

# Cultural Policy

Perspectives on the Island of Ireland

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## **Addressing Barriers to Cultural Participation for People with Disabilities in Ireland**

Towards Bridging Disability and  
Cultural Policies

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# 4 Addressing Barriers to Cultural Participation for People with Disabilities in Ireland

## Towards Bridging Disability and Cultural Policies

*Delia Ferri and Ann Leahy*

### Introduction

With the ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), Ireland has committed itself to ensuring the full inclusion of people with disabilities in society, as well as to promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. The CRPD recognises that one vital facet of social life is that of cultural participation. In fact, Article 30 CRPD obliges States Parties to the Convention (i.e. countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention), including Ireland, to ensure accessibility of cultural materials, services and activities as well as cultural heritage and to take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities ‘to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential’. This provision must be implemented in light of the general principles of the Convention embodying a ‘paradigm shift’, away from a medicalised view of disability to a human rights-based approach (Broderick & Ferri, 2019; Bantekas et al, 2018; Quinn, 2009).

In spite of the wide-ranging obligations provided for in the CRPD, to date the importance of participation in cultural life for people with disabilities has been largely underestimated and the implementation of Article 30 CRPD is lagging behind in Europe (Ferri & Leahy, 2023) and beyond (among others, Collins et al., 2023). This chapter, focusing on Ireland, addresses the following research question: “What barriers are preventing people with disabilities in Ireland from participating in cultural activities?”. It then connects the identified barriers experienced by persons with disabilities to strengths and shortcomings of the current Irish legal and policy framework in addressing those barriers. This chapter adopts a socio-legal approach, blending qualitative research with legal-doctrinal research. Specifically, this chapter discusses, from a socio-legal angle, some results from a pan-European empirical research study, making specific reference to data obtained from the Irish participants in the study. The research was carried out within the remit of project titled *Protecting the Right to Culture of Persons with Disabilities and Enhancing Cultural Diversity through European Union Law: Exploring New Paths* (DANC-ING), funded by the European Research Council.

This chapter is underpinned and informed by the human rights model of disability (Lawson & Beckett, 2020; Degener, 2017), and in that connection it aligns

with the terminology used in the CRPD. Thus, this chapter employs person-first language (“person/people with disabilities”) which places the person, as a subject, before the disabling identifier and recognises that disability stems from the interaction between the individual’s impairments and external barriers. We also acknowledge that other terms (i.e. “disabled person/people”) are used in some contexts, associated especially with the social model of disability.

This chapter first sets the scene by situating the discussion within relevant interdisciplinary scholarship and then moves on to briefly outline the relevant Irish legal and policy context. The latter section does not give a detailed account, but only points to key legal and policy sources to frame the discussion of the empirical findings. Next, this chapter presents the methodology and findings arising from a small set of qualitative interviews conducted within the remit of the DANCING project with Irish organisations representing persons with disabilities and/or Deaf people as well as organisations working in arts and disability. In providing some concluding remarks, this chapter highlights the need for social science scholars to further engage with interdisciplinary research on how to better mainstream disability concerns across cultural policy and how to ensure that non-discrimination is more systematically enforced in the cultural field. In that regard, this chapter also posits that interdisciplinary research, which involves legal scholars besides academics in other fields, is needed to overcome existing fragmentation in the legal and policy framework, but also to address and understand the effects of new European Union (EU) legislation on accessibility, which has just been transposed in Ireland.

### **A Multifaceted Scholarly Context and Scant Data**

It is well known that a lively and accessible cultural sector is important for the development of an inclusive democratic society. However, disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, older people and people with migrant backgrounds, still face structural barriers to participation in culture (see, among others, European Parliament, 2018).

With regard to people with disabilities, research relating to cultural participation is growing within disability studies, as well as other disciplines, such as law, cultural studies, museum studies and art studies (among many others, Ferri & Leahy, 2025; European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities, 2020; Arengi, Garofolo & Sørmoen, 2016; Eardley et al., 2016; Fox & Macpherson, 2015). However, such research is still limited compared to the wealth of literature discussing access to education and employment. Data on rates of cultural participation are also scant (European Parliament, 2018), but a few recent national surveys and other studies have engaged more consistently with access to culture for people with disabilities (e.g., ISTAT, 2019, p. 99). A few studies have discussed access to cultural products, services and information for people with a range of impairment types as consumers and audience (see, among others, European Blind Union, 2021, 2012; Primorac et al., 2017; Rix et al., 2010). Notably, as shown in an earlier work (Leahy & Ferri, 2022a), previous research is often artform specific and/or disability-type specific and many studies involved small sample sizes. These

