

# DOCU- MENTALITY

**A Report on Mental Health  
in the Canadian Documentary Sector**

PHOTO CREDIT - UNSPLASH - RENE RANISCH / DENISE JANS / LOGAN WARD



DocuMentality



DOCUMENTARY ORGANIZATION OF CANADA  
DOCUMENTARISTES DU CANADA



## A NOTE FROM DOC'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This Report began with a phone call from Tamara Dawit, who was at the time the Vice President of Growth and Inclusion at the Canada Media Fund. It was February 2022, and the COVID-19 Pandemic had put mental health top of mind. Canada had just appointed our first ever Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, but there was little being said about mental health within our sector. I jumped at Tamara's invitation to connect with Rebecca Day and Malikkah Rollins, who were working on an initiative to normalize conversations around mental health in documentary film.

Anecdotal stories about documentary filmmakers struggling with mental health is nothing new. Amongst themselves, filmmakers have spoken for years about experiencing PTSD, toxic dynamics, burnout, financial precarity, the demands of juggling family with work, the harms of systemic racism, and the trauma Canada's ongoing colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples. It was time to bring these issues out.

Together with Rebecca and Malikkah and the support of the CMF, DOC launched Canada's first program to address mental health in the documentary industry. As you'll see in the body of this Report, many of our filmmakers struggle with what can be framed as a paradigm of privilege: one is expected to fit within a narrow mold of being able to spend years developing projects without pay, to remain emotionally removed from a story and community even while being encouraged to make films from one's own perspective, or to navigate the industry without any neuro-divergence or disabilities. When one's identity or experience falls outside of that mold, many suffer negative impacts on their mental health.

Documentary films play an incredibly important role in our cultural landscape, and the documentary sector is one of the most diverse creative communities in the country. If we don't address mental health issues within our sector, we risk losing perspectives and stories that are so important to helping us make sense of the world around us, that showcase our unique Canadian identity to the world.

- SARAH SPRING



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This research was conducted through DocuMentality. DocuMentality is a group of filmmakers and mental health professionals who came together to raise the alarm about mental health in the documentary film industry.



**WRITTEN BY**  
**CLAIRE MALENEY**



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# Executive Summary



PHOTO BY - UNSPLASH - LINDSEY

**Storytelling is about connection. Documentary makers have a calling to share stories and use film as a medium to highlight injustice, explore all corners of the human experience, and celebrate identity.**

This already difficult work is made more challenging by working conditions predicated on isolation, scarcity, competition, and precarity as well as systemic barriers of institutional racism, sexism, and exclusion. These conditions foster disconnection and damage documentary maker’s mental health.

The purpose of this report is to share the findings of research conducted in 2022 to understand the current state of Canadian documentary filmmakers’ mental health. The research was conducted through a series of seven focus groups. Each group was composed of filmmakers with shared identities: Black, Muslim, and Racialized; Indigenous Session <sup>1</sup>; 2SLGBTQIA+ <sup>2</sup>; Creators Living with Disability; Women and Non-binary; Mixed Francophone; and Mixed Anglophone.

**1.** In Canada, Indigenous refers to First Nations, Inuit or Métis

**2.** Two-spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more

This report contains three parts. The first part will paint a picture of the stresses and pressures common to documentary filmmakers’ experiences, and the impact these conditions have on their mental health: funding, power imbalances, stressful working conditions, financial precarity, interpersonal relationships, distribution, isolation, stigma, industry events, emotionally charged topics, family, quitting, lack of mental health care, and diversity initiatives.

The second part will examine the specific discussions in each focus group concerning challenges faced by different marginalized groups of Canadian documentary creators. This section looks at the compounding effects of systemic discriminatory forces on documentary filmmakers working conditions, and the impact on their mental health.

The third part is a summary of the documentary makers’ suggestions for improvements within the industry. These suggestions include greater transparency particularly in funding, a more equitable balance of power, standardized working practices, additional training, more connection with peers and mentors, improved distribution methods, flexibility around needs stemming from personal health and family, and crucially, mental health support for filmmakers, crew, and protagonists in documentary film.

# Introduction

## PURPOSE

As filmmakers and mental health professionals, we have been aware for a long time that conditions in the industry are causing documentary filmmakers often unacknowledged mental health issues.

We felt addressing these issues was long overdue, but needed a comprehensive understanding of the problem in order to proceed.

We developed a two-part research initiative to understand mental health in the documentary industry in Canada, the US, and the UK at this moment in time. Phase 1's purpose was to collect anecdotal evidence and explore the individual and systemic mental health and well-being challenges of documentary filmmakers. This report contains the findings from the Canadian focus groups. For a summary of findings from the US and UK focus groups, please see Appendix A. A full report is forthcoming.

These findings have already begun to inform Phase 2, which is geared towards taking action. At the time of writing, we have begun meeting with funders and other industry representatives to understand the role they can play in improving systems that impact the mental health and well-being of filmmakers, crews, and participants.

## STAKEHOLDERS

This report is produced by the Documentary Organization of Canada and funded by the Canada Media Fund. The Documentary Organization of Canada (DOC) is the collective voice of Canada's independent documentary creators. Founded in 1983, today DOC has over 1300 members across six chapters from coast to coast. DOC's National office leads on research and advocacy work that strengthens the ecosystem for documentary production while DOC chapters provide local programming and community support. DOC's mandate as a member-driven organization is to advocate for an equitable, sustainable environment for documentary production and to strengthen the sector within the broader cultural industry.

This research was conducted through DocuMentality. DocuMentality is a group of filmmakers and mental health professionals who came together to raise the alarm about mental health in the documentary film industry. DocuMentality's aim is to create dialogue and collaborative change to the key mental health and well-being challenges currently facing the documentary community: filmmakers, crew and participants.

