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PEN International, PEN America, and its Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) program is pleased to submit a contribution to the Special Rapporteur's report on migrants' contributions to societies from a human rights-based approach and relevant facilitating and hindering factors.

PEN International is the international secretariat for the PEN network of 130 centers—including PEN America—in 90 countries.

## **EXAMPLES OF MIGRANTS' CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE FIELD OF CULTURE**

PEN International and ARC observe that artists and cultural figures in exile can assume diverse roles in influencing and engaging with both the creative community and the people of their host countries. Some artists, like the artists from Hong Kong interviewed by ARC, believe that their work can help shape the socio-political development of their new homes, stirring debate and questioning the status quo around issues such as equal opportunity. Many cultural figures are forced to flee their countries of origin and become migrants precisely because of their ability to influence public discourse at home through art and writing, which they often continue in exile. While displacement brings a myriad of challenges for artists and their families, ARC notes that not all artists view displacement as a negative experience. Bart Was Not Here, an artist living in exile interviewed by ARC for "[Art is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change](#)". He views his displacement as a response of resilience and an acknowledgement of his pro-democratic efforts in an authoritarian country.

### ***Interpreting Identity in Diaspora (Hong Kong)***

Many artists displaced from Hong Kong work to preserve and promulgate a distinctive Hong Kongese identity—a perspective that is often criminalized in Hong Kong through clampdowns on expression by the authorities and cultural organizations in adherence to draconian laws, like the National Security Law (NSL), that censor any expression deemed a threat to national security. In 2023, during Art Basel Hong Kong, a major digital [artwork was taken down](#) following the revelation that the artist, Patrick Amadon, had included concealed messages honoring incarcerated pro-democracy activists within his work. Artists, cultural figures, publishers, writers and human rights defenders have been [targeted](#), with some facing lengthy jail sentences and others going into exile, including visual artist and activist, [Kacey Wong](#). Artists like Wong, who felt increasingly stifled and restricted with growing surveillance and authoritarian laws such as the National Security Law, moved to Taiwan for "100% freedom" to continue their creative practice, have highlighted emerging challenges and geopolitical events that may further impact the Hong Kong artist diaspora, such as the growing Chinese influence in Taiwan and the implications for Hong Kong artists who have resettled there in the past few years. His first solo exhibition since moving to Taiwan, Wong's "[Battlefield Apocalypse](#)" hosted

at 182ArtSpace in the city of Tainan, was a collection of 20 works focussed on highlighting the authoritarian crackdown of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the region.

In assuming the role of culture bearers, migrant and displaced artists have actively engaged in activities such as film screenings, peaceful protests, and cultural festivals related to Hong Kong in their new countries. A diasporic perspective has become integral to how these artists now interpret Hong Kong's history and share their interpretation with new communities. This shift has compelled them to infuse the Hong Kong migrant experience into their art and contemplate broader ways to connect individuals from diverse cultures in their host countries, with their work. Owing to their visa regulations and immigration pathways, certain countries have become a preferred destination country for several Hong Kongers. The United Kingdom now hosts one of the biggest HK diaspora communities including several artists, curators and cultural practitioners. Artist and curator [Clara Cheung](#) was compelled to resign as a district councilor in Hong Kong after receiving political threats – many that could not be attributed with certainty to a single source. Upon relocating to the U.K., she discovered parallels between her new home in Sheffield and her homeland, sparking the Harcourt Road project with artist duo C&G Artpartment. This ongoing initiative explores the shared history and migration narratives of Sheffield and Hong Kong's Harcourt Road, culminating in an upcoming exhibition slated for September 2024.

### ***Omaid Sharifi of ArtLords (Afghanistan)***

[Omaid Sharifi](#), co-founder and president of [ArtLords](#), emerged as a key figure in the landscape of art and culture in Afghanistan. Despite having to leave Afghanistan, his work [offers a beacon of hope and resistance amidst the country's turbulent socio-political environment](#). ArtLords transcends the conventional boundaries of art by leveraging murals and public art installations as instruments of social commentary and public discourse. This initiative had ingeniously transformed the war-torn walls of Afghanistan into canvases that narrated the collective aspirations, struggles, and resilience of the Afghan people following Taliban rule. However, one of the first acts of the Taliban upon return was to paint over the [2200 murals created by ArtLords](#) starting in early September 2021. Sharifi's work not only beautified urban spaces but also fostered a sense of community and collective identity among Afghans who longed for peace and normalcy. In August 2021, Sharifi fled his homeland with only essentials—a backpack, a T-shirt, and a pair of shoes.

