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From Fascinated Victims to Disease Vectors .The role of sex worker activism in the creation of public health policy for the prevention of HIV

On the verge of the first HIV case and death reported in Australia in 1983, the NSW government announced the creation of a Select Committee on Prostitution. The formation of the Select Committee was prompted by a tumultuous and violent four-year period on the streets of inner Sydney following the decriminalisation of street solicitation in 1979 and its effective recriminalisation in April 1983. Following decriminalisation, sex workers took to the streets of Darlinghurst, now without fear of arrest, and were met with a militant campaign led by residents and Sydney of City Aldermen to push them back out of public view. Yet, as HIV began to enter the public's consciousness, the Select Committee became increasingly fixated on the threat sex workers posed to the public as vectors of HIV transmission. In their struggle to assess the size and activities of the clandestine industry, the Select Committee turned to the newly formed Australian Prostitutes Collective (APC) to obtain insider information and data on sex work in NSW. The funding of the APC by the NSW Department of Health in 1986 marked the first formal partnership between sex workers and the government. It signalled a strategic change in how the state sought to monitor populations of interest. This paper explores the formation of this unlikely partnership, identifying it as a break with the preceding 120 years of Western policy on prostitution. I pay particular attention to the transformation of prostitution from an issue of moral hygiene to one of public health. In doing so, I highlight how sex worker activists positioned themselves as intermediaries, leveraging their access to communities of sex workers to gain a seat at the table, helping to shape the state government's response to the HIV epidemic.