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

In Canada, we conducted seven focus groups. The groups were centered around identity. This choice was made with the knowledge that people from marginalized groups have a different experience from non-marginalized groups. We did not want to repeat the historic patterns of not including all experiences.

Our intention was to provide space for creators to raise issues specific to their race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, etc., which might be erased in a mixed group setting.

These groups were comprised of the following groups of documentary creators: Black, Muslim, and Racialized; Indigenous; 2SLGBTQIA+; Creators Living with Disability; Women and Non-binary; Mixed Francophone; and Mixed Anglophone.

**The sum of a person's identities cannot be contained in one label, and so here, the concerns of the groups intersected and overlapped...**

with disabled creators speaking to their experience in the women and nonbinary group, BIPOC <sup>3</sup> creators in the mixed group, queer creators in the indigenous group and so on. Participants represented a wide spread of experience from entry level to experts and largely consisted of producers, directors, cinematographers, and freelancers.

<sup>3</sup>. Black, Indigenous, People of Color

## METHOD

Using qualitative research methods, researchers explored how documentary filmmakers perceived their mental health, how their mental health was connected to their work, and what changes to the industry might improve their mental health. As the term 'mental health' covers a broad range of ideas from self-care to mental illness, the discussions were far ranging, but largely focused on personal mental health challenges, challenges participants faced through work, and the impacts these challenges had on their mental health.

## Part 1 Common Experiences Around Mental Health in the Canadian Documentary Industry

### SUMMARY

The discussions held in the seven focus groups demonstrate that documentary filmmakers are struggling with their mental health and that these struggles are brought on or worsened by their work in the industry.

**With inadequate resources, they are navigating issues ranging from constant financial uncertainty to carrying the weight of their protagonist's traumatic experiences.**

Nearly all participants reported that the working conditions in the documentary industry negatively impact their mental health. Some reported impacts on their physical wellbeing and their ability to do their work.

What follows is a discussion of areas flagged by the majority of groups that can have negative impacts on their mental health: funding, stressful working conditions, financial precarity, interpersonal relationships, distribution, isolation, stigma, industry events, emotionally charged topics, family, quitting, lack of mental health care, and diversity initiatives.





## FUNDING

Every group cited a lack of adequate funding, resources, and transparency around how to access funding as major sources of anxiety and stress.

There are limited avenues to access funding, “If you’re not getting Canada Council or Talent to Watch or Story Hive, then that’s it. You’re not getting anything.”

**Scarce opportunities create anxiety, competition and a “scarcity mindset.”**

The process of accessing funds or getting commissioned is long, unpaid, and frustrating. Funding bodies want applications written in a formal style which is a barrier for neurodiverse applicants, or those who may have limited training in formal writing. Furthermore, there are few mentors willing to teach newcomers best practice for applications. Inadequate development funding means that hours spent working to find and develop stories go unpaid. There is an uneven distribution of funding across the country, with more opportunities available for those living in cities. Funders often prefer to support larger projects, or fund projects that already have other organizations supporting them. Many participants voiced frustration that the same small number of production companies received funding year upon year.

Funding can have high barriers to entry including higher education requirements, or requiring that a filmmaker has already completed a feature film to be eligible for feature film funding. “To make that first piece of work, you’re expected to do it with zero funding and zero interest from anyone and just like, bootstrap it. Then you can show around, get proper funding for future projects, which is still really hard to secure, but easier once you’ve had the first thing.”

**This first-feature barrier favors individuals that come from wealthier backgrounds or with leverageable connections.**

“I know some successful directors, indie directors, that are working with low budgets, but they can afford to take out a \$30,000 credit line that their parents will initially pay, or they can access a location saying ‘I’m so and so’s kid.’ I don’t have that luxury.”

Funding, once secured, is restricted, and filmmakers perceive power imbalance weighted towards funders and commissioners.

**There are strict rules governing film budgets, and a lack of recognition for critical needs including childcare and emotional support for protagonists, crews, and creators.**

Funders rarely appreciate the complexity and nuance of making a documentary and may push to know what the story will be in advance. This is counter to the medium because in documentary you must “create a narrative when the building blocks of the story are beyond your control.” Creators reported being pressured by broadcasters and commissioners to make editorial choices with greater ‘commercial appeal’ without ethical sensitivity, “if it bleeds it leads.” “I was asked, ‘Could you make it more like, Icarus? Or could you make it more like a crime film in the trailer?’ I said, ‘No’ And they said, ‘then the film is not going to sell.’”

**Funding shapes career options and the stories which are told.**

Available funds are often narrow in scope, and risk-averse funders rarely support new ideas. One participant described the process of securing funding to being akin to chopping off their limbs to fit inside the box of funders’ interests and then being asked to ‘think outside the box’ – meaning be creative, but only within acceptable limits. “It’s a paradox!” they said. One filmmaker shared, “my biggest fear is am I going to, at some point, knowingly, or unknowingly drift away from my actual voice” because “to find resources you’re expected to change your story or start telling your story a certain way.”

