

EDN's Online Conference on Dance and Wellbeing Calls for Care, Access, and Transformation

On November 29, 2024, over 200 participants from within and beyond the contemporary dance sector joined the European Dance Network's (EDN) [online conference](#). The event offered a forum for discussion on how contemporary dance can play a pivotal role in societal transformation while addressing the critical need for better access and working conditions within the dance sector.

The conference was co-curated and moderated by dance dramaturg and facilitator **Monica Gillette**, who shared highlights from the newly published EDN report titled "[Practices of Care and Wellbeing in Contemporary Dance - Evidence From the Field](#)".

Transforming Society Through Dance

The conference started with an invitation to move by contemporary dance artist, choreographer, and educator **Jean-Baptiste Baele**, who grounded the participants throughout the event in embodied practices to energise and inspire collective joy.

Opening words from EDN Co-Presidents **Louise Costelloe** (Dance Ireland) and **Laurent Meheust** (Le Gymnase CDCN) introduced the contemporary dance culture as transformative, offering pathways to enhance societal wellbeing and social cohesion. The sector faces challenges from economic precarity, burnout, budgetary cuts, and a lack of recognition by public policy, which calls for reimagined funding mechanisms and institutionalised practices of care.

Linking Culture, Health, and Public Policy at EU level

Georg Häusler, Director for Culture, Creativity, and Sport at the European Commission, offered policy insights on connecting culture with health and wellbeing. He congratulated EDN on securing the renewed EU network grant, which strengthens the network's advocacy role. He outlined the importance of EU-level collaboration between culture and health ministries, specifically mentioning the need for consulting recommendations from the field and acknowledging EDN's advocacy work through its campaign and research publication.

Monica Urian, Policy Officer at the European Commission, shared further insights into the role of public institutions in supporting arts and health initiatives. Her presentation highlighted current initiatives and ongoing efforts to connect policy with practice, including the upcoming action by DG for Neighbourhood and Enlargement in the frame of Culture for Health, which involves Eastern neighbouring countries, as well as the Horizon and Interreg – funded research in relation to the Arts

on prescription initiative. The EU-funded Culture and Health platform for emerging artists working with community-engaged health practices is highlighted as a first-of-its-kind initiative.

Addressing the Sector's Working Conditions

Luísa Saraiva, choreographer, performer, and clinical psychologist, presented the challenges faced by dance artists, including unstable funding mechanisms, financial pressures, power imbalances, intimidation, performance pressure, anti-social working hours, constant availability and attention-seeking behaviour, body-based discrimination and experiences of abuse and trauma. She called for improved working conditions in the dance sector by enhancing interpersonal, transversal and management skills in all areas of governance, designing structural support for artists and cultural workers, including professional support and peer-to-peer initiatives, career counselling with a focus on lifelong development and education, and implementation of good working practices based on mechanisms fostering transparency, autonomy, and responsibility.

Monique Smith McDowell, choreographer, performer, and artistic audio describer, emphasised the importance of creating a healthy room culture and advocating for transparency, autonomy, and responsibility. She highlighted the need for more inclusive practices and the importance of educating our collective spaces on the needs of marginalised communities.

Advocating for Sustainable Dance Ecosystems

Biljana Tanurovska Kjulavkovski, cultural worker and EDN board member, presented Nomad Dance Academy as an example of good practice in how grassroots practices of care can transform workplaces in precarious cultural sectors. She stressed the importance of advocacy for policies prioritising care and sustainable funding mechanisms, urging to shift away from productivity-focused demands that lead to self-exploitation among artists and other dance professionals.

Building Community Through Dance

A panel discussion with **Roberto Casarotto** (co-director Aerowaves) and **Markéta Vacovská** (dancer/choreographer) emphasised dance's unique capacity to build meaning through an embodied experience. Working in community-engaged settings opens up pluralistic spaces for encounters among diverse citizens, showcases diverse bodies, and influences body-based ideals. In contemporary dance culture, we share our responsibility to keep our spaces open during growing polarisation and intolerance.

Access, Collaboration, and Joy

The conference featured a screening of the dance film *In My Skin* by **Sándor M. Salas**, highlighting flamenco's role in challenging stereotypes and promoting body diversity.

Emily Jenkins, dance artist and founder of Move Dance Feel, presented how dance fosters a culture of care based on her decade-long work integrating dance into health initiatives. The principles she works with include deliberate choice of words, quality of one's presence, kind, thoughtful and transparent communication, fair pay, paying on time, regular check-ins, and time for rest and reflection.

Key Takeaways

- Recognise and support the dual role of dance in societal transformation and practitioners' wellbeing.
- Embed care into how institutions are run, their funding mechanisms, policies, projects, spaces, and other collaborative settings to ensure sustainable development.
- Foster inclusion and community-driven approaches to advance the dance ecosystem.

Conclusion

By being recognised and reciprocated for its ability to respond to real societal needs, the dance sector can continue to generate embodied meaning, foster pluralistic and intuitive ways of being together and bring societies into movement and joyful collaborations.