



**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

Community Brief: Sex  
Worker-Led Organisations'  
Engagement and Benefit  
from the Global Fund C19RM  
Funding 2022



## Background

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The Global Fund COVID-19 Response Mechanism (C19RM) was intended to be an improved version of the Global Fund COVID-19 response. Responding to criticisms and concerns that the initial response failed to engage with or benefit key populations and communities, C19RM 2022 was expected to address those concerns. However, a survey of sex worker-led NSWP member organisations showed that C19RM was not effective for most sex workers, noting a lack of information and communication in-country, low-level engagement in planning and proposal writing, and very little funding reaching sex worker-led organisations.

The C19RM has awarded US\$4.3 billion to 131 countries since April 2020 to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on programmes to fight HIV, tuberculosis (TB) and malaria, and initiate urgent improvements in formal and community health systems.

C19RM funds the following areas: the COVID-19 response; COVID-19 related adaptation of programmes to fight HIV, TB, and malaria; and strengthening formal and community health systems. These three areas should also incorporate cross-cutting activities that bolster community responses to COVID-19 and support pandemic preparedness.

## Methodology

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This report is based on a survey of sex worker-led NSWP member organisations in all C19RM-eligible countries. The purpose of the survey was to gain a fuller understanding of the involvement (or lack thereof) of sex workers in C19RM processes at country level; whether sex worker priorities and needs were addressed; whether funding was awarded to sex worker-led organisations for COVID-19 activities; and whether sex workers benefitted from Global Fund C19RM funding.

The survey was conducted over a 2-month period using Survey Monkey, and reminders were sent out every 2 weeks to encourage responses from as many participants as possible. The survey was translated into Russian, French, and Spanish, as well as English, and was based around 4 key questions. Each question had a “yes,” “no,” and “don’t know” option, including an option to respond with additional information.

There was a total of 61 responses from 38 countries: 36 responses in English, 14 in Spanish, 9 in French, and 2 in Russian.

Sex workers from the following countries participated in the survey: South Africa, Cameroon, India, Malaysia, South Sudan, Burkina Faso (2), Ukraine (2), Ecuador (6), Bolivia (5), Montenegro, Tanzania, Kenya (5), Colombia (2), Cote d’Ivoire (3), Nigeria, Pakistan, Thailand, Burundi (2), Senegal (2), Sierra Leone, Namibia (2), Democratic Republic of Congo, Guyana, Peru, Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, El Salvador, Ghana, Nepal, Zambia, Uganda (2), Liberia, Myanmar, Fiji, Benin, the United States (2), and the Netherlands.

The following questions were included in the survey:

1. Were you involved in country dialogue or C19RM funding request development in your country?
2. Were sex worker priorities identified and included in the final C19RM funding request submitted to the Global Fund by your CCM?
3. When the national C19RM grant reached your country, were you aware of any funding awarded to sex worker-led organisations for COVID-19 activities?
4. In your opinion, did sex workers benefit at all from Global Fund C19RM funding in your country?



## Results

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### Sex Worker Involvement in C19RM Funding Request Development

Although 24 out of 61 respondents reported that they were involved in both country dialogue and funding request development, which should be viewed positively 22 respondents were involved in country dialogue, but knew nothing about C19RM processes in their country. A quarter of all respondents stated they did not know about the C19RM process, nor the country dialogue or the opportunities to submit priorities to the C19RM funding request development in their countries. Although it was a positive development that three quarters of all respondents were involved in country dialogues, it is concerning that almost half of those respondents stated they did not know about the C19RM processes. When looking at these figures, it is important to understand the nature of country dialogues. They are almost never only for a single community, such as sex workers, but are large meetings involving all key populations and diverse communities. The priorities and needs of many different types of groups are reviewed during these meetings, not just those of sex workers. Therefore, opportunities to directly influence are limited and participation in a country dialogue should not be a primary indicator of sex workers' engagement with the Global Fund. The fact that over one third of respondents did not learn about the C19RM process through country-level communication is also a serious concern. All sex worker-led organisations who are members of NSWP were informed about C19RM funding opportunities, and without this many would not have been aware about C19RM funding in their country.

