

Immigrant Women Workers at the Center of Social Change: AIWA Takes Stock of Itself

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For more than twenty-five years, successful direct action and educational campaigns by Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) have placed immigrant women workers at the center of struggles for social change. Rooted in the conviction that Asian immigrant women employed in low-paid and socially devalued jobs such as garment sewing and electronics assembly have both the potential and the right to influence the decisions that shape their lives, the organization's Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS) has worked to build meaningful democratic participation among this economically vulnerable and political marginalized population. The ingenuity of the CTOS model — which prioritizes a long-term commitment to grassroots leadership development — is the combination of political education and skills workshops with hands-on training in every stage of campaign development: from conducting community-based research to sitting down with local business and political leaders and developing new policy initiatives on labor standards and health care. By creating the conditions for disenfranchised immigrant women to challenge entrenched power hierarchies in their families, workplaces, communities and the broader society at large, the CTOS leadership model aims to transform its constituents from voicelessness and devaluation to empowerment, self-representation, and self-activity.

AIWA has now decided to undertake an extraordinary self-reflective evaluation of its history and of the lessons that can be learned from it. The organization has compiled an extensive membership database and conducted in-depth focus groups with individuals who have moved through the steps of the CTOS leadership program.¹ As the self-study progresses, AIWA also plans a series of public conversations placing its members in dialogue with other activists and with academic experts about what can be learned from the group's history. AIWA is asking how its organizing has transformed immigrant women into agents of meaningful democratic change, what has succeeded and what has failed, who stays in the group and who leaves, and what happens to the lives and social relations of women who pass through all seven stages of the CTOS program. AIWA wants to know if the CTOS model can be replicated among

other aggrieved groups. At a time of ever-expanding inequality between the haves and have-nots, the study asks if a science of organizing can be developed from AIWA's experiences that can guide efforts to empower other disenfranchised grassroots groups to participate in the full democratization of society.

Like most successful grassroots organizing groups, AIWA has made hard work the great equalizer. Immigrant women workers and their allies rarely have the same kinds of resources that are routinely available to their more powerful opponents, but tireless and relentless mobilization and organization have enabled the group to win important victories. As United Farm Workers organizer César Chávez used to say, the rich have money and the poor have time.² Of course, the poor actually have no more time than anybody else. On the contrary, poverty can mean that everything in people's lives takes longer, from travel time to work, stores, and services to negotiations with unresponsive employers, landlords, or government bureaucrats. But members of aggrieved groups that are almost always outnumbered and outspent often win victories by devoting their precious time to deliberative talk and face-to-face decision-making in meetings, to raising consciousness in their communities and recruiting allies from outside it, to walking on picket lines, passing out pamphlets, and staging public demonstrations. Yet precisely because many social justice groups are always immersed in emergencies and frantically scrambling to respond to crises, it is difficult for groups to sit back and take stock of where they have been in the past and where they need to go in the future. That is why AIWA's self-study is so unusual and so important.

The impetus for self-study flows directly and organically from AIWA's unusual understanding of its mission: the self-empowerment of limited-English speaking immigrant women in serving as their own advocates of change. All social movements need to win concrete victories to maintain credibility and justify the risks of activism for participants in their struggles. Yet too much attention to immediate victories without long-term grassroots leadership development of the disenfranchised can turn social movements into service providers while transforming grassroots members into clients. Short-term successes can lead organizations to believe that their leaders are indispensable, a view that makes the leaders consolidate power in very few hands, creating the seeds of an entrenched bureaucracy unresponsive to the membership and to changes in its needs and goals. The CTOS leadership model, on the other hand, disperses responsibilities and rewards widely throughout the organization. It creates constant dialogue among members at different stages of development, and it requires leaders to become peer teachers and trainers to new participants. These practices may be less efficient in winning short-term gains for the group, but they function successfully to focus attention on the long-term goal of the full democratization of society and the development of new social relations and new horizons in the lives of immigrant women workers.

