



Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

Filling The Gap – Sustaining
the Strength and Impact of
Sex Worker-Led
Organisations and Networks
**Report on Global Sex Worker
Convening 13-15th June 2023 in
Nairobi, Kenya**



Executive Summary

Sex worker-led organisations and networks struggle to obtain sufficient, sustained funding for their work. For many years, the Open Society Foundations (OSF) was a leading funder of sex worker-led organisations, providing essential core flexible funding, including funding for advocacy, capacity strengthening and movement building. OSF staff that funded sex work had experience, understanding of and trust in the sex worker-led movement that enabled essential funds to flow to sex worker-led organisations and networks that were attuned to the needs of sex workers. There were also collaborative initiatives to advance the rights of sex workers. Financial support from OSF has played a significant role in the creation, growth, and success of sex worker-led organisations at the global, regional, subregional, and national levels. Due to recent changes in OSF's structure and fundraising strategy, OSF will no longer fund sex worker programming beyond 2023. This departure marks a critical turning point for sex worker-led organisations and networks worldwide, who have long relied on OSF for core funding, while facing a shrinking pool of funding and shrinking spaces for sex workers and an environment of growing anti-rights and anti-gender movement, policies and laws.

OSF provided a tie-off grant to NSWP in 2023 to facilitate NSWP, together with regional and subregional sex worker-led networks, to strategise and plan for OSF's departure, and to respond to the reduction in funding in the context of ongoing attacks on our rights and autonomy. This grant included funds for a global convening of sex worker representatives from the NSWP Secretariat, Red Umbrella Fund (RUF) and regional and sub-regional sex worker-led networks to discuss priorities and develop key messages in the realms of capacity-building, movement strengthening and funding.

This meeting allowed representatives across the global sex worker movement to convene and discuss challenges, successes, and learnings. It facilitated peer-to-peer exchange, allowing participants to work together to articulate key messages and priorities for ensuring sustainability and success of the sex worker movement. This global convening is only the first stage of addressing funding and capacity-building

challenges, however, and further work must be done to adapt and respond to an increasingly challenging funding and policy landscape.

Meeting Summary

Introduction

Between 13th and 15th June 2023, 17 representatives of NSWP, RUF, and regional and sub-regional sex worker-led networks from Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and Central Asia convened in Nairobi, Kenya. This included representatives nominated from the regional networks; Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), European Sex Worker Rights Alliance (ESWA), Plataforma Latino America de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS), and Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) and sub-regional networks; Coalition de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre sur le Travail du Sexe (CAFOCTS), East Africa Sex Workers Alliance (EASWA), Southern African Sex Workers Alliance (SASWA). Representative from the Caribbean from Guyana Vulnerable Populations Alliance (GVPA) and Your Ark Trinidad and Tobago were also present.

The purpose of the convening was to discuss priorities in the realms of capacity and movement building and funding for sex worker-led organisations and networks, particularly in the context of OSF's departure from the sex worker funding space.

Day 1 of the meeting was centred around discussions of the current funding environment for sex worker-led programming, as well as the regional and subregional contexts in which organisations and networks operate. Jules Kim from NSWP provided an overview of the convening and its significance in the context of OSF's departure from sex worker funding.

OSF has played a crucial role in supporting sex workers' rights advocacy over the years. However, given OSF's change in strategy, sex worker-led organisations and networks must now take stock of their own strategies for funding and meeting organisational and community needs. Accordingly, this meeting aimed to achieve several objectives:

- 1) Identify sex worker-led organisations' and networks' priorities for capacity-building,



organisational strengthening, and movement-building

- 2) Develop key messages which effectively convey our needs and priorities to funders, in order to address funding gaps.

Presentation on the Funding Landscape for Sex Worker-Led Organisations

Paul-Gilbert Colletaz from RUF then gave a PowerPoint presentation, with input from the Sex Work Donor Collaborative (SWDC), on the current funding landscape for sex worker-led organisations. He also provided information on RUF's grant-giving and funder advocacy. He highlighted that globally, funding for sex worker and key population programming remains critically scarce, including within the category of HIV funding. He also noted shifts in the funding landscape for sex workers' rights, including with the creation of the SWDC. There are increasing conversations about community involvement, participatory grant-making, and core flexible funding within the funder community – however these conversations do not always translate into action. Lastly, Paul-Gilbert urged organisations to read funding applications carefully, to communicate with each other about different funders, and consider how to most effectively convey their funding needs.

