

“Economic Justice is a Women’s Issue:

The Chicana Welfare Rights Organization’s Challenge to Welfare Reform in the 1970s”

In 1967, during the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, the U.S. Congress passed increasingly restrictive amendments to the Social Security Act. These amendments marked a shift in federal policy toward the country’s poor populations from the entitlement based system under Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal programs to a more conservative “work” requirement. Essentially, the 1967 amendments to the Social Security Act established the Work Incentive Program (PL 90-248), which required AFDC recipients to take mandatory state-based employment training programs with the end goal of pushing them into the labor force. The majority of the cash aid recipients on AFDC were, in fact, single mothers, many of them women of color, raising families. That same year, in the midst of this political shift away from government support of the poor, Alicia Escalante, a welfare activist from East Los Angeles, founded the East Los Angeles Welfare Rights Organization (ELAWRO) in direct response to the mounting issues faced by single Chicana welfare mothers in her community. Almost immediately, Escalante and the ELAWRO joined the fight against the conservative drive to remove single mothers from those deemed deserving of public assistance. They centered their efforts on creating awareness regarding the plight of the single mother on welfare and serving as an advocacy group on behalf of a vulnerable population that was increasingly becoming the target of repressive legislation.

This chapter on Alicia Escalante and the ELAWRO’s battle against welfare reform demonstrates the significance of the struggles poor, single mothers, most of them women of color, faced in challenging policies and practices as well as ideologies about who was worthy of government support. To do so, it begins by briefly tracing Escalante’s development as a grassroots community leader and locates the 1960s and 1970s as the site of the transition in

government policies from welfare to workfare. As scholars have observed, these two decades witnessed the passage of increasingly restrictive social policies and the dismantling of New Deal welfare policies in favor of workfare.¹ Prime examples – and foci of this study – are the passage of the 1967 amendments to the Social Security Act, which first established the Work Incentive Program (WIN) and the Talmadge Work Incentive amendments to the Social Security Act, also known as WIN II, in December 1971. Using untapped archival documents from Escalante's personal collection, in addition to the personal papers of Guida West, NWRO founder George A. Wiley, and Chicana feminist and Chicano movement publications, I turn to the battle waged by the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization (CWRO), formerly the ELAWRO, against the Talmadge amendments to the Social Security Act.² I argue that through Escalante's leadership and practice of a militant dignity politics, she and the organization were able to build bridges across difference and help mobilize a broadly-based, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic coalition of women and men to challenge repressive legislation that they believed robbed people of their dignity. Further, it demonstrates that economic justice was a Chicana feminist cause that was well represented in Chicana feminist print communities and was an issue that required the collective effort of the Chicana feminist movement. Escalante and the CWRO were committed to defending and advocating for women's rights as human rights. And, though they lost the larger battle against welfare reform, their efforts demonstrate the power of the collective movement they built to preserve the dignity of poor people and the awareness they created regarding our interconnected nature as human beings.

Beginnings: Alicia Escalante and the Emergence of the East Los Angeles Welfare Rights

Organization

Alicia Escalante's entry into grassroots community activism was rooted in her lived experiences in witnessing the indignities her impoverished mother had to endure as well as her own as a poor, under-educated, under-skilled, single mother. Her activism began in the Ramona Gardens housing projects in Los Angeles, an experience that quickly led to her involvement in a state-wide campaign against the threat of Medi-Cal cuts proposed by Governor Ronald Reagan in 1966. Soon after she founded the ELAWRO, which began as an affiliate of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Escalante had cut her activist teeth organizing with the NWRO against the passage of PL 90-248, which was the public welfare reform provision embedded in the social security amendments of 1967 that established the WIN program. This work provided an early training ground for Escalante and the ELAWRO in the sustained battle against early welfare reform. Escalante served as the alternate for the California state delegate of the National Coordinating Committee of the NWRO from 1968 through 1970. Catherine Jermany, an African American leading grassroots community activist from Los Angeles and president of the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization and, later, the California WRO, served as the state representative. Close allies, Escalante and Jermany worked together to build bridges between Chicano and Black communities in Los Angeles. Under Jermany's leadership, Escalante also served as the first vice chairman of the LACWRO.³

In order to reach their goal "to build a nationwide grass-roots organization of poor people that could carry on activity to get changes in legislation and through the courts," the NWRO sought to educate recipients and others regarding their rights and the oppressive conditions that were included in this early welfare reform.⁴ The WIN program was focused on AFDC families and administered by the U.S. Department of Labor in conjunction with local state welfare agencies. The program consisted of three priorities. The first was to "establish an employability

plan” for each recipient through an employment agency. The second was “appropriate” training for “all those found suitable,” and, if eligible, the disbursement of up to a thirty-dollar-a-month incentive payment. After the training, the third priority was referring as many as possible to regular employment. For those “who [were] found unsuitable for the training and those for whom no jobs in the regular economy can be found at the time.” they were assigned to “special work projects.”⁵

The goal of WIN was clear: to get recipients off of welfare and into the labor force. While a lofty goal, the NWRO and ELAWRO questioned how this would happen and what it would look like. That is, what kind of training would welfare recipients receive? What sector of the labor force would they be expected to join? These were major sources of concern. In a fact sheet circulated by the NWRO in their December 1967 newsletter *NOW!* the organization posed a series of questions about how the legislation would impact recipients. It asked rhetorically: “If welfare decides I am ‘appropriate’ to be forced to work,” what kind of jobs could they be expected to find? According to the *NOW!* fact sheet, those positions would be the “same low paying, menial, dead-end jobs that have always been reserved for the poor.” If a recipient was found to be unsuitable for training or placement, “a special job is supposed to be created for you with some agency like the welfare department or the poverty program.”⁶ That special job, however, remained unclear. To the NWRO and the ELAWRO, welfare reform was equivalent to a forced work program that would not lift people out of poverty, as it intended. Rather, the reform effort would only serve to keep them occupied while, at the same time, quell the growing public concern over the soaring cost of welfare.

The NWRO took immediate issue with the reform agenda, labeling it enslavement, as it did in the June 17th 1968 issue of *NOW!* On the newsletter's cover, the acronym WIN was

changed to reflect the organization's critique of the reform as "WIP" as a play on the word "whip." It read, "The Welfare WIP program and YOU." Across the WIP acronym appears an image of a whip with four tails on it and below the whip is an image of a woman scrubbing a floor with a brush and a bucket. The use of the whip as a symbol is significant, for it reflects the legacy of slavery and forced labor system experienced by people of African descent in the U.S. The image served as a powerful critique of the 1967 Work Incentive Program and one that made a direct connection between the oppressive legislation and slavery. One welfare rights activist, Mrs. Margaret McCarty, from Baltimore, Maryland, made a blatant connection to this past at a NWRO rally held at the capitol building in Washington, D.C., by arguing the WIN welfare bill was "devised by 'lousy, dirty, conniving brutes.'" The bill, she cried, is going "to take us back to slavery."⁷

The NWRO's and the ELAWRO's critiques of the WIN program were rooted not only in a dissatisfaction with the training and placement in meaningless, demeaning low-wage jobs but also in an awareness that the program directly impinged on the agency of welfare mothers to make decisions for themselves and their families. "We are against forcing mothers to work," the NWRO fact sheet stated. "We are for meaningful jobs with adequate pay and proper child care for all women who wish to work and for adequate income for all women who choose to work fulltime as mothers caring for their own children."⁸ From the perspective of the NWRO, whether a woman chose to work inside or outside of the home was irrelevant. What was most important is that the work was valued and compensated adequately, allowing women to live a dignified life. Escalante and the ELAWRO vehemently agreed with this position as they regarded dignity as the right of all human beings. While Escalante was drawn to the NWRO for their commitment and

advocacy to the preservation of recipient dignity, she also understood the NWRO's limitations in realizing the needs of the Spanish-speaking community locally and nationally.

While the NWRO focused on the compulsory employment of women in the formal labor market at the national level, Escalante and the ELAWRO took on culturally relevant issues that directly impacted Spanish-speaking recipients at the local level. Among those battles was a challenge to the racist and discriminatory treatment by social workers and welfare office staff and the lack of bilingual and culturally sensitive social workers. They demanded the need for Spanish translation of English-language welfare forms and called out the demeaning welfare policies that infringed on recipients' dignity. To tackle these and other structural issues, the ELAWRO established a local office in East Los Angeles and staffed it with volunteers, many of them members of the organization and welfare recipients. Some of the strategies they practiced included informational community meetings about recipients' rights, letter writing campaigns to state and local officials, and direct action.

The regular community meetings held by the CWRO were critical to spreading awareness about the rights of welfare recipients, the threats posed to those rights, and organizing responses to those threats. For example, on November 7, 1967 one such community meeting addressed the threatened cutbacks to the Medical program. Seventy-five welfare recipients attended the meeting to hear from speakers and to launch an organization drive against these proposed cuts by Governor Ronald Reagan. That night the membership wrote over fifty letters to the governor to detail the impact these cuts would have on poor families in California.⁹ The following month at a community meeting in early December of 1967 the issue of special needs grants, which were being rolled back, was the topic of discussion. At that meeting attendees expressed their discontent with the cutbacks to these grants, which provided recipients with extra support for

“beds, refrigerators, cribs, [and] transportation” and suggested that the ELAWRO take action.¹⁰

Following this meeting, on December 5, 1967, fifteen members of the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization, in which the ELAWRO was an affiliate, attended a Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting to address these concerns. Jermany, president of the LACWRO, was given only five minutes at the end of that meeting to present their case. In response, Jermany and supporters of welfare rights were told that “the County didn’t have money for these things” and that these concerns would be brought up to the governor and would be discussed further the following year.¹¹ In reaction to this response, the ELAWRO continued to put pressure on the Board of Supervisors and Governor Reagan by launching a “basic needs campaign,” and holding demonstrations against these cuts, which drew media attention.¹² Demonstrations such as these were often the quickest form of direct response to the imposition of unjust policies and an important tool to circulate publicly their discontent and opposition.

Letter writing campaigns proved particularly effective in the CWRO’s effort to bring awareness to the struggle of single welfare mothers and the emergent punitive legislation that affected their everyday lives. Indeed, in an effort to bring the concerns of the Spanish-speaking community to their attention and to gain momentum in the organization’s mobilization to amend or abolish the Talmadge amendments, Alicia Escalante wrote several tersely worded letters to elected officials. Among those she wrote to included Edward R. Roybal, a Los Angeles City Council member elected in 1949 and the first Mexican American to serve since 1881. In response to her correspondence, Roybal, who was also an important ally in advocating for the Spanish speaking community (he would go on to be elected to the U.S. Congress in 1962), wrote “concerning the problems that the Spanish speaking have had with welfare and social security forms written in English.” Upon carrying out research, Roybal asserted that it was clear “that

many Spanish speaking [members of the community] are unable to comprehend Social Security and Welfare forms that may affect their lives.” As a result of these findings, Congressman Roybal proposed legislation in the U.S. Congress in 1973 “mandat[ing] that notices to recipients of the termination of their eligibility...must be printed in languages other than English when there is a substantial number of recipients of aid who are not fluent with English in a given community.”¹³ Although it remains unclear why the legislation did not garner enough votes to pass in the U.S. Congress, Roybal was nevertheless influential and brought the concerns of the Spanish-speaking community of Los Angeles to the national arena in Washington, D.C., and was supportive of Escalante’s and the CWRO’s efforts.

Through Escalante’s and the CWRO’s advocacy, Congressman Roybal became very familiar with the crisis his constituents had experienced as a result of the implementation of the Talmadge amendments in Los Angeles County. Escalante shared her concerns both in writing and in person and did so at a meeting regarding the operation of the “Talmadge-WIN program” in Los Angeles. Following this meeting, Roybal told her he was “seriously concerned that these officials will continue to take a rigid and repressive approach and place unreasonable conditions on the participants.” Further, he believed that since it was unlikely that Congress would act to repeal the Talmadge amendment, “our best approach,” he said, “is to discuss our grievances and recommendations with those administrators who are responsible for operating the WIN program for the Los Angeles County.” He closed by notifying Escalante that he had tentatively scheduled meetings with the regional administrators of Los Angeles County in addition to the county director of the Department of Public Social Services and would be in contact with her.¹⁴ The support of public officials against or in favor of amending the Talmadge amendment was critical to the CWRO’s mobilization against repressive legislation.

Indeed, through Alicia Escalante's effort as the Chairwoman of the National Chicana Welfare Rights Organization and her and the CRWO's letter writing campaign, support came from multiple elected officials. In response to Escalante's request for support to dismantle the Talmadge amendment, Congressman George E. Danielson asserted, "we must pursue the question of welfare reform." "I do not feel the piecemeal effort to patch the present system late in 1972 is adequate," he argued.¹⁵ California Senator Mervyn M. Dymally also replied to Escalante's concerns, saying "I agree with you that strict enforcement of such stringent rules and regulations would infringe on the self determination guaranteed to all citizens in the constitution."¹⁶ California Assemblyman Bob Moretti went further stating that the obvious impact of the Talmadge amendment to the Social Security Act "would be to restrict many of the basic freedoms every woman has the right to make regarding her life and her family. I am opposed to any public law which denies these basic rights to women or any human being." Moretti supported the CWRO's position on the amendment and was willing to provide "any assistance" that he could and wanted Escalante to continue corresponding with him on matters of importance to her. While Escalante and the organization did receive some support from elected officials, many did not offer any assistance, including California State Senator Clark L. Bradley. Bradley declared in his correspondence to Escalante that "I would be in support of the Talmadge Amendment if it would, in fact, deny women the listed points contained in your letter." Further he exclaimed, "I believe that women now have full and adequate legal rights and more are not necessary."¹⁷ In his view, women already had enough rights, and he directly associated Escalante's struggle with the wider movement for women's rights and liberation.

Though the community meetings and letter writing campaigns were generally effective, these strategies could only go so far in the CWRO's struggle for human dignity. Many times

Escalante and the organization relied on direct action tactics to draw attention to their plight and raise awareness, especially during difficult economic times, such as Christmas when gifting was (and is) often expected. Two days before Christmas, on December 23, 1968, for instance, in response to the great need that recipients had experienced due to the cutbacks on “special grants,” Escalante, members of the organization, and several members of the social worker union and organization Social Action Latinos for Unity Development (SALUD) demonstrated in front of the State building in downtown Los Angeles to demand an increase in aid. The Director of the Metro East district of the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), Mr. Gustafson, who was described as “an incredibly insensitive administrator,” reacted to the demonstration at the following Metro East district staff meeting of the DPSS.¹⁸ He bitterly attacked the actions of Escalante, the ELAWRO, and the social workers who supported the demonstration.¹⁹ Though it is unclear exactly what he said, it is clear that Gustafson’s reactions were not limited to verbal attacks at that meeting but also included outright intimidation tactics.

Following this demonstration, Escalante was invited to speak at the State building by members of SALUD and the social workers’ union. Members of that union were also concerned with problems arising for recipients in their districts. When Director Gustafson learned that Escalante had been invited to speak, he refused to allow her to speak and for them to have their meeting in the building. When Escalante arrived soon after, she found members of SALUD and the social workers’ union huddled outside in bad weather as they had opted to have the meeting outside despite Director Gustafson’s gruff response. Unmoved by Gustafson’s intimidation tactics, Escalante pushed her way into the building followed by the forty-three social workers who had been refused to hear her speak. Escalante was once again confronted by Gustafson who tried to keep her out of the meeting room. When she entered the room and turned the lights on,

he shut them off. Undeterred, she turned them on again and he turned them off again. By this point, the tense situation had attracted the media. With reporters present, Escalante spoke in front of the social workers who had invited her and left soon after she was done. Unfortunately we do not know exactly what she said, but we do know that the social workers' support led to all forty-three of them to receive suspension notices.²⁰

In response to the suspension, a broad-based coalition was formed. It included Escalante and the ELAWRO, SALUD, members of the social worker's union, and the Welfare Issues Committee (WIC). WIC formed in early 1969, was constituted by members of several different local Chicano movement organizations such as the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), the Brown Berets, La Junta, The League of United Citizens to Help Addicts (LUCHA), and many other concerned organizations fighting for community empowerment and self determination. The WIC joined with the ELAWRO, members of SALUD and concerned social workers to gather to discuss the needs of those on welfare and to develop forty-three demands (the number of social workers and supervisors suspended) to be presented to County of Los Angeles Director of the Department of Public Social Services, Ellis P. Murphy.

