

Living Outside the Cup: Asian Immigrant Women Workers Fighting for Change

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1 Hai Yan's Story

I asked Hai Yan what she thought her life would be like if she never came to AIWA. She paused for a second and pointed to the paper cup she was drinking water from. "If I never came to AIWA, I would still be stuck in a cup. Now I've stepped outside of the cup to the outside world."

Hai Yan is one of over 1,000 immigrant women who have participated in the grassroots leadership program at Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA). Hai Yan first walked into AIWA's doors in 1996, three years after leaving Guangdong, China. She was hoping to learn enough

English to pass the U.S. citizenship exam while still keeping her job, and AIWA was one of the few organizations in Oakland Chinatown that offered assistance to low-income Chinese immigrant women. At the time, Hai Yan had just gotten a new job at an electronics assembly factory. Her annual wages amounted to less than \$20,000 a year, but it was a slight step up from her first job as a seamstress and her second job making buns and shrimp dumplings (siu mai) in a restaurant kitchen

Fourteen years after taking her first citizenship preparation class at AIWA, Hai Yan explains that her life has been fundamentally transformed. She used the metaphor of a cup to describe the difference between her life before and after AIWA. "What is life like in a cup?" she asked. "Eat, sleep, go to work, finish work, come home." She then explained,

“But outside [the cup], since coming to AIWA, I meet a lot of people, come into contact with [people from] other races, go into different groups and organizations to give speeches. Grassroots women like us even have the courage to go to places like Berkeley and give presentations to university students. And if we see something that is unfair, then we will fight for change.”

The sense of boldness and tenacity with which Hai Yan lives her life today is intimately tied to her personal growth and transformation as one of AIWA's most dynamic leaders. When she first came to AIWA, she explained that she had a “very selfish mentality.” She was only interested in doing things to help herself like learning English and becoming naturalized. Her multiple obligations at home and in the workplace left little time or energy to take on additional responsibilities. But as she learned about the history of white settler colonialism and the movements for civil rights and immigrant rights, she began to see her personal troubles as part of a larger structure of economic and racial oppression.

Hai Yan explained, “Once I learned that English [can be used] as a tool to oppress us, I had to figure out where the way out lies. I had to find my own way out.”

Since 2001, Hai Yan has participated in every level of AIWA's leadership program. After working for a year in the Health Care Committee, she became one of the first Peer Organizers (POs) for the Ergonomics Improvement Campaign (2002-2006), working with fellow Chinese immigrant garment workers, medical professionals and public health officials to innovate workplace health and safety in a dozen garment factories. Skills development workshops in community outreach, participatory research, meeting facilitation and public speaking provided her with the confidence and ability to lead community delegations with Oakland city council officials, publicly speak out at immigrant rights marches and protests, and give class presentations to university students. Most recently, she co-facilitated a community organizing training for ten Chinese immigrant women who are parent advocates for Bananas, a Bay Area-based non-profit child care referral and support agency serving diverse families. As one of AIWA's most experienced Senior Trainers (STs), Hai Yan is regularly deployed to other community organizations to inspire and empower other immigrant women to speak out and lead collective efforts for social change.

2 Shifting the paradigm: developing grassroots leadership

Hai Yan's development as one of AIWA's most active and dynamic leaders did not happen overnight; it was a long-term process of individual and organizational transformation, in which the ability of individuals to bring about change was facilitated by the role of organizations in making such change possible. AIWA has taken concrete steps to ensure that immigrant women workers such as Hai Yan are able to assess the root causes of their disenfranchisement and marginalization and work collaboratively with their peers and other allies and supporters to concretely change their situations.

AIWA's emphasis on grassroots leadership challenges conventional understandings about how to engage in meaningful and effective social change work. For those who work on the movement frontlines as well as study social movements, the emphasis is often on the campaigns, the mobilizations, the immediate victories. Attention is paid to how to maximize the wins and minimize the losses. Some victories, however, cannot be quantified. How does a sense of individual and collective empowerment factor into what is considered a movement victory or a failure? How does a shift in the ordinary and mundane elements of everyday life, like having the confidence to speak up to your husband or your boss, affect movement outcomes? When some of the most

disempowered and disadvantaged groups are not at the table to speak out and take part in the decision-making process because it is not convenient, efficient or strategic, how much can the balance of power and inequality between the haves and the have-nots really change?

