

Episode 11 Transcript: Disrupting the Sex Trafficking Network in Minnesota and Beyond

Lauren Martin

A big part of what we were doing was really shining a light on what was going on in people's lives. Why were they there? What were their hopes and dreams? and really seeing the fullness of people who are involved in trading sex. This is just one thing that is happening in their lives. They have full lives. They have full families. You know, there's so much more.

Makeda Zulu

Welcome to rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota Robert J. Jones Urban Research, Outreach and Engagement Center. I'm your host, Makeda Zulu. In today's episode, we will discuss disrupting sex trafficking networks in Minnesota and beyond. With Associate Professor Lauren Martin. It's good to have you here.

Lauren Martin

It's great to be here, Makeda.

Makeda Zulu

Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

Lauren Martin

Maybe I'll start a little bit with how I got into this work.

Makeda Zulu

That sounds good.

Lauren Martin

Okay, so I got into this when I was just finishing my PhD in anthropology, and, you know, I was looking for academic work, trying to figure out, okay, what are my next steps going to be? And I had a friend in north Minneapolis who hired me to work at a neighborhood association. Just, she was like, you know, you're looking for work. Come and do some, you know, this'll be interesting. You'll enjoy it. Before you go on to whatever else you're going to do. And then as part of that job I just started, you know, people were asking questions because people have questions like, why are there a bunch of abandoned houses there, but not on this other block? And I was like, well, I could look into that. So I started just like answering questions that people had that we're trying to do work in North Minneapolis. And one of the big questions at that time, this is about 2005, a lot of people were

really worried about street based sex trading. So people were asking a lot of questions. Okay. What's happening? Why are there all these people out there trading sex? Where are they from? What can we do about it? And what I noticed is...

Makeda Zulu

Did they have questions or were they trying to get rid of what was happening?

Lauren Martin

Yeah... The big question was how do we get rid of this? And they were talking to lots of people but not talking to the people trading sex. And so, you know, as part of my job at this neighborhood association, I was asked to look into it. And so I said, sure, give me three months to kind of come up with the plan because, you know, this is a sensitive thing, right? Trading sex is stigmatized, it's dangerous, it's illegal. I needed time to, like, talk to people and kind of figure out you know, could I actually do this in a way that was ethical? And so, yeah, after three months, I came back and I said, you know, I would love to do this, but I really want to talk to people, you know, who are involved. And then I want to talk to everyone else in the community. And we wanted to have a community advisory board because like I said my dissertation work was not on this topic. So I knew, like in my very soul, that I was not an expert. And this is really important because with academic research, a lot of times academic researchers come in like, oh, I'm the expert. I knew I was not the expert. So that very first project kind of set the tone for the rest of my career. I came in as somebody who was helping people answer questions that they had. Working with communities to develop those questions, develop research projects, think deeply about ethics. And then, of course, you know, when you're working for a neighborhood association, you work in community, you have to do something with the information, right?

Makeda Zulu

Say more about that.

Lauren Martin

Well, you know, a lot of times in research, we do the study, we write it up, we publish it, and then we're like, okay, I did something. When you're working in community, you actually have to figure out, okay, how is this information going to change what we do? Are there things we learned that will help us make life better? Are there things we should stop doing? Are there things we should start doing? I think with this topic, stigma is such a big problem and a challenge. You know, people who are involved in sex trading, especially street based sex trading at the time, I will say everything's changed now with the internet, street based trading isn't quite... where everything's at, but we can get to that later. But, you know, this is a super stigmatized topic. And the people, there's a lot of shame, so a big part of what we were doing was really shining a light on what was going on in people's lives. Why were they there? What were their hopes and dreams? and really seeing the fullness of people who are involved in trading sex. This is just one thing that is happening in their lives. They have full lives.

They have full families. You know, there's so much more. So a big piece of what we did was just raising awareness of who the people were and what the struggles they were going through are with the goal of destigmatizing. So that very early work talked to over 150 people who were involved in transactional sex, heard their stories, learned from them, and then also talked to hundreds of other people in the neighborhoods. and that work is like the seed of all the other work that I've done since then, because the way I work, you know, those conversations, doing things that the information that we learned led to new problems. I mean, new projects, new questions, deep partnerships, just working together to kind of figure out these questions and what to do with the information. So that's a little bit about me, I think. I know that's how you started. One challenge that I had is I'm now from north Minneapolis. I'm white. Most of the people we were working with were African-American at that time. So I had to go through a real process of understanding who am I? Like, what are my roots? What am I bringing to this conversation? What am I not bringing? What do I need to learn here about assumptions that I might have from my upbringing that are just not accurate? So I had to do a lot of self-study, and I had a lot of people who helped me along the way by keeping me accountable, by calling me out, by calling me in, but welcoming me, by calling me on stuff that needed to be called. It's been a huge learning journey as a person. Doing this work has really changed how I approach my own self, my own family, my life. It's been a huge transformation for me.