Goals and Expectations for the Convening

Following Paul-Gilbert's presentation, Jules led a discussion to cover the goals and expectations for this convening in more detail. She noted the importance of consistency and clarity in our messaging, and illustrating the value of our work with stories of change or impact. With the messages we develop from this meeting, we will undertake the following:

- Producing artistic resources and graphics to use across different languages
- Organising dialogues with donors and allies
- Organising a set of global and regional webinars to communicate messages from the convening to communities

- Providing small grants to regions/sub-regions, each of whom will define their own priorities in the realms of capacity-building, organisational strengthening, and movement-building, including strengthening fundraising capacity within the organisation and region.

Participants then shared their own expectations for the convening. Many participants explained that they would like to learn how to better strengthen their organisations and networks. In part, this could be achieved through increasing opportunities for peer exchange and learning. In addition, participants stated that they would like to strengthen their strategies for funding and liaising with donors. Many participants looked forward to sharing experiences, learnings, and stories of success.

Presentation of Regional and Sub-Regional Contexts

Next, participants presented their regional and sub-regional contexts. Across regions, many shared challenges were noted, including violence, criminalisation, lack of access to justice, and inadequate access to health services and supplies, in particular access to prevention commodities. In addition, participants noted a global increase in punitive laws that affect sex workers, and the growing influence of anti-rights movements and actors within governments and decision-making bodies. They also agreed that there is not enough funding specifically for sex workers, and that despite intersectionalities, sex workers are often excluded from funding that goes to other communities, such as the LGBTQI+ community and women. This merely exacerbates gaps in capacity within the sex worker community and sex worker-led organisations – both in terms of building new capacity, and being able to maintain the capacity which already exists.

Given these challenges, participants agreed that there is still a need for increased capacity-building programming, at the individual, organisational, and movement levels. Increased, sustained funding for empowering new leaders and supporting the sustainability of established organisations and their staff is also essential. To achieve these goals, sex workers' priorities and the impact and value of sex



worker-led organisations must be made more visible to funders.

Breakout Group Sessions

Day 2 of the convening was dedicated to participatory group-work in three breakout sessions. Participants were randomly divided into three groups for three breakout sessions on different topics. After discussing prompts under each theme, each group then presented and discussed their findings with the other participants.

The first breakout group session of the day sought to identify issues and priorities in the realms of: funding for sex worker-led organisations, capacity-building and organisational strengthening for sex worker-led organisations, and capacity-building for the sex worker community and movement. Each group was tasked with identifying three key issues and three key priorities under their group's thematic area, taking note of any commonalities or differences. The second breakout group session was dedicated to examining examples of success and/or impact. Each group examined the key factors leading to success, short and long-term impacts, and key learnings which could be applied to future work. Lastly, breakout session three sought to identify actions to strengthen relationships, organisations, and the movement. All groups discussed actions that sex worker-led organisations can take, needs from other stakeholders, and potential challenges that may be faced, as well as how to overcome them.

These breakout group sessions resulted in rich discussions that revealed many shared needs and priorities across regions and different areas of the sex worker movement that could then be galvanized into key messages and future actions. While many important priorities and examples were shared, only the common themes that emerged across the three groups are detailed below for each breakout session.

Breakout Session #1- Funding, organisational strengthening, and capacity-building for sex worker-led organisations, and for the sex worker community and movement

In breakout session one, participants emphasised the importance of adequately resourcing global and regional networks and how this in turn benefited

national organisations. In particular, core flexible funding was prioritised as a means to ensure that national, region and global sex worker-led organisations and networks can meet their communities' needs while sustaining themselves and the movement. Core flexible funding has also facilitated successful relationships with donors (including with OSF), which have allowed sex worker-led organisations greater flexibility in their work. However, the overall lack of funding – let alone core flexible funding – remains a pervasive issue.

Capacity-building across all parts of the sex worker movement was also noted as a priority. At the individual level, multiple participants noted the need to empower community members, including young and emerging leaders, via mentorship and peer exchange. While sex worker-led organisations are extremely effectively in what they do, it was identified that within organisations, significant gaps remain in terms of capacity for finance and human resource management, organisational development, fundraising and donor relations, and advocacy planning. Within the community and movement at large, it was identified that there remained gaps in knowledge and capacity surrounding human rights, legislation, access to health, justice, and social protection and how to effectively mobilise to achieve these.

