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*Strange Bedfellows: "Liberal" Feminists, Prostitutes, and Sex Workers' Rights in the 1970s*

In February 1969, the San Francisco chapter of NOW held a public meeting to "organize women into action groups." The "action," member Mimi Kaprolat proclaimed, "will be aimed to expose, dramatize, and change those conditions which coerce women into secondary, adjunct roles." Moreover, she sought "to effectively threaten the self-interest of male power groups which either ignore or ridicule the legitimate demands of women for full equality." That this rhetoric came from NOW women is hardly surprising; from its founding in 1966, NOW sought full equality between women and men. However, what is largely unaccounted for in the scholarship on NOW in particular and second-wave feminism in general is that one "male power group" these women targeted was johns—men who paid for sexual services from female prostitutes.

From 1969 to 1973, NOW members in San Francisco, Seattle, and Nevada worked with prostitutes, in particular the prostitutes' rights organization COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), to decriminalize prostitution and call for an end to all sexual solicitation laws. In doing so, they approached prostitution from a variety of feminist perspectives. Some advocated abolishing prostitution altogether because this commodification of some women's sexuality exploited all women physically, economically, and culturally. Others sought legal prosecution of johns alongside prostitutes in an attempt to ensure gender equity under the law. Still others pursued job security for prostitutes, demanding protection of sex workers' hours, wages, and workplaces. In debating the viability of these perspectives, NOW feminists worked *with* prostitutes, soliciting their voices and opinions as sex workers with a firm stake in the debate; in doing so, they also confronted the material realities of race, class, gender, and sexuality in women's lives.

As a result of this grassroots work, national NOW called for the complete decriminalization of prostitution in 1973. Rather than condemn female prostitutes or eradicate the profession altogether, NOW worked with prostitutes to create feminist solutions that could be implemented on the job—in part because NOW members approached prostitution as an occupation as well as a sexual identity. This paper will explore how, in the absence of feminist consensus on prostitution and sex work, NOW feminists and prostitutes worked together to articulate a feminist point of view about prostitution.

By allowing prostitutes and NOW feminists to tell their own stories, this study introduces voices rarely heard in the histories of second-wave feminism—sex workers and local-level NOW feminists. It also challenges the traditional dichotomy women's historians have ascribed to second-wave feminist activism that divides U.S. feminists into liberal and radical camps. Much scholarship on second-wave feminism insists that only radical feminists (along with lesbian feminists) articulated theories about women's sex and sexuality, and that NOW feminists were not radical. The fact that NOW feminists, who have become the scholarly epitome of liberal feminism, also debated a variety of perspectives on women's sex and sexuality suggests that the terms we apply to feminists and their organizations do not necessarily conform to local-level

feminist activism. As a result, this paper highlights some of the many ways in which women worked together across differences and built feminist coalitions across seemingly unbridgeable divides.