Makeda Zulu

I appreciate the transformation... just that you talked about this transformation. I have to say, I've known you for a little while, and you've always been incredibly aware of who you are in your identities and welcomed all that helped you transform. And I think that because you are aware of your identities and comfortable with that, people are comfortable with sharing their identities. You know, we'll have to have Doctor Martin back because at some point, because we have shared so many experiences. And one of my favorite experiences was a time when UROC was going to be shut down, and we stood together to say, we will not shut down UROC until the police actually had to evacuate. And they had a Swat team. And we hid... over here in the parking lot because, well, we, you know, can you share a little bit why we hid?

Lauren Martin

So... yeah, that was a really defining moment. And I have known you a long time. And thank you for what you just said. That's really meaningful to me, to hear you say that. But, yeah, at that moment, it was a real crisis in this community caused by police violence. And at one point, yeah, they were going to shut down UROC. And I just remember you and I both, like, looked at each other kind of almost out the side of our eyes, we like we met eyes. We both knew neither one of us is going to be leaving right now. So yeah, we went out outside just we just felt like we had to be here with our community.

Makeda Zulu

We had to be with the community. We had to be witnesses. And I felt like we felt we were protecting and we understood, she understood and I understood what we brought with our identities would help protect.

Lauren Martin

The two of us together, in this together, we're bringing our identities into a piece together so that we could take care of each other in whatever type of situations might have arisen. And, you know, there would be situations where my identity might have been the one to step forward. And there were situations where yours might have been the one that stepped forward. And we both intuitively knew that, and we knew that we needed each other in that moment to be able to be effective witnesses of what was about to go down, because it was quite likely that something not good was about to go down.

Makeda Zulu

That's right. And I think that's important to share because we're, you know, some of our audience, will be researchers who want to work in community. And they're trying to figure out what does that mean? It means bringing your full self, and it means being vulnerable. And it means creating relationships. If you want to work deeply in community for a long time now, if you want to just come in and come out, you wouldn't work with UROC but, you know, that's the kind of people that build trust and keep trust and then the community because I believe what happened not only did, some folks in the neighborhood organization ask you to start this work, but then because of the way you did the work, then the folks who were most involved in most impacted wanted to work with you.

Lauren Martin

Right, because when people are invited to participate in processes where they can bring their whole selves, and that includes the researcher, like, I get to show up as a full person, right? I don't have to come as some like closed off person with a clipboard creating distance between me and the people I'm working with. I get to show up in my full self. And when people are invited into those kind of spaces, it offers a space to shine a light to bear witness, to see things that you might not be able to see in other circumstances because like I said before, this is a super stigmatized thing. It's not something that people talk about just like in their everyday lives. So this first research project opened a space for people to share things that were in their hearts, things that they were experiencing, that other people just didn't want to hear, or that they were nervous to tell other people for fear of the judgment. But in this space, people could share. You know, I wasn't going to have a long term relationship. I'm not part of their family, but we could create a welcoming space where people could share things and they could think, okay, I'm going to contribute to something, something a little bit bigger, a big piece of research for me is about shining a light into a space that's hidden, you know, because it's hidden by design, because transactional sex is, you know, it is a part of our society. It's interwoven in a lot of stuff. But it's subterranean. It's a hidden driver of a lot of

trauma, a lot of health disparities, in a lot of structural root causes of, it kind of lays bare the way in which our society fails people.

Makeda Zulu

And I know there's a lot to share about this. And so what I want to get out of the way and not get out of the way, I want to highlight before you talk about your more recent work, the work that you did, opened up, a healing space in north Minneapolis. It changed the laws to protect young people. Can you talk about those two things?

Lauren Martin

Sure. So one of the things to me that's the most meaningful and kind of the coolest part of what I get to do, and I don't even want to call it a job because it's much more than a job for me, is I get to work with people, like I said, to figure out what to do with what we've learned. So the two things that you've mentioned grew out of partnerships, like my involvement in those grew out of partnerships that I've had for many years, starting from that very first research project. So the North Side healing space initially grew. It's at Liberty Community Church, and it's this absolutely beautiful space that is just open and welcoming and affirming. And it grew out of deep work that that church has been doing in this community for a very long time. And it also came from a really huge insight from my first research project, which is that people want a space where they can just go and share and connect without judgment, without people telling them what they need to do, without a resource list, without social workers, you know, just a place to be a person, not a client.

Makeda Zulu

That's right.

