

Community Capacity Building Workshop by the Multicultural Artist Coalition

Report on challenges and barriers faced by Immigrant/Refugee Artists in the City of Ottawa

Challenges and Barriers

1. Language and Cultural Barriers

The feeling of isolation, due to language and cultural barriers, might be one of the main challenges immigrants and refugees face, as they settled in Canada. Many immigrant artists do not speak good English/French, or have strong accents, getting them in a vulnerable position. Here are some of the opinions stated by the assistants to the meeting:

1. "Language barriers and cultural norms may lead to being less vocal and take less ownership in the programs, hindering us from entering the main stream industry".
2. "The lack of understanding of the language is a huge barrier in order to explain the projects when applying for grants, even more when projects are very elaborated or high in complexity".
3. "Sometimes, in order to access to those grants and programs we must meet high demands with limited capacity to understand resources".
4. "Grant writing can be extremely difficult for some artists. They can be difficult to write as they are presented in a highly technical language, and there is no clear access to guidance on how to proceed".
5. "Close minding representative authorities shows lack of understanding of other cultures and narrow definition of the art and the artistic processes. The general vision of art and culture is pretty based in colonial constructs, which means there is a lack of understanding from many institutions and public in general about the world cultures".

2. Economic Barriers

Another challenge consist in the lack of economic resources, being this a huge impediment when incorporating to the artistic professional life.

1. "Many of the immigrant and refugee artists live on the threshold of poverty. As we struggle economically to survive, we also struggle in the accomplishment of the artistic creation".
2. "As being artists, we recognize the importance and necessity of the volunteer work for both, individuals and the society, but many of us can't afford it due to the high cost of living and the low income that most of us get".
3. "It can be economically challenge for us trying to engage with the educational system in order to upgrade ourselves".

3. Challenges regarding the access to resources and information

An important issue also discussed was related to funding being inaccessible or limited, the little knowledge they have on who to approach for funding or how to gain access and information on immigrants and refugees funding opportunities.

1. "When it comes to grants or institutional programs, there are very limited founding for refugees and immigrants artists. There is also lack of Information about the available funding".
2. "When looking for help it is challenging for us to find the information we need. Artists depend on their networking skills to access to resources. There is not a centralized database or viable accesses to all the information (that sometimes can be overwhelming) including organizations providing programs and grants, criteria and policies. We are not familiar with the access to the government institutions".
3. "There is also lack of multicultural representation in service providers".

4. "We have no access to subventions for creative spaces provided by the government".
5. "We need more opportunities to learn and affordable access to education".

4. Challenges with Networking

In the discussions networking opportunities were as well identified as a facing problem. As they often come from a different culture, the "art" of networking can be a difficult challenge for immigrants or refugees in Canada, as discussed in the meeting:

1. "We "suffer" from lack of connections, which makes difficult the access to the artistic community, we need to improve our possibilities and capacities for networking".
2. "By the government side, we have noticed lack of call for artists and info-sessions, workshops or spaces for discussion (as this meetings are) where networking can be propitiated."

5. Difficulty in Gaining Recognition and Exposure

In spite of the continued discourse in the arts community diversity, immigrant and refugee artist face a big challenge in gaining recognition and exposure due to the lack of inclusivity and trust. This are some of the opinions:

1. "Multicultural artists are at the mercy of the decision makers, but there is lack of diversification in organizations and not enough ethno-racial representation in the institutions and juries/decision makers.
2. "Artists of colour can have a hard time trying to find roles in the Canadian arts industry. There is racial and ethnic discrimination".

3. “Due to the cultural differences we often struggle with the lack of trust by the institutions, organizations and individuals, making difficult, for example, to get into art collectives.

4. “It’s difficult to get to work with communities due to the lack of trust. Sometimes they are not open to other cultures and different ways of thinking. We need support opening consciousness for inclusion and diversity in all Canadian communities.

