

Anti-Sex Work Feminism and the Lived Reality of Criminalization and State Violence

Panelists: Heron Greenesmith, Melissa Gira Grant, Oni Hadiya, Tina Horn, and TS Candii

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Koki Mendis: Thank you for joining Political Research Associates today for the third of four discussions in our series on subverting state violence.

Today, we'll be discussing anti-sex work feminism and the lived reality of criminalization and state violence of U.S. sex workers. PRA, or Political Research Associates, is a social justice research and strategy center dedicated to blocking the advance of oppressive, anti-democratic movements, and to building a just and inclusive society.

Over the past four decades, PRA has researched, monitored, and publicized the agenda and strategies of the U.S. and global right, revealing the powerful intersections of Christian nationalism, White nationalism, and patriarchy. PRA produces investigative reports, articles, and tools, publishes the peer-reviewed quarterly magazine *The Public Eye*, advises social justice movement organizers, and offers expert commentary for local and national media outlets. Our core issue areas span reproductive justice, LGBTQ rights, racial and immigrant justice, civil liberties, and economic justice. This series is part of our ongoing 40th anniversary celebration in acknowledgment of 40 years spent researching and strategizing against right infiltration of the state. Join us next month on December 14th for a 40th anniversary virtual cocktail celebration and help us celebrate in style.

And now to the topic at hand. So for today's discussion, we are joined by five incredible, incisive thinkers, advocates, and practitioners working on the existential threat to sex work and the safety and livelihood of sex workers posed by the anti-sex work movement and the embrace of its rhetoric by lawmakers and progressive movements alike. We are honored to be joined by Heron Greenesmith, policy attorney and PRA senior research analyst;

journalist, author, and filmmaker Melissa Gira Grant; Oni Hadiya, exotic dancer, community organizer, single mother, and the founder and director of On Muvaz; Tina Horn, journalist, host, and producer of the Kink podcast “Why are people into that?”, creator and writer of the sci-fi sex rebel comic book series Safe Sex; and TS Candii, a leader in the movement for Black and Brown civil trans right—trans civil rights and founder of Black Trans Nation and Black Trans Nation New York.

Thank you so much to our esteemed panelists and to you, our audience for joining us today.

A couple notes: the webinar will be recorded and the recording will be distributed by email and on our website in the next few days. Audience members, feel free to introduce yourself in the chat, which I’m seeing people are doing right now. We also encourage you to use the chat to engage in the conversation, but expect that the chat should remain free from rhetoric that may be harmful to our panelists and attendees.

All right, with housekeeping out of the way, we’ll go ahead and get started. I want to start today by setting the context for this discussion. We are convening during the latter half of year two of a global pandemic that has perhaps permanently altered how we do work, acquire services, and participate in public life. As much as the U.S. workforce has moved its day-to-day operations online, online sex work and advertising remains deeply politicized, highly regulated and/or criminalized, and in a state of constant uncertainty. And, of course, COVID has added another layer of uncertainty to in-person sex work. The recent announcement and reversal by online platform OnlyFans really underscores the ongoing impacts of stigmatization and criminalization on sources of daily income and safety.

I’d like to start a discussion with an overview of how the precarious conditions of being involved in sex work have been exacerbated by our contemporary moment. How has the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the harms of working in an industry that is already violently policed, criminalized, stigmatized, and excluded from the admittedly scant protections afforded workers in other industries like workplace safety and access to health care? And I’m going to open this question to our full panel. Who’s our first taker?

Oni Hadiya: Can I ask for you to repeat the question sans context? So I got the gist of the precariousness of sex work. I need a little bit of help understanding exactly what the question was.

Koki Mendis: Sure. Great. I appreciate the follow-up. So the question really is how has COVID 19 made an industry—that is already policed already

underprotected, already excluded from workplace safety and health care—how has this pandemic made things worse? How has it really highlighted the harms that sex workers already faced prior to 2020? What has COVID-19 really shown us about this industry, that is, now is a really good time to bring both pre and current pandemic conditions into the conversation.

Oni Hadiya: OK, got you. I could definitely get it started up. So, hi, everybody. I'm Oni. My dance name is Trixie and I'm talking about stripping, so in my brain, I'm like Trixie right now. So just, you know, if I take the glasses off and put them on, I'm like switching. No, but, so I'm what we would describe, right, as a pandemic dancer. And so what I have heard, like in locker room conversations and stuff like that, is a frustration. I know, among strippers, like a frustration that people who haven't been doing the work for as long, and so like, don't really understand the game, are coming in. And the thing that makes it precarious or the thing that makes it uncomfortable for long term, for like more long term sex workers, I think, is that what you offer and what you accept can change the vibe of like a whole club. So it's like, just for something like really simple, right, like if the understanding is that a lap dance is \$20 and like a new person comes in and is now taking \$10 to \$15—especially, we know that men are cheap and what they can get for little they will—that has changed the—the vibe or the money flow of the whole club. Also, just in general, because men are fickle and that's the majority of our clientel base, that they love new faces, right? So there's also that.

And so from the other side of the table, right, like as a pandemic dancer on the other side of the table, it's been really important to me to do what I do in the organizing world, to take that same behavior to dancing. And like, I'm at a new club. I'm not—I'm not a house girl, do you know what I'm saying? Like, I've never been to this club. So it's not my job to step in and start saying, "Oh, this needs to happen, that needs to happen. This needs to happen, that needs to happen," because what I have learned about dancing in the [time] I've been doing it is that sex work and stripping cannot happen—in person sex work, rather—cannot happen without like people working together, right? And so it's really, really important for you to like, get an understanding of like what the landscape is before you just hop out there. Because you don't know whose regulars are who, you know what I'm saying, you don't know, you know, kind of what the dancers may have been doing to subvert some behavior from like, you just don't know, there's already things that are being established.

And so I think what the pandemic has done for myself, I was a sixth grade teacher before this. Like a thousand percent, right? And I also intended, like most people who they are in sex work in this moment, to start doing OnlyFans.

And I do do OnlyFans, don't get me wrong, but I found that it was just as much work as like curating curriculum, right? Like, it's just as much work. And I just like stripping better. But also, I really like ones. I didn't know that me and ones had that relationship, but apparently we do. And so I really enjoy the in-person sex work more. But the— things have been relatively oversaturated, and sex work is already so precarious and already so unstable, like with our foundations, that it feels like I've put too many things in my grocery bag, and then it broke. Because it wasn't—originally, sex work doesn't infrastructurally have the support within it. Like, this is an easy, very easy analysis: Onboarding. You can't onboard all of them people at one time. Very difficult.

What On Muvras would like to do, you know, moving forward is like, I would love to be wrap-around services, right, for sex workers. So resources for people who want to come in, resources for people who want to go out, right? But for what it's worth, and I am, you know, I'm new here. On Muvras just became a thing a couple months ago. And so, you know, so there's that. I think there's a couple of things happening: not understanding the landscape; not understanding, like, the way that you need to come in to figure out how to work with other dancers or other sex workers, period; but then lastly, sex work just has not had this like type of spotlight, this type of shine. And so we're all just kind of running around trying to figure out how to get ourselves organized because like, this wasn't a thing at first. It wasn't a thing at first and it's a thing now. And also, because there are a lot of us who quit our vanilla jobs to come here and do this, what we're also going to end up seeing is that rollback. And so like, there's just so much that we have to prepare ourselves for. I'm in it for the long haul, I'm not going back to a 9-5. But I know that there are people who will want to, and we're just going to have to figure out what a society looks like that has seen everybody's vagina.

Koki Mendis: Thank you Oni, that's such an interesting perspective to bring in, sort of the, what the lack of infrastructure means when the labor market changes too. And the conversations that are happening within the labor market for people who are working pre-pandemic and during. I think that's such a like, interesting—I mean, that shows the value, right, of speaking to people who are doing sex work because these are conversations that those of us who are not doing sex work are not aware of these conversations. And I think it really underscores where the privilege of working in an industry with infrastructure has ways to handle large influxes and outgoing labor supply that, you know, sex work doesn't have those protections in place to begin with. I think that's fabulous. TS, were you going to jump in here?

