English Transcript

**Mic Check! Podcast**  
**Episode 06 Part II:** Centering Sex Worker Leadership & Liberation  
**Guests:** Sex worker organizers Jenna Torres and Raquel Savage  
**Total Run Time:** 25:00  
**Original Release Date:** February 14, 2023

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*Intro music plays.*

**Priya Dadlani**  
You're listening to Mic Check!, a podcast by Third Wave Fund. For over 25 years, Third Wave has resourced youth-led, gender justice organizations that philanthropy has consistently left behind. We do this work because we know when directly-impacted communities have the resources they need to come together and dream up our shared liberation, they have the capacity to build stronger organizations and movements for social change. Whatever your relationship is to philanthropy, we’re glad you’re tuning in to hear directly from queer, trans, intersex, and sex working organizers and activists on their movement origin stories, what their day-to-day work is like, and how we - and especially those in the funder sphere - can best support them not just in moments of crisis, but for the long haul.

*Intro music fades out.*

I’m your host, Priya Dadlani, and today we will be continuing a conversation started in last week’s episode with sex worker organizers Jenna Torres and Raquel Savage. Jenna, pronouns she/her and Jenna, is a community advocate, human rights supporter, author, artist, entrepreneur, mother, as well as a fellow from this year’s Sex Worker Giving Circle at Third Wave Fund. Raquel Savage uses she/her pronouns, and is a Black, queer therapist, educator and sex worker who facilitates trauma therapy through Zepp Wellness Center, a non-profit organization she founded in 2019 that centers the mental health needs of Black queer folks and sex workers.

Last week, we discussed why it is important to center current and former sex workers in gender justice organizing, what decriminalization is and isn’t, and ways that sex work decriminalization intersects with abolitionist movements. We also got a great primer on what the Sex Worker Giving Circle at Third Wave Fund is and how it came to be from Third Wave’s very own Christian Giraldo and Pati Morales. Today, we are going to be diving deeper into this conversation, examining the ways in which sex worker-led organizing and reproductive justice overlap, and also discussing the ways in which philanthropy can step up and support sex worker-led organizing efforts without co-opting their movements.

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*Mic Check! Podcast - Episode 06 Part II - Centering Sex Worker Leadership and Liberation with Jenna Torres and Raquel Savage*
So reflecting on what you both shared in last week’s episode, we want to kick this conversation by asking each of you, in what ways do you see sex worker leadership being critical to the reproductive justice movement at large?

**Jenna Torres**

Well, I love talking about sex work and reproductive justice because most of the people that I come across are really uncomfortable or really knowledgeable, one or the other. And also just to understand that most people think that reproductive justice ends at abortion. It's just about abortion, it is centered about abortion, and that couldn't be furthest from the truth. It's about all of the things, especially in Georgia, it is about comprehensive sex education. It's about explaining and really detailing what sex trafficking looks like for people and how it's not a Black and White issue, that it's very much gray. There's very much people who have been involved in both ends of the spectrum who have been trafficked by their actual legit jobs. Those things are never talked about. And in Georgia, it's really hard to have those conversations about comprehensive sex work with young people because they're very super protective over the information that is given out rightfully, but also in a sense of fear. It's not because they're trying to empower young people with knowledge. It's because they want to protect them for whatever the morals that they feel they want to place upon them. So my experiences in the sex industry literally are from front end of what happens when you're not educating and doing what you're supposed to do in reproductive justice. From doctors, from medical professionals to therapists, to just anybody else that I've possibly come in contact with. The savior complex around trying to save young people and from experiences has never been beneficial.

So for me, when I do direct services or are involved with organizations who are doing direct services, there is A to Z conversation of this is how you get young people and people in general through your doors. This is how you have conversations with them that are not stigmatizing. This is what you do as for medical professionals, when people are coming here like social workers, this is how you support somebody who's in the industry. Not to say that you have to condone it, meaning that you are doing your job in the best professional capacity that you have. So a lot of times when I'm in spaces that are directed towards reproductive justice, it's never a conversation about how sex workers can be leaders in that movement. It's always about a savior complex. How do we save people who are trafficked?

