were changed (3.9%) and some shifted online (5.2%) (figure 2). The category of work related to artistic events also registers the highest percentage share of all postponed and cancelled events. Rehearsals, work-in-progress and creative research register the highest percentage for activities that have changed whereas arts education features as the predominant activity which shifted online. Despite the relevance of shifting to work-from-home mode during the pandemic, using various virtual meetings platforms, for artists it was not always possible to transfer work online. This was possible for activities related to arts education (43.5%). However, it was not possible to transfer private events (4.3%) such as gigs online (figure 3).

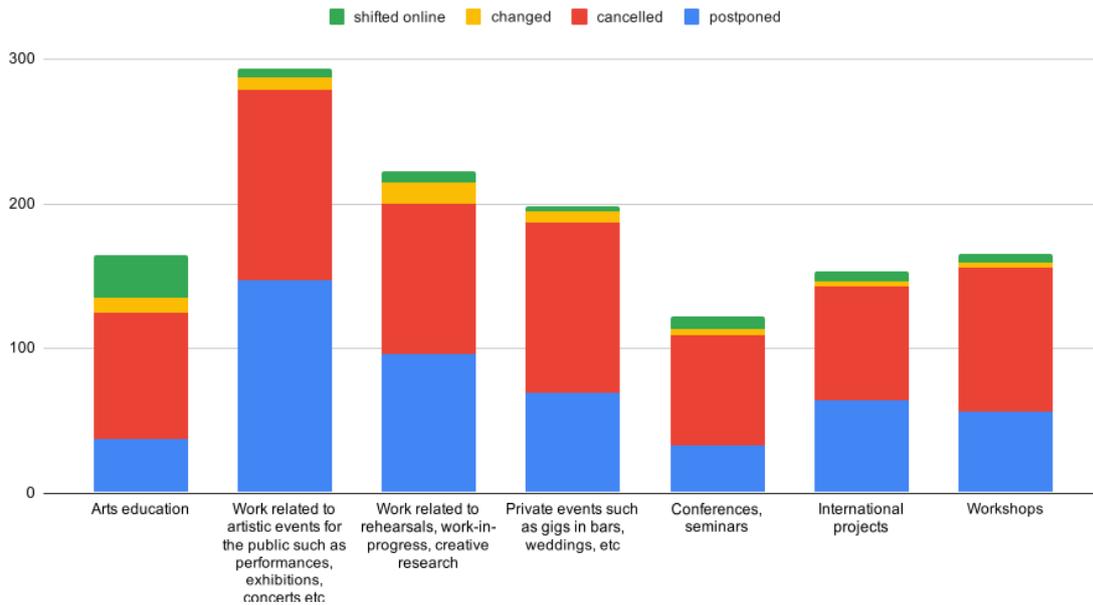


Figure 3: Activities providing a source of income and impact

The casualization and short-contract working conditions, subject to postponement or termination during unfavourable times, have substantial inferences on the artist's life satisfaction and wellbeing. One research participant reflected on the effect of such crisis on her/his wellbeing: "It is also important to safeguard the mental well-being of those who have been impacted severely by production cancellations and financial troubles". A high percentage of artists considered this pandemic as having substantial impact on their personal wellbeing (figure 4).

