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Honors Thesis

MUJERES LATINAS EN ACCIÓN: PRAGMATIC FEMINISM AND THE LONGEVITY OF
GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

MUJERES LATINAS EN ACCIÓN: PRAGMATIC FEMINISM AND THE LONGEVITY OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

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Bachelor of Arts

In 1973, Mujeres Latinas en Acción was formed in the midst of the Chicano Movement. Simultaneously, Chicana feminists were working in and breaking from Chicano organizations to fight for egalitarian gains. Pilsen, a neighborhood in Chicago and the home of Mujeres Latinas en Acción, was a hotbed for Chicano and Latino activism during this period. The women who founded MLEA saw similar disparities in social services offered to women in Pilsen that Chicanas around the country were noting. The ways in which Chicanas were approaching these feminist ventures varied. Based upon my studies of Mujeres Latinas en Acción, I argue that *pragmatic feminism* was the main driver in MLEA's formation and methodology in carving out space for women and themselves, becoming the longest Latina-run organization in the country. The intricacy with which the organization was run was led by a distinct inclination on behalf of founders and members that was based upon Chicano and Latino culture, Women's Liberation ideologies, and the specific needs and community of Pilsen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The inspiration of this project came from my own personal family history. In 1973, the same year *Mujeres Latinas en Acción* was formed, my grandmother immigrated from Ecuador to Chicago, leaving her young son, my father, in Ecuador as she traversed unfamiliar terrain. Her courage and perseverance are echoed in the stories of members and patrons of *Mujeres Latinas en Acción*. To her, I give my heartfelt love and gratitude. I am grateful also to Susan Grettenberger and Linda Tortolero who willingly shared their histories and knowledge of *Mujeres Latinas en Acción* with me.

I would also like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. David-James Gonzales, who has assisted in my development as a budding scholar. He has provided an immense amount of guidance and support throughout the process of research and writing. He has both assisted in my development as a historian and in my fascination and appreciation of Latino culture. His mentorship throughout my undergraduate studies at Brigham Young University has cultivated a drive within me to uncover and tell the stories of Latinas in the United States. Additionally, I am grateful for Dr. Rebecca DeScwheinitz and Dr. Daren Ray for their service on my advisory committee.

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Mujeres Latinas en Acción: Pragmatic Feminism and the Longevity of Grassroots Organizations

Introduction

At a bar nestled in a Chicago neighborhood, four women discussed, at length, the lack of services for the Latina women of Pilsen. This soon turned into a discussion about the possibility of opening a women's social service organization in Pilsen. These four women, three Chicanas and one Anglo, created Mujeres Latinas en Acción. The organization was founded as part of a larger conversation occurring across the nation. In 1973, "Mujer Despierta: Latina Women's Education Awareness Conference" was held at El Centro de la Causa, an organization in Pilsen. This came as a result of a previous conference held in Indiana, "Mujer Adelante." There, each state was assigned two representatives to hold an additional meeting the following year. These were just two of dozens of similar events happening across the country as Chicanas began to formally organize within the Chicano Movement. In 1969, at a Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, a group of Chicanas rushed into the conference to say that women were not "equal parts of this."¹ Other Chicanas felt similarly and began to organize themselves within the Chicano Movement. At "Mujer Despierta," women in attendance were encouraged to make specific organizations for Chicanas in the state. From these calls to action, these four women in attendance knew that an organization had to be started and, in 1973, formally founded Mujeres Latinas en Acción.

Mujeres started with small workshops, with members relying on their own abilities to provide services. With no funding, these services were limited and included English and GED classes, as well as the founding of numerous co-ops. By 1976, Mujeres had secured funding and

¹ Leonard G. Ramírez, *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 37.

was officially a not-for-profit organization.² Some of their primary issues included domestic abuse, family planning, immigration, and education. These were based on the needs and interests of the Latinas in Pilsen and were informed by the members' personal feminist ideologies.

In June 2023, Mujeres Latinas en Acción will celebrate its 50th anniversary, making it the longest Latina-run organization in the nation. Based on my analysis of minutes, newspaper clippings, by-laws, ethnographic papers, and annual reports found in the DePaul Archives, I argue that the key to Mujeres' longevity is their standing in the community, which was forged through *pragmatic feminism*. Similar to Chicana feminism as defined by Benita Roth, pragmatic feminism is my term for the methodological approach of Mujeres that finds intersections between Chicano culture and Women's Liberation. However, what differentiates Chicana feminism from pragmatic feminism is the effort on behalf of the organization and its members to fit the intersections between the Chicano Movement and Women's Liberation within their specific community to allow for progressive transformation. It is localized feminism which is shaped through self-determination and egalitarianism, and which is fitted to the specific needs of Pilsen. Pragmatic feminism accounts for the semi-reactionary relationship between Mujeres Latinas en Acción and Pilsen. The push and pull between Mujeres and Pilsen crafted a moderate approach for Mujeres which resulted in shaping, and at times tempering, Mujeres' outreach in the community. This resulted in Mujeres being more moderate. Mujeres' success in Pilsen and the larger Chicago area is in large part due to their pragmatic feminist methodology and its ensuing rapport that it built with Pilsen and the city.

In this paper, I contextualize Mujeres Latinas en Acción within the Chicano Movement and Chicana feminism. I also place Mujeres into Pilsen, the community in which it was founded.

² Jemima Sanchez, "Independent Study: Mujeres Latinas en Accion," 1996, MSS0026_01_001_008, Box 1, Folder 8, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 5.

Pilsen saw many forms of Chicano activism and Mujeres' ensuing struggles in the community speak to both the environment into which it was born and the efficacy of MLEA's methodologies. Finally, I expound upon various areas in the history of Mujeres Latinas en Acción to both extrapolate the pattern of push and pull that MLEA participated in with Pilsen and to expound on how they utilized pragmatic feminism to create a thriving organization in the Chicago area.

Historiography

Despite Mujeres' long history, relatively little scholarly work has been dedicated to the organization. Lilia Fernández, in her dissertation "Latina/o Migration and Community Formation in Postwar Chicago," is among the only published histories of Mujeres. In her dissertation, Fernández purports that the programs within Mujeres, such as English classes and nutrition classes, were formed organically through the observation and immersion in the community of Pilsen.³ Additionally, Fernández identifies the collaboration that occurred between MLEA and other organizations whose goals aligned with their own. For example, in 1977, Mujeres teamed up with another women's organization in Chicago to open a women's shelter.⁴ Fernandez also depicts MLEA's role in the larger Chicago area, in addition to expounding on their role in Pilsen. In her dissertation, Fernández conducted some of the final oral histories with founding members of the organization, namely María Mangual and Alicia Amador, before their passing.⁵ Fernández illustrates the nuanced gender relations in Pilsen, specifically in the beginning of MLEA, characterized by the simultaneous support and suspicion of the organization and the women who

³ Lilia Fernández, "Latina/o Migration and Community Formation in Postwar Chicago: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Gender, and Politics, 1945-1975." (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2005), 276.
<https://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/305001861/348F88DF6FF04384PQ/3?accountid=4488>

⁴ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 278.

⁵ Maria Mangual passed away in 2007, Alicia Amador in 2010.

ran it.⁶ Moreover, in *Brown in the Windy City*, Fernández further adds to the methodology of Mujeres stating, “they [MLEA] drew on feminist ideology, grounded it in the Chicano community, and reshaped its cultural contours to fit the local context.”⁷ I argue that this aspect of Mujeres Latinas en Acción, namely MLEA’s unique intersection between the Chicano Movement, feminism, and their community, accounts for their durability and longevity. They were able to react to community response through the lens of their intimate and personal knowledge of their culture which thereby enabled them to gain trust with the community while pushing for egalitarianism.