So yeah, I just love going into spaces and disrupting and making people really uncomfortable because they don't have any answers for me. When I tell my whole complete A to Z story, people do not have the answers for me of where it went wrong. It went wrong so many different places that nobody has an answer for me. So my only goal doing any type of work is I want people to not have the experiences that I've had when it comes to medical professionals, when it comes to
safe spaces, when it comes to organizations. I also want to empower people, especially young people, about having an autonomous choice about their body, especially because of how Roe v. Wade has gone and where we're living is situated right now in this moment. I think education and practice of education is even more important and we can't continue to lie to our young people.

There's like a model in Georgia where if you put a piece of tape on your leg and you pull it off, you put it back on, you pull it off, it's equivalent to your value. And that's what they're teaching young people in sex ed. It's like just don't have sex. Just don't do it, don't have it, which is irrational. It's not feasible. It's not realistic. Young people are going to engage in sex. So what does it mean for us to have empowered conversations about sex, having safer measures for us, engaging in sex?

If there is a young person engaging in sex work, who's failing? Who's not providing this young person with what they need to be in the sex industry? What conversations do we need to have as a community to make sure that young people can have informed choices? I'm not anti-young people being in the sex industry. I'm anti-doing it for survival reasons, because adults in their life and their community have not provided what they needed. So sex work and reproductive justice, it's either a conversation about how folks are not receiving services or not utilizing, it's a very negative connotation of why are you getting tested so often? Why are you need to be here? But then it's also a lack of services because there's places who don't provide a full spectrum of STI testing, or I had an organization who was telling folks that bacteria vaginosis was a STI. And when we were freaking out, people were freaking out about, oh my God, I got BV, so it must have come from somewhere. So I had to take the time to educate folks about. Yes, BV can be instigated by sexual activity, but you can also get it from using the wrong detergent and eating crap and drinking alcohol. It's all of those things.

So how do we have reasonable, realistic, honest, educated conversations with people about their bodies and what it does and how we would link that to a larger movement that is primarily focused on abortion rights, which is great, but also people need to have access to birth control on a regular. There's other things and the medical negligence that happens in reproductive justice, particularly around childbirth, around making sure that pain management for everyday issues that people go through pertaining to their bodies, all of it, how do we have responsible conversations with our community and really honor and respect their experiences so that we can help them and do the things that they're asking for. So yeah, I love being the shit starter in reproductive justice.
Raquel Savage

I love that so much. It's so interesting because sex workers are so uniquely positioned to do this work, but are also left out of leading it, but are also the ones only leading it. So it's this weird space because the people who are doing the best work organizing activism, whatever disruption around repro health are sex workers and the folks who are like, I don't know, considered the authority on some of these issues are leaving sex workers out of the conversation and think, just like you said, that sex workers actually need to be saved rather than put in leadership positions to lead these conversations. It's just so interesting because yeah, sex workers are just so uniquely positioned to talk about every single step of the way of any of these conversations. Even towards what it's like to be a parent and have a child and what the needs are around that, which I think is an extension of conversation as well. Because the back end of repro health is you have kids. So it's just really interesting how sex workers are left out of leadership roles and leading these conversations and are also already doing the work. It is us who are leading these conversations in our own communities around how to keep ourselves safe.

Priya Dadlani

Thank you both. We're nearing the end of our time. And before we shift into a conversation towards how philanthropy can best support sex workers and sex worker led organizing, I'm wondering if you both could take a moment and just think of a time this year that serves as an example of sex worker solidarity that took place in your communities.

Raquel Savage

Yeah. I mean, I think for me, just in my own personal community, it is always to the best of our capacity being available to each other and being able to provide supports for each other in a reciprocal way and in a way that keeps us safe. So I had a friend who is a parent and is a sex worker and was in the middle of moving and essentially was in crisis because they needed support. Moving is hard. Moving is particularly hard when there are other things that are going on that compound the complexity of it. And I got on a plane and I flew out to go help her move and no question, no hesitation. And I think that to me, those are good examples of solidarity generally and what it looks like to build communities where you rely on other folks and don't think to yourself, "I have to do it alone. I have to figure it out. I'll just go..." It's like, "No, you actually do have the capacity or I hope that you can build the capacity to have folks you can rely on and lean on." And because both of us are sex workers, I for sure would consider that sex worker solidarity. That was amazing. And I'm happy to have been able to be there for her because I understand at minimum that especially moving across the country, which is what she did, is really fucking hard.
Jenna Torres

