

# From Do-No-Harm to Inclusion


A Toolkit for Funders on the Issue of Sex Work

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**SWDC**

SEX WORK DONOR  
COLLABORATIVE

A large, stylized orange umbrella graphic is positioned on the left side of the page, partially cut off by the edge. The umbrella has a dark orange handle and a lighter orange canopy. The background is a solid orange color.

// Whether or not your foundation endorses sex worker rights, there are practical steps you can take to ensure your practices do not harm marginalized people.

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## Introduction

Philanthropy, at its best, is about a love of humanity—a desire to improve the lives of others and the health of our planet. At the Sex Work Donor Collaborative (SWDC), we are motivated to ensure this philanthropic impulse reaches some of the most marginalized people on earth: sex workers. This tool is designed for funders, donors, funder intermediaries, and co-implementers who are committed to human rights and interested in exploring how their funding impacts the sex worker community. We envision this toolkit as a guide to ensure that your funding does not negatively impact oppressed individuals who are advocating for their own survival and dignity, regardless of whether or not you wish to proactively support sex workers' rights. This toolkit is designed to help you navigate the often-complex issues surrounding sex work and to offer practical steps for developing a principled, human rights-based approach to grantmaking—moving toward ensuring greater inclusion and equity.

Sex workers have been organizing and advocating tirelessly against violence, human trafficking, poverty, discrimination, censorship, and criminalization for decades. While so often neglected and denigrated by governments and society at large, sex workers have nevertheless helped to establish sexual and reproductive health and HIV services to benefit millions. The Global Network of Sex Work Projects alone has 344 member organizations, who are organized on the local, country, regional, and global level.<sup>1</sup> These movements have beaten back repressive policies, built power to create safer work environments, and generated resources, services, infrastructure, and homes for those who have been marginalized and excluded by societies and systems. United sex workers have changed repressive laws, reducing discrimination, incarceration, and violence against people who engage in sex work in all their diversities. They have set up their own banks, hotlines, schools, and mutual aid structures when systems fail them. Sex workers have authored scholarship, journalism, memoir, film, theater, and visual art that have expanded our culture.

<sup>1</sup> A searchable list of members of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects available at <https://www.nswp.org/members>.



And let us not forget the role that sex workers have played in many other progressive movements, whether their sex worker identities were visible or not.

Despite being one of the most intersectional and resilient human rights movements, sex worker rights movements find themselves at the bottom tier of funding, receiving only 0.36% of overall human rights funding that year.<sup>2</sup> The disparity is glaring, even when compared to other marginalized populations.

Not only are sex worker-led organizations drastically underfunded, but some funders are (intentionally or unintentionally) supporting work that actively undermines sex workers' safety and well-being. By funding the work of organizations that oppose sex workers' human rights, or promoting the idea that all sex work is exploitation, these funders risk legitimizing longstanding myths and causing harm. Most philanthropists and people working in philanthropy respect the principle of “do no harm” and the right to bodily autonomy. Irrespective of their personal positions on sex work or feminism, most funders do not want to hurt people in the sex industry. However, few have studied this issue deeply enough to feel confident in their decisions. Sometimes this lack of confidence leads to fear, discomfort, and avoidance, all of which prevent funders from taking steps to ensure that their funding does not cause harm.

This toolkit is intended to lend clarity and support in navigating this tricky terrain. After reading the toolkit, please get in touch with the Sex Work Donor Collaborative if you have questions, need more examples or guidance, or would like assistance in discussing these issues with your board, donors, or grantee partners.<sup>3</sup> There are no “stupid” questions, and we all began as beginners on this learning journey. We welcome you!

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Funders Network, *Advancing Human Rights; The State of Global Foundation Grantmaking/ Population: Sex Workers 2020* (2022), available at <https://humanrightsfunding.org/populations/sex-workers/>.

<sup>3</sup> The Sex Work Donor Collaborative can be reached at [coordinator@sexworkdonorcollaborative.org](mailto:coordinator@sexworkdonorcollaborative.org) or at <https://sexworkdonorcollaborative.org/contact>.

## Who Is This Toolkit For?

Funders—those who give grants, donations, or other valuable assistance to movements, non-profits and organizations. This toolkit is for all funders: public foundations, private foundations, private individual donors, co-implementers, and even those who oversee government funding programs. Sex workers exist in every part of the world, and their identities overlap with almost all other marginalized groups. Thus, learning how to form policy and practice around sex workers is essential for almost every funder, even those who oppose the idea of sex work as a viable occupation.

This toolkit is especially for you if...

- You are a feminist or human rights funder, but have not yet learned about or focused on sex work or how it might arise as an issue for your grantee partners or in your grantmaking decisions.
- You fund migrant, refugee, labor, or workers' rights.
- You fund anti-trafficking projects, sexual and reproductive justice, or LGBTQ movements, or work to end gender-based violence.
- You are concerned or confused by your institution's or your grantee partners' position on sex work and would like to know how to make sure your funds aren't contributing to harm or work that goes against your values.
- You fund sex workers' rights and want to grow in your alignment with human rights values.
- You do not or cannot fund sex workers' rights, but you care about the safety and welfare of people in the sex industry.

We think this toolkit will also be interesting for sex worker leaders and activists to read, as well as other advocates and service providers, to better understand the dynamics of funding around this issue, and what funders have to contend with when making decisions. Maybe you know a funder who needs this resource.





## PROGRAM PROFILE

**CLIW (Community Led Initiative for Women) is an organization founded and coordinated by sex workers in Tanzania.** It aims to empower sex workers in all their diversities to advocate for their fundamental human rights and access to justice. CLIW confronts police brutality in a country where sex work is criminalized and police harass, rape, and assault sex workers with impunity. CLIW lives the ideology of “nothing about us without us,” claiming space in decision-making tables and partnering with human rights and HIV service and education organizations to reach sex workers.

## Definitions & Premises

For the purposes of this document, we start with the following definitions and premises:

### What is sex work?

**Sex work** is “the provision of sexual services for money or goods” and sex workers are the “people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, and who consciously define those activities as income generating even if they do not consider sex work as their occupation.”<sup>4</sup>

This definition is widely embraced by global human rights and public health institutions. The term “sex work” was invented by and continues to be used by sex workers around the world, and by movements and networks who advocate for sex worker rights, with the aim of demystifying, destigmatizing, and building common cause with other worker movements.<sup>5</sup> There are many other terms used to define similar acts, but many, like “prostitution,” have connotations of criminality or

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organisation and UNAIDS, *Technical Guidance for Global Fund HIV Proposals Round 11 Key Populations: Sex workers* (2011), available at [https://files.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/programmes/programmeeffectivenessandcountrysupportdepartment/gfresourcekit/20110909\\_Technical\\_Guidance\\_Sex\\_Workers\\_en.pdf](https://files.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/programmes/programmeeffectivenessandcountrysupportdepartment/gfresourcekit/20110909_Technical_Guidance_Sex_Workers_en.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, *NSWP Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law* (2013), available at <https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-publications/nswp-consensus-statement-sex-work-human-rights-and-the-law>.

immorality and thus are found to be demeaning by many sex workers.<sup>6</sup>

Not all people who offer sexual services want to be referred to as sex workers. Due to stigma and criminalization, some people who offer sexual services may distance themselves from the phrase “sex worker”, preferring to refer to themselves as escorts, companions, service workers, or providers. People who work as exotic dancers, web cam models, or BDSM professionals do sexual labor but may not have sexual contact as part of their job, and therefore might not identify with those who do. People who have been coerced or forced into the sex industry may not describe their experience as sex work or themselves as sex workers. However, some survivors of sexual exploitation do identify as sex workers and fight for labor rights as a solution to exploitation.