Elizabeth Día, in her undergraduate thesis “Motherhood en Acción,” published her work on the organization in 2018, arguing that the members of MLEA “frame[d] their work in ways which acknowledged traditional gender roles” in order to find acceptance in the community of Pilsen.⁸ I agree that, at times, Mujeres framed their work in accordance with traditional gender roles. However, to say that they framed all of their work in this manner, and that others saw them only as mothers to the community, ignores other conscious decisions that Mujeres made, such as endorsing birth control and training women as leaders, the reception of which proves that the community was wary of some of their actions. To emphasize the intentionality of Mujeres’ choice to conform to gender roles also downplays the organic, pragmatic, and subconscious decisions that Mujeres chose based on intersections found between feminist ideals and their culture. This is supported by general Chicana feminist sentiment during the time.⁹ I add that Mujeres did not see themselves as conforming or changing tradition so much as they wished to

⁶ Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 257.

⁷ Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City*, 252.

⁸ Elizabeth Día, “Motherhood en Acción: Gender, Latinidad, and Community Action in Pilsen, 1973-1987,” (BA Thesis, The University of Chicago, 2018), 4.

⁹ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12.

protect and elevate women of the community. They used culture and tradition to support Latinas in personal development and protection. This allyship created within the community, more so than conformation to traditional gender roles, led to their reception and endurance in Pilsen.

On the Chicano Movement, Dr. Ignacio Garcia has expounded on the Chicano Movement's methodology as a whole. "Chicano" was a new identity which was highly politicized. The term differentiated between Mexican Americans and Chicanos, citing "Chicano" as a more politically radical, and militant identity which demanded political progressivism. Chicanos found pride in their brown skin and rejected the need to pass as white. They actively saw themselves as Mexican, which was a byproduct of political action. The changes they sought were, at the time, radical. They were also steadfastly focused on the community.¹⁰ Similarly, Mujeres was extremely community focused. Much of their time and energy was spent in the community of Pilsen exclusively. While the founding members—minus one—were Chicanas, they were extremely thoughtful in their pan ethnic, multiracial vision for Mujeres Latinas en Acción. Indeed, Mujeres, through their push and pull relationship with the community, fostered more moderate roots in comparison with Dr. García's militant Chicanismo. This worked for their good, I argue, as their ability to look beyond the Chicano Movement was one connecting link with the future of Latino activism in the American landscape.

Chicana activism, specifically, is thoroughly presented in Maylei Blackwell's book, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. Blackwell focuses on the "multifaceted vision of liberation" that Chicanas held.¹¹ Within the Chicano Movement, Chicana feminism was especially seen in young Chicanas who were on college campuses. The

¹⁰ Ignacio García, *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos Among Mexican Americans*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

¹¹ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 1.

first organization to “explicitly call for and theorize Chicana feminism” was Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc.¹² Mujeres Latinas en Acción is an additional example of the lived, active form of Chicana feminism which called for community involvement and progressive, egalitarian ideals. Thus, the legacy of MLEA makes it an extremely potent example of the “political tradition of Chicana feminism” which continues today.¹³

The Chicano Movement

As Mujeres was being shaped and created, its members were part of a larger body striving for civil rights in the Chicano Movement. The term “Chicano” originally referred to those of Mexican heritage and eventually became a rallying cry to defy decades of discrimination through Mexican Americans referring to themselves as such. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of African Americans, the Chicano Movement sought “racial, ethnic, and economic justice for Mexican Americans.”¹⁴ The process was sought through local and national organizing. The movement is largely categorized between the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, although new work is pushing the timeline into the late 1970s and 1980s. One of the most popular organizations of the movement, of whose impetus is largely cited as the beginning of the movement itself, was the United Farm Workers, led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, which used national boycotts, picket lines, and negotiations to unionize farm laborers, many of whom immigrated from Mexico.¹⁵

Integral in the general movement was *Chicanismo*. Chicanismo ideologically and literally expanded “the bonds of friendship and obligation” from between male Chicanos “to the

¹² Blackwell, *Chicana Power!*, 3.

¹³ Blackwell, *Chicana Power!*, 9

¹⁴ Marc Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement* (New York: Oxfordshire, 2015), 6.

¹⁵ Mario T. García, “Introduction: The Chicano Movement and Chicano Historiography,” in *The Chicano Movement: Perspectives from the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Mario T. García (New York: Oxfordshire, 2014), 3.

community as a whole.”¹⁶ The exact methodological execution of this ideal varied, however, it was often by militant efforts of young Chicanos and Chicanas.¹⁷ Chicanismo also expanded the realm of the Chicano Movement by weaving it throughout the country, despite the locality of many activist efforts.¹⁸ This was done in various manners, including MLEA’s, which used an intense focus on locality that gradually expanded throughout the organization’s existence. Their unwavering attention to Pilsen and later the Chicago area, unlike many of the other grassroots organizations created during the Chicano Movement, created a stability which allowed its persistence through the twentieth century into present.

The increasing urbanization of Chicanos in the United States helped activist efforts to gain political and social traction.¹⁹ Within larger cities such as Chicago, ethnic enclaves of Chicano and Latino populations became hubs of activism. After-school programs, educational efforts, and artwork were a few of the various signs that the movement was underway. Within these various organizations, Mujeres Latinas en Acción formed during the latter-half of the Chicano Movement and was the first in the city to specifically target Latina women. The formation of MLEA was part of a larger effort by Chicanas to change the dynamics within the movement and the culture.²⁰ These efforts, which began with the *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, created a “multifaceted vision of liberation” which aimed to change the community in which they were formed by reaching out to women to lead in their homes and community.²¹

Chicana Feminism

¹⁶ Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement*, 12.

¹⁷ Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement*, 14.

¹⁸ Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement*, 10.

¹⁹ George Mariscal, *Brown-eyed Children of the Sun: The Chicano Movement 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 246.

²⁰ Blackwell, *Chicana Power!*, 3.

²¹ Blackwell, *Chicana Power!*, 1.

The Chicano Movement's dependence on local organizing and the grassroots organizations which stemmed from local and national organizing meant that a vast number of Chicanas were active and present participants in activist efforts. The majority of Chicanas in the movement were rank and file members, many of whom were juggling jobs and families at the same time. Despite their often clerical tasks, their presence was vital to the progress of *La Causa*.²² They organized, rallied, and spoke out against the marginalization of the Chicano community and helped to demand change. Nevertheless, within the movement Chicanas often confronted sexism and machismo.

The lived experiences of Chicanas led to an increasing number of Chicanas, many of whom were young and college educated, to confront the marginalization that they were facing in their own communities as women. The efforts of these Chicana feminists were diverse and varied. Some, such as that of Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, utilized print and media to create networks which spanned the country. Others, such as that of Mujeres Latinas en Acción, centered themselves locally and derived success from community activism. For Mujeres, their feminist ideals were present in the workshops and services they offered. Some of these included domestic violence classes, skills classes, and family planning classes. However, many Chicana feminists worked within already-existing organizations of the Chicano Movement, lending their voice to the equality of La Raza in the nation and of gender within their culture.

