The Chicago Women's Liberation Union: White Socialist Feminism and Women's Health Organizing in the 1970s

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The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union:
White Socialist Feminism and Women’s Health Organizing in the 1970s

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Submitted: April 2015
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Introduction

In August 1973, Vivian Rothstein, a founding member of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union (CWLU), made the first donation of archival material to the Chicago Historical Society to document the history of the CWLU, a white women’s socialist feminist umbrella organization operating in Chicago from 1969-1977. Encouraging others to follow her lead she said, “Believe it or not, a lot of our work is sure to be of interest to women in the future who want to study our movement.”¹ Even at that early date, Rothstein conceptualized the CWLU as an integral part of a broader movement for women’s liberation and importantly, worthy of being remembered.² In 1999, former members of the CWLU established the Women’s Herstory Committee to continue preserving the memory of the CWLU’s activism by creating a website.³ CWLU women painstakingly ensured that they will not be forgotten. But what does this memory mean?

CWLU members’ preoccupation with memory reflects the multi-faceted, complex, and often-contested terrain of the history of women’s activism in the 1960s and 1970s. The question of who has power over the memory of this period is an important one. Most often, histories of this era center on the activism of middle-class white women who advocated for what they called “women's liberation” and were active in anti-Vietnam War activism, the Black Freedom Struggle in the South, and the organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). According to this now dominant narrative, white middle-class women in these organizations became fed up with the sexism they perceived from male leadership, and broke away to form autonomous women's

¹ CWLU News, August 1973, p. 15, Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Records (from hereon CWLU Records), Box 19, Folder 6, Chicago Historical Society (from hereon CHS).
² The emphasis placed on historical memory in the organization enabled me to do this project. The archive at the Chicago Historical Society, started in 1973 has grown to a 48-box manuscript collection plus additional materials pertaining to the CWLU.
organizations which would address the root of “women’s oppression.”\textsuperscript{4} This younger generation of women alternately cooperated with and sought to distance themselves from an older generation of white middle-class feminist activists involved in organizations such as Chicago NOW.\textsuperscript{5} This construction of the origins of the “second wave” has become the authoritative voice explaining the emergence of post-war feminism.\textsuperscript{6}

The “second wave” framework has definitional power that prioritizes white middle-class feminists as those worthy of remembrance. First, it defines a chronology that focuses on women's activism within the bounded period from about 1968 to 1975. Second, it encompasses a limited scope of activist issues often limited to: educational access, employment equality, and access to reproductive technologies. Both the chronological and issue-based foci, result in a conceptualization of feminism itself that privileges white middle-class women, ignoring long standing documentation of key feminist struggles undertaken in the post-war period by women of color. Latina Feminist scholar Chela Sandoval calls this “hegemonic feminism,” and describes the dominant narrative as one which places white middle-class women’s activities at the center of analysis theorizing their experiences as all women’s experiences.\textsuperscript{7} Her critique echoes the

\textsuperscript{4} This narrative is put forward for the first time in Sara Evans, \textit{Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left} (New York: Vintage Books, 1979.) In a Google scholar search, this work was cited 955 times. It clearly has power in defining the origins of 1960s and 1970s feminist activism.

\textsuperscript{5} Chicago NOW existed in the tradition of “liberal feminism” and sought to make improvements to the existing system in order to gain equality for women instead of seeking to dismantle the system itself. See Suzanne Staggenborg, \textit{The Pro-Choice Movement: Organization and Activism in the Abortion Conflict} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), for a detailed history of Chicago NOW.

\textsuperscript{6} Works such as Alice Echols, \textit{Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.); Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow eds., \textit{The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices From Women’s Liberation} (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998); Ruth Rosen, \textit{The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America}, (New York: Viking, 2000); Rory Dicker, \textit{A History of U.S. Feminism} (Berkeley CA: Seal Press, 2008); and others have all used Evans’ narrative of the ‘beginnings’ of feminism as the basis for their understanding of the activism of the period. The term “second wave” was coined in an article in \textit{The New York Times} Magazine in 1968 in order to describe the ways in which the contemporary “wave” of feminism signaled an increased interest in feminist activism while simultaneously building on the gains of the “first wave” of feminism in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{7} Hegemony is a term that comes from Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci’s “cultural hegemony” which refers to the process by which the view of those in power becomes the unquestioned ideology of an entire society. Antonio Gramsci, \textit{Selections From the Prison Notebooks} (New York: International Publishers Co., 1971). In this context a
ways that women of color contest this hegemonic feminist narrative by documenting their own histories of activism. In response to such critiques, intersectional feminist histories have attempted to redefine the historical narrative of women’s activism. Some scholars utilize the framework of the “second wave” but broaden it to include the activism of women of color and working-class women at this time period. Other scholars reject the “wave” framework altogether in favor of new conceptual understandings of women’s activism. The identities of members of the CWLU place the organization in this “second wave” narrative yet the CWLU defies easy categorization due to their more extended chronology and the umbrella nature of the group that incorporated diverse activist issues under the banner of socialist feminism.

The challenge of placing the CWLU in history reflects the larger contestation over who has the power to define feminist history. The limited scholarly writing pertaining to the CWLU dominant narrative of feminism can be thought of as hegemonic. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 41-42.


has not adequately interrogated the organization’s place within a narrative of hegemonic feminism. While various authors have analyzed the CWLU’s organizational structure in relation to their activism, nothing has been written that analyzes the anti-racist anti-capitalist politics central to their socialist feminist ideology in relation to their white middle-class identities.¹² This thesis engages in the process of critically re-investigating the CWLU. This historical analysis is important for two reasons: first, because the CWLU can be a case study for the shortcomings of strict adherence to hegemonic feminist analysis. Second, it allows for interrogation of why the women of the CWLU were unable to put into practice the anti-racist, anti-capitalist vision they painfully sought to theorize and enact. Placing the CWLU within a longer narrative of women’s activism—as one strand among many—allows for a better understanding of both their contributions to women’s activism and the limitations of their approach.¹³ Yet my work also has limitations: it does not suggest how to de-center the largely the hegemonic feminist narrative itself, a project that remains critical for prioritizing the activism of women of color and working-class women. My critical re-engagement with middle-class white feminism is thus an incomplete yet vitally important endeavor.

I came to this project as a white middle-class feminist in the year 2014. Born in 1993, my life began long after the events that are contested as the “second wave.” Nonetheless narratives of the “second wave” shaped my understanding of feminism and what women’s activism should

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¹³ I have found the “strand” metaphor put forward by women's labor historian Eileen Boris as the most useful category of analysis in order to position the CWLU not as part of the “second wave,” but rather, as a single strand of women’s activism contingent on particular historical circumstances. Laughlin et al. “Is it Time To Jump Ship?” 92. For more on the “both/and” conceptual understanding stemming from a tradition of Black feminism see, Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, (New York; Routledge, 2008), ix.
look like. The enduring image of (implicitly white middle-class) “second wave” feminists that I internalized was one of racist, classist women focused on their own liberation at the expense of others. As I grappled with my own internalized racism, I felt a desperate need to find the “good second wave” feminists—women I could admire as models of anti-racist white feminist identity. I quickly learned that the “good second-wave” feminists did not exist; but I also learned that the “bad second-wave” feminists perhaps should not be so easily written off. The CWLU espoused an explicitly anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics and they aspired to create a multi-racial cross-class feminist movement.¹⁴ However, while they sought inclusion, they could not figure out in practice how to empower women across race and class differences. Rather than being an unthinkingly racist and classist group, the CWLU was a group of women who desperately struggled to liberate all women, but could not figure out how.

This thesis reexamines the white socialist feminism of the CWLU. I do not wish to glorify their feminism, nor to erase its problems, but rather, I want to interrogate the ways that white middle-class feminists grappled with the complexity of their race and class positions, even as they could not move beyond them to build community with women of color and working-class women. A re-examination of “second-wave” feminists is important because middle-class white feminists of today still have much to learn from them. By standing back and discounting their activism as irredeemably racist, we fail to see the ways that they tried and failed to be anti-racist anti-capitalist activists. In doing so, we distance ourselves from our own racism and class privilege without actively working to dismantle it.

¹⁴ In this thesis I will identify the CWLU itself as an actor. In saying that the “CWLU espoused politics” I mean to recognize the ever-changing cast of characters who make up the organization any few of which may have been responsible for determining the direction of the organization at any time. In this wording, I hope to emphasize the collective organization and while this essentializes some conflict happening internally, it makes clearer how the organization itself functioned
The CWLU labeled themselves a socialist feminist organization, seeking the empowerment of all women. Their decision was influenced by the larger state of activism in the late 1960s. Key founders of the CWLU had experience in the Black Freedom Struggle working in the south during Mississippi Freedom Summer and Students for a Democratic Society’s project JOIN Community Union in which they undertook community organizing in working-class neighborhoods in Chicago. The knowledge about organizing that early CWLU members gained in mixed-gender activist spaces informed the creation of their own organization and influenced its socialist feminist politics.\(^{15}\) When the CWLU was founded in 1969, other women’s liberation groups formed under the banner of “radical feminism.”\(^{16}\) Radical feminists understood sexism as the “primary oppression” from which all other oppression (such as racism and classism) stemmed. At the same time, some Black Power organizations such as the Black Panther Party were learning from the examples of North Korea and North Vietnam to apply Marxist thinking to the position of Black people in the United States.\(^{17}\) Many New Left organizations referenced Marx in creating what they believed to be revolutionary social movements that framed American capitalism as the fundamental source of oppression for all people.\(^{18}\) It was in this context that the CWLU was founded.

From its beginning the CWLU claimed 200 to 300 active members, with a mailing list that reached hundreds more.\(^{19}\) The CWLU formed as an umbrella organization to bring together a number of existing women’s activist projects in the city of Chicago. It was made up of: chapters based on common interest or geographical location, workgroups that were project-based

\(^{15}\) Strobel, “Organizational Learning in the CWLU,” 150-151; Strobel “Consciousness and Action,” 55-56.  
\(^{16}\) Radical feminists were also largely middle-class white women who had experience in previous social movement activism of the 1960s.  
\(^{19}\) Strobel, “Consciousness and Action,” 53-54.
and brought together women to work on a common issue, and at-large members.\textsuperscript{20} Beginning with a distrust of hierarchy, organizational structure emerged as the CWLU evolved from a de-centralized collection of projects to an organization run by a central Steering Committee with democratically elected representatives and co-chairs.\textsuperscript{21} But who were the women of the CWLU? Scholar Margaret Strobel conducted interviews with 46 former members who she believes to be broadly representative of all women active in the organization. Of the women she interviewed, the median age at the founding of the organization was 24. All of the women Strobel interviewed were white except one Asian American woman. The majority identified as either middle or upper-middle class and were highly educated holding at least a B.A. A majority also identified as either lesbian or bisexual.\textsuperscript{22} (See Fig. 1) From the beginning the membership of the CWLU presented a fundamental tension. While they sought to create programming to empower all women, their organization predominantly consisted of young white, middle-class, well-educated women.

The CWLU defined themselves in conversation with radical feminism and Marxism. While they recognized sexism as central to women’s oppression they reacted against radical feminists who called it the primary oppression.\textsuperscript{23} In hoping to work towards the empowerment of all women they adopted an anti-capitalist approach to feminist activism.\textsuperscript{24} The CWLU attempted to create an integrative model that addressed how women were oppressed by both

\textsuperscript{20} CWLU News, April 1971, p.5, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS.
\textsuperscript{22} Margaret Strobel, “Organizational Learning,” 149.
\textsuperscript{23} By seeing gender as the primary oppression, radical feminists negated the way that women of color and working-class women felt oppression based on gender, in addition to race and/or class and that organizing to address women’s empowerment needed to address all of these things. See, Chicago “Writing Group,” “Women and Class,” 1968, CWLU Records Box 1 Folder 3, CHS.
\textsuperscript{24} Historian Wini Breines explains, “Socialist feminism was the feminist current most closely linked to the anti-capitalist New Left and black movement, especially the Black Panther party.” Breines, \textit{The Trouble Between Us}, 6.
sexism and capitalism.\(^{25}\) Missing from this model was a framework to interrogate the ways that race shaped women’s lives as well as gender and class. The inability to speak to racial oppression of women in Chicago would become a fundamental limitation of the CWLU’s approach to women’s empowerment.