TS Candii: Yeah. Hello, everyone. My name is TS Candii, that's TS Candii with two I's because I never question myself with a Y. Thank you so much for having this, this webinar, and thank you for everyone that's joining, the panelists and the viewers.

For me, I first want to say that it's our constitutional right to make porn. So if you are, you know, on any platform where you are making porn or, you know, anything of that nature, I'm sure everybody here has watched porn. And it's our constitutional right to do porn. And so I say that to say the whole MasterCard blow up that happened, that, you know, excluded sex workers, you know, or any platforms that you know, sex workers utilize and MasterCard is accepted, they were declined. And, you know, blocked. So I really want to highlight how MasterCard has put a hindrance and have basically written us out of their policy. So what have—and I'll say this again. It's our constitutional right to make porn. And what the pandemic has done for a former sex worker like myself. While I dabble, one minute I'm former one minute I'm current, as of right now I'm former. But if the price is right, I will be back current.

And so what it has—what, what the pandemic has done for us? Well, when they were giving out the checks for—for individuals, the twelve thousand dollar check that the state was giving, what check was that? The stimulus, the stimulus check, you know, it was 100 percent written out—the stimulus checks had written us out. If you was a sex worker, or anything of that nature, you couldn't get a stimulus check. I still haven't received a stimulus check. So I wanted to say like, you know, due to federal, you know, and the individuals that's in government, our policy leaders are individuals that—our mayors, our governor and City Council, our state, our president, you know, have written us out and made sure that they made it hard for us to, you know, sell or buy sex. It had come to a point where, you know, a lot of our go-to's has been, you know, revoked, suspended and or made harder life for—like when I post on, you know, trans for rent or TS for rent or whatever, you know, and they're not even taking money no more, not taking debit cards or credit cards. They're taken bitcoin, you know, and then when it comes down to the bitcoins, it'd go from, you know, I can put \$100 in on a bitcoin and they want to take, but they're gonna leave me with eighty. So they took 20 off, you know, or whatever like that just for me to even outsource.

So I started to say that the pandemic has made, you know, sex workers, especially us black sex workers and trans sex workers, you know, it left us in a loop where we wasn't really able—we don't have a process and the tools that we used to have to screen our buyers, our clients. And due to that, you know, a lot of laws and policies have been put in place and, you know, which have revoked us, which has basically, you know, made a lot of sex work go farther,

farther underground. It had just been, you know, traumatizing because, you know, during the pandemic, you know a lot of our clients lost their job and this whole, you know, vaccination mandated, you know, that's mandated by the state of New York. For city individuals it basically pushed away a lot of individuals whose culture— who was getting paid— getting paid by the city, and due to the vaccination they no longer have a job and some of them were our clients, or whatever like that. So you know it—it prevented—it basically cut our buyers' check, which cut our check. Not only did it cut their check, but it made it more hard for us to, like I said, to screen our buyers. It made it hard for us and it made it more, a bit more easy, you know, for law enforcement to step into surveillance of, you know, to keep an eye on us. And it pushed a lot of us to street work, back to street work or whatever. And with this pandemic it just has been very traumatizing as a sex worker to really navigate through it. And with, you know, anyone who has sold sex knows that this line of work can be very dangerous, you know, and it can be very violent. And I guess I feel like I'm rambling, but I'm going to give it back.

But I just want people to take away from what I'm saying is that, you know, let's not worry about how or why someone is doing that. Let's figure out how we can make it safer, you know, for them to be able to exit the sex trade because everybody in the sex trade, you know—some are doing it by choice, some are doing it about circumstances, some are being forced, you know? So, it's just making sure that we have the tools that they took from us, that they erased from us and that they purposely made sure that we didn't have. Because, you know, the only reason why we are in this trade is because of the coin. We need to be able to pay rent. We need, you know, it's an employment. It's just like doing hair in the kitchen. So for, you know, legislators to purposely write that out, it's doing nothing but furthermore leaving us in the hands of men. Which can be, you know, it can be a good thing and it can be a bad thing, but we all know that toxic masculinity and we all know that, you know, we are— we have something— that the man wants. And you know, due to COVID, some of our prices have been cut. So you know, if we were starting to get, say, for instance, I hear because I utilized that vanilla chart, you know, to say because, you know. So from \$300, you know, so I had my clients that was like \$300 for an hour or whatever I get. This knocked me down to like 150 or \$100, you know. Then if I have my \$100 they'll probably to try to cut me down to \$50. You know, things of that nature. So it's just been a lot of cuts in the employment. But you know, our bills still stay the same. You know, our— nothing is changing in real estate or nothing is changing or put on pause. You know, our bills still run. But I feel like I'm ranting so I'm gonna give it back. Thank you.

Koki Mendis: There is no ranting when you are talking about your lived experience in this difficult time. Fully, I want to say that. I think that's an important point. I think, you know, looking at how both being excluded from stimulus checks and on the other side of things impacted by other people's low employment, lack of employment, shows the double harms that come from being systematically excluded from any kind of state protection, right? Any kind of acknowledgment, any kind of security. So I think that's a really important point, TS, that you bring into the conversation. Would anybody else like to touch on some of the things that the pandemic has highlighted? Or we can move on to the next question if there's no takers? All right.

Oni Hadiya: I just wanted to hop back to TS really quickly and just say like, I feel you in like, I don't know, I was really feeling what you're saying, as well as to add to what she says, that like sex work—or at least I can only to stripping because that's what I do— but it's a job that like you have to self-motivate in order to do it. And so like when me and my dance partners and other girls at the club was finding over the past couple of months is that like we are harder on ourselves, which makes us work harder. But there is a disconnect in our understanding of what everybody else's pockets look like.

And so we're telling ourselves like, I'm not coming to work early enough, or telling ourselves, like, I'm not dancing hard enough. I'm not good enough at pole. We're telling ourselves, like I'm not able to get this guy to spend this amount of money or whatever. And like, what I've had to— what I have had to kind of do to get myself out of that funk, and get my dance partner out of that funk, and get the other girls in the locker room out of that funk, is like, remind everybody that everybody else's economic situation changed completely. And we are the people that because, you know, we see—like literally our job is like, we see the money. It's right there. What they're tipping is what they have. They're not tipping because they don't have it.

And so— somebody in the group chat is saying institutional gaslighting and burnout—it's like right, because as we think of ourselves, as independent contractors, as we think of ourselves, as self-employed, and you know me and the majority of the women that I work with, we are black women. And so we're telling ourselves, Oh, if you're not making it dancing, it must be because you're not grinding hard enough. And what I found is that we just keep grinding harder, harder, harder, harder, harder. Me and my dance partner were going out of town, the money is the same. Doing this, doing that, spending money going to— coming back and forth to Baltimore, almost driving to West Virginia. Because we think of this as like a job where we self generate money, it's very difficult, especially when you are excluded from like, institutional economic

relief. It is very difficult to get a proper gauge of what your possibilities of your income can be because nobody around you has income. Right? So then the other—the other part of that is I can't even pay to work, I don't have no money to chip in. I can't even go to work. Like, if that is something that I have noticed in the past couple of months. I'll never forget I was dancing for this one guy and his stimulus hit in the middle of the night. He checked his account and was like, Oh y'all about to get some bills paid. And we did! When stimulus stopped coming, it got real different.

Koki Mendis: That's such an in the moment example of what stimulus checks can do, especially if applied, you know, much more fairly. I think that's such a good point, too. I mean that— that's such a design of the system, right, that individuals internalize their inability to support themselves. And we do. And that is the design so that we don't organize, so that we don't take a political action to change the system that is actually at fault. Right? So I think that's such a really important point to bring into this conversation as well, is what the impact of being excluded systematically from an economic system means for the individuals who then are also part and parcel of this 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' narrative. Thank you Oni, I think that's a great point to end this on that question with.