27 out of the 61 sex workers who answered the survey confirmed that they had identified and had their priorities included in the funding request submitted to the Global Fund. This showed that there was an improvement from the first round of C19RM, which is something to build on. In terms of barriers to prioritising sex worker needs identified through sex worker consultations, the CCMs often did not hold sectoral dialogues. This is usual for the CCMs, to bring together all stakeholders in a single

large meeting making it difficult to ensure inclusion of sex worker needs.

And Soppeku, NSWP country partner in Senegal, only participated in the country dialogue but not the funding request development. However, they were able to submit sex worker priorities for inclusion in the C19RM funding request, which were included in the final submission to the Global Fund. It was through the funding received from NSWP that enabled And Soppeku to consult with the sex worker community and develop the priorities.

And Soppeku received some funding through ANCS, a sub-recipient of DGDC/MOH, for the following activities:

- Peer talks (each activity involved 5 people) on the transmission of COVID19..
- Classic talks (10 sex workers per activity) on anti-COVID vaccines (vaccine promotion).
- Distribution of condoms and lubricants.
- Distribution of masks and anti-COVID hygiene products.

Regarding if C19RM was effective for sex workers in Senegal, And Soppeku noted:

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**“We were missing advocacy activities carried out by the community towards the health and judicial authorities. During the confinement and the state of emergency, [health] providers received a limited number of patients per day and sometimes it was the sex workers who were the least consulted during this restriction. Many law enforcement agencies also took advantage of the emergency situation to intensify racketeering against sex workers, even in their homes.”**

*And Soppeku, Senegal*

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This highlights the fact that the COVID-19 response is more than simply sending money to countries. For sex workers, COVID-19 is not simply a health risk. Confinement and state of emergency often served as a justification for increased harassment of sex workers. COVID-19 is a social issue, as well, and too little attention was paid to this aspect of the COVID-19 response.



Most sex worker-led organisations were unable to provide information about funding awarded to their organisations for COVID-19 activities. This is consistent with the previously highlighted finding that communication at country level was poor. Four respondents highlighted issues with the programme focus of the C19RM grant in their country. They reported that projects funded by the Global Fund prioritised testing and PrEP trials over the needs and priorities of sex workers that are the key determinants of health and access to healthcare.

The programme comments highlighted that C19RM funding was not always used as it should have been, to meet the needs and priorities of sex workers to respond to COVID-19 and its impacts. Given the relatively small cohort of responses, it is unwise to be definitive, but this may indicate a wider problem with the focus of Global Fund C19RM programmes.

A few organisations were able to give positive feedback about the benefits of the funding received during COVID-19.

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**“Sex Workers Movement Sisonke was part of the funding during COVID-19 to make sure that sex workers are not left behind.”**

*Respondent*

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Some organisations reported that they were able to use the funds to purchase protective materials, such as masks and disinfectant gels, for sex workers, as well as food vouchers for sex workers in situations of extreme poverty. In 2021, Strumphet Alliance Network was a recipient of the APNSW Activity Theme “Promote and Protect Human Rights of sex workers,” through which the funds allocated for COVID-19 relief for sex workers amounted to \$1060. Others received a COVID-19 grant even though they did not have a general grant from the Global Fund, while some benefited from a broader national campaign. One respondent stated:

- “We are not aware of any specific COVID-19 funding from the Fund Manager to sex worker organisations. However, a large campaign attached to the Fund Manager programming for our country was made on COVID-19 initially in relation to HIV for example and later in

association for the services offered by our organisations engaged in the defence of sex workers.”

