

[Chicago Women's Liberation Union \(1969–1977\)](#) ^[1]

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The Chicago Women's Liberation Union, hereafter Union or CWLU, was a feminist union that operated in Chicago, Illinois, from 1969 to 1977 and was the first and largest union, at the time of its operation, focused on women's issues. The Union organized women with the self-proclaimed collective goal of achieving liberation from sexism and inequality. Within the larger CWLU, smaller groups and chapters formed to address issues such as [abortion](#) ^[8], rape, child care, and reproductive health, among others. During CWLU's eight years of operation, the activists circulated petitions, held demonstrations, and visited high schools to raise public awareness of women's issues. The CWLU created educational opportunities for women in response to apparent sexism in the US and connected them to social groups to further the women's liberation movement and women's reproductive health awareness in the United States.

The CWLU formed during a time of increasing awareness of social movements in the US. Throughout and following the Vietnam War, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a growth in anti-war and civil rights movements and organizations across the US. Around the same time, many historians note that the second wave of the feminist movement began. First wave feminism occurred throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and focused primarily on gender equality and women's suffrage, which gained the American women's right to vote in 1920. Second wave feminist issues primarily surrounded sexuality, the workplace, family issues, reproductive rights, and political inequality. During the second wave movement in the 1960s, most women earned half of what men earned for the same job, [abortion](#) ^[8] was illegal and punishable by law enforcement, and [birth control](#) ^[9] was just beginning to gain popularity after being legalized for all US women in 1965, although many forms of birth control were potentially dangerous to women.

Until the 1960s, many women did not receive adequate reproductive health information from primary care physicians and reported feeling embarrassed and unable to communicate their reproductive health issues with their doctors. Additionally, many women would leave the workforce if they became pregnant and affordable childcare options were less than common. During the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women campaigned across the country for solutions to the gender inequalities of their everyday lives and sought solutions to issues including the need for child care, employment inequality, and lack of reproductive health options and education.

According to their website, the founding members of CWLU saw the time of social unrest following the Vietnam War as an opportunity to promote awareness of women's unequal treatment in Chicago, Illinois, to join the social changes around them. A group of women founded the CWLU in 1967, when women's activism was beginning to gain momentum. One of the founding members, Heather Booth, was a student at the [University of Chicago](#) ^[10] in Chicago, Illinois. There, around forty students formed the Women's Radical Action Project to discuss [feminist issues](#) that were radical at the time. According to CWLU member Sara Boyte, before the CWLU was founded women from different radical women's groups in Chicago had begun to gather and exchange thoughts, strengthen ties, and create a sense of common cause and history among the different women's groups. Meetings like those gained popularity throughout the country as female activists taught women through discussion about female gender's oppression by showing them real examples of gender inequality in their lives. Those conversations exposed what the female activists described as the reality of sexism in the workplace, healthcare, politics, and many other domains of a woman's life.

In 1968 Booth, along with friends Evie Goldfield and Sue Munaker, wrote an article titled "Towards a Radical Movement" in which they discuss the aspirations of many radical thinkers in Chicago. In that article they note that, while women gained the ability to work among men in politics, they were still constantly denied any decision-making or leadership roles like serving as CEOs or representatives and were restricted to typewriter and receptionist positions in the workplace. Also in the paper, Booth, Goldfield, and Munaker evaluate the status of women in society, comment on the mundane lives their mothers had led and state that they did not want to assume those roles. To conclude their article, the authors asserted that, in order for women to have freedom, institutions that subordinated women needed to be restructured to enable women as a gender to be equal to men. Gender equality would require women to have more opportunities in the workplace and for there to be less of a prejudice against women.

Following the paper, in the summer of 1969 women in Chicago, including Booth, Goldfield, and Munaker, organized a women's conference to develop a program that enabled women to reach beyond personal discussions in small meetings and grow the multi-issue women's movement. The objective of the conference was to establish a multi-issue group that consisted of women who saw the need for a new [organization](#) ^[11] to expand the women's movement. The conference took place in October of 1969 in Palatine, Illinois, and it strongly emphasized themes of women's struggle such as [reproductive rights](#) ^[12], workplace inequality, and sexism. During the event, a group of women including Booth, Goldfield, Munaker, and Vivian Rothstein formed the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, or CWLU. CWLU formalized itself by creating a set of political principles for the [organization](#) ^[11] and

initial programming and structure. Those political principles emphasized that the women's liberation movement was a part of a much larger social justice movement that represented many different people including racial minorities.

After initial formation of the Union, members created several subgroups from projects that had existed during the 1960s before the conference, unifying many separate local Chicago groups under one large umbrella [organization](#)^[11] that was the CWLU. The CWLU's objectives included reaching out to women all around Chicago and spread women's liberation issues beyond the CWLU community by handing out literature, organizing rallies and protests, and holding open meetings. Many small groups within the CWLU were based at Chicago universities or neighborhoods and focused on topics including but not limited to health care, education, service, economic and workplace justice, lesbian rights, and female prisoners. One such small neighborhood group that grew under the CWLU was the Jane Collective, a secret underground illegal [abortion](#)^[8] and counseling service that the CWLU provided.

