

Theory and Strategy in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

By Christine R. Riddiough and Margaret Schmid

The Chicago Women's Liberation Union was formed in 1969 and played a leading role in the women's liberation movement in Chicago during much of the 1970s. CWLU organizing was done with a clear focus on both strategy and theory, recognizing that immersion in developing a theory often prevents one from actually being an activist, but without a theory and a strategy that flows from it, activism can be mindless and even counterproductive.

In our theory, we acknowledged that the struggle for women's rights was not isolated from other struggles. In an era before the term "intersectionality" was coined, we recognized the intersection between gender, race and class and the importance of ensuring that our theory, strategy and actions bridged those intersections. We also recognized that our activism had to relate to the conditions facing women in a concrete manner in order to communicate the liberating potential of the women's movement.

In this paper, we review:

- documents from the founding conference and from the organizers that show that the main focus of the work of the organization was achieving real gains for women;
- the political principles of CWLU adopted at the 1969 founding conference. They provided the basis for the organization's theory and action;
- 'Some Thoughts on Program', advocating a strategic approach to program, and adopted by the CWLU to help the women's liberation movement expand and struggle for power;
- the position paper 'Socialist Feminism: Our Strategy for the Women's Movement' outlining three strategic goals for projects that CWLU undertook to:
 1. win reforms that objectively improve women's lives;
 2. give women a sense of their own power, both potentially and in reality; and

3. alter existing relations of power.
- the paper on 'Leading CWLU into Outreach' that discusses the importance of outreach in building the women's movement.

'A Proposal for a Chicago Radical Women's Conference'¹ was circulated in the fall of 1969. This was to be the founding conference of the CWLU. Crucially, it called for a conference 'for women who are primarily committed to the development of an independent, multi-issue women's movement and who see in particular the need to develop program and structures to enable us to get beyond the stage of personal discussions and to reach out to new women.' Of equal importance, recognizing the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, the proposal for the conference also sought papers on strategy to deal with questions like the relationship of the women's movement to the larger social justice movements of the time.

The Political Principles: The conference proposal foreshadowed the statement of political principles that was adopted at the October 1969 founding conference of CWLU. They provided the basis for the organization's theory and action, stating:

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 a consciousness of their effect on women.

We are dedicated to a democratic organization and understand that a way to ensure democracy is through full exchange of information and ideas, full political debate, and through unity of theory and practice.

¹ Alter, Barbara, Ackerman, Carol, George, Liz, Rothstein, Vivian, Weisstein, Naomi, Keller, Alice, Hedda and others. 1969. *A Proposal for a Chicago Radical Women's Conference*. Unpublished.

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 to have faith that people have unending energy and ability to change.²

Several things stand out in reading these principles. The first three lines neatly summarize the position of the founders and reflect their backgrounds as part of the student, anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements. Yet, unlike many position papers and statements of the era, they are succinct. They clearly position women's liberation as a part of a larger revolutionary movement and as essential to that movement.

The women who founded CWLU and many of the early members were involved in political activism through the movements of the 1960s.³ For them, as for other women of their generation, these activities gave them the energy to fight on behalf of women as well as a keen awareness that the progressive movement was still primarily led by men and that even the most active women were marginalized when decisions of any consequence were made. Out of this arose a consciousness that, if women were to be liberated, an independent women's movement was essential.

The fifth sentence, explicitly linking the struggle for women's liberation to the struggles against racism, imperialism and capitalism, again reflects the prior political activism of the primary founders and other early activists. The experiences of women in the movements opposing these forces made it clear that the fight for women's liberation was not separate from the efforts of other oppressed people in the United States or around the world.

² *CWLU Political Principles*. 1969. revised 1972. Unpublished.

³ For example, Vivian Rothstein, an author of the call for the conference had traveled to Vietnam and met with women from their National Liberation Front. Heather Booth, an early CWLU activist, had participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer and in student actions at the University of Chicago.

Over the life of CWLU, only one change was made in the political principles – this was a modification to the fourth sentence in the principles: “We will struggle for the liberation of women and against male supremacy in all sections of society.” In 1972 this statement was revised as follows:

We will struggle for the liberation of women and against sexism in all sections of society. Included in this struggle is the struggle for the right of sexual self-determination for all people and for the liberation of all homosexuals, especially lesbians.

