

STRUGGLES IN FORMING CHICANA SISTERHOODS, 1970-1982

A thesis

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Introduction

On October 9, 1970 forty women met at the Mexican American National Issues Conference in Sacramento to place the plight of Mexican American women at the forefront of the Chicano movement's political agenda. Francisca Flores, a veteran of Los Angeles labor politics, urged Mexican women to join together in order to form their own female led workshop that addressed women's rights, childcare, higher education, abortion and the future of Chicana women. After over six hours of deliberation, the women passed resolutions that called for the representation of Mexican American females in local, state, and national government. They called for the recognition of Chicana women's issues throughout the Western hemisphere and sought to build a network of women that would cross national boundaries and lead to a worldwide Chicana social movement. At the same time, they wanted to work on community issues, demanding childcare and reproductive rights on the conference agenda in addition to women's right to self-determination. The outcome of the workshop gave birth to Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional (The National Mexican Women's Commission), one of the first Chicana feminist organizations of the nation, which transformed the local concerns of Mexican women to the forefront of state and national political agendas.¹

The Chicano movement, which took place in the late 1960s and 1970s, has been best known for charismatic male leaders, such as Caesar Chavez who led the United Farm Workers in the fight for civil rights or the Brown Berets who used self-defense against police brutality in the

¹ "Report on Workshop and Present Women's Activities," *CFM* vol. I no. 1 (1971).

massive Los Angeles “blowouts” of 1968.² But who were the women at the Mexican American Issues conference who demanded women’s rights during the political turmoil that scorched the streets of Los Angeles? Did they fight alongside Chicano males for self-determination, and if so, why are they absent in most historical accounts of the Chicano movement? This thesis reinserts women from Comision Femenil, namely Chicana feministas (feminists), into narratives of the Chicano movement, women’s liberation movement, and Chicana feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The study of Comision Femenil challenges historians to reconsider the history of Chicana activism and women’s activism because it reveals a link to pre-Chicano movement politics, a link that has not been clearly identified for Chicanas in this period.

Although some historians have narrated the development of Chicana feminism in response to the mid-1960s women’s liberation movement, members of Comision Femenil’s, Chicana feminists in Comision Femenil developed from Mexican American women who organized alongside Chicano men to engage in political actions on multiple fronts including labor and anti-racist struggles, as well as electoral fights for political power. After experiencing sexism within the Chicano movement, Chicanas articulated a feminist philosophy based on different lived experiences than women in the liberal feminist movement of the mid-1960s. Chicanas feminists created “a politic born out of necessity” that became known as women of color feminism(s) within the 1980s.³

² Dolores Bernal, “Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. Vol. 19, No. 2, Varieties of Women’s Oral History (1998), pp. 113-142.

³ Gloria Anzaldua, Cherie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*. (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 25. The term women of color came into being during the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston, Texas when Black feminists urged the female delegates to pass a black women’s agenda rather than the inadequate minority women’s plank included within the two-hundred page feminist agenda. Other “minority” women wanted to be included within the Black feminist agenda and after plenty of deliberation, the term women of color was developed to describe non-white women within the conference. This was a political term that

Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional (CFMN) developed on both a local and national level with the emergence of over twenty-six local chapters dispersed across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Local chapters developed throughout the nation with oversight from the national organization. In 1971, Francisca Bojorquez, who had attended the Mexican American National Issues Conference of 1970, founded the Los Angeles chapter at the University of Cal State Los Angeles. Women from the conference held meetings at the International Institute in Boyle Heights to discuss the needs of Chicana women in the community. From 1970-1982 Comision Femenil de Los Angeles (CFLA) stood as the conduit between community activism and the realm of electoral politics transforming Chicana women's local, neighborhood direct action into a feminist state and national political agenda.

Comision Femenil Los Angeles acted as a bridge leading organization that sought to link the "politics of the flesh" that everyday Chicana women practiced with the traditional electoral politics to create social change for all Chicana women.⁴ I borrow Linda Robnettes' concept of "bridge-leaders" to argue that Comision Femenil members mobilized working class women with middle-class intellectuals, building community coalitions between the grass-roots activism of Chicana feminists with mainstream professional organizations such as the California Commission of Women.⁵ They created a space for Chicana women to become leaders within

symbolized the women's solidarity and commitment to work in collaboration with other oppressed women of color who had been "minoritized." See "The Origin of the Phrase Women of Color" last modified Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com>.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldua, Cherie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*. (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 25. This term frames how one understands the way identities are performed and embodied and understood as a means for shaping a Chicana feminist epistemology. These women established a theoretical terrain that incorporated the various aspects of identity for women of color and grounded these elements in women's lived experiences.

⁵ Robnett, Belinda. *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*. (New York: Oxford, 1997). As "bridge leaders," a term Robnett coined, African American women were the vital link between nationally recognized male leaders and the masses of people during the Civil Rights movement. Critical to the movement's success, especially at the local level, they were able to extend and transform the movement's

their own community, igniting a feminist political consciousness that related to their personal and everyday struggles. Once the women became politically alert and civically engaged, they strove to make change on a local, state, and national level that led to more Latina representation in government and a multiplicity of Latina organizations. The organization paved the way for the entrance of Latina politicians, such as Gloria Molina, Hilda Solis, and Sonia Sotomayor; however, the women's incorporation into electoral politics also limited their political strategies for social change. By the early 1980s, the preference to improve conditions for the Chicana woman through political reform and legal legislation dominated the organization's political goals and affected their feminist commitment to societal transformations that would allow the most oppressed women to live better lives.

As the repository of historical knowledge about these women has yet to be filled, this thesis seeks to conduct a case study on the women active in the Los Angeles chapter of Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional from 1970-1982. This thesis engages in a recovery history project, which seeks to understand why and how these women's activism has been rendered invisible within the historical record. The historiography indicates the way women in Comision Femenil have been marginalized within U.S history due to their multi-faceted political work rooted in ties to their community, fights against racism, capitalism, and imperialism that historians did not always recognize as feminist work. The crux of this thesis documents how the women of Comision Femenil Los Angeles transformed Chicana women's local grass-roots politics into a national feminist rights agenda from 1970-1982 and the problems the organization faced along the way in creating a national and international Chicana sisterhood. Although Comision Femenil

message. In a similar sense, the women of CFLA transmit the Chicana feminist philosophies of local women to national and international recognized political leaders in order to mark the plight of Chicana women on U.S. political agendas. The women within CFLA also act as bridge leaders between local Chicana women in their community and the Chicana leaders within the national organization of Comision Femenil.

Los Angeles launched a feminist platform which placed Chicana women's issues at the forefront of U.S national politics, in doing so, they distanced themselves from local grass-roots political strategies creating a rift between the working-class Chicana women they sought to serve and the actual women within the organization. Ultimately, the professionalization of the organization made it difficult to build a sisterhood that transcended class, political and ideological differences between Chicana women and other feminist activists.

Historiography

The documentation and dissemination of information about the Chicana Feminist Movement has been and continues to be a challenging assignment in women's studies and Chicana/o studies programs. The history of second wave feminism in the U.S. has largely obscured the activism and feminism of Chicanas. Scholars have emphasized the existence of a homogenized narrative of second wave feminism that identifies it as white and excludes the activism and contributions of women of color.⁶ The dominant narratives on the second wave feminist movement situate women of color as emulating or being influenced by the "women's movement" in their development of a feminist consciousness, identity, and agenda.⁷

Traditionally, historians have studied feminism within the wave chronological framework. The conventional wave chronology categorizes the first wave as a movement for political and citizen's rights, known as the suffrage movement, that began in 1848 and ended with the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920.⁸ The second wave has been known to start with Betty Friedan's publication of the *Feminine Mystique* in 1963, where she wrote about

⁶ Rosen, Ruth: *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. (New York: Penguin, 2006), 271.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Eileen Boris, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Julie Gallagher, and Kathleen Laughlin, "Is it time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Wave Metaphor," *Feminist Formations*, 22, no. 1(Spring 2010), 78.

unhappy suburban housewives who were unfulfilled with their role as wives and mothers despite material comfort.⁹ Friedan's book sparked a feminist consciousness within women and started a new movement for equal rights and the reconfiguration of gender roles throughout the 1960s till the mid-1980s.¹⁰ The third wave describes younger women and men challenging singular notions of gender through categories of race, class, age, and sexuality. The wave method has been used by many academics and scholars of feminist and women's studies because it has been a framework that has allowed historians to easily chronicle change over time in public women's social movements.

Recently, however, scholars and historians have come to see how the wave method has become problematic for many reasons, the most prevalent one being the wave method's exclusion of multiple forms of feminism and marginalization of women of color.¹¹ In "Revisiting Constructs and Their Tyrannical Inclinations," Julie Gallagher claims that "[a]s a construct, the metaphor creates and reinforces exclusivity; it illuminates only certain kinds of activism that were engaged in by a limited set of historical actors."¹² Narratives of the first wave of feminism often marginalized African American women's activism and participation in abolition and suffrage movements. First wave feminist historiography often recognized the activist work of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but not the work and voices of Ana Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells.¹³ These women created and led women's clubs for social change within black communities striving for black men's and women's suffrage by embarking

⁹ Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Eileen Boris, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Julie Gallagher, and Kathleen Laughlin, "Is it time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Wave Metaphor," *Feminist Formations*, 22, no. 1(Spring 2010): 76-135.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ White begins her narrative with African American women's club organizing of 1890s and ends her story at a black women's conference in 1994. From 1890-1994, she documents how African American women spoke out and organized around racial issues, women's suffrage and women's rights, and civil rights and civil liberties; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves*. (New York: Norton & Company, 1999), 14.

on an anti-lynching crusade.¹⁴ Even though African American women participated in multiple movements that included anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-poverty struggles they did not solely operate within feminist circles or even call themselves feminists. Therefore, they were largely excluded from feminist histories due to historian's narrow definition of feminist activism, which mainly focused on white female activists who solely advocated for women's rights.¹⁵

Historians have marginalized women of color feminism(s) within U.S women's historiography due to a narrow definition of feminist activism that rarely includes multifaceted political work. The first articles or books that investigated gender in U.S history utilized the wave method as the predominant framework to conceptualize the roots of the "second wave" feminist movement. In *Personal Politics*, Evans wrote a book of her time, in the sense that she wrote one of the first histories of the women's liberation movement, rooted in white Southern women's activism in the New Left and Civil Rights movements. Her book established a partial history of the women's liberation movement, leaving black women at the margins of the movement, while creating the black/white binary between women due to no acknowledgement of Chicana women's participation.¹⁶ Evan's reliance on the wave methodology prevented her from investigating certain feminist genealogies of resistance due to her definition of feminism that was highly grounded in a hegemonic narrative championed by white, middle-class women.

In the 1980s and early '90s, historians addressed the gap in the historical record on the complexities and nuances on African American women's histories within the Civil Rights and women's liberation movement. Angela Davis published *Race, Gender and Class* (1983), Paula

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Eileen Boris, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Julie Gallagher, and Kathleen Laughlin, "Is it time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Wave Metaphor," 81.

¹⁶ Evans, Sara. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & New Left*. (New York: Vintage, 1980).

Giddings wrote *When and Where I Enter* (1984), and Deborah Grey White authored *Too Heavy a Load* (1999)—three books that gave insight to black women’s specific histories in which they engaged in a politics of resistance against race, gender, class, and sexual oppression(s) dating back to the era of slavery.¹⁷ Giddings wrote *When and Where I Enter* during a period when historians began questioning where African American women’s voice stood in the annals of U.S history, women’s history, and African American history.¹⁸ Giddings wrote from the personal experience of a black woman and explored the relationship between sexism and racism, documenting black women’s fight against both forms of oppression and their struggles for black rights and women’s rights. She argued that the black woman’s experience under slavery, her participation in the work force and political activism made her more of a woman instead of less of one. Her book allowed other historians, such as Deborah Grey White, Darlene Hine, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to further investigate the way black women redefined the meaning of womanhood.¹⁹

Due to the wave methodology, some recent scholars have grappled with the topic of women of color in second wave feminist history, but have often claimed that women of color joined the feminist movement at a later period in history. In Ruth Rosen’s *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America*, Rosen chooses the life of Betty Freidan and the formation of the National Women’s Organization as her starting point to begin

¹⁷ Angela Davis, *Women Race & Class*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 172-201; Paula, Giddings, *When and Where I enter: The Impact of black Women on Race and Sex in America*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); Deborah, G. White, *Too heavy a load: Black women in defense of themselves, 1894-1994*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

¹⁸ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*.

