CREATING COMMUNITY IS A THREAT TO POWER: Three Years of Resourcing Revolution and Liberation at the Sex Worker Giving Circle
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This report, and all of the work of the Sex Worker Giving Circle, was made possible by the pathbreaking legacies of ancestors Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Lorena Borjas, along with all of our Fellows, our advisors, our grantees and their leaders, and so many other BIPOC and LGBTQI+ sex workers who have created community as a threat to power.

Third Wave Fund is especially indebted to Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP), an organization by and for young women of color in the sex trade and street economies that existed in Chicago from 2002-2013. YWEP, along with other members of INCITE!’s FUSE network, created the BIPOC-centered frameworks of prison abolition and decriminalization that shape sex worker movements today; YWEP organizers’ work to educate Third Wave about these frameworks made the SWGC possible. To learn more about YWEP and the next organization in their lineage, SWGC grantee Street Youth Rise Up, visit youarepriceless.org.

This report was written by Christian Giraldo and Maryse Mitchell-Brody, with support from Third Wave Fund staff, Itzel Corona Aguilar, Adrienne Wong, and insights from all of the SWGC Fellows and grantees, as well as our community of funders and donors.

This report was designed by Grae Rosa, cover art by Rebeca Soto, with supplemental artwork throughout by Andy Moon, JB Brager, and Kae Goode.

We welcome feedback and questions about this report and our work at swgivingcircle@thirdwavefund.org.
INTRODUCTION

Sex workers have always been an integral part of collective liberation struggles, whether or not we receive credit or recognition. From Malcolm X to Maya Angelou to Janet Mock, movement leaders have used sex work as a way to survive in an oppressive world.

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson are trans liberation icons and leaders of the Stonewall uprising. But the stories told about them often leave out an important fact — like many other patrons of the Stonewall that night, Marsha and Sylvia were sex workers. They self-funded the powerful organizing they did with Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) by doing sex work on the streets and piers.

Sex workers organize across issues because the violence and discrimination we face cross-cuts oppressions. Every community’s liberation is bound up with one another’s, and many non-sex workers have directly benefited from sex worker leadership and analysis. Sex worker organizers in the United States are on the frontlines of struggles for migrant justice, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) liberation, bodily autonomy, gender justice, and an end to prisons and policing, but this work is under-recognized and even more under-funded. In fact, mainstream philanthropy often funds harmful and misguided anti-trafficking efforts whose collaboration with law enforcement actually endangers the lives of both sex workers and survivors of trafficking. When right-wing think tanks and funders partnered with second wave feminist funders to funnel resources into the mainstream anti-trafficking movement, many sex worker-led groups were targeted and some were even forced to close their doors as a result.

The Sex Worker Giving Circle (SWGC) was founded in 2018 to intervene in this dangerous pattern and resource organizations led by and for sex workers most impacted by oppression to organize on their own terms. In that time, and especially during the pandemic and uprisings of the last year, we’ve seen communities of sex workers thrive when their inherent creativity, leadership, and genius are nurtured and resourced. We created this report to share some of that brilliance back with you, and to document the SWGC’s model of participatory sex worker grantmaking along the way.

You’ll learn about how the SWGC got our start, and how the sex workers who lead our grantmaking and fundraising have changed the funding landscape of the U.S. sex worker movement. You’ll get a snapshot of our grantees’ leadership: 93% are BIPOC-led, 64% are Black-led, 79% are led by trans and/or gender non-confirming (TGNC) people, and 46% are led by trans women of color. We dig into grantees’ key organizing areas and the strategies they use to build sex worker liberation, including mutual aid and healing justice, decriminalization and prison abolition, migrant justice, and leadership development and political education. Throughout, we highlight grantees and leaders who exemplify these approaches.

You’ll also get to take in learnings from three years of resourcing the sex worker movement, all rooted in the community wisdom that informed them. These key lessons are:

1. Get the Money Up Front: Move funds to sex workers as simply and broadly as possible,
2. Trust Your Gut: Honor and center sex workers’ insights and instincts,
3. Meet People Where They’re At: Show up with understanding and care, and,
4. Secure the Bag: Transfer sex worker skills to communications and fundraising

Read on to take in all this sex worker brilliance and more!

