

# RED UMBRELLA FUND

The Creation of a Collaborative Fund  
by and for Sex Workers



## DEAR READER

*This report celebrates the history of the Red Umbrella Fund and appreciates the energy, commitment, and courage of the people involved in setting up this pioneering funding mechanism for sex worker rights. We have been eager to document this history as a way of sharing our learning from this process with other activists and donors and contribute to the growing knowledge of peer-based funding mechanisms. We hope to inspire many more community-led funding mechanisms to emerge.*

*This publication of the history of the Red Umbrella Fund is, like everything about the Red Umbrella Fund, a collaborative effort. Interviews were conducted and transcribed by Casey Callaghan and the report was further researched and drafted by Heather Larson. The project was coordinated by Nadia van der Linde. Additional support was provided by Dennis van Wanrooij, Eva Jansen, and Louise LaFleur. Many members of the International Steering Committee (ISC) of the Red Umbrella Fund - Heather Benjamin, Tara Burns, Patrick Fotso, Nataliia Isaieva, Ana Luz Mamani Silva, John Mathenge, Rani Ravudi, Javid Syed, and Tracey Tully - contributed to the content and finalisation of this document by sharing their memories, questions or feedback.*

*An enormous thanks goes to the people who volunteered their time and brain power to travel back in time with us during the in-depth interviews: Sam Avrett, Heather Doyle, Miriam Edwards, Annie Hillar, and Ruth Morgan Thomas. As sex worker activists and Interim Steering Committee members, donors, and consultants who helped set up Red Umbrella Fund, they all played a critical role in its formation.*

*Additional informal conversations took place with people involved with the Donor Collaboration, a network of donors that came together to advocate alongside sex workers to increase the amount of human rights supportive funding for sex workers and were key, along with sex worker activists, to initiate the process of the creation of the Red Umbrella Fund. The reflections of these critical players involved in the initial stages of the Red Umbrella Fund helped clarify the significance and relevance of processes and decisions made.*

*Thank you to all those involved in any part of the collaborative processes that resulted in the creation of the only global sex worker-led fund: the Red Umbrella Fund.*

*Tara Burns & Javid Syed  
Co-chairs of the International Steering Committee (ISC)  
Red Umbrella Fund*

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# RED UMBRELLA FUND HISTORY

## 2006

June 2006  
Research

**Sex Worker Health and Rights: Where is the Funding?**  
published by OSF-SHARP

Key finding:

🔑 There is little funding for sex worker-led organisations.



## 2008

December 2008  
Meeting

**Donor Dialogue on Sex Work and Trafficking**  
In Tarrytown, USA  
Hosted by OSF-SHARP, CREA, and NSWP

Key finding:

🔑 Funders agree sex worker voices need to be heard more and sex worker-led organisations need more funding.



## 2009

December 2010  
Meeting

**Collaborating to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Workers**  
In Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
Hosted by Mama Cash and OSF.

Key decision:

🔑 To set up a participatory pooled fund for sex worker-led organisations and initiatives, and to also establish a platform to carry out joint advocacy.



November 2010  
Resource

**Communications Toolkit**  
commissioned by the Levi Strauss Foundation, developed by Leon Mar.

Key objective:

🔑 To support staff within foundation to better articulate the case for funding sex worker rights.



## 2011

June 2011  
Meeting

**Interim Steering Committee meets face to face**  
In New York, USA.

Key decisions:

- 🔑 The new sex worker-led fund is named the Red Umbrella Fund.
- 🔑 The governance structure and administrative structure of the fund are designed.
- 🔑 Criteria for the host and International Steering Committee are agreed on.



September - November 2011

**Request for Proposals**  
For a host organisations for the Red Umbrella Fund.

Decision:

◆ Mama Cash, the international women's fund based in the Netherlands, is selected as the administrative host.

February 2012

The **International Steering Committee (ISC)** is chosen.



April 2012  
Meeting  
**The Red Umbrella Fund is publicly launched!**  
at the AWID Forum in Istanbul, Turkey.

## 2012

February 2009  
Meeting

**Conference call** between donors who participated in the 2008 meeting: AIDS Fonds, Global Fund for Women, Hivos, Mama Cash, Oak Foundation, OSF-SHARP.

**Key outcome:**

🔑 Funders explore creating a more formal collaboration focused on advancing the human rights of sex workers.

October 2009  
Research

**Grants made related to sex work by participating funders** collected by OSF-SHARP.

October 2009  
Research

**Strengthening Global Commitment to Sex Worker Rights** produced by Matthew Greenall.

November 2009  
Meeting

**Donor Collaboration to Advance the Health and Human Rights of Sex Workers**

In Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
Hosted by Mama Cash and OSF-SHARP in collaboration with Aids Fonds, AJWS, Global Fund for Women, Hivos, Oak Foundation.

**Key priority areas for collaboration:**

- 🔑 Strengthening the sex worker movement.
- 🔑 Building linkages with other movements.
- 🔑 Donor leadership.

