



<http://kalwnews.org/community/blog/2010/04/19/what-does-it-take-limited-english-speaking-immigrant-women-participate-meaningfully-in-the-broader-society>
OPINION: Community Correspondent

What does it take for limited-English speaking immigrant women to participate meaningfully in the broader society?

By [Young Shin](#) on Monday, Apr 19, 2:02pm



The story of Ms. Wu highlights the challenges faced by immigrant women, and their tremendous potential. In 1993, she came to the United States from China to be united with her family. She found her first job as a seamstress in a garment factory in Oakland's Chinatown. After learning about Asian Immigrant Women's Advocate's (AIWA) English classes from an AIWA organizer who came to her factory to recruit students, Mrs. Wu came to AIWA to learn English. At the class, she learned not only how to speak English, but also about her rights as an immigrant, a woman and a worker. She was encouraged to participate in a leadership training workshop at AIWA. The training provided her with the knowledge of how civil rights movements have positively affected the rights of immigrants. Without the Civil Rights Movement, there would not have been the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which increased the number of immigrants from Asia to address racial discrimination in immigration. Without those reforms, she would not have been here to be united with her family. This training gave her an opportunity to appreciate the importance of being part of continuing struggles, in solidarity with other groups. Thus, Ms. Wu, who would have been "ahistorical" in this county, found a sense of belonging by being part of continuing civil rights movements.

Another training workshop covered why and how limited- English speaking women like herself need to stand up for their rights, regardless of their ability to speak English. Ms. Wu became involved in AIWA's health and safety committees to address the issue of chronic work place pains garment workers have experienced for centuries, including back, neck, shoulder, hand, elbow, wrist and knee pain caused by repetitive motions, awkward positions and long hours of labor-intensive work. To participate in the committee meaningfully, she received training on how to facilitate and document the meetings and recruit others to join the committee. After two years of organizing others to address health and safety issues, she was nominated to sit on AIWA's membership board to

oversee the Chinese program and activities. She served on the board for two years, and then became a peer organizer to use her leadership skills to coordinate various AIWA committees and leadership training sessions.

Having developed her leadership skills systematically and gradually, as a senior trainer, she now trains other women and represents AIWA, giving speeches at college classes, conferences and public rallies. Ms. Wu is the embodiment of her message -- immigrant women can and must develop grassroots leadership to successfully demand the decent working and living conditions that lead to a just and inclusive society.

For women who might doubt their ability to speak up and fight for their rights, Ms. Wu stands before them as the evidence of their potential power.

This is how she sums up her grassroots leadership experiences: "Use our mother (tongue) to voice out what is in the bottom of our heart...what we want to say...what we want to fight for. After we went through many trainings... we would impart the knowledge and skills we learned to the new immigrant women... at the same time, we learn, too...and increase our confidence. We equip ourselves and gave back what we learn. I feel like I am honored. As I am growing at AIWA, I feel proud of myself."

After promoting the grassroots leadership of immigrant women like Ms. Wu for the last 25 years at AIWA, I have witnessed a critical mass of voiceless and vulnerable immigrant women, who first came to AIWA only to learn English, transform themselves into agents of social change who believe that the active participation in this society is a must.

However, immigrant women still face insurmountable challenges to participate actively and fully in this society. For example, Ms. Wu wanted to participate in a broader coalition to advocate for language accessibility in the recent health care reform debates, but without the help of translators, it was impossible for her to participate.

The question to ask all of us who believe in democracy is: how can the limited-English speaking immigrant women like Ms. Wu participate fully and meaningfully in our society?

We all say that the United States is a democratic society, which assumes that the system promotes "all of us" to participate meaningfully and equally. But does "all of us" include Ms. Wu? This society hardly provides an opportunity for the disenfranchised like Ms. Wu to speak up, participate and advocate on the issues affecting them and others.

In fact, even those who believe in the meaningful and equal participation of all don't recognize that it takes time, commitment, multi-lingual and financial resources for the disenfranchised like Ms. Wu to develop their leadership skills and knowledge in order to participate meaningfully in this society. We can't have the thriving democracy we strive for until the disenfranchised are included and empowered.

I believe it is time to see a shift in our social paradigms and values. We need to institute programs that will concretely and systematically develop the grassroots leadership of the most needy like Ms. Wu. And it is time to stimulate the public discourse on what it takes to develop the grassroots leadership of the disenfranchised like Ms. Wu.

Toward this end, AIWA would like to offer our leadership model Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS) which transforms immigrant women to be the agents of social change through community outreach participation, self education, leadership training and opportunities at AIWA and in the broader society. A multi-pronged approach for developing grassroots leadership, CTOS promotes the belief that leadership skills and knowledge are learned rather than inherent, and recognizes the importance of self- and peer- education for collective leadership and action. It consists of seven levels of leadership transformation, starting with community outreach and participation to bring immigrant women together (Level 1 and 2). Once we have a base of immigrant women, we encourage them to engage in self education (Level 3), to participate in the leadership training (Level 4), and to assume leadership opportunities and positions (Level 5 to 7.) For a more detailed leadership structure, please see the leadership chart (Link to chart.)

The CTOS model has provided a framework for developing the leadership skills of limited-English speaking immigrant women like Ms. Wu for the last 25 years. We believe that this enduring leadership model can be further tested, revised and strengthened by other groups as they adopt it to develop the grassroots leadership abilities of their constituencies. We also hope that this model will serve as a vehicle to stimulate the public discourse on what it takes to achieve the democratic society, inclusive of all of us, we all believe in.

Young Shin is executive director of Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates.