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From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is *Trending Globally*-- a bi-weekly podcast bridging research, politics, and policy to address today's critical global challenges. I'm your host Sarah Baldwin.

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Today, we're joined by Elena Shih, a sociologist and assistant professor of American Studies at Brown University. She's also a faculty fellow at the University's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice and a post-doctoral research associate in International and Public Affairs at the Watson Institute.

She's currently working on a book manuscript, titled, *Fair Trade Freedom-- Moral and Political Economies of Human Trafficking Rescue in China, Thailand, and the United States*. The book looks at the way anti-trafficking efforts actually perpetuate female subordination.

Our other guest is Bella Robinson, director of the Rhode Island Chapter of Coyote. Coyote was founded in 1973 as an advocacy group that works to repeal prostitution laws and end the stigma associated with sex work. Bella herself is both a sex worker and a sex workers' rights activist.

She was married at 17 to a 41-year-old man who turned out to be abusive and alcoholic. She left him at 18 and worked for minimum wage while living out of her car. While she was walking to a gas station one day, she was arrested for prostitution by an undercover cop. Welcome both of you. Thanks for being here today.

Thanks, Sarah.

So we're talking today about a very busy intersection, it seems to me. And it's the intersection of many things, including gender and gender identity and race and class and criminalization. And like many busy intersections, it can be a dangerous place.

But first, I have to say that as I was researching this topic, a few things jumped out at me. And one is that there is a lot of conflating of terms going on. So I thought we should start with sort of parsing what some of these terms means.

And the most basic example seems to be the way people use sex work and sex trafficking interchangeably. So what's the difference? And why is it important to understand that difference?

I would love to answer this question by situating this moment within two historical moments. So I really trace the emergence of contemporary anti-trafficking efforts to the year 2000 when the United Nations passed a Palermo Protocol on trafficking within the United States in the same year passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

And both of these together encouraged all UN member states to streamline issues of sex work and prostitution, gender migration, and labor into this framework of human trafficking. The reason that's been so difficult, as it's been implemented across different nation states in the past 16 years, is that that's mean something very, very different on the local level.

So what do you mean? How does that play out?

So within the United States, anti-trafficking politics have been really embroiled within conservative evangelical Christian funding but also, general ideologies. And what that's meant is that the majority of early anti-trafficking efforts focused on the abolition of prostitution but framed that within the language around punishing human trafficking.

And this tension has actually existed for decades. And that's the other historical moment that I'd love to gesture to, which was that the term "sex work" was actually coined in the late 1970s by a sex worker and sex worker activist Carol Leigh, and in that earlier movement advocated for sex work and sexual commerce to be considered a kind of labor like any other kind of job as a way to recognize it not as something that was monolithically victimizing, but something that had alongside all different kinds of work its opportunities but also its constraints.

But what we've seen now, given the really global excitement around human trafficking and stopping human trafficking is that most efforts-- and when you talk about human trafficking, people are thinking about sex trafficking. And then people are really making that jump to equate all forms of sex work with trafficking.

And yet, there is a huge swath of people who engage in this voluntarily as a profession as a way to pay the rent and feed their kids.

Actually, I'll weigh in with this that there's a great youth study that interviewed 1,000 youths between 16 and 24 in six cities. 97% of them said that they don't have pimps that they teach each other how to find clients while avoiding the police.

But the anti-prostitution lobby is selling the story that there's all these evil traffickers and exploiters out there. And when you think about the impact of criminalization, when people can't report they're being exploited or abused or robbed or raped, that's what sets the whole stage to allow the abuse to continue.

So the way I look at this is their anti-prostitution lobby framed this as, let's save the children, because these evil traffickers, because they knew it wouldn't be real popular to just hate on sex workers. And people might say, that's really bad. We shouldn't do that.

Like, blaming the victim.

Right. And even as far as the rescue industry goes, when they tag along with law enforcement for stings, first of all, they break trust. They're violating people's due process rights, because they don't have an attorney present.

