



Funding for sex worker rights

Opportunities for foundations to fund more and better

Summary

Background

Around the world, sex workers of all genders are confronted with widespread violations and abuse of their human rights. In many countries sex work is criminalised, which hinders sex workers' access to legal protection and justice. Criminalisation also fosters stigma and discrimination against sex workers, increases their vulnerability to violence, HIV infection and STIs and hampers access to services and support. But funding for organisations that protect and promote the human rights of sex workers is lacking everywhere.

Research

In 2014, three funders (Mama Cash, the Red Umbrella Fund, and the Open Society Foundations) supported research to map global grantmaking for sex worker rights by public and private foundations and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The researchers contacted foundations and organisations working with sex workers to better understand what is being funded and to identify the main gaps. The findings presented here are based on grants made worldwide in 2013.

This summary highlights key findings and recommendations from the report for sex worker rights activists. The full report, including an annex with a list of key foundations investing in sex worker rights, is available in English here: www.redumbrellafund.org/report.

Key findings on funding for sex worker rights

There are many organisations protecting and promoting sex worker rights around the world that seek funding (referred to here as sex worker organisations). 183 organisations around the world that work with sex workers completed our survey. 70% of these organisations self-identified as sex worker-led.

→ Foundations and NGOs are important funders for sex worker rights.

- Because sex work is criminalised in many countries and stigmatised everywhere, sex worker organisations have difficulty accessing government support.
- 72% of the survey participants received money from foundations or NGOs in 2013.

→ Funding for sex worker rights from foundations has increased since 2006, but most investments are small.

- Globally, 56 funders invested €8 million (US\$11 million) in grants to support sex worker rights¹.
- Just over half (57%) of this money went to sex worker-led organisations.
- 70% of the funders invested less than €10 000 (US\$13 700) each in sex worker rights during 2013.
- The top 5 funders that invested the most money in sex worker rights were:
 - 1) Open Society Foundations
 - 2) Ford Foundation
 - 3) American Jewish World Service
 - 4) Red Umbrella Fund
 - 5) Mama Cash

→ Funders for sex worker rights are mainly based in the United States and Western Europe.

- But there is an increasing number of women's or other activist funds based in the Global South that provide small grants to sex worker organisations as well. For example, the Central American Women's Fund in Nicaragua, UHAI-EASHRI in Kenya and HER Fund in Hong Kong made grants for sex worker rights in 2013.
- Some sex worker networks have played an intermediary role, making it possible for smaller sex worker organisations or networks to access money from larger grants.

→ Most grants go to organisations in low- and middle-income countries.

- **Latin America:** 30% of the total grant amount for sex worker rights went to organisations in this region.
- **Africa:** 27% went to organisations in Africa.
- **Eastern Europe and Central Asia:** 12% of the total grant amount was invested in this region.
- **Western Europe:** 11% went to organisations in Europe.

This includes some grants that were actually partially spent in other regions and not in Western Europe.

- **Asia and the Pacific:** Although 60% of the world's population resides in Asia and the Pacific, this region received just 10% of the total grant amount for sex worker rights.
- **North America and English speaking Caribbean:** Organisations in North America and English speaking Caribbean received 10% of the total grant amount. Only one out of three grants made in the United States went to sex worker-led organisations.
- **Middle East and North Africa:** no grants were identified to organisations in this region.

→ Sex worker organisations need money to support their rights based work and organisational development.

- The survey results specifically highlight challenges in fundraising for policy advocacy, legal services and organisational development.
- Half of the total grant amount, or €4.4 million (US\$6 million), supported advocacy and policy.
- 61% of the grants for policy advocacy work went to sex worker-led organisations.
- Sex worker organisations report that funding for 'rehabilitation' projects or 'exit' are easier to get than human rights-based funding.

→ Funding in the area of health is focused mainly on HIV/AIDS and related access to health care.

- €3 million (US\$4 million) of the €8 million (US\$11 million) funded health-related activities.
- 90% of these grants focused on HIV and related access to health care.
- 27% of this investment went to grants for sex worker-led organisations.

→ Most sex worker organisations have very small budgets and rely on in-kind support and local donations.

- 8% of the organisations in our survey had no budget at all. This is most common among sex worker-led organisations.
- 53% of the organisations had budgets below €50 000 (US\$68 500) per year.
- 35% of the organisations had organisational budgets below €10 000 (US\$13 700) per year.
- 50% of the survey participants, including those in communities with high rates of poverty, raised money from their local community (including their members).

1. In comparison, foundations provided more than €1.2 billion (US\$1.7 billion) to organisations and projects to promote human rights in 2011. <http://humanrights.foundationcenter.org/key-findings/> (accessed 15 December 2014).

Recommendations

Sex worker organisations struggle to access funding for their efforts to advance their human rights, while their work is critical to addressing the violence experienced by sex workers and achieving lasting change. There is a vast opportunity for foundations and other non-governmental grantmakers to make a significant difference in the lives of sex workers in every region on the world: by investing **more and better**.

Providing more direct funding to organisations and programmes that protect and promote the human rights of sex workers is a first step. Additional key recommendations from sex worker organisations to funders are:

→ **Increase funding for sex worker-led organisations.**

“We understand that we are less literate but we are not ignorant. Funders should provide grants to the real sex worker communities and not to the organisations and individuals who can write proposals.”

– **Sex worker organisation from South Asia**

→ **2. Include sex workers’ perspectives when setting funding priorities.**

“Funders should have courage. Be willing to listen to us and support us in our struggle to have our rights respected and our voices heard.”

– **Sex worker organisation from Southeast Asia**

→ **3. Offer multi-year core funding, as opposed to short-term project funding.**

“The political struggle against criminalisation, the battle against violence done to us, the work of building organisational structures to link us and support us better – these are long-term efforts that need sustained steady financing.”

– **Sex worker organisation from Latin America**

→ **4. Also offer funding to smaller, newer and unregistered organisations.**

“Funders should consider ways to fund youth and grassroots groups that have less power than established organisations to communicate and bargain.”

– **Sex worker organisation from Africa**

→ **5. Reduce administrative burdens on organisations by simplifying application and reporting requirements, providing translation support and accepting innovative methods for reporting, including verbal or video reports.**

“The belief that audits and paper trails are the solution against corruption is not evidence-based and is just costing too much, in the form of large amounts of admin staff pushing papers to meet donors compliance requirement.”

– **Sex worker organisation from South Asia**

→ **6. Fund intermediaries who can directly re-grant to sex worker-led organisations, if it is not possible to fund them directly. Examples of intermediaries can be activists or community-led funds and larger sex worker organisations or networks.**

“Fund us for who we are. Don’t force us to moderate our tone and divide our work into projects. We need funders who will back us.”

– **Sex worker organisation from Western Europe**

→ **7. Provide additional support to grantees such as relevant feedback, access to existing tools and manuals and opportunities to gain visibility, build capacity, network or fundraise.**

“Capacity building support would be greatly appreciated. There is very little awareness about how to interact with funders, and many regard this support as a waste of time because it is not fruitful.”

– **Sex worker organisation from North America**

→ **8. Be an ally, speak out and invite more donors to join and invest in sex worker rights.**

“It is very helpful and encouraging when a donor organisation speaks openly about their support for sex workers, this approach can take some stigma off sex work and encourage other potential donors to look into supporting sex work related projects.”

– **Sex worker organisation from Eastern Europe**