The impetus for this change came from lesbians in CWLU. When the principles were first adopted in 1969, the new gay liberation movement had barely begun. No gay pride parades had been held, no lesbian feminist festivals established, Stonewall was still a whisper in the background, but by 1970 CWLU had started to incorporate lesbian and gay liberation into its program. In the summer of 1970 the connection between gay and lesbian issues and women’s liberation was discussed at a meeting sponsored jointly by CWLU and the women’s caucus of the Chicago Gay Alliance. This led to further discussion within CWLU and ultimately the adoption of the principle above and a position paper on ‘Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism’⁴.

It is also interesting to note the change from male supremacy to sexism. In 1969, the word sexism was not in general use, but by 1972 the word sexism was used to denote the institutional nature of the oppression of women. The change in the political principles reflected this understanding.

In addition to the political principles, CWLU also adopted a structure to guide its work. Like most local women’s organizations of the time, CWLU was democratic in nature, but unlike many groups CWLU did have a structure. It consisted of a steering committee to guide the organization and included representatives of chapters and work groups within CWLU. Further, from the beginning, CWLU had staff, recognizing that the enormity of the struggle for women’s liberation required a way to focus and move forward that volunteers alone could not provide. Over the course of its existence, over 90 chapters and work groups were formed. Ultimately the chapters combined political discussion with consciousness-

⁴ Blazing Star Work Group. 1972, *Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism*. Unpublished.

raising and personal support, while work groups focused on projects aimed at advancing women's liberation. Much of the theory and strategy for CWLU was developed in the chapters.

Some Thoughts on Program: Over the course of its existence, CWLU adopted several papers proposed by chapters to help direct the work of the organization. The first of these was *Some Thoughts on Program*, inspired by the work of British Marxist-Feminist Juliet Mitchell.⁵ Presented by the Midwives Chapter of the CWLU at its second conference (1971), this paper noted conflicting views within the women's liberation movement about how to best move forward: For example, consciousness raising as the main focus for work as opposed to programs to meet immediate needs such as child care. Instead, *Some Thoughts on Program* argued

*for a program and strategy which emphasizes struggle on many different levels, none of which is a clear priority over the others, and none of which is adequate without the development of the others.*⁶

To illustrate this idea of a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted program to struggle against the oppression of women, the Midwives said that they

*....conceived of making a visual chart. Along the sides are the four major roles into which women are placed in American society – roles which oppress us. First is our role in production (as surplus, menial, malleable labor force; domestic workers and keepers of the work force); second is production (being responsible for the reproduction of the race); third is sexuality and fourth is our role as socializers of children.*⁷

Going beyond Mitchell's four categories of the sources of oppression, the Midwives recognized that an understanding of women's oppression must be coupled with a strategy to fight that oppression, and so added four dimensions of struggle to complete the chart:

⁵ Juliet Mitchell, 1966, *The Longest Revolution*, New Left Review, No. 40, In which Mitchell traced the evolution of socialist views on women from Charles Fourier, August Bebel and Karl Marx to Simone De Beauvoir and Kate Millet.

⁶ Midwives Chapter. 1971. *Some Thoughts on Program*. Unpublished.

⁷ *Some Thoughts....* , pg. 1 The paper notes that these four areas were taken from Mitchell *The Longest Revolution*.

Across the top are the different levels or dimensions of struggle which we have begun to see as necessary to build our movement. First are struggles around the immediate needs of women.... Second is the development of consciousness through educational and other work...The third area is work which leads to the development of an analysis of women's oppression and all oppression in our society, and which will lead us to developing a strategy for transforming this society...And the fourth dimension is the building of a vision of how society should look and the building of alternative institutions to the oppressive ones which exist today.⁸

The Midwives included an example of the chart with some early CWLU activities filled in to demonstrate how it would work.⁹