But I've heard that they become hostile to the so-called victim or sex worker when they won't play into that they're a victim. And they won't name their pimp or trafficker because there isn't one. And well, if they reach out for services, they kind of want to dump them in a public shelter. And then they kind of treat them like a whore anyway.

What is that? What do you mean?

Well, it's, like, well, if you claim you're a victim, we can wash the shame off you. And you can be a proper woman again. I read an article where they were rescuing these women. Or the women just wanted to exit. And they joined this church. And the next thing the church was complaining that these women were marrying men in their church in their congregation. [LAUGHS]

So a double standard.

Yes, very much so.

Interesting. OK, so it is really important to know the difference. And I also, I kept seeing sex work and sexual violence being sort of implicitly the same thing. Or there's an assumption of violence or victimization in sex work. And I also saw that many sex workers defend not only their choice but their clients.

And they say, yes, these terrible stories of predatory-- mostly men-- who murder women or hurt-- prostitutes are true and deserve our attention. But most of my clients have nothing to do with that and with the profile that we see in awareness-raising campaign.

So but at the same time, there are some really disturbing statistics of violence that's perpetrated against sex workers, especially black and Latino and immigrant and transgender people not only by clients but by police. So feel free to weigh in. But just some numbers that I thought we could discuss is that globally, sex workers have a 45 to 75% chance of experiencing sexual violence at some point in their careers.

In India, 70% of sex workers in a survey reported being beaten by the police. In Russia and Eastern Europe, 42% of sex workers reported physical violence from the police. In New York, 80% of street-based sex workers report

experience in violence.

In 2004, and probably, the rate is higher in 2016 or 2015. The homicide rate for female sex workers was estimated to be 204 per 100,000 people, which is a higher occupational mortality rate than any other group of women ever studied. So I think it's really important that we understand why this is happening.

This doesn't happen in other professions. It's not because you're having sex or that you also should assume that violence will be done to you. And I wonder what is the role of stigma and criminalization, because since you're advocating for decriminalization, there must be reason. And I'm wondering if violence is part of that reason. But stigma too, makes these lives less worthy?

I'll weigh in. The impact as stigma has taught society that these women get what they deserve that they're bad women. And we look at with the Green River killer, he says, I knew I could kill as many prostitutes as I wanted because no one was going to care.

That was in Washington state?

Yes.

And he killed-- what-- 71?

I think. And then we just had the-- Ripper. Or what was it-- the Grim Reaper killer in Los Angeles that killed 200 black women. And no one cared. And now there's another one up in Alaska. We had Heather in West Virginia last year who actually shot the serial killer with his own gun that was choking her out.

She was not charged with the crime. And they found the list of eight or nine local escorts in his pocket. And he had a whole kill kit in the car. So she became our hero. She saved many of us.

So when we look at the impact, not only are sex workers being abused by police, like, off-duty cops that are like the Oklahoma officer who just preyed on people he thought had probation problems or drug issues. But in many places, police officers are allowed to engage in sexual conduct and then arrest you for prostitution. This even happens with minors.

Wait, why is that OK? Why is--

It's not OK. Well, there's a program that's building steam in the West. It started in Seattle. It's called LEAD Law Enforcement Diversion. And they started in Seattle for drug offenders. And there's \$32 million on the table in California to promote lead to go after sex workers.

So basically, a police officer will go after a sex worker and say, we won't arrest you if you'll go see this case manager. Now, ironically, the case managers have nothing other than the list of public shelters and food banks, just like you can get by dialing 211.

So in the legislature hearing, several people testified that over half the youth interviewed had said the police were exploiting them for sex under threat of arrest. And one of them said, I was 17. And I got in this guy's car. And he let me fondle him for five minutes. And then he pulls out a badge and arrest me. And if he's a police officer among a minor, isn't that not supposed to happen?

