

# Moving Latinas beyond Bella, Betty and bra burning

By Linda Garcia Merchant, March 20, 2014



Ruth "Rhea" Mojica

Hammer appeared regularly on community-based television shows, including WBBM-TV's "Common Ground," with longtime Chicago broadcaster Warner Saunders, in 1972. [Courtesy Ruth Mojica Hammer private collection]

For many Latinas and women under 40, feminism is associated with “bra burners,” a misnomer that has become part of the narrative of the women’s liberation movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Coupled with the elevation of three white women — Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem — as the standard bearers of modern feminism, it’s easy to see why many young Latinas don’t know the contributions of women of color or the history of the movement.

I can speak to those rich contributions because I saw them up close as the daughter of a fearlessly liberated woman, Ruth “Rhea” Mojica Hammer. In the early ‘70s, my mother was a Latina pioneer in Chicago television and politics. She co-hosted two community-based TV shows, and she was the first Latino to run for congressional office in Illinois.

I watched Ruth endure an election campaign whose purpose was to show that Latinos were ready to organize, to be involved in local

politics and to show that they had the voting power to make a difference. Her candidacy meant living with death threats and Teamster bodyguards towering over her 5-foot-2-inch frame everywhere we went. It meant withstanding the personal and professional stigma after losing the congressional race in 1972. I remember the helplessness and rage I felt when I heard the whispered conversations about ballot boxes floating in the river several months after the election.

Ruth moved on to the national scene. She served two terms on the governing body of the National Women's Political Caucus, the political arm of the movement. My mother met presidents, spoke at a White House press conference, managed and supported local campaigns and mentored dozens of young professional Latinas back home in Chicago.

I grew up in this reality and yet, almost three decades later, could find no information about Latinas in the women's movement. My solution to this problem came in two parts. I started a film production company and produced *Las Mujeres de la Caucus Chicana*, Women of the Chicana Caucus. It was about a sisterhood I had grown up with and that taught me my first lessons about feminism.



Rhea Mojica Hammer, Liliana Alcalá and Blanca Vargas work the phone lines during the call-in show “Ayuda!” on WCIU-TV, Channel 26. [Courtesy Ruth Mojica Hammer private collection]

Las Mujeres is not just a film about six Latinas in the movement; it allows each woman to share how she comes to an awareness and acceptance of her activism. For example, in 1960, when librarian Martha Piña first saw architecture student Juan Coteria in an El Paso library, she took off her engagement ring. As the conversation progressed, she realized that he was a better match for her than her fiancé. She was right. Juan's intelligence and confidence challenges hers. He is equally interested in how the world works and how to find ways to make it better. Their marriage in 1963 became a partnership based on principles of social justice.

I always had a rapport with the women featured in Mujeres. We had a phone history that included conversations about school, grades and my health. I met them twice — in 1972, at the first Midwest Latina Conference in South Bend, Ind., and in 1977, at the International Women's Year conference in Houston.

At the Houston conference, Chicanas and Latinas were passionately debating the issues without worrying about being nice. I found so much courage at the conference that a few weeks later I called my mom to tell her I was switching my major from political science to photography. Houston helped me create my own voice, equal in power and purpose to any man, woman or mom.

While Houston was a turning point for my feminist development, I didn't become an activist. I knew at a very young age that I didn't want a public life. To me, that meant bodyguards, financial hardship and tremendous sacrifice for a community that wouldn't often reciprocate. It would take 31 years, and the realization that Chicana history had been erased, for me to claim my political voice.

I got involved in a national oral history project, Chicana Por Mi Raza, which documents the stories of Chicana/Latina feminists. It was created by another daughter of the movement, Maria Coteria, an associate professor in American Culture and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan.

Chicana Por Mi Raza works with student researchers to identify and collect materials and oral history interviews from Latinas working in the Chicano and women's movements. As production assistants, research assistants and data curators, students connect to these Latina feminists through the careful handling and production of the women's histories. The goal of the project is to create a virtual repository of their recollections for study by present and future scholars.

To date, the Chicana Por Mi Raza project has produced more than 40 interviews and 1,000 digitized documents and created three state – based oral history initiatives – the Somos Latinas project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the MAPBW Collection at the University of Illinois Chicago and the Community Stories project at the University of Michigan.

Someday soon, there will be too many names of Latina feminists for Latinas to remember.

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