At times, we will use the term “**sex industry**” to describe the entire global economic sector of sexual commercial transactions. This term is intended to include all forms of transactional sex or sexual labor, which vary in formality and legality and from region to region, and to include the diverse array of people engaging in these services by choice, circumstance, or coercion.

## Is sex work work?

The sex worker movement holds a strong global consensus that sex work, when consensually carried out by adults, should be viewed through a labour framework, and advocates for the recognition of sex work as work. The Global Network of Sex Work Projects has helped to develop this consensus and [explains in this policy brief](#) how the struggle for recognition of sex work as work is integral to the safety and dignity of sex workers.<sup>7</sup> Sex work is an income-generating activity and supports families and communities, while contributing to the overall economy and not harming the planet. Some sex workers consider themselves care workers, providing an important service. Regardless, in most places on Earth, sex workers are excluded from labor protections, putting them at more risk of violence, discrimination, wage theft, and exploitation. Affirming that sex work is work opens the door to claiming a range of labor rights.

<sup>6</sup> Open Society Foundation, *Understanding Sex Work in an Open Society* (2019), available at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society>.

<sup>7</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, *Policy Brief: Sex Work as Work* (2017), available at [https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/policy\\_brief\\_sex\\_work\\_as\\_work\\_nswp\\_-\\_2017.pdf](https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/policy_brief_sex_work_as_work_nswp_-_2017.pdf).



### PROGRAM PROFILE

Trajche Janushev of Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN). SWAN is a regional network of 28 member organizations in 19 countries across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

SWAN advocates for the human rights of female, male, and transgender sex workers. It works toward the decriminalization of sex work and envisions a society where sex workers live free from violence, stigma, and discrimination. Guided by values of agency, inclusion, and intersectionality, SWAN empowers sex workers through capacity building, community mobilization, and advocacy at national, regional, and international levels.

Many global health and human rights organisations recognise sex work as work, including [Human Rights Watch](#),<sup>8</sup> [International Planned Parenthood Federation](#),<sup>9</sup> [Human Rights Campaign](#),<sup>10</sup> [Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women](#),<sup>11</sup> [CREA](#),<sup>12</sup> and the [ACLU](#).<sup>13</sup> Many UN Agencies also recognize sex work as work, including the [International Labor Organisation \(ILO\)](#),<sup>14</sup> the [World Health Organization](#),<sup>15</sup> and [UNAIDS](#).<sup>16</sup> [The Sex Work Donor Collaborative](#),<sup>17</sup> which includes 30+ global, regional, and local funders, affirms that sex work is work and sex workers should have access to their labour rights. That said, this toolkit is for all funders who are committed to do no harm, even those who don't share our stance on sex work as work.

### Is sex work a crime?

In many places, sex work is criminalized, as is same-sex sexual behavior, sex outside of marriage, and other behaviors seen as “deviant” by the dominant society or religion. However, some countries and states, such as New Zealand, some states in Australia, and Belgium, have decriminalized sex work as part of a public health approach to the issue. It is a core demand of sex worker movements worldwide to decriminalize the purchase, sale, and management of sex work in a way that allows the workers to earn a living and access other supportive rights-affirming services free from stigma and discrimination. Many international human rights organizations and UN agencies agree, including many of those listed above, as well as the [United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women](#)<sup>18</sup> and [Amnesty International](#).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Policy available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/07/why-sex-work-should-be-decriminalized>.

<sup>9</sup> Policy available at <https://www.ippf.org/resource/ippf-policy-sex-work>.

<sup>10</sup> Policy available at <https://www.hrc.org/blog/hrc-supports-important-washington-d.c.-decriminalization-legislation>.

<sup>11</sup> Policy available at <https://gaatw.org/about-us/basic-principles>.

<sup>12</sup> Policy available at <http://www.creaworld.org/who-we-are/cross-cutting-issues>.

<sup>13</sup> Policy available at <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbt-rights/sex-work-is-real-work-and-its-time-to-treat-it-that-way/>.

<sup>14</sup> Policy available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---ilo\\_aids/documents/genericdocument/wcms\\_185717.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/genericdocument/wcms_185717.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Policy available at [https://www.who.int/hiv/topics/sex\\_work/about/en/](https://www.who.int/hiv/topics/sex_work/about/en/).

<sup>16</sup> Policy available at [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2012/20120402\\_UNAIDS-guidance-note-HIV-sex-work](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2012/20120402_UNAIDS-guidance-note-HIV-sex-work).

<sup>17</sup> Policy available at <https://sexworkdonorcollaborative.org/mission>.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women, *Guidance document of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls: Eliminating discrimination against workers and securing their human rights* (2023), available at <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/tools-and-resources/guidance-document-working-group-discrimination-against-women-and>.

<sup>19</sup> Policy available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/amnesty-international-publishes-policy-and-research-on-protection-of-sex-workers-rights/>.

## Organizations That Recognize “Sex work is work.”



SEX  
~

## Is sex work human trafficking?

The terms “sex trafficking,” “human trafficking,” and “sex work,” are often conflated, but they are not the same thing. Transactional sex, like any work, can be coerced or free. All choices about work occur on a spectrum of agency when confronting the challenges of capitalism, poverty, and discrimination. But saying that all sex work is coerced or forced ignores the complex and varied realities of those in the sex industry, and makes it difficult for people who do experience violence

or exploitation to find the right support. This conflation leads to confusion for funders and policymakers alike, resulting in programs and initiatives that can cause harm.

In many regions, anti-trafficking policies mandate a criminal justice response without addressing the economic needs or human rights issues involved.

Human trafficking is defined in international law as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”<sup>20</sup> This kind of force, coercion, and exploitation can occur in almost any industry, and a majority of human trafficking cases occur outside the sex industry—in domestic work, agricultural work, mining, and manufacturing.<sup>21</sup>

Human trafficking does occur in the sex industry, especially where sex workers are marginalized and criminalized in ways that deprive them of power and protection. But in many places, the response to human trafficking in the sex industry has also been harmful. In many regions, anti-trafficking policies mandate a criminal justice response without addressing the economic needs or human rights issues involved.<sup>22</sup> In some countries, anti-trafficking policy has escalated incarceration and deportation of sex workers, without considering how consensual sex workers can be part of the solution to this problem.

<sup>20</sup> The U.N. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, available at <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>.

<sup>21</sup> See International Labor Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery* (2022), finding that commercial sexual exploitation represents 23 per cent of all forced labour. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/global-estimates-modern-slavery-forced-labour-and-forced-marriage>.

<sup>22</sup> See Special Issue—Fifteen Years of the UN Trafficking Protocol, Anti-Trafficking Review, Issue 4 (2015) available at <https://antitraffickingreview.org/index.php/atrjournal/issue/view/12>; Global Network of Sex Worker Projects, *Impact of Anti-Trafficking Legislation and Initiatives on Sex Workers*, p 11, available at [https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/impact\\_of\\_anti-trafficking\\_laws\\_pb\\_nswp\\_-\\_2018.pdf](https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/impact_of_anti-trafficking_laws_pb_nswp_-_2018.pdf).



### What about minors in the sex industry?

When a minor is enabled to engage in transactional sex, it also qualifies as a form of human trafficking and as one of the “worst forms of child labor” under current international law.<sup>23</sup> Children should have the right to live free from exploitation in the sex industry, just as they have the right to be free and protected from other forms of exploitative labor. When sex worker rights organizations advocate for a safer industry, this means an industry of consenting adults.

However, funding work around minors in the sex industry can still be complex. Different countries have different legal and cultural frameworks about when someone is considered a minor. Minors are also affected by poverty and discrimination, which can lead to transactional sex as one of few options for survival. While we do not consider minors able to legally consent to transactional sex, their agency, rights, and voice must be respected in determining what response is appropriate and what services would best serve their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Unfortunately, many legal systems criminalize minors or force them into punitive services or programs that distance them further from their rights.