November 2010  
Research

**Sex Worker Organisations' and Projects' Funding Priorities**  
a community mapping by Anna-Louise Crago.

November 2010  
Research

**Red Umbrella Funding: An overview of options for donor collaboration to advance the human rights of sex workers** commissioned by JASS and Comic Relief, developed by Sam Avrett, Julie Greenberg, and Will Rockwell.

April 2010  
Resource

**Guiding Principles: Donor Collaboration to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Work**  
Shared for discussion by OSF-SHARP.

2010

September 2012  
The Red Umbrella Fund **office is set up** and first two staff start working.

October 2012  
Meeting  
**The Programme Advisory Committee** selects the first grants to be made.

October 2012  
Meeting  
**The International Steering Committee** starts a strategic planning process.

December 2012  
**First Red Umbrella Fund grants are made** to 21 sex worker-led organisations!

# THE STORY OF THE RED UMBRELLA FUND

***"In my point of view, the Red Umbrella Fund is very important. It provides direct support for our ideals, our dreams. Other funds tell you where you should go, what you should do, what activities to implement. The Red Umbrella Fund supports us in what we want because it is by sex workers, for sex workers."***

**- Ana Luz Mamani Silva,  
Mujeres del Sur**

The Red Umbrella Fund is the first global fund guided by and for sex workers. The fund responds to the needs of sex worker rights groups that are fighting against violence, stigma and criminalisation, in an environment where there is little funding accessible to them. It is the result of a unique and innovative collaboration between sex worker rights activists and social justice funders.

There are as many histories of the Red Umbrella Fund as there are people who were involved in its development, and each person has a unique perspective of how the fund came to be. This report combines insights based on interviews with different people involved in the process and an analysis of meeting reports and related documentation. This report does not do justice to everyone's contribution or clarify every crucial decision made, but it is a first attempt to document and share a unique collaborative experience with a significant outcome.

## WHERE IS THE FUNDING?

The first international exploration of funding for sex worker rights and health issues was initiated by Open Society Foundation (OSF)'s Sexual Health and Rights Project (SHARP) in 2006. The report, "Sex Worker Health and Rights: Where's the Funding?", was intended to stimulate constructive conversations on how to promote increased and better funding for sex worker organisations<sup>1</sup>. The good news was that there seemed to be a growing number of sex worker organisations and allied NGOs working to improve sex worker health and rights.



However, the report also stressed that the funding situation for these organisations was dire: "The five most active foundations funding sex worker health and rights in 2005 gave less than U.S. \$1million, a small amount compared to the millions of dollars needed for this sector."

## ANTI-TRAFFICKING AND SEX WORK: A DIALOGUE

Two years later, the Director of the Public Health Program at SHARP, Heather Doyle, initiated a dialogue on sex work and trafficking between donors, researchers, and activists in collaboration with the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and CREA. Although acknowledged as a co-organiser in the meeting report, Ruth Morgan Thomas, Global Coordinator of NSWP, mentions that their inclusion in this process was very last-minute:

"OSF said to me, 'Would you come to this?', and I'm going 'Why am I being invited just a week before, and what about the regional networks?' And so we came in very late, and I think we threw a stone in the pool and caused some ripples, because we actually challenged them in saying, 'We're not

quite sure why you think the priority is trafficking. We have many, many other issues.'"

Other donors involved in the discussions included: Aids Fonds, American Jewish World Service, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Global Fund for Women, Hivos, Oak Foundation, and Mama Cash. These dialogues were intended to help donors make the distinction between sex work and trafficking, and figure out more effective ways to support anti-trafficking efforts that affirm sex worker and migrant rights. In other words: to develop a sex worker rights based approach to anti-trafficking.

***"What emerged from this meeting was the realization that there needs to be more of a focus on looking to supporting sex worker rights and to decoupling sex of worker rights and sex worker issues from the whole trafficking debate."***

**- Annie Hillar, Mama Cash**

Box 1 shares the key recommendations that resulted from this first international dialogue. The importance of sex worker organisations and networks and the need for them to access funding were highlighted in the narrative.

<sup>1</sup> Dorf, Julie. "Sex Worker Health and Rights: Where is the Funding?" Commissioned by Open Society Foundation's Sexual Health and Rights Project. June 2006.

## BOX 1

### Key recommendations from the 2008 donor-activist dialogue:

- ◆ Change public perceptions (from “victims” to “active agents”)
- ◆ Strengthen the understanding of sex workers rights
- ◆ Influence policy makers
- ◆ Build bridges with other progressive movements
- ◆ Get accurate data and evidence through rigorous and ethical research
- ◆ Document the harms of anti-trafficking initiatives that are not rights-based focused
- ◆ Place the voices of those affected by trafficking and/or anti-trafficking initiatives at the center of advocacy and programme agendas
- ◆ Increase funding to groups advocating for sex workers’ rights

**“We’re not quite sure why you think the priority is trafficking”**





## ZOOMING IN ON SEX WORKER RIGHTS

In light of the findings from the first donor-activist dialogue, SHARP organised a conference call in February 2009 with donor representatives from Hivos, Oak Foundation, AIDS Fonds, Global Fund for Women, and Mama Cash. They considered a more formal collaboration dedicated specifically to advancing the rights of sex workers.

