

# decriminalised futures

## WE CAN BUILD A DIFFERENT WORLD

9th of September 2020

*Mutual Aid in the UK (We've Always Supported Each Other)* was the second session in our panel series We Can Build a Different World, organised in collaboration with Verso Books.

**Transcript:** Mutual Aid in the UK (We've Always Supported Each Other)

**Speakers:** Tobi Adebajo, Juno Mac, Dania Thomas, Juan Fernandez Ochoa, Jodie Beck

**Tobi Adebajo 00:00:**

Great. Hi, everyone. Welcome. Welcome to *We Can Build a Different World*. This is a weekly series of events that's exploring abolition and mutual aid in the UK. Tonight's event is *Mutual Aid in the UK*, and we have a great collection of speakers gathered to talk about their work, their experiences and their ideas around mutual aid. This event is organised as a collaboration between Decriminalised Futures and Verso Books.

Decriminalised Futures is a collaborative project that utilises creative tools and popular education to explore sex worker lives, experiences and movement struggles. This year, they've been working with 13 artists, myself included, creating 10 different artworks in preparation for an exhibition that will be showing at the ICA early next year. These works are designed as responses to SWARM's audio archives, and this archive features discussions on migration, trans feminist activism, healthcare, austerity and criminalisation. All of these recordings are available on the Decriminalised Futures website. They also run a monthly reading group, which you can sign up for, and next year, will be running a year-long series of storytelling workshops, primarily for sex workers.

Abolitionist Futures is a network of community organisers and activists in Britain and Ireland working together to build a future without prisons, police and punishment. All year, they have been running an abolitionist reading group, and the reading lists for all these are up on their website. So even if you can't make the reading groups, they're well worth checking out, like there's some really amazing resources there. They've also recently worked with a bunch of other groups and organisers to create some resources about steps towards defunding the police, looking at reformist reforms versus abolitionist steps forwards for UK policing, it's a really useful and important resource that anyone interested in UK abolition should go and have a look at.

The session tonight will be recorded, so we'll send out a link to all of these things when we send out a link to the recording. This event series is also supported by Verso books. So, shout out to them for lending their platform and supporting grassroots abolitionist work. Also, thank you to Erica for their support in making the event series happen. Everyone in attendance today can get 50% off *Revolting Prostitutes*, which is a book by Juno Mac and Molly Smith, and there will be a link in the chat to the discounted price. This event also has a handler who will be keeping on top of questions and any questions posed during this conversation. So please feel free to comment, and we may include some of your comments in the Q and A at the end. Just a little bit of a note on the slide as well about the panellists. The panellists may cover some topics and share some personal information, so please make sure that no assumptions are made about publishing the information elsewhere without consent from the panellists.

I'm going to do a little intro about myself, who I am, what work I do, and then I'm going to hand over to the speakers who are going to be doing intros about themselves as well. So, my name is Toby Adiebajo. I am a UK based African Nigerian artist and organiser, community organiser. So, I do a lot of work within my community. I do a lot of work around accessibility, and I love making music. I also am very, very much about thinking about and working towards a decriminalised future for sex workers everywhere in the world and also in the UK. Mutual aid work is very, very important, and I hope that by the end of this conversation that we're all able to think about what that can look like in an active, you know, manner within our communities and in our personal lives too. Mutual aid means a lot to me, especially as a disabled person. There's really no way that I would be surviving without it. So really, really grateful that we're getting to a point in the UK where also that is becoming a more prevalent, a more regular part of our conversations, especially when we're thinking about communities and organising and activism, and yeah, community care and collective care and neutral care. So, I think that's it for me.

In terms of the layout for today, we're going to start, we're going to start off now. We're going to start the event intros from the speakers, and we're going to go into questions and sessions. So, we'll do questions that we've already prepared, and then hopefully, if there's enough time, we'll be able to get into some questions that you all, as in, the viewers, have prepared or asked or commented. And then we'll close. So, we should be hopefully done by 9pm. Yeah, so now I'm going to introduce you to the rest of the speakers. The first speaker I'm going to introduce you today is going to be Juno Mac, whose book we are actually also talking about, hi Juno. So just if you're comfortable, to give us a little bit about who you are, what kind of work you do, what mutual aid work you think is most important at this current moment, and also what mutual aid means to you. Also, thank you so much for taking the time to write such an amazing and necessary book, especially one that's really, you know, UK based. I think it's really important.

**Juno Mac 06:22:**

Thanks Toby, yeah, my name is Juno Mac. I'm really excited to be here. I am a UK based organiser with SWARM, the Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, who a lot of people might know by our previous name, SWOU, the Sex Worker Open University, which has been running for about 10 years now. The project was founded in 2009 to advocate for and make visible the rights and needs and the demands of sex workers. And we define sex workers as people who sell or trade their sexual services, and we seek to kind of make them visible, represent how diverse and inclusive our community is, and support sex workers in their demands for better working conditions.

Since I've been in SWARM, and you know, before then, the work that we've done has really varied. Some of it's about public advocacy, so yeah, like advocating within society for what sex workers want. But also, a huge amount of that has always been about, like, community facing stuff, a lot of which I would classify as

mutual aid, and some of which is also just to kind of serve people's like social and cultural needs. But I think over time, I've seen a trend towards much more practical, focused mutual aid that really targets the needs that people have that are a result of sex workers resources and infrastructure being neglected or destroyed under capitalism, and I'm really excited to see that becoming more of a thing in grassroots movements. More generally, it's something that sex workers have been doing for a really long time, sharing resources and particularly like practical stuff around money, whether it's money itself or support in accessing money, has always been a part of the way that sex workers support one another, because it's a community that's based on our relationship to work under capitalism. And I think sex workers have a really keen understanding of how important it is to give directly, and that was in place even before the pandemic began.

When the pandemic started, we decided to create a hardship fund for sex workers on the basis of the fact that a lot of people in SWARM had started to panic and they were worrying about their income, and we knew that that would be the case all over the country quite a bit before the lockdown was announced. So, we set up the hardship fund. People had to meet three criteria to qualify for a payment, and then we reached out to them in the order that they had applied in to give them grants of £200, one-time grants, and over the course of the time we were running the hardship fund, we actually managed to raise and give out £251,000 pounds in grants to over 1,200 sex workers. And we gave that to them directly after speaking with them to check that they were eligible. And if you're interested in how and like how that works and how we did it, then we have created a document outlining that, just in case other people are interested in hardship fund, mutual aid on that kind of scale, because it throws up a lot of a lot of stumbling blocks. But I'm super proud that we managed to do that, and like materially, managed to meet people where they were at instead of kind of trying to imagine what their needs would be or prescribe stuff to them, which is how I feel like for me, the difference between mutual aid and charity is about that fundamental relationship of reaching out to people as part of the same group, and not having to imagine what those needs are, because you also experience those needs is a really important part of mutual aid.

That's something sex workers really understand, and it's also really important to us, because when, when help is given to sex workers, not through a mutual aid lens, it can actually create problems. It can it can be a driver for violence against sex workers in many ways, because sex workers have practical needs, and when they need those needs met, they don't need to have their time wasted with diversionary type things. So, a lot of the violence of the benefit system was something we really didn't want to replicate with the hardship fund. We didn't want to make people jump through hoops or have to prove themselves, which, again, I think, is another characteristic of charity or bureaucratic framework. So, we really just wanted to put money directly into people's hands, not tell them how they had to spend it, so long as they met our criteria. And although I don't think that's what mutual aid is always about, I think that the pandemic has for a lot of people, the pandemic has been all about economic struggle and loss of loss of access to money, or the resources that they usually have access to, they can no longer have.

And I think at this time, especially given that we can't be in real life space with one another, I think for sex workers, the kind of mutual aid that enhances people's access to capital is really important, not just because they need money to live, but also, because at the moment, going back to work could be really dangerous to health, or working more than we absolutely have to is dangerous. Sex workers are really familiar with the idea that work can be dangerous, and the work that we do as SWARM is not just about trying to eradicate danger, but also reduce harm in the context of dangerous work. So, as well as that, we set up a guide at the start of the pandemic to disseminate information about working during the pandemic

and ways, ways to mitigate the harms of that, amongst other things. And we also put out a guide to Universal Credit.

So, it's not just about giving money directly into people's hands. It's also about looking at generally enhancing sex workers access to resources. And I think for all of these reasons, for me, mutual aid is an inherently political thing, stepping in to create resources that are destroyed, but also recognising why those resources are being destroyed. And who does it serve when those resources are destroyed? Who is it? Who? Who like who's been kept down by the destruction of those resources? And also, mutual aid sees the whole system as a problem and not the people in it. You know, it doesn't see the people as deserving of their circumstances in any way. Which is, I know that just from my personal experience working on the hardship fund, that a lot of people in need have internalised the idea that there's a reason they're in need, and the reason is them. And what for me was very uplifting about taking part in this and working in SWARM in general, is the sense that we're disrupting that idea and introducing people to the idea that actually they deserve to have their needs met regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in. So, I'm really excited for the event. I'll leave my introduction there, and yeah, I'm looking forward to hearing from everybody else.