The strategy was set. The first meeting with Director Murphy took place on January 30th 1969. When Escalante and members of the community arrived at the Triggs Street central office at the 9:30 am scheduled time, they were locked outside of the building. Two security officers stood on the inside of the glass doors as Escalante and members of the community first asked and then demanded to be let in by pounding on the glass. Eventually they made their way into the building but were soon met with the arrival of seven to eight Sherriff vehicles who were there to "make sure that no one started a 'riot.'"²¹ Despite the very tense situation on the Triggs Street

welfare office, by 10:30 am Escalante and members of the community were allowed to have the meeting that was scheduled for that morning with Director Murphy.²²

At the meeting, they presented some of the forty-three demands, which centered on the recognition of the human dignity of recipients, accountability from the welfare department, cultural sensitivity and representation within welfare administration, and access to resources. At the top of the demands was a public apology from the welfare administration in Los Angeles County to the East Los Angeles community and for the removal of Director Gustafson who they believed had disrespected Escalante and the East Los Angeles community outright. They wanted culturally sensitive people on all levels of welfare administration and the hiring of Chicanos. They advocated for cultural sensitivity training for social workers, welfare outposts in the community that included Spanish-speaking staff, the creation of a welfare advisory council with members selected by the community, and the translation of specific welfare forms from English to Spanish. Access to resources such as child care centers was another area of need identified by the demands. Overall they sought to humanize the welfare system and improve relations between the social worker and client.²³ Though Escalante and members of the community were there to advocate for the community and present these demands at that first meeting with Director Murphy, they were met with resistance and intimidation tactics via law enforcement.

Though productive, that initial meeting with Los Angeles County director Murphy evolved into a series of meetings that at times became very contentious. At the second meeting held on February 10, 1969 Director Murphy walked out before even hearing any of the demands. In response, Escalante sent a telegram to California State director of the Department of Social Welfare, John C. Montgomery, notifying him of Murphy's unwillingness to participate in the meeting due to the presence of a specific committee member.²⁴ Montgomery's response,

although sympathetic to Escalante, asserted that “all aspects of Mr. Murphy’s performance as County Welfare Director are not the responsibility of the supervisory agency (State Department of Social Welfare). It would appear that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors would be your proper court of appeal since they have the responsibility for all staff employed in county government.”²⁵ In essence, Montgomery, passed the buck back to the County. Upon Director Murphy’s unexpected departure from the February 10th meeting the coalition immediately launched a candle light vigil at Murphy’s home for two nights “with over a hundred people participating including some of his neighbors.”²⁶

Since State Director Montgomery informed Escalante that the County Board of Supervisors were responsible for all County employees, including Director Murphy, Escalante, the ELAWRO and the Welfare Issues Committee turned their attention there. Escalante and members of the WIC attended a Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting where they were met with resistance, namely from Supervisor Ernest E. Debs. When Escalante and her supporters arrived unannounced demanding to be heard by the board, the police were called. When Escalante proceeded to pressure Supervisor Debs to arrange special meetings to discuss the issues impacting recipients, Debs became irate and began verbally insulting Escalante. Debs then ordered the police officers to quiet Escalante and make her sit down. When approached by the officers, members of the ELAWRO and the WIC rushed to Escalante’s side and surrounded her, escorting her safely out of the room.²⁷

Despite instances such as these, Escalante and WIC continued to meet with Director Murphy and other County administrators in order to bring to light the experiences and needs of welfare recipients in East Los Angeles and discuss possible solutions. The community’s support of Escalante and the ELAWRO did not emerge in a vacuum but rather was a reflection of her

deep commitment to community issues that went beyond welfare rights. As poor and working-class people on the East side of Los Angeles their dignity was often at risk of being trampled on not only by the welfare system but also by the multiple forms of oppression that emanated from the education system, law enforcement, and the White House. This commitment to doing the work necessary to preserve her own dignity and that of the greater Chicana and Chicano community entailed her consistent involvement in community struggles and in turn, Escalante was recognized as a community leader by many.²⁸ Her dedication was mirrored by her high school aged children who participated in the 1968 East Los Angeles High School Blowouts and joined the Brown Berets.²⁹ Their involvement in community issues, which she encouraged, and her dedication to doing dignity work on behalf of the community led to her playing a leading role not only in the battle for welfare rights but also in the Chicano movement and broader civil rights struggles. These struggles were closely interwoven and informed one another, though scholars have often examined them in silos, as unrelated, and not part of a larger whole. The history of Escalante and the ELAWRO provides a vital opportunity to explore these struggles at their nexus.

Fighting for Civil Rights, Human Dignity, and Justice on Multiple Fronts

On June 1, 1968 Sal Castro, a Lincoln High School teacher, along with twelve other individuals were indicted by a Los Angeles County grand jury on conspiracy charges for their role in the high school “blowouts” or walkouts that March. The “blowouts” involved thousands of East Los Angeles students walking out of their local high schools in response to substandard educational experiences and conditions. Following the indictment, Castro was relieved of his teaching duties at Lincoln High School, an act that galvanized the Chicano community in support of his reinstatement. Escalante, too, was compelled to join community activists who had

organized the Chicano Legal Defense Committee (CLDC) to advocate for Castro's reappointment to Lincoln High School. On September 16th the first day of the school year, and the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution of 1810-1821, the CLDC and community supporters held a series of protests outside of Lincoln High School and began to pressure the school board to reinstate Castro. During the last week of September, at the end of a school board meeting, attendees who were present in support of Castro decided to stay and form a sit-in until they board met their demands. The sit-in lasted for almost a week and ended with the arrest of thirty-five participants, including Escalante. Although Escalante and the organization were focused on welfare rights, their greater goal was working towards the recognition of the human dignity of the marginalized. Educational struggles were human dignity struggles and were closely tied to their own experiences as mothers of high school aged children. By participating in the sit-in, Escalante demonstrated to her children and the community the importance of carrying out their civic duty by being steadfast in their advocacy for a quality education, human dignity, and justice.

Escalante's leadership and notoriety within the Chicano community in East Los Angeles was also reflected on a national level through her involvement with the national welfare rights movement as the alternate California state delegate to the National Welfare Rights Organization. Recognizing her leadership in the struggle for the human dignity of the impoverished, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) invited Escalante to attend the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., as part of the Chicano contingent from Los Angeles.³⁰ Escalante was asked to fill a greyhound bus with welfare mothers and their families, and was told that she would have a bus monitor from the SCLC. Escalante delivered on the request and filled the bus with welfare mothers and their children, and also took her five children on the several days long

trip. Their bus monitor was none other than Jesse Jackson who would go on to fight larger civil rights struggles across the nation. Escalante and the organization's participation in the Poor Peoples Campaign reflected their commitment to a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and broad based politics and movement for justice. The PPC represented the coalescing of multiple social movement sectors into a concerted effort to cast off the existing economic structure that kept Blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, women, and poor whites at the bottom. For Escalante and the organization there was no separation of these struggles, they were all human dignity struggles.

Escalante's national leadership was further recognized a year later, on November 25th 1969, when MEChA de UCLA, a leading student organization in southern California, invited her to participate in "A Chicana Symposium: Corazón de Aztlán." Focused on Chicana leadership in the Chicano movement, the symposium included notable women such as Dolores Huerta, a nationally known leader in the United Farm Workers union; Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez, a former SNCC member and co-editor of La Alianza's *El Grito Del Norte* newspaper; Enriqueta Vásquez, co-editor of *El Grito Del Norte* newspaper from New Mexico and allied with La Alianza; Geraldine Gonzales, co-founder of the Crusade for Justice and the Escuela Tlatelolco, an independent school for Chicano and Native American youth in Denver; Alicia Hernández, who was active with the Los Angeles Brown Berets, a paramilitary troupe offering protection to the community; and Susan Racho of MEChA de UCLA.³¹ Each of the participants on the panel represented the broad range of activism and organizing taking place across the country by Chicanas and Chicanos. Collectively these women demonstrated the leadership that emanated from these respective struggles and their connections, which was rooted ultimately in the struggle for human dignity and self-determination.

Given Escalante's insightful and fiery speeches as well as her growing notoriety in Chicano movement circles, she was invited to speak at all three anti-Vietnam war protests organized by the National Chicano Moratorium Committee in East Los Angeles in 1969 and 1970.³² This was significant given that the majority of speakers at the anti-war demonstrations were men. As her speeches and writings demonstrate, Escalante was skilled at making connections among movement sectors and the struggle of the single welfare mother. For Escalante, they all formed part of a larger struggle and she consistently advocated for and raised awareness about single welfare mothers and their plight as well as the Chicano community in general. All of the battles she was involved with reflected her keen desire for justice and for the recognition of human dignity. While Escalante was involved in these multiple struggles she never lost sight of her and the organization's focus, which was to challenge national policy towards welfare recipients and welfare rights. From the perspective of Escalante and the organization, welfare rights were civil rights.

From Welfare to Workfare: The Shift in Federal Public Assistance Policy, 1967-1971

As Escalante would later realize, the restrictive 1967 welfare reform establishing WIN or the Work Incentive Program was partially the result of a politically conservative drive by Southern Democrats who ushered in a new age in the approach to public assistance, which would have a lasting impact on the welfare state in the United States. Other factors that contributed to this shift included demographic changes in recipient caseloads from white women to women of color, a national increase in out-of-wedlock births and divorce, the ballooning of AFDC budgets, and the resulting public outcry.³³ The introduction of the 1971 Talmadge Work Incentive amendments to the Social Security Act, or WIN II, further signaled the demise of the welfare state in favor of a workfare state. The passage of the WIN program in 1967 and WIN II in 1971

are significant in the history of public welfare as they signaled the first work requirements for public assistance. The 1967 WIN program was the first to require states to establish employment and training programs for welfare recipients, however, it was on a voluntary basis. The 1971 WIN II program championed by Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge federally mandated participation in the program for recipients without “special responsibilities” in the home or no preschool aged children.³⁴

WIN II was much more “tough” on AFDC recipients than under previous requirements as outlined in the Work Incentive Program of 1967. WIN II removed states’ ability to use discretion in deciding who to enroll in these programs and required all recipients who were eligible for work to register for employment, including single welfare mothers. WIN II also had a harsher enforcement provision than the 1967 reform, which would make states subject to a loss of federal funds if they did not reach a set quota of enrolled recipients working in the labor force.³⁵ In essence WIN II prioritized quick job placement for recipients rather than training, which would provide opportunities for long-term and skilled employment and thus bring higher earning power. That would not be the case, however. When the Talmadge Amendments (WIN II) were introduced in the summer of 1972 in Los Angeles County, Alicia Escalante and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization, formerly the ELAWRO, were ready to organize to challenge its implementation.

By the time of the implementation of the WIN II program in 1972, the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization had become deeply engaged in the national struggle for economic justice and human dignity. While they had joined forces with the NWRO in the late 1960s, a series of conflicts with that national organization had led the CWRO to give up their affiliation and claim autonomy. Nevertheless, they maintained their connections with the NWRO to continue

organizing for welfare rights and economic justice in the Chicano and broader community. From the first appearance of WIN II, Escalante and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization adamantly opposed it. As single welfare mothers this legislation directly affected their everyday lives, as it imposed new regulations and meant a new level of bureaucracy that they had to deal with, in addition to caring for their children and maintaining their households. In a resolution issued in 1972, at a third world women's group conference, the CWRO blasted the amendments for its impact on women, children, and families specifically and "human being[s]" generally:

We as a Chicana Welfare Rights Organization believe that every woman has the right to make her own decisions affecting her and her family, therefore maintaining her dignity as an individual and knowing that the Talmadge Amendment would deny women this basic right that should be the right of every human being, we as a Chicana W.R.O. oppose the Talmadge Amendment for the following reasons: I. Work registration allows H.R.D. and other agencies to control people II. People will be working for no pay just their welfare check III. Slave labor jobs IV. Women should have the choice to stay home to care for children or work V. Devi[c]e to eliminate AFDC VI. Offers no meaningful training VII. [I]nadequate day care services...[sic]³⁶

The CWRO's resolution clearly identified the Talmadge Amendment as directly infringing on recipients' agency and on women's agency in particular. For these women, being able to make decisions for themselves and their families was understood as critical to the maintenance of their personal dignity, which the CWRO viewed as "a basic right that should be the right of every human being."³⁷ Escalante and the CWRO framed women's rights as a human rights issue signifying the broader struggle they were dedicated to, the struggle for human dignity for all people. This desire obligated Escalante and the CWRO to cross social movement boundaries to work within and among the white feminist, Chicano, Chicana, and Welfare Rights movements to achieve their goal. They found the WIN II policy's intent to "control people" unjust, believing that women should have the right to choose whether they stayed home to raise their children or leave the household to earn a wage. The CWRO was understandably critical of

the “wages” recipients would be receiving under this program. It was understood that recipients would be locked into the low-wage labor sector which provided a meager living. Plus, as they noted, the state had yet to provide adequate day care services for recipients to complete their required training or job searches under the new legislation. As CWRO understood it, neither the jobs nor the training were meant to lift them out of poverty. To the CWRO, the Talmadge Amendment’s intent to alter radically welfare legislation was a direct blow to the spirit of the welfare state and its obligation to the poor through the elimination of AFDC. As Historian Eva Bertram has emphasized, the conflicts over workfare were not just about low wages for single mothers but about questions surrounding what counts as work and whose work counts, under what terms must the work be done, and what role the government should play in the lives of one of its most vulnerable populations.³⁸

With their opposition to the Talmadge Amendment and WIN II outlined clearly, the CWRO took on one of their biggest battles: to abolish or revise the Talmadge amendment (WIN II). The fight would not be easy or quick. In East Los Angeles, Escalante and the CWRO faced a triple-pronged attack on their battle to shore up the welfare state. First, it came from President Nixon and his national welfare reform proposal, the Family Assistance Plan; second, from the Southern Democrat controlled House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee, both of which were chaired by Southern Democrats and who determined welfare policy; and, third, from California Governor Ronald Reagan who ran on a platform of welfare reform in his reelection campaign in 1970. Knowing the enormity of the struggle, the welfare activists took on the challenge strategically by building solidarity with disparate groups and forging a coalition. Using writing campaigns, which they often employed to seek change, they called on people of “all races and classes” to join the struggle:

The Chicana WRO in East Los Angeles is organizing to abolish the Talmadge Amendment. It is their hope to arouse concern of all people of all races and classes to help fight for the abolishment of an amendment which does not provide meaningful employment or training for the poor. ELAWRO is holding welfare info classes. Join the fight against repressive legislation affecting the poor.³⁹

The CWRO attempted not only to cast a broad net over who could and would join their fight against the Talmadge amendment (WIN II) but also to educate people about the larger struggle. Their goal was to build bridges across difference and create awareness about welfare rights as an issue important to all people and social movement sectors.

