



SEX WORKERS TRANSFORMING ECONOMIC POWER TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

POST 2012 AWID INTERNATIONAL
FORUM INNOVATION SEED GRANTS

Sex Workers Transforming Economic Power to Advance Women's Rights and Justice. Post 2012 AWID International Forum Innovation Seed Grants

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international feminist, membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID's mission is to strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women's rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women.

For more information on AWID: www.awid.org

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INTRODUCTION

This report shares highlights and insights from the four recipients of AWID’s “**Innovation Seed Grants**” whose projects focused on advancing the rights of sex workers. These projects reflect the culmination of a process of engagement and collaboration between AWID and diverse sex worker groups and coalitions around our **2012 International Forum** on Women’s Rights and Development.

Organized around the theme of *Transforming Economic Power to Advance Women’s Rights and Justice*, the 2012 Forum sought to help participants gain a stronger understanding around economic issues; re-energize participants, especially with regard to their engagement in economic debates; link and connect diverse women’s rights advocates, movements and allies; and contribute to forward-looking proposals for transforming economic power. Linked to this last objective, AWID mobilized resources for “Innovation Seed Grants” to support Forum participants to convert some of the creative ideas, solutions, and connections sparked at the Forum into reality. Following the 2012 Forum, AWID was able to award a total of twenty-four USD 5,000 seed grants.



SEX WORKERS AT THE 2012 AWID FORUM

Considering the theme of *Transforming Economic Power to Advance Women’s Rights and Justice*, AWID was particularly interested in ensuring strong, meaningful engagement by sex workers in the 2012 Forum. The on-going financial crisis and economic recession in many parts of the world as well as long-lasting results of structural adjustment policies have had negative impacts on women, including increasing inequalities, unemployment and migration. Women are faced with ever narrowing opportunities to secure economic livelihoods. Sex workers of all genders find themselves particularly challenged by daily realities of stigma, criminalization and exclusion. Many have limited knowledge of human rights frameworks, or limited identification of themselves as subjects of rights. At the same time, the sex worker movement has been engaged in incredibly exciting and powerful organizing in recent years to secure recognition of their rights and it was important to AWID to feature these experiences prominently within the Forum. Recognizing that some women’s rights spaces have excluded sex workers or not featured their voices, we felt it important

that the Forum ensure recognition and visibility of sex worker voices, proposals and realities and tackle head on some of the divisions within our movements that have prevented stronger solidarity and collaboration.

To this end, AWID felt it was important to go beyond just supporting sex worker presence at the 2012 Forum and to support the meaningful involvement of sex workers organizations and networks in both the preparatory process and the AWID 2012 Forum itself, profiling sex worker rights within the larger debate on transforming economic power and justice. To do this, AWID embarked on a substantive preparatory process in collaboration with the [Global Network of Sex Work Projects](#) (NSWP) and the [Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers](#) (APNSW) that included:

- Identifying 23 sex workers from 15 countries to receive support from AWID's Access Fund, covering travel costs to attend the Forum.
- Consideration of the comfort and security of sex worker participants, e.g. careful selection of roommates for Access Fund recipients placed in double rooms, pre-arrangements with hotels to prevent harassment (and even then challenges were faced).
- Supporting preparation of a [briefing paper](#) by the Center for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalisation (CASAM). The paper covered each of the Forum sub-themes and discussed their relevance for sex workers.
- APNSW and NSWP co-organized a one-day Pre-Forum meeting of over 40 sex workers from diverse regions to help orient them to the Forum space and discuss the Forum themes. Part of the strategy developed during the pre-meeting was to convene collective debriefs at the end of each day, as well as a solidarity strategy for Kaythi Win's plenary speech, to support her in raising awareness of sex worker issues.
- Ensuring visibility of sex worker organizing through a dedicated 'Sex Worker Area' with a multi-media exhibition, advocacy videos and artwork used in various campaigns advocating for the rights of sex workers. In addition, post-Forum coverage by mainstream and alternative

media as well as bloggers signaled that the event indeed raised the profile and understanding of sex workers' rights as they relate to economic power.

- Ensuring inclusion of sex workers in the Forum program, including four breakout sessions either organized by or including presentations from sex workers. In addition, Kaythi Win, Chairperson of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), Myanmar spoke during the Forum plenary on day 3 of the Forum. Win brought a majority of the audience to their feet to join her in declaring "sex work is work".

