

**Crafts Council
Research**

Making Changes in Craft
Craft Expertise Phase One Report

Dr Karen Patel



BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

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“ I think until people realise that we're not a thing, we're not this otherness, we are individuals and the things that we need, like, job security and financial security and acceptance, are just the same as anybody else. So we need it now, not in 20 years ”

- Janet, mixed material designer maker, London



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Foreword from the Crafts Council

The Crafts Council is seeking to make a step change in our progress in tackling racism and inequality in all its forms, locating this at the heart of our activities as the national charity for craft. We have rightly, like many organisations, received criticism of our progress in demonstrating our commitment to diversity and inclusion with visible actions.

The opportunity to partner Dr Patel and Birmingham City University (BCU) in making a change in craft was a welcome step in this process. We recognised the need to understand the impact of racism and inequality on craft as a sector, on makers and on audiences in the UK and to ensure that this knowledge and experience shapes and directs our values and programmes. Our involvement in the study follows three previous attempts to fund collaborative research in this area. Dr Patel's work directly with makers about their lived experience is now informing the breadth of our actions going forwards.

We held an event in 2020, facilitated by Inc Arts, in response to the murder of George Floyd, the impact of the pandemic and the renewed urgency for this work prompted by the Black Lives Matter protests. We published a revised set of diversity and inclusion commitments which are updated every six months.

The key themes emerging from that meeting echo a number of the findings in this report. They were:

- The narrow craft canon and Crafts Council's place in it
- The lack of alternative histories and narratives in craft
- The need to de-colonise the craft curriculum
- Lack of initiatives to nurture Black and ethnically diverse makers
- Need for more visual representation
- The creation of a Black Crafts Council

Since then a series of meetings have been held to develop to further the discussion. Following these conversations, we're taking action in a number of ways. Our actions include:

- Supporting a Global Majority Branch of makers and craft professionals, building on the theme of a Black Crafts Council. The Branch is in development and will provide a much-needed safe space for this community. The Steering Group, supported by a Relationship Manager post, will help shape our future programmes and activities
- Signposting support, through Inc Arts, to those experiencing racism in craft

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- Shaping plans to address the issue of decolonisation through our programmes and telling the story of contemporary craft, making and makers of Black, Asian and ethnically diverse heritage that is not told by the Crafts Council Collection, for example, commissioning Dr Christine Checinska to make a curatorial intervention in our opening gallery exhibition *Maker's Eye* in 2021
 - Developing sector-wide resources and a campaign to be delivered in 2021/22, through the Craft UK network; assisting in the production of school assets and checklists (as members of the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) anti-racism educational group, ARAEA) to support teachers of art, design and craft to move towards a more diverse and representative curriculum
 - Generating debate through seminars, online and Magazine content about social justice, developing an anti-racist approach to craft education and increasing access to the Maker Directory. We've diversified our Board, recruiting new members to better represent our communities and increasing diversity in terms of race, sexuality, disability, age and geography

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- Exhibiting five works by Black and Asian female artists in the Crafts Council gallery in November 2021, commissioned by Dr Karen Patel as part of this research. A freelance creative producer will produce the exhibition and devise a programme of supporting events.

We're making progress but we acknowledge there is more that we need to do. We welcome this report and thank Dr Patel for the opportunity to partner her in this really important work and for her skilful and committed approach. We will take forward our commitments through our business plan and will be looking at what else we can proactively do to address the recommendations in Dr Patel's study.

Rosy Greenlees
Executive Director
Crafts Council

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Project overview

This project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (project reference: AH/S004343/1) and in collaboration with Crafts Council, the UK's national organisation for supporting craft. The project, Supporting diversity and expertise development in the contemporary craft economy (short name Craft Expertise) commenced in March 2019 and ended in June 2021, and constitutes the first phase of a four-year project. Phase two will begin in July 2021.

Most of this first phase was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented a number of challenges for the research. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement gained increased exposure and traction after the murder of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis. The effects of this were felt around the world, raising awareness of police brutality and racism, and spurring conversations about addressing racism in all spheres of life, including in craft. Organisations took to Instagram to show their support for Black Lives Matter by posting black squares on Blackout Tuesday¹ in June 2020, but in the craft sector, it was clear from the response from makers of colour that craft organisations need to do much more to address racism and inequality in the sector².

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/02/blackout-tuesday-dominates-social-media-millions-show-solidarity-george-floyd>

² [Instagram post by Lorna Hamilton-Brown](#)



Image Credit: Silenced beauty 1 (SAMARKAND), Yanire Sylva Danire

This research has helped to inform Crafts Council's approach to addressing racism in craft, and the report author and project lead, Karen Patel, has spoken at several events about these issues which are presented in this report. As the quote from Janet³ at the beginning of this report suggests, urgent change needs to be made to make craft spaces safer and more welcoming for people from marginalised groups. The contemporary craft sector is characterised by whiteness and elitism, and the findings from this research reveal the lived experiences of these conditions for women of colour trying to make a living in craft.

The methods for this research consisted of interviews with women makers of colour from around the UK, and observations at makerspaces during 2019, before the pandemic. While much of the data derived from the research and the insights focus on professional craft, some of the research also involved observation of community crafts and interviews with some of the participants. The purpose of this approach was to get a sense of the experience across the craft ecology. Indeed some of the insights from the community crafts groups are useful for imagining a craft sector which is more inclusive, where social justice and equal opportunities for participation are central to how craft organisations operate. A total of 21 women were interviewed, three of them were participants

³ Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect the identity of the interviewees

in Craftspace's Women's Maker Movement project, a community project in Birmingham which aimed to bring migrant women together through craft.