Not all Chicanas agreed with egalitarian efforts within the movement. There were generally two camps of Chicanas: *las loyalistas* and *las feministas*.²³ Loyalists to the Chicano Movement viewed feminism as a threat to the progress of the movement. They viewed Chicana feminists as *vendidas* [sell-outs] to Anglo feminism. During the 1969 National Chicano Youth

²² The Chicano Movement is also known as La Causa.

²³ Mariscal, *Brown-eyed Children of the Sun*, 271.

Conference in Denver, primarily male delegates concluded that Chicana feminists “were opposed to their own liberation!”²⁴ Chicana feminists were ““suspected of assimilating into the feminist ideology of an alien culture,”” which is to say, Women’s Liberation.²⁵ However, most of the Chicana and Latina feminists were not aligned with the Women’s Liberation movement, at least not entirely. In fact, while many Chicana feminists saw the value of Women’s Liberation, they did not feel that Anglo feminism properly addressed the effects of race and class on gender. Therefore, Chicana feminists held themselves at a distance from Anglo feminism.²⁶ One author from the Berkeley Chicano Studies Newsletter depicts Chicana feminists’ stronger loyalty to their cultural group than their gender group:

“We aren’t oppressed by Chicanos, we’re oppressed by a system that serves white power and depends upon a white majority for its survival and perpetuation.... That we have decided as Chicanas that our place is beside our men and with each other does not mean there are no problems between us or that we as women are completely satisfied in our relationship to our men.”²⁷

A dissatisfaction, rather than a rebellion, is a more accurate description of how Chicanas navigated feminism within culture during this period. Some, like the author of this article, found that the cause of sexism within their culture was a consequence of the oppression of their race. Therefore, for Chicanas, there was a varying degree of prioritization given to Chicana feminism in comparison to the Chicano Movement.

²⁴ Mariscal, *Brown-eyed Children of the Sun*, 271.

²⁵ Marisela R. Chávez, “We Have a Long, Beautiful History,” in *No Permanent Wave: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 81.

²⁶ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 12.

²⁷ Vella G. Hancock, “La Chicana, Chicano Movement, and Women’s Liberation,” *Chicago Studies Newsletter, University of California, Berkeley*. 1, no. 4/5 (February & March 1971): 6.

Other skepticism regarding gender egalitarianism included the potential jeopardization of the inner workings of organizations, which were dependent upon Chicanas for many of the day-to-day tasks.²⁸ To quell these suspicions and skepticisms, Chicana feminists placed their feminism in the context of the movement using two main arguments. The first appealed to the larger themes of the Chicano Movement by using Chicano and Mexican history to illustrate the deep roots that feminism had in their own history, thereby disproving that feminism was an Anglo creation.²⁹ The second addressed “the Chicano family’s political familialism [sic], and the further necessity to remake the politicized family for struggle.”³⁰ Chicana feminists simultaneously viewed the Chicano familial structure as a cultural and political asset while “challenging roles within it.”³¹ Family and community was essential to Chicana feminists. Their ideas of progression were inextricably linked with the progression of their community.³²

By the 1970s, many Chicana feminists were working within Chicano organizations. However, a portion of Chicana feminists worked “with community-based women’s service organizations, and before long they created their own associations distinct from those of other members of La Causa.”³³ *Mujeres Latinas en Acción* was one of the few organizations running in the early 1970s. In 1974, at the nadir of the Chicano Movement, MALDEF reported that only 53 Chicana organizations were present in the nation.³⁴ This relatively low number illustrates both the affinity to community for Chicana feminists, as well as some of the difficulty that organizations like *Mujeres Latinas en Acción* faced. In an effort to create a lasting institution,

²⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 6.

²⁹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 159.

³⁰ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 159.

³¹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 165.

³² Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 172.

³³ Mariscal, *Brown-eyed Children of the Sun*, 271.

³⁴ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 172.

MLEA embraced the values of Chicana feminism, namely that of culture, community, and progression. They inserted those values into their methods serving Latinas in Pilsen and the surrounding metropolitan area.

Mujeres in Pilsen

MLEA's creation was a continuation of efforts by Chicanos in Pilsen to create a strong, healthy community. In the 1970s, Pilsen became "an epicenter of both Mexican immigrant life and the new currents of the Chicano Movement."³⁵ Pilsen had many ethnicities present but after the Great Depression and continuing into the latter half of the twentieth century, the number of Latinos, primarily Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, increased.³⁶ Thus, when MLEA was created, Pilsen was experiencing both growth and new concerns. Gang violence, immigration, structural vulnerability, and a lack of political representation were just a few of the concerns plaguing the neighborhood. Mujeres was part of a trending "new generation of Chicano leaders" who "took to the streets to raise awareness and seek socioeconomic justice as the neighborhood's problems worsened in the late 1960s and early 1970s."³⁷ The increased number of Mexicans and Chicanos in the area exacerbated the gaps in social services offered at the time, namely those for women. Before MLEA, various social activist groups were present in the community, including El Centro and the Young Lords. Targeting Latinos within the neighborhood, El Centro offered services to community members such as after-school programs. One member of El Centro was Maria Mangual, founding member of Mujeres Latinas en Accion. Of serving in the El Centro she said, "I was looking around and I realized that unless you were a jock, unless you were a kid

³⁵ Deborah E. Kanter, *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 130. <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctvwh8dm8.9>

³⁶ Latino Institute, "Latinas in Chicago: A Portrait," 1996, MSS0026_01_001_008, Box 1, Folder 8, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 10.

³⁷ Kanter, *Chicago Católico*, 130.

involved in sports, there was nothing there for you.”³⁸ El Centro was just one area where women, in this case young women, were being overlooked. When MLEA began, they started by creating programs to help young girls who were runaways or in otherwise precarious situations. This program was in addition to other “relevant social and education services.”³⁹

Despite filling a gap in services, Mujeres Latinas en Accion still experienced pushback from the community.⁴⁰ The specific act of organizing was both nontraditional and disturbing to many in the community.⁴¹ Some men refused to take them seriously, “calling them ‘rabelrouers [sic]... lesbians... loose women.’”⁴² Even progressive women had trouble accepting Mujeres and their presence in the community.⁴³ The mere act of organizing put Mujeres on the outskirts of the community which was further cemented by the majority of them being unmarried and non-Catholics.⁴⁴ The community’s displeasure was publicly demonstrated when MLEA’s location, loaned to them by El Centro, was torched and gutted.⁴⁵ Before that, one of the Mujeres’ members had been assaulted by a gang. Later, a hit list with the names of the organization’s members was found.⁴⁶ Churches in the area, even those considered progressive, labeled Mujeres as radical.⁴⁷ Groups in the community were discontent with the presence of Mujeres in Pilsen. The burning of

³⁸ Fernández, “Latina/o Migration,” 260.

³⁹ “Proposal for Mujeres Latinas en Accion: Community Education and Advocacy Project,” circa 1975, MSS0026_01_001_002, Box 1, Folder 2, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois. 1.

⁴⁰ Diana Salazar, “Mujeres Latinas en Accion: In Action,” May 3, 1996, MSS0026_01_001_010, Box 1, Folder 10, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁴¹ Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City*, 243, 251.

⁴² Fernández, “Latina/o Migration,” 273.

⁴³ Fernández, “Latina/o Migration,” 273.

⁴⁴ Michelle Teresa García, “A Preliminary Ethnographic Study of a Latina Feminist Grassroots Organization in Chicago,” 1996, MSS0026_01_001_011, Box 1, Folder 11, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 31.