**Tobi Adebajo 13:59**

Thank you so much. You know, that's such great points and so important to also like kind of highlight and remind people that mutual aid is not - it shouldn't, I mean, for me anyway - also, in my opinion, mutual aid is not something that should be reactionary. It's something that we need to really like embed into, like our language of conversation and community. I do a lot of organising with different groups and one of them, Purple Rain collective. And before the pandemic, there was like just, there was not really, there were no donations coming in to the to the fund, to like, help support other people. So Purple Rain Collective is like a - it's a collective that's for queer, trans, intersex, black people and people of colour in the UK to kind of mobilise, kind of strategise and organise, talk about, you know, collective liberation. Think about how we want to be existing in a world that really tries to oppress us in so many different ways.

But because of the pandemic, all of a sudden we had probably close to £4000 donations just in the space of a month coming into the account, and it meant that we were then able to start distributing funds to like queer and trans, intersex, that people of colour, primarily in the UK, but also in other parts of the world, who were literally going through lots of different experiences. That meant that they weren't going to be able to survive as people weren't actually supporting them. So it really, it made me want to have more of these conversations. It made me want to really find a way of continuing to embed - like embed - and remind that this is not just, it's not if it's increasing, you know, mutual aid in the UK as a result of the pandemic. But I also, I'm hoping that because of these kinds of conversations we're having, and because people are seeing the real need for us to be caring for each other in a collective and, like, interpersonal way, then it shouldn't just end once the pandemic has ended, even though we don't, you know, we don't know when that's going to be. So, we can also go on like donating money to people who need it, and also keeping the work's going and making people, you know, letting people know that they're not they're not alone. Yeah? So, the next person I'm going to introduce to y'all is Juan, yeah, I'm going to let them do the intro.

**Juan Fernandez 16:14**

So yeah. First, I wanted to thank the organisers for the invitation. I feel very honoured to be in the company of the panellists whose work I very much admire, and slightly terrified. But anyways, we'll deal with that. So, I am Juan Fernandez. I was born and raised in Venezuela, and I have lived in the UK for the last nine years, and I've been interested in drug policy for the last 10 I'm also, like the majority of the UK population, a drug

user, except that some of my drugs of choice will expose me to criminalisation and other forms of state sponsored punishment and harm. But I'm also white. I live in a former empire, and I'm in stable employment, which puts me in a situation of great privilege compared to a lot of people. And the reason why I'm mentioning this is because it does partially shield one from the hums of the War on Drugs, which is this endeavour that's racist, colonial and classist, and it has always been, thanks to US and British imperialism, we can discuss that later.

So, I work with the Secretariat of the International Drug Policy Consortium, which is a network of about 200 non-profits from all over the world that advocate for change in drug policy. And the objective is to build responses to drug related challenges that advance human rights and social justice, very different organisations that said, I am here talking in a personal capacity, and mostly in relation to my involvement in a related project that's called Support and Punish, which is a decentralised campaign for which IDPC acts as a main hub of sorts. So the campaign came to be in 2011 and resulted from conversations between networks of people who use drugs from all over the world and allied organisations that were trying to respond to the HIV epidemic and the destructive impact on people, on communities of people who use and people who inject drugs globally, people who inject drugs are 20 times more likely to acquire HIV than the rest of the population, and that owes itself entirely to the War on Drugs, that I would generally describe as narratives, practices and policies that advance the idea that some drug markets are inherently evil, and every population that is either involved in them or perceived to be involved in them will be also deemed by association, evil and thus deserving of punishment.

So, to dismantle this edifice, we came together with three tactics. One, decriminalise people who use drugs, ensure that people have access to harm reduction and ensure that decisions that are taken by the state with regard to people who use drugs involve people who use drugs. So, the campaign was, and remains, an open invitation to any local initiative from around the world to join this mobilisation under a common banner. Over the last seven years we have, it's been really excited to see how communities continue to develop what it means to Support and Punish with regards to drug use. So, whereas initially the campaign focused on decriminalising people who use drugs, we have seen more and more local partners talk about decriminalisation of other identities and other behaviours that are considered to be outside of bourgeois society, so the supply of drugs, the cultivation of crops deemed illicit, but also sex work or queer and trans identities, and in some cases even the abolition of the criminal legal system as a whole in the same.

Whereas initially, harm reduction was understood as the provision of services by the state, some colleagues have pointed out to principles or to ideas like full spectrum harm reduction, the idea that in order to for harm reduction to work, you need to address the social structural barriers that include people to living and staying well, but also safe supply, the idea that we should be able to access substances that are of predictable content and predictable impacts, whereas the conversation initially was very much focused on getting a seat at the table. I think it's really interesting to see campaigners come up with models of caring and supporting each other that are not state dependent. Now I want to be clear that Support and Punish. It's as I mentioned, that decentralised campaign, and there's very many different ways of approaching what we're after. So, I wouldn't say that there's like a mass turn towards abolition and mutual aid, but I think at least for me, it is incredibly interesting to see these conversations evolve in ways that respond to the War on Drugs through non-reformist responses.

Now, mutual aid is absolutely crucial for people who use drugs, because it's absolutely impossible to rely on the British state to care for people who use drugs and other communities affected by the war on drugs. So, Britain was a key architect of the International Drug Control Regime, which enshrined into international law

the idea of the War on Drugs, and it has translated that nationally in incredibly punitive terms. So, over the last 10 years, drug policing has led to almost 1 million arrests, which disproportionately impact black people. So, like our colleagues from Release have found that people - black people - are nine times more likely to be stopped for drug offences, and not that it matters, but that's completely independent from patterns of use. But I struggled with that clarification and also the drug war translates into other forms of violence, like the routine sectioning of people who are experiencing drug related psychosis. And I really appreciated Amal in the previous panel, mentioning the carcerality of some of the systems within public health, because this definitely ties in with that. This reliance of punishment on punishment takes place against the backdrop of neo-liberal abstinence centre policy making, which has also had a direct impact on the well-being of people who use drugs. So, over the last five years, we have seen a reduction of 30% in drug treatment access to Naloxone, which reverses opioid overdose, which accounts for most deaths, remains basic, very limited harm reduction interventions that like safer consumption sites or drug checking are mostly inexistent in the country. So, it is quite unsurprising that, although incredibly tragic, that the UK has one of the highest overdose death rates in the EU, and in the case of Scotland, it is the highest overdose death rate in the EU and one of the highest in the world. And these disproportionately affect working class, neurodivergent and street-based people.

So COVID-19 makes things worse. We know that there's been a 40% increase in stop and searches in London, for instance. But also, the government has come up with new ways to crack down on raves organised by young people without thinking at any point, how do we support these young people that are engaging in these spaces where drug use is quite common, and also, like we see from colleagues in North America, very sharp increase in overdose deaths? So, although currently we're not, we haven't identified that here in surveys by colleagues who are doing that monitoring work I am worried about on the reporting, and then I'm also thinking of like the medium and long term impact of being involved in a very traumatic situation, increased economic precariousness, the dismantling of the welfare state. So mutual aid is a life and death kind of thing for people who use drugs and communities affected by the War on Drugs.

Now, in terms of what it means to me, I think it's about - and other people have said it already - it's about creating more caring and more supportive societies, and in that sense, I think it's a radical response to the individualistic ethos of capitalism, where once, the serving of care only as a function of the potential to a mass capital and at the same time, is not only a response to current needs, but also about building, building a future and gesturing towards a better future. It's about the idea of realising that neo-liberal capitalism is taking us somewhere where that is not liveable, and if we want to create something that's liveable, we need to create more loving and more caring relationships.

Now in practical terms, how does it look for people who use drugs? It's always existed like mutual support is something that always happens, very informal, informally in drug using communities, they've always, always, always organised to support each other. But if I have to think of initiatives today, they look like Peter Krykant, an activist in Scotland who's lost his job and risked arrest to set up a mobile drug consumption ban where people can actually inject in a safe space and receive like some like hygienic materials to inject, but also have a conversation and talk about like, potential access to different services. It's about humanising the experience of injecting, but also Ray Bay crew, which has crowd funded to provide information, reliable information, about drugs and their potential impact. It's about colleagues like the Lambeth Service Union User Council and Respect who are doing peer to peer naloxone distribution and Naloxone training, but also the black protest legal support in the UK, and even SWARM's Mutual Aid initiative. Because I think the frontiers between what's mutual aid for people who use drugs and what's mutual aid for like, there's people

who use drugs in absolutely every community. So, I think as like, part of supporting people who use drugs is about improving welfare and well-being for all. And sorry, I overran.

