



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

# Make funding access easier for artists

Black artists and activists have to jump through too many hoops to get resources that could help them do their best work and change the world

**Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah**

Last year, I received a letter from Purposeful, a feminist hub for girl-activism rooted in Africa, informing me that I had been selected as a recipient of its inaugural Feminist Scholar Award of \$50 000.

The award was to enable me to have space and time to focus on my next book “away from the burdens of institutional fundraising or commercial income generation”, and to be able to centre working with girls as a part of my process.

Best of all was that this award came with no strings attached — and no requirement to account for how I spent the money or the need to submit a narrative report.

Their one ask was that I participate in a reflection and presentation session around the six and 12-month periods.

“Yessssss,” I hastily typed back. “I accept this award. I have no words. I will write back again when I am more composed.”

I remember calling my mum afterwards and explaining to her that the organisation, which had previously invited me to Sierra Leone to run a workshop for young girls around sex, sexualities and the body, had so much trust in what I do that they had decided to support me so I

could focus on my next book.

She struggled to believe me. “What do they want you to do for them?” she asked.

“Nothing, Mum. They don’t want me to do anything. They just think the work that I do is important.”

It took a while for my parents to see my work — speaking up about sex and sexualities, often revealing intimate details of my own sex life in the process — as something worth doing. This changed when I began to get public recognition, although their fears (in the case of my mum who is now my only surviving parent) continue for very different reasons.

Recently, I proudly shared with her a feature about myself in a prominent Western publication and what she picked up on was that I had been described as “Queer”, which made her anxious because of the draconian anti-gay bill that is going through the Ghanaian parliamentary system.

I feel privileged that an African-based organisation has seen my work as worthy of being supported. Recognition always feels more special when it comes from “home”, and I would like more philanthropic organisations, especially Black and African ones, to step up and meaningfully support artists whose work sparks social change and justice.

And herein lies the rub. It is way too difficult for Black artists and

activists, who are also a valuable part of the ecosystem of Black feminist movements, to access resources.

Philanthropy as a sector is traditionally staid and unimaginative. Anyone who has had to apply for a grant knows that the process can be soul destroying.

Traditional donors usually have a long list of requirements.

Proving you’re a registered non-governmental organisation, having at least three years of audited reports and submitting application forms online in colonial languages (usually English) are only a few of the hoops people have to jump through to prove they are worthy of having their work supported.

These requirements stifle the most creative forms of activism or, at minimum, mean that activists struggle to access much-needed resources to do their best work. This is particularly the case for Black women, trans and gender non-conforming people as new research by the Black Feminist Fund shows.

Cynthia Eyakuze, a researcher and co-contributor to the report “Where is the money for Black feminists?” speaks to the “trust gap” that Black feminist movements face and

the challenges they have accessing resources for that reason.

She further highlights: “There are many ways that biases show up and are experienced in funding, from perceptions about capacity and risk to opaque processes, to accessibility of funders and funding opportunities, funder proximity to certain organisations, coupled with distance from marginalised contexts and communities, and burdensome application and reporting requirements.”

“We must be clear that these barriers are not essential technical barriers for due diligence but rather systemic barriers rooted in white supremacy that come from the ‘civilising’ and ‘charity’ roots of development and philanthropy.”

As someone who has worked in, and been affiliated with, the NGO sector for close to two decades, I am aware of the strict and stringent funding application processes, as well as the onerous reporting requirements that come into play when you manage to access resources to support your activism.

For this reason, I have personally never applied for funding to support the work I do around sexual rights unless the donor has explicitly approached me and expressed an interest in supporting my work.

This means some of the projects I have initiated, including Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women and the Abena Korantemaa Oral History Prize, have stayed fairly small because they have either been fully supported by myself, family and friends (in the case of the latter, for instance) or have only one donor (in

the case of the former), which means the work is also subsidised heavily by the labour of my co-founder Malaka Grant and I, as well as our small team of staff and volunteers.

Just imagine how much inspirational, creative work could bloom if artists were deeply resourced. Just imagine how much the world would change if people saw themselves fully reflected in books, films and art in their full diversity.

Since I published my book *The Sex Lives of African Women*, people have often asked me what kind of reaction I have had to it, especially on the continent, where same-sex relationships are often criminalised under laws that stem from the colonial era. I always share what the most consistent feedback has been. Queer people DMing me, and saying something along the lines of, “I have never felt so seen before.”

Just imagine a world where we all feel seen. The arts across the spectrum — literature, music, film, theatre, poetry, dance — have the strongest potential to move hearts and minds towards a better world. One in which we live in synergy with each other and in ways which preserve the planet for the generations to come.

**Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah is the author of *The Sex Lives of African Women*, which *Publishers Weekly* described as “an astonishing report on the quest for sexual liberation” in their starred review.**

**The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the *Mail & Guardian*.**

**Philanthropy as a sector is traditionally staid and unimaginative. Anyone who has had to apply for a grant knows [it] can be soul destroying**