AIWA projects guided by the CTOS philosophy and methods have enabled Chinese and Korean immigrant women workers in Oakland and San Jose to win victories on many fronts. The group's campaign against and consumer boycott of Jessica McClintock, Inc. from 1992 to 1996 enabled workers to win back wages withheld by unscrupulous subcontractors and to secure corporate funding for a toll-free confidential hotline that allowed garment workers to report workplace violations of laws regulating health, safety, wages, and hours. AIWA's Environmental Justice Project in San Jose educated and trained workers and employers about the dangers of toxic chemicals, the need for adequate ventilation at work sites, and the necessity of posting warning signs in additional languages other than English. Under its community-based Garment

Workers' Clinic, the group's Peer Health Promoter Network connected workers with doctors, nurses, and occupational therapists to identify, treat, and reduce repetitive actions on the job that led to injuries. AIWA's Ergonomics Improvement Project from 2002 to 2006, which built on its community-based research on workplace injuries of garment workers, established a unique lending "library" of ergonomically sound and safe chairs for garment workers, a campaign that made immigrant women workers the leading experts in innovating workplace health and safety policy and the leading agents in improving working conditions in over a dozen garment factories employing more than 200 garment workers.

Yet these concrete material victories are less important to AIWA than developing the long-term potential for full civic participation and leadership by immigrant women workers at the grassroots level. The CTOS leadership approach emphasizes the formation of politically empowered subjectivities that challenge entrenched relations of power and inequality that render immigrant women workers voiceless and invisible in multiple arenas. Fundamental to this process is the development of critical perspectives, organizing and communication skills, and forms of specialized knowledge that reconfigure the balance of power between immigrant women workers and employers, service providers, government officials, and other recognized decision-making entities. Participation in AIWA programs also leads immigrant women to negotiate social relations and power dynamics with each other, with their families, with often hostile and dismissive employers, and with potential allies drawn from community organizations, worker groups, unions, governmental and academic institutions, and sympathetic professionals. Workplace literacy classes, for example, are team-taught by native English-speaking students from local colleges and universities and AIWA members who have completed the early stages of CTOS leadership training. The content of these courses includes lessons about the historical struggles of previous generations of immigrants to the U.S. from all over the world and the political struggles of racially oppressed groups during the Civil Rights movement. This format encourages participants to see themselves as part of a wider world, to view the problems they face today in Oakland's garment factories and Silicon Valley's computer assembly plants as part of struggles that extend back temporally to previous generations and that connect laterally to the concerns of other contemporary workers confronting the consequences of new production methods and new patterns of labor recruitment and exploitation all around the world.

Many social movement groups would be satisfied with the kinds of victories that AIWA has achieved. The lessons of the CTOS model, however, lead AIWA in another direction. AIWA learned that organizational successes do not necessarily enhance members' ability to participate. The organization also views its members as more than the sum total of their injuries, as a collectivity characterized by more than their exploitation and poverty. Asian immigrant women workers with limited English language skills have a unique understanding of the global economy and its impact on humans. They are witnesses to war and empire, to flexible accumulation and low-wage labor, to global marketing and migration, to sexual exploitation and harassment, to racism and police brutality, to language discrimination and suppression. Of course, they want better wages and working conditions, better health and safety practices on the job, and better opportunities for upward mobility. Yet AIWA members have learned from their life experiences and their CTOS leadership training alike that changes in their individual lives will mean little if society itself does not change in fundamental ways.

Early in its history, AIWA provided English language literacy classes to meet the needs of limited-English speaking immigrant women. The women wanted to learn English even though

they worked in ethnic garment shops where they used English very little or not at all in a typical day. But learning English was an aspiration of these limited-English speaking women who saw speaking English as a tool for their social and economic mobility. Yet the dialogic dimensions of the CTOS process brought forth another reason for learning English apart from desires to facilitate individual upward mobility and cultural assimilation. Immigrant women also wanted English language speaking skills in order to stand up for their rights at work, to tell their bosses in a language they would understand that the workers are not machines but humans who deserve dignified treatment. These discussions led to the establishment of workplace literacy classes that offered instruction in workplace rights and other civil rights issues affecting low-income and limited-English speaking immigrant women.

