

MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE:
THE FOUNDING OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICE ORGANIZATION
IN LOS ANGELES, AN ORAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The Community Service Organization, a grassroots social service agency that originated in Los Angeles in the late 1940s, is generally identified by its male leadership. Research conducted for the present oral history, however, indicates that Mexican American women were essential to the founding of the organization, as well as to its success during the forty-six years it was in operation. This paper is a history of the founding of the CSO based on interviews with eleven Mexican American women and one Mexican American man, all of whom were founding members.

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Several assumptions about the Mexican American/Chicano community include the notion that it is composed of “recent immigrants” (Ruiz, 1987, p. 3), and that the Mexican-descent population is “illegal” and therefore not eligible to participate in mainstream political processes. Mexican-descent people also have been described as apathetic and apolitical (Pardo, 1990, p. 1). This last assessment is especially ascribed to Mexican-descent women.

Researchers in the field of Chicano/a studies have in fact documented the opposite (García, 1989; Gómez-Quíñones, 1990; Marín, 1991; Ruiz, 1987). Twenty years ago, noted Chicano scholar Ralph Guzmán concluded:

Mexican Americans . . . also have a long history of organized struggle, but they have yet to capture the imagination and conscience of their fellow Americans (Guzmán, 1976)

There are those who consider this assessment as an affront, but it is the conclusion I have reached as well in my years as a scholar and activist. It is also true that the history of women in this struggle has gone unnoticed. For example, the Community Service Organization (CSO) and the historic 1949 election of Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council are often cited in discussions and research on Chicano/a political activity. Usually the recognized male CSO leaders are identified and their various accomplishments discussed. Rarely mentioned, however, is the role that Mexican-descent women played in founding and organizing the CSO.

Exceptions include the work of Ralph Guzmán, 1976; Marguerite Marin, 1990; and Cynthia Orozco, 1995. These works, however, discuss women as a whole and do not identify individuals and their specific contributions. In each of these works, mention is made of ways women were involved, but an in-depth study has not thus

far been produced. Mario García concludes that the inability to do a more thorough analysis of CSO is the “lack of archival materials” (García, 1989). I found that the archives existed in the remaining offices of the CSO and in the homes of its members.

The intent of this paper is two-fold: first, to present the histories of involvement of eleven women who were founding members of the CSO movement and the Committee to Elect Edward Roybal; and second, to develop the discussion of politics and leadership from a Chicana feminist perspective.

Research Process

Growing up in a union family, politics was always a topic of discussion at the dinner table and family gatherings. Although we were not involved in local politics, we were knowledgeable of state, national and international political issues. In fact, I have heard said that Chicanos, by the nature of their relationship to Mexico and their experience in the United States, are immersed in politics (i.e., the Mexican Revolution of 1910; immigration; deportations; union activity; electoral politics).

I was accepted at California State University, Los Angeles, which at that time was a center of student activity. In fact, in 1970, CSULA students in cooperation with the Third World Coalition, and Students for a Democratic Society elected Saul Saucedo as the first Chicano president of the Associated Student Body (Muñoz, 1989). Becoming involved with Movimiento Estudiantil de Chicanos en Aztlán (MEChA), I was introduced to a young woman named Senda Ríos, who was the god-daughter of Congressman Edward Roybal, and the daughter of Anthony P. Ríos, executive director of the Los Angeles Community Service Organization. The significance of this meeting did not make an impact until I became deeply involved in studying California history and Chicano political history.

While I was an undergraduate, Mr. Ríos offered me the opportunity to work as a teacher in a pilot community teaching project called the PADRES (Parents Activated for the Development of Relevant Education) Program. From this involvement I was able to observe some of the CSO workings and connections. At one of the CSO yearly conventions, I saw that elected officials, judges, and other dignitaries were in attendance. It was inspiring to one day walk into the CSO offices on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles and see Cesar Chávez. There was an aura surrounding Cesar that I remember to this day, an aura that surrounded him wherever he was, whether it was at Los Angeles International Airport or a demonstration. During that time, I also noticed numerous women in positions of leadership. They were directors of programs, and the head of the Credit Union was a woman. It was at this time that I decided to study the women of the CSO.