¹⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History.” *Gender & History* no. 1 (April 1989): 50-67; Hine, Darlene. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance.” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989).

discussing the women's movement.²⁰ She claims that ethnic and racial minorities later joined the movement and reinvented feminism for themselves. Although she recognizes multiple forms of feminism within her book, she creates a homogenous narrative which characterizes white middle class white women as the champions of the second wave feminist movement. Furthermore, she historicizes them as the original and primary feminism that is later replicated by women of color.²¹

Despite historians attempts to challenge biases that exist within histories of second wave feminism, some scholars with the best intentions have upheld these claims by continuing the practice of professing to be "first" in regards to the development of the second wave of feminist activism. In her article "What's Love got to do with it White Women, Black Women, and Feminism in the Movement Years," Winifred Breines examines why an cohesive feminist movement was unable to form. She confronts the argument put forward by many scholars that Black women and women of color in general found the movement to be racist.²² Within her study she includes the political histories of both Black and white women. She locates the development of a white radical women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and locates the development of "the political articulation of black feminism more than five years later."²³ Breines discerns that radical white and black women's time frames were non-synchronous in the early years; however, she situates women of color feminism, in this case black feminism, as a later development.²⁴

²⁰ Rosen, Ruth: *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. (New York: Penguin, 2006), 271.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Winifred Breines, "What's Love Got to Do With it? White Women, Black Women, and Feminism in the Movement Years," *SIGNS* 27:4 (Summer, 2002): 109.

²³ Ibid, 113.

²⁴ Ibid.

While Breines argues that an integrated women's movement was unattainable, other scholars such as Sherna Berger Gluck, question who should or who has been included in the history of the U.S. women's movement. Gluck challenges histories of the second wave which uphold and are based on "the old hegemonic model."²⁵ Gluck claims that the model was a "convenient pedagogical tool," which feminist scholars came to rely on as a foundational historical framework.²⁶ Due to the hegemonic model, feminist activism by women of color that "cannot readily be placed within this paradigm are constantly left out of the histories of the early days of 'the women's movement.'"²⁷ At the center of this collaborative study is African American, Chicana, Native American, and Asian American women's activism. Rather than identifying every woman's group as feminist Gluck argues that certain women's groups expressed what she has termed "hidden gender insurgencies."²⁸

Becky Thompson further explores Gluck's notion of multiple types of feminism through the acknowledgement of multiracial feminism. Thompson argues that second wave feminist scholars focus on an "old litany" of the women's movement that includes liberal, social, radical and at times cultural feminism.²⁹ She explains that from the perspective of women of color, second wave feminism "illuminates the rise of multiracial feminism."³⁰ This multiracial feminism was multi-issued and went beyond "women-only" spaces.³¹ Women of color

²⁵ Gluck, Sheena, "Whose Feminism, Whose History? Reflection on Excavating the History of (the) U.S. Women's Movement(s)." *In Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy A. Naples.(New York: Routledge, 1998), 31.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 32.

²⁸ Ibid, 39.

²⁹ Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 28:2 (Summer 2002): 337-360, 330.

³⁰ Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," 338.

³¹ Ward. Stephen. "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics." *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, edited by Peniel Joseph, 119-44. New York: Routledge, 2006.

contributed to feminism by developing several organizations and building coalitions with mixed gender and nationalist organizations. Thompson challenged traditional models of periodization which frames the late 1960s through 1972 as the height of radical feminist movement, 1972 through 1982 as the period of mass mobilization and lastly 1982 through 19991 as a period of feminist “abeyance” or backlash.³² Thompson reworks this periodization from the perspective of multiracial feminism and creates a different time frame that situates the late 1960s and early 70s as the origins and the mid-70s through the 90s as the height. Thompson asserts that multiracial feminism is not just another sector of the second wave and cannot be taught alongside established “brands’ of feminism.³³ Re-periodization complicates the narrative of feminist victories and losses in order to show nuance and depth in feminist philosophies, including regional variances, racial and class differences, along with various political strategies and goals.³⁴

In addition to the absence of Chicana women in feminist historiography, within Chicano historiography little attention has been paid specifically to Chicana activism within the male-dominated Chicano movement. In the 1960s the Chicano movement swept across the nation. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales led the Crusade for Justice” stressing the concept of family unity in improving the social, economic, and political position of the Chicano. In Texas, Jose Angel Gutierrez led the Raza Unida Party with the aims to gain political power for Chicanos, and in California Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta led the United Farmworkers in attempt to unionize

³² Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” 344.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The year that the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified in 1982, considered a low period in feminist history is the same year that Gloria Molina became the first Latina Legislator in California—one of the biggest goals fulfilled through Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional since their emergence in 1970.

workers.³⁵ Although, CFLA was one of the earliest feminist organizations to emerge in the Chicano community, they are not acknowledged as such, and are limited to a few lines in the majority of Chicano movement narratives. For example, historian Juan Gomez-Quinones a pioneering Chicano scholar who has been producing Chicano history for decades now, published *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise* (1990).³⁶ In his survey of Chicanos from World War II to 1990 Gomez Quinones recognizes the contributions of Chicana activism and organizing throughout the movement. Gomez-Quinones claims that there were several Chicana organizations that emerged during this historical moment and cites the Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional as one of them. However, Gomez-Quinones does not go beyond this acknowledgement and does not provide any other type of Chicana participation in the movement. His discussion is limited to a few lines in his book length history of Chicanos.³⁷

Similarly, Rodolfo Acuña another prominent Chicano historian, in his foundational work *Occupied America*, relegates Comision Femenil's history to a few sentences.³⁸ This publication is considered to be one of the first Chicano history texts that was originally published in the early 1970s and has been continually updated throughout the years. Acuña relegates the history of Comision Femenil to two paragraphs on two of the main leaders of the organization. Under the heading *La Chicana*, Acuña wrote about Francisca Flores as a veteran Chicana activist, who created *Regeneracion*, an activist magazine while “[playing] a leading role” in the development of Comision Femenil.³⁹ He also includes information on the election of the first Latina legislator,

³⁵ Sonia Lopez, “The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement,” 18.

³⁶ Juan Gomez-Quinonez, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise 1940-1990*. Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1990.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rodolfo, Acuña. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 333.

³⁹ Ibid.

Gloria Molina, in 1982, noting her participation in Comision Femenil in Los Angeles.⁴⁰ Although he recognizes the women's active participation in the Chicano movement, he does not fully evaluate the gender and sexual politics between men and women within the movement. Instead he tells the women's history through a male-centered lens that places less importance on the leadership roles they assumed within the Chicano community.

Responding to the marginalization of Chicana feminism in the historical record, scholars have contributed to the production of counter histories that re-evaluate both Chicano and second wave feminist historical narratives. In 1997, Alma Garcia's significant anthology, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, was published and is now used in Chicana/o studies courses nationwide.⁴¹ In 1998, Dolores D. Bernal's article on grassroots Chicana leadership in the Los Angeles walkouts was printed in the journal *Frontiers*.⁴² Each of these events, and others like them, challenges the idea that Chicanas were not as involved in the Chicano movement as were men. Historical evidence provided by Vicki L. Ruiz in *From Out of the Shadows* and Emma Perez in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History late in the 1990s* proved that Mexican and Mexican American women have always been involved in their communities. Both Ruiz and Perez forged historical links between Mexicana and Chicana feminism to show how Mexicanas and Chicanas have been constant agents in the making of history and culture.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid, 423-425

⁴¹ Alma Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁴² Dolores Bernal, "Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. Vol. 19, No. 2, Varieties of Women's Oral History (1998), pp. 113-142.

⁴³ Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America*. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998); Perez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

The publication of Benita Roth's *The Separate Roads to Feminism* (2004) has been one of the few books to challenge the periodization of second wave feminism.⁴⁴ She claimed that Chicana feminism, black feminism, and radical white feminism all developed at the same time, but along different ethnic/racial lines. She challenged the dominant history of second wave feminism beginning with radical liberal women out of the Leftist organizations of the 1960s, and makes it clear that Chicana and black feminists each have a history of organizations that developed their own particular critique of sexism along with racism. In 2011, Maylei Blackwell added to this conversation, publishing the first book-length study, *Chicana Power: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, which historicized the emergence of Chicana feminism within student and community-based organizations throughout southern California and the Southwest in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁵ Her book provided a critical genealogy of Chicana activist Anna Nieto-Gomez and the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc (Daughters of Cuauhtémoc), one of the first Latina feminist organizations established in 1968 that provided an autonomous space for women's political participation and challenged the gendered confines of Chicano nationalism in the movement. She uncovered the multifaceted vision of liberation that Chicana women embarked on alongside other women of color activists, recording their "multiple feminist insurgencies" while dismantling narrow definitions of feminism. Moreover, they have enriched the field of history while shifting the paradigms of traditional notions of leadership, shedding light on the different types of leadership, in which Chicana women participated.⁴⁶

In 2011, Sonia Garcia and Marisela Marquez wrote "The Comision Femenil: La Voz of a Chicana Organization," which showed the way Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional bridged

⁴⁴ Benita Roth, *Separate roads to feminism*, 103.

⁴⁵ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power!*, 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the gap between grass-roots and traditional political strategies. Although, they shed light on a new type of political leadership, they do not evaluate conflicts and difficulties the women faced while achieving their political goals. They do not evaluate Comision Femenil's complex, multi-faceted identities that made it difficult to create a united Chicana sisterhood and form coalitions with other feminist organizations. Members of Comision Femenil identified as Chicana women, but different class identities between women created conflicts and barriers between the Chicana population they hoped to serve and the actual leaders who ran the organization.⁴⁷

Within the latter scholarship produced on the feminist movement, historians have revealed Chicanas vital contributions and leadership within the Chicano movement and within the feminist movement. Historians in the field of Chicana studies have written feminist history from a woman of color perspective that has been marginalized within the feminist historical record. They reveal the importance of Chicana women's involvement in communities, nations, and political spaces that had been rendered off limits to women before their activist struggles of the late 1960s into the present day. Following in this tradition, this thesis seeks to add Comision Femenil Los Angeles' contributions to Chicana activism and political leadership to the established body of knowledge on Chicana feminists within U.S women and Chicano history.

Chicanas' Emergence into the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s

Chicana feminism developed from Mexican American women who had engaged in political activism since the 1950s and earlier, who guided younger women in the important realms of political strategy and leadership. The 1930s-1960s set the groundwork for the

⁴⁷ Sonia Garcia and Marisela Marquez, "The Comision Femenil: La Voz of a Chicana Organization," *Aztlán*. 36, no. 1, (2011): 149-170.

establishment of networks, alliances, electoral campaigns, and voter registration that created a foundation for the development of Comision Femenil Los Angeles (Comision Femenil).⁴⁸ While the political goals, structure and strategies are reminiscent of organizations in the previous areas, Comision Femenil also developed in the context of 1960s and 1970s Chicano social movements. Although the women built on the activism of reformist politics of the previous era, they focused on self-determination for Mexican American women that allowed an autonomous Chicana feminist organization to come into being.⁴⁹ Similar to black and white feminists' experiences in Civil Rights and New Left movements, Chicana feminists aligned themselves with the Chicano movement until they confronted a call to traditionalist gender ideology that relegated them to secondary roles within the movement and ultimately suppressed them.⁵⁰

Los Angeles stood as the hub for Mexican American reformist politics of the early twentieth century, setting up the conditions for the development of Chicano power movements and Chicana feminism. In 1848, Chicanos came into being when Mexicans in the U.S southwest became a new national minority with the signing of the Treaty of Hidalgo Guadalupe.⁵¹ They became a linguistically distinct and regionally concentrated people, predominantly within Los Angeles, California. By 1928, Los Angeles contained the highest population of Mexican and Mexican American families of any other city in the nation. Many families settled into the downtown housing covenants and later migrated into the cities of Watts and Boyle Heights along with other families of African American, Asian American and Eastern European descent.⁵²

⁴⁸ Marisela Chavez, *Despierten Hermanas y hermanos!: women, the Chicano movement and Chicana feminisms in California 1966-1981*, (December 2004), 81.

⁴⁹ Anna NietoGomez. "La Femenista." *Encuentro Femenil*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1974: 35.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 133.

⁵² Catherine Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 7.