The other 18 participants were all either working as professional makers full time, or aspiring to do so. Their career stages varied from studying at University, to well established makers with over 20 years of experience as craft professionals. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Handwritten notes were taken during the observations which were then typed up and also thematically analysed. Because of the pandemic we were not able to carry out as much observation of craft spaces as hoped, however further research and observation of spaces will take place in phase two, and on a wider geographical scale⁴.

In November/December 2020 we also held online workshops in collaboration with STEAMhouse in Birmingham. The participants included makers and craft organisations, including Crafts Council and Craftspace Birmingham. The activities within the workshops were informed by the research and based on design thinking principles, to generate ideas to address inequalities and racism in craft. More information about these workshops is on page 53.

⁴ For more information about the next phase of the project, visit the website <http://craftexpertise.com>.

The excellent input from participants in the workshops helped to shape our recommendations for the craft sector and for policy.



Key Findings

The interviews and observations revealed the challenges these makers face across the craft ecology and at all stages of their careers. These challenges include:

- **Racism and microaggressions in craft spaces** – all of those interviewed had experienced some form of racism and/or microaggressions in craft spaces. Microaggressions were more common and more difficult to report – they include looks, comments and behaviours which make the recipient feel othered or offended. These incidents occurred at craft fairs, in studios and in craft education settings.
- **The craft expertise of the makers being devalued or misrecognised** – many of the makers felt that their work was devalued or judged unfairly. Some makers felt that judgements were primarily based on their race, gender or class, and not the quality of their work. These judgements were made by people across the craft ecology including trade suppliers, fellow studio holders and potential customers.

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- **Perception of craft as a career, and issues within craft education** – many makers were discouraged from pursuing craft as a career, because of the perception that it is low paid, precarious work. Instead many were encouraged to go to university to work towards ostensibly more ‘stable’ careers in law or medicine, for example. This leads to fewer people from ethnically diverse backgrounds in craft and design courses at university. For those who do make it to university, they are met with a host of issues including an inadequate curriculum dominated by a white, Eurocentric history and aesthetics, and microaggressions from university staff and fellow students.

These issues were highlighted within the STEAMLab workshops and at an online sharing event held with makers and craft organisations in February 2021. Based on the input and feedback from these events, we have developed recommendations for addressing these key issues in craft, including trade suppliers, fellow studio holders and potential customers.

Recommendations

To begin addressing the issues highlighted in this research, we recommend the following actions for individuals and organisations across the craft ecology.

① **Reframe the narrative of craft**

We call on craft, creative industries and arts organisations and social enterprises to:

- Embed social justice objectives in their planning – have social justice and equality at the centre of how they operate
- Prioritise stories of and by craftspeople from ethnically diverse backgrounds to help redefine making, allow them to tell their own story
- Evaluate their branding, imagery and staffing and make it a strategic priority to be more representative
- Increase interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge exchange, working with different industries to build and grow networks, forge partnerships and make alliances that strengthen the craft and creative environment

② **Establish industry codes of conduct in craft**

We call on all craft organisations, craft fairs, markets and galleries, retailers, guilds and creative industries and arts organisations to:

- Agree clear codes of conduct with clear routes for action to be taken in response to racist behaviour and microaggressions
- Be transparent and accountable about the work they are doing to address racism and microaggressions
- Display a statement at premises/fair/offices stating that discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated, and that any discriminatory behaviour will be dealt with swiftly
- Take action to become an actively anti-racist organisation. Inc Arts have produced Unlock, an anti-racist toolkit for craft and creative organisations, which we highly recommend organisations use: <https://www.incartsunlock.co.uk/>

③ Improve our evidence base

We call on national government (the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), local government and research organisations to re-evaluate how they gather data by:

- Revisiting the design of and recruitment to the Taking Part participation survey
- Addressing data gaps where freelance and individual workers and the wider craft ecology (such as social enterprises) may be omitted
- Evaluate and redesign local data collection and recruitment practices for the craft and creative industries

We call on craft, creative industries and arts organisations and social enterprises to:

- Use the research in this report to build a detailed picture of key challenges for makers from marginalised groups in the craft sector, working to find potential solutions and networks that could help

④ Embed and support craft in education

We call on craft educators to:

- Prioritise hiring staff from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and give greater voice and presence to existing staff from diverse backgrounds
- Ensure the craft curriculum which is taught includes craft histories and traditions from around the world, which are fully contextualised and not delivered through a Westernised, Eurocentric lens.
- Widen the scope beyond what is considered to be 'legitimate' craft. Highlight the diversity of making across the amateur to professional spectrum, and critique the binaries between 'amateur' and 'professional' to ensure craft education moves away from elitism.
- Take measures to ensure students from diverse backgrounds have access to trained staff who can support them effectively
- Ensure students have opportunities to pursue craft courses at all levels of education

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- At school level, engage with parents to find out the barriers with encouraging their children to study craft and creative subjects at FE/University, to address the stigma associated with this

We call on Government (the Department for Education) to:

- Ensure that national and local careers education and advice showcase successful craftspeople who are ethnically diverse and from a variety of craft traditions.

