



In Movement Together:

Reflecting on a Decade with Mama Cash

zohra moosa, in collaboration with Susan Jessop

I love Mama Cash's origin story. In short: five women got together around a kitchen table to invent a new way to support other women, across national borders. It had never been done, so they did it.



The longer version is: **Mama Cash is an international women's fund that was founded in 1983 by five Dutch lesbian feminists.** One of them, **Marjan Sax**, had received a substantial inheritance. She was active in the women's, Left, and student movements of the day, and this sudden access to money mortified her. She even kept it secret for a while. Eventually, she and her friends decided that they could harness the wealth for revolutionary purposes, and working around a kitchen table in Amsterdam, they created the first international fund to support feminist activism, wherever it was happening. No matter how many times I hear or share this story, long version or short, it still gives me goosebumps.

The work these five set in motion nearly forty years ago continues today. Mama Cash is now a much larger and more formal organisation, but our fundamental purpose has not changed. **For four decades, Mama Cash has been resourcing feminist activists and movements worldwide to fight for and build more peaceful, just, joyful, and sustainable futures for us all.**

I became part of the story when I moved from London to Amsterdam in 2013 to become Mama Cash’s Director of Programmes. My task was to manage the team that provides grants and accompaniment to feminist groups and initiatives every year. It was a dream come true!

2013 was the year Mama Cash celebrated our 30th birthday – definitely a fun year to join the organisation. At the time, we had 35 staff members, all working out of the Amsterdam office. Our annual income then was €7 million, and our total grantmaking was €4.3 million. A few years later in 2017, after an international recruitment process, I was appointed Executive Director, the second ED who was not Dutch, and the first Muslim and woman of colour to hold the position. **Now, as we are preparing to celebrate our 40th birthday, we have a staff of 52, almost a third of whom live outside the Netherlands. We estimate that our income in 2022 will be €21.3 million, and our total grantmaking €14.1 million** (including Mama Cash’s and Red Umbrella Fund’s grantmaking, as well as payments to our CMI! partners). *[Note: figures for 2022 have not yet been audited.]*

Over the past ten years, we have worked intentionally to grow our resource base because we know that feminist movements are key drivers of transformative and lasting change of all kinds that are useful to society. **Feminist movements are also dramatically under-resourced.** These activists do their work, often at great risk to themselves, with terribly limited resources. To be honest, it’s extremely frustrating.

Moreover, feminist organisations are not only under-resourced; they are also under attack. Repressive forces, anti-rights, and ‘anti-gender’ movements target feminist and LGBTQI organisations and activists throughout the world with violence.

In 2017, Mama Cash published a report called [Standing Firm: Women- and Trans-Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space for Civil Society](#). Based on consultations with partners from countries where the civic space for organising was becoming severely restricted, our report made the case that feminist movements are like the proverbial ‘canary in the coalmine’ – they function as a barometer for approaching danger. Our conversations with partners made obvious that because they already have deep experience working in repressive contexts and navigating forces that are against them, feminist groups have relevant knowledge and experience to share with funders and other social justice movements about how to deal with restrictions on civic space. **To put it simply: we all have a lot to learn from feminist movements.**

2013			2022		
35 Netherlands-based staff	€7M Annual Income	€4.3M Grantmaking	52 Total Staff 15 Outside the Netherlands (29%)	€21.3M Annual Income	€14.1M Grantmaking

Sharing Power

Since I have been with Mama Cash, we have been committed to providing core, flexible, longer-term funding to enable partners to strengthen themselves and deepen their work. We hear from them, and learn from the evidence being collected by others, that this type of support is badly needed, hard to come by, and crucial for making lasting change.

We are proud of the support we provide, but we know that the stakes are high and that we can always do better. **Sharing power is a central tenet of our feminism, and, for many years, we talked about how we could strengthen our funding by involving activists more directly in making grantmaking decisions.** Activists are the experts on their own realities, and we wanted to make our funding even more relevant to their contexts. We decided that by shifting decisionmaking from our staff to feminist movement actors, removing our geographic and thematic restrictions, and co-creating with, rather than for, partners, we could strengthen both our accountability to feminist movements and the impact of our work.