When I finally sat down to write about the CSO, my thoughts went to identifying the women who took part in its foundation. As I became quite close to the Ríos family, I decided to begin my interviews with Lucy Ríos, and then speak with Urusula Gutiérrez (sister of Tony Ríos), and of course Lucille Roybal, wife of Congressman Ed Roybal, and mother of Congresswoman Lucille Roybal Allard. The first two I knew how to approach. I was hoping that Lucy would help me gain access to Mrs. Roybal—and she did. My first significant observation was that nearly 50 years after the start of the CSO, some of the women still had the numbers from the “phone trees” that had been established. Lucy gave me three or four numbers, which led me to Margarita Duran Mendez, who gave me an additional three or four numbers. Later, Henrietta Villaescusa gave me additional numbers. Eventually I interviewed twelve women. More women have been interviewed since completion of the original study, and it is the author’s plan to

identify women across the state who were involved in the CSO.

In starting the interview process I did not have a hypothesis. My purpose was to gather the raw data, contrast it to existing works on the CSO, and then arrive at a concluding hypothesis.

The CSO Women

Let me first say that I do not call these women Chicanas. Although two of the women would come to call themselves “Chicana” and “feminist,” the rest called themselves Mexican American. In fact, for Carmen Mendez joining the CSO movement was a way to validate her ethnic identity, something she feels the schools had tried to denigrate (Mendez, Summer 1991). Lucy Ríos also spoke of her grandfather instilling in her a strong sense of being Mexicana. Lucille Roybal, however, specifically identified herself as a “*Californio*” (Ríos, 1991; Roybal, 1991). For all the respondents pride in their ethnicity was a way to get back at a system they thought was racist. This was the bond that shaped the early CSO movement.

The women interviewed are part of the generation that first called itself “Mexican American.” They are the generation that gave birth to the Chicano/a Baby Boomer generation. At the time of the interviews, 1991-1992, the women ranged in age from 62 to 86, meaning they had been born between 1905 and 1929. They are part of the political generation that grew up or came of age during the Great Depression, and fought in World War II. They witnessed the deportation of Mexicans in the 1930s, the Zoot Suit Riots, and the Sleepy Lagoon murder case in Los Angeles. More significantly, after the war, they sadly came to know that though they had fought to make the world safe for democracy, at home civil rights for Mexicans and Mexican Americans were being denied (García, 1989; McWilliams, 1990; Gonzalez, 1990, 1995).

Of the 12 persons interviewed, only two were not born in the U.S. María Durán was born in Mexico, but was educated in New Mexico. She later came to Los Angeles with her husband. Lupe Morales was also born in Mexico—Chihuahua to be exact, but her father, a journalist, was forced to leave during the Revolution of 1910. He later went back and brought his wife and children to Texas. In El Paso, Lupe graduated high school and then attended a business college. Unlike the women who went to school in Los Angeles, Lupe had positive memories of her school experience (Morales, 1991; Mendez, 1991).

The rest of the women were born in the United States. Some were third and fourth generation, and could trace their ancestry to the time of the early Spanish colonization of the 1600s. “My family has been in New Mexico since day one,” said Estelle Guzmán, during a 1992 interview. Enriquetta Villaescusa recalled that she and her father had both been born in the same house in Tucson, Arizona (Villaescusa, 1991). Lucille Roybal said: “My mother’s family was in California when it was Mexico. They had a ranch in Baja California and they had a townhouse in Old Town San Diego. . . so I’m a Californio. I can’t go back anywhere. My father was born in San Francisco.” (Roybal, 1991). Lucy is second generation; both her parents came to the United States in the early 1900s. In fact, her father had been drafted for World War I but just as he was about to leave the war ended. Lucy was born in 1922 (Ríos, 1991).

Of the twelve persons interviewed, only one did not graduate from high school. Estelle Guzmán went to the community college and received an associate’s degree. Two women, Enriquetta Villaescusa and Mary Sparkhul, became registered nurses. Enriquetta went on to receive a bachelor’s degree in nursing and later a master’s in Public Health. Margartia Duran Mendez was one of the first Chicanas to receive a B.A. in Political

Science from UCLA in 1946. In 1950 she received a master’s degree in Social Work from the University of Southern California (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), *California News*, Sept. 1991).

