Women played key roles in the success of the American civil rights, student, and peace movements in the 1960s, yet their brothers in struggle treated them like second-class citizens. The failure of the civil rights movement and New Left to recognize women’s contributions was the catalyst for the formation of an autonomous women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Women who formed independent organizations used their experience in the civil rights movement and New Left to shape the structure of their own groups.

One such group was the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union (CWLU). The CWLU was a multi-issue, socialist-feminist organization that formed in the Windy City in 1969. The women who created the CWLU envisioned societal, not only personal, transformation. As such, they developed numerous projects aimed at creating a society that embraced anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist ideals. During its eight-year existence, the CWLU was one of the country’s largest, most active, and longest-lasting socialist-feminist organizations. Chicago women formed the CWLU as a response to their alienation from New Left and civil rights organizations. The legacy of these groups was that they served as a model for the structure of the CWLU.

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a civil rights organization, would eventually provoke the creation of women’s liberation in Chicago, when female members became alienated by the sexism that pervaded SNCC. A group of southern black college students formed SNCC in 1960 to end segregation in the South through voter registration drives,
marches, and sit-ins.¹ Their goal was to create a “beloved community” of blacks and whites working together to end segregation.

Northern college students came south to register voters during the summer of 1964, designated Freedom Summer, by a coalition of civil rights groups, including SNCC. While this was a positive step for race relations, it also created some problems. The appearance of four hundred white female volunteers pushed sexual tensions to the breaking point. Some southern white SNCC women engaged in sexual relations with both black and white SNCC organizers. It was part of “being a member of an interracial family.”² Northern white women, however, were unfamiliar with the tense atmosphere in small southern towns and not accustomed to the affections of black men, both locals and SNCC organizers. Eager to prove that they were not racist, some women made easy sexual targets.³

In November 1964, SNCC held a staff retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, to discuss the future of the organization. Staffers were asked to draft position papers on issues they felt were dividing the organization. Mary King and Casey Hayden, two white female staffers, drafted a paper about the role of women in the civil rights movement to distribute anonymously at the retreat.⁴ Mary King wrote in her memoir, “I was afraid. My heart was palpitating and I was shaking as I typed it.”⁵ She feared that the paper would either not be taken seriously or would provoke criticism. “Women in the Movement” detailed the grievances discussed privately among SNCC women. The major complaint was the unquestioned authority of men in the organization.⁶ Women performed clerical work regardless of their skills and preferences, and

¹ Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, Rebirth of Feminism (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 110.
³ Rosen, The World Split Open, 103.
men always formed the leadership core of the organization.\(^7\) King and Hayden’s intention was not to form a separate women’s movement but to move SNCC toward a loose, democratic structure. King anticipated that if SNCC’s local groups were autonomous, some might take on women’s issues. She was outnumbered, however, as SNCC would soon move toward a highly centralized structure.\(^8\)

The reaction to King and Hayden’s paper was harsh. People quickly realized who drafted the memo and mocked the women. The most infamous response to the paper came from Stokely Carmichael, a black SNCC organizer, who stated, “the only position for women in SNCC is prone.”\(^9\) His words provided shocking evidence of the disrespect for women in SNCC. Carmichael apparently meant the comment as an inside joke, referring to the sexual exploration of Freedom Summer. His joke did not offend Hayden or King, who regarded Carmichael as one of the men most sympathetic to their position paper. The comment crossed the line from joking to offensive, however, when Carmichael continued to repeat it at numerous other meetings. His comment touched a nerve because it legitimized women’s fears that they were seen only as playthings for movement men.\(^10\) Women in SNCC were “faced with the self-evident contradiction of working in a ‘freedom movement’ without being very free.”\(^11\) This reinforced the need for an autonomous women’s movement.

By 1965, black separatism in SNCC had triumphed, and whites were asked to leave the movement. Many white women who had previously organized for SNCC began to focus their


\(^{8}\) Davis, Moving the Mountain, 75.