So having taken stock of the broader environment in which sex workers find themselves during our contemporary moment, I'd like for us to turn explicitly to the movements that are really working in concerted effort across agendas to entrench the criminalization of sex work and the exclusion of sex work well into the future. So from anti-trafficking organizations, to sex worker exclusionary feminist anti-trans movements, the Christian Right and anti-pornography crusaders, this landscape of anti-sex work organizations and movements is vast, ideologically diverse, and closely aligned in their determination to end sex work in the United States. Heron, this is a huge question, but one you've been thinking a lot about as an expert on the ways in which the agendas of regressive and anti-democratic groups overlap and amplify one another. What are the implications for such a broad range of actors aligning on this issue? What parallels do you see between anti-sex work organizing and anti-trans organizing, which is what you've been really writing for PRA in recent years? I'd love to hear you sort of take on this really big question.

Heron Greenesmith: I mean, it's enormous. I think what I would like folks to take away from today's conversation is that anti-sex work feminism is entrenched in the United States, in feminist and women's organizing and networking and

just movement building in a way that anti-trans advocacy is not compared to a place like the UK, for example, in which mainstream feminism is so solidly anti-trans that the largest women's organizations there don't speak out in the way that some large women's and feminist organizations here do—not loud enough, of course, but just comparatively, we have a stronger foundation for support for trans and non-binary folks here within feminist circles than we do for sex work. So we end up with this White feminist carceral understanding of saviorism, right? The approach to how we can support trans lives is by passing hate crimes laws and passing nondiscrimination laws instead of listening to actual folks.

You know, like Oni was saying around when you come into a conversation, when you come into a club and it's not your club. Women's and feminist organizations in the U.S. are coming into the sex work conversation without listening to anybody who's actually a sex worker and who has been doing sex work, whether it's for a couple of months or for their entire lives. And you have this... Essentially two conversations going on. You have a conversation among the women's organizations with power who are led in the majority by White upper-class older women. And then you have a conversation of sex workers, and hopefully, we are in the right space aligning with the right people in this space.

But also anti-sex work rhetoric infects all of us because we have been swimming in this anti-sex work soup for so long. You know, like Oni you were saying about the hustle, like, that itself is like—anti-capitalist rhetoric is anti-sex work rhetoric, right? That like, you know, the only reason that you're a sex worker is because you couldn't find another job, right? Or you must make so much money that the perception of the hustle, the perception of either you must have been trafficked to do it or you must be making so much money that it's worth it. Right? So we all have these infections of anti-sex work rhetoric that pervade everything that we do. And that's kind of what a little bit of what we do it at PRA, certainly what I do around anti-trans feminism. It's just making sure that as social justice organizations, we are not replicating the very systems that we are critiquing. So it's important for us to realize that our anti-sex work bias is actually pro-capitalist bias.

You know, our anti-sex work bias is male supremacy is the patriarchy infecting us and saying that it's dangerous when someone who is not a cis man, or someone who fails to meet the standards of being a correct cis man is—selling something that normally cis men get for free. And that the very act of selling is a transgression of norms that the patriarchy thinks are important. So as soon as money enters the equation, as soon as someone says “absolutely we can have sex” or “absolutely look and you can look at my boobs, I would love to

also live and survive. So if you could give me money, I will show you my boobs.” Then suddenly, the patriarchy says, “No, I have a right to see your boobs and a right to have sex with you, and you are violating my right.” And it’s really hard for us to break free from those, from that rhetoric. And it infects so much of what we do and what we say, just for me, the big, the big way in which we see that disconnect of rhetoric is around differentiating sex work from other manual labor and other labor that requires using one’s body. You know, one of the big. Anti-trans—anti sex work, feminists talking points is like, you know, no one would do that with their body. Listen, I’m not at the bottom of a coal mine. I hope that coal miners make enough money to thrive. I’m also not out in a field picking tomatoes. I notice you aren’t either. And I hope people picking tomatoes have the job support they need and massages at the end of the day from bending over. But I sure need potatoes, tomatoes and coal. It looks like you need sex, so... Where’s the money?

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Heron, I think that was such an excellent use of metaphor. Simile? Metaphor? Whatever. One of those. Well, it’s really important to, I think, to consistently root that capitalism is designed to create systems of inequality. It is designed to value some labor above others. We live in a particularly patriarchal capitalist society and so these two systems absolutely feed on one another and the people who suffer the most are people who are women, people who are non cis White men, and people who are in precarious labor positions. So I think that was right on the money and the really interesting point, too, of the difference between the anti-trans movement and the anti-sex worker movement in the US compared with the UK. I think that, I think that’s what is—what did you call it? The anti-sex work soup is the context that we live in. And it just really saturates so much of the left, too, right? Like that’s a big part of the problem is that progressive movements are anti-sex work, and in doing so, they’re just reproducing these systems of harm.

Melissa, continuing with our focus on the actors perpetuating criminalization, stigmatization, I’d really like for you to talk more about this women-led anti-sex work industry that Heron touched on and your really brilliant analysis on the role that profit and opportunity play in perpetuating this industry. So staying with the question of capital, staying with the question of labor, in your book, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, you write “rescuing sex workers is good for them, the loss of sex workers income with their gain.” The message of anti-sex work feminism says “it’s the women working against sex work where the real hard workers write, shattering glass ceilings and elevating womanhood. while the tramps lull about down below.”

We often hear labor used as the linchpin of arguments for sex workers’

rights. That sex work is work. You turn this logic on its head and identify where anti-sex work activism creates economic opportunity, becomes a source of employment, as well as identity for the women who lead these movements. Can you talk us through this argument a little, providing the much-needed perspective of who profits in the anti-trafficking anti-sex work movement?

Melissa Gira Grant: Sure. Wow, this is a staggering group of people to be sharing a space with, first of all, I'm so, so grateful and also grateful to PRA for doing this work of looking at these groups in the context of other actors who are essentially treading our democracy, like shredding our right to the public space, shredding our right to exist in some cases, because it's really hard, I think, to sort of think of feminism as being complicit in that. And where I've kind of landed is like, not so much trying to figure out, like, "are these groups feminist?" But looking back and seeing how oh, actually what they're doing right now around sex work is in a continuity with issues that feminism has been struggling with, at least as far back as the suffrage fight in the 1870s, in the 1880s.

So if you allow me to kind of go back that far for just a moment, that was sort of the first time that we see women's groups—and these are groups really fighting for suffrage or temperance or both—that take up prostitution as an issue alongside those things. And they explicitly frame it as an issue of what they call the traffic and women, or White slavery, which we're going to unpack in a moment. Thinking that sexual slavery is as important for women to attack as being disenfranchised and not having the right to vote. So those groups, like the anti-sex work groups today that have a feminist presentation, sometimes we paint them with a broad brush. You know, they're moralistic, they're conservative. But some of them did place these anti-prostitution campaigns right alongside their other progressive work, including things like expanding waged work opportunities outside the home that would largely benefit middle class and White women. Right? I mean, we're talking the 1870s, 80s, 90s White women are the ones who were maybe not working outside the home, but Black women were working outside the home. They're working inside the home.

We have a rise in the immigration of Asian-American women, which becomes a sort of moral panic that crosses into this. This idea that like all these Chinese women are coming to the United States as prostitutes, this sort of folds into this whole White slavery thing and they end up just becoming again like a kind of a soup. So you get women who are both advocating for women's economic independence, but then also aligning with these xenophobic and nativist groups to block any Asian immigration into the United States. The first anti-immigration laws we have targeted people who are believed to be sex workers who are Asian women, and then we get the more expansive anti-

immigration laws that follow that. So all of this, I see as sort of the antecedent to this moment. The rescue industry, the groups who are not just ideologically anti-sex work, but also sort of position themselves as the experts and are looking for a way to manage the lives of sex workers.

