'A Particular Kind of Job': The Programme for Reform of the Law on Soliciting and the British Women's Liberation Movement's stance of sex work

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Abstract

The Programme for the Reform of the Law on Soliciting (PROS), active between 1976 and 1982, campaigned for the legalisation and destigmatising of sex work in Britain. Their campaign started, and thus centred on Birmingham and the Midlands, but quickly expanded to Britain's major cities, including Bristol, Manchester, and Sheffield. This article examines their grassroots organising for political and legal change, effected most obviously in 1979 when PROS were consulted by the House of Commons Expenditure Committee. PROS negotiated not only cultural prejudices against sex workers but the illegality of soliciting, demonstrating their ability to work across a large section of society, gaining support from a number of organisations, whilst including lawyers, social workers, and probation officers alongside sex workers on their committee. Their focus on improving sex workers' rights also led them to a contentious relationship with the British Women's Liberation Movement (BWLM), and although sex work was not considered a high priority by the movement's socialist-feminist strand, this article argues that PROS engaged with the BWLM at certain strategic points to improve their campaigning position, and thus the legal status of sex workers, at a provincial, grassroots level.

Keywords: sex work; prostitution; British Women's Liberation Movement; socialist-feminism; Programme for Reform of the Law on Soliciting

1976 was another crisis year of the decade, with the women of the Grunwick Photo-Processing Plant Dispute sharing media domination with Harold Wilson's International Monetary Fund loan request, sterling crisis, and consequent resignation (**Tomlinson, 2000: 84; Robinson et al, 2017: 270**). This year was also when a group of social workers, probation officers, lawyers, and sex workers in Birmingham founded the Programme for Reform of the Law on Soliciting (PROS) with the sole aim of decriminalising sex work and removing the term 'common prostitute' from law (**PROS Bulletin 1, 1977**). Despite being considered a 'marginal organisation', PROS were innovative, drawing on, and at times distancing themselves from, the British Women's Liberation Movement (BWLM) as they learnt how to not only effect legal change, but improve the social status of sex workers (**Connell, 2020**). The organisation focused considerably on providing sex workers with a platform to share their experiences, and made it a primary focus to have them represented on PROS's organising committee (**PROS Bulletin 1, 1977**).

PROS has, however, been largely ignored in the historiography, and aside from Kieran Connell's 2020 article, remains secondary to the more publicly aware and media-astute English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP), based in London and affiliated to the Wages for Housework campaign (**Connell, 2020; Walkowitz, 2019**). Connell focuses on the relational nature of PROS to other organisations and political groups, insisting on the ability to 'tread [a] mediatory path', something which, though not denied in the following analysis, is placed secondary to PROS's locality-based, grassroots campaigning successes (**Connell, 2020: 411**). I will thus attempt to shed light onto the organisational structures and campaigns of PROS that allowed them to remain largely provincial whilst both working with and critiquing the BWLM's dominant socialist-feminist strand between 1976 and 1982.

British Women's Liberation Movement & Sex Work

Commonly cited to have emerged around 1968 with the rise of women's activism across the UK, Europe, and much of the Western world, the BWLM was seen to start with the Ford Dagenham strike that forced female collective demands for equal pay, and women's willingness to strike, onto a public stage (**Moss, 2015**). By 1970, the first National Women's Liberation conference was held at Ruskin College, Oxford, organised by Sheila Rowbotham and others who would become key actors in the BWLM and its public-facing rhetoric (**Thomlinson, 2016: 36**). At the Ruskin Conference, four demands were established that became the foundation of the BWLM: equal pay, equal educational and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, and free 24-hour nurseries. Throughout the 1970s these became increasingly challenged by radical

and revolutionary feminists, with the demands of legal and financial independence for all women, the right to self-defined sexuality and an end to discrimination against lesbians, and freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence, added to the campaign. By the 1978 National Conference held in Birmingham though 'sisterhood was broken down irretrievably', and no other national conferences were organised (**Rees, 2010; 346**). Despite the BWLM's seemingly continuous evolution of demands, sex work was never included, and at a glance then it seems that sex work was not considered part of the BWLM's campaign.