For Hai Yan and AIWA's other immigrant women leaders, the opportunity to participate in leadership training opportunities has had a ripple effect in their lives. While such changes do not easily or neatly translate into short-term victories, they are pivotal to transforming the unequal power structures that prevent low-income Asian immigrant women from challenging oppression and discrimination on a daily basis. Women are no longer hesitant to spend time away from home outside work because of disapproving husbands and in-laws, or an all-consuming sense of their gender and family obligations. They no longer shield their faces from the public when participating in marches or protests in fear of employers or the police. They no longer view language barriers as a legitimate reason for their lack of voice in the workplace or in broader public life. And they are speaking out more boldly when it comes to issues of fairness, justice and equality, whether they are in the presence of those who speak better English or have higher educational levels and more prestigious jobs.

Since AIWA first began in 1983, its founding director, Young Shin, recognized that the conditions of immigrant women's lives would never change without a fundamental shift in values. This did not only pertain to the values of individual immigrant women who felt disempowered and marginalized, but it also applied to the values of social movement organizations committed to a common project of social, economic and political transformation. "For us to really create a just and equal society," states Shin, "everyone needs to participate. Yet, I see every day that immigrant women are not involved." Shin emphasized that we rarely, if ever, see a low-wage immigrant woman worker at the table discussing how to enforce labor protections, change immigration policy or decide which funding proposals deserve support. Instead, we have become used to their long-standing absence and invisibility. Shin explains:

"Certainly, I have had more opportunities [as the leader of a community organization] but that doesn't disregard the fact that I have similar experiences as an immigrant woman. At

first, people don't hear you. They don't really see you as a part of [society]...that somehow, just because you are an immigrant and you can't speak English, you are not there."

Rather than accept their chronic invisibility and advocate on behalf of others, AIWA has devoted the last two decades to promoting a "paradigm shift," as Shin puts it, in the way social movement organizations do social change work. This entails more than simply giving voice to the voiceless; it is about reconfiguring the very ground upon which people make decisions and see themselves in relation to others. It is about changing the values and practices that determine who can and should participate in changing our society. It is about creating the conditions that facilitate the ability of the marginalized and disenfranchised to participate in a collective project of social change. And if everyday inequalities around axes such as English language ability, economic marginalization and racial- and gender-based discrimination create barriers to participation, whether it is in the arena of formal politics or in the spaces of progressive social movements, AIWA argues that it is the responsibility of social movement organizations to eliminate them.

3 Institutionalizing Transformation: AIWA's Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS)

Overcoming the many barriers that prevent low-income and limited English-speaking immigrant women from actively participating in civic and political life may seem daunting, but AIWA has developed a model of change to guide this process. Based on over 25 years of successful direct action and education campaigns, the Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS) outlines a concrete path for disenfranchised immigrant women to become empowered agents of change. This 7-step approach combines political education with hands-on skills development and capacity training at every stage of the campaign process. (SEE FIGURE 1). This pragmatic approach seeks to provide immigrant women with the relevant skills, knowledge and experience to directly participate in collective efforts to improve workplace conditions and change public policy, regardless of one's language ability, education, status or income. By addressing the material conditions of immigrant women workers' political exclusion in an incremental yet strategic and long-term fashion, AIWA's CTOS model has institutionalized a model of individual and collective transformation that ensures that democratic participation is treated as a necessary precondition, not an often-neglected afterthought, to meaningful and effective social change work.

CTOS's success can be attributed to its insistence on communicating clear and accessible steps for how disenfranchised and marginalized immigrant women workers can become active leaders for social change. By outlining the aims and mechanics of various AIWA activities, the CTOS framework enables immigrant women workers to visualize how a simple decision, such as taking English classes, can lead to a community-driven campaign to improve workplace health and safety conditions or reform health care policy. According to Hai Yan, the CTOS chart is helpful for both new and old members because it "doesn't require any special efforts." The CTOS chart shows that if women complete specific trainings and participate in specific organizational activities, they can become peer teachers and peer trainers, even if they only finished middle school and have limited English language skills. It also creates a way for immigrant women to relate to each other based on respect and mutuality as opposed to competition and fear.