**Seeking funding for personal stories can feel like a “trauma Olympics” where “you put your trauma out there for them to see and decide if it’s worth funding.”**

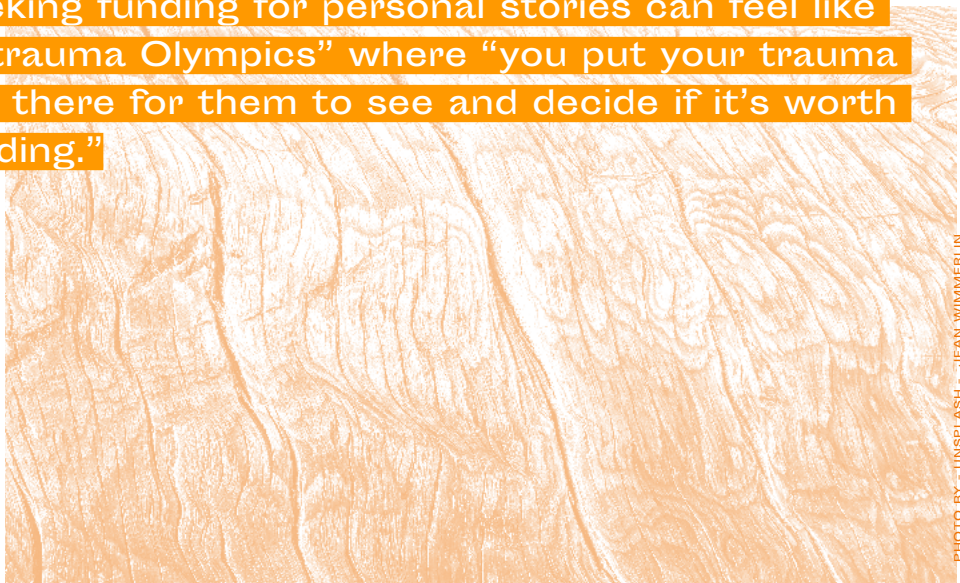


PHOTO BY - UNSPLASH - JEAN WIMMERLIN

## BURNOUT-INDUCING WORKING CONDITIONS

Filmmakers with mental health issues discussed how the pressure of filmmaking triggers and exacerbates conditions such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, and other conditions. On top of funding and time pressures, documentary creators pointed to the “culture of productivity” as a cause of distress, leading them to feel guilty or like a failure if they were not working.

One director shared, “I’m coming out of a year and a half of hell that I needed to be medicated to get through. On the outside I look like I’m doing really well. I’ve released so many hours of content, but internally, personally, financially, and for my mental health it’s been at a huge cost.” Another said,

“On one-percent of the budget of a feature film I’m told to just ‘turn on a camera, and throw it together’ To look at our mental health is to confront the fact that what we’re doing is unreasonable.”

There is also a “culture of disposability” which means people are viewed as easily replaceable.



Creators are afraid of the consequences of working less. “Very often if you say, ‘I need to step back and take some space,’ then that’s it for you. They’re not going to want to hire you. Taking space and time for yourself is frowned upon as lazy.” It becomes impossible to say no, and people burn themselves out taking on every single role offered.

Documentaries are often connected to the filmmaker’s heart, and the need to make them can take over their creator’s life, “as if that’s part of your identity, rather than a job that you do.” “The mythology of an invincible warrior filmmaker means sacrificing everything, including one’s health, relationships, family dynamics, everything in the name of so called art.”

To make a film a reality, documentary creators are required to “wear many hats” – producer, director, cinematographer, and editor. “I’m playing director, producer, writer, and it’s taken a lot of resources for me to maintain my mental health, because I’m putting myself out there, I’m putting really difficult things out in the world, I’m exposing my family to things.”

On top of these stressors, the working climate is affected by the ongoing epidemic of bullying, abuse, and racism, as well as the awkward questions of how to handle these situations.

“At what point do you call out a name? Or do you just choose to not work with that person again? What about physical or sexual assault when, as a filmmaker, you’re just trying to get your film made?”

For those that do choose to report abuse, there can be career damaging implications. One director shared a story, “My friend is an indigenous filmmaker and she was assaulted verbally, and arguably, physically by a white filmmaker. After she reported the incident, this white filmmaker proceeded to have their lawyer send a cease-and-desist letter to my colleague saying that she was defaming them. That has a mental health impact, but it also has a financial impact. It has a legal impact.”

## FINANCIAL PRECARITY

Participants in every group reported suffering from deleterious mental and physical health effects due to the constant financial pressure and precarity.

Working freelance can mean unpredictable employment, never knowing where or when the next paycheck will come. “All of a sudden, you get this one contract, and that’s great for three months, four months, and then there’s nothing and I find myself in a financially stressful situation, having to take anything and everything in order to pay my rent.” This can mean taking on projects which can be damaging to mental health. Work can also be seasonal, leaving people with extended periods of unemployment. “It’s snowing, so there’s no productions right now, and I have no income.”

The unpredictable income makes paying bills and housing stressful, especially as to find freelance jobs people often need to live in cities where the cost of living is higher. Many documentary makers take other jobs for income, however

**“there’s some stigma or shame around talking about how you actually pay your bills.”**

When on jobs, “there’s a lot of labor theft. Your paycheck will say that you’re working for eight hours, but they will expect you to work unbilled overtime. Oftentimes, people are hired as precarious temp workers. Just enough to get a steady paycheck, but not enough to get extended medical benefits.”

PHOTO BY - UNSPLASH - MIKE VON

## INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Participants described their struggles with how to best manage the dense web of relationships on each project, including those with protagonists, commissioners, and crew. One director pointed out that in film there are legal and financial contracts, but

**perhaps there should also be agreements for “moral and ethical standards, and how we interact with each other as human beings.”**

Creators have little guidance on how to support those around them, and how to navigate the inevitable conflict that comes with high stress projects.

Participants reported significant anxiety regarding their relationships with the protagonists of their documentaries. Creators want to support their protagonists and treat them well, especially while talking about emotionally charged or traumatic experiences, but often they do not have the skills, training, or resources to give the best support.

Sometimes protagonists will know for themselves what they need. While it can be beneficial to ask participants what would help them feel comfortable, it can take up valuable time. A sensitive production team can come under pressure from demands by their higher-ups. “It was hard knowing how much pain some of the people I was talking to were in, and then navigating producer or broadcast notes that wanted to push for more entertainment.”

Many documentary makers, but particularly those in the Women and Non-Binary Group, wrestled with questions around duty of care. What did they owe the protagonists once filming was complete?