As a result of these activities, Forum attendees were able to deepen relationships and build knowledge toward increased capacity of working together to advance sex worker rights. APNSW and NSWP reported that, *'the forum created a space to help weave sex work into complex issues and we found a space for ourselves.'* In the forum evaluation 80% of responding sex workers reported that they felt greater solidarity for the issues or struggle that they focus on. A sex worker activist affirmed this saying, "Sex workers' issues got a new place at the Forum and lots of exposure during and after... which will help with my work as a sex worker activist." AWID heard from many Forum participants who found the engagement with sex workers at the Forum an important contribution to their Forum experience and others who were still challenged to accept sex work as work. Nevertheless, during elections for AWID's International Board of Directors in 2012, sex worker activist (and plenary speaker) Kaythi Win was elected by the AWID membership. Representatives of the Aids Myanmar Association National Network of Sex Work Projects said that for them, Win's election *"signaled a turning point in the relationship between sex workers and the broader feminist movement."*

Following the Forum, AWID launched the Innovation Seed Grant application process. Considering the significant and on-going challenges faced by women's rights organizations in accessing resources for their work¹, we feel these seed grants are a particularly

¹ See AWID's recent report, [Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots](#).

important strategy, especially for historically discriminated and excluded groups, such as sex workers, to access funding to make their ideas a reality. Open Society Foundations' Sexual Health and Rights Project provided funding for the four grants focused on sex worker organizing. The selection process for all seed grants was led by an advisory committee made up of members of the Forum International Planning Committee and AWID staff, using basic criteria (link to Forum theme, viable in budget and method, originality and creativity), as well as consideration of regional distribution.

As the projects here, and the other 19 seed grantees show, even small seed grants provide an important power of access to resources that can be leveraged for significant impact. This experience illustrates the importance of ensuring that women's rights organizations working at all different levels, and including sex workers and other commonly excluded groups, are well-resourced if substantive progress is to be made in advancing women's empowerment and rights.

Significant controversy remains among diverse actors in feminist and women's rights movements on the legitimacy of women engaging in sex work, because this engagement is viewed as the culmination of patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. AWID has and will continue to support work to end sexual exploitation and violence against women, including trafficking. We also believe that it is vital to recognize the human rights of sex workers and stand in solidarity with them in their struggles and organizing processes. AWID considers sex workers as key actors in the effort to eliminate all forms of violence against women, including trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Our experience of engagement and collaboration with diverse sex worker groups and coalitions for the 2012 Forum was an enormously valuable learning experience for AWID and one that we look forward to building on for the upcoming 2016 Forum and throughout our work.

HOW THE SEX WORKERS LEADING THESE PROJECTS ARE TRANSFORMING ECONOMIC POWER



Following are the stories of the seed grant experiences of the Association of Hungarian Sex Workers (SZEXE), Red Umbrella Project (RedUP), Debolina Dutta in collaboration with sex worker collectives DMSC and VAMP, and Aids Myanmar Association National Network of Sex Work Projects (AMA). The four offer rich insights into how sex workers are transforming economic power to advance women's rights and justice. They also offer useful lessons for funders seeking to support sex worker organizing as well as lessons for collaborative organizing and engagement between sex workers and other women's rights and feminist activists.

- All of the work reflected here was either directly **led by sex workers or involved their close engagement in shaping the focus and priorities of the work.** "Nothing about us, without us" has been a theme throughout this process and the relevance of that organizing principle is amply illustrated here. The sex worker project organizers and participants were able to craft and adapt the projects as needed to respond to contextual realities, challenges faced along the way, and shifting needs and priorities. RedUP realized from participant feedback that writing workshops were not as empowering as they had intended given literacy constraints and adapted their method accordingly. They also realized they needed to offer low barrier 'drop in' sessions, for sex workers who couldn't make the commitment to a more intensive process. Debolina Dutta heard from the sex workers she was in conversation with that they were reluctant to participate in a video and so the result is an illustrated text. SZEXE encountered

varying comfort levels with public speaking and adapted their training accordingly, providing individual media training for those interested. **Putting project “beneficiaries” in the drivers seat means ensuring that they have the flexibility to make the adjustments needed to effectively advance their work.**