***“We were starting to recognise that, as we did more and more funding on sex worker issues and with sex work communities, that there was a very small pool of funders, and also that the political environment was very challenging, and often it would be helpful to have funders who could open up spaces for sex workers to participate in different political processes.”***

*- Heather Doyle,  
Open Society Foundations*

In November 2009 SHARP and Mama Cash organised the “Donor Collaboration to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Workers” meeting in Amsterdam. The meeting included representatives of NSWP from mainly global and regional networks and donors with backgrounds in human rights, women’s rights, global health, and social justice.

A key background paper was written by Matthew Greenall in preparation for the meeting, outlining a proposal for a donor collaboration<sup>2</sup>. Fourteen representatives of sex worker organisations and thirteen representatives of interested grantmakers were interviewed for the paper in order to frame:

1) the human rights context of sex work and the range of organisations currently working to advance sex worker rights,

2) the work of grantmakers and foundations interested in participating in the collaboration as well as their different expectations, and

3) tentative suggestions about ways to move towards a collaboration.

The meeting was intended to define issues and areas where donor attention and collaboration were needed, and to determine next steps for collaboration(s) between donors. Both sex worker activists and donors were invited to share their perspectives on what a donor collaboration should offer sex worker organisations. The results are shared in box 2.

## BOX 2

**What a donor collaboration should offer sex worker organisations:**

### **Activist Perspective**

- Core, flexible funding
- Organisational development
- Leadership building within the movement
- Opportunities for sex workers to voice their opinions (in the movement and in other settings)
- Donor consultation with sex workers regarding funding strategies
- Donor advocacy targeting other donors and movements (as they are often better placed than sex worker activists to do so)

### **Donor Perspective**

- Capacity building and institutional strengthening for sex workers and their organisations
- Cross-organisational sharing
- Creating space for dialogue among sex workers (i.e. donor-convened spaces)
- Donor transparency regarding organisational limits and priorities
- Donor comparative advantage (i.e. access to other movements and donors)

2. Greenall, Matthew. “Strengthening Global Commitment to Sex Worker Rights.” Background paper for a proposed donor collaboration. October 2009.





**“often it would be helpful to have funders who could open up spaces for sex workers to participate in different political processes”**

The following three priority areas were agreed on:

- 1)** Strengthening the sex worker movement through institutional capacity building, leadership building, and pooled funding, with a global mapping of funding needs and opportunities as a next step;
- 2)** Building linkages with other movements, such as strategic connections with the women’s rights movements, connecting sex worker rights with feminism; and
- 3)** Donor leadership in donor spaces where sex worker activists do not have access. This includes seeking opportunities within their own institutions, as well as among their peers to promote institutional policies that increase and improve funding for sex worker rights.

## **FORMALISING THE COLLABORATION**

The next meeting of the Collaboration to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Workers took place a year later in December 2010 in Amsterdam, once again hosted by Mama Cash and SHARP. The lead-up work to the meeting was extensive and crucial. The collaboration commissioned a community map<sup>3</sup> that aimed to present regional and global funding trends and recommendations for

supporting sex worker rights organising. With funding from the UK-based Comic Relief, consultants Sam Avrett, Julia Greenberg, and Will Rockwell developed an overview of potential funding models for the collaboration<sup>4</sup>. Levi Strauss commissioned a Communications Toolkit to guide internal messaging and advocacy for organisations that fund or are considering funding sex work projects<sup>5</sup>. The toolkit outlined myths and realities of sex work, and provided a background and definitions to concepts like a sex work human rights approach to trafficking, and criminalisation.

NSWP organised a preparatory meeting for sex worker representatives from its membership in five regions immediately prior to the Collaboration meeting to discuss and define their priorities. They determined that they would want the collaborative funding to exclusively support sex worker-led groups (not NGOs that support sex workers). This would allow sex worker-led organisations to set their own priorities and hire experts from their own communities. They agreed that core funding was essential, and that transparency was integral: donors and sex workers must be informed of each other’s agendas and expectations and be able to build trust and understanding, making compromises in order to work together.

The decision to launch the Collaboration to Advance the Health and Human Rights of Sex Workers was officially made at this December 2010 meeting.