...How to support protagonists that were being pushed into activist roles? Why could they not pay protagonists? Where is the line where filmmaking becomes exploitative or extractive?

They also wrestled with how to provide safety and support for their crew, and how to create a positive “good vibes” working environment. One director described an experience where a camera person had to step back because they knew one of the protagonists. It left her wondering, “what kinds of emotional support do we need to be providing beyond what we already provide?” Directors spoke of feeling unsure how to navigate situations where crew are exposed to danger or vicarious trauma.

In caring for so many others, sometimes documentary makers neglect their own mental health.

“Who takes care of the leader?”  
“What is the best way to take care of others while also taking care of myself?” directors asked.

Awareness of privilege and authenticity of expression are additional concerns. Through ongoing discussions around race and bias in the industry, white and privileged documentary makers are asking themselves ‘am I, or was I the right person to tell the story?’ One producer shared, “I’m a middle-class cis white woman with young kids. People don’t really want to watch documentaries about me, particularly, but where can I fit in?” Another shared an experience of directing a film in an African country as a white Canadian director working with a local director of photography, “If I had gone to the village, I would have shot the big mountain, I would have shot the poverty, but the way he saw it was beautiful. Today I think I wasn’t the right person to tell that story.”



PHOTO BY - JAMES ASH - OSARUOJA, NIGERIA

Finally, creators discussed their relationship to the film and to the audience, raising their concerns about how to navigate a duty to care for the audience. “There’s a sense of responsibility that comes from making a film, and talking about a subject, and becoming an authority.” One director whose film is about a family suicide shared, “It’s really fundamental to me that when we have a screening, we have councilors or professionals present so that people don’t walk out with no one to share their feelings with, but we have to fight with festivals to get this to happen.” Another director felt overwhelmed and unsure how to handle emails from people saying “I was on the edge, and you saved me,” she said. “I’m just a filmmaker, you know, I’m not a therapist!”

## DISTRIBUTION

Participants reported frustration with the lack of options for distribution of documentary films. There are few sales agents, and it is hard to get a foot in the door. Part of the pain is what participants called the “post-partum” experience that comes after finishing a film. “When I deliver to a broadcaster, it’s like all of my energy has been used up to put it on the screen. I don’t have anything left to spend with renewed force, getting it into festivals, putting it out to other platforms, getting it distributed.”

**Favoritism and “the hierarchy of distribution” creates a system “completely stacked against most people.”**

“There’s nepotism. It’s always the same filmmakers at Sundance. It feels like there’s no path for distribution except for those in the top tier.”

Some filmmakers feel ashamed of this post-delivery crash, particularly because of the culture of productivity, but comparing similar experiences has helped others “anticipate it and prepare myself to be okay with feeling sad. I am recognizing that the depressive feeling is not necessarily bad. You’re needing to go inward and regenerate.”



## ISOLATION

Participants shared that one of the challenges of making documentaries is working in isolation.

**“There is an incredible loneliness. You might work with many people, but you are always alone, carrying the project.”**

It comes from within you. You might work with many people, but in this industry you are alone.”

Documentary makers are often working with little mentorship or peer support. “I don’t know of any professional bodies for documentary creative documentary filmmakers where I can go in times of crisis.” Another producer shared, “I’m alone in my house, my own company. I don’t even necessarily have networking or support from other producers that often. I think it would be helpful to get together regularly and just vent.”

The need to be seen as productive, successful, or available for work all further the sense of isolation. “It creates so much anxiety to work for interminable hours without knowing whether there is anything worthwhile at the end. You don’t know if your film will be good or win prizes. But you must keep up appearances, be positive with the crew and participants. At home you are vulnerable.”

Filmmakers report that the stigma and judgment of “work ethic” sometimes prevents them from sharing their financial and mental health struggles.

**“You can’t be vulnerable or expose how you really are. You must always be professional. When you talk about mental health or share your vulnerabilities, it’s never perceived well.”**

Participants worried that sharing their mental health struggles with colleagues could have financial and career implications as that person might decide not to work with them in the future.



PHOTO BY - UNSPLASH - MATTHEW MOLONEY



## INDUSTRY EVENTS

Festivals are the main place where documentary filmmakers can connect with peers, however the steep costs of travel and lodging make participation in festivals challenging. Many participants reported finding festivals overwhelming. “You feel like you have to constantly participate, or else you’re gonna miss out on something. And it’s emotionally and physically exhausting.” There’s an expectation to be always “on,” the need to “hustle”, to “make oneself visible.” “It’s like ‘network, network, network.’ It’s very, very difficult and very, very scary for me to do that. But what’s the other option if you’re not a social butterfly? The pressure to go out, talk to everyone, sell yourself as an artist – it’s just not possible for everyone.”

## EMOTIONALLY CHARGED TOPICS

Documentaries often explore heavy, upsetting, and traumatic topics, and many creators report that they need emotional support. One documentary maker shared :

**“I was recently referred to a psychiatrist and have been exploring PTSD as a result of trauma, vicarious trauma.”**

Vicarious trauma, also called second-hand trauma and compassion fatigue, is the emotional residue of exposure to traumatic stories and experiences of others, born of witnessing fear, pain, and terror that others have experienced. Despite its significance, there is little widespread knowledge about the issue.

One director shared, “I had to work really hard to acknowledge that I was suffering from vicarious trauma. I was having nightmares, seeing the worst things. It wasn’t just one film, it was 30 years of depressing, sad topics. I remember protagonists saying to me, ‘how are you dealing with the stuff we’re telling you?’ I felt embarrassed to admit it was hurting me to hear it.” Vicarious trauma can cause depression. “I felt hopeless because I was covering these subjects, but nothing would change.” It can also manifest as physical symptoms. “I’m working on a heavy project and found myself in the hospital

in pain. I have what's called an occipital headache and it can last up to a year. I just hadn't been taking physical care of myself because I felt like every moment of every day should be spent working. But realizing I'm likely going to need surgery has really forced me to confront how much self-sacrifice is necessary and acceptable."