The Jane Collective [abortion](#)^[8] service was the first of the established work groups to form within the CWLU. Until 1973, [abortion](#)^[8] was illegal in the US and considered a form of murder punishable by imprisonment. Additionally, the [abortion](#)^[8] providers that women could find usually had no medical training and charged expensive fees for their services, which frequently resulted in botched abortions and even death for the women undergoing the procedures. The Jane Collective operated in secret in several different apartments and provided [abortion](#)^[8] counseling and procedures. Women volunteers for the Jane Collective had initially received training from a highly skilled doctor on specific [abortion](#)^[8] techniques. The women eventually trained each other on [abortion](#)^[8] techniques, although they had no formal medical training, and performed safer than average abortions without the presence of a doctor.

In addition to the Jane Collective, another early work group within the CWLU was the Liberation School for Women. The informal school was founded in the 1970s and was one of the first women's studies programs established in the US. Rothstein, one of the founders of the CWLU, also founded the Liberation School to provide women with education in feminism, politics, and skills that women did not traditionally learn about, such as auto mechanics, home repair, self-defense, and economics. The women who taught for the school also taught students about the history of women in society, something that was not regularly discussed in schools. The Liberation School provided reproductive health education to many women who had never received any education on their bodies. Women learned reproductive anatomy and also received a sex education course, which was unusual during the late 1960s. Women in CWLU taught some courses on subjects in which they were knowledgeable and, conversely, attended other courses on topics that were less familiar to them. According to historian Christine Riddiough, the school helped strengthen the bonds between the teachers themselves as well as the students and women found new purpose through teaching.

Another CWLU project was called Secret Storm. That group aimed to expand women's ability to participate in organized recreational sports teams in Chicago parks. At the time, men ran most men's organizations and discriminated against women. Secret Storm strived to promote teamwork, sportsmanship, and confidence among women and to increase female presence in sports. To do so, members held protests and petitioned Chicago parks for equal access to sports fields and teams. Secret Storm had 140 women involved in organized sports teams by 1975 and because of their efforts, women's sports became more common in Chicago parks and popular despite roadblocks from park officials and park goers.

Other work groups under the CWLU brought the arts to raise awareness about women's issues. The Women's Graphics Collective produced original silk-screen art posters that highlighted the core messages and values of the CWLU and raised awareness of the women's liberation movement across the US. Volunteers posted many of those images throughout Chicago and some even got republished in women's publications across the world. The images featured provocative messages about the inequality of males and females in the US. Some poster art promoted International Women's Day, Lesbian Pride, Working Women and they highlighted issues such as [abortion](#)^[8], child care, rape, and economic justice. Slogans included "Women Are Not Chicks," "Working Women Unite," and "Take Back The Night," which campaigned for women to protest rape culture and promoted women's safety at night. Other posters promoted groups and chapters within CWLU, such as the Liberation School and the Chicago Maternity Center Project. Members of the Graphics Collective met weekly to brainstorm ideas and collaborate on the art and poster content.

In addition to graphic art, the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band was one of the earliest-formed subgroups and raised public consciousness of the movement by spreading feminist values through rock music. According to the group's members, the group formed in response to the misogynistic tone of male rock groups during the 1960s. Songs by Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band empowered women to think independently, challenge authority, and own their bodies and sexual lives. Some song titles included "Ain't Gonna Marry" and "Papa Don't Lay That Shit On Me."

In addition to the work groups under the CWLU, the Union also established chapters that served as political and awareness-raising discussion groups throughout the Chicago area. Chapters included the Hyde Park chapter that originated at the [University of Chicago](#)^[10], the West Side chapter that was centralized near the [University of Illinois](#)^[13] Circle Campus in Chicago, Illinois, and the Evanston chapter from the Northwestern University Campus in Chicago, Illinois. Those chapters met weekly to discuss personal experiences and share stories of female inequality in everyday lives. Topics ranged from family conflict, employment issues, reproductive health, and sexual education. Many chapters evolved into more personal friendship groups and took up different nicknames, such as the Midwives of the Revolution, Brazen Hussies, and Mrs. O'Leary. According to historian Riddiough, chapters created bonds and friendships between women that lasted longer than the eight years that CWLU was active and strengthened the women's liberation movement in Chicago.

CWLU held their second conference in 1971, where the activists proposed a chart that strategically described and define the work done by CWLU. That chart was eventually named the Juliet Mitchell Chart after the British feminist advocate and it highlighted the objectives of the groups and chapters. Members of the Union described a sense of camaraderie that was unique to their specific group and often referred to each other as sisters in a gender-wide struggle. One of the primary issues that the CWLU advocated for was [abortion](#)^[8] safety and rights. In the US, [abortion](#)^[8] became legal in 1973 with the *Roe v. Wade*^[14] Supreme Court decision. After eight years of operation, the CWLU disbanded in 1977. The accomplishments of the CWLU have been collected in the CWLU Herstory Project, which former members of the CWLU founded to provide historical information about the group as well as modernized teaching modules for women's studies courses in schools with lectures and recommended readings.

Sources

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