Prior to WIN II, the CWRO had built a solid relationship with several social worker unions in an effort to better the conditions for Spanish-speaking recipients living in the Eastside of Los Angeles, and they called on them in this effort. These supportive relationships had been built in the late 1960s with social workers that serviced East Los Angeles and the surrounding areas. SALUD too supported their efforts. Both of these connections would be important in the battle against the Talmadge Amendment as they created a direct link with organized labor. “Workers and Welfare Recipients Unite Against Forced Work Programs” was the title of a flyer announcing a collaborative meeting among the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization, the Metro-North Welfare Union, Social Services Union no. 535, the Coalition for Economic Survival, and United Defense Against Repression. Though it remains unclear who organized the meeting, at this informational gathering, which included a film screening held at an International Longshoreman Workers Union hall, these groups forged a collective response to “Nixon’s and Reagan’s so called ‘welfare reforms,’” which, they argued “attack[s] both workers and welfare recipients fundamental rights.” The flyer articulated precisely what they meant by these “fundamental rights.” They included a “decent standard of living, the right to organize, a legal minimum wage,” and the right to “raise their children as they see fit.”⁴⁰ The solidarity shown by

these groups was based on a recognition that the Talmadge amendments amounted to the creation of a forced work program that threatened the precarious labor market by potentially flooding it with low-wage labor in Los Angeles and across the country in this period, the 1970s which was undergoing massive economic restructuring with the expansion of Asian markets, the technology sector, and the service industry, and the decline of manufacturing and industry, leaving many without opportunities for social mobility.

The CWRO's strategy to defeat the Talmadge amendments not only included tapping local and national labor networks but also feminist coalitions, which would serve as a major component to the mobilization. Locally, the CWRO linked with the active and visible Chicana activists involved with the Chicana Service Action Center (CSAC), which was founded in East Los Angeles in 1972 as a project of the Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, a Chicana feminist organization founded two years earlier, in 1970. In addition to working with Chicana activists at CSAC, the CWRO joined forces with a diverse group of educated, activist, and professional Chicanas through the formation of the “Committee on Current and Proposed Welfare Legislation.”⁴¹ This committee included individuals such as Diane Holguin of CSAC, Carmelita Ramírez, the State Chairwoman of the Chicano Law Student Association, and Anna Nieto Gómez, an instructor at California State University, Northridge, and, arguably, a leader of Chicana feminism in Los Angeles.⁴²

The CWRO sought to recruit the support of Chicanas and other women of color to their cause—a feminist cause—through the circulation of their activities in Chicana feminist and Chicano movement publications. Although Escalante and the CWRO did not claim a Chicana feminist identity outright, their activism and advocacy for single mothers speak otherwise. I contend that Escalante and the CWRO represented one of the earliest Chicana feminist

organizations in California and the nation. Further evidence of this is their vast documented presence in Chicana feminist publications such as *Encuentro Femenil*, *Regeneración*, and Chicano movement publications such as *La Raza*. Feminist scholar Maylei Blackwell argues that these publications in addition to several others documented Chicana feminist mobilizations and forged new sites to build “Chicana political solidarity and participation.”⁴³ The formation of Chicana print communities then were essential to the forging of critical links and conversations across regions, organizations, activist individuals, and significantly to the “Chicana feminist politics of knowledge production, debate, and distribution.”⁴⁴

To elaborate on the role of Chicana print communities to the forging of conversations across regions, organizations and activist individuals, as well as to the representation of a diversity of perspectives, we can turn to two important Chicana feminist publications in Los Angeles, *Regeneración* and *Encuentro Femenil*. These publications document the exchanges and, sometimes, conflicting viewpoints, among activist individuals such as Escalante and the CWRO, NietoGomez of *Encuentro Femenil*, and Flores of the Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, *Regeneración*, and CSAC. This dialogue or, rather, public debate among Chicana activists about national policy impacting women on welfare demonstrates the diversity of perspectives and approaches to Chicana feminism. In 1973 Anna NietoGomez documented the activities of Escalante and the CWRO against the Talmadge Amendments in articles published in *Regeneración* and *Encuentro Femenil*. NietoGómez’s articles reflect her concern for the welfare rights struggle in East Los Angeles and, apparently, wrote them to raise awareness about the Talmadge Amendment in support of the CWRO’s effort to mobilize opposition. The first of NietoGómez’s essays, published in *Regeneración*, “Chicana Welfare Rights Challenges Talmadge Amendment,” was a brief statement that called for “the cooperation of every Welfare

Rights Group, every Women’s Group, every organization and every individual in helping us to revise or eliminate this law altogether.” The resolution passed by the Third World Women’s Group conference, mentioned earlier, which was adopted by the CWRO in November of 1972, was also included in this first article. Alongside the resolution was the second article, “What is the Talmadge Amendment,” a detailed discussion of the impact of the legislation on recipients and CWRO’s fight against it. The third article, published that same year in 1973 in the first issue of *Encuentro Femenil*, “Madres Por Justicia,” was an adapted and expanded version of “What is the Talmadge Amendment.”⁴⁵

In response, Francisca Flores, a life-long activist who advocated for the leadership, political involvement, and economic independence of Mexican American women, Chicanas, and the Mexican American community in general, in 1973 wrote a “reaction” piece on the organizing efforts of the CWRO against the Talmadge amendment.⁴⁶ Flores’s article, which immediately follows NietoGomez’s articles in the same journal, identifies the Talmadge Amendment as being “apparently designed as one of the many efforts to get people off of welfare in order to appease the great number of people who labor or are middle class and who are tired of the rising cost of government.”⁴⁷ Essentially, Flores’s article chastises the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization for taking what she believes is a limited approach towards organizing against the Talmadge amendment. She argues that the CWRO is hindering its ability to garner support from a wider audience by limiting their advocacy “solely on the basis and interest of one group affected by it.”⁴⁸ Flores posits that the CWRO “would receive greater support from the general public if they took up the cause of mothers who work or who are unemployed but not on welfare.” She proposes that by doing this the CWRO could then have a campaign that advocates for “adequate child care,” “adequate hourly minimum wages,” and meaningful training “for people who want

to work in para-professional occupations.”⁴⁹ Knowingly or unknowingly, Flores’s words reinforced the stigma surrounding mothers on welfare by suggesting their need to collaborate with women who “work” or who are unemployed but not on welfare. Flores, it appears, was unable to recognize how the CWRO had actively worked to demonstrate that workfare policy was a threat to all people and not just single mothers on welfare. As Escalante reminder her, it is the “[w]elfare mother and her family who has practically been ‘singled out’ by the system as a target for elimination from the welfare rolls.”⁵⁰ In Escalante’s view, Flores failed to draw a connection among welfare mothers, working mothers, and unemployed mothers, as mothers who “worked,” regardless of whether they received numeration for their labor.

To Escalante, Flores’s critiques were misguided. Escalante asserted that the CWRO “feels [that Flores’s suggestions] are unjust and destructive to all the efforts we have put forth in opposing the Talmadge amendment.”⁵¹ Escalante’s rebuttal to Flores’s article was made public and published alongside Flores’s original commentary in the second edition of *Encuentro Femenil* in early 1974, providing readers the opportunity to view the perspectives of two very well respected Chicana feminist leaders in Los Angeles. Escalante’s rebuttal was also published in *La Raza Magazine* in February 1974 in an effort to further circulate her position to a wider audience, as Flores had done by publishing her article in *Regeneración* a few months prior in late 1973. She proceeds to counter Flores’s critiques regarding the organization's approach to challenging the legislation declaring, “the main issue here is obviously the right of those on government aid to be able to check and prohibit any encroachments the government might make, in exchange for the aid, on these individuals’ civil liberties.”⁵² Escalante goes further and argues that the Talmadge amendment does not just impact welfare mothers but rather has direct implications for workers. She states, “Forced labor is the means by which the welfare system

helps to manipulate the labor market...It is to the clear disadvantage of all workers, not just for those out of work, on relief, the un-unionized, but also for those who are employed and organized.”⁵³ Escalante argues that their battle is not only for poor single mothers but also for all workers who deserve a decent, livable wage. Escalante follows her piece with a list of supporters to their cause and echoes Flores’s recommendations about campaign demands and details several more focused on “meaningful training,” more flexible civil service requirements, “transportation and child care,” a “community children’s center,” and “advisory board participation.”⁵⁴ Escalante then closes her article by schooling Flores on the issues: Escalante writes, “first,” she should “get herself [Flores] informed about what the East Los Angeles Chicano Welfare Rights is all about and what it is really doing before she starts forming or giving her opinions.” In a final admonishment, supported by her signees, Escalante states that we “are not playing politics with each other. We are not competing. We don’t need to. *Sin Mas* [without more], Sra. Alicia Escalante, Board Members, Advisory Committee.”⁵⁵

