



The Activist Files Episode 36: Decriminalize Sex Work - Freedom Dreams of Black Trans Liberation

Alex Webster:

Hello, and welcome to the Activist Files, the Center for Constitutional Rights podcast. I'm Alex Webster, and I'm here with TS Candii, the executive director of Black Trans Nation, lead organizer on the Walking While Trans Ban repeal victory and a member of the Decrim NY steering committee. I'm also here with Paris Jackson, a member of the Sex Worker Advisory Committee of Women with a Vision in New Orleans, Louisiana.

maya finoh:

And I'm maya finoh, the Advocacy Associate at CCR, and I'll be co-moderating this podcast episode. I'm really excited to be in conversation with all of y'all. I'm wondering if you could both explain for our listeners why decriminalization is the approach that best supports people working in the sex trades, including people subjected to violence that's often described as trafficking.

Paris Jackson:

So decrim versus legalization is a primary argument that I have with a lot of people. Legalization of sex work leads to more regulations of workers' conditions. For example, brothels in Nevada where there's like a lot of regulations of what kind of people can work. So decrim makes it safe for all sex workers to a low barred entry for work.

TS Candii:

That and most definitely, and I could reckon with everything that Paris just mentioned. And so being a little more broader on these models, and the differences, the decriminalization – before decriminalization of sex work, which is the removal of criminal penalties for sex trade participants that does not involve trafficking, including selling sex, buying sex, living with, working with, and associating with sex workers. Who is criminalized? No one. Under committed balance or exploitation. Examples: like the New Zealand and Australian models. The legalization is a strict regulation of what is considered illegal versus legal. Sex work often equals licenses and registrations requirements. Who is criminalized? Trans women, migrants, street-based workers, and many more. Examples: Germany and Netherlands. The

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Nordic model, which is forward slash the End Demand forward slash the Equality model forward slash that is, trying to steal our language – now they're calling themselves the full decrim. But they don't have any policies that have been introduced and that the state, so therefore I don't have anything to say to them. But in reference to there, what that is, it seeks to end the sex trade by ending demand for it, which is the removal of criminal penalties for selling sex, but maintains or increases criminal penalties for buying sex, and living with, working with, and associating with sex workers, including sex workers themselves. Who is criminalized? Everyone. Including sex workers themselves. Models, examples: Sweden, France, and Ireland.

Alex Webster:

Yeah. I really appreciate this bit of context that you all have provided for us. And I think that a lot of our listeners will especially appreciate some of the models that TS Candii you've laid out and maybe hearing these for the first time. So I hope that folks who are listening will go and continue to look into some of these models, whether it's decriminalization or legalization or the last model that TS Candii mentioned. But I want to, um, to shift gears a little bit and, uh, really reflect on just sort of the growing visibility of sex worker organizing and visibility around the sex trades more generally. I think that as people who are in community with folks or people who they themselves are participating in sex trades, we know that it is a long history rooted in practices of mutual aid and support, particularly in Black and Brown communities, queer and trans communities and other people who have been marginalized or denied access to really critical resources. Can you talk a little bit about, you know, both that mutual aid practice and maybe talk about what type of support networks you all are involved in through the Sex Worker Advisory Committee or Decrim NY to provide safety and support people who are in the sex trades.

TS Candii:

I guess I could just jump in and reference up here in the state of New York. What we have done was the Black Mutual Aid Fund, which is the BMAI. We had got over \$400,000 from the OSF where we was able to, during the COVID-19, we was able to reach out to all Black folks, I was one of the payees over the trans sex workers, the Black sex workers, the Black migrants, uh trans folks. So I had a pot of money that I was able to distribute out, like over, you know, like a \$100,000 to individuals that are Black and, you know, that were in sex work. And it was like they was able to get up to \$200, but you had individuals that were asking for like \$800, \$1000 that we were honoring. Because, you know, our cap was \$1000. So we was able to do that as well as a lot of mutual aid on the street where we was going out, giving out condoms. We ran into a hiccup with the condoms, because during this time with COVID, there was a, mind you, there was a high demand for latex, so a lot of gloves, the things of that nature was being used. So there was like a slow demand on condoms. Like that was like a hiccup, when it came down to, you know, the manufacturers being able to manufacture condoms because of the demand of the COVID was the urge was to move. It was a whole hiccup, so with going through that as well as Black Trans Nation, up-to-date, we have been able to successfully give out over \$800,000 to community members, individuals that are in other coalitions that were connected with, you know, mutual aid. There's so much that we've done up here for our community. And I'm just so honored to be a part of it being connected with so much love that we got with so many donations from [inaudible], you know, that was giving out masks and gloves that, you know, donated to us for us to be able to give it to not only individuals in the state of New York, but individuals that was out-of-state. We was able to ship items international to our chapter in Kenya, where they was, where they were able to utilize some of the goods, things of that nature 'til they COVID-free. So it was like a domino effect.