As the community continued to grow, Mexican Americans practiced reformist politics through the creation of various organizations within Los Angeles that fought for the rights of the ethnic Mexican community. Mexican American women had been key players in the founding of early reformist organizations of the twentieth century. Since the early 20th century, women integrated personal and public realms where family and community overlapped. The women of Comision Femenil arose out of a history of Chicana activism “manifested by the heroines of the War for Independence, the French Intervention, and the Social Revolution of 1910 Mexico”.⁵³ Organizations with high female participation that pre-dated the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s included: El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española, The Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) and The League of Mexican American Women (LMAW). El Congreso, one of the first civil rights organizations within the Mexican community played a large role in the defense of the Mexican American young men in the Sleepy Lagoon incident and zoot suit riots of the 1940s.⁵⁴ In *Out of the Shadows* Vicki Ruiz flushes out the themes of Chicana feminism with a quote by Tejana activist Rosie Castro, who professed that Chicanas “practiced a different kind of leadership, a leadership that empowers others, not a hierarchical kind of leadership”.⁵⁵ Luisa Moreno and Josefina Fierro de Bright championed that type of Chicana leadership through their labor activism within El Congreso. Luisa Moreno and Josefina Fierro de Bright led strikes, wrote pamphlets and summoned the 1939 El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española, the first national Latino civil rights assembly. Moreno also participated in the

⁵³ Patricia Hernandez. “Lives of Chicana Activists: The Chicano Student Movement (A Case Study),” in *Mexican Women of the United States: Struggles of Past and Present*. (Los Angeles: UCLA Research Center Press, 1980), 18.

⁵⁴ The Post World War I period marked a transition in Mexican American communities with the Sleepy Lagoon incident of 1942, the prosecution of young Mexican men, known as zoot suiters and pachucos, held responsible for the death of Jose Diaz. This case received national attention and pre-dated the zoot suit riots of 1943 that scorched the streets of Los Angeles. The 1940s resonated strongly in Mexican residents minds and marked a period of cultural rebellion with the arrival of zoot suit sub cultures within pockets of Los Angeles; See Catherine Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009)

⁵⁵ Vikki, Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 100.

United Cannery, Agricultural Packing, and Allied Workers of America, a union for cannery workers. She along with other women within the union developed “a job-oriented feminism” that sought equal pay with men while demanding benefits specifically for women’s needs.⁵⁶

Francisca Flores, another prominent female activist of Los Angeles worked with labor activists of the period to create the league of Mexican American women, a precursor to the founding of Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional. From 1928 to 1939, Flores formed Hermanas de la Revolucion Mexicana (Sisters of the Mexican Revolution), an organization where she could engage in political discussions with other Mexican women.⁵⁷ In 1939, she moved to East Los Angles to live with relatives where she became a writer for Latino magazines, worked with the congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples and participated on the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee in the 1940s. By the 1950s, she organized screenings of the controversial “communist” film *Salt of the Earth* and helped found MAPA in 1959, an organization to achieve greater Mexican American political representation. In the 1960s, Flores began publishing the newsletter, *Carta Editorial*, that responded to the redbaiting of the 1950s and advocated for democratic rights. Later on, the newsletter turned into *Regeneracion*, one of the foundational periodicals of the Chicana feminist movement. Flores’ participation in labor movements of the 1950s relegated her to develop an organization that would address the specific needs of Chicana women, with a particular focus on employment, education, and leadership opportunities. In 1966, Flores and Romona Morin founded The League of Mexican American Women (LMAW) in Los Angeles. They created an organization that recognized the political contributions from Mexican American women and worked to increase the number of women in local and state political

⁵⁶ Ibid, 105.

⁵⁷ Marisela Chavez, Despierten Hermanas y hermanos!: women, the Chicano movement and Chicana feminisms in California 1966-1981,(December 2004), 88.

office.⁵⁸ LMAW was the first organization that facilitated a space for woman-centered political activity. Most of the women participated in the Mexican American movement for civil rights, but after “recognizing gender disparities, they joined LMAW and received training and a sense of empowerment.”⁵⁹ Although the organization only consisted of twenty women, it was one of the first political organizations that recognized and enhanced women’s political leadership. LMAW paved the way for the formation of Comision Femenil, a larger organization that would be able to effectively implement the political changes these women imagined possible.

As the egalitarian promise of the postwar years of integrationist politics were not fulfilled, the 1960s and 1970s brought radical calls for political power with strategies of militant, direct action. The turn to radical politics led to the Chicano movement, which emerged out of a period of history marked by social and political upheaval by what the U.S government termed its “minority” populations.⁶⁰ During this period, a more nationalist and militant Black power movement was replacing African American Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. Hard fought gains had been made with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, the struggle to end segregation and racism continued under emerging militancy. By 1966, activists turned away from Civil Rights Politics and called for Black Nationalist and black power movements that stressed self-determination and black cultural and political revolution. At the same time, Chicano communities continued to suffer from low paying jobs, workers’ rights violations, inadequate health care, inferior educational opportunities, police brutality, and lack of political power.⁶¹ There was a 50% high

⁵⁸ Ibid, 86.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 96.

⁶⁰ Sonia Lopez, “The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement” in *Essays on La Mujer*. Ed.by Rosaura Sanchez Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center Publications, 1977), 17.

⁶¹ Ibid, 18.

school drop-out rate among Chicanos, discrimination in housing, and boycotts and riots. These social conditions laid the groundwork for the founding of militant organizations, such as the Raza Unida Party and the Brown Berets. Moreover, it set the scene that gave birth to the Chicano movement known as *el movimiento* (the movement) and *la causa* (the cause), that became “a flourishing of political, artistic, and intellectual activity among people of Mexican descent in the United States in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s”.⁶²

The Chicano movement, under full swing by the mid to late 1960s, included among others the college student movement, land struggle in New Mexico, East L.A high school walk outs, in addition to end the Vietnam War due to large amount of Mexican Americans in the draft. Mexican-Americans used the word Chicano to indicate their rediscovered heritage, their youthful assertiveness, and their new militant agenda. The Chicano identity arose as a militant response to the oppression Mexican people suffered under Western society.⁶³ In 1848, Mexicans’ “national” identities were changed for them with the conquest of Mexican lands in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.⁶⁴ This treaty disrupted Mexican people’s way of life, stripped them away of political, economic, and turned Mexicans residing in the Southwest into a national minority. Thus the term “Chicano” called attention to that history and carved out a unique identity for Mexican-Americans who wanted to reclaim their national identity and regain political, cultural, and economic power within their communities. Though activists used the term Chicano to refer to the entire Mexican and Mexican-American population, they understood it to have a greater political meaning and used it to describe the new militant and politically active parts of the community.⁶⁵

⁶²Catherine Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 7.

⁶³Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 15-16.

⁶⁴Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 133.

⁶⁵Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 133.

In March of 1969, at Denver, Colorado the Crusade for Justice organized the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference that drafted the basic premises for the Chicana and Chicano Movement in El Plan de Aztlán.⁶⁶ The following month, in April of 1969, over 100 Chicanas and Chicanos came together at University of California, Santa Barbara to formulate a plan for higher education called, El Plan de Santa Barbara (Santa Barbara Plan). With this document they were successful in the development of two very important contributions to the Chicano Movement: Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán) and Chicano Studies.⁶⁷ The adoption of the name Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) signaled a new level of political consciousness among student activists. It was the final stage in the transformation of what had been loosely organized, local student groups, into a single structure and a unified student movement.

In Los Angeles, young Mexican American women participated in the student college movement organizations such as MEChA and the Mexican American youth Organization (MAYO). They participated in the 1969 conference with a few vocal activists expressing how traditional roles for Chicana women limited their capabilities; however the majority of Chicana women did not understand or express any feelings of gender oppression. Due to women's silence on gender roles most meetings ended with the consensus that "the Chicana woman [did] not want to be liberated."⁶⁸ Some women did believe that turning to women's issues diverted attention away from the *la causa* (the Chicano cause), while others feared alienation from male leaders if they spoke their mind.

⁶⁶ Sonia Lopez, "The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement" in *Essays on La Mujer*. Ed.by Rosaura Sanchez Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center Publications, 1977), 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 19.

Although women stood alongside men in the struggle against oppression in the Chicano movement, during this period Chicanas developed a feminist consciousness that led them to struggle for political equality and escape from their secondary roles in the student college movement.⁶⁹ The gendered division of work in student organizations, including the relegated tasks of dishwasher and secretaries, led Chicanas to contest the inconsistencies between female and male work. Many Chicanas felt alienated, if not exploited by certain organizations of the Chicana movement in the types of jobs that she was being given or relegated to. Gloria Molina, future President of Comision Femenil, remembered when Chicano leaders constantly talked about challenging discrimination and racism yet at the same time they oppressed her as a Chicana:

I remember kind of being told to just sit down. Like I had no voice or was not entitled to participate...like within the Chicano movement, finding ourselves relegated to very secondary kind of roles almost instantly and automatically, because [it was] dictated from one of the guys.⁷⁰

As women continued to face gender discrimination within Chicano organizations, a community of Chicana female activists developed their own critique of sexism within the Chicano community and called for organizations to address issues critical to la Mujer—the Chicana woman. Women claimed that the farm workers struggle had brought community awareness to many Chicanos and allowed them to see the relationship of the oppressor to the oppressed; however they did not recognize their own oppression against Chicana women. The Chicanas became aware of male discrimination and decided it was prime time to act. In an article

⁶⁹ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 132.

⁷⁰ Gloria Molina and Carlos Vásquez, "Oral history interview with Gloria Molina ... oral history transcript 1990," Bancroft Library. Regional Oral History Office and State Government Oral History Program, 1990, 35.

in *Regeneracion*, Gema Matsuda expressed the new feminist consciousness as the Chicana awakening. She claimed that “the Chicana [had] been aroused....no longer satisfied with taking part in the struggle beside her man.”⁷¹ These conditions contributed to a large social discontent amongst Chicanas who experienced both sexism and racism and began to organize and participate in activist work within each of their own Chicana networks. As Chicanas asserted their roles within the Chicano movement, their ideological debates shifted from a focus on racial oppression to a focus on gender oppression. Similar to other women of color, such as African American, Asian American and Native American feminists, Chicana feminists struggled to gain gender equality and ethnic/racial equality.⁷² Ultimately, the inherent constraints and pressures facing Chicana feminists within the Chicano movement led to the broader development of Chicana feminist thought.

The Founding of Comision Femenil Los Angeles and La Nueva Chicana (The New Chicana)

Chicana Feminism emerged as Chicanas struggled in opposition to the unresolved gender tensions and contradictions experienced both within the Chicano movement and within their communities. As a way to overcome their racial and gender oppression, Chicana feminists constructed a feminist ideology based on their lived experiences as women of color.⁷³ They articulated a Chicana feminist philosophy that was devoted to ending patriarchal oppression within the structure of a cultural nationalist movement. Although case studies show that white

⁷¹ Gema Matsuda, “La Chicana Organizes: The Comision Femenil Mexicana in Perspective” *Regeneracion* Vol. 2 (1975), 25.

⁷² Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, “The Development of Feminist Consciousness Among Asian-American Women,” *Gender and Society* 1 (1987) pp. 284-299; Alma Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

⁷³ Gloria Anzaldua, Cherie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*. (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 25.

feminism also emerged out of a culture of male domination within New Left and Civil Rights movements, Chicana feminists represented a struggle that was both nationalist and feminist.⁷⁴ Similar to Black feminists who experienced sexism within Black national movements, Chicana women aimed to reform the structures of social inequality within American society, starting within their own communities.⁷⁵

Chicana women experienced dissatisfaction with lack of leadership roles for women within Chicano organizations and resolved to create a new women centered organization where they would deal specifically with Chicana issues without having to face machismo attitudes and sexism.⁷⁶ Francisca Flores and forty other Mexican women founded Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional at the Mexican American National Issues Conference on October 19, 1970. Flores created the link between the activism of her generation with the new student Chicano movement that took place in Los Angeles. She “recognized the cultural trends which perpetuated—male chauvinism, lack of incentive for female higher education, and lack of Chicanas in the professional fields”.⁷⁷ Therefore, she urged Chicanas in her political circle to attend the workshop in Sacramento, including a number of women who came from the radical Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) and the newly formed all female group,

⁷⁴ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 103.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 140.

⁷⁶ Some social scientists have created a stereotype of machismo as a type of masculine syndrome attributed to the Latin male, but machismo is a multifaceted term that has various definitions, origins, and cultural connotations. Another derivation of Machismo resulted from the necessity to have and express a Chicano cultural and national identity. This form of machismo refers to males pride in his Chicano Nation that often times resulted in sexist attitudes towards women within their own community and female activists in Chicano organizations.

⁷⁷ Gema Matsuda, “La Chicana Organizes: The Comision Femenil Mexicana in Perspective” *Regeneracion* Vol. 2 (1975), 26.

Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc (The Daughters of Cuauhtémoc) led by the young militant Ana Nieto Gomez.⁷⁸

The workshop discussed issues vital to women, including women's rights, public office, family, childcare, abortion, equal pay for equal work, maternity leave, protective labor legislation, higher education, and the future of Mexican/Chicana women. After six hours of discussion, the women came up with resolutions that recognized the invisibility of Chicana women on a local, state, and national level and addressed practical issues within Chicana communities.⁷⁹ They came up with five resolutions that they believed addressed the problems of the Chicana woman.⁸⁰ They declared all Chicanas have self-determination over their own bodies and therefore are entitled to the right of free abortion. They called for links with local and international women's organizations in order to develop coalitions with Chicana women in their communities as well as spread political awareness of the plight of Mexican-American women. Their platform demanded proportionate and representative appointment of Mexican American women to the State of California Commission on the Status of Women and the Federal Commission on the Status of women in order to combat the invisibility of Chicana women in politics. They called for twenty-four hour day care in Chicano communities in the name of La Raza to promote both the working Chicana woman and the betterment of children, and lastly, drafted a statement to form the Comision Femenil Mexicana and a future Chicana national conference. The two resolutions on childcare and abortion resonated with demands usually

⁷⁸ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power*, 212.

⁷⁹ The women first came up with four resolutions on October 10, 1970, and then finalized five resolutions on October 11, 1970. Francisca Flores published both drafts in the CFM report.

⁸⁰ "Report on Workshop and Present Women's Activities," CFM vol. I no. 1 (1971).

referred to as women's issues, and for the first time in history the women labeled these issues as vital to the entire Chicano community.⁸¹

Comision Femenil formed under similar conditions as the National Organization for Women (NOW), a largely white dominated feminist organization created in 1966. Comision Femenil was founded at a Mexican-American Issues Conference, while NOW was founded at the National Conference of State Commissions on the Status of Women.⁸² Both organizations came into existence due to male dominated political organizations that denied women the right to take leadership positions. Even with similarities, Comision Femenil and NOW had different feminist agendas that did not always coincide with one another. NOW sought to create a universal sisterhood of all women across society, but Comision Femenil saw itself as an organization particularly for fostering the leadership, education, and economic opportunity for Chicana women within society. In the four years of NOW's existence, Chicanas did not believe that it represented their interests. In the same newsletter which Comision Femenil published its 1970 resolutions, Francisca Flores, editor of the *CFM Report*, included a section labeled "Equal Rights vs. Women's Rights," that disagreed with the goals of the women's liberation movement.⁸³ In the column, Flores, claimed that the movement distorted the need to protect women who worked in jobs requiring physical rather than professional labor. She further claimed that the campaign for equal salary between men and women was not relevant to the majority of women who worked in labor, especially Chicana women who made up a substantial number of unskilled workers.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Sara Evans. *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 277.

⁸³ Francisca Flores, "Equal Rights vs. Women's Rights" *CFM Report*, Vol I No. 2 (1970).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

After the 1970 conference, the Comision established its base of operations in Los Angeles and created its first chapter on the campus of Cal State Los Angeles. The women decided that they would return to their respective communities and develop chapters of the commission in order to deal with issues of each community throughout the country. Francisca Bojorquez, student body president at California State College in Los Angeles returned home with the formulated conference proposal.⁸⁵ Frances and several other girls came together on January 19, 1971 and decided on strategies to recruit members for the creation of the first chapter of Comision Femenil Mexicana at Cal-State, Los Angeles. It was founded to organize and train women to assume positions of leadership in their community. The organization had four main goals that echoed the national organization's resolutions of 1970: "A woman's right to self-determination in order to be free to make decisions affecting her own body, the need to establish links with other women's organizations around the world, the need to ensure resources for Chicanas at the state and federal level, and that the group become a Comision Femenil Mexicana chapter".⁸⁶

The chapter came up with three main goals that focused on both campus and community issues. They wanted to visit young Chicana women in penal institutions in order to create awareness of flaws in the social justice system for naïve and sheltered college girls. They sought to create dorms for young women whose families did not support school attendance and forced them out of the home if they did not work to help the families' financial needs. Most significantly, they wanted to encourage leadership among Chicana women, and they endorsed and supported female Chicana candidates for the school elections. They also strove to "enhance

⁸⁵ Interview with Francisca Bojorquez by Marcie Miranda, 10 July 1996, Los Angeles, California, Marcie Miranda Collection, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara.

⁸⁶ Gema Matsuda, "La Chicana Organizes: The Comision Femenil Mexicana in Perspective" *Regeneracion* Vol. 2 (1975), 25.

the image of the Latina, educate members to be more effective in advocating for Latina rights, recognize Latinas achievements and promote the welfare of the Latina and her family”.⁸⁷

The Comision Femenil women were among the first to understand and define the realities of Chicanas and the discrimination they faced as women, as women of color, and as part of the larger Chicano community. A CFLA report refers to the founders of the organization and documents how the founders recognized that they “could build on their collective power, they could build on their strengths as feminists, and they could build on their common bonds of culture, language and heritage.”⁸⁸ The report states, “We too must build on the resources of the collective power of Chicanas.” It defined power for Chicanas “as synonymous with vitality, strength, energy, influence, magnetism.”⁸⁹

The idea was that the Chicana must make herself independent socially, economically culturally, and politically before she could be recognized and could achieve total liberation from racism, exploitation, and oppression. The women of Comision Femenil belonged to “a broader mobilization of movement women in the greater Los Angeles region that included the east Los Angeles Chicana Welfare Rights Organization” led by Alicia Escalante and Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc.⁹⁰ Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc originated in Cal State Northridge and was headed through the leadership of Anna Nieto-Gomez, who was present at the founding of CFMN and was a volunteer at the Chicana Service Action Center. These women developed female-centered organizations that sought social, political, and economic changes for Chicana women. They

⁸⁷ History of Comision Femenil de Los Angeles, UCLA Archive, Box 1, Folder 6.

⁸⁸ “Comision’s Role in the Decade of the 80s: Annual Report 1980-1981.” Series IX, box 53, folder 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power*, 212.

placed childcare, reproductive rights, housing, employment opportunities, healthcare, and education disparities at the center of their agendas.⁹¹

Francisca Flores: Generational Bridge-Leader

The women who formed Comision Femenil derived from three different generations of women, including older women, such as Flores who had participated in Mexican-American integrationist politics of the 1940s and 1950s, women who were between the ages of 21-30, and younger women from the student college movements based in California state universities.⁹² The women were all born in California who participated in the popular front politics of the 1940s and 1950s, while others were first generation college students who became involved in the Chicano movement through student organizations, such as Movimeiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA).⁹³ The younger students focused on closing the education gap for Latino students, believing that it would improve the overall conditions for the Chicano community.

Higher education and breakthrough into political organizing shifted younger women's conception of womanhood from previous Chicana women's philosophies. The younger women challenged societal norms that confined the Chicana woman, including their ties to the family, the institution of marriage, and religion.⁹⁴ Although their mothers lacked the opportunity for an education and defined their womanhood through the bearing of children and marriage, the young Chicana women of the late 1960s became the first women in their families to receive a college

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Aida Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 116-129.

⁹³ Interview with Yolanda Nava by Marcie Miranda, 10 July 1996, Los Angeles, California, Marcie Miranda Collection, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara.

⁹⁴ Aida Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms*, 116-129.

education, and broke down education and class barriers.⁹⁵ Some of these women's parents had already been involved in political work within the Los Angeles community, while others came from a-political families that discouraged their daughters from obtaining a higher education for different reasons. Some Mexican American families believed that their children needed to go to work directly after high school in order to help contribute to the families' overall income. While other first generation Mexican families assimilated to American culture in order to gain acceptance within communities and did not cause any trouble with political confrontation and direct action that challenged racism in the law, education, and within Western society.⁹⁶

Flores contacted Connie Prado, Lilia Aceves, Dolores Sanchez and Grace Montanez Davis, women who she had known through her personal political networks. Aceves and Prado both attended school in Hollywood and had been involved in East Los Angeles politics. Montanez Davis "met Flores in 1951 when she was one of the very few Mexican Americans, let alone Mexican American women, attending graduate school in biochemistry at the University of California Los Angeles".⁹⁷ Flores met Lilia Aceves, another veteran activist, when they worked together on political projects in MAPA. Flores also recruited younger women, such as Yolanda Nava and Gloria Molina, two women who would become fundamental leaders of both the national organization and local Los Angeles chapter. Yolanda Nava at the time a young 26 year old graduate student attending Cal State Los Angeles, claimed that "there was this group of older women who drew us in...we were drawn to them were drawn to their intelligence and they

⁹⁵ Aida Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 116-129.

⁹⁶ Ibid; Interview with Lilia Aceves by Marcie Miranda, 10 July 1996, Los Angeles, California, Marcie Miranda Collection, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara.

⁹⁷ Marisela Chavez, "Despierten Hermanas y hermanos!," 105.

wanted young blood...they wanted to bring in a new calvary of leadership... and those of us who were drawn became leaders".⁹⁸

Some younger feminists believed that Flores and other older women who helped found the national organization were indispensable to the women who took leadership roles in the Los Angeles chapter. Yolanda Nava believed "if it had been [the younger women] reinventing the wheel from scratch in [their] twenties, not knowing anything [they] probably would have taken another ten years to get as far."⁹⁹ Due to mentorships from women who had twenty to thirty years of political activist experience, the younger women had role models to show them how to become an effective political activist. Flores encouraged the younger feminists to research problems Chicana women faced and forced them to take action and testify on those issues in front of the California Commission on the Status of Women for the first time in history.¹⁰⁰

Francisca Flores provided leadership and inspiration to younger generation of feministas (feminists), but at times engaged in power conflicts with women of her own age. Lilia Aceves, a Los Angeles political veteran, became a vital leader of the organization and head of the Chicana Service Action Center, one of the legends left by Comision Femenil.¹⁰¹ Aceves did not receive a formal education until the later years of her life. She took sixteen years to receive her bachelor's degree because she felt she had to marry and have a family at a young age. In 1965, Aceves joined the Eastside Democratic Club ran by Frank Munoz as well as Heights Co-op Nursery. She remained a member of Comision Femenil de Los Angeles and headed many committees, such as the committee to honor all the women. She honored Ursula Gutierrez who was on the Equal

⁹⁸ Interview with Yolanda Nava.

⁹⁹ Interview with Yolanda Nava.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Marisela Chavez, "*Despierten Hermanas y hermanos!*," 105.

Youth Opportunity Association (EYOA) Board, and she also became a part of the board herself to represent the community for six months.¹⁰² Lilia believed that Francisca was a hard woman to get along with. She claimed “she was very opinionated and she wasn’t always very diplomatic.”¹⁰³ Francisca made her feel uncomfortable for unknown reasons. It may have been that the two women butted heads for political power due to similar experience in MAPA or it could have been an educational difference. Even though Flores was not formally educated, she was an intellectual while Aceves did not receive her education through her later years.

Gloria Molina, another headstrong member, does not credit Flores with the founding of the organization, and instead credits the younger generation of Chicanas with the founding of the organization. A native of Los Angeles, Molina was the eldest of ten children and a graduate of El Rancho High school in Pico Rivera, California, who attended East Los Angeles College and Rio Hondo College. Molina came from the generation of women involved in the student movements who was considered *la nueva* (the new) Chicana. She claimed that the “Comision was sort of in existence because Francisca and others had gotten together and they had developed a statewide conference. And there really wasn’t a network of Chicanas.”¹⁰⁴ But “what we did, was we formulated the Comision. What we know now, the L.A. chapter of it”.¹⁰⁵ Molina recognized Flores’ influence in her political life, however, she creates a dichotomy between the older and younger Chicanas, and claims that the younger generation of women truly found the organization and was the ones who made it run smoothly.

¹⁰² Interview with Lilia Aceves.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Gloria Molina and Carlos Vásquez, “Oral history interview with Gloria Molina ... oral history transcript 1990,” 58.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Nonetheless, Francisca Flores played an essential role in the creation of la nueva Chicana (the new Chicana). In Bernice Rincon's article, "Chicanas on the Move," she calls for the recognition of Mexican women's struggles for justice, claiming that they have been fighting alongside their men in the battlefields and in the home. She speaks to la nueva (the new) Chicana, urging her to free herself and recognize her own right to self-determination while justifying women's rights to organize their own Chicana organizations. She quotes Francisca Flores who claimed:

...[T]he issue of equality, freedom and self-determination of the Chicana---like the right of self-determination, equality and liberation of the Mexican community---is Not Negotiable. Anyone opposing the right of women to organize into their own form of organization has not place in the leadership of the movement. Freedom is for Everyone. Women do not intend to argue or be diverted by engaging in wasteful and useless rhetoric on this subject¹⁰⁶

Rincon's use of Flores's words to ignite a feminist consciousness within a new generation of Chicana women illustrates how Francisca Flores registered as one of the foremothers of the new Chicana feminism. Through the founding of Comision Femenil, her political ideologies, though not always welcomed or appreciated helped paved the way for young Chicana activists to become leaders within Comision Femenil de Los Angeles. She also played a foundational role in the creation of literature on Chicana feminism and bridged the activism of her generation with the political goals of the new Chicana feminist of the late 1960s.

