

Immigrant women voice, participate and advocate: Developing grassroots leadership toward a just and inclusive society

I would like to thank the Asian American Studies Program for inviting me to the University of Illinois and the Balgopal Lecture Series. I would like to especially thank Viveka Kudaligama for her support in coordinating this event. Through my work at Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (or AIWA), I have witnessed immigrant women transform themselves from the invisible and voiceless into strong grassroots leaders. I am happy to be here today to tell you about how these women developed leadership skills to voice, participate and advocate for themselves and their community.

It has been my life time interest and pursuit to understand and improve? Facilitate? how people from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate in their community, in the broader society, and the world, to(so that they can) voice their concerns and bring positive change.

As an immigrant woman from Korea, I saw and experienced multiple layers of oppressions and discrimination in the United States. With my Korean hot temper, I used to turn my anger and frustration into confrontation whenever I faced unfair treatment and injustice. My twin girls who are now in their second year of college, still talk and joke about how their mom used to take on people who would try to put her down.

But I did realize that change needs to happen on a broader level by changing social and institutional paradigms and values we have all acquired due to deeply entrenched institutional racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination or biases.

I was fortunate enough to meet strong Asian women like Elaine Kim and Pat Lee, who are the co-founders of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates. Elaine Kim, some of you may know, is a renowned professor at UC Berkeley. Pat Lee was a veteran Union Organizer then.

Right after graduating from law school in 1983, I was asked by Pat Lee, who was then a hotel and restaurant union organizer, to talk to Korean immigrant hotel maids who work at one of the most luxurious hotels in San Francisco. With impending union contract negotiations, Pat wanted Korean hotel maids to be informed of their rights and the terms of their contract negotiations to fight for them.

I walked into the hotel and saw bright and fancy chandeliers, expensive boutiques, and high ceilings. I also ran into Asian hotel maids cleaning the corners and toilets. I then walked down to the basement where Asian hotel maids were taking a lunch break. No more fancy chandeliers or boutiques. They were

very glad and relieved to see me, clung to me and wanted to know and understand what was happening with their contracts and what they should do. They also talked about their supervisors who would scream at them. They hated such disrespectful and abusive treatment and thought it was so inhumane, but they could not complain because they were afraid of losing their jobs and could not speak in English.

After listening about the inhumane and unjust treatment the hotel maids received, I saw the word “injustice” right in front of my eyes. I also saw the two worlds so far apart: one of immigrant hotel maids whose every day work involves scrubbing toilets, changing bed sheets and cleaning after guests; the other of hotel management who profited from the immigrant women’s hard labor, and did not think the maids deserved respectful and humane treatments, and of bystander guests who obviously enjoy a comfortable stay.

This, combined with my own experience as an immigrant woman, motivated me to jump into the organizing work of immigrant women without any question or reservation. That was 26 years ago when I began my work at AIWA.

In 1983, when AIWA first began, low-income Asian immigrant women in the San Francisco Bay Area were primarily concentrated in garment and hotel industries as seamstresses and hotel maids. And many Filipina immigrants worked as nursing aids. While AIWA first started organizing Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipina immigrant women, we soon decided to focus on more limited English speaking Chinese and Korean garment and hotel workers due to limited resources we had.

With the goal of empowering low-wage limited English speaking immigrant women, AIWA decided to develop its program based on the needs of immigrant women. AIWA organizers, including myself, went out to garment factories, restaurants and hotels to listen and identify the needs of immigrant women. We went out to talk to garment workers during their lunch time since they ate their lunches on the door steps right outside of their garment factories and most of factories would not let us in out of fear of unwanted inspections.

I still remember talking to a Chinese seamstress who was having her lunch on the doorstep outside of her Chinatown garment shop. When we asked what kind of program she would like to see for immigrant women like her, she said “learning English.” I wondered where she would speak English since she worked 8 to 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, shopped in Chinatown, and hung out with her Chinese families and friends. I soon realized and understood that learning how to speak English was a symbolic need for immigrant women to feel like a part of their adopted country the United States. Immigrant women believed that only if they spoke English could they truly be a part of this society.