Alex Webster:

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Thank you so much, TS Candii, for really walking us through the mutual aid and the amount of support. I was so excited to hear that you all were able to provide support to your partners in Kenya. Super, super exciting. Paris, on your end, if you could describe to us some of the things that y'all have been working on, and I really appreciated that there was some, like, discussion from TS Candii about how COVID has transformed the way that mutual support networks have developed. So if you want to talk about that too, that'd be dope.

Paris Jackson:

So yeah, COVID has definitely made working conditions harder and I've been more on the receiving end of mutual aid here, than giving and organizing. So a lot of what Women With a Vision does besides educating, of course, we give out condoms. We do have, like, whenever we get funds, redistribute and I've definitely been on the receiving end of that. Oh, you know what, one member of the council actually, her name is Amira, she runs an app and she's a Reiki master. And she helps like sex workers and survivors build a community virtually to help heal themselves and each other. So that's definitely been a big part of the community here. I've definitely because of how hard working conditions are, and because of like how young and disadvantaged I am, I've definitely been on the receiving end of mutual aid here. Outside of sex worker unity here there's also a really strong queer community here and trans community here. And it's really beautiful to see all the trans folks helping each other. We have local farms, we do like group meetings, group yoga, just like doing anything to uplift each other, even if we don't have the financial resources to.

maya finoh:

Thank you so much, Paris, just for reminding us of the ways in which like Black people, specifically like Black folks who are marginalized, Black queer folks, Black trans folks, Black sex workers have always like stood for each other and rode for each other. Um, when the state has turned its back on us, has criminalized us, like we've been the ones who both looked at each other, who prioritize each other's healing, each other's like safety, material support through mutual aid, through like holistic practices, like yoga, through like food justice, all of that care, that is like truly the care that requires you to want to see someone both survive and thrive. And that is so powerful. I really appreciate you both, you and TS Candii, for like uplifting that work.

TS Candii:

I'm so sorry. Can I just jump in for a second.

Paris Jackson:

Yeah, of course.

TS Candii:

Because I'm going to say, Paris, I feel everything that you said. Because, coming from the South, living in the South, the Jim Crow laws, the color-coded laws, you know, just the whole entire, the whole, the real KKK, the confederate flag like, you know, just like the federal one, everybody got, they little they little, um with the 1200, 600 or whatever, how we was, you know, written out, purposely highlighted out. You know, it's like, after everything that you said, and that's why it was so important for me to, you know, connect nationally with individuals that are actually doing the work. Because up here in New York, there is so many resources up here. And my goal was to be able to try to push, because all these funders are national or whatever like that. It's just that as Black folks, because of the color of our skin, are constantly

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overlooked and we're underfunded or whatever like that and we're the ones that are out there doing the work. And it's disgusting that the white folk can come in and capitalize on our work and get our amendment, which is pressed around the capitalism. And it's so hard for us, you know, as Black folks, as trans folks, to be able to even know who to get in contact with in reference to press. And I just wanna, you know, most definitely send our offer and our helping hand in reference to if you need any help with lobbying because I don't mind coming down there and tapping on some shoulders. And I also want to because I hear you say, and I know that it's real by now to get the product, to even give to sex workers or whatever like that because Black Trans Nation, that's how we got founded, because out of COVID everybody came running to me because I was doing the Walking While Trans. I didn't know, I mean, I didn't know what was going on. And then, you know, when organizations started closing down and everything, it was nothing. So we needed our community. I have Black Trans Nation and whatever I do want to donate to you all or whatever. Most definitely reach out to us. I mostly want to donate that on behalf of us.

Paris Jackson:

Thank you. Yeah. So to kind of piggyback off of what you said, the sex workers rights movement is not a white movement. I don't know what else to say about it. Like, a partnership sounds really great because although we have like a lot of supporters here, having more national support would make the lobbying and reaching people more effective. Our Deep South Decrim Toolkit just launched on the third, March 3, Sex Workers Rights Day. Um, and um, you know, it's like in the news and it's really crazy, but at the same time, I don't think we're getting as much visibility as I'd personally like. We have lots of supporters, but always more are welcome.

maya finoh:

I am just so appreciative. Like what Alex put in the chat, like this conversation is just incredible. And I really appreciate, like, this is not white. Like, this, sex workers' rights is not white. And like white people love to take credit for like the work that like Black trans, like Black queer and Black sex workers do. But what are y'all's like freedom dreams, like in addition to full decriminalization, what else are y'all dreaming about? Like what are the other visions for freedom? Like what else do y'all desire?