Challenging everyday marginalization and isolation (CTOS 3)

CTOS begins by recognizing that, for certain Asian immigrant women, immigration results in a life of everyday marginalization, isolation and disenfranchisement. While many factors contribute to this state, the majority of women identify their inability to speak English as the primary source of their disenfranchisement and thus, learning English as the first step towards changing the conditions of their everyday lives. CTOS 3 takes advantage of this belief by offering English classes that combine language education with popular education—that is, an approach that seeks to challenge power and oppression, as opposed to reproduce them. In doing so, CTOS provides an entry point to leadership development that allows women to begin to experience a different kind of life: one that seeks to challenge, rather than accept, everyday marginalization and isolation.

Embracing Activism and Change (CTOS 4-5)

Once immigrant women make the decision to take an English class, they embark on a series of explicit and interlinked steps that shift their perception of activism and social change. Women begin to embrace, rather than reject, participation in public activities as a legitimate and worthwhile vehicle to promote their interests. Participating in successful direct actions and community-driven campaign produces positive feelings

of engaging in social change, including greater confidence and enthusiasm. These actions also reframe people's relation to power and authority. The police are not seen solely as a repressive force, and people in higher status positions—from politicians and lawyers to university professors and students—are viewed as active allies and supporters in immigrant women's fight for change.

Leaders in Action (CTOS 6-7)

Participation in the CTOS model transforms women's relationships with each other and the broader society. Rather than see themselves and other Asian immigrant women as devalued members of society, they begin to revalue each other as leaders and potential leaders. Seeing Asian immigrant women workers as *leaders in action* is a powerful mechanism for reconfiguring everyday power relations and affirming their continued participation in a long-term and sustained process of individual and community transformation. The ability to visualize how low-income immigrant women workers can become respected and valued leaders through the graduated CTOS structure is key to AIWA's success in developing active and dynamic grassroots leaders.

4 CTOS in Detail

The following sections elaborate on how CTOS works in action. Each section draws directly upon insights shared by AIWA members during a series of focus groups that were conducted between August 2006 and August 2009.

Life after immigration: everyday marginalization and isolation

Contrary to the idea that immigrants move to the U.S. to seek out a better life, few Chinese immigrant women who participated in our study viewed the U.S. as a place of opportunity. Most women felt ambivalent or held negative feelings about life in the U.S. Stories frequently circulated in the Chinese and Hong Kong newspapers about the “miserable” and “tragic” lives of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. and many women were well aware that life in the U.S. meant a life of isolation and hardship, working long grueling hours for low wages. Despite these negative opinions, many women still made the decision to immigrate, citing “family reunification” with parents, brothers, sisters and in-laws who were already living in the U.S. as the main reason for their transnational move.

Although women were aware that their future life would involve much hardship

and suffering, many women still felt shock at the gap between their perceptions of the U.S. as a wealthy, industrialized country and the reality they witnessed after arrival. Linda moved to Oakland in 1988 from Hong Kong with her husband and five children, and she explained that her first impressions of life in the U.S. were even worse than she anticipated, “When I got here [Oakland], it was so dilapidated. Honestly, it was like torture. Even rural villages [in China] were not that bad. The houses were moldy. The paint was peeling. I thought to myself, ‘You call coming to a place like this coming to the US?’” Hai Yan, who moved from Guangdong province to Oakland in 1993, expressed similar sentiments of shock and disappointment. She said, “At first, when I just got off the plane, I thought, ‘So, this is America. No tall buildings. It’s like a rural village. I never imagined this was America.’”

Many immigrant women who relocate to Oakland and surrounding areas in Northern California face extremely limited job opportunities and are confined to work in highly competitive and exploitative jobs in the ethnic labor market. The first jobs of the overwhelming majority of Chinese immigrant women are either in sewing or restaurant work, although the recent decline of the local garment manufacturing sector is changing this phenomenon. Approximately half of 139 survey participants who worked

in garment factories in Oakland already had prior experience sewing while living in China or Hong Kong. Some women who did not have this experience explained that they prepared for the move by working in a sewing factory for an entire year. Linda explained, “Everyone said that if you came to the U.S., you either sew or wash dishes. Washing dishes is heavy duty work, and I was afraid to do such a heavy duty job. So, I decided to learn how to sew.”