\(^{9}\) Rosen, The World Split Open, 108.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 108-109.

energies in the student and peace movements, which were collectively called the New Left.\(^{12}\) Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was the primary organization. Developed from the youth branch of a socialist group called the League for Industrial Democracy, SDS held its first meeting in 1960 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Its political manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, criticized the American political system for failing to achieve international peace and address social ills. It also advocated non-violent civil disobedience as the means by which students could bring forth a participatory democracy. Unlike SNCC’s direct action methods, SDS was best known for its intellectual theory and position papers.\(^{13}\)

The leadership core of SDS functioned as a “young boys’ network.” Women worked in the background of SDS. They did much of the direct action work, organizing welfare mothers and high school students. Women, however, rarely had the opportunity to formulate policy, speak forcefully at meetings, or write treatises—intellectual work that was respected within SDS.\(^{14}\)

In her scathing essay, “The Grand Coolie Damn,” Marge Piercy exposed the rampant sexism in the New Left. She explained how men were rewarded for intellectual work within New Left organizations, while women did the work that actually kept the groups running—without any prestige. Piercy explained:

> If the rewards are concentrated at the top, the shitwork is concentrated at the bottom. The real basis is the largely unpaid, largely female labor force that does the daily work. Reflecting the values of the larger capitalist society, there is no prestige whatsoever attached to actually working.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{12}\) The term “New Left” described the leftist movement in the 1960s, especially among college students, that advocated radical change in government, politics, and society. Though communism and socialism influenced New Left ideas, the movement was not committed to any political party. The “Old Left,” in contrast, described the Western communist movement in the early twentieth century that was committed to industrial labor organization. The Old Left declined in the United States after the Red Scares of the 1920s and 1950s, and resurfaced in the 1960s as the New Left.

\(^{13}\) Rosen, The World Split Open, 110.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 118.

In an effort to begin a dialogue about sexism in the New Left, King and Hayden, who by then turned their focus to the student and peace movements, mailed a three-page memo to forty female activists in November 1965. The memo described the gap that existed in the New Left between the ideal of equality and the “sex-caste system that kept women in subordinate positions.”

“A Kind of Memo” was an effort to create a new community of women. Blacks had begun organizing other blacks and men gathered other men in draft resistance. King and Hayden were searching for a “sisterhood, an attempt to create real discussion.” While their “Women in the Movement” paper detailed the sexism within SNCC, this memo focused on the discrimination women faced within the New Left community. Hayden and King described women as working within an “institutionalized caste system which dictates the roles assigned to women in the movement.” The memo was essential to raising the consciousness of movement women who experienced sexism and discrimination but accepted such treatment as normal.

In December 1965, one month after King and Hayden mailed “A Kind of Memo” to female activists, SDS held a conference at which the “woman question” was on the agenda. Women began to share examples of sexism that they experienced within the movement. Heather Booth, who helped found the CWLU, was at the SDS conference and remembered, “Several of the men, used to dominating the discussion, cut off the women, talked over them, and denied their experiences.” Instead of concern, the discussion elicited “catcalls, storms of ridicule, and verbal abuse from the men.” Men hurled insults like, “She just needs a good screw” or “She’s a castrating female.”

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18 King and Hayden, “Sex and Caste,” 235-236.
20 Hole and Levine, Rebirth of Feminism, 112.
women they needed to talk alone and “get their act together.” Garrett walked out and most of the other men followed. The women shared their experiences late into the night.21

The formation of an independent women’s movement did not begin in earnest until after the National Conference for New Politics in August 1967. At that conference, a women’s caucus met for days but was told that their resolution was not significant enough to discuss. After finally succeeding in having their statement attached at the end of the agenda, it was never discussed. The chair refused to recognize any of the women when they raised their hands, waiting to bring forth their resolution. When one of the women demanded an explanation, the chair literally patted her on the head and told her, “Cool down, little girl. We have more important things to talk about than women’s problems.”22

That “little girl” was Shulamith Firestone, future author of *The Dialectic of Sex*.23 In 1967, she joined with other Chicago women to form the West Side Group, the first women’s liberation group in the country, with the primary goal of raising the consciousness of its members.24 Amy Kesselman, Heather Booth, and Naomi Weisstein, future leaders of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, were also among the organizers of the West Side Group. Kesselman remembered a male activist cautioning her that the women’s group would divide the larger peace movement. “I wanted his approval more than I’d like to admit. I remember thinking, ‘Could he be right?’ and then, after a minute or two, ‘He’s full of shit,’ and finally, ‘I’ll be damned, he’s threatened.”25

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23 Firestone would author *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* in 1970. The treatise articulated a socialist-feminist theory to free women of the gender inequality imposed by reproduction.
The discussion in the West Side Group further developed the feminist analysis that women had previously discussed informally among friends. The women recalled the excitement that they felt in sharing their experiences of sexist exclusion in the activist movement and in their personal lives. “We had become so used to the usual heterosexual chill that it was a giddy and slightly terrifying sensation to talk and have everybody listen,” Naomi Weisstein recalled. “We couldn’t wait to go to meetings, where we talked ecstatically about everything.”