So these legislatures insisted that they were going to use good officers who wouldn't do that. And they started passing out money at the table. And they totally ignored the abuse. So, yeah, it's a big problem. And then society and the media has a big play in this. The media shows street prostitution as half naked women looking through car windows.

And statistics say, only about 15% of all USA sex workers are working the streets anymore. Then they published their names and addresses, as if that's going to be helpful to these women that are so-called victims. They're really pushed to the edges of society. And what I see is, they have no sense of community. And that's a huge problem.

So when I look at what we did for LGBT rights, they had to get decriminalized. They had to get hate crime and discrimination legislation. And even then, it took a couple more decades to change social perception. And those are the steps that we hope to take to getting sex worker rights.

I think that the focus on violence outside of the different context of work that it is a part of is a troubling part of this movement. So I think all of those statistics that you listed-- what they do do is, they generate this moral panic against sex that absolutely demands the end and the abolition of sex work or prostitution.

But what it doesn't do is ask sex workers for what strategies they would have to end this violence. And when people ask for decriminalization, I think that, ultimately, it will decrease violence for two possible or more reasons. The two that I'm thinking it off the top of my head-- one, it allows sex workers to report instances of violence or abuse that occur on the job or even off the job.

Bill and I are working on a study in Rhode Island. We've interviewed 62 female sex workers to date and found that 65% of them are not willing to report instances of violence to the police, because they feel they will be arrested or further criminalized.

--because in 2009, prostitution became a criminal again. So Elena, can you tell us a little bit more about that? Is that a grant you're working on?

Yeah, this research was funded by the American Sociological Association's Community Action Research Grant, which supports research that appears in academic institution with a community-based organization.

So here at Brown University, in particular, the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice where I run a human trafficking research cluster, reached out to Coyote, Rhode Island. And we've worked together incorporating undergrad, graduate students, members of the community in doing this work collaboratively.

Yes. And you remember how we caught the Craigslist killer in 2009. He went to Boston and killed a girl. And he came to Rhode Island and tried to rob a sex worker. And she dialed 9-1-1 because she was decriminalized. And they caught him within 24 hours before he could hurt anyone else.

But the state's response to that was, let's criminalize everyone, because the state police insisted they could not investigate human trafficking without criminalizing us. And it's kind of ironic, cause let's take a strip club, for example. Cops can go into strip clubs and ask anyone for their ID. They can hand out cards and say, hey, ladies, if you have any problems, feel free to call us.

So why wouldn't they be able to do that with spas or any other venture of sex workers they could? And in Canada, they do what they call knock and talks. It kind of freaks the sex worker out, because the cop books an appointment. He shows up. And he says, oh, I'm just here to make sure you don't have a pimp, and you're OK. And he leaves his card. But it's much better than being arrested.

It is, yeah. I would--

But it does freak them out. It's kind of traumatic.

Well, speaking of that, I mean, I'm going to sort of stay on that topic but also bring in another dimension which is the rescue narrative. I want to believe that general public can be forgiven for buying a piece of jewelry that says, made by a former sex worker in China.

I want to believe that the intention is good. But there is a lot of, I guess, ignorance that goes with that. And like, it's a show of support for what you think is a story with a happy ending, I would say. But Elena, your research has revealed a very different story.

And locally, Bella, I think you mentioned, recently, an event at which police officers were recognized as heroes of community policing. But that community policing was actually cracking down on 15 massage parlors in Rhode Island.

So why is that sort of operation harmful to the women who worked in them? And then maybe, Elena, you can talk

about what really goes on when one's rescued. And I'm using a lot of air quotes.

Over the last two years, I've mapped out domestic violence shelters, project renew-- all these people that are taking money for sex trafficking. And I found out that none of them want any training from sex workers. None of them want to allow us to participate. They want to label us all as victims.

Some of them get up and talk about how we're all drug addicts. And they out people in media reports. And it's his shame-based thing. But where the solution lies. And it's not only will Decrim help sex workers maintain their human rights and reduce violence and trafficking, we need to start looking at the issues of why people do sex work.