In exile, [Sharifi has continued](#) to influence the spheres of art and activism, or "artivism," extending his impact far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. His work from abroad has not only kept the international community's attention focused on the plight of his homeland but has also highlighted the transformative power of art as a universal language of resilience and hope. Sharifi's efforts have significantly amplified the reach and impact of Afghan art, showcasing it on a global stage and fostering dialogue about the role of art in socio-political activism. Mr.

Sharifi has recently launched the [#IStandWithYou](#) movement against gender apartheid in Afghanistan.

Through [digital platforms](#), [international exhibitions](#), and collaborations with global artists and institutions, Sharifi has harnessed the potential of art to transcend geographical limitations and engage a worldwide audience. His advocacy for activism continues to inspire a new generation of artists and activists around the world, demonstrating how creativity can be a potent tool for awareness, resistance, and change. And despite being forced out of his country, Sharifi and ArtLords have recently launched the female artists mentorship program where they work with and support 108 female artists who remain in Kabul, Afghanistan.

### ***Artivists in Forced Exile (Cuba)***

Over the years, facing repression and crackdowns on freedom of expression, waves of Cuban artists have left the country and established diaspora enclaves across the Americas and Europe, contributing to the global arts, cultural, and human rights sectors.

In the United States, artist [Tania Bruguera](#), once part of an independent creative vanguard on the island, contributes to the global activist movement, using art and culture to denounce human rights abuses. Bruguera has presented works in the Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the New Museum in New York. She was a Guggenheim Foundation fellow, has had several artistic residencies, and is a senior lecturer at Harvard University. She also founded and continues in exile the [Hannah Arendt Institute of Activism \(INSTAR\)](#), a collective that serves as an open space spotlighting the power of art to advance social justice in Cuba. In December 2023, the collective put on the [fourth edition of the INSTAR Film Festival](#), a week-long event held in multiple cities, including Barcelona, Paris, Miami, New York, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and São Paulo. The collective was also a part of Documenta Fifteen, an exhibition of contemporary art that occurs every five years in Kassel, Germany.

In Spain, cities like Madrid and Barcelona have become hubs for Cuban immigrant communities. In 2023, the curator [Solveig Font](#), along with artists and cultural professionals Aminta D'Cárdenas, Lester Alvarez, and Julio Llopiz Casal, founded the creative collective [Forma Foco](#). Since its founding, the collective has held three exhibitions, one in Madrid and two in Vienna, Austria. Their artistic oeuvre demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of diasporic communities, in turn contributing to the arts and human rights spheres. In Barcelona, exiled Cuban writer and journalist [Abraham Jiménez Enoa](#) has made significant contributions to the literary community through his work with outlets such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, and Gatopardo. In 2022, Jiménez Enoa was recognized for his defense of press freedom in the face of threats and harassment, receiving the [Press Freedom Award](#) from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

In Germany, the visual artist [Hamlet Lavastida](#) has left his indelible mark on the European art scene. Once imprisoned in Cuba for his activism, Lavastida won the [Idealista Prize for Contemporary Art](#) in 2022 and has exhibited his work in Germany, Spain, and Poland.

## **THE EMPOWERING ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

In various instances, migrant and displaced artists have effectively created communities of belonging in their new social and cultural environments, often by being hosted or supported by academic, cultural, and arts institutions. Afghan filmmaker Sahraa Karimi, currently residing in Italy, was appointed as a visiting professor at the National School of Cinema (CSC) in Rome by its President, Marta Donzelli. Karimi has expressed the profound impact of this opportunity on her life and career in [interviews and at public events](#), such as the Culture Summit in Abu Dhabi in 2022, where she also spoke with ARC. She has emphasized how teaching at CSC has allowed her to collaborate with talented students and esteemed faculty within a nurturing and creative setting.

Exhibitions and curated public programming present a platform for host countries to exhibit the creative endeavors of displaced and migrant artists. The digital exhibition ["Before Silence: Afghan Artists in Exile,"](#) curated by ARC in collaboration with Art at a Time Like This, featured the artworks of Afghan artists in exile. This initiative raised awareness and fostered engagement between displaced Afghan artists and global audiences. City of Asylum organizations in various cities across the U.S. such as Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Ithaca, offer extensive public programming and platforms for community involvement with their at-risk artist residents. These opportunities include performances, readings, events, and interactions with local schools.

