

A report for the
The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

A Guide to Open Up:
**Addressing the barriers facing
Black artists' access to funding
and opportunities in Ireland**

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Research by Lucy Michael Research, Training and Consultancy Authors: Lucy Michael and Daniel Reynolds

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Each year, the Arts Council publishes equality data on individuals applying for and receiving Arts Council funding, broken down by gender, disability and ethnicity. In 2021, Black or Black Irish artists were found to be those most likely of any ethnic or racial group to have their applications deemed ineligible. Research was commissioned to investigate this further. This is a summary of the research report, 'Open Up: addressing the barriers facing Black and Black-Irish artists' access to funding and opportunities'.

An extensive literature review was conducted to explore international evidence on Black and minority ethnic engagement with the arts, diversity of representation in the arts workforce (including artist and arts management roles), the role of professional networks, values, and information exchange in the public arts, selection criteria and assessment, and minority artists' strategies to counter discrimination and exclusion.

More than 900 ineligible applications across all Arts Council awards were analysed to identify patterns of eligibility and success, in particular how assessment criteria were applied. Ineligible applications from Black artists were found mainly in awards for music and from first-time male applicants. A review was also conducted of success rates across all categories and awards.

This showed that female Black artists were more likely to be successful than female artists of other ethnic backgrounds, but there were proportionally fewer, and they were more likely to be well-established in their careers than the general female applicant pool. To investigate both of these patterns further, research interviews were carried out with 17 Black and Black-Irish artists, and 4 people from arts organisations, including 1 Black and 3 White Irish participants.

Patterns of racial discrimination in the Irish labour market are reflected in the arts sector. Black artists with equivalent experience and qualifications are offered fewer opportunities and less information and are widely excluded from professional networks. The cumulative effect of this discrimination creates an interlinked series of barriers to Black artists at all stages of careers to secure the roles, venues, programme spots, references and professional memberships which are expected in applying for public arts funding.

Issues in the arts sector reflect the problems faced by Black workers in other sectors of the labour market. However, the extensive impact in the arts sector of professional networks, the nature of freelance work, the lack of transparency in hiring, support and funding of artists across the sector and the lack of diversity in arts organisations amongst arts professionals amplifies the effects of marginalisation further.

Barriers identified in this research include a preference for more experienced artists, limited representation and opportunities, lack of mentors and support networks, insufficient training opportunities, biases favouring familiar art forms, difficulties in accessing networks and joining groups, and reliance on connections for access to venues and opportunities.

Black female artists were found to be persistently excluded from professional networks, not receiving the informal mentoring that comes with those networks and not being recognized and guided towards public funding until they had already won awards elsewhere. Black female artists were more successful when they were already embedded within established arts organisations.

Early career artists, in particular, struggle to obtain financial support, equipment, and opportunities as they often find themselves overshadowed by more experienced artists. The arts sector tends to prioritize established artists, perpetuating a cycle where opportunities are more readily given to those who have already had exposure or are associated with well-known names or brands. This preference for familiarity and existing networks hampers the chances of early career artists, hindering their access to funding and limiting their growth prospects.

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Artists who had migrated to Ireland as adults specifically sought opportunities for professional development including mentoring because they faced significant barriers in entry to the arts sector which were not experienced by Black artists who had grown up in Ireland and engaged with arts organisations from a younger age.

A lack of representation and visibility in the arts sector often leads to the voices and perspectives of Black artists being marginalized, and resulting biases manifest in forms such as stigmatisation of certain genres, preconceived notions about the type of art that Black artists do or should create and conservative assessments about the quality of their work. The lack of diverse representation in selection panels for funding and programming was highlighted as problematic particularly where panel members were less likely to be familiar with different cultures, including Black arts. This results in a systemic form of racial discrimination which reproduces a small number of funded Black artists.

There is also evidence of expectations placed on Black artists to produce or shape content in particular ways because of their ethnicity. In applying for funding and opportunities, participants felt pressured to emphasize their ethnicity and heritage to increase their chances of receiving funding but saw White Irish artists as more likely to be perceived as innovative for projects that reflected cultural fusion. Additionally, there was a perceived preference by the Arts Council for projects rooted in traditional Irish culture, making it more challenging for artists with other or mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The barriers faced by Black artists in Ireland are shared to varying extents with other marginalised artist groups, particularly where there are intersections of gender, migration history, and disability. Most of the actions recommended in this report will benefit a much wider population than Black and Black-Irish artists. The impact on Black artists however warrants continued monitoring as well as some specific actions within the Arts Council and across the arts sector targeting the inclusion of this artist profile. Twenty-six recommendations are laid out in the report for consideration by the Arts Council. An action plan will be developed by the Arts Council in response.

The authors wish to acknowledge the importance of the expertise and experience shared with us by the Black artists in Ireland who participated in this research. Though they are anonymized in this report to protect their privacy, their considered insights on the arts sector and reflections on possibilities for positive change have been crucial to the success of this study and significantly enhanced the quality and depth of the findings. It is crucial that the arts sector now work directly with Black artists and arts professionals to implement the recommendations of this report.

The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon is the Irish government agency for developing the arts. It works in partnership with artists, arts organisations, public policy makers, and others to build a place for the arts in Irish life. The Arts Council has policies that aim to ensure that all of its funding is spent strategically, all of its actions reflect the long-term interests of the public and that all decisions are transparent and fair.