So the same kinds of people who maybe 100 years ago were doing things like opening homes for like wayward girls, now you see them in these specialized anti-prostitution courts. And they're both opportunities for women to mother women and manage women in the public sphere. And in a way, I do think it was a way for them to assert a political voice in a time where they had to couch it in this very conservative framework of what gendered work is, what's appropriate work for a woman to be doing. That's the bad work that those girls over there are doing. But this is the good work that we're doing.

And like, you know, sex workers work as a slogan. It isn't to say that sex work is good because work is good. I think sex workers, more than a lot of other people understand work is just a thing that you do. Goodness is really not coming into it, versus these kinds of feminists who I think are really all in with the idea of like, "No, work is what liberates you. Work is what defines you. We need more women in the boardroom."

You know, I don't think I would surprise anybody to learn that Sheryl Sandberg from Facebook and the book *Lean In* is incredibly anti-sex work and has supported anti-sex work laws coming from this place. So I don't know. I think of this in this larger kind of like labor context or context of capitalism. Where we are right now is what we have the social safety net, and we saw this was COVID very acutely, is shredded, right? And where we're putting our money is into these programs of what are sometimes called penal welfare or carceral feminism, where we're sort of using the criminal punishment system as a way to provide social services to people which are not free and voluntary. They're contingent on participating in this program and if you don't participate in the program, you could potentially be incarcerated or lose your children or face other consequences. Rather than sort of taking universal approaches to expand the social safety net, address our issues around housing and health care, and education. And yeah, so it can sort of seem a little perplexing. Like, "Wait a minute, why would feminists be working against that?" And it's like, "Well, feminists have had a class and race problem from the beginning, and this is the expression of this persistent problem."

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Melissa. That was so succinctly put, I think, too, the question or the foregrounding that work is not inherently good, right? No work is inherently good. And to pin any argument on that argument is already going to lead you down the wrong path, I think is a really interesting way to think

about labor in this context.

I'm going to keep us with this question of labor and sort of this question of, in interrogating this idea that sex work needs to be framed as a question of labor, a question of safe workplaces, access to government regulation and oversight, to employee protection, etcetera, to warrant advocacy, to warrant legalizing sex work and bringing it under the reach of government oversight, rather than removing sex work from state policing by decriminalizing it. Are there other frameworks rooted in care, expertise, other ways of understanding the value of human intimacy that could be considered political and movement building when we're thinking about advocating for sex work? Oni, I want to start with you as founder and director of On Muvás's Mutual Aid Fund, care is fundamental to your activism and politics. Can you start us off on thinking about how care provides a framework for how you think about the politics of sex work?

Oni Hadiya: Yes. So thank you so much. That was a nice, fancy transition to what I do. So I'm going to give a quick "what is On Muvás and why is that question relevant?" And then I try to, you know, go from there. So On Muvás is, we are graduating from a mutual aid fund into full-blown programming so I'm really, really excited about that. We got a fiscal sponsor recently. Eventually, I'll get my own status. And so we are still keeping the direct to mutual aid as a key tenant, I think is the word I'm looking for. And the reason why we do what we do, but definitely what I end up seeing was, through doing the care work, that there was so much more that needs to happen, right?

And so On Muvás is like an organ project at this point that services sex workers and moms and services moms who are sex workers, sex workers who are moms that obviously the two groups are not mutually exclusive. Laugh and say like Twitter is where yes, I'll get people missing links. Twitter is where I connect with my organizing community. Instagram is where I connect with other strippers and Facebook is where I connect with moms. So on Instagram, I'm playing in. They, you know, the guys are tipping. Whatever the case may be, but in the Facebook group, we're talking about what's the order of your bedtime routine, right? So are you a snacks, cuddle, bath person? Or are you a bath, cuddle, bedtime snack? Are we doing a story, right? And so obviously, Facebook is the place where everyone's mom is. So that's what we're doing.

But so, the reason why I started On Muvás is because I cared, and it wasn't necessarily even because I cared about other people, it's because I cared about myself. I was a sixth-grade teacher and the pandemic changed that so think about this. Imagine the dichotomy, right, of doing work that everyone sees as inherently good, right? A freaking teacher, that's up there with like the five

professions that people tell you are available, right? Like growing up, it's like you can be like a teacher, a doctor, a vet. One kid in the class may know something about being a marine biologist for, not really sure, like right, like nobody says like, "Oh yeah, you can be a program analyst over at that nonprofit." Nobody says that, right?

So I was doing work that was inherently good. But the pandemic really changed it because I found that I was in an office in my house and I was on my computer trying to teach sixth graders, which was just [makes a negative noise] right. Well, because via computer, because in middle school, you got to be there, you know what I'm saying? Middle school, you got to be in person. Computers, who knows what's going on on the other side of that screen, right? And then my daughter, she was behind me on Zoom pre-K4. If anybody has ever tried to facilitate Zoom pre-K4, you know there's not anything that you'd be interested in. And it really hit me when I heard the teacher keep telling her "unmute yourself, unmute yourself," and she's like screaming at the iPad, saying, "I don't know how" and I end up having to tell her teacher she can't read. And so even my students who are twelve, they understand that they're supposed to be transferring in-person experience to a virtual experience. A person who is at pre-K4 has never been to school before, she don't even know what's going on. She cannot read and has not figured out how to really like kind of signpost yet. So she has no idea that— she was born in 2017, she doesn't know what a megaphone looks like. What you talking about? She doesn't even know what a regular—she doesn't know a house phone. She doesn't have any. She talks to my mother on the iPad like she is basically a hologram. She has no. You know, she has no idea. Right?

And so what I found because I was also grieving, I had lost my grandmother. My family lost five people in the past year, like a lot of different families, I have been through a lot. And so it was like it came down to me honestly. And I was truly sitting in the room where I found my grandmother dead crying on Zoom because I had twenty sixth graders in front of me and a four-year-old behind me. And it was like, it stopped making sense to me. It was like, "How am I?" I'm doing this work. That's inherently good, but I am in my house grieving with my child who is grieving, and the expectation is that I become unavailable to my child so that I can be available for somebody else's kids while they too are in the house with their kids. But they are unavailable to their kids because they're supposed to be available to some other grown people, and I quit because it didn't make sense. I was doing this work that was good and I had been doing it for years and went to school for all this, I was teaching and I was supposed to be good.

But you know, I'm saying I am one of those women who being a mother is

my most important job. That is, I understand what that means and looks like four different women, whatever the case may be, but for Oni, I anticipate getting to the pearly gates and being asked, "Did you do what was asked of you?" And the only thing that was truly asked of me was to summon that life, get her in and get her through, you know what I'm saying, until your time is up. That's my most important job. And so I don't care whose child doesn't make it to the seventh grade. You shouldn't be trying to figure out why they're trying to go to seventh grade in a global pandemic anyway. So the fact that I'm sitting on this computer, my daughter from the time I wake... It was so terrible from the time I woke up to the time I went to bed, she woke up and mommy is crying, grieving because again, my grandmother lived and died in this house and we were there. You know, my mother is crying and grieving, unavailable. My mother is on Zoom all day with other people's kids, unavailable. Mommy gets off Zoom by four o'clock. Too tired, unavailable and I've never been more unavailable to my child than I was trying to teach during the pandemic.

And so it wasn't even really about other folks. It was about me and the fact that I could not look myself in the mirror any longer and tell myself that I was a good mother because I was a teacher and teachers are good. I would rather be a stripper and am and did because what dancing did was made it different from this, made it different from teaching. Teaching, I was unavailable for my, to my child when we were in person from seven a.m. to seven p.m. She was seeing me at six a.m. getting dropped off. I'm going off to be with other people's kids. Come back, pick her up, feed her, put her down. That was our life.

