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Women's liberation in Action, "Women vs. Connecticut"

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I'm going to talk about a different city but one in which women's liberation activists tried to build the kind of movement that the CWLU was committed to building— one which would organize women around their needs, build women's sense of power, educate women about women's position in society, make concrete changes and sustain a vision of a transformed world. I'm going to focus on one project of New Haven Women's liberation both to illuminate its successes and to focus on problems that I think were common to many women's liberation groups throughout the country.

Women's liberation's passion and commitment to radical social transformation gave women's liberation its dynamism and power. But it also made it difficult to develop and sustain projects that embodied our politics.. I want to illustrate this by an examination of one project in New Haven CT one that was extremely successful in educating women, helping to change public opinion, making a valuable contribution to the judicial opinions in abortion cases and in providing a service. It was less effective in challenging the power relations and

in sustaining the movement after its achieved its initial goals. The group called itself Women versus Connecticut – which began with fifteen women’s liberation activists who wanted to challenge Connecticut’s abortion law.

Despite their distrust of the system they decided to use litigation as an organizing tool. Rather having one plaintiff to represent the class they recruited hundred of named plaintiffs 2,000 by the end of the lawsuit. According to one of them: "The objective was to use the process of changing the law, which would be a good thing to do, to further the goals of the women's movement over all." They believed that collective political activity on their own behalf would strengthen women's sense of their own power to challenge a system in which they were denied power to shape their own lives. Plaintiff recruitment was an organizing process – getting women to talk about their own experiences and to sign on to the law suit. Organizers felt "the mere act of putting your name down and saying `I want to be a plaintiff; I want to take this position’ was very important politically for the individual woman who signed up as a plaintiff."

In the plaintiff recruitment pamphlet (with plaintiff sign up sheet on the back) the organizers explained their politics:

- The anti-abortion laws were imbedded in a social order in which women were seen primarily as wives and mothers and were denied opportunities to determine their own destinies.
- Equality in the public world, could not be achieved if women could not control their reproductive lives.
- Women should not be forced into personal and economic dependence on men or on degrading jobs in order to assure adequate care for the children they bear.

- Our decisions to bear children cannot be freely made if we know that aid in childcare is not forthcoming and that we will be solely responsible for the daily care of our children.”
- We must work against a society that put the needs of corporations before those of human beings, that exploited workers and polluted the environment.
- Saw changing the law as “the necessary first step toward winning cheap and available legal abortions. Next step: to make sure that doctors and hospitals begin serving our needs, once the law doesn't stand in their way

Women versus Connecticut was spectacularly successful in building a movement of women throughout the state.

- They formed groups in their area and many of them crowded into the courtroom or demonstrated outside it.
- They changed public opinion in the state. Seventy six percent of Connecticut residents polled in 1972 believed abortion should be decided by a woman and her doctor in contrast to a national survey in which sixty four percent of those polled shared this belief.
- They brought women’s stories to the forefront of the campaign against anti abortion laws. When plaintiffs testified in court about the effect of the abortion laws on their lives they educated the judges who ruled in their favor. One judge wrote in his majority opinion for example, Because of the "extraordinary ramifications for a woman" of the decision to "carry and bear a child," such a decision,” “was of

fundamental importance to a woman." These ideas found their way into the opinions in *Roe v. Wade*.

Despite these achievements the women's liberation activists were uneasy about the movement they were building, Uncertain about whether their the 2000 women recruited into the movement understood the ways that abortion connected with the position of women. As they reached beyond the circles of like minded people they sometimes felt troubled by the ways their message about abortion became detached from their broader critique of patriarchy. "If you don't know about what's wrong with the whole political system in this state," said a women v CT activist, frustrated by her talk to a women's Democratic club in an affluent Connecticut town, "than you can't change the fact that a legislator is going to screw around on abortion and women generally and also all the other things you believe in, because of the way that it's set up." Discussions of "how it all goes together" became more and more difficult to initiate.

When *Roe v Wade* was decided the members of women's liberation in New Haven cheered but worried that the abortion rights movement had become detached from women's liberation. Sister, the women's liberation newsletter called for a reconsideration of what the issue of abortion has meant to women's liberation in terms of its ability to attract many "unpolitical" women, its success as a clearly reformist struggle and its importance as a sign of our strength. In looking ahead we are faced with two questions: how do we bridge the gap between the two movements, and where to we go from here?"

"If Women vs. Connecticut's only achievement is the repeal of the state anti-abortion laws, one of the organizers told an audience at the Women and Power conference "we have stopped midway through the battle" in their campaign for clinics and a health system

responsive to. In 1973, it seemed to the members of Women vs. Connecticut that the best way to work towards these ambitious goals was to create their own abortion clinic. After two years of strenuous preparation Women's Health Services opened its doors and provided reproductive health care, including abortions for over 20 years. Over time however, the requirements of survival took precedence over efforts to influence other medical institutions and its connections to the women's movement became weaker.

- The story of women v CT illustrates a number of things about women's liberation which, I believe, are also true of other projects in other cities:
- The strength and ingenuity of women's liberation activism
- The difficulty of sustaining a multifaceted critique and a revolutionary vision as they engaged women in working for changes in oppressive laws and practices
- The process by which women's liberation moved from challenging practices and institutions to providing services which become less and less connected with their women's liberation roots.

