

Transcript: Women Lead Network Podcast: Episode #1-Let's talk about Women and Work

Hello, everyone, and welcome.

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I'm Leona, I'm Denise, and we are with women lead network, and we are very excited for this episode to talk about women in labor.

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Why are we excited, Steve? Well, I mean, it's so interesting, right?

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Because we all have to work. Even though I don't really love to work, I still have to work.

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And, you know, recently we've been talking a bit more about labor.

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I think, especially because labor has really changed so much over the last two years of a pandemic and what it looks like for people.

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So. So, you know, we're just excited to spend some time taking a look and talking about it.

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And I think one of the things that's interesting is to consider some of the.

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Maybe questions that arise arise like when we're trying to consider women's experience with labor,

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and so I mean, I know I have a few things that I've been looking at that maybe we can chat about.

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Yeah, you are so too. So yeah, let's do this. OK, let's do it.

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So I'm going to start because, you know, I've been thinking a lot recently about this idea of of informal versus formal labor,

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and some of this came up because I had I've had the opportunity to spend some time doing some advocacy work with sex workers, collectives.

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And so they've been talking a lot about the ways in which informal labor can actually,

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you know, create an environment where where women in particular have more access to power.

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And so I was curious about that.

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And so I sort of was doing some research on it and thought I would throw some stuff out that I learned and maybe we could chat a little bit about it.

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Let's do it. OK, so first of all, I think one of the things that I always like to start with is,

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you know what we're talking about sort of when we mean informal versus formal labor.

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So I think in general, when I think about informal labor, I'm thinking of, you know,

folks like street vendors or farm workers or domestic workers or even sex workers. 2:13

And then formal labor really is, you know, somewhat more organized. 2:20

Maybe establish working agreements hourly or salaried folks benefits, et cetera. 2:25

Hmm. So and I just I do want to point out the fact that farmworkers fall into that category 2:32

of informal labor because they are not protected a significant amount of time, 2:37

but contribute to an extreme amount of labor for the country. 2:44

Right. And and then when we think of women who are migrant farmworkers or farm workers in 2:49

general, 2:54

the type of toll that takes on you, this this idea that your wages are not really being tracked in a way 3:01

that they should, 3:08

even though I mean, we both know this, 3:09

there are legal agreements like we have right the Fair Labor Standards Act and we have like acts for 3:17

farmworkers. 3:26

But the true protections that go along with a major industry of labor in our country are pretty gray 3:31

and precarious, right? 3:38

Absolutely. And you know, it's so interesting because, you know, 3:46

I think historically when we've thought about labor history and the development of rights around 3:53

labor history, 3:58

we've looked primarily to more formal labor rights so, you know, factories or public employment. 4:07

But increasingly, we've seen the real power of collective organizing happening for farmworkers. 4:23

Certainly, you know, domestic workers, more recently, sex workers and even street vendors.

So, you know, it's, I think, a little harder sometimes to differentiate between formal and informal in these current times.

But, you know, I think for me, some of the research that I was doing was really around this idea about whether or not people who especially women,

right, who are in informal labor environments are really more.

Or really less empowered, shall we say? Right? 4:31

I think from a from the point of view of capitalism, which, you know, the reality is that we live in a capitalist society. 4:34

We often sort of point towards these and labor relationships as being, you know, better for people or more power. 4:42

But, you know, there has been some interesting. Some interesting ideas around, first of all, just looking at the idea of formal labor, 4:51

which was ultimately used to as a tool for colonization really and the beginning of capitalism, right? 5:01

Because prior to capitalism, all labor was theoretically informal. 5:09

And so, you know, just this idea that from a policy. Perspective, you know, as a society, we sort of promote laws and policy around formal labor. 0:01

I'm. Really sort of looks at this informal late work strategy or informal labor as being sort of deficit based when in reality, 0:11

historically it was never really deficit based, right? There was a lot of power. 0:24

So so it's kind of, you know, one of the things that was interesting to me and thinking about this. 0:29

I don't know what are your thoughts? 0:36

I think it's I do think it's interesting because I think it's going to Segway into this the conversation that I want to have around costal culture. 0:37

