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Katherine A. Kendall Institute for International Social Work Education

María B. Cerda, AM (1934–2020)

"When You Reject My Language and Culture, You Reject Me"

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Biography

María B. Cerda was a trailblazer and leader who made significant impact in the areas of public policy, economic development, and education in the city of Chicago, Illinois. She was born and raised in Puerto Rico and moved to Chicago after she completed her bachelor's in social work (BSW). In 1969 she was the first Latina appointed to the Chicago Board of Education and led the introduction of bilingual education to the Chicago Public Schools. She was the founding executive director of the Latino Institute, the first national policy institute for Latinos. She volunteered for Harold Washington's mayoral campaign, served on the transition team, and was appointed to the Office of Employment and Training. Her legacy lives on through the impact of her policy work, the institutions she helped build, and the many leaders whom she mentored and who went on to hold political office or assume other leadership roles such as agency founders.

Born in 1934 in Lares, Puerto Rico, María Cerda is well known for her response, "*Estoy in la lucha*" [I am in the struggle] whenever she was asked how she was doing. Cerda began her social work education at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) at Rio Piedras. Cerda left Puerto Rico for Chicago, where she attended the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. She dedicated her life to advocacy for the Latino community in Chicago, where was met with resistance and challenges. Thus, she was continually *en la lucha*, a never-ending fight for social justice.

The Move to Chicago

After exposure to faculty trained at the University of Chicago while studying at UPR and struggling to find employment in Puerto Rico after graduation, Cerda decided she would spend a year working in Chicago with the intention of improving her English (Fernández, 2004). She found her new home at the Young Women's Christian Association on Oak and Dearborn Streets and began to look for work. As she walked, she saw the sign for the Department of Labor's Migration Division where she inquired about a job (Fernández, 2004). They needed bilingual caseworkers. The Mexican population in the city was increasing, and Puerto Ricans were arriving as part of the economic restructuring initiated by Governor Luis Muñoz Marin (Bhana, 2023). These workers and their families came to Chicago as labor migrants and they needed support. She accepted the job as a caseworker and volunteered at Hull House. The contributions of Latinas like Cerda in the settlement house movement are unknown in social work history. A year later, Cerda applied to the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration

(SSA),[1] but was initially declined a scholarship and could not attend (Fernández, 2004). The scholarship was given to a male Puerto Rican student who had a family—gender bias shaping the perception of need and worth. The second year, she was awarded the scholarship after some advocacy from a Puerto Rican social worker and was able to enroll in program and earn a master's degree in social work.

Advocacy for Latino Education

Puerto Rican migration to Chicago peaked in the 1950s and 1960s.[2] Most Puerto Ricans settled in the Lincoln Park area but were later displaced by high rents and gentrification. They moved west and settled in what were then the 26th and 31st Wards. A mass exodus of Polish, German, and Jewish residents followed. The aldermen in these wards neglected and ignored the heavily Puerto Rican precincts and failed to provide needed city services and police protection. Absentee landlords neglected their properties, unemployment was rampant, and adolescents dropped out of high school at extremely high rates and were harassed, abused, and arrested by police.

The discontent, anger, and frustration culminated in the Division Street Riots on June 12–14, 1966. The riots made community members realize that more organization and advocacy was needed. Cerda went to New York to meet with the leaders involved in the ASPIRA Project, an

[1]Now the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice.
[2] Puerto Rico is a U.S. colonial territory and has a rich and complex social, political, and cultural history. Puerto Ricans were conferred citizenship by the Jones Act of 1917. Despite citizenship status, Puerto Ricans living on the Island cannot vote in presidential elections and cannot elect their own U.S. Senators and Representatives. See Maldonado (2021) for a more extensive pollical and economic history.

organization founded by Puerto Rican social worker Antonia Pantoja that focused on Latino leadership, education, and advocacy. With a $100,000 grant, an ASPIRA chapter was established in Chicago. Cerda's leadership and support led to the growth of ASPIRA Chicago, serving thousands of students each year.

Because of Cerda's work with ASPIRA, Mayor Richard J. Daley appointed her to the Chicago Board of Education. On July 15, 1969, at the age of 35, Cerda become the first Latina appointed to the Board of Education and the highest-ranking Latina/o in public office in Chicago. At that time, Latinos were invisible, and not included in decisions that impacted their lives. As a Board member, Cerda went to community meetings, joined community boards, and went to protests to learn about the community's concerns. Cerda's accessibility, her sense of justice, empathy, and the way she voiced the concerns of the community helped her gain the trust and support of Latinos and African Americans across the city.

