



What Women Are Telling Us

Special Report from

Soundcheck: Mental Health in the Canadian Music Industry

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Content Warning

This report contains direct quotes from survey respondents describing experiences of sexual harassment, sexual assault, workplace abuse, discrimination, and mental health challenges. Some content may be difficult to read.

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Executive Summary

This special report synthesizes anonymous feedback from hundreds of women working in Canadian music industry who participated in the Soundcheck national survey on mental health. Respondents shared detailed experiences of workplace challenges, discrimination, and systemic barriers affecting their well-being.

You can access the full report at revelios.com/soundcheck.

This special report highlights open-text comments from >600 women who participated in the survey. These comments were echoed in focus groups and interviews.

Key findings include:

1. Systemic lack of professional accountability and regulatory oversight enabling abusive behavior
2. Pervasive gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment with minimal consequences
3. Ageism affecting both younger emerging artists and established professionals over 30
4. Financial precarity preventing access to mental health support and creating chronic stress
5. Power imbalances between established industry gatekeepers and independent artists
6. Inadequate support systems for navigating funding applications and career development

Methodology

Data Collection

This report draws from women-only open-text responses to a national survey on mental health in the Canadian music industry. Participants provided voluntary, anonymous feedback describing their experiences with workplace issues including sexism, racism, bullying, ageism, and harassment.

Analytical Approach

Using qualitative thematic analysis, responses were coded to identify recurring patterns and themes. This approach honours participant voices by presenting their exact language while providing analytical context. Quotes have been selected to represent the breadth and depth of experiences shared.

Ethical Considerations

To protect respondent anonymity, potentially identifying information has been removed or generalized. This includes:

- Names of specific venues, studios, festivals, and organizations
- Geographic details that could narrow identification
- Specific timelines or dates
- Names of individuals

Where content was particularly graphic or could cause harm, it has been summarized rather than quoted directly. All other text preserves respondents' original language and phrasing.

Findings: Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Absence of Professional Accountability and Regulatory Bodies

A dominant theme across responses was the absence of professional standards, oversight bodies, or mechanisms for accountability in the music industry. Multiple respondents described experiences with established professionals who engaged in unethical practices without consequence.

Disrespectful Treatment by Established Professionals

Independent artists described being treated with disrespect by studios, producers, and industry gatekeepers. One respondent detailed a four-year experience creating their debut EP, only to face serious challenges when seeking professional mixing services:

“Large producers, large studios, and the industry generally in place treat independent artists with ENORMOUS disrespect. Independent artists are intimidated, shown a lack of seriousness and/or respect toward their project(s), and even insulted in writing by people who are supposed to be great industry professionals.”

This same respondent paid a reputable studio for mixing services but experienced repeated failures to follow creative direction:

“When we started working, the person refused to listen to me and respect my work instructions. I received a mix that respected half the points I had requested, so I had to provide a new feedback document for the remaining points. And EVERY TIME I sent a feedback document, it was never respected. We ended up with dozens of documents, months of useless back-and-forth to finish mixing 4 songs with someone who refused to do what was asked. In the end, the only way we were able to obtain a final mix was through threats of legal action.”

Call for Regulatory Framework

Multiple respondents called for the creation of professional standards and oversight mechanisms:

“What system is in place to report problematic people? People who lack ethics? People who show bad faith or refuse to collaborate within the framework of a work agreement? I believe we should seriously consider creating a professional order for music professionals that would have oversight over the right to practice and to which it would be possible to report people who have toxic/harmful/fraudulent/disrespectful practices that create trauma for artists.”

Another respondent echoed this concern:

“There should be a regulating body in the music industry to handle harassment and abuse.”

No Recourse for Freelancers

The freelance nature of much music industry work compounds the lack of accountability:

“The rampant sexism, misogyny, sexual harassment, and racism is no secret. Yet there is not one single regulatory body to be able to report to, as most perpetrators are self-employed/independent contractors in the eyes of the law. Women who speak up just get blackballed out of work.”

“We have no boss to go to even if we wanted to about problems or challenges. We have no-one to ask for sick leave to deal with crippling mental health problems. There is no service I know of that is subsidised for supporting musicians.”

Theme 2: Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination

Gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment emerged as pervasive issues affecting careers, mental health, and safety. Respondents described experiences from microaggressions to assault, often with minimal institutional support.

Workplace Sexual Harassment

Multiple respondents reported inappropriate conduct:

“I have been inappropriately spoken to or touched by men in the industry, I have experienced bullying and pressure from superiors. I have been undervalued and not paid appropriately or at all for my time.”

“Older music industry professionals have targeted me and my insecurities or self-perceived lack in knowledge, offering to be the ‘coach,’ or ‘mentor,’ using that as a way to get close quickly. It has led to a sexual relationship once which I now regret.”

Institutional Protection of Predators

Respondents described how sexual predators continue to thrive despite known patterns:

“Sexual predators are protected everywhere, especially at institutions (universities and conservatories) and are often awarded Junos and Order of Canada. These are open secrets and yet, record labels spend millions protecting them. Abuse of power, bullying and harassment are so common that I’ve felt too degraded to perform anywhere as a result.”

One respondent described the aftermath of assault:

“I was raped by a well-known Canadian Musician. He was a stranger at the time. He continues to excel in the music industry despite the trauma he caused me. I was bullied and shamed by colleagues. Over the last few years, I have worked hard to overcome PTSD. I was an up-and-coming Canadian musician and lost it all.”

Retaliation Against Survivors

Survivors who speak out often face professional consequences:

“I am outspoken as a survivor of sexual assault, as my abuser has frequently contacted organizations and venues, I work with to try and prevent me from performing. I thought opening up would help, but it hasn’t—now it feels like even fewer people want to work with me because I’m an open self-advocate.”

Systemic Sexism

Women described persistent sexism affecting careers:

“As a female front person and sound technician, sexism is a HUGE challenge for me.”

“Being a woman, this is so difficult. Nearly every interaction with a male colleague has to be calculated and strategized to protect oneself.”

“In my early career I was told I needed to be 10% better than a man to be successful in winning an orchestral position. Several times I was disqualified because of being a woman. I ended up developing severe and chronic stage fright which I wrestled with all my career, relying on beta blockers.”

One respondent left the industry after years of harassment:

“I finally decided to switch careers at age 28 after I decided I was no longer willing to put up with sexism. Being a professional musician was always my number one priority in life. But after years of sexual harassment – and feeling like my opinion as a woman did not count – I decided my mental health was worth more than my career in music.”

Exclusion and Double Standards

Women described being excluded from opportunities:

“Bad luck to have a woman in your band common to hear. Men are jealous and protective of their old boys club. Men edge women out of gigs. Wives are jealous of having a woman in the band on tour.”

“As a woman, I’m taken far less seriously as a performer as a pianist than any male pianist is.”

Different standards applied to women:

“I was judged in my community for having a few drinks during bar gigs in my early-mid-twenties. Someone said I was unreliable and irresponsible, thus not wanting to hire me, while male colleagues were almost praised for drinking on stage.”

“People don’t hire me unless I maintain a below average body weight.”

“Having a baby in the music industry was a discriminatory experience. There was a belief I wouldn’t be a good musician once I had a baby. However, inside I still carry that identity of being a weak woman who had a baby and therefore is not a good musician.”

Theme 3: Ageism Across Career Stages

Ageism affects professionals at both ends of the spectrum. Younger professionals described being dismissed or exploited, while those over 30 felt ‘aged out’ of opportunities for ‘emerging artists.’

Youth as Vulnerability

“I have experienced ageism for looking younger than I am.”

“I’ve been feeling like the older generation doesn’t fully respect or recognize the new wave of artists and professionals. There’s this unspoken hierarchy, and sometimes when I talk to people in industry spaces, I feel looked down upon—like my ideas aren’t taken as seriously just because I’m younger.”

The ‘Emerging Artist’ Trap

Programs targeting ‘emerging artists’ effectively exclude anyone over 30:

“Emerging artists = young artists = ageism. I didn’t start my career until my early 30s because I experienced abuse in childhood and needed my 20s to heal. By this point, I had aged out of most opportunities available to new artists. The exclusion I felt time and again because I was an ‘older artist’ (in my 30s!!) was heartbreaking and definitely affected my mental health.”

“I’m only 31 but as a woman trying to break into the industry - all signs point to me being too old and that I should give up.”

“I’m in my 30s. It still feels as if everyone is looking for the ‘hot new thing’ – why can’t I be supported and treated fairly when I am the most mature and at the strongest point in my career?”

Invisibility of Older Artists

Established professionals described feeling marginalized:

“I’m starting to feel old and irrelevant. I’m not as inspired to create; could be lack of energy as I get older, that I’m not as fresh and bright eyed like the younger artists.”

“Ageism is huge - constantly worried about ‘aging out’ of my job.”

“As a CIS-woman with a solid track record, I’ve encountered more ageism than sexism. It’s from all sexes and ethnic backgrounds.”

One senior artist provided a detailed account:

“I feel very much silenced. The tenor of every arts organization is ‘how to reach the young and support emerging artists’. Noble, but terrible towards elders and seniors. We understand supporting the young, we have been caregivers and mentors for many years. But we have something to say based on our experience. Unfortunately, we’re not being hired for ourselves. This is particularly hard on older women who sacrificed and fought for equity all their lives and are now hoping to use their remaining time to reach people through art.”

Theme 4: Financial Precarity and Mental Health Access

Economic realities emerged as a fundamental barrier to mental health. Respondents described chronic financial stress, inability to access therapy, and the growing reality that sustainable music careers require family wealth.

Inability to Access Mental Health Care

"I consistently struggle financially which holds me back from getting the therapy I need."

"I am Autistic and struggle to manage it because I don't make enough money to get dedicated therapy. I am in a waiting list with the government for free care I probably will never get to the top of because I am too old to be prioritized."

"I have been sexually harassed, sexually assaulted and threatened/bullied multiple times during my 25-year career and there seems to be no support system for therapy and legal fees."

Class Barriers to Music Careers

Music has become accessible primarily to those with family wealth:

"Venues pay less than 30 years ago! Anyone I know working in original music has their parents'/ spouses' credit cards, house to live in, is floated by a day job. These days you must be from a rich family, high middle class or above to entertain the profession. There are NO working musicians anymore. The only people who succeed are privileged."

"The Canadian classical music industry is very clique-ish and not always merit based. Those with family or personal wealth not gained in the music industry are often hired or move into positions of power when their colleagues with less generational wealth who have the same or better skills are often left behind."

Inadequate Compensation

"The non-profit sectors do not pay a livable wage. So you are stressed out while executive directors are getting paid over \$100,000."

"There are large differences in pay based on looks, body type and gender. Thin lower body weight singers are hired more often, even if they're not the right vocal fach (sic). Male singers tend to make 25-50% more than women and non-binary singers."

Structural Economic Changes

Changes in the industry's economic model have destroyed financial sustainability:

"Canadian radio, trackers and promoters have lost their way and the system is completely flawed in promoting Canadian talent and offering any possibility of financial stability for independent musicians. CD sales are gone, and streaming revenue is ridiculous when you look at the ROI of online advertising budgets needed to create a buzz. To new artists I work with I always tell them not to give up their day job!"

Call for Basic Income

“The Canadian music industry is not at its core built by the people for the people. It is time to distance ourselves from big money and capital. There needs to be a campaign to pass liveable UBI so we can just do our work and live. Arts should not mean risking living in the streets.”

Theme 5: Institutional Barriers and Funding Challenges

Respondents described significant challenges navigating funding applications and institutional systems. The complexity, combined with lack of feedback and support, creates additional stress.

Inaccessible Funding Applications

“Factor grants and Canadian Council grants are set up for professionals who have Time to sit for hours and know how to navigate the convoluted sites. As a non-represented musician, I’ve called and reached out for help. I’m still waiting for a call back a month later. No one cares about us and the music we make.”

Lack of Feedback

“Funding agencies that provide no feedback on rejected applications are distressing. (Canada Council, Factor, Socan Foundation)”

Gatekeepers Without Accountability

“Gatekeepers in music communities who face no accountability for their actions have caused me immense mental distress. Current systems based around success being determined by online plays is deeply demoralizing.”

Theme 6: Intersectional Discrimination

LGBTQ+ artists and artists of color described facing compounded discrimination that limits opportunities and creates hostile environments.

Experiences of Trans Artists

“Growing up being Cis but realizing I was Trans in the Canadian music scene was not easy. There were barely any real out queer artists 20 years ago let alone trans ones.”

“Being a trans woman working as a freelance FOH engineer means I’ve been passed by for opportunities on many occasions resulting in loss of potential income.”

“The music world is akin to the rest of it. Me being a brown trans woman just means I will always be afforded less opportunity.”

Racism in Hiring Practices

One respondent provided a detailed account:

“The racism and sexism within the music industry is ridiculous. I find that there are a lot of white women in higher positions and due to that they do not hire any other minorities, especially black women. The rude behavior of white people in these higher positions is ridiculous and if it is a minority that is not black, they will always hire their own kind. Discrimination is a big part, and white people are in positions of power. They do not move up any black people at all.”

Rape Culture and Silencing

“Rape culture and sexism is very prevalent in the music industry and a huge barrier to women and queer people. I have also been told that I need to be less sensitive and suck it up when I try to point out issues.”

Theme 7: Workplace Culture and Bullying

Beyond specific discrimination, respondents described toxic workplace cultures characterized by bullying, competitive pressure, and lack of support.

Power Dynamics and Bullying

“For 6 years I worked for a large music festival and conference, and I learned that the music industry is run by a ‘boys club’ of men and particularly my boss was a terrible bully.”

“There feels like there is a battle between the older generation and the need to be available 24/7 and the new generation trying to advocate for better balance and healthier work environments. I have been bullied and made to feel like I don’t belong despite my 10+ years dedicated to supporting Canadian artists.”

“Very often the abuse can be from artists to their management, especially with the younger cohort of artists, either because of age, or being white, or especially because of being female.”

Forced Competition

“Bullying is also experienced no matter what your gender because the industry forces us to compete against each other whether we want to or not, and some people don’t know how to handle that, and it comes out in ways that aren’t welcoming.”

“Competition and pressure to ‘compete’ or make it is directly related to my mental health.”

Lack of Supportive Infrastructure

“We’re harassed and bullied to be permanently online, sharing everything about ourselves for attention and profit. We have no benefits. Unless you know a lot of other musicians, you have nowhere except Instagram to share what is going on. Young and developing artists are on their own...no one develops an artist anymore; you just have to do it yourself.”

Fear of Retribution

“I actually deleted what I first wrote because of fear of retribution despite the promise of anonymity. The Canadian Music Industry is not a welcoming world.”

“I feel that regardless of what is said at the workplace, there is still a high and dangerous stigma for women to come and speak out against harassment. It does not feel like I would be supported or believed.”

Theme 8: Disability and Chronic Illness

Musicians with disabilities or chronic health conditions described being forced to hide their conditions and facing job loss when accommodations were needed.

“I have permanent disability I have to work very hard to hide. It’s exhausting. I’ve recently lost two ensemble jobs because of living with a condition. There is no understanding in the industry. It’s just business is what I’m always told.”

“Other people’s struggle with their mental health has hugely negatively impacted me. There are no structures or bodies overseeing the whole.”