And and, you know, when we're looking at, for instance, historically the cottage industry, and we would think of that as being informal labor. 0:49

But in some ways, it created more latitude for women than going into an office that they were either completely excluded from or marginalized within. 0:57

And then domestic work has historically been for certain groups of women based on socioeconomic status and or race was a way for you to sustain yourself economically, 1:10

right, because of either your relationship with impoverishment or your relationship with racism beyond just patriarchy. 1:15

Being able to clean somebody's kitchen and wash someone's dishes and even take care of someone's child meant that you could sustain yourself within the structure of society. 1:21

1:32

Right, that was a great know, right? 1:40

And hence why several generations of people, like my grandmother told my mother, You're never going to clean anyone's houses. 1:46

Because as a as a black woman, she made sure that she, when she was white, quite young, she cleaned someone's houses and she was like, I'm never going to do that again. I'm only going ever clean my own house. 1:49

And she wanted her daughter to not do that. 1:57

And and in some ways, it was this idea of like this helps sustain us, but we need to push ourselves into a more formal place. 2:03

But in a formal setting, my mother was deeply abused. Right? 2:07

Right. And her economics were abused in an another way, but it made it feel like, well, at least you made it here and you're not being abused in someone's home. 2:09

Right? Well, and I think that's absolutely right. 2:16

And I think that this is the thing that sort of requires us to think more about this conversation between empowerment and labor sectors vs., 2:20

you know, informal wage work. Right. So certainly right. 2:24

In general, informal wages are lower across the board wage and informal sectors, and certainly right because those informal wage environments are disproportionately filled with women. 2:28

And we know that there's a pay gap and that, of course, women of color disproportionately make up that community. 2:32

And we know that there's a gender pay gap and that intersects with race, right? 2:44

So I mean, this is all very clear evidence that we don't really need to have a conversation about. 2:49

But I think, you know, the the thing that sort of strikes me about that conversation that you were just having that, you know, 2:57

that part of the conversation that you just raised is this idea that you know, 3:05

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that women, in order to survive, have historically utilized informal work rate. 3:37

And so they've utilized informal work in a variety of ways. 3:45

And you're going to talk a little bit more about sort of that hustle culture sorting out the economy component of it. 3:49

But as you point out, things like domestic work or sex work, right? 3:55

These are all the the environments, the informal work structures that have allowed women to survive and thrive, quite frankly, 4:00

and be able to make some of those decisions, like you pointed out with your grandmother who said then about her own children, Hey, I'm not. 4:15

You don't need to do this now, right? You don't need to do that because I did it. 4:24

And so, you know, I think for me, perhaps the deeper conversation around empowerment in labor, you know, 4:29

there's sort of this idea that somehow women, when they rise to the level of formal labor, are much more empowered. 4:38

To me, the real question then is, you know, deeper than that, 4:44

it really has to do with how we're addressing things like gender inequality that you know, that disproportionately push women into the. 4:50

Massive work and sex work, right, which is informal leavers, how we value that work, right? 5:00

And are we creating labor protections across the board in any sector that allow for folks to not be exploited in their workplace? 5:06

You. So, yeah, so interesting. Yeah, 5:17

and I and I want to Segway into this idea of how I think that what comes out of that is so you had a generation of 5:29

women who were really isolated into informal labor and then they get protections and we get to a place in society. 5:39

You know, we have the Civil Rights Act. I always forget it's 1964. I think whatever I do, I teach this. 5:48

I think I would know this. But with this Sunday afternoon, we don't have to go in. 5:55

I don't I don't remember a lot of things, but we start formalizing our protections of our labor rights.

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And so then there becomes this idea of, Okay, well, now I'm going to get into formal settings.

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But what even with this, these protections, we realize that because they exist within a society that is deeply sexist,

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deeply racist, that the your protection is only as good as the people who are implementing them.

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And so now we have a generation that has been harmed within these formalized sectors,

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and there becomes this idea of like, OK, well, I need to have this hustle, I need to have this gig.