However, other comments give testament to sex worker-led organisations not being included in C19RM funding awards. For example:

- “No sex worker led [organisation] was involved.”
- “Being directly involved with sex worker community members, there has been no discussion on C19 or any feedback questions coming from the sex workers. This shows that we all have no ideas on C19RM.”
- “In Kenya, Kakamega County – we didn’t have any brief from the GF partners and in our program specifically (PITARP Community Based Organization) we didn’t receive any funding.”
- “The sex workers were not included in any of the planning or proposal writing for the request for COVID-19 Funds. If there were money allocated for the Sex Workers in the countries who applied, nothing was given to us. We only benefited from our Regional [and Global] Partners (APNSW and NSWP).”
- “We have not been given any chance to be part of any proposal writing, budget and planning as well.”
- “This did not reach grassroot organisation.”
- “I said no because my country CCM did not consult the sex workers community for any input and we haven’t seen the documents submitted.”
- “Sex workers in the DRC are excluded, marginalised, suffer violence of all kinds, and never attract the attention of decision-makers or financiers. And there is no support or subsidy.”
- “The funding went to organisations that support PLHIV and not to organisations of key populations.”
- “Nothing for sex workers.”

These responses show that for many sex worker-led organisations, C19RM was a process that overlooked them. It points to the exclusion of sex workers, accidentally or intentionally, by the CCM and Principal Recipient (PR), with very little access to funding for COVID-19 activities for sex worker-led



organisations. These results are only early indicators of much bigger issues once C19RM funding reaches a country.

One of these issues is that there is a lack of a proper follow-up processes to monitor how C19RM grants were spent and how funding was allocated.

Overall, the responses indicate that very little C19RM funding reached sex worker-led organisations. This raises a number of points regarding the strength of sex worker involvement in the funding allocation process. The poor communication at country level is also an issue. Information is simply not being communicated to sex workers (and probably to other key populations).

Although there was some improvements than the first round of C19RM funding, in sex worker priorities being included in country dialogues and/or funding requests, most sex worker-led organisations were not funded to implement activities. Even for those who had participated in country dialogues and/or funding request development, it is clear that when it comes to funding disbursement and implementation of activities, sex worker-led organisations are, for the most part, excluded.

This suggests a significant fault in the Global Fund system. Sex workers may be involved up to the point that allows the CCM and the country to meet Global Fund expectations in terms of showing involvement, but not enough to be involved in implementing the grant. A number of sex worker-led organisations were involved in country dialogue, some in the development of the funding request as well, and quite a few submitted sex worker priorities to the writing team and/or CCM. But the majority of responses indicate that this is where it stopped. This means the system is faulty because there seems to be a lack of effective follow-up once funding reaches a country to ensure funding reaches key populations.

There seems to be a lack of systemic checks, balances, and effective follow-up which raises the question of where the responsibility for addressing this sits. If the Global Fund aims to be a world leader in Pandemic Preparedness and Response, and stay true to their commitments in their new strategy, this is something that must be resolved.

However, in the small number of cases when C19RM funding did reach sex worker-led organisations, there were clear benefits to the community. Despite the limited funding those that did receive funding reported benefiting in different ways:

- “It was beneficial because some of sex worker-led organizations have been able to utilize the funds for economic empowerment to its members.”
- “Through Global Fund C19RM funding, there were many projects aimed to relieve COVID and TB burden on the country. Although there were cash and food support programs selectively aimed towards sex workers, there are not many, and I believe we did not cover all the population of FSWs in the country and they are still in need of more support.”
- “However, only 2 sex workers led, and focused organizations benefitted which couldn't reach out to other areas where sex workers needs are unmet.”
- “Yes, sex workers did benefit from this fund with basic needs, dignity packs and PPE materials for COVID, we did house visitations to members and conducted COVID awareness to sex workers communities.”
- “Definitely yes. The mobile outpatient clinic continued to operate, personal protective equipment, HIV/STI counselling and testing, motivation for COVID testing, personal protective equipment and case management were provided (Ukraine).”
- “With the funding from the C19RM global fund, the CSW organisations have benefited from the funds through the ANCS (national civil society organisation). The C19RM funds are housed at the Ministry of Health and the ANCS is the recipient of this fund and the sex worker organisations are sub-recipients. They carry out the activities planned in their priorities during the country dialogues.”