We call on craft and creative organisations to:

- Work closely with craft educators to offer support and mentoring programmes for new graduates

⑤ Enhance financial support for makers

We call on local and national government, Arts Council England, funding bodies and craft guilds to:

- Evaluate the current funding mechanisms so that available opportunities can reach more people across the craft ecology. For example, prioritise grants for people, organisations and companies trying to make positive change in the sector
- Revisit funding criteria and co-design it with the communities and people it is meant to support
- Ensure panels for funding decisions are ethnically diverse
- Ensure application guidance is clear, and that all aspects of the application process are explained clearly and requirements clearly set out
- Evaluate the language used in funding calls, ensuring it is appropriate and not off-putting to prospective applicants who are new to the process

We are now moving into the second phase of this project, in which we aim to carry out further research and explore alternative models for a more sustainable and inclusive craft sector. For further information visit <http://craftexpertise.com>

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Inequalities in craft

The research in this report is the first to highlight the lived experiences of women makers of colour in contemporary UK craft. Women makers from ethnically diverse backgrounds were the primary research participants here because of the stark gender, ethnic and socio-economic inequalities in the UK craft sector, as highlighted in industry data. For example, Crafts Council's 'Market for Craft' report⁵ (2020) states that despite the increased popularity of craft in the UK, with more people buying and selling craft than ever before: “the sector has to go further to ensure craft is an inclusive space for all ethnicities and genders, with the proportion of BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) makers remaining unchanged compared to 2006 at 2-4%” (p. 8).

The 'Market for Craft' report also states that three quarters of makers identify as female, but other research highlights that women makers are more likely to be working precariously and for lower pay than makers who identify as male. The Crafts Council's Who Makes? Report (2018) suggests that people working in craft occupations are more likely to be male, “but more likely to be female if self-employed part-time” (p. 5).

⁵ Crafts Council Market for Craft report https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/documents/880/Market_for_craft_full_report_2020.pdf



Image Credit: Fluted Landscape Pots, LuckTaylor Ceramics. Photo: Anya Rice

The report also states that people working in craft occupations are more likely to be older (with 40% being over 50) and more likely to be white, with 96% of makers in craft occupations from white ethnic groups. The data was based on the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS). Brook, O'Brien and Taylor's (2020)⁶ research on the UK creative industries also includes some data on the craft sector. Again drawing from the LFS, they state that 92% of the craft workforce is white, and 22% are women. Their figures indicate a small improvement in the proportion of ethnically diverse makers in the craft sector since the *Who Makes?* report, but quantitative datasets only tell part of the story, and don't capture the entire craft sector, with so many working freelance or as sole traders, and this data is not captured adequately in national statistics.

⁶ Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor (2020) *Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries*. Manchester University Press.

The existing data highlights that there are inequalities in professional craft, where only a select few are able to make a full-time, successful living from making, but it is not clear why this is. The research carried out in the Craft Expertise project reveals the barriers and challenges faced by women of colour in the sector, who arguably have experienced intersectional oppression – discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity and in some cases, class. These overlapping systems of discrimination further disadvantage these women in the craft sector and highlight how difficult it is for anyone from marginalised groups to feel like they belong in professional craft.

The following sections will reveal how these challenges are manifest across the craft ecology – from education, to studios, to interacting with customers, peers and suppliers. The evidence presented in this report should serve as a wake up call to the broader craft sector and a catalyst for affirmative action to make professional craft more inclusive for all.

“ I actually got my stall right next to this racist man. I was a bit upset, but my sister in law came over, and then she was kind of like standing in between us, because she could tell how affected I was getting. Because he was just coming over, in my personal space, because I think he realised it affected me more. Then he just started saying, ‘Oh, yeah, we don’t want brown people here’. It was so in my face, it was horrible. Unfortunately, apparently, that is kind of like the norm at some markets, and it’s a bit strange ”

- Sophie, craft artist, Newcastle upon Tyne



Image Credit: Boundary Estate
Liaqat Rasul. Photo: Daniel Farmer

4

Racism and microaggressions in craft

Almost all of the professional makers interviewed had experienced racism or microaggressions of some kind during their craft careers. One of the worst incidents was described by Sophie, her quote is featured on the previous page. Her experience of outright racism from a fellow stallholder at a craft fair in the North East of England is a stark reminder of how far the craft sector needs to go to support makers of colour in the sector.

Microaggressions were most commonly experienced by the interviewees. These are “Brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to people of colour because they belong to a racially minoritised group. Compared to more overt forms of racism, racial microaggressions are subtle and insidious, often leaving the victim confused, distressed and frustrated and the perpetrator oblivious of the offense they have caused”⁷

- Yasmin, textile designer maker, London: “If I say I work in fashion, and because I make a lot of my own clothes, they just- and I’m quite casual, so people assume, if I say fashion, “Oh, streetwear?” And when I’ve told people I’m from London, and they say “oh, Brixton?” just because I’m Black”.

⁷ Nicola Rollock (2012) Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25:5, 517-532, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2010.543433

- Janet, mixed media designer maker, London: “Even people that you've had conversations with, lengthy conversations, I see them all the time. I know who they are, but then they still confuse me with someone else. It was just riddled with that situation, which is partly why I left. I don't know if that was the right thing to do, if actually there needs to be more Black people rather than Black people leaving because they don't feel like they belong. I mean, there was even a girl who was American, she's got a really strong American accent. We look nothing alike at all and we were consistently confused.”

Microaggressions make spaces unwelcoming and make people feel like they don't belong. Many of the interviewees talked about comments and assumptions made about them by fellow studio holders and potential customers.