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And it's like a rebirth of the cottage industry and being able to have some ownership over your labor in a very specific way.

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And then the language then becomes, you know, you know, your passion for profession like joy and fulfillment and work.

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And I really love this hobby. I should make money off of it because, you know, what's that adage?

6:52
Love what? Love your work or something. You'll never work or write if you love what you do.

6:59
You never work a day in your life or some [INAUDIBLE] like that because I love it, but I have to eat my love.

7:05
It's not going to pay my bills.

7:13
But I think that that is a reaction to being so harmed in these ways, like psychically harmed, even physically harmed in these formal settings.

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And now it's like, Well, I don't actually really like working behind this desk.

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And, you know, I'm not getting that much joy out of it. Let me shift my labor to something that brings me joy and let me put all my energy into that.

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But what ends up coming out of that is that work is still dominating your life, right?

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And the more you do, the more you have value and quantity is greater than quality.

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And you, you see them, then the stresses I've got to make this hustle really big, and in some ways,

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I feel that then people are even building out jobs around how to sell the hustle to Oh, I know, right?

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I mean, go to my seminar and I'm going to show you how to hustle because this is my hustle teaching you how to hustle.

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But it's better than working that nine to five behind a desk. Right? Well, and I think, you know, it's so interesting, right?

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Because because it's basically selling the idea that you know,

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this process of just pulling yourself up from by your bootstraps is really going to make everything OK.

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And the reality is that we know that it doesn't do that. I think these are also some of that.

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If you were talking about hustle culture, I was thinking of what do they call it, those multi-level marketing side of things where, you know,

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women disproportionately enroll in these types of business opportunities, quote unquote and are disproportionately exploited, right?

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They lose money. And all of this is as a result of, you know, I don't know, loving candles or loving clothes, right?

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And it's almost like really feel sort of predatory, not just from the companies to who they know their clientele are, which are traditionally women.

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Yeah. But also and I I sort of hesitate to say this because it's painful to say, but also some women to other women, you know?

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Yes. No, I am not. I don't live in a utopian place where I can't say that other groups that are marginalized can harm people within their community.

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I know, I know, it's hard for people to hear. But you know how I feel.

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Human beings are just human beings to begin with, right? And we've given the tools and mechanisms to harm, unfriend you.

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They will sometimes use harm over. Yeah, not harming.

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Right. And so and I and I think that this also leaves into another part of our conversation of, you know,

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women getting to be spaces where they want to do good and they want to have community and they want to feel like,

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you know, I have joy in in my work and my labor,

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and they get into organizations that are often predominantly run by women and are centered around women's needs.

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And they find themselves exploited and harmed in those communities as well. 10:23

Oh, God, don't get me started on this topic. 10:35

This is, I think, one of the most painful sort of conversations to have to have when we talk about women and their labor. 10:37

And that is, you know, 10:47

the ways in which women's commitment to helping each other right to helping society because women have traditionally been the service providers, 10:49

right? And then, you know, sort of coming into these environments where they expect to be respected and honored by the women leading them only 11:03

to experience really deep exploitation and harm at the hands of these super hierarchical great organizations. 11:18

And here I need I need to sort of maybe do a caveat here because I have a very I have some very personal feelings about this. 11:34

You know, for some, you know, maybe obvious or not so obvious reasons, but also, you know, 11:42

there are certainly organizations that are led by women that have tried to do things differently. 11:48

I like to think of our work right and women, that work is trying to do things differently. 11:54

But you know, the idea that the. 11:59

Adoption of these super hierarchical models on the parts of some women's organizations that leave folks to be exploited. 12:07

Yeah. In the works. And one of the articles that I read when thinking about this conversation, they used a term called passion exploitation, 12:18

and we're going to make sure that we put in links to the resources that we found on the website. 12:27