Becoming a fully participatory grantmaker

We started out by exploring how we could become a **'participatory grantmaker'**, the term that is used in our field. We are certainly not the first to do this, but **no other funder of our size has yet undertaken this journey of shifting all their existing funds to become participatory.** This absence of a template created space to imagine and innovate according to our boldest, wildest dreams. We consulted activists and also spoke with other participatory funders, including the Disability Rights Fund, FRIDA | the Young Feminist Fund, Red Umbrella Fund (a fund by and for sex workers that Mama Cash is proud to host), and UHAI, the East Africa Sexual Health and Rights Initiative.

In 2017, we launched our first participatory fund, the Spark Fund, which was developed by and for Netherlands-based activists. Spark gave us valuable experience in learning about activist-led, participatory grantmaking, and also re-anchored us politically in the Dutch context. A couple of years later, in 2019, we launched the Solidarity Fund, a fund designed by and for other women's funds.

Last year, in 2021, after further consultations, research, and many, many hours of discussion, we were ready to take our Big Step. Mama Cash shifted all of the new grantmaking decisions for our Resilience Fund, our largest fund, from members of our staff to a Community Committee of activists (the 'COM COM') who represent the communities with which we work. (Our other, smaller funds – Radical Love, Revolution, Solidarity, and Spark – have their own participatory decisionmaking mechanisms.) **We have since been told that this makes us the largest participatory grantmaker in the world.** The Resilience Fund's COM COM also has the wisdom and experience to make us a very well informed grantmaker. With activists from around the world now engaged as decisionmakers, our grantmaking includes a cherished level of expertise on a much wider range of issues, themes, and contexts with which feminists are dealing.

Following the leadership of feminist movements

One of the innovations that we added to our new participatory approach was to ask applicants about the areas of work that they see as most in need of funding. We stepped away from organising our grantmaking by theme, and began funding any issue that feminist activists see as crucial to advancing justice in their contexts. Always international, we also decided to step away from the few geographic restrictions we still had in place. **We are now willing to make a grant anywhere in the world, so that we can back critical feminist movements wherever they are organising. These changes were driven by a desire to be responsive to the increasingly intersectional and cross-border organising that we see in feminist movements.**

One of things I've loved most about Mama Cash is how we deliberately and boldly go where we are needed, often where other funders are not yet ready to be. We prioritise working on issues that are contested and under-addressed, and that's intentional. For example, we added trans people and intersex people in 2014 and 2017, respectively, to our mission and vision statements. Over the past decade, we have seen trans- and intersex-led feminist activism growing worldwide.

Between 2016 and 2018, the number of applications we reviewed from groups led by trans people increased three-fold, while the number of applications we reviewed from intersex-led groups increased from zero to nearly 30. Trans and intersex people are doing vital organising to resist the patriarchal sex binary and speaking out against the human rights violations that they experience because of rigid gender norms. As feminists, we need to support them.

Acting as a co-creator

Mama Cash aims to be a trusted source of knowledge on the needs and priorities of feminist movements. **We believe we can only do this by centring grantee-partners as knowledge-holders, experts, co-creators, and crafters.** That's why in developing our participatory funds, reports and other key documents, and even our strategies, we have involved partners and activists in creating content, reviewing and validating our findings, and advising on framing and recommendations.

We took this approach in the 2017 Standing Firm project: activists vetted the report and created the recommendations to funders. In our strategic planning process in 2020, we commissioned activists to analyse trends they were expert on and advise us how we could responsibly respond. We also asked grantee-partners to vet our draft strategic plan before we confirmed our decisions.

Over the last two years, we set a goal of 'learning with, from, and for grantee-partners' as we established our starting position for [In Movement Together](#), our new strategic plan. We designed our benchmarking process so that participating partners with whom we co-conducted the research would also benefit from the process and generate knowledge that supported their own work. The process of centring partners' needs in the design and implementation of the baseline was a result in itself. We gained a more in-depth understanding of our partners' work than numbers can capture, while also deepening our LME practice in a way that is more aligned with our principles. **Centring our partners' needs in the design of the study took time, resources, and commitment, but it allowed us to re-frame the idea of who holds expertise, contribute to rather than extract from the work of partners, and lift up the importance of learning from activists' lived experience, as a funder.**

Mobilising resources

As a women's fund – a public foundation focused on supporting feminist movements – Mama Cash relies on our own fundraising to resource our work. Our fundraising – and our view that financial resources are political – is part of our DNA, and **the money we have raised over the years and has enabled us to grant over €84 million to feminist groups worldwide (as of 2021)**. In our 2021-2030 strategic framework, In Movement Together, we took a visioning approach and set the **bold target of raising €25 million annually by 2030**. We don't have to look far to see why it's important to set ambitious goals. Every year, we receive a high volume of eligible applications, making visible the vibrant feminist organising that is happening all over the world. And, each year, we are able to fund only a very small fraction of these requests. **In 2021, we received 1,002 eligible applications and were able to fund only 15 of them (1.5%).**