Actions

The conversation conducted within the meeting brought clarity on some important actions that immigrants and refugees need to take in order to build a successful art career in Canadian society. We will mention here some of them:

1. “Music, dance and visual arts are universal languages that allow us to create spaces without margins. Encouraging and supporting each other in order to create, participate and get involved in parties and events, where those forms of art take place, can be productive and mind opening. At the same time we can produce economic benefits and get exposure, creating networking opportunities and facilitating better understanding of other cultures and languages”.

2. “We should take part in multilingual free events that help to enhance our language skills (E.g. Library talks, City Council meetings and neighbour/communities activities) also UBER driving can help to develop official languages”.

3. “Finding opportunities to volunteer (that suits our time and availability) would give us a bigger perspective on the artistic and social sceneries. In the meanwhile it will be enhancing our social and language skills, being a great contribution to the society”.

4. “It is Important to support each other as an artist attending to vernissages, artistic shows, gallery openings and other gathering opportunities, getting through the city social network”.
5. “It’s crucial to create and promote more workshops and open discussions to enhance our knowledge and abilities on how to generate our own funding, or to learn about the different procedures our career demands”.
6. “Another way to gaining in force is encouraging the creation of artist collectives. Strengthening in number will have more impact than as an individual artist”.
7. “It’s important for us to organize and get together. We should aim for higher levels of advocacy for immigrant and refugee artists in the city of Ottawa”. We need to create an operating and efficient network (physical and digital, like this one) where we can meet and/or share information, knowledges and experiences.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges and barriers that immigrants and refugees are facing, they proposed during the meeting some strategies for the government and institutions. These are focused in helping emerging artists to succeed and to encourage the diversity in the Canadian cultural prospect. They also aim for the organization of meaningful dialogs between the different cultures to achieve one artistic diverse but socially unified Canada.

1. Regarding the economic issues, the government should facilitate more financial support to organizations and artists, increasing the funding in the community art sector and elaborating specific programs to alleviate the financial demands. Some ideas:

- Incorporate more artists to work within communities (that could be crucial for the development of a healthier society and includes

working with kids, elders, people with disabilities and people struggling with mental health issues).

- Create social enterprises with more diversified work force, including the artists.
- Access to employment that offer permanent positions for artists and/or implementation of the universal wage (base salary).
- Provide subventions for creative spaces, where artists can work and create in different mediums.
- Facilitate processes where the communities can award itself their own founding, empower communities.

2. Regarding the education, the government should provide with mentorship programs or create affordable resources to educate emerging immigrant and refugee artists in order to:

- Face claims and be legally aware of the right procedures in different sceneries.
- Get proper education and information about the copyright laws and the intellectual property protection.
- Learn about business management processes, enhancing financial capacities and teaching how to better work with time and budgets.

3. Regarding the access to resources and information the government should find better strategies to outreach artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. This could include:

- A centralized database showing information about art institutions, art schools, existing and available funding sources and other available services and opportunities that many times are difficult to locate when new to the city.
- The creation of cultural bulletins (electronic and physical) centered in synthetize what's happening in all circles and cultural communities.
- Promotion of resources and events in different languages.

4. Regarding the difficulties accessing to recognition and exposure the government could help:

- Assuring the racial/ethnic diversity is to be reflected on juries / decision makers (the richer the point of views, the better the decisions).
- Reviewing the current practices in the selection processes of funding art programs and the recruitment of artists in performing art industry.
- Encouraging art institutions and organizations to be more inclusive.
- Implementing a platform where immigrant and culturally diverse artists can showcase their art and receive recognition for their work, creating equal opportunities for emerging and existing artists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conclusions

The government should work towards addressing the undervaluing of arts and culture in the Canadian modern society, creating more space into the narrow definition of the art and the artistic processes.

The government also should aim for a more versatile discussion, vision and definition about the arts, which can take place at institutional and social levels.

Work needs to be done regarding the city officials, in order to value more the art and culture in terms of strategic developments. Reinforcing the cultural perspective on a political level could give more voice to the citizens, allowing various type of discourses and empowering them to imagine and create, alone with the artists.

It is imperative the decolonization of the society from “western” working and social processes to achieve highest levels of social justice. It’s necessary an implementation of a system where ancestral and ethnic cultures and knowledges start to be recognize at the same level as the “western” culture and knowledge.