***“The added benefit is that by doing something together, it will mobilise new money, and it will also empower sex workers to have decision-making power and control over how the money flows. And it’s a community organising effort, and that’s important if you want to strengthen a global movement. And doing it as a funding mechanism not only helps with the funding, and it makes the funding better, but it also helps people work together. Something tangible to do, rather than just creating a global coalition for the purpose of global coalition building.”***

**–Sam Avrett, consultant**

The collaboration’s shared vision was for “societies that uphold and respect the health, human, and labour rights, and self-determination of sex workers of all genders”. The intention of the collaboration was twofold: to establish and manage a pooled fund for sex worker-led organisations and initiatives, and to establish a platform to carry out joint advocacy.

3. Crago, Anna-Louise. “Sex Worker Organisations’ and Projects’ Funding Priorities.” Mapping commissioned by the Donor Dialogue to Advance Sex Workers’ Rights. 2010.

4. Avrett, Sam, Julia Greenberg, and Will Rockwell. “Red Umbrella Funding: An overview of options for donor collaboration to advance the human rights of sex workers.” Commissioned by Just Associates (JASS) with funding from Comic Relief. 2010.

5. Mar, Leon. “Communications Toolkit: Donor Collaboration to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Workers.” Commissioned by the Levi Strauss Foundation. July 2011.

## PARTICIPATORY POOLED FUNDING

***"We don't understand why you want to set up a funding mechanism for us where you set the priority. Surely, if you're genuinely interested in supporting our rights, you should set up a fund where we set the priorities ourselves."***

*- Ruth Morgan Thomas, NSWSP*

During the 2010 meeting, Sam Avrett and Julia Greenberg presented the logistical details of pooled funding and its added value. They defined pooled funding as a pot of money that donors contribute to, administered from one place and governed by a governing body. The proposed funding mechanism would, unlike traditional pooled funds, be a participatory model led by sex workers. It was understood that a sex worker-led fund could contribute to a paradigm shift in the power dynamics between funders and donors.

***"Sex workers are never given that kind of opportunity, because they're seen as beneficiaries. They're not considered agents who have power or a voice. They're often victimized or treated in a very paternalistic way by donors... The notion of creating a grantmaking mechanism for sex worker rights needed to have not just the participation of sex workers, it actually had to have sex workers in the driver's seat."***

*-Annie Hillar, Mama Cash*

Additional benefits of having a sex worker-led pooled fund were discussed such as:



- ◆ A fund specifically for organisations focused on sex worker rights would bring in new money for sex worker rights; indeed, seven donors had already committed to funding in 2011, and six of those said that the funding would be completely new.
- ◆ Funding would be devoted to core support, capacity building, and crisis response – a change from the often earmarked HIV and health specific funding.
- ◆ The fund would also provide a useful mechanism for donors who

want to give to the sex worker rights movement, but cannot for various reasons: perhaps they cannot fund sex worker groups directly, but could donate to a pooled fund;

- ◆ Some organisations can only give large amounts of money, which they could give to the pooled fund and which would then be redistributed in smaller grants.

But the following concerns were also raised:

- ◆ A pooled fund may merely re-route current funding to sex worker rights, while adding administrative overhead.
- ◆ Funders could remove money from a pooled fund once they realize they can also fund small groups directly. As a result, sex worker groups may end up competing with the pooled fund for funding.
- ◆ Other donors may stop funding sex worker groups if they see there is a fund dedicated specifically to funding sex worker organisations
- ◆ The peer review mechanism could be quite difficult in practice, and even contribute to competition or conflicts between groups competing for limited available funding.

There was also some concern among the activists about whether the funders that were part of the meeting would really follow through on the agreements.

Participants in the meeting decided that a collaborative fund would add visibility and voice to the sex worker movement and sex worker groups. It would be the best way to reach small organisations that currently do not have access to funding, and it would provide a platform to make a case for the human rights of sex workers in the philanthropic community. Sex worker involvement would lead to sensitive funding, mentoring and guidance, and capacity building for the movement. In response to the concerns, it was stressed that the pooled fund must attract new funding, and practicalities of the peer review panel would need to be considered, with possibilities of conflict of interest taken into account