In 2022, we doubled that percentage. The major reason we were able to fund more of the requests **we received was an incredible gift from U.S. philanthropist MacKenzie Scott who awarded Mama Cash an unrestricted grant of \$20 million!** I have been on a lot of calls in my years at Mama Cash, but receiving this news was among the most memorable. A word like "transformational" does not exaggerate the impact of a gift like this which matches the scale of change that feminist movements, collectively, are achieving.

In 2020 and 2021, we also successfully renewed funding from the Dutch and Swedish governments, which accounted for €71 million in total, for Mama Cash, and our CMI! and GAGGA coalition partners. In 2021, this government funding represented 60% of our budget. All three grants are from funding pots that are not focused on women's rights. This means they are more difficult for us, as a women's rights organisation, to secure. **Receiving them shows that these governments understand the importance of feminist movements for human rights, democracy, and civil society more generally.**



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Influencing the donor community



The scale of feminist movements' needs, and also their potential to secure liberating change, is great. **In view of this, Mama Cash uses our convening power, access to funders, expertise on funding with a gender-lens, experience in funding and accompanying self-led groups, and experience as a participatory grantmaker to engage with and influence other donors to fund feminist movements.** We often do this advocacy together with other women's funds which play a critical role influencing donors and ensuring funding for feminist work.

Coming from an advocacy background, this area of Mama Cash's work has always been a passion of mine. In 2015, we made influencing the donor community (IDC) one of our three organisational strategies. Our goal was to be more ambitious and intentional about using our knowledge, experience, and credibility to influence both philanthropic donors, like private foundations, but also, and increasingly, government donors, to provide 'more and better' funding for feminist groups. We put a focus on advocating for 'more and better' funding because not only the amount, but also the quality of funding matter. IDC remains one of our now four core strategies, and since 2021 we are putting even more emphasis on 'better' resources because we know that the quality (e.g., core, longer-term, flexible) and accessibility of resources are urgent issues for feminist movements.

It can be hard to know if we are making a difference sometimes. Yet, I know that Mama Cash has been directly responsible for influencing a number of initiatives with governments (and others) that have generated significant new resources for gender equality in the Global South. For example, in 2015, feminists were dismayed when the Dutch government failed to recognise feminist, women-led, and Global South-led initiatives in its Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women (FLOW) II funding decisions.

In response, Mama Cash and others lobbied the Dutch government to address this omission. Our advocacy led to the allocation of more money at embassy levels for gender equality. Directly following that win, Mama Cash brokered the creation of Leading from the South (LFS) with women's funds and the Dutch government.

LFS was a special grant of €40 million over four years to support movement building and feminist activism in the Global South. **The Fund is managed by four Global South-based women's funds – setting an important international precedent in recognising the expertise and leadership of these women's funds and their capacity to manage significant bilateral funding.** LFS was renewed in 2020 and increased to €80 million over five years; the partnership is considered a major milestone in shifting control of resources to Global South actors and paved the way for other firsts, such as the creation of the Equality Fund.

In 2022, we launched a new influencing strategy, the result of conversations with peers and allies to help us refresh and sharpen our advocacy approach. Recognising the importance of our influencing efforts to building a robust resource base for feminist activism, we have set the goal of annually leveraging for feminist movements double what we fundraise for Mama Cash by 2030.



Building an even more feminist organisation

Governance doesn't have the sexiest ring, I admit, but I do believe that who makes decisions and how they are made matters. In 2018, Mama Cash made some important changes to how the Board of Directors and the Management Team work together. **As part of this, we developed a new consensus model that the Management Team (MT) now uses to make decisions, which ensured the Executive Director shares power with the full MT.**

Over the past year, we have recruited our first Supervisory Board member with a declared disability and our first openly trans Board member, increasing the diversity of our Board leadership. **In 2022, we achieved another ambition of mine: shifting to a co-executive leadership model to support our value of 'sharing power' – and to make us more robust and resilient.** Since July, I have been joined by Happy Mwendu Kinyili, and the two of us have been working in partnership as co-EDs. The first five months of working with this new model have convinced me that my instinct on this one was right: the decisions made by a co-ED team are more creative and stronger. And sharing executive responsibility between two people makes the work less lonely (and more fun!); this is important for an organisation that has to be sustainable for the long haul.

