The Red Umbrella Fund is a unique collaboration between sex worker activists and donor organisations. It is the first global fund guided by and for sex workers. Launched in 2012, the Red Umbrella Fund is hosted by Mama Cash.

Sharing lessons learned

The Red Umbrella Fund was pleased to celebrate its fifth anniversary this year, a good moment to reflect on its work and to share lessons learned. Since its founding, the Red Umbrella Fund has increasingly received questions from funders and activists about the process of setting up an activist-led grant-making initiative. To respond to this growing interest and to document its unique history, the Red Umbrella Fund published The Creation of a Collaborative Fund by and for Sex Workers. Based on interviews and contemporary reports, the publication documents the process, key decision-making moments and lessons learned in the process leading up to the fund’s launch.

The Red Umbrella Fund also published three case studies about grantee-partners. Each case demonstrates, in its own unique context, the important contribution of the Fund’s core, flexible grants to enabling sex worker-led groups to build and expand their organisations and networks, and to creatively and strategically advocate for change. For example, APROSMIG in Brazil describes the reduced levels of violence against sex workers that was achieved by building a partnership with the local police. The group’s entrepreneurship workshops supported sex workers in switching from cash to an electronic payment system as another practical step to reduce violence from clients and police. The group’s peer-to-peer sexuality education efforts reduced the number of unwanted pregnancies among sex workers.

Funding activism and resilience

Red Umbrella Fund grants, which are selected by an international panel of community activists, aim to sustain and strengthen sex workers’ rights movements in all regions. Although legislation in many countries has made it increasingly difficult for communities – particularly those that identify as sex workers and LGBTQI – to organise and receive financial support from abroad, the Red Umbrella Fund’s grants continue to reach community groups in every part of the world. In 2017 the Fund made more grants and awarded more money than ever before. New grantee-partners include sex workers of all genders. Red Umbrella Fund grantee-partners include groups and networks that have been around for many years, such as the regional network RedTraSex in Latin America, and more recently established groups such as the Suriname Coalition of Sex Workers (SUCOS) and Red Edition in Austria.

Meaningful involvement

An external assessment of the Red Umbrella Fund’s participatory processes, which involved the International Steering Committee and staff, concluded that the fund has been implementing a high level of meaningful involvement of sex workers in its grantmaking and other decision-making processes. In the words of one International Steering Committee member: ‘There is a big awareness [at the Red Umbrella Fund] of there being a diversity of sex workers. And there is a big awareness of trying to be inclusive, and trying to pay attention to sex workers who aren’t usually included, or who aren’t usually heard’.

The Red Umbrella Fund shared its participatory grantmaking model and experiences in funder spaces, including the European Foundation Centre, EDGE Funders Alliance, and Funders Concerned about AIDS meetings. In all these meetings, the Red Umbrella Fund encouraged funders to invest in community organising and the protection of sex workers’ rights.

Facts & figures 2017: Number of grants 26* Total amount granted €855,000 Average amount per grant €32,885

* Includes 17 first-time grants and 9 renewals.
Anonymous group
€30,000
This group advocates for the decriminalisation of sex work in a country where sex workers face persecution, public stigma, and high levels of violence and abuse by public officials. The group organises capacity building opportunities for sex workers, including health education sessions, self-defence classes and entrepreneurship workshops. With the grant, the group is setting up six local self-help groups to foster mutual support and solidarity. It will also work to improve access to psychosocial counselling and other health services to women sex workers.

Argentina
AMMAR Cordoba
€35,000
This group of women sex workers functions as a labour union for sex workers in the province of Cordoba in Argentina. AMMAR Cordoba advocates for the labour rights of all sex workers by networking and lobbying towards local authorities and other government departments. The group combines political activism with provision of tailored services to different groups of sex workers. Such services range from social support and sex worker friendly health services to economic empowerment and artistic expression workshops. The group also engages with academia and recently published a book on sex work in Argentina.

Red Edition
Austria
€24,000
Created in 2015, this is the first sex worker-led organisation in Austria. Red Edition welcomes sex workers of all genders, identities and ethnic backgrounds and has a specific focus on migrant sex workers. The group promotes the full decriminalisation of sex work and the recognition of sex work as work. This grant supports Red Edition to expand its outreach work, strengthen its organisational and financial capacities, and develop a strategic plan.

Bangladesh
HIV/AIDS Research and Welfare Centre (HARC)
€45,000
This sex worker-led group promotes sex workers’ safety, health, and human rights by mobilising the community and organising capacity-building opportunities for sex workers. HARC provides referrals for HIV and sexual and reproductive health services. The group also challenges laws and policies that are harmful to sex workers. Building on the knowledge and experience gained through the group’s previous Red Umbrella Fund grant, HARC plans to use this grant to build the capacity of five local sex worker groups in five major cities of Bangladesh to address human rights violations and promote respect for sex workers.