- These projects contain an important lesson that we know to be true from decades of women’s rights organizing: **legal change is a crucial, but insufficient step on its own.** SZEXE and AMA both had important policy objectives and impacts – such as AMA’s successful advocacy with the government, UN and donors to stop the policy of condoms being used as evidence of sex work in Myanmar. However, in addition to the substance of the law or policies, there was also attention to **changing the institutions that mediate sex workers’ ability to access and enjoy their rights.** For example, AMA was working with banks and bank staff to ensure appropriate attention to sex workers seeking to open bank accounts. They also supported sex workers to exercise their own political agency in providing feedback on donor or governmental policies and practices that would be impacting them. SZEXE sought to expand sex worker access to legal aid and social counseling by expanding their online presence. But the third, and perhaps in some ways most important dimension of change was at a cultural level: both **how sex workers view themselves and how they are seen and treated by the broader public.** RedUP offers a compelling experience of working with sex workers to ‘name’ and validate their experiences through storytelling. RedUP invested in a process of personal transformation through storytelling, with a long term view of mobilizing participating sex workers for social change. In turn, the public attention that the RedUP project has achieved is a crucial step forward in influencing attitudes and behaviors on sex work and sex workers. SZEXE and AMA both speak to the importance of sex workers being able to recognize themselves as

subjects of rights—in the case of SZEXE through learning about the human rights framework, and in the case of AMA, through helping sex workers claim basic rights to open a bank account and secure national ID cards.

- The projects by RedUP and Debolina Dutta both emphasize the **transformative potential and power of storytelling**—affirming the value of the teller’s experience and encouraging a shift to think of oneself as a proactive subject with agency rather than a passive object to which things happen. As RedUP describes, their experience has been an “affirmation that personal storytelling is **key to resilience and resistance.**” At the same time, an important lesson that RedUP shares from their experience is the reality of the gap between personal transformation **and the link to social action and transformation.** Too often, timelines for change (especially when it comes to how resources are used) are extremely short – often on a one-year grant cycle. We must take this insight to heart and remember the tremendous value of the very slow process of personal change, allowing that the path to social action is not a linear one, and will have many bumps and setbacks along the way.
- All of the projects speak to **transforming economic power through collective action** and relationships: the power of coming together, **overcoming isolation**, and amplifying voices of sex workers and their organizations. At the heart of Debolina Dutta’s project is a powerful insight that “collectivization and community building” in work *is* a needed and important dimension of transforming economic power. For the sex workers participating in the training by SZEXE, it was a rare opportunity for them to come together outside of a virtual space and collectively explore solutions to challenges they face. Many participants in the AMA project were motivated to volunteer for that organization so that they could continue the process of community-building and advocacy. And participants in the RedUP project have clearly found value in the space to connect

with each other and build confidence over time through sharing their stories.

- Access to resources and **economic empowerment** was an important consideration in AMA's project, which expanded sex worker's economic power by supporting them to **open bank accounts to hold savings** that could be used in times of crisis, thereby helping the sex workers avoid putting themselves in risky situations when they needed money in an emergency.
- Three of the groups used the small seed funding of USD 5000 to **leverage additional resources**. For AMA even just receiving the seed grant was transformative in that it was their first external funding. They later secured additional funder commitments. RedUP describes using the seed funding to consolidate their methodology, which could then be repackaged and scaled up to reach more participants and access larger funding opportunities.

Similarly, SZEXE built on this experience to package next stages of work and secure additional funding. In this sense, even these relatively limited initial seed funds could contribute expanding broader access to resources.

Building on their experience at the 2012 AWID Forum, these groups found creative ways to advance sex worker rights and transform economic power. We hope their stories and insights contribute to inform and inspire other activists and funders seeking to support sex worker organizing. At the same time, we hope AWID's experience and lessons can benefit other women's rights and feminist organizations committed to stronger inclusion and engagement with sex worker activists. AWID is committed to continuing to strengthen our own practice in this regard and to support increased visibility of and solidarity with sex workers around the globe.



SUMMARY OF THE FOUR SEED GRANT INITIATIVES

1. Sex worker rights are human rights (Hungary)²

The Association of Hungarian Sex Workers (SZEXE) sought to mobilize and train Hungarian sex workers to have a strong voice to demand positive changes for better safety and wellness for sex workers. SZEXE started with recruitment and awareness raising, directly contacting over 40 sex workers through outreach on the street and at indoor locations, as well as through speaking with sex workers who used SZEXE's legal aid service.