Lauren Martin

Right? But they still want to be able to access things. But they need people. People. Humans need a space to decompress before they can figure out what they want to do. And you know, when you're involved in sex trading, that's a high stress, high stakes situation, you don't have a lot of time to sit around and just decompress about what you want to do with your life, right? You're... in a mode where you've got to protect yourself. So people were expressing this desire for a really basic human desire for just a place to rest and connect. And so when I first met pastor Lee Galloway, at Liberty Community Church, I just thought she's just the most amazing, I mean, you know, her, she's just the most amazing, warm, welcoming presence. And the church is so grounded in community. When she said that, yes, Liberty would want to have this be part of their work, I just thought, okay, great. This thing is really going to find a home. It's going to have roots. Obviously, they took the concept, you know, did it, did what it needed to be done with. But I'm so proud of you having been able to walk alongside that work.

Makeda Zulu

That was amazing. So to turn, you know, just so you all are clear, this was a church that was turned into a space for people to heal. And more specifically, people who were trading sex at that time. And, Lauren you explained how that happened, you know, so I appreciate that. And then, you know, you talk about your partnership with Pastor Alike, but you had partnerships with a lot of people who would usually be kind of at odds with one another. Can you talk about that and how this new law came out of that?

Lauren Martin

Part of the thing with commercial sex is a lot of people have a lot of feelings about it. A lot of people have a lot of different experiences. So it can be hard. It can be hard for people to come together even when they have a lot of shared experiences, too. So, for example, people who have been trafficked or kind of forced have a certain experience. People who trade sex for a place to stay have another kind of experience. So maybe it wasn't a person forcing them, but maybe it was a circumstance or not having enough to eat or being homeless. Right? It's still a form of exploitation, for sure. But then there's other people for whom this might be something that they choose to do, given whatever other choices they might have. So they're not feeling that same level of force. Right? So there can be a lot of conflict within the people who trade sex because there's just kind of a fundamental difference in how people view it based on their experiences. But if we're going to have laws and policies, we need them to work for everyone. We need them to be grounded in those shared and common experiences. And pretty much everyone I've ever worked with who's been involved in the sex trades has identified a lot of exploitation, a lot of violence, police brutality, stigma, police not taking them seriously. You know, like if they are sexually assaulted, for example, which... is fairly common. Very true. And sometimes it's police who are doing that, and sometimes it's people purchasing sex. And then when a person calls the police on the person who's purchasing sex, the police officer might say, oh, well, what did you expect, right? Instead of treating that like the sexual assault, that it was. For me, when we start to think about policy, it's really important to get everyone in a room to be able to hash out, okay, what are the truly common deep roots? So you might be referring... at UROC, we had a project that was funded by the state called Safe Harbor for all. So Safe Harbor is legislation in Minnesota that decriminalized youth under the age of 24 for being an, I'm sorry, under the age of 18, youth up to age 24 can receive services and support.

Makeda Zulu

Okay, that's good.

Lauren Martin

Yeah, it's a recognition that young people should not be arrested for prostitution.

Makeda Zulu

And should receive services.

Lauren Martin

Should receive services and supports, yeah.

Makeda Zulu

Because no one under 18 usually chooses...

Lauren Martin

I mean, what the state is saying is that under the age of 18, you can't really consent to this, right? So we should be taking care of young people. They should get what they need without having to trade sex, right?

Makeda Zulu

Makes sense to me.

Lauren Martin

Yeah. So, you know, Minnesota has a really unique approach to this. Other states have safe harbor laws. Ours is the only one that's in a public health framework instead of a criminal justice framework and our state puts a lot of money in to support young people. And it should. And so some of my early work had to do with, you know, developing funding around this and helping to provide some evidentiary base for why it's important to help youth in this way. But the safe harbor for all project was the state wanted to explore, the state of Minnesota I should say, wanted to explore what would it look like to have a safe harbor program for anyone, whether they were, you know, whatever age? So to kind of take that age off. So we were part of a strategic planning process gathering information from stakeholders across Minnesota. And it was super important that we facilitate a process where people with different experiences in commercial sex could come together in the same room and kind of get to the root, okay, what are the core things that we all have in common here that if we could change, would make life better for all of us? And we were able to do that again by paying very close attention to the process, by making sure that everybody felt welcome. It was really hard. It took a lot of work. We had a lot of partners involved that helped shape those conversations.

Makeda Zulu

And those partners, you know, and when I was thinking about folks that were at odds with one another, you had the people who were, you know, I would say, directly involved. You had, police officers. You had maybe social workers, folks from Hennepin County who might be a part of the charging. And all of that process, you had min casa. Are there others? I just, I want people to understand who are the types of people that you pulled together because I think that was not an easy task. I mean, it might have been easy for you, but it wasn't...