The exchange, though heated, signifies a collective and critical conversation between two Chicana feminist leaders in Los Angeles, Alicia Escalante and Francisca Flores, about economic justice and women’s rights.⁵⁶ Although Escalante and Flores may have not seen eye to eye about how to approach the Talmadge amendment, what is clear is that they were both committed to advancing the economic status of Chicanas and Mexican American women in Los Angeles and beyond, albeit from different ideological stand points. Escalante was a barrio grassroots activist who was ardently against accepting any funds from government institutions or anti-poverty sources. This was because she believed that once funds were accepted from these sources that the direction of the organization would ultimately be co-opted by those outside of the barrio and the experience of those on welfare. Escalante was also much more militant than Flores, especially

when it came to the practice of dignity politics and advocacy for single mothers on welfare. Flores, who was also a grassroots activist, came from an earlier generation of Mexican American women in Los Angeles and, by 1973, was sixty years-old as compared to Escalante who was thirty-five at the time. The generational difference speaks to very different processes of politicization and community involvement and may have served as another source of contention for them. Flores, and the organizations she founded, CFMN and CSAC, both received funds from the federal government and seemed content with working on a reformist agenda from within the existing power structure. While both of these prominent Chicana activists from Los Angeles were focused on achieving economic justice for Chicanas and Mexican American women nationally, they also practiced a different set of activist politics and served different sectors of the Chicana population, the poor on public assistance and the working poor.

As Flores's and Escalante's exchange illustrates, economic justice was a central issue to the organizing efforts of Chicana feminists in Los Angeles. The Talmadge amendment, the greater national push for welfare reform under the Nixon administration, and Chicanas' historic lack of social and economic opportunity provided a rich ground on which to launch a battle for economic justice. Delving further into Chicana feminist publications based in Los Angeles such as *Encuentro Femenil*, *Regeneración* and Chicano movement publications such as *La Raza* we can discern that there was an ample amount of activity around economic justice and welfare rights. For example in the *Regeneración* 1973 special issue on Chicanas there are several other instances where the mobilizations of Chicanas for economic justice are documented. An excellent illustration of this point is the essay, "Chicana Service Action Center: Proyecto de La Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional Inc." This article proclaims that "the purpose of the Chicana Service Action Center is to provide meaningful employment and/or job training in order

to promote women's social and economic well being."⁵⁷ Further focusing on economic justice issues is Yolanda Nava's testimony before the California Commission on the Status of Women on behalf of the CFMN in Los Angeles on February 10, 1973. The transcript was published as an article "The Chicana and Employment: Needs Analysis and Recommendations for Legislation." An excerpt read: "So when we talk about employment as the solution to the economic situation of the Chicana, the issue is not a job at \$1.65 an hour, but a job which provides an adequate income which will raise the Chicana and her family well above the poverty level."⁵⁸ Chicana engagement with issues of economic justice demonstrates their understanding of the centrality of fighting for class struggles in conjunction with race and gender.

Indeed, as *Encuentro Femenil* documents, Chicana struggles with the welfare system and education were paramount. "Canto de Alicia," a semi-autobiographical essay written by Alicia Escalante, traces her development into a welfare rights activist by detailing the dehumanizing circumstances that she and her mother had experienced as single mothers on public assistance. Escalante also details the struggles against the myth of the welfare recipient, which situated women on government support as as shiftless, lazy, and unwilling to work, and makes a call for solidarity among all women "from the law student to the college student, to the middle class Chicana [and] [f]rom the *pinta* (imprisoned Chicana) to the *abuela* (grandmother) that is receiving old age social security."⁵⁹ The first issue also includes an article by Yolanda Nava, a Chicana activist, regarding the employment counseling of Chicanas and the importance of employment counselors' awareness of poor Chicanas' barriers to full employment, including transitional support, birth control, and social pressures. Other issues *Encuentro Femenil* included "Chicanas in the Labor Force," which provided an overview of the status of Chicanas and employment.

Chicana engagement with issues of economic justice and welfare rights organizing were not only documented in Chicana feminist publications but also in the Chicano movement's underground press, specifically through *La Raza*. *La Raza* was significant because it was in production from 1967 through 1977 and was a great source of information for happenings in Los Angeles. It was also a member of the Chicano Press Association, which was a Chicano underground press collective that reprinted articles across Aztlán (the southwest) to disseminate activities of the movimiento. Although focused on a range of issues, economic justice was a common appearance in the paper. For instance, between 1971 and 1974, several articles about the Talmadge amendment and further proposed welfare reform legislation under the Nixon administration were published. Clemencia Martínez, a writer for the paper, first published such a piece, "Welfare Families Face Forced Labor." In it, she exclaimed: "Wake up, people on Welfare! You are about to be worse off than ever, and it's time to fight back!"⁶⁰ The article challenged the Nixon-Mills Welfare Reform Bill or H.R. 1, which passed the House of Representatives in 1971 and was pending passage in the Senate. H.R. 1 was a repackaged form of legislation of Nixon's proposed Family Assistance Plan pushed by Democratic Senator Wilbur Mills from Arkansas. Martínez argued that this "bill is a big step backward. It is repressive, it throws people on welfare out in the cold, by saying that they must work when there are no jobs—and that they must work for almost slave wages." In, "WELFARE," published in the subsequent issue of *La Raza* and written by Sandra Ugarte, another staff writer, argued against H.R.1 for slightly different reasons. Paying attention to the impact of H.R. 1 on labor union efforts, Ugarte wrote: it "will force a cheap source of labor onto the labor market at a time when job competition is already at a critical level."⁶¹ Citing a Department of Education, Health, and Welfare publication, "Welfare Myths vs. Facts," Ugarte used government statistics to debunk the

myths associated with welfare recipients. These myths included the idea that the children of welfare recipients were illegitimate, that once a family is on welfare, they stay on welfare, and that people on welfare have no morals and are cheats. Ugarte ended her call by stressing the hypocrisy of a government that is constantly calling on the poor to carry an overburden load, while also paying taxes, when that same government doles out subsidies and grants to corporations which pay little to no taxes. The consistent appearance of welfare issues and discussion of Escalante and the ELAWRO's effort in *La Raza Newspaper*—they appear a total of eighteen times in the first two years of the paper's publication -- demonstrates the significance of issues impacting single mothers on welfare in the larger community.⁶²

Collectively these articles and many others reflect a shared struggle against the oppressive conditions under which many Chicanas found themselves or could potentially find themselves as those relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Alicia Escalante and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization effectively utilized print communities to educate people about the plight of poor women, to organize opposition to the Talmadge amendment, and to build bridges across difference and forge a necessary coalition to battle the severe economic inequality taking place across the U.S. Gaining publicity regarding their plight was yet another strategy Escalante and the organization employed to create awareness, garner support for their cause, and further their feminist connections.

Another critical way in which Escalante and the CWRO built and mobilized support, especially among feminists, was by attending and networking at Chicana and women of color conferences. In 1972, the CWRO gained the support of women attending a Chicana conference held in Southern California at Whittier College and a Third World Women's Group Conference held in Northern California in San Anselmo. Though the details of these two events remain

unclear (I'm in the process of searching for this information), the CWRO's coalition building proved effective. Both conferences passed resolutions in support of the CWRO and the fight against the Talmadge amendments.⁶³ As these outcomes indicate, garnering the support of feminist organizations was yet another vital site to build a coalition against repressive legislation that directly impacted women.

