

## WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN CHICAGO: HOW THE IDEAS OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT FRAMED STRUGGLES IN HOSPITALS, THE WORKPLACE AND SCHOOLS

Mardge Cohen, Challenging defacto segregation in childbirth and expanding  
abortion services in Chicago hospitals

Christine George, Promoting women's power and leadership in trade unions

Diane Horwitz, What did feminism offer to working class women at a community  
college?

These papers were presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's  
Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the  
Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29,  
2014.

Introductory Remarks: Diane Horwitz

During the late 60's and 70's, ideas about women's empowerment reached far and  
wide in the culture. Ideas about women's equality were everywhere - in the media,  
in schools, in our homes and workplaces, on the streets. There were a multiplicity of  
arenas where feminist ideas and consciousness took hold and were expressed by  
women: challenges to traditional gender roles, ideas of equity, developing voice, and  
agency, political and economic empowerment, the promotion of women's  
leadership, of struggling for power through collective action. While not identifying  
as feminists or with the women's liberation movement, nor self-identified as  
political activists, women engaged in struggles as workers, community members,  
students, parents, consumers, etc. expressed similar concerns and goals as the more  
traditionally defined women's liberation movement.

Personal issues such as caring for your kids education, going back to school,  
reproductive rights, experiences at the workplace - got politicized through collective  
action and solidarity with other women.

In her book, *Finding the Movement*, Anne Enke argues that the "women's  
movement took place outside and alongside as well as within the institutions and  
actors bearing the name feminist." She says that, "to understand the widespread  
and popular nature of the movement, we must also consider relevant activism  
and locations that did not always earn the label "feminist."

We believe that any description of the women's movement is messy; there are many  
manifestations, complex, nuanced, varied from city and region.  
The women's organizing and activity we describe is not part of the traditionally  
defined feminist movement; but it is connected to a long tradition of women's  
activism.

Sara Evans in her opening address called for local stories to be told.

We hope our examples are contributions to the historical record of this activism and will expand the narrative of what is considered the women's movement.

Women like ourselves, (socialist feminists, members of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, activists, grounded also in other social movements of the 1960's), were often part of these different constituencies (as labor organizers, health care providers, educators).

We used the concept of socialist-feminists to express our broad perspective on what we considered women's issues. Yesterday I got an email with the subject: a la socialist feminism; it was a notice that there was march for International Women's Day with a rally at the school committee. Here were their demands: emergency funding for equal public education, student transportation, a living wage, affordable housing and health care, no cuts to social programs. Are these women's issues? We think so.

We had an anti-capitalist perspective, emphasizing disparities by race and class as well as gender. We believed in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical society. Our participation in the feminist movement and the broader movement for social justice at the time gave us support, strength and perspective. We felt we were part of a larger transformation.

(DID NOT MENTION THIS , BUT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND AS ANOTHER FRAME FOR OUR WORK: Socialist-feminism conference of 1975 is a perfect example of this perspective and the range of organizing around women's issues throughout the country. And should be a topic for a different panel.)

Our goals for this panel are to describe lesser known examples of women's organizing around the time that the women's liberation movement was taking hold. This work has not received the same kind of attention as some of the more traditionally defined areas of feminist organizing. We argue that women's organizing and projects involving working class women and women of color demonstrates a more widespread, multi-faceted and diverse picture than is usually presented when discussing the feminist project. These are stories of women coming together across barriers of class and race. Our focus will be on Chicago

The panel will focus on 3 areas of women's organizing using examples, stories from our own experiences. We are speaking as activists, as participants, not as historians or theoreticians.

Conclusion of panel: What are the themes or lessons that were learned through these stories we tell?

Working to change women's lives where you are at - in hospitals, schools, at the workplace, in unions. Life as an organizer. Our participation in the feminist

movement and the broader movement for social justice at the time gave us support and strength, and perspective. We were part of a larger transformation. Understanding that very small victories were part of this bigger trajectory. What does it mean now that our work is less connected to a broader movement? What problems does that present? How do we develop a broader women's movement and what would that look like? Bringing a women's perspective - how are women specifically impacted - environmental movement; health care for all; education reform; minimum wage., labor organizing, voter participation.