AIWA started English classes, based on the expressed needs of immigrant women like that garment worker, as a way to outreach and bring other women to

AIWA. But recognizing the need of informing women about their rights, we developed English curriculum not only to teach English, but to educate women about their rights. A topic of our curriculum covered the right to receive the minimum wage. Receiving the minimum wages was then and is still sometimes now, an exception to the rule in the low-wage industries where many immigrant women are employed. Many did not receive the minimum wage. One garment worker, informed of her right to receive the minimum wage in her English class, went and asked her boss to pay her the minimum wage, only to be fired the next day.

This incident highlighted the profound need for women to not only be informed of their rights, but also analyze the political and economic structure of oppression so they can identify issues to successfully challenge unjust treatments and structures.

AIWA started developing leadership training materials to inform, discuss and analyze the power structure of the garment industry and how to collectively, not individually, challenge them. The power of solidarity and collective actions were discussed in recognition of the vulnerability limited-English speaking workers face.

As AIWA started gaining its reputation as a workers' rights organization, one day, 12 Chinese seamstresses came to AIWA; they found out that their boss filed for bankruptcy without paying their back wages. While the non-payment of back wages was not an uncommon story in the garment industry then, we saw the unique opportunity to support this group of courageous garment workers to stand up on their own together, instead of being represented only by professional advocates.

Now looking back on our work, I would say it was a first participatory community based research these seamstresses were involved in: Seamstresses and AIWA organizers took a field trip to see how much the dresses these garment workers sewed were selling for. In a fancy boutique in the San Francisco shopping district, these garment workers spotted a dress they had sewn. The price tag showed that it was selling for \$175, which made these workers so surprised and mad. Women also figured it out that they would have been paid for \$5 to make this dress, but they were not even paid for that meager \$5.

Injustice and unfairness were easily and simply understood among all of us. It did not take too much calculation nor explanation to see that someone was making a huge profit while these seamstresses were not even paid at all. Retailers who sold those dresses were enjoying the fruits of these workers' cheap labor, and making a profit (even after counting all the operational costs they had to incur). Women workers demanded justice for their labor by challenging retailers and the garment manufacturer to be corporately responsible, even though they were not these women's immediate and legal employers. Women also appealed to the broader public. These women workers stood up and voiced the injustice they experienced as immigrant workers in the garment industry. Seeing the courage of

12 garment workers, allies and supporters from all walks of life- students, union, labor, religious, gay/lesbian activists and others- joined the struggle; successfully demanding the corporate responsibility of garment manufacturers. This campaign also left a legacy of how voiceless and vulnerable limited- English speaking immigrant women can stand up, to voice, participate and advocate for the rights of themselves and their fellow garment workers.

Here, I would like to take a moment to share some historical pictures of our campaign, which lasted from 1992 to 1998. (Ppt)

As you saw, it galvanized thousands of students, and activists across the nation to make the garment manufacturers responsible for the working conditions of the garment workers who sewed (or made) their clothes in their subcontractor shops. These bold and courageous garment workers, supporters and AIWA would like to take a credit for inspiring a movement for corporate responsibility of garment manufacturers.

In 1998, another crisis happened among English class participants at AIWA. AIWA students were evicted from their classrooms which were offered to them for free for over two years by a cultural center in Oakland. After conducting research, we discovered that the classroom spaces were owned by the City of Oakland and were accessible to those who can pay.

Women were upset and angered. In response, AIWA developed an economic literacy leadership training curriculum to help women to understand how the city spends its money and how it raises its revenue. Women learned and understood how the City has subsidized millions of dollars to sports stadiums and developers under the pretext of promoting its economic benefit for the city; it did not matter to the City whether they continue to fail or how much it loses on its investments. Women also understood that low-wage workers like them bear, a heavy burden of paying taxes, and that City resources should also be set aside for them. Women demanded equal access to a city owned facility. They argued that it was only fair that the City also support the literacy development of immigrant women workers who contribute to the City's economy.