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**Data from sample of 46 women interviewed by Margaret Strobel**

**Sexuality**

- Straight: 35%
- Lesbian: 39%
- Bisexual: 26%

**Race**

- White: 98%
- Asian American: 2%

**Class**

- Upper Middle Class: 11
- Middle Class: 22
- Lower Middle Class: 13
- Working Class: 8

**Education**

- High School Diploma: 7
- B.A. or B.S.: 18
- M.A. or M.S.: 11
- Ph.D or equivalent: 7

**Figure 1** Note that the bar graph data does not add up to 46 women—this may have been because women identified as being from more than one class background and some women did not report their educational background.

Of the many programs the CWLU encompassed under its umbrella, this thesis will examine the relationship between the development of the central organization and the health

\(^{25}\) The word intersectional comes from Kimberlé Crenshaw “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” in *The Black Feminist Reader* edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). Crenshaw’s article sought to provide an important intervention in Black feminist theory to include the particular experiences of Black women for whom struggles against racism and sexism are intertwined.
workgroups in order to gain insight into the complex navigations of the CWLU’s articulations of theory and practice. Health specifically is an important lens to understanding the CWLU for two reasons. First, the health programs had longevity in the organization and existed in some form from the CWLU’s founding to its dissolution. They therefore are helpful for examining the changing politics of the organization over time. Second, the health programs represent key areas for tentative explorations of anti-racist, anti-capitalist feminist activism. Many health programs explicitly sought to empower working-class women and women of color to fight for control over their own bodies and the right to make decisions about their medical care. These varied programs demonstrate the contradictions and complexities the CWLU’s overwhelmingly white middle-class membership encountered in trying to envision the empowerment of all women.

The politics of reproduction became a site at which the theorizing of the CWLU was put into practice and both the possibilities and limitations of their activism came to light. The history of reproductive rights has largely centered on the history of white middle-class activism around abortion rights, erasing the histories of women of color who often organized around broader reproductive rights agendas of which abortion was a part.26 Sterilization abuse, in particular, stood as a key issue for reproductive rights activists of color, with its long history of ties to eugenics and population control women of color activists faced the dual challenge of resisting population control while maintaining the ability to control their fertility.27 Understanding male

26 In the narrative of hegemonic feminism this largely means a focus on Roe v. Wade and the battle to legalize abortion.
27 At the same time, “White women of different socioeconomic classes struggled to obtain contraceptive sterilization while poor women, predominantly women of color, struggled to resist coercive sterilization.” Becky Kluchin Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America 1950-1980, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 8. Eugenicists used sterilization as a tool to prevent the reproduction of populations they deemed to be ‘unfit.’ Puerto Rico served as a laboratory for overpopulation schemes as the U.S. government tested potentially dangerous new forms of birth control. Additionally one third of women in Puerto Rico were sterilized by such programs. These atrocities were connected to anti-sterilization abuse activism in the U.S. Laura Briggs, Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 143; Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Guriérrez eds., Undivided Rights.
medical authorities as oppressive to women, the CWLU hoped to empower women on the basis of their own knowledge of their bodies.\textsuperscript{28} Health programming revolved primarily around abortion, but also included broader women’s health concerns as well as sterilization in a recognition of the ways that women interacted with the medical system differently based on their race and class positions. (See fig. 2). The CWLU’s attempts at broader reproductive health programming represented their vision of empowerment for all women, yet they struggled to enact this intersectional politics.

Over the course of the CWLU’s existence from 1969 to 1977 their politics changed and evolved. At their founding, they based an understanding of socialist feminism on the experiences of key members in different activist communities. By the end of their existence, the CWLU had spent eight years struggling to theorize and implement a socialist feminism that they hoped could move all women in Chicago to fight both for their own empowerment, and for broader revolution. This thesis will examine the relationship between the development of socialist feminism in the central organization and in the health projects. While the central organization cultivated the theoretical direction of the CWLU, the health programs put this vision into practice, and often discovered tensions between the needs of women and the theory of the organization.


The first chapter focuses on the struggles of the central organization to define a revolutionary autonomous women’s organization as separate from yet connected with larger activist movements. At the same time, the organization made initial attempts to put their political principles into action in their health programming in the form of what I call, “revolutionary service.” Chapter two explores the way the CWLU grew to articulate a specifically socialist feminism and the turn towards direct action health organizing in a search for a “mass base” for revolutionary struggle. It will then look at the struggle over lesbian identity challenging the
CWLU to reexamine its feminist politics. Finally, the third chapter examines the limits of Marxist theory to address mass-based women’s empowerment and the ensuing factional struggles, and demise of the CWLU as it failed to come to a definition of Marxism that could weather such conflict. Meanwhile the health programs moved farther from the theoretical orientation of the central organization in order to practice community-based organizing detached from socialist politics. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to engage with the tensions between identity and politics, theory and practice that are so central to an understanding of feminist activism.
In Service of the Revolution: The Birth of the CWLU

As women of the CWLU prepared for the opening of their new women’s clinic, the Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, they emphasized the importance of having a concrete revolutionary space saying, “Without a living model based on our beliefs, all our demands sound utopian.” Rather than embracing abstract revolutionary discourse, the women of Alice Hamilton as well as those of the Abortion Service, Jane, focused on a concrete vision grounded in service. In their early years, the CWLU struggled both to theorize and enact their revolutionary feminist politics. While the central organization, preoccupied with theory, worked towards the creation of a new kind of revolutionary feminist identity, the health programs focused on action-oriented work that used what I call “revolutionary service” to enact their politics.

Revolutionary service allowed the health programs to reconcile theory and practice by providing a concrete model of action in line with larger revolutionary vision. Women of the CWLU understood their service programs as revolutionary because they enabled women to take their health into their own hands, thereby providing alternatives to the profit-oriented and male-dominated medical system. Revolutionary service sought to meet women’s daily needs through the provision of services while simultaneously building alternative institutions that would provide a vision for change. Refuting claims of reformism, women of the CWLU argued that service programs gave women a sense of how things could be different and the will to fight for that change. The CWLU took two distinct paths in their exploration of revolutionary service: 1)

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1 The Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, A Debate Within the CWLU About the Value of Service Programs, p. 1, Knauss Collection, Box 13, Folder 10, NUL.
2 Women of the CWLU adamantly defended their service programs as inherently revolutionary, yet did not use the term “revolutionary service.” I created this term in order to clarify the CWLU’s political strategy.
3 The CWLU’s early revolutionary service programs were based in an ethic of revolutionary change but had not yet taken on the label of socialist feminist.

Griffin 13
Jane, an illegal abortion referral service and provider and 2) the Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, a para-medical clinic focusing on women’s preventative healthcare.

The CWLU was founded in 1969 on a set of seven what they called political principles that outlined the ideological basis of the organization. Rather than thinking about gender as the primary category of oppression, the political principles displayed a deeper understanding of the need to combat racism, sexism, and classism simultaneously for the empowerment of all women:

The struggle for women’s liberation is a revolutionary struggle.
Women’s liberation is essential to the liberation of all oppressed people.
Women's liberation will not be achieved until all people are FREE.
We will struggle for the liberation of women and against male supremacy in all sections of society.
We will struggle against racism, imperialism, and capitalism and dedicate ourselves to developing consciousness of their effect on women.
We are dedicated to a democratic organization and understand a way to insure democracy is through full exchange of information and ideas, full political debate and through the unity of theory and practice.
We are committed to building a movement that embodies within it the humane values of the society for which we are fighting. To win this struggle, we must resist exploitative, manipulative and intolerant attitudes in ourselves. We need to be supportive of each other, to have enthusiasm for change in ourselves and in society and faith that people have unending energy and ability to change.  

The statement of principles formed the basis for a new kind of organization: one that prioritized both revolutionary anti-capitalist politics and women’s empowerment. They recognized the interconnected nature of activism for gendered, class, and racial empowerment and sought to create an organization that functioned as one piece of a larger revolutionary movement. Women in the CWLU continued to define and contest the importance of these principles to their organizational identity to determine what it meant to be an autonomous revolutionary feminist organization that maintained ties to the larger activist Left.

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4 CWLU News, December 1 1969, p. 3, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL.
Issues of self-definition became the impetus for a struggle over how the CWLU would constitute membership in the organization. After about a year of their existence, the women of the CWLU decided they needed to call a membership conference to come together and reflect on their beginnings and to outline a direction forward for the future. As they began to prepare for the conference, they had to answer the questions: who was a member of the CWLU? What constituted membership and therefore who was able to attend the membership conference?

The conference precipitated a conflict over the meaning of membership that raged over the next year between two opposing contingents who had very different understandings of the purpose of the organization. The conflict centered on whether membership should be inclusive of all women who wanted to join or if it should be determined by participation in the organization and formal adherence to the political principles. Advocating for a more exclusive definition of membership were many women active in the founding of the CWLU who had experience in the New Left and anti-Vietnam war movements, and who maintained ties to male-led organizations. They worried that if the CWLU were open to everyone their agenda would become co-opted by other parts of the Left.\(^5\) Advocating for a less strict definition of membership were women associated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and their youth branch the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA). The SWP was a revolutionary socialist group that tied their politics back to a very orthodox reading of Marx in which class was the primary oppression, and hence sexism, symptomatic of capitalism, would be resolved after a socialist revolution.\(^6\) This group thought that to be effective, the CWLU had to open membership to as many women as possible to create

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\(^5\) CWLU News, December 1 1970, p. 3, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL.

a mass base for revolution. The conflict over membership represented a much larger
disagreement as to the purpose of a revolutionary women’s organization.

The SWP used participatory language in order to argue that the desire to restrict
membership to those active in the organization was “elitist” and “undemocratic.” They believed
that, “every woman who is interested in WL [women’s liberation] must be welcomed and
accepted into our meetings…it is on the basis of our common experience as women that we must
come together and not on the basis of some esoteric knowledge of the inner workings of a select
group of active women.”7 This argument played off the fears of many women in the CWLU who
sought alternatives to the hierarchical structure in many male-led New Left organizations and
attempted to identify the CWLU with some of the tendencies of the Left that they reacted
against.

A core contingent in the CWLU, wary of the SWP’s approach, wanted to be able to
define what an autonomous women’s organization would be without interference from the
broader Left. They worried that the SWP as an outside entity would co-opt their organization.
This contingent wanted to restrict decision-making power to those women who had been active
in the organization and who agreed with the founding political principles.8 Many thought that
women in the organization should have ideological agreement and a basic knowledge of
women’s liberation in order to have influence over the direction of the organization. While they
feared duplicating the structure of male-dominated radical organizations, they also wanted to
build a structure to meet the needs of a revolutionary feminist group.9

7 CWLU News, November 11, 1970, p. 4, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL.
8 Ibid, 2.
3-5, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 2, NUL.
After more than a year of conflict, the CWLU voted to define membership based on activity and ideological commitment to the political principles. Members of the CWLU also voted to consolidate the decision-making power of the organization in a Steering Committee that was representative of all chapters and workgroups. They hoped this structure would create a democratically run organization and avoid many of the problems of hierarchy. After this decision women affiliated with the SWP/YSP gradually withdrew from the organization. The issue of membership was decided but the larger struggle of who the organization should serve was not over. Meanwhile, the health programs developed a model of service partially in conversation with the central organization, both drawn from and rejecting their navigation of revolutionary feminism.

The Abortion Service that became Jane started almost five years before the CWLU and in joining the CWLU at their founding in 1969, the women of Jane affirmed a revolutionary purpose for their organization. At the founding conference Jane was challenged by women who thought that service providing was inherently reformist, likening it to social service work that did nothing to change an unjust medical system. However, those in Jane articulated a view of abortion referral as a revolutionary issue. By emphasizing the high cost of illegal abortion, they framed referral as a feminist and economic justice issue that addressed women’s classed and

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10 CWLU News, January 15, 1971, p. 1-2 Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 2, NUL.
11 CWLU News, April 1971, p. 5-7, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS.
12 Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7-9. I will use the terms “Jane” and “the Service” interchangeably, as this is the language they used to identify themselves. Due to the underground and illegal nature of Jane, members produced very little documentation of their activities. Those that they did produce were mostly destroyed after their immediate usefulness had passed. Much of what we know now about Jane comes from interviews with women in the organization. Laura Kaplan’s book, *Jane: An Abortion Service* provides the most complete and in-depth narrative of the activities of the organization and will be drawn on extensively in the course of this paper. Most secondary sources, including Kaplan’s, paint a very uncritically celebratory portrait of the organization that does not engage with issues of race and class in the organization. This perspective presents limitations in critically analyzing Jane’s work.
gendered oppression. Between 1969 and 1973, the Abortion Counseling Service of the CWLU provided more than 12,000 illegal abortions to women in Chicago before the passage of Roe v. Wade.