## NEW AND BETTER FUNDING

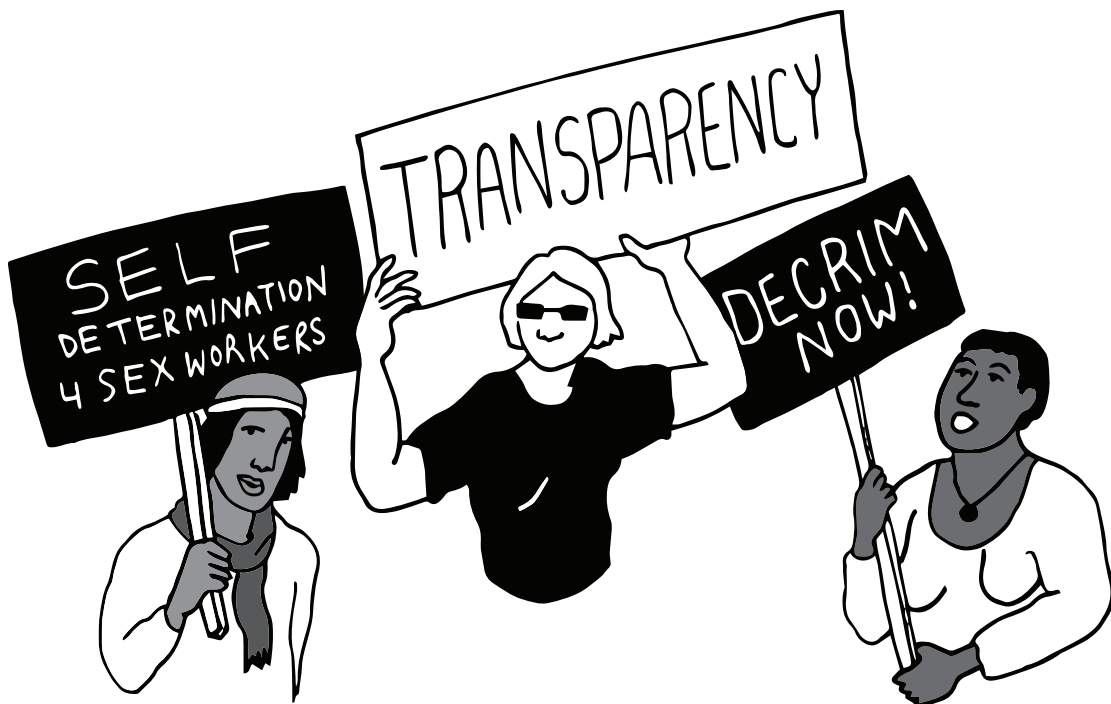
Sex worker activists who were part of the collaboration had concerns about creating a single entity that decided about the majority of funding for sex worker organisations, potentially decreasing diversity of funding opportunities and reducing direct donor contact with grantees. The aforementioned research about potential funding models for the Collaboration (2010) also looked at the effects of donor advocacy on sex worker organisations. Advocacy was found to be positive when donors facilitated activists' voices on issues on the policy level. This indicated possibilities for collaboration in the incorporation of sex workers in to the larger women's rights movement, as well as the provision of direct funding to sex worker organisations. Donor advocacy was found to be harmful when donors drove the agenda and neglected activist voices, when donors were not well-informed and pushed their own advocacy agendas too far, or when it was not appropriate. The collaboration determined that the basic premise of a new fund would be to generate new and better funding for the sex worker movement, increasing the funds invested in sex worker rights and activism.

It was also decided that the new fund would clearly be a grantmaking organisation. Donors initially envisioned a pooled fund that would also have a strong advocacy component, but sex worker activists reasoned that sex worker groups are capable of advocating for themselves. They did not want the fund to speak on behalf of sex workers or in their place; rather, they wanted the fund to be a tool to invest money in grassroots sex worker organisations so that they could continue to do their work. The Red Umbrella Fund's advocacy focus is therefore clearly focused on influencing philanthropy. The intention has been for the broader collaboration to continue its partnership and joint advocacy work.

## ESTABLISHING A FUND

It was thus decided that a fund would be set up, and given the opportunity to prove itself within five years. There was a strong emphasis on leadership

**“if you’re genuinely interested in supporting our rights, you should set up a fund where we set the priorities ourselves”**



development for sex workers and learning for both sex workers and donors. The fund would have a global governance structure where sex workers would be in the majority. An International Steering Committee (ISC) would be set up with at least 51% sex workers from diverse regions, languages, genders and experiences. The other steering committee members would be donors, again with a focus on diversity of the types of funders represented.

***“The process of setting up the Red Umbrella Fund was a long journey. There were so many tensions with funders. An important decision that was made was to have 51% of the ISC come from the sex worker community. You know, we never really imagined that there would ever be a sex worker-led fund.”***

***- John Mathenge, HOYMAS***

To support the governance processes and implement the work, a non-voting administrative structure would be set up. This administrative structure – later referred to as the office or the secretariat - was to be a transparent structure that would organise an application review process that involved sex workers, explore ways to get money to groups in different regions, and use the existing infrastructure of a host to administer the funds.

An Interim Steering Committee was established to take ownership of the fund’s creation. The members were six sex worker activists, all regional representatives from NSW, and five donors. All members had already been involved in the establishment of the Collaboration to Advance the Health and Human Rights of Sex Workers and were self-nominated. Box 3 provides details of the people directly involved in the Interim Steering Committee.

The work of the fund was understood as distinct but complementary to the vision of the broader collaboration. The fund would not act as a governing body for the Collaboration to Advance the Health and Human Rights of Sex Workers, rather it would be a product of the broader collaboration.

SHARP hosted the Interim Steering Committee’s face-to-face meeting in New York in June 2011 where the committee decided on the Fund’s mission, core strategies, as well as its name: “The Red Umbrella Fund”, with the tagline “A Collaborative Fund to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Workers”.