⁴⁵ García, “A Preliminary Ethnographic Study,” 32.

⁴⁶ García, “A Preliminary Ethnographic Study,” 32.

⁴⁷ García, “A Preliminary Ethnographic Study,” 32.

the building and assault are largely attributed to local gangs and MLEA persisted through the communal hazing.

Their mere endurance of these struggles attests to their grit. In addition to grit, the members of MLEA also utilized pragmatic feminism to overcome opposition and gain a steady and persevering presence in the community. It enabled them to last 50 years past assaults and threats to become a pillar in the community and larger Chicago area. After the fire and the assault, Mujeres was left with ten members. Within MLEA, a myriad of voices, experiences, and opinions were present. There were a handful of members who were college educated and previously involved in the Chicano Movement. Some were still struggling against the strictures of sexism by their activist-husbands, and others were local community women who wished to participate.⁴⁸ Internal diversity of opinion was extremely helpful for Mujeres. It led them to forge a strong foundation of communication with the women in Pilsen. While MLEA's purpose was to provide "advocacy to effect changes in the social and organizational structures in the community to increase the participation of and services available to women," the ways in which they did so was largely informed by Latinas in Pilsen. This level of communication, grounded in a commitment to egalitarian ideologies, is pragmatic feminism. Their careful heed of the community to create a unique intersection, personalized to Pilsen, between Mujeres members' personal beliefs about gender equality and the cultural ideals held by Chicanos and other Latinos in the community was vital to how they navigated the community and formed space within it for themselves. What Mujeres found was varying opinions of women who were much more open-minded and willing to learn about culture, healthcare, education, and skills than they were often

⁴⁸ Ramírez, *Chicanas of 18th Street*, 114.

given credit for. Consequently, buoyed by the desire for knowledge that many Pilsen Latinas had, and the rapport being built with them, Mujeres was able to plant roots in Pilsen.

Mujeres Latinas en Acción

The formation of MLEA came after a series of Chicana-focused conferences, which culminated in the Fall of 1973 at a statewide conference where “a series of workshops were held on such issues as parenthood, the role of Latina women and Women and the Law.”⁴⁹ After the conference, which was headed by María Mangual, one of the founders of MLEA, a group of women who attended began to discuss the situation of Latinas in their own community of Pilsen.

Early on, the purposeful accounting of Pilsen and its residents was implemented into the organization’s methodology. Before Mujeres Latinas en Acción could officially form, they had to decide on a name. The name with which Mujeres would be known was hotly debated amongst members. The decision mainly revolved around the organization’s use of “Chicana” in its name. There were different reasonings to use the term. For one, all of the Latinas present in the organization were Chicanas. Additionally, their efforts in formal organizing were directly inspired by the Chicano Movement and the efforts of other Chicana feminists. The demographics of Pilsen also showed a vast majority of Chicanos and recently immigrated Mexicans to the neighborhood. However, Chicago, Pilsen in particular, was distinct in its general regard towards the term “Chicano.” In Chicago, the word “Chicano” was controversial in the 1960s and 1970s. It was seen as a “crude way to refer to recent Mexican immigrants, one that characterized them as unsophisticated or even as criminals.”⁵⁰ The ultimate decision to use the term “Latinas” rather than “Chicanas” shows the consciousness that Mujeres had of Pilsen and its community

⁴⁹ “MUJERES LATINAS EN ACCION,” 1975, MSS0026_01_001_001, Box 1, Folder 1, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁵⁰ Ramírez, *Chicanas of 18th Street*, 24.

members. Their name demonstrates one of the first uses of pragmatic feminism within Mujeres, as they navigated the dichotomies between their own backgrounds and beliefs and the demographics and diversity in Pilsen.

María Mangual's involvement with El Centro, a community outreach group in Pilsen, was vital to informing the mission of Mujeres. It was here where her "community-focused sense of activism and empowerment" was formed.⁵¹ In her work there, Mangual was "exposed...regularly to the *barrio*'s day-to-day realities and material inequities."⁵² El Centro was an after-school program that focused mainly on kids involved in sports, which disproportionately affected young women.⁵³ The focus on young men left many of the young women in the community vulnerable and underserved by comparison.⁵⁴

When Mujeres was first established, volunteers addressed young Latinas. This could be due, in part, to the average age of Latinas being 22 years old.⁵⁵ However, runaway rates of young Latinas were high in Pilsen. Additionally, Mangual had already been working with youth through El Centro, a social service organization and saw the differences in services offered to young men and young women. Therefore, at the advent of Mujeres, members understood the vulnerability of young women in the community.⁵⁶ While this decision was practical, it also caused families in the community to worry about the effect that Mujeres would have on young

⁵¹ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 261.

⁵² Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 261.

⁵³ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 260.

⁵⁴ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 262.

⁵⁵ "The Condition of Latinas In Illinois and Chicago: A Working Paper," 1985, MSS0011_12_146_010, Box 146, Folder 10, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁵⁶ Rosa Pina, *Mujeres en Acción: Needs Assessment*, 1991, MSS0026_07_007_003, Box 7, Folder 3, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 14-16

women, fearing that it would cause them to turn away from tradition.⁵⁷ This is one instance where Mujeres' pragmatic feminism led them to push boundaries within the community. The push and pull of pragmatism in Mujeres will be further seen in the subsequent pages.

Their decision to focus on young women led them to address the reason why so many girls were running away. They found that there was an increasing number of Latina women who were single mothers. From 1970 to 1990, single Latina-headed families rose from ten to eighteen percent.⁵⁸ Latinas were two times as likely to be divorced or separated in comparison to Latino males.⁵⁹ Additionally, according to a report in 1985 by the Latino Institute, there seemed to be a possible increase of unmarried Latinas having children.⁶⁰ The combination of these factors influenced how teenage girls were responding to their home environment. So, Mujeres created specific workshops to help both generations, in addition to assessing the need for equality and respect between the sexes and generations in the family.⁶¹ The issue of runaway girls was being impacted by issues within the family unit. Mujeres worked to bring these issues into a discussion with the community members. The private nature of the family in Chicano culture made this feat difficult, however, it was an important factor in properly addressing the problems in the community. Mujeres observed multiple problems within the community, many of which depended on the fortification of the family and the disposal of harmful gendered norms in the Latino culture.

⁵⁷ Debra Westlake, "Mujeres Adelante: The Early History of 'Mujeres Latinas en Accion,' 1973-1980," Winter 1992, MSS0026_01_001_005, Box 1, Folder 5, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 16.

⁵⁸ "Some Facts about Latinas in the Chicago Metropolitan Area," 1990, Box 150, Folder 13, Latino Institute records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 11

⁵⁹ "The Condition of Latinas in Illinois and Chicago."

⁶⁰ "The Condition of Latinas in Illinois and Chicago."

⁶¹ "Project Family: United We Stand," 1980, Box 85, CBS - Project Family, Latino Institute records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 11.

Thus, the main focuses of MLEA included claiming legitimate spaces and providing social services for women.⁶² Over the decades of its existence, MLEA narrowed their focus to four “priority areas” which seem to be reverberated clearly throughout its history. They are women’s health and reproductive justice, immigration, economic well-being, and gender and race violence.⁶³ Such a herculean task with no funding and little support required pacing. Therefore, MLEA began by offering classes that the Latina volunteers were able to teach themselves. These included English classes, basic health classes, and a few others. MLEA, in the beginning especially but also throughout its existence, relied on volunteers and charitable donations. By 1976, MLEA was officially established as a not-for-profit organization.⁶⁴ For MLEA, the beginning years brought the most growing pains. Mujeres was “a premature child born ahead of her time.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the organization has survived.