**Tobi 27:14**

Thank you so much. That was very necessary conversations to have. Also, it's just a thing of, like, destigmatising people's existences, and, like, removing this weird kind of shame culture that people are so comfortable sitting inside of when it comes to thinking about drugs, and thinking about drugs specifically in different communities, because drug users exist everywhere, and that's not going to change. So, it's good to be thinking about it in the context of mutual aid, and like what that actually means for our direct communities, and how we can incorporate that into our work. I worked at Open Barbers before the pandemic. I used to work at Open Barbers, which is a queer salon, essentially, in London, and I used to work there on Saturdays, and I remember they had Narcotics Anonymous, which was for queer and trans people and sex workers, which is such a, like, very specific niche. It's not a niche, and that's a really bad word, actually, not a niche, but it's such a - it's an intersection that I don't know if a lot of people are thinking about. Oh yeah, like that also indicated for, but yeah, if anybody is ever thinking about, like, one meeting, things like that, like I think they have some information on their website. I will pass the mic now over to Jodi to do their intro.

**Jodie Beck 28:29**

Hi everyone. My name is Jodie, and I am one of the co-founders of our Empty Chair, and I do some organising around prison abolition. I'm just going to speak about our Empty Chair and how it came about, what we're doing, and then also what mutual aid means to me. So, our empty chair is a grassroots collective bringing together the stories and experiences of families separated from their loved ones through prison during the Coronavirus crisis, although it's the work that we're doing, will live way beyond this current time that we're living in. We set up our Empty Chair at the beginning of kind of lockdown, so at the end of March, so when the whole country was put into lockdown, you also saw this happen in prisons, with the suspension of prison visits, and also prisons themselves going into a completely different type of lockdown. So, people inside being locked up for upwards of 23 hours a day, having very limited time out of their cells, having around like 15 minutes outside to get fresh air, and then trying to split the remaining time they had between trying to make contact with family, trying to get the medication, if that's what they needed, buy stuff in the canteen. So, what we kind of saw was that, although it's important to say that. Uh, prisoners families have been organising and doing mutual aid work for decades and decades and decades, it hasn't really been public in the sense that, like they were posting on Twitter, they were kind of like writing to MPs and things like that. And we thought of setting this up to try and amplify those stories, but also provide um, kind of support to the people that were experiencing this. Um, also I was experiencing this at the same time in a kind of different way, with my dad experiencing criminal proceedings and being at risk of being sent to prison. So, it's something that I resonated with myself, and kind of wanted to bring together and organise, like the families and friends that we're speaking at publicly, which hasn't really happened before, because it's a heavily shamed and stigmatised experience.

So, there was a level of desperation to what prisoners' families were saying at this time, because you had a situation where on the daily we had like Boris Johnson on the telly telling us about how many people had died in the community from Coronavirus, but there were people dying in prisons, and there are people reporting really horrific conditions from the prison estate that just weren't being heard in a public way. Families were trying to get through to prisons by phone, and just weren't being communicated with at all. And that's from going to having kind of a routine from when you see a loved one in prison. So it's really strange to kind of say in this way, but kind of when you have say, if you're the mother of a number of

children and your partners in prison, you kind of develop a routine, like where your partner might - the term sometimes goes - like you parent from prison, and that just might be the routine you have where you kind of have a set time where your partner will call, you have a set time every week, or two weeks where you'll have a visit, and that's such an important part of kind of surviving that sentence, and that had completely gone out of the window, and instead, you had a situation where you might not even receive a call every day, and you just had no means of contacting your loved one. And this was particularly horrific when it was hanging against the backdrop of key worker messaging. You had prison officers doing dances and posting them on Twitter, but also the clamping down of the state by introducing longer sentencing and also, more recently, increasing the length of time you can spend on remand.

So, for us doing this work with Empty Chair, it was about actually just getting out there, what's happening. I think it was Angela Davis that said, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, about how we never really question the existence of prisons and policing, because they're kind of like - they're so kind of pervasive, but also in a geographical sense, like they are very much out of sign outside, out of mind. You don't tend to get many inner-city prisons, so in the very physicality of prisons be located out of our kind of eyesight, it's very easy to kind of just pretend that these buildings are over there, like doing what we think Justice is, and not really giving it a second thought. And on top of that, you have that's like the issue of people who are inside prison, but then how the web of criminalisation and sentencing expands to families and friends, and that's really what, what our focus was like. Actually, everyone, to some extent, under lockdown, is experiencing some level of separation, but not in the same way as people are who have no access to their loved ones who are serving a prison sentence. So, we just try to get that out there, using the very - using the imagery around like the empty chair that you have when someone leaves, and kind of trying to bring to light that grief and loss that is suffered when that happens.

And I just want to say again, like, I think, with when, when the kind of Coronavirus pandemic started, there was kind of like a proliferation of mutual aid groups, which has been really brilliant in so many ways, in different local communities. But sometimes they weren't spaces where family members could go and openly disclose that they had a family member in prison. And also, kind of in some mutual aid groups. I'm sure a lot of people are aware that there have been, like, lots of difficult discussions around like, do we involve the police? Which is, like, always a no, but I know that some friends that have been organising in their local communities have had to have those conversations about why it's unsafe and harmful to have police involved in mutual aid work, and why it should be completely separated from the state, because it's the reason why it exists is because the state isn't providing what people need.

But yeah, it's important to say that obviously prisoners' families have been organising for a long time, like prisoners' wives, Facebook groups and things like that, like organising, like travel to visits, etc. And this work has been going on for a really, really long time. So, I guess, like this was trying to bring together kind of that work that was already being done, the care work that was already being done around that kind of political demand for release of people from prison, but also the call for visits to be reinstated. And it's kind of with abolition, it's kind of that mixture of, how do we build the systems that we want, and that's a world without prisons. But also, how do we ensure that people have what they need right now? And I think that's a really important point in terms of how we link together abolition and mutual aid, and for that in a practical sense, because empty chair was kind of calling for release, but also, we're also going to be calling for visits to be reinstated, and we're also going to be calling for things like in cell phones, mobile phone handsets being handed out to people inside, because that is how that contact is maintained. And I think both what Juno and Juan said about like all of this is to do with resisting that kind of individualistic pull yourself up by the by your bootstraps narrative of the state, especially around a common one with prisoners families, is like, well,

if they really care that much, they wouldn't have done what they did, and they wouldn't be in prison. And I think something that kind of overarched everything that we did when we set up empty chair was like, that's not even going to ever come into it. That's not going to be a precondition of any sort of work we do together with families. It's yeah, we're not passing any value judgments on that, and it's not even a question. So, yeah, I think that's my introduction, but I'm really excited to see what everyone else is contributing. And thank you so much for inviting me to speak.

**Tobi 37:31**

Thank you so much for speaking. Jodi, it's all doing just very important and necessary work. And there's so many ways in which, yeah, mutual aid is at the intersection of literally, the work that you're doing. So much appreciation. I will hand over to Dania now to do that intro.

**Dania Thomas 37:50**

Hello everybody, and thank you. Thank you for the organisers, and thank you for having us here. So, I'll kind of say a bit about myself, and then go on to talk about Ubuntu Women's Shelter, with which I'm associated. So, I want to, kind of, before I begin, I want to first of all say I'm here speaking and platforming the work of our amazing, driven, committed volunteers, and we are entirely volunteer run. We and our board. We are a by and for organization. And I would also like to thank our wider network, and we developed a network of drivers who support our work and our interpreters, okay, and least, but not last. I would like to really thank all the women our guests, who have, who have, in so many ways, defined who we are and what we do.

So, yeah, so I'm a law researcher. I work at the University of Glasgow, and my research, my specialism is markets, and what is it that makes markets tick? Okay? And I particularly am drawn to international finance and regulation, but I'm going to kind of bring some aspects of that into the discussion today, but I'm going to kind of focus on the work that we do as Ubuntu Women Shelter, and in order to kind of get into or describe what we do, I'll begin by asking a question. The question is, how do we sustain mutual aid in a patriarchal, structurally racist, white structure? Okay, so how do we sustain it? Juno and Jodi have all described instances about their particular characteristics, about mutual aid and sustaining mutual aid and particular. Characteristics of the structural nature of the harms that we are kind of resisting and fighting so, so Ubuntu Women Shelter, and the name kind of says a lot about who we are and what we do. So, Ubuntu is, again, there's the naming here is, is critical. So, Ubuntu is a name that's used in many African countries and cultures, so, say, in South Africa and Zimbabwe and Namibia, to describe essentially mutual aid and this idea that we are because, I mean, I am because we are. And this, this kind of essentially collective nature of our identities. So, it's really the glue that binds us together and what we see in our work is that it's also a site for capitalist extraction. Okay, so I'm kind of going to keep that, and keep coming back to that.

