

# "NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US"



## Funding for sex workers' rights

Sex workers in communities around the world are organising to end exploitation and violence, to access appropriate and respectful health care, and to build movements for lasting change. However, as a result of criminalisation, discrimination and stigma, few institutions are willing to fund the fight for sex workers' rights.

### Why fund the fight for sex workers' rights?

Advancing the rights of sex workers is key to upholding human rights. Various international human rights principles and legal instruments obligate states to respect, protect and fulfil those rights. Recognising the human rights of sex workers affirms their dignity and humanity including and beyond the context of their work.

Sex work intersects with multiple social justice concerns, such as racism and economic inequity. Sex workers may also face discrimination because they are (im)migrants, women, transgender, gay and other men who have sex with men, living with disabilities or HIV, or because they use drugs.

#### Funding for sex workers' rights has important ripple effects:

- Sex workers are at the forefront of movements that challenge stigma, discrimination and criminalisation of sexuality and bodily autonomy. Many sex workers face overlapping forms of discrimination because they belong to several marginalised groups. For example, if a clinic or police station is sensitised to respect the rights of sex workers, they will likely improve the treatment of other groups that face discrimination, e.g. women, members of the LGBT community, migrants, and people who use drugs.
- Sex workers are on the frontline in the battle against HIV. Sex workers are 13 times more at risk of HIV compared with the general population. The sex worker rights movement received roughly 2% of total HIV philanthropic funding in 2017 (only \$13.9 million) - a 24% decrease from 2016.



### Current funding for sex workers' rights



Sex workers' rights movements currently receive less than 1% of all global philanthropic human rights funding.



Majority of donors are in North America and Europe and most recipients are in the Global South.

Few donors involve community members in making decisions about funding priorities.



Raid and Rescue operations and rehabilitation centers continue to be generously funded but their approaches are harmful and violate the rights of sex workers. They conflate sex work and trafficking.



"Often 'rescue' results in arrests and deportation, leaving sex workers just as poor and desperate, but now with additional stigma as they have been exposed to their families and communities" (Anonymous Donor)

# What is needed



## Consistent sources of rights-based funding

for sex worker-led organisations from diverse grant making portfolios including women's rights, migrant rights, poverty eradication, violence prevention.

*"We often hear inclusion is expensive. But what is the cost of exclusion?"  
(Anonymous sex worker rights activist).*



## A non-judgmental approach to funding.

Sex workers should not be perceived purely as targets for public health interventions or victims to be 'saved'.

Funding programmes should focus on making the conditions of sex workers' lives safer and do not necessitate judgment about sex work.



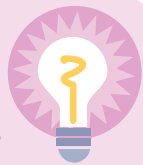
## Meaningful involvement of sex worker-led organisations.

This includes consultation in design, implementation and evaluation of programmes.

*"It's helpful having sex workers making funding decisions because we understand which projects or groups will really be effective towards positive change. Bottom line, it's our bodies, our lives, and we should be at the forefront of all decisions affecting us" (member of the Red Umbrella Fund's Programme Advisory Committee).*

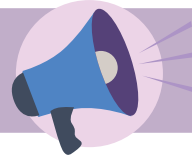
## Understand that anti-trafficking and sex worker health and rights are not mutually exclusive funding areas.

Research shows that sex workers who are able to organise and access their rights without fear and discrimination are best placed to recognise and fight against trafficking.



## Challenge funding conditionalities.

For example, challenge the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath because it harms sex workers' ability to access affordable and quality health services.



## Speak out and invite more funders to join and sustain the effort.

# Taking the lead

## Some examples of innovative funding for sex worker rights

**Count Me In!** A special joint initiative led by Mama Cash, including the sex worker-led Red Umbrella Fund, together with the Association for Women's Rights in Development, CREA, Just Associates and the Urgent Action Fund Sister Funds (providing support for women's human rights defenders all over the globe).

**The Red Umbrella Fund (RUF):** The first global fund guided by and for sex workers. RUF is a unique and innovative collaboration between sex worker rights activists and social justice funders. Since 2012, RUF has awarded 188 grants to 123 sex worker-led groups in 63 countries. These investments have resulted in stronger organisations and leadership and increased solidarity within the sex worker rights movement and with other movements.

**Third Wave Fund:** In 2018, the Third Wave Fund launched the Sex Worker Giving Circle (SWGC), inspired by community-led grantmaking at other funds as well as the long history of sex worker communities taking care of each other, especially sex workers of colour and trans and gender non-conforming sex workers.

**UHA! EASHRI:** Africa's first indigenous activist fund supporting sexual and gender minorities and sex worker human rights. UHA!'s grants are decided by local activists from within the sexual and gender minorities and sex worker movements.

**Sex Work Donor Collaborative:** A network of funders that aims to increase the amount and quality of funding to support sex workers' rights through donor education. The Collaborative also advocates for funding that is accessible to sex workers and responsive to their priorities, as well as flexible, sustained and long-term. <https://www.sexworkdonorcollaborative.org/members>

*References: Advancing Human Rights (2019). "Annual Review of Global Foundation Grantmaking 2016 Key Findings". Funders Concerned About AIDS (2017). "Annual report Philanthropic Support to Address HIV/AIDS". Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (2018) "Sex Workers Organising for Change: Self-representation, community mobilisation, and working conditions". Open Society Institute (2006). "Sex Worker Health and Rights: Where is the Funding?". The Red Umbrella Fund, Mama Cash and the Open Society Foundations (2014). "Funding for sex worker rights". UNAIDS (2018) "Miles to go: closing gaps, breaking barriers, fighting injustices".*