So you can also peruse and form your own opinions. 12:34

Even though I think Denise and I think that we're right, but we have a lot of opinions and a lot of opinions and talked about passion, 12:37

exploitation and I and this goes to this idea that you were supposed to be OK with your low wages, you're supposed to be OK with, 12:47

you know, the hierarchy that doesn't promote your advancement and learning and all these other things because 12:59

you are passionate about this cause and you're passionate about the work and money and all these, 13:05

these other things don't matter when the work is your focus. 13:11

But it completely erases the fact that you are still a person who's living in a society that my passion does not pay my bills, right? 13:15

Money pays my bills, right? And my passion doesn't necessarily help prevent me from getting burnt out. 13:23

And my passion doesn't necessarily help prevent me from being exploited. 13:29

Yeah, yeah. And I, you know, it's so I think this idea of passion, exploitation, perhaps you are one of the themes, which is unfortunate. 13:37

But I think it's I mean, why do we think, why do we have such a rich labor history globally, right? 13:50

Because work exploitation is, you know, is something that touches everybody, quite frankly, 13:55

and especially women and communities of color and women of color, in particular working class women, right? 14:02

It's something that we can't not talk about. And you know, I i this idea of exploiting passion is so profoundly. 14:09

Painful sometimes to think about, right, because if you think about the disproportionate number of people that go into, 14:23

for example, work in social justice organization. Right. So about 80 percent of quote unquote human service workers, right? 14:32

So these are people that are doing service around the world, 80 percent of them are women, and more than half of those are women of color, right? 14:41

And so this idea that you know, their experience they have experienced and are experiencing exploitation in their community, 14:49

right, and supported subordination in their communities, and then come into organizations where they're trying to rectify that. 15:02

They're trying to change that outcome and are experiencing that internal marginalization again. 15:10

Right. Is so painful. And I and I think, you know,

one of the things that you pointed out when you talked about this passion 15:17

exploitation is the culture within or within those organizations in particular, 15:23

right? Because this doesn't actually a lot of times translate out of these social justice organizations. 15:27

But within these social justice organizations that there's this culture, 15:35

that there's an expectation that not only work for low pay and in terrible conditions, but that you work for no pay. 15:43

Yes, right? That you, you know, we would that would be unthinkable from our collective bargaining perspective, 15:47

from a labor organizing perspective that people would be expected to work for nothing. 15:55

Right. 16:03

But this culture within organizations that you know you, especially social justice organizations that you do a lot of unpaid work is deeply harmful, 16:11

right, for communities that are already struggling economically. I also think that, though, 16:12

that this is where the classism comes in because historically the people and the women who could form these 16:25

organizations that work in these organizations were coming from spaces where they were educated women. 16:30

They were women of middle or upper middle class, and they were being excluded from formal labor with their peers right there. 16:37

There are peers that were men who could go to school and go to college and then go into these formal sectors. 16:42

These women were denied it, so they created these charities and these organizations that were doing really well. 16:50

I don't I don't want to make it sound like I'm on because the people have done. 16:57

But I think it's important to look at the root of how this comes out of. 17:03

So you have the time and the energy to do this collectivism because of where you are economically. 17:07

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And that same framing then goes into once these organizations become more formalized, once they get nonprofit status,

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once they get federal moneys and state moneys and things like that, and the structure of it is still built around the fact that, well, of course,

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we don't pay high wages because some of these people who are in these situations are still coming from a place where they even have,

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they have partners who are they don't need high wages or they come from families where they are able to be economically subsidized.

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And I will speak for myself personally. You know, I fell into that trap.

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I was raised in a middle class environment. And this is this intersectional construct of like being a black person who was raised middle class.

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I come from a family where, you know, you give back, it's a part of your community, you do these things.

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And so even at times when I wasn't getting the best wages, I just thought, Well,

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it's fine because I never knew what it was like to be impoverished, right?

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And we can joke about, oh, well, you know, struggling student things like that.

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But I was never going to be homeless, right? I was never it was never not going to be housed.

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And so giving to the cause was just wrapped up into this sort of framework that is established when you have parents that say,

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Yeah, my dad said, if you get a degree in basket weaving, I just really want you to have a college degree.

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That's really great.

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And there's cheering me on and they're like, You're doing such good work, but I'm not being financially compensated for that work.