Now, when we talk about mutual aid, we're talking about this nurturing and caring and compassionate and space of unconditional solidarity. So, it's kind of quite particular. And you know, it's, it's, almost unspoken, the things that keep us together. So, in Ubuntu we essentially do two kinds of things, and I'll come back to this later. We have a shelter which we own, and it we provide short term, temporary emergency accommodation for women with no recourse to public funds. And we also have outreach activities where we go into the community and to deliver baby food and cooked food. And this is something that started after the COVID lockdown, and I'll come back to that. So, the nature of our support is, really, it's unconditional. We have, we don't access any state funds. It's entirely free and it, we are a no borders organisation. So, it comes with the territory, I think, mutual aid. And just picking up on what Jodi said, this idea of mutual aid existing across the walls of prisons is an idea that kind of captures a no border characteristic of mutual aid that you know, that we are sustained by, okay, so the woman that we support,

so it's anyone who self identifies as a woman. So, it's a diversity of guests that we support. And then the word shelter. Now the way we use it is, it's a verb, not a noun. So, it's, it's a process, and it's a movement, as opposed so it's, it's things that are continuously regenerating and so, yeah, so it's a kind of a present, continuous verb.

Okay, so in order to understand how we how we started, how we exist in this moment, it's necessary to contextualise our development. So, there's a historical trajectory that explains why we are here at this point, and it's also important to contextualise it within the context of the wider changes in the wider political economy. So, so I'm just going to kind of bring back some of the some of the key kind of shifts that have led to something like now in to be set up. We kind of were a community group and just sitting around, a lot of food, discussing about what, what do we do, and how do we react to something - that we are kind of people we were experiencing on the ground, and most of us were volunteers at the Unity Center, and which is a group very similar to ours, that provides unconditional, kind of no borders organisation in Glasgow.

And so, what we saw in 2017 and wasn't a mistake that we, while kind of started thinking about setting up an organisation like Ubuntu, is because it came really on the back of the Immigration Act, the expansion of the hostile environment 2016 and before that, in 2014 so from restrictions on employers, you had the expansion into the financial sector. Like, bank accounts, and you had an expansion into the property market with restrictions on landlords. So, and we've heard a lot about that in in the discussion on Prevent by Sita Balani last week. So yeah, so it wasn't a mistake that we were actually thinking about doing something to resist what we were seeing on the ground. And what were we seeing on the ground. We were basically seeing two things. One is this expansion of privatisation in in the enforcement of immigration law. Okay? So, they were the, you know, the home office provision of housing, for instance, was now being privately provided. Deportation flights were private flights, and then you had the detention centres, which were run by a private company. So that was the first thing that we were seeing.

The second thing was this expansion of the criminal law, decriminalisation of immigration and enforcement. And the combination that we were actually seeing was precarity. So, there's this enhanced precarity, and it was particularly affecting women. And of course, in this racialised structure, it was black and brown women. So, so this is what I'm and the other key thing here what we were noticing is that there were many more women who needed accommodations. So, destitution started becoming very much a characteristic of the precarity, or the enhanced precarity that we will see. Okay, so we decided to set up charity in order to provide shelter. So that's how we and it would be unconditional, taking no borders, and it would be run by people with lived experience. So, this is picking up on the point you know made that this a very different model of providing this service in from a standard charity.

So again, we needed to raise funds, and that's what we did. We raised funds and we bought our own shelter. Again, this is kind of dismantling that particularly tenacious aspect of the hostile environment where landlords were becoming the gatekeepers to accommodation and property. Again, I'll come back to that in in a minute, and it's interesting about destitution being the characteristic way in which the hostile environment is playing out in the ground, is because, and this goes back to something actually Achille Mbembe talks about how even during slavery, you have destitution, very much an aspect of slavery, because you deny people spaces for cultural regeneration. Okay, so, so it is kind of, and this is why, what I meant by taking a step back and looking at situating this particular period historically, because they are continuities in what we see, and the kind of the new manifestations of these ideas that sustain this racialised structure.

Okay, now, so why are we seeing destitution? What was happening? What was driving this? And why were we seeing privatisation? We know we've heard about the hostile environment. We know how it looks. We know what are the features of the host, and we know the law, and we need we know the provisions and the changes that were made. But why was this happening, and what is privatisation got to do with it? Okay now, and for this - to understand this - we need to go slightly behind, slightly back in time, and we need to go back to the 2008 crisis, and again, the financial crisis, and we have talked about austerity, and one of the kind of key features of austerity was as the state was being cut back. So, it's a form of structural violence, and it's kind of the particular effects that are felt on groups with - and that kind of reflects the racialised structure. So, women were being particularly affected, differently abled people were being differently affected, specifically affected. And it was racialised, okay, so, so austerity, was, was this again, increasing precarity, okay, so it goes right back. And this is kind of a small, small skip, so it's not very long time where you see all these changes coming in.

Okay, so now we understand austerity. We felt it. We feel it. We know that. That job. If we know how it works, we have this really fine grain understanding of how that pernicious, that structural violence, is what we really don't understand very well, and what I'm arguing is that we do need to understand it quite well in order to structure our strategies and resistance to sustain mutually going forward. Is this flip side of austerity? Okay? We saw the production of the state, okay, but what we don't understand is the flip side was the expansion of the financial sector, okay, so what we had in 2008 was a state bailing out the financial markets. So, coming out of that period, you have this bloated financial sector. Now, in in financial markets, it's not good to have money lying around, because this is investment capital, and this is another feature of capitalism that we really need to engage with, and it's so filled with jargon and the preserve of experts that we really need to get a hang of this.

Okay, so, so just bear with me, and I'm going to take you through the steps that lead to us today and on this panel and having this discussion on mutual aid so, yes, so we have this bloated sector. You have capital that's pressurising the state in order to open up avenues for investment. Okay, so, and at that time, around that time, you have the development and the flowering of the hostile environment. So, from where we are sitting, this is not an accident, okay, and the way we are looking at it, and what we are seeing in how we work, is the hostile environment actually opens up, okay, black and brown bodies, okay, for opens up opportunities for capital extraction. Okay, so, and that's why you see this characteristic of the hostile environment, which is privatisation. So, you have private companies who now are funded by financial markets. Okay, so all these investments need to make, to be made, and these returns needed to be got, but here the profits are coming from the precarity of black and brown people. Okay, so it's, it's extremely important to keep that in mind, and I'll come back to it in terms of, how do you resist it, and how do you sustain mutual aid in order to sustain the work that we do? Okay? So, you have this expansion so at all points, and one of the key features of the hostile environment was the access to restrict access to financial markets. Now with the enhanced precarity, okay, you have it translates into a risk profile. So black and brown bodies suddenly become - the risk becomes enhanced, okay? Now, in a normal day to day conversation, enhanced risk is not good, so you need to reduce the risk. Okay. So one way in which this works is So, for instance, if you're an insurance provider, you will be excessively careful about, say, offering a credit service to a black or brown person, because this is enhanced, okay, and so the excluded from access to financial markets or capital markets, okay, so you will find it more difficult to get a mortgage and to do just the stuff that other people in the sales structure can do. Okay, but there's another way in which finance markets react to enhance precarity and risk, and that is and the way it translates, it's the higher risk you get, the higher return, okay? And so, their financial instruments that are structured in order to capture the

returns from this enhanced okay? And that's why you had financial mortgages that were directed to predominantly black people. Okay. So, what we see the hostile environment expands. You open up opportunity, opportunities of extraction, and the sites become black and brown bodies. Okay?

Now coming back to mutual aid, what we see is the hostile environment - the way it's structured, it has this kind of fuzzy element to it. Yes, we have the provisions in the act that specify what needs to be done and what's there, but when in its implementation and in enforcement. It doesn't have the sharp edges, right? It doesn't say, Okay, if you do X Y Z, there will be an X Y Z penalty. It's quite fuzzy, the way in which the hostile environment is implemented. And what I'm arguing is actually, this is by design. It's not an accident. And this fuzziness actually as this element where - so let me give you an example, if you have a civil penalty imposed on a landlord, if a landlord rents to a person who doesn't have papers. Okay? Now in this situation, the landlord basically has to make a choice, okay? So, the landlord is put in a situation where they have to make a choice, that they have to look at this person's papers, and then they have to decide that this person doesn't, we can't rent to this person, because it's going to be true in the law, okay? In addition to civil penalties, there are criminal penalties that apply to the landlord, and therefore the landlord is going to be hyper cautious. Okay, so again, this higher risk profile for black and brown bodies because the landlord first is not competent or trained into identify or look at people's papers. So, what's going to happen is there's going to be a very racialised effect of having such a kind of provision, because black and brown people, by being visible, are going to be excluded from the property market. Okay, so now, given this, this, this fuzziness around it, what we see as an effect of enforcement is, is this particular kind of structural harm. So, it's very difficult to name it, okay, as X, Y, Z, okay. It's structural harm, and it has particular characteristics. And I know people who are working in the hostile environment, trying to resist it.