## **FACTORS THAT HINDER MIGRANTS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

Many migrant artists and cultural figures face threats and socio-economic precarity in their destination countries as a result of incomplete identity documentation and/or social and legal discrimination. In 2022, ARC has seen an alarming number of artists who had fled their countries of origin but continue to feel unsafe or face threats in their new host countries, representing 11% of our total caseload this year. This was most common among Afghan artists who had fled to Pakistan, Burmese artists who had fled to Thailand, and Iranian artists who had fled to Turkey. In other circumstances, cultural figures report feeling isolated and disconnected from creative communities in host countries.

Many migrant and displaced artists flee their countries abruptly and without proper documentation, including but not limited to passports and the requisite permissions such as work permits, thereby leaving the displaced artists little to no choice but to go into hiding from the authorities. These artists lacking in documentation are unable to access their host country's social and cultural life. ARC has observed through its programs how migrant artists are in a state of

limbo, unable to fully participate in their host country's creative economy. Instead, they are focused on struggling to secure legal documentation, emergency funding, and—for those artists who remain at risk in a country of refuge—seeking to relocate once again to a country where they can be truly safe and secure. This tenuous existence impedes migrants' capacity to make meaningful contributions to their transit and host countries, contributions that often go unrecognized by their host communities. For example, according to information collected through [ARC's regional workshops](#), the Tunisian government provided a stimulus package of \$115 a month that was designated for artists—but as only Tunisian nationals were eligible for the program, migrant artists in Tunisia were excluded and unable to access this critical financial support.

The same can be said of migrant artists from Myanmar who have fled to Thailand, many of whom are also forced to flee abruptly and without proper documentation. Following the [military coup in Myanmar](#) in February 2021, artists have faced threats of persecution, detention, and even death, particularly due to their involvement in pro-democracy movements and protest art. In December 2021, PEN America reported that [at least 45 artists](#) had been detained, including five who were executed, while many others had fled the country. Many artists who have fled to neighboring countries like Thailand live in constant fear, avoiding any contact with local authorities due to their lack of legal status. Consequently, they are unable to engage with local art communities or continue their artistic pursuits. Additionally, fleeing artists often leave behind essential tools and instruments vital to their work, further hindering their ability to resume their careers.

Some governments are quick to silence displaced and migrant artists whose practices fall outside the purview of the dominant or majority population. In Bangladesh, musicians from the Baul community—traveling minstrels native to parts of Bangladesh and India, who are heavily influenced by Sufism—are subject to censorship and arrest under the Digital Security Act (2018). The legislation allows for the forced detention of artists who are critical of the government, or whose expression “threatens the national sovereignty” of the country. Arguably, the lack of a proper definition of national sovereignty permits action to be taken against minority groups such as Baul musicians, whose music is considered to be embodying a philosophy that is antithetical to the dominant culture and religion in Bangladesh. Likewise, ARC has worked with numerous cases of Kurdish artists (from Syria and Iran) who have fled to Turkey but face persecution for their Kurdish identity and related creative expression, due to anti-Kurd sentiments that are common in Turkey.

In countries such as [Portugal](#) and Germany, Syrian musicians, such as those from the Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra, and Afghan musicians from the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM), have found refuge. Despite their presence, they face challenges integrating into the local creative scene and accessing performance opportunities due to linguistic and cultural barriers, which then impose barriers to resources, funding and other opportunities. Advocates

like [Dr. Ahmad Sarmast](#) and Mirwais Siddiqui are raising awareness globally about the struggles of Afghan musicians, highlighting the need for support to help them adapt and reignite their artistic pursuits in their new homes.

ARC observed that, compounded by weak networks and scarce networking opportunities in their new environments, Hong Kong artists find themselves disconnected from local art scenes, intensifying the isolation felt by those accustomed to the close-knit artistic community in Hong Kong. This isolation has fueled a strong yearning for a cohesive diaspora community.

## **OVERCOMING HINDERING FACTORS**

Cultural organizations and educational institutions play a crucial role in assisting displaced artists to navigate unfamiliar creative environments. While their support may be limited by financial constraints and visa complexities, many strive to facilitate connections between artists and local creative communities, healthcare providers, and fellow displaced artists to facilitate their integration. However, the extent of this support often depends on the geopolitical and bureaucratic landscape of the host country.

