

Equity in Cultural Policy

Research Brief, September 2025

This research brief highlights key findings from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded research study titled “Equity in Cultural Policy” conducted by Deniz Ünsal from Royal Roads University and Taiwo Afolabi at the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre (C-SET), University of Regina. The research team consisted of Yvette Nolan, Luba Kozak, and Fonon Nunghe. For the full research report which includes a Reflection Checklist for different actors in the cultural ecosystem, podcasts and other audio-visual material produced in the context of this project please visit: <https://equitycp.ca/>

The research, conducted between 2022 and 2024, captures a critical moment in time when the arts sector was navigating the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to the powerful wave of social justice movements that emerged in its wake. The findings and reflections presented are deeply informed by the social, political, and cultural dynamics of that specific period, marked by both unprecedented challenges and renewed calls for equity and transformation. While the context has since evolved, with shifting priorities, and new developments in the arts and broader society, the issues raised, such as systemic inequities, underrepresentation, need for support for BIPOC arts leadership and the need for inclusive cultural policy, remain deeply relevant.

The aim of this project was to document and understand the strategies of self-employed BIPOC cultural entrepreneurs from Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) who serve an important role in their own and wider communities by creating social value while leveraging their creative talents, collaborative and leadership skills to address discrimination and foster a sense of identity and belonging. We explored the question: *In what ways might the social value creation strategies of self-employed BIPOC artists who employ socially engaged arts practices contribute to the making of an equitable Canadian cultural policy?*

We were guided by ethics of care, “a moral disposition and set of practices that revolve around an understanding of the self as constituted by relations with others...[that] seeks solutions to problems related to the giving and receiving of care that are nonexploitative and equitable” (Webteam, 2014) and community-based participatory research framework. Our premise for creating knowledge was based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), where we as researchers collaborate with participants to understand the situation. This approach allowed us to define and describe the social value of the arts and its role in building communities in the experiences of artists.

We used snowball method to identify and reach out to artists. We interviewed 18 Indigenous, Black and racialized independent, self-employed artists from the four provinces of Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) from the visual and performing arts. These were emerging and established artists living and working in urban and rural areas. We prioritized artists who are located and practise in Western Canada due to our objective of amplifying perspectives from this region, which is often underrepresented. Based on insights gained during the individual interview sessions, available individuals were invited to participate in the group workshops. Group participants had a chance to share additional thoughts and expand on the key themes from our initial conversations with them and were invited to engage in a collaborative exchange of ideas among each other.

The report is divided into three themes based on questions that were asked in individual and group sessions to independent self-employed BIPOC artists:

Theme 1: Cultural entrepreneurship - What does BIPOC arts leadership mean in the future?

When we embarked on this research project, we wanted to investigate whether terminology used in the study and research of arts management came close to or was able to represent the nature and scope of the work of Indigenous, Black and racialized self-employed independent artists and cultural makers within their communities. We found that the term cultural entrepreneur is not widely known or heard of. Also, it is not a concept/role that artists immediately identify with. Instead, artists prefer words such as *arts leaders*, *community leaders*, *craftsmanship*, and *“movers and shakers”*. These different views on cultural entrepreneurship, its content, aims and relations prompted a deeper reflection on how BIPOC artists envision their leadership, raising the critical question: What does BIPOC art leadership mean in the future? The discussions revealed that the future of BIPOC arts leadership hinges on shifting how we redefine and develop leadership, moving beyond titles to values, care, and collective learning. Leadership must not be confined to executive roles, but seen as a practice rooted in service, values, and relational accountability. Leadership emerges through community care, creativity, and thoughtful engagement, not just administrative strategy. Rather than relying on individual figures to carry the burden of change, leadership must be collective, rooted in compassion, integrity, and a commitment to balancing the diverse needs of communities. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for more horizontal, accessible support networks that empower emerging leaders and reduce the isolation often felt by those in BIPOC leadership positions. Environments that allow for mistakes, learning, and growth are crucial to sustaining leadership and fostering long-term change. Ultimately, reducing structural barriers and creating more equitable pathways into leadership is essential for cultivating the next generation of BIPOC leaders in the arts.

Theme 2: Social value of the arts - What are your expectations from and suggestions to mainstream arts organizations and policy makers to embrace and promote values, processes and relations for community-based art production? What alternative strategies exist for BIPOC artists and art leaders who work within community-based values and processes?