Tapping National Feminist Networks: Bringing Welfare Reform to the (White) Women's Movement

Nationally, Escalante and the CWRO took the battle against the Talmadge amendments to the first convention of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) in Houston, Texas, in February 1973, knowing it was a critical space to gain support for the coalition against the dismantling of welfare. Escalante had been invited personally by the conference committee as she had already received notoriety as a national welfare rights leader for her participation in the National Welfare Rights Organization and founding a local WRO in East Los Angeles. Founded in 1971, the NWPC was "dedicated exclusively to increasing women's participation in all areas of political and public life."⁶⁴ It was also a multi-partisan, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic national women's organization. The NWPC's Chicana Caucus was first formed at the state level within the Texas Women's Political Caucus in 1972 in response to a lack of inclusion of Chicanas in the NWPC leadership and in an effort to represent Chicana concerns and perspectives, which had yet to be addressed in any way. In a report written by Evey Chapa following the Houston conference she explained that, "[t]he goals of the mujeres of the Chicana Caucus were aimed towards including the needs of the mujeres of La Raza in any political action the National Women's Political Caucus might undertake." The Chicana caucus consisted of "sixty mujeres from, seven states—California, Texas, New Mexico, Illinois, Washington D.C., and one other state."⁶⁵ The

Chicana caucus met several times at the 1973 convention and collectively formulated resolutions that would be presented and voted on the convention floor by the entire NWPC. In all, they produced seven resolutions, one of which focused on welfare and the Talmadge amendments. The resolution declared its support for Alicia Escalante and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization's opposition to the legislation and argued that the Talmadge amendment was responsible for the breakup of the *familia* and did not provide the means to earn a meaningful wage.

A second resolution developed at a welfare rights workshop, co-facilitated by Escalante and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, "Welfare is a Woman's Issue," charged that the Talmadge amendments perpetuated "discrimination against black, brown, and native Americans because it is sexist and discriminatory against women who are the sole support for their families." "[T]he amendment," the statement continued, "should provide adequate day care facilities and does not...it perpetuates the underemployment of women." For these reasons and more the "National Women's Political Caucus expresses its opposition to this amendment which created so much havoc in the lives of women."⁶⁶ Although both resolutions adamantly opposed the Talmadge amendment, the at-large NWPC membership failed to adopt them, for reasons that remain unclear (I'm in the process of identifying the various issues). Nevertheless, I can safely say that the NWPC's lack of support for the resolutions mirrors the deep divisions about welfare occurring nationally during the 1960s and 1970s and welfare reform.

Even though the NWPC failed to pass the resolutions, the conference space was an important meeting point for prominent Chicana activists and feminists, including Martha P. Cotera, Evey Chapa, María Jimenez, Anna NietoGómez, and Gracia Molina De Pick.⁶⁷ Moreover, Escalante was voted in as an at-large representative to the NWPC steering committee,

forging a reciprocal link between the CWRO and NWPC. What is perhaps most significant about the first convention of the NWPC is that it became a site of a national gathering of Chicana activist and feminist leaders from across the country and a space in which networks were created, empowerment was fostered, and solidarity was forged around an issue directly impacting Chicanas and welfare reform.

Conclusion

By 1974, Alicia Escalante and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization had gained local and national momentum in building a coalition against the Talmadge amendments (WIN II). To do so, they had forged critical connections with local grassroots community organizations as well as labor unions who advocated on behalf of the working poor. They built strong feminist links with women of color, Chicanas, and white women both locally and nationally through their efforts with the Chicana Service Action Center and the Chicana Caucus of the National Women's Political Caucus. This is what Alicia Escalante's and the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization's feminism looked like, it was grassroots, broadly-based, inclusive, and intersectional. I argue that Escalante practiced a militant form of dignity politics. At the center of this dignity politics was the demand for an unequivocal recognition of the human dignity of poor people in general and of single Chicana welfare mothers in particular. Advocating for poor people's dignity, and the recognition of their humanity was a Chicana feminist issue in the eyes of Escalante and the CWRO. Escalante militantly advocated for the recognition of the human dignity of welfare mother's and framed their struggle as one that required the collective force of many to expose the reality of the welfare system. In the second issue of *Encuentro Femenil* Escalante proclaimed that "the real welfare picture will eventually come out if we as mujeres, madres, Chicanas, get together and communicate and help each other. The road of the welfare

other is a lonely one. And our hermanas, no matter what walk of life they come from, will have to join us.”⁶⁸

Join them they did, as evidenced by the collective efforts of Chicanas and several other organizations and politicians who supported the CWRO in their battle against the Talmadge Amendment. Those organizations and individuals included: The National Welfare Rights Organization; the National Council of Churches, La Raza Churchmen; Third World Women’s Group; Congressman Edward R. Roybal; California State Assemblymen Willie J. Brown Jr., John Vasconcellos, and Bob Moretti; and California State Senators Alfred H. Song and Mervyn M. Dymally.⁶⁹

Yet, despite the collective efforts of Escalante, the CWRO, and the broad-based, multiracial and multiethnic coalition, they were unable to upend the Talmadge amendments (WIN II). Notwithstanding the defeat, the collective movement the coalition built worked to preserve the dignity of poor people in the face of dire circumstances, including racial, ethnic, gender, and class oppression. Led by Escalante and the CWRO, they centered organizing efforts on building bridges across difference and bringing together a diverse group of people, both women and men from multiple social locations and movements. Ultimately, Escalante, the CWRO, and the coalition were successful in creating awareness about their interconnected nature as human beings and the oppressive policies being doled out by the government in the name of cutting costs and getting people to “work.”

¹ Eva Bertram, *The Workfare State: Public Assistance Politics from the New Deal to the New Democrats* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Cybelle Fox, “Unauthorized Welfare: The Origins of Immigrant Status Restrictions in American Social Policy,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 102, no. 4 (March 2016): 1051-1074; Premilla Nadasen, “From Widow

to ‘Welfare Queen’: Welfare and the Politics of Race,” *Black Women, Gender, and Families*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 52-77.

² By the early 1970s the ELAWRO had changed its name to the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization. The name change, I argue, is a reflection of the development of a feminist sensibility that corresponded with the larger push by women nationally for equal rights. The organization was also known as the National Chicana Welfare Rights Organization and La Causa De Los Pobres which reflected the organization reaching out to a wider national audience in an effort to build a national organization.

³ “For Immediate Release” *Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization News*, June 30, 1969, Social Welfare Department Records, R350.051. Los Angeles County Files, Box 84, Folder 1 [Restricted Access], California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California.

⁴ United Church, “Conversations with George Wiley and Johnnie Tillmon,” (New York: United Church of Christ, Council for Higher Education, 1971), 4. Guida West Papers, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

⁵ “The 1967 Anti-Welfare Social Security Amendments Law – A Summary,” *NOW!: The Official Publication of the NWRO*, 29 December 1967, Guida West Papers, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

⁶ “The Work Incentive Program and YOU,” *NOW!*, 17 June 1968, Guida West Papers, Smith College, Box 25, Folder 10, Northampton, Massachusetts.

⁷ “Welfare Bill Called ‘Betrayal of Poor,’” *The National Welfare Rights Organization in Action*, n.d., Guida West Papers, Smith College, Box 10, Folder 25, Northampton, Massachusetts.

⁸ “The Work Incentive Program and YOU,” *NOW!*

⁹ “Welfare Rights Organization,” *La Raza Newspaper*, vol. 1 no. 5, November 15, 1967.

¹⁰ “Welfare Rights Organization,” *La Raza Newspaper*, vol. 1 no. 7, December 25, 1967.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “WRO Protest,” *La Raza Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 10, March 1, 1968, pg. 2.

¹³ Congressman Edward R. Roybal, “Correspondence to Alicia Escalante,” November 5, 1973, Alicia Escalante Papers, BOX AND FOLDER, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

¹⁴ Congressman Edward R. Roybal, “Correspondence to Alicia Escalante,” February 8, 1973, Alicia Escalante Papers, BOX AND FOLDER, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

¹⁵ Congressman George E. Danielson to Alicia Escalante, “Correspondence,” January 11, 1973, Alicia Escalante Papers, BOX AND FOLDER, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

¹⁶ Senator Mervyn M. Dymally to Alicia Escalante, “Correspondence,” February 20, 1973, Alicia Escalante Papers, BOX AND FOLDER, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

¹⁷ Senator Clark L. Bradley to Alicia Escalante, “Correspondence,” January 8, 1973, Alicia Escalante Papers, BOX AND FOLDER, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

¹⁸ Conchita, “Welfare Rights and Community Continue Battle Against Welfare Department,” *Chicano Student Movement*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1969.