Jo Freeman, who opened her apartment as a meeting space for the West Side Group, also wrote and circulated a newsletter called the *Voice of the Women’s Liberation Movement*. The newsletter contained articles about the formation of women’s groups around the country, the role of women in the New Left and in society, and other issues related to the new liberation movement. The first issue, printed in March 1968, consisted of three mimeographed pages. Two hundred copies were printed but only thirty were distributed to Chicago women. The last issue, printed in February 1969 was twenty-four pages long. One thousand copies were distributed in Chicago, and another one thousand were mailed out to liberation groups and individuals nationwide.

Organizing an autonomous women’s liberation movement was no easy task in Chicago. In addition to facing down the repressive Daley political machine, the city had such strong ties to the New Left that separating from it was, as Amy Kesselman put it, like “divorcing your husband.” Because the civil rights and New Left groups of the 1960s shaped the women who organized the CWLU, they found it especially difficult to break from them and form their own movement.

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27 Hole and Levine, Rebirth of Feminism, 115.
In August 1968, twenty-two women attended a small conference in Sandy Springs, Maryland, to discuss the logistics of forming an autonomous women’s movement. The women came from New York City, Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Gainesville, Florida. The main question at stake was whether to form an independent women’s movement or to remain as a branch of the New Left. “Politicos,” as they were called, with strong ties to the New Left tended to favor remaining a branch of the movement. Those from the civil rights movement tended to be more ardent feminists who favored an independent movement. The hostility of some New Left men, however, convinced many politicos of the need to form their own movement. The politico viewpoint shifted into the socialist-feminist faction once the women’s movement was born. Although there were socialist-feminist organizations in many major cities, it was only in Chicago that this viewpoint dominated.29 The only concrete agreement to come out of Sandy Springs was the decision to hold a national conference around Thanksgiving.30

In November 1968, over two hundred women from twenty states and Canada met at Camp Hastings, a YMCA summer camp in Lake Villa, Illinois, at the first national gathering of women’s liberation activists. Many women who came had never previously been involved with women’s liberation. The diversity of ideas became apparent in intense discussions and disagreements. Although nothing concrete was decided, many women returned to their cities excited about the idea of women’s liberation, ready to plan and organize.31

Amy Kesselman,

29 The Politics of Women’s Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and its Relation to the Policy Process (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975), 108. Women’s liberation groups on both coasts tended to advocate a radical brand of feminism focused primarily on ending patriarchy. Chicago women, however, who had gained organizing experience in labor unions and the New Left, tended to identify more with working-class women and women of color. As such, socialist-feminism—which emphasized both an end to patriarchy and an end to capitalism—was more in line with the views and experiences of Chicago women.


future organizer of the CWLU, remembered the conference as “enormously stimulating. It convinced me of the importance and viability of an autonomous women’s movement.”

In October 1969, Chicago women met in Palatine, Illinois, for the Radical Women’s Conference. At the two-day conference, participants discussed the formation of a new organization that would bring all of the fledgling Chicago-area women’s groups under one umbrella. It was here that the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union was born. During the two days, women representing different political perspectives presented their views in order to determine the political framework of the new organization. Though some women disagreed intensely, the participants voted to organize the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union based on the socialist-feminist viewpoint.

Socialist-feminist organizations, strongly influenced by labor unions and New Left groups like Students for a Democratic Society, acted on the assumption that articulating a precise theory would “inform strategic activism and ultimately bring about the revolution.” Modeling their papers on those of SDS, socialist-feminists engaged in a great deal of political theorizing. They identified both capitalism and patriarchy as sources of oppression and asserted the need for a transformation in economic and political structures as well as in relations between women and men. This often led to divisions in socialist-feminist groups, as it did in the CWLU, when some members identified patriarchy as the greater threat than capitalism and vice versa.

