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**Panel: Comparing City Organizations
The New Haven Liberation Movement**

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I'm going to focus on three of the questions we were asked to address: Relationship with other parts of the new left; examples of successful projects and how movement changed over time

The first New Haven women's liberation group emerged from a local left organization, the American Independent Movement (AIM) that was started by anti war activists and had run an anti Vietnam war candidate for Congress in 1966. In the late 1960's it was trying to organize New Haven residents around local and workplace issues.

The women's liberation group began in 1968 a result of cross fertilization from N.Y. Its members were plagued by insecurity about the legitimacy and value of their movement in terms of prevailing left categories. In fact they were about

to dissolve when an influx of new women emboldened them; their confidence grew as the infectious spirit of women's liberation suffused the atmosphere, bringing new women to the movement¹ But they continued to seek the approval of AIM, writing articles in their newsletter and giving presentations to the group that embedded their analysis in staples of prevailing left rhetoric. AIM never really incorporated women's issues or feminist analysis into its program and the women were somewhat taken aback by AIM's failure to embrace women's liberation as part of their vision of a socialist society

During the following three years the women's liberation movement mushroomed and became more autonomous. Women's liberation activists however did see themselves as part of a broad multi issue left. Two events strained the relationship with male dominated left organization and drove the women's movement away from left organizations.

The first was the process of organizing the "Free Our Sisters Free Ourselves" demonstration in November 1969 to support the seven Panther women who were accused of participating in a conspiracy to commit murder and were being treated harshly in the State Prison for Women. Women's liberation co sponsored the march with the New Haven chapter of the Black Panther Party, whose leadership

at the time was all male, was a nightmare from beginning to end as tensions about various decisions threatened to torpedo the demonstration.

The second event had to do with the Newspaper *Modern Times*, a tabloid style newspaper that replaced the AIM Newsletter and embraced a variety of Progressive causes.. Several women's liberation activists worked on the paper and at one point one of them who was acting editor at the time put a story about a major victory for abortion legalization on the front page. The leadership of AIM which saw the paper as a way to reach the white (male) working class which was heavily Italian and Catholic, decided that this would undermine their agenda and tightened their hold on the editorial decisions of the newspaper. Many women quit the paper. This incident demonstrated AIM's resistance to incorporating feminist analysis, issues and constancies into their politics and drove the women's liberation movement further from this part of the New Haven left.

The New Haven movement did not have a central organization with a representative structure like Chicago although it did make repeated attempts to figure out ways to improve decision making process. The New Haven Women's Center was at the center women's liberation activities ; it moved several times over the two decades of

its existence and many different groups used it as their base. At the peak of the movement in 1974 there were about 25 groups that were connected with the women's center. It sponsored a new women's course that introduced new women to the ideas of women's liberation; consciousness raising groups were generated at the final day of the course. A speakers bureau of volunteers responded to the many requests for speakers.

Three of the groups most successful at achieving their goals (not the only ones):

1) Women vs. Connecticut, which I've described in another session, organized a movement around the legal challenge to Connecticut's abortion law and after legalization gave birth to an abortion clinic that provided reproductive health and education in a feminist setting.

2) *Sister* which developed out of the women's liberation newsletter but became a lively and broad ranging monthly with that applied a feminist issues to a wide range of topics such as women and the Vietnam War, Children, motherhood, work, women in prison. I It published until the late 70's.

3) A rare money making enterprise that was extremely successful was the prose divorce kit produced by the women and divorce group. How to do a divorce without lawyers.

The women's center lasted until the early 1990's . By that time it had ceased to be a center of feminist activity and couldn't sustain itself financially. Between the early 1970's and the late 1980's the focus of the New Haven women's liberation movement shifted from efforts to make changes in social and political institutions to providing services that addressed women's needs and supporting individual e change. For example, in the early 1970's women's liberation activists talked about making child care a focus of their activities. Since Yale was the major employer in the city, they decided to pressure it to provide child care, not only for its employees but for community members a well. They did a survey which they presented to the Yale corporation and held a child in on the steps of the building where it met. In cooperation with student activists they were able to get Yale to provide one fairly small center which over the years became too expensive for most employees and was used mostly by faculty. Their efforts to get Yale or other institutions to broaden their efforts did not succeed and members of the Child care organizing group moved to the creation small parent run child care coops.

Activists were successful in setting up a battered women's shelter which at first was effective at reaching out to all communities; they hired community organizers from the Latino and African American communities but when the shelter became funded by federal and state agencies it became professionalized and lost contacts with women in these communities.

I also believe that there were significant tensions between lesbian and heterosexual women in the mid 1970's and I think that many heterosexual women withdrew from women's movement activities. (not true of *Sister*). By the 1980's there no longer any heterosexual women on the board of the women's center. While I haven't studied this systematically, heterosexual women I spoke with felt that they were judged negatively by lesbians in the movement. I think this shift was coincident with a move away from action oriented programs to more service and community building activities and an increasing emphasis on personal rather than political change.