## BOX 3

### Thank you to all the members of the Interim Steering Committee:

Deborah Alvarez (President, Group Fanny Mujeres Transgenero de Ciudad Juarez), Gabriela Leite (Director, Davida and the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes), Irene Keizer (Program Manager, AIDS Fonds), Jesse Wren (Program Officer, AJWS), John Mathenge (Peer Educator, Sex Worker Outreach Program), Kate Kroeger (Director of Grants, AJWS), Marijke Mooij (Program Officer, Hivos), Miriam Edwards (President, Caribbean Sex Work Coalition, One Love Organisation), Nicky McIntyre (Executive Director, Mama Cash), Ruth Morgan Thomas (Interim Global Coordinator, NSWP), and Sheena Manikiwai (Coordinator, Survivor Advocacy Network).

A final thank you to Heather Doyle from SHARP who pushed and pulled and skillfully coordinated most of the process.

### LOOKING FOR A HOME

A new fund needs to start somewhere. NSWP was asked to express their interest to host the fund. The NSWP Board seriously considered the option but decided it was not what NSWP should be doing as a membership network. "If you suddenly manage a fund, you change your relationship with your members, and you change the power dynamic," reflects Ruth Morgan Thomas. Instead, an independent fund was requested – one that had very clear sex worker representation. Therefore an administrative host, an experienced funding organisation that would be willing to both house and administratively support the new Red Umbrella Fund, was sought.

A Request for Proposals for a host organisation was announced and, after a public application process, the Interim Steering Committee selected Mama Cash, based in the Netherlands, as the host organisation. Mama Cash, the oldest international women's fund with years of experience supporting sex worker organising, was considered a relevant and strong host organisation with ample experience funding self-led sex worker groups. Support for the Red Umbrella Fund from a highly respected feminist funder was also recognised to have much added value to the sex worker movement. The Executive Director at Mama Cash,

Nicky McIntyre, recalls that "it was a significant decision for Mama Cash to apply to host the Red Umbrella Fund", with some individual donors questioning Mama Cash's decision and focus on sex workers.

### GOING PUBLIC...

The Interim Steering Committee then launched a public call for self-nominations for members of the first International (not Interim) Steering Committee (ISC) of the Red Umbrella Fund. The subsequently appointed ISC officially launched the Red Umbrella Fund in April 2012 at the AWID Forum in Istanbul, Turkey, in the presence of 75 sex worker activists, donors, and allies. Ana Luz Mamani Silva, a sex worker activist from Mujeres del Sur in Peru, was one of the ISC members speaking at the launch. She remembers feeling overwhelmed by emotions, crying, and feeling a great sense of pride: "We, as sex worker groups, felt protected and supported by having the Red Umbrella Fund. We never thought this could be possible."

### ...AND GETTING STARTED

Soon after the launch, the host organisation Mama Cash and the ISC started preparing the Fund's first global Call for Applications which was launched

in August 2012. The grantmaking criteria and templates were in line with the Red Umbrella Fund's mission and principles determined by the Interim Steering Committee and ratified by the ISC and largely based on the templates available at Mama Cash. The first peer-led Programme Advisory Committee (PAC) was recruited in 2012 through a global call for self-nominations, selected by the ISC, and orientated by Red Umbrella Fund and Mama Cash staff. Its ten members came from different regions and included women, men and trans sex workers.

At the same time, the ISC was directly involved in the selection process for the Red Umbrella Fund's first coordinator. Nadia van der Linde, who had recent experience working with and for the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) and a strong commitment to participatory processes, was appointed in September 2012. She was supported by a Programme Associate, Eva Cukier, who had been involved already in the setting up of the Red Umbrella Fund, as well as by additional Mama Cash staff. The staff's most urgent responsibility was to process the over one-thousand applications received in the Fund's inbox and put in place a transparent, participatory grantmaking process that would facilitate sex workers to decide on the Fund's grants that were to be made before the end of the year.