People usually do sex work to escape poverty. And in Rhode Island, rent has doubled in most places since 2009. So where do people live on \$10 an hour? And a huge majority of sex workers are single moms with kids. And sex work allows them a flexible schedule. They could be soccer moms, pick their kids up every day at 3:00 and spend time with their families.

But no one's looking at solutions of-- I see the shelter system keeps people displaced. For the amount of money they get and the few people they actually take in, they're not doing anything to empower these people and get them stable so they can go on to other things.

So I think while we need to allow people to exit if they want or not exit and support them if they don't want to exit, we need to create more services or more opportunities for people. Now, the trafficking narrative focuses on women. But the Youth Report in New York said 53% of those youth were male. I had no clue that was that many.

There's tons of LGBT youth that have been kicked out when I found out Rhode Island had 320 unlicensed foster homes. So when they do rescue one of these teens, they're dumped back into these unlicensed foster homes. And then day one, Rhode Island gets up and talks about, oh, these kids just want love. And they're dumb. That's why they running away.

And I'm, like, no one's asking the kids why they're running away. And I'm sure some of them are incorrigible. But I'm sure some of them been abused. And I see that is really problematic that all the funding and all the programs that are supposed to be for sex workers were called trafficking. And they exclude sex workers, unless they're willing to play the victim and put the blue dress on and tell their sad story.

But you are for law enforcement when it comes to underage.

Absolutely. Minors should be involved. If I had my way, I'd say, no one under 21. But I don't think they should be in trouble. But there's situations, like a lot of the stings they do in Arizona, obviously on an escort site, you have to list

that you're at least 18.

Well, the man would call an ad. At the last minute, she would say, it would be a police decoy. Would you pick me up a pack of Marlboro's because you know I'm only 16. Well, he shows up with cash in hand. And then he's charged with a child sex crime. And quite frankly, I don't feel bad for him because he knew. She told him she was underage.

It's different when you're with someone 20 that you thought was 22. And you find out they're 17. But again, I think that a lot of this funding that's going to trafficking NGOs that create jobs for them. So 80% or 90% of this money goes to their employee salaries, fundraising.

And it's kind of like, throwing pennies at trafficking victims or homeless people, there's not much left. Those funding should be shifted over to Youth Services and to support our youth. And then we would have less kids. So even though I didn't get into sex work till I was 18, I was incorrigible. I used to run away a lot. I grew up in foster care in Florida.

And I got this from my friend, Tara Burnside. She framed it. We have a new name for an old problem. The old problem is runaway youth and problem kids-- throwaway kids. And the new term is sex trafficking to frame them all under.

And even in Rhode Island since 2000-- they've only rescued about a dozen teenagers. So they have violated the human rights and put everyone's safety at risk. And when they did operation cross country last year in Detroit, they rescued one teenager that had been rescued during this operation the summer before.

And again, they go back into the system. They run away again, or they're back on the street. And there doesn't seem to be a solution or any empowerment by model.

Elena, what are you going to say?

I was thinking to advocate for the rights and safety of sex workers is an uphill battle, because of how strong the anti-trafficking movement is, and how pervasive efforts to abolish prostitution are. But to advocate for sex worker rights does not mean that we don't believe that there are cases where people are working in really dangerous exploitative conditions, both in sex and nonsexual forms of labor.

And so I think to focus on these extreme sensationalist cases of sexual violence does a huge disservice to the lives of working class people more generally. And so in the research that I'm doing for my book, I look at this growing industry of victim repair for primarily for sex workers and former sex workers.

And what organizations around the world are doing is offering sex workers jobs in manual labor positions, making everything from jewelry, as you mentioned, to tea to cashmere scarves, to tote bags. And I'm sure you've seen many. And the listeners have seen many of these things and will continue to see these things as the holiday season encroaches. And you're right. They offer a really feel good solution to what we understand is this problem of sexual slavery.

