



Shifting power case study:

Mama Cash

Since its inception, Mama Cash has been rooted in feminist and power-sharing values, and over the years it has continued to adjust its structures and practices to align with these values. More recently, they transitioned from more traditional grantmaking practices to participatory grantmaking in which decisions about grants are made by a committee made up of community representatives. Here we provide a high-level summary, followed by a detailed case study, of Mama Cash's experiences, learnings, and reflections.

Summary

Mama Cash supports women, girls, trans, and intersex people across the globe to advance their rights, challenge oppressive norms, and advocate for systemic justice. Its five grantmaking funds - the Resilience, Solidarity, Revolution, Radical Love, and Spark Funds - collectively provide flexible, long-term support for feminist activism across diverse contexts. Beyond financial resources, Mama Cash offers accompaniment in organizational strengthening, networking, and resource mobilization, ensuring that movements have the capacity and confidence to pursue transformative change on their own terms.

Rooted in a legacy of redistributing wealth and decision-making, Mama Cash has continually sought to align its structures and practices with **feminist and power-sharing values**. Over the years, it has intentionally diversified its leadership and staff to reflect global feminist perspectives and has embedded reflection on equity, anti-racism, and inclusion into its institutional culture. Most recently, Mama Cash has transitioned from more traditional grantmaking practices to **participatory grantmaking**, through which decision-making authority has been transferred from staff to community-based bodies. These include the ComCom (Community Committee) which leads decision-making for new grantee-partners in the Resilience Fund. This transition reflects Mama Cash's belief that those most affected by injustice are best placed to determine priorities, strategies, and the allocation of resources.

Through this transformation, Mama Cash has achieved significant **successes**. It has fully transitioned its five grantmaking portfolios to participatory grantmaking, ensuring that community activists lead funding choices across its global network. The organization continues to model core, flexible, and long-term support - often extending to ten years - enabling grantee partners to grow, adapt, and sustain movement-building work. Its leadership in feminist

philanthropy has helped keep gender justice on the philanthropic agenda and has inspired broader shifts toward trust-based and movement-led funding. These achievements have been made possible by learning from feminist movements that practice collective decision-making, and by incorporating diverse perspectives across regions. Yet, **challenges** remain: donor restrictions, compliance requirements, and regulatory barriers often limit flexibility and can inadvertently reproduce the bureaucratic burdens that participatory models seek to dismantle.

Mama Cash's experience offers several **key learnings** for organizations seeking to meaningfully shift power. First, transformation need not begin from scratch - building on existing knowledge and peer experience strengthens practice and avoids duplication. Second, change is most sustainable when it is gradual and iterative, allowing for experimentation and adaptation. Third, redistributing power requires trust, risk-taking, and a willingness to confront institutional discomfort. Finally, transparency and shared learning are vital: by openly documenting and reflecting on both successes and challenges, Mama Cash contributes to a growing collective effort to make participatory and movement-aligned philanthropy the norm rather than the exception.

Detailed case study

About Mama Cash

Mama Cash supports women, girls, trans, and intersex people in advancing their rights. They support feminist activists and movements in ensuring their voices are heard, fighting oppressive norms and practices, and advocating for just laws. Mama Cash collaborates with donors to mobilize more and better money to movements.

Quick facts

- Founded in 1983 by a group of feminists in the Netherlands. Headquartered in the Netherlands and has staff from around the world.
- Grantmaking budget in FY2024: €7,700,000
- Five grantmaking funds: Solidarity Fund - for women's funds; Resilience Fund - for feminist groups, collectives and initiatives that are founded, led, and/or run by people who belong to the communities whose rights they seek to advance; Revolution Fund - for one-off initiatives of feminist movements that respond to or create a critical or strategic opportunity for change; Radical Love Fund - for individual activists whose work is connected to feminist movements and contributes to feminist social change; and Spark

Fund - for communities of women, girls, and trans and intersex people in the Netherlands and the ABCSSS islands¹

- Mama Cash accompanies and supports grantee-partners with the following alongside funding: Organizational strengthening, networking, fundraising, and addressing specific issues identified by grantee-partners.

Over 40 years, Mama Cash has made over 7,460 direct grants to feminist movements and self-led groups of women, girls, trans, and intersex people in 160 countries.

Mama Cash's motivation for shifting power

Mama Cash was founded over four decades ago in Amsterdam by a group of lesbian feminists, sparked by one member's decision to share an inheritance rather than keep it. This act reflected their deepening awareness of systemic inequities and their commitment to redistributing wealth and power. From the outset, Mama Cash has been rooted in a critical analysis of how wealth and power are held, and in a firm dedication to social justice, gender equity, and liberation.