The second set of questions we asked artists from BIPOC communities aimed at understanding the artists' approach to community-based arts practice and their experiences with the values, relations, processes, practices, resources of mainstream arts organizations. The conversations centred on integration of social value in governance and administration of the arts. We explored the limitations of performative decolonization in mainstream arts organizations and calls for a transformative shift toward relational accountability, ethical responsibility, and genuine inclusion of Indigenous and racialized voices in creative spaces. Community based artistic work often blurs the lines between personal and professional life. This interconnectedness sometimes conflicts with policies and institutional practices that operate on an outdated model that seeks to separate work and life, overlooking the personal investment artists bring to their craft. BIPOC artists and cultural leaders encounter significant pressure to conform to Western systems and protocol, which can hinder cultural practices and negatively impact the creative process. This pressure often arises from institutions that adhere to standardized practices of creating and sharing art. Although most organizations and institutions are aware of the need for “safe spaces,” labelling spaces as “safe” does not necessarily reflect a community's real needs and can be seen as superficial without systemic change. Rather than relying solely on rules, policies or punitive measures, individuals are encouraged to ask, “Who am I accountable to in this

moment?” This question expands the framework of accountability beyond formal structures to include fellow artists, community members, spiritual teachings, and one's own creative and ethical commitments. Relational accountability holds that real decolonial work is not simply about changing policies or instituting symbolic gestures, but about building deep, meaningful relationships grounded in mutual respect and understanding. These relationships cannot be built on performative actions or rushed initiatives but require time, sustained effort, and consistent engagement.

Theme 3: Cultural policy change - Cultural policy plays a crucial role in fostering systemic change and shaping the practices and priorities of arts organizations. What changes need to happen to support BIPOC artists and their community-based work?

The final set of questions aimed at understanding the experiences of BIPOC artists with arts organizations around issues such as existing funding structures, policies and processes at local, provincial and federal levels. We explored whether the arts ecosystem responds to and accommodates the values and perspectives of artists' community-based arts processes, supports their artistic growth and promotes community-building. In these conversations with a group of artists we focused on the challenges faced by BIPOC-led organizations, particularly in relation to funding, space, and institutional support, while exploring potential shifts in policy that can better support these organizations. By addressing the systemic barriers that limit BIPOC representation and involvement in decision-making, the conversations highlighted the need for long-term investments, equitable resource distribution, and a reimagining of community engagement in the arts. A central concern raised in the discussion is the urgent need to create and sustain BIPOC-led arts spaces that allow for autonomy, artistic growth, and community-rooted ways of working. Participants highlighted how access to space, both physical and structural, remains a critical barrier for BIPOC artists and organizations, especially in urban centers. With fewer such spaces available, artists are being rushed from training directly onto main stages, often without the time or support to fully develop their work. This dynamic creates a fragile ecosystem where failure is disproportionately blamed on artists rather than the systems that failed to support them. On the other hand, in rural regions, while access to space may not be as urgent as in metropolitan areas, there is still a troubling shift in how development resources are distributed post-pandemic. There is an urgency for funders and policymakers to recognize the value of these independent BIPOC-led spaces, not just as projects to support temporarily, but as foundational to the future of a more equitable arts ecosystem. Long-term investment, flexibility in development funding, and intentional efforts to return agency to BIPOC communities are key to this shift. Shifting dynamics in the arts sector, particularly in relation to funding and project leadership, reveal both progress and persistent inequities. There is a critical need for grant structures that explicitly prioritize community organizations as principal partners, fostering genuine relationship-building and trust. Ultimately, financial leverage appears to be the primary catalyst for meaningful transformation in the arts landscape, even if such change is driven more by necessity than by a collective commitment to equity.

Conclusion

Artists navigate tensions between caring for community collaborators and meeting institutional expectations. Through their stories, we explore how reciprocity, interdependence, and relationality can reshape cultural policy. Care ethics presents us with a conceptual framework and a set of tools to critically reflect on cultural policy through a lens of empathy and mutual responsibility. It challenges us to move beyond transactional frameworks and instead promote and foster the ability to engender connection, understanding, and collective growth at personal and institutional levels. This approach to policymaking which values social connection would reform structures of funding and institutional practices. By adopting care ethics, cultural policies

can become catalysts for transformative change, fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and vibrant artistic ecosystem. This paradigm shift invites us to reimagine the role of cultural policy as an active and intentional facilitator of meaningful relationships, a catalyst for empowerment, diversity of cultural expressions and visibility.

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References

Webteam (2014, February 16). Fiona Robinson, Interview on February 12, 2014. *Ethics of Care: Sharing views on good care*. Click [here](https://ethicsofcare.org/fiona-robinson/) [https://ethicsofcare.org/fiona-robinson/]

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You can also visit our Research website: <https://equitycp.ca>