## INADEQUATE MENTAL HEALTH CARE

In nearly every group, filmmakers reported frustration that mental health care is not built into budgets. "Vicarious trauma is something that exists in the vast majority of documentaries that are created. The work of telling important stories can cause vicarious trauma and I think the industry should have a hand in ensuring that we're building self-care into schedules and budgets." There is no standard line item on budgets for mental health care on projects, which means these costs fall on individuals. Filmmakers also want support and care built into schedules through group debriefs at the end of a day, or time to rest after heavy interviews. While some disability support is available through Arts Council Funding for mental health, it must be the creator who has the disability. This support is not available for crew or protagonists.

Therapy and mental health care are expensive and hard to access. Some documentary filmmakers can afford therapy, but many cannot. Without regular employment, many in the film industry cannot access extended medical care plans. The public health system in Canada offers 12 weeks of therapy paid for by the government. One creator shared, "12 weeks is better than nothing, but 12 weeks is not enough for somebody who is dealing with ongoing mental health issues."

**"I've been on a waitlist for complex PTSD for over a year now, but I don't have \$250 for the sessions."**



## FILMMAKERS WITH AND WITHOUT CHILDREN

Being a documentary filmmaker has a huge impact on choices around family. "As an independent documentary filmmaker, you're going from one project to another. You're not really financially secure, but when you have a family, in terms of finances, you need to have some sort of stability." Having children can make participating in industry events impossible. "You're expected to show up and be there and commit 100%. And that can be really difficult when you need to work because you need to provide for a family."

For many participants, one of the consequences of choosing to be a filmmaker was choosing not to have a family.

**"I had two serious relationships fall apart, and I had to forgo a decision to be a mother, because I don't know how I could do this job and have a child. I would be fired. It's a human right not to be, but somehow in this business, that's how it happens."**

## WHEN DO YOU QUIT?

While many creators fear losing opportunities or feel unable to walk away, for some, knowing when to quit was essential to their mental health. "I feel like drawing that boundary within yourself is really important. How far would you go? Knowing that line when you'll walk away is great for mental health."

One director shared, "I would have quit because it was so toxic, but I've handed over a project with characters that I committed to.

**"So I can't actually quit, because there's only two people that buy docs in this country. If I burn my bridge with both of them, then like, what is there?"**

For some, quitting projects does not need to be black and white. Filmmakers with leverage were able to negotiate boundaries on projects, such as only working remotely with people they found toxic.

However, there are many filmmakers who are considering quitting the entire industry. “I think a lot about, ‘What is my future as a filmmaker?’ Will I be able to have a long, sustained career? Or will it get to the point where my health issues and disabilities prevent me from continuing as a filmmaker because I just can’t make enough money?”

I don’t have a social safety net that I can fall back on. If I can’t pay for my apartment, if I can’t pay for my medication, if my disabilities get worse and I need adaptive technology, social assistance is basically where I’d end up.

...And I don’t know if you guys have looked at the figures for what social assistance covers, but it ain’t a lot.”

## DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

The final point that was brought up in all groups was the recent introduction of new diversity initiatives and mandates to bring more people with marginalized identities into the industry. All participants felt that increased diversity was necessary, but many felt that there were flaws with the current approach, that change is happening too slowly, and that these initiatives need to target the strongholds of power such as commissioners and funders as well.

Many participants felt that the changes were not coming from a sincere desire for diversity, but a need to appear to support diversity.

One participant from the 2SLGBTQIA+ group offered, “I’ve found myself in different situations where I kind of realized after I was hired that I was brought on specifically because of my different identities. I felt like a fraud.” An indigenous filmmaker shared, “A lot of white organizations want me to play this role of ambassador because I am white passing enough that white people don’t feel uncomfortable. ‘Oh, you check this many boxes? Oh, you’re trans and native? Great.’”

Concern was expressed that there is a lack of awareness on the part of producers and broadcasters for the need to provide training for new talent.



One director shared that on a recent project, the producers brought on a BIPOC editor who was inexperienced. The director told the producers they needed to change the delivery timeline, which had been scheduled for an editor with 15 years' experience. "The schedule never changed. She had to deliver at the same level. The pressure and anxiety was so intense."

**Too often, poorly thought-out diversity initiatives mean people are "given a huge opportunity and then they're getting yelled at by people and then they just leave the industry."**

This director supported and trained the editor working unpaid 12 hours a day for 18 days to deliver on time. "What I realized in that whole process is that these diversity initiatives aren't being applied to the production companies... frequently white male producers just don't feel that duty of care."

## **Part 2 Specific Experiences Around Mental Health in the Canadian Documentary Industry**

Within each group there were discussions that did not happen in other groups linked to the shared identity of the participants. While these discussions cannot be taken as representative of all individuals that might identify with that group, they do provide perspectives on the challenges faced by each group.

### **MUSLIM, BLACK, AND RACIALIZED AND/OR PEOPLE OF COLOR**

Participants in this group stated that one of their major concerns was examples of systemically racist commissioners and funders not investing in BIPOC narratives. This discrimination happens behind a veil, especially as organizations often resist releasing relevant data. One of the participants talked about her outrage when a report came out about a broadcaster that showed that :

**"98.3% of funding went to non-diverse filmmakers,"**



PHOTO BY UNSPLASH, MATTHEW BRINDLE

...and there was silence from her white colleagues, along with comments blaming the racialized community.