strands of research show that dismantling physical barriers to facilitate access to cultural venues is generally prioritised and can be taken as sufficient for a cultural service to be deemed accessible (Muscarà & Sani, 2019; Swedish Authority for Participation, 2016). Consistent with this, a Dutch report suggests that many studies on increasing accessibility of cultural institutions for people with disabilities are based on discrete case studies that do not always address accessibility comprehensively (Jongerus et al., 2020; see also Mesquita & Carneiro, 2016). Reports from several European countries also contend that cultural facilities are not accessible and that there are lower participation rates for people with disabilities compared to the rest of the population (see, among others, National Education Centre Slovak Republic, 2020; Swedish Authority for Participation, 2016; Byrne et al., 2014). Interestingly, a survey with people with disabilities in Ireland, commissioned by *Arts & Disability Ireland*, found that 86% of respondents had attended at least one arts event including cinema in the past 12 months (79%, if cinema is excluded), which the report notes was higher than the rate of non-disabled people in Ireland (Maitland, 2017a). As noted in a summary of the report presenting the survey, however, it is also relevant that all respondents were already active members of a group, and that ‘active people tend to do things – lots of different things’ (Maitland, 2017b).

A review of disability strategies across Europe found that greater attention is given to the consumption side of cultural participation (that is, as audiences) than to the production of culture by people with disabilities, and that there are few measures addressing participation by people with disabilities in decision-making and management within cultural sectors (Šubic & Ferri, 2022). Notably, research has also shown that arts engagement by people with disabilities is frequently considered a merely social, recreational, therapeutic or educational activity, and that such understanding hampers access to cultural opportunities and funding (Collins et al., 2022).

If we then look at participation by people with disabilities as creators of arts and culture or as professionals working in cultural sectors, existing research suggests that rates of participation are particularly low, and also that there is a lack of knowledge about disability among people working in creative industries (see, among others, European Audiovisual Observatory, 2021; British Council, 2023; 2021). For example, a survey carried out with people working in the performing arts across Europe found that 48% of the respondents to an online survey expressed lack of confidence in the accessibility of their artistic programmes for artists with disabilities and 23% of respondents never work with artists with disabilities (British Council, 2023; 2021). In Ireland, a government study exploring the composition of the arts sector shows that only 7.38% of respondents identified as experiencing disability (Ó Cuinn & Feldkircher, 2023). Disability prevalence varied significantly across artforms among respondents (who were drawn from artists, creative arts workers and people recently trained), ranging from 2.5% to 15% – with literature and multidisciplinary artforms being those with the highest rates of people with disabilities involved, and music, theatre and dance being those with the lowest rates. A survey on arts and disability provision carried out in Clare, Mayo and Galway city, while highlighting key projects, suggests that barriers in accessing

the arts sector remain (Mayo County Council Arts Service, 2023). These are linked to, *inter alia*, lack of networking, lack of assistance with funding applications and access to studios or arts venues.

### **The Legal and Policy Context**

In the Irish legal framework, the right to participate in cultural life has been, to a large degree, side-lined.

In the Constitution of Ireland 1937 (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*), references to culture are scant. Article 1 of the Constitution provides that:

[t]he Irish nation hereby affirms its inalienable, indefeasible, and sovereign right to choose its own form of Government, to determine its relations with other nations, and to develop its life, political, economic and *cultural*, in accordance with its own genius and traditions

(emphasis added).

Irish identity and culture of the diaspora are referred to in Article 2, which provides that ‘the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage’.