Almost all of the women we interviewed described piece work in garment factories as one of the lowest paid and most exploitative jobs. Women recalled being underpaid and short-changed by employers who knew that newly arrived immigrant women had little ability to challenge abuse. Women who were able to find jobs outside the ethnic labor market explained that wages and working conditions were often better, but their options were still limited to low-paid jobs in other manufacturing plants or in the service sector as domestic workers, hotel cleaners or food service workers. Few women earned living wages from sewing work and some were barely able to cover basic food and transportation costs. According to Linda, her lack of sewing experience translated into meagre wages, barely enough to buy “one lunch box and a bus ticket back home.”

Women repeatedly emphasized that the major difference between working in the U.S. and China or Hong Kong was the work environment. According to Joanne, who worked in a sewing factory both in Guangdong and Oakland, “In China, if you work, you get \$36. If you don’t work, you still get \$36. Here, you have to rely on your

own hard work.” Although the necessity to work to support one’s basic livelihood is often equated with heightened stress and anxiety, some women experienced this pressure as a form of “freedom.” Linda explained, “The best thing about working [here In the U.S.] is there is a lot of freedom. If you want to work, you work. If you don’t want to work, then you leave. In Hong Kong, there are no arrangements like this. If you go to work at noon, then don’t even think about leaving before 6pm.”

Although women spoke positively about the “freedom” of living and working in the U.S., few had the time or luxury to exercise such freedom. Many Chinese immigrant women who worked in the garment and restaurant industry described living a “hand-to-mouth” existence, which resulted in a generalized state of monotony and isolation with few opportunities to do anything besides work, eat and sleep. Qing explained, “In the U.S., there are only three things: 1) wake up and go to work, 2) after work, you go home to eat, and 3) after you eat, you watch a little television and go to sleep. After you sleep you go to work again. There’s no leisure at all.” Hai Yan expressed similar sentiments, using the metaphor of a “cup”. “What is life like in a cup?” she asked rhetorically. “Eat, sleep, go to work, finish work, come home. It’s that simple.”

Challenging everyday marginalization and isolation (CTOS 3)

Language ability is cited as the primary source of everyday marginalization and isolation for Asian immigrant women workers. The inability to speak English restricts one to employment in the ethnic labor market, as well as prevents them from speaking out against mistreatment and abuse. The inability to speak English was also viewed as a source of humiliation and disempowerment. Kyung explained, “If someone says ‘what’ when we talk, we lose our confidence. It’s because our accent is different. We lose our confidence at that point.” Kathy agreed, stating, “Look at our children [who speak English fluently]. They are different from us. If you speak English, even your walk looks confident. We are ignored because of our poor language skills. We cannot confront things without good [English] language skills.”

Given the overwhelming emphasis on language as a source of disempowerment, women who choose to break the monotony and isolation of their everyday lives often start by taking an English class. Adult school is a standard option for most non-native English language speakers, but AIWA members describe adult school as “expensive” and “inflexible.” As one of the few options that allow immigrant women to work and learn English, AIWA’s English classes have become a popular option for many Chinese immigrant women in the Oakland area. All classes take place on Sunday mornings and can be combined with weekly shopping errands in Oakland

Chinatown. AIWA English classes are also team-taught, usually by a second-generation Asian American student and an AIWA member who has gained higher levels of English language proficiency. The fact that an AIWA member serves as a peer teacher in the classroom immediately begins to challenge ingrained beliefs about authority and legitimacy, and create new avenues for limited-English speaking immigrant women to become recognized leaders.

Once women set aside two hours per week to learn English during AIWA’s Workplace Literacy classes, small shifts begin to take place in women’s everyday lives. Initially, most women seek out English classes due to their self-interest. Many immigrant women are not able to engage in basic English language communication, including saying basic phrases such as their phone number and address in English. Many see improved English language skills as a direct route to finding a better job, usually outside Chinatown with a “Caucasian,” not a Chinese, boss. As women begin to improve their basic English skills, they immediately begin to feel the effects of their efforts. Women talk about how they feel less dependent on others for the simplest of tasks and more reliant on their own ability. Women also realize that learning English can be a source of enjoyment rather than a source of humiliation. Ming described AIWA English classes as a rare opportunity to break the monotony and isolation of her everyday life, saying “I felt so happy coming to AIWA to study because I often stayed at home all day [when I wasn’t working] and I only saw people in my family. After two hours here [at AIWA], I felt really happy.”