As the SWDC, we support the sex worker movement’s call to see sex work as work and to decriminalize sex work. We also strongly reproach human trafficking and exploitation in the sex industry, including of minors. We believe a human and labour rights approach will work to end human trafficking and make the industry safer for those working consensually.

#### PROGRAM PROFILE

It all began with a question: What would happen if sex workers in Latin America joined their voices? In 2013, a group of comrades from Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico decided to find out. They met, shared their stories, and between anger and hope, they created a common space. A space where talking about rights was not a risk, but an act of dignity. That’s how PLAPERTS (Plataforma Latinoamericana de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual) was born. Today, PLAPERTS is the voice of thousands of sex workers in 12 Latin American countries. From political activism to leadership training, from denouncing violence to building strategic alliances with the health sector, academia, and feminist groups, they have shown that sex work is work and that their rights are not negotiable.

<sup>23</sup> International Labour Organization, *Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (1999, ratified 2020), available at [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_IL0\\_CODE:C182](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_IL0_CODE:C182).

## Reality Check: The Funding Landscape

Sex worker rights movements are found on every continent and in almost every country, and are becoming more visible and successful in many regions. There is a myth propagated by some anti-sex worker organizations that the movement for sex worker rights is well-funded (some have even called it “the pimp lobby”<sup>24</sup> to make a false equivalency between advocating for rights and exploitation). However, the successes and visibility of these movements should not be confused with being well-funded. In a recent scan of 101 sex worker-led organisations, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects found that 17% of these organisations receive no funding at all, and the remaining had only minimal funding for basic functions. Sex workers are fighting for their lives, and most sex worker activism, even at the highest levels, is unpaid or underpaid.

Getting a clear picture of the sex worker rights funding landscape is challenging, as we have noted in our prior reports.<sup>25</sup> However, all the data we have shows that funding to sex worker rights is stubbornly low, even compared to funding to other marginalized populations.

The Human Rights Funders Network found that, worldwide, human rights philanthropic funding to sex workers in 2020 totaled only 18 million USD. This was only 0.36% of overall human rights funding that year, by far the smallest amount of funding for any population.<sup>26</sup> Global Philanthropy Project releases bi-annual reports on global LGBTQ grantmaking. In its latest Global Resources Report, funding targeted to LGBTQI sex worker communities came in at only 2% of overall LGBTQI funding, and this funding is on the decline outside the U.S.<sup>27</sup>

Sex workers are fighting for their lives, and most sex worker activism, even at the highest levels, is unpaid or underpaid.

The largest source of funding for sex workers in low- and middle-income countries is for HIV

<sup>24</sup> Frankie Mullin, *In Full Sight: 'The pimp lobby' at the Amnesty AGM* (2017), Verso Books Blog, available at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3162-in-full-sight-the-pimp-lobby-at-the-amnesty-agm>.

<sup>25</sup> Beksan Jang, Erin Howe, Sex Work Donor Collaborative, *The Impact of Open Society Foundation's Funding Withdrawal on the Sex Worker Rights Movement, and Recommendations for a Path Forward* (2023), available at <https://sexworkdonorcollaborative.org/our-publications>.

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Funders Network, *Advancing Human Rights: The State of Global Foundation Grantmaking/Population: Sex Workers 2020* (2022), available at <https://humanrightsfunding.org/populations/sex-workers/>.

<sup>27</sup> Global Philanthropy Project, *Global Resources Report: Government & Philanthropic Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Communities (2021-2022)*, available at <https://globalresourcesreport.org/>.

prevention and treatment. Over the four years between 2019 and 2022, an estimated annual average of \$79.3 million was allocated towards the HIV needs of sex workers, mostly from two sources: the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) a U.S. aid program.<sup>28</sup> While life-saving, this funding is very restricted to specific services without allowing for advocacy to address root causes, build organizations, or pursue a full agenda of human rights defence. These sources, especially PEPFAR, are now at high risk as the U.S. government walks back all of its global commitments to public health under the Trump administration.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to receiving extremely low overall funding, when sex worker groups are funded, sex worker organizations tend to receive short-term and project-focused funds, which don't fund the organizational infrastructure critical for the movement's long-term development, growth, and core sustainability. This leads to the funder's priorities driving the organizational focus. When sex worker organizations receive general support, it tends to be from smaller public foundations, which can limit grant size and duration. Thus, fluctuations in funding that would be minor for other movements are devastating. For example, when the Open Society Foundation recently closed its Global Public Health Program, it affected nearly all sex worker organizations and networks across East and Southern Africa and Eastern Europe, forcing many to either downsize their programs or close their doors.<sup>30</sup>

This funding situation flies in the face of what many funders say they care about: justice for women, for Black and Brown communities, for LGBTQ communities, for people with disabilities, and for immigrants. Funding data research shows us that sex workers are the most intersectional population, meaning they are likely to face the multiple forms of oppression shared by these communities. Funding sex worker movements is a way of supporting all of these communities, and investing in the power and resistance of the most marginalized to define the solutions and ensure we can all share in social progress.



<sup>28</sup> AIDSfonds, *Dangerously Off Track: How Funding for the HIV Response is Leaving Key Populations Behind* (2025) p. 31, available at [https://aidsfonds.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Dangerously\\_off\\_track\\_EN\\_web.pdf](https://aidsfonds.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Dangerously_off_track_EN_web.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Jennifer Kates, *The Status of President Trump's Pause of Foreign Aid and Implications for PEPFAR and other Global Health Programs* (2025), available at <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/the-status-of-president-trumps-pause-of-foreign-aid-and-implications-for-pepfar-and-other-global-health-programs/>.

<sup>30</sup> Beksan Jang, Erin Howe, Sex Work Donor Collaborative, *The Impact of Open Society Foundation's Funding Withdrawal on the Sex Worker Rights Movement, and Recommendations for a Path Forward* (2023), available at <https://sexworkdonorcollaborative.org/our-publications>.

# On the Road: Steps to Ensure No Harm

We hope that these facts inspire you to consider funding sex worker movements. However, we recognize that funders start at many points on a spectrum on this issue. The next section will help you identify where you are on that spectrum, and what actions you can take from that point.

## Your stance

The first step to considering what you should do around funding and sex work is to consider your organizational stance on sex work. As a funder, it's likely that your stance will fall into one of these categories:



### Champion

Your organization supports and believes in the human rights of sex workers, including sex workers' right to self-determination in choosing sex work as an occupation and in labor rights and economic justice for sex workers.



### Allied

Your organization funds sex worker organizations to carry out their mission when it aligns with yours.



### Uncertain

Your organization has no stance, believes the issue isn't relevant to your mandate, or wants to learn more about the issue of sex work to inform a stance.



### Opposed

Your organization believes that sex work is not a legitimate form of labor or views all transactional sex as a form of exploitation or gender-based violence.

Depending on your stance, there are different concrete steps you can take to ensure that your funding practices do not harm people in the sex industry. As you move through these steps, your stance may change and evolve.

## Do no harm

The foundational commitment any funder can make is to do no harm. The Do No Harm principle originates in healthcare and bioethics. "First, do no harm," is taught to medical students, dating back to the origins of modern medicine. It calls upon those practicing medicine to consider the possible harm that any intervention might do, even before its benefits. "Do No Harm" has now been applied more widely to spark thinking about the ethics of many fields.