Jane’s model formulated an understanding of revolutionary service that attempted to empower all women, but in practice struggled with how to relate to women across race and class difference. At the center of Jane’s model were two core values: 1) that women should have access to affordable abortions at any stage in their pregnancies and 2) that women should be active participants in the process of abortion becoming agents over their own bodies rather than the objects of medical procedures. Women seeking abortions called Jane’s number (posted all over the city) and a woman identified as Jane took their information and called them back. The woman seeking an abortion was assigned a counselor who talked her through the procedure and referred her to one of the abortionists in Jane’s network who performed the abortion procedure. As time went on, Jane worked more and more closely with one particular abortionist who allowed them to exert some control over the price of abortions, but who insisted on close contact with only a few women to protect his anonymity. As these women developed a closer relationship with the abortionist, he began training them to assist with the procedures. As time went on, a couple women discovered that he was not a licensed physician. This discovery broke the illusion that abortion was a complex medical procedure that could only be performed by a licensed physician after years of training. Several women began taking on more and more

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16 Kaplan, *The Story of Jane*, 44.
responsibility in the abortion process until eventually, Jane’s membership performed the majority of the abortions themselves.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1970 abortion was legalized in the state of New York and as those who were able flew out to get abortions, the majority of women who came through Jane’s service became low-income women many of whom were women of color. The legalization of abortion in New York coincided with Jane’s ability to perform abortions themselves and, having more control over the procedure, Jane dropped the price of abortions to ensure that every woman who came to them could get an abortion regardless of their ability to pay.\textsuperscript{18} Prioritizing access to low-income women came from an understanding of the structural inequality that forced “lower-class women [to] bear unwanted children or face expensive, illegal and often unsafe abortions, while middle-class women can frequently get safe and hush-hush ‘DandCs’ [abortion procedures] in hospitals.”\textsuperscript{19} In theory, the women of Jane understood on a structural level how class shaped women’s experience of abortion. However, Jane’s values manifested in a de-medicalized, de-professionalized attitude that had been shaped by the privilege of access to medical care that the majority of women in Jane enjoyed, an opportunity not shared by many women who came through the Service.\textsuperscript{20} Jane provided an invaluable service in providing safe abortions to women who might otherwise not have had access to them. At the same, their lack of attention to disparities in power between the women in the organization and many of the women they served meant that at times they empowered themselves at the expense of other women.

Jane emphasized self-help centered abortion counseling as a site for the empowerment of women, however in practice, counseling also served as the site at which the power those in Jane

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 122.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 99, 173-175.
\textsuperscript{20} They always identified women as ‘going through’ the Service rather than being a patient, client, etc.
held became evident. In counseling sessions, members of Jane hoped to impress upon women the agency they had over their own bodies. An anonymous member of Jane reflected, “How many women were radicalized, I don’t know…Hopefully, some women were radicalized by the process. That certainly was part of the counseling, was to radicalize these women.”\textsuperscript{21} Women in Jane began by asking women if they would like to know what was happening during the abortion procedure, many women declined. Jane nonetheless told them anyway.\textsuperscript{22} Meant to be empowering, this practice was not respectful of the different kinds of engagements that women may have wanted to have with their bodies. This created a contradiction between Jane’s rhetoric about empowering women, and the practice of counseling in which members of Jane dictated the rules to women who came through the service.

Jane’s conscious rejection of the medical establishment’s standards of professionalism was meant as a radical statement to affirm women’s competency and control. However, their implementation of this ethic came with the underpinnings of their race and class positions and served to alienate many women of color and working-class women who sought evidence of respect from professionals. One woman recounted her experience getting an abortion from Jane and expressed discomfort with the attire of her abortionist saying, “I remember thinking, gee, you think she’d tie her hair up! She didn’t have nurse’s clothing on. I didn’t think that she was a nurse. I don’t think she had any medical training.”\textsuperscript{23} The lack of professionalism in the abortion procedure was meant to create a mutually affirming environment that diminished the power dynamics between doctor and patient. However for women desperate to find abortions, this

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{21} Paula Kamen, Anonymous Jane and Husband interview transcript, Sept. 1992, p. 20, Paula Kamen Collection, Folder 1, Manuscript Series CXXV, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Linnea Johnson, \textit{Something Real: Jane and Me, Memories and Exhortations of a Feminist ex-Abortionist}, p. 10, 1990, Chicago Historical Society.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Paula Kamen, Lorry Interview transcript, p. 3, Paula Kamen Collection, Folder 6, Manuscript Series CXXV, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.
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atmosphere may have only heightened their sense of powerlessness, reminding them that they could not access medical professionals.

Perhaps part of the reason women in Jane seemed to be oblivious of the power dynamics inherent in the abortion procedures was their lack of recognition of the ways their service enacted feminist politics. Many members of Jane were adamant that their organization was not based on political ideology. Distancing themselves from the central organization they explained that “group counseling and political discussions with women who come through the service” replaced concern about the membership debate so central to the CWLU.24 While the central organization defined membership as adherence to a set of ideological principles, no feminist identity was necessary for involvement in Jane. Women from the CWLU, Chicago NOW, and women unaffiliated with the feminist movement were all members of the Service.25 According to one member, the rejection of the concept of a “correct political line” and substitution of a basic consensus about the right to abortion allowed Jane to function smoothly.26 However, by avoiding discussion of how their de-professionalized, de-medicalized ethics reflected a specific white middle-class feminist politics, they limited their ability to recognize how, in practice, they reinforced some of the hierarchies they sought to dismantle.

Lacking an explicit interrogation of the ways their race and class identities shaped the Service, women in Jane failed to interrogate the ways women felt oppressed by the medical system differently based on their race. Even when, after the legalization of abortion in New York, the women who came through the service became increasingly women of color, Jane members did not know how to move beyond their all-white membership. Looking back, an

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24 CWLU News, March 15 1971, p. 7, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS.
anonymous Jane member recalled their contradictory racial: “we talked about it [race] constantly, we didn’t know what to do, we were very ignorant about racism, our own, and racism in the world.” Because they were providing a desperately needed service, Jane members were more able to ignore both implicit and explicit accusations of racism. Indeed, such accusations were levied at them from some members of Black Power organizations in Chicago who contended that abortion was equated with genocide. At the same time Black feminists refuted this claim, centering Black women's’ reproductive autonomy as vital to Black peoples’ liberation. Members of Jane defended themselves against such accusations saying that they met “Black revolutionaries [who] accused us of genocide while weary black women pleaded for ‘no ore kids!’” Yet when it dismissed the claims of genocide, the white organization ignored Black women’s need for racial solidarity.

Racial ignorance was especially clear in Jane’s understandings of how some procedures it provided had vastly different racial consequences. Women more than twelve weeks pregnant, received induced miscarriages and were sent to the hospital. A few women who went through the Service were sterilized in local hospitals after having reported miscarriages. One source recounts, “several women who came through the service subsequently had hysterectomies because of incomplete abortions or problem miscarriages. All but two of these we considered medically

30 “The Most Remarkable Story Ever Told,” Hyde Park-Kenwood Voices. While the story of Jane is retold in many different secondary sources, this aspect of their work is almost always glossed over or not mentioned. It is only when you go back and look at the very limited primary material that you can see both that these critiques of Jane were being made, and that they were aware of and responding to them.
unjustified, and had strong medical opinions supporting our view.”

On May 3, 1972, the Chicago police busted Jane, while the organization continued to function after the bust, this event marked the last phase in the Service’s existence. Seven members of the Service were arrested and charged with “abortion and conspiracy to commit abortion.” After the arrest the CWLU formed the Abortion Defense Committee as a workgroup to raise money for the Jane women’s defense. On March 9, 1973, the charges were dropped against the “Abortion 7” after the legalization of abortion in Roe v. Wade. While some members wanted to continue providing abortions, believing that the legalization of abortion did not change the fundamental reasons for their existence the organization slowly disbanded and turned abortion provision back into the hands of medical professionals. The money raised by the Abortion Defense Committee was then used to found the Abortion Task Force and the Emma Goldman Women’s Health Center to be discussed in chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

Unlike Jane, the Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center represented an attempt to create a theory-driven model of a women’s health clinic in conversation with the central organization. Jane and Alice Hamilton represented two divergent models members of the CWLU used to enact revolutionary service. Women in the CWLU envisioned Alice Hamilton as a women’s health clinic that focused on preventative medicine. They too hoped to de-medicalize and de-mystify

31 Ibid.
32 Fact Sheet, Knauss Collection, Box 6, Folder 4, NUL.
33 CWLU News, June 1972, p. 12, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 5, CHS. Immediately after the arrest, some members of the CWLU believed the bust was part of a larger conspiracy against women’s liberation groups. It soon became clear that the bust was a fluke. The sister-in-law of one woman who was getting an abortion became angry and called the police. There was an understanding among the police tha they would not disturb Jane but the police captain was new and did not know this. Judith Arcana, “Feminist Politics and Abortion in the U.S.A., in Jane: Documents from a Clandestine Abortion Service 1968-1973 (Baltimore, MD: Firestarter Press, 2004), 43-44.
34 CWLU News, March 19, 1973, p. 4, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 6, CHS.
women’s health care. Their health center sought to provide “all routine gynecological and obstetrical services for women free or at cost, routine care of infants and small children, training in paramedical skills and specific techniques.” Proposed in the spring of 1970, the project was short-lived and by mid-1971 abandoned altogether. Pregnancy Testing was the first service in operation and despite grand plans, the clinic never expanded beyond this. Alice Hamilton attempted to use a model of revolutionary service to bridge race and class differences and to bring women together around their health care needs, but it failed to find an adequate basis in community.

Those involved with Alice Hamilton wanted to build a clinic that would serve the “women’s community” in Chicago based on the examples of community clinics run by the Black Panthers and Young Lords Organization. Based on the collaborative work of other community-based clinics, Alice Hamilton planned to make reciprocal referrals with Benito Juarez Free Clinic, a community health clinic in the Pilsen neighborhood run by community members involved in the Chicano movement. The women of Alice Hamilton hoped to build community ties to Black Panther and Chicano movement clinics to solidify their basis as the hub of a “women’s community”. The “women’s community” envisioned by Alice Hamilton was meant to encapsulate the race and class diversity of Chicago. In order to accomplish this, planning began to situate the clinic in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, a racially diverse but

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36 Work Project Report: Alice Hamilton Women's Health Center, CWLU Records, Box 13, Folder 10 CHS. Alice Hamilton was named after a woman of the same name, a Progressive-era social reformer involved in medicine who worked at Hull House. The women of the CWLU describe Alice Hamilton as a fitting name because of her recent death at the age of 101 and because “she was, for all practical purposes, the founder of industrial medicine, and a dedicated champion of women’s rights. We are sure she would have approved our goals.” Outreach letter from the Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, CWLU Records, Box 13, Folder 10, CHS.

37 CWLU News, January 15 1970, p. 5, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL; Elaine Wessel, letter to Jenny Knauss, September 15, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 2, NUL.

38 CWLU News, March 1 1971, p. 7, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS.


40 Minutes, Steering Committee meeting, January 22, 1970, CWLU Records, Box 4, Folder 14, CHS; Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, Proposal for a Women’s Medical Center, CWLU Records, Box 13, Folder 10, CHS.
geographically segregated area Southwest Chicago, with its population of women largely absent from the CWLU. Alice Hamilton would, “give women in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, who are mainly white and middle-class, an opportunity to get together with out Black, brown, and working class white sisters to attack some of our common problems as women” They hoped to give community women control over the clinic by letting them decide which services would be offering training in leadership roles. This newly created women’s community would then fight for their collective empowerment.