Table 1: Original Mitchell Chart

	<i>Struggles around Immediate needs of women</i>	<i>Consciousness raising/educational work</i>	<i>Development of Analysis and Strategy</i>	<i>Developing a Vision and Building alternatives</i>
<i>Production</i>		August 26 Strike		art-co-ops
<i>Reproduction</i>	struggles to legalize abortion	Myrna Lamb's play on abortion		
<i>Sexuality</i>		Self-defense; anti-Playboy demonstrations		Self-defense classes
<i>Socializers of Children</i>	Childcare centers			Co-operative childcare

Underscoring the understanding by early CWLU activists of the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, the Midwives' paper recognized:

this is just a two dimensional chart. It helps us look at different types of program necessary to organize around women's oppression as women. But it is clear that women are not only oppressed as women, but are also part of all other oppressed groups within this society (e.g. blacks, workers, students, gay people). Because of women's interrelatedness to all of society we must have a view of program which says that our oppression as women cannot be separated from the oppression of all other groups. That means that our movement must work on program which struggles against all

⁸ *Some Thoughts...*, pg. 1

⁹ *Some Thoughts...*, pg. 2

*kinds of oppression and must respond specifically to the ways the oppression of these groups affects women in them*¹⁰.

This paper and what came to be called the “Mitchell chart” were very influential in the CWLU. Discussion of the strategic program proposal *in Some Thoughts on Program* took place at the second CWLU conference in April 1971. A lively debate resulted in the adoption of the chart as a tool for CWLU planning and strategy. In the course of the debate, the strategic areas were changed to reflect the outward oriented work of the organization. Struggles around immediate needs of women became direct action; consciousness raising/educational work was called education; building alternatives became service. Development of analysis and strategy and developing a vision were viewed as part of the internal work of the organization which largely fell to chapters. Throughout the remainder of CWLU’s existence, the Mitchell chart guided the organization’s work. An example is given in table 2.

Table 2: An example of how the Mitchell Chart was used. (ca. 1973)

	<i>Production</i>	<i>Reproduction</i>	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>Socializers of Children</i>
<i>Service</i>	Legal Clinic and DARE (job discrimination cases)	Pregnancy Testing, HERS Line, Emma Goldman Clinic, Alice Hamilton Clinic, Abortion Counselling Service (Jane)	Legal Clinic (lesbian rights cases), HERS Line, Emma Goldman Clinic, Rape Crisis Line	Legal Clinic (Divorce and child-support cases)
<i>Education</i>	DARE (Secret Storm), Liberation School (Women and the Economy), WOMANKIND (Don’t buy Farah Pants)	Outreach (Secret Storm), Liberation School (Our Bodies, Ourselves, Preparing for childbirth) , WOMANKIND (What About Birth Control)	Lesbian Group, Liberation School (Our Bodies Ourselves, Sexuality), WOMANKIND (Reply to Ann Landers)	Outreach (Park District), Liberation School (Families, Free Children) , WOMANKIND (And Jill came tumbling after)

¹⁰ Midwives Chapter. 1971. *Some Thoughts on Program*. Unpublished.

<i>Direct Action</i>	Direct Action for Rights in Employment (DARE)	Abortion Task Force & Health Group, 'Abortion 7' Defense, Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC)	Rape Crisis Line	Outreach (Park District), Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC), ,
----------------------	---	--	------------------	---

CWLU developed programs in each of the areas of the chart as table 2 illustrates. The primary education programs were the Liberation School for Women, *WOMANKIND* newspaper and the Speakers' Bureau. Each of these programs focused on the whole range of issues defined in the Mitchell chart. Service programs of CWLU included the iconic Abortion Counselling Service ('Jane'), the Legal Clinic and the Rape Crisis Line. Action programs ranged from Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC) to workplace organizing with the Chicago City Hall janitresses (Direct Action for Rights in Employment) to demanding equity for women in Chicago Park District sports programs.

The Mitchell chart was also used to advance the theoretical perspective behind CWLU strategy. An example is the work of the Lesbian group of CWLU. In 1972 it proposed that CWLU adopt the position paper *Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism*¹¹. The paper started by noting that:

to understand how women's oppression and gay people's oppression are related to each other, and to discover the relationship of lesbianism to the women's movement, we need a deeper understanding of the structure and functioning of our society. In this paper we want to examine these questions from our perspective as socialist-feminists.