This principle animates much of current critical thought in and about philanthropy. Funders, like doctors, hold a lot of power and are assumed to be there to assist and do good. The “Do No Harm” principle comes in to ensure the funder pauses to consider the potential harms of their actions. For example, government and private funders have been cautioned to consider possible harms before scaling up certain HIV interventions.<sup>31</sup> Funders have been challenged to think about what harm is caused by their “cultural arrogance”<sup>32</sup> when they dictate solutions around reproductive healthcare. Funders have developed a growing literature of self-reflection<sup>33</sup> about behaviors and patterns that may cause harm, including reliance on small, overly projectized and highly monitored grants.

At the end of the day, philanthropy is not a field like medicine, where regulations and patients’ rights can hold practitioners accountable. Beyond general financial laws, funders are often only accountable to their own consciences. We encourage anyone working in philanthropy to strengthen that conscience and codify it by developing and adhering to core principles, such as Do No Harm, as a starting point. These principles can guide you when it’s time to make hard decisions.

### When funding harms sex workers

Some of the most vocal organizations that are working in women’s rights are proactively or inadvertently harming sex workers. Funders are supporting these organizations without always realizing the harm they’re doing.

The  
foundational  
commitment  
any funder  
can make  
is to do  
no harm.

### ANTI-SEX WORKER FEMINISTS

Some people and organisations view sex work as inherently exploitative and sex workers as either unacknowledged victims or as harm-doers, and by extension they view the sex worker rights movement as harmful. Sex Work Exclusionary Radical Feminism (SWERF) is a political framework that disavows sex workers’ agency. “SWERFs” believe that any person who has engaged with sex work and is advocating for its decriminalization speaks from a space of false consciousness. It is their belief that the damage done by sex work renders these advocates for sex work incapable of making rational decisions and their advocacy for sex worker rights is a marker of their damaged psyche—denying that sex workers have any agency in their decision-making. This framework highlights the many real abuses that sex workers face, but locates the harm in the “system of prostitution” rather than in discriminatory laws and social stigma, leading to a lack of support and impunity for those who abuse sex workers.

<sup>31</sup> Dawn Greensides, Kristina Bishop, Liz Manfredini, Vincent Wong, *Do No Harm: A Review of Social Harms Associated with HIV Partner Notification, Global Health Science and Practice* (2023), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10749648/>.

<sup>32</sup> Karen A Scott, Stephanie Bray, Monica R McLemore, *First, Do No Harm: Why Philanthropy Needs to Re-Examine Its Role in Reproductive Equity and Racial Justice, Health Equity* (2020), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7097698/>.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Moody, *Philanthropic Harm: How “Doing Good” Can Go Bad* (2022), available at <https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/types-of-philanthropic-harm-a-working-list/>.

We at the SWDC and the sex worker-led organizations we work with find this framework inherently paternalistic and protectionist. SWERFs and those who hold this view may actively work to ensure no sex workers who support sex worker rights are allowed to speak in front of decision-making bodies, or only certain viewpoints on sex work are represented. They may advocate against the use of the term “sex work.” They might vocally support the criminalisation of sex work purchasers/clients, a model known as the Swedish or Nordic Model—or more recently and inaccurately as the “Equality,” “Empowerment,” or “Sankara”<sup>34</sup> Model. This model can be appealing to those who think all sex workers are victims of exploitation and want to punish those they see as their exploiters. It has been widely promoted and adopted in many countries. However, this model has been proven to harm sex workers everywhere it has been enacted, leading to denial of housing and/or healthcare, stigma, discrimination, and violence.<sup>35</sup> Instead of leading to equality or empowerment, it has disempowered sex workers.

One way to ensure that you are not harming sex workers is to ensure that you are not funding organizations or leaders who make it their mission to advocate against the agency of sex workers, and for the abolishment of the sex industry no matter the collateral harm it causes.

A good question to ask is “does this intervention expand or reduce access to human rights and self-determination?”

### ANTI-TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

Many anti-trafficking organizations have developed holistic responses to trafficking that integrate protection of the rights of trafficking survivors and all workers, including sex workers. These organizations have adopted a rights-based approach that is inclusive of sex workers’ human rights.<sup>36</sup>

However, some anti-trafficking organizations have gained a reputation for disregarding the rights of sex workers. You may even encounter trafficking survivors who endorse this approach. People who have engaged in transactional sex are not a monolith—they have diverse experiences, values and viewpoints. It is important to not assume that a view held by one person is held by everyone who has engaged in the sex industry. Even interventions endorsed by people with lived experience of transactional sex or of trafficking may cause harm.

<sup>34</sup> In South Africa— this model is called the Sankara Model see Stand Against Legal Exploitation’s description here: <https://www.salesa.org.za/prostitution/models-of-prostitution>.

<sup>35</sup> See the extensive resources available through NSWP on the harms of this model in Sweden, available here: <https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-publications/advocacy-toolkit-the-real-impact-the-swedish-model-sex-workers>. Similar impacts have been tracked in France, Norway, Canada, and other countries where the model has been implemented, and thus NSWP and other sex worker organizations have organized against its introduction. See <https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-smart-guides/smart-sex-workers-guide-challenging-the-introduction-the-nordic-model>.

<sup>36</sup> The Freedom Network USA is a good resource for thinking on how to fight trafficking while respecting rights. See *Recentering Sex Worker Safety in Anti-Trafficking Work* (2023), available at <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2023/10/Recentering-Sex-Worker-Safety-in-Anti-Trafficking-Work.pdf>.

In making your own evaluation, a good question to ask is “does this intervention expand or reduce access to human rights and self-determination?” Interventions that are not rights-based may harm not only consensual sex workers but survivors of trafficking, too.

Interventions that are likely not rights-based include:

- Efforts to “rescue” people from the sex industry without asking those rescued if and how they want to be assisted, or offering additional income-generation activities that provide them with a similar level of income/resources. These efforts also often lead to the arrest of consensual adult workers and discount those arrests as necessary collateral damage.
- Initiatives that seek to “abolish” or eliminate the sex industry, including the adult film sector, completely.
- Programs that restrict the freedom of movement of people in the sex industry “for their own good” so that they do not make contact with others involved in the sex industry or do not re-engage in sex work. Such interventions can even include confiscation of passports.<sup>37</sup>
- Initiatives that are offered as alternatives to sex work without consulting the community as to whether they are needed, appropriate, or useful.
- Programs that are only offered as part of the criminal justice system or as an alternative to incarceration. Often such programs assume sex work is a problematic behavior that can be changed through behavioral counselling.
- Programs that further penalize or target clients of sex workers, including public awareness campaigns that seek to reinforce stigma associated with the sex industry. These efforts can place sex workers under increased economic stress, give them less power in sex work transactions, and force them to work in more dangerous, clandestine ways. They can make it harder for sex workers to access safe housing and stigma-free healthcare, and to stay safe from arrest.
- Conditioning assistance or services on a plan to “exit” or end their work as sex workers.
- Initiatives which center law enforcement and carceral punishment as the primary solution for addressing problems in the sex industry.

Other interventions may harm sex workers in more subtle, but just as painful ways, if the grantee or its staff hold prejudices that go against sex workers’ rights to bodily autonomy, integrity, and self-determination. Like anyone else, sex workers may seek access to supportive health, social protection, housing, or legal, educational, or healing services. When service providers express their disapproval of sex work or treat sex workers in a discriminatory way, it becomes hard for sex workers to access and utilize services or be truthful about their needs. Having to engage with those who are prejudiced against you based on your work, your choices, or your identity as a sex worker can be traumatic, alienating, and counterproductive. And yet many programs are staffed by people who hold those attitudes, whose work is motivated by a desire to stop sex workers from doing sex work, which they see as harmful to them and to society. This is the same type of thinking that allowed certain actors to say, ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin’ towards LGBTQAI+ people. Just as LGBTQAI+ communities deserve more respect, so do sex workers.