- Anita, Mixed media craft artist, London: “My two neighbours [in the craft studios] came up to me and said, ‘Oh, we're trying to work out what your religion is. Are you Christian, Muslim?’ I'm just thinking, ‘Do you go and ask everyone down the corridor that? Is that anyone's business?’ Yes, so it's just been little things and it's all done so jokey-jokey that it's very difficult to deal with.”

Some of the interviewees also described receiving unfavourable treatment in other areas of the industry, such as dealing with suppliers, or at trade fairs.

- Rebecca, jewellery designer, Birmingham: “I went to a goldplaters to get some samples done, and this is very trade, so trade can be very different, they don’t quite understand what we make. I was pleasant enough, said I’d bring the samples, then when I brought the samples he was really, really rude to me [...] I’ve had friends who’ve had a similar experience but I definitely got that feeling off him that it was partly because I was Asian. It’s always a feeling, you can’t pinpoint it, I couldn’t say you said something racist to me, but it’s a definite feeling because I see when other people get to see that person, they might be rude but they wouldn’t do it in the same way.”
- Meg, knitwear designer, London: “when we go to knitting shows, to buy stuff, you always get looked at like you’re weird. So, I love it when I do see different ethnicities, when I go to knitting shows, because we have a right to be there.”

The whiteness of the professional craft sector can make people of colour feel like they don’t belong. The lack of representation of diverse makers in promotion and marketing can put off makers from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

- Janet, mixed media designer maker, London: “I just find it bizarre because in my life, through working and going to university and everything in London, it’s impossible not to have a varied group of friends and then go to this place that is creative in the middle of London and most of the makers there are middle-aged white women, it was just so bizarre and there was only a few of us that were Black and there were so many times I just got confused with other people.”
- Theo, mixed media designer maker, London: “There is a once a year Bristol meet-up that’s very popular. It sells out within the same day...I’d like to go, but I don’t feel in the mood to go, if that makes sense. Having looked at pictures, I know I will be the only Black person there and I don’t feel- I know that in years to come I’ll probably feel like, “Okay, yes I can go.” I’m just not in the mood to be that person.”

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- Yasmin, textile designer maker, London: “I went to look around at what they had and the studio spaces and the people that were there, and I was like, “I don’t belong here, I don’t belong here. [...] I find, a lot of the time, I’m usually the only black person in a room, which can be exhausting.”
 - Sam, craft artist, London: “I think I’m still an outsider because I’m just doing everything myself and trying to get into this scene. I think it’s one of those things that’s a little bit hard to get in, but once you get in, you are recognised, and then you get all these opportunities thrown at you.”

It is essential that makers from all backgrounds and educational levels are made to feel welcome in professional craft. Measures need to be taken by organisations to ensure that racism and microaggressions are not tolerated.

“ At Open Studios, you have all your work out on display and it’s for sale. You can see that this is a workshop. And people have said to me- And usually it’s been people of a certain age and of a certain demographic. And they’ll say, “Is this all made here, in the UK?” Or, “Do you make this yourself?” Or, “Is it made here or is it made abroad?” Now, that’s quite loaded, isn't it? ”

- Tina, Jewellery designer maker, London



Image Credit: Low Tide, Yeshen Venema and Mugdha Sapte
Rachna Garodia

5

Expertise and cultural value in craft

Racism and microaggressions are outward expressions of implicit biases and assumptions, which arguably feed into how craft by makers of colour is judged and valued. Interviewees spoke about how they felt their work was often judged through the prism of their ethnicity, gender and in some cases class, and not the quality of the work itself.

A few interviewees were often asked why they don't make "ethnic" crafts, or crafts more inspired by their culture. Or if they are not asked directly, there are assumptions made by potential customers about the types of craft that are expected from makers of colour.

- Rebecca: "I don't feel successful in my jewellery career, and it's quite hard to describe myself as a jeweller because people don't always understand. They have a certain perception of either somebody who obviously makes Asian jewellery or traditional jewellery, they don't quite get that I'm quite versatile in what I do."
- Anita: "I think the crafts is going to be even harder because craft is associated as something uniquely British or it's a British craft. So I can't be seen to be doing a British craft because I'm not British. On the one hand, I'm not allowed to do what's British, but on the same extent I'm not allowed to do what's culturally mine either. So it's kind of a lose-lose situation."

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- Olivia, textile artist, London: “There was one occasion where it was an American group [in her studio] and I was talking about my work [...] and one of the guys said, ‘Do you do different coloured figures?’ I was like, ‘What do you mean?’ He said, ‘Do you ever not do them that colour?’ I was like, ‘No, it’s a silhouette, it’s a shadow, it’s not necessarily a black face.”
 - Rita, knitwear designer, London: “I guess, sometimes, customers are a bit confused. I’ve based all my product around Scottish lambs’ wool and it’s not consciously but I don’t actually use my face much. People are, sometimes, a bit confused, ‘So are you Scottish or do you have a Scottish background?’ because I work with this particular yarn. I’d say that’s about the only confusion that’s ever come up.”

For some of the makers who have created work which relates to their culture, they have found it doesn’t sell or get selected for shows. Or when work is selected for shows, it is often related to specialist shows focused on a particular culture or diaspora, not as part of the mainstream.

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- Rebecca: “If some of my exhibition work is concept led and obviously reflects my culture sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, it’s not seen as up there with other contemporary makers. My work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell.”
 - Olivia: “There are other communities where ethnic minorities get together, different artist communities. [...] it’s all very well that those communities and spaces exist but it’s trying to get it so that it’s inclusive for everyone. [...] Maybe to take part in an exhibition, it’s only when it’s focused on African diaspora but, actually, why can’t it just be in general? [...] I know plenty of other ethnic minority makers and artists and designers who are just as good or even better and yet they’re not in spaces like this. Why not?”