AIWA's popular education approach to English language creates a new social space in immigrant women's lives. Chinese immigrant women describe AIWA as a place of "sociality," where they can develop alternative relationships outside of work and family life. Fan explained the social space of AIWA in the following terms: "AIWA creates an open environment for women to come closer and to understand each other more. So it's friendlier at AIWA. There's a difference between work and AIWA. There's always competition at work. It's a materialistic world, but at AIWA, we just participate in activities that lack that kind of competition." This is even true for women who bring their co-workers or family members to AIWA. Seeing familiar faces in settings that are not mired by competition and unequal power dynamics promotes cooperative and supportive relationships, laying the basis for new ways of relating to each other and eventually, new ways of working collectively with each other on a community-driven campaign to change city policy or improve workplace health and safety conditions.

Women also describe positive changes to their attitudes about work as a result of taking AIWA English classes, including the ability to say certain phrases in English to address difficulties with a co-worker or supervisor. Once women begin to speak up in the workplace, even in the most mundane of cases, they begin to develop greater self-confidence and self-esteem. Jin Sung explained, "For me, when I faced certain inconveniences at my workplace, I used to think, 'Oh well, this is how it is, and I went along with it. But, as I came here [AIWA] and learned about health and safety issues

in English classes, I could see how I could change things little by little. For example, if I saw we needed an extra fan, I could ask for that." Some women attributed their improved English language ability to improved job opportunities. Chen-Lu attributed her success in finding a job in a local school to her new sense of confidence, stating, "I didn't have the guts to go out and look [outside Chinatown for a job.] But, after I came to AIWA, they encouraged us to fight for ourselves in all things. So, I tried to look for work in schools and I got a position doing food service in schools. Now, I have health insurance and the pay is good too."

The development of more respectful and supportive family relationships is another positive impact of AIWA's Workplace Literacy classes and participation in AIWA programs more generally. Kyung felt validated by her daughter's response to the subjects she was learning at AIWA. She explained:

"The first story we learned in English class was the Rosa Parks story. And of course, my English wasn't that good in the beginning. Now, they ask us to do typing in class. So, they asked us to type something up at home, and when I did that, I asked my daughter to check for typos. She read it over and said to me, 'Do you always read stories like these in class?' I said, 'Oh, you know Rosa Parks?' It was shortly after I heard what

the story meant to her that I felt really warm inside. My daughter saw that her mom was learning about such good stories, and has backed me up since then. Till then, my husband didn't really care about my kids, but now he sees it differently. So, the kids give me support and now my husband also has started to show me support.”

Embracing Activism and Change (CTOS 4-5)

While AIWA English classes use curricula that begin to tackle topics such as workers' rights and movements for gender and racial justice, the actual content of political education is limited by the need to present material in the form of English language education. It is during specific Leadership Development Program (LDP) workshops, which are conducted in participants' native languages, that AIWA begins to outline a concrete framework for confronting oppression and embracing activism: the CTOS model. Women who take AIWA Workplace Literacy classes and other CTOS 3 self-education classes (e.g. computer classes) are encouraged to sign up for separate workshops on topics such as AIWA History and Campaigns, Community Organizing, English Dominance and the Civil Rights Movement. These political education workshops are one of the very few places where Chinese immigrant women can learn about the histories of struggle among different

oppressed groups – histories that are now the familiar subject of ethnic studies and American studies classes in university but are rarely shared with low-paid immigrant women workers. AIWA LDP workshops not only preserve institutional memory about subjugated histories, but they also ensure that such histories are imparted to groups that experience similar but different conditions of oppression and disenfranchisement.