The Personal is Political

It is alleged that women’s involvement in any kind of politics, especially before the 1960s, was a result of their husbands’ involvement. However, I found that the women were politically active in their own right. Several of the women took the initiative and personally challenged patriarchal/racist institutions and individuals in their formative years, and at a time—the 1920s and 1930s—when there was not a visible Mexican American women’s movement.

Mary Sparkhul and Urusula Guitiérrez both challenged the traditions of their Irish and Mexican Catholic families during the 1930s. Unwilling to submit to her mother’s demands, Mary went to the City Mother and asked to be placed in foster care. She was sent home and told she should be glad she had a home during the Depression. Mary pursued her plan to leave home by pursuing a nursing career (the training required student nurses to live at the hospital). Urusula, on the other hand, sought to move away from an abusive step-father. She succeeded, and was placed in a religious boarding school. (Sparkhul, 1991; Guitiérrez, 1991).

One summer Lucy Ríos went to work in the garment district. Against her father’s wishes, Lucy joined the movement to organize the shop, and took part in the strike. Her family didn’t talk to her for a week as they believed that union organizing was not the proper behavior for a young woman. Lucy dropped out of school and continued to work until she got married and became a housewife. “I kept the home fires going,” she said.

(Ríos, 1991). Interestingly, for years her family continued to ridicule her and the other members of the CSO. Her family believed that nothing would come of all the effort (ibid.)

A theme that ran through the interviews was the discrimination that the women had faced in the Los Angeles school system during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. They recognized both ethnic and gender discrimination, although the latter was not explicitly identified as gender based.

I didn't know how to accept myself. At home Spanish was spoken; at school we were punished and made to feel inferior for speaking Spanish. This one teacher didn't think I should take secretarial classes, she believed I belonged in the sewing classes (Mendez, 1991).

In an angry and frustrated voice, Estelle Guzmán explained,

[T]hey had me sitting in this classroom putting weights on these big skirts that were for some play or something. My time could have been better used. I didn't know that could have been different (Guzmán, 1992).

Lucille Roybal felt alone in her struggle to find a teacher who would let her take the necessary business classes. She knew her father would tell her that she was doing something wrong in fighting the system that said she belonged in home economics (Roybal, 1991). For Henry Nava, the attitudes of teachers left a lingering sense of anger:

As far as my thoughts are concerned, I was quite angry to hear the teachers tell me that I, as a Mexican, could not go to college. That soured me on my attitudes towards school teachers, towards Anglos, and you could say towards the establishment because I started to see that teachers were a product of the establishment. They were the establishment expressing itself to me (Nava, 1991).

These experiences were carried deep in the hearts

and minds of the persons I interviewed. It is this spirit that united the founding members of the Los Angeles Community Political Organization, which later became the CSO, and the Committee to Elect Edward R. Roybal in 1947 and 1949. Henry Nava was president of the CSO during the successful campaign in 1949 that sent Roybal to the U. S. Congress.

Extending Civil Rights

In telling the story of the women of the CSO, one is also telling the story of how people can come together to alter the status-quo, and how something tangible can be created from nothing but human commitment, spirit, and dedication. The story of the CSO is several stories intertwined: the CSO story, the women's story, the story of the Committee to Elect Edward Roybal, and lastly, the Mexican American community's story.

The thirty founding members of the CSO were originally a group of people affiliated by family, friendship, and work. Most had not had any real civic involvement except union organizing, church activities or the YMCA. Edward Roybal, however, had developed a network tied to his work with the Tuberculosis Association coordinating mobile units for T.B. testing. He made contacts with doctors, educators, and other Los Angeles civic leaders (Guzmán, 1976; Gómez-Quiñones, 1990; Lopez, 1962).

