

# Executive summary of the research



# Sex workers know best!

An operational study on the effects of hosting  
relationships on sex worker-led programmes

# About this publication

This study report presents the findings of an operational research (qualitative and quantitative) into the advantages and disadvantages of hosting relationships for sex worker-led organisations. The research was implemented by Aidsfonds in 2018.

## Published

2018

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## Design

Aidsfonds

In partnership with and funded by:



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
Netherlands

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# Introduction

Almost everywhere in the world, sex work is criminalised and surrounded by stigma and discrimination. Sex workers are confronted with widespread violations of their human rights on a daily basis. This places sex workers in a marginalised position and makes them more vulnerable to HIV and other STIs, as well as different forms of exploitation. Evidence shows that empowerment of sex workers and sex worker-friendly services are essential in order to improve their lives and health (World Health Organization (WHO) 2013). Against this contextual backdrop, sex workers are organising to claim their rights, to stop violence, to get access to quality healthcare and to define and lead their own organisations and movements. Their struggles to organise for their rights need recognition and support in the form of community-led programming. A large part of the sex worker-led organisations and networks worldwide are hosted by (international) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society organisations, for a variety of reasons. These relationships can be challenging and demand research into the advantages and disadvantages of such hosting constructions. In 2018, Aidsfonds implemented an operational study into hosting relationships in ten countries.

# 1 The research

The key question of this study is the degree of effectiveness of hosting relationships for sex worker-led organisations to become strong and independent entities that are able to claim their rights to end violence and HIV among sex workers. Through a mixed-method study, twenty-eight directors or coordinators of host and sex worker-led organisations were interviewed. In addition, 44 sex workers took part in the survey, and 72 sex workers took part in nine focus group discussions. The study was conducted in Botswana, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Myanmar, South Africa, Uganda, Ukraine, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

## 1.1 Reasons for hosting

The study explored hosting relationships in different contexts. In all these contexts, sex work or activities associated with sex work were either criminalised or sex workers faced civil or criminal sanctions for engaging in sex work. One of the main reasons for being in a hosting relationship is the limited possibility for registration of sex worker organisations, because of bureaucratic procedures or external threats. Registration is considered critical in order to be able to access national and international donor funds, to be recognised by the government as an official entity, and to be able to open a bank account and receive funds. Weak financial management or governance was the second most mentioned reason for operating in a hosting relationship. In other situations, the hosting relationship was the result of a sex worker organisation being born out of an NGO-led programme involving sex workers.

## 2. Types of hosting relationships

After analysis of the data set, three types of hosting were identified: full, partial and fiscal hosting. A fourth type is the partnership model in which sex worker-led organisations have become independent and work together with other stakeholders in partnership. In Aidsfonds programmes, a fifth type was identified, 'a service provider that meaningfully involves sex worker communities', but this type is not included in the study as it does not involve a clear hosting relationship. In addition, the study identified a sixth type, 'nesting', during the inception phase when sex worker leadership is provided through a service provider or a national or international NGO and, after some time, a sex worker-led organisation would emerge. However, this situation was not very common, and it can be best described as a pre-stage of hosting during the inception phase. For these reasons it was not explicitly included in this study, although the results discuss how sex worker led-organisations emerged. In figure 1, the term 'space' is used to indicate that the sex worker-led organisation is being physically hosted at the host organisation's office or premises.

# Figure 1: Four types of hosting relationships

## Full hosting

The host provides a physical office space, is a fiscal conduit and programmes are implemented jointly

## Partial

The sex worker-led organisation is in its own space, but implements programmes jointly with the host, and the host is a fiscal conduit

## Fiscal

The host is only the fiscal conduit for the sex worker-led organisation. The sex worker-led organisation has its own space and implements programmes independently of the host

## Partnership

The sex worker-led organisation is autonomous and collaborates with other stakeholders, sometimes its prior host

### Types of non-hosting relationships:

#### Nesting

Different situations where sex worker groups might be nested or emerge in an organisation

A service provider meaningfully involves sex worker communities

# 3. Advantages and disadvantages of hosting relationships

This study report explores the advantages and disadvantages of each hosting relationship, as experienced by sex workers and the directors and coordinators of host organisations.

## 1. Full hosting

In this scenario, the host provides a physical office space, is a fiscal conduit and programmes are implemented jointly.

Advantages	Disadvantages
In settings where sex work is criminalised, being fully hosted might be the only way for sex worker-led organisations to secure funds.	This type of hosting is not the most effective to empower the sex worker community or to support organisational strengthening of the sex worker-led organisation.
In full hosting situations where sex worker-led organisations received their own office space, sex workers were able to meet safely in a secure location.	If a sex worker-led organisation is offered a space within the host organisation, it does not necessarily mean it is a safe space. In some cases, it limited the sex worker-led organisation's potential to run their own activities and implement their work.
Full hosting can create opportunities for sex worker-led organisations to strengthen their capacity by shadowing and mentoring staff from the host organisation.	In some cases, it was difficult for sex worker-led organisations to work independently from the host organisation, because everything was done in collaboration.
Full hosting can open up advocacy spaces and opportunities for sex worker-led organisations that were inaccessible before.	There could be competition between the host organisation and the sex worker-led organisation, especially if both organisations run sex worker programmes. This can be a serious barrier to successful hosting.
	Especially in full hosting situations, there are a number of governance challenges, including poor communication, lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities, no clear exit strategy and organisational strengthening strategy.