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4 Scott W. Stern, “Sex Workers Are an Important Part of the Stonewall Story, But Their Role Has Been Forgotten,” Time Magazine, June 27, 2019.
5 Melissa Gira Grant, “Beyond Strange Bedfellows: How the “War on Trafficking” Was Made to Unite the Left and Right,” The Public Eye, Summer 2018.
While Third Wave Fund has funded sex worker-led organizing since 1998, it is because of the labor of grantees like Young Women’s Empowerment Project that our organization came to understand how sex worker organizing is central to gender and reproductive justice movements. Sex workers are the experts on our own lives, so we’re in the best position to interrupt and transform the oppressions that we face. That’s why when we started the SWGC, we knew that sex workers directly impacted by oppression had to be the only people at the decision-making table, especially because philanthropy had been making decisions completely without our input for too long.

The SWGC exists within the long tradition of Black and brown, queer and trans, and working class communities organizing to take care of ourselves and each other in the face of social marginalization and violence. The SWGC is led by our Fellows: sex workers who are Black, Indigenous, of color, trans women, working class, immigrants, drug users, and/or holding other identities targeted by oppression.

Fellows participate in popular education-style workshops to help transfer their existing skills to developing grantmaking criteria and decisions, throwing our annual fundraising party, and leading our online fundraising campaign. Fellows also get individualized support to be able to show up fully, whether that’s through language interpretation, childcare, a scent-free environment, or a space to show up as their full selves. We keep things down-to-earth, playful, and rooted in sex worker culture and values, and we do the same with our grantees. By doing this, we’ve carved out a space within philanthropy where sex workers’ leadership is nurtured rather than excluded and devalued.

When we first started, we looked at the amount of funding going to sex worker-led organizing in the United States. Our best estimates put this at about $500,000–$600,000 a year, which accounts for just 0.00089% of the $66.9 billion of all grants made by U.S. foundations in 2017. We figured that if we could make $35,000 in grants, we’d be in great shape, especially because few foundations were ready to fund the work. As we got ready to launch, SESTA/FOSTA, a piece of supposed anti-trafficking legislation, became federal law. This made it much harder for sex workers to use the internet to earn a living and stay safe. The U.S. sex worker movement needed resources to respond to the crisis.

Thanks to the sex worker genius and magic of the staff, Fellows, and advisors behind the SWGC, hundreds of activist donors saw the urgency and pooled their money to help meet the need. We were able to make $200,000 in grants that first year. Other funders soon pitched in, and starting in 2019, we were making $400,000 in grants per year, including our first two-year grants. We’ve now granted out one million dollars to a total of 28 groups, with 25 currently funded SWGC grantees. To learn more about our grantees and the strategies they use to build a movement, check out our website, and keep reading below!

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7 The last reliable comprehensive survey of sex worker funding was done in the 2014 report, Funding for Sex Workers Rights (Red Umbrella Fund, Mama Cash, & Open Society Foundations). There, 2013 statistics shared that only $1.1 million had gone to sex workers rights organizing in the U.S. and only $330,000 went to sex worker-led initiatives. In conversation with colleagues and grantees, we estimated that a $500,000–$600,000 total was a generous one for such funding in 2017, especially given decreases by some major sources of funding, like HIV philanthropy (Funders Concerned About AIDS).
Sex workers have always been some of the most creative, stubborn, and ingenious organizers in any struggle for liberation. Because sex workers exist at the intersection of so many different kinds of oppression, sex worker movements use a diversity of tactics to confront and transform these conditions. Below, we’re highlighting just a few of the main strategies that our grantees use to do this work, but be sure to check out the infographics on page 8 and all of the fabulous grantees to get a better idea of the work.

**Mutual Aid and Healing Justice**

Almost all of our grantees practice some form of mutual aid, where community members take on the responsibilities of caring for each other because we know that the systems will not only fail to provide the care or support they promise, but often create more harm in the guise of “safety,” “security,” or “care.” Mutual aid practices have a deep history in BIPOC and LGBTQI+ communities, and they’re one of the most time-honored traditions of doing sex work. We share outfits, safety tips, makeup, laughter, and outrage. In a world that targets, criminalizes, and isolates sex workers, there’s strength and safety in numbers, in mutual aid. Creating community is a threat to power.