Socialist-feminism was the dominant strand within the movement, and my current research focuses on its attempts to theoretically negotiate socialist and feminist conceptions of work. The strand focused on how capitalism and patriarchy mutually reinforced one another to ensure the oppression of women. It was at the interstices of the two that sex work was situated theoretically, as the extreme form of female oppression under capitalism, whereby the body itself had become a commodity (**Overall, 1992: 717**). The limited engagement with sex work by those such as Wendy Chapkis (**Chapkis, 1997**) who placed it within her framework of 'erotic labour', Judith Walkowitz's examination of Victorian prostitution (**Walkowitz, 1980**), and Michèle Barrett's use of sex work as a lens to understand police 'harassment of prostitutes and reluctance to pursue kerbcrawlers', gave socialist-feminism some understanding of sex work (**Barrett, 1988: 236**). This work was heavily critiqued by revolutionary feminists like Sheila Jefferys (**Jefferys, 1997**), though, for considering prostitution 'a low-priority issue', and the historiography has continued this in separating the BWLM and socialist-feminism from sex workers' rights campaign groups such as PROS (**Kantola & Squires, 2004: 81**). Socialist-feminist narratives of the necessity to raise awareness and then counter the continued exploitation of women through capitalism were reinforced through the promotion of small-group meetings and consciousness-raising efforts that characterised the BWLM's campaigning. PROS engaged with these methods, especially in focusing on raising the consciousness and awareness of exploitation among sex workers themselves. As such, there is much to be explored and gained from examining the, at times strained, relationship between PROS and the BWLM.

It is essential here to briefly present the history of the phrase 'sex work' itself, as it is a loaded term that brings with it an activist perspective when considering the sale of sex for money. American feminist activist Carol Leigh, otherwise known as Scarlot Harlot, is credited with coining the term 'sex work' at a San Francisco Conference in 1979 or 1980 (**Leigh, 1997: 229**). Leigh argued that the term should be used to describe 'what women did', allowing for a recognition of the sale of sex as work, with sex workers then able to identify themselves as workers, key for socialists to encourage

sex workers to organise and lobby for their rights (**Leigh, 1997: 230**). The term was slow to be used in academic and public fields alike, but gained widespread acknowledgement with the publication of Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander's *Sex Work* in 1988, a collection of writings and testimonies from 'women in the industry' **(Delacoste & Alexander, 1988**). This book was published in the UK by Virago Press in the same year and thus the term, albeit imported from the American women's movement, had reached the UK much later than PROS had started their campaign. The changing of the terms in which the sale of sex for money was referred is significant here in the shaping of discourse surrounding PROS and sex work, with the focus now being on sex workers identifying themselves as workers and thus, in the hopes of socialist-feminists, realising their oppression under capitalism *and* the patriarchy.

PROS's Campaign focus

The Programme for Reform of the Law on Soliciting was established in Birmingham in 1976, advocating for the legal abolition of the term 'common prostitute' in law that could define a woman's life if she were convicted of soliciting as it was never removed from criminal records (**PROS Bulletin 1, 1977**). Being mainly a legislation-focused pressure group, they worked with local councils, activist groups, and later national government, to improve the conditions under which sex work was policed, with the end view of sex work becoming fully legalised. Key to establishing PROS was Eileen McLeod, a social worker turned sociologist at the University of Warwick who wrote PROS's flagship book *Women Working: Prostitution Now* in 1982 (McLeod, 1982). Alongside her were Louise Webb, a student of McLeod's, social worker Inger Bird, lawyer Malcolm Fowler, and a number of sex workers, including Brenda, Kim, and Nancy (PROS Organising Group in Birmingham). The inclusion of sex workers on their organising board is pertinent to understanding the organisation's functioning, as well as their considerable involvement in the local area. It allowed PROS to act as a 'mediatory' organisation, providing insight into the actual experiences of sex workers whilst remaining focused on changing their legal status (**Connell, 2020**).