The right to participate in cultural life penetrates into the Irish legal order mostly via international law. It is in fact proclaimed by Article 27 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and with particular reference to persons with disabilities, as noted above, by Article 30 CRPD (Ferri & Leahy, 2023). As noted earlier, Article 30 CRPD, which is at the heart of this chapter, requires States Parties to the Convention to take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to cultural materials, to be interpreted in a broad manner – television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities – as well as to places where cultural performances are held or services are provided, and to monuments and sites. This provision, echoing Article 9 CRPD, recognises that accessibility is a precondition to ensuring cultural participation, as highlighted by the *Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD Committee) in its General Comment No. 2 (CRPD Committee, 2014). It also must be read in conjunction with Article 21 CRPD, which requires States Parties to the Convention to provide information in accessible formats, to recognise and promote the use of sign languages, as well as to facilitate communication in Braille and other accessible formats. Further, Article 30 CRPD obliges States Parties to take all appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to develop their creative, artistic and intellectual potential. However, Ireland is a dualist State, meaning that international rules, including Article 30 CRPD, must be incorporated into domestic law, normally by means of legislation, and it is this domestic legislation which is then applied by national courts. Thus, in the absence of legislation, Article 30 CRPD, which Ireland has ratified, is not justiciable, notwithstanding its binding effect on the State as a matter of international law.

Ireland has adopted legislation in the field of culture, but this is quite sparse, and, in general, focuses on cultural institutions rather than on the right to cultural participation. However, the right to participation in cultural life of people with disabilities is protected indirectly via a rather robust non-discrimination legislation. The *Equal Status Acts 2000–2018* prohibit discrimination *inter alia* on the grounds of disability in access to and use of goods and services. In that connection, it needs to be highlighted also that the *Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014* includes the so-called Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, requiring every public body, in the performance of its functions, to have regard to the need to ‘(a) eliminate discrimination; (b) promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services, and (c) protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services’ (Section 42[1]). Another important piece of legislation that is relevant in relation to the protection of the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life is the *Irish Sign Language Act 2017*, which was commenced in December 2020. This Act provides for the recognition of Irish Sign Language, its use in legal proceedings and the provision of interpretation into Irish Sign Language by public bodies. *Inter alia*, this Act requires that broadcasters, in fulfilling their obligations in relation to Irish Sign Language targets and requirements in respect of programmes transmitted on a broadcasting service under Section 43(1)(c) of the *Broadcasting Act 2009*, must ‘adhere to principles of equality, dignity and respect in terms of the promotion and broadcasting of such programmes’. Further, Section 9 of the Act states that the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection may

provide funds to facilitate users of Irish Sign Language with regard to support in relation to access to social, educational and *cultural* events and services (including medical) and other activities by such users  
(emphasis added).

Finally, it is worth noting that accessibility provisions related to websites and other digital goods and services are deriving from the implementation of recent EU directives (Ferri, 2023).

Recent Irish cultural policy has been increasingly concerned with the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life. Ireland’s national cultural policy framework (Hadley, Collins, & O’Brien, 2020), *Culture 2025 – A National Cultural Policy Framework to 2025* (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media [DTCAGSM], 2020, p. 10) – does not specifically address disability, but it places a strong focus on diversity. It also states that:

providing opportunities for wider and richer cultural and creative participation can also contribute to community cohesion and reduce social exclusion and isolation, leading to more resilient and sustainable communities.

However, the *Statement of Strategy* for the three-year period from 2021 to 2023 (DTCAGSM, 2021) within its Goal B (i.e., to support and develop engagement

with, and in arts, culture and creativity by individuals and communities thereby enriching lives through cultural activity) indicates the overarching objective of ‘enabling people with disabilities to participate in cultural-related activities and programmes’ (p. 30). Within the remit of disability policy, the former National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2017) was ‘underpinned by a vision of an Irish society in which people with disabilities enjoy equal rights and opportunities to participate in social and *cultural* life’ (p. 1) (emphasis added). In that regard, this Strategy commits to an action to ‘foster disability awareness and competence in voluntary, sporting, *cultural* and other organisations’, and to ‘ensure that disability inclusion is fully integrated into funding programmes, monitored and linked to further funding’ (p. 35), actions for which the DTCAGSM (along with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport) are responsible. Notably, the Strategy and, more generally, the deployment of disability policies aligning with the CRPD are supported by participatory mechanisms such as the Disability Participation and Consultation Network (DPCN), a network of civil society organisations and organisations of persons with disabilities established by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in 2020.

Remarkably, the Arts Council Ireland (ACI) (2012) – the national executive agency responsible for funding, developing and promoting the arts in Ireland – enacted its own five-year strategy, *Arts and Disability* (2012–2016), which tallies with the broader *Equality, Human Rights and Diversity* (EHRD) policy and strategy (ACI, 2019). *Arts and Disability* referred overtly to Article 30 CRPD supporting the rights of people with disabilities to have full and equal access and opportunity to the arts in Ireland – as arts practitioner, audience member and arts worker. The ACI also promotes specific funding instruments for artists with disabilities, such as the *Art & Disability Connect* scheme. The ACI further funds organisations such as Arts & Disability Ireland, which is considered the national development and resource organisation for arts and disability.