Yeah, I definitely agree. Lysistrata Mutual Care Collective saved my ass more times than I can count. I got four kids. Georgia ain't trying to give me no benefits, nothing. So yeah, I just really appreciate anytime we have SOS, we send it out. There's people who respond and they really do help mutual care collective. Mutual aid in general has always been really, really successful.

And I just want to just highlight that December 17th for me, which is a national Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, is always the January 1st in my mind. This is always the point where it's real concrete evidence that we still have work to do. And every year that we read the names, every year that we see the names, every year that we're lighting candles for me is the moment of solidarity where people have a reality check and then they get back to their lives and they do what they can in their community. So for me, that's always been a point of solidarity of even though it's really painful, it's really sad, it's really hard for some folks. I also think it's a point where we realize, okay, the battery that throughout all the year, through COVID, through all the things that we got going on, this is the reality check was actually there's people who are no longer with us and we still have not solved the issue. So that is definitely always a reality check for me. And then, yeah, just mutual care collectives and mutual aid collectives have calmed through with funds, with actual physical support, being able to just take people places, transportation, whatever it looks like, people will get it done. So I love that model and it continues to work, has been working for I think now five plus years. And I just want to see more of that in our community.

Priya Dadlani

Thank you both.

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Priya Dadlani
We have a lot of listeners who work in the philanthropy sector, both in big capital P philanthropy and also more smaller intermediary funders like us who are by and for, community led. And some folks listening are trying to understand maybe more about sex worker led organizing. Some may be trying to convince their foundations to give more money and move more money towards sex worker led organizing. So this is a good opportunity for us to speak directly to those people and like if you want to reflect on what your experiences have been working with philanthropy and or what they can, and Third Wave too, what can we do better to support sex worker led movements?

Raquel Savage
Sure. So this year is probably my first year ever attempting to get any funding for my nonprofit, which is a sex worker led organization. And I had no idea where to start or what the process even looked like or who would even fund something that a sex worker led. And I think the things that stand out to me as the most important for funders to hear and for folks generally to hear is, I guess a couple of things. One being that it feels important to me that there are as little barriers as possible to getting the funding to sex worker groups because we are a community of folks who are already navigating so many barriers around generally and specifically around money banking, whatever that this process, I believe needs to be as easy as possible, as transparent as possible, as accessible as possible, and with a priority or the capacity or the understanding that a lot of what sex workers do is just give money to other sex workers. So I've seen on some applications it's like, well, what are you going to do with the money and blah, blah? And it's like, first of all, I mean in some capacity I understand that I guess there has to be some level of reporting. And also I need to move this money to folks who need it. That's what I need to do. There's not going to be anything to report. It's making sure that I can give at least $500 to one sex worker this month. So understanding that that becomes a barrier when it's like, "Well, can you prove what you're going to do with the money? Or can you..." It's like, "No, I can't. I'm going to just give it and I'm not policing what they do with it." If they choose to put it in their plastic surgery fund, that's fine. Versus if they choose to use it for basic needs.

So I think that that feels important to me, just values wise and yeah, lowering the barriers. I also want to say that the easiest funding opportunity that I engaged with was Third Wave, because there was a process that we sent in just a little bit of information about Zepp Wellness, and it didn't require this heavy lift for the application. We just sent it in and then we were notified if we were even going to be among the group of folks who may get it. And then we were asked to do an interview, which we got a stipend for. And it was just like this recognition from Third Wave perspective, we understand how much labor it is to apply for funding and how many things you're going to have to write and have other folks look over. And it's a huge process. And I think
Third Wave just made it very accessible by saying, "Send in a little bit of information so we can see if you're even on the right track, then we're going to do this interview where you come and you just talk to us. You don't have to write anything and we're going to pay you for that labor even if you don't get the grant." And I think that that has been... No other funding opportunity has done that, and that has just made this process so much easier, so much more accessible. And I think that that model is a great one for other funders to consider as opposed to other applications that we've done where it's taken us hours to get the information together. And then that's it. We just hope for the best.