The relationship between PROS and the BWLM was complex, with there being many different ways in which the former both critiqued, and mirrored, the latter. In PROS's first newsheet, thought have been published in 1976, they stated that their supporters included 'members of the Women's Movement', though it was not stated whether these were from the women's movement more broadly, or from specific tendencies, such as socialist-feminism (**PROS Newsheet no.1, [1976]**). In all subsequent newsheets, there was no mention of the BWLM, and thus it can be seen from this perspective that there was little connection between

the women's movement and PROS's campaigning board in public discourse. Despite this, PROS were the subject of some interest in feminist publications; in both *Spare Rib* and *WIRES* – nationally circulated periodicals – they featured in both interview- and report-based articles. The most insightful article concerning the inner activities and politics of PROS was written by Victoria Green in the March 1977 edition of *Spare Rib* which included a number of interviews with PROS's organising board (**Green, 1977**). Here, there was discussion of PROS's reasons for organisation, notably police targeting of, and threats of violence towards, sex workers, and how the group intended to campaign at a local level involving sex workers themselves. The relationship between PROS and the BWLM was also addressed in this article, with Eileen McLeod and Louise Webb stating 'we want women's liberation to think about the whole thing and discuss it, not just *use* it. They have used the word 'prostitute' in a really nasty way' (**Green, 1977: 18**). This engagement with, yet critique of, the women's movement from two members of PROS's organising board placed the group not necessarily in contention with the BWLM, but highlighted the improvements PROS believed needed to happen before they could engage fully with the women's movement.

The Midlands Circuit and the Expansion of PROS's campaign

Unlike the national British Women's Liberation Movement, PROS's understanding of the local area for sex workers was extensive. Established in Birmingham, PROS were aware of what human geographer Phil Hubbard identified as the 'Midlands Circuit' whereby sex workers rotated around the local towns and cities of Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Leicester, Nottingham, and Coventry, mainly to avoid police targeting (**Hubbard, 1998: 63**). As such, PROS's initial expansion, supported almost entirely by local grassroots campaigning of other social workers, was to three of these cities, and Leamington by 1979. This shows an astute awareness of the local context in which PROS were working, and an understanding of the lives and routines of the sex workers they were trying to recruit and provide support to. With the involvement of three sex workers on their organising board, this was not surprising, but it does highlight the onus that the other founding members of PROS gave to the experiences and opinions of sex workers.

Two years later, PROS had gained a stronger national presence, with groups in Bristol, Manchester and Sheffield. Little is known about how the groups were established in these large cities, but from their writing in PROS's Bulletin 5 'Street Beat', it is clear that these were not satellite branches, but autonomous groups affiliated to PROS's centre in Birmingham (**PROS Street Beat No.5, 1981**). In this bulletin, the Bristol, Manchester, and Sheffield groups wrote about the local problems of their

PROS members, particularly the increasingly harsh and disproportionate targeting of sex workers by the police. These groups showed a clear understanding of the experiences of local sex workers; in an article entitled 'The Sheffield Four', PROS Sheffield gave details of the court proceedings of 'four women [who] received prison sentences of between 2 to 6 months' for soliciting (**Ibid**). Within this, it is stated that the local group 'had reports in the papers and took part in various radio programmes. The women felt they had made their point' (**Ibid**). Alongside this was an update from the Manchester PROS group, who were attempting to form 'stronger links with Manway [Manchester Workers Against Racism] and other local organisations' to oppose the racism encountered by sex workers and their children, again primarily from the police (**Ibid]**). This local reporting presented to the national PROS campaign highlighted their continued grassroots focus, combined with an understanding of how these actions fed into broader activism against sex workers' police charges. This direct awareness of the local experiences of sex workers was mirrored throughout the fifth issue of 'Street Beat' and demonstrated how PROS, although expanded nationally by 1980, remained directly linked to the sex workers they were campaigning for.

'A Particular Kind of Job' Film

Within the Warwick Modern Records Centre exists a source essential to understanding PROS: a film entitled 'A Particular Kind of Job' produced in 1978 in collaboration with students from the London College of Print (**A Particular Kind of Job, 1978**). This film included interviews from the main sex workers involved in PROS, each discussing their experiences of the industry and the key areas they wanted to address, notably the law, money, and emotions. One of the only recordings of the sex workers involved in the organisation, in this film the women were allowed to discuss their experiences in a semi-structured manner. Although the women spoke about their experiences openly, editing still occurred with their discussions split up into topics – the law, money, and jobs – rather than being free-flowing (**Ibid**). Despite this, the film humanised the 'sex worker', and facilitated the sharing of experiences through the words of women involved in PROS.