## **Methods**

The empirical findings discussed in this chapter in light of the scholarly and policy framework presented above are drawn from the *DANCING* project’s empirical research with organisations working on disability across 28 European countries (27 EU countries plus the UK). This strand of the *DANCING* project, carried out between 2021 and 2023, aimed to examine how organisations working on the rights of persons with disabilities or Deaf people understand the barriers to access, production and enjoyment of cultural goods and services. It involved representatives of 64 organisations, encompassing organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) (n = 28), of Deaf people (n = 11) and of organisations working in arts and disability (n = 25). It included at least two organisations from each of the 28 countries concerned. This chapter focuses on the findings from interviews with the Irish participants in our study, who numbered six and were drawn from the same three categories (that is, from OPDs (n = 2), organisations representing Deaf people (n =

1), and organisations working on arts and disability [ $n = 3$ ]). As mentioned, these findings relating to Ireland will be discussed below in light of the larger empirical study of which the participation by Irish organisations formed part.

Our approach was qualitative, and involved mainly semi-structured interviews, although we offered some alternative accommodations using qualitative questionnaires (allowing for open-ended or free-text answers), which can be combined in a complementary way with interviews (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). The interview guide included, among other things, questions about barriers to engagement in culture by people with disabilities, which is the key focus of the findings we discuss here. Participants were provided in advance with information and gave informed consent. All contributions have been anonymised, and we identify them by numbers only (IE 1–6). We obtained ethical clearance from the relevant *Maynooth University Ethics Committee*.

The analysis process followed the steps for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke 2021; Clarke & Braun 2017, 2013). We, therefore, undertook an initial coding process that was open, unstructured and largely inductive, and themes were afterwards developed from codes. Our research question as to barriers to cultural participation informed how we organised our initial themes. Further, a narrative literature review on the subject that we had previously undertaken within the project (Leahy & Ferri, 2022a) supported the overall classification of barriers.

## **Findings**

This section discusses, in light of the context presented above, the findings arising from a thematic analysis of our qualitative research, focusing especially on findings from the six Irish organisations working in disability who participated, but framing the discussion by reference to the broader project findings (Ferri & Leahy, 2025; Leahy & Ferri, 2023). We identified five interlinked categories of barriers, which we discuss in more detail below: (1) lack of effective/adequate laws and policies; (2) lack of adequate services or lack of funding; (3) negative attitudes; (4) lack of accessibility; and (5) lack of consultation with, and involvement of, persons with disabilities in cultural organisations. The first barrier points overtly to shortcomings of the Irish framework discussed above, but all other barriers also connect to gaps or pitfalls in current legislation and policy.

### ***Lack of Effective/Adequate Laws and Policies***

A key perception among Irish participants was that existing national laws did not include specific provisions that facilitate participation in culture, such as guaranteeing access to cultural content to persons with disabilities (that is, exhibitions or content of performances). In that regard, participants highlighted to varying degrees the need for a better alignment with the CRPD.

However, for many, the greatest barriers were in the area of enforcement or implementation of existing laws and standards. Participants also often perceived ambiguity

and considerable room for self-regulation by cultural bodies. In addition, problems with enforcement were perceived to be exacerbated because the burden fell to individual people with disabilities to bring a case to courts, which is costly and off-putting. For example, one Irish participant talked about the *Equal Status Acts 2000–2018*, suggesting that while the protection from discrimination extends to cultural goods and services, few legal cases on disability discrimination had ever been taken (IE 3). This participant also suggested in a more general fashion that Irish legislation was not ‘specific enough to support ... implementation in cultural contexts’ (IE 3). This participant went on to indicate that ‘a great deal of disability law, particularly when it applies to the arts, is very soft’ and that change for the better occurring in this area is ‘much more down to policy’, rather than law but they also instanced the public sector duty set out in the *Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014* (outlined above), as a measure that was proving useful because public bodies were engaging with it. This participant also perceived that the CRPD, which, as discussed above, is not directly enforceable, could be used as a tool for advocacy, particularly mentioning TV broadcasting as an area where Articles 9, 21 and 30 CRPD were being used ‘quite effectively to push agendas around broadcasting’. Specifically addressing the *Irish Sign Language Act 2017*, another participant highlighted how it only applies to public services, and that, even in the case of cultural performances delivered by public institutions, it was not applied ‘very often’ (IE 4).