The English Dominance curriculum is one of the most powerful educational tools that AIWA uses to “decolonize” immigrant women's sense of inferiority and inadequacy as a result of their limited English language skills. Rather than shy away from basic conversation, women feel more emboldened to speak, even if “their English is not perfect.” Another powerful educational tool is AIWA's workshop on its own history and campaign successes. Providing information about previous AIWA campaigns ensures that victories such as the Justice for Garment Workers Campaign remain part of the community's memory, regardless of whether people were directly involved in the actual campaign. They provide concrete examples of how immigrant women workers in their own community refused to accept everyday injustices and stood up to immigrant sweatshops, global retailers, city officials and other local authorities. They also reveal the array of supporters and allies that immigrant women workers can draw potential support from if they choose to wage collective struggles for change. The message of AIWA's LDP training—that women can fight successfully for their rights if they speak out and fight together—is reinforced by the fact that workshop

facilitators are other immigrant women workers with similar histories and circumstances, not AIWA staff or native English speaking non-immigrants.

Although learning about previous examples from their peers is an important first step, the actual experience of participating in public meetings and protests changes people's everyday orientations towards accepting mistreatment, exploitation and disenfranchisement. Women learn that participating in collective actions can lead to positive, rather than negative, outcomes. Thus, they begin to change their perception of the consequences of confronting power, be it the police, employers or the government.

Betty moved to Oakland in 1987 from Guangzhou, China. She wanted to stay in China, but she explains that all her relatives lived in California and she felt compelled to join them. She explains that when she first immigrated, she "was really afraid of other people" and she did not "dare to speak out." Much of her fear stemmed from the isolated existence she led. Not only did her daily life consist of simply going to and from work, but she actively avoided people. She recalls, "When we came here [Oakland], those relatives and people told us, 'If someone falls, don't ever try to give them a hand up. Don't go to places where there are a lot of people. Get away. Don't be nosy.' Stuff like that. So it makes you uncaring about things." Her attitude began to change as she participated in more AIWA activities: "Coming to AIWA, it teaches you that, no, if something's unfair, you have to speak out. And also you should fight for your own rights. So then, even if you're harassed,

AIWA says you should not hurry and walk away without making a sound. If someone harasses you, you have to speak out. It's a huge difference."

The fear of getting involved in potentially harmful activities convinces many immigrant women to "keep quiet." Leanne attended her first English class at AIWA in 1993. She recalled feeling instantly drawn to AIWA's mission, which helped women "be self-sufficient and independent and afterwards, fight to improve their living and working conditions." However, she was "afraid" and instead stayed "inside the office" when AIWA planned an action. She said, "I was a new immigrant back and I was scared of everything back then. I was afraid people would expose me. I was afraid my boss would see me. If they saw me, they might fire me the next day. Or my co-workers would steal my work and make more money."

Part of her resistance to participating in public activities also began long before she moved to the U.S. and could be linked to her family's experience during the Cultural Revolution. "When we were in China, our background wasn't good, so we were afraid of everything. We didn't dare join any kind of demonstration or I wouldn't have a dad anymore." As a "rich farmer," Leanne's father was considered a "bad element" by the Chinese Communist Party and was constantly in danger of being "purged." Leanne explained, "If something happened to him because we did something wrong and caused them to suffer, people would say, 'How did you bring up your children to be like this? You didn't raise them properly.'"

Her fear of getting involved in questionable political activities resulted in a tendency to disdain any activity that could result in harm to herself and her family. For example, she recalled telling her son not to participate in the June 4th Tiananmen Square uprising. Her family had applied for immigration status and she feared that her son's actions could jeopardize their application, telling him, "Remember, we got through the Cultural Revolution alright. Don't get involved in any controversies now. Don't do anything that would jeopardize our immigration. Don't go [to the square]." She also held extremely negative memories of Tiananmen Square protesters at the time. She was doing clerical work at the university at the time and she remembers that the roads were blocked off during the demonstrations. "It was so difficult even to go to work. It took three hours, when normally it would take me an hour to get home from Guangzhou. I felt resentment and hatred for the Tiananmen protesters."

Leanne's feelings started to change as she became more involved in AIWA's activities. "It was after the English class and the [leadership] training classes, at the time of the [Community Equity] campaign." The Community Equity Campaign represented a fight for access to public space for low-income residents of Oakland Chinatown. AIWA members were about to lose their access to classroom space at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, which was partially funded by taxpayer dollars. AIWA organized a community-driven campaign to demand that low-income residents also have the right to access to publicly-subsidized space. Leanne recalled, "Stacy [Kono, the community organizer for the

campaign] took us to the [Oakland] city council hearing. We were so bold. After a few times of going to demonstrations and making demands for public access, I gradually became more daring."