¹⁰⁶ Bernice Rincon, "Chicanas on the Move," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. Edited by Alma Garcia 138-142. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Challenging the Machismo in Chicanismo, and Other Chicana Feminist Concerns

Although Chicana women bridged generational gaps, they could not overcome tensions they faced from their Chicano/a comrades who portrayed them as sellouts and traitors to their people due to their newfound feminist identity. Chicana women continued to participate in the Chicano movement, but as the women advocated for the advancement of their community they continued to experience resistance from Chicanos and Chicanas within the community who considered feminism a part of racist, Anglo culture.¹⁰⁷ Chicana women deemed feminist organizing as a necessity to counter the effects of machismo culture and sexism that pervaded through the Chicano movement. They did not believe that a feminist consciousness meant that they would leave their community and join the already established women's liberation movement.¹⁰⁸ Instead, they wanted to participate in Chicano movements while asserting their feminist identities. The women critiqued machismo culture and published many articles on the negative effects that kept women inferior and tied to the family. But at the same time Chicana loyalists, who denounced Chicana feminist goals and frowned upon the formation of autonomous women's organizations, positioned the women of Comision Femenil and other Chicanas between a rock and a hard place. Both Chicano males and loyalist Chicanas made feminists feel as if they had to choose between their feminist identities and their raza (race) communities.¹⁰⁹

Chicano nationalism built up men's machismo attitudes towards women within the student movement and other Mexican American organizations of the period.¹¹⁰ Men wanted to

¹⁰⁷ Anglo was the term used to describe Western cultural society that oppressed the Chicano people.

¹⁰⁸ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 150.

¹⁰⁹ Ana Nieto-Gomez, "Chicanas Identify," *Regeneracion* vol. 1 no. 10 (1971): 9.

¹¹⁰ Some social scientists have created a stereotype of machismo as a type of masculine syndrome attributed to the Latin male, but machismo is a multifaceted term that has various definitions, origins, and cultural connotations. Another derivation of Machismo resulted from the necessity to have and express a Chicano cultural

reclaim power within society, and they believed women's place in the Chicano struggle was to support their Chicano *carnales* (brothers) without taking any frontline leadership positions. Historian Ramon Gutiérrez claimed, "Chicanismo meant identifying with *la raza* (the race or people), and collectively promoting the interests of *carnales* (or brothers) with whom they shared a common language, culture, religion and Aztec heritage".¹¹¹ During the Chicano movement, activists theorized that the repeated colonization of Mexico had taken the physical and spiritual power of its people away and left the Chicano feeling vulnerable and defenseless. Because the Chicano could not protect his people, (brothers, women, and children) from the violent conquest of his nation, he developed a strong sense of masculinity as a compensation for his feelings of powerlessness. The same feeling of powerlessness continued to be instilled into the Chicano through his discrimination and oppression, and the washing away of his dignity which created within him an aggressive and protective nature of his woman and family.¹¹²

The Chicano movement turned people away from white dominated institutions and systems of power while calling for cultural nationalism as a way to gain self-determination and political power. Black nationalism of the 1960s, expressed through the charismatic, militant leader Malcolm X, claimed that men were culturally emasculated due to the psychic effects of racism. Gutiérrez argues in a similar manner to black men, Chicano men also faced "social emasculation and cultural negation" and as a result dedicated themselves to a cultural nationalist vision of the past, glorifying Aztec heritage and history when Mexican men had power over their

and national identity. This form of machismo refers to males pride in his Chicano Nation that often times resulted in sexist attitudes towards women within their own community and female activists in Chicano organizations.

¹¹¹ Ramon Gutierrez, "Community, Patriarchy and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality" *American Quarterly* Vol. 45. No. 1 (March 1993):44-72, 46.

¹¹² Ibid.

own lives and families.¹¹³ Chicano activists believed they were an internalized colony, socially, culturally, and economically suppressed. Therefore, they appealed to the Chicano family as a way to strengthen men's position as the head of household in order to gain power and virility. They also wrote historical narratives that praised the dominance of male warriors, a gendered vision that portrayed women only as mothers and wives supporting the men in their communities.

After the formation of autonomous Chicana organizations, such as Comision Femenil, Chicana women suffered a feminist backlash within their communities. Many Chicanos called them *venditas* (traitors) and claimed that feminism merely represented Anglo culture that divided and set back the Chicano movement. They wanted Chicana feminists to choose between being a woman and being a part of the Mexican-American community. At the same time Chicana women who remained loyal to the male leader's ideology of a Chicano movement became known as loyalists, who also wanted Chicana feminists to choose between being a woman and being a feminist. In *Regeneracion*, Ana Nieto-Gomez wrote about the resistance she faced:

*Being compared with the Anglo woman has been the greatest injustice and the strongest device used to keep Chicanas quiet. Nobody liked to be called a traitor in a [cause] she feels she would die for. And no Chicana who has worked in the movement deserves to be compared with any Anglo woman...These comparisons are divisive and threaten the strength of the movement*¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid, 47.

¹¹⁴ Ana Nieto-Gomez, "Chicanas Identify," *Regeneracion* vol. 1 no. 10 (1971): 9.

Chicana women refuted the attacks through the rewriting of Mexican American feminist histories of resistance. They rewrote their own histories, salvaging the reputation of Malinche, the woman who was known to betray her people when she became the right hand lady of Hernand Cortez and gave him the keys to Spanish conquest. Chicana women believed misogynistic beliefs in Mexican and Mexican American culture contributed to the social construction of Malinche's reputation. They claimed that the virgin and the whore remained the limited roles available to Chicana women. Therefore, the women in Comision Femenil and other Chicana activists within the community used political activism to claim agency, as well as the creation of counter narratives to contest the representation of Chicana women in the sexist Chicano imagination.

Comision Femenil wrote about feminism, refuting stereotypical and sexual images of Mexican and Mexican American women, analyzed employment and labor struggles, which declared that they had always worked alongside men and equally struggle for their Chicano community. They believed that only the Chicana could define her own reality, as well as who and what she was and where she came from. They promoted a feminist consciousness amongst women with writing in many newsletters and publications, such as *Regeneracion* and the *CFM Report*, which was a way to break the silence and oppression of Chicana women, redefine themselves, and embark on a political journey for women's empowerment on many different levels.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power*, 134.

Early Grass-Organizing and Institution Building

From 1972-1974 Comision Femenil built grass-roots service organizations to serve the practical needs of Chicanas within their local community. In 1970, Mexican American women over the age of eighteen made up 50% of the work force and 21.5% remained as the head of their households. Moreover, 47% of all Mexican American families fell below the poverty level with Chicana women heading 75% of impoverished Mexican families.¹¹⁶ The women of Comision Femenil wanted to do something to improve the economic conditions for Mexican women, and they believed that Mexican American/Chicana women did not receive a fair share of services because of her gender as well as cultural and language barriers. Comision Femenil was a mix between an advocacy and a service organization since its founding and sought to serve working class Chicana women with needs in employment and childcare facilities.

Members proposed the establishment of a center called the Chicana Service Action Center (CSAC) to advocate for the employment training, childcare, and educational needs of Chicanas in Los Angeles.¹¹⁷ Following the annual National Chicano Issues Conference, Francisca Flores, Frances Bojorquez, Amelia Camacho, Vi Muñoz, and Evelyn Velarde Benson met with Regional Director of the U.S. Department of Labor Ed Aguirre. In March 1972, women from different areas of the southwest attended the Phoenix Consultation for Spanish Speaking Women, where Chicanas issued many formal demands to the Department of labor, asking government officials to explain why programs for Chicanas had not been implemented. Within the same year, Comision Femenil Los Angeles developed the Chicana Service Action Center, an employment training program to meet the needs of Chicanas.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Chicana Service Center Pamphlet CFMN Santa Barbara Archive, 1973.

The center began as a grassroots organization designed to serve the employment training, educational and social needs of women in the Los Angeles area. In 1972, Francisca Flores asked Lilia Aceves to direct the Chicana Service Action Center. Lilia wrote the proposal and accepted the role of director for seven to eight months before going to work for Senator Bradley and the city of Los Angeles. Aceves explained that “we would be a referral agency. As women we would do that service because we felt that everything was there...but...the Mexican women didn’t know how to go about getting those services that they deserved and they were entitled to...”¹¹⁸. The women promoted the service center through the development of the Chicana Service Action Center Newsletter, CSAC, and through television media. The center provided a program to train low income, unskilled women in order to promote them to become managers and administrators.

The center provided a voice for Chicana women who could not speak English, gave them an education to be eligible for well-paying jobs, and defended older women who experienced ageism. CSAC served mostly women 35 years and older, who could not speak English and needed work skills. They found that “women were not accepted in numerous manpower training programs on two main counts: age (because industry would not hire them readily) and language”.¹¹⁹ Therefore, the organization developed language, education, and employment skills programs for women and believed that women-to-women contact would reveal problems females faced due to the way their gender affected their search for work. CFLA members believed that racist, sexist stereotypes of the Chicana as a passive nurturer worked as a social barrier to women’s entrance into better jobs.¹²⁰ They sought to counter these images through education and

¹¹⁸ Lilia Aceves Interview.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹²⁰ Ana Nieto Gomez “Chicanas in the Labor Force” *CSAC News* No. 11 (April 1974).

advisory committees that promoted Chicana women's abilities as workers instead of their maternal roles as mothers, sisters, and wives.

The center acted as an intermediary organization that linked its programs with other manpower training programs in the community, including the East Los Angeles Skills Center, East Los Angeles Occupational Center, and Centro Aztla. In the first year of the program "the center interviewed, placed, or referred 350 women to jobs, training or educational programs. 63% were referred to other agencies or programs, 35% were placed on jobs".¹²¹ They tried to advance Chicanas from low-paying factory workers into better paying and specialized jobs, such as medical secretary and book keeper. Twice as many women from the general population held professional occupations as compared to the Chicana. Members of Comision Femenil believed that Chicanas deserved the opportunity to enter better blue collar jobs that did not demand high physical labor. At the same time they aimed to promote the clerical worker into management and supervisory positions.¹²² The organization also formed relationships with private agencies, such as the Sothern California Edison Company, the Telephone Company and Los Angeles City and County schools.

The center sparked political awareness within young female college students about the conditions that affected the women in their community and offered them a chance to try and change these conditions through education and advisory programs. CSAC gave young women a positive place to work in the community.¹²³ The center stood as a way for first generation female college students to give back to their community and instill the knowledge and skills they gained

¹²¹ Ibid, 4.

¹²² Francisca Flores, "A Sequel," CSAC NEWS Newsletter No. 16 December 1974.

¹²³ Ibid.

in the University to less privileged women. In an evaluation of the center, Francisca Flores proclaimed:

*one of the most positive effects the Chicana Service Center has had on the women of the community, is that they immediately identified with it and that the young Chicana college and graduate was drawn to it as a source of information and help but also as a place to give off their training and knowledge*¹²⁴

The center also provided role models for the new first generation college students, who often felt alienated on their campuses. It provided them with positive programs, good work habits, and research assignments. The college students also followed up to determine if the women referred to jobs remained at work, investigating the reasons why employers kept them or fired them.

In 1973, CFLA created childcare centers within the first two years of their involvement in the Chicana Service Action Center. They created two bilingual, bicultural child development centers called Centro de Niños, which offered childcare and services to the working poor and to mothers in school. Within the child care centros (centers), the push for Chicana leadership continued. The women implemented flexible hours for employees in order to encourage them to continue their education. The center also encouraged parents to express their views during the development of the center. The program serviced people from many socioeconomic backgrounds, which was possible because the fees “were regulated by the State Department on a sliding scale according to family income”.¹²⁵ The center stood as an answer to Chicana women’s fight for adequate childcare. Chicana women demanded childcare be provided as a public service similar to public schools, unemployment insurance, and social security. They believed that

¹²⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹²⁵

helping women with childcare benefited the entire community. “A proposal for Childcare” declared:

*What adequate child care means for women is by extension what it would also mean for society as a whole. Freeing women from the daily pressures of diapers, super-markets, and socializing with only three-year-olds will mean more relaxed family situations. An adequate child care...means that fathers can have a real chance to take part in their children's lives.*¹²⁶

Mostly, women believed that childcare centers enabled women to work without using half their salary to pay for child care. The ASPO's Planning Advisory Service report on Day Care showed only 637,000 licensed day care centers for 4.5 million working mothers, who had children under six years old. The Centro de Niños developed in response to these calls for action as well as from lack of state action to provide adequate childcare centers due to mythologies that childcare would disrupt the fabric of the family. In November, 1971 President Richard Nixon vetoed a childcare bill which proposed free centers to families earning less than \$4,000 a year. Nixon rejected the centers because he believed that it would allow the woman to leave the family for work, ultimately disrupting the most fundamental institution in the country---the family.¹²⁷ In January 1974 the State Department of Education allowed CFLA to establish Child Care centers in East Los Angeles or “poor communities”. Gloria Molina and Yolanda Nava took lead roles in establishing the center, and served on the community committee on January 2, 1974 to outline steps to establish the program. Molina, the Chairperson of CFLA worked with Linda DeSoto of

¹²⁶ “For All Women A Proposal for Child Care” *Regeneracion* Vol. 1 No. 10. 1971.