**“we never really imaged that there would ever be a sex worker-led fund”**

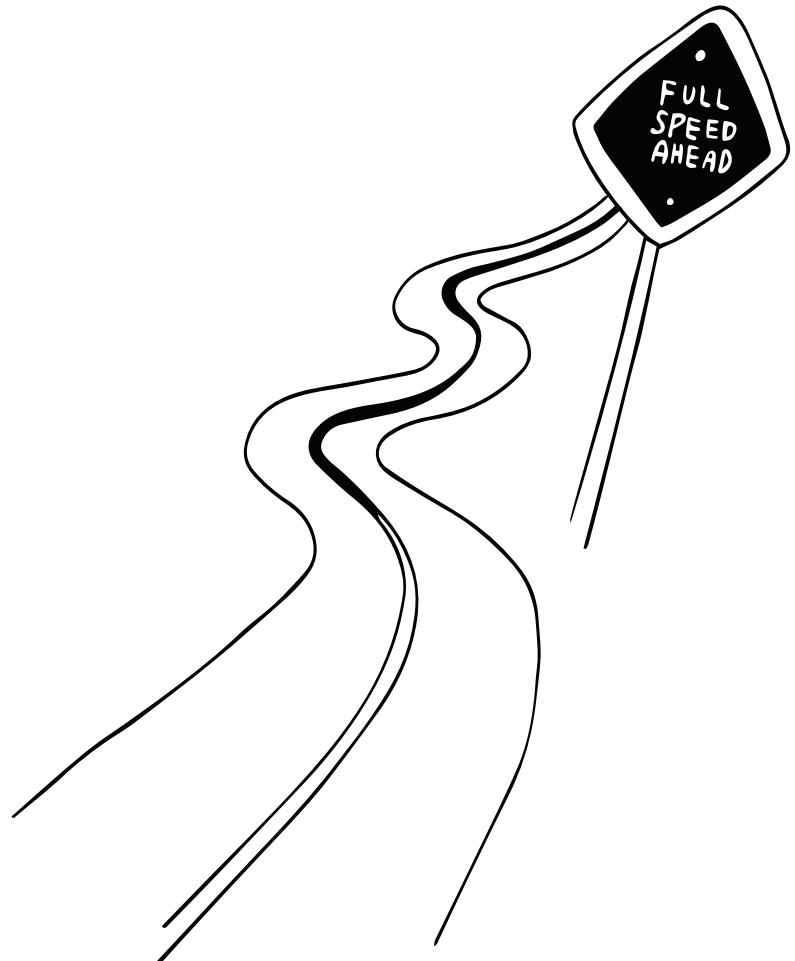
The Fund Coordinator reached out to other participatory grantmakers, including UHAI-EASHRI, HIV Young Leaders Fund, GMT Initiative, and the Robert Carr Community Networks Fund for practical tips, templates and advice. These peer exchanges proved immensely valuable and have continued – in various formats and with diverse peers - ever since.

## **FULL SPEED AHEAD**

In its first year, the Red Umbrella Fund received 1.147 applications for funding and was able to fund just twenty-one groups. The high number of applications confirm the importance of the fund, and operations have grown since. In its first four years the Red Umbrella Fund made 78 core grants between €7.000 and €55.000 to 66 sex worker groups in 45 countries. The fund now employs three full time permanent staff members. The Red Umbrella Fund continues its efforts to increase and improve the funding given to sex worker rights groups and communicate the importance and impact of sex worker rights activism to the funding community.

### **Why a red umbrella?**

The red umbrella, as a symbol of sex worker activism, was first used in Venice, Italy in 2001 during an international march of sex workers to bring attention to the poor working conditions and the human rights abuses they face. Red umbrellas were again used in Brussels, Belgium in 2005 by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) as a symbol of resistance to discrimination during the European Conference on Sex Work, Human Rights, Labour, and Migration. The red umbrella has since been adopted by the international sex worker rights movement, symbolising resistance to attacks from the sky and from humans, protection from abuse and discrimination, as well as the strength of sex workers.



# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

A distinct accomplishment of the collaboration was that it was able to overcome the challenges of bringing together diverse sex worker activists and donors from varying backgrounds. Building trust was a major part of the process throughout the collaboration and development of the fund. Sex worker activists were initially hesitant to trust the funders in the room to take their perspective seriously and funders were initially insecure about speaking out about their funding experiences of sex worker groups in a room with sex workers present.

Many sex worker activists had negative previous experiences with donors, feeling they had been treated with some level of concern, disdain, or even antagonism due to personal or organisational positions on sex work. The reality is that many donors do not understand the community's needs, see sex work as violence, and often treat sex worker issues as anti-trafficking issues, leading sex workers to take an understandably defensive stance when presented with a real opportunity for dialogue with donors. The donors coming into this collaboration were from progressive funds, but it remained intimidating to come into a field that some of them did not know very much about to work with communities that have generally been excluded. The sex workers were coming in with high expectations and a preconceived notion of what they had to battle against, and donors wanted to ask questions, but did not want to offend or be perceived as disrespectful or discriminatory.

The collaboration navigated these trust issues by creating sex worker only spaces and donor only spaces, and then safe spaces where those groups could ask honest questions and give honest answers. The initial sex worker activists present were ones who already had some kind of relationship with funders, and NSWP was a key partner in deciding who was invited to meetings and navigating

questions of representation. It was also important to start the conversation with a group of like-minded donors as a core group. Education on the issue of sex worker rights was still necessary, as donors were coming into the collaboration with their own motivations and perspectives (for example, health or human rights). However, the collaboration and the fund would not have been able to move forward if the people initially involved needed to be convinced of core principles from the beginning.

Donors were educated on relevant language and key concepts, including the differences between sex trafficking and sex work, exploitation and choice, and the framing of sex work issues as labour rights issues. It took some time for donors to recognise that sex workers needed to be central in the decision making process to set up a funding mechanism to support sex worker rights, instead of just being consulted in the process.