The reason why Mujeres is cited as being “premature” is in part because of the environment in which it was created. The community of Pilsen and the general Chicano community in general, of which Pilsen was largely made up of, were at a crossroads with their identity. Mexicans and Mexican Americans tried to distinguish themselves racially and socially through either earlier settlement in the states or a return to their “traditional Mexican culture, which did not always bode well for women if their greater independence was seen as adopting American ways and straying from Mexican cultural preferences.”⁶⁶ At the same time, the

⁶² “Articles of Incorporation Under the General Not For Profit Corporation Act,” January 7, 1975, MSS0026_02_001_013, Box 1, Folder 13, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁶³ Linda Tortolero (President and CEO of Mujeres Latinas en Acción) interview by Lindsey Meza, via Zoom, December 4, 2022.

⁶⁴ Jemima Sanchez, “Independent Study: Mujeres Latinas en Accion,” 1996, MSS0026_01_001_008, Box 1, Folder 8, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 5.

⁶⁵ “Mujeres Win NCLR Award,” n.d., MSS0026_03_001_020, Box 1, Folder 20, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁶⁶ Ramírez, *Chicanas of 18th Street*, 8.

Women's Liberation Movement was gaining traction. While Chicana feminism had been ongoing with various intensities for centuries, the simultaneity of these two movements led many in the Chicano Movement to label Chicana feminists as *vendidas*. Many Chicanos saw Chicana feminism as a prioritization of gender over culture.

Chicanas felt this disparity acutely. Chicana feminists did not fully align with Women's Liberation and wished to largely stay within the Chicano Movement rather than carve space in the Women's Liberation Movement. However, even with their active involvement in the Chicano Movement, credibility was not forthcoming from traditional Chicanos and Chicanas. Such a task necessitated a persistent distancing of themselves from Anglo feminism and nurturing their connection to the Chicano Movement.⁶⁷ Chicana feminists worked avidly to tie together egalitarianism of Chicanas within the community and equality of Chicanos in the United States. They argued that "it was only with Chicanas' liberation as women that the entire community could move forward."⁶⁸ Thus, *Mujeres* was fitting itself into the complexity of Chicana feminism in the Chicano community by finding the natural intersections between egalitarianism and culture, specific to Pilsen.

Pilsen's initial reaction to *Mujeres* was harsh for *Mujeres* members. Mangual recalled, "a lot of time spent complaining about the men in the community, becoming sort of a feminist consciousness-raising group for a lot of us."⁶⁹ Members of MLEA were in a difficult position. While many of them held feminist ideologies, they were still working within a largely traditional Chicano community. For the most part, *Mujeres* tried to create concessions between feminism and chicanismo. *Mujeres* explicitly stated that "*Mujeres* is not a [sic] anti-men, anti-family, or

⁶⁷ Roth, *Separate Roads*, 12.

⁶⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads*, 12.

⁶⁹ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 267.

pro-divorce organization.”⁷⁰ Despite initial pushback, Mujeres, in order to survive, had to work with the men and the family. However, more than survival, the marriage between Chicano culture and egalitarianism, to Mujeres and other Chicana feminists, seemed natural. They used their own cultural beliefs of family and community to thereby promote egalitarian ideals. This was not a manipulative nor malicious move on the part of Mujeres. For Mujeres and other Chicana feminists, “it was only with Chicanas’ liberation as women that the entire community could move forward.”⁷¹

As they were deciding between which classes to hold, in which ways they would formally be involved in the community, and other decisions, Mujeres was pragmatically thinking of their mission to provide “increase the participation of and services available to women” while simultaneously informing their decisions based on the community itself.⁷² Some of these efforts were formalized in class offerings. In 1977, Mujeres was offering a Mexican Indian arts and crafts class. That same year, they also offered a class on cultural field trips.⁷³ Mujeres was offering services that were meant to both enlighten Latinas while also speaking to the general loyalty that Mujeres members felt for Chicano culture.

This was furthered by Mujeres’ focus on the family. Much of MLEA’s focus on women related back to the overall health of the family—a sacred unit in Latino culture. Therefore, MLEA had to finesse the boundaries of gender within the family in order to progress the community to uplift Latina women and create an egalitarian community.⁷⁴ To do so, they

⁷⁰ García, “A Preliminary Ethnographic Study,” 22.

⁷¹ Roth, *Separate Roads*, 12.

⁷² “Proposal for Mujeres Latinas en Accion: Community Education and Advocacy Project,” circa 1975, MSS0026_01_001_002, Box 1, Folder 2, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 1.

⁷³ Annual Reports, 1977, MSS0026_03_001_022, Box 1, Folder 22, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 8.

⁷⁴ I add that by “create an egalitarian community” I am referring to Mujeres’ aim to rework the social structures of the community to more fully allow Latinas to thrive.

targeted the traditional role of the woman in the family: the mother. Some have purported that the organization emphasized the importance of motherhood to the point of framing all of their work in the framework of mothering.⁷⁵ While this notion is partly correct, it also misses the bigger picture surrounding the family and its importance in Latino and Chicano culture. For centuries, many Latinas dealt with the ideal of *marianismo*, or the imposition of the Virgin Mary's attributes on women, typically manifested in the expectation of purity and self-sacrifice in women. This ideal created harmful notions of womanhood in Chicano communities regarding ideas about sexuality, independence, and motherhood. Thus, in order to effectively serve the Latinas of Pilsen, MLEA had to find the ways to work within Chicano culture while also forsaking cultural traditions such as *marianismo*. Their work with the family was not in spite of their feminist ideals, but rather a key factor in it. To change the structures of the community, Mujeres had to encourage and teach how women could find their voice within the family.

In order to effectively serve Latinas, MLEA connected motherhood with leadership. In Pilsen, nearly half of Latinas were mothers.⁷⁶ This meant that a large part of the demographic with whom Mujeres was working with had children. Thus, MLEA was not churning out programs to make these mothers "career women."⁷⁷ Instead, they were focusing on helping women to be equal leaders in their families and community.⁷⁸ This ideology was not necessarily to appease the men and the Latinas who were against MLEA. Rather, this was a practical way in which Mujeres could help Latinas become leaders in the community and increase their involvement. Like other Chicana feminists of the time, MLEA was aiming to support their

⁷⁵ Día, "Motherhood en Acción," 2.

⁷⁶ Latino Institute, "Latinas in Chicago: A Portrait," 1996, MSS0026_01_001_008, Box 1, Folder 8, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 11

⁷⁷ Mara Dodge, "Mujeres Latinas en Accion: In Action," 1996, MSS0026_01_001_010, Box 1, Folder 10, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 18

⁷⁸ Dodge, "Mujeres Latinas," 17.

cultural values while rooting out harmful gender beliefs which hurt Latinas. In one article published in the *Bronce Magazine* about women in the Chicano Movement, a Chicana wrote, “We women need our men. We need them to help us develop. A Chicana not only needs a man who is to love and protect her, but one who is going to treat her as a creative being.”⁷⁹ This sentiment, while not entirely universal, did factor into how many Chicanas navigated feminist ideals. Family was of utmost importance to Chicano culture and the Chicano Movement. Therefore, the importance of family to Mujeres members was nearly subconscious as they worked in Pilsen. They saw and knew the importance of family to the community. If they were to help Latinas be more involved in the community, then they needed to pay special care and attention to the family unit.