¹²⁷ Ana Nieto Gomez, “What is the Talmadge Amendment?,” *Regeneracion*. vol 2. No. 3. 1973.

the Childcare Committee to organize the centers. This same year the city of Los Angeles eased back on the number of restrictions placed on child care centers, including the waving of fees and fire and safety codes, allowing Comision to gain the support necessary to build an adequate facility.

Over the years the centers developed and their agendas expanded. CSAC developed a graduate institute to prepare Chicanas for administrative careers in higher education. It aimed to rectify disparities faced by the Mexican-American woman in education and encourage and prepare more Chicanas to enter these jobs. The organization networked with other centers within the community, such as the East Los Angeles Skills Center and Poder Femenino, collaborating on workshops and fundraisers. In 1974, CSAC was funded under the new Comprehensive and Training Employment Act by the Los Angeles City and County Manpower Revenue Sharing Funds. At times the organization was held back due to its feminist agenda. The County of Los Angeles Manpower Department rejected a CSAC funding proposal because the proposal “single[d] out Chicana women to be served” and, thus, was “discriminatory”.¹²⁸ The center tried to expand its program to include a comprehensive employment training program, but the proposal was critiqued as feminist and denied. By the mid-1970s, both centers became their own entities funded by the City of Los Angeles, the State, and private donations.

Comision Femenil also used the legislative process to advocate for issues affecting the Chicana and her family. Comision Femenil members lobbied for bilingual education worked with policy makers and helped more women into public office. Beginning in 1973, CFLA sponsored workshops on the structure and function of government and on developing political

¹²⁸ Kathleen McHugh and Julie Childers. “From Protest to Policy: Women’s Social Movement Activities in Los Angeles, 1960-1999” UCLA Center for the Study of Women (2012).

awareness and effectiveness. CFLA encouraged its members to develop leadership skills because “it was perceived that if Latinas’ concerns were to be addressed, then Latinas themselves would participate as decision-makers and policy makers on boards and commissions and in public office”.¹²⁹ In November of 1972, CFLA testified on Chicana issues before the California Commission on the Status of Women. Francisca instructed the women on what to talk about and made them testify before the California Commission Status of Women for the first time in history. Nava remembered the women’s fears:

*We were terrified, we had never spoken before and that time Gloria was not shy, but certainly, the joke was as soon as she started talking she didn’t shut up you know none of us did. But we were literally thrown into a situation that we didn’t expect and Francisca just says you’re going to take this out there and present it to this commission.*¹³⁰

Phil Montes who was then the Western Regional Director of the U.S Commission on Civil Rights was in the audience, along with Assemblyman Richard Alatorre. The women made the comment that “there are all these white middle aged women that are on this commission, but why weren’t there any Chicanos present as part of this California Commission on the Status of Women?”¹³¹

In 1973, Assemblyman Richard Alatorre and Phil Montes helped members of Comision Femenil appoint the first Chicana woman on the board of the California Commission of the Status of Women. Due to Governor Ronald Reagan’s affiliation with the Republican Party, the women had to find a suitable Chicana Republican candidate to fill the seat on the commission. They gathered a pool of Republican candidates, including Carolyn Orona along with a couple of

¹²⁹“History of Comision Femenil de Los Angeles,” (Feb. 1983) Box 1 Folder 6, 2.

¹³⁰ Interview with Yolanda Nava.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Democrat names. This testimony led to the appointment of member Carolyn Orona in 1973. Nava recalled the feeling of victory:

So we had this victory of not only presenting and being included in a document that's probably an inch and a half thick...on the needs of Chicanas and of the needs of women in California, but we also were successful in getting the first Chicana appointed to the California Commission on the Status of Women¹³²

Within the same year the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Human Relations Women Commissions appointed Latina women. In 1975, Grace Montanez Davis was named Deputy Mayor of Los Angeles and Sally Martinez was named to the Los Angeles County Commission on the Status of Women as was Patricia Gandara the following year.

As they sought to fill the practical needs of the Chicana community with service centers and advocacy of representation, the organization facilitated and promoted education on a local and state level. In 1974 Comision Femenil chairperson, Consuelo Gonzalez established an education leadership committee. From 1974-1975 the committee developed a series of workshops on communication skills, legal rights, Chicana stereotypes and the media. The committee's objective was "to embrace a broad mandate to educate the total Chicana through the workshop series".¹³³ CFLA members sought to confront the issue of Chicana identity within the "Anglo" world. Within this committee, Rodriguez also began a scholarship fund to provide an opportunity for young Chicanas to attend college. Chicana feminist in Comision Femenil knew

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ "Leadership Development Agenda" CFLA Box I Folder 4

from first-hand experience that an education would allow more Chicanas to cross class lines and enter into professional careers.¹³⁴

Speaking on Behalf of U.S Chicana Women

By 1974, Comision Femenil Los Angeles had established community programs for local Chicanas and created attention for local community issues and placed them onto California state agendas. From 1975-1977 Chicanas further dived into political activism on a national and international level by advocating for justice on behalf of Mexican-American women who had undergone coercive sterilization procedures at the Los Angeles County Medical Center (LACMA). Within the same year members of Comision Femenil also attended the International Women's Conference striving to build a feminist sisterhood with other women of Mexican origins, but were not able to fully transcend national cultural differences. Their attendance at the International Women's Conference helped

On June 18, 1975, twelve women filed a civil lawsuit against Los Angeles County Medical Center (LACMC) for coercive sterilization during child labor. Hospital staff at Los Angeles County Medical Center allowed their beliefs about poor immigrant women dictate their medical practice of family planning and the treatment they delivered to patients. The hospital family planning programs turned highly abusive with doctors pressuring Mexican women into sterilization through scare tactics and trickery. Hospital staff pressured many Mexican women into sterilization due to doctor's cultural biases towards Mexican women. Dr. Bernard Rosenfeld, a physician-researcher working undercover at the County hospital, overheard one doctor remark,

¹³⁴ Ibid.

“‘well if we’re going to pay for them, then we should control them’”.¹³⁵ The doctor’s words exposed the cultural hostility that contributed to the coerced sterilization of over 180 women at LACMC. Since guidelines for sterilization were never sent out to hospitals, during the first three years of sterilization there were no safeguards to prevent widespread abuses at the women’s hospital. Although regulations were sent out nationwide in 1974, they remained unenforced.¹³⁶ Women confessed to consciously declining sterilization operations, but nurses and doctors continually harassed them until they consented to the procedure. Due to language barriers Mexican women could not always read nor understand the English consent forms. Many women did not fully understand that they would never be able to have children again, believing that the procedure was reversible. In addition, doctors often pressured the woman into the procedure in their last hours of labor, even denying pain medication until she signed the consent form.¹³⁷

The *Madrigal vs. Quilligan* trial began on May 31, 1978 and lasted two and a half weeks. The case had three lead advocates, Antonia Hernandez, a young lawyer from the Model Cities Center for Law and Justice, attorney Richard Nabarette, and political activist Gloria Molina from Comision Femenil. Plaintiffs in the case argued that the hospital lacked a clear consent policy for sterilization and encouraged sterilization abuse.¹³⁸ During the trial, Hernandez and Nabarette provided strong evidence of abuse through the affidavits of the victims themselves and through the testimony of a former medical student, Dr. Karen Benker, who revealed derogatory remarks that Dr. Quilligan made about the fertility of poor Mexican and black women. She claimed Quilligan accepted federal funds with the goal of reducing birth rates of the women in order to

¹³⁵ Elena Gutierrez, *Fertile Matters: The politics of Mexican Origin Women’s Reproduction*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 39.

¹³⁶ Virginia Espino, “Woman Sterilized As Gives Birth’: Forced Sterilization and Chicana Resistance in the 1970s.” in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz, Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, 1993, 72.

¹³⁷ Elena Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters: The politics of Mexican Origin Women’s Reproduction*, 39.

¹³⁸ Terry Kupers, “Ten Lose their Fertility and their Case” Comision Femenil Los Angeles Papers III, Box 3 Folder 16

reduce welfare costs. They also called anthropology professor, Dr. Carlos Velez-Ibanez, as an expert witness, who evaluated the cultural impact of sterilization on the victims. The lawyers claimed forced sterilizations arose due to discrimination and hostility based on ethnicity, gender, class, and doctor's notions of immigrant status of the ten women.¹³⁹

On June 30, 1978, the federal judge denied the women's claims, believing that the sterilizations were the result of cultural differences derived from language differences and misunderstandings. Federal Judge Curtis's own biased views of Mexican women's fertility came out during the trial in more than one way. First, he did not see the vital importance of Dr. Benker's testimony and did not see a problem in doctors convincing patients with large families to seek sterilization. Secondly, he contested the testimony of Dr. Velez-Ibanez and "questioned the necessity of an expert witness on Mexican culture, maintaining that any information such an expert could provide would probably be self-evident".¹⁴⁰ He concluded that the sterilizations had occurred due to miscommunications between doctor and patient due to the victims' cultural background. He did not hold the hospital administrators accountable for physician's actions because no specific rule directed employees to push sterilization on poor Chicanas. In effect, the judge placed the blame on the women for their cultural differences and misunderstandings without considering how their reproductive rights had been violated.¹⁴¹

Beginning in 1965, Chicana feminists within the community helped ignite a campaign for reproductive justice. The fight against sterilization did not end in the courtroom but with grass-roots activism primarily advocated by Chicana feminists, such as Gloria Molina. Sterilization abuse became a unifying issue for the Chicana rights movement in the early 1970s. Activists

¹³⁹ Virginia Espino, "Woman Sterilized As Gives Birth': Forced Sterilization and Chicana Resistance in the 1970s," 70.

¹⁴⁰ Elena Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters: The politics of Mexican Origin Women's Reproduction*, 48.

¹⁴¹ Sterilization Issues-Update, July 19, 1977, Comision Femenil Los Angeles Papers III, Box 3 Folder 16

from different organizations, including the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization and Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional (CFMN) educated women about forced sterilization and led them through protests. Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional played an instrumental role in identifying and articulating for the first time the discrimination Chicanas faced. CFLA not only participated in the lawsuit but they also helped with fundraising and staging protests at the hospital in the name of the plaintiffs. Their activist work created solidarity amongst Chicana women while educating the community about the racist and sexist practices of the hospital. Moreover, they held the hospital accountable for their illegal actions towards Mexican-American women.¹⁴²

Members of Comision Femenil helped create political awareness of sterilization for Chicana women and transformed the white feminist fight for reproductive rights into a struggle for reproductive justice that affected other women of color. Chicana resistance to sterilization stimulated media attention that informed communities about sterilization abuse and led to changes in California guidelines. On a national level, the lawsuit connected California to the other cases of sterilization abuse across the country.¹⁴³ The federal government was forced to look at this abuse as a national trend in public hospitals, rather than as isolated incidents. In 1975, the Coalition for the Medical Rights of Women coordinated efforts of local feminist, legal, consumer, and medical groups which petitioned the California Department of Health to develop and implement guidelines for sterilization abuse. Chicana feminists “prepared for hearings by submitting oral and written testimony from victims of sterilization abuse, relatives and friends

¹⁴² Sterilization Law Suit Materials, 1975-1978, Comision Femenil Los Angeles Papers III, Box 3 Folder 16

¹⁴³ Rebecca Kluchin, *Fit to be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980*, 151..

and victims, community organizers, and health workers concerned with patients' rights".¹⁴⁴ The women of CFLA also testified in front of the board and due to the "Los Angeles episode, the California Department of Health re-evaluated its sterilization guidelines to ensure the right of informed consent and issued an informational booklet, in both English and Spanish".¹⁴⁵ The booklet warned the patients about language of sterilization, asserting that the phrase "tying tubes" is equivalent to sterilization. The pamphlet also explicitly told women that "'only YOU can make up your mind to be sterilized'" and don't "let anyone push you into it".¹⁴⁶ By 1978, these women's efforts, with the support of some radical white feminists who adopted reproductive rights philosophies of Chicanas and other, women of color, made respective gains. In effect, the University of Southern California-Los Angeles County Medical Center and other hospitals like it had to end coercive sterilization.

