

Strategy and Action in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union: The Example of the Lesbian Group

Christine R. Riddiough

The Chicago Women's Liberation Union was formed in 1969. The political principles of CWLU stated, in part:

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.

To advance women's liberation, CWLU focused on activism, organizing, and outreach. The activism of CWLU was not directed simply to doing something for the sake of being active, rather it was guided by an understanding of the need to recognize, and combat sexism, and as a necessary part of this, to empower women as individuals and collectively.

CWLU was made up of work groups oriented toward specific projects and chapters - a cross between consciousness-raising and political strategy groups. In April 1971 the Midwives chapter of CWLU proposed, and CWLU adopted, what came to be known as the Juliet Mitchell chart (Figure 1). It was

	Production	Reproduction	Sexuality	Socializers of Children
Service	Legal Clinic and DARE <small>Job discrimination cases</small>	Pregnancy Testing HERS Line Emma Goldman Clinic <i>Alice Hamilton Clinic</i> <i>Abortion Counselling Service</i>	Legal Clinic <small>Lesbian rights cases</small> HERS Line Emma Goldman Clinic Rape Crisis Line	Legal Clinic <small>Divorce and child-support cases</small>
Education	DARE <small>SECRET STORM</small> LIBERATION SCHOOL <small>Women & the Economy</small> <i>WOMANKIND</i> <small>Don't buy Forth Pans</small>	Outreach <small>SECRET STORM</small> LIBERATION SCHOOL <small>Our Bodies, Ourselves; Prep. Childbirth</small> <i>WOMANKIND</i> <small>What about Birth Control</small>	Lesbian Group LIBERATION SCHOOL <small>Our Bodies, Ourselves; Sexuality</small> <i>WOMANKIND</i> <small>Reply to Ann Landers</small>	Outreach <small>Park District</small> LIBERATION SCHOOL <small>Families; Free Children</small> <i>WOMANKIND</i> <small>and Jill came tumbling after</small>
Direct Action	Direct Action for Rights in Employment (DARE)	Abortion Task Force & Health Group "Abortion 7" Defense <i>Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC)</i>	Rape Crisis Line	Outreach <small>Park District</small> <i>Action Committee for Decent Childcare (ACDC)</i>

Figure 1: Example of the Juliet Mitchell Chart

based on the pamphlet, *The Longest Revolution* (New Left Review, no. 40, December 1966), written by Juliet Mitchell, a British socialist feminist who emphasized the importance of having a multi-faceted approach to feminism. The chart was used as a guide to our organizing. It defined the areas of struggle that would be the focus of CWLU programs. The Midwives

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.'

As the Midwives' paper notes,

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, unskilled, malleable labor force; domestic workers and keepers of the work force); second is reproduction ...; third is sexuality and fourth is our role as socializers of children.

The second dimension of the chart as used by CWLU shows three aspects of struggle: service, education and direct action. In developing programs in these areas we wanted to involve women who had not previously been politically active and we wanted to mobilize women to change the relations of power. The work of the Lesbian Group of CWLU (later called *Blazing Star*) is an example of how the chart was used.

CWLU started to address gay and lesbian issues early on through Liberation School. Then in 1972 the Lesbian group proposed that CWLU adopt a position paper on *Lesbianism and Socialist Feminism* along with an amendment to the political principles in support of gay and lesbian rights. Much of the paper focused on a more theoretical analysis of the position of lesbians and the impact that had on the lesbian and gay community and on all women. 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 then 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. At the end of the paper a strategy for organizing on LGBT issues is discussed in the context, again, of the Mitchell chart:

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.

The paper outlined an extensive effort to incorporate lesbian issues into the educational programs. It suggested including such discussions in "Women and Their Bodies" courses in Liberation School. A course called 'Women's Liberation is a Lesbian Plot' was given in a number of Liberation School

sessions. The Speakers' Bureau set up talks in high schools, community groups and other venues on the nature of women's oppression and these, it was urged, should include a discussion of lesbian and gay issues. WOMANKIND, the CWLU newspaper, had already included articles on lesbians and continued to do so.

The major service programs at the time were the Health Project, and the Legal Clinic. The health project had potential to expand into areas of more concern to lesbians, such as gynecological exams and referrals. The legal clinic also could take lesbian rights cases.

It was felt that developing a direct action strategy around gay issues was more difficult, because the situation of gay people was different from that of most other oppressed peoples. It was noted that:

The gay liberation movement ... sees as a major part of its constituency people who are passing for straight (at least part of the time). This makes it considerably harder to organize the gay movement, particularly around direct action struggles, because there are people who might feel free to attend a lesbian rap group or a gay dance, but who dare not become involved in a public demonstration for fear of being exposed, losing their job, etc. For this reason, it is crucial that struggles for gay rights should include organizations which are not identified as gay groups, such as women's liberation or civil liberties groups, so that all people can become involved in the struggle without having to declare themselves gay or straight.

Following the passage of the political principle and the position paper on gay and lesbian issues, the Lesbian Group began organizing around gay and lesbian rights. That organizing took two primary approaches – work within the lesbian community and work in the broader Chicago community in support of gay and lesbian rights. We used the Mitchell chart to design our actions.

Our outreach work was the fun part of our organizing – it included going to the Lost and Found bar and playing pool or to Augie's bar to dance. During the summer months we played on the Augie's softball team (although none of us were especially good athletes). In the course of these activities we distributed our newsletter, *Blazing Star*, and talked with people about socialist feminism and the importance of getting involved in the movement. While this was the primary focus of our outreach efforts, we also were involved in the more politically oriented segments of the community. We were active in the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Metropolitan Chicago, a coalition of gay religious groups, bar owners, NOW, feminist groups and a wide range of others. I, as a representative of *Blazing Star*, was one of the co-chairs of the coalition. *Blazing Star* members also participated in events at the Lesbian

Feminist Center and Chicago Lesbian Liberation and tried to make connections with all segments of the lesbian community.

The second aspect of the group's work was an effort to support gay rights through education and action. Members were involved in efforts to pass gay rights legislation in the Chicago City Council and participated in the Illinois Gay Rights Task Force (later the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force). We organized petition drives and stood outside grocery stores in many areas of the city to collect signatures. Through the CWLU Speakers' Bureau, we would send people out to talk about feminism and gay and lesbian liberation. We also did interviews with newspapers and on the radio. All these activities may seem mundane today, but 40 years ago, they were very risky.

Blazing Star continued its work even after the CWLU disbanded. We joined the New American Movement as a chapter and continued our organizing efforts. We worked with groups like the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force to advance gay rights legislation. Individually we also continued our work – joining the staff of NOW, leading labor unions, doing community organizing.

The legacy of the CWLU is in the organizing and activism it generated during its existence, and in the people it touched who continue that work. The goals of our movement may have been partially achieved, but there is still much that remains to be done.