It went on to describe, using the areas of oppression from the Mitchell chart, the intersection between women's oppression and that of lesbians and gay men. The paper suggested that a more complete understanding of the oppression of gay men and lesbians involved going beyond the obvious issue of sexuality to issues related to production, reproduction and socialization of children. At the end of the paper, a strategy for organizing on LGBT issues was discussed using the Mitchell chart to provide context:

¹¹ Blazing Star Work Group. 1972, *Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism*. Unpublished.

The Chicago Women's Liberation Union operates with a three part strategy of service, education and direct action. At the present time, educational and service programs are perhaps the easiest to relate to gay oppression, and direct action struggles more difficult.

Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement: Two years later, in 1973, CWLU adopted a position paper, 'Socialist Feminism: Our Strategy for the Women's Movement'¹². Written by the Hyde Park Chapter, this paper outlined in more detail the ways in which women are oppressed and provided three strategic goals for projects that CWLU undertook:

1. projects must win reforms that will objectively improve women's lives;
2. projects must give women a sense of their own power, both potentially and in reality; and
3. projects must alter existing relations of power.

The introduction to the paper described the competing perspectives within the women's movement of the time:

One is the direction toward new lifestyles within a women's culture, emphasizing personal liberation and growth, and the relationship of women to women. Given our real need to break loose from the old patterns--socially, psychologically, and economically--and given the necessity for new patterns in the post revolutionary society, we understand, support and enjoy this tendency. However, when it is the sole emphasis, we see it leading more toward a kind of formless insulation rather than to a condition in which we can fight for and win power over our own lives.

The other direction is one which emphasizes a structural analysis of our society and its economic base. It focuses on the ways in which productive relations oppress us. This analysis is also correct, but its strategy, taken alone, can easily become, or appear to be, insensitive to the total lives of women.

¹² Hyde Park Chapter (Booth, Heather, Creamer, Day, Davis, Susan, Dobbin, Deb, Kaufman, Robin and Klass, Tobey). 1972. *Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement*. Unpublished.

As socialist feminists, we share both the personal and the structural analysis. We see a combination of the two as essential if we are to become a lasting mass movement. We think that it is important to define ourselves as socialist feminists, and to start conscious organizing around this strategy.¹³

The paper's five sections laid out a comprehensive approach to organizing:

- Socialist Feminism - the concept and what it draws from each parent tradition.
- Power - the basis for power in this society, and our potential as women to gain power.
- Consciousness - the importance of consciousness for the development of the women's movement, its limitations, and its place in a socialist feminist ideology.
- Current issues and questions facing the movement - a socialist feminist approach to respond to and develop a context for our programs and concerns.
- Organization - the importance of building organizations for the women's liberation movement and some thoughts on organizational forms.

Section I detailed the idea of socialist feminism and described its roots in the traditions of socialism and feminism. It incorporated a feminist perspective that recognized that the institutions of sexism and capitalism combine to oppress women. It then provided a detailed analysis of society and gave examples of the kind of changes it viewed as desirable but not obtainable in current society. It concluded that:

1. *We must reach most women. We must work toward building a majority movement. Our analysis tells us this is possible if we proceed in the right way.*
2. *We must present intermediate goals that are realizable as well as desirable to show the necessity and possibility of organizing*
3. *We must develop collective actions.*

¹³ Ibid.

Perhaps the idea of power and the role it plays in women's oppression and the necessity of women gaining power to gain liberation was the most important idea detailed in the paper:

As socialist feminists we have an analysis of who has power and who does not, the basis for that power and our potential as women to gain power. Sisterhood is powerful in our personal lives, in our relationships with other women, in providing personal energy and maintaining warmth and love. But sisterhood is revolutionary because it can provide a basis on which we can unite to seize power.

The remainder of the paper discussed specific issues. It concluded by reiterating the three point strategy: '1) win reforms which really improve women's lives, 2) give women a sense of their own power through organization, 3) alter the relations of power.' It said:

Primarily, we argue for an aggressive and audacious perspective. It is one that our movement began with when we thought we were the newest and hottest thing going. Now, we have found roots. We will need strategy, organization and so many steps along the way. But we must take the offensive again, and this time fight a long battle--worth it because we believe we can win.