Right, it feels feminist. It feels very pro-woman.

Absolutely. But I think the harder question is, why do we necessarily advocate the replacement of manual labor, and, in these cases, low wage, menial jobs with sex work? And what undergirds that is a real moral conviction that we have as feminists as American feminists that sexual labor is something beyond our imagination but that maybe low wage manual labor is something more dignified or acceptable.

But I've talked to hundreds of sex workers who have left jobs in sex work and now work in these reform programs and find that they have far less autonomy than they did when they worked as sex workers. But now, they work a very, very rigid 40, 50-hour work week.

And again, most importantly, they're paid at the local minimum wage, which is often a third to a fifth of what they formerly earned as sex workers. So I think the larger question here is, why there is so much focus on replacing sexual labor with different forms of manual labor, which, ultimately, all they're doing is trying to promote the exit from sex work.

And I wanted to bring that back to an earlier question that you'd raised. Does this stigma exist in other industries? Or does this level of violence or harm exist in other industries? And I think that we never ask questions about-- or there isn't such a potent movement around working rights in other occupations.

So yes, there are movements that are demanding a living wage here in retail outlets, like places like Walmart. But you don't see people trying to transform Walmart workers into jewelry makers when there are just as many horrifying documented instances of abuse, financial insecurity that exists across a smattering of, like, agricultural, garment, construction industries.

So I would say that, yes, this kind of abuse and unequal access to fair, safe working conditions exists in so many different labor sectors. And sex work needs to be understood alongside all those.

So why do you think that is? What is it that electrifies people around sex work?

I think that's a lot of it is, because when I look at it 30 years ago, I was ashamed that I was a sex worker because society told me it should be ashamed that I didn't feel shame.

Well, Elena, you move forward 30 years. And we're living in a hookup culture where young people often are hooking up with strangers for free casually on a regular basis. And I thought, wait a minute. And they want to judge me? Oh, no.

So I think because casual sex is not stigmatized as so much, and there's not so much slut shaming going on, that loses the focus. But I think a lot of these feminists have in their head, no one would choose this. Well, no one chooses to be homeless and have to panhandle either.

Well, and it's not very feminist to assume that a woman doesn't have agency. It's very condescending. It starts in a good, perhaps, knee jerk place. But, I mean, correct me if I'm wrong. But I--

But one of the reasons I look at it, like, groups like now, now, in the '70s, passed a proposal for Decrim for prostitutes because they realized most of them were single moms. And, yet, they were one of the first woman's groups that got on the trafficking bandwagon with equality now.

And these people, like, I get a lot of a society and a lot of people think they're doing good. Oh, it's a great campaign. Everyone wants to save kids. There's the people at the top of the tier that know exactly the harm they're creating and the violence that they're creating. And they don't care.

And I see part of it is that some of them are scared they're not going to be able to control their men that they think that themselves as a woman is going to be less valuable on the job market. Or this idea that your virtue is something of value, I think, we're starting to see that's kind of silly. And I think a lot of that.

So I look at it is that they're promoting violence, because when you're trying to abolish anyone, if you're trying to abolish any population, it's a form of violence. And that's why I think, like I said, that they made it into, let's save the children. They're all victims, because that's the nicer way to do it. And that's the way they can get support. But I think they have more money than God. They're well-organized.

And they is the anti-trafficking NGOs?

And this is globally, like, and then a man will start in Sweden. The next thing within a week, it's around the whole globe. I mean, they're so well-organized, they're leaving us in the dust right now.

So talk to us a little bit about the Nordic approach or the Swedish solution.

The Nordic approach started in the '90s where they decided-- cause in Sweden back then, buying and selling was both legal. And they decided to reduce prostitution and make sure everyone understood this wasn't socially acceptable that they were only going to criminalize the clients.

There's a lot of bad data that says, oh, it's great now. Well, what they didn't factor in is street prostitution went down because the internet came up. It was around the '90s, OK. So immediately, almost all the sex workers went inside. Second of all, sex workers are saying that they're being evicted. The police stopped there in-calls. They can still steal all their wages.