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But it's it's it's just all written into this idea of like, but that's what you do to give back.

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Yeah, yeah. Well, and it's it's interesting because I think as someone who has experienced homelessness, right?

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Yeah. When I I'm thinking about an organization, you know, you and I have collectively spent many years,

probably decades, even at this point working in women's organizations. 19:01

And I'm thinking back when you were talking about that to the very first interview I had at one organized. 19:10

And where they were hiring a full time person, but I was still in school and I and in order to get the job, I said. 19:14

Hey. Because they didn't want to hire me because I was, you know, I was still in school, 19:23

so I couldn't work a whole full time hours, I said, Look, I'll do the full time job it for part time pay. 19:37

Right? And you know, they took me up on it right away. 19:42

And then I lived in that environment. I continued to work even though I had graduated from college. 19:49

Right? Continue to work for part time pay, doing a full time job for at least five years after that. 19:54

And just the idea that, you know, women who are hiring in an organization would would be okay with another woman. 20:00

Right? Working for at least half of her value, right? 20:08

Feels like a terrible precedent. 20:18

Yeah. You know, but is this going to do that? You're so committed, right? 20:25

Or so committed? And then also that part time pay was, from a class perspective, was better than you pay? 20:29

It was absolutely. I was always like, OK, well, I've got to do this thing. 20:34

I've got to get paid. And it's all wrapped into this idea of like, but at the end of the day, at least, 20:39

if I'm not getting paid a full wage, it's OK because I'm doing good, right? 20:44

I'm back giving back. I'm helping. I'm finding something better for my community. 20:48

And the irony is, and I think it's it's interesting because you sort of pointed this out at the beginning of this conversation that, 20:53

you know, highly educated, affluent women often started these organizations. 20:57

Right? And so frequently, the projects that they highlight, right, 21:06

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their pet projects are really those projects that make people feel pretty comfortable with their affluence, right? 21:19

They don't want to sort of rock any boats because then a quote unquote funder might not want to fund. 21:26

Yeah, but the irony is, you pointed out that many of them as an as an opportunity to have some of their power back from from men's power ride. 21:30

You were running other organizations and when sort of let them in. 21:41

They started these organizations. And the irony is that even now, much of the value within those organizations the valued perspectives, 21:46

the valued identities, the value contributions within those organizations are when men join them, right? 21:59

So then you have groups of women and women's organizations who are continuing to create those same exploitive 22:09

structures because men come in gray and then their leadership is valued over other women's right. 22:17

Their pay is valued over other women. 22:25

As a woman who worked my way up in a women's organization to a leadership role. 22:30

I, you know, supervise both women and men. 22:38

And I was often pressured to give my male employees raises and rarely pressured to give my female employees raises within these organizations. 22:43

Mm hmm. And I think that it's also important to recognize that women were using very like we're seeing men women were coming 22:55

from these very binary constructs because this is a really complex conversation and it just personally for my brain. 23:04

It makes it easier for me to talk in that particular way. 23:11

But we also know that when you get really intersectional around this, but even those men who were not heteronormative, who were not, 23:13

you know what we would think of as being deeply aligned to the patriarchy do not thrive in these types of environments 23:23

because their proximity to femininity is so strong that we are conditioned that the closer you get to woman ness right, 23:29

the less value that you hold in overall society. Absolutely. 23:41

And so like as we're talking through this, I hope that people also recognize that once you start pulling peeling this onion, 23:45

I should say it gets so much more complex. 23:53

And I think that this sort of Segways into like one of the things that we're going to talk about in closing is 23:57

the burnout that happens right and the ways in which you come in to do good and you have passion about it. 24:04

But you find that we are still replicating systems of oppression even within our organizations that are about this. 24:13

Yeah, absolutely. I'm so glad that you made that point. 24:28

I think one of the things that has been increasingly interesting in terms of how some of the work is done in in this area and sort of unraveling the tangle of what these organizations look like is that, 24:32

you know, oftentimes, as you stated, right, the closer your proximity to white male leadership race, the more power you have within an organization. 24:40

