The anti-trafficking field has gone from a preoccupation with sex work to addressing exploitation in varied labour sectors, as reflected in the mainstreaming of the term ‘modern slavery’. Yet the expectation that all forms of extreme labour exploitation would attract the equal application of anti-trafficking law has not been realized. Cultures of ‘sex work exceptionalism’ persist and are gaining strength around the world.

In my lecture, I ask why. I interrogate the sexual politics of anti-trafficking discourse and examine what this has meant for long-term struggles for a politics of redistribution within the sex sector. I also reflect on how anti-trafficking campaigns play out in postcolonial contexts, and consider what this means for retheorising the sexual politics of anti-trafficking discourse.