Okay, so how do we fit in? How does Ubuntu come in and kind of deal with this and resist this? We take a really, very clear anti-capitalist stance, because we want to resist the extraction that comes with the hostile environment. Okay? So, there are three kind of key things that we do. The first thing is we witness. So, when a woman comes to us, it's unconditional. We have a very low Needs Assessment threshold, and they have access to the service, okay? They come into the accommodation. And so, the first thing we do is witness, we witness their trauma, okay? We witness the nature of the effects of structural harm, okay. The second thing is, we name it as structural violence, and that's important. And that goes back to the point made earlier, that this is not an individual problem. This is not an individual choice, this is a structural problem. And the third point is we offer unconditional solidarity, okay, so, so that's where we stand. And I'll end now and come back to the conversation.

**Tobi 58:27**

Thank you so much. Dania, that was great. Also, very informative. I feel like this specific, also part of the conversation around the economy is something that a lot of black and brown people don't have structural access to like this language of economy, of finances, so it does make it even more dangerous and even more precarious to be existing in the hostile environment. So yeah, thank you. And also, people look up Ubuntu shelter because they're doing really amazing work. The next question that I have is really talking about the things that differentiate mutual aid from charities, like, what are some of the challenges of mutual aid in terms of gatekeeping and avoiding replicating state systems? Yeah, so the person I'm going to ask the question to first is Jodi, if you don't mind. So, I might be having some technical difficulties, so I'll pass over to Juno for now.

**Juno 59:37**

Okay, um Yeah, I think the key thing for me that differentiates the two is this idea of reciprocity. You know, the key, the clue is in the term mutual aid, I think it can make a big difference that both the giver and the receiver of mutual aid, ultimately, at any given point, can both benefit from that exact kind of solidarity. So, in SWARM, you know, even if a person or us as a group are at any given moment giving mutual aid, we have all in SWARM benefited from that kind of solidarity in the past. And it's that reciprocity that can impact how the it makes a big difference to dignity, basically, dignity, the trust that is placed in the giver, because to ask for mutual aid and to receive it is quite a vulnerable thing. When we were running the hardship fund, we found that it was often the case that people, the applicants to the hardship fund, were very much in the mindset of having to make their case to a bureaucracy, you know, that kind of charity framework that asks people to prove themselves and to jump through hoops.

So, we really tried to get out of that mindset of thinking about people as like the deserving or the non-deserving poor, and look at it through the framework of, you know, this is the kind of care that we all need at some point, and we all deserve to receive from people who know us best, which is our communities. I think that whilst that being said, and that's definitely the framework through which we approached it, it would be remiss not to say that it's hard sometimes not to fall into the trap of, you know, feeling that tension line between mutual aid and charity, particularly when there's really no precedent for giving that kind of care. You know, we're, in some ways, communities are making up our own like ways of doing this. Certainly, no one has ever given this amount of money directly into sex workers hands before. So, we were kind of creating our new path, as it were, and also we were safeguarding a lot of money, and with that comes the temptation, or the tendency, to gate-keep and to try and guard our resources, not just the money, but our own time. So, there was a lot of a lot of tension about trying not to gate-keep and not to adopt a power dynamic with the applicants, whilst at the same time making the hardship fund as efficient as we possibly could. I do think we walked that line well, as far as like the tension between mutual aid and charity, where I see that people are not necessarily doing that well, is in the mainstream anti prostitution movement, whereby, I think a lot of I think we'll see the term mutual aid being appropriated a lot in those spaces. Because in to the mind of the average anti prostitution organization, they are delivering mutual aid because, you know, they might come from the perspective of formally working in the sex industry, but for me, the crucial difference is like material impact of various policies, and class, money, and all these things make a huge difference.

So, we were trying to be mindful of that with the hardship fund. But I think a lot of charitable initiatives probably think of themselves as doing mutual aid work, and so it's really important to stay vigilant, basically, and keep thinking about what it is that sets mutual aid apart from charity, which for me, is reciprocity, trust, reaching a consensus, instead of having a top down, a top down approach and a whole host of things. I think a lot of the other speakers might have good stuff to say on, but, you know, I think that a lot it's really important to take these questions really seriously, because when they're not thought about, the impact on people who are receiving mutual aid can be quite intense, and sex workers are already framed in our society as people who can't really be trusted to know what they need and want, and not really seen as like reliable narrators of their of the needs that they have. So, it's very important not to accidentally slip into that that power differential when helping each other out, and not to replicate the violence of the benefit system so much, yeah.

#### **Tobi 1:04:11**

Yeah. It's important to talk about this, like, the specifics of, like, charity, justice, mutual aid. So, with Purple Rain Collective, we at the beginning, when we first started organising in 2016 when all the Brexit stuff was just starting out, we were really like, okay, are we registering as a charity, or are we just going to continue

organising as a grassroots organization? And the thing of registering as a charity in the UK is that you're not allowed to be political, and that is just, this is a bit like, what do you mean? We're a charity. We have to be political, because we have to be about the people. And there is an inherent politics. There's an inherent politics to care that I don't really know how we're going to engage with if we're then registering as a charity.

So, we decided not to register as a charity. We continued organizing as grassroots organization. And so, with this age or this time of COVID, when all the funds started coming in, and people were like, Yeah, you know, black lives matter. We really need to think about, you know, the people and start giving back, and we realised, Wow, there's so much money in the community, and people just like, gatekeeping their own funds instead of, like putting back and being more intentional about how they're managing their finances, especially people who have it. We then started thinking about gatekeeping of the funds, because we had this money, and we were like, how do we give it out? Like, how do we make it's not just sitting in an account when we know, like we have so many people and so many community members who need this. We then decided to just go with a number, which is kind of also like a bit of a protection spell for the people. And it was like, you would donate £33 to any black, trans, POC, queer funds or fundraisers that we saw going around, and that was kind of like our own way of being like, it's okay, this is what we can afford to do, because also it wasn't quite it wasn't a big fund, so it was a long conversation. But I think we all kind of got to a point of being like, Okay, this is a good decision to make. I'm gonna ask for Juno, I'm sorry, for Dania to answer this question as well, with regard to the difference between mutual aid and charities, and what the what the difference is? Yeah.

#### **Dania 1:06:25**

Thanks Tobi. So, yeah. So, charity is built, I mean, this idea of charity or charitable giving is built on an essential inequality. So, there's a donor and a recipient. Okay, so there's this inequality that's kind of part of the way in which that that charitable giving idea works. And if you situate it in the context of the structure, then you have a very specific - so, for instance, you get tax breaks if you are a charity, and there is a huge incentive to actually to sustain and perpetuate inequality so you continue to get funds. So there is a huge issue around charitable giving, and the kind of ecosystem that develops around that idea, and so in terms of mutual aid, it's, it's, it's kind of, it doesn't have that, that that kind of structure, and it's difficult to kind of capture it on, on, you know, name it because it, it by definition, it's, doesn't it resist that, that, that institutional kind of description that said so one of the conversations that we had when we were deciding to switch from a community group to a charity was really to create a kind of a shell, okay, in order to resist the external structure.

So how do we do that? How do we sustain it? And at the point that, as I described before, the point at which we had to make this decision, was a point in which women's refuges were just collapsing because they were not sustainable. And so, the question that we had to ask is, how do we get and again, part of the hostile environment was this destitution which was kind of coded into that hostile environment. So, we needed to get accommodation, and we needed to get a resource. And so, to do that, it just meant that we needed to have this visibility in order to sustain the resistance and so and it's, it's, it's, in some sense, where we work in, in the place at which we work is not the commons, okay? So, this is a different kind of ecosystem that where you have these institutions that sustain mutual aid, it's a different kind of system where you don't you the borders bug of these organisations. By definition, have to be porous and open in a way. And so, this whole idea of unconditional cash, support, free provision of services, refusing to share information. So, all this is hardwired into Ubuntu, into the way in which the charity is structured. And so, yeah, so we operate in what Fred Morton calls under commons, where it's a different, very different kind of

flora and fauna. So, you know, the way in which we think about ourselves for charity, as a charity, is very different than mainstream charities. So, I'll leave it.

**Tobi 1:10:02**

Thank you so much. I'm going to give the space now to Jodi to answer the question.