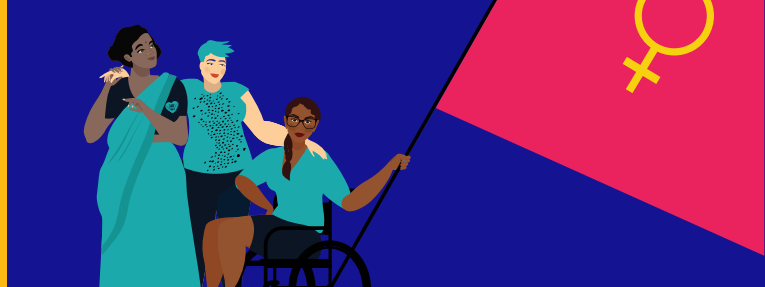
Not all of my ideas for organisational change were popular, or lasted. One which wasn't popular at first, but stuck, and has now become a treasure, is our annual staff gathering. **In 2018, we created a new multi-day annual retreat for all staff to connect, learn, play, and to conduct annual planning as one organisation, working together in real time.** Named Sashay Away after RuPaul's Drag Race (TV show), not just because 'sashay' is a synonym for an excursion, but to symbolise the hard work of breaking down layers of patriarchy through drag, creativity, and fun, the retreat was temporarily reworked as the Sashay A(ny)way during the COVID pandemic.



After two years of convening online, we were again able to gather together for four days in person in 2022. This was particularly significant for building our relationships, given not only that we had not seen each other in three years, but also that we are now a hybrid organisation, with a third of staff based outside the Netherlands, and even many Netherlands-based staff working predominantly from home.

When I was appointed ED, the Board knew that I wanted to address how Mama Cash deals with race and racism, and they knew that I take an intersectional approach. **Over the past two years, we have implemented two "JEDI" (justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion) initiatives to address disablism, and racism and white supremacy, in our daily work and to support Mama Cash to develop ourselves as a truly inclusive, anti-disablist, and anti-racist organisation.** These initiatives have included full organisational audits, tailored trainings for staff over several months, convenings with grantee-partners, intentional recruitment of new Supervisory Board members, induction modules for new staff to ensure that the learning and practice is embedded and reinforced, and action plans to take this work forward in the coming year (and beyond). For both initiatives, we intentionally invested time (12 and 15 months, respectively), resources (paid external experts for each), and energy (supporting staff to show up to multiple trainings over several months) to support us to shift ourselves and our institutional habits and practices, so that we can be the Mama Cash feminist movements need.

Navigating a global pandemic



In January 2020, I expected a challenging year. We were developing a new, ten-year strategic plan – the first time we had ever planned for a whole decade. And our two big partnerships with the Dutch government, Count Me In! and the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA), were up for renewal. When I look back now, I can only shake my head. I had no idea what we were in for in 2020 – or 2021, for that matter.

We know now that the largest global pandemic in a century shifted everything about the way that we live and work. One of the reasons I accepted the job at Mama Cash in 2013 was that I was so impressed by the shared communal lunch I participated in when I came for my interview. I remember the curiosity and amazement I felt when I learned that everyone in the office stopped to share lunch together every day. I thought if an organisation of this size is able to find time to hang out with each other for a break together every day, I want to work there. What a shock it was to shift to working almost exclusively online in 2020 and 2021.

As an organisation led by women, our gendered roles as carers made the acute period of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 exhausting; social and caring duties intensified during periods of lockdown. We did what we could to support each other as colleagues. I sent out a weekly email with the subject line “COVID and us” to all staff throughout 2020, to check in with people and to connect by sharing my own

experiences of coping with the fear and loss, as well as the unexpected gifts and discoveries, of living through a pandemic. As an institution, we provided extra resources for mental and social health, and made other adjustments to our ways of working to provide more flexibility. But the pandemic confirmed what we already knew: women have too much work and do not receive adequate support.