Bolivia
ONAEM
€39,000
This national sex worker-led group builds the sex workers’ movement in Bolivia by providing capacity building opportunities for its members. ONAEM builds alliances with the related movements, including the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in the country, to more effectively promote sex workers’ rights. By educating public health service providers about sex work and human rights, ONAEM contributes to improving the quality of services and reducing the level of stigma and discrimination experienced by sex workers. ONAEM coordinates its work at the regional level through the regional sex workers network RedTraSex.

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Red Umbrella Fund  Meet our grantee-partners

Botswana
Pilot Mathambo Centre for Men’s Health (PMMC)
€35,000
This group of men sex workers works to improve sex workers’ access to adequate health care services, especially HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, management of other sexually transmitted infections, and psychosocial support. PMCMH regularly contributes to research among sex workers and advocates for decriminalising sex work at the national level. The group provides workshops for men sex workers to enhance their safer sex negotiation and financial management skills, and increase their safety and security.

Cameroon
Alcondoms
€35,000
Alcondoms was established in 2012 in response to the harmful legal and policy environment for sex workers in Cameroon. This sex worker-led group promotes the human and labour rights of sex workers and works to increase sex workers’ access to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, STI and tuberculosis screening, and counselling services. Alcondoms is located in the outskirts of Douala and directly serves the high concentration of sex workers in the area, who are often not reached by other local and national service providers.

Canada
SWANS
€40,000
This group, located in north-eastern Ontario, provides frontline services and community building to women sex workers (cis and trans) and Indigenous sex workers. SWANS fills a gap by working in a rural area where mainstream service providers have limited awareness of sex workers’ realities and needs. SWANS’s core activity is a drop-in centre in Sudbury, based on a peer education model, which offers capacity building opportunities to sex workers on legal, health, economic, and personal issues. It also offers direct psychosocial support and health services.

Ecuador
ASO TST QUITO
€20,000
This group was formed by and works for trans street sex workers in Quito, the capital city. The group aims to improve the working conditions on the streets for trans sex workers who are vulnerable to harassment and violence. ASO TST QUITO organises frequent meetings with local police, mediates in conflicts, conducts regular outreach work on the streets, and provides health services and various other forms of support to trans sex workers. The group cooperates with other sex worker organisations in Latin America through the sex worker network Plaperts to promote the decriminalisation of sex work.

El Salvador
Liquidambar
€20,000
In a country where violence against women sex workers is particularly high, this sex worker-led group devotes much of its time to activities related to self-care, healing and overcoming experiences of violence. Liquidambar organises training opportunities for sex workers on human rights and builds lobbying skills. At the national level, the group works collectively with other sex workers’ groups in El Salvador to promote the human rights of sex workers.

Fiji
Strumphet Alliance Network (SPAN)
€20,000
This peer-led community network of women sex workers in Fiji advocates toward the national government for the human rights of sex workers. The group raises awareness among local authorities about sex workers’ human rights and promotes respect for sex workers. This grant will enable the group, which was created in 2014, to strengthen its organisation and build internal capacity in areas of leadership and management. Strumphet Alliance Network aims to increase the visibility of the organisation and its messages by developing educational materials.

Finland
TAMPEP
€47,000
TAMPEP is a migrant sex worker-led European network that focuses exclusively on advocacy and networking for the promotion of social inclusion, economic empowerment, health access, and legal rights and safety of migrant and mobile sex workers. It collects and maintains updated information on the political and legal situation on sex work in European countries, supports national and European advocacy efforts through the production and dissemination of position papers and amplifies the voices of migrant sex workers by mobilising network members and ensuring their presence in key EU-level advocacy spaces.

India
All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW)
€45,000
This national network, represented by sex worker-led groups in 16 Indian states, strives for the eradication of criminal laws against sex workers and their clients. AINSW plans to use the grant to develop a national campaign for the recognition of sex workers as workers. Through this campaign, the network will not only engage sex workers but also reach and involve key representatives from trade unions, civil society organisations and other relevant activists in social and cultural movements in five major cities.

Ashraya
€24,000
This community-based organisation in the Indian state of Karnataka was created in 2007 to address the specific needs of sex workers living with HIV. Ashraya provides a safe space for sex workers living with HIV to connect, access health and social services, and benefit from alternative income generating activities and other economic empowerment services. The group works with sex workers of all genders. Ashraya amplifies the voices of sex workers living with HIV in decision-making spaces and campaigns for legal reforms in India to improve the human rights of sex workers living with HIV.

Indonesia
OPSI
€32,000
With a presence in 19 provinces in Indonesia, this sex worker-led network provides HIV and other health services to sex workers through drop-in centres, outreach, and referrals. OPSI builds partnerships with government, service providers and HIV organisations to improve sex workers’ access to HIV and STI prevention, treatment and care services. With this grant, OPSI plans to study the impact on sex workers of brothel closures in six major Indonesian cities, and the connection between human rights violations and HIV/STI vulnerability. OPSI will use the results of this research in its advocacy work.