The CWLU tied women’s struggle for liberation with other struggles. Terry Radinsky and Lucy Gadlin, two Chicago activists, wrote a treatise called “Toward a Revolutionary Women’s Union” in 1969, at the time of the CWLU’s formation. The treatise influenced the

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women who organized the CWLU. Radinsky and Gadlin wrote, “The oppression of women is fundamentally tied to the same economic and social system that oppresses blacks, launches imperialist wars, and values private property above human life.” Since these struggles were interconnected, the CWLU was founded on the principle that eliminating capitalist oppression would also eliminate women’s oppression. Though the CWLU was always a women’s liberation organization, its ties to socialism and to the New Left made the organization more broad-based than some other women’s groups. As such, the group was interested in issues not directly tied to feminism, like the war in Southeast Asia, Third World women’s oppression, and the dismantling of the capitalist system.

Additionally, adopting a socialist-feminist ideology had important consequences. Unlike some radical feminists, socialist-feminists identified patriarchy, not individual men, as the source of oppression. As such, though the membership of the CWLU was restricted to women, men were not generally seen as the enemy and were welcomed at public CWLU events. Some feminists in the CWLU, however, took a more radical perspective and adopted lesbianism as a protest against the patriarchal structure. Another consequence of the socialist-feminist ideology was a sense of solidarity with working women. A founding document of the CWLU warned that “a movement that does not have a broad base among working-class women, both black and white, must constantly beware of becoming a special-interest group for relatively privileged women.”

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36 Terry Radinsky and Lucy Gadlin, “Toward a Revolutionary Women’s Union: A Strategic Perspective,” 1969, 1/5, CWLU Records.
39 Radinsky and Gadlin, “Toward a Revolutionary Women’s Union: A Strategic Perspective,” 1969, 1/5, CWLU Records.
to appeal to working-class women, its membership remained rooted in the middle- and upper-middle classes.\textsuperscript{40}

In addition to shaping the political theory of the CWLU, the Radical Women’s Conference also shaped the basic structure of the organization—using New Left groups as a model—including workgroups, chapters, and a steering committee.\textsuperscript{41} Jo Freeman, a CWLU member, pointed out that “Chicago, more than any other city, had a women’s movement almost entirely rooted in the New Left.”\textsuperscript{42} Movement women applied their ideas about democratic structure, accountable leadership, and direct action initiatives to the founding of the CWLU. Since many women’s liberation organizations were loose affiliations of workgroups with little central direction, the CWLU’s use of formalized structure was unique. This setup, while imperfect, helped to facilitate organizational learning and encouraged the group’s longevity.

There were three main branches of structure in the CWLU: the steering committee, workgroups, and chapters. The steering committee was made up of representatives from each of the workgroups and chapters. It met at least once per month and more often during crises and major projects. The steering committee was largely an administrative body whose task was to “guide the general policy and politics of CWLU activity.”\textsuperscript{43} It was responsible for coordinating work among the subgroups of the CWLU, for overseeing the office and staff, and for discussing activities that affected the entire membership.\textsuperscript{44} In order to prevent elitism, membership on the steering committee rotated frequently. In mid-1971, as the role of the steering committee

\textsuperscript{40} Margaret Strobel, “Organizational Learning in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union,” in Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women’s Movement, ed. Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 149.

\textsuperscript{41} “Minutes: Radical Women’s Conference,” 31 October 1969, 7/7, CWLU Records.

\textsuperscript{42} Jo Freeman, interview by Margaret Strobel, 24 April 1986, 3/9, Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Interviews, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois.


\textsuperscript{44} Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 152.
became more important, the membership conference voted for staggered three-month terms (later changed to nine-month terms at the November 1972 conference).\(^{45}\)

In 1973, the organization elected two co-chairs in order to provide additional leadership beyond that of the steering committee. In 1974, a five-member planning committee was added to do long-range planning for financial security and outreach, which often got lost amid daily activity.\(^{46}\) At each of these levels, leaders were elected, given concrete tasks, and expected to report back to the membership. This additional leadership added structure that grounded the CWLU.