It was 1947 and the United States was still reeling from the euphoria of winning the war for democracy. Mexican Americans had also gone to war, and were an important part the American effort. It has been documented that Chicano G.I.s garnished more medals than any other ethnic group during the war (Meier and Ribera, 1993; Acuña, 1981). Whether at the front, in the defense industry, in the garment industry, or as wives living with rations and the fearful anticipation of husbands and sons being called to war, Mexican-descent women became very patriotic

(Roybal, 1991; Apodaca, 1991). Because Anglo American males were going to war, jobs not normally open to Mexicans and women became available. Maria Duran worked as a “Rosita the Riveter” during the war and established contacts with the steel workers union (Mendez, 1991; Santillán, 1989). Later, in the early CSO days, she was able to get financial support from the same union. Urusula Gutiérrez struggled to become a cutter in the garment industry. Cutting was usually a man’s job, but with the war there was a shortage, and eventually she succeeded (Gutiérrez, 1991).

Despite the patriotism displayed by the Mexican community of Los Angeles, justice and equality were not forthcoming. In L.A., their image had been tarnished by the Zoot Suit Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon murder case (Meier, 1993; Acuña, 1981; McWilliams, 1975), and in Texas, Felix Longoria, a decorated serviceman who died in battle, was refused burial in his hometown cemetery because he was Mexican. Eventually, in 1948, he was buried at Arlington cemetery in Washington, D.C., as a result of an executive order from President Truman (Meier, *ibid.*; “Quest for Empowerment”, 1993).

In various places in and around East Los Angeles (La Carioca, St. Mary’s Church, and the homes of Mexicanos) people discussed the important issues of day. Uppermost in their minds was the poor treatment of Mexicans, substandard civic services, lack of quality education, housing and medical services, and police brutality (Ríos, 1991). For example, Alberto Camarillo and Jorge Bustamante document that Mexican children were only allowed to go to city and county pools the day before they were emptied to be cleaned. The CSO came to the conclusion that Mexicans lacked representation in government, and it was decided in 1947 to run a candidate in the upcoming ninth district city council election. The CSO found that there had not been a Spanish-surnamed person in public office since the late 1800s. The next issue

was who to run for office. “We sat around the booth at the Carioca. We looked around at each other and decided Eddie had the cleanest slate,” said Lucy Ríos (*ibid.*).

In these early gatherings the women were active participants, not bystanders. At first, Lucille Roybal was ready to move from Boyle Heights to her dream house in El Sereno until Ed told her about the election. She cried but asked if this is what he wanted to do. Seeing his interest she agreed to stay in Boyle Heights. (Roybal, 1991)

From the very beginning Lucille threw herself into the election and turned part of her home into a campaign headquarters. She became the office manager, part-time campaign manager, and full-time candidate’s wife, going to League of Women Voters meetings, candidates meetings, PTA meetings, and other election-related events. “We learned as we went along,” she said. Following the election, several of the women became involved in mainstream social and political institutions, but in 1947 meetings were conducted at the grassroots level—in their homes. Several of the women pointed out is that, in contrast to today’s elections, in 1947 and 1949, *everyone* was a volunteer. Campaign literature was all hand made using mimeograph machines, typewriters, and hand stamping letters.

As I entered Lucy Ríos’ home to interview her, she yelled from the kitchen, “I just kept the home fires burning,” playing down her contributions to the CSO, but she added “I did a lot” (Ríos, 1991). Lucy’s home also became a main location for organizing the Roybal campaign. As Lupe and Robert Morales lived across the street, their home also became a campaign center.

Nevertheless, for all their effort in this first attempt, they lost. Roybal told Lucille after the defeat that they could now move to their new home.

I told him he was crazy. He had lost by only 300 votes. The others kept telling him that he would do it next time. By

that time the house didn't mean that much; it was these people who had worked so hard. I saw their enthusiasm and knew we couldn't let them down. We never lived in that house in El Sereno (Roybal, 1991).

The group behind the 1947 campaign was not formally organized, but afterwards, the thirty founding members formed the Community Political Organization (CPO). However, because of the increase in red baiting, the name was changed to Community Service Organization (*Across the River*, pg. 5). "The response was electrifying," according to a 1950 CSO publication.