¹⁹ “The Battle for Welfare Rights,” *La Raza Newspaper*, March 28, 1969, pg. 3; Conchita, “Welfare Rights and Community Continue Battle Against Welfare Department,” *Chicano Student Movement*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1969.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Conchita, “Welfare Rights and Community Continue Battle Against Welfare Department,” *Chicano Student Movement*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1969.

²² Ibid.

²³ Welfare Issues Committee, “Welfare’s 43,” Social Welfare Department Records, R350.051. Los Angeles County Files, Box 84, Folder 1 [Restricted Access], California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California.

²⁴ “Correspondence from California state director John C. Montgomery to Alicia Escalante,” February 24, 1969, Social Welfare Department Records, R350.122. Coded Files, Box 159, Folder 6 [Restricted Access], California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “The Battle for Welfare Rights,” *La Raza Newspaper*, March 1969, pg. 3. Lydia Lopez, Interview by author, 16 February 2018, Alhambra, California; Carlos Montes, Interview by author, 15 January 2018, East Los Angeles, California.

²⁷ “The Battle for Welfare Rights,” *La Raza Newspaper*, March 1969, pg. 3; Conchita, “Welfare Rights and Community Continue Battle Against Welfare Department,” *Chicano Student Movement*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1969.

²⁸ Rosalio Urias Muñoz, Telephone interview by author, 4 February 2018; Lydia Lopez, Interview by author, 16 February 2018, Alhambra, California; Carlos Montes, Interview by author, 15 January 2018, East Los Angeles, California; Martha Coteria, Telephone interview by author, 4 January 2018; 10 January 2018; Gloria Arellanes, Interview by author, 30 March 2018, El Monte, California.

²⁹ Alicia Escalante, Telephone interview by author, 16 February 2018.

³⁰ Escalante brought all five of her children to the Poor Peoples Campaign who ranged from their late teens to six years old.

³¹ “Chicana Symposium,” *La Raza*, vol. 2, no. 10 (1969): 4; MEChA-UCLA, “Event Announcement,” *UCLA Daily Bruin*, 24 November 1969, vol. LXVII, no. 37, p. 3; Debbie Ashin, “Symposium to focus on role of Chicana,” *UCLA Daily Bruin*, 25 November 1969, vol. LXVII, no. 38, p. 1.

³² Rosalio Urias Muñoz, Telephone interview by author, 4 February 2018. For more on Alicia Escalante and the Chicano Movement please see: Rosie C. Bermudez, “Alicia Escalante, the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization, and the Chicano Movement,” in Mario T. Garcia ed., *The Chicano Movement: Perspectives from the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge Press, 2014), 95-116.

³³ Premilla Nadasen, “From Widow to ‘Welfare Queen’: Welfare and the Politics of Race,” *Black Women, Gender + Families*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2007): 52-77; Eva Bertram, *The Workfare State: Public Assistance Politics from the New Deal to the New Democrats* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Julilly Kohler-Hausman, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Susan W. Blank and Barbara B. Blum, “A Brief History of Work Expectations for Welfare Mothers,” *The Future of Children, Welfare to Work*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1997): 28-38.

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- ³⁴ Susan W. Blank and Barbara B. Blum, “A Brief History of Work Expectations for Welfare Mothers,” 31.
- ³⁵ Bertram, *The Workfare State*, 78.
- ³⁶ “Resolution,” 21 November 1972, Alicia Escalante Papers, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Bertram, *The Workfare State*, 6-7.
- ³⁹ “East Los Angeles Welfare Rights Organization, “Talmadge Amendment,” typed document, [1973], Alicia Escalante Papers, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.
- ⁴⁰ “Workers and Welfare Recipients Unite Against Forced Work Programs,” Flyer, n.d. [1973-1974], Alicia Escalante Papers, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.
- ⁴¹ “ELAWRO Committee on Current and Proposed Welfare Legislation,” n.d. [1972], typed document, Alicia Escalante Papers, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.
- ⁴² Anna NietoGomez was also associated with the Chicana Service Action Center and the Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional. She built connections with long-time feminist, activist, and community scholar Francisca Flores. For more on Anna NietoGomez please see Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
- ⁴³ Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!*, 146.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 149.
- ⁴⁵ Anna NietoGomez, “Chicana Welfare Rights Challenges Talmadge Amendment,” *Regeneración*, vol. 2, no. 3, (1973), pg. 14; “What is the Talmadge Amendment,” *Regeneración*, vol. 2, no. 3, (1973), pgs. 14-16; Anna NietoGomez, “Madres Por Justicia,” *Encuentro Femenil* vol. 1, no. 1(1973): 12–18.
- ⁴⁶ The article was also published in *Encuentro Femenil*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1974), 13-14.
- ⁴⁷ Francisca Flores, “A reaction to discussions on the Talmadge amendment to the Social Security Act,” *Regeneración*, vol.2, no. 3 (1973), 16; *Encuentro Femenil*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1974), 13-14.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 13.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 14.
- ⁵⁰ Alicia Escalante, “A Letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization,” *Encuentro Femenil*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1974),
- ⁵¹ Alicia Escalante, “A Letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization,” *Encuentro Femenil*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1974), 15.
- ⁵² Ibid, 16.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 19.
- ⁵⁴ Escalante, “A Letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization,” 18.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid
- ⁵⁶ For more on Francisca Flores see, Marisela R. Chavez, ““We have a long beautiful history’ Chicana feminist Trajectories and legacies,” In *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, Nancy A. Hewitt, Ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 77-97. Also see the forthcoming chapter written by Anna NietoGómez in *Chicana Movidas!: New*

Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Years, eds. Maylei Blackwell, Maria Cotera, and Dionne Espinoza (University of Texas Press, June 2018).

⁵⁷ “Chicana Service Action Center: Proyecto de La Comision Femenil Mexicana Inc.,”

Regeneración, vol. 2, no. 3, (1973), pg. 6.

⁵⁸ Yolanda Nava, “The Chicana and Employment: Needs Analysis and Recommendations for Legislation,” *Regeneración*, vol. 2, no. 3, (1973), pgs. 7-8.

⁵⁹ Alicia Escalante, “Canto de Alicia,” *Encuentro Femenil* vol.1, no. 1, (1973), 10.

⁶⁰ Clemencia Martinez, “Welfare Families Face Forced Labor,” *La Raza Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 7, n.d. pg. 41.

⁶¹ Sandra Ugarte, “WELFARE,” *La Raza Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 8, n.d., pgs. 16-17.

⁶² I reviewed issues from the first two years of *La Raza Newspaper/Magazine* and tallied the total number of instances in which an article or advertisement about either Escalante and the EALWRO emerged.

⁶³ “ELAWRO Committee on Current and Proposed Welfare Legislation,” n.d. [1972].

⁶⁴ The first convention of the NWPC was held February 9TH through February 11th 1973.

<http://www.nwpc.org/about/nwpc-foundation/>

⁶⁵ Evey Chapa, “Report from the National Women’s Political Caucus,” *Magazín*, vol. 1, no. 9, September 1973, pg. 37-39. Reprinted in Alma M. Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 174-177.

⁶⁶ “National Women’s Political Caucus,” February 10, 1973 “Resolution passed by the workshop on Welfare Rights,” Alicia Escalante Papers, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California Santa Barbara.

⁶⁷ Cotera, Telephone interview, 10 January 2018.

⁶⁸ Escalante, “Canto de Alicia,” p. 10.

⁶⁹ NietoGomez, “Madres por Justicia,” p 18; Escalante, “A Letter from the Chicana Welfare Rights Organization,” p. 17.