SWGC grantees’ mutual aid work often includes healing justice, that is, caring for our communities with healing practices that address and transform trauma as we build towards a more just world. When we share what we have and what we know, we stand a better chance of there being enough for everybody. So when sex workers organize, mutual aid is often at the foundation of the work. SWGC grantees were immediately on the leading edge of grassroots responses to COVID-19, drawing on their mutual aid experience and their wisdom as informal community health educators. They also were on the frontlines of the uprisings, as experts on abolition, police violence, and creating community safety outside of the legal systems.

One of our newest grantees, Love Me Unlimited 4 Life (LMU4L) in Jackson, MS, truly illustrates the spirit of mutual aid both during and beyond the pandemic. Ms. Evonné Kaho, known in Jackson as the “Queen Mother of the South,” founded LMU4L to create a space by-and-for trans women of color where they could get support without judgment. In the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ms. Evonné saw that so many street-based trans women still had to do sex work because they had no other way to pay rent. She and LMU4L took action immediately, and converted her basement into temporary housing so that folks didn’t have to choose between making rent and catching COVID-19. Members know that they can come to LMU4L to get their needs met, and many stay on and get involved with LMU4L’s community building work.

“Funding from the SWGC means we can be open about helping people who do sex work for the first time and that will help us be an even brighter beacon of hope.”

— Ms. Evonné Kaho, Founder and CEO, Love Me Unlimited 4 Life
Decriminalization and Abolition

For as long as sex work has been criminalized, sex workers have been resisting policing and prisons. We know that sex work is not inherently dangerous and that it’s criminalization, discrimination, and stigma against sex workers that causes harm. Many of our grantees identify the criminal legal system as one of the major sources of violence and oppression in their communities, so they’ve been organizing to decriminalize sex work (remove all criminal prohibitions against sex work) and find ways to keep each other safe without relying on the police. They’re also active in broader struggles to defund the police and abolish prisons.

Sex workers know that laws against prostitution are often used to profile and harm BIPOC people and trans women, especially Black trans women. When sex work isn’t criminalized, sex workers have more self-determination, and can better access the health, economic security, and safety that every person deserves.8

The Coalition for Rights & Safety of People in the Sex Trade (CRS) in Seattle shows what sex worker-led anti-criminalization and collective safety building can look like in practice. CRS has successfully organized to make sure that sex workers and people who trade sex are protected from prostitution-related arrest when they call for emergency assistance, conducted participatory action research to document how SESTA/FOSTA hurts trans and street-based people, and helped repeal laws related to loitering for the purposes of prostitution and drug trafficking. By working across issues and in broad coalition, CRS has had some amazing wins for their communities, and helped change the public discourse along the way.

Migrant Justice

Given the realities of discriminatory employment practices and anti-immigrant laws, many migrant people and trans women of color wind up doing sex work in order to get by, and are targeted for criminalization and violence. SWGC grantees at the intersections of migrant justice, trans liberation, and sex worker movements have responded to these harms by bringing their communities together across different lived experiences to share resources, build power, and rally for one another. Our grantees work with migrant sex workers from a number of communities, especially Asian, Pacific Islander, and Latinx. As a bilingual grantmaking program, we’ve been able to get to know and support a number of by-and-for trans Latinx sex worker community groups, including some who only speak Spanish. Despite very few available Spanish-language resources and grants, these grantees are thriving forces for sex worker-centered migrant justice.

“We are finding allies in unexpected places and some of the anti-trafficking people have come to us and apologized for their stance on certain legislation. There are still challenges and some still see sex work as inherently bad, but using models that protect other sectors like hotel workers has been a useful starting point for talking to people about sex workers’ rights.”

— Emi Koyama, Coordinatrix, Coalition for Rights & Safety of People in the Sex Trade (CRS)

The work of Organización Latina de Trans en Texas (OLTT), a Latinx-led organization in Houston and Dallas, demonstrates the power of this cross-issue approach. Many of their community members are criminalized as trans people, Latinx people, sex workers, and/or immigrants, and some face the imminent threat of detention and/or deportation. OLTT’s leaders, including Executive Director Anandrea Molina, know what it’s like to navigate these systems and do whatever they can to make sure their members know they’re not alone. OLTT does this by providing by-and-for peer support, resources, political education, and leadership development to community members in order to resist marginalization and intervene in the crimmigration system.

