

Open Up: addressing the barriers facing Black and Black-Irish artists' access to funding and opportunities

Research Report

Prepared for The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

15 August 2023

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Summary Report

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The Arts Council /An Chomhairle Ealaíon is the Irish government agency for developing the arts. 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. 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 its 2021 Awards Data Report, Black or Black Irish artists were found to be those most likely of any ethnic or racial group to have their applications deemed ineligible on assessment.

Funding applications in Ireland

More than 900 ineligible applications across all 2021 Arts Council funding programmes were analysed to identify patterns of eligibility and success, in particular how assessment criteria were applied. In the Arts Council's 2021 Awards Data Report, Black or Black Irish artists made up 1.9% of applications, 1.5% of successful applications, 1.4% of unsuccessful applications, and 4.5% of applications deemed ineligible.

71 percent of ineligible applications from Black artists were deemed to be missing mandatory or other supporting materials. The remainder related to fit for scheme or other criteria. Ambiguous or unclear feedback was common both for Black artists and artists of other ethnic backgrounds. A higher proportion of Black artists with ineligible applications are also first-time applicants (63%) than ineligible applicants overall (47.2%). Male Black artists were far less likely to be funded than males overall once deemed eligible.

The highest rate of ineligible applications for Black artists compared to artists of other backgrounds is in the Agility and Bursary Awards for Music. The lowest success rates for eligible applications were in Film and Music. The number of female Black applicants is lower than male in almost all art forms, with the exception of Arts Participation and YPCE, even in art forms which are heavily skewed female in general. Disability was not significantly related to ineligibility overall or to ineligible applications from Black artists. However, the rate of declared disability amongst Black and Black-Irish artists is notably low.

The statistical data presents no evidence of direct discrimination against Black artists. The findings from the ineligibility data present three avenues for further investigation: (1) the low number of applications from female Black or Black-Irish artists, and (2) factors affecting the significant increase of applications from male Black or Black-Irish artists in the music sector, and (3) factors affecting the quality of those applications.

The international picture

Internationally, the absence of minority artists from the arts sector has little to do with their interest or awareness, and much more significant are entry supports into arts careers and the ability to sustain arts careers. Across Europe there is systematic under-representation of Black and minority ethnic people in the workforce, leadership and governance of the arts and culture sectors. Minority ethnic artists often encounter various barriers that impede their access to opportunities and funding within this sector, including socio-political context and recognition of culture, unequal support systems, limited career capitals, cultural barriers (including formal and institutional language), lack of networks and connections, limited access to resources and funding, lack of representation and underrepresentation, and erasure of cultural identities. Language skills, particularly proficiency in written English, can be a barrier for migrant artists, but also for those with fluent English where institutional language is highly particular.

Arts funding is made inaccessible to minority artists through institutional language, heavy administration, lack of contacts, and tick-box requirements. The persistence of barriers means that minority artists have to develop various strategies to overcome these repeatedly, including (1) building networks and connections, (2) developing cultural capital and skills, (3) seeking support from arts organisations and funding bodies, (4), overcoming stereotypes and biases. They have to self-advocate to a greater extent than others. Racial discrimination has been widely acknowledged as a significant barrier faced by minority ethnic artists in the public arts sector, limiting access to opportunities, resources, and funding. Dominant cultural practices and hierarchies marginalize cultural diversity, through institutional norms and decision-making processes. Changing the public arts sector to accommodate and embrace diversity is seen as both costly and risky. There is a persistent issue in perceiving minority artists as being only of 'interest' and not of 'quality'.

Artist and Arts Organisation Perspectives in Ireland

Participation in interviews was invited from all Black and Black-Irish artists who have applied for Arts Council funding in the previous five years. Research interviews were carried out with 17 Black and Black-Irish artists, and 4 staff from arts organizations, including 1 Black and 3 White Irish participants. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and compensated. The sample included a mix of artists by gender, nationality, art form, career stage, age and migration status.

The most common issues in application are complexity of application forms, and unclear language in questions and guidance. All agreed insufficient support is provided for first-time applicants. Just under half (47%) of the participants indicated they had no or little support starting out as artists and this was a barrier to their progression, particularly for migrant artists. Additionally, applications were routinely undermined by the difficulties Black artists routinely faced in finding opportunities for work and repeated lower- or no-pay contracts, and difficulties securing venues or support from organisations or groups to display or promote work. Arts organisations and venues were more likely to 'take risks' on White Irish peers who were seen as promising, while Black artists were commonly seen as unlikely to draw audiences and to be understood by White Irish audiences. Participants also commonly referred to the need to present excellence compared to their White Irish peers in order to be considered for even the most basic roles and opportunities. A lack of diversity is prevalent in positions of leadership, management, and decision-making within the arts sector. Arts organisations working with Black artists identified 3 types of barriers facing Black artists: a significant challenge in accessing artist networks; a lack of representation across many genres, and relatively fewer supports and opportunities for minority artists in Ireland compared to other European countries.

Two-thirds of participant artists felt their ethnicity affected opportunities and success overall, and half believed differential treatment based on ethnicity was a significant factor in obstacles faced. Almost all expressed caution in assigning racial discrimination as a factor, but were influenced by repeated and shared experiences with other Black artists. The barriers faced by Black artists in Ireland in identifying and securing funding are numerous and interconnected. These highlight systemic issues of institutional racism in the arts sector in Ireland, particularly in devaluation of Black genres, underrepresentation of Black artists, unrealistic expectations, and the socioeconomic challenges faced by migrants and second-generation individuals. A small minority of participants felt fully confident they could trust the fairness of the Arts Council funding application process. Four factors determined this: the artists' own success, poor or no feedback on applications, lack of ethnic diversity amongst funded artists, and concerns of bias within selection panels. Irrespective of their own application outcomes and personal experiences, all participants felt it was important to increase participation by Black artists, and exhibited a strong commitment to promoting the Arts Council, encouraging others to apply and assisting fellow applicants.

A more inclusive and equitable arts sector can be created by creating platforms and initiatives that promote diverse voices and perspectives and increase opportunities for Black artists to showcase their work. Establishing mentorship programs specifically tailored to the needs of Black artists can provide crucial guidance, support, and networks to navigate the industry. Additionally, investing in training programs and educational resources that target underrepresented communities can help bridge the gap and provide Black artists with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in their artistic pursuits. Some of these barriers are shared with other marginalised artist groups, particularly where there are intersections of gender, migration history, and disability. Recommended actions will benefit this wider population. The cumulative impact on Black artists however warrants particular attention and continued monitoring as well as some specific actions targeting this artist population.