One of these fortifications for the family was in childcare. Mujeres began a daycare system that was meant to help mothers while working or taking English classes. Notes from kids in the neighborhood talk of the impact that Mujeres staff members had in its after-school program.⁸⁰ Mujeres was also assisting Latinas in the community to further help their families and themselves through education. Latina female-headed families had the lowest average income at the time.⁸¹ Additionally, over a quarter of all Latina women were uninsured, double the national rate and other minority groups.⁸² Therefore, educating Latinas, many of whom had not attended college nor finished high school, would help them to receive better jobs that would provide health insurance and enough money to sufficiently provide for their families.⁸³ Mujeres was

⁷⁹ Elvira Saragoza, “La Mujer in the Chicano Movement,” 13

⁸⁰ Testimonial about Mujeres Latinas en Acción by Saul Padilla, MSS0026_13_025_004, Box 25, Folder 4, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸¹ Latino Institute, “Latinas in Chicago: A Portrait,” 1996, MSS0026_01_001_008, Box 1, Folder 8, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 17.

⁸² Latino Institute, “Latinas in Chicago,” 34.

⁸³ Latino Institute, “Latinas in Chicago,” 22.

working with family dynamics and familial realities. Such efforts were largely met with gratitude from the community. While many were utilizing the services provided, in each action taken by Mujeres, there was a deeper meaning. In these instances, Mujeres was attempting to assuage the education and income gap of Latinas.

Another problem faced by many Latinas in the community was domestic violence. In the realm of domestic abuse, the dismantling of harmful gender ideologies in Latino culture was difficult. For many Latino households, “the topic of domestic abuse is considered taboo.... It is simply avoided.”⁸⁴ While Latino culture was dependent on the family, it was also deeply respected and private. MLEA worked to break through the barriers of cultural norms simply by providing a platform to 1) educate about domestic violence and 2) to provide resources for women being abused.⁸⁵ In educating about domestic violence, it was important for women to understand the widespread nature of domestic violence in Latino communities. In the educational classes offered by MLEA, “rape and wife abuse” were consistent topics.⁸⁶ The education of Latinas in the community was vital to helping dispel the forbearance of abuse in Latino communities. By hosting classes, MLEA was able to become a space where Latinas could come to be educated, thereby keeping MLEA as a resource rather than an active enforcer who entered into the homes of Latinas in Pilsen. However, this was only initially. Eventually, after their relationship with the community was firm enough, Mujeres, in collaboration with another Chicago organization, opened a women’s shelter. The additional response by Mujeres was both a practical one, due to the increased amount of funding and networking available, but also a smart

⁸⁴ “Abused Latinas,” 1995, MSS0026_03__001_020, Box 1, Folder 20, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸⁵ “Es la mujer la que debe querer el cambio,” 1997, MSS0026_03__001_020, Box 1, Folder 20, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸⁶ “What is Latin Women in Action?” 1975, MSS026_01_001_003, Box 1, Folder 3, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

one. It is likely that if MLEA had first opened a women's shelter, the facility would have been met with backlash inspired by a betrayal of cultural norms and a lack of trust on behalf of the community that would have been difficult to overcome. Thus, the situation called for pacing in their actions and efforts.

The position that MLEA held in the community was extremely precarious at the start. Their persistence in the education of women on the perils and signs of domestic abuse was a risky choice. Already labeled as feminist in the community—which, to Chicanos, was anti-family and therefore anti-Chicano—the decision to focus on domestic violence as one of their primary concerns, hints that MLEA was persistent in their efforts to connect “feminist agendas” with the family.⁸⁷ MLEA was not attacking men, nor was it trying to dismantle marriages and homes. Instead, MLEA was focusing on the safety of Latinas and how that safety related to the overall health of the family and thereby the community. In doing so, they were following the pattern of other Chicana feminists and their organizations across the country. By creating ties between the traditional values of the Chicano community and feminist values, Chicanas were attempting to show the importance of gender equality and how such values uplifted the Chicano community. For Mujeres, this methodology proved to be a key part in the success of the organization.

Involvement in the community was always present, and within the first decade of opening operations Mujeres was putting on an annual block party for the community.⁸⁸ Additionally, in their first few years of opening, one of their main focuses was persuading community members to be foster parents.⁸⁹ This was part of their initiative to help young women. By working with

⁸⁷ Sanchez, “Independent Study,” 4.

⁸⁸ García, “A Preliminary Ethnographic Study,” 32.

⁸⁹ “Proposal for Mujeres,” 2.

community members to increase their participation in aiding these girls, Mujeres was creating ties between the community and the services available to women. Practically, this decision also made sense. If they were to support Latinas while also working with Chicano culture, they had to keep young Latinas in the home. The efforts to place girls into homes within the community was perhaps affected by the general worry that Mujeres members were taking these young girls from tradition. By trusting community members to become host families for runaway girls, they were extending trust to the community and expecting it in return. This also helped to support MLEA's initiative to increase the general participation of local women in the community itself.⁹⁰ This pointed towards MLEA's rapport being built with Pilsen, as Mujeres' actions were effecting real change.

An impediment to this impact was that Mujeres Latinas had very little funding. In the beginning, Mujeres was able to scrape by with little money due to many of Mujeres members being volunteers.⁹¹ This was not sustainable. Fairly soon after opening, they held community dances and raffles to raise funding.⁹² After their original storefront burned down, which was donated by El Centro, local fundraising helped them to lease a building on 18th street.

By the 1980s, Mujeres was on the brink of closure. Susan Grettenberger recalled the plight of the organization in the mid 1980s, when she was made director of Mujeres. At Christmas time, and due to the nature of retroactive funding, Mujeres had two options: pay every worker, or buy supplies for their programs. Grettenberger asked Mujeres members whether any of them would be willing to not cash their paycheck until they bought the supplies and received

⁹⁰ "Proposal for Mujeres," 6.

⁹¹ Annual Reports, 1977, MSS0026_03_001_022, Box 1, Folder 22, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 2.

⁹² Emmett George, "It's action for women of Pilsen," *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 1976, <https://byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/action-women-pilsen/docview/171265842/se-2>.

funding. Multiple workers were able to scrape by for a few weeks without cashing their checks, waiting for the go-ahead from Grettenberger. Miraculously, the organization made it through the season.⁹³ While this is just one example, the history of Mujeres was made up of instances such as this where the survival of the organization was determined by fiscal resources which came from their community, the surrounding area, and within the organization itself. It was Mujeres' reputation in Chicago which helped them to eventually become financially stable. Susan noted in our interview that they utilized businesses in Chicago. Dining with executives in the city would yield big rewards: "In one night we would make \$30,000."⁹⁴

While donations were motivated by numerous factors, the impact of Mujeres in Pilsen and in Chicago was noted by both political and business leaders. Mujeres first showed up in the Chicago Tribune in 1976, three years after being officially established. In 1977, Mujeres was part of eight organizations chosen by the Economic Development Administration to approve a planning committee appointed by Mayor Daley.⁹⁵ Additionally, Mujeres was one of two organizations on a steering committee for the opening of Benito Juarez High School in Pilsen.⁹⁶ They were also formally and informally involved in the Little Village Youth in Action and Centro de La Causa.⁹⁷ MLEA was able to work efficiently within and surrounding their community. MLEA utilized various methodologies of practicality that were specifically suited to the city of Chicago to create bonds with government leaders and activists. While Mujeres

⁹³ Susan Grettenberger (former Director of Mujeres Latinas en Acción) interview by Lindsey Meza, via Zoom, October 11, 2022.