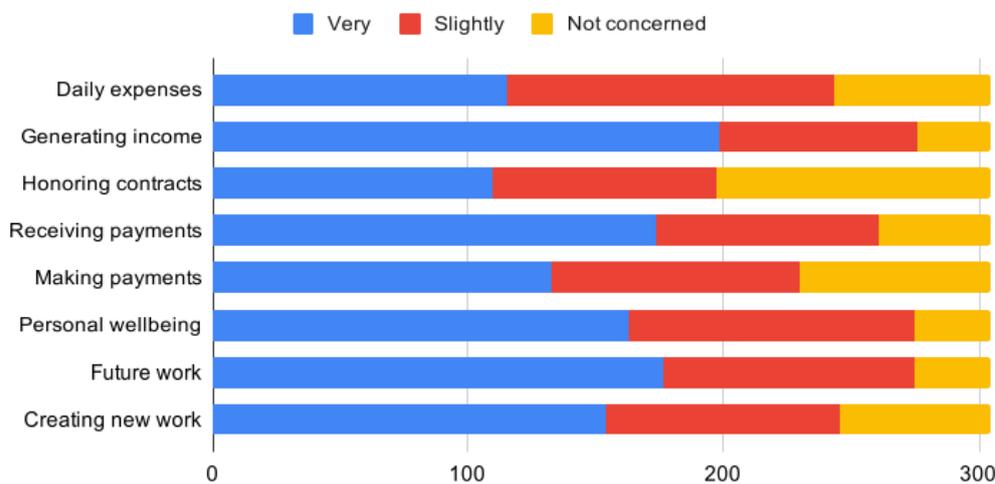


Figure 4: The impact of the pandemic on the livelihood of the artist

Financial loss

During the months of lockdown, I'm not generating money, even though I might continue with preparations. Also, if a current project/s is/are postponed to e.g. October, this means that in October I cannot accept new work. So I'm losing more money.

Anecdote by an artist participating in the survey

Perhaps the most jarring of all is that the pandemic continued to underpin the notion of inequalities in the rights for a living wage amongst workers. Reflecting the general nonstandard employment and precariat practices of artists, including working to the demands of the market and economic conditions, in times of crisis, artists have to fully shoulder on the financial burden when events are cancelled. A majority of participants (67.2%) maintained that they had already suffered financial losses, while 25.9% say it's too early to calculate these losses (figure 5). A total of 32.5% of respondents' state that most of their income for this period has been or will be lost and 28.2% claim that all their income for this period has been or will be lost.