However, basing women’s community in shared sisterhood ultimately focused on the organizational needs of the CWLU rather than the specific needs of women in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. When women in Alice Hamilton enthusiastically claimed that “…our power is the people’s power!!!” they failed to interrogate who “the people” were and how their position as middle-class white women coming into the Back of the Yards community, alienated women from their clinic. This alienation is visible in statistics collected by Alice Hamilton about the women who used their clinic. While they hoped to serve women of different races and classes to present them with a vision of women’s empowerment, the clinic’s records indicate that this did not happen. They reported, “most” of the patients are white although “a few” were Black or Latina. A model of community building based on sisterhood was not adequate to make their services desirable to women of color living in the neighborhood. Reflecting a number of years

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41 According to the 1970 census, the clinic sat at the intersection of a number of census tracts ranging from one which was 99% white, to another which was 97% Black. There were small numbers of “Spanish origin” people living in the area as well. Race, 1970. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed March 25 2015); Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 2, NUL; Work Project Report: Alice Hamilton Women's Health Center, CWLU Records, Box 13, Folder 10, CHS.
42 CWLU News, March 22 1970, p. 8 Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL.
43 Free Abortion Is Every Woman’s Right, p. 6, CWLU Records, Box 23 Folder 1, CHS.
44 The Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, A Debate Within the CWLU About the Value of Service Programs, p. 2, CWLU Records, Box 13, Folder 10, CHS.
45 Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, p.1, Knauss Collection Box 4, Folder 2, NUL. The only data available is their self-reported assessment which is not particularly empirical, however no other recorded data exists.
later on the clinic, member Elaine Wessel hypothesized that “part of the problem was trying to create one single women’s clinic to serve the ‘women’s community’ as the other free clinics served the Black or Latin or white working-class community…But that analysis failed to see the lack of a ‘women’s community.’”46 In basing the clinic off of an understanding of the shared oppression of women in the medical system, the women of Alice Hamilton failed to recognize the ways that the oppression of women in the medical system, was mediated by their race and class positions, fracturing any sense of race-less “women’s community.”

Moreover their lack of neighborhood affiliation or medical credential made the practical work of finding funding for the clinic impossible.47 Women from Alice Hamilton explained that, “male directors have trouble understanding why women need a separate health center of their own, and because C.W.L.U. is neither a geographical community organization nor a group of health professionals.”48 The project ended without ever opening a permanent location. After the failure of Alice Hamilton and the bust of Jane, women in the CWLU began to seriously consider the ways that revolutionary service alone might not be an adequate model for revolution and drew on the SWP’s emphasis on mass base in their own articulation of socialist feminism. They took seriously criticism from a contingent of the CWLU involved in Left sectarian organizations similar to the SWP. These critiques came in the form of an often-articulated tension in the CWLU between reform work and revolution.

_We will provide you with services, why don’t you join our movement? This is exactly the opposite of what we want to do. We want to convince women of their own power and ability, of their being able to accomplish things through collective struggle…[the Center] is a new version of the traditional womanly tasks: philanthropy…_49

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46 Elaine Wessel, letter to Jenny Knauss, September 15, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 2, NUL
47 Steering Committee meeting, May 28, 1970, CWLU Records, Box 4, Folder 14, CHS.
48 Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, p.1, Knauss Collection Box 4, Folder 2, NUL.
49 The Alice Hamilton Women’s Health Center, A Debate Within the CWLU About the Value of Service Programs, p. 1, CWLU Records, Box 13, Folder 10, CHS.
They identified that the service model was in some ways used for proselytizing about women’s liberation and referred to this method as utilizing women as ‘political conquests.’ As we see in the next chapter, the CWLU returned to an analysis of its own politics and the theory behind it.

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50 CWLU News, May 1 1970, p. 6, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL.
Building a Mass Base, Defining a Socialist Feminism: Divergent Paths in the CWLU

The CWLU had to define themselves as they went; there was no template for how to be a socialist feminist organization. Traditional Marxist thought identified capitalism as the central oppression from which all other oppression stemmed; if there were a socialist revolution, women’s oppression would disappear because sexism was a symptom of capitalism.¹ Historically, many socialist organizations did not focus on the oppression of women, and many contemporary groups thought that feminism was a distraction from class-based struggle.² The CWLU’s socialism accepted Marx’s vision of class-based revolution that would overthrow capitalist society. Their feminism identified what they understood as the common oppression of women on the basis of their sex. The work of the organization, then, was to join these two approaches into a cohesive whole. While the women of the CWLU founded the organization on principles of anti-capitalism, it was not until 1972 that they began to define themselves using the label of socialist feminism.

As the members of the CWLU began to work out the theoretical basis of their organization, they drew from British socialist feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell. Writing in 1966, Mitchell argued for a more complex analysis of women’s class oppression that incorporated more than just their relation to the means of production. Mitchell’s major theoretical contribution was the introduction of four structures that shaped women’s place in society: production, reproduction, sex, and the socialization of children which defined women’s class position based

¹ Engels thought that the oppression of women was based in their physical weakness in relation to men and would be improved by technological advances that ameliorated this difference. Juliet Mitchell, “Women: The Longest Revolution,” New Left Review, 40 (December, 1966), 5. The terms Marxism, socialism, and communism are confusing but ultimately related. Marxism is the political thought premised on the ideas of Karl Marx and other thinkers that followed him. Socialism is the political movement that arose out of Marxism, and communism is the specific vision of socialist revolution in which private property is not only regulated, but abolished all together. In the 1970s, many were people were alienated from communism as a label due to McCarthyism and associated totalitarian regimes even though many revolutionary socialists espoused similar ideologies.
both on their relationship to the traditional family structure and in relation to production.\(^3\) Many members of the CWLU read Mitchell’s work and hoped to translate the four structures into the basis of their program (Fig. 1). Mitchell’s model provided them with a way of formulating what socialist feminism might look like both in theory and in practice, evaluating its usefulness for the needs of real women.\(^4\)

Figure 1 Juliet Mitchell chart prepared for the 1972 CWLU Membership Conference. CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 9, CHS.

As women of the CWLU moved towards a clearer understanding of socialist feminism, they embraced direct action tactics as a way of putting their vision into practice. The goal of direct action organizing was to make realizable demands of institutions that held power to create


\(^{4}\) CWLU News, June 1972, p. 9 CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS.
changes that would directly affect women’s daily lives. This definition built on a long history of
direct action organizing in Chicago with which many of the women in the CWLU would have
been familiar.⁵ Importantly, this strategy prioritized a focus on both immediate needs and a larger
revolutionary goal. The CWLU believed they could use direct action to give “…people a sense
of their own power” through “…reforms that materially improve the conditions of peoples’
lives.”⁶ According to this model, “winning reforms” was a good thing because it taught people
that they had the power to make change. As this power grew, it would lead to mass-based
socialist revolution.⁷ Direct action was the strategy that the CWLU identified to put socialist
feminism into practice by focusing their program around the ways that women in Chicago felt
oppressed by sexism while working towards revolution. A chapter of the CWLU articulated this
in their 1972 pamphlet entitled, *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement*
which was circulated nationwide and became foundational for the creation of other socialist
feminist organizations.

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⁵ First employed by the International Workers of the World in 1909, direct action went on to be used by Saul
Alinsky when doing community organizing as part of the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Students for a


⁷ Ibid. This turn towards direct action happened in conversation with critiques the CWLU received the SWP who
labeled certain kinds of activities as “reformist” and therefore inherently problematic. For example, the childcare
workgroup of the CWLU pressured city officials into revising licensing restrictions of daycare facilities which
allowed for more daycare centers around the city to serve women. This reform met the needs of women who could
not afford or find adequate childcare in the current system. However it simultaneously “moved women” towards a
revolutionary vision of free, 24-hour, community-controlled daycare. Hyde Park Chapter of the Chicago Women’s
In their health organizing, women of the CWLU put their politics into practice by attempting to create a program that would meet the needs of working-class women and women of color in order to build a revolutionary movement comprised of all women. To do this, they relied on the radical feminist concept of sisterhood in service of trying to create a mass base of women. The idea of sisterhood was premised on a commonality felt based on shared oppression on the basis of sex, and in the case of the health programs, shared biology. While sisterhood allowed women to organize around their common oppression, it ignored vital differences in identity that affected women’s experience in the healthcare system, namely race and class.\(^8\) The concept of mass base came out of socialist organizing and emphasized the need for support from the people the program wished to serve. Women of the CWLU hoped to organize women on the basis of their shared sisterhood into a mass base that would be part of a movement to change the health system. In order to put these concepts into practice, the health programs needed to expand their influence beyond the homogenous membership of the CWLU. Consistently, the CWLU realized and understood the limitations of having an overwhelmingly white middle-class membership, but prior to this moment, had not thought of a way to expand it.\(^9\) In 1972, their strategy became organizing in Chicago neighborhoods in which working class women and women of color lived.\(^10\) They hoped socialist feminism would enable them to build a multi-racial cross-class revolutionary group of women that could challenge health institutions in Chicago.

While they hoped to build an empowering revolutionary movement, the outreach of the CWLU resulted in a proselytizing approach that put the organizational needs of the CWLU

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\(^8\) Gloria Steinem defines sisterhood for the first time in Ms. Magazine in 1972 as “deep personal connections of women…[which] often ignore barriers of age, economics, worldly experience, race, culture—all the barriers that, in male or mixed society, had seemed so difficult to cross.” Quoted in Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, 15.

\(^9\) CWLU News, Oct 15, 1970, p. 1, Knauss Collection, Box 9, Folder 1, NUL; CWLU News, Late November 1971, p. 4, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS; CWLU News, December 15, 1971, p. 2-3, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 4, CHS. All these mark the various moments when the CWLU met to discuss problems with their homogenous membership.

\(^10\) A Proposal For Community Work, p. 9, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 9, CHS.
above those of other women. The CWLU believed that women’s common oppression would bring them together in feminist politics; all that was necessary was to “raise the consciousness” of women about their own oppression to bring them together.\footnote{Abortion Task Force, p. 1, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 9, NUL.} Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement articulated a need to “develop ways to transform women's currently felt interests in line with our vision. Real sisterhood changes concern from individual needs to concern for one’s group, organizational and class needs.”\footnote{Heather Booth, Day Creamer, Susan Davis, Deb Dobbin, Robin Kaufman, Toby Klass, Hyde Park Chapter of the CWLU, Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement, p. 10, 1972, CWLU Records, Box 27, Folder 13, CHS, (emphasis added).} According to this strategy, developing sisterhood and political consciousness would convince women that their needs would be met by the politics of the CWLU. The paper went on to “propose that the CWLU initiate the formation of four community “outposts,” or centers, of the Union in communities around the city.”\footnote{A Proposal For Community Work, p. 9, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 9, CHS.} This strategy, that intended to bring women together according to their common oppression, failed to interrogate the ways that women’s differences might require alternate political approaches than the one favored by the CWLU.

Moreover, still missing from their analysis in the Socialist Feminism paper was an analysis of race. Realizing this, members of the CWLU tried to remedy their lack of theoretical focus on race by writing an “insert” to the Socialist Feminism paper. The insert focused on why addressing race was necessary as part of a socialist feminist vision; however, it lacked a structural analysis that examined the ways that racism functioned on an institutional level, and the ways that women of the CWLU themselves might be complicit in it.\footnote{CWLU News, Early December 1972, p. 7-9, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 5, CHS.} Lacking the conceptual tools to think about race as a separate structural system, women of the CWLU...
emphasized the need to overcome racism as a tool to build a mass base.\footnote{These issues are reflected in the language choices of women in the CWLU. By understanding women of color as an oppressed ‘class’ of women, they articulate two groups: “women of color” (or more narrowly in their terminology, Black and Latin women), and “working-class women” (presumably white). The needs of these two groups are often conflated in a generalized understanding of outreach to a ‘mass base.’} They attempted to use the theoretical tools of Marxist theory to address U.S. racism and in doing so, conflated race and class oppression.

While the central organization grappled with articulating their socialist feminist theory, the health programs put these ideas into practice. Both the Abortion Task Fore (ATF) and the Health Evaluation and Referral Service (HERS) that was its offshoot, functioned as integral parts of the organization as they participated in the development of socialist feminist theory and navigated putting it into practice. The ATF was founded out of the Abortion Defense Fund after the charge against Jane members were dropped, and represented a continuation of some of the spirit of Jane’s work. The ATF and HERS struggled to implement direct action organizing in order to broaden the reach of the CWLU as an organization and to demand reforms of the medical system that so intimately controlled women’s lives.