**Discussions around race are fraught because white people shy away from discussing race. Filmmakers who broached the topic lost support from friends and colleagues, and were branded troublemakers.**

One participant shared, “That has deeply affected my own mental health. It has led to feelings of profound alienation, despondency, deep discouragement, all of which, in addition to the challenges that all documentary filmmakers have, of being marginalized within the context of a larger film industry... I think all those issues are compounded by being on the margins, or being perceived and forced to be on the margins.”

**Black, Muslim and racialized filmmakers are also harmed by lateral violence - 4.**

4. Lateral violence, also called horizontal violence includes behaviors born from anger and rage that are directed towards members within a marginalized or oppressed community rather than towards the oppressors of the community – one’s peers rather than adversaries. Lateral violence was also discussed in the 2SLGBTQIA+, Women and Non-Binary, and Indigenous groups.

One participant shared, “The most challenging thing to deal with is the colleagues who look like me, a minoritized person, who have followed the rules put in place by white power, and reached a level of success and seniority, and then are like, ‘Why are you rocking the boat for the rest of us?’”

## **2SLGBTQIA+**

In the 2SLGBTQIA+ group participants discussed their frustration with expectations that they should only make content that is ‘on brand’ for their identity. “You’re expected to only put forward that narrative. You have to be making content about being queer.” There are expectations about what a sexual or gender identity should look like, both inside and outside the community. These expectations can leave people feeling like they are too much, not enough, or both. Participants felt it should not be a requirement to disclose trauma or perform an inauthentic identity to receive industry support.

**Identity-linked funding “pits people against each other for resources.**

If you’re competing for a grant, that’s for queer people, you are having to fight other queer people.” This competition can fracture the community, and can be particularly divisive if certain individuals are continually receiving funding.

## CREATORS LIVING WITH DISABILITY

For people with disabilities there are entry barriers such as institutional ableism and gatekeeping. Participants felt that there was token funding, but they saw no systemic change.

**The industry is inflexible regarding people's needs, and creators with disabilities are being excluded and harmed at all levels.**

Misrepresentations spread biased and misleading narratives. The Mad Pride movement demands that people who live with mental health challenges and “dis/ability” be the ones to tell their own stories or – “nothing about us without us.” Participants shared experiences of inflexible deadlines leading to breakdowns, and professors bullying them for lacking a work ethic due to their lower energy levels.

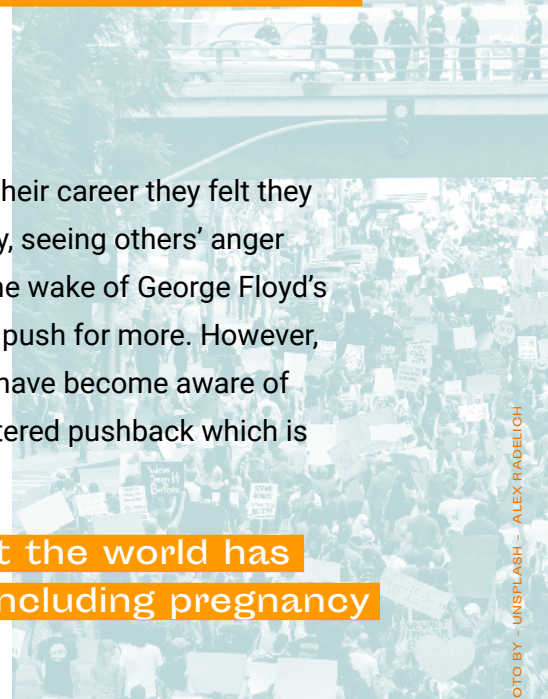
Currently, it falls to the individuals with disabilities to raise the conversations around their needs, which puts pressure on them to disclose information they may not want to share. One participant said, “Obviously, you're afraid as the person who's receiving funding to be the one bringing forward these conversations, and afraid of coming off as extra needy and difficult to work with because you need to make these accommodations to support our team.”

**Participants preferred working with partners who were comfortable having open conversations about needs.**

## WOMEN & NON-BINARY

Several participants reflected that for so much of their career they felt they should be “grateful just to be in the room.” Recently, seeing others' anger through the MeToo and BLM movements, and in the wake of George Floyd's lynching, they began to question their attitude and push for more. However, as they begin to reach for new opportunities, they have become aware of the opportunities they were not given, and encountered pushback which is impacting their mental health.

**Participants raised concerns that the world has moved on from women's issues, including pregnancy and domestic abuse.**



This sentiment echoes fears in many other groups that diversity is simply a “flavor of the month.”

To empower women in their careers, childcare costs should be acceptable costs in budgets. These are rarely covered as it is assumed that mothers will have support around them and built-in childcare options.

## INDIGENOUS

In this group, participants spoke about how the genocide and ongoing erasure of their communities gave them personal mental health struggles which they are working to heal. Storytelling has been a part of their healing process and a way of reclaiming knowledge and identity.

**In this group, the participants shared a desire to use film as part of research and community-care.**

They shared that when representing an underrepresented community, it's possible “that your little voice might end up being quite big in comparison to the way your people have been viewed or heard in the world.” However, this can draw abuse for the director and protagonists; one director shared that audience responses to one of their films had included death threats.

In addition to systemic barriers, “There are also these incredibly harmful grenades thrown into our industry that just cause so much damage.” These grenades include, but are not limited to, Canadian funding bodies supporting films made by non-natives which claim to represent the native experience but perpetuate negative stereotypes. “There's so much triaging to do. The damage that they're doing, it depletes so much energy from us.

**When you're just shaking from the trauma of these grenades, it's so hard to do our own work in a good way.**

There's no support when something like that happens, and you still have to be a filmmaker who interacts with these festivals and these funders and all these people.”

Change is happening slowly, and participants pointed to the work of the Indigenous Screen Office as a source of positive change for the future.