Colectivo Flor de Azalea in Ecuador said the following about the benefits of C19RM for sex workers in Ecuador:






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**“The fact that this new C19RM grant was opened for COVID helped us once again to take possession of the issue of HIV and sex work, but more than anything it allowed us to see our needs and priorities, empower ourselves, be united all to have a single speech, but the problem is that the resources came too late because the realities change immediately, many colleagues died, they did not have food to eat, or protective material and they got infected again, and the resource that is for victims of violence or people who have COVID was just a food voucher. They have wanted to remove this item because the cases of COVID, according to the Ministry of Health, are no longer necessary due to the vaccine, but they do not see other epidemics coming out,... or the consequences of COVID in the populations. There is a biased view of wanting to see from the epidemiological point of view and not seeing the social determinants that affect the populations that are currently at greater risk, which is not only the COVID pandemic, but also violence, hired assassins, robbery, blackmail...”**

*Colectivo Flor de Azalea, Ecuador*

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In Ecuador, as in Senegal, the fact that broader issues such as food, loss of income, inability to work, etc., were not considered as a part of the COVID response, represented serious challenges for the sex worker community. Colectivo Flor de Azalea were involved in both country dialogue and in the C19RM funding request development. They were able to submit sex worker priorities, which were included in the final funding request submitted to the Global Fund.

When the funding reached the country, Colectivo Flor de Azalea were informed on how the C19RM funding would be used: COVID and HIV prevention activities; addressing gender-based violence (GBV) within the sex worker population; promoting information on COVID, violence, and HIV; COVID, HIV and GBV prevention kits; and carrying out COVID and HIV tests.

However, sex worker advocacy was effective and some of the priorities received at least some attention. Colectivo Flor de Azalea received funding for the following activities: prevention, supplies, and

the response to GBV; economic resources for survivors; communication campaigns; and the purchase of GBV prevention kits.

SUCOS, the only sex worker-led organisation in Suriname, was also involved in both the country dialogue and the funding request development for C19RM.

They were able to ensure that sex worker priorities were submitted to the CCM and that those priorities were included in the final C19RM funding request submitted to the Global Fund.

However, Once the C19RM funding reached the country, the situation for sex workers became more complicated.

SUCOS found that food vouchers and a small contribution for rent were made available for only a small selection of sex workers. Access to women’s shelters were only available on demand for those who were deemed to have experienced an emergency and were not available to most sex workers who were homeless.

The funding situation for sex workers was further complicated because not enough funding was allocated in proportion to the size of the sex worker community.

The funds that were allocated were often appropriated by other non-sex worker-led organisations.

In an attempt to appease other stakeholders (NGOs, CSOs), the CCM decided that all C19RM funding designated for sex workers should be equally distributed among civil society organisations who have little or no contact with sex workers. This was a huge disadvantage for SUCOS and severely impeded their ability to support sex workers during COVID-19.

Despite involvement in country dialogue, development of the funding request, and the fact that sex worker priorities were included in the final submission, SUCOS do not feel that sex workers derived any real benefit from C19RM. Lockdown and other restrictions of movement severely restricted sex workers’ ability to do their job and earn money to feed their families. The food vouchers and small rent subsidies were drastically insufficient, resulting in great hardship for sex workers in Suriname. The



push by other, non-sex worker organisations to acquire some of the funds allocated for sex worker activities, and the political appeasement approach of the CCM, were factors explaining why C19RM funding did not benefit most sex workers in Suriname.

Many other sex worker-led organisations indicated that there were no benefits that reached the sex worker community from C19RM funding.