Although abortion formally became legal through the second trimester after the ruling in \textit{Roe v. Wade} in January 1973, in Chicago, abortions were expensive and hard to find making their legalization virtually meaningless for many women in the city. The Abortion Task Force was founded to address this issue.\footnote{Many Chicago Women with Healthright “A View From the Loop: The Women’s Health Movement in Chicago,” \textit{Healthright}, late 1970s, CWLU Herstory Project, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.cwluherstory.org/a-view-from-the-loop.html.} A study conducted by the ATF found that approximately 200 abortions were being performed each week in Chicago, while referral services were receiving upwards of 400 calls a week. Clearly, “hospitals in the Chicago area…[were]…not meeting the demand of the community.”\footnote{Hospital Fact Sheet, p. 1, Knauss Collection, Box 6, Folder 1, NUL.} Further, the abortions that were being provided were expensive (all were more expensive than the average price paid by women who got abortions}
through Jane). Women in the CWLU had long advocated for “free abortion on demand,” and rather than bringing them closer to this goal, abortion’s legalization produced new challenges.\textsuperscript{18}

The ATF attempted to increase the availability and accessibility of abortion in Chicago by focusing on three smaller goals around which they hoped to effect change. The first goal was to make abortion available through the second trimester. After conducting research they found no hospitals “…willing to perform abortion beyond the 10\textsuperscript{th} week…”\textsuperscript{19} Through the pressure of the ATF Cook County hospital, the largest abortion provider, finally agreed to perform two second trimester abortions per week.\textsuperscript{20} Second, they worked to overturn a regulation requiring a 24-hour waiting period between the application and when an abortion procedure could be performed.\textsuperscript{21} ATF identified these wait times as not medically or “psychologically necessary,” and succeeded in having them struck down after multiple meetings with the Board of Health.\textsuperscript{22} Finally, they focused on the financial accessibility of abortion by working to get coverage by insurance and Medicaid funds.\textsuperscript{23} The ATF employed the direct action strategy of “winning reforms” in an attempt to gain power for women over abortion providers and met with small but important successes.

ATF was both interested in winning reforms for women across the city, and also doing outreach work to grow the base and influence of the Union itself. As representatives of the CWLU they focused on: “1) building the Union’s membership [and] 2) building the power and

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid; Hyde Park Chapter of the CWLU, \textit{Socialist Feminism}, CWLU Records, CHS.
\textsuperscript{19} Rather, these hospitals referred people to New York for abortions, further limiting their accessibility. Jenny Rohrer, Robin Kaufman, Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Mocks Hospital press release, p. 1, March 8, 1973, CWLU Records, Box 23, Folder 2, CHS.
\textsuperscript{20} Many Chicago Women with Healthright, “A View from the Loop,” CWU Herstory Project.
\textsuperscript{22} Many Chicago Women with Healthright, “A View from the Loop,” CWU Herstory Project; Abortion Task Force: Who We Are, What’s Happening With Legislation,” 5, \textit{Womankind}, CHS.
relevance of the Union and the women's movement.”

In contrast, their programmatic goal focused on making changes in order to gain women power over the medical institution. “Our ultimate goals are that women have control over their own bodies and that to this end major transformations in the health system and in the society which created it be brought about. Within this vision, we seek good health service which is free or low cost, which meets our needs, and in which we have maximum control and information.”

This articulated split in their goals speaks to the tension between organizing women around their daily needs, and creating the mass base necessary to the Union’s vision of socialist feminism. This tension became evident in the ATF’s attempts to organize women of color.

There were limits to the efficacy of organizing women of color around abortion at all. This became clear to women in the ATF as they attempted to use direct action organizing in communities of color. When they first started, “the direct action approach taken initially by the Task Force stressed mass organizing—‘all women are our constituency.’” In practice however, they realized that it was not possible to organize “all women” around issues of abortion accessibility. When organizing in communities of color, women were less willing to work with the ATF because of recent experiences with the welfare department in which women had been pressured to have abortions as part of a “population control scheme.” After working on the issue for a few months the ATF reported, “we see our constituency as being primarily young

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24 Program Meeting Planning Committee, Outreach Packet on Program, p. 2, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 6, CHS.
26 Abortion Task Force, p. 2, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 9, NUL.
27 The details of this event are lacking because rather than investigate these events, the ATF simply left to organize in other neighborhoods. Abortion Task Force, Reports on Communities, p.2, Knauss Collection, Box 6, Folder 1, NUL.
working women like ourselves.” Rather than listening to the concerns of women of color, the ATF moved on to organize in different constituencies.

Direct action organizing, as the CWLU had theorized it, ultimately did not provide the ATF with the tools to confront the ways racism limited women’s access to abortions differently from class oppression. They saw it as their goal initially “to insure that women of all economic levels and races have access to safe, low cost abortions.” However, by approaching abortion simply from the perspective of accessibility, they overlooked the ways that women of color’s struggles for reproductive autonomy combatted the dual challenges of access to abortion and freedom from sterilization abuse. For example, the ATF identified the Midwest Population Center as the best abortion provider in the city due to their sliding scale fees and their attitude towards women, calling their counseling “wonderful and caring.” This Center however had ties to Zero Population Growth, an organization that supported forcible sterilization as a means of population control, often practiced on women of color. In recommending this clinic highly to women looking for abortion, the ATF exhibited their ignorance of the ways that race shaped women’s experiences of reproductive autonomy and revealed the limits of their framework for abortion organizing.

One contingent of the ATF, recognizing the limitations of their strategy for organizing around abortion, sought to broaden the scope of their work to include women’s health more generally in the hopes of increasing their relevance to all women. However, this analysis did not engage with, or seek to remedy the ways that their strategy fundamentally lacked a racial

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28 Program Meeting Planning Committee, Outreach Packet on Program, p. 2, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 6, CHS. Emphasis added.
29 Letter to the Editor from Jenny Rohrer and Margaret Schmid, January 23, 1973, CWLU Records, Box 23, Folder 3, CHS.
30 CWLU News, August 1973, p. 5-7, CWLU Records Box 19, Folder 6, CHS.
31 While it is unclear whether or not sterilization abuse was happening in the Center at this time, the affiliation to a population control organization likely would have made it an unwelcoming place for women of color. Kluchin, Fit To Be Tied, 34, 65.
analysis. In reflecting on the ATF two years later, members explained, “many in the ATF did not really want to organize around abortion but rather around women's health services, especially because abortion was such a difficult issue around which to organize support in many black, Latino and white communities.”32 While one group wanted to continue working on the abortion issue to organize women who were middle-class, white working-class, and, surprisingly, in white Catholic communities, other women in the group, “had problems around the contradictions that this issue represented because abortion was not a mass issue.”33 Using socialist language, women from the ATF shifted into broader health organizing in the hopes of finding the issue that would better fit the needs of all women rather than interrogating how they could address the concerns women of color had about their existing reproductive rights agenda.

The Health Evaluation and Referral Service (HERS) grew from the concerns of women in the ATF and broadened the focus of their organizing to health more generally. HERS’ major undertaking was the creation of a 24-hour phone line that provided referrals to both doctors and abortion providers for women around the city. HERS attempted to combine service and direct action strategies by leveraging their referral line to change the medical institution by “listing only a few good clinics.” They hoped to then “develop enough referral clout to force clinics to provide higher quality services, lower prices, and sliding scale payment systems.”34 However, their resources were too limited and their constituency never broad enough for their referrals to carry this kind of weight. While they aimed to make direct action tactics a regular part of their programming, they did not have the membership or resources to both consistently maintain their

32 Leatrice Hauptman , Evaluation of the Abortion Task Force, p.1, December 1975, CWLU Records, Box 12, Folder 1, CHS.
33 Ibid. Perhaps the interest in organizing in white Catholic communities stemmed from the large number of Catholic women who made use of Jane’s services.
34 Mim Desmond, Health Evaluation and Referral Service of the CWLU (HERS)—“a not for profit volunteer patient advocate organization of and for women,” p.1, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 22, NUL.
phone line and do community-based organizing. Prioritizing the importance of the phone line, HERS became an exclusively service-providing program.

The work of HERS provided a valuable service to working-class women and women of color in Chicago; however, in focusing exclusively on the phone line, they lost the more revolutionary grounding of direct action work. Members of HERS reported the success of the phone line saying, “Women who call us are of all different races and classes. We get a lot of calls from poor women, older women, black women, young women.” Their phone line provided a valuable service that was more easily accessible to women in Chicago than the work of the ATF, but was not coupled with action that challenged the existing medical system. The ATF implemented the theory from the *Socialist Feminism* paper directly and in recognizing its limitations, the women of HERS moved farther from a basis in socialist feminist theory and from revolutionary ideology.

Tension arose between HERS and the central organization of the CWLU around the disconnect between socialist feminist theory and the needs of the women HERS reached through their phone service. In fact, HERS was relatively ambivalent about their continued membership as part of the Union after some time. “We don’t talk about being revolutionary. Or communist or socialist, although some of us individually would define ourselves with these words…we have a hard time relating to Steering Committee because: most of the SC report is too boring or irrelevant to women who…haven’t been involved in left politics before.” Members of HERS felt that they had reached the limit of socialist feminist theory. They were working to meet the needs of women in Chicago, but were drifting away from the revolutionary

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35 HERS’ Answers to the Prison Project Questions, p.2, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 22, NUL.
36 Ibid, 3.
37 Ibid, 2.
basis of the CWLU. While women in the central organization prioritized direct action organizing as the basis of a revolutionary socialist feminism, women in HERS were finding service to be the way to reach women across differences of race and class.

Meanwhile, as the health programs struggled to put into practice a strategic vision of socialist feminism, the meaning of revolutionary politics and identity was being contested in the central organization. While women in HERS and the ATF were contesting organizing strategies, the central organization was preoccupied with another assault on the revolutionary nature of their organization. Lesbians within the CWLU called for an acknowledgement and incorporation of their identity as a part of the socialist feminist politics of the organization. The organization responded by assenting to these demands in the form of a new political principle which read:

“We will struggle for the liberation of women and against sexism in all sections of society. Included in the struggle against sexism is the struggle for the rights of sexual self-determination for all people and for the liberation of all homosexuals, especially lesbians” With the adoption of the “lesbian principle” the CWLU supported lesbian identity as part of revolutionary socialist feminism in theory. However, they did not necessarily do so in practice. Despite the adoption of the principle, the Steering Committee decided not to pursue any lesbian-oriented programming in the organization out of a fear that publicly embracing lesbian identity would complicate the work of building a mass base. The organization was at an impasse; they theoretically supported lesbians but could not put that support into practice in their programs.

38 Steering Committee Minutes, September 5, 1974, p 3, CWLU Records, Box 5, Folder 3, CHS.
39 CWLU News, Early December 1972, p. 3, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 5, CHS.
40 CWLU News, November 1972, p. 26, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 5, CHS.
41 Central to understanding the tension between lesbians and heterosexual women in the CWLU, is an understanding of the political identity of lesbian vanguardism. Lesbian vanguardists believed that in order to end women’s oppression, it was necessary to reject men both politically and socially. Lesbianism was an embodiment of the total rejection of men and was therefore the most revolutionary lifestyle. For many women however, this kind of separatism was alienating, not only to men who might be potential allies, but also to many women who did not wish
In late 1974 and early 1975 the contradiction between theoretical and practical support came to a head when the CWLU was attacked on the basis of their support for lesbians. Members of the Revolutionary Union (RU), an ultra-left sectarian communist group, became a vocal contingent of the membership at this time and espoused an anti-lesbian ideology. The RU was a group that understood class as the primary oppression, and viewed any focus on other oppression as divisive and therefore counter-revolutionary.\(^{42}\) In line with this thinking, they believed that “homosexuality is an ideology of the petty bourgeoisie, and must be clearly distinguished from proletarian ideology.”\(^{43}\) As opposed to collective class struggle, “homosexuality” was understood as an individual solution to the problems of capitalism that detracted from class struggle. Instead, they thought that monogamous heterosexual relationships were the best representation of revolutionary communist political because they was not alienating to “the proletariat” and allowed people to be fully immersed in the masses.\(^{44}\)

When the RU attacked the CWLU as a counterrevolutionary organization, the CWLU was forced to articulate a defense of lesbianism that was inherently revolutionary. What began as a response to accusations by the RU soon became a conversation about anti-lesbian attitudes more generally. Not all women in the CWLU were quick to condemn the RU’s position and lesbians in the organization, angered by the lack of response to what they perceived as a direct attack, called for a purge of all members sympathetic to the RU. Forced to choose whether to support lesbians in the organization, or appear aligned with the RU’s rhetoric, the Steering Committee voted for the formal expulsion of all members associated with the RU on the basis of


\(^{43}\) Special Newsletter, December 1974, p.4, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 7, CHS.

