

# Be fund(ed) or die: The precarity of sex worker organizing

By Red Schulte, with contributions and considerations from The Support Ho(s)e Collective

The violence sex workers from all sectors of the trades already face can be difficult for those who have never traded or sold sex (acts) to fully comprehend. Being asked to recount these acts of violence for the *privilege* of receiving lifesaving and lifechanging funds to do the work we are already struggling to do to improve our lives, working conditions and world is one of the most intolerable harms. There exists very few funders and grant-making organizations that do not require sex-working organizers to regularly engage in this sort of reliving and retelling of trauma to prove we too deserve the ability to care for ourselves and our extended communities. Even so-called ally grantors can fall into the roles of judging the most deserving based upon how we perform poverty, trauma and survivorship for their consumption. Direct funds, financial literacy, budget-making resources, low-barrier interviews and creative application processes that embrace disabilities and acknowledge exhaustion, systemic oppression and unfettered access to decision making regarding funds allows survivors and sex working people to not to have to do this hellish reliving while undertaking the grant-seeking process.

I will detail positive and negative experiences with regards to funding throughout this piece.

I want to share an anecdote, vague enough to not jeopardize my safety or the safety of my fellow organizers. A small and intensely committed collective of sex workers and survivors of violence that I co-organize recently received a grant from one of the largest funders in the realm of sex worker grant giving. At every stage, our questions were met with disregard and our direct asks, when finally acknowledged, were not acted upon, which resulted in our grant being sent at the wrong time to the wrong fiscal sponsor. We had to snap into action to solve

this incredibly destabilizing issue ourselves while the funder has yet to apologize or act with accountability or care in any way. This all took place over the week of December 17, International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. Make no mistake, jeopardizing sex worker organizers' funding, which pays for mental health-care, rent and childcare as well as directly resources our organizing labor, is an act of violence. I believe this is a direct result of the paternalistic, strings-attached funding practices that necessitate emotional, care-informed distance from grantees and personify red tape.

Decriminalization, and bold police/prison abolitionist-informed decrim at that, exists as the greatest harm reduction we can fight for at present. Truly, this effort will protect sex working people and the communities from which we most regularly hail and those with which we interact—those who have major affective disorders and/or are disabled, neurodivergent, using drugs, queer, trans, youth of color, (im)migrants of all (un) documented statuses, criminalized survivors, cash poor rural white and Black folks. The work of promoting and fighting for decrim is not one reserved for policy-making circles alone. It emerges from our neighborhoods—when we block walk, clean up streets and educate our neighbors on why we should not call the cops on each other when we beautify the spaces in which we live, those where our city governments have abandoned us. This work in all sectors is costly, and it is work that needs to be fully resourced or we will never see measurable change. Organizers must be able to feed themselves and clothe their children while doing this work. Our comrades holding down policy meetings must have physical space, access to technologies to support these efforts, and the ability to pay people for their insights, time and labor. Our messaging and political education efforts must

have money to commission infographics, art and easily dispersible materials that can reach the masses.

Some of the most exciting and uplifting community work I have seen with a decrim campaign was used during the early days of forming of Decrim NY and consisted of commissioning beautiful, radical art by queer, trans and artists of color to create engaging, educational and unapologetically sex work-forward pieces that could be used in community wheat pasting, door knocking/block walking and events. This community artwork was largely organized by Leila Raven—who helped hold down coordinating groups of supporters to wheat paste and engage in neighborhood conversations. Other sex worker organizations like Hacking// Hustling stepped up to fund this community artwork to support sex working artists and our efforts toward decrim. As incredibly supportive as the other sex working collectives were, they should not have had to use their own budget funds to support a fellow group while engaged in their own organizing efforts. Where were the robust philanthropic donors for decrim?

This is expensive work, and it is necessary work. To not fund this work means nothing short of the death and continued exploitation of sex working and trading people. To not fund work toward decrim means you have chosen the side of the carceral state and the morally corrupt who believe some people's lives are worth disposing of. "Disposability" as a subject position is railed against by many funders, while "sustainability" and "accountability" are championed. However, what does this look like in practice? How are funders showing up for protecting the lives of sex-working people?