Over the years, Mama Cash has sustained and sharpened its political analysis, consistently reflecting on power and privilege. They have continuously adapted their internal and external systems to shift power and decision-making to those most affected by the issues - and those leading the work to address them. For example, while the organization initially operated with all staff based in the Netherlands, over time they have restructured their systems to enable hiring staff across different regions of the world. Increased representation and inclusion of diverse global feminist perspectives in their internal staff team has broadened and strengthened their political awareness and action. They also engage regularly and intentionally in learning and dialogue around equity, anti-racism, anti-ableism, and broader commitments to justice and inclusion.

As part of their ongoing journey to live out their values, Mama Cash has further deepened its commitment to shifting power through its most recent strategy. Although the organization has long prioritized funding self-led groups, grant decisions were still largely made by Mama Cash staff. Recognizing the disconnect between this practice and their belief that those most affected are best placed to decide what is needed, Mama Cash has recently embraced participatory grantmaking as their core approach to grant-making decisions.

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¹ The acronym ABCSSS refers to the six Caribbean islands that form part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands: Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten, which are autonomous countries within the Kingdom, and Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius, which are special municipalities of the Netherlands.

Mama Cash's work to shift power

Since its inception, Mama Cash has aimed to mobilize more money, in more effective ways, to resource feminist movements and groups addressing the most pressing issues facing women, girls, trans, and intersex people. Their approach is guided by a commitment to feminist principles and a recognition of the structural barriers these movements face in accessing sustained support. **Key strategies include:**

1. **Providing core, flexible, and long-term funding:** Mama Cash prioritizes grants to self-led feminist movements and groups - those led by individuals from the communities most affected by the issues they are working to address. Their funding is often multi-year, with some relationships extending an average of 10 years, allowing partners to plan, adapt, and grow on their own terms.
2. **Offering adaptive accompaniment:** In addition to funding, Mama Cash provides tailored, responsive support to grantee-partners. This includes organizational strengthening, networking and alliance-building, fundraising support, and other forms of accompaniment that respond to partners' self-identified priorities.
3. **Influencing the philanthropic sector:** Mama Cash plays an active role in advocating for increased and improved resourcing for feminist movements. They work to influence philanthropic norms and practices, urging funders to move beyond short-term, project-based grants toward more trust-based, flexible, and movement-aligned funding models.

Participatory grantmaking

Although the ethos of shared power has been integral to Mama Cash's history since its founding, for many years its grantmaking resembled traditional philanthropy, with staff reviewing applications and selecting grantees within thematic portfolios. Since 2021, Mama Cash has committed to participatory grantmaking in all its funding streams. This includes the Resilience Fund, in which new grantee-partner decisions are now made by the ComCom, a committee of feminist community activists. Alongside this governance shift, Mama Cash has also reorganised its work regionally rather than thematically, aligning more closely with feminist movements' contexts and priorities.

For Mama Cash, participatory grantmaking is about transferring final decision-making power about grants from staff to the communities they serve - women, girls, trans, and intersex people working toward a more just and joyful world. This approach -

- Shares power and recognizes communities as experts of their own realities.
- Embeds transparency, partnership, and shared responsibility - as well as feminist values - into the grantmaking process itself.
- Challenges power hierarchies that sustain inequality and oppression - those directly affected by injustice now determine priorities and funding directions.

Mama Cash's transition to participatory grantmaking has been multi-step - based on learnings from peer funds. They began by first trying out smaller participatory funding models, and after these successful pilots, Mama Cash decided to extend participatory decision-making to all its grantmaking. However, before the full transition, Mama Cash undertook nearly two years of research, consultation, and dialogue to design the process collaboratively. They engaged with other participatory funders, advisors, and stakeholders to gather insights while ensuring the process was participatory, non-extractive, and gave back to contributors. Mama Cash also facilitated extensive internal discussions to embed power-sharing and transparency across the organization, while carefully addressing operational realities such as risk management, donor restrictions, auditing, and due diligence.

Today, Mama Cash's entire grantmaking portfolio is fully participatory, including its largest fund, the Resilience Fund, which offers long-term, flexible core support. This fund enables grantee partners to set their own priorities and use resources to meet essential and strategic needs, such as staff salaries, offices, or advocacy work. Support is often sustained for up to ten years, allowing movements to deepen their capacity and resilience over time.

