

A legacy of movement building: being a feminist fund in Europe

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When Mama Cash was founded in 1983, women in the Netherlands were one year away from having abortion rights legally recognised, Czech born athlete Jarmila Kratochvílová set the 800m world record, which still stands today, and Madonna released her debut album, under the same name. In 1983, for the first time British women could pass their nationality on to their children. It was an era of breaking down barriers surrounding women's sexuality, combating gender-based oppression within the family, marriage and sexuality, and of effervescent feminist movement building in the Netherlands and in many other European countries.

The European feminist movement was feeling the influence of important historical events, such as the Paris uprisings in 1968, anti-colonialist theory and politics in some places and feminist anarchist movements in others, and the Dolle Mina (Mad Mina, a women's liberation group) started in 1972 in the Netherlands. It was also a time of significant challenges and gender stereotypes. Women faced active and normalised political, social and economic discrimination.

In the early 1980's there were very few women in formal leadership positions in the Netherlands. Financial institutions doubted women's entrepreneurial skills and were reluctant to do business with them. More than three quarters of the European Parliament was made up of men (85%, 1979-1984).¹ Homosexuality was still considered an illness, and was criminalised in most European countries. Abortion was criminalised in many European countries, including Belgium, Greece, Portugal, and Romania - where the ban on abortions claimed the lives of almost 10,000 women.² But feminists were organising to achieve sexual and reproductive rights, full citizenship rights, to reform legislation on divorce, rape, including marital rape, and to claim the personal as political.³

According to many Dutch feminists active in that time, **Mama Cash captured that radical spirit and message of social change**. As founder Marjan Sax (also an active member of Dolle Mina) shared: 'What made Mama Cash special is that we were all active members of the women's movement'. Using her inheritance money, Marjan Sax together with four other lesbian activists gathered around a kitchen table in Amsterdam and created a feminist organisation which would become the first international women's fund. In 1983 Mama Cash made its first grants in the Netherlands and one year later started funding women's rights organisations in other European countries.

¹ European Parliament, 1979-2019, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/images/20190305PHT30285/20190305PHT30285_original.jpg

² It is estimated that 9,452 women died because of the demographic policy of the communist regime in Romania in the 1966 -1989 interval. VOICES OF ROMANIAN WOMEN: Perceptions of Sexuality, Reproductive Behavior, and Partner Relations during the Ceausescu Era -ADRIANA BABAN, University of Cluj, Romania & HENRY P. DAVID, Transnational Family Research Institute, Bethesda, MD.

³ Pilar Ballarin, Catherine Euler, Nicky Le Feuvre, Eeva Raevaara, Women in the History of Europe, <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/xantippa/wee/weetext/wee214.html>

In 1987, Jos Esajas, a Dutch Surinamese activist, became Mama Cash's first paid staff member. She would become the driving force for the women entrepreneurs initiative known as the [Guarantee Fund, which is still known in the Netherlands for its contributions to economic justice for women](#). Soon after, Mama Cash started raising funds from women's philanthropy groups, such as Women with Inherited Wealth (*Erfdochters*, in Dutch). Most importantly, **we funded taboo-breaking feminist groups in Europe**, such as the first openly lesbian activist group in the former socialist Eastern European states, [ŠKUC-LL](#), in Slovenia in 1989. Other grants made by Mama Cash in Europe in the 1980s included a domestic workers union in Portugal and contraception and abortion rights organising in Spain. It was the beginning of a commitment to significant and consistent support for women's rights and feminist groups and movements in Europe, and worldwide, which continues into the present.

As a woman's fund Mama Cash was revolutionary. **We encouraged new, bold, unconventional ideas, and challenged the white, Western, heterosexual norm, as well as the top-down development framework.** Our founders followed the lead of the women's and feminist movements that they were part of. Mama Cash didn't make heavy bureaucratic demands on activist groups and didn't tell other feminist activists what to do. To qualify for a grant, loan or guarantee, groups had to be run by a woman or a collective of women. **They could freely choose the best actions, and tactics** – to start a business, run a lesbian literary magazine, build a women's health centre. Mama Cash was the go-to funder for fresh, nonconformist initiatives, women's leadership, and collective, activist organising. In contrast to common practice in those times, even in the women's movement, **Mama Cash sought to embrace diversity, particularly related to sexuality, genders and race.**

In Europe, Mama Cash started funding ground-breaking groups that pioneered many of the strategies, campaigning, and organisational models still used in feminist movement building today – the creation of safe spaces for and by women, popular education, awareness raising, collective organising, to name a few. **In 1996 Mama Cash set up the Fund for Central and Eastern Europe as more and more grant requests started to reach us.** In 1999, we supported **Women on Waves** – a ship that set sail to countries that prohibited abortion, where crew provided sexual education and offered the abortion pill safely to pregnant women in international waters. At the request of local women's organisations, the abortion boat has sailed to Ireland, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, among other countries. The initiative later inspired similar projects in other parts of the world.