Some makers had the quality of their work and expertise questioned, and they felt this was because of the ethnicity, gender and in some cases, class. This is exemplified in the quote from Tina at the beginning of this section, and other makers have had similar experiences.

- Anita: “Like people a couple of times who have said to me, ‘Oh, you don't really do craft.’ I remember one of the girls I shared with, she did everything on the computer. No one ever said to her, ‘You don't do anything that's craft...’ - But they said it to me. It was just like, ‘What's wrong?’ It's just the double standards were obvious [...] my expertise was just devalued or unaccepted, in a way.”

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- Tina: “Another guy, last year, bought a pair of earrings off me, and they were like £150. And he said, ‘So, when they break, I can come back to you?’ and I said, ‘What? Why would you even say that?’ [...] I wish I'd have said something to him, and I didn't, I laughed it off. And I said, ‘Look, I'm always here if there's ever any problems with the piece, I'm here to fix it.’ But I wished I'd have pulled him up, and said to him, ‘Do you know what, I don't think that's a very nice thing to say to me. I don't know why you would say that. Because you're questioning me as a maker, and the quality of my workmanship.’”

In studios and other professional spaces, some of the makers received comments about them ‘ticking a box’, like their position was not achieved through merit, but through handouts based on a ‘diversity’ agenda instead. These accusations – of ticking a box - undermine the position of the makers and dismiss the idea that they are there on merit.

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- Anita: “I got loads of jibes also when I got here [to the studio] about being funded. Someone actually did say to my face, ‘Oh, you're here to tick a box’, as though I couldn't actually draw or paint, and that also I didn't come from a culture that draws or paints.”
 - Janet: “I did like a pop up shop with other makers and there was this lady sitting there, and we were chatting and then she said something like, ‘Oh, it's obviously not about you, but I just think that, you know, [the studio] having these young people from poor backgrounds come in and then you just get help and then, what? Like, they're not giving you any skills. What are you going to do at the end of the year when you can't afford the rent or anything?’ And just very, kind of, like, ‘You're a poor black person, what do you know?’”

Some of the interviewees felt that the perceptions of their craft are somewhat informed by how Eurocentric crafts dominate the marketplace, media and particularly in craft education.

“ I guess, culturally, in my, sort of, background, that's [craft] something that you do as a hobby. If you're going to go to university and you're going to have a job, it has to be a more serious subject [...] I guess I had that pressure for a long time and I thought if I'm not doing politics, at least if I'm doing a scientific subject, that's sort of okay. And then I realised, well, it's not okay for me because I don't enjoy it ˆˆ

- Janet, mixed material designer maker, London



6

Perceptions of craft as a career and barriers in craft education

Research on craft careers has acknowledged that within families, parents will often want their children to go to University and work towards a seemingly more financially secure, stable career, rather than pursue craft⁸ This was a major theme in the preceding project to this one⁹ and the subject repeatedly came up in the interviews for this project. For those who did make it to college and university to study craft, they encountered various challenges which made it difficult for them to thrive on their course.

Many of the interviewees described how craft was not encouraged by their parents, because it was not considered to be a viable career choice.

⁸ Susan Luckman, Jane Andrew and Tracy Crisp (2018) Crafting Self: Promoting the making self in the creative micro-economy <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-02/apo-nid220886.pdf>

⁹ Karen Patel (2019) Supporting diversity in craft practice through digital technology skills development report <https://craftexpertise.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Supporting-Diversity-in-Craft-Practice-report-March-2019.pdf>

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- Rita: “My dad’s attitude is, ‘You really should think about getting a proper job now,’ My dad is never going to change, but however much you’ll be selling to such and such or you’ll have won this or done this, my dad’s attitude is always, ‘Yes, but you really should be thinking about your pension’ and, ‘How much longer can you continue working like this?’”
 - Rebecca: “I think the expectation for my parents is they’re still waiting for me to get a real job”
 - Tia, mixed material craft artist, London: “A lot of people have said, ‘You get quite a lot of challenge from your family and friends. They don’t understand what you’re doing.’ That was a real problem.

Some went back to craft after their first career, such as Janet described at the beginning of this section, or Rebecca, who trained as a teacher. They are known as ‘career changers’ who represent a significant proportion of makers in the UK.¹⁰

¹⁰ Crafts Council (2012) Craft in the age of change https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/documents/866/Craft_in_an_age_of_change_2012.pdf identified that career changers constitute over a quarter of those surveyed.

For those who do go on to study craft and pursue it professionally, they can face microaggressions, making them feel isolated in environments that are usually dominated by white students and tutors.

- Leila, textiles student, Manchester: “I would say, when I first joined, it was quite a bit of a shock, in a sense, and part of me wasn’t that shocked that I’d be in the minority, seeing that the course is mainly white women. I was quite shocked at how different they were to what I’d expected, in the sense that I’ve come from Birmingham and I’ve gone to Manchester, so I’m quite used to that kind of environment. Whereas a lot of the girls that came across were from quite rural areas, the country, small villages and whatnot. So, immediately I kind of had a sense that they’d not been around black women like me. So there was always this kind of unspoken sense, that they didn’t understand me or didn’t get me. And I kind of felt the same towards them, because I wasn’t sure how they would react to me.”