⁹⁴ Susan Grettenberger interview.

⁹⁵ Ed McManus, "U.S. acts to speed funds for city," *Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 1977, <https://byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/u-s-acts-speed-funds-city/docview/169565558/se-2>. Three out of the eight organizations chosen needed to approve to keep the planning committee. This was a compromise given by the Federal Government after it relaxed regulations regarding minority participation in city expenditure of funding.

⁹⁶ Annual Reports, 1977, 8.

⁹⁷ Annual Reports, 1977, 5.

focused most of their attention in Pilsen, their decision to forge ties with the city helped to prove their usefulness as both a Latina organization and a route for Latino rights and advocacy. In this manner, Mujeres carved the compromise between the Chicano Movement and Women's Liberation that was specific to Pilsen and its residents through using power and prestige gained through their advocacy for women.

Mujeres pushed the boundaries of Chicano and Latino culture in other ways by supporting women's reproductive health and family planning. Mujeres was aware of the potential backlash that they could receive; however, Mujeres felt that there were problems with how Latino culture oppressed women, becoming an "iron cage" for some.⁹⁸ Thus, they openly supported birth control and family planning. In 1968, just a few years before Mujeres Latinas en Acción was established, the Catholic pope had made known his stance against birth control in the *Humanae Vitae*.⁹⁹ Moreover, Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers and a leading voice in the Chicano Movement, decried birth control as a tool for racism and eugenics.¹⁰⁰ Mujeres Latinas en Acción began in 1973, the same year *Roe v. Wade* secured the right for women to have an abortion, which no doubt affected how Mujeres was run. MLEA was established in a time and in a community which was fairly split on women's reproductive health. Like other Chicana feminists at the time, MLEA supported family planning despite backlash from conservative and traditional members of the community.

The realm of family planning and birth control was messy, however, Mujeres was willing to navigate it to help Latinas in Pilsen. As they began to speak to Latinas in the community, they

⁹⁸ Rosa Pina, *Mujeres en Acción: Needs Assessment*, 1991, MSS0026_07_007_003, Box 7, Folder 3, Mujeres Latinas en Acción records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 20.

⁹⁹ Ana Raquel Minian, "'Indiscriminate and Shameless Sex': The Strategic Sexuality and the United Farm Workers," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 2013): 66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41809548>.

¹⁰⁰ Minian, "'Indiscriminate and Shameless Sex'," 66.

found that many women were open minded about the topic and wished to learn more.¹⁰¹ While MLEA was trying to navigate the turbines of Pilsen, they also consistently kept the women of the community at the forefront. Pragmatic feminism required that certain concessions be made in regard to the organization and its running, however, the board and members of Mujeres understood the general need for the education of women in important issues regarding their well-being. Their utmost concern was to help Latinas have some sense of autonomy in their decisions. Therefore, despite the myriad of powerful voices discouraging family planning and abortion, Mujeres persisted. Nevertheless, practicality did take effect in the exact ways that Mujeres talked about and advertised family planning. For example, in its infancy, Mujeres did not always offer specific classes on family planning. Even so, members of MLEA were always open about family planning, even though it was not formalized through class topics. Mujeres held classes on women's health generally, which often included reproductive choice.¹⁰² The earliest record of MLEA holding a class regarding birth control was in 1975.¹⁰³ However, workshops and classes on birth control and family planning were inconsistent.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps because there were mixed reactions to the classes, in 1979, reproductive health did not figure anywhere in a long list of workshops that Mujeres had planned.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Mujeres felt strongly that Latinas should be involved in the reproductive movement.¹⁰⁶ In 1991, Mujeres became officially affiliated with

¹⁰¹ Linda Tortolero interview.

¹⁰² "What is Latin Women in Action?"

¹⁰³ "Mujeres Latinas en Accion" addressed to Richard Salas Office of Professional Standards Chicago Police Dept., 1975, MSS0026_01_001_001, Box 1, Folder 1, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

¹⁰⁴ "Tax Exempt Status Application - Summer 1976," 1975, MSS0026_01_001_002, Box 1, Folder 2, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 2. "About Mujeres," 1980-1996, MSS0026_01_001_004, Box 1, Folder 4, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

¹⁰⁵ Sanchez, "Independent Study," 5.

¹⁰⁶ Rosa Pina, *Mujeres en Acción: Needs Assessment*, 1991, MSS0026_07_007_003, Box 7, Folder 3, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 14-16.

Planned Parenthood in response to the *Rust v. Sullivan* case.¹⁰⁷ Despite any documented inconsistencies, Mujeres' stance never changed. MLEA did not, however, publicly support abortion, for fear of alienating a significant portion of the community.¹⁰⁸ Instead, they adapted based on numerous factors. Community response and resources decided much of Mujeres' outward stance on the issue.¹⁰⁹ For example, when Mujeres became officially affiliated with Planned Parenthood, they were sure to put an Anglo woman in charge of communications between the two groups.¹¹⁰ When asked about birth control and how often Mujeres offered classes on the topic, Susan Grettenberger, former director of Mujeres, emphasized that MLEA made choices based on women's needs at the time.¹¹¹ Such a deliberation provides insight into how Mujeres was trying to navigate the waves of community response. The relatively recent establishment of partnership between Mujeres and Planned Parenthood further cements that the push and pull between Mujeres and the community was a consistent pattern. Judging by the varying degrees of publicity in its first twenty years, MLEA had to have a solid foundation in the community before they were able to form official partnerships with organizations such as Planned Parenthood, although MLEA had encouraged Latinas to utilize their services previously. Even within the organization, members had varying opinions on birth control.¹¹² Nevertheless, there was a universal understanding that women in the community deserved to know and fully understand the options that they had regarding their health and livelihood.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Fitzpatrick, "Rust Corrodes: The First Amendment Implications of *Rust v. Sullivan*," *Stanford Law Review* 45, no. 1 (Nov 1992), 185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228987>. The case prohibited recipients of Title X funding to counsel patients on abortion.

¹⁰⁸ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 277.

¹⁰⁹ Debra Westlake, "Mujeres Adelante: The Early History of 'Mujeres Latinas en Accion,' 1973-1980," Winter 1992, MSS0026_01_001_005, Box 1, Folder 5, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, 12.

¹¹⁰ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," footnote 106, 277.

¹¹¹ Susan Grettenberger interview.

¹¹² Linda Tortolero interview.

To quell intense reactions to some of their more liberal, “feminist” stances, *Mujeres* made deliberate choices on its leaders, especially towards its beginning. Maria Mangual was a seemingly obvious choice for the position of director because of her qualifications and previous experience in community outreach in Pilsen. However, *Mujeres* members, including Mangual, instead chose Maria Luz Prieto. Prieto was chosen for multiple reasons. The largest, which put her above the rest, was her name. Her father was a well-respected physician in Chicago and well-known in the community of Pilsen. The choice to institute Prieto as director was in effort to gain respect from the community and solidify a good reputation. ““The Prieto name [wa]s going to have people think twice about what they sa[id] about *Mujeres*. ””¹¹³ The founding women agreed strongly about Prieto as director. A deliberate choice, Prieto as director shows conscious decision-making to try to solidify their position in Pilsen. They needed the reputation of a devoted member of the community, a male physician, to solidify their own, despite many of them having their own relationships to Pilsen. Pilsen valued credibility and service. Not to mention that Dr. Prieto was a male. Though *Mujeres* had set out as a social service for women, they needed to connect with the community on the basis of a service that was given to all members, not just women. This echoes similar methodologies used by other Chicana feminists who often aligned themselves relatively close to Chicano activist males in the community.¹¹⁴ This alignment was not indefinite and was a move by *Mujeres* to establish trust at the start of MLEA rather than a continued dependence upon male Chicanos.