**Jodi 1:10:14**

Great. Thanks Toby. I think in terms of differentiating between mutual aid and charity, I think for Empty Chair, we've thought it's kind of all of the support is led by that community. And I mean, that was something that we learned quite quickly at the beginning when we set up empty chair, we were kind of actively like responding to tweets, and kind of like trying to get trying to get people involved that way. But then we kind of like looked at how that might limit agency, which is something that we totally don't want to be doing. So, then we tried to, kind of just like allow it to grow organically, which in that respect, like it is, it's quite difficult, because when you I guess, especially because this, this, this sort of work, is linked to my lived experience. It's like, Oh, yeah. Like, really want to organise this group of people who kind of have the shared experience. It's like, actually, like, people just need to come to you and you need to organise, like, that's, that's a, like, a much better way of kind of building that community. So that was something right at the beginning that we were really keen not to, not to kind of do. And I think that speaks to the difference between mutual aid and charity quite a lot, in the sense that we're not, when we're not providing the support we think people should have, it's been completely led by that community.

So, although that there is a pretty standard format to what we're doing in terms of, we're sharing those kind of testimonies. Behind that kind of public facing element to the kind of collective is like the messages exchanged between families, the kind of messages you get at any time of day, being like, Who do I send this email to if I want to kind of check in with my loved one about their phone like I haven't heard from them in in many days now, um, and then also, I guess it's that thing of actually, like connecting people. So, there were quite a few of the families that we were kind of organising, organising with were based in in the Manchester area, and we connected to families in particular, who now that they're like a support, source of support for each other. And I guess that's kind of where, say, if we were on to chat the charity, there'd be loads of stuff there around, like not sharing information, and I guess it's just viewing safety in a different way, viewing safety in that non-bureaucratic safeguarding risk way, which actually, like, just ends up like burying the need for support and the multiple layers of bureaucracy. And it just ends up being so, so alienating when, when, particularly when we're working with prisoners, working together with prisoners, families, like it's already an incredibly isolating time, kind of having that stigma of having a loved one in prison and then having that added layer of not being able to get in touch with them and maintain that relationship because of the lockdown. So, yeah.

**Tobi 1:13:25**

Thank you. My next question for Juno and Juan, so thinking about kind of the links between mutual aid and criminalisation, wondering if you had any comments as to why you know so many criminalised groups that have such long histories of mutual aid practices. For me, I, I mean, it feels like you know something that that does go hand in hand, because mutual aid exists, because the government and wider society doesn't care about marginalised groups. And mutual aid exists, and it's what's created for and by, you know, marginalised groups. So, it has been a saviour for me in many different instances of my life. So yeah, I'm just wondering how you both feel about that.

**Juno 1:14:17**

I feel like sex workers and drug users and a lot of other criminalised groups keenly understand that. You know, when your non-violent survival strategies are criminalised, then you're looking at a situation where none of your like most basic needs are guaranteed to be met by the state you fall outside the charm circle, and you belong to a group of society that will be forgotten about, especially in times of crisis, but also at any other given time. And criminalisation is one of the harshest ways that this day enforces social hierarchies that protect the resources of the powerful and, uh, while keeping other people in a state of lack. And I think mutual aid seeks to address that lack in equally effective, practical and material ways, and that's certainly what we try and do in the sex worker movement.

I think it's also important to say that criminalisation is really about stripping away people's sense of interconnectedness. This is why we literally put people in prisons, in cages, to cut off their connections to other people and to keep us all siloed away. And criminalisation is about doing that, and it's also about creating bad groups of people. For example, many types of people engage in survival sex or transactional sex, but criminalisation creates and dehumanises a particular subset of people and legally codifies them as prostitutes. It's the same with certain kinds of drug use which are seen as problematic, versus the kind of drug use that, as Juan pointed out, a lot of people engage in, so these people who are legally defined as bad, are seen as worthy of poor treatment. And mutual aid is about cutting through that, cutting through that kind of neo-liberal mindset that says some people actually deserve what they get. They deserve the bad hand they've been dealt, and they have to rescue themselves basically because they got themselves into that mess in the first place. And mutual aid is about cutting through that to say, actually, any, any of us in a society could be treated just as badly. We're all worthy of being helped and and it's, yeah, it's just about recognising that if somebody has needs, it's, it's, it's not on them alone as an individual to fix them. It's about the whole community coming together and criminalised people know that, best of all, I think

#### **Juan 1:16:52**

There's very little that I would add. Yeah, that was an incredibly complete... I would yeah, for people who use drugs, it's very clear that like this, this whole idea that you can delegate to the state carrying and protecting duties like that, was never available to people who use drugs, at least from the 60s, and it only got worse as the century continued. So, the only way to stay alive and stay well was through mutual aid and schemes of mutual support. Just to give you an idea, like, you know, like initially I was, like, during my presentation where I introduced harm reduction, I was referring to, like, two forms of harm reduction, needle and syringe programs and opioid agonist therapies, so, like methadone, but also other therapies, and these are like now have been enshrined into so many international, national legal instruments, recognising that they're essential for the well-being of people who use drugs, and particularly for people who inject drugs, there's only 40% that have 40% of countries that have harm reduction programs at all. So even when you manage to compel through legal means that the state should provide at least like some basic support and basic forms of people staying healthy and safe, like the state doesn't do that. So, yeah, I just echo the sentiment, like for people who are criminalised, it was never like staying alive and staying well was never available through the means that are provided by the state, so you have to go elsewhere, and then through that solidarity and mutual support, you discovered that you can then organise to change the conditions that the state is imposing on you. So yeah, I think that that's some of the connections.

#### **Tobi 1:18:56**

Thanks so much both of you. I just wanted to also give a little reminder, a gentle nudge to all our viewers to make sure that you're leaving any questions that you have, so that we have kind of some questions to pick from during the Q and A section once we're done with the conversation, the next question that I had for Dania, Jodi and Juno was thinking about the explosion of mutual aid projects in the UK, while you know this

happening at the same time as us all feeling the impact of like, a decade of austerity, what does it mean to run mutual aid projects whilst at the same time the government cuts funding, or even, you know, private, I mean privatised, essential resources and essential social services. So, I'll give a say to Dania first.

**Dania 1:19:47**

Yeah. Thanks, Tobi. So yeah. So, as I said before, austerity is kind of pulling back the state and then kind of the provision of state services are not - no longer available. Right? And so, it's not surprising that we have this explosion of mutual aid. And we saw this really clearly with COVID and the COVID lockdown. Now, in terms of kind of, yeah, so that's a key question. How do you sustain this? Okay, so it can't, in some sense, we have to sustain the mutual aid provision without subsidising the state. So, this we don't be - the state has to do its job, okay? It has to direct and redirect tax payers' funds towards providing these services. Okay, so, so there's a careful, there's a fine line here. And we've, we've kind of had this discussion several times, especially in relation to the home office, where, when, when the home office, for instance, we have, we provide emergency accommodation, and because we don't want to subsidise the home office, because home office has a duty to provide accommodation.

So, it's only the period where women come into the city and who and they need accommodation and they're destitute that we fill that gap and it's really this provision, this services that should be provided, because the labour of doing that is done by black and brown women, right? Because it is a fine line for an organisation. So, so there is a fine line in terms of, how do we decide to, you know, leverage what we are developing in terms of providing a service without removing the obligation of the state, okay, to fulfil that role, right? So, one and this and this kind of opens up. If there is a gap, okay, you're going to have private provision coming that takes over that gap that is there because there is no state provision, okay. So again, so we are kind of sitting between two chairs. One are the private providers, and one is a defunct kind of state provision, okay, so, so what we do is and, and this is when the women come to us, okay, we provide accommodation, but we also have and that's a characteristic of mutual aid, right? It doesn't end at a particular point. It's for the life cycle. So, we are supporting women right through their journeys. Okay, so we have women who have come back for support with rents once they can get accommodation and they have papers, we have women who come back with for different when they have babies. So, it's the life line kind of support that underpins how we sustain and how we are sustained by mutual aid. Okay, so, so it's a different kind of provision, and it's, it's a form, the one provided on a kind of needs based kind of, you know, very directive or prescriptive way, in terms of you have to fill this box and you have to fulfil the categories in order to get the services. Very much like the benefit system and the welfare system works, okay, so, so there is a there, there is a difference in which the mutual aid is sustained and in order to maintain the provision of services. So even though the state comes in where there's an opportunity, it'll be on a different it'll have a different kind of provision to be qualitatively different, because we've done that groundwork. Okay? So, the idea is definitely not to subsidise private companies and do the labour and definitely not to subsidise the state in not fulfilling its obligations so but it's about creating and sustaining that. You know, the that that mutual work framing. And that's where that abolishing this kind of idea comes in. And it goes back to this book by Mari Matsuda, who talks about mushrooms at the end of the world. So, it's really about creating an ecosystem of support, okay, which kind of develops a resilience irrespective of what's happening in in this, in this realm above the under current. So, so yeah, so it's really about sustaining and resourcing that that's where our focus is, yeah.