Throughout its history, CWLU included a focus on direct action. The Socialist Feminist paper put this into perspective. The Hyde Park chapter, which drafted the paper, also gave birth to the Action Committee for Decent Childcare, a program aimed at revising licensing laws for child care centers in Chicago and getting the city to provide funding for centers. Working women, who had limited access to childcare, joined the effort. They staged an action in the office of the city official responsible, at first seeking a study on child care in the city. When the official did not respond, the group took further action, ultimately leading to some of the licensing reform and funding demands they had made initially.

The jobs work group was another example of the use of direct action. (It ultimately changed its name to Direct Action for Rights in Employment – DARE.) In the early 1970s CWLU received a letter from one of the janitresses working at Chicago City Hall. At that time the city maintained two job categories: janitors (male) and janitresses (females). This resulted in women getting paid less. The jobs work group equal for women and men.

Later in the 1970s CWLU's Secret Storm work group worked with women in the Chicago Park District to ensure that women had equal access to Park District sports facilities such as playing fields and equipment. These are but a few examples of how CWLU put theory into action.

Leading the CWLU into Outreach: Another perspective that guided the work of CWLU is described in a paper on 'Leading CWLU into Outreach'¹⁴. Written by Jenny Rohrer and Judy Sayad and influenced by their work on Park District equity for women, it built on existing outreach programs such as to Liberation School and WOMANKIND, emphasizing the importance of outreach to women beyond those in CWLU:

Outreach means getting to know a lot of people; it means bring women's consciousness and politics into the everyday lives of people.

It is the whole process of meeting women, talking to them about their lives, about women's liberation, and offering them programs - to use and to work on. It is how we initially mobilize and educate masses of women to begin to take control of their lives, to see their personal problems as political, and to use the tools of service, education, and direct action to make their lives better.

The idea behind outreach, already recognized in early CWLU projects, was to get women outside the core group of CWLU involved in the organization and in the movement as a whole. It recognized that simply involving the same 100 or 1,000 women in activities would not result in the liberation of women. Overall, CWLU programs addressed many of the issues women faced, but did not always connect with women:

Our programs speak to many of the specific needs in women's lives, and we have to take our programs out; we have to talk to women who have never heard of a women's liberation union about their lives and women's liberation.

Outreach was not an additional tactic to be added to the Mitchell chart nor was it opposed to direct action, rather it was a way to approach all CWLU work.

¹⁴ Rohrer, Jenny and Sayad, Judy. ca 1975. *Leading the CWLU into Outreach*. Unpublished.

This paper provided examples of what outreach would look like in the context of a range of CWLU programs. By offering services in many neighborhoods in Chicago, the Pregnancy Testing program could provide a nucleus for neighborhood women's organizations. Each CWLU program - from the Health Evaluation and Referral Service to the Legal Clinic - could make better use of *WOMANKIND* newspaper as a way to get the word to women around the city.

The outreach group also worked to encourage high school and junior college students to get involved in women's liberation. Through the distribution of leaflets in girl's bathrooms, young women who might not have heard of women's liberation got involved in CWLU activities. Work in the Park District began when women's softball teams were displaced by men's teams. Women from CWLU worked with the softball teams to challenge the division of resources. *Secret Storm* spread the word among the players and described other activities for women.

The lesbian group published its own newsletter, *Blazing Star*, which was distributed to lesbian bars in Chicago. This group worked with bar-sponsored softball teams to encourage more women in the lesbian community to join the women's movement.

These and comparable efforts in other CWLU work groups aimed to involve women from Chicago's working class neighborhoods and thus expand its constituency of women.

The explicit and essential connection between theory, strategy, organizing and activism made by the CWLU was, in many respects, unique. Despite internal controversies, CWLU and many of its projects lasted for eight years before it disbanded in 1977, much longer than any of its sister counterpart organizations. Its relative longevity was due to the fact that its members were able to make these connections and its activities were sustained by them. Even after disbanding, projects of CWLU like *Blazing Star* (the lesbian group) and HERS (Health Evaluation and Referral Service) were sustained for several years. Many individual members continued their activism as staff and leaders of other organizations, including NOW and several unions, their lives having been changed and enriched through their participation in CWLU.