Collaboration was a tool utilized by *Mujeres* that enabled them to access more connections and build both their reputation and needfulness. At the start of their grassroots organization, *Mujeres* members recognized that they were untethered to the foundations of the

¹¹³ Maria Mangual as quoted in Fernández, “Latina/o Migration,” 274.

¹¹⁴ Roth, *Separate Roads*, 167.

community. They did not have a reputation nor access to substantial and reliable funding. Therefore, when they noticed that there wasn't a women's shelter in the community, they partnered with a neighboring women's organization to create one in 1977.¹¹⁵ Collaboration also helped them later, in the 1980s, when they addressed funding. Susan Grettenberger remembers the harsh restrictions around funding, which kept Mujeres and other women's organizations from being able to access various avenues of funding. Mujeres, along with numerous other organizations, created a coalition which eventually changed regulations to allow for the funding of Mujeres and others in their coalition.¹¹⁶ Although Mujeres was a small organization that did not hold much power nor much money, through collaboration with like-minded organizations, some of which were outwardly feminist, they crafted networks throughout the city and the nation which relegated power to their purpose.

Mujeres' collaboration also extended to the community, as the connection between women, family, and the community was personally experienced by many of Mujeres' members. Maria Martinez was one of the founding members of Mujeres. When Martinez was still a young mother, she divorced her abusive husband. She had three children and heavily depended upon family members for childcare as she worked.¹¹⁷ Familial networks were vital to the health of Latino culture and Mujeres personally knew and supported them. While they were supporting and educating women's reproductive health, they were also setting up childcare and block parties to support the family and community. Although Mujeres continually faced criticism from groups within the community, by the 1990s, they were even collaborating with parishes and other

¹¹⁵ Fernández, "Latina/o Migration," 277.

¹¹⁶ Susan Grettenberger interview.

¹¹⁷ *Women Building Chicago*, 541.

groups in the community.¹¹⁸ Their wide range of collaboration shows the diversity that Mujeres cultivated. They wished to be of service to all Latinas and to the community. They understood that in order to fully advocate for women and to enact change in the “social and organizational structures in the community,” they needed to work with both the Latina and the community.

Nationally, Mujeres used relationships with other organizations to lend power to their advocacy for women. Importantly, these collaborations rarely took MLEA out of Chicago. Rather, they pulled national organizations locally to help. At times, such collaboration allowed Latinas in Pilsen more access to resources and also gave MLEA the freedom to promote certain ideas and options without damaging their relationship with the community. Mujeres never waned from their promotion of family planning, however, they used collaborative efforts with organizations such as Planned Parenthood to refer women to as they needed. It was debated among Mujeres members whether they were going to fully endorse abortion.¹¹⁹ Eventually, as the organization progressed and further strengthened their foundation in the community, they were able to collaborate more openly with Planned Parenthood, a nation-wide organization. More recently in 2005, in response to the appointment of Justice Roberts to the Supreme Court, Mujeres partnered with the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and the Chicago Foundation for Women in the national Latinas for Justice campaign to “create a movement for women’s reproductive rights” and “to mobilize Latinas across the country to take action.” As Mujeres has developed and expanded, they have been able to participate in national initiatives at a much more frequent rate than at their founding. Their level of practicality in feminist matters has evolved as they have become more secure in the community and in their impact.

¹¹⁸ Melita Marie Garza, "Hispanics Find Help Breaking Cultural Taboos." *Chicago Tribune*, Sep 26, 1993, <https://byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/hispanics-find-help-breaking-cultural-taboos/docview/1831477070/se-2>.

¹¹⁹ Westlake, “Mujeres Adelante,” 6.

Conclusion

Mujeres Latinas en Acción encapsulates Gloria Anzaldua's term of "a politic born of necessity."¹²⁰ The women who created Mujeres were acutely aware of the challenges facing Latinas in Pilsen as well as the decided lack of services available to them. Yet, MLEA did more than provide services to Latinas. Mujeres, like other Chicana feminist organizations, was utilizing pragmatic feminism to impact change in the social structure of Chicano culture locally. As Mexicans and Mexican Americans were at a crossroads in their own identity, Mujeres inserted itself as a possible purveyor of transformation. Such a feat required a deep understanding of the community and a willingness to react and pivot if the situation required it. In their community, "the way feminism manifests...is...fighting against the macho system, the patriarchy."¹²¹ The goal of Mujeres was to ultimately help Latinas be respected leaders in the community of Pilsen and protect against various forms of neglect and abuse—"that was revolutionary."¹²² At the same time, Mujeres Latinas en Acción understood the importance of certain cultural values and worked with them to create a bond within their community. While many of the founding members were feminists, they were careful, especially in the organization's beginning, to not emphasize their ideologies.

MLEA instead echoed the methodologies of other Chicana feminist movements by connecting their egalitarian ideologies with their culture. They observed and formed various workshops, classes, shelters, and resources that would help Latina women in the community. Their vision was to help Latinas in Pilsen while also creating a stable relationship with the community. This involved feminist issues such as leadership and family planning, however, they

¹²⁰ Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City*, 253.

¹²¹ Interview with Linda Tortolero.

¹²² Interview with Linda Tortolero.

understood the numerous factors that oppressed women economically, socially, and culturally and tried to address what they were able. Mujeres strived to be a place of refuge for Latinas. Through Mujeres persistence, the organization became “the big sister everyone longs to have.”¹²³ The members of MLEA fostered strong bonds with the community to create a stable organization in Pilsen which has now become the longest-Latina run organization in the country. The success of MLEA and their use of the methodologies of pragmatic feminism therefore proves the efficacy of pragmatic feminism in navigating the intersections of culture and egalitarianism and the role that individual communities have on the adaptation of said intersections within specific organizations.

Mujeres Latinas en Acción has become the longest Latina-run organization in the country, celebrating 50 years in 2023. They now have new offices that span into different parts of Chicago as the majority of Latinos have migrated from the city into the surrounding suburbs. In 2007, they employed 35 people, but have now doubled with 70 employees. They continue to prioritize women’s health and reproductive justice, immigration, economic well-being, and gender and race violence. Their success in Pilsen and the state of Illinois is a pillar to other grassroots organizations that are similarly striving to make a lasting impact on their community. Additionally, their history deserves a much closer look to understand the nature of grassroots organizations and the lasting impact of pragmatic and multiracial feminism in local communities. For Mujeres, such an impact heavily relies on practicality that pushes for greater, deeper change. MLEA’s place in the Chicano Movement illustrates the evolution of the Chicano Movement, which did not end in 1975. The organization has fostered a solid connection between feminism

¹²³ Testimonial by Martha S. Velez, n.d., MSS0026_13_025_004, Box 25, Folder 4, Mujeres Latinas en Accion records, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

and culture whose continuation is proof of MLEA's and other Chicana feminists' belief in the rightness of egalitarianism in Chicano culture.

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