**Juno 1:24:56**

Thank you so much Dania, yeah. I would, I would echo a lot of the those. Something we really keenly felt since the pandemic, was the sense that we were like gazing into this yawning gap of provision for people

that we could not, excuse me, interesting that we could not fill even best of intentions and the hardest work and we were working flat out, and were left with this kind of as uplifting as it was, this kind of soul destroying feeling that there just wasn't enough, and that we were kind of just not to diminish the work, the work doing, but it was really just a gesture in many ways, because a one-time £200 payment can't completely upend the effects of years of austerity. And my concern is, and we actually did see this play out sometime back in April, when we found out that the police had been disseminating information about how street sex workers could apply to the hardship fund, and they were telling people working outside of the street. They were even using this information to try to get people to leave the street and go home and stop working. And we had a couple of applicants say that they'd been told by the police that they would be able to have follow up payments. And we felt that that was very unfair, because we don't work with the police, obviously, and in many ways, the police are kind of working against what sex worker rights activists are working for most of the time. And yet, on this occasion, when it served them, they were utilising and kind of instrumentalising our mutual aid work to serve their own ends and to kind of make themselves look friendlier and more magnanimous whilst they were doing their jobs, which is intrinsically a form of violence. And I actually think that that could become a big part of the way that mutual aid exists in our increasingly neo-liberal and hyper capitalist society, where mutual aid is a term that's co-opted and appropriated by power, by capital, by authorities, to mask the fact that it's doing less and less and less for marginalised people. And so that's my that's my concern. And yeah, really good points by Dania.

**Tobi 1 1:27:24**

My next question is kind of referring back to the panel last week. If somebody caught it, it was talking about abolition. There's a question about abolishing work and what that means for caring labour. How does Mutual Aid, or the idea of caring for each other, fit within, like abolition?

**Juno 1:27:53**

I can, yeah, yeah, I sort of, I feel like it sort of fits in with ideas about harm reduction. It's about like thinking about the bigger picture, to meet people's needs in here and now, rather than allowing for people to become human cannon fodder in some future, you know, situation that serves an ideology or treat them as an afterthought. It's about seeing people's everyday needs is really important. And this is a conversation that sex workers are quite used to having, even before the recent crisis. We're used to like treading this line of discussing about how we want our immediate needs met, safety in the workplace. That's a transitional demand, because ultimately, a lot of us feel as though it would be better if all work was abolished. I certainly see myself as sex industry abolitionist, in a way, because I feel that good conditions at work don't necessarily constitute sense of work. So, I think that me like an abolitionist thinking, you know, thinking about abolishing systems that aren't working for us isn't the same as saying, well, in the meantime, we don't have any requests or requirements within that system. So sometimes mutual aid is about tending to those needs in a system that overall we'd be happy to lose or dismantle in some way.

**Dania 1:29:35**

I don't mind going and jumping in if I can. So the thing I kind of highlight about this question is that now, when we're talking about caring labour, and this is again, we need to be, we need to focus on the structure in which this labour exists, mutual aid exists, and we need to be careful about it, because the structure, the way it's positioned, is that there is going to be an extraction, okay, of all, everything that's generated by mutual aid, mutual aid initiative. So, there is a in order for sustaining mutual aid, in order to do that, we do need - it kind of goes hand in hand with abolition. And we can't think about the two things separately. So, in order to sustain mutual aid, we do need to abolish those or negotiate in some way, or dismantle this, those mechanisms of extraction. Okay, so whether it's through the privatised companies that profit from brown

and black bodies. We do need to work those things are joined up. Okay, so and so we can't have mutual aid without abolition, so it's kind of the - it's two sides of the same struggle. So, at one level, you're resistant. At the other level, you're regenerating. So, there's this mutuality to that process, okay, and it's important, I just wanted to bring that up in terms of that for that question.

**Tobi 1:31:18**

Thank you so much, Dania. The next thing that we kind of, I think we got, we got to was trying to check in with the questions about the questions that people had left in the Q and A section. So, the first one that I want to pose to the panellists was about, kind of the relationship between anti-capitalism and mutual aid. And whether or not you believe that, you know there is a relationship between anti-capitalism and mutual aid, I personally, I do believe that, I believe that mutual aid is kind of like moving away from living this capitalistic lifestyle where we're not thinking about each other in a way that is not based off of people's merits in life, and it's more just about caring for one another, or at least trying to, based on the kind of powers that we have as individuals in our community. I'm going to pose the question first before, yeah.

**Juan 1:32:24**

I think when it comes to - I mean, when it comes to, like in general - but like when it comes to drug related challenges, I think, like it is impossible to think of drug related harm separated from capitalism, if you look at - for example - I was mentioning earlier overdose deaths or the health impact of drug use, very often we're told that it's it responds to, sort of like inherent qualities to these two substances. But actually, when you're looking at who are the populations most affected by drug related harm, it's the poor, it's the poor, as a neurodivergent, is the people for whom capitalism undermines their possibility of staying well. So, like I think it is impossible to conceive a world where we're able to reduce drug related harm without having a clear horizon of abolishing capitalism. And until then, mutual aid offers a mechanism of survival that can, as Dania was saying, be prefigurative of what we would like to see in the future. This I really like the idea of like mutual aid is resisting and regenerating, resisting and gesturing towards a better future. But that resistance responds to the - Yeah, the many huge harms that capitalism inflicts on different communities and situations of vulnerability, including criminalised people who use drugs.

**Tobi 1:34:17**

Thank you so much. Juan, the next question that we had from the Q and A, I'm going to direct at Juno, and it was, how and should the sex worker movement move into areas focusing on solidarity and mutual aid for women with no access to public funds?

**Juno 1:34:37**

Yeah, I think, you know, in the in the long term, mutual aid that takes the form of helping people like that financially is a really a good thing. We're currently talking about restructuring the hardship fund so that we can continue with that kind of work. But the key thing is being able to raise enough money and dealing with donor fatigue. So, I think there was another question about the money that's form raised, and it's probably relevant to mention that all of the money, the £250,000 that we gave away, all of it was raised in from March onwards, and all of it has been given away. And in that was in part, we managed to capitalise on the surge of donations and surge of like donor energy that there was flowing around in March and throughout the summer, but that just isn't a long term system.

So now we're really trying to kind of promote the idea that we small organisations really do need regular, regular donations. They need monthly donations so that they can plan their work and create long term, sustainable projects, rather than a big influx of stuff and a short-term thing that burns out. Because I

actually would say that that's one of the things that mutual aid should not be. It should not be a short-term thing. It should be, as Dania said, like something that stays with people throughout the cycle that they need it in, rather than a bright fire that burns and then goes out. So that's something that we would really love to do, and anybody watching, if you could make a point or a habit out of setting up recurring monthly donations to smaller organisations whose work you admire really helps those organisations do that work. Otherwise, all we can do is, is triage. Basically, we can only do emergency type work, which, in the long term, is still really transformative, and that it stays with people. I especially think it matters to people that they receive mutual aid from their peers, it can be really profoundly impacting on things that more than just their bank balance. But in this case, you know, we want to make a long-lasting impact in the community, and it's going to take more than a one-off payment of £200 paid to somebody to do that.

**Tobi 1:36:57**

Yeah, I completely agree. Looking forward to it being kind of a fabulous, very little one, just like in the background a bit, yeah, just thinking about mutual aid. And yeah, I think I will move on to the question that I had for Dania, which came up in the in the comments, which I kind of feel like you've already answered in some ways, someone was saying, during the height of they agree with the instrumental, instrumentalisation of mutual aid. And they were saying during the height of COVID, so many issues came up around landlords, government workers, police bosses being in mutual aid groups, and how to tackle that, yeah.

**Dania 1:37:43**

Yeah, that's a great question, because in some sense, it kind of adds a granularity to the notion of mutual aid. And who is it for? And you know, who is benefiting from it. So that goes back to the instrumental, instrumentalisation of mutual aid. So, one of the things in terms of COVID, it's interesting, because, in some sense, the when COVID happened, it kind of opened up the ways in which mutual aid was sustaining this economy, okay, after austerity and after the policies of Conservative government. So, it's, it's, in some sense, it opened it up, right? So, we had the, the structure basically, kind of having to, okay, they were dragged into visiblising the what they needed, which was mutual aid in order to come around or get around the crisis the COVID. Okay? So that's interesting, because suddenly mutual aid become becomes highly visibleised, okay, and, and, and what? And the important thing here is that the visualization of mutual aid by definition, invisibilises certain things and it invisibilises what the government is doing. Okay, so the focus is on all this clapping for NHS Care Workers and it becomes kind of a performance of recognition and witnessing. It's a performance, performative witnessing, and, and it's important to keep that in mind, because this is very, it is very time bound. It's very, it's very reactive, okay? And it's and we need to be able to distinguish, okay, this kind of performance and distinguish it from mutual aid, which will exist, which is always invisible, okay? And by definition, as I said earlier, it's invisible the moment you are representing these things to people, and triggers the structures speaking, okay? And we have to keep that in mind.