Now I'm up at 11, which is really a blessing because we've orchestrated some homeschool with my neighbors, though, it's lit. Up at 11 or 10 or whatever. We walk the dog, we have breakfast. She gets to watch a little TV, maybe even some cuddles if I'm in the vibe, in the mood, or whatever the case may be, she goes to homeschool. She comes home at 2. We're able to, you know, do you know whatever naptime, bedtime, whatever, she could get me to the grocery store learning she gets to... Like she's actually with me. Now that I'm a stripper, she's actually with me. I'm actually not just giving her to somebody else. And in the other piece of that is, I deal with, as a mother, you deal with this whole, "Oh, I don't get to be a... I do not be one to cuddle all the time, please. No, I don't.

You deal with this, I'm a single mom, right? And so, I don't have dick just, you know, available to me all the time. I have to go and I have to find it. And so I do need to be sexually stimulated like the Madonna-whore complex is the real thing. And it's like stripping gives me a time and a space for that. There's a time and a space where I'm going to go somewhere, take my clothes off, show someone my breasts, show someone my vagina. Do whatever. Get touched, get complimented. Get some money and then I go home. I go to work at, you know,

about 10. She is down most times, if I'm lucky, by 9:30, I come back in 2, 3, she's asleep. When she wakes up, I'm mommy again. If I, you know what I'm saying, it's like I went out my pumpkin turned into a carriage. I had a great time, clock struck twelve, went right back in the house. Back to Cinderella.

And even the other thing that I want to say is that in the Black community, there is a huge stigma around child birthing and parenting. And the reason why is because Black women have been so left without the resources that we need to be proper parents that it often falls on other Black women to raise our kids. And so, you know, it is very common in the relationship between Black mom and daughter that the conversation is "don't bring no babies in here, don't bring no babies in here" because, and it's not because we don't love babies, we do, but it's because there's already so many people who we're caring for and we need you to also be caring for someone else.

And so like, we can't afford, not just economically, but just like spatially, right? We can't afford more kids. And so I feel a shame and bringing my daughter home. I got pregnant. I barely made it off the college graduation stage, man, I graduated. I was pregnant. Two weeks! I barely made it, but I did make it. I came home with a baby, but when I came home with a baby, my mother was already living with my siblings in the house. They were already living with my grandmother. Like, I was already walking into a space where there is this multi-generational expectation of mothering, really just landing on the women. And so just me, my mom, and my grandma like really trying to figure things out.

And so the guilt of teaching, right, is that I got to drop her off to somebody every day from seven and I can't pick up until seven. And that is ruining, or that is creating a rift, between me and my godmother, between me and my mother, between me and my grandmother. Because there's this huge gap. There's this huge need that I have all the time, and there's the need of childcare because of my need to be available to capitalism.

But now that I'm dancing, I very rarely work during the week. I mean, unless I'm like grinding grinding is when I work during the week, but if not, then I just don't. So that's five days that I'm just in a career with here. I can send her to one family member one weekend, I can send her to another one another weekend. I'm on my period so I don't work on that week and then I have my little brother come out here. Even sex work has changed my relationship with my family and my relationship with myself and my understanding of my positionality in my family because I am more self-sufficient. And as a Black woman, that is my desire.

I am more self-sufficient and sex work has made me that because I now can be the type of mom that's available all day. I also can only need my mama once a month, only need my cousin once a month. Only need my brother once a

month. And I don't. And I'm not leaning on somebody to just do seven to seven, 12-hour labor. Our families do this, like how people are incarcerated and we say your family does the time with you, our families, Black women, our families do that time with us. When we have kids, somebody has to be there with us. And so figuring out what On Muvvas has really been about, figuring out what care looks like, particularly from like a Black feminist lens and then particularly from the lens of, [unknown], I'll put her in the chair. She's one of my favorite African scholars on gender, but she talks about how I know from a Western context, mothers are looked at as sexual extensions of the sex act between a mom and a dad. So the child sees the woman as like, "I'm here because you had sex with daddy," and the dad sees you as "you are here because you have sex with me."

But in African and eastern contexts, it is so much about the mother being a stand-alone figure, like a stand-alone identity. Me as a mother, as a stand-alone identity. She needs to be fed just as much as the other identities that I hold. And what On Muvvas tries to do is make sure that as many of the women that live inside of you are as many that can be fed in this space. So like if I can find space for you as a sex kitten, purr. If I can find space for you, you know what I'm saying, as mommy, cool. And sex work has really allowed me of that so much that I get to be all the women that I get to be at once.

And that is Black feminist existentialism the way that I learned it in college, it's not having to throw away a different, a different part of who I am. I love it when I'm in the club and guys are like, "Ooh, you have kids?" And I'm like, "Look at this physique. Yes, I do." I get that. And it feels good to get that. And it's about pleasure. It's about so many things. It's about pleasure, it's about care. It's about autonomy. It's about having a knowing. There are so many theories that live in care and ethics of care, but we definitely pull from Black feminism. And Toni Morrison, I read *Sula* when I was in 10th grade and I was like, "Wow, there's a person in a book who fucks and doesn't care. I would like to be her one day" and it's like, "Look at me, showing my vagina on the Internet." On her.

Koki Mendis: Oni, I can listen to you all day. I think that was the most compelling way to talk about the value of different kinds of work. I think that that is a really clear example of how there is value in sex work that is not just because it is labor, because it is part of the moving of capital from one person to another. I think that you, I mean, that was the most compelling argument that we could have made in this moment for why "sex work is work" is not enough of an argument for advocating for sex work.

Before we move on from this question, I would really love to hear from some of our other panelists. How do you think about sex work outside of this

question of labor? Tina, I'd love to hear from you. Your work is so much about sex positivity and living very sexual lives, and I would love to hear, you know, sort of how you bring that into your politics.

Tina Horn: Oh, thank you. Yes, my work is about being a slut. And I also just want to say that I really feel like I just got like the best front-row seat in the house to a show that I want to be at this afternoon. So I'm just like, honestly honored to be here.

You know, any time you are in the... Any time you do any kind of publishing or media work and you have any kind of point of view or opinion, you get called an activist and I feel like I get introduced as an activist a lot, even if I haven't included that word in my bio. And while I feel really grateful to have been involved in a lot of movement work, like everybody else on this panel has so many more activist bonafides than me, a lot of my work is more focused on, yeah, sluttiness and being a whore and being queer and being a pervert and like fantasy and storytelling.

And so I guess to respond to your question, something that I feel like I can add is thinking about what... Regulations are a pain in the fucking ass and having to like no matter, no matter what sector you're in or part of your life, we're talking about like navigating regulations, navigating like constantly shifting and changing regulations. It is, you know, is like a Kafkaesque nightmare in the truest sense of the word. It contributes to burnout. It definitely contributes to the thing that Oni was talking about earlier of like being gaslit by the state and by infrastructure and thinking "it must be me. I need to work harder. I need to be doing something different." And that shame which obviously only then benefits the oppressors who put those ideas in your head in the first place, which is what it's designed for. And so, I mean something that's coming to... OK, two things. One is that when we talk about social stratification and something that I and many other people talk about in my work is this term whorearchy, which is not whore anarchy which is its own wonderful thing, but the whore hierarchy. And simply put, it's how we map hows stigma and criminalization affects different people in the industry across different kinds of intersecting social stratification.

And to me, the thing that is most relevant back to this conversation is social mobility. So we've talked about a few things today. We've talked about people who are dabbling in sex work for the first time because of the pandemic and how they might not be forming communities partially because we're also alienated from the opportunity to grow those communities, but also because maybe, a lot of them feel like they can just kind of dip in and dip out and like not build those communities or crucially, contribute to those communities and think about

how they can leverage their privilege to contribute to those communities. And so there's the people who are doing that work and maybe who are dabbling in starting an OnlyFans for the first time, like during the pandemic, like trying to get, you know, like doing like financial domination online for the first time in the pandemic for a lot of very understandable reasons. But then like and my issue with that is when those people then contribute to the watering down of what those things mean or the whitewashing of what those things mean and don't contribute to community and don't leverage their privilege.