There was also a monthly citywide meeting, which provided a forum for at-large members who were not in a workgroup or chapter. Initially, members directly decided policy at these citywide meetings. A 1971 conference, however, affirmed the principle of representative democracy over direct democracy.\(^{47}\) Decisions affecting organization and structure were then made by the steering committee, not at the large citywide meetings. The April 1971 newsletter explained the rationale for this decision: “Important decisions will be talked about with women we work with and know, rather than made in large meetings in which many of us do not speak or understand the procedure.”\(^{48}\)

In order to help the new organization move past its roots as a consciousness-raising group, Amy Kesselman, a founder of the CWLU, suggested the creation of workgroups organized around specific action-oriented projects, an idea she borrowed from SDS.\(^{49}\) The women developed projects meant to educate, provide a service, and take direct action. Members

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\(^{46}\) Steven M. Buechler, Women’s Movements in the United States: Women’s Suffrage, Equal Rights, and Beyond (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 78.


\(^{48}\) Karen W., “Report from the CWLU Conference” and “Structural Decision Made at CWLU Conference,” CWLU Newsletter, April 1971, 19/4, CWLU Records.

believed that the best initiatives fulfilled all three goals. Education was necessary to change and deepen women’s understanding of themselves and society. The service component intended to meet women’s immediate needs and to provide alternatives to the sexist structures of society. Without taking direct action to challenge the existing power structure, education and service activity alone could not bring about societal change.\(^50\)

Specific educational workgroups included the Liberation School for Women, which enrolled about two hundred students per session in diverse classes, including Women and Their Bodies, Readings in Feminism, and Auto Mechanics for Volkswagens.\(^51\) The *Womankind* workgroup produced a newspaper by the same name, which introduced women to various aspects of women’s liberation. The Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band crossed the categories of education and service, creating a feminist album and performing shows. Service workgroups included the Legal Clinic, which provided free legal advice—mainly on divorce, child support, and domestic violence issues—to women one night per week.\(^52\) The Abortion Counseling Service, known as “Jane,” helped women to arrange abortions—and later learned to perform procedures themselves—between 1969 and 1973 before abortion was legal.\(^53\) Direct Action for Rights of Employment (DARE) blurred the line between service and structural change. DARE women supported strikes and organized workers in local factories. Furthermore, along with the National Organization for Women, DARE successfully sued Chicago City Hall for sex discrimination on behalf of female custodians who worked for the city.\(^54\)

Membership in the CWLU also came from its various chapters. Chapters were semi-autonomous groups that made some of their own decisions, but also participated in the leadership

\(^{50}\) Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 156.

\(^{51}\) “Course Offerings,” April 1973, 14/9, CWLU Records.

\(^{52}\) “Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Legal Clinic brochure,” n.d., 14/8, CWLU Records.


\(^{54}\) “DARE to Testify on Behalf of City Hall Janistresses,” press release, 13 November 1972, 12/13, CWLU Records.
of the CWLU. Some of the strongest CWLU chapters were centered on college campuses, but other non-campus chapters also formed around common neighborhoods or interests.

From its inception, the CWLU had a paid staff of one to three women who performed administrative duties and, with the help of volunteers, produced a fairly regular monthly newsletter. Though the CWLU had a small paid staff, members continually struggled with the idea of paying people to do work in an anti-capitalist organization. Those who opposed it believed that “since capitalism is so concerned with money, we should not be.” On the other hand, offering paid positions increased the likelihood that working-class women could take leadership roles within the CWLU. Most staff was volunteer, however, because the CWLU lacked strong financial resources.

During the early 1970s, when membership in the CWLU was at its peak, approximately fifty women formed the core of active members. In addition, around two hundred women participated in some twenty workgroups and chapters, and another one hundred at-large members were active in some way. In addition, a mailing list reached nine hundred by the end of 1970 and continued to grow for several years.

Despite their efforts to reach working-class women and women of color, the makeup of the group remained relatively homogeneous. Margaret Strobel, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, interviewed forty-six former members who were broadly representative of the CWLU’s membership. All forty-six were born between the years 1915 and 1954, with the median year being 1945. This made the average woman twenty-four years old when the CWLU was founded in 1969. Except for one Asian-American, all were of European

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descent, including a substantial Jewish contingent (43 percent). The membership tended to be single and childless, but a large minority (35 percent) was married or had children.\footnote{Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 149.} A substantial portion of the membership was lesbian (39 percent) or bisexual (26 percent).\footnote{Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 149.} Referring to the National Organization of Women, the CWLU warned of the “dangers and pitfalls” of a membership based overwhelmingly in the middle class.\footnote{Radinsky and Gadlin, “Toward a Revolutionary Women’s Union: A Strategic Perspective,” 1969, 1/5, CWLU Records.} Unable to diversify, however, almost half of the CWLU’s membership described themselves as middle class. The rest varied between lower middle class (28 percent), upper middle class (24 percent), and working class (17 percent). The vast majority of members were getting or possessed a college degree while in the CWLU. Their parents were relatively liberal but not radical (52 percent Democratic, 24 percent Republican, 20 percent liberal, 7 percent socialist, 7 percent communist, and 7 percent conservative).\footnote{Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 149.} This overall homogeneity hindered recruitment among women who did not fit the profile.

