

CASE STUDY: POWER OF PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING WITH CRIMINALIZED POPULATIONS: RED UMBRELLA FUND

Criminalized populations, especially sex-worker-led organizations, have received very little funding historically. According to data discussed later in this briefing paper, HIV-related philanthropy to intermediary organizations that support sex worker populations has decreased by approximately 70% since 2017. There is often a lack of understanding of sex workers' rights issues within donor communities and a lack of trust between sex worker activists and funders. The funding landscape has reportedly become even more challenging over the last 19 months during the COVID-19 pandemic: communities most at risk, such as sex workers and other key populations, have received a smaller proportion of pandemic response funding as many donors have turned to supporting general population strategies.

The donor community is not meeting its commitment to support an intersectional response which includes sex workers and other criminalized communities.

To Paul-Gilbert Colletaz, the Coordinator of the Red Umbrella Fund (RUF)¹, this demonstrates that the donor community is not meeting its commitment to support an intersectional response, which includes sex workers and other criminalized communities. He said, "In human rights funding, 1% goes to sex workers, with 20% going to women's rights and 24% going to racial justice issues. With such numbers, it is clear that the discussion around criminalized populations and human rights just isn't the same as any of these other populations. This is illustrated when, for instance, these other populations are part of the sex worker community and still receive less funding."

RUF was established over 10 years ago, as a unique collaboration between sex worker activists and social justice funders to create the first global fund guided by and for sex workers. It is a reflection of the understanding that a community-led, community-driven funding mechanism is essential in responding to the needs of sex worker rights groups that are fighting against violence, stigma and criminalization. In a document recounting RUF's creation story, Ana Luz Mamani Silva from Mujeres del Sur reflected, "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."⁴

¹ The Red Umbrella Fund mission statement can be found online at www.redumbrellafund.org/about-us/mission-principles/.

As part of the process of establishing RUF operations, Mama Cash and Open Society Foundations hosted a meeting in which sex worker groups and donors who were part of the collaborative agreed to a number of key principles: RUF would exclusively support sex-worker-led organizations so that sex workers could set their own priorities and hire experts from their own communities. Additionally, transparency would be enforced by asking both donors and sex workers to openly share agendas and expectations so that trust could be built and sustained. It was also determined that RUF would focus its advocacy efforts solely on donors, as other advocacy could and should be done directly by sex workers. RUF committed to exclusively giving core, flexible grants to ensure that sex workers, rather than donors, were driving decision-making.

During the creation of RUF, governance was also carefully thought through so that sex workers comprised a majority of the Fund's International Steering Committee and Programme Advisory Committee. Sam Avrett, an RUF consultant, noted, "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 organizing effort, and that's important if you want to strengthen a global movement. Doing it as a funding mechanism not only helps with the funding, and 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."

Colletaz is proud of RUF's accomplishments. From 2012 to 2020, the organization made 217 grants totaling over \$6,600,000 in over 60 countries. Colletaz noted that funders should be proud of giving to community-rooted funders and should raise this up as an accomplishment.

"Funding community-rooted funders is shifting power. If donors commit to genuinely shifting power, then they must commit to participatory grantmaking — directly and through community-rooted funders."⁴