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Kenya
MAAYGO
€30,000
Created in 2008, this sex worker-led organisation in Kisumu, a port city on Lake Victoria, advocates for the rights of communities with multiple stigmatised identities (e.g., sex worker, LGBTQI+, and/or living with HIV). MAAYGO’s mission is to provide men sex workers and men who have sex with men, especially those living with HIV, with access to quality health services. The group runs a safe space where young LGBTQI+ people can meet, exchange experiences, access free condoms, receive HIV counselling and simply be themselves.

Macedonia
STAR-STAR
€40,000
This self-led organisation promotes the human rights of sex workers and develops programmes that address their diverse needs in Macedonia. STAR-STAR mobilises sex workers from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds who are working in different sectors of the sex industry, ranging from brothels to border highways. The group organises advocacy trainings for sex workers, monitors political parties’ views on sex work, and works to influence relevant laws, policies and practices. STAR-STAR is expanding its network with two additional branches, Star-East and Star-West, to better reach sex workers across the country.

Mauritius
Parapli Rouz
€40,000
This community-led group advocates for the recognition of sex work as work in Mauritius. At the local level, the group works to strengthen the capacity of sex workers through educational workshops on health, economic development, human rights and advocacy skills. Nationally, Parapli Rouz organises regular community gatherings, bringing together sex workers from different regions of the country to share experiences and strengthen cooperation. The group plans to use the grant to expand its emergency support to sex workers by setting up a phone hotline.

Nicaragua
Girasoles
€39,000
This sex worker-led group promotes the rights of women sex workers in Nicaragua through capacity building, political activism, and public visibility campaigns. Girasoles develops publications on topics such as stigma, discrimination and institutional violence. Eighteen of its members are officially accredited judicial facilitators who provide accompaniment to sex workers in cases of human rights violations. The group plans to set up unions of sex workers in nine different locations to further amplify the voices of local sex workers and support them to advocate for their rights.

Nigeria
Ohotu Diamond Women Initiative (ODWI)
€30,000
This sex worker-led organisation in Lagos advocates for the human and labour rights of sex workers of all genders, sexual identities and backgrounds. The group trains sex workers on human rights and builds partnerships with local authorities to prevent and address violence against sex workers. ODWI plans to use the grant to run a media campaign to address stigma against sex workers and set up a crisis centre to respond to human rights abuses and support sex workers who have experienced violence.

Paraguay
UNES
€20,000
This group promotes public policies and practices that protect women sex workers and that improve their working and living conditions. UNES aims to eradicate all forms of discrimination, stigma and violence against sex workers. The group carries out sensitisation campaigns in coordination with other sex worker groups in Latin America. UNES organises regular meetings with municipal authorities, health service providers and local police to promote the well-being and rights of sex workers in Paraguay.

Suriname
SUCOS
€20,000
This sex worker-led group was created to promote the human rights of sex workers by pursuing decriminalisation of sex work and combating stigma in all its forms. The group reaches out to law enforcement agencies, community and religious leaders to educate them about sex workers’ rights. SUCOS unites diverse sex workers, including transgender people, migrants, and people living with HIV in Suriname. With the grant, SUCOS will launch a two-year media campaign to illustrate sex workers’ stories and put sex workers’ demands forward.

Uganda
Rainbow Mirrors Uganda
€24,000
This organisation of young transwomen sex workers protects and advances their economic, social and political rights in a context in which sex work and being LGBTQ are both highly criminalised. Rainbow Mirrors Uganda builds the economic capacity of sex workers by providing small loans for entrepreneurial initiatives, coordinating income-generating activities, and organising management workshops for young transwomen sex workers. The group also trains sex workers on human rights advocacy and uses performative and visual arts as tools for sex workers’ social inclusion and for public education about sex workers’ rights.

United Kingdom
Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM)
€20,000
This workers’ cooperative aims to strengthen the sex workers’ rights movement by organising community workshops and festivals, networking and collaboration. SWARM advocates for full decriminalisation of sex work by lobbying parliamentarians, amplifying sex workers’ voices in public debates, and speaking out in media. The cooperative actively campaigns against the recent rise in arrests, unlimited detention, and deportation of migrant sex workers in the UK who are being specifically targeted since the Brexit vote.

United States
Desiree Alliance
€31,000
This network brings together organisations and individuals from diverse sex worker communities across the United States to strengthen their advocacy for the human rights of sex workers. Desiree Alliance supports the development of local and regional sex worker leadership in the country, so that sex workers themselves can advocate for their human, labour and civil rights. The network organises national conferences, providing space and opportunity for sex workers and allies to share, learn and strategise together for more effective sex workers’ rights advocacy.