## FRANCOPHONE

Francophone documentary makers largely experience the same adverse conditions as marginalized English-speaking filmmakers, and feel there is a lack of standard work expectations and conditions, particularly around hours on set and contracts. In addition, they feel that their work is valued less as French-language films are given smaller budgets than English films. They reported that less French content is commissioned than English content, and that due to smaller budgets their work has lower production quality. The lack of French speakers outside Quebec limits audiences, so commissioners prefer films on subjects that might do well internationally.

Francophone filmmakers were frustrated and angry that commissioners wanted the same products again and again, and were disinterested in stories from outside Quebec.

The filmmakers felt trapped by these constraints. One director shared that they were so dispirited that they were considering switching to making English films which they saw as the only way to succeed in their career.

One participant shared their frustration that, while Quebec is known for their strong history of documentary films, only 3.4% of the funding from SODEC, which is responsible for supporting Quebec cultural businesses, is dedicated to documentary films.

### **Part 3 Suggested Solutions to Improve Mental Health in the Industry from Documentary Filmmakers**

The filmmakers were able to envision many ways to address and improve on the frustrations and limitations of the system as it is currently set up. Their ideas and suggestions are broad and far-reaching. Focus groups show that participants want to see more mental health support, industry reform, investment in marginalized groups, and safe and standardized working conditions.

# Mental Health Support

## BUDGET LINE FOR THERAPY/SUPPORT

The most repeated request across all groups was creating a standard budget line item for mental health support for creators, crew, and participants in documentary film. The need for this to be a normal and expected cost cannot be overstated. As an example, the reports from documentary makers of receiving PTSD diagnosis as a result of vicarious trauma demonstrates the impact that documentary filmmaking can have on those involved. Filmmakers underlined the importance of normalizing talking about mental health. Making mental health funding a standard line item in budgets will ensure these conversations are prioritized.

## SUPPORT GROUPS

Filmmakers would like to see more support groups in place where they could have fun, connect, and normalize talking about complex and difficult topics. These groups could be ongoing or for a set number of sessions. They would be run by trained professionals or moderators. Ideally, they would have funding from an external body that provided payment for the experts and possibly for the participants in addition.

## TRAINED SUPPORT WORKERS

Another suggestion was to train support workers specifically for the industry, as having someone who understands the system to talk to is validating. One participant said there had been a mental health support center for artists in their town which they found very helpful, but that it had closed down. They suggested mental health phone lines could provide support for artists and filmmakers.

## SUPPORT ON SET

Many filmmakers wanted more mental health support on set such as a clinical psychologist to support debriefs at the end of each day. A director who had this support on a recent shoot shared, "Taking the time to acknowledge what happened, even just to say it out loud, took off so much weight. The first time we did it, 'I thought oh my god, every single documentary filmmaker needs to be doing this.'" Other supports could include creating intentional cultures

with safe working environments, and schedules that offer time to check in with crew participants, for example to debrief and process individually or as a group after emotionally charged experiences.

### **TRAINING FOR FILMMAKERS**

Filmmakers themselves would like more training around mental health. This includes training in Mental Health First Aid and more long-term training in self-care and care for protagonists. One director shared, “If you are making a documentary about domestic abuse in intimate relationships, that can be extractive as a director. It would be really helpful to know how to do that in a more balanced, ethical way, that will just make everyone more comfortable. I want to take care of my protagonists, but what does that look like when I want a certain performance?”

### **CONTRACTING**

Filmmakers suggested creating comfort agreements or contracts on set or with groups. “When you’re beginning your group, you sit down and sort of lay out the rules and engagement of how we will treat each other, and what’s expected of us.”

## **Financial Support**

### **DEPENDABLE INCOME**

Filmmakers reported that a dependable income such as universal basic income would be hugely beneficial. “Then we can just afford to produce our films without feeling all of those different pressures. The focus totally changes, because you can focus on the film and on the impact it makes, rather than on the money that you have to make to survive.” Barring this, filmmakers would like to see more funding become available to be able to pay everybody involved a living wage. Freelancers in particular want to be able to access health benefits or see a fund to cover healthcare costs for filmmakers.

### **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION**

Filmmakers want less restriction on how project funding is spent. Along similar lines, one participant suggested creating a co-op where independent

filmmakers could pool line items in budgets. Filmmakers also want a fund to support them to build their company and pay for business training. A final suggestion was to make all arts tax deductible.



UNSPASH - VADIM SHUYSKIY

## Industry Reform

### ADDRESS GATEKEEPING

Filmmakers want organizations, including funders and unions, to lower the barriers of entry so they are more inclusive for BIPOC creators, creators with disabilities and from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Filmmakers also want to see alternative methods for funding applications beyond written forms. One suggestion was an extended discussion with the funders, which would be less restrictive and more personal. Filmmakers also want mentorship and networking events to be conscious of people's needs and build in breaks and quiet spaces. The Arts Council and other funders should allow applicants to include requests for support funding for themselves, participants, and crew. Filmmakers want Accessibility Coordinators for festivals and industry organizations to become standard industry practice.

### VET AND EDUCATE THE GATEKEEPERS

In order to dismantle the status quo, filmmakers want to see changes to positions of power such as festival directors and commissioning editors. Filmmakers would like to see five-year terms for commissioning editors. Commissioners and other managers should receive anti-bullying, anti-harassment, and anti-racism training. The people in these powerful positions should be vetted for their commitments to ethical practice. Filmmakers want to see more diversity in such high powered positions.

### ACCOUNTABILITY

There should be greater transparency from broadcasters and funders and there should be regular audits of performance, to determine not just who is being funded, but also if their practices are causing mental health issues or fostering abuse, and if they are objecting to inclusion in any way.