The three main speakers in this film brought to life their experiences as sex workers. Brenda spoke specifically about the link between poverty and sex work, stating that sex work was commonly the last resort for many women as 'what's left to sell is herself' as a way of making enough money to survive (**Ibid**). She also talked considerably about the never-ending cycle of sex work, as women 'can't get a job because they've been a prostitute, so they're back on the streets', a particularly pertinent statement considering the legal position of sex workers whereby, once convicted of

soliciting, it remained on their police file indefinitely (**Ibid**). Brenda's arguments were complemented by Jeannie, who was interestingly shown in a much more luxurious apartment and had a much posher, southern English accent, compared to the other interviewees with their more Midlands-based accents. She stated explicitly that 'nobody likes doing it for the money', thus removing any notion that the women working as sex workers were engaged emotionally in their work, instead illustrating the economic necessity underpinning the industry (**Ibid**).

Accompanying these two accounts was Rita, a member of the board of PROS, although this was not stated in the film. Her discussion focused much more on sex worker solidarity and organising into a collective. She was 'all for forming a union for the whole of the country and even applying to the TUC', a decision which would mean sex work would have to be considered employment, and thus placing it directly within this framework (**Ibid**). Rita also humanised sex workers in stating that they were just 'human beings with a particular kind of job', rather than continuing the socially-accepted notion that the women involved must be 'different' and the 'other' to be willing to engage in sex work (**Ibid**). This emphasised not only that sex work was work, but that there was active campaign based on solidarity working against the dehumanisation and stigmatising of sex workers by those engaged in the industry themselves.

This film first became 'available for meetings with a PROS speaker' in June 1978, and was then shown at the Birmingham Arts Lab Cinema and Lanchester Polytechnic Coventry, allowing it to be seen by a number of viewers, and not restricted to those who were members or supporters of PROS (**PROS Bulletin 3, 1979: 2**). By 1981, the film was expected to be made available as a video demonstrating a continued demand for the film at least within PROS's immediate circle, and the financial investment PROS were making to put this into a more accessible format (**PROS Street Beat No. 6, 1982: 14**). The testimonies of the three women featured in the film brought to the fore the importance of poverty in placing sex work within the framework of employment, and the conviction of the women involved in campaigning for sex workers' rights. In doing so, they mirrored socialist-feminist discourse surrounding the compounding of women's oppression through capitalist enforcement of poverty and patriarchal subordination of women's bodies. PROS and socialist-feminists thus engaged in intrinsically similar conceptual frameworks of sex work, yet PROS remained differentiated enough from this to promote their own understanding of female liberation through improving the lives and legal standpoint of sex workers.

Political Lobbying and the End of PROS

PROS were significant not only in their organisation of sex workers for better working conditions, legal protection, and sharing of experience, but also for their legal and political lobbying abilities. Throughout their campaign, they lobbied a number of politicians, members of the House of Lords, and local councils for better protection of sex workers and more targeting of those paying for sex. This involvement with politics thus made them one of the most outspoken organisations representing sex workers' rights during this period.

In March 1979, Maureen Colquhoun (MP for Northampton North) brought the private Protection of Prostitutes Bill to the House of Commons. Colquhoun was an influential supporter of sex workers' rights, mentioned in correspondence by both PROS and the English Collective of Prostitutes based in London, for their considerable legislative efforts to change sex workers' legal standing. The debate began at 3.32pm on Tuesday 6th March, with the Bill aiming 'to amend the Sexual Offences Act 1956 and the Street Offences Act 1959, and to provide for prostitutes better protection from exploitation and victimisation' (**HC Deb 6 March 1979, vol.963: cols.1095-7**). Although there were no explicit references to PROS in this debate, their rhetoric of legal change to provide better support to sex workers was obvious, and historian Kieran Connell has stated how PROS continued to play a supportive role in Colquhoun's campaign for better conditions for sex workers (**Connell, 2020: 406**). Despite avid objections from DUP MP Ian Paisley the Bill was passed with a 130-50 majority, but never became law due to the dissolution of parliament very shortly after.