**Leadership Development and Political Education**

Behind every SWGC grantees’ incredible work are incredible organizers. But people don’t become incredible organizers overnight. These groups are deeply invested in nurturing each other’s leadership, and in sharing knowledge and analysis to help build out the movement. Leadership development in the sex worker movement often goes hand-in-hand with mutual aid and supporting members to have better access to healthcare, legal services, and employment so that they are well positioned to become more effective leaders.

Support Ho(s)e, based in Chicago and NYC, is a grassroots collective that is working to build radical community for sex workers through political education and public agitation. Working to build community looks like organizing sex worker-led demonstrations, hosting reading groups, and creating resources for public education. One of Support Ho(s)e’s leaders is Alisha Walker, a former sex working person who is currently incarcerated for defending herself against a client’s violent assault. She has been organizing from the inside, offering political education and peer support to resist unsafe conditions during COVID-19 along with the other harms of the prison industrial complex.

“**In Texas we live under very strong anti-immigrant and anti-LGBT laws, within a very oppressive prison and detention system. We need to create spaces and foster sex worker leaders who can testify about the impacts of that to the Texas legislature. We have to nurture this leadership so that we aren’t afraid to say that we are sex workers, and that we depend on it in order to put food on the table.**”

— Anandrea Molina, Executive Director, Organización Latina de Trans en Texas (OLTT)

“We should all be telling our stories... People will try to take our stories and tell them for us, no. We need to be the ones writing. Zines and prison newsletters do this work. We’re in control of the narrative. We can build each other up that way, build collective power and understanding.”

— Alisha Walker, Collective Member of Support Ho(s)e
Grantee Demographics

- Black-led: 57%
- BIPOC-led: 93%
- Trans and/or Non-Binary-led: 79%
- Trans Woman of Color-led: 46%
- Black Trans-led: 50%

Key Issue Areas Addressed by Our Grantees

- Gender Justice: 100%
- Cultural Work: 100%
- Racial Justice: 96%
- Service Provision*: 71%
- Trans Justice: 61%

*i.e., safer sex supports, legal referrals, job training*
The past three years have been a time of collective study, creativity, and adaptation for the SWGC. We’ve learned alongside our grantees, advisors, Fellows, and other funders, especially the world’s two other sex worker-led participatory funds, Red Umbrella Fund in Amsterdam and UHAI-EASHRI in Nairobi. With these sibling funds, we created The Hack List: Hustler Lessons from Community Grantmaking by and for Sex Workers. That resource has many more ideas on how funders can support sex worker movements, so please check it out!

What we have to say about the magic and brilliance of sex worker-led grantmaking could fill a book. Instead, we figured we’d just share with you a few of the juiciest bits of learning we’ve had along the way. The SWGC was created to draw on and amplify the inherent genius of sex workers, so everything you’ll read below is rooted in sex worker strategies for staying safe.

**Trust Your Gut**

Sex workers have to develop powerful sixth senses to navigate potentially dangerous scenarios. We trade tips for staying safe on the job and spread the word about bad dates through whisper networks. We basically have finely-tuned lie detectors, which makes for some excellent and super rigorous grantmaking. The SWGC Fellows ask thoughtful questions, see red flags coming from a mile away, and hone in right away on what matters, leaving behind the rest. When they do have a good feeling about a particular group or approach, we trust and honor those instincts. All of our meetings — with Fellows, grantees, donors, and staff — contain space for folks to weigh in on how we’re feeling, what might be up for us, and how decisions land in our bodies.

**Get The Money Up Front**

As sex workers, we put first things first and make sure we’re getting paid for our labor. At the SWGC, we take the same approach. Following the leadership of the Trans Justice Funding Project’s model, we make sure our Fellows are well compensated. We also prioritize hiring sex workers as staff members and as consultants for everything from artwork to language interpretation.

