

Policy Review:

In Diversity is Strength - Equality, Human Rights and Diversity in the Arts

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Summary:

A review of the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and Strategy and three year Action Plan for 2019 to 2021.

Key words: Arts; equality; diversity; Human Rights

In March 2019 the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon launched its new *Arts Council Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and Strategy* (EHRD) accompanied by a three year action plan for 2019 to 2021 outlining positive policy measures, objectives and actions to promote equality of opportunity, access and participation for artists and communities. The policy and action plan state the Arts Council's commitment to promote equality of opportunity based on ten grounds and recognises the principle that increased diversity and equality in the arts supports a richer creativity in Ireland and impacts positively on 'arts development as well as wider social, cultural and economic development' (2019, p. 7).

Nine of the ten grounds referred to in the Arts Council policy are covered by the Irish state's public sector duty and equality legislation 'which outlaws discrimination and requires all publicly-funded organisations to take positive policy measures to promote equality of opportunity, access and outcomes

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for all those living in Ireland regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, civil or family status, religion, age, disability, ethnic or national origin or membership of the Traveller community. Furthermore, the Arts Council notes the ground of socio-economic background as a further basis for which equality of opportunity, access and outcomes must be guaranteed (2019, p. 7).

The EHRD policy sets out to address unequal representation of groups including women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other marginalised communities as recipients of Arts Council funding. The aims are to ensure that artists who are marginalised or excluded are guaranteed equal access to participation in the Irish arts sector and have the opportunity to express and have their voices heard and to overcome barriers associated with the ten grounds identified. The policy also aims to promote equal access to participation in the arts by attracting diverse audiences and ensuring 'the inclusion of all voices and cultures that make up Ireland today (2019, p. 1).

Three-Year Action Plan

The twenty-page EHRD policy begins with a brief introduction and statement of policy acknowledging that inequality still exists within the arts. The document contains a three-year action plan from 2019-2021 under six headings which are aligned with the Arts Council's ten-year strategy *Making Great Art Work (2016-2025)*.

The first heading **Corporate Action** involves priorities such as making the Arts Council building on Merrion Square more accessible by 2021; conducting an equality audit of current human resources practices with the aim of increasing diversity on the Arts Council workforce, board and panels;

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and creating a full-time Equality, Diversity and Inclusion position within the Arts Council to be in place within three years. In the meantime, the Arts Council have advertised for a 'project lead' to implement the plan. Other actions are two paid work placements in arts administration; the translation of policy information into different languages; the publication of regular updates and diversity 'proofing of future policy and strategy development within the council'.

The second heading **Artists** primarily involves research and consultancy. Key actions are publishing annual statistical data on the ten protected characteristics as they pertain to artists that apply for Arts Council funding in order to identify gaps and actions to address those gaps; publishing aggregate information on award applicants and recipients re gender and 'in the long-term further fields as appropriate'; and holding consultations with artists from diverse backgrounds on the discrimination issues they face in advancing their careers. Research will be collected from artists and 'funded' groups the council works with and used to set targets for representational change to be achieved in five years.

The third heading **Public Engagement Actions** focuses on information gathering, systems for data collection and consultation primarily with Arts Council strategically funded organisations in relation to the different publics they engage with as audiences, participants and collaborators. An advisory forum will be established and the Arts Council will partner with 'self-identified excluded groups' to determine actions required to address barriers to participation.

The fourth heading **Investment Actions** highlights the Arts Council's intention to incorporate gender equality and diversity criteria into future plans and strategies and to ensure that Arts Council funded organisations have

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gender-balanced boards and demonstrate best practice in governance structures.

The fifth heading **Spatial and Demographic Actions** relates to the Arts Council's strategic partnership with local government and the need to create models of practice that ensure inclusion and diversity in the arts.

The sixth heading **Developing Capacity Actions** refers to the delivery of training and identification of further training needs for Arts Council staff and decision makers on unconscious bias, anti-racism and diversity awareness, as well as the delivery of a diversity and inclusion toolkit and training for artists to be delivered initially in three regions. The Arts Council will provide updates and review their work and publish a new Equality, Human Rights and Diversity action plan by 2021.