The following month PROS itself was invited to be consulted in the House of Commons. In April 1979, PROS gave evidence to the House of Commons Expenditure Committee on the issue of sex workers being imprisoned for soliciting as part of a wider inquiry into prison overcrowding. This gave PROS national influence, and also indicated their authority as a sex-worker-focused advisory organisation for the government. What was especially significant was that PROS sent a sex worker, Kim L, to the committee to present the impact of imprisonment for soliciting on the lives of sex workers themselves, thus adding a much more personal element to the testimony and reality of prison (**Connell, 2020: 407**).

Despite this, PROS did not have much legal success. The 1982 Criminal Justice Act amended the 1959 Street Offences Act to remove imprisonment as a punishment for soliciting, though the term 'common prostitute' remained (**Connell, 2020: 409**). Seeing this, PROS had failed: their six years of campaigning, lobbying and building an organisation that represented sex workers had not achieved its main aim – to decriminalise

sex work. Imprisonment was also not entirely out of the question for sex workers; fines remained in place for those convicted of soliciting, and failure to pay these very commonly resulted in prison time. Disillusioned, and with an increasingly harsh police presence under Thatcher's government, PROS disbanded. Despite their lack of complete success, though, PROS were an anomaly in the increasingly fragmented 1970s and 1980s when the BWLM itself was struggling to address sex work in any coherent manner. They were also one of the very few organisations that were committed to providing platform to sex workers themselves whilst the sale of sex for money was still considered a crime.

Conclusion: Place within the Archive

The Modern Records Centre was essential to this research; without the comprehensive PROS collection they hold, this research would not have been possible and the important actions of this group forgotten. Eileen McLeod, who has featured considerably here, donated the collection from her own papers after being a University of Warwick lecturer in sociology for some years. Sadly, McLeod passed away in 2023, but her actions, and later her decision to donate the papers, brought the experiences of sex workers to a wider audience. The collection adds a considerably human element to her 1982 book *Women Working: Prostitution Now*, with its sociological examination of the experiences sex workers had, and their legal standing at the time of writing (**McLeod, 1982**).

Within these papers is, as discussed at length, the film 'A Particular Kind of Job'. It is the only copy available to researchers through archives services, despite the film being distributed by PROS themselves throughout their campaign. The film captured not only the position and experiences of women working as sex workers, but gave them platform to talk about their own politics and attitudes. This is a valuable insight given the common silences of the archive, and the lack of written material left about the personal experiences of sex workers in their own words. There is also considerable organisational transparency regarding finances and decisions made about the future of PROS. In the archive there is not only information about who was involved in PROS's campaign, but where the funding came from, especially concerning the Barrow Cadbury donors, the decisions made about how to spend this money through committees, and the network PROS created across the country.

The PROS archive thus acts as a paper, and video, trail of a campaign that targeted and involved some of the most vulnerable women in society during a period of increasing hardship and industrial turmoil under the Callaghan and Thatcher governments. It sheds light onto this group of social workers, lawyers and probation officers, willing to put their professional and academic credentials aside to campaign, and provide

discussion space, for sex workers who were unable to get help and commonly imprisoned for trying to earn money. The organisation's 'mediatory' nature allowed them to work across the political spectrum whilst also engaging with the BWLM's methods of participation and consciousness-raising (**Connell, 2020**). As such, PROS provides insight into how the liberalising efforts of a provincial, intensely grassroots-focused, group not only gained nationwide support from a number of individuals and movements, including the BWLM, but could also affect legal and social change.

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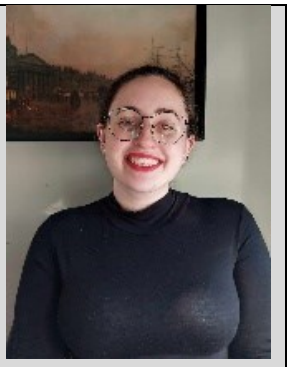

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