This campaign, which we called the Community Equity Campaign, pressured the City to create a Community Access Fund so that low-income communities have equal access to the city owned property. In this campaign, women again voiced their concerns of injustice, participated in the actions to bring change, and successfully advocated for a policy change, which benefitted not only low-income immigrant women at AIWA, but also other low income communities.

Here are some pictures for you to see: immigrant women and youth demonstrating to demand equal access to the city- owned properties. (Ppt)

After these two successful grassroots campaigns, a critical mass of immigrant women emerged who possessed leadership skills and knowledge to

identify issues, to successfully demand the rights they duly deserve, and to bring about positive change not only for immigrant women, but also for others.

These women leaders also understood that disenfranchised women workers like them are always surrounded by a cycle of crisis because of their vulnerability caused by the multiple oppressions they are subjected to: low wages, job loss, and difficulty accessing health and housing, and services due to language and cultural barriers. We all understood that there are multiple unfair and unjust issues for immigrant women to challenge before our society is free of oppressions and institutional biases.

Rather than responding to every crisis women constantly face, it was time for immigrant women to sit in the driver's seat and be empowered to bring positive change proactively! We hold an annual retreat to discuss and analyze the multiple oppressions and challenges immigrant women face. The women identify and prioritize the issues they could work on that year, and develop work plans for campaigns. This way they can progressively build leadership skills, knowledge, opportunities, and solidarity to build a strong organization of immigrant women.

At an annual retreat in 2000, garment workers identified workplace health and safety as a critical issue they faced. Chronic pains, especially back and neck pains, had been the everyday realities for these garment workers since the early 19th century. The time had come for these seamstresses who constantly suffer from chronic pains to voice their concerns, participate in developing solutions and proactively advocate for positive change so that thousands of garment workers do not have to continue to experience these workplace injuries.

A committee of garment workers at AIWA partnered with the University of California San Francisco and the California Department of Health Services to develop solutions for these chronic pains. After meeting and collaborating weekly with nurses, doctors, ergonomists, and industrial hygienists, garment workers in partnership with this committed cadre of ergonomic experts, found a viable solution – ergonomic workstations, especially ergonomic chairs.

Here, I would like to show a picture of the chair (Ppt). This is the chair. Also it shows how it can prevent workplace injuries. I hope you all have good ergonomic chairs.

The ergonomic changes came to less than \$250 per garment worker. However the cost of ergonomic chairs became an issue. This led immigrant women to testify to procure funds from the City of Oakland and Alameda County for ergonomic chairs. Garment workers and even owners testified on the importance of the chairs and successfully acquired the funds to provide ergonomic chairs to 137 workers.

Here, an immigrant youth along with other youth, who are the children of garment workers and understood their mom's pains, stood in solidarity with a seamstress, as they testified before the City of Oakland's City Council in 2002.
(ppt)

After witnessing how limited- English speaking immigrant women, who first came to AIWA only to learn English, developed their self-confidence and leadership, and recognized the importance of collective action, we knew it was time to document what we had learned about developing grassroots leadership for the last 25 years.

By documenting it, we hoped to develop a science out of our grassroots leadership model, encourage other groups to adapt it, and, together, concretely and gradually shift a social paradigm which puts priority of the grassroots leadership development of the most needed.

Here, I would like to share with you the AIWA's grassroots leadership model (PPT chart).

Briefly, it starts with community outreach (CTOS 1) where women leaders outreach to other immigrant women, encourage them to participate in the community events (CTOS 2) and in self-education to be informed of their rights (CTOS 3). After learning of their rights, women are encouraged to participate in leadership training (CTOS 4) where they have an opportunity to learn, understand and discuss political and economic contexts the women live under.