<sup>37</sup> Beatriz Hernández Pino, *Trabajadoras denuncian los métodos de APRAMP para sacar a mujeres de la trata* (2021), available at <https://www.pikaramagazine.com/2021/10/trabajadoras-denuncian-los-metodos-de-apramp-para-sacar-a-mujeres-de-la-trata/>.

## Community-based due diligence

The best way to learn if an organization is supporting or harming sex workers is to ask sex workers themselves. “Doing your homework” is an essential aspect to trust-based grantmaking, and that means learning as much as you can about the context within which you are funding. The issues and nuances around sex work are complex, and sex workers who have actually interacted with your grantees are best positioned to describe their attitudes, approaches, and impacts. For example, perhaps your grantee’s public position is adversarial to sex worker rights, but privately the staff they employ are friendly and skilled at working with sex workers, and provide needed, accessible services. This knowledge can frame the conversation you have with your grantee. Develop relationships of trust with sex workers or sex worker rights organizations in the region you fund, or bring on paid advisors and consultants from that community to ensure you are not using their time and expertise without giving back. In these efforts, also consider diverse identities and experiences within sex worker communities, such as those of transgender sex workers, migrant sex workers, male sex workers, and sex workers from various ethnic and racial backgrounds. Respect and value lived experiences in your hiring process, instead of making people with the most knowledge on the subject hide their background.

Finally, consider making community endorsements a part of your grant-making due diligence. Organizations should be able to provide powerful references from the people they serve or work with. A grant-maker must also be mindful that not all organizations will agree on strategy or tactics and, due to funding constraints and philanthropic control of resources, competition and funding scarcity exist. Doing your homework requires building trusting relationships, in order to assess the advice you are given.



### Language Tip-offs

Several funders have asked us for ways to identify whether a grantee holds discriminatory attitudes towards sex workers, or affiliates itself with an exclusionary position. While language is not determinative, if you see the grantee using certain language in their proposals or other communications, it’s a reason to ask more questions. **Organizations around the world may use the below language and still be supportive of sex workers.**

- › **Prostituted women or prostituted people**  
(in some cases, using prostitution instead of sex work can be a red flag)
- › **Survivors of prostitution**
- › **Pimp lobby**
- › **Using sexual exploitation and sex trafficking interchangeably with or to mean sex work**
- › **System of prostitution**
- › **Statements implying that all sex workers are women or girls, and all clients are men**
- › **Sex work referred to as violence against women and girls**
- › **End demand**  
(to refer to efforts to punish clients of sex workers)

*Caveat: language is extremely culturally and context-specific. The tip-offs below may be more relevant to organizations working in the Global North.*

The Sex Work Donor Collaborative and its members can be a resource in finding sex worker organizations that can offer their perspective.

## **How to talk to your grantees**

If you are concerned that some of your grantees may fit the description above, you are in a position to do some good and reduce harm to sex workers. Presumably, your grantees trust and listen to your ideas, and you listen to theirs. You can initiate a constructive conversation, learn where their positions come from, and potentially address the misinformation and prejudice that may be present.

We encourage funders to learn as much as they can about the grantees they fund and their programs, campaigns, and attitudes that may be affecting sex workers. We encourage you to share where you are in your learning journey and how your thinking is developing on sex worker rights. If you have a policy (see below), you can share it, but these conversations can also help you to develop one.

After these conversations, you may decide that a particular grantee is causing harm and is unwilling to change, and you need to discontinue funding. You may have a historically strong partner that is effective on a critical human rights issue (say abortion rights) but disapproves of the rights of sex workers. These disagreements can cause conflict within movements, breaking up coalitions of solidarity and undermining shared agendas of self-determination and bodily autonomy. In this instance, you can assist by ensuring your grantees adopt the “do no harm” principle. If they aren’t willing to support sex worker rights, they should at least abstain from speaking against sex worker rights.

Donors can also engage with grantees who are currently not supportive of sex worker rights about their potential to be better allies. It might be that some grantees are actually well positioned to be allies to sex workers, but are misinformed or not informed at all because they haven’t had the opportunity to engage with the issues or communities. When grantees are willing to learn and grow on this issue, you may suggest learning opportunities or partners they could seek out.

## **Rights-based alternatives for anti-trafficking funders**

Sex workers are disproportionately affected by violence and exploitation due to stigma, marginalization, criminalisation, and systematic discrimination. They are often seen as vulnerable and easy targets by perpetrators of violence and exploitation, especially in contexts where sex work is criminalized or heavily regulated, as this makes it harder to seek assistance. To reduce exploitation in the sex industry, we can approach it just like we do other high-risk sectors of work. For example, the fishing industry is rife with exploitation. Those working to reduce trafficking within the fishing industry are not seeking to abolish fishing, but to pass and implement laws that empower workers, hold exploiters accountable, and serve survivors. A rights-based approach to trafficking in the sex industry seeks the same: to make the industry safer within a labour rights framework that “lifts all boats,” including trafficking survivors and consensual sex workers.

This approach can include such interventions as:

- Sex workers and survivors working together to reduce stigma and increase public understanding of their spectrum of experiences.
- Survivor-led organizing efforts that include sex workers in research, convening, and movement-building efforts to prevent future violence and exploitation.
- Providing both survivors and sex workers with legal representation and rights education; following their lead in making the best decisions for how to address violence they have faced.
- Providing sex workers and survivors with access to voluntary and non-coercive healing modalities, such as therapy, counseling, peer counseling, medical care, alternative/traditional medical care, pastoral or spiritual care.
- Sex workers' and survivors' efforts to educate those seeking sexual services about how to be respectful and rights-affirming, and what to do when exploitation is suspected.
- Policy and practice reform to allow easier access to assistance and protection from the state or others, such as repealing laws that exclude sex workers from "victims of crime" compensation, or passing laws to provide immunity from prosecution to sex workers who report crimes, or laws to increase funding for rights-based services. For example, two prominent sex worker activists in Alaska started Communities United for Safety and Protection, and successfully advocated to pass a law granting sex workers and survivors immunity from prosecution when they come forward as a victim or witness of a violent crime.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Clara Miller, *Former sex workers seek protection for prostitutes* (2016), available at <https://www.juneauempire.com/news/former-sex-workers-seek-protection-for-prostitutes/>.



## Conversation Guide

Conversations about delicate topics must come from a place of trust and respect to be successful. The power dynamics between funders and grantees can get in the way of trust and honesty—and many funders and grantees avoid difficult conversations because of this. Having these conversations when a grant is not on the line is ideal, which means regular conversations, with one point person, throughout the year. It also means sharing your journey, missteps, and experiences that have led to you or your organization adopting your principles and values. **Here are some questions to ask in the context of a trusting relationship to determine where your grantee stands or how far along they are in their learning process:**

- › We have been thinking a lot at the foundation about people who engage in sex work (or the sex industry) and how our funding may touch them. How do these issues show up at your organization?
- › What language do you use to describe sex work, the sex industry, prostitution, etc., or people who do it?
- › Do you think your organization has a "position" around sex work (the sex industry)? Do all staff and board members share a position, or is there diversity of opinion?
- › In addition to our grant to you and our existing partners, we are interested in funding more in this area. Do you know any good organizations you would recommend?
- › We've been learning about different policy approaches to sex work. Have you ever engaged with any policy change efforts around the sex industry? Do you know of any coming up in your region that you might take a stand on?
- › Are you open to learning more about different perspectives around sex work?