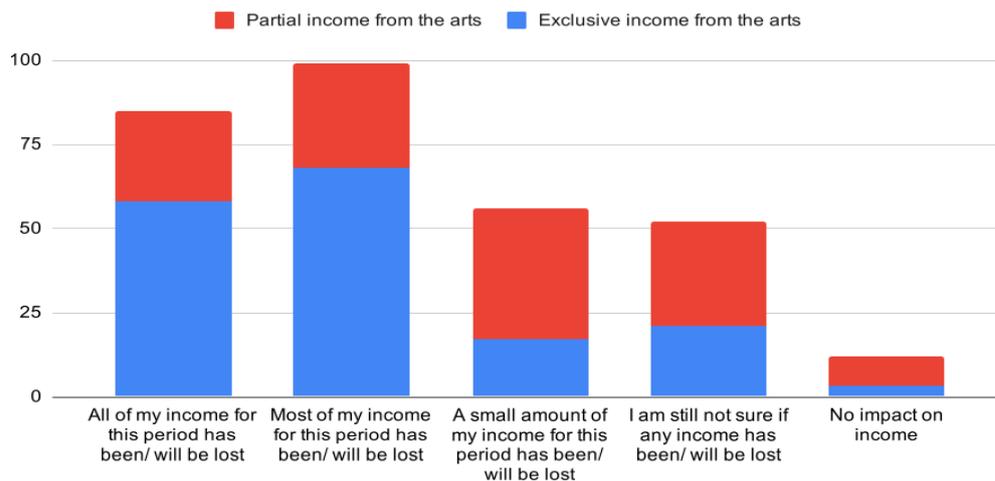


Figure 5: Impact on income

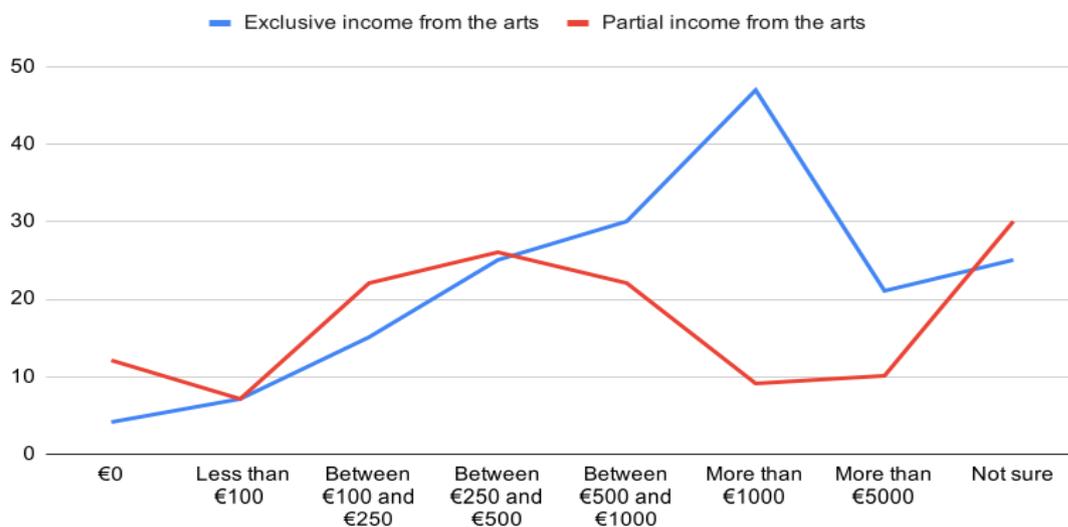


Figure 6: Financial losses so far

Concerning the total amount of income lost, 18.4% of respondents claim losses of more than €1000 and 17% claim between €500 and €1000. Respondents claiming an income exclusively from the arts register higher losses that those claiming partial income. Those with partial income also claim to be the most unsure of the financial losses. Asked to forecast weekly financial losses should the current scenario be extended further, both categories of respondents claim mostly between €250 and €500 per week, followed by the €100 and €250

category for those earning an income exclusively from the arts. This continues to demonstrate how artists, working as freelancers, were harshly hit by the pandemic. Such situation is likely to exacerbate the situation in the months ahead due to postponement of projects. One participant referred to this and stated that:

During the months of lockdown, I'm not generating money, even though I might continue with preparations. Also, if a current project/s is/are postponed to e.g. October, this means that in October I cannot accept new work. So I'm losing more money.

Anecdote by an artist participating in the survey

Whereas 52.1% of respondents' stated that there are no dependants on their income, others claimed that their livelihood from the arts impacted their family (figure 7). A high percentage of 41% of participants claimed that their family is dependent on their income from the arts.

Thus, such financial losses, when working on short-term contracts with no advance payment, reflect the nonstandard employment practices archetypal in precariousness work conditions. Respondents earning an income exclusively from the arts indicated that dependency on their income on family, other artists, contractors and employees is higher than those earning part of their income from the arts.

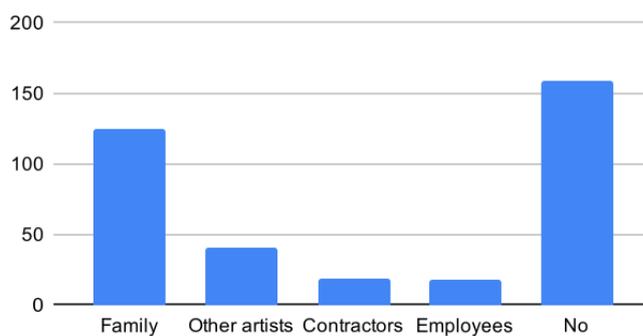


Figure 7: Dependants on artist's income

Generating income, future work and receiving payments were the three main concerns of respondents at the time of responding to the survey. Honouring contracts featured as least of concerns with 108 responses.

Covid Wage Supplement: Governmental Measures in Malta

Similar to other countries, like Ireland with the introduction of a 'Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme'⁷ to employers from all sectors whose business suffered financial losses due to the pandemic, Malta also implemented a similar scheme. Following consultation and open discussion with various sectors of workers who had their operations temporarily suspended, the 'Covid Wage Supplement' was introduced. This measure, being managed the Malta Enterprise⁸, Malta's economic development agency, provides a basic wage covering full-time employees and self-employed by was..

Through this scheme, people working in the creative arts, whether full-time employees or self-employed/freelance, are entitled to a monthly supplement of €800. Part-time employees within the creative arts sector are entitled to a monthly supplement of

⁷<https://www.pinsentmasons.com/out-law/guides/coronavirus-unemployment-ireland>

⁸<https://covid19.maltaenterprise.com/employee-wage-support/?application-form-added>

€500. Creative practitioners working in the sectors which are originally considered to have been adversely, but not drastically, affected are entitled to a monthly supplement of €160 in the case of full-time employees, €100 in the case of part-time employees, and €320 in the case of self-employed/freelancers. These sectors include publishing, motion picture video and television programming, and radio broadcasting. Following feedback from the film and television industry, after being excluded from this scheme, were included in the revised list⁹.

Malta's creative sector is adopting its own measures to adapt to the situation. Arts Council Malta issued a call for feedback from its beneficiaries on March 20th 2020, to assess how they were impacted, and has relaxed obligations related to its funding agreements with artists, while fast-tracking payments in light of the situation¹⁰. It has also assured its beneficiaries that project losses due to restrictions will be made up for. Public cultural organisations were directed by the Arts council to support the sector by easing up on financial obligations and providing more flexibility in terms of logistics. Such measures are a step towards the safeguarding of artists during challenging times. It is also a worthy endeavour of initiating discussion for policy makers on having long-term measures to counteract exploitative and precariat conditions often faced by artist.