And then there's also the element of how... Of the stories that the media tells about sex work during the pandemic and something you see a lot in headlines is like "this mom started an OnlyFans and now makes like X amount of money per week," and the more extreme sensational the money can be framed, the more likely it is to get a headline. And as a journalist, I understand that we're living in a clickbait world and clicks pay the bills. But I think that there is also a social responsibility to the media and to journalists and to storytellers of all kinds to think about which stories are we telling and how are we framing them?

And especially since people are in our social media age, in our internet age, like sometimes only seeing headlines, there are so many different implications by this. Like, you know, "this person started an OnlyFans and now they make this much money." Like the implication is that the money is easy. The implication is that they have that social mobility to stop doing that work without it affecting... Without this stigma affecting their ability to access housing, their custody of their kids, their ability to get other jobs should they want to supplement having their OnlyFans with other noncriminalized form of work that may be these White feminists that we're talking about would ostensibly approve of.

All kinds of things, not to mention interpersonal stigma in families and with partnerships and with friends and social communities like churches. And then the other element of it, I think, and I'll end here for the moment, is anybody who has done sex work, we've talked about personas and especially in the chat, we talked about personas, we've talked about emotional labor, we've talked about fantasy making and fantasy building and yeah, adult entertainment is about fantasy, whether it's one on one or making porn like TS Candii was talking about like our inherent right to make and consume erotic stories across mediums and the potential social good of that.

Anybody who's done sex work has probably encountered a client or a patron or a consumer of some kind who's like, really invested in like the story of why you're doing the work. But they say they're invested in it, but what they actually want is like a different level of the story. So like, the best explanation

I can give for it is like having a second persona name that is your real name. So when someone asks, what's your real name? If you decide that telling them your real name and making them feel like they're special is the thing that is going to get you more money, then you just have it ready, and it doesn't seem like you were making it up because you're just like, I have this whole other shell, this other Russian nesting doll ready to go.

And you know, a lot of depending on who you are, for me, as a White cis person, as a White, cis woman, like, you know, whatever looks are projected onto me, it's like, "Oh, like I'm in college, I'm in art school and doing this for this, I'm doing this for that," right, or "I'm doing it because I'm just a sexy slut and might as well get paid for it anyway. And different people are going to learn what stories their clients want to hear. And I think that right now the story of like, "I'm just doing it because the pandemic" is a really powerful version of that real name story, that like second Russian nesting doll, it's quick and easy to understand. It could even be like a conversation starter, especially when continuing more conversation is the thing that's getting you more paid on or paid for something that is maybe preferable to other things and like, that's all well and good in the moment when you're at work.

But the bigger social implication of that is the media and the sort of like social imagination, the cultural imagination at large, telling the story, the implication being that you would—going back to just all these tropes, like you're only doing it out of desperation, like if it weren't for, like if it weren't for this, you would never do something like this, but all it's available in, you know, in the more stories that we see about, you know, the more like BuzzFeed profiles, literally BuzzFeed profiles of, you know, people who are like, "Oh, I was sexting already, so now I'm charging for it." The more like.

But like new tropes are formed and when new tropes are formed, the people who don't fit into those tropes, either in the media or for client consumption are going to have less social mobility and are, you know, people are going to be less interested in your story if your story is not as consumable. But your story not being consumable doesn't mean that you don't need to eat, that you don't need housing, that you don't need community and companionship that you, that you, that you don't deserve rights. So. So, yeah, I guess that that is what I want to contribute about that as a slut.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Tina. I think that again really shows when sex workers are not in the conversation, the conversation is so harmful, reductive, perpetuates systems that work to then perpetuate the exclusion of sex workers from their own narratives. I think it's such a sort of complex and really durable cyclical situation that we're in, and I think, you know, I'm really regretting that

this is not a three hour webinar, not that, I think, you know, everyone wants that through three hours of a webinar. But you know, there's just so much here to unpack and there's so much to... There's so much listening that I want to do.

And I think this is, I want to stay with this question of media coverage for a second. And I really think about what is the public narrative? What is the discourse in the U.S. that is defining what sex work is and isn't? And again, really parcel of this anti-sex work soup—going to stick with the soup metaphor here.

And Melissa, I'd like to talk a little bit with you as somebody who is a longtime journalist in this field who has not only written as a journalist but has rigorous analysis of journalism covering sex work and anti-sex work initiatives. And you have this wonderful insight into the ways that cultural norms and media narratives around sex work empower and aid the anti-sex work industry norms and narratives that we just heard from Tina are also growing with pandemic conditions involved, too. So I really want to talk with you about what is—and again this is another big topic—but can you tell us a little bit about how you see this cultural narrative translated from an overarching public discourse into deeply harmful bipartisan legislation like SESTA and FOSTA to enormously popular bills that purport to combat sex trafficking, but that have, by all accounts, made conditions for sex workers far less safe and in some cases made sex workers more vulnerable to the people whom this legislation claims to protect them from. So I want to stick with this question as sort of journalism and media.

Melissa Gira Grant: Yeah, yeah. I think somehow in the last year or two, I didn't quite mark the anniversary. I find we passed from sex work being the job that I did the longest in journalism being the job that I've done the longest. That's kind of wild to think of that. But yeah, I mean, part of the reason I was motivated to be a journalist is I've always been a writer. I've written about sex work for going back to when I was probably too young for people to be thinking I should be writing about it to like a high school newspaper, to like now being in this position of seeing how the media has shifted its narratives around sex work. And Tina really spoke eloquently to that.

That like even when there's these like positive stories about “look at the sex worker doing X,” I mean one, it's just like ridiculous that like a sex worker does a totally normal thing that other people do is like a story that you're a part of, you're part of a community that needs to be humanized is in itself like a terrible position to be starting from. And also, it creates the situation where everybody who doesn't fit into that neat little story is not legible, like in a real way, like not just in like “my story isn't consumable,” but like you have then to do all of

this work to sort of make people understand that you exist, how you exist, what you do matters, even if it doesn't like fit into this little box. So I think that, I mean, the reason that it's so enduring and the reason that even these positive stories seem like so limiting is because we still live in a world where anti-sex work stigma is the status quo.

Oni mentioned something in the chat about, you know, the sort of generational thing where like with millennials, like, maybe there's less sex work stigma. And I think that that's true to a degree because, but not because, like our cultural stories about sex work have changed, just so many more people are doing gig work. It's so part of the reality. All of the stuff that used to be like really isolated to sex work, like branding and emotional labor, like now this is just like blown out. Like everybody's kind of doing parts of sex work now, like the fact with the pandemic, we all had to use webcams like many people who've never cammed for their job. Like, I think that there's something about the entire economy that's trending toward aspects of sex work. But we like, the story hasn't been quite pieced together yet. Right? But that's not about like sexualization, that's about like the conditions of work are shifting really fast to like make us much more reliant on like our self presentation or branding, our ability to like have authentic connections with customers, right?

Like when I started working in the 90s is like a teenager, like, that was not part of the vernacular of having a job. Like this is a job. And now there's this kind of fake "do what you love" that sort of suffuses everything that I think just makes this super complicated. But going way back to where we started and into the heart of this question, I'm having a, I'm like having an internal debate. I'm like, "well are these anti-sex work feminists—and by extension, these reporters who spread their narratives—are they really not listening to sex workers or have they heard it? And they're like, "Yeah, that doesn't matter." Like, I actually think that that is really important to figure out.