These findings tally with the results of the broader study conducted across Europe (Ferri & Leahy, 2025), whereby participants from many countries perceived that cultural policies (and, indeed, other policies) did not include input by people with disabilities and resulted in creating barriers to access to culture, sometimes associating this with lack of expertise to ensure implementation of good policies, or overly medicalised approaches to policies in general that did not support participation in many spheres of life, including culture.

Specific policies on education and social welfare were perceived as operating as systemic barriers in many countries. These issues also featured prominently in interviews with Irish participants. For example, one participant highlighted how organisations that do training targeting people with disabilities do not include a section on art or seek to help people with disabilities to develop artistically (IE 2). Another pointed to the need for more specific opportunities for people with disabilities, including internships in arts and media organisations, outlining also, however, how obtaining a grant to attend third-level education, or obtaining a temporary income from an internship, might mean losing social welfare benefits. That participant said:

One of the key barriers...[is] if you are on disability allowance or any kind of welfare you can’t apply for artist grants without any fear of your benefits or your supports being taken

(IE 5)

Another talked about artists having to do a lot of ‘sporadic work to build up your profile’ suggesting that doing so ‘is too much of a risk for anybody with serious

cost and impact of disability’ (IE 2). Another participant (IE 3) highlighted that while there are now many artists with disabilities in Ireland, there continued to be a lack of arts professionals with disabilities, among administrators, curators, consultants and programmers, which was perceived to mean that they were not in positions to influence decisions sufficiently, something we return to below. These findings are consistent with Finn’s study (2023), which found that welfare regulations undermine the working ability of artists with disabilities in Ireland, especially in combination with other issues such as the sporadic nature of work in the arts. They are also consistent with an Irish report that found people with disabilities face considerable annual costs of disability (and that arise in a plethora of areas, including additional living expenses, aids/appliances, transport and communications) (Indecon, 2021).

### ***Lack of Adequate Services and Lack of Funding***

The second category of barriers identified in our broader study refers to lack of adequate general services and inadequate income, and these interlined issues were raised by participants from many countries. In Ireland too, these were identified as barriers. As one said, ‘poverty is a big barrier for disabled people, even for just going to the theatre, lots of us won’t be able to afford it’ also adding that lack of access to Personal Assistance services could mean being ‘isolated and trapped’ at home (IE 5). Another suggested that accessing sign-language interpretation for cultural events was not always an option, and that a planned voucher scheme to make funding available that could be used to access any service that a person chose was not operating (IE 4). Transport was also identified as a barrier. One participant suggested that the biggest challenge was not always access at a venue, but getting there and getting home, instancing the situation of people for whom cultural participation meant having to travel into large urban areas (IE 3). This clearly points at systemic shortcomings in the way the current Irish legal framework addresses the rights of persons with disabilities.

As well as financial problems faced by individuals, participants in our broader study also mentioned that sometimes cultural organisations did not always have the funding to achieve accessibility. This was also the case in Ireland. One participant suggested that grants for accessibility were not available to community or voluntary groups highlighting, especially, rural Ireland, where, for groups putting on performances, there was a lack of funding that could provide accommodations like sign-language interpretation or audio description (IE 6). Another participant suggested that access costs for companies wishing to employ professional actors with disabilities, or to put on accessible productions, would involve a significant additional budget (for things like integrating sign-language interpretation and touch tours), which is not always available. That participant talked both about financial costs and costs constituted by the time involved for companies wanting to work with disabled performers, suggesting that ‘you have to fold all of those supports

into your usual working methodology’. That participant instanced challenges for a disabled performer:

If he is asked to take part in a TV series, he needs another person...so often the carer...is integral to that [...]. So that is one barrier but it is a very real one when making professional work

(IE 1)