## **ART AS A WAY TO CHALLENGE HARMFUL NARRATIVES ON MIGRATION**

In the midst of a global surge in authoritarianism, artists worldwide, many of whom are migrants themselves, face incessant threats and persecution. The recent publication by the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), titled "[Art Is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change](#)," serves as a guiding example, showcasing the narratives of numerous artists who have harnessed their creative prowess to bolster, sustain, and galvanize social and political movements across borders. This initiative stands as a testament to the power of art in amplifying migrant voices, offering them a platform to counter detrimental narratives that pervade public discourse.

The story of Bart Was Not Here, a Burmese visual artist currently living in exile, illustrates how, despite facing adversity, Bart embraces his migrant identity. He finds valor in the act of venturing into the unknown and building anew from scratch. His perspective sheds light on the inherent courage of migration, challenging misconceptions. Providing migrants like Bart with a platform to share their experiences in a positive light can significantly alter the social narratives surrounding migration, fostering both understanding and empathy for the complexities migrants encounter on both individual and communal levels.

Similarly, Zeina Daccache, a drama therapist from Lebanon, exemplifies how the transformative power of theater can empower marginalized populations, including migrant workers, to articulate their voices. Through her work, Daccache not only amplifies these voices on stage but also empowers individuals to advocate for their rights beyond the confines of theatrical performances.



Through creative mediums, she dismantles barriers and fosters solidarity, underscoring the importance of recognizing and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by migrants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**To governments in destination countries: Facilitate asylum processes and provide direct support to migrant cultural figures as a matter of support for cultural rights defenders.**

First and foremost, we at ARC, including hundreds of our network members and the artists we support, hold that acknowledging the need to protect migrant and displaced artists is a prerequisite for protecting the cultural rights of migrant communities. Therefore, given their special status as cultural figures and contributors, host countries should facilitate their asylum processes, provide direct administrative and financial support and help them through their transition by removing barriers to access resources, work and other opportunities in the host country.

**To governments in destination countries: Facilitate greater mobility of cultural figures by lifting restrictive immigration and visa related requirements that prohibitively impact the frequent and safe travel of cultural migrants across borders.** Artists and cultural producers should be able to pursue professional, cultural and economic opportunities without travel restrictions, even when seeking asylum or temporary relocation in a destination country. Doing so inhibits their abilities to sustain and advance themselves and their work.

**To governments in destination countries: Provide resources to relevant CSOs that work to educate local communities on the realities and lived experiences of migrant cultural figures and help connect artists with existing diasporic communities.** Governments should provide civil society organizations with the support and resources to help them build stronger networks between artists, both online and offline, so long as such networks are sensitive to the experiences, traumas and cultural differences of their members.

**To governments and NGOs providing travel assistance: Prioritize strategic in-region relocation.** As highlighted in our report [Connecting the Dots: Artist Protection & Artistic Freedom in Asia](#), ARC is a proponent of strategic in-region relocation whenever possible, rather than moving artists to new and unfamiliar countries on the other side of the world (as often happens when artists from the South are relocated to the North). In-region relocation is often less expensive, poses fewer language and cultural barriers as well as visa hurdles, and allows artists to remain closer to their friends, family, and communities.

**To civil society organizations in destination countries: Provide mentorship on local practices and rights awareness.** Displaced artists can also benefit greatly from mentoring sessions on a range of topics including rights awareness, general and digital safety, financial autonomy, and perhaps more importantly, language courses and introductions to local culture.

Stakeholders, like the librarians who work with ICORN cities to help relocated individuals get resources on the local customs and languages, play an important role in easing and connecting refugee artists to the local culture and practices of their host city. There is a need for organizations to perform this crucial role of connecting and educating artists, to help them overcome the challenges of migration.

**To cultural institutions in destination countries: Provide robust professional opportunities and financial compensation to migrant cultural figures.** ARC and its network members, strongly urge museums, galleries, and established cultural spaces to do more to support refugee artists and offer spaces for them to showcase their work. Additionally, in a workshop co-hosted by ARC and Southern Defenders in 2021 and summarized in the report [We Have Always Had to Fight: African Artists on Human Rights and Artistic Freedom](#), African artists and cultural practitioners noted the need for more financial assistance to support the work of artists who are forced into exile or are otherwise displaced from their home country.