Understanding their rights as workers led some immigrant women to exercise their rights. One garment worker who learned of her rights to receive the minimum wage at an AIWA literacy class asked her boss to pay her the minimum wage, only to be fired the next day. This incident prompted AIWA to establish the Leadership Development Program. Not only was it important for women to be informed of their rights, it was imperative for women to develop a critical analysis of how socio-economic and political power imbalances can unjustly affect the exercise of their rights. It was also important for immigrant women located in vulnerable social and economic positions to understand the importance of their collective power: immigrant women workers were much less likely to win even the most basic rights if they stood alone rather than together.

In order to facilitate the ability of immigrant women to develop a critical analysis of the power imbalances affecting them, AIWA developed a series of leadership training materials such as “English Dominance.” This training challenged the assumption that English language ability was a determining criterion for political membership. It asserted that the ability to speak and be heard in one’s native language was a fundamental human right. To combat the stigma and humiliation that non-native English speakers experienced on a daily level, the English dominance training traced the insistence on speaking “English only” to a longer history of racial and colonial domination. By denaturalizing the link between English language ability and competency as a full and equal member of society, AIWA’s English language dominance training sought to empower limited-English speaking immigrant women to voice, participate, and advocate for the workplace and civil rights they rightly deserve, regardless of their language ability or marginalized socioeconomic location.

By training Chinese- and Korean-speaking women to lead trainings in their own native languages, AIWA’s English Dominance trainings directly challenged language-based hierarchies that denied limited-English speakers the ability to speak and teach others. AIWA’s leadership trainings also created opportunities for immigrant women from different language communities to learn directly from each other by making leadership skills, not language skills, the basis of training facilitation. One such example was the exchange between AIWA and an ally organization, *Mujeres unidas y activas* (Women united in action), whose constituency is mainly Spanish-speaking immigrant women workers. Although it took time and effort to translate lessons from Korean to English and from English to Spanish, workers in both groups saw new possibilities in creating an alliance based on their similar but not identical experiences with migration and low-wage labor. They also recognized affinities resulting from the deployment of English as a form of colonial domination in their home countries, as a mechanism of labor control in their workplaces, and as a tool for devaluing immigrants from Asia and Latin America in the United States.

Ensuring that immigrant women are in a position to embody and disseminate knowledge is a cornerstone of AIWA's CTOS leadership development model. Given that limited-English speakers, immigrant women, and low-wage workers are rarely seen as legitimate experts, AIWA's occupational health and safety campaigns have created concrete opportunities for immigrant women workers to develop and exercise expertise. This involves more than providing firsthand testimony from immigrant women that exposes workplace abuses and hazards; for example, it entails changing familiar patterns of social movement practice in which immigrant women workers are the voices but not the agents of enacting social change. Through its community-based worker clinics, worker-led research surveys and peer training-based organizing model, AIWA has equipped immigrant women workers with the skills and opportunity to diagnose health and safety problems, collaborate with health professionals (e.g. doctors, nurses, occupational therapists) and devise innovative policy solutions for reducing workplace-related injuries. Immigrant women have taken their expertise to meetings with city government officials and employers to demand access to public space and public resources, including the allocation of City of Oakland funds to improve garment shop workstations under its Ergonomics Improvement Campaign. By becoming counter-experts, immigrant women workers have been transformed from bystanders into up-standers and have linked community organizing directly to political action that unites workers with city officials, local employers, and health professionals in a common agenda to improve the lives of low-income immigrant women workers.