- “The money has yet to reach us.”
- “Sex workers did not benefit because they were not involved in the implementation and even priorities were not considered.”
- “As KP led organizations, we feel left out in the planning and implementation. In future these grants should be given directly to organisations that are directly working with various KP constituency against a background that the KP CCM representative refused to endorse the C19RM because it was given on short notice to endorse but was not involved in the planning.”
- “As the only sex worker-led organisation in country, we cannot say if the service workers benefitted from C19RM funding. We are hearing of this funding for the first time.”
- “There used to be representatives for the CCM. After COVID came no one went to any meeting.”
- “I am not sure if sex workers benefit [from] this because I am not aware of any sex worker organisation that received Global fund C19RM funding.”
- “Nothing at all. We bought masks and hand sanitizers from stores to use with our members. Nothing was benefited. Even the key messages or a mask was not given free of charge. But we did suffer a lot more in PNG from COVID-19 due to restrictions and we have had nothing to feed our children, many of whom have no fathers.”
- “[To] date no single evidence has been provided to let us know which sex worker-led or organizations have benefited from the grants, amount allocated and key programmes for implementation.”
- “They have received nothing. The orientation of funding in the DRC does not take into account

sex workers' rights. Sex workers' projects or projects from sex workers' organisations have not been funded.”

Sex worker-led organisations reported that even months after C19RM, funding has still not reached sex workers. They continue to be excluded from the country-level C19RM processes and poor or non-existent country-level communication persists. Sex worker-led organisations are still not being selected as sub-recipients (SRs) for C19RM and there is a lack of feedback from the CCM to the community about where the funding is spent.

While sex workers in some countries did benefit from C19RM, for the most part, sex workers have failed to benefit from C19RM. Almost all sex workers around the world experienced loss of income due to pandemic-related restrictions and exclusion from national emergency relief schemes, yet this was not considered by most C19RM programmes.



## Conclusion

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C19RM has not been effective for most sex workers. Despite the increased efforts of NSWP and the Global Fund CRG Team to increase the level of sex worker engagement in C19RM processes, little appears to have changed. Involvement in country dialogue and the submission of sex worker priorities in the funding request did improve, but this did not translate into increased benefits for sex workers or for more sex worker-led organisations becoming SRs. The same exclusion of sex workers from national Global Fund grants processes and implementation was evident within the C19RM process. This suggests a systemic problem that the Global Fund has not resolved or chooses to ignore. Effective follow ups must be implemented to ensure sex workers are receiving funds in country. The C19RM process was rushed in response to the COVID-19 emergency. The timeline for CCMs to submit funding requests was very short. This placed undue pressure on sex worker-led organisations to organise consultations, prepare sex worker priorities, participate in country dialogues, and submit their priorities to the CCM. All this was expected in addition to their usual work in the context of a pandemic, as well as the need to secure money for surviving as an organisation, without any additional financial support to compensate staff for the extra work involved. And despite these efforts performed under constrained circumstances, this did not result in funding reaching most of these organisations,

In the small number of cases where sex worker led organisations did receive C19RM funding, benefits to sex workers were reported by respondents. When sex worker led organisations were able to receive these funds, they were effective in implementing programmes for the sex worker community. More must be done by the Global Fund to ensure the benefits and funds are reaching more sex workers in more countries.

## Recommendations

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- Participation in a country dialogue should not be an indicator of engagement, as country dialogues do not necessarily prioritise the needs of sex workers.
- Clearer instructions to CCMs are needed regarding effective communication with sex workers and other key populations.
- CCMs and PRs should be instructed that sex worker activities should be implemented by sex worker-led organisations.
- The C19RM funding application process must be improved with increased resources made available for sex worker consultations.
- Follow-up processes must be improved once C19RM funding reaches a country.
- Funding for sex worker activities must be channelled through sex worker-led organisations.





Mitchell House, 5/5 Mitchell Street,  
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, EH6 7BD  
+44 131 553 2555

[secretariat@nswp.org](mailto:secretariat@nswp.org)

[www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)

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