Eleven of the thirty founding members were Mexican American women (CSO 10th Anniversary Program). The CSO counted women in its roster as full members with full voting rights. "I didn't join the League of United Latin American Citizens [LULAC] because women were brought in only as an auxiliary group. CSO granted us full membership with full voting rights. Also, in LULAC you could only speak English, in the CSO Spanish was allowed. In fact, most meetings were bilingual," Ríos said (Ríos, 1991). Unlike other organizations, the CSO was a multiethnic and multiracial group that sought to empower the Mexicano/Chicano community by electing a Mexican American to office. It was understood that the candidate would represent the entire community. Although East Los Angeles has been considered as primarily a Mexicano/Chicano enclave, other ethnic groups once shared the eastern banks of the Los Angeles River. For example, in 1947, the East L.A. neighborhood of Boyle Heights had a large Jewish community, and in the area of Olympic and Atlantic Boulevards, an Irish community, and Japanese Americans lived in the area around Eastern and Brooklyn Avenues (Sparkhul, 1991). As Lucy Rios recalled, "the Newmans—he was a police commissioner and was married to a Mexican woman—and the Sparkhuls both donated time and money" (Rios, 1991). Maria Duran, through

the CSO Civil Rights Committee, established relations with the Jewish community and the NAACP.

Seniel Ostrow, noted Los Angeles industrialist of the 1940s, told historian Florence Mischel that it was through him and at the request of Mayor Fletcher Bowron that Saul Alinsky's Backyard Movement of Chicago became involved with the CSO.¹ Fred Ross² was brought in to lend his skills in community organizing (Mischel, 1985), but James Mendez noted that CSO'ers already knew about organizing and had already started mapping out strategies before Ross appeared (Mendez, 1991). Ostrow concludes that the CSO was at the top of the achievements he was most proud of "because it affected so many people." Ostrow was one of the main CSO benefactors.

After officially forming the organization, CSO members asked themselves: what caused Roybal's defeat? Their conclusion was that Mexican Americans were not registered to vote. "There were only three thousand registered Mexican American voters in the whole of California!" Ostrow explained. In Los Angeles County in 1947 there were approximately 400,000 persons of Mexican-descent (*Daily News*, 1949). The CSO found for itself two immediate tasks: voter registration, and increasing its membership. The main organizing tool was home meetings. Lucy Ríos, Lucille Roybal, Lupe Morales, Maria Duran, and other women took it upon themselves to organize these meetings, which involved each person inviting five or more neighbors, friends, or family to their homes. During the meetings, the organization's leaders were introduced, and would discuss the CSO motive and philosophy. Meetings were held all over Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and in the county in areas like Watts, El Monte, Lincoln Heights, and the San Fernando Valley. In the course of two years CSO developed from a thirty-member core group into a 3,000-member civic action group dedicated

to “helping people help themselves”(CSO 25th Anniversary Program).

The voter registration drive was one of the CSO’s first successful projects. In the first three months of the drive, the number of registered Mexican American voters in the 9th Councilmanic District increased by 15 thousand, and 17 new precincts were created in the Belvedere area alone (ibid.). No one had thought previously to register the Mexicans.

Before they could register people, CSO members had to become deputy registrars. “The hardest thing that I ever did was [becoming] a registrar of voters. We went door to door registering votes. It was the hardest thing. It would take me an hour to get one registration,” said Lucille Roybal (Roybal, 1991). Volunteer registrars waged a non-partisan, door-to-door campaign designed to overcome the fear of red-baiting and anti-Mexican harassment. Women acted as block warriors bringing voters to the polls on election day. Ultimately, 87 percent of those they registered voted in the 1949 election. By 1972 CSO had registered more than 500,000 voters. Needless to say, Edward Roybal and the CSO won in 1949.

The women also took leadership in other ways. While they were not as visible as the men in the organization, the women advocated for the CSO through the “*comadre* grapevine.” They were also leaders of committees and other activities. They looked to each other for the courage to challenge traditional Mexican women’s roles. Maria Duran was seen as a “spark plug”—a woman who believed an obstacle was a challenge to be creative. She was one of the women on the executive committee, and acted as spokesperson for the CSO. She chaired the important social committee, which, contrary to its name, was the main fundraising unit of the early CSO. The CSO was also supported by Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation, which provided funds for Fred Ross, a secretary, and an office (CSO 25th Anniversary Program).