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- Leila: “We were in a workshop and I was just minding my business and I just felt somebody’s hand in my hair, feeling through my braids, and it was my tutor. And I turned around, I was really shocked, I was like- I didn’t know what to do. And she was just like, ‘Oh, I love your hair,’ whatever she said. And I just kind of- I don’t know, I didn’t know how to take it, there was nobody in the room that I felt like I could turn to and just be like, ‘Did you see that?’”

Some of the interviewees also work in craft education, and all noted how they can feel isolated, particularly in higher education.

- Yasmin: “In education, I’ve found the higher up I go in teaching and education in craft and creative, very often I’m the only one [person of colour] in the room, and very often I’m usually the only one in the room and I’m not a permanent member. It’s usually, yes, it can be isolating and frustrating.”

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- Nykeesha, textiles designer maker and teacher, London: “I have met, especially in my capacity teaching, a lot of jaded and angry students who had not been educated in the way they’d expected. [...] There’s a lot of tension there between what suits the students, what the students want to get out of their degree programme and the intentions of their tutors. Many of them come into it, especially if they’re working class, non-white or both, having relatives who might already own fabric shops or work in industry somehow having a small business of their own. Then they find the degree programme doesn’t really prepare them for that or endows them with the skills to strike out on their own in their own terms.”
 - Anita: “I’m teaching on an MA course, and that’s really interesting because it’s supposed to be traditional diverse arts. The director is Egyptian, but, I’m just thinking, I think there are two technicians, one’s Iraqi Kurd and one’s Iranian, but all the other members of staff are white except for me. I’m always fighting, even in that situation,

to be heard. It's incredible.”

Some felt that what is being taught in craft courses at University and college is too Eurocentric, which can make students from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds feel isolated and frustrated, because they can't relate to what is being taught.

- Leila: “I haven't experienced anything extremely horrible, but I feel like there are not a lot of people that I feel I could turn to. Or just simple things, like just not being told about Black artists, for example. I've never said anything about it, because part of me thinks they don't care or part of me just thinks they wouldn't know how to deal with it.”
- Nykeesha: “If your parents or grandparents were not born here, it would be good to have a module that enables you to relate your background to what you want to do creatively. If you've got brutalist architecture and 1930s art deco being pushed at you, then you're not really going to make the connections and be fulfilled.”

The main focus of this research was not craft education, but of course the experiences of many of the professional makers, who have been through craft education, demonstrate that the issues of racism, microaggressions and hierarchies of craft value are linked to issues in craft education. Phase two of this project will focus more on craft education, as well as alternative routes in to craft. An example of an alternative route is evidenced in my observation and interviews at Craftspace Birmingham's Women's Maker Movement project.



Image Credit: Aquatic Silk Scarf
Abeer Kayani

Case study: Women's Maker Movement project, Craftspace Birmingham

Pathways to craft enterprise can vary, and are not necessarily through the traditional, higher education route. The interviews and observations from Craftspace Birmingham's Women's Maker Movement project provided some interesting insights into perceptions of craft as a potential career. Women's Maker Movement¹¹ was a community craft project which ran between 2018 and 2021 in Birmingham. It was a programme of craft and enterprise activities involving women facing economic and social challenges. The sessions were held in collaboration with local community hubs and social enterprises, and were facilitated by Shelanu women's craft collective, a social enterprise established by Craftspace which is run by migrant women.

The women of Shelanu are trained in jewellery making, and teach those skills in workshops and masterclasses. They have also exhibited their work around the UK. The sessions I observed in 2019 were held in collaboration with Go! Woman Alliance in Birmingham, a social enterprise which supports individuals into work.

¹¹ <https://craftspace.co.uk/womens-maker-movement/>

They have a support group called Dosti¹² which is a support group for older women in the local community in Adderley, Birmingham who are isolated due to a lack of English language skills and unfamiliarity with cultural norms. The women in the Dosti group participated in the weekly sessions, which took place every Tuesday morning over a period of 6-7 weeks.

The jewellery that was produced from the sessions was then exhibited in a showcase at the host venue, to which family and friends were invited to look at the jewellery. I observed these sessions and took field notes, and I also carried out short interviews with three of the Dosti group members about their experiences on the course and how they feel about craft. The work of Craftspace and Shelanu was important to observe for this research to get a sense of craft outside of the professionalised, economically driven sector which has been the focus of much of this project and most contemporary research on craft.

For the women interviewed, craft was mostly considered to be an important household skill, and they only thought of it as a way to make money after they developed jewellery making skills on the

¹² 'Dosti' is a Hindi term meaning friendship

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- Tabitha, jewellery course participant, Birmingham: “My mum stitched clothes, she stitched my own clothes and her own clothes. We don’t go to a tailor. If you see the young generation, they don’t know how to do things at home. [...] It’s not just about going to work or just sitting in front of the computer and knowing everything about the computer. It’s a basic need, you need that IT, programing, and everything. It’s a modern world need. But arts and crafts, the cultural things, it’s very important. That connects us to our ancestors, our roots.”
 - Sheena, jewellery course participant, Birmingham: “I want to start my own business, but I want to get better first. I have a book where I write down the things I want to make, when I get fluent with the techniques. I am practicing making on my own at home, and give to friends and family first, then maybe I will start [a business] after that”.

The idea of craft as something to be gifted was common in the group, with many of the women making jewellery for their friends and family. One of the participants even made earrings for the whole Shelanu team and me, as a gift as the course came to an end.