And I think one other thing would be that I really appreciate with Third Wave again, is that you all have made it possible for me and for Zepp Wellness more broadly to be in community with other sex workers, meaning I've been able to meet lots of people just in the process of applying to build community and network further, which is really important for us to be able to remember that we're not isolated. Remember that we're not alone. To be able to grow our communities and expand our reach and see what other needs are of other community folks who are not even in the area that I'm in. So I appreciate that too, just being able to access the other folks who are applying for this fund, who are doing similar work, who I would've probably never found out about otherwise.

Jenna Torres

And yeah, I definitely think that foundations and philanthropy is really interesting when it comes to sex worker organizing. And some of the things that I wish were easier is the level of information that we have to disclose about the people that we serve. I definitely think that direct services should be more funded, especially because people are already in crisis and asking them to do any level of additional work to earn the money that we are receiving for them is really a hardship for folks. Some of the things that I learned by going through Third Waves Fellowship was that for somebody like me, myself and I, who are leaders in lots of different things, having conflict of interest definitely came up. So I'm hoping that through this process that there can be a different interesting model about supporting not only leaders who are in the community, but also the organizations or the places that they come from as part of the process of allowing me to split my time where I would be somewhere else to be here and do education and be in community, and how do we also continue to support the organizations who are supporting us to be in those positions, I think is really interesting. And yeah, Lysistrata has never been grant funded until this summer I think we, with the Effing foundation. So we've been in direct services for a long time. We've made it through COVID, and all of the funds that we have received have been from people's own pockets, people in the industry, people who are sustainer donors to make it possible for myself to have emergency funding and other folks to continue to have little stipends that support them in being well.
So how do we figure out how to have philanthropists who are particularly not in the community understand why it's so vital to be able to support folks in the ways that we do stipend so that they can live their life and continue to do the work? I don't think those are two separate things, but definitely the most disheartening process is one, having to explain or to pad what sex work is in the context of the larger conversation so that we can get funding. And also the conversation around disclosure of how people are reporting back, I don't ever feel comfortable putting those demographics into a report ever. So I definitely think that's part of it, and I just really, really wish that there were more processes, how we did go through Third Wave Fund. For me, it was the fellowship of the interview, and it's also about actual mental barriers. I have ADHD. I'm not going to be able to sit and write a three hour grant. It's not happening, never. So how do we make it more accessible for folks to be able to apply for these different forms of funding, lower barrier funding, and how do we just communicate to folks who are supporting the foundations of what it means to do underground work? What you have planned in the proposal isn't always a thing. We've seen COVID and all our plans for what, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 now have gone out the window. So yeah, I just really think that the reimagining of what those things can look like of how do we have communications and trusting that organizations who are community centered can receive funding and do what's right with the funding, I think is another conversation. Because there's a lot of organizations, not to throw no shade but there's a lot of organizations who get a lot of money to do a lot of things, and they're not fucking doing it. They're not doing it. So instead of giving them the money, you can give us the money and we can go do what we know we need to do for our communities. So yeah.

Priya Dadlani

Yes. I want to thank you both, Jenna and Raquel for your time, labor giving to this, and also just generally being bad asses and leading this work and doing such a beautiful job. I'm so grateful to have this time in convo with you all. Just for other folks listening, if you want to want to learn more about the Sex Worker Giving Circle at Third Wave, the fellowship program, our sex worker led grant making and more, you could check out our reports. Creating community is a threat to power, three years of resourcing revolution and liberation at the Sex Worker Giving Circle, you could see that a thirdwavefund.org.

Outro music fades in.

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of Mic Check! Podcast at Third Wave Fund. This episode was produced and edited by Priya Dadlani and Monica Trinidad, with support from Christian Giraldo and Pati Morales. Our intro music was created and produced by Jordan W. Carter. If you want to hear past episodes, find us on Spotify, Soundcloud, or Apple Podcasts, and
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*Outro music fades out.*