Power-Sharing

The Arts Council are to be commended for publishing an Equality, Diversity and Human Rights policy and action plan that acknowledges the need for change and supports diverse representation. This new policy builds on pre-existing Arts Council work including a *Cultural Diversity and the Arts Policy and Strategy* (2010), an *Arts and Disability* policy (2012-2016), and a *Dignity at Work policy* (2018). In addition, the Arts Council's current 10-year strategy *Making Great Art Work* (2016-2025) recognises the value of diversity. The current policy document does not identify the effectiveness of pre-existing policies or how they were measured.

There is excellent work in the policy and action plan, particularly in relation to addressing representation. There is a strong focus on research, data collection, consultation, and the development of new policies into the future

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as well as structural change within the Arts council itself, all of which are beneficial. However, the primary focus is on representation, which does not guarantee structural change and access to shared power and there is a lack of substantial change in the short term to benefit diverse artists and arts organisations.

Firstly, the new Arts Council EHRD policy lacks concrete action to share power and is focused primarily on increasing representation rather than empowering people through systematic organization and cultural change.

According to author Suzanne Pharr (2000, p. 455)

Diversity work fails if it does not deal with the power dynamics of difference and go straight to the heart of shifting the balance of power among individuals and within institutions. A danger of diversity politics lies in the possibility that it may become a tool of oppression by creating the illusion of participation when in fact there is no shared power.

Equality and diversity are not just about sharing 'representation' or bringing in more women or people from diverse backgrounds. A group of artists may be different but still all belong to the same social class and those who are different may join existing social circles that fundamentally remain unchanged. Increasing representation of gender, ethnicity or disability is essential but how do we challenge the system and ideologies at play that created barriers in the first place? For real change to happen, political, economic, social and cultural frameworks in which inequalities currently exist need to be addressed and, where lacking, to be fundamentally altered.

Secondly, under artist actions, the aim is to collect and publish data, to consult with artists and key stakeholders, and based on findings, to set realistic targets for 'representational change' so that in 'five years' time' there is a more diverse range of artists applying for and receiving Arts Council funding. The focus is on research, consultancy and increased representation

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on a long-term basis all of which are important, however this produces incremental change and there is a lack of concrete, transformative action in the short to medium term. While this is the first Arts Council Equality, Diversity and Human Rights policy, many of the points raised in this document have been said before. There is a real need to find a way to move beyond repeating what has already been said and to implement immediate, concrete action for positive change.

Class

Wealth inequality is a major form of oppression in Ireland and across the globe and class representation continues to be a serious form of invisible discrimination. The Arts Council is to be commended for including socio-economic background in the new EHRD policy document as a barrier to equality. Actions to address socio-economic inequality include research, data collection, and consultation with the aim of ensuring a more equal representation and allocation of resources into the future.

In England, artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds are 'still vastly underrepresented' (Jerwood 2019, online) and less likely to have the 'right networks ... and cultural references ... to get ahead' (Jerwood 2019, online) and that 'these challenges can often be more acute in the arts, since there are less defined career routes, often with limited job security' (Brook, et al. 2018, online). In Ireland, it can be difficult to sustain a career in the arts without alternative sources of income. The EHRD action plan commits the Arts Council to conducting research to identify the under-representation of artists from socio-economic backgrounds, which is a positive step. Research is needed to identify socio-economic discrimination related to income inequality, low or non-existence wages and access to power sharing. The policy is focused on bringing more artists from working class backgrounds

into the system rather than identifying what structural changes need to happen.

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Research and action are needed to expose how current power structures and decision-making processes work (who has power, how is power maintained and how does it support current social class constructs and associated inequalities) and to identify how artists can 'reimagine' new structures beyond traditional patriarchal systems.

Gender Equality

One of the ten grounds referred to in the Arts Council's EHRD policy and action plan is gender equality. Important actions include a diversity and equality audit of current Arts Council human resources practice to ensure gender representation on Arts Council boards and panels into the future and a requirement for strategically funded organisations to ensure their boards are gender balanced although there is no reference to the 'real equality (50%) rule' which needs to be reinforced as the basis for reform. Another key action is to research how resources are currently allocated with the aim of ensuring more equal representation and allocation of resources into the future. These are important steps to promote representation however, a statistical presence, while essential, does not guarantee access to decision-making processes and gender biases may continue to exist.