The change in Leanne's attitude was the result of her direct experience participating in AIWA public actions. Not only did she learn that no harm would come to her or her family as a result of participation, but she also witnessed the broad support that AIWA-organized protests received from the broader public, including individuals in high-status positions like "professors." Leanne explained:

"When we were at the public hearing at [Oakland] city hall, there were police at the door. I saw that there were professors outside supporting us, so we rushed straight through. The people behind us started to shout. Once they got started, the crowd called out and cheered us on together. The police couldn't do anything. They didn't dare. From here, I further learned that there's nothing to be afraid of. If what you're doing is right, then there's no need to be afraid. So, then I changed."

As Leanne participated in more public fights, she began to realize that the decision to embrace activism and fight collective for change was a worthwhile and broadly sup-

ported effort. Leanne recalled another public protest she attended in San Francisco in support of workers' rights that continued to "build up her courage" to fight for what she believed was just. She explained:

"At the beginning of the protest, there were only thirty or forty people. Later, as we protested, all along the way, we used megaphones to say what the purpose of the protest was: to fight for workers' equality and higher wages. A lot of Westerners began to respond to us. And I thought, 'Wow, I really don't need to be afraid.' Then, they joined the progression, clustering around us, and the group got bigger and bigger.

After participating in these events and protests a few times, I built up my courage. That's why I say AIWA has made me more daring and courageous...If there's no AIWA, then I wouldn't be able to act with so much daring and openness."

Leaders in Action (CTOS 6-7)

Participating in successful direct actions creates positive experiences of speaking out and fighting collectively for one's rights, but the benefits of such efforts are short-lived without a structure that allows disenfranchised people to exercise influence and authority in multiple settings and over a sustained period of time. Chao-Ju put it simply when she stated, "If people do it all for you, then you don't have to do it. But, now, we make the plan ourselves in cooperation with youth, in cooperation with other women...What's different? The feeling is different."

The feelings that women most commonly associate with participating in AIWA are confidence and validation. Whereas many women would never have previously "dared" to speak up to their bosses or another person in power, women who serve as peer organizers and work on the membership board confidently describe themselves as leaders. Kyung responded definitely to my question, "Who do you see as a leader?" by saying, "I can consider myself a leader. Whether I talk to people who visit here or people from outside, I speak with more confidence. I can see people taking me seriously because I do this work, get trainings for it and spread it to people."

Participants regularly identified women at CTOS levels 6 and 7 as "leaders" in response to my question, "Who do you see as a leader?" During one focus group, I noticed that two of the women seemed particularly intimate. I commented, "I'm curious, you seem to know each other well." Our

seemingly insignificant side conversation proceeded as follows:

LEANNE: “Yeah, that’s right. We both studied [English] here [at AIWA].”

SHIN-YI: “It’s been a few years. But, but the time I knew you [Leanne], you were already a leader.”

LEANNE: “I wasn’t a leader. I was just teaching together with Chen-Lu.”

After a few other comments, **SHIN-YI** said, “I thought Leanne was so impressive.”

The active involvement of their peers in AIWA programs and activities provides a model of self-development. Joanne did not see herself as a leader at the time of our interview, but she recognized that she, too, could become a leader by learning from her peers: “Like me, personally, right now I am not a leader. I am just a participant. I feel that the experienced instructors all have a skill. So us now, we have to slowly learn from them.” Fan used the phrase, a “path to walk on,” to explain how their involvement in AIWA changed their approach to the future. She stated, “If we walked our own path, it would be full of twists and turns. It wouldn’t be a straight path. AIWA gives us a path to walk on.”

CTOS’s ability to reframe women’s expectations of themselves and others derives from the creation of a straightforward and uncomplicated approach to leadership development. Linda views the chart as a valuable organizational tool for both recruiting and maintaining members over a long-term period. She explained, “If you have a chart, it’s easier for people to understand and to see. It makes things simple, like something to compare, like ‘Oh, I’m at level 3 right now. If I learn this much more over the next few months, I will be on level 4.’ Like that.” Betty joined AIWA before the organization had established the CTOS framework in 1996. After she learned about the CTOS structure through her participation as a peer organizer, she attested that she felt more clear and confident. She explained, “When I first came here to join AIWA’s activities, there was no CTOS. It was later, when we got (Omo) to help us set up this structure, I thought, ‘Hey, this is pretty good. We can follow it and do things level by level. This helps to give us a system to do things by. I think it’s really good.’”