Chicana women's pursuit of reproductive justice in the face of coercive sterilization revealed how Chicanas and other women of color faced a very different set of reproductive health issues than women in the mainstream women's liberation movement faced, which was predominantly due to race and class differences. In the 1960s and 1970s, "women of color filed law suits against forced sterilization in various parts of the country including South Carolina, North Carolina, New York, Arizona, Georgia, Washington, Indiana, and Maine".¹⁴⁷ Women of color insisted that the right to restrict one's reproduction had to go hand and hand with the right to bear and raise children without state interference. They faced higher death rates from illegal abortion than white women and higher maternal mortality rates due to poverty related diseases.

¹⁴⁴ North East Community Health Council, September 27, 1978, Comision Femenil Los Angeles Papers III, Box 3 Folder 16.

¹⁴⁵ Virginia Espino, "Woman Sterilized As Gives Birth': Forced Sterilization and Chicana Resistance in the 1970s," 77.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Rebecca Kluchin, *Fit to be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980*, 152.

Most importantly, their struggles for reproductive justice developed from a commitment to social justice within their own communities. They not only wanted reproduction rights, but they wanted “equal access to healthcare, housing, safe work environments and the right to choose contraception and abortion without state interference”.¹⁴⁸ Mexican women’s fight for reproductive rights alone involved citizenship, welfare rights, and cultural struggles primarily around language barriers. Therefore, these women situated their demands for reproductive justice within the struggle against poverty and the crusade for racial equality through activism starting in their own communities.

Having advocated for women’s issues and tallying up victories in local Chicana communities, Comision was the first nationally-recognized Chicana organization to advocate issues within the international women’s movement. In 1975, CFLA attended the International Women’s Conference held in Mexico City in order to create coalitions with other feminists, especially Mexican feminists. Celia Herrera Rodriguez, a student at Cal State University, Sacramento, and Frances Romero pushed the women into attending the conference because they wanted to see Mexico and explore their connection to their heritage.¹⁴⁹ Initially, the women of Comision Femenil expected to have a natural bond with feminists in Mexico. However, after meeting Latina activists from around the world, especially Mexican feminists, the women from Comision Femenil began to understand their own privilege as Americans in relation to “Third World women”.¹⁵⁰ They also realized that they did share a bond with Mexican women, but at the same time culturally, members of CFLA primarily were more American than Mexican.¹⁵¹ The participation of the women within this conference transcended the U.S.-Mexico border, but their

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 150.

¹⁴⁹ Marisela Chavez, *Despierten hermanas y hermanos!*, 138.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Marisela Chavez, *Despierten hermanas y hermanos!*, 137-141.

experiences at the conference did not transcend differences in national and cultural identity. For the first time in their lives, the women felt that their American identity dominated their Mexican identity, which challenged how they perceived themselves as an oppressed Chicano nation. At the same time they realized that women around the world faced similar discrimination based on sex, race, class, and ethnicity which reinforced the Chicana's goals to support social reform in the United States.¹⁵²

The International Women's Conference set the foreground for the first U.S. National Women's Conference sponsored by the government. Twenty-thousand people gathered in Houston for the first National Women's Conference from November 18-21, 1977. The conference revealed the challenges of creating a national plan that addressed the needs of all American women and not just the white majority. Many minority women in attendance criticized the U.S. women's movement for not better representing, or working to understand, the interests of women of color.¹⁵³ CFLA representatives attended Conference, where members assumed a leadership role in developing the Plank for Hispanic Women which was read to the convened body within the Minority Resolution by the President of CFMN, Sandy Sewell. The L.A chapter women attended the National Women's conference held in Houston where the chapter sold commemorative tote bags with the IWY/Comision logo on them.¹⁵⁴ The profits were used to finance the expenses of those women whose trip was not funded. Members of the Los Angeles chapter served on the coordinating committee for the CFMN Issues Conference, "responsibilities

¹⁵² Ibid, 188.

¹⁵³ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 140

¹⁵⁴ CFMN Annual Business Meeting June 17, 1978, CFLA Collection I Box 2, folder 7

included program chair and chairing various workshops, in particular, “Reproductive Freedom.”¹⁵⁵

President Sandy Serrano Sewell, one of the first members of CFLA, presented the “Hispanic plank” in the national plan of action which the Comision was at the forefront of developing. The plank was over 14,000 women who joined together to make a statement on behalf of women in predominantly Mexican communities. In the president’s message, Sewell claimed that on a local level they worked on the plan of action by providing workshops, participation on panels, being keynote speakers, making television appearances and writing media articles, including for Ms. Magazine, Los Angeles Times, Somos Magazine, the Star News and Town Hall News.¹⁵⁶

This was also the same conference where the term “women of color” originated. It is unknown if the women of Comision Femenil were there when Black feminists wanted to exchange the “minority” plank, which was a document that inadequately addressed Black women’s and other women of colors needs. At the same time, it was a lost for black feminists who wanted to create their own agenda that spoke to the needs of black women across the nation. They did create a women’s minority plank that did not previously exist, but at the expense of black feminists hope for an agenda that focused on the plight of women within their own communities.¹⁵⁷

The Struggle for Sister Solidarity

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵⁷ “The Origin of the Phrase Women of Color” last modified Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com>.

Although Comision Femenil strove to create coalitions with other women across the nation, they faced problems due to race and class differences. Comision Femenil worked within a network of Chicana organizations including Hijas de Cuauhtémoc and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization (CWRO) as well as they supported the National Women's Organization (NOW). The women in CFLA wanted to create a Chicana sisterhood that reached across local, state, and international boundaries; however, class conflicts often made it difficult for them to be able to draw in all Chicanas into their organization. They also experienced the problem of racial barriers in organizations when trying to add the plight of the Mexican woman to already established liberal feminist agendas.¹⁵⁸

Although CWRO and CFLA focused on the needs of Chicanas, they differed in some aspects. CFLA considered itself an organization of professional women who sought to help improve the condition of all Chicana women. Its members focused on providing employment training, leadership skills, and child care services to Chicanas so that they could work outside the home. CFLA also received government funding to run their programs and centers such as the Chicana Service Action Center and the Centro de Niños. CFLA members tried to reach out to welfare mothers and often times educated Chicana women about welfare legislation and political issues that affected welfare recipients in their annual CFM annual reports and newsletters.¹⁵⁹ The CWRO, on the other hand worked primarily with welfare recipients who remained unemployed or performed low skill menial labor. The CWRO was a purely grassroots organization that did

¹⁵⁸ Ana Nieto Gomez, "What is the Talmadge Amendment?," *Regeneracion*. vol 2. No. 3. (1973).

¹⁵⁹ Ana Nieto Gomez, "What is the Talmadge Amendment?," *Regeneracion*. vol 2. No. 3. 1973.

not receive any type of government funding, but rather relied on the limited resources its members could muster from their community.¹⁶⁰

Both the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization and Comision Femenil Los Angeles supported the abolishment of the Talmadge amendment and worked hard to spread information about its faults and help build opposition to it. They spoke out against the Talmadge Amendment, which was an amendment to the Social Security Act that required all able-bodied persons to register for work with the Human Resources Development program. This amendment targeted welfare recipients and their families, specifically welfare mothers with dependent children.¹⁶¹ According to the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization (CWRO) and other welfare rights organizations, the aim of this amendment was to reduce the welfare rolls. The CWRO believed that the Talmadge Amendment would not help people get off welfare, but rather would keep them on it. They argued that the training established through this amendment was inadequate and merely prepared workers for minimally paid jobs.¹⁶² The CWRO also argued that this amendment would just create another level of bureaucracy that recipients would have to deal with and that this would cost an immense amount of capital. They asserted that, rather than spending millions of dollars on a new layer of bureaucracy, the government should put the money towards offering poor women adequate training, child care, and assistance with education.¹⁶³

Although CFLA supported welfare mothers, they did not always support tactics of working class Chicana organizations, such as the Chicano Welfare Rights Organization due to

¹⁶⁰ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicano Power!*, 236.

¹⁶¹ Francisca Flores "A Reaction to Discussions on the Talmadge Amendment to the Social Security Act," *Encuentro Femenil* vol. 1 no. 2 (1974): 13-14.

¹⁶² Escalante, Alicia. "A letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization." *Encuentro Femenil* 1:2 (1974), 3.

¹⁶³ Escalante, Alicia. "A letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization." *Encuentro Femenil* 1:2 (1974), 2.

educational and class differences and political goals. In 1973, Francisca Flores and Alicia Escalante, President of the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization, published two articles in *Encuentro Femenil* regarding the Talmadge Amendment that illustrate the diversity in opinion and ideology among Chicanas.¹⁶⁴ Flores had argued that the struggle against the Talmadge Amendment could become a platform to include others in the struggle for economic justice. She, asserted “it is one thing to oppose Congressional or administrative repudiation of social legislation and quite another to call on the community to oppose a piece of legislation such as the Talmadge amendment solely on the basis and interest of one group affected by it”.¹⁶⁵ Escalante replied that, “[Flores] first get herself informed about what the East Los Angeles Chicano Welfare Rights is all about and what it is really doing before she starts forming or giving her opinions. Constructive criticism, yes: destructive no. We are not playing politics with each other”.¹⁶⁶ Although Flores and Escalante differed in opinion, eventually the two organizations worked together to try and abolish the Talmadge amendment from 1972-1973.¹⁶⁷

Despite the fact that both organizations worked for the benefit of Chicana women, addressing issues of education, employment and childcare, Escalante and some of the women from CWRO viewed the women from Comision as bourgeois and elitist. They felt that the some of the women did not have a sense of urgency in preventing the legislative amendment from becoming legal, particularly the women who served on the Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional board of directors. The CWRO and Escalante primarily got along with Comision members who worked out of the local Los Angeles chapter and the CSAC center. Ana Nieto

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Francisca, Flores. “A Reaction to Discussions on the Talmadge Amendment to the Social Security Act” *Encuentro Femenil* 1:2 (1974): 13-14.

¹⁶⁶ Escalante, Alicia. “A letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization,” 16.

¹⁶⁷ Marisela Chavez, *Despierten hermanas y hermanos!*, 142.

Gomez, leader of Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc volunteered at the CSAC and developed a close relationship with Escalante. She defended the plight of the welfare woman in an article on the Talmadge Amendment published in *Encuentro Femenil*. She advocated on behalf of welfare women and supported the CWRO's desire to educate both middle-class and working class women to bridge class difference in order to fight against the amendment.¹⁶⁸

In addition to facing conflicts within Chicana feminist circles, CFLA also struggled with forming coalitions with mainstream women's liberation organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). CFLA formed in large part because other women's organizations did not consider how Mexican women needed solutions to specific issues they faced as members of the Chicano community and as individual women. They claimed that Mexican women not only fought for equality within the work place, but also fought for labor rights for Chicana women who made up a large percent of working class factory workers. For these reasons many Chicana political activists did not feel comfortable working with women of a different race and class. First, they did not feel comfortable leaving their community and the network of women they had created through their political activism, and secondly, they did not trust women in mainstream feminist organizations, particularly because they did not share similar backgrounds or close community ties. Francisca Flores and Yolanda Nava were some of the few members to encourage Comision members to form coalitions with other women. Yolanda believed she built bridges between feminists in different circles:

I was then too always the bridge builder I was the one trying to move us to the West side of ties and with white women's groups because I felt that we needed to be part of the women's movement we just couldn't be our own little isolated group and we really were

¹⁶⁸ Anna Nieto Gomez de Lazarin, "Madres por Justicia!!," *Encuentro Femenil* I, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 17.

*part of the larger issue of women's issues not just Chicanas issues. We had our own unique circumstances and problems and...we had to deal with racism and sexism but my own feelings was that sexism was a larger part of the issues than the racism*¹⁶⁹

Nava encouraged working with the Los Angeles chapter of the National Women's Organization. In 1975 the organization publicly endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and members participated in the Los Angeles Coalition for the ERA march in May 1976. Members also attended a rally to show solidarity with the national lobbying effort in Springfield, Illinois, one of the remaining states that had not yet ratified the ERA."¹⁷⁰

Incorporation into Electoral Politics

By the late 1970s, CFLA had become a well-established, credible organization that had placed the issues of Chicana women on the political map. When discussing the strategies and goals of the organization, "[t]he original focus was reiterated when membership drew up goals for 1975, the exception being that it was no longer necessary to spell out the desire to work within a women's organization".¹⁷¹ By 1978, the women of CFLA wanted to change to a strictly politically oriented organization. They wanted two main goals, to "get a Chicana elected to public office and influence the legislative process and learn about it".¹⁷² They envisioned a program with guest speakers to teach the membership about pending legislation which affected Chicanas and tried to ensure methods of passage. They invited candidates to address the membership, and developed a political base for electing favorable candidates. They wrote to the

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Yolanda Nava.