Once the jewellery was completed for the exhibition in the final session, the women would then be given a talk about starting a craft business from a local entrepreneur who they could relate to. I observed that when the local entrepreneur came to give a talk, many of the women seemed more interested in starting a social enterprise, rather than an individual business. Many questions were asked about social enterprises and community interest companies, and some of the women expressed a desire to work together.

- Geeta, one of the participants, said in interview: “I would love to [start my own craft business]. I would love for other women to come on board as well, because women in this area, they’ve got fantastic skills. They can sew, they can cook, they can design, they can do so many things, and they're really, really creative in their own way.”

The case of the Women’s Maker Movement project demonstrates that there are alternative pathways into craft, and that those pathways are more accessible for more people, allowing them to connect with others and express themselves through craft. For the women who were involved in these sessions, their relationship with craft was different to many of the professional makers interviewed, who often set out to make a career from craft, and tended to situate themselves at the intersection between craft and fine art.

In certain cultures, craft is considered to be a fundamental skill, a way to show care for family and friends, and a means through which to share skills and knowledge. The jewellery classes allowed the participants to express their creativity more through craft, and explore the possibility of craft enterprise. Programmes such as Women’s Maker Movement, which involve collaboration with craft social enterprises and community groups, are a crucial part of the craft ecology which allow a greater diversity of people to be involved in the sector. This collaborative way of working is instructive for the rest of the sector, in terms of exploring how craft can be more accessible to more people.



Image Credit: Mille Leather Crossbody Bag,
Herin Hong

7

STEAM Sprint workshops

The research carried out for this project highlighted the experiences of a specific group of makers in the UK, all with their own individual experiences and stories to tell. These insights were used to inform an online workshop series which took place during November and December 2020. Participants included 11 makers who had already been involved in the project in some capacity, either through interviews or attending the project conference in 2019. Julia Bennett from Crafts Council and Deirdre Figueiredo from Craftspace also participated in the three sessions, which were designed in collaboration with Patrick Bek and Sophia Tarr from STEAMhouse, a makerspace at Birmingham City University.

The online workshops, called 'STEAM Sprints' utilised design thinking methods to generate ideas to address the specific issues faced by makers of colour as highlighted in the research. Below is a summary of each workshop.

Workshop 1: Problem Framing

This workshop began with a presentation of key findings from the research. Participants took part in an empathy exercise and the ‘Why Tree’ exercise (Figure 1) to map the key challenges facing makers of colour in the sector, and think through the root causes.



Figure 1 Why tree exercise

The main challenges and some of the potential root causes identified are listed below:

Makers of colour experience racism and microaggressions in craft spaces

- Lack of experience with different cultures/ limited networks
- Lack of diverse curriculum
- Ignorance
- Fear of change

Makers of colour are made to feel like they don't belong in the craft sector

- Dominance of white craftspeople and imagery at craft spaces
- Financial issues
- Issues of diversity are not a priority for certain spaces

Craft made by people of colour is devalued or judged unfairly

- Limited or no contact with diverse makers
- Opportunities to determine the canon are often restricted to the white and privileged
- Schools don't prioritise craft, so fewer people are able to make it through in the sector

The next step was to determine how to address some of these root causes.

Workshop 2: Idea Generation

This workshop focused on rapid idea generation to address the problem statement, which was a compilation of the challenges and root causes generated from the previous workshop.

The problem statement is below.

Problem Statement

Who experiences the problem?

Craftspeople of colour living and working in the UK, at all stages of their working life, from young adults, graduates, and early career makers, to established practitioners.

Describe the problem

Like all craftspeople, our target beneficiaries are trying to make a sustainable career in an industry that's highly competitive. They want to build their network, access support and be treated as individuals with specialist expertise. They're often working alone or in very small teams, having to design and produce work but also manage all other aspects of their business from finance and administration, through to supply chain, sales, and marketing. Unlike their white counterparts, craftspeople of colour face additional challenges and barriers that impede their chances of success, regardless of the quality of their work.

In many Black and ethnically diverse households in the UK, craft is not viewed as a serious or viable profession for young people to pursue, which negatively impacts the numbers of young people going on to study design or craft in higher education. Class and economic background also have some bearing on who is able to pursue a career in craft. Those that do will often experience racism and microaggressions in craft spaces for the first time. The negative effects of this are further impacted by college and university curricula that teach a white, Eurocentric canon of design and craft. Craft traditions that sit outside this framework are largely neglected and non-representative teaching staff are ill-equipped to support students who want to explore alternative traditions.

For early career and established craftspeople of colour, experiences of racism, othering, implicit bias and microaggressions are widespread. Many have felt their work was devalued because of their ethnicity, gender and/or class, or them being expected to make 'ethnic' crafts. In craft spaces, people of colour are overwhelmingly in the minority which leads to feelings of isolation and their work being unfairly under-acknowledged by majority-white audiences, buyers and decision-makers such as judging panels.

Such experiences have a significant impact on the confidence of many craftspeople and can lead to increased insecurity and fragility within their business.

Where does the problem present itself?

Incidents of racism, microaggressions, othering, and unconscious bias are experienced in 'craft spaces' throughout the life and career of a craftspeople of colour, from their first interest in art and design at school, through to establishing and growing a sustainable business in the craft.

The problems often present themselves at:

- Schools, colleges and universities on craft and art/design courses
- Craft fairs and markets - fellow stallholders, customers, organisers and decision-makers
- Craft social gatherings and networking events - other craftspeople at these events
- Online marketing platforms and publications, and social media - from anyone in the online space, usually craftspeople, people from craft organisations

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- Craft studios and maker spaces - fellow studio holders, management, customers at open studios
 - Craft support organisations - in the demographics of their staff, at board level, the promotional material, aesthetics and language they use, how they select people for opportunities
 - Suppliers and craft shops

Why is the problem worth solving?