Recommendations

Based on experiences shared by survey respondents, this list is a starting point for considering systemic changes:

1. Establish Professional Standards and Accountability

Create an independent regulatory body or professional order with authority to:

- • Receive and investigate complaints of professional misconduct
- • Establish and enforce codes of professional conduct
- • Impose meaningful consequences for violations
- • Provide mediation and conflict resolution services
- • Maintain public records of disciplinary actions

2. Address Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

- • Develop industry-wide harassment reporting mechanisms
- • Create funded support services for survivors including legal aid and therapy
- • Implement consequences for institutions protecting predators
- • Establish anti-retaliation protections
- • Require anti-harassment and bystander intervention training for all music workers

3. Reform Funding and Support Systems

- • Simplify grant applications and provide free application support
- • Provide detailed feedback on rejected applications
- • Expand definitions of 'emerging artist' beyond age-based criteria
- • Create programs specifically supporting mid-career and senior artists
- • Establish artist basic income pilot programs

4. Improve Access to Mental Health Services

- • Create industry-funded, sector-specific mental health support programs
- • Provide subsidized therapy addressing industry-related trauma
- • Establish peer support networks
- • Develop mental health literacy training and development

5. Address Economic Precarity

- • Establish minimum fee standards for music work
- • Create portable benefits programs for freelancers
- • Advocate for improved streaming royalty rates
- • Develop affordable housing programs for artists
- • Explore universal basic income pilots for arts workers

6. Combat Discrimination

- • Implement anonymous audition practices where possible
- • Require diversity training for all hiring personnel
- • Establish targets for representation of marginalized groups in leadership
- • Create mentorship programs pairing emerging with established, vetted professionals
- • Audit funding and programming for age, gender, and racial bias

Conclusion

The voices in this report reveal a music industry in crisis. While individual experiences vary, the patterns are clear: systemic lack of accountability, pervasive discrimination, economic precarity, and insufficient upstream and downstream mental health support are interconnected features of how the Canadian music industry currently operates.

Respondents demonstrated remarkable resilience and dedication despite facing significant barriers. Many persisted not because conditions improved, but because their commitment to music outweighed the personal cost. This should not be necessary.

The detailed accounts make clear that mental health challenges in the music industry are not primarily individual failings requiring individual solutions. They are predictable outcomes of structural problems requiring structural solutions.

Creating meaningful change will require commitment from multiple stakeholders: government funding bodies, industry associations, educational institutions, unions, and individual music professionals. The recommendations outlined provide a starting framework.

Most importantly, the hundreds of women who shared their experiences deserve to see their voices lead to tangible change. Their honesty and courage should be met with action.

**Thank you to all survey respondents for sharing your experiences.
Your voices matter.**

Appendix: Thematic Summary

The following themes emerged from optional open-text feedback:

Theme 1: Absence of Professional Accountability

Respondents described lack of regulatory oversight enabling unprofessional behavior without consequences. Many called for creation of professional standards bodies.

Theme 2: Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination

Widespread experiences of harassment, assault, and discrimination. Institutional protection of known predators. Retaliation against survivors.

Theme 3: Ageism Across Career Stages

Younger professionals dismissed or exploited. Artists over 30 described as 'too old' for emerging programs. Senior artists experiencing invisibility.

Theme 4: Financial Precarity

Chronic financial stress preventing access to mental health care. Growing class barriers to sustainable careers. Inadequate compensation.

Theme 5: Institutional Barriers

Complex funding applications without support. No feedback on rejections. Gatekeepers without accountability.

Theme 6: Intersectional Discrimination

Compounded discrimination against LGBTQ+ artists and artists of color. Racist hiring practices. Systemic barriers for trans musicians.

Theme 7: Workplace Culture and Bullying

Toxic workplace cultures. Power imbalances. Forced competition. Fear of retribution for speaking up. Low leadership skills and proper performance management practices.

Theme 8: Disability and Chronic Illness

Forced concealment of disabilities. Job loss when accommodations needed. No understanding or support for health conditions.