A couple years ago, there was justice for Jasmine. Jasmine was a Swedish sex worker that had exited, was in grad school. And they gave her kids to the abusive ex who had drug and abuse charges, because she wasn't ashamed that she used to do sex work. And she fought for four years for visitation rights.

And she finally got in the meeting with the social worker and the ex and the kids. And he stabbed her to death in front of the children and the social workers. And she hadn't even broken a law, because she worked under a legalized system. So we see that not only did it not empower the women, it created more stigma in sex workers in Sweden say, that they don't trust the place. They're facing more violence.

The number of sex workers in Sweden has not gone down. But you'll see things where they only go and count the street workers. And then they'll claim that it's gone down, but it hasn't. And then you wondered this too. So if we had a magical wand that we could wave, make all the clients fall off the face of the earth, why is no one concerned that these women now have no income to pay their rent and feed their kids?

And no one's coming up with a new plan other than making jewelry for minimum wage or working at Walmart as an alternative--

That's a really good point, yeah. Mm-hmm.

And I think it's scary that "end demand" is really aggressively landing in Rhode Island.

Can you talk just to define "end demand"?

"End demand" is the turn towards criminalizing clients and Johns while protecting the innocence and victimhood of sex workers. So it's really something that is born out of a lot of the anti-trafficking campaigns that say, OK, now, it's taboo to say that we're going to arrest sex workers. We're just going to protect them. We're going to send them to rehabilitation.

And then what we're going to do is arrest the Johns. And you can look through the Providence Journal now. They are in the habit and the practice of publishing the names and photos of Johns that they are arresting as part of this naming and shaming campaign, which is dangerous, because like all other forms of policing, the majority of these things are happening in immigrant, people of color, working class communities.

--really vulnerable.

[INAUDIBLE]

Absolutely.

Vulnerable populations.

And so what you have is a roster of black and brown faces who are already deeply, deeply criminalized. And you have, like, flaunting their faces around as another alleged success of the anti-trafficking movement.

Well, I'm glad you brought up "end demand," because these campaigns are really visible. I'm can't imagine that they're not effective that they are shaping public opinion. Have I missed a countervailing campaign for decriminalization or for sex worker pride? Or what's the counter balance?

It's been real hard, because the media loves to ignore us. I can set up press releases to, like, 20 news people. And they don't open them. They don't return them. Our event won't be on Channel 10 News, OK, even though they're well aware of it. So we're ignored. And I see that they like to talk about us in the media, talk at us. But they won't allow us in the conversation.

They won't allow a public debate, because a public debate would mean that I could poke tons of holes in their narrative and show how much harm it is causing. So if they use the media to talk at me, they don't have to be accountable. And they're not called out on what they're doing.

I think another way in which sex workers and the sex worker activist's voice has been excluded from the anti-trafficking narrative happens through things like funding. So for many years, organizations working around the globe were forbidden from receiving anti-trafficking funding if they would not sign the anti-prostitution pledge, which signaled that we would not support sex work, which on the basis of the fact that it was illegal in these places.

So what it meant was that if you had an organization that had great connections to sex workers because they were on the street on the daily doing outreach providing condoms, they wouldn't be eligible for anti-trafficking funding, because to the US government, it looked like they were promoting an illegal trade.

Oh, I see.

And it was struck down as unconstitutional 10 years later.

I mean, because the profession is illegal, they have been excluded from numerous international conferences--

International HIV AIDS Conference when it was held in the United States-- international sex workers who are excluded from coming.

I mean, it's such an important topic. I just read that in Louisiana, you can be arrested, I think, for prostitution if you're carrying condoms?

Yes, that's called condom for evidence law. It also happens in New York and in San Francisco.

So if you're scared out of carrying condoms, that's the spread of HIV as probable.