The issues described must be addressed to question what the craft sector is, what it represents, and who it includes. There's an urgent need to transform the UK craft sector into a rich, contemporary, thriving industry that's truly representative of the diversity of the UK. We must act so that harm being caused to craftspeople of colour is not normalised and to ensure it's called out. We aim to make craft in the UK a safe space, with equality of opportunity for all.

Participants were encouraged to think of ideas to address the problem statement using their Miro canvas, drawing on a variety of prompts and questions to try and think outside the box.

These prompts included ‘How might we?’ questions, which flipped the root causes and turned them into questions, for example ‘How might we uncover and amplify role models in craft?’

To answer these, participants were encouraged to use inspiration and ‘alter ego’ cards, which included questions such as ‘How would Beyonce address this problem?’ or ‘What would we do to solve this problem if we had no budget?’ Participants then picked their top three ideas to present to the rest of the group in the next session.

Workshop 3: Crafting Policy recommendations

Participants presented their ideas, followed by a discussion about how to turn these ideas into recommendations. The ideas of the participants and the discussions generated were central to forming the recommendations presented in this report, which are aimed at craft and creative organisations, policymakers, craft educators and other organisations from around the craft ecology.



Image Credit: The Arcades Project
Beate Gegenwart.

8

Recommendations

This report has provided insights into the challenges makers of colour face in the UK craft sector. The research and workshop activities have informed the following recommendations, which we feel are crucial to ensure that professional craft is more representative of the rich diversity of makers in the UK, and to ensure that all makers feel safe, and that aspiring makers feel that craft is a potential career for them.

① Reframe the narrative

Histories and stories about craft are dominated by a Eurocentric perspective. More needs to be done to give space to makers from a wider variety of traditions to tell their story. More needs to be done to increase the representation of makers from all backgrounds.

We call on craft, creative and arts organisations and social enterprises to:

- Embed social justice objectives in their planning – have social justice and equality at the centre of how they operate
- Prioritise stories of and by craftspeople from ethnically diverse backgrounds to help redefine making, allow them to tell their own story
- Evaluate their branding, imagery and staffing and make it a strategic priority to change it so it is more representative
- Increase interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge exchange, working with different industries to build and grow networks, forge partnerships and make alliances that strengthen the craft and creative environment

② Establish industry codes of conduct

To change the culture of racism and microaggressions, we call on large and small craft organisations, craft fairs, markets and galleries, retailers, Guilds and creative industries and arts organisations to:

- Agree clear codes of conduct with clear routes for action to be taken in response to racist behaviour and microaggressions
- Be transparent and accountable about the work they are doing to address racism and microaggressions
- Display a statement at your premises/ fair/offices stating that discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated, and that any discriminatory behaviour will be dealt with swiftly
- Take action to become actively anti-racist. Inc Arts have produced Unlock, an anti-racism toolkit for craft and creative organisations, which we highly recommend organisations use: <https://www.incartsunlock.co.uk/>

③ Improve our evidence base

To ensure data about the crafts sector accurately represents the breadth of makers, we call on national government (the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), local government and research organisations to re-evaluate how they gather data by:

- Revisiting the design of and recruitment to the Taking Part participation survey
- Addressing data gaps where freelance and individual workers and the wider craft ecology (such as social enterprises) may be omitted, for example by publishing aggregated figures for craft occupational categories
- Evaluate and redesign local data collection and recruitment practices for the craft and creative industries

We call on craft, creative industries and arts organisations and social enterprises to:

- Use the research in this report to build a detailed picture of key challenges for makers from marginalised groups in the craft sector, working to find potential solutions and networks that could help

④ Embed and support craft in education

To address inequalities in education, we call on craft educators to:

- Prioritise hiring more ethnically diverse staff, and give greater voice and presence to existing staff from diverse backgrounds
- Ensure the craft curriculum which is taught includes craft histories and traditions from around the world, which are fully contextualised and not delivered through a Westernised, Eurocentric lens. Invite makers involved in these traditions as guest speakers and allow students to learn from their expertise
- Take measures to ensure students from ethnically diverse backgrounds have access to trained staff who can support them effectively – this means ensuring staff have knowledge of the wide variety of craft traditions, and also ensuring they have undertaken appropriate EDI training
- Ensure students have opportunities to pursue craft courses at all levels of education

We call on Government to:

- Ensure that national and local careers education and advice showcase successful craftspeople who are ethnically diverse and from a variety of craft traditions

⑤ Enhance financial support for makers

We call on local and national government, Arts Council England, funding bodies and craft Guilds to:

- Evaluate the current funding mechanisms so that available opportunities can reach more people across the craft ecology. For example, prioritise grants for people, organisations and companies trying to make positive change in the sector
- Revisit funding criteria and co-design it with the communities and people it is meant to support
- Ensure panels for funding decisions are ethnically diverse
- Ensure application guidance is clear, and that all aspects of the application process are explained clearly and requirements clearly set out
- Evaluate the language used in funding calls, ensuring it is appropriate and not off-putting to prospective applicants who are new to the process

For more information about this project and the next phase of research visit www.craftexpertise.com



Image Credit: Stem Vases - Woodland Wonders Series, Rowena Gilbert