Discussion

In divergence to the neoliberal climate within the Anglo-American context in recent years, safety-net measures of wage supplements in various European countries, are targeted at protecting citizens at risk of experiencing the hard-hit effects of the coronavirus pandemic. These measures continue to reinforce the state's obligation to protect citizens and offer social security during the churning labour market. The success of these measures are yet to be measured in the coming months or years.

Recent discussions on having self-employed and freelance artists included in the wage supplement scheme is a step forward towards having creative practitioners fairly represented amongst other self-employed workers. Throughout recent years, one major barrier for the creative sector to improve its professional status has been the lack of collective sector-led voice of artists through unions and associations. Within this climate of uncertainties, industry-led associations opened up conversations with Government to discuss financial measures, yet it was evident that the absence of an equivalent industry-led organisation in Malta for the arts. Even though it is misguided to dismiss the autonomy of the self-employed artist, and her/his attitude for self-direction and entrepreneurship, it is necessary for artists to be represented collectively by lobby groups.

In spite of the resistance by some artists to engage in professional arts management, public policy measures are required to address a few of these challenges addressed in this paper. The public sector, as a major investor in the arts, needs to set an example by ensuring that fair and equitable conditions are offered to artists, providing contracts and payments on time. Public funding commitments, be they commissions or grants, should emphasize further the importance of appropriate remuneration for artists and their right to enjoy a living income from the artistic work they generate. Continuous advocacy within the private sector is also needed to ensure that the business community understands and values the contribution artists can make to the development of their enterprises.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/news/covid-19-wage-supplement-notice>

In these exceptional circumstances, we propose a few immediate responses, inspired by the conversations held virtually with artists as well as from the observations that emerge from the results of the online survey. These recommendations include the need to mobilise, with immediate effect an emergency fund for artists, prioritising those earning an income exclusively from the arts and consider universal basic income as a funding model. Recommendations to public and private institutions receiving services from artists include having a fast-track any pending payments. Also, the commissioning of new work needs to provide advances to pay for research and development which may be designed at home. Equally relevant, funders and sponsors are recommended to shift any grants that will not be issued in the interim into solidarity grants that support the livelihood of artists. Building on the suggestions of Leban (2017), it is recommended that policy makers, both at national and EU level, acknowledge the precarious working conditions of the artists within the creative economy. This is necessary to safeguard the wellbeing of artists working through internships programmes as well as artists doing non-payment work within the freebie culture. It is worth noting the normalisation in requests for free work within the arts. Every request for free work in the name of exposure and every underpaid offer undermines the value of the arts and the livelihood of the artist. It threatens the growth of artistic talent and reinforces a culture that free or underpaid work pay the bills.

While the collected data through online surveys informs the recommendations made in this article and provides a tentative engagement with artists in Malta, the authors are aware of the present time and physical presence limitation. It is suggested that a full ethnography with artists would be followed on to supplement this data and present a richer and in-depth picture of the situation.

Conclusion

Sociologically, it is intriguing to see how the pandemic is impacting, not only on socio-economic structures but it is a wide-ranging disruption of everyday life in general. This paper dealt with the current concerns of artists during the coronavirus pandemic. In view of the multidimensional definition of precarious work, this article acknowledges the precarious working and living conditions of artists within the creative economy. It specifically explores three indicators of precariousness applied in the everyday life of artists and their working conditions; their nonstandard practices, the freebie culture surrounding the arts, and the under-representation of artists.

The data presented in this article had initiated discussion on a national platform and prompted action through the 'Covid Wage Supplement' in Malta, as a systematic allocation of governmental measure to artists and creative practitioners. Additional to the supplement, this paper outlined the need for artists to have some form of protection in their contracts and to be represented adequately by unions or lobby groups. The introduction of these measures and policies are necessary for an equitable income to artists, particularly to support them during time when their livelihood is at stake.

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ⁱ The data in this research was presented as part of a keynote delivery by one of the authors, Toni Attard, as the Director of Culture Venture, at the International Virtual conference COVID-19 crisis & emergency funding mechanism: what action plan for the cultural and creative sectors organized by Fondation Rambourg Tunisie and Culture Funding Watch.