\(^{44}\) Ibid, 3-5.
lack of adherence to the political principles, specifically the lesbian principle.\textsuperscript{45} The expulsion of the RU signaled the first time that the CWLU showed support for lesbians not just in theory, but in practice.

The purge of RU members represented a new understanding of the place of lesbians within the CWLU. Rather than being a divisive faction, they were a core community with sway over the direction of the organization. The decision to support lesbians within the organization became the impetus for a new focus on lesbian issues in programming. This programming, based on the needs of the white middle-class lesbians of the CWLU, focused on depoliticized outreach to women (especially lesbians) in Chicago and failed to engage substantively with issues of race and class. Women in Blazing Star, the CWLU’s lesbian outreach program described their approach as being “low-key around race, class, imperialism, sexism, and how these things relate to lesbian oppression. We feel that our first priority is to win recognition and trust in the lesbian community.”\textsuperscript{46} The focus on lesbian outreach in the central organization prioritized lesbian community over explicitly revolutionary programming and failed to speak to the oppression women felt based on their race, class, and even gender. Rather than adapting their organizing strategy based on the lessons learned on the ground in HERS and the ATF, the central organization was working to expand that theory to accommodate the needs of their lesbian members. This work was largely irrelevant to those in the health programs whose focus on reproductive health based in biological commonality largely centered the experiences of straight women. The RU conflict signaled a breakdown of the co-creation of theory between the central organization and the health programming and marked their continuing alienation from one another.

\textsuperscript{45} Steering Committee notes, February 27 1975, p. 2-3, CWLU Records, Box 5 Folder 3, CHS.
\textsuperscript{46} CWLU News, December 1975, p. 7, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 8, CHS.
The Limits of Theory, the Possibilities of Practice: The Dissolution of the CWLU

In July 1975, 1800 women from across the United States gathered in Yellow Springs Ohio to “examine major questions of theory, strategy, and practice of the women’s movement,” this was the first Socialist Feminist Conference. While many socialist feminist organizations had been working in isolation, the conference brought groups together in the hopes of settling on a source of political unity and building an interconnected unified national movement.¹ However as the conference made clear, many women who were united under the banner of socialist feminism had irreconcilable differences. Some women thought it was necessary to center their work on a primary contradiction; one contingent understood this primary contradiction as class while another understood it as gender. Still others rejected this model in favor of one that emphasized “interconnected systems of oppression.”²

One of the most pressing priorities at the conference was building a multi-racial movement.³ A caucus of Third World women formed and demanded that socialist feminists as a whole return to a study of traditional Marxist theory in order to grow the multi-racial character of the movement.⁴ Their impact was clear when the CWLU’s own conference report emphasized “Study is the basis for summing up practice, so we can move forward strategically and ideologically...study is essential.”⁵ Yet even as organizers supported this initiative, they took few

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³ The number of events at the conference addressing the need for a multi-racial socialist feminist movement include panels on: “Theoretical analysis of race and capitalism; the particular oppression of Third World women; feminism and the Third World movement; Relationships between white and Third World women; building a multi-national movement.” CWLU News, April 1975, p. 3, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 8, CHS; CWLU News, September 1975, p. 9, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 8, CHS.
⁴ CWLU News, August 1975, p. 6, CWLU Records, Box 19 Folder 8, CHS.
⁵ CWLU News, September 1975, p. 9, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 8, CHS.
steps to analyze the underlying cause of the movement’s whiteness, nor did they interrogate the adequacy of Marxism for resolving that issue.

This chapter examines the aftermath of the conference, particularly the period between July 1975 and the CWLU’s dissolution in early 1977. While the central organization turned towards a renewed study of theory in the hopes of building a multi-racial cross-class organization, the health programs enacted a very different understanding of how to build a diverse movement: community building. The health programs found that traditional Marxist theory was not an adequate tool to think about race and class as they engaged with real women in their communities. This chapter charts the growing distance between the revolutionary theory being developed and honed in the central organization, and the revolutionary practice of the health organizations based in an ethic of community building. This distance became so great that while all four major health projects detailed in this chapter were founded as workgroups of the CWLU they became entirely autonomous and sent no representatives to the Steering Committee where theory discussions dominated the inner workings of the organization. Ultimately, the factional divisions between theoretical camps in the central organization eclipsed the mission of the CWLU, leading to its dissolution.

In July 1975, the CWLU had four years of health program efforts to look back on and evaluate. As they did so, they were able to reflect on the limitations of both their service and direct action organizing. Two trends emerged in the direction of health programming during this period: the Emma Goldman Women’s Health Center and the Chicago Women’s Health Center followed in the tradition of Jane and Alice Hamilton by using the clinic as a model of revolutionary service. The second trend, represented by the Bilingual Health Project and the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse focused on coalition work with Latina women aimed to
meet the needs of women in Latinx communities.⁶ These four health initiatives experimented with models of organizing that expanded the CWLU’s initial categories of service and direct action. Emma Goldman engaged in direct service and education (fully collective) while the CWHC transitioned to direct service and education (with professionals). Meanwhile the Bilingual Health Project and CESA used a model comprised of research, education and advocacy. All sought to move beyond single-strategy models in order to become “rooted in a community” and better engage with the experiences and needs of the women they sought to organize.⁷

The Emma Goldman Women’s Health Center opened in January 1974 and continued the CWLU’s tradition of revolutionary service by applying the collective self-help ethic of Jane to the structure of a women’s clinic.⁸ Emma also followed in the footsteps of the Alice Hamilton clinic hoping to offer to women in the community accessible preventative medical services including: “pregnancy testing, VD screening, pap smears, self-help clinics, abortion counseling, blood tests, and more.”⁹ Located in the overwhelmingly white working-class Chicago neighborhood Roger’s Park, they likely served mostly women in this demographic.¹⁰ What made them “revolutionary” was their commitment “as women to learn skills previously

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⁶ “Spanish is a gendered language, and the traditional name for Spanish speaking Latin Americans and their descendants in the U.S. (Latino) is gendered male. The use of the word Latinx (pronounced La-teen-ecks) is an attempt to encompass people of all genders, including non-binary gender identities, without subordinating them to a male default.” Pablo Cerdera, “Healing and Belonging: Community Based Art and Community Formation in West Oakland,”(undergraduate honors thesis, Oberlin College, 2015), 3.


⁸ CWLU News, January 1974, p. 2, CWLU Records, Box 19, Folder 7, CHS.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ According to Census data from 1970, this neighborhood was, 95% white, 1% Black, and 4% “Spanish origin or descent”. While the average family income in Chicago was $13,168, the average family income in Roger’s Park was $11,616. Race, 1970. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed March 25 2015); Income, 1970. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed March 25 2015).
monopolized by the professional medical establishment.”¹¹ Rather than employ doctors, Emma Goldman implemented an educational model in which women shared knowledge they already had about their bodies to empower each other.¹² This non-professional model relied on presentations from staff members of the Health Center about women’s bodies before providing medical services.¹³ They hoped the incorporation of education in their model would move them beyond the pitfalls of an exclusively service-based approach.

Emma Goldman’s collective model centered on a non-hierarchical alternative approach to medical provision in which all women involved in the clinic had an equal say in its operation. Due to their alternative model, funding was not easily obtainable and the clinic had to rely on large donations to stay afloat; women who staffed the clinic did so on a volunteer basis.¹⁴ At the same time, because of their commitment to the free-clinic model, services were available according to a “pay as you are able” system.¹⁵ The clinic’s lack of self-sustaining funding resulted in a tension between making services accessible to working-class women in Rogers Park and creating opportunities for community women to access positions of paid employment within the clinic.

Further, Emma Goldman’s focus on education limited the center’s efficacy as a medical service provider, thus limiting their relevance to the needs of women in the community. Education was mandatory for women receiving services at the clinic. As a press release explained, “women arrive together and participate in discussion and skill-sharing before receiving services.”¹⁶ For women who lacked easy access to medical care, mandatory education

¹¹ Press Release…A Note to Our Friends, p. 2, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 16, NUL.
¹² Ibid, 1.
¹³ Emma Goldman Lives!, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 16, NUL.
¹⁴ Handwritten document on Emma Goldman, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 16, NUL.
¹⁵ Press Release…A Note to Our Friends, p. 2, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 16, NUL.
¹⁶ Emma Goldman Lives!, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 16, NUL.
about their bodies may not have been what they sought from a free neighborhood clinic.\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, the time spent on education took away from the resources allocated to care. Emma’s staff recognized that “the demand for medical services during the times that Emma’s is open has always made it difficult to provide information and discuss health problems with individual women.”\textsuperscript{18} The lack of professional doctors at the clinic coupled with the focus on self-help style limited the medical care available at the clinic and created barriers to “rootedness in community.”

The limitations in Emma Goldman’s model led to frustration on the part of some of the women in the collective; these women broke away to found the Chicago Women’s Health Center (CWHC) which opened on October 1, 1975.\textsuperscript{19} While the CWHC still identified as a collective women’s self-help clinic, they made the substantive change of employing doctors in their clinic in an effort to prioritize formalized medical care to better meet the needs of community women. Women in the CWHC believed they could embrace collective structure and provide women with needed medical care by adding doctors to their staff “without developing hierarchies or losing commitment to alternatives to the traditional medical model.”\textsuperscript{20} The CWHC built on the model of Emma Goldman by recognizing the barriers to community participation that their de-professionalized model created and seeking to create a new kind of clinic more situated in community.

\textsuperscript{17} While Emma highly recommended that women attend these group education sessions, they would also see women individually, but limited these visits to 7-10 women per day. Press Release…A Note to Our Friends, p. 1, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 16, NUL.

\textsuperscript{18} Handwritten document on Emma Goldman, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 16, NUL.

\textsuperscript{19} Emma Goldman Lives!, Knauss Collection, Box 4 Folder 16, NUL.

\textsuperscript{20} Wendy Kline, “Learning from the Uterus Out: Abortion and Women’s Health Activism In Chicago,” in \textit{Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women’s Health in the Second Wave}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 81. Quoted interview with Terri Kapsalis; Chicago Women’s Health Center (revised copy), Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 7, NUL.
Specifically, the CWHC sought to make changes to their clinic to better serve working class women and women of color. The CWHC relocated to a more racially diverse neighborhood in the hopes of situating themselves as a community free-clinic accessible to women of color. At its opening, staff members predicted that CWHC “will be the first women's clinic in actual operation in Chicago to be a community clinic accessible to black, Latin and working class women and their children. It will be in the racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood around Halstead and Armitage on the North Side.”21 The intersection of Halstead and Armitage, in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood, was a rapidly changing place. Lincoln Park had long been home to Puerto Rican and Black communities but it was rapidly undergoing “urban renewal” and many of the neighborhood’s previous residents were being evicted or priced out of their homes.22 In the late 1960s, Lincoln Park was the birthplace of the Young Lords Organization (YLO), a Puerto Rican nationalist group that advocated for the self-determination and empowerment of Puerto Rican people both in Chicago and in Puerto Rico.23 In fact, “an empty urban renewal lot on the corner of Armitage and Halsted Streets” understood as “the symbolic center of the YLO movement” may have been the very lot that the CWHC moved to in 1975.24 The decision to locate the CWHC in this location was likely informed by knowledge of the radical history of this place and grounded in a vision of community-based activism that they hoped to extend to the model of a women’s clinic.

21 Esther Moscow, Jenny Knauss, Summary of New Health Projects, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL.
22 The location of CWHC was at the intersection of a number of different census tracts. In 1970, two of these were more than 90% white; the third was 71% white, 24 % Black, and 27% of Spanish origin; and the fourth was 55% white, 43% Black, and 31% of Spanish origin. Average income ranged from $7,478 in those tracts home to predominantly people of color, to $13, 633 in the tracts home to predominantly white people. Race, 1970. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed March 25 2015); Income, 1970. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau; accessed March 25 2015); Lila Fernandez, Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 132-135.
23 For more on the Young Lords Organization and their activism in Lincoln Park, see Fernandez, “The Evolution of the Young Lords Organization: From Street Gang to Revolutionaries,” in Brown in the Windy City, 173-207.
24 Fernandez, Brown in the Windy City, 176-179. 188.
In their model of empowerment the CWHC’s alternative medical practice would provide opportunities for women who lived in Lincoln Park to become involved with the clinic. In contrast to Emma Goldman, women who opened the CWHC hoped to “support its workers financially, full or part-time, and provide a humane worker-controlled work-place for women, particularly from the neighborhood.”