Paris Jackson:

Coming from being trafficked myself and engaging in the sex trade while underage, my freedom, I guess, is freedom for people who are being trafficked. Whether they are children or adults, regardless of racial or gender identity, those people are still out there being criminalized and not having bodily autonomy and decrim will definitely help the trafficking problem, but it's not going to solve everything.

TS Candii:

Um, Paris. I'm going to just, my heart is out for you. Like I said, I didn't even know you was trafficked. And this is just so much I'm learning. And I just want to say, I love you and stay strong. But in reference to us, I just, I would like for individuals to know that us Black folks, we ain't ask for this. We didn't know nothing - I just want people to remember that we are not criminals. The criminal justice system has just written us out because of the color of our skin. I just want people to know that prostitution, see this whole name prostitution, this prostitution, is just so hard for the white people that gave us the name prostitution, the white man, the western. Let's take it back to our ancestries of the land. Because we on stolen land. Like they got us fighting for freedom on stolen land. That's what I'm here still trying to understand. How are we fighting for our basic human rights on stolen land? How? And it's okay! They OK with that! And I want

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to highlight that women's rights are human rights. And I also want to highlight that the white man, how the plantations that we pass everyday that's now called the farm, that our ancestors pushed a lot of our bodies out on, the blood. I just want to highlight that the white man wouldn't come to our land where we was picking the cotton if the Black woman wouldn't have sex with him. So the Black woman had to agree to being a prostitute before the white man can even, even come over, so the white man been exploiting the Black bodies before we even knew about sexuality and orientation and gender. And they been playing with us. Alright? So for me, it's a no-brainer and this whole trafficking, look. Let's talk about the human trafficking and what, if you want to talk about trafficking, let's talk about human trafficking. Let's talk about the mass incarceration with the prisons and jails where y'all are human trafficking, where one Black man is worth 30, depending on the state, 10,000, 10,000 a head. You know how much money we cost out here in a jail cell? Like they don't want to talk about the real call, the real human trafficking.

Paris Jackson:

This is so good; these are all such great points. Thank you for bringing up incarceration. Louisiana actually has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Specifically, in New Orleans, there are more Black people incarcerated than there are Black people actually living in New Orleans. And that's really crazy. And yeah, like the white society, western society polices our bodies, in such bad ways. Another thing that I wanted to touch on was sex workers' rights being a public health issue and a housing issue. And yeah, it's human rights as well. I feel like there isn't one group of people who defines what a sex worker is. There's a sex worker in damn near every community of people. And so every issue in social justice should also be taking sex workers into account.

Alex Webster:

I'm so moved by this conversation. I'm so, like, excited and incensed and moved by your words, moved by all the energy that both of y'all bring to this room. And I'm, you know, as y'all are talking, I'm thinking about Cyntoia Brown, I'm thinking about Chrystul Kizer, I'm thinking about International Working Women's Day, which was rebranded to International Women's Day, taken to erase the contributions of women to the workforce, and then the criminalization of women through the sex trades or through sex work, and like the connections that you all have already so beautifully delineated to incarceration. And that not just Black men who are incarcerated, but Black women, who are targeted by the police, who have been targeted for sexual exploitation, who have been targeted for criminalization, who have been targeted for being cycled into systems that, as TS Candii already mentioned, is \$10,000 a head. And so like, it's, it's a form of like, it's a form of genocide, it's a form of ethnic cleansing, and we have to be talking about this and relating all of these colonial institutions to one another as we're having these conversations around sex work, about body autonomy, and everything that we're having here, which I'm, I'm loving. And I hope that we have time for one more question, because it is around labor and it's around work. When I was reading Women With a Vision's Sex Worker Decrim Toolkit that it says in there, and I was really moved by this in so many ways, but like sex work is value-creating work. And I want us to think about like, what, what is work? What is labor? Like so much of the conversation around visibility of sex workers is about who is valued, who is erased. And in relation to like labor rights and economic justice, like, is there anything that y'all think is missing, like at least in the public consciousness or in public knowledge around like what sex work is or what this labor pertains and how it's framed, that you want to set the record straight on?

TS Candii:

In reference to labor, this is my thing. Sex work is just like doing hair in the kitchen and all that. What's the difference from me popping it and dropping it in the kitchen and me combing some hair out and

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doing different things. I don't understand, it's the same thing. And so my thing is that it's an independent contractor. You feel me? So my thing is, we're just, it's a 1099, you know. If you ask me, John is just mad because John trying to figure out how can John get his [inaudible] out up. But John, you're not gonna – you don't own my – how you gonna take my liberty to just be, on stolen ground, my God-given body, and tell me that you – I understand that humans are the world's highest collateral. I understand that. I understand that we, that we cost more than anything. So, you know, I understand that, but at the same time, look, this world is in debt. Not because of me, right. This world is in debt, because there's been a white man fucking up this world. When it comes down to labor their concern is how can we get a part of you all? How can we tax it? And my thing is, it's 1099, none of your business. I'm an independent contractor and that's really it for me because I own my body. So why would I give anybody rights over my body? Like come on, and it's always the white men. Like, come on, like you're not gonna get it, you're no, what?