Right. And when you tell people this, like in what rule does this promote public health or safety? It doesn't. I read an article just a month or two ago where 19-year-old Latina woman, very pretty, grocery shopping with her 50-year-old father. And she comes out of the grocery store. And there's five cops, because someone has called it a tip that she might be a victim of human trafficking, because she's a pretty sexy woman, and she's with an older man.

And in Ohio, they're forcing cosmetologists to take trafficking training to get a cosmetology license, like, because my pimp is going to take me and force me to do my nails. But I will be too scared to ask you for help. So what they're doing is they're getting the public to snitch on sex workers.

Mm-hmm, yeah, there's a lot of-- almost hysteria right--

Yeah. And I think the hysteria becomes dangerous when it marshals civilians into this arena of rescuing victims of trafficking, of stopping, just stopping trafficking in ways in which you wouldn't do in other criminal justice concerns.

Except that it reminds me of choice, right? So there are people who wouldn't have an abortion themselves. So they believe in legislating that no one can. And whereas, you might not want to be a sex worker. You might not want to pay for sex. So you must not let anyone else. It's not dissimilar in my mind.

Yeah, absolutely. And I think two things-- you've raised so many good points about advice to give to people who really, really mean well, because I think there's so many people who are really compelled by all the news radio reports of the explosion of human trafficking and the government telling us and Hollywood movies telling us.

They don't really know what to do. And I would say the first is to be very, very cautious of civilian efforts to go out and identify human trafficking victims within your own neighborhood-- be very cautious about our own-- question our own imperatives to want to save other people.

Rather than take to the streets and try to report on what you might see, tap into local sex worker-- migrant worker rights organizations and see what they're already doing, because there's a likelihood that they have a better

sense of what's going on in the community than you seeing this one-off what you think is a child prostitute walking with a client. You have no idea what that relationship is.

I'm the second in the area of buying fair trade items or slave free goods-- just ask a couple of more questions. So ask, what do people have to give up? Ask the hard questions-- what do people have to give up when they come to work at these rehabilitation programs.

And then also, what does your organization do to assist the health and safety of people who decide to stay in sex work? I think those are simple questions that don't often get asked because we want to be polite. Everybody's trying to do good.

And if you're at like a ethical consumption holiday party, you don't really want to ask questions that put the organization on the spot. But they're really important for generating more transparency and accountability in these efforts.

I read an article a couple of years ago-- I think it was last year, actually-- that the trafficking NGO is the biggest growth industry since the 2009 recession other than low-paying jobs. So basically if you say, you're against sex trafficking, which means you want to abolish prostitution and hate on whores, the government will throw tons of money at you.

Now, I totally get why a lot of the HIV foundations can't come out and say, we support Decrim, because they do lose their funding. And they wouldn't be able to do HIV testing and provide services like that that are needed in the communities. But when these other places are doing it-- and I've seen this from coast to coast.

I mean, you can pretty much call 2-1-1 from any city and get a list of shelters and food banks. Let's pretend I'm a victim. And I've been exploited horribly. And I call the police. And whether they catch the bad guy or not, what services are offered to me?

They offer me in a bed in a public shelter. So I'm supposed to leave my nice apartment. If I have a family or pets, I'm supposed to just leave them behind and go live in the shelter and work at Walmart and probably never be able to leave the shelter, because I'll never be able to afford rent or anything else. So it just--

It's a nonsolution.

--misguided. And I've heard, even some students over in Connecticut said that they joined a local NGO. And they said, we want to help. And all they said, all we need is fundraising. That's all you can do. And they said, we raised, like, \$1,500. But we think they're a scam. And we don't want to give it to them. And so we gave them a list of a couple good organizations that they could donate to.

Mm-hmm. Well, speaking of things that we can do, December 17 is International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers. I wonder if you have any actions planned or any events in Rhode Island?

Yes, we do. We'll be having an event at Prism's on Saturday, December 17 between 1:00 and 3:00 PM. Their address is 669 Elmwood Avenue. They're in Suite B, Providence, Rhode Island. We'll have food, community. We'll be having a candlelight vigil.