Within the policy and action plan, the terms 'gender equality' and 'equality' are interchangeable. There is no reference to action on the gender pay gap or care responsibilities (the latter affects women, men, and gender diverse people) or to the advancement of equal female representation in artistic, decision making and leadership positions in arts and cultural institutions, as

distinct to boards. More emphasis needs to be placed on gender stereotyping, gender discrimination, gender mainstreaming and feminism.

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Lucy Kerbel of Tonic Theatre who spoke at the historic Waking the Feminists meeting in the Abbey Theatre on 12 November 2015 (Barry, 2015), spoke about the importance of having not just women, but ‘feminist’ women represented in positions of power to ensure that change happens. The word ‘feminist’ is not used in the Arts Council’s EHRD policy or action plan.

The one-year grassroots campaign #WakingTheFeminists (2015-2016) had huge success in raising awareness of equality for women in Irish theatre. Actions identified as part of Waking the Feminists and subsequent work by a range of arts organisations include having an equal balance of men and women on boards, good governance, and providing unconscious bias training for all staff in the workplace - all of which are referenced in the Arts Council action plan - as well as equal inclusion of female directors and playwrights and a more equitable gender balance in arts programming - which are not referenced in the Arts Council action plan yet play a key part in promoting gender equality in the arts.

Ireland remains ‘institutionally patriarchal’ (Rosari, 2019). Intersectional feminism has to be addressed to highlight the multiplicity of oppressions that continue to exist for particular groups or individuals for example the multiple layers of discrimination experienced by women with disabilities from different ethnic backgrounds. The rights of trans and non-gender artists also need to be addressed. Structural change requires gender proofing and a feminist approach to gender mainstreaming to be embedded in arts organizations and for female representation to be promoted in management, artistic and cultural decision-making positions. The feminist Gloria Watkins (bell hooks) says ‘patriarchy has no gender’ and it is not enough to simply ask institutions

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to acknowledge racism or patriarchy and to do something about it, that we need to start seriously talking about dismantling patriarchy.

Finally, gender equality needs to be measured qualitatively as well as quantitatively to incorporate a broad range of approaches to artistic creation by both women and men. It is essential to examine the processes of selection and exclusion that create gender inequalities as manifest in changing lives and structures (Scott, 2010 pp.223-236). I am aware of a number of recent success stories in the arts created by women who continue to be under-funded and under-valued. Borrowing the words of Helmut Anheier (2017, p. 17), Arts Councils need to 'go beyond mere equality in numbers to deconstruct negative female imaging and representation' and uncover the tendency to see male characteristics, successes and attributes as the norm. The aim is to move beyond narratives of maleness and to re-define how art is made, presented, valued and measured, how gender diverse artists are represented in the arts, and to recognise the different styles of leadership and ways of making art which may be different to current models accepted as the norm.

Future Imaginings

Barriers to building careers in the arts in Ireland encountered by artists from diverse communities include a lack of short and long-term sustainable funding and resources, a lack of access to power and decision-making processes, a lack of physical access for people with disabilities, low wages or unpaid work, the use of 'art speak', closed networks, a lack of cultural capital, invisibility and a belief in meritocracy rather than acknowledging privilege and the invisible supports it brings in relation to 'success'.

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The Arts Council needs to ensure immediate access to funding and resources, inclusion for artists and arts organisations in power-sharing and decision-making processes and to embed human rights in policy and practice. The following are a list of ‘future imaginings’ and suggestions from previous research (see bibliography) that can benefit diverse artists and arts organisations, some of which are included in The Arts Council action plan:

- Provide immediate open funding calls and make widely available and accessible for diverse artists to support the creation of work.
- Provide immediate open funding calls for small to medium sized arts organisations working with diverse artists to support the creation of work and to support artist residencies, placements, showcases and creative networks for meeting face-to-face and online.
- Provide funding to support diverse ways of making, presenting and viewing art and to support the arts for human rights.
- Fund materials and space for diverse artists making, creating and presenting work.
- Ensure all arts and cultural organisations in receipt of state funding pay living wages, promote diversity, gender equality and proofing and a feminist approach to gender mainstreaming in casting, programming and the engagement of artists and the recruitment of staff.
- Promote physical access for people with disabilities.
- Provide information in easily accessible formats and languages.
- Introduce voting and other mechanisms for access to decision making process and support artists and arts organisations as leaders in reimagining new structures for systematic, transformative change.
- Promote affirmative action for equal representation in relation to boards, staffing, and in artistic and decision making roles.