Being seen or treated as disposable often looks like not having a self to defend (see Mariame



This beautiful piece was created by Amira Lin and commissioned as a gift to our collective by M. Sabal, Alisha's pen pal and comrade. It is a brightly colored digital illustration of our core collective members set in an abstract under the sea scene. Each of our members is shown in portrait from the torso or shoulders up in stylized seashell or coral vignettes. Beautiful sea grasses and kelps swirl around the whole drawing.

Kaba's work discussing Black women and femmes in particular not having a self to defend and being criminalized for acts of survival in our white supremacist society) or being interpreted and ignored as being messy, dramatic, "not worth the effort or cost," and ultimately not worth listening to, directly resourcing, respecting or protecting. This then translates into silencing, erasing, caging, deporting, and killing. These are not buzz words, these are life-and-death scenarios for folks in the sex trades.

But we cannot stop at the word "funded." There is a difference between project and campaign-based or "contingent" funding and unrestricted funding as a designation. I am here to advocate for unrestricted funding, unapologetically. This method works. Unrestricted funds allow sex worker organizers – who know best how to get this work done – to support themselves and the waves and layers of our community who might not otherwise become engaged due to the lack of support and resources. Being creative with funding enables us to better respond to and meet the needs of those most impacted by state violence every day. Unrestricted funds recognize the violence of banking institutions, the discrimination of online platforms, and the racism and class antagonism inherent in the sanctioned economy. Unrestricted funds give sex workers the capacity to realize our goals outside of the paternalism of the non-profit industrial complex and recognizes sex worker organizers' autonomy, responsibility and intelligence.

To further this, multi-year funding may directly ensure lifesaving and affirming work. Being able to rely on income is something that

few sex workers have the ability to do.

With unrestricted, multi-year funds, our organizations and collective networks can project future budgets and realize our effort's potential. As we all have felt, a year in crisis can fly by. Knowing that as soon as you obtain a grant you **do not** have to immediately begin looking again is an enormous relief. It allows organizers who are navigating criminalization and stigma to focus on their well-being and work as opposed to panic-grant applying.

Speaking personally, I have been organizing in an on-and-off funded capacity for almost 6 years now but organizing for 17 years total. In these past 6 years, I have felt most supported as a sex working organizer in the Support Ho(s)e Collective (SxHx) by the Sex Worker Giving Circle (SWGC) – a formation that has embodied real listening, directives and active learning from sex working/trading community. SxHx has been able to directly resource currently and formerly incarcerated sex working people and criminalized survivor organizers – focusing on their immediate needs while inside and offering robust material support upon their return home. Before receiving grants from the SWGC, we relied entirely on our own grassroots fundraising efforts and paid for any organizing needs out of pocket. This remains typical for the majority of queer, trans and undocumented sex working-organizers in the United States.

To me, the SWGC draws upon deeply connected and reflective community resourcing – steeped in true feminism, womanism and communalism. The SWGC does this by forming a giving circle with

former and current sex worker advocates and championing flexibility with report backs (audio recordings, interviews via video conferencing and/or written responses). Additionally, the SWGC has multi-lingual application processes, which are not redundant, but succinct, brief, and still allow for a comprehensive look at the work, and gives unrestricted funds, which is empowering, respectful and far too rare!

I can imagine a very near future in which large donors and grantmaking institutions commit to principles of real accountability, respect and unwavering support to those they purport to serve. This means turning more funding toward the efforts to decriminalize the sex trades, and by extension decriminalizing all survival, giving in an unrestricted capacity and ensuring funds are granted across multiple fiscal years. This future may be closer than even I can imagine. In truth, I hope and pray it is. This future, where our movements are championed, fully funded, and can sustain not just our labors toward another world, but our lives in the here and now – this future is dependent upon trauma-informed and radically self-critical action from funders. The future my comrades and I are dreaming of requires accomplices and co-conspirators, not just check writers. Be in this work with sex workers – be invested in our futures alongside us. A future like this one could see such transformation and revolutionary potential – dream and act toward this (w)horizon.

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