In order to make this vision a reality, the CWHC moved away from the model of a free clinic by introducing a “flexible ‘suggested fee’ system for women using the center so that it may become self-supporting.”

While Emma relied on longstanding donors to maintain basic operations, the CWHC hoped to create a more sustainable model with a modest but reliable source of earned income that could in turn support women from the neighborhood in positions of authority. While documentation does not exist on the fate of the CWHC, their thoughtfulness as to the needs of working-class women and women of color in Lincoln Park suggests that they might have come closer to creating community-centered activism.

Both Emma Goldman Women’s Health Center and the Chicago Women’s Health Center used a self-help model of health care but came to different conclusions about how to enact community-based activism. Emma Goldman prioritized giving women education and providing space for discussion about services while CWHC prioritized access to medical services and employment by working-class women and women of color. Absent from both models was the emphasis on traditional Marxist thought that so fully captured the attention of the central organization during this period. Meanwhile, the Bilingual Health Project and the Committee to

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25 Esther Moscow, Jenny Knauss, Summary of New Health Projects, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL.
26 Ibid.
27 Unfortunately, there is no record of the women who were actually served at the CWHC. It is unknown whether neighborhood women became employed by or even utilized the services of the Center.
28 Emma Goldman closed its doors in 1986 while the CWHC survives to this day.
End Sterilization Abuse cultivated another model of community-based activism. Moving away from revolutionary service, these two health projects refined models of health activism based in research, referral, and advocacy.

At the outset, the women who formed the Bilingual Health Project reflected on the previous health organizing efforts of the CWLU and evaluated where they could address the gaps in health organizing in the city. They mused on:

The need to expand the HERS service to meet the needs of a broader range of women, particularly minority women…The HERS group alone could not do this, but a related group of organizers could expand the referral system, collect feedback on health facilities and through educationals help in the development of criteria for evaluating the health care delivered in each community.²⁹

HERS’ 24-hour phone line met with great success but they lacked the resources to continue engaging in advocacy work at the same time. Rather than seeing this as a limitation in the model of HERS, women who formed the Bilingual Health Project sought to engage in research and provide resources and advocacy to women to compliment the existing service work of HERS.³⁰

The Bilingual Health Project and the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) were both coalition-based projects that partnered with the organization Mujeres Latinas en Acción (MLEA). MLEA was formed “in response to the various unmet needs of Latin women in the Pilsen area of Chicago. Since then we have been an active advocacy and service organization”³¹

While MLEA focused on the needs of women specifically, many members were also involved in mixed-gender Chicano activism in the Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen.³² Women in MLEA

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²⁹ Esther Moscow, Jenny Knauss, Summary of New Health Projects, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ What is Latin Women in Action?, May 1978, p. 1, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 26, NUL.
³² I intentionally use the gendered term Chicano both to emphasize the male-dominated nature of these activist groups and also to respect the terminology used by the Chicano movement in the 1970s to describe itself. While the community they served was largely Chicana, the use of Latina in the name meant that they were open to the participation of Puerto Rican women as well. For more information on MLEA, see Fernandez, “The Limits of
responded to needs they saw among women in their own community and based their activist model on meeting these needs rather than on revolutionary theory.

Partnered with MLEA, the Bilingual Health Project aimed to have the priorities of their project defined directly by the needs of women in the community. In attempting to have the action of their project grow organically from the needs of the community, the women of the Bilingual Health Project hoped to support existing community activism.33 Despite these good intentions, according to some observers they “went into communities ‘like steamrollers’” and “didn’t know much about organizing around health care.”34 Although the Bilingual Health Project represented new possibilities for community collaboration and respect, the women involved in the project still grappled with de-centering their own political agendas.

By fall 1975, the Bilingual Health Project transformed into the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, deciding that sterilization was their priority for community-based activism. Two additional factors aided the creation of program on sterilization specifically. First, many women who attended the Socialist Feminist Conference, went to a workshop led by the New York Committee to End Sterilization Abuse and were inspired to create something similar in Chicago.35 Second, work in the Bilingual Health project had caused women to realize that “the commitment of the independent women's movement to the issue of forced sterilization has at best been rhetorical.”36 Committed from its start to the slogan of “free abortion on demand” accompanied by “no forced sterilization,” the CWLU had not yet undertaken concrete

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33 Bilingual Health Project meeting minutes, Sept. 8, 1975, p. 1-2, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL.
34 Steering Committee minutes, October 2, 1975, p. 2., CWLU Records, Box 5, Folder 3, CHS.
36 Esther Moscow, Jenny Knauss, Summary of New Health Projects, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL.
programming around sterilization abuse in Chicago. CESAs took up the research and advocacy model of activism set up by the Bilingual Health Project to address this need.

To begin their work, the women of CESAs first conducted research into the state of sterilization abuse in Chicago. They gathered data from the period of 1971-1972 and found that of 751 obstetric patients at a few private hospitals, 48 were sterilized. Of these, 45 were Black and three were white. The racial disparity in sterilizations in the city was undeniable. They also found that government money allocated for family planning included sterilization but not abortion or prenatal care. CESAs drew from a national report on the state of sterilization abuse which found that while stricter regulations on the use of sterilization had been put into place in 1974, many medical institutions did not adhere to them. The report found that in Illinois, hospitals were lax in observing regulations requiring a three day waiting period before sterilization procedures, often did not have proper consent forms, and did not tell welfare recipients that their benefits did not depend on their compliance to sterilization. While their findings showed sterilization affecting Black women more than Latina women, their partnership with MLEA shaped the specific community in which they were organizing.

After compiling their research findings, CESAs sought to educate women about their rights regarding sterilization. They printed a newsletter for dissemination to local women in English and Spanish in which they outlined the risks of sterilization as it was being practiced in Chicago and specified women's rights to refuse sterilization. They listed situations that constituted sterilization abuse including: when a doctor asked a woman to agree to sterilization when she was in pain; when women were threatened to be removed from welfare for not

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37 Paper on Sterilization, p. 1-3, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL.
38 Tom Littlewood, “Welfare Sterilization Rules Still Being Ignored Here,” Chicago Sun Times, August 20, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 5, NUL.
39 Minutes of the meeting held on Sterilization Abuse, p. 3, September 15, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 5, NUL.
complying to a doctor’s suggestion of sterilization; when doctors did not outline the risks of the procedure; and when adequate time was not given for the patient to make a decision. CESA’s education work also framed sterilization as a trans-national issue. They connected U.S. support for state-sanctioned sterilization programs in the “Third World” to the sterilization abuse of women of color in Chicago. Women in CESA hoped that by disseminating information about sterilization abuse to the community, they would empower women to advocate for themselves and engage in political action.

While CESA maintained the desire for their program to be community-led, they still struggled to engage community members in their work. One member noted that community members wanted education about family planning more generally, and did not turn out for CESA community meetings. CESA continued to search for ways of connecting their vision of revolutionary politics with the needs of community women, moving ever farther from concerns about correct Marxist theory, even as the CWLU central organization sought to develop theory as a basis for action. Yet the central CWLU’s emphasis on theory eventually led to its implosion. Differences over the role Marxist theory should play in building socialist feminist ideology drove conflict between women who emphasized study of traditional Marxist writings as the basis or program and those who thought program should stem from the needs of the women they wanted to serve.

The argument over theory played out in a lack of interest in elections for the leadership positions of the CWLU, when no one ran for any of the elected positions. In the wake of this

40 Committee to End Sterilization Abuse Newsletter, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 5, NUL.
42 Bilingual Health Project meeting minutes, Sept. 8, 1975, p. 4, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 4, NUL; Minutes of the meeting held on Sterilization Abuse, p. 2, September 15, 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 5, NUL.
43 Steering Committee Notes, February 12, 1976, p. 3, CWLU Records, Box 5, Folder 4, CHS.

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organizational crisis, three contingents put forward position papers on the future of the CWLU. Two of these groups, the Asian Women’s Group (AWG) and the “Two-Line” Group called for a return to the study of theory while the third position paper, written by the previous year’s Planning Committee, called for a renewed focus on organizing rather than theory.\footnote{Asian Women’s Group, p. 1, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS; Two Members of the CWLU, Two Lines in the Women’s Movement, p. 1, December 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL; Planning Committee Ideology, p. 2, January 19, 1976, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, NUL. The Planning Committee was the latest attempt to structure in democracy. It consisted of two rotating co-chairs of the organization as well as a member in charge of three areas vital to the operations of the CWLU: fundraising, media, and outreach. Together these five women were largely responsible for the leadership of the organization. The “Two-Line” group was called this by women from the Planning Committee because their position put forward the view that there were “two lines” in the women’s movement: one that served the bourgeois and one that served the proletariat.} The Asian Women’s Group was a chapter of the CWLU formed in mid-1975 just before the Socialist Feminist Conference. They were made up of East Asian American women active in the larger Asian American movement.\footnote{This is especially interesting because the CWLU has engaged with Asian American women in any of their documented programming, yet this group joined the organization. Asian Women’s Group, p. 1, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS.} The “Two-Line” group was made up of two women who had been active in the leadership of the CWLU in the past who were part of the same study group in preparation for the Socialist Feminist Conference.\footnote{Beth Blacksin and Vicki Cooper, the paper’s two authors had served as staff and co-char respectively between 1974 and 1975. Petition for Split, p. 7, March 14, 1976, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL.}

Prior to this point, the socialist feminism of the CWLU sought to define a revolutionary politics that was more than an additive relationship between class and gender; the AWG and “Two-Line” groups challenged this framework by calling for an orthodox reading of Marxist theory in which class was seen as the primary oppression and women's liberation would be achieved solely through socialist revolution. Women in the AWG and “Two-Line” groups believed that a class-based uprising of the proletariat was imminent and thought that anything that distracted from this primary goal was counterrevolutionary. The CWLU, with its focus on
the intertwined nature of class and gender oppression, was therefore identified as “bourgeois feminism” that stood in opposition to real revolutionary struggle.47

By invoking an orthodox Marxist view of class struggle, the AWG and “Two-Line” women put forward a de-raced and de-gendered vision of revolution that ignored the reality of working-class life in 1976. With the rise of deindustrialization and the decline of jobs in manufacturing, the proletariat in a traditional Marxist sense largely ceased to exist in the United States. Further, as the economy worsened towards the end of the 1970s, many white working-class people turned towards more conservative cultural politics rather than towards socialist revolution they blamed people of color, for their declining job prospects. The prospect for a mass-based uprising of the unified proletariat appeared unlikely at a time when the working-class became and more fractured.48

The AWG and “Two-Line” groups did not address the tension between theory-driven priorities and the call for a mass based organization. Both groups subscribed to the Maoist ideology of the “mass line” which dictated that “to build a women's movement that is truly revolutionary means to build a women's movement that is led by the working class and by working class women”49 However, they simultaneously critiqued the CWLU for basing their program on what women in Chicago told them they needed. Women in the AWG and “Two-

47 Asian Women’s Group, p. 1, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS. For more on the history of the term “bourgeois feminist,” and the conflicts between feminist and socialist women, see Marilyn Boxer, “Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept ‘Bourgeois Feminism.’”
49 Two Members of the CWLU, Two Lines in the Women’s Movement, p. 5, December 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL; Asian Women’s Group Monday Night Chapter, p. 3, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS. The “mass line” was an ideology that said that revolutionary organizations must be immersed in the “masses.” It built on the Marxist idea of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” meaning that the direction and program of the CWLU should come directly from the “masses.” Proletarian Revolutionaries of the Political Academy of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat is Dictatorship by the Masses,” Peking Review, Vol. 11, 44, (Nov. 1, 1968), 14-17.
“Two-Line” contingents believed that it was not “possible to develop a guiding theory and political line only by asking women what their needs are…rather…it is the role of good leadership to bring socialist consciousness to the workers and to the masses.”\(^{50}\) They advocated for working-class leadership, and did not question that they were the embodiment of that leadership.