So, in terms of tackling it. It's, it's a difficult one, because you then you need to have the you need to continue the work that you're doing. Okay? So, you need to just continue the work. And in as from the perspective of Ubuntu, in terms of the practical support, we've expanded that outreach. So instead of women coming to us, we are going out into the community, because now we see that as a way that's necessary and a necessary intervention to sustain mutual aid so they can live the lives that they want. Okay, so, so it's important in terms of tackling it. My thing would be to just continue doing what you're doing. And again, there's this thing that Juno mentioned about donor fatigue, and there are two things here. One is, you put money to the problem and you say, Okay, let somebody else deal with it. Yes, we survive on donations, and that's very important for us. But the other thing that the volunteers and to do is they give their time and energy and their resources in order to sustain, sustain Ubuntu. So that's another thing, to

just go out and volunteer into your local organisations, okay? And to sustain mutual aid and sustain yourself, right? So, there is a there's a there's a duality, there's a common kind of way in which we can tackle it. Thanks.

**Tobi 1:41:32**

Thank you so much. Dania, the last question of the event before we wrap up, I think is a very it's a, it's a nice one to kind of end on. It's people asking about if any of us have advice when avoiding burnout and providing emotional support whilst doing mutual aid. So, I'll give the stage to Jodie.

**Jodie 1:42:01**

Yeah. Thank you, Tobi. So, the first thing I'm going to say might seem really basic, but I think something that I've learned especially through setting something up during COVID. So, a lot of my interactions with the people in the arm to share community has been virtual, is just to acknowledge that you are on the, on the on the kind of path to burn out, or you are burnt out, that can be quite difficult to acknowledge. If the role you're playing in your group or community is kind of you are taking on more of those kind of administrative roles you are providing more emotional support, is just actually acknowledge that it's happening from my own personal experience, like going through setting a parent to chair during the time when my dad was facing criminal proceedings like it, it did begin to feel very, very suffocating, but I still wanted to keep doing the work and having people in your community that can kind of enable you to make that acknowledgement and take a step back is really, really valuable.

And then I guess, like, another thing is, is, which, again, might be kind of obvious, but not all of the work that we're doing around mutual aid is public, and it absolutely doesn't need to be public. And I think again, this is something that I began to learn, is that, like, if we're not posting testimonials on on Twitter every week. It's fine. We're still doing the work. The families that are kind of involved in this community are still coming to us, um, with things that aren't public and don't need to be public, and it's not appropriate then for them to be public. So being comfortable with knowing what you're doing and not feeling like you have to justify yourself about what you're doing is kind of what I've learned in terms of taking care of myself and like thinking about sustainability and how we can keep the work going.

**Tobi 1:43:50**

Thank you so much, Jodie, I feel like we're probably going to be echoing the same sentiments there, because I was going to say something quite similar in terms of especially people who are doing community organising, grassroots organising, mutual aid work. It's very, very, very, very, very important for us to look after ourselves, and for us to kind of mimic the things that we're asking of our community in terms of mutual aid, and being able to say, actually, my capacity is limited at the moment, or is there anybody else who could support me in doing these things and like the radical honesty and like checking in with our own needs so that we can then care for our communities. And that also kind of ties into this mutual aid, yeah, model that we're hopefully all trying to work from. So just, I think, checking in with your body and also being honest with your community about your own capacity. Because if you do the work to the point of burnout, and you burn out, then it's, you know, kind of gone, and there's nobody else doing it. It's just like, it kind of affects you as well as the people who are relying on you, as opposed to you being like, "yo, I'm gonna take some time". Uh, sorry. I think my mic kind of went out there for a second.

But yeah, to wrap up, I was just talking about being honest with your needs and checking in with your body, and prioritising checking in with yourself as a part of mutual aid work, as opposed to something that's separate from it so that you can continue to do the work that you're doing. And shout out to everybody

who is engaging in community organizing. You all are amazing, really grateful that you're taking the time and energy to do the work, as you can see from this amazing panel as well. It's very, very important, and the effects of mutual aid are far reaching, far like globally on the anti-capitalist scale. So please continue to and please continue to look after yourselves. So, we're wrapping up now kind of the end of the of the session. I want to thank everybody for coming. I also wanted to check in with the speakers and see if there's anything that they wanted to mention, like any last comments, any events or projects that you're all doing, you know, engaging with at the moment, and then we can try and make sure that we're including that in the resource pack that gets sent with the recorded um version of this chat.

**Juno 1:46:12**

Yeah, I could just jump in, or, sorry, there you go on. I wasn't, uh, yeah. I just wanted to give a shout out to a project that somebody from SWARM has been running lately, along with some others, I think, called the Dial Tone project, which is trying to recycle unwanted phones. I think it might just be smartphones, or maybe all phones, if you have them, and you could check out the dial tone project on Instagram. I will also tweet about it from Juno Mac underscore. You can get in touch with them and give them your phone, and they will make sure that it's passed along to a sex worker who needs it, which is a really useful tool for safety, obviously, to have a second phone. So that's really important, and also just another shout out to swarm who need a regular donations. They don't have to be big, but small donations that are regular are really, really as useful as big, one-off donations so that we can plan the work that we do.

**Dania 1:47:15**

I just kind of like to pick up on the point the question raised in terms of sustaining ourselves while we do the work and that's something that we've really kind of, you know, kind of started recognising and witnessing in Ubuntu as well. And the so one some, some of the strategies that we are using is to actually be very clear about, you know, what are the roles and response? So, it's not only the responsibility of the individual, it's also the responsibility of the organisations that are doing this work, and about, you know, having a structure and clear roles and responsibilities, and also to kind of, you know, reach a place where this work is resourced and to sustain it. So, we do need to have salaries that are paid, that careers that are made out of sustaining mutual aid, you know. So hopefully that's a career description that we can kind of, you know, look forward to in the future. Thank you.

**Jodie 1:48:22**

Um, I would love to just quickly shout out a couple of projects that are going on at the moment. I'll be really quick. So, there's an Instagram account called Blue Bag Life, and they share stories about addiction, recovery, prison, mental health and love. If you're new to issues around prison abolition or just kind of wanting to know, kind of like, what's going on in British prisons at the moment, that's an amazing platform to follow. Cradle Community are doing incredible transformative justice and community accountability work in the UK. They have a go from to me page on - yeah, it'll be linked on their Twitter and Instagram, which I think are at just Cradle Community. This is really vital work, and they could always do with more support. And then the last one that I'll mention is ours, which is a letter writing project. And Letter Writing is a really concrete way that you can show solidarity with people in prison and bars is specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender variant, intersex and queer prisoners in Britain, um, LGBTQ plus people a long history of being criminalised and again. Yeah, it's a really concrete way that you can show your support. So, yeah, get in touch with Bent Bars, Cradle Community and Blue Bag Life, and thanks to Verso, Decrim Futures and Abolitionist Futures for having me, and thanks to all of the other panellists.

**Juan 1:50:01**

I was muted. Sorry, yeah, I think if I'm not wrong, Decriminalised Futures tweeted some of the projects that I mentioned before, so if you go and check them out, that would be amazing. Your support is super invaluable.

**Tobi 1:50:25**

This is a really amazing, necessary panel. Looking forward to also doing all of this next week. So, I mean being part of MLB hosting. I'm just going to be in the YouTube live just watching. So, if anybody else is interested, don't forget to sign up and make sure that you're present, because it's happening every Tuesday at 7pm until it's over. The applicant online booking system. Check out the Decriminalised Futures website. They're doing the amazing work with SWARM as well. Purple Rain collective. We're a smaller grassroots organisation, but we're trying. We're doing our best to make sure that we're checking in with our queer scarcity, trans, black all around the world, but specifically in the UK as well. If you enjoy tonight's session, please just make sure you sign up. It's happening on Wednesdays. I don't know, Wednesday, Tuesday, sorry. So yeah, we'll get to delving deeper into this book around empire, creative practices towards abolition. And if you're interested, don't forget to take advantage of the 50% off the Revolting Prostitutes, but which there's a link for in the chat. Thank you again, and I hope you all have a restful evening.

**Dania 1:51:35**

Thank you. Tobi, thank you.

[www.decriminalisedfutures.org](http://www.decriminalisedfutures.org)