### *Negative Attitudes*

Attitudinal barriers, or negative attitudes or ableism, were identified as key barriers by many participants across Europe, including in Ireland, something that is consistent with scholarship in disability studies in respect of limited and often negative cultural representations of disability (Hadley, 2015; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Shakespeare, 1994). Participants sometimes could also talk about attitudes being not so much negative as ‘ignorant’, ‘charitable’ or ‘not open’. For example, an Irish participant talked about not having wanted in the past to draw attention to disability, ‘because I was aware that if I draw attention to my disability I might be excluded’ or pitied. One talked about invisibility of people with disabilities in general in Irish society, linking this, among other things, to the difficulties of physically navigating public transport, public spaces and cultural venues (IE 5). Another talked about ‘massive stigma’ and yet another felt that attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities were particularly problematic, with unquestioned assumptions operating to exclude performers with intellectual disabilities from opportunities of various kinds including not being considered for panels at conferences in the arts (IE 1). Thus, overall, barriers to cultural production by people with disabilities tend to link back to stigma, negative attitudes and overly medicalised or charitable views of disability, which are still underpinning the legal and policy framework as well as society at large, and that run counter to the obligations set forth in Article 30(2) CRPD.

### *Lack of Accessibility*

The fourth theme identified in the *DANCING* project analysis relates to lack of accessibility. This category encompasses physical barriers for audiences and difficulty in accessing cultural content – such as performances and exhibitions. A common finding across countries in Europe was that inaccessibility of venues was still an important barrier in particular with regard to backstage areas preventing artists, performers and arts-sector professionals with disabilities from participating. Ongoing lack of accessibility is often related to older buildings, those outside large urban areas and/or those privately owned. Participants also reported barriers constituted by inaccessible content in venues such as museum exhibitions, theatre performances, film screenings and contents of libraries, and mentioned various events not being accessible to people with a range of disabilities. While often

highlighting improvements and some good examples in recent years, a general perception was that the opportunities provided were frequently intermittent. Thus, overall, good examples of accessible content were perceived to remain fragmentary or project-based and outside the mainstream. These findings align with existing scholarship and with a recent analysis of State reports submitted by European countries to the CRPD Committee (Leahy & Ferri, 2022b). Participants also sometimes highlighted ineffective features intended to provide for accessibility of buildings and content, attributing this to lack of knowledge on the part of those engaged in building design, and among those working in cultural sectors, and a related lack of consultation with representatives of people with disabilities.

Again, these issues were raised consistently by Irish participants in the study. For example, one talked about many ‘brilliant, artistic, creative things happening’ in Dublin, but also mentioned ‘up all these creaky windy staircases that are not accessible’ (IE 2). Another talked about key cultural venues continuing to be inaccessible to wheelchair users, militating against participation as audience/visitor and against developing a professional engagement in some cases (IE 5). That participant also reflected that access was complex: ‘There are so many different kinds of impairments and so many different ways that places can be inaccessible’. Experiencing a sense of being ‘awkward’ in attending cultural events, such as theatres, due to low lighting and unclear signage making access challenging was mentioned by one participant (IE 2). That participant stressed the need, instead, for integration of disability experiences in all aspects of culture, saying: ‘I mean that just shows that it is not integrated, your difference is awkward here’ (IE 2). Other issues raised related to challenges for some groups in booking tickets and to sign-language interpretation not being widely used in cultural venues (IE 4), and, even where it was, Deaf people not always feeling confident that interpretation will be provided even when it was flagged by the venue (IE 5). Linked to the foregoing issues, another participant stressed the need for people attending events to be made to feel ‘welcome’, suggesting that audiences with disabilities need to ‘feel that they are hand-held a little bit through that process’ (IE 1).

Again, consistent with our overall findings across countries, some Irish participants linked inaccessibility to lack of knowledge on the part of people working in cultural organisations. For example, one participant (IE 2) instanced production of a large print book to accompany an exhibition in which the ordering was out of sync with the order of the actual exhibits, making navigation impossible for visually impaired people. Also consistent with our overall findings, several participants pointed to good practice in relation to the development of opportunities, albeit often qualifying this by reference to the fact that opportunities remained fragmentary. For example, one pointed to ‘good things happening’ even if somewhat ‘patchy’ – such as the role played by some libraries in facilitating access, instancing, in particular, one organising a weekly storytelling session for Deaf children (IE 6). One reflected that there are ‘some brilliant people in the arts who really want to make stuff happen and they are making it happen’, adding that it was not ‘consistent’, instancing different approaches to promoting the arts within local authority areas and commenting on the need for more overall knowledge as to accessibility of cultural venues (IE 3).