## 2. Partial hosting

In this scenario, the host provides a physical office space, is a fiscal conduit and programmes are implemented jointly.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>If sex worker-led organisations are unable to register, partial hosting ensures the organisation's access to donor funding.</p>	<p>In the partial hosting relationships, the host feels less involved and responsible over the safety of the sex workers.</p>
<p>Partial hosting that does not involve joint planning and implementation are often short-term relationships and not permanent constructions. Partial hosting has a more clear goal of the sex worker-led organisation becoming independent.</p>	<p>Sharing a space provides the sex worker-led organisation with opportunities to meet other organisations and donors. Since sex worker-led organisations in partial hosting have their own space, they sometimes miss out on these opportunities.</p>
<p>In all partial hosting relationships, fiscal support and capacity strengthening on financial management is provided. This remains essential for sex worker-led organisations to mobilise and manage resources.</p>	<p>In partial hosting relationships, the roles and responsibilities of the host organisations and the sex worker-led organisations are not always clear and documented.</p>
<p>Sex workers felt that having their own space was a critical step towards autonomy and independence.</p>	<p>The sex worker-led organisation needs to have staff with skills and capacity in place to implement and report on programmes.</p>

### 3. Fiscal hosting

In this scenario, the host provides the fiscal conduit for sex worker-led organisations. The sex worker-led organisations have their own space and implement their own programmes.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Fiscal hosting can provide sex worker-led organisations that are unable to register or have severe security issues due to criminalisation of sex work access to donor funds.</p>	<p>This type of hosting does not necessarily support organisational capacity strengthening or technical support in designing effective HIV programmes for sex workers. Sex worker-led organisations need to acquire funding that allows them to buy technical support, either from their fiscal host or other technical partners.</p>
<p>Sex workers are acknowledged and treated as the experts on sex worker programmes by third parties, such as fiscal hosts, donor organisations and strategic stakeholders (e.g. the government). There is no competition between the host and sex worker-led organisations to acquire funds or to gain access to the sex worker community.</p>	<p>Sex worker-led organisations often need to contribute to the administrative costs of the host organisation from their budget. The administrative costs differ per organisation, but range somewhere between 5 and 20 per cent of the total budget.</p>
<p>The relationship between the fiscal host and sex worker-led organisation is clear. The sole purpose of the relationship is fiscal sponsorship.</p>	<p>This type of hosting does not offer support on the safety and security to the sex worker-led organisation. There is no 'safety net' in place when there are raids, mobs or backlashes from the police, community members or other perpetrators.</p>
<p>The fiscal host provides support through its financial systems and governance. This is identified by sex workers as a key area in which sex worker-led organisations need support.</p>	
<p>Sex worker-led organisations can often copy the policies and procedures of their fiscal host to strengthen their own financial systems and governance.</p>	

## 4. Partnership

A partnership consists of a sex worker-led organisation that runs autonomously but strategically works together with other stakeholders, sometimes also including former host organisations.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Sex worker-led organisations are autonomous and 'have control' over their own resources, programming and organisational development.</p>	<p>Sex worker-led organisations do not have the protection of larger organisations as they implement their own work in challenging environments where sex work is criminalised or sex workers face criminal sanctions. The organisation is responsible to take measures for the safety and security of staff and the involved sex worker community.</p>
<p>Sex worker-led organisations are in direct contact with donors rather than through the fiscal host and can mobilise resources independently. To put it differently, there is no competition and power play between host and sex worker-led organisation.</p>	<p>Power dynamics still exist between the sex worker-led organisation and the sex worker community, but there might not be a host organisation to 'mediate' or to support a problem-solving process.</p>
<p>Sex worker-led organisations can identify their own allies and networks of organisations with which they want to work.</p>	<p>Donors might be hesitant to directly finance sex worker-led organisations without a host.</p>
<p>Hosts are more likely to be risk-averse than sex worker-led organisations. Being independent means sex worker-led organisations can identify their own advocacy priorities, for example decriminalisation of sex work. This is not always the case in hosting relationships, where there is sometimes a mismatch between the strategic goals of both organisations.</p>	

# 4. Recommendations

For effective hosting relationships in which sex worker-led organisations can become strong and independent entities that are able to claim their rights to end violence and HIV among sex workers, all stakeholders have to consider their part in the process. The qualitative research resulted in a set of recommendations per stakeholder.