Three one-day training sessions were held with 10 sex workers, facilitated by an experienced trainer with knowledge of both the region and the capacities of local activists. Participants in the sessions were either

former or practicing sex workers, all women, with representation from the LGBTQI and Roma communities. The focus of the training included:

1. The human rights context of sex work in Hungary;
2. Tools and resources for sex workers to understand and advocate for their human rights (including the structure and mechanisms of the international human rights system, with a focus on the **UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** and **SZEXE's 2013 shadow report submission to the 54th CEDAW session**);
3. Implications of and strategies to mobilize against the **Honeyball report**, which supports criminalization of clients as a policy solution in sex work;
4. Strategies to carry out monitoring, with the sex worker community, of hate crimes against sex workers.

In addition, **SZEXE distributed three newsletters, *Heterae***, with relevant information on human rights, to approximately 4000 sex workers.

² This summary is adapted from the final project report written by the Association of Hungarian Sex Workers.

- http://szexmunka.hu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Heterak2013aug_szept.pdf
- <http://szexmunka.hu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Heterak2013Okt-Nov.pdf>
- <http://szexmunka.hu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Heterak2013dec-janJav.pdf>

Outcomes

Although conflicting schedules meant that some participants could not attend the sessions regularly (requiring repeated introductions of participants and overviews of material covered), 10 sex worker participants received the training, which had three important outcomes:

- **Problem-solving for the participating sex workers:** participants used the content of the training to think together about possible recourse for pressing concerns or rights violations they face, for example: abuse, blackmail, theft or physical abuse by various actors, e.g. pimps, police.
- **Preparing participants to be peer educators:** trained participants have already begun to play their “multiplier” role, engaging in outreach and providing “legal literacy” information, sharing what they have learned with other sex workers in their communities.
- **Preparing participants to speak out in the media:** their greater familiarity with human

rights terminology and its application to sex work will help the participants speak publicly in the media. Participants who expressed particular interest in publicly sharing their experiences were provided individual training in media skills. This was particularly important given the reality that many sex workers are fearful or hesitant to talk about their work in public and yet it can play a crucial role in fighting the stigma and discrimination they face.

SZEXE felt that the trainings were so successful that they continued organizing similar sessions. They say that participants appreciated the human rights dimension of the training and for many it was the first time to look at sex work framed in the context of labor and women’s rights.

Based on participant feedback, SZEXE took steps to **increase their presence in online forums popular among sex workers**, to provide advice on social counselling or assistance with legal matters. Thus SZEXE is able to have an expanded reach.

Participants also came up with the idea and **received funding** from the EEA/Norwegian NGO Fund in Hungary for EUR 10,000 to further develop an empowerment project, including **a photo portrait series and exhibition and the organization of a sex-worker led conference with the aim of engaging women’s rights NGOs**. The photos can be viewed as an **online** exhibit of sex worker portraits.

INSIGHTS

1. In addition to the substantive themes covered in the training, an important dimension was the opportunity for networking among sex workers, since they often work in isolation with little (or only virtual) interaction.
2. The project highlighted the importance of initiatives that are driven by sex workers themselves and show different facets of sex worker realities in order to draw attention to abuses they face by various state and non-state actors.
3. Drawing connections with sex workers’ issues is crucial for creating and maintaining a more inclusive women’s movement.



2. Memoir Storytelling Workshop (USA)³

The Red Umbrella Project (RedUP) requested a seed grant to create a space where people in the sex trades living in New York City are heard and their experiences respected, through involvement in a cultural project that gives them a **creative outlet to express**

themselves, document their experiences, discuss economic equality and make social change.

What began as **memoir storytelling workshops** using writing as the main medium, evolved through extensive feedback from participants. As a result, instead of just structured writing workshops, theatre or oral storytelling tracks were developed and implemented, all with the intention to empower individuals in the sex industry to challenge the stigma and discrimination that are barriers to accessing rights and justice, by breaking the silence in both informal and institutional spaces.

³ This summary is adapted from the final project report written by RedUP.

RedUP organized four different storytelling workshop series, along with numerous drop-in workshops as well as organizing a theatre production—together 58 workshop sessions with a total of 84 participants, including current and former sex workers with very different experiences, who would not have otherwise met in the context of their work. The workshop sessions progressively built memoir-writing and observation skills as well as the practice of prolific writing. Writers who participated in this session, as well as others who missed it requested a space for drop-in workshops to keep them writing through the next few months and tide them over until the next session began. The drop-in sessions also allowed for different levels of commitment from participants, creating space for personal expression, play, and community building without the need to commit to more than one session. Drop-in sessions serve as first point of contact for many new members, while the intensive sessions are structured to build toward a creative output: a show or a published piece.