Lauren Martin

It was not easy... This kind of stuff is never easy. And it takes time, and I think this is something that in research we often neglect building trust, having systems that are accountable, having processes that are transparent takes time. It takes sitting in a room and getting to know people, right? It takes time to have those conversations to figure out what do we have in common here? Because I think when you can find those common, those common roots, those common causes, then you can start to act in ways that you can start to develop policy that takes into account more people's experiences and that looks at unintended consequences. So part of those processes, yeah, we have to have police involved in these conversations because they're the ones enforcing many of these laws. And same with prosecutors. They're the ones that interpret the law and make charges. And there are intricacies of the legal system that, you know, that I'm not familiar with because I'm not a prosecutor, but they know what it means. Like, you know, if you're going to write a law, it has to be something that a prosecutor can use because sometimes the wording and laws make it such that you can't actually charge someone for that crime, but they're the ones who are going to know that. And so they're... different stakeholders come to these tables with their expertise and their experience, not knowing everyone else's expertise and experience. But if we have time and space in these processes to share these things and hash them out, then we can start to say, oh, okay, I get why you do that weird thing. I didn't know that. It's the same with research. So, you know, in research, sometimes researchers, we do things that are not normal, they're not natural, they're not things that people do in everyday conversation or everyday life. But there's reasons that we do them. You know, we all ask and answer questions in our daily lives. We all gather information. But what research does that's different is it's supposed to be systematic and, you know, rigorous in a way that we might not do in our everyday lives. And so sometimes the things we do to add rigor look weird. But if you explain it to people, then it's like, oh, okay, I get why you ask that same question to everyone, and you're not just having a flowing conversation, right? You can explain these things, right? It makes sense, but it's the same when you're bringing other stakeholders to the table. We all have our expertise. And if we can share that, we can unpeel the onion a little bit around why we do things that are confusing. And sometimes people just do things that they need to stop doing. I mean, let's just be clear about that. So it's not like everything's good and everyone can just keep doing what they're doing. Sometimes things need to stop. Like people realize, oh, what I'm doing here is actually harmful. And I will say in Minnesota, across the board, most law enforcement now come to tables realizing it doesn't actually help people necessarily to arrest them for prostitution, right? It's a sea change in thinking. And so, you know, sometimes people in these processes realize, oh, I've deconstructed something that I used to think was okay, and I no longer think it's okay,

Makeda Zulu

Which is the most powerful. I think that's the most powerful. Well, you know, our time is winding up and you've been doing this work a while. You know, you used to be here at UROC as the director of research, powerhouse here, keeping us going in the right direction. You over at the School of Nursing. What's happening with you right now?

Lauren Martin

So right now, part of what I'm realizing is my early work was really about north Minneapolis. It was about the people here. It was about connecting with people here, building relationships, understanding what was going on in people's lives, particularly people who trade sex. But as it got deeper and deeper, we began to realize we need to understand also these processes and procedures that are doing the exploiting, right? So if we really want to prevent this, we have to start visualizing the systems of oppression through which the sex trade actually unfolds.

Makeda Zulu

Seems like a big task.

Lauren Martin

Well it is, yeah. So we have lots of different projects going right now working with lots of different partners. But what we're trying to understand is how do sex trafficking networks form? How do they function? And what happens if we disrupt certain elements of those networks. And one area we're looking into is, you know, how is it that somebody gets into being a sex trafficker, right? There's some glimpses there that maybe some of their experiences are similar to people who end up trading sex, right? So there's running away from home as a child of abuse and neglect, right? So there's some potential common preventative root causes we can look at there. I'm also doing some work around understanding prevalence and intersectional understanding of who are the young people most likely to be involved in trading sex with the full knowledge that it's not the young people and their identities that cause risk or vulnerability. It's the structural oppression around those young people. So, you know, racism, homophobia, transphobia, legacies of settler colonialism here in Minnesota and in the US, right? These are structures that have caused deep harm and that kind of set in motion some of the logics through which commercial sex unfolds. So we're just kind of trying to interrogate and kind of get to the root of those and also work with people to figure out how do we disrupt this. It's not enough to admire the problem, right? We have to figure out what do we do? And who has to do things? And who does what? And so just kind of working lots of partnerships in that way, moving in those directions. And I mean, what am I doing now? I'm just working with partners, being in community, learning, absorbing and, you know, just trying to make a difference.

Makeda Zulu

I don't think you're trying to make a difference, you're making a difference. And, I know we have to wind up. Thank you for being here today. It has been a wonderful conversation. We will have to talk again. Folks who are listening, if you want to learn more about disrupting sex trafficking networks in Minnesota and beyond, you can look at the Missed project on Instagram. It's a very creative way of helping people to understand what sex trafficking is. I think it's fantastic.

Makeda Zulu

A special thanks to Nina Shepard, senior communications director for the office for Public Engagement and UROC. Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt. Engineered by Stan Tequila, edited by Jordon Moses. Please make sure to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts and Spotify to learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships. Visit UROC.umn.edu That is UROC.umn.edu. Thanks for listening.