***Lack of Consultation with, and Involvement of, Persons with Disabilities in Cultural Organisations***

Our last theme relates to failure to consult people with disabilities in meaningful ways in decisions about cultural accessibility and to lack of involvement of people with disabilities as artists, arts professionals or leaders. These issues are linked with, and, in many ways, underpin, several of the themes discussed already. They were also raised by participants from Ireland. For example, one participant from Ireland felt that cultural organisations in general were very unaware of disability issues ('it just doesn't enter their head; they don't think about it'), but, on the positive side, felt that this could change following interventions, including disability awareness training, suggesting that 'once they have the knowledge they are very interested and they are very willing and open' (IE 6). Another Irish participant questioned why people with disabilities were not employed in all kinds of roles, not only as artists, but also as professionals in various roles, including in front-of-house and programming roles, suggesting that this was due to systemic inequalities and positing that if addressed, 'that would change everything' (IE 2). Similarly, another highlighted the need for people with disabilities to get involved as professionals in arts administration, production, presentation, marketing and finance and also in leading collaborative projects and facilitation, suggesting also that 'they need to be qualified, they need to have the skills and they need to be able to compete' (IE 3). This participant linked this with the fact that, as a consequence, they were not in positions to influence decisions sufficiently. The need for more access to educational opportunities was also linked to this theme, with one participant highlighting the need for more awareness of disability generally in society and more education on disability issues, including in all areas of third level education, such as media studies, which were considered capable of starting to address invisibility of disability issues (IE 5).

**Conclusions**

Cultural participation of persons with disabilities is gaining momentum in scholarly research across different fields. Such attention reflects a general growing focus on disability rights, which ensued the entry into force of the CRPD. This trend is also visible in Ireland, where new studies have tried to fill the data gap and identify barriers faced by persons with disabilities in participating in cultural life.

Our chapter has endeavoured to advance the state of art by discussing the barriers that are preventing people with disabilities in Ireland from participating in cultural activities and *de facto* hampering the implementation of Article 30 CRPD. Relatedly, this chapter has linked these barriers to shortcomings of the legal and policy framework. It has also connected them to existing research on barriers to cultural participation by people with disabilities, which is, however, quite narrow in focus, being, in several instances, artform specific or limited to one impairment type or even to one type of venue (Leahy & Ferri, 2022a). In that regard, this chapter is innovative in that it presents barriers commonly experienced by people with disabilities at large and across different range of cultural activities. While

focusing on Ireland, this chapter also bridges the findings to overarching results of the broader European study, which it is part of.

This chapter has shown that current Irish legal and policy framework is fragmented and, most notably, perceived as ineffective and inconsistently implemented by participants. The *Equal Status Acts 2000–2018* are too ‘general’ to ensure access to cultural services by persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others. In this respect, it needs to be noted that two important EU directives have just been implemented in Ireland and may, in the long run, support a better accessibility of a range of digital services and websites, including those offered by cultural institutions. Other barriers, such as stigma and negative attitudes, showcase that the robust Irish equality legislation, which also includes a public sector duty, has not fully supported a paradigm shift and the overcoming of charitable and medicalised approaches. Further, even though ACI has recently deployed dedicated funding schemes to arts and disability, lack of funding (and the inadequacy of such funding) remains a key barrier. Thus, it becomes apparent the need for interdisciplinary research on how to better mainstream disability concerns across cultural policy and how to ensure that non-discrimination is more systematically enforced in the cultural field.

This chapter has contended that, notwithstanding the existence of general participatory mechanisms that ensure consultation with, and involvement of, persons with disabilities in policy-making in Ireland, such consultation and involvement are still lacking in cultural organisations. This suggests that high-level participatory policy-making does not always translate into participatory practices on the ground, and that much remains to be done in this respect. In that connection, interdisciplinary research is key to ingrain participatory practices and make them more effective.

At various junctures, all participants in the study suggested that there are underlying issues hampering the full realisation of their right to participate in cultural life, with reference to poor transport services, inadequate general services, lack of accessibility and, in many cases, lack of income or poverty on the part of people with disabilities. In that regard, the findings highlight how the barriers experienced by persons with disabilities are both interlinked and underpinned by general structural barriers, which points to the need for more interdisciplinary research, which involve legal scholars besides academics in other fields, to overcome existing fragmentation in the legal and policy framework and to ensure that the implementation of Article 30 CRPD in relation to culture goes hand in hand with the implementation of other provisions and principles of the CRPD.

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