AIWA's classes, leadership trainings, and policy advocacy campaigns have not only provided immigrant women with valuable tools, skills, and experiences to reconfigure power relations in the workplace and the broader society, but they have also created opportunities for immigrant women to challenge gendered hierarchies in the family. Traditional expectations from family members have served as a barrier to more meaningful forms of political participation for immigrant women. Some husbands have viewed time at AIWA classes and meetings as time lost from the cleaning, cooking, and caretaking at home they expected women to do. Some English language dominant children were ashamed of their mothers' limited-English language skills and treated them disrespectfully as a result. Other children armed with computer skills viewed their mothers as lacking intelligence because the women did not know how to use computers. However, as immigrant women prioritized activities that enhanced their human and political development as immigrants and workers, they began to challenge their devaluation as wives and mothers. Their sole responsibility was no longer caretaking, and their sole identity was no longer someone who could not speak English or use a computer when they became responsible for leading English classes, training their peers, and tackling occupational health and safety reform. Rather than simply acquiring new skills, women engaged in CTOS training took steps to renegotiate the terms of their relationships as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters in such a way as to accommodate their evolving identities as people engaged in deliberative talk, face-to-face decision-making, and dignified self-representation and self-activity.

AIWA's interest in a science of community organizing is rooted in a desire to explore the links between particular experiences and general patterns of social behavior. Social science research often grounds general claims in large data sets made up of many different individual cases and situations. AIWA's experience with the CTOS model proceeds from a different premise. It starts with the proximate and particular aspects of immediate problems to see how they lead logically to broader understandings of regional, national, and global dynamics and problems. Intersecting systems of power make it impossible to solve problems in only one social realm.

Discrimination in the labor market and at work, for example, is made possible — and made continuously worse — by unequal relations of power outside the workplace: in the family, in the neighborhood, in the city, in the state, in the nation, and in the world. Power is inscribed and reproduced on many levels in the lives of limited-English speaking immigrant women workers. Discrimination takes many forms as well, from health and safety signs posted only in English to abuse from monolingual English-speaking supervisors who demean, bully, and denigrate speakers of other languages. AIWA has developed its politics and policies to speak to all of these dimensions in immigrant women workers' lives, to use the intersections of power as a privileged site for emancipation. Although the particulars will vary for members of other groups, the principle of attending to local problems and practices is likely to be generalizable, and certainly the principle of intersectionality as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw and other Woman of Color feminists is indispensable.

In her great novel *The Salt Eaters*, one of Toni Cade Bambara's characters advises "Keep the focus on the action, not the institution; don't confuse the vehicle with the objective; all cocoons are temporary."³ In its bold project of self-scrutiny, AIWA is attempting to identify the exact role of the institution in the action, to diagnose the relationship between the vehicle and the objective. Rather than staying safely within an organizational cocoon, AIWA understands that even its great successes should be seen as temporary and transitory steps on the path toward the bigger goal of developing the full potential for democratic and egalitarian social relations among its members, a potential that persists despite the unequal, unjust, and indecent practices of our society.

Endnotes

1. CTOS has seven steps: Through community outreach (CTOS 1), immigrant women participate in events and workshops of their interest, are informed of AIWA's mission and activities (CTOS 2), and take interest in self-education by attending workplace and computer literacy classes (CTOS 3). AIWA's education for empowerment encourages immigrant women to learn about critical issues affecting them by participating in peer-led leadership trainings (CTOS 4) and to move on to volunteering for AIWA's various committees and to acquire hands-on leadership skills such as facilitation, documentation, and public speaking (CTOS 5) for a year. Women in CTOS 5 level are nominated to serve on the Membership Board to oversee the various committees and activities for a term of two years, at which point they are eligible to apply for AIWA's Peer Leader program — an on-the-job training internship to coordinate and staff all the committees and activities (CTOS 6). Equipped with critical analysis, knowledge, and skills, women become Senior Trainers (CTOS 7) to conduct leadership training as Peer Trainers, represent AIWA in public, and act as part of broader social movements.

2. Peter Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes (Escape if You Can): Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), vii.

3. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1992), 199.