During her time on the Board of Education (1969–1974), Cerda highlighted the importance of listening to the child's perspective on their own education. In an interview with Studs Terkel (1974), Cerda said it was important to respect the child's point of view and not underestimate the child's needs. She wanted the Chicago educational system to neither limit nor silence children, but instead for them to experience the joy of learning and to analyze information. Ahead of her time, she also recognized the importance of culturally affirming practices in schools.

Cerda's analysis also included a gendered and intersectional perspective: "By the time a girl comes out of Jones [a Chicago vocational high school], she has been … dehumanized to the

point where she is a mechanical doll that will look very well in an office and will type very well but has very little to say about what happens to her or to her work. To me that is very destructive and bad" (Terkel, 1974). Cerda firmly believed that biases needed to be addressed within the school system so children could truly thrive. She was aware that minoritized students were being taught mainly by White teachers who did not view the cultural backgrounds of their students as assets upon which they could build.

Rejecting Assimilationist Policies and Advocating for Bilingual Education

Cerda rejected the "melting pot" theory believing it was a strategy used to overlook the marginalization of Latino students. To her, this assimilationist approach was destructive because it "breeds prejudice" (Terkel, 1974). Cerda reiterated this view in a later interview when she underscored, "When you reject my language and culture, you are rejecting me" (Fernández, 2004). A key part of Latino culture and identity is the Spanish language. Cerda was concerned with the practice of forbidding Latino students to speak their home language in school and discouraging it's use in the home. This happened to her own children, who spoke Spanish first and had to switch to English-only when they entered school. They lost their bilingualism and had to relearn Spanish years later.

To better illustrate the confusion and frustration of non-English-speaking students, Cerda decided to speak in Spanish only to Board of Education members at one of their meetings. This act took courage. When they told her that they did not understand her, she told them that non-English-speaking students did not understand their teachers either. She stressed that bilingual

education was needed to make sure students made progress in subject matter areas while, at the same time, they gained fluency in English. This moment was pivotal to Cerda's fight for bilingual education programs in the Chicago Public School system.

Cerda had impact on the Chicago Public Schools in multiple ways. Cerda wanted to celebrate diverse cultures and understood the importance of Latina/o children having role models. Thus, she also supported adding Latino history to the school curriculum and was inspired to create a living legacy of Latino and Black leaders. Cerda did this by joining the School Naming Committee of the Board. She chose to name schools after civil rights leaders and heroes like Whitney M. Young, Roberto Clemente, and Benito Juarez. Additionally, as a Board member, she was instrumental in supporting the demands of Pilsen community members for a high school in their neighborhood and Benito Juarez High School became a reality. Cerda also fought for school desegregation. For Cerda the important thing was to provide more access and opportunities for all students, insisting that the Board allocate more resources for all Latino and African American communities.

Leading Policy Advocacy and Research —The Latino Institute

After completing her service on the Board of Education in 1974, she and a group of community leaders helped found the Latino Institute, a policy think tank. As Executive Director, with a $50,000 grant from Chicago Commons and support from the Rockefeller Foundation, she grew the Institute into the first national agency to bring together diverse Latino national origin groups. She believed the term *Latino* was inclusive and would also bring about unity within the

different communities. She stated in her interview with Fernández (2004), "And since we're going to be a Latino agency, at that time they wanted to be Hispanic because it's more Spanish, I said, I'm not Hispanic, I'm a Latina. I think I established the Latino name in Chicago because nobody called us Latinos until I did with the Latino Institute. And I got insulted many times for it."

The Institute was politically non-partisan and created a technical-assistance center that provided information, advocacy, referral, research, and organizational development services in Chicago and nationally. This was the nation's first technical-assistance resource center for Latinos. Cerda was determined to build an organization that did not replicate what already existed and instead strengthened the existing organizations (Fernández, 2004). A key mission of the Institute was bilingual education. Through this work, the Institute implemented a parent leadership training program to help parents navigate the Chicago Public School bureaucracy. Institute staff visited schools with high Latino enrollment and trained parents in how to present demands to the Chicago Public School system. Her executive assistant at the Institute, Carmen Prieto, remarked that "this is one of Cerda's legacies: she brought parent engagement into Chicago's public schools."

The work of the Institute team fueled policy changes and linked neighborhood organizations to key policymakers. Before the Institute, leaders lacked the data they needed to show the need for funding educational, workforce, housing, and health-care programs. Cerda's reputation as a leader with strong analytical and policy skills grew. She served on 40 different boards, some at the national level. This included the National Puerto Rican Forum and her

appointment by President Jimmy Carter to the National Council on Education Research and the International Year of the Child Commission in 1978.