***"We keep on saying that we want our voice to be heard. With this fund we are able to make decisions for ourselves and to sit and talk with donors. I feel the work that I am doing, as an activist, being a sex worker, fighting for sex workers' rights over the years, I feel good that it's not going unheard."***

***- Miriam Edwards, Guyana Sex Work Coalition, Caribbean Sex Work Coalition***

During this process, sometimes seemingly administrative issues became contentious. For example, sex worker activists felt that donors often spend too much of the money on their internal processes that should go directly to sex worker groups. Therefore, they wanted administrative costs to stay low and not to exceed 10% of the budget. At the same time, they wanted the fund to be accessible to groups who communicate in different languages, with translation provided, which considerably raises the administrative costs of the fund. Lengthy

discussions took place about the acceptable balance between grants and administration budgets. The first strategic plan of the Red Umbrella Fund stipulates the fund's commitment to ensure that at least 70% of its annual budget is spent directly on grants to sex worker-led organisations and networks.

Discussions also took place about funding priorities and the place of earmarked and restricted funding. Many funders set restrictions on the funds they give, for example requiring HIV services to be provided, a certain number of people to be reached, or requiring a focus on trafficking. Ruth Morgan Thomas stated that "We want to allow sex worker groups to set their own agendas and priorities, and come up with a mechanism that funds what the sex workers need, not what you [the donor] want them to want or need." It was decided that the Red Umbrella Fund will only give core funding to groups to best serve the sex worker organisations and fill the gap in funding, even though it was recognised that it can be a challenge to find general support from funders.

The Red Umbrella Fund has truly embodied its core principle of living and sharing its values, making sure sex workers are always at the core of its work and leadership. It is powerful that communities are driving and managing the process and deciding where the funding goes. Ruth Morgan Thomas reflected, "I actually think it's a really unique fund that is specifically dedicated to allowing communities, sex worker communities, to advocate for their rights. And that's the reason I live and breathe, to ensure that we try and create some justice in this world for sex workers. And I think Red Umbrella Fund is one of the tools for doing that."



**“Everyone just needs to relinquish a bit of control... As people began to trust each other, people were able to delegate responsibility and delegate decision-making, and trust each other to make decisions for them. Trust each other to share control”**

**- Ruth Morgan Thomas, NSWP**



## WHAT MADE IT WORK?

The key to the fund's success, according to some of the people closely involved in the process, has been the passion of the individuals involved, mixed with their confidence in the initiative and their courage. The core group of more or less like-minded, progressive donors came together with a real commitment to making a difference in the field of sex worker rights. Having continuity in many of the core people involved and a few people able to dedicate time to keep the process moving forward was a great help.

Including a diversity of sex worker voices in the process was recognised as an important issue, as no single organisation ever represents the diversity of any global social movement. In one meeting, the facilitator wanted sex worker activists to collectively pick a single priority, but the diversity of their regional priorities made this impossible, and eventually the funders accepted this.

The participants had patience and perseverance, taking time to overcome hurdles and trust, creating safe spaces for all to participate, holding face-to-face meetings, exercising humility, showing respect for lived experiences and putting typically marginalised people in the driver's seat. A shared and clearly defined vision and

purpose ensure that the fund is able to continue as new people join along the way.

In addition, three other key ingredients to success stand out:

### 1. Appreciate and Respect Diversity

◆ The collaboration always sought ways to make processes accessible and acceptable to all involved. A lot of effort was invested into pre- and post-meeting research, preparation of relevant background information, translation support, and presentations by experts.

◆ The need for sex worker activists and donors to sometimes organise separately was a constructive and positive part of the process.

◆ NSWP emphasized the importance of having regional (and other) diversity of sex worker participants in the dialogues, recognising the value and crucial importance of better understanding and including diverse local experiences and expertise.

### 2. Create and Embrace Opportunities to Learn (including for yourself!)

◆ Emphasis was placed on knowledge sharing (both ways), building a common understanding, and creating a shared vision.

◆ It was understood that the diverse groups would need to understand each other's terms: sex workers needed to understand grantmaking terminology, donors needed to understand sex worker rights and activist lingo, and donors from different backgrounds in HIV, women's rights, civil society, and development needed to understand each other's perspectives.

◆ Both sex worker activists and donors recognised that they learned a lot throughout the process.

### 3. Work to Build Consensus

◆ There was acceptance of the need to make compromises in a collaboration. This may sound easy, but it's not.

◆ As there was no single organisation in charge, and it was really a group of people coming together from diverse backgrounds to make joint, collaborative decisions, trust had to be built, often with the help of face-to-face meetings.

◆ Decisions were based on consensus, which created a sense of shared ownership.

**“if you’re genuinely interested  
in supporting our rights, you  
should set up a fund where we  
set the priorities ourselves”**