- Self-organized sex workers taking control of sex work spaces such that they can investigate situations where sex workers are being abused or exploited and eject offenders from such spaces, or intervene when minors are found working in the industry.
- Sex workers and survivors building their own systems of safety and freedom. Systemic exclusion can reduce choice and mobility and keep sex workers tied to one profession. For example, in East India's Sonagachi district, sex workers were excluded from financial institutions, forcing them to rely on violent money-lenders. The sex worker collective, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, in West Bengal, responded in 1995 by setting up a bank, the Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society Limited. This has increased the financial freedom, mobility, and safety of everyone working in the sex industry.<sup>39</sup>

You can see from this list that we believe sex workers should be treated less as collateral damage or obstacles, and more as partners in the anti-trafficking response. Sex workers also want a safer sex industry and have essential information about how the industry operates. Good relationships with sex workers are important to conducting research about the conditions in the sector. Anti-trafficking organizations that are friendly and open to consensual sex workers may also increase their ability to locate and serve victims of abuse. The anti-trafficking cause will be better served if the interventions you fund enable both sex workers and survivors to prevent, escape from, and address violence in ways that affirm their agency and build their power.<sup>40</sup>

## Other rights-affirming work to fund

Even if your organization does not feel comfortable supporting sex worker movements to achieve goals like decriminalization of sex work, there is work you can fund that is supportive and not harmful, such as:

- Initiatives that identify and work towards “common ground” solutions that benefit all those in the sex industry, no matter how they identify. Common ground reforms include broadening record relief (so that those with prior sex work-related convictions are not discriminated against), implementing protections against discrimination (in housing, employment, education, etc.), or preventing law enforcement from having sexual contact with people they investigate or detain. These reforms make a tangible, positive difference in the everyday lives of people in the sex industry, whether they choose sex work or are coerced into it.
- Fund “upstream” solutions to expanding income-generating options and reducing poverty, such as housing-first, racial justice, migrants’ rights, LGBTQ+ rights, basic universal income, immigration reform, closing the wage gap for women, etc. When people can meet basic needs for themselves and their families, they have significantly increased agency in choosing work they enjoy and rejecting work that isn’t fulfilling or safe for them.

<sup>39</sup> Kritivas Mukherjee, *Sex workers’ bank builds dreams in India*, Reuters (2007), available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/sex-workers-bank-builds-dreams-in-india-idUSDEL139487/>.

<sup>40</sup> For more ideas on how to adopt a rights-based approach to anti-trafficking work and ensure that sex workers are not harmed, see *Freedom Network USA, Re-Centering Sex Worker Safety in Anti-Trafficking Work* (2023), available at <https://freedomnetworkusa.org/app/uploads/2023/10/Recentering-Sex-Worker-Safety-in-Anti-Trafficking-Work.pdf> and *Global Network of Sex Work Projects, Addressing Violence Against Sex Workers* (2012), available at <https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/DGP%20Violence.pdf>.

## A Journey for Women's Fund Asia



**Women's Fund Asia (WFA)'s approach to sex worker rights is the outcome of an organic, movement-led process of learning and growth.**

In 2010, when WFA (then South Asia Women's Fund) was approached by a funder to support anti-trafficking work in India, we held a consultation with anti-trafficking organisations, feminist groups, and sex worker rights organisations— where sex worker activists emphasised that the traditional rescue-rehabilitation-repatriation model of the anti-trafficking discourse could be violative of the rights to decision making, bodily autonomy, and labour. We also undertook an accompaniment programme with an anti-trafficking network in India. Through training and exchanges with sex worker and migrant worker rights organisations, this network was able to analyze their approaches from a human rights perspective and gained greater sensitivity.

Between 2012-14, we expanded our "Right to Safe and Secure Mobility" thematic focus to address the issue of "stigmatised labour," and increased grants to sex worker organisations. In 2013-14, consultations with our partners revealed that the use of the words "safe" and "secure" may be used to prohibit women's mobility and agency, following which we renamed the thematic area the "Right to Mobility."

In 2015-16, through thought partnerships with sex worker rights organisations and like-minded donors, we organised a donor consultation to highlight how funding for anti-trafficking interventions often infringes on the rights of the

most marginalised communities.

In 2016, as we expanded to Southeast Asia, we renamed the thematic area as "Movement and Labour", supporting interventions that amplify the voices and decisions of women, girls, trans and intersex people; support the bodily autonomy and rights of sex workers; challenge protectionist views about the right to move freely and safely; and engage in work of their choosing without stigma, violence and exploitation.

This journey enabled us to clearly articulate the distinction between trafficking and sex work, stating that "WFA recognises sex work as work, and trafficking as a violation of the broader rights to mobility, safe movement, and labour rights violations."<sup>1</sup> Now our eligibility criteria, due diligence processes, and a grants advisory committee that includes sex worker activists ensures that we do not support groups that use raid and rescue strategies or are anti-sex worker rights and prioritise applications where sex workers are represented in the leadership of groups that seek to work on sex workers' rights. We also support partnership and exchange between diverse groups, including trafficking survivors, women workers, and sex worker-led organisations – so that sex workers' voices are not excluded in anti-trafficking or workers' rights advocacy.



<sup>1</sup> Women's Fund Asia, Movement and Labour, available at <https://www.womensfundasia.org/index.php?r=whatWeDo/ssafmMovementAndLabour>

## Sex Worker Inclusion in Funding Practices

We hope that your learning journey inspires you to not only decrease or prevent harm to sex workers, but to outright fund their movements! When you do, we hope you continue to take a rights-based approach in what you fund and how you fund.

### Developing a position

A sensitive and principled position on sex worker rights is a useful tool for engaging grantees, your board, or your staff, and guiding decision-making into the future. We encourage donors to be explicit and public about their position and thinking behind supporting sex workers' rights, including with their grantee partners. It can also be an exercise that builds broader alignment across your organization and situates your position on sex worker rights within your mission, values, and vision as an organization. Consider hiring sex workers as consultants to ensure their perspective is represented in developing this position or policy, and to deepen knowledge and connection to the issue among your staff.



If your organization is not there yet, developing a “do no harm” institutional policy may be a first step towards developing a position on sex work. Such a policy could be broad and also apply to others, such as those stigmatized or criminalized because of their race, sexuality, disability, immigration, or HIV status.

Be clear about how your position will be implemented. For example, will you use it to review your grantmaking or apply it to future grantmaking decisions? Will you examine your communications and platforms through this new lens?



# Defining Sex Worker Rights Funding

**In 2019, the Sex Work Donor Collaborative drafted this document to explain what we mean by sex worker rights funding, which we offer here as the potential basis of a strong sex worker rights affirming policy for a foundation.**

**Sex worker rights funding promotes work that affirms the below values, activities, and rights:**



## VALUES

**The following values are reflected in sex work-focused funding from a rights-based approach:**

1. We recognize the agency of sex workers in developing strategies that best address their human rights and social justice concerns, and seek to support those strategies through our funding.
2. We recognize that sex work is work and that sex workers are entitled to the same rights as other workers, including the right to self-organize.
3. We fund programs/initiatives that are led by current and former sex workers and create infrastructure to support their politically progressive leadership.
4. In contexts where feminist or other allies are creating vital space for sex worker rights organizing, we fund organizations that support the emergence and strengthening of sex worker leadership and ensure the meaningful input and inclusion of sex workers in setting the priorities regarding content, design, implementation, and evaluation of the programs/initiatives.
5. We seek to fund programs/initiatives that are led by or prioritize the needs of sex workers who are most impacted by oppression on the basis of race, ethnicity, caste, gender, gender identity, sexuality, national origin, age, nationality, migration status, disability, HIV status, criminalization history, and other identities.
6. We oppose the criminalization of, and all other forms of stigma and discrimination against, sex work and sex workers and other communities impacted by oppression. We fund programs/initiatives that address and reduce the harms of criminalization, stigma, and discrimination.
7. We commit to funding processes that are transparent and grounded in sex worker activists' priorities.
8. We commit to support advocacy for rights-based policies, laws, and practices that are based on evidence of what works, as analyzed from sex workers' perspectives.
9. We oppose all forms of exploitation of and violence against sex workers, and recognize the distinction between sex work and human trafficking.