Even though few women of color joined the CWLU, the organization successfully worked in cooperation with black and Latina organizations. For instance, the Abortion Task Force, a workgroup of the CWLU, worked to stop sterilization abuse. Since Latina women were the predominant victims, the Abortion Task Force worked with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and \textit{Mujeres Latinas en Acción} (Latin Women in Action) to form the Coalition to End Sterilization Abuse. This coalition work resulted in other cooperation. In 1975, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party asked the CWLU to provide a speaker for its May Day celebration.\footnote{Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 149.}
The structure of the CWLU encouraged personal growth and learning, which added to the strength of the organization. The membership periodically evaluated individuals and projects in order to promote learning and correct emerging problems. Drawing on Mao Tse-tung’s notion of criticism/self-criticism, each meeting ended with an evaluation of self and of the group. In addition, at the completion of a project, members published an elaborate evaluation in the newsletter to be publicly discussed at the annual conference. This accountability of leadership helped to prevent elitism and encouraged the active participation of all members.

The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union adopted an umbrella structure to assure participatory democracy at a time when many women’s liberation groups fell victim to the “tyranny of structurelessness.” This is evident in the contrast between the CWLU and Bread and Roses, a Boston-based women’s liberation group. Bread and Roses formed three months earlier in 1969 and collapsed in 1973, four years before the CWLU. The two groups were similar in terms of membership makeup and ideology. Bread and Roses members, however, were suspicious of formal leadership. Their structure rested upon affiliation with workgroups but lacked a formal center that held the organization together. Bread and Roses kept no meeting minutes and had no newsletter. The organization chose two part-time staffers by lottery from among members. Meredith Tax, a former Bread and Roses member who later joined the CWLU, remembered, “Inevitably, most of the real decision-making got done informally . . . leading to a feeling of exclusion and resentment on the part of the majority. Fearing an SDS

63 Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 156. Mao Tse-tung ruled the Communist party in the People’s Republic of China from 1945 until his death in 1976. Self-criticism was an important part of Maoist thought. Self-criticism originated as a form of punishment under some totalitarian systems of communism. Important party members who had fallen out of favor with the political elite were sometimes forced to undergo self-criticism sessions, producing either written or verbal statements detailing how they had been ideologically mistaken, and affirming their new belief in the party line. In the CWLU, self-criticism served as an evaluation tool, not as punishment.


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model of leadership, we ended up with de facto leadership. It was rule by friendship clique, a popular form of oligarchy in the feminist movement.\textsuperscript{66}

Although the CWLU did not share the wider feminist movement’s suspicion of structure, like many other women’s organizations, it did reject the notion of elitism. Movement women who acquired public notoriety for any reason were denounced as elitist.\textsuperscript{67} Instead of rejecting leadership within the organization, the CWLU used policy to structure out elitism. This can best be seen in the group’s Speakers Bureau. The CWLU established the Speakers Bureau in 1970 in response to the barrage of requests for information about women’s liberation. Within its first six months, the Bureau scheduled fifty speaking engagements and averaged twenty-three per month after that.\textsuperscript{68} The CWLU expected every member to give speeches so that the few women with exceptional speaking skills would not dominate. Thus, the Speakers Bureau taught the membership how to effectively speak and answer questions about women’s liberation. Naomi Weisstein, who organized the first Speakers Bureau training sessions, found them “dismaying, both in terms of the speaking itself and in the shallowness of people’s understanding of the ideas.”\textsuperscript{69} Despite her frustration, Weisstein remained enthusiastic about teaching other women to speak publicly. The adherence to this policy was premised on the assumption that all women were equally capable, an assumption that widely pervaded the women’s movement.\textsuperscript{70} The CWLU rotated speaking engagements among the membership and sent women in pairs to engagements in order to facilitate criticism/self-criticism.\textsuperscript{71} Supporters of this Speakers Bureau policy saw it as structuring out elitism. Critics, however, claimed that the policy was blind to