Though initially designed for a mixed group, trans women members requested, and RedUP provided, a space just for trans women. This space became the improv theatre workshops, while the memoir writing workshops were for all people with experiences in the sex trades.

At the conclusion of the improv theatre series, the participants—mostly trans women of color who are impacted by HIV and have unstable housing situations—said they wanted to work towards creating a troupe and doing a public performance. Realizing this would require more funds than those provided through the AWID Seed Grant, RedUP sought further funding and secured a USD 10,000 grant from the Sparkplug Foundation to scale up their work. All who auditioned became part of the ensemble group, and committed to six weeks of creating/rehearsing twice a week. RedUP used a theatre process called ‘devising’, in which the first several weeks are spent doing improvised scenes, and then the group picks their best scenes to create a complete performance. This **process supports a collectively produced theatre piece**, instead of having actors saying lines that someone else wrote.

Outcomes

In all of the activities, participants had the opportunity to empower themselves by creatively turning their experiences into concrete products. The flexibility of the grants allowed sex workers to shape the activities, resulting in a variety of creative expressions to be shared in public spaces. Some of the most powerful moments happened when **participants showed support and concern for each other’s success**, and practiced communication and leadership skills.

Beyond the storytelling projects, RedUP was also engaging in advocacy at city and state levels to ban the use of condoms as evidence of prostitution-related crimes. The storytelling work informed and strengthened their advocacy, but also provided an important counterbalance, in that *“The storytelling work and production of our own published work and theatre events provides us with an important, self-determined space where we control our stories, unlike in political and media spaces. Both spaces are necessary, but **our own spaces help us build up the resilience to deal with outside forces.**”*

During 2013 RedUP produced two readings, five small **storytelling events**, and a gala storytelling and theatre event, which involved seven storytellers and the performance of “In My Skin” a theatre piece, written and performed by the newly created Trans Women’s Theatre Ensemble (an ensemble of nine transgender women) at Joe’s Pub - a historical 200-person venue in New York City.

In October RedUP ran a **Kickstarter** crowdfunding campaign, raising almost USD 25,000 (well above their USD 15,000 goal) to produce a **feature documentary** of this process “The Red Umbrella Diaries” about seven of their storytellers, which will premiere in 2015, as well as “In My Skin” – **a short film about the Trans Women’s Theatre Ensemble**. “In My Skin” premiered at the Boston LGBT Film Festival in early April 2014 and screened at numerous festivals as well as in the Global Village at the International AIDS Conference in Melbourne.

Through the writing workshops, storytellers worked toward the goal of publishing a piece in Red-

Up's **literary journal**: *Prose & Lore: Memoir Stories About Sex Work*. Issues 2 and 3 included a total of 47 stories from storytellers in the RedUP program.

Feedback from participants in the workshops affirms the transformative potential of storytelling:

"For years I struggled with the shame of having been a sex worker. Being a part of the RedUP memoir writing workshop has helped me to heal from years of pain, and to finally accept that I am a good person. Through shared experience, I realized that if I can appreciate and respect others who are intelligent, kind, loving, complex beings, then maybe I deserve that same respect..."

"Getting to know each other, even though sometimes we clashed, was the most amazing part of the theatre making process. I felt like I gained eight sisters, and I saw myself and other transgender women as sources of power and knowledge. It was incredible to see what we could do together."

2013 was RedUP's first year of partially funded programming and they have now found a workshop model for the storytelling program that will be replicable in the future and powerful tools for sex worker empowerment and organizing.

INSIGHTS

1. Personal storytelling is key to resilience and resistance in a world where inaccurate and salacious stories are told about sex workers without their input.
2. The open-ended question "how do we fix it?" is not the right approach. Members of the sex worker community aren't always sure how to identify ways to improve their conditions with respect to economic injustice and discrimination they face. It's useful to focus instead on nurturing the skills, critical analysis, and confidence needed for effective activism and to begin to identify systemic oppressions that make the lives of sex workers more difficult.
3. Storytelling and creative programming are not "luxury" programming, but rather an important piece of respecting and caring for people in a holistic way.