Once women are equipped with basic leadership knowledge and skills, women are encouraged to participate in leadership committees (CTOS 5) where women have an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills to organize other immigrant women.

After participating in leadership committees for one year, women are eligible to be nominated to the leadership positions such as Membership Board, Peer Organizers and Peer Coordinators (CTOS 6).

After strengthening skills and knowledge thru hands- on leadership experiences and positions, women train and transform others into agents of social change, participate in broader coalitions and networks, and represent AIWA publicly (CTOS 7).

AIWA is fortunate and grateful to have many committed volunteers who team-teach and co-train with AIWA women leaders. Jenny Chun who has volunteered with AIWA for over 10 years during her Ph. D. pursuit at UC Berkeley and now teaches at the University of British Columbia in Canada, is collaborating with AIWA as principal researcher to reflect and conduct an assessment of the 25 years of our grassroots leadership and organizing work. This partnership is an important example of a community based research collaboration which is driven by the leadership needs at the grassroots level.

As part of the Research and Assessment Project, Jenny has interviewed over 30 Immigrant women leaders to understand and assess their leadership transformation and trajectories and has preliminarily found that grassroots leadership program of AIWA has developed confidence, political awareness and advocacy skills. It also has contributed to tangible economic gains like higher wages.

Here, I would like to share what women have said about their leadership transformation. Ms. Ku, a Korean electronics assembler says how she has developed self-confidence, which led to economic gains. She says, (ppt)...

While documenting and analyzing the women's transformation and leadership trajectory from the women's own experiences and voices, AIWA also wanted to demonstrate quantitatively how our grassroots leadership model contributed to women's leadership. Toward this goal, we have developed a leadership database to collect and track women's demographic data, gains in skills and knowledge, and their participation in leadership committees and positions.

(Show AIWA's leadership model again)

Here, I would like to share screen shots of our database for you to glance at. We assess and improve our leadership programs by collecting women's demographic info (summary page), and gathering their learning gains in leadership knowledge (knowledge page) and skills (skills page). As well, we track women's participation in various leadership committees and positions (participation page).

AIWA is proud and glad that we have a strong and sound database. We have an enduring grassroots leadership model that can be further tested, revised and strengthened for AIWA and other groups. It is important to understand that the women also own this process. They train each other, collect the data, and review the results of the analysis to make program decisions.

We will continue to ask:

- What kind of skills, knowledge and participatory opportunities do disenfranchised immigrant women need in order to develop their grassroots leadership?
- How long would it take for immigrant women who come to learn English to become active agents of social change?
- What kind of financial and personnel resources does it take to build the collective leadership of immigrant women?

By taking these concrete and gradual steps and encouraging other groups to adapt the CTOS grassroots leadership model and develop leadership with their own constituencies, we hope to see a social paradigm change. It is time for our society to put priority on instituting and concretely and systematically supporting

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programs that develop grassroots leadership among vulnerable and oppressed communities. Not just “talking about it,” but actively supporting and believing that the (full and) meaningful participation of all, especially disenfranchised communities, is a must for a democratic society. Only then, I believe we will have a society where people continue to challenge each other on our entrenched biases and where we will be respected equally and fairly for who we are, regardless of our citizenship status, gender, race, class, sexual orientation or other institutionalized biases.

The women leaders at AIWA and I understand that without support from all of you, the work cannot continue nor can it be finished. AIWA has been fortunate to enjoy support from many volunteers who dedicate their time and talents. I encourage each one of you to dedicate time and resources to supporting grassroots leadership development and community based research efforts in your communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you AIWA’s critical work of developing grassroots leadership toward a just and inclusive society. And I would like to end it with a quote from Charles Payne, from his book *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*.

“Over the long term, whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their lives. (68)

Charles Payne
from his book: I’ve Got The Light of Freedom