So in the case of SESTA-FOSTA, for example, there weren't that many groups in Congress lobbying for SESTA-FOSTA. The fact that it was very popular didn't have anything to do with them being really good at lobbying. It had to do with the fact that they could lean quite effortlessly into the hatred of sex work and the hatred of sex workers and myths and fears about sex work. It was a far heavier lift for sex workers to intervene in that narrative. And the fact that they did so successfully, I think, is really important. And I'll talk more about that in a second. But yeah, like I think they've heard sex workers, particularly the really ideological anti-sex where people are obsessed with us, like if you've ever been a sex worker on Twitter talking about sex worker rights, like, you've probably interacted with these people. They know you exist. They may even know your political positions. They just don't think they matter. And in fact,

they really matter because, like, they're often defining themselves against them.

So like, we hear this whole bizarre, like you say, "sex work is work" is, you know, but that's not true because like sex work is disgusting. And it's like, "Wow, thank you for [unknown] sex workers' work all the time, everywhere that you go." Like decriminalization is language that came out of the sex worker rights movement that then the anti-sex work movement has sort of co-opted because it sounds good. People broadly support the idea of less criminalization of being less punitive, particularly right now. So it's. They're not that smart.

Like, I hate to—or they're not that strategic even or their strategy doesn't require very much of them because people in Congress, and there are some people in the chat who could testify to this personally, are not having regular meetings with sex workers. And even if they were, they still have all this stigma to fight against. And even in the case of SESTA-FOSTA, which was really like a symbolic fight in many ways, even though it had real material consequences. They didn't have to do very much to push that bill.

So what the story of SESTA-FOSTA was that they wanted to push is that Congress acted to prevent sex trafficking, and they allied with principled actors and tech companies like Facebook and Sheryl Sandberg. And there were no laws that could hold websites like Backpage accountable. And so we wrote a law and we passed it and poof, Backpage was gone. And like literally none of that is true. Like, none of those things actually happened in that order.

Like when SESTA-FOSTA was first introduced, the largest tech lobbying group, Internet Alliance, IA, were opposed to it, and it was only over months and months and months that gradually the larger tech companies came on board and Facebook being a really significant one. Did they come on board because all of a sudden their politics on sex work changed? Or did they come on board because what happened in that period, and this is like early 2018, you know, what are tech companies looking down the barrel of in Congress? Huge regulation.

You know, like the first Facebook hearings in Congress were around the same time as SESTA-FOSTA was up for debate. So one way to look at what happened is they threw sex workers under the bus to save themselves. They didn't all of a sudden develop a different analysis of trafficking. This was to save themselves. And then third, and most importantly, SESTA-FOSTA had nothing to do with the end of Backpage. But that is a meme that even journalists are sharing and spreading, and I say it's a meme because it is powerful in that way. Like it just sort of follows like pass a law website goes down. That didn't happen, SESTA-FOSTA was signed by President Trump after the seizure of Backpage. So it actually wasn't even in effect. They weren't prosecuted under it, and only

one criminal prosecution has happened under SESTA-FOSTA in the three years since it's been passed.

So what happened? Like a bunch of groups leaned into the status quo to pass a law that didn't do the thing they said it would do. It actually really didn't do much at all. And why is that important? It's important because, I think what the real point of it was for those groups is to make the social conditions of sex work more dangerous, to increase isolation, to increase stigma, to make us scared to talk to each other on the Internet. I mean, there has not been a prosecution and I don't think there will be a prosecution of individual sex workers speaking on the internet, trying to build community and keep each other safe. But that doesn't mean that sex workers building community and keeping each other safe online weren't also a casualty of SESTA-FOSTA. Does that make sense?

The fear of that prosecution was enough. The fear of that prosecution was enough for certain platforms to start erasing sex work and policing sex workers more vigorously on their platforms in ways that were probably way more than the law required of them. Right? So that's why I think that maybe these anti-sex were feminists are actually listening. And they just don't care, or they, they just don't think it's valid. I mean, I think that's a lot of it, like if you've ever had an argument with these groups and seen how they're represented in the media sort of uncritically, it's as if sex workers don't even exist. And I don't think that's because they don't they exist or they don't listen to us or they don't know where we are, but because we're just not valid. It's as simple as that. I think that, you know, they have these ideas of false consciousness, which are very like second-wave feminist, but I really do think it is like they have a certain idea of what womanhood looks like. We don't fit into it. Even if we aren't all women, it doesn't matter. They still insist we're all women. And that's like a very powerful ideal that like even as we have more positive media representations of sex work challenging that narrative, the reality is we have to work so much harder to challenge that narrative than they have ever had to work to advance it.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Melissa. I think that's a really, a really powerful point, and I guess sort of to this like bourgeois morality that's at the base of anti-sex work, anti-sex work movement. It's so accessible, right? It's so easy to tap into. And I think that your point that SESTA-FOSTA did not result in the crackdown, but rather the self-policing of platforms that does the work for the anti-sex work movement. And I think, you know, in the chat, Tina, you referred to OnlyFans and how sort of arbitrary their content regulation threats were prior to being rolled back. That it's because it can be used in sort of a variety of ways and to persecute people who are already in very marginalized positions. And I just, I'm really struck by this. I think in our marketing we called it a fatal

listening problem, right? But maybe it's not a listening problem, maybe it's a caring problem.

Again, we're coming back to care. We're coming back to humanity and how sex workers have been so systematically dehumanized. But how also there that there is like an underlying layer of morality that makes it really easy to do.

I want to actually move into kind of a win. I think what I'd like to do this next part and then move into sort of that incredible work that a lot of you are doing in the advocacy front, with some work that you just did, TS. So in an interview you did with CBC Radio earlier this year, which to me is like a great example of positive media coverage that I'm sure took a shit ton of work to get out there, you demonstrate so clearly how intersectionality becomes codified in law that then perpetuates and is perpetuated by anti-sex work rhetoric. And so you, in this interview, you have this amazing quote: "This often meant using the carceral state to remove Black bodies from space, even Black bodies that were not engaged in illegal activity so that those spaces will become more palatable for tourists and White New Yorkers. In the 1990s, as was redeployed to target the LGBTQ youth of color to discourage their presence in gentrifying neighborhoods like the West Village, they justify it as rounding up so-called undesirables." Again, this narrative of dehumanization, right?

TS, can you tell us about how the Walking While Trans policy was used to criminalize sex workers and who ultimately was most targeted by the law enforcement using, enforcing the policy, and also some of the ones that you've seen in doing this work most recently?

TS Candii: Yep. Thank you so much for highlighting that. So the Walking While Trans ban was a penal code 240.37 And 240.37 is actually the loitering for the purpose of prostitution. How we came up with the Walking While Trans name was getting all the police, getting all the police reports, all the arrest, all the data. And that was needed for this case to actually make it a case, a political case where we're seeing that the majority of the individuals arrested was trans and, you know, Black trans and Latinx trans women. And it was just simply, you know, walking down the street. It was simply, you know, we saw affidavits and police reports where, in the description of, you know, the arrest was, "Oh, well, we seeing, you know, a woman with an Adam's apple" or, you know, "wearing a sweater or pants" or "standing on the sidewalk too long" or "waving down a taxi or waving at a car" or, you know. It was a lot of profiling that was happening, that law enforcement was doing.

So they would profile us by where we were standing, where we was walking, the area we was in, and automatically assume that we was, you know, sex workers. So a lot of people, you know, just from walking down the

street and being trans and being in an area, you know, was profiled or that was sweeps done where, you know, they get thrown in the back of a patrol car or van, you know, and get taken in which will leave a lot of young New Yorkers more vulnerable to do sex work. Because at this point, you know, they didn't know nothing about sex work or they didn't even know what they were being charged for. You know, they go through the, you know, the arraignment process and HCIs, don't quote me on HCIs. I don't know if I'm saying it right, HCIs. But it's a whole court process that, you know, individuals will go through. And that's when [unknown] some of them will find out that, "oh, they was picked up off of prostitution," you know, and things of that nature.