3. Sex, Fun and Money (India)⁴

Led by Debolina Dutta, in close collaboration with two sex worker collectives in India—DMSC and VAMP—the goal of this seed grant was to look at *‘fun as the politics of economic transformation’* in the lives of sex workers from Sonagachi and Sangli, India and their collective struggles for gaining dignity and economic rights. Sex worker participants were engaged in a conversation to share their stories of fun with the aim of uncovering the important role that humor plays in sex workers’ everyday lives, and how it contributes to making their work more exciting, enhances financial security, and keeps them and their clients happy and coming back.

Dutta conducted many group conversations with sex workers and selected 24 voices who shared funny real life incidents and were able to draw a connection with their own transformation of economic power. Of the 24, 3 were trans women. The participants were either members of the DMSC, the sex workers collective based in Kolkata, West Bengal, or VAMP, the sex workers collective based in Sangli, Maharashtra. The participants represented a range of caste and religious backgrounds.

Dutta uses the term ‘conversation’ deliberately as part of a process for connecting with sex workers. She explains that a conversation is an attempt to **break down traditional research-researched relationships** with their inherent power dynamics at play. She carried out the conversations keeping in mind the perceived position of authority she has as a researcher and attempted to participate in the discussions with a focus on what she could learn and unlearn from the sex workers, as a non-sex worker. All conversations in

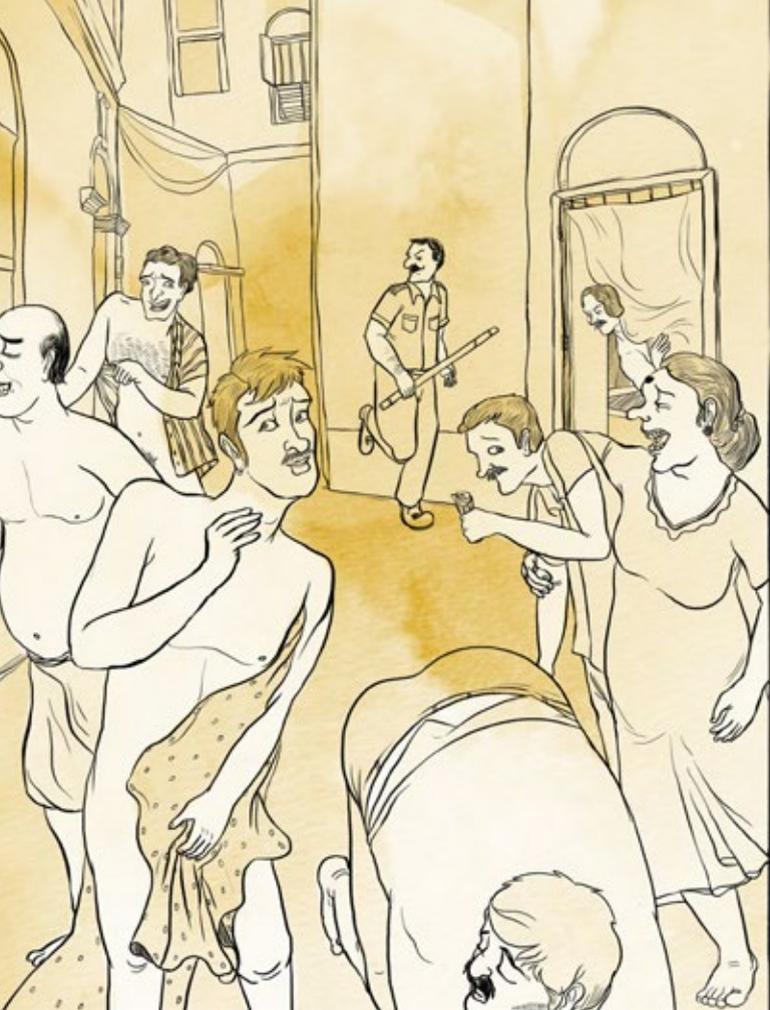
Sonagachi and Sangli were carried out in consultation with DMSC and VAMP, respectively. Both collectives, as well as the individual sex workers involved, were closely consulted at each step along the way in the process.