Public Service in City Government

Change was coming to Chicago. The mayoral candidate, Harold Washington, was promising reforms that would lead to an equitable distribution of resources, assuring communities would get their fair share of the federal dollars. Washington's positions on social justice and his vision to include Latino and African Americans in decision-making resonated with Cerda. This passion for an inclusive Chicago led her to volunteer for Harold Washington's campaign, becoming an influential part of his campaign. In 1983, Harold Washington became mayor after a contentious election, and Cerda became part of the mayor's transition team. Cerda worked to ensure that Latinos were well-represented across dozens of commissions and set a course for the newly elected Mayor Washington.

Cerda was soon appointed to lead the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training (MET). Mayor Washington noted that, "'Her experience is vast, and she is well-known in all communities—no easy feat in a city so diverse. Moreover, she is a dogged administrator'" (Gillespie, 1984). She was tasked with ending political hiring and accelerating affirmative action programs. Cerda believed that "'if Chicagoans aren't employed, then you've got the root of major trouble. In my opinion, everything hinges on that. Jobs are clearly the bottom line to making a city work'" (Gillespie, 1984). While in city government, Cerda continued to support the leadership of others who later became commissioners and prominent elected officials, such as

Luis Gutiérrez, who represented the 26th Ward in the city of Chicago and later served as U.S. Representative from 1993–2016. It was her hope that all these mentees and future leaders would continue fighting to ensure equity.

Despite her position and support from Mayor Washington, Cerda experienced sexism and racism. One afternoon when returning to her office after a meeting at city hall, Cerda was stopped by the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) and asked to provide proof of U.S. citizenship. INS stopping Latino professionals was commonplace. All Latinos were suspected of being undocumented. Cerda was infuriated by this incident and immediately reported it to Mayor Washington. In collaboration with the mayor, she worked to prevent this from happening to others. This was the impetus for the mayor to designate Chicago as a sanctuary city more than 30 years ago, a designation that continues to this day.[3]

Cerda's approach was grounded in her training as a social worker. She supported communities in developing their capacities in the areas of education, health care, and employment. Cerda did not grant requests for resources easily; she was thoughtful in how she utilized resources. One day, for example, a young community activist from the South Side of Chicago came to her office with a group of community members. She asked her staff to tell her the identity of the individuals in the conference room and why they were screaming and yelling. She asked for the group's leader. Their leader, Barack Obama (now former President Obama),

[3]A sanctuary city is one that limits its cooperation with federal immigration-enforcement agents to protect low-priority immigrants from deportation. Cerda's advocacy helped to limit harmful actions by the INS against Chicagoans.

told her his community group wanted an employment and training center on the Southeast Side of the city. She told him to calm his group down and come back with a comprehensive and well-researched plan for the center with facts about the need for this new site. Obama listened to her and returned with a well-researched plan. Cerda granted the request and expanded access to job training resources to the Southeast Side of Chicago.

After the death of Mayor Washington in 1987, Cerda's work was cut short. Despite the best efforts of three Latino aldermen who recognized the great need for Cerda to remain in a leadership position, and after decades of her tireless work to open opportunities for others, the incoming Mayor ended her appointment.

Cerda's Legacy

As an administrator and in boardrooms, she was driven by a sense of equity, and she had the courage to act." (Cerda, 2020). She is credited with bringing visibility and respect to the Latino community in Chicago. Her work on the Chicago Board of Education led to major advances in bilingual education. She helped found and grow organizations such as ASPIRA Chicago and the Latino Institute. Her role on the MET provided relevant and accessible training and job opportunities for all in Chicago. She helped develop the next generation of Latino leaders. Cerda was also aware of the way that gender and race impacted her experience and the experience of others. She understood that developing Latino leadership in Chicago meant also creating opportunities for women, especially women in the Latino community:

> *Hijita*, if it weren't for us there wouldn't be a community. In ASPIRA in New York, Puerto Rico, and wherever they are, the women are leaders in Chicago's ASPIRA, and Look at [Guadalupe Reyes] at El Valor, she got that agency from nothing and look what she has. Look at Alivio, another woman. . . . If it weren't for women, we would not have the leadership that we have right now. . . (Fernández, 2004).

Cerda's story of leadership and advocacy is important for social workers to know. She embodied social work values in all her roles and understood the importance of building bridges across communities. As Cerda would say, we need to all be "*en la lucha!*"

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