During the pandemic we also increased funding to grantee-partners through a specially-created, dedicated emergency response Fund, mobilised more resources to ensure we could remain viable as an organisation, and transitioned to a hybrid organisation. **In short: we worked very hard to keep our communities as safe, strong, and supported as we could.**

And as hard as it was, the pandemic was also a time of revolutionary learning. **We experienced how it is possible to entirely change the way we live and work, if we decide to.** We can decide to value care, reduce air travel, work together for the collective good, and prioritise life and relationships over profit. Virtually overnight, we completely restructured our ways of living and being. **The Black Lives Matter-movement inspired us further, showing us that we could reach even deeper for justice and liberation.** At Mama Cash, we took the moment to revise our organisational values and seed the JEDI projects.



Closing a chapter



After almost a decade at Mama Cash, I wanted to make way for new leadership as part of my personal commitment to sharing power. I decided, after reflecting and talking it over with a few trusted colleagues, that the end of 2022 was a good moment for me to step out. We [announced this intention in February](#), and we've used this year as a transition period. **I leave the organisation two years into our current ten-year plan, with a healthy financial base and solid momentum toward our ten-year goals.** Mama Cash will move forward under the capable leadership of [Happy Mwende Kinyili](#), who has been co-ED with me since July, and [Saranel Benjamin](#), who will join Happy as co-ED in January 2023.

I look back on the past decade as one of the hardest I have ever worked, but it has also been tremendously creative and meaningful. And frequently joyful and fun! I got to host a podcast with Happy that we called 'Tea with Mama Cash'. It was fun to cycle through Amsterdam's Vondelpark to sit in a real recording studio, learning to use a new platform to spread the message about our work and the the incredible activism we support. We explored so many feminist topics that interested and provoked us – everything from love, to menstruation, to decolonising feminism, to feminist futures and feminist science fiction.

In 2018, I was thrilled to welcome the Guerrilla Girls, personal heroes since I was young, to give the keynote address at our Feminist Festival on International Women's Day. The Guerrilla Girls are a collective of anonymous artist activists that have been exposing sexism, racism, and corruption in art, film, politics, and pop culture since the 1980s, and they spoke to a sold-out crowd at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum about their decades of intersectional feminist activism exposing and challenging sexism and racism in the art world.

2018 was also the year that I received another of my most memorable phone calls at Mama Cash. One morning in June, our communications lead rang to say that Beyoncé had just invited Mama Cash to her concert in Amsterdam that night. I said, 'ok, great, thanks for letting me know' nonchalantly and hung up, convinced that she was pranking me and that I could prank her back by playing it cool. Five minutes later, when I heard explosive screaming in the hallway, I realised it was no joke. That night 50 of our staff and partners were standing in the VIP section of a massive arena dancing our hearts out – invited because Mama Cash was known for our work supporting feminist activism.



I leave Mama Cash with a feeling of great pride in what we have collectively been able to contribute to women's, girls', and trans and intersex people's movements. I am honoured to have been able to meet and support activists around the world who work so hard and risk so much to create a world where we can all live free and joyful lives, in good relations with each other and the planet. I am grateful to have learned from, and worked and created with,

our grantee-partners, donors, staff, Board, allies, and other partners. While my personal chapter in Mama Cash's story is closing, I know that we will stay In Movement Together.



Zohra Moosa

zohra moosa

PHOTO CREDITS:

FRONT PAGE: zohra moosa, Photo: Julia Ruijter.

PAGE 1: Mama Cash's five founders (standing, left to right, Lida van den Broek, Patti Slegers, Dorelies Kraakman; seated, left to right: Marjan Sax, Tania Leon). Photo: Mama Cash.

PAGE 3: Mama Cash's 2016 My Body Is Mine! campaign raised awareness about bodily autonomy. Photo: Carmen Chan.

PAGE 6: zohra on a work trip to Thailand in 2014. Photo: Mama Cash.

PAGE 7: Mama Cash's management team in 2013 (from left to right: Amanda Gigler, zohra moosa, Janet Zeegers, Nicky McIntyre). Photo: Mama Cash.

PAGE 8: zohra moosa speaking at a TED Amsterdam event in 2018. Photo: Chiel Eijt

PAGE 9 (photos from top to bottom):

[top] zohra moosa and Happy Mwende Kinyili recording the Tea with Mama Cash podcast. Photo: Mama Cash.

[middle] zohra moosa and Happy Mwende Kinyili at a Spark Fund event in 2019. Photo: Mama Cash.

[bottom] zohra moosa introducing the Guerrilla Girls in 2018 at Mama Cash's Feminist Festival. Photo: Claire Bontje.

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