Outcomes

Feedback from participating sex workers shifted the original idea to produce a video archive to a text-illustration book. Plans are for the book to be published as part of the ‘sexuality series’ of an independent publishing house. The book is being illustrated by graphic artist and filmmaker Anirban Ghosh. It will include 15 illustrated stories based on Dutta’s conversations with sex workers as well as a centerspread illustrated representation of the journey of the sex workers movement, and the evolution of its assertion of the right to sex work. The book will also include reflections by Dutta on the main theme and subject; as well as pieces by DMSC and VAMP that will talk about the journey of their collectives as part of a larger global sex workers movement. The hope is that the publication will be used as **a tool for advocacy and teaching**, by the sex workers movement, and other activists. What emerged through the conversations was an idea of fun that is closely connected to a community and stories of friendship. Dutta says, *“The community of friends in other sex workers allowed them the safe space to have fun... It was love in the community of friendship that connected their idea of fun to economic security.”*

Following is an excerpt from the resulting publication, from “The Underwear Story”:

4 This summary is based on the final project report by Debolina Dutta.



THE UNDERWEAR STORY

It is generally during police raids that things go helter skelter. Clients have to escape in a hurry so that they don't get caught. In that mad rush sometimes they put on their clothes, but leave their underwear behind! I don't think men are particularly attached to their underwear because none of these clients ever came back looking for them... and we have to take on the task of discarding all these accumulated, multicolored, many shaped, many sized pieces of clothing!

INSIGHTS

1. Transforming economic power is not just about law and policy; it is as much about collectivization and community building in work that is heavily gendered, like sex work.
2. A focus on the everyday and ordinary forms of resistance and negotiation can provide extremely powerful insights into how women, individually and collectively, work to secure their own rights. A focus on these daily experiences will enable the framing of laws and policies that take seriously what women want and need to fully exercise their rights.
3. Economic injustice can also be challenged if attention is paid to the politics of knowledge production, especially by 'experts' about the lives of subaltern women like sex workers. Different forms of collaborative work need to be evolved that enable a sharing of ideas, products and resources with the communities that a researcher works with.

4. Opening bank accounts to save money (Myanmar)⁵

With this seed grant, the **Aids Myanmar Association National Network of Sex Work Projects** (AMA) hoped to help at least 150 women sex workers in Myanmar to save money by opening bank accounts and thus have funds available to improve their nutrition and to defend their legal rights if arrested. AMA believes that by saving money, female sex workers will have more power and become less involved in risky sex and high interest loans when they need money in emergency situations.



5 This summary is adapted from the final project report of AMA

AMA worked to make it as easy as possible for sex workers to open a bank account by **providing them with information and liaising with bank managers and staff to establish trusted contacts**. AMA also matched sex worker contributions so that each participating sex worker could start an account with 4000 MMK (about 4 USD). In Myanmar, banks are just starting to open after a long period of military rule and international sanctions. Many people are suspicious of banks due to bad experiences in the past with the government seizing funds from bank accounts. Like other Burmese people, sex workers are wary of banking institutions, but they are also generally looked down upon and excluded from these institutions.

AMA held five workshops with a total of 113 sex workers (mostly women, but also with transgender and men participants) that focused on how to open and manage a bank account, including bank processes such as deposits, withdrawals, interest payments, confidentiality and budgeting. The final workshop also included **training on relevant national laws and advocacy**. Apart from banking, the workshops focused on **social justice principles** and sex workers are beginning to recognize that these issues are all interconnected. Now more than ever **sex workers are interested in participating in the democratic process** in Myanmar. They see themselves as playing a viable role in Burmese society as it undergoes major change.

Outcomes

Following the workshops, a total of **43 sex workers opened a savings account** and 12 received their **national identity card**. Other participants have not yet been able to open an account until they obtain national identity cards. The ID cards are also important because they facilitate free movement from city to city and can help sex workers avoid police harassment.

Not only did the project help sex workers to open bank accounts and start saving money, but it was also about **“breaking the silence”**. Sex workers have been marginalized in Myanmar but these activities opened a window for them to be more socially and economically empowered. When the work started, banking was a new

concept for sex workers and now AMA says it is one of the most popular activities. Even though the seed grant is over, the impact is ongoing as sex workers continue to open bank accounts in other cities, are getting their national identity cards and many are getting passports and visiting neighboring countries. The workshops provided participants with fundamental information about bank accounts that was previously considered “unavailable” to sex workers due to their perceived lack of status in Myanmar society. As one participant commented:

“We believe that sex workers earn a lot of money but do not know how to save their money... AMA advocates to bank staff and managers on sex work, and the bank staff provides the sex workers with appropriate information. Previously in Myanmar, sex workers do not know how they can save their money in a bank”.