We try to make it as easy as possible for sex worker groups to get SWGC funding. We have a simple, bilingual (English/Spanish) application process. Groups that make it past the first round but who don’t get funded still get a $500 payment for the work of applying, and to recognize how even if we don’t fund the group, as grantmakers we are learning about critical work from their application. Applicants don’t have to be fiscally sponsored yet when they apply, and we help groups with becoming fiscally sponsored if they do get accepted. Starting in 2021, we’ll also be covering fiscal sponsorship fees for our grantees. Once funded, our two-year, general operating grants give grantees some breathing room to decide for themselves how the money should be spent. And, since many of our grantees are new to grant funding, we connect them to opportunities with other grants and funders, creating greater sustainability than we alone can provide.
Meet People Where They’re At

We try to meet our grantees and Fellows where they’re at, without judgment and with a lot of love. As the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and anti-Blackness ravaged our communities in 2020, we encouraged our grantees and Fellows to put their survival and healing above all else. We know that this movement has a lot of leadership transition, in any year but especially this one, and so we’ve supported a number of our grantees to do that sustainably and intentionally instead of in a cycle of boom, burnout, and bust. We’ve talked groups through drafting their first budgets, and connected folks to local resources and other aligned groups. We nurture and highlight the brilliance of our Fellows, as writers, communications wizards, entertainers, and philanthropic professionals. We recognize the power that comes with being funders, and so we do everything we can to be approachable, transparent, and responsible with that power.

Secure the Bag

Sex workers are some of the most naturally talented fundraising and communications professionals on earth — we know how to secure the bag. Lots of what non-sex workers find challenging about this work — talking to strangers, background research, thinking on your feet, self-promotion, asking for money, creating messaging — are actually big parts of doing sex work. At the SWGC, we honor and draw on that expertise in everything we do. For example, we break down the similarities between tailoring a fundraising ask to a specific donor and tailoring a sex work persona for a specific client. Fellows have used their skills to make pitches to major donors, and been lead organizers of our celebration parties and online fundraising campaigns.

Because of this sex worker brilliance, our annual online campaigns have raised a total of over $150,000 from over 1200 individual donors, with gifts ranging from $2 to $40,000. Thanks in big part to the Fellows’ fierce messaging, we’ve had several campaigns go viral, making millions of impressions and getting signal-boosted by celebrities. All of this external work not only supports the SWGC and our grantees, but pushes broader social justice movements to more solidly center and honor sex worker wisdom and leadership.

Resource

sex worker-led joyful resistance for the long haul.
Everything we do at the SWGC is aimed at moving us towards a vision of collective liberation for sex workers and our communities. When we think about a world where the SWGC grantees have won, we know that sex workers will have full self-determination over our own bodies and what we do with them. In this world, sex workers have uncovered lost histories of survival and resistance, and are telling our own stories on our own terms, without compromise. Sex work and drug use are no longer criminalized, police no longer exist, and reparations have been made for the racialized and gender-based violence of the criminal legal and immigration systems. We see sex workers directly impacted by oppression — like the groups the SWGC funds — resourced to show up for each other as healers, mediators, organizers, mentors, and friends.

In this liberated future, sex workers are always at the head of the table for any decisions that impact our lives and livelihoods. Groups led by BIPOC, trans, and working class sex workers have what they need because sex workers are in charge of resourcing their own communities. We envision a world where foundations have followed the lead of grassroots donors and sex worker mutual aid funds to close the funding gap. Foundations have hired sex workers as well-compensated staff, upended anti-sex worker stigma in their organizational culture and practices, and stopped funding groups that expand and intensify the criminal legal system. Wealth made off the backs of sex worker stories and labor has been redistributed back into sex worker hands, and then some.

We see the SWGC as a small but mighty project aimed at moving us towards these radical visions. Three years of resourcing some of the most radical, BIPOC- and trans-led sex worker groups in the U.S. has taught us that these are not pipe dreams. These visions are our future if we only invest in them — they are plans ripe with potential. Sex worker visions of liberation deserve our collective care and nurturing - we hope you’ll be a part of the work to nourish them for the long haul ahead.

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DREAMCASTING A LIBERATED FUTURE

No pride without abolition, no abolition without decriminalization.

Art by @goodegawd
We believe powerful movements need the ability to respond to and heal from immediate threats with flexible and responsive funding opportunities.

CAPACITY-BUILDING FUNDING

In 2019 through the Own Our Power Fund, we awarded $225,000 through 11 grants!

The Own Our Power Fund makes one and two-year capacity-building grants of up to $25,000 for projects that seek to increase the agency communities have over their organizations by supporting leadership, sustainability, and self-representation.

The fund supports communities most impacted to lead the work, aiding in developing sustainable revenue models and fundraising strategies, and harnessing the power of self-representation through community-led research, storytelling or communications.

Own Our Power Fund was made possible by DataCenter, an institution which advanced...