Areas of progress

Mama Cash's journey offers numerous powerful and instructive examples of how an institution can meaningfully shift power, resources, and decision-making to feminist movements and activists. Some important achievements or successes include the following -

- Mama Cash consistently provides **core, flexible, and long-term funding to feminist groups and movements** led by those directly affected by the issues they address. Despite constraints from source funders, they manage to sustain a broad and inclusive funding approach that centres feminist organizing across a wide range of issues and geographic contexts.
- Mama Cash plays a critical role in advocating within philanthropy. They help **keep feminist issues - including women's rights, gender equity, and reproductive justice - on the agenda**, particularly in the face of growing political and social backlash against these movements.
- Mama Cash has **fully transitioned from staff-led grant decision-making to participatory grantmaking approaches**. This transition is particularly noteworthy given the complexity of their global reach, the diverse issues they support, and the parameters sometimes set by the source funders with whom they partner.

According to Mama Cash colleagues, a couple of key factors have enabled this progress:

- **Learning from feminist movements:** Mama Cash funds movements that have long practiced horizontal, collective decision-making - in contrast to conventional hierarchical and capitalist systems. Although Mama Cash cannot fully replicate these approaches due to structural limitations, they continuously draw inspiration and guidance from the

feminist movements and groups they work with to guide their own evolution and transformation.

- **Staff and leadership from across the globe:** The presence of staff and leadership from diverse geographies within Mama Cash has allowed the organization to learn from its missteps and evolve beyond a Eurocentric or Global North-centric understanding of feminism. This has enabled a shift toward a more inclusive, intersectional approach, influenced by Global South feminists and grounded in lived realities from around the world.

Challenges along the way

Like other organizations committed to systemic change, Mama Cash has been working to overcome a range of challenges in its ongoing journey to shift power and resources to local communities and movements. These tensions reflect both the structural constraints of the broader funding ecosystem and the complexities of operating as an institution within it.

- In light of Mama Cash's global reach, it is not feasible to ensure full **representation of all constituencies and regions** within its staff or participatory grantmaking bodies. This means that sometimes key lived experiences and perspectives are not present in the decision-making spaces that they would ideally be part of.
- The **funding landscape** also remains persistently challenging. Unrestricted, flexible, and long-term funding from source funders is rare, with most available funds narrowly tied to specific regions, issues, or time-bound projects. These constraints are intensifying as parts of the philanthropic sector become more conservative or retrench in the face of political and economic pressures.
- A core tension emerges from source funders appreciating and wanting Mama Cash to reach the movements and contexts that are most underfunded - while simultaneously **increasing demands for compliance, oversight, and due diligence**. This dual pressure often compels Mama Cash to request more documentation and formal reporting (such as audits) from grantee-partners, which can undermine the principles of trust-based and movement-aligned funding that they aim to uphold.
- **Legal and financial regulations** in many of the countries where grantee-partners are based also present significant barriers. These restrictions complicate the process of transferring funds, especially to informal, unregistered, or marginalized groups, and often require navigating complex and shifting bureaucratic landscapes that impede timely and effective resource flows.

Lessons learned

Mama Cash's journey towards more values-aligned systems and processes continues to evolve, and their shift to participatory grantmaking has been a key part of this journey. Valuable learnings from Mama Cash's transition to participatory grantmaking include the following:

1. Learn from and build on existing knowledge and practice.

Mama Cash did not have to start from scratch - instead, it drew on the collective experience and wisdom of peers. This ensured they weren't "recreating the wheel" in terms of frameworks and systems, they could avoid mistakes that peers had already made and learned from, and they could build on others' best practices from experience.

2. Gradual, iterative change creates stronger foundations.

Mama Cash's shift to participatory grantmaking unfolded through a deliberate, multi-step process. Starting with small-scale pilots helped them to try out different approaches and see what works and what doesn't. Based on their learnings, they were then able to roll out participatory grantmaking across their entire grantmaking portfolio.

3. Transformative change requires trust, risk-taking, and iterative adaptation.

For Mama Cash, becoming a participatory grantmaker required openness to experimentation and the courage to transfer decision-making power to community members. The process was complex, non-linear, and demanded significant investment of time, leadership, and institutional transformation. It also necessitated redefining staff roles and responsibilities, and navigating challenges related to restricted funding and donor requirements.

4. Collective learning and transparency strengthen the field.

As interest in participatory grantmaking grows across philanthropy, Mama Cash recognizes the value of contributing openly to shared learning. They have thus chosen to intentionally and transparently document and share their evolving experiences to encourage others to embark on similar journeys. By being transparent about both challenges and successes, Mama Cash hopes to help make participatory grantmaking a widely embraced practice across the sector.

A note about this case study

The Giving for Change Alliance commissioned research on strategies to influence donors to shift power, and changes observed in donors. As part of this research, this donor organization was studied in detail as a case study. For the full research reports, please visit:

www.wildeganzen.org/giving-for-change.

Learn more about Mama Cash here - <https://www.mamacash.org/>