And that means that, you know, women, people of color, queer folks, right, are often excluded from the power within those organizations leading to, 24:48

you know, this idea that your work so so number one, it leads to this idea that your work isn't valued, 25:10

but also because so many of these folks that make up these organizations come from communities that have been impacted 25:19

by the trauma they're trying to write checks that they are sort of having to deal with their historical and community. 25:31

Trauma, as well as the direct impact of not having a, you know, economic security, 25:43

being food insecure or struggling with homelessness or being exploited in their own organizations. 25:51

And so it creates this really cumulative impact that has been referenced as it's actually 25:59

been referenced around like racial justice works and called racial battle fatigue.

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But it shows this sort of cumulative impact of experiencing both the day to day racism of somebody's life or sexism or homophobia of somebody's life.

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And at the same time, having your work in that environment exploited.

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Yeah, and I think that the social circles back in some ways when we're even if you move out of

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these social justice spaces and you move into participating in labor for wealth attainment,

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hustle culture leaves a lot of people feeling burned out, right?

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Because in some ways, it's still seated in an exploitative practices of, like I said earlier,

26:49
your value is only at how well you work right and how well you're willing to ignore your body.

26:57
Let's say you're tired. You need to drink water, you need to take a nap.

27:03
You do all these things because you need to accumulate wealth and wealth in the sense of I need wealth in this society.

27:06
When I say, Well, I'm not talking inherently about riches,

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but I'm just talking about a quantity of money that allows you to have a quality of life that is sustainable.

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And so to chase that level of wealth, but also being tied to, you know, how good you are at it, how well you can sell it,

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how much you are, how great your images are on Instagram, like how you can hit the algorithm just right,

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but not really talking about it in the sense that this is a small business you're

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running because you at your storefront and you have your trust shop and you have your,

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you know, like, this is what I have to do. But this sort of pervasiveness of like, but it's all, you know, it's just a hustle.

27:54
My side gig I do online and I should just love it because I don't have to go into an office really well.

28:01
And and that so much of that sort of hustle culture is framed around this idea of self-care.

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Right now, I've somehow my nine to five. Right?

28:18
So because my nine to five was killing me, but I'm still taking those same practices and hustle,

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or I love corporate America to go work at a nonprofit because corporate America just felt so soul draining.

28:29
But there are the same mechanisms in harm that are happening in this environment as well, right?

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Absolutely. And and, you know, I think ultimately that leaves us at the point where maybe we're wrapping up our conversation today,

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which is that these the idea that somehow you can individually fix your,

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you know, your health around utilizing health care practices or your job around, you know, sort of venturing out on your own right.

28:58
These very sort of individually directed remedies fundamentally are the problem, right?

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Because they keep us from looking at the systemic issues that are really ultimately going to fix the problem.

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They tell us, Hey, you fix yourself through self-care or going out on your own or whatever instead of fundamentally looking at,

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you know, how do we address better labor practices? How do we value women, queer folks, people of color, labor, right?

29:31
How do we get to that point where we can talk about equality instead?

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Let's just forget that and focus on what you can do as an individual like drinking water.

29:45
Have your eight ounce glass of water 14 fourteen hundred times a day, and that's going to impact everything.

29:52
Follow the guru who tells you how to drink that water. And I mean, right, right?

29:57
Exactly. Well, as always, our conversations are very enlightening and enjoyable,

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and we hope those of you who are listening has have found something that's sort of interesting to you in the discussion that we had today.

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Leona mentioned it earlier. We're going to put our sources of information up on the website for you to be able to go and dove more deeply into.

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And I'm really excited to be having this conversation.

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Yeah. And I think this is the part where we say, like, subscribe and follow whatever it is,

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because believe it or not, we talked all the smack about, hopefully with the podcast here. 30:41

Let's do that. Let's do this. Since we just talked about hustle. 30:49

So go ahead. Like us. Subscribe, follow us right on all of our social accounts because we want to be able to continue having these conversations. 30:54

That's a good reframe. Well, thank you all. 31:05

Bye. Thanks, everybody. It's been a joy. 31:09