Breakout Session #2- Examples of success and/or impact

In breakout session 2, participants highlighted a number of examples of success and impact by sex worker-led organisations and movement that demonstrated their value and impact. Examples highlighted the significance sex worker-led organisations have played in relation to health, justice, policing, legislation and policy change, community care and wellbeing, emergency responses, promoting rights based policies and practices and in resisting and challenging anti rights forces. In the realm of relationships with donors, participants valued arrangements in which donors listened to sex workers' needs, rather than simply imposing their own, and where donors allowed for changes and flexibility in order for organisations to be responsive to emerging threats and priorities, and to the needs of the community. Positive examples of this during the COVID-19 outbreak were



shared by participants, but it was noted that there were only a few donors who were willing to adapt to the changing needs of the community throughout the pandemic. The importance of honest and transparent communication between donors, sex worker-led organisations and networks, and fiscal hosts was also stressed. Support from donors, as well as technical support from NSWP, helped regional and sub-regional networks identify gaps and build leadership capacity in their [sub-]regions. These factors have helped sex worker-led organisations strengthen partnerships, improve communication, and transfer skills and knowledge. However, greater investments must be made to maintain gains and sustain success.

Breakout Session #3 - Actions to strengthen relationships, organisations, and the movement

In breakout session 3, participants reemphasised the importance of holding more conversations between donors, sex worker-led organisations and networks, and other stakeholders (e.g. allied movements, UN agencies, and policymakers). This will not only promote peer-to-peer exchange and build solidarity within the sex worker movement, but will also help sex workers more effectively communicate their communities' needs and priorities to external stakeholders. Participants noted that while sex workers remained the key stakeholders, progressive donors and allies were a critical component of the sex worker-led response. At the organisational level, participants agreed that more work must be done to map out existing capacity resources, as well as needs and gaps, including resource gaps. Lastly, partnership-building and allyship remain an important strategy for fundraising, advocacy, and capacity-building, particularly within the context of a range of challenges that may be faced by sex workers and their organisations, including structural barriers, restrictions on sex worker funding, the growing influence of anti-rights movements, and changing donor priorities. This included exploring new relationships or strengthening existing ones across a range of intersecting issues and movements for sex workers.

Key Messages and Next Steps

As part of the tie-off grant from OSF, NSWP will conduct a global webinar to hold a discussion with donors and allies of the sex worker community. In addition, each region will be sub-granted funds to conduct a regional webinar and implement activities with the aim of strengthening the capacity of their regional sex worker organisations and movement.

Reflections on OSF's Departure and Loss of Core Funding

Across regions, participants noted that core funding and institutional support from OSF have played an essential role in the development and success of their networks. For many networks, core grants from OSF provided baseline funding for their existence, allowing them greater flexibility and space to seek out additional donors for activities, projects, and organisational growth.

Without funding from OSF, many sex worker-led networks and organisations are now struggling to cover the costs of staff, office rental, and other core expenditures. Across regions, participants reported that organisations and networks are reducing their secretariat and moving into smaller offices. Some smaller organisations have closed down entirely. The majority of funding that remains for sex worker-led networks and organisations is project- and activity-based, and therefore cannot be used to cover salaries, rent, or emerging issues which are not already included in workplans. This has led to a challenging situation in which organisations must now implement an increasing amount of activities to maintain funding levels, but with less human resources and organisational capacity to do so. Participants noted that this reliance on project- and activity-based grants has led to increased stress, burnout, and mental health issues within the sex worker movement.

Strategies for Addressing Funding Gaps

Participants discussed approaches and strategies for addressing gaps in funding. Participants agreed that it is essential to seek new donors, and many noted that it may also be beneficial to engage with



donors more actively at different stages. Sex worker-led organisations and networks can seek to involve donors in meetings and participate in donor roundtables, with the aim of making new connections and influencing donor strategies. To increase the chances of a successful funding application, organisations can also approach donors beforehand to ascertain whether they are suitable candidates for funding. In the case of a negative application response, organisations are encouraged to ask for feedback. In addition, donors may be willing to assist sex worker-led organisations and networks in finding alternative sources of funding.

Another strategy noted by participants was partnering with organisations and networks from intersecting movements, such as the women's, labour rights, migrant and LGBTQI movements. Across movements, organisations can identify common goals and priorities to submit joint funding applications. These partnerships may also facilitate introductions to new donors.

Making the Case for Core Flexible Funding

Participants brainstormed ways to more effectively articulate sex worker-led organisations' and networks' need for core flexible funding. Core flexible funding is not merely a matter of survival for the sex worker movement – it is essential for ensuring that sex worker-led organisations and networks can grow and build capacity, address the needs of their communities, and achieve long-term advocacy goals, such as the full decriminalisation of sex work.