And we'll be reading a statement talking about stigma, and how sex workers need to start networking in their community and building community with other local community.

And I'll just add that Prism was so kind and generous to open up their space to us. But these missions actually align really well. So Prism, the Providence use student movement. They have actively backed a campaign advocating the passing of the Community Safety Act, which is calling for drastic reforms to different kinds of policing and surveillance in immigrant, people of color communities across Providence.

And I think when we talk about sex worker rights and violence that sex workers experience, this is also an issue that is fundamentally about policing and changing our holding accountable different forms of policing and how they're actually harming communities. So I think that it's a nice marriage between coyote and Prism and one that gestures to the importance of passing the CSA and other measures like it.

Absolutely. Are you optimistic about decriminalization in Rhode Island?

I don't think it's going to happen any time soon. But I'm also a board member of ESPLERP, the Erotic Service Provider Legal Education and Research Project. They're based in California. We have filed a constitutional challenge in California called *ESPLERP versus Gascon*.

And it's now in the Ninth District Court of Appeals, Lambda Legal, the ACLU. We have awesome amicus briefs. Even Children of the Night that have worked with the youth involved in the sex trade for over 20 years gets that criminalization's causing most of this. And it's not helping support anyone.

So I'm kind of glad we're already in the appeals court, because who knows what's going to happen when they put new judges in. I wanted to do it in Rhode Island. I thought we had a better shot because we had already been decriminalized. The case was funded by small private donations. We have ongoing legal costs. We've already put over \$60,000.

So I fundraised for them for three years. We also developed a union, the Erotic Service Provider Union. And we send sex workers to a union labor training every summer. I've attended two of the UALE Conference in Regina

Polk. And when my mentor told me you need to learn to organize, I shook my head and said, what do you mean?

And I didn't know how these people were going to treat us. And I can say, most of them were really supportive. Even if they didn't approve, they were, at least, polite. But I found, like, with the groups with Prism I'm excited, because most people aren't, well, kind to us. And they'll be nice to our face. And they'll talk to us.

They'll even let me volunteer if I keep showing up, and I won't go away. I don't promote prostitution. I don't teach people how to be prostitutes. I don't even work with other sex workers, because I know I could be accused of all these things.

I'm optimistic. Tell me-- tell me-- give us reason to hope.

I'm relatively new to the area. So I moved to Providence three years ago. And I was sort of surprised of the relatively late arrival of the anti-trafficking industrial complex. And that's another one of Carol Leigh's--

That's a great--

--wonderful terms-- the relatively late arrival of that complex to Providence. So, for instance, I mentioned that a lot of anti-trafficking programs start as early as the year 2000. Providence just got funding this past summer for its first anti-trafficking shelter.

And so there is the opportunity since this money through the victims of crime act is coming in now to begin to learn from all of the lessons that have been compiled over the past nearly two decades of reasons and ways in which the anti-trafficking movements failed.

And so we have a chance to build a movement here in Providence that doesn't replicate what we know that has been damaging regarding stigma, regarding prostitution politics within anti-trafficking.

I have visions of a halfway house where current sex workers can live. Of course, you can't bring your clients there and do anything illegal on the property. But especially for street-based workers that you have a safe place to come home at the end of the day and a key to your own room. And when you open up your room, all your things are still going to be there.

And we could have community gardens. And we can do community projects. And those that want to exit, we can help them with that. We can do more prison outreach. Those are the kind of things I want to see happening. But they would need to be run by sex workers.

So Bella, I find you incredibly good natured, given all the things you've talked about today. And all the things that you're facing. And all the battles that you're waging. I think it's amazing.

Thank you.

I wish you a lot of luck with all this. And everybody come down to Prysm on December 17 at 1:00. Thank you both so much for being here today.

Thank you for having us, Sarah.

Thank you, Watson.

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