\textsuperscript{66}Meredith Tax, interview by Margaret Strobel, 26 April 1986, 3/8, CWLU Interviews.
\textsuperscript{67}Jo Freeman, The Politics of Women’s Liberation, 121.
\textsuperscript{68}“State of the Union,” 1970, 4/4; and Conference packet, April 1971, 7/7, CWLU Records.
\textsuperscript{69}Naomi Weisstein, self-interview, November 1987, 3/13, CWLU Interviews.
\textsuperscript{70}Freeman, The Politics of Women’s Liberation, 105.
\textsuperscript{71}Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 157.
differences in people’s abilities and placed “the need of developing our members before the need of making an impact on the audience.”

By 1973, the policy was modified to make elected co-chairs responsible for important media contacts, while workgroups were responsible for speaking on their particular areas.

For all its discussion of structure, however, the CWLU was unable to find a structure that was both democratic and inclusive, and also served the needs of people with minimal available time. Additionally, the CWLU never succeeded in recruiting a diverse group of activists to the organization. Suzanne Staggenborg, sociologist and former member of the CWLU, suggests that because of loose membership criteria, the CWLU actually experienced greater heterogeneity since any woman could join. She fails to recognize, however, that the time commitment required of members served as an internal mechanism to keep membership homogeneous. Because the CWLU required so much time of its members, intense friendships resulted. This created an in-group that was not conducive to bringing in diverse membership. The intense time commitment also prevented most working-class women and mothers from becoming involved. And like other socialist organizations, the CWLU was unsuccessful in convincing mainstream capitalist America of its vision. This also contributed to its homogeneity since the group’s socialist-feminist ideology tended to attract like-minded countercultural individuals.

The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union was unique among women’s liberation groups for its use of accountable leadership and formalized structure. This was a contributing reason for the longevity of the CWLU, compared to most other socialist-feminist women’s groups. Only

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73 Steering Committee Minutes, 15 March 1973, 5/1, CWLU Records.
74 Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 159.
75 Staggenborg, “Stability and Innovation in the Women’s Movement,” 84. To be fair, Staggenborg compares the CWLU with the National Organization of Women, whose centralized structure makes the CWLU appear extremely decentralized by comparison.
76 Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 159.
the Baltimore Women’s Union, which functioned for ten years from 1972 until 1982, lasted longer. Additionally, the umbrella structure of the CWLU contributed to the longevity of many of its workgroups. Even when the CWLU dissolved in 1977, many workgroups continued to flourish. For example, Health Education and Referral Services (HERS), which referred Chicago women to low-cost healthcare, continued to flourish until 1990. The fact that each workgroup was an autonomous subgroup with its own structure and leadership contributed to the longevity of those workgroups that endured. In addition, the CWLU successfully exposed non-members to women’s liberation. For instance, Womankind targeted women who were not members of the CWLU. Also, most students in the Liberation School classes were not members of the organization. Despite its structural flaws, the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union succeeded in achieving concrete changes for Chicago women, providing a model for future women’s groups, and keeping a left-wing presence alive in the years after the Vietnam War.

Ashley Eberle

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77 Hansen, “The Women’s Unions and the Search for a Political Identity,” 70. The Baltimore Women’s Union formed several years after the start of second-wave feminism and benefited from the mistakes and successes of earlier women’s liberation groups. This could have contributed to its longevity.

78 Staggenborg, “Stability and Innovation in the Women’s Movement,” 86.

Primary Source Collections
at the Chicago History Museum

Interview Collection

Interviews with former members of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union are located in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Interview collection at the Chicago History Museum. Interview transcripts are located in Box 3 and are organized into folders. In the notes, transcripts are described according to their location within this system: box 3/folder number. Researchers must obtain written permission from Margaret Strobel, who conducted these interviews, in order to access the transcripts.

Manuscript Collection

The personal papers and documents of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union are located in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Records collection at the Chicago History Museum. Sources from the manuscript collection are organized into boxes, and then subdivided into folders. In the notes, documents are described according to their location within this system: box number/folder number. The manuscript collection is open to all researchers.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Strobel, Margaret. “Consciousness and Action: Historical Agency in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union.” In *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and...*