One of the main benefits of core funding is that it provides organisations and networks with the flexibility and autonomy to respond to needs identified by communities, rather than by donors. Moreover, with core flexible funding, sex worker-led organisations and networks can swiftly respond to emerging issues – such as health, humanitarian, migration, and political crises – without having to apply for a new grant.

Many participants also noted that core flexible funding increases their organisations' and networks' efficacy by allowing them to spend more time doing work on the ground, rather than writing proposals for project-based grants. Having core flexible funding will not only reduce financial pressure, but

will also free up time and space for sex worker-led organisations and networks to better serve their communities. Moreover, it will allow more funding to be allocated to staffing, human resource development, and capacity-building, thereby promoting new generations of leaders and reducing the likelihood of staff burnout.

Lastly, core flexible funding, delivered as multi-year grants, acknowledges that sex workers have diverse needs and priorities beyond the realm of short-term projects. While HIV remains a major global concern, more funding must be made available to sex worker-led organisations and networks to support communities' broader, holistic needs over the long term.

Key Messages and Recommendations

Based on discussions from the previous days, the group brainstormed key messages to convey the importance and impacts of funding sex worker-led organisations and networks at the subregional, regional, and global levels. Ideas from this session were streamlined into the following recommendations.

Sex worker-led organisations are the core of the sex worker rights movement and must be adequately resourced and capacitated to address their communities' priorities. Yet globally, sex worker-led organisations remain chronically under-funded, and are often excluded from critical discussions with key stakeholders, including donors. Where funding is available for sex worker programming, it is seldom attuned to communities' needs, and may come with restrictions which make it inaccessible or unfeasible for sex worker-led organisations.

The global sex worker movement calls for increased funding and support for capacity-building, organisational strengthening, and advocacy. Together, sex worker-led organisations and networks have identified 4 key messages for the movement, donors, policymakers and allies.

1. **The sex worker rights movement is connected, made up of local, national, regional, and global organisations and networks which form an interconnected structure.**
 - Sex worker-led organisations and networks, from the local to global levels,



all form an essential, interrelated and supportive part of the movement, and must be adequately funded.

2. Sex worker-led organisations need core, flexible, multi-year funding to sustain their work and progress as a movement.

- At present, most donors only fund activities, resulting in salary and staff cuts. Flexible core funding gives sex worker-led organisations the autonomy to deal with emerging situations such as health, humanitarian, and political crises, without having to apply for new grants.

3. Global and regional sex worker-led networks must be properly resourced and capacitated so they can provide capacity-building support to others.

- This will promote mentorship, skill transfer and peer-to-peer learning across different parts of the sex worker movement, helping to address capacity and knowledge gaps while strengthening solidarity and sustainability.

4. Sex worker-led organisations hold the line and maintain the gains.

- Over the course of decades, the sex worker movement has made significant achievements to advance the health and human rights of sex workers and the recognition of sex work as work. In the continuing environment of anti-rights and anti-gender offensives, sustained funding and support are essential to maintain these gains and build upon the movement's successes.

Conclusion

Given shrinking funding for sex worker-led organisations and the growing influence of anti-rights movements, the future of the sex worker rights movement is at risk. The gains and successes achieved over decades of advocacy will be lost if sex worker-led organisations and networks are unable to secure continued core, flexible, long-term funding for their work. Meanwhile, sex worker-led organisations and networks continue to grapple with unmet needs in the realm of capacity-building. This global convening represented the first stage of addressing these challenges, unifying the movement to identify shared priorities and adapt strategies in response to an increasingly restricted funding landscape.



The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the voices of sex worker-led organisations are made visible. Case studies examine the strategies, activities and impact at global, regional and national levels of NSWP and regional sex worker-led networks in consultation with NSWP members. Case studies are based on ongoing monitoring, utilising internal reports, and in-depth interviews.

The term 'sex workers' reflects the immense diversity within the sex worker community including but not limited to: female, male and transgender sex workers; lesbian, gay and bi-sexual sex workers; male sex workers who identify as heterosexual; sex workers living with HIV and other diseases; sex workers who use drugs; young adult sex workers (between the ages of 18 and 29 years old); documented and undocumented migrant sex workers, as well as and displaced persons and refugees; sex workers living in both urban and rural areas; disabled sex workers; and sex workers who have been detained or incarcerated.



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