Paris Jackson:

I just wanted to say, TS Candii, your mentioning of the 1099 is great because I feel like if strippers can get a 1099 then so can street-based workers and private escorts. Just specifically like myths about what sex workers are and what they do, one of the main things is people feeling like we don't respect ourselves in the work that we do. And it's like, you know, like I'm getting my bag. If, um, if it was hurting my mental health, I wouldn't do it. Same reason why I don't go and work a nine-to-five, because that hurts my mental health. I think a lot of people see sex workers as like drug users. And, you know, I know sex workers who use drugs, but it has nothing to do with the work. There are people who work in grocery stores, CEOs of companies who also use drugs and who also have STDs. And, just, trying to devalue our work in all of these myths and beliefs put out by media, especially in movies, like *Pretty Woman* was so wack. Um, another myth that I wanted to touch on was sex workers, specifically street-based workers, making more violent crime within the city. Your New Orleans street-based workers are pretty heavily policed. And a lot of the thought process here with people, like I know within my own family, is like with decrim, then there will be more people out on the streets, there will be more crime happening, when sex work isn't a crime.

TS Candii:

It was another thing that you hit on Paris, and I wanted to highlight that, and I want to be mindful of time as well. I want to let people know that, you know, sex work can be by choice, circumstance, or coercion. Okay? So I want people to understand, and this is the takeaway for me: Don't worry about how and what someone is doing. Let's worry about, I mean, don't worry about why and what, and things of that nature – let's worry about how can we make this safe? Okay? My thing is instead of, um, downgrading us and things of that nature, let's figure out, how can we provide some resources, more jobs or education or more, whatever the need is for the individuals in that particular area when a survey is done in that area, you know. So my thing is let's worry about, you know, how can we make it safe, let's worry about individuals when they do leave the sex trade, that whole aspect, you know. Um, being able to, because I'm, I'm gonna tell you, I was, the reason why I'm now a former sex worker. The reason why I am now a former sex worker is because I've been advocating for this work for two years, I'm a new advocate, and we got some good things done. And to be honest with you, my organization, I was able to give myself a salary, so there was no need for me to sell sex at this time, so I was able to step back. So now what I'm learning as a former sex worker is my triggers. You know, like going past the stroll or, you know, or a guy texting me with \$300, \$400, you know, it's like the triggers then, you know, and things of that nature, it's just having to cope with that. But you know, in the prevention, and so my thing is by giving sex workers money, like, you know, for, so that they don't have to go sell sex, you know, so, you

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know, you can be like, okay, well, you know, have like a cash – but that's what we need so that we can be able to be phased, you know, like a financial – because we were written out of the financial. So like, we need, we need financial help. So if we had financial help, then we wouldn't have to worry about going to our roots, which is survival. So that's why I wanted to, and I'm glad that you did highlight that and throw that out because it brought me back to remind folks like let's worry about, how can we make the sex trade safe?

maya finoh:

Thank you.

Alex Webster:

Yeah. I'm, I'm just so blown away. There's so much power in this room. I don't know if we have time for one last question on just what maya was mentioning, but how can people support you? How can people support your work and what are some of the things that you all are calling for people to do in the coming months or in the coming weeks, or, you know, as we're living through this pandemic? Tell us how to support y'all, please.

Paris Jackson:

In support of the Deep South Decrim Campaign, we ask that people share, you know, like share social media, read the toolkit, share it with anyone you can. We ask that people take a look at the bill; it's Louisiana House Bill 67. And we also have an online form where you can sign on and support. So just add to our list of supporters. And within that organizational list, there are groups like the DSA, our local DSA chapter is on board and they're helping spread the word and lobbying and stuff like that

TS Candii:

Yes, and on behalf of Black Trans Nation, in order to help us move forward, we need sustainable donors. You know, we need individuals that, um, can, can donate sustainably so that we can continue to donate sustainably to not only local, um, or state, but nationally and internationally, because the struggle is real everywhere. And we all are – we need to help all of us, you know.

Alex Webster:

Yes. Thank you both so much for your time today. I cannot tell you how appreciative I am, how appreciative we are of your time and, and your candor and your honesty and your energy. I'm so, so, and not surprisingly, but so pleased with how the conversation went and just everything that you brought today. So yeah, I really want to just wrap it up and again mention, there's so many ways that we can continue to support two incredible people and the organizations that they're representing and the movements that they are involved in.