A major obstacle to registering voters was citizenship. The CSO was the first to organize citizenship classes for Mexicans in L.A. Again, women like Marian Graff, Henrietta Villaescusa, and Lupe Morales took the leadership in organizing these classes, and also created the bilingual literature needed for the predominantly Spanish-speaking population (Graff, 1992). “In those days you could only take the citizenship exam in English. Well, we got the Immigration Department to allow Mexican Americans eligible for citizenship to take the examination in Spanish . . . that had to be one of the most important things that ever happened to this state,” Ostrow told Florence Mischel (Mischel, 1985).

Henrietta Villaescusa, believing that the Boyle Heights CSO was overly male dominated, started her own CSO chapter in Lincoln Heights. She was its first president. As a nurse, she organized mobile health units that traveled throughout East L.A. providing health care to isolated areas and families. Dr. and Mary Sparkhul and Lucille Roybal were involved in this program as well. The Lincoln Heights chapter was involved in numerous issues, including educational reform, support of labor unions, voter registration, and community involvement in elections.

In most areas, the CSO became an umbrella service group dealing with housing, labor, neighborhood improvement, police-community relations, and health. Local, state and federal agencies came to trust CSO as the group to contact in East Los Angeles. The CSO went on to have chapters in California and Arizona. In San Jose, Cesar Chávez joined the CSO and became a state director; in Stockton Dolores Huerta joined. It was in the CSO that both honed the organizing and advocacy skills that would serve them later as internationally recognized leaders of the United Farm Workers (Levy, 1966; Rose, 1990).

The CSO at its height had 19 chapters throughout California and Arizona. The Los An-

geles chapter (LACSO), through the War on Poverty grants was able to develop and implement innovative projects for the East Los Angeles community. Several of these programs were developed and directed by women. Edith Brown directed the Alcoholism Help and Prevention Program (AHPP). The AHPP was one of the first community-based, family-focused alcoholism treatment programs in the East Los Angeles area. In 1964 the CSO was able to charter a credit union. Under the leadership of Flavia Vasquez and the credit union committee, banking services became available to low-income persons and families, some of whom were undocumented. By 1972 LACSO credit union had \$91,000 in assets and had made over \$250,000 in loans to its members.

As part of the Office of Economic Opportunity-funded Consumer Action program, LACSO formed a Buyers Club in 1966. Members of the Consumer Education class organized the club as a cooperative to offer quality products at reduced cost. On May 24, 1968, the club opened its first Buyers Club Center, which was directed by Margot Benavides.

Since its inception, the CSO has been concerned with educational issues. Under the leadership of Margaret Gutiérrez, the CSO sponsored a program directed at working with first and second graders and their parents in 1971. The PADRES (Parents Activated for the Development of Relevant Education) program provided after-school instruction to Spanish-speaking children and their parents. Margaret Gutiérrez developed the program, the curriculum, and was the PADRES program first Director.

In the 1980s, under the leadership of Rosie Vasquez, the CSO in Los Angeles County became a clearing house to help the undocumented with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) amnesty processing. During this period the CSO also assisted families in saving their homes from

foreclosure through a Department of Housing and Urban Development program (Apodaca, 1991).

The CSO has been sharply criticized by later generations. Those involved in the CSO have been called accommodationist, assimilationist, reformist, and ‘poverty pimps,’ among other things. The actors in that early period see things in a different light. Fred Ross writes, “the CSO, as we called it, was a movement among the Chicanos with, at that time, the reputation of being the most militant and effective organization of its kind in the United States!” (Ross, 1989: p. 1). For Margarita Duran, her early CSO years were the most exciting of her entire career as an activist and social worker (Mendez, 1991). While Mexican American labor organizations, political groups, newspapers, and mutual-aid societies existed before the creation of the CSO, it forced open doors to government, education, business, and cultural institutions for Mexicans, and Chicanos/as. Although not as vibrant as in its heyday, and with diminished members and chapters, the Los Angeles Community Service Organization remained open and functioning under the leadership of Rosario “Rosie” Vasquez until October 1995 (Rios, 1996).

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