¹⁷⁰ "History of Comision Femenil de Los Angeles," (Feb. 1983) Box 1 Folder 6, 2.

¹⁷¹ "Philosophy" CFLA collection I Box 1, Folder 6

¹⁷² Ibid.

CFLA Board and waited on their agreement before officially changing the bylaws. Evie Martinez moved that “Comision involve themselves on an informal, unofficial basis in political matters to see whether or not they will in the future change the Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation to reflect a strictly political organization”.¹⁷³ In 1978, CFLA had come to the realization that the legislative process was the most effective means of upgrading the status of Chicanas throughout the nation, and they focused on providing intensive training sessions to the political process so that more Chicanas became politically involved and establish effective changes in their communities.¹⁷⁴

The 1981-1982 year brought forth many legislative and advocacy activities at the national level. The Comision made several presentations at conferences, such as the National Chicana Leadership Conference, the Western Regional Conference on Women and The Law, the Career Planning Center Employment Conference and at the Pasadena Commission on the Status of Women.¹⁷⁵ It also had a private meeting with Governor Jerry Brown to talk about issues such as “the lack of jobs, the impacts of cuts in health and social services, ratification of the ERA, and attempts to limit a woman’s right to choose abortion and family planning services”.¹⁷⁶ CFLA members made sure it had a role in monitoring the reapportionment when districts for the California State legislature, the Senate, the Assembly and the Congressional and municipal legislature were redrawn.¹⁷⁷ They wanted to reassure themselves that Latinos were given fair and effective reapportionments. Finally, CFLA took part in filing a suit along with MALDEF and the American Civil Liberties Union. The State Legislature had restricted the funding of abortions in

¹⁷³ CFLA Board Meeting Minutes, 1978, Comision Femenil de Los Angeles Papers II Box 4, Folder 11

¹⁷⁴ CFMN Annual Business Meeting June 17, 1978” CFLA Collection I Box 2, folder 7

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ CFLA 1980-1981 Report, CFLA Papers III, Box 1, Folder 9.

¹⁷⁷ “Reapportionment flyer” Box 6, Folder 4

the 1981-1982 budgets. Cuts had been declared unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court and the State Legislature was trying to override the Supreme Court decision. La Comision said that “denying funds to poor women was unjust because this violated a woman’s right to choose abortion merely due to her economic situation”.¹⁷⁸

Members of Comision Femenil considered Gloria Molina’s election to the office of State Assemblywoman in June of 1982 the greatest success of the organization. Molina had been active in the Los Angeles chapter since its founding. From 1973 to 1974, she was the chapter representative of CFLA as well as the Vice President of the eastern region. In 1974-1976, she held the offices of the Board of Directors First Vice President, and the President of the Board of Directors respectively. Because of this involvement, the CFLA did,

A lot of walking precincts and that is going door to door and speaking with voters. It’s always best when candidates can speak with the voters but obviously she can’t walk all of them so every weekend there was a force of volunteers walking on her behalf and they would go to door to door carrying literature, a pamphlet saying this is Gloria Molina and this is what she stand for....say “we urge you to support her, answer any questions they may have and just continue this throughout the campaign. Also you do mailers and discuss an issue or issues and say this is my position on these issues and these other people are supporting it. You send several of them doing the campaign to the voters in the district; you do media kinds of things, speaking engagements and interviews on radio...”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ “Articles on Reproductive Freedom,” CFLA Papers 1970-1980, Box 1 Folder 12.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Leticia Quezada by Marcie Miranda, 10 July 1996, Los Angeles, California, Marcie Miranda Collection, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara.

In 1980, two Southern California congressional district vacancies opened. Molina ran against Richard Polanco in the Democratic primary race for California State Legislature in the 56th Assembly district in East Los Angeles. This district stood as the same district where Molina was born and raised, and where she began her political career with her involvement with CFLA and her position as Field Deputy for Assemblyman Art Torres in 1974. Most male politicians discouraged Molina from running because they ultimately believed a woman could not win in East Los Angeles. They did not believe that Molina had a tough enough attitude to negotiate with other politicians. Molina remembered the men “laughing in her face” believing that she could not possibly win without their funds to support her.¹⁸⁰ However, CFLA rallied behind Molina, putting on fundraisers for her and lobbying for public support. President at the time Gloria Moreno-Wycoff vouched for Gloria’s character in a support letter, describing her as a role model who “epitomize[d] what...minority women in particular must strive for: leadership roles in their communities, active participation in local politics, and dedication to supporting issues of concern to the greater community”.¹⁸¹ The commission provided a conference in 1982 designed to enable Chicanas to be effective key staff members of Gloria’s political campaign.¹⁸² Due in large part to the commission’s support and community of Chicanas behind her, Molina won the election. Her election in 1982 helped paved the way for other Latinas to follow in her footsteps.

During her time as legislator, she pushed for more Latinas in higher education, fought against redlining, and advocated for prison reform. Later on in 1986, she was the first legislator to oppose the establishment of a prison in downtown Los Angeles. She joined forces with the Mothers of East Los Angeles, a grass-roots organization in Boyle Heights to rally against the

¹⁸⁰ “Gloria Molina” Latino Leaders: The National Magazine of the Successful Mexican American, Comision Femenil de Los Angeles III Box 6 Folder 7.

¹⁸¹ “Gloria Molina Democrat for Assembly letter from Gloria Moreno-Wycoff” Series III Box 35, Folder 2.

¹⁸² “Comision Femenil Mexicana Nacional Annual Los Angeles Report, 1981-1982” Box 5 Folder 9

construction of the prison. Her campaign paid off and the prison plan was halted. In 1987, she became the first Latina appointed to the Los Angeles School Board of Superintendents. Her political victories represented a challenge to the “leadership of Eastside politicians”.¹⁸³ She signified a departure from party politics dependent on party leaders who were able to generate large amounts of money for campaigns. Instead, Molina used grass-roots community tactics to gain ground for her political campaigns and broke Latino male monopolies on the Council. Art Alatorre, her former mentor was forced to take a more even stand on progressive issues due to Molina’s presence on the council.¹⁸⁴

Gloria Molina became an icon within the Chicana community and served as the ideal role model for a younger generation of Latina women. In 1972, KCET filmed a commission meeting and Gloria Molina and Diane Holguin discussed Chicana identity on KFI radio in 1972, where they declared that “[t]he ultimate role model is Gloria Molina”.¹⁸⁵ Gloria Molina’s election placed Comision Femenil as a prominent feminist organization within the state of California. On January 22, 1983, at the Cocunut Grove, readers of *CAMINO*s magazine recognized the growth and development of the Chicana community and honored them by electing Gloria Hispanic of the Year. With the election of Gloria Molina as the first Latina legislature, the Los Angeles chapter had fulfilled its goals to provide role models for the Chicana community and had helped elect a Latina into state office. Moreover, they had taken the local, everyday problems that Chicanas endured within their communities and created a national and international political awareness through twelve years of advocacy work. By 1983, Comision Femenil had successfully developed a platform that placed the plight of the Mexican woman at the forefront of national

¹⁸³ Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America*, 424-426.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ “Image of Chicana,” (1983) CFLA Collection I Box 1, Folder 6

and international feminist, political agendas, and was elected Hispanic organization of the year.¹⁸⁶

Evaluation

This thesis shows how the grass-roots activism of Comision Femenil de Los Angeles transformed local community politics into a national political feminist agenda by bridging grass roots local politics with traditional political strategies, such as legal reform and political representation. The roots of the organization stood in a radical, grassroots feminist ideology. Although today we may not see their initial goals as radical, for the time period they went against the grains of society through merely forming one of the first autonomous Chicana women's organizations. These women identified and confronted injustices Chicana women faced, that Chicano males ignored and middle-class white feminists failed to recognize. Their community activism spread political awareness on the plight of the Chicana woman for the first time in history. The women articulated a feminist identity rooted in their lived experiences as Chicana women. They refused to choose between their identities as women and as Chicanas.¹⁸⁷ The women within Comision Femenil created one of the first political platforms that allowed Chicana women to freely discuss women's issues, such as reproductive rights, childbirth, childcare, health, family, role models, and education. Moreover, they established that Chicanas did not betray their community by standing up for their rights, claiming feminist identities, and investing in feminist epistemologies and philosophies.

This case study has allowed one to see the advancement Latinas have made through legal reform and political representation. In the 1970s, Chicanas changed from observers of the

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

political process to participants, with seven female Latina Congressional and state electoral officials.¹⁸⁸ In the 1980s, the organization grew politically successful with the election of Gloria Molina. The women in this organization paved the way for twenty-first century Latina politicians that presently represent countless Latino communities from various sectors of the nation. From the appointment of Hilda Solis as State Secretary, to the election of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court Justice, Latina political officials overall have made significant strides in legislative influence at the local, state and national levels. These opportunities for Latinos/as today would not exist without the voices of members from Comision Femenil, who fostered leadership positions for Latinas in education, employment and political office throughout the late twentieth century.¹⁸⁹

While Latinas' visibility has increased through such appointments, an important question arises: how well are Latinas as a social group served through such appointments? Moreover, how well have women of color, been heard in the turn to electoral political representation? Although Latinas have gained appointments in political offices, in the 1980s Chicanas continued to bring in an "average income at 5,060, while 53% of families headed by Latinas lived in poverty".¹⁹⁰ In 1980, Latinas earned 49 cents to every dollar earned by a white male and 29 cents less than a Latino. Moreover, 1 in 17 Latinas completed four or more years of college while 1 and 6 other Americans completed the same.¹⁹¹ This shows that political representation did not create changes in structural and economic inequality everyday Chicanas face. Moreover, the women's shift in their political agenda created distance from the Chicana community they sought to serve.

¹⁸⁸ Beatriz Olvera Stotzer, "Changing the Role of the Latina in Political Office," *Intercambios Femeniles*. vol 2 no. 3 (1984): 8.

¹⁸⁹ Sonia Lopez, "The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement," 17.

¹⁹⁰ Beatriz Olvera Stotzer, "Changing the Role of the Latina in Political Office," 8.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Although they maintained a connection to the community awarding educational scholarships and organizing political forums, the two centers they created became legal entities, and the women lost connection with the Chicana Service Center as well as Centro de Niños in the mid-1970s. These centers helped build bridges between Chicanas of different social classes, such as between Ana-Nieto-Gomez and Alicia Escalante. The centers allowed young college students to not only help working class Chicana women, but also to work with them and advocate on behalf of them creating the start of a Chicana sisterhood.

By achieving their goals they became a professionalized organization and changed their political feminist agenda. They strove to appoint more Chicanas in political office and helped women into government positions, such as Gloria Molina, Hilda Solis, and Beatriz Olvera Stotzer. Yolanda Nava became one of the first television Latina reporters as well. The organization facilitated the place for these women to grow into professional women, but they could not reach all Chicana women in the same way. Although these women came from working class communities their college education and political education within Comision Femenil pushed them into a professional life. Beatriz Olvera Stotzer exemplifies this point:

As we climb up the economic ladder of success, we join organizations that helped us succeed in our personal career choices. Yet it is at the grass-roots level (the community) that we continue to suffer the greatest. So the challenge of the 80's is to bring about innovative solutions which address the needs of the community, by directly dealing with the needs of the Latina and her family¹⁹²

¹⁹² Beatriz Olvera Stotzer, "Changing the Role of the Latina in Political Office," *Intercambios Femeniles*. vol 2 no. 3. (1984), 8.

At the end of their first ten years, the Chicana women did become professionals and did engage in reform practices, which made them similar to white women's organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). They even tried to create a universal sisterhood for Chicana women similar to the way NOW tried to create a universal sisterhood for all women.¹⁹³ However, Chicana women within Comision Femenil practiced a feminist politics that was rooted within their own identities as women and identities as Chicanas, which meant that even when they grew successful and became professionalized, they still tried to be the bridge leaders that they sought out to be, putting the community, the Latina, and family at the center of their politics. To a certain extent these women stood as the bridge leaders between grass-roots and traditional forms of politics, between generations of Chicana women, and between local, state, national, and international communities.

¹⁹³ Gloria Anzaldua, Cherie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*. (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), 25;

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