## Recommendations for host organisations and sex worker-led organisations:

- ▶ The sex worker community should be meaningfully involved in creating and managing the hosting relationship, for example by setting parameters of what is needed from the host organisation in terms of capacity building and what strategic goals and activities will be worked on together.
- ▶ When a sex worker-led organisation starts looking for a host organisation, it is wise to have conversations with a number of potential host organisations. These can be organisations outside the specific field of sex work. Organisations that promote rights for the LGBT community or human rights may be a good fit for a host relationship.
- ▶ During the inception phase of a host relationship, both organisations need to have a conversation to see whether their organisational values correspond, for example to see whether they have the same understanding about meaningful involvement of the sex worker community.
- ▶ During the inception phase, host and sex worker-led organisations should clearly define the purpose of the hosting relationship. For example, being able to access donor funds, becoming an independent organisation, or implementing joint activities with the host organisation.
- ▶ Based on the purpose, terms of reference should be developed that will guide both organisations during the hosting practices. This document should include agreements on roles and responsibilities, on how organisations will work together, how decisions are made, who has ownership over funds and resources, how to contact donor organisations, how to manage conflicts, how the relationship will be monitored and when and how the relationship will be ended.
- ▶ Spaces can be created for learning and reflection where both host and sex worker-led organisations can reflect on the current hosting practices. Based on the identified opportunities and challenges, improvements should be planned.
- ▶ If the hosting relationship has independence as its purpose, a capacity strengthening plan needs to be developed that includes activities that are needed to succeed, for example technical support for registration.
- ▶ Donors may be asked for financial and technical support to create effective hosting relationships. If possible, integrate the activities and support needed in programme budgets and plans.
- ▶ It is advisable to develop a plan to mitigate external risks and threats, for example a safety and security plan.

## Recommendations for host organisations:

- ▶ If hosting goes beyond fiscal support, host organisations should provide technical capacity strengthening to sex worker-led organisations to become (more) autonomous. This could include capacity strengthening on governance, finance management and fundraising, for example. However, what capacities are needed and who should provide the technical support should be directed by the sex worker-led organisations.
- ▶ It is essential to share knowledge with the wider community. For example, the organisational skills and capabilities of the collective as a whole can be developed. This may involve enhancing business and management skills among group members, strengthening leadership and management or developing resource mobilisation activities. This could be done by the host organisation, but the sex worker-led organisation could also be trained with the purpose of training sex workers themselves.
- ▶ Space and resources need to be provided for staff of sex worker-led organisations to ensure that they are in control of the planning, implementation and monitoring of the organisation and its activities.
- ▶ Sex worker-led organisations can be involved in contacts with donor organisations.

## Recommendations for sex worker-led organisations:

- ▶ The terms of the hosting relationship must be clear for the host organisation, the hosted and the wider community. An exit strategy should be included in the terms of reference between both organisations.
- ▶ Awareness of the hosting relationship and practices can be raised among the sex worker community, including its purpose and the different roles and responsibilities of the host and the sex worker-led organisation.
- ▶ The sex worker community can be involved in creating and managing the hosting relationship, for example through community consultations, advisory groups and membership meetings.
- ▶ Leadership must be defined including a broad range of staff and other community members in organisational decision-making and ensuring the sharing of information across the organisation.
- ▶ It is important to make sure that leadership is nominated through a democratic and transparent process.

## Recommendations for donor organisations:

- ▶ Donor organisations can be involved in creating and managing hosting relationships. They can have regular meetings with both host and sex worker-led organisations to monitor the hosting relationship. They should be aware of power dynamics and address potential challenges, for example by organising focus group discussions with the sex worker community.
- ▶ The hosting relationship needs to have a clear purpose and clear agreements on roles and responsibilities. If funds need to be installed in a short-time period and there is no time to meaningfully set up a hosting construction, it might be most effective to create a fiscal hosting relationship.
- ▶ Donor organisations can give funding and flexibility to the host and sex worker-led organisations to meaningfully create and manage hosting relationships.
- ▶ Opportunities may be provided to include capacity building related to hosting practices in work plans and budgets.
- ▶ Donors should encourage cooperation and learning between sex worker-led organisations and networks nationally and internationally. Examples that were given include the Sex Worker Academy Africa and technical support received from the regional sex worker-led networks.

# 5. Conclusion

This study shows that whilst hosting relationships offer benefits of capacity strengthening, fiscal sponsorship and 'safety' in particularly risky environments, the evidence is mixed about whether hosting relationships enable sex worker-led organisations to become autonomous organisations. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for hosting relationships, but there are key factors that affect the effectiveness of the relationship. The key factors include meaningful involvement of sex workers, donor requirements, clarity of purpose, and autonomy over decision-making. In conclusion, meaningfully set-up hosting relationships can be an effective mechanism to support community-led initiatives, but they need to be meaningfully created, managed and exited by sex workers and for sex workers. The study results underline the need to fund sex worker-led programmes and to give back the power to the communities to lead the development and implementation of programmes that directly affect them.