Providing women a clear sense of what they are doing and how their activities relate to those of others creates a sense of ownership and authority in AIWA activities. Women at CTOS 6-7 routinely give workshops that explain the CTOS structure to new members. Betty provided a clear explanation of how she familiarized other women with AIWA’s approach to leadership development and social change. Pointing to a copy of the CTOS chart that was hanging on the wall, she said, “In our structure, you have to move up level by level. So we have to explain it to them very carefully.” She

proceeded to explain the CTOS chart in detail:

“We explained this [CTOS] chart during leadership training classes. This chart, if you look at it, it looks like a spider’s web—very complicated. But actually, after we explain the structure to them [new members], then they understand that AIWA proceeds and plans according to this structure. And we tell them that the first level is like educating them, and after they are familiar with the structure, then they get to know AIWA. The first level is getting to know AIWA and giving more women the chance to participate in AIWA’s activities and services. Second, after they have learned about AIWA, the second step is participation. Participate in AIWA’s plans. Letting them participate in some beginners’ training classes, community activities and outreach, stuff like that. So, then, [we move] from education to participation. Women get together to share their work experiences or interesting things that happened in their daily lives, stuff like that. And then, they participate in the English conversation class. So the English class isn’t

really there for them to learn English, it’s to teach them how to fight for their rights and learn what kind of words and phrases can they use to fight for their rights.”

When women start to participate in leadership development trainings, the CTOS structure is particularly important, explains Betty:

“Then, we tell them about the leadership training class. We explain it [in detail] to them, so they will understand a lot and then, if they want to continue to participate in AIWA’s activities, then they can follow it [on their own]. For example, we have a lot of committees. [If new members] look it, they don’t understand. Some people ask, ‘What are committees? What are senior teachers?’”

After explaining the chart to them, Betty feels confident that they have a deeper understanding of what they are doing and can work collectively with others on a common goal.

CTOS establishes a new structure of relationality among immigrant women. Women who may have never met in the organization recognize each other based on where they are at in the CTOS framework. It also provides opportunities to live a life outside the everyday isolation and marginalization that overdetermines the lives of many Asian

immigrant women workers. Many women leaders emphasized that AIWA changed the context of her entire world. Chen-Lu explains that she would still be a “blank piece of white paper.” Leanne said that she would still be “scared of everything.” And like Hai Yan, Linda explained that she would not know anything about the “outside world” but after living in the U.S. for over 30 years and joining AIWA a few years afterward, she has “come out.” She explains:

“If I never came to AIWA, I wouldn’t know about the outside world. Without a chance to study, none of us would come here. [We would do nothing] whether we were being exploited, no matter how much our wages were. [Before I came to AIWA], I didn’t care about any of that. I just wanted to take care of myself and my own income. Coming out lets you see more and meet more people, see more, learn more.”

5 Organizational reflection and sharing

To call attention to the real victories that are won when immigrant women are placed at the center of social change, AIWA is engaging in intense self-reflective evaluation and sharing. 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, and how it can learn from the experiences of other community organizations that prioritize grassroots leadership development. At a time of ever-expanding inequality, 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.

To embark on this journey, AIWA is asking other organizations to engage in a collective dialogue about grassroots leadership. Sharing how it has attempted to prioritize the

participation of each and every immigrant woman, regardless of language ability, educational background, occupation and income, is an important step towards assessing the benefits and limitations of its strategic approach. Rather than stop the conversation by saying, "it is too difficult to develop grassroots leaders," AIWA is asking others who have also emphasized its importance to share their experiences and insights.

For AIWA, ensuring the conditions of participation for low-income, limited-English speaking immigrant women is about recognizing the value and contribution of each member of the community. It is about doing the hard work necessary to enhance the full potential of all human beings, a potential that persists despite the unequal, unjust, and indecent practices of our society. As Ella Baker reminds us, "I am here and so are you. And we matter. We can change things."