This seed grant also helped to mobilize sex workers to engage with relevant local and regional agendas. Through the advocacy and leadership training provided, participating sex workers feel better prepared to engage with different governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as UN agencies to defend sex worker interests. AMA reports strong demand from the government, NGOs, the UN and some donors now to hear from sex worker communities on decisions impacting them. *“Now nothing for us without us policy is a reality in Myanmar.”*

As an example, sex workers from throughout Myanmar participated in the Country Dialogue on the

new funding model of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, with AMA developing a concept note documenting the needs of sex workers. AMA also engaged in strong yearlong advocacy to change some government policies. For example, condom use is no longer considered evidence of sex work. AMA is trying hard to legalize sex work in Myanmar. *“Through the advocacy and social and economical empowerment activities, now sex workers are more open and stigma and discrimination are going down. Now many sex workers are open about their profession in the family and in the society. We strongly believe that in future sex work will acknowledge as a respectable profession in the country.”*

This seed grant was the first funding grant from an international organization ever received by a sex worker organization in the country, as previously the Myanmar government did not allow sex worker-run programs. As the year progressed, government tension eased about sex worker run activities, and by the end of the year, other sex workers were inspired by the activities and started to form community-based organizations (CBOs) and run their own programs, with support from the government, UN and donors. AMA believes the government is becoming more tolerant and in the next three years most of the sex worker CBOs will become registered. Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers documented this initiative as a good practice. This seed grant also opened doors for AMA to secure funding from other funders, including UNFPA.

INSIGHTS

1. Economic power is an important part of life and self-determination is a critical part of economic empowerment. With economic savings sex workers can avoid taking risks when they need emergency funds, and feel more empowered to negotiate safer sex with clients.
2. Financial literacy (like household budgeting) was a big area of interest, even for the sex workers who were unable to open a bank account. They could see the value in planning ahead and putting something aside for if they get sick, arrested or if they want to send their children to school.
3. The process served to motivate some of the participating sex workers to get more involved and active in serving the community.
4. While the experience with the banks thus far has been positive, AMA and the broader sex worker community are discussing the possibility of a banking co-operative for sex workers in the future, to better meet their needs.

About the Seed Grant Recipients

The Association of Hungarian Sex Workers (SZEXE) advocates for the human and labor rights of sex workers in Hungary and Hungarian sex workers abroad through:

- Providing legal aid for sex workers and strategic litigation
- Increasing sex workers' access to quality health and social services
- Empowering sex workers to participate in policy debates and public discussions and holding the government and other entities accountable when they exclude sex workers from debates and consultations
- Sensitizing the media and the general population to change attitudes towards sex workers.

contact:

Email: info@szexmunka.hu

Website : [Szexmunkások Érdekvédelmi Egyesülete](#)

Facebook : [Szexmunkások Érdekvédelmi Egyesülete](#)

The Red Umbrella Project (RedUP), is based in New York City.

- RedUP works to amplify the voices of people who end up in the sex trade by force, circumstance, or choice by engaging them in media, advocacy, and storytelling programs.
- It is run by and for people in the sex trades. RedUP believes *“that storytelling is the building block of movement building and that it can empower individuals and by extension our communities.”*

contact:

Audacia Ray, Executive Director, audaciaray@redumbrellaproject.org

Websites : [Red Umbrella Project](#) and [The Red Umbrella Diaries](#) (film, podcast, and written stories)

Facebook: [Red Umbrella Diaries](#)

Tumblr: [RedUPnyc](#)

Twitter: [@redupnyc](#) and [#redupdoc](#) on the process of producing our documentary about sex worker stories.

Debolina Dutta, India

- Debolina Dutta is a human rights lawyer, researcher and documentary filmmaker from India. She is currently a PhD student at the University of Melbourne who focuses on transnational sex workers' organizing and the politics of anti-trafficking funding
- Dutta worked in close collaboration with two sex worker collectives in India: [Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee](#) (DMSC) based in Kolkata, West Bengal and [Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad \(VAMP\)](#) based in Sangli, Maharashtra.

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Aids Myanmar Association National Network of Sex Work Projects (AMA)

AMA is a community-based group representing various organizations working for women sex worker rights. Its main activities are to

- Mobilize sex workers to protect human rights, promote public understanding that sex work is work and so that sex workers obtain the status of worker
- Increase the capacity of sex workers to solve their own health, social, political and economic problems
- Provide information and referrals on sexual and reproductive health, HIV and STI; accommodation for HIV positive sex workers from outlying areas undergoing antiretroviral therapy; and support imprisoned sex workers with food and connection to family and friends.

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