So of getting all of that data together and obtaining a lot of individuals that was impacted by that law, and individuals that had experience of being sex workers or arrested off of Loitering for Prostitution, we also had individuals that, you know, that was Latinx, that, you know, was migrants. And, you know, they had to. Yes. Thank you so much, Melissa, for the HCIC. Yeah. So that was a lot of Latinx women had to walk down the street with their marriage license. If they was with a man enough to shout at the police, "Hey, I'm married to this person." This is not, you know, my buyer. You know, things of that nature.

One of the biggest things, the conflicts that we've been having, you know, was, you know, they was constantly complaining client with trafficker. So that was one of the biggest things that was happening with the entire, you know, individuals, you know, not the entire individuals as well rich white folks that has money, that can sit in a room and have doubts about a plate dinners and discuss and policies that's not even including us in it or their experiences, whatever like that.

So the Walking While Trans ban it was a fight. I ain't never felt like I'm I'm still unwinding, unplugging, and emotionally and mentally, you know, getting myself back together from that two-year fight, you know, and which look like, you know, going to Albany, speaking with City Council, speaking with elected officials. Thank you for your roses. Thank you for the roses. And speaking with speakers and, you know, things of that nature and all of that having to bring up, you know, individuals that are... That has been traumatized and that this record has been on their record. I mean, this case has been on a record.

We have been bringing them up to do storytelling. Storytelling helped us out a lot for this case, but it was so much work to get that storytelling because, you know, you're not going to get, you know, a previous sex worker to come up and, you know, speak about a service. I mean, speak about, you know, them being, you know, criminalized or anything of that nature without any type of, you know, coin. So, you know, we had to make sure that, you know, they had food, you know, they had money, you know, and they had the things that they

needed and they feel comfortably, you know, going up to Albany and speaking and, you know, telling a story and actually, you know, giving them a platform.

So, you know, with the Walking While Trans, we had the take that... We had some... the Walking While Trans was like a grapefruit. We're just like little grape hanging. And what we did was we was like, OK, we're not going to work on decriminalization of sex work because that's just so, you know, [unknown], let us tackle something that is a low hanging fruit and that we can knock it out the way. So, you know, with the pandemic coming, it kind of pushed us back with the Walking While Trans, because honestly, it was a two-year fight. It's also been a [unknown] in the way that the numbers, you know, because we had, you know, we had so many assembly members in so many... We have majority of the assembly and majority of the Senate that all agree. There was no opposition to the Walking While Trans. It was just that the pandemic came, it threw everything back, you know, they had bringing more bills. All the bills they brought in didn't even... The payments, anything it did not even center or was applied to sex workers.

So when we finally got the bill to the floor on February 2nd, 2021, it was amazing to see over 800 unlicensed massage parlors' cases dismissed. You know, to see the over the 10,000 cases dismissed and expunged. You know, for me if felt, I felt like I've done what I had supposed to do. You know, we'll putting, you know, being one of many that organized, that lobbied that, you know, fought for this particular law, and I thank all of them out for the hard work, the dedication, the trips to Albany, you know?

All the press conference, the op-eds, you know, it was so much that we had to put into to it to even be seen by the governor, you know, so it was just, you know, it goes to say how when our previous speaker was speaking about how others don't even have to put in that work! You know, they can just go in and [unknown], he's got a bill in his side, you know? So it just goes to show how sex workers Black or Brown, blue, yellow, or White have to work ten times as harder to be seen, to be heard, and to be acknowledged. [unknown] You know, we had to fight, and I just want to say thank you to everybody who followed, and yes the antis are taking our language because they don't have any language.

You know, the antis lied about their bill being introduced when they didn't even have a bill introduced. You know, so it was so much discredit that they've done, and they knew the only way to fight in combat against the most marginalized is to copy and plagiarize our language and utilize our language against us. So that's what's happening. They are utilizing our language against us. Every time somebody says sex work, they think about trafficking when there are so many, there's a cycle of trafficking.

And guess what? State-imposed trafficking is the number one highest-

ranking trafficking that is going on. And state-imposed trafficking looks like individuals that are in prison and working on farms for one cent, two cent, and three cent that are making our PPE they cannot even utilize it. You know, so we're trafficked by the state. And there's no consequences about that. They don't talk about the human trafficking that's done in behind the jails. You know, you get arrested, you know how many sex workers got arrested and that was in the same cell? And how much money that was for four people to be in one cell per head? You know, and to have to pay plenty of money for commissary and get thrown, you know, and actually have jobs to go out and work, but you pay pennies, literally pennies. So not pennies, but pennies, no, pennies. But I just goes to say that it, you know, it's...

The Walking While Trans, it opened up so many doors when we introduced the decriminalization of sex work into legislation. It, for me and for what I saw, it gave everybody like a woof, you know, and it made people be able to more to be able to speak about the harms and the balance that are being done. It gives people an option to speak about what resources that looks like.

You know, so it's it... I just want to say thank you to everybody who was an ally for the Walking While Trans, everybody who came forward and spoke and memos, signed any of our memos, or are just anything like, thank you all because it was you all that helped us as well. I would have liked that if we didn't have you all support and have you all there with us doing the whole fight, the Walking While Trans would not have got passed, no matter how loud I screamed down them halls of Albany and tried to knock the picture frames off the wall with my voice. You know, it was, it was the hard work all of us, and it just goes to show me that, you know, Black and Browns just got to work 20 times as harder than our White counterpart to get anything done or to even be seen and heard and still be raised with it all.

Like with the whole Walking While Trans, I saw so many people, you know, and legislators that talk about it, but don't even acknowledge those that actually put the work in, the devils on the ground have done it. They just thinking like, "Oh yeah, this is a bill that we sign" oh, like, well, the way they sounded like it was so easy, it was like, well, we know that Cuomo at the time could've been signing that bill into law. I would have liked that, so he didn't, you know, it had to literally be something dedicated to the Black community and the trans before he even put, signed it February 2nd as Black History Month. He had to do something on Black History Month to make you look good as a mayor or governor, excuse me. You know, so it was just traumatizing. But the Walking While Trans, its path its repeal, anybody that has a 240.37 on your record, if your record has not yet been expunged or still, please contact me. I can most definitely get a contact with the D.A.s or whoever just prosecuted, whoever

that, whoever your D.A. is and whichever Bureau of the state of New York, we can make sure that your record is expunged and sealed.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, TS, what a beautiful, beautiful story. Also incredibly frustrating to hear the amount of labor that has to go into getting one seriously repressive bill off the books. I mean, I think it's, it goes to show exactly what your point, right? That Black and trans, Black and Brown trans people work 20 times as hard for the same kind of voice, access, and political power. And I think that, you know, the work that you're doing, the work that you're doing Oni and On Muvas, like, this is the... These are the grassroots movements that are going to make change and that we should be throwing all of our support behind.

And I think that there's also a really important point here that those of us who have different levels of access and privilege and voice need to be changing these national narratives like anti-sex work should not be the status quo rhetoric, right? Like this is this is something progressive movements. This is something the left needs to pull progressive movements on is changing that status-quo so that that work isn't required. I think that, I mean, your story is beautiful. I think that it's such a win.

Again, if I can keep you all here for another 90 minutes, I would do it but I think that my team might explode if I require that. But this is such an incredible conversation. I can't thank you enough for being here with us today. If we want to do a part two, I would love that.

And this is, you know, Heron just called for links, we're also going to be sending out an email with all of this aggregated, all of the links from the chat right now aggregated, any content that you all want to send me as panelist after the fact. We'll do social media so that there's more access because people clearly want to be here for these stories, too, right?

Just thank, you I think this has been one of the most empowering conversations that I've had a privilege to be in. I think that this is such an important area of political work, not just for PRA, but for the larger movement that we're a part of. And it's clear that the people, the wrong people are in the room, right? The stories that we need to be hearing are not being heard. And so I think that today has been such a great example of where we can move these conversations and the power in doing so.

So thank you all. Thank you. Thank you. Oni, TS, Melissa, Tina, Heron, y'all are a bunch of badasses. This is such a great conversation.