The “Two-Line” and AWG positions both called for a return to the study of theory and a stronger basis in the proletariat; but they differed on their “revolutionary politics:” the AWG subscribed to a kind of dogmatic Marxism that centered class so thoroughly that they understood feminism itself as bourgeois. Further, the AWG was composed of women of color rather than middle-class white women, and situated itself within a larger context of global Third World Marxism. The AWG opened their statement by saying: “Fight for the democratic rights of working women! Smash feminism—build the working class leadership of the women's movement!”\(^{51}\) They also expressed an explicit stand against lesbian women as representing a personal solution to the class-based problem of capitalism.\(^{52}\)

Neither adequately addressed the complexity of race. The “Two-Lines” paper largely ignored race, while the AWG addressed the position of the CWLU as a majority white organization charging, “if…[the fight against racism]…is not taken up the CWLU can only remain a white organization with a token Third World Chapter.”\(^{53}\) The AWG cited Lenin’s pronouncement that “For different nations to live together in peace and freedom” there must be “Not even the slightest degree of oppression or the slightest injustice in respect of a national

\(^{50}\) Two Members of the CWLU, Two Lines in the Women’s Movement, p. 9-10, December 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL.

\(^{51}\) Asian Women’s Group Monday Night Chapter, p. 1, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS.

\(^{52}\) Ibid, 9. Their position on lesbians was reminiscent of that of the women associated with the RU (see previous chapter). This similarity helped the women on the Planning Committee to frame the AWG as subversives within the organization.

\(^{53}\) Asian Women’s Group, p. 6-7, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS.
minority.” Yet they offered few suggestions about how to operationalize this theory in late 20th-century Chicago.

In response the CWLU Planning Committee’s attempted to affirm a vision of revolutionary socialist feminism based in the needs of women. The Planning Committee paper revealed a deep-seated tension between, on one hand, the desire to build a multi-racial organization committed to overcoming the oppression of women, and on the other, those women of color in the organization who adversarially condemned the Planning Committee themselves. What resulted was a contradictory and fractured document that quoted Mao extensively to justify the revolutionary basis of the organization, and simultaneously rejected the turn towards theory advocated by the AWG and “Two-Line groups. As they attempted to articulate a realizable vision of mass based women’s activism they returned to the concept of “a ‘mini-CWLU’ in every ward of the city.”54 Faced with irreconcilable contradictions, the Planning Committee turned back to a proselytizing model of activism in which they dictated the needs and the structure of activism for women across the city.

The Planning Committee solved the tension between wanting a multi-racial movement, and rejecting the move towards theory by identifying the AWG and “Two-Line” groups as interlopers who had infiltrated “their” organization and needed to be removed. Rather than members with legitimately different opinions about the future of the organization, the Planning Committee framed the AWG and “Two-Line” groups as “part of a larger coordinated attack on the women's movement. In early 1976, women on the Planning Committee called for a “political split” between those who agreed with the AWG and “Two Line” perspective, and those who

54 Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Planning Committee Paper, p. 1-2, October 1975, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, NUL.
agreed with the Planning Committee, with the majority party constituting the CWLU. On March 18, the Steering Committee voted on the split, and all those agreeing with the AWG and “Two-Line” perspective were formally expelled from the organization.

While the immediate political struggle ended with the “political split,” the larger issues concerning the role of revolutionary theory in socialist feminism were not resolved. Reflecting on the events, one member remembers, “even though the bad bogeyman had been scared away or purged, the CWLU only one year later would vote to dissolve itself.” As the health programs were finding out, the role of revolutionary theory in most women’s lives was nonexistent. The recent turn towards theory had alienated many women from the central organization and the expulsion of a quarter of the membership did nothing to renew women’s confidence in the organization. A couple of women attempted to apply the Planning Committee’s understanding of revolutionary theory to a new Union-wide health project, but this plan relied on the Union as an integrating force to bring the disparate health projects together. The political conflict shattered the trust that many women had in one another, making it impossible for this project to get off the ground.

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55 Petition for Split, p. 3-4; 7, March 14, 1976, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL. 90 women constituting the contingent of the CWLU who sided with the central organization signed this petition for a vote to split the CWLU. A couple of the founding members of HERS and Emma Goldman are on the list, however most of the women in the health programs are absent from this petition and any vocal support of a position in this issue. This speaks to the fact that this theoretical and political debate is largely unrelated to the health program’s on-the-ground concerns.

56 CWLU letter to membership, March 19, 1976, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL. Statement to CWLU

57 Mary Ann Gilpatrick, CWLU History, p. 5. CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS.

58 Steering Committee Notes February 12 1976, p. 3, CWLU Records, Box 5, Folder 4, CHS.

59 Janet Migdow, Kathy Mallin, Jenny Knauss, Lauren Crawford, Sharon Mitchell, Health Strategy Proposal, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, NUL.
Conclusion

In the eyes of the women of the CWLU, the correct articulation of theory seemed to be the key to bridging differences among women to create a mass-based movement for revolution. But this hope turned out to be overly simplistic. Rather than allowing them to build a mass-based revolutionary movement, their focus on an exact and unified Marxist theory alienated them from the reality of many women's lives. Reflecting on the breakdown of socialist feminist groups across the country, a Massachusetts-based socialist feminist organization published an article in 1978 observing how, “Attempting to be more politically focused, socialist-feminist groupings lost touch with their roots in the mass women's movement…We shifted priorities away from meeting personal needs and tended to move farther and farther away from the language and concerns of most women.”\(^1\) As Steering Committee meetings became embroiled in arguments about particular tenets of Marxist theory, failure to interrogate the relevance of such debates for women outside their radical activist circles resulted in insular factional rivalries.\(^2\) Marxist theory ultimately became a framework that kept women of the CWLU, and other socialist feminist groups, focused on themselves.

In the context of the 1970s U.S., traditional Marxist theory did not adequately address complexity of class oppression. At a time when the labor movement was shrinking, jobs disappeared, welfare supported the unemployed, and perhaps most importantly, racism divided the working class internally, a unified “proletariat” did not exist.\(^3\) The theoretical tools of traditional Marxism also failed to fit the needs of socialist feminist activism. A traditional reading of Marx did not address the oppression of women outside of their relationship to

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\(^2\) Petition for Split, p. 7, March 14, 1976, Knauss Collection, Box 1, Folder 14, NUL.

\(^3\) Cowiem *Stayin’ Alive*, 236-239.
production. While the CWLU attempted to move past this exclusive focus by utilizing tools such as Juliet Mitchell’s four structures, they never fully integrated the specific needs of women in Chicago surrounding health care with the concept of women as a social class. In 1978, Zillah Eisenstein, a white socialist feminist scholar described what she saw as the inadequacy of Marxism to create a mass-based movement for women’s empowerment:

First, the existing conceptions of a potentially revolutionary proletariat are inadequate for the goals of socialist feminism. Second, there are serious questions whether the potential [for revolution] defined in classical Marxist terms would ever become real in the United States…The importance of socialist feminist strategy, to the extent that it exists, is that it grows out of the daily struggles of women in production, reproduction, and consumption.4

Eisenstein points towards a different kind of socialist feminism grounded in women’s experience more broadly and not just tied to production. As the Asian Women’s Group demonstrated, a strict commitment to traditional Marxism could lead to a position that promoted the interests of an amorphous class of “working women” over another of “bourgeois women” that required the rejection of feminism itself without adequately interrogating who these groups represented in 1970s U.S.

Traditional Marxist theory in the hands of white socialist feminists also did not provide the tools to confront American racism or the complexities of building a multicultural organization. Lacking tools to address the ways that women experienced oppression differently based on race, women of the CWLU attempted to let their theoretical framework replace interrogation of the ways that many of them benefited from the racist and classist systems of the United States due to their white middle-class identities. Even as the central organization articulated its support for a multi-racial cross class movement, they did not examine how racism or classism might be structured into an organization founded by white middle-class women that

could make it inaccessible to women of color and working-class women. One member reflected, “...while we have undoubtedly touched the lives of thousands of women...[the multi-racial, cross-class composition of] women who use our services...has never been reflected in the more middle class, overwhelmingly white membership.”⁵ Women of the CWLU sought to address this problem by engaging in more coalition work with women of color in other organizations. Yet a focus on coalition work, while giving the CWLU an image as a racially progressive organization, did little to improve the racial dynamics of their own programming.⁶ This focus on building membership without interrogating why women of color and working-class women did not join the organization, allowed women in the CWLU to avoid asking questions about how their own identities shaped the politics they espoused and invited others to share.

For many women the CWLU was not just their politics but their personal life as well, further complicating their efforts at building a multi-racial organization. Common class and race backgrounds allowed many women to easily build friendship networks out of their activism.⁷ The embeddedness of social networks within activist ones functioned to make the organization difficult to enter for women outside the circles of middle-class white activists. The women of the CWLU refused to consider renouncing their comfort in order to engage differently. As Black feminist activist Bernice Johnson Reagon articulated, “You don’t go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can stay alive.”⁸ Without deep analysis,

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⁵ Sarah Bornstein, A Critical History of the CWLU, p. 1, August 1976, CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS.
⁶ “The death of the CWLU...” p. 24, CWLU Records, Box 2, Folder 11, CHS; Estelle Carol and Suzanne Davenport, Who we are, our purpose, p. 3, February 27, 1978, CWLU Records, Box 2, Folder 6, CHS.
⁷ Mary Ann Gilpatrick, CWLU History, p. 1. CWLU Records, Box 1, Folder 10, CHS.
women of the CWLU chose comfort over solidarity, thereby undermining possibilities for a multiracial, cross-class revolutionary women’s organization.

While the political theory of the central organization became more and more based in orthodox Marxism, the health programs found their direction from the needs they encountered of women in Chicago. But in distance they lost symbiosis. The health programs needed the network of support provided by the central organization in order to connect their work to one another’s and to broader activism in Chicago. Once the central network was gone, much of the documented women’s health organizing that former CWLU members engaged in centered on legislative reform of abortion laws. While many women continued to organize in health, without the CWLU, they lost the revolutionary critique of the medical system as a whole and their activist projects became reform work.

After the dissolution of the CWLU, an increasingly conservative political environment created a hostile environment for reproductive health activism and further frustrating continued efforts at revolutionary women’s health organizing. On the national level, the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976 restricted federal funding for abortion and drastically limited the accessibility of abortion for low-income women nationwide.9 On the local level the Burke Bill, a City Council ordinance proposed the prohibition of abortion in publicly owned clinics or hospitals.10 The 1980 election of Reagan, further confirmed the conservative turn in national politics.

In response to these challenges, women’s health activism turned to educating people in Chicago about the changes brought with new legislation. Cooperating with Planned Parenthood, women formerly of the CWLU put out pamphlets opposing such legislation as the Burke Bill and

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9 Ron Williams, “’Human Life’ Amendment loses,” in *In These Times*, Dec. 6-12 1978, 5.
10 Don’t Let them Close the Doors flyer, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 9, NUL.
the Hyde Amendment. While this legislative work still affected the lives of many women, this method of organizing was devoid of the community connections and ownership of local women for whom these issues were of greatest concern. The activism of many women previously involved in the CWLU’s health projects turned towards battling conservative legislation in attempts to preserve some of the rights to abortion that Roe v. Wade had enabled, rather than envisioning, if not always enacting, new models of revolutionary women’s health care.

As later women’s health activism demonstrates, despite its flaws, the CWLU played an important role in creating possibilities for new kinds of revolutionary women’s activism. Most prominently in the health programs, the CWLU worked towards creating an empowering model for women’s organizing that recognized the complexities of women’s different experiences with the health system based on their race and class positions, even as they struggled with how to implement this vision. The work of the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse in particular, grew from the CWLU’s efforts and most successfully attempted to base their activism in the needs of particular communities and emphasizing community leadership and support. Ultimately, one of the greatest possibilities of the CWLU was its ability to build networks of activism that connected different specific issue-based struggles to a larger revolutionary movement seeking to create massive change in women’s lives. When white feminist activists remember the CWLU we must recognize both the possibilities and limitations that their activism presented. While they failed to create a multi-racial cross class revolutionary feminist organizations, their vision is a powerful example of the possibilities of feminist organizing.

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11 Abortion Rights Under Attack pamphlet, Knauss Collection, Box 4, Folder 9, NUL. This kind of cooperation with an organization understood as reformist and with historic ties to eugenic-era policies, would have been unthinkable during the CWLU’s existence.
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I have adhered to the Honor Code on this Assignment. Lara Griffin