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Intersectionality as a Social Movement Strategy: Asian Immigrant Women Advocates

Our expression of our lives cannot be narrowly conceived, for we cannot change our condition through a single-minded banner.

—Barbara Christian (1987, 4)

Intersectionality pervades the political imagination and the practical work of organizations mobilizing for social justice, especially those organized by women of color. Social movement groups embrace intersectionality as a radical yet viable strategy because the core problems that women of color face are themselves both intersectional and radical. Intersectionality helps women of color invent and inhabit identities that register the effects of differentiated and uneven power, permitting them to envision and enact new social relations grounded in multiple axes of intersecting, situated knowledge. They do not deploy intersectionality as a tool for self-discovery or as a means for living more comfortably in this society as it exists but rather as a way of turning what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002) describes as “fatal couplings of power and difference” (15) into actions that deepen democratic self-activity.

The history of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in Oakland and San Jose, California, over nearly three decades provides a vivid illustration of social movement intersectionality in action, of the logic of intersectionality inside an organized movement for social change, and of the utility of intersectionality to expose the diffuse and differential nature of interlocking forms of oppression. Established in 1983 in Oakland, AIWA was one of the first community organizations created to address the predominance of Asian immigrant women employed in low-paid manufacturing and service jobs in the San Francisco Bay Area. AIWA’s work takes place in no single physical locus because the problems that AIWA’s constituency faces are not confined to the shop floor, the neighborhood, the family, or the offices of governments. AIWA provides opportunities for immigrant women workers to become active and visible leaders in movements for social and economic justice, regardless of their prior educational

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level, English-language ability, or position in the social, economic, and political orders. Organized to advance the interests and aspirations of limited-English-speaking, low-wage immigrant women workers, AIWA does not embrace intersectionality simply because its members have been wounded by racism, sexism, imperialism, class exploitation, and language discrimination, but because each realm of these experiences has helped the organization to see how power works and how new identities are needed to combat its intersectional reach and scope. This approach rejects the subordination of one oppression to another. It does not focus solely on gender, class, race, or language, nor does it organize along single-axis identities such as Chinese or Korean or Vietnamese immigrants, Asian Americans, women, or workers. Rather, it offers participants many different points of entry and engagement at the intersections of their diverse and plural identities. In doing so, AIWA promotes an approach to identities as tools to be used in complicated, flexible, and strategic ways.