- Ensure state bodies and local arts authorities adhere to displacement policies re arts practice.

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Ireland has a wide range of cultures and communities. The Traveller culture is a unique part of Irish society yet this community continues to experience harassment, racism and discrimination. Taking action to support artists from a range of communities that have experienced marginalisation is essential. The new Arts Council's EHRD policy states that diverse artists and representative bodies will be consulted and their voices 'heard'. What guarantee can the Arts Council provide to ensure the voices of artists will be not just heard but heeded? Now is the time to conduct an independent evaluation of how the Arts Council meets the needs of artists and arts organisations and to align Arts Council and arts community vision and objectives as we build a collaborative approach to the promotion of equality, diversity and human rights for all.

Previous Arts Council overall strategies had a dual focus of supporting artists and arts organisations; however the current strategy *Making Great Art Work*, identifies the artist and public engagement as its two governing and inter-dependent priorities effectively excluding arts organisations from Arts Council strategic priority support. This strategic shift is possibly benefitting larger cultural institutions. Yet, what is the impact of such a strategy on gender, class or ethnicity when smaller arts organisations are denied adequate support? The research document *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre 2006-2015* (Donohue, et al., 2015, p. 32) found that

there is an inverse relationship between levels of funding and female representation. In other words, the higher funded the organization, the lower the female representation across all roles.

Further research is needed to identify the number of women and diverse artists working in small to medium sized arts organisations and how the

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current Arts Council policy impacts on representation, power, and autonomy, all of which fit under the framework of equality, diversity and human rights.

In Diversity There is Beauty

Equality is about creating a fairer society where everyone has an equal level of opportunity to participate and to fulfill their potential as an individual member of society. The American poet, award-winning writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou (1928-2014) said that 'in diversity there is beauty and there is strength'. Diversity is about recognising and valuing differences to be found between individuals.

Human rights are basic rights and laws that belong to everyone. Human rights are about promoting a culture where all people are treated with dignity and respect. Including human rights in the EHRD policy is a positive step and there is now a unique opportunity for the Arts Council to work with diverse artists and arts organisations to identify key actions to take into the future. The arts and human rights are both concerned with the idea of transformation, with a view to creating new visions for the future. Under the human rights framework, it is important for the Arts Council to support calls to end direct provision and to support the right to protest and freedom of expression for artists.

Arts and human rights are interdependent. Arts can only thrive in an environment that supports human rights. In countries where human rights are denied or curtailed there is often a corresponding suppression of artistic freedom. There is a growing awareness of the role the arts can play in generating engaged and informed debate and to embed human rights in society. In Ireland, the arts have been used to reflect on themes such as poverty, gender discrimination and remembrance arising out of a legacy of

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violence and abuse from state and church run institutions and the arts can play a key role in celebrating human rights.

Arising out of the Corona virus pandemic there is a renewed focus on wealth inequality and the lack of equal access to health care and basic human rights. Similar to many other sectors, artists, arts and cultural organisations across Ireland, Europe and the world are hard hit by the Corona virus pandemic. Artists and arts organisations, are now facing huge challenges in terms of survival and growth into the future with a range of new challenges ahead. Funding is key along with resources and measures to support the creative and cultural industries through this difficult time. The Arts Council have cited human rights as a key component of cultural policy and they need to identify practical steps for key action including a genuine process of listening and direct engagement with the arts community. A key priority is to provide adequate funding that artists and arts organisations can easily apply for without discrimination. In the light of the prevailing conditions, artists are being forced to move into virtual performing spaces however the creativity and imagination of artists and arts organisations can be used in new and innovative ways to bring people together during periods of physical distancing and there is an onus on the Arts Council to support this work in a fair and transparent manner.

I want to acknowledge the loss and suffering of so many people across the world during this pandemic and to thank all those who continue to work to support others and to provide assistance. The arts have a key role to play in promoting positive mental health and well-being and can provide solace and inspiration for a better future for all during these changed times.

I commend the Arts Council for creating an equality, human rights and diversity policy, as this is a step towards meaningful engagement with the

arts and wider communities. The Arts Council acknowledges that ‘fundamental changes in our structures and operations, as well as for those we support in delivering the arts in Ireland’ is needed. There is now a unique opportunity for the Arts Council and arts community to work together and to create concrete actions promoting equality and human rights for all.

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