Starting in 2000, Mama Cash funded **StudioMobile**, a feminist media organisation using travelling video theatre to reach rural women in Georgia. Our focus on funding women's, girls', trans and intersex rights in Europe continues today with our grantmaking and accompaniment programme for groups based in Europe, Central and North Asia. Over the last 10 years (2008-2018), Mama Cash has made **320 grants for a total of more than 10 million euros to European-based feminist groups.** They are all working on issues that are under-addressed or contested in their contexts, and are led by girls, women, trans and intersex people who may also be migrant, disabled, elderly, LBQ+, factory, domestic, and sex workers.

As a feminist funder participating in the women's funding movement in Europe, Mama Cash seeks to engage with other European funders via funder networks such as [Ariadne](#), the [European Foundation Centre](#) and [EDGE Europe](#). We've embraced collaboration with allies, learning from and with peer funders, and developing collective advocacy agendas in our efforts to resource feminist activism—in Europe and beyond. Mama Cash co-founded the [European Foundation Centre Gender Equality Thematic Network](#), and was a founding member of the

[Gender Justice Initiative](#), [the With and For Girls Collective](#) and [the Red Umbrella Fund](#), to name a few. When the EU and the U.N. announced the Spotlight Initiative in 2017, through the Count Me In! consortium, Mama Cash and fellow CMI! members delivered key recommendations to European donors and decision-makers that would make such an initiative more effective in ending violence against women and girls.

As both a funder and a fundraising organisation, Mama Cash has also explored new ways to mobilise resources for European feminist movements. In our early days, all substantial gifts were donations made by women with inherited wealth. Later, from the 1990s on, we were able to access funding from governments and private foundations. In more recent years, to build the case for making funds from European donors more accessible for feminist movements, Mama Cash has been collecting data about the funding landscape for women's rights. One example of this is the study we commissioned in 2011 – [Untapped Potential](#): European Foundation Funding for Women and Girls – which showed that **only 4.8% of total grant monies were actually allocated by foundations in support of women and girls.**

Looking at the achievements and challenges of funding feminist movements more than 35 years since Mama Cash began, it's clear that these findings still hold today: women's rights funding continues to be limited. From **the average of 1,820 grant applications that we receive each year from women's rights groups, we have the funds to support merely 1.6%.** This shows the huge extension of the unmet need for funding feminist movements, and Mama Cash continues to make this case, mobilise funders and funds, and make grants.

Today, our annual grantmaking portfolio for Europe consists of 39 grants in the total value of €1,081,000 to women, girls, trans, and intersex-led groups in Europe, representing 20% of our total grantmaking budget. The particularity of Mama Cash's role as an international women's fund, based and working in Europe, also inspires us to take up new endeavours.

In 2017, we launched the **Spark portfolio, an initiative to support feminist activism in the Netherlands, and to honour the feminist movements from which we emerged.** In 2018, through Spark we funded 13 initiatives to counter racism and islamophobia, facilitate feminist art production and expression, and promote the rights of LBT (Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans), migrants and incarcerated women from the Netherlands. It's the work of groups like **FOS'TEN**, which devotes itself to transferring the knowledge and training of migrant Surinamese women, age 50 and older, and the **Climate Liberation Bloc** which advocates for a feminist, decolonial and intersectional perspective on the Dutch climate movement that give a glimpse of the vibrant Dutch and European women's rights movements.

Today, the rise of ultra-nationalism in Europe is targeting women, trans and intersex people and limiting sexual and reproductive rights, LBT rights, and freedom of speech. As shared by our European-based grantee-partners from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Russia, **feminist groups are experiencing both physical and digital insecurity, unjustified inspections, violence, surveillance, and control/limitations on international funding.** A grantee-partner from Poland recently described that more and more participants in trans people's support groups are expressing their fears of being the target of violence—more than they did just a few years back. Another group from Bulgaria reported that there is **a growing visibility of anti 'gender ideology' rhetoric** - an attempt of political forces to attack anyone that threatens patriarchal, racist, xenophobic, homophobic norms. The Hungarian government has targeted

women who are migrant, and have banned academic gender studies programs from the list of accredited degrees.

But as our history has taught us, where there are challenges, there is always brave collective action, and there are resources to be redistributed. We ask ourselves what steps we can take to counteract the forces limiting women's, girls', trans and intersex people's rights, and contribute to strengthening the European feminist movements today. There are a few. Amplifying the voices and lifting up the work of feminist groups is one of them. Mobilising resources to support self-led feminist groups fighting contested issues is another. So is building alliances that connect women, girls, trans and intersex people here, in Europe, and worldwide to achieve social change. **The real breakthrough will happen when every woman, girl, trans and intersex person has the power and resources to participate fully and equally in creating a peaceful, just and sustainable world.**

Though we may be facing a different context than in 1983, our determination and enthusiasm are still the same. Mama Cash is inspired and motivated by the feminist movements we are a part of and the groups we exist to serve. In the era of #metoo, closing space, anti-gender-ideology forces, our role as a feminist funder in Europe is still much needed.