## ACTIVITIES

**We support the above values through funding, and advocating for others to fund, sex worker rights and sex worker organizing that fosters systemic change through a range of activities, including, but not limited to:**

Political education and community organizing for sex workers to analyze and articulate their needs, concerns, and solutions.

Public education, including anti-stigma work both within the community and with other external duty bearers and allies. This enables a structural and interpersonal analysis for how violence and shame are internalized and constrain access to community and rights.

Legal and rights-focused education, outreach, and services to sex workers, including work to address the harmful impacts of the criminal legal system, and to defend and affirm the human rights of sex workers.

Building alliances between sex worker rights and other social justice movements to create mutually reinforcing and shared political vision and action of this broader base to enact a more holistic vision of justice.

Documentation, monitoring, research, and fact-finding reporting to expose violence and discrimination against sex workers, as well as evidence that builds the credibility of solutions proposed by sex workers and their allies.

Services and approaches that promote harm reduction, healing, justice, and safety planning that meet sex workers and activists where they are and contribute to their increased resilience and success while doing no harm.



## RIGHTS

**Sex worker rights funding supports activities that affirm the below list of rights, particularly from within an intersectional social justice lens.**

We reaffirm that sex worker rights are human rights, with no exceptions, and our work will strengthen the recognition of rights of sex workers as core human rights, regardless of the present-day inclusion in existing legal frameworks.

The below list identifies key human rights elements that enjoy both legal recognition and broad consensus, while other rights listed below that have been identified as important by sex worker activists are still contested and not part of the legal framework recognized by duty bearers.

The Sex Worker Donor Collaborative is highlighting this list, as each right is of particular concern to sex workers and their allies. We understand and affirm that this is a subset of the comprehensive list enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that these rights are universal and indivisible.

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Economic and Labor Rights</b></li><li>• <b>Right to work</b></li><li>• <b>Right to fair and safe conditions of work</b></li><li>• <b>Right to self-organize and unionize</b></li><li>• <b>Right to labor self-determination (including the rights to choose where, how, with whom, and what kinds of work one does)</b></li><li>• <b>Right to Bodily Self-Determination</b></li><li>• <b>Freedom from trafficking and coercion</b></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Freedom from discrimination and violence, including discrimination and violence on the basis of sex work involvement, as well as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexuality, national origin, age, nationality, migration status, disability, HIV status, criminalization history, and other identities</b></li><li>• <b>Freedom from sexual violence</b></li><li>• <b>Freedom of sexual expression, activity, and orientation</b></li><li>• <b>Right to reproductive health</b></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Freedom of gender expression and identity</b></li><li>• <b>Right to health and well-being</b></li><li>• <b>Right to privacy and confidentiality</b></li><li>• <b>Expression and Information Rights</b></li><li>• <b>Freedom of assembly</b></li><li>• <b>Freedom to share information</b></li><li>• <b>Rights to Migration</b></li><li>• <b>Freedom of movement and the ability to change where one lives and works</b></li></ul> |
|---|--|--|

Organizing and tiered advocacy that is grounded in grassroots realities and lived experiences of sex workers, including labor organizing which addresses oppressive labor practices within sex work.

Security measures in situations of urgent and unexpected threats against sex worker rights activists and particularly timely and strategic advocacy opportunities in response to urgent and unexpected shifts.

Legislative and policy advocacy that holds to account those who violate sex worker rights and proactively creates an enabling and empowering environment for sex workers to seek rights and services.

Work that seeks to transform cultures and social structures to affirm sex worker rights, safety, and self-determination, and embed this struggle in the broader movements for rights and justice.

Cultural work, including using the arts, media, and technology to promote sex worker rights, safety, and self-determination.

Leadership development, capacity building, and technical assistance programs to support the above work, particularly those programs which provide infrastructure for sex worker leadership.

## Trust-based funding

Social movement leaders are clear that what is needed for movements to thrive is funding that is based on trust and places agency in the hands of the grantee. This is also true of sex worker movements.

Not only do funders need to trust grantees, but grantees need to trust funders. The latter may be more important, as it enables grantees to communicate with funders and tell them what is needed and what is happening, so that funders can tailor their strategies. Trust is mutual and can be deepened by funder behavior. According to the trust-based philanthropy model, multi-year, flexible, general operating support grants are necessary as a first step in building the trust in funders.

Multi-year general operating support grants allow organizations to focus on their missions and not have to contort their work into projects that may not be the organization's priority. This type of

## A Journey for Global Fund for Women

**Global Fund for Women is a global feminist fund that has supported movements for gender justice since 1987. Starting in 2018, at the behest of GFW staff in the Sexual and Reproductive Justice program, the foundation decided to be more intentional about how it was supporting sex workers. It took the following actions:**



- › Joined the Sex Work Donor Collaborative (SWDC) to learn and build community with other donors.
- › Hired Ankit Gupta, a queer feminist and sex worker activist passionate about sexual and reproductive health and rights, as a program officer to lead the work.
- › Audited its funding history on the issue, finding two decades of support for sex worker rights, but also a few past grantees who conducted harmful activities like police brothel raids.
- › Coordinated with the Red Umbrella Fund – the first and only global fund by and for sex workers.
- › Committed to exploring funding sex worker-led groups across a spectrum of portfolios – not just sexual and reproductive justice.
- › Released an internal position paper to help the institution get on the same page about sex work and form consensus around a common agenda. This guide states that sex workers, like all other workers, should be able to exercise their individual power. This includes sex workers being able to negotiate safely with clients, form unions, and organise for just treatment.
- › Made a commitment to move more money, resources, and decision-making power to sex worker movements in its Strategic Plan.
- › Organised internal learning sessions with staff and grantee partners on sex workers' rights, the history of sex worker movements, and its role as feminist funders.
- › Designated sex workers as a priority population under its Sexual and Reproductive Justice thematic portfolio – because a dedicated portfolio allows for better tracking of funding and “what’s measured gets done”.
- › In 2022, GFW published an article detailing its journey on sex worker rights in Alliance Magazine, “in the hopes that it might spark action among fellow funders.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more details, please see Ankit Gupta & Erin Williams, *To fuel gender justice, donors must support, not shame, sex workers*, Alliance Magazine (2022), available at <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/to-fuel-gender-justice-donors-must-support-not-shame-sex-workers/>.

funding should always be the default. Occasionally, a group may want a restricted project grant to guarantee income for a certain strategy priority under their organizational umbrella, and in that case, it would make sense to follow their lead.

Change takes time. Many social changes regarding norms, culture, and narratives take generations to occur. Multi-year grants allow grantees to adequately plan for the future and not spend a large proportion of their time on fundraising. This allows grantees to pursue the most robust short-term and medium-term outcomes for the communities that they serve.<sup>41</sup>

## Absorption and redefining risk

Conventional and conservative thinking about risk is a barrier to trust. When philanthropy determines that a grantee or a movement is “risky,” it typically means that they are concerned about their capacity to deliver on their plans or manage their finances appropriately. This impression is more likely to occur for small organizations and can lead to the funder not making a grant or making a very restricted or small grant. Too often, funders believe small grassroots organizations do not have the capacity to absorb and effectively use large or even medium-sized grants. However, research such as *Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements*, from Shake the Table & Bridgespan Group, shows that grassroots organizations and feminist funds working on the ground can effectively absorb 10 times their current funding. The same is true of sex worker movements. Many sex worker-led organizations are on a shoestring budget– not because of a lack of effectiveness, but because they and their issues have been marginalized for far too long. They may rely heavily on volunteers and the unpaid labor of staff to carry out expansive programs, so their budget is not necessarily an indicator of their impact or size. Investing in these organizations, even with grants that exceed their current budgets, can be smart and visionary grant-making. Larger and less restrictive grants can actually reduce risk by enabling organizations to pay and retain talented staff and build the infrastructure needed to sustain growing work, such as communications, operations, financial management, and learning and impact. Instead of looking just at budget size or bank accounts, funders should look at whether the organization is rooted in community, has been endorsed by movement actors, and has an existing infrastructure that can be supported. Donors should provide financial support to smaller and newer grassroots organizations, recognizing their potential to bring fresh perspectives, innovation, and grassroots connections to the forefront.

## Support beyond the check

A valuable aspect of trust-based funding is providing ‘support beyond the grant’ to prospective grantees so that they can succeed, both in the application process and in their work at large. Sex worker organizations have been underfunded for decades, so many have not had the opportunity to develop many of the skills, policies, and capacities that could be useful for them within both formal organizations and collectives. Consider investing not only with funding but with your time, advice, and partnership in their development. Many of our members offer specific “capacity building” or “accompaniment” support to share skills in fundraising, communications, management, impact and

<sup>41</sup> Additional resources on this approach are available from Trust-Based Philanthropy here: <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/practices>.

<sup>42</sup> For more details, please see Ankit Gupta & Erin Williams, *To fuel gender justice, donors must support, not shame, sex workers*, Alliance Magazine (2022), available at <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/to-fuel-gender-justice-donors-must-support-not-shame-sex-workers/>.

evaluation, and board development. Some also provide consultants to take on projects that will support the organization's core work. These offerings should be paired with general operating support so that the organization has the sustainable funding to actually implement changes and new systems.

### **Welcoming sex workers**

We have spoken to many funders who say, "We do not exclude sex worker organizations from funding, but they don't apply!" If your proposal requirements are not accessible and/or if sex workers don't feel they belong, they won't engage. It takes intentional outreach, proposal development support, and clear messages of welcome<sup>43</sup> for sex workers to learn about your funding opportunity and believe that their proposals may be funded.

Outreach includes developing your knowledge of the landscape of trusted sex worker organizations and sex worker rights-friendly organizations in the region where you fund. The SWDC can be a resource as our 30+ peer funders have grantees to recommend, as can the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, which boasts 300+ member organizations around the world. Clear messages of welcome include statements on your website and other materials that sex workers are one of the populations you want to fund, and explain how they fit into your strategy. You can also include sex workers' rights as an issue, strategy, or population in your proposal form.

Local sex worker organizations are often grassroots, unfunded, and under-developed. They may be inexperienced in writing long grant proposals to fit a foundation's requirements. Do what you can to lessen the burden on grant seekers in general, by offering the process in multiple languages, being open to receiving informal letters of inquiry, funding unregistered organizations, providing support with budget development, offering introductory webinars for organizations learning about the opportunity, and using peer-based community due diligence.

### **Intermediary and collaborative funders**

While we highly encourage any and all funders to directly make grants to sex worker organizations, many of the above suggestions on how to fund simply are not realistic for some funders. Some foundations have little staff to manage participatory processes or capacity-building programs, and may have boards of directors who are unwilling to get behind a sex worker focus or program area. In these cases, there are other solutions if there is a will to give grants to this movement. For example, trusted intermediaries such as the [Red Umbrella Fund](#) (the only global, sex worker-led fund) can receive and redistribute funds. There are also many other public foundations and women's, feminist, and activist-led funds, and funder intermediaries who may have the infrastructure to do excellent grantmaking in this area, but need to hear from their own funders that resourcing sex workers is a priority.

**It takes clear messages of welcome for sex workers to believe that their proposals may be funded.**

<sup>43</sup> With thanks to Global Philanthropy Project, who shared this approach with relation to the trans community in their internal resource "Tools for Trans-Inclusive Philanthropy" (2022).



## Do No Harm to Inclusion Cheat Sheet

Whether your foundation endorses sex worker rights or believes all sex work is harmful, there are practical steps you can take to ensure your practices do not harm marginalized people. **Check out these suggestions for funders with different stances.**

### WE ARE OPPOSED TO SEX WORK.

- + Fund common-ground solutions that benefit all those in the sex industry, such as expanding criminal record relief and other protections against discrimination.
- + Fund rights-based approaches to human trafficking and violence.
- + Fund upstream solutions to expanding income-generating options and reducing poverty.
- + Vet your prospective and current grantees to see if they are harming or discriminating against those in the sex industry.

### WE ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT SEX WORK.

- + Learn from sex workers! Sit down with sex worker organizations, or bring on sex workers as consultants to assist you in expanding your knowledge.
- + Vet your prospective and current grantees to see if they are harming or discriminating against sex workers—engage them in conversation.
- + Learn more about how sex work is related to your mandate and the issues you fund, and how the communities you target likely include sex workers.

### WE SUPPORT SEX WORKER RIGHTS.

- + Develop a public position or policy on funding sex worker rights.
- + Ensure sex worker organizations see you as a prospective funder by engaging in intentional outreach and naming sex workers' rights as an issue you want to fund in your public communications.
- + Hire sex workers as consultants and/or staff to ensure you have their perspectives integrated.
- + Include sex workers in your grantmaking review process (and compensate them).
- + Write a sex worker focus or portfolio into your strategic plan and budget.
- + Move from restrictive project grants to trust-based philanthropy, funding sex worker organizations to work on their own priorities and organizational growth.
- + Fund at all levels (or ensure your funding gets to all levels) of the movement.
- + Share your learnings candidly with other funders and join the SWDC.



## Conclusion

As we were finishing this toolkit, the U.S. government was in the early days of President Trump's second term, which brought the attempted shut-down and defunding of USAID, PEPFAR and every other domestic and global commitment to public health, LGBTQ rights, and racial justice. The impact on sex workers was severe and immediate. PEPFAR provides 32% of the global resources available for sex worker-specific HIV services,<sup>44</sup> to say nothing of the many sex workers who access the other services funded by this \$8 billion program. This blow was just the latest in a series of funding crises for sex workers, including the closure of Open Society Foundation's Public Health Program and a new right-leaning Dutch coalition government's announced plans to cut Dutch foreign assistance by two-thirds by 2027 (the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been a leader on sex worker funding).<sup>45</sup>

Clearly this moment encompasses more than sex workers, as growing authoritarianism around the world shakes the foundations of every human rights movement. Many funders will drift to the center, out of fear of becoming targets themselves, and leave marginalized communities out in the cold. But this is actually the time to do the opposite. We have never had more in common across the Global North and South, across identities and issues. Not only do we need to stand by marginalized communities, including sex workers, we need their leadership to survive this era with any of our human rights intact. And we need to have the difficult, but ultimately liberating, conversations that allow us to support them, or at least, to do them no harm.

<sup>44</sup> AIDSfonds, *Dangerously Off Track: How Funding for the HIV Response is Leaving Key Populations Behind* (2025), available at <https://aidsfonds.org/resource/dangerously-off-track/>.

<sup>45</sup> Government of the Netherlands, *First development budget cuts announced: overhaul of grants for NGOs* (2024), available at <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/11/11/first-development-budget-cuts-announced-overhaul-of-grants-for-ngos>.

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# SWDC

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We envision a world in which sex workers' rights movements are fully resourced,  
in which sex workers have a strong voice in the decisions that impact their lives,  
and in which sex workers' rights and other movements are in solidarity  
to create a more just world. [sexworkdonorcollaborative.org](http://sexworkdonorcollaborative.org)