## STANDING IN SOLIDARITY

Filmmakers want to see powerful organizations in the industry move into authentic solidarity with marginalized creators and work to make the industry more inclusive and supportive. If necessary they should bring cultural advisors on board to help them understand their blind spots and biases. Funders should open conversations with creators to ask about their needs.

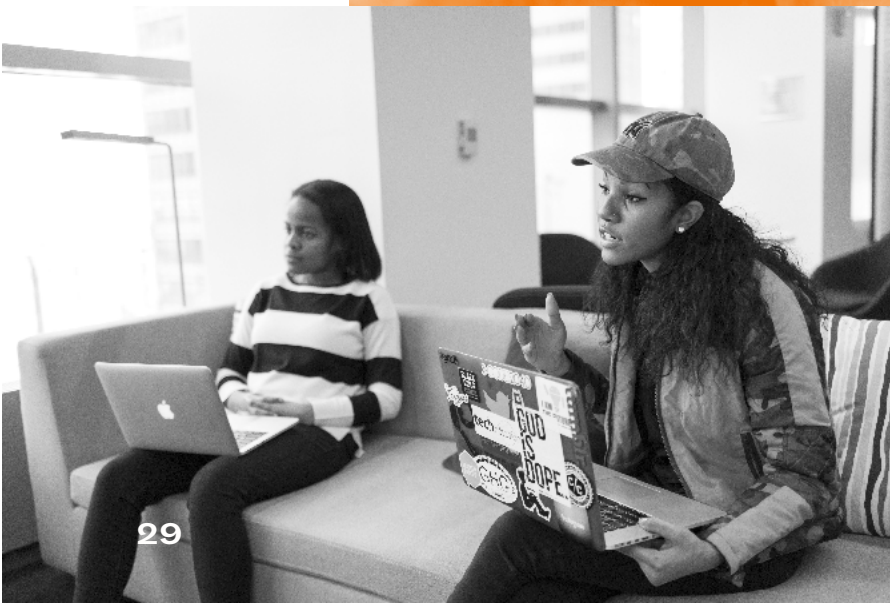
## Diversity Empowerment

### INVESTMENT IN DIVERSITY

Investment in diversity will strengthen the Canadian documentary film industry. This investment needs to include minority run production companies and creators. Mentorship programs are an important form of investment. One director shared that they wanted to see the industry “framing diversity not just in terms of altruism, but as a strength.”



PHOTO BY UNSPLASH - NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE



## **Safe And Standardized Working**

### **WORK SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR CREW AND PROTAGONISTS**

Filmmakers want legal guidelines to ensure safety of crew and participants' physical and mental health, for example limits on working hours.

### **REPORTING ABUSE**

There is an ongoing epidemic of abuse, but no system for reporting abuse beyond calling out abusers. Filmmakers want an HR system developed to be able to report abuse anonymously.

### **GUIDANCE ON STANDARD PRACTICE**

Filmmakers are frustrated that practices can differ wildly between production companies. They suggest an anonymous ombudsman at the broadcaster level who could provide general advice or explanation of standard practice.

### **PROTOCOL GUIDELINES**

Filmmakers would like a protocol document that offers a roadmap or guidelines on how to talk about difficult topics including suicide, eating disorders, addiction, and mental illness.

## **Other Support**

### **CHILDCARE SUPPORT**

Filmmakers want childcare costs to become a standard above the line budget line item. This change will particularly affect women, who are disproportionately responsible for childcare, but empowering mothers to take on more creative projects, and enabling people who want to have children to do so without giving up their career.

## **MENTORSHIP**

Filmmakers believe that increasing mentorship opportunities is essential. Mentorship would include support on funding applications and business practice. Mentors can facilitate network connections for emerging filmmakers to more experienced colleagues. One creator said, “mentors facilitating connections to people I couldn’t reach out to can be really validating.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this research demonstrates that documentary filmmakers are struggling. The highly competitive, under-resourced nature of the business, coupled with the challenges of telling stories that are often deeply personal and traumatic, multiplied by the number of years it takes to move a documentary from idea to screen, make for fertile ground for mental health challenges. For too long we have brushed this aside as problems related to “an artist’s life”.

This research demonstrates that the community is at the edge of a crisis. Addressing these issues is long overdue.



PHOTO BY - UNSPLASH - SHALOM DE LEON



PHOTO BY - UNSPLASH - LEO SOKOLOVSKY

## **Appendix A**

This report is part of a larger research project including focus groups in the US and UK. The overarching themes from these focus groups align with the experiences of Canadian documentary makers and reflect similar conditions of isolation, loneliness, secondary trauma, and feelings of rejection and inadequacy.

### **THEME 1 - THE DOCUMENTARY SUBJECT MATTER**

- Topics are often “tough” – emotionally charged or traumatic
- Filmmakers are not trained to process trauma or support their crew and participants
- Can experience secondary trauma and feel powerless to create change

### **THEME 2 - FINANCES**

- Financially unsustainable career for many
- Lack of decent, reliable income
- Freelancer vulnerability (eg. lack of health insurance)
- Opaque, convoluted, discouraging grant making system

### **THEME 3 - BOUNDARIES**

- The stress of wrestling with ethical dilemmas, lack of support, advice, or protocol framework
- No entity to hold people accountable for abusive, unethical, inhumane behavior
- Toxic relationships



#### THEME 4 - \*SUCCESS\*

- Industry built on status, pretense, and perception
- Pressure on filmmakers to be “successful”: win awards, get funded, be recognized by influential people
- Pressure to be constantly promoting oneself or film
- Easy to see oneself as a “failure” within this system

#### THEME 5 - MARGINALIZED FILMMAKERS (BIPOC, LBGTQA+, DISABLED)

- Stress and exhaustion convincing funders and executives our stories are valid
- Being on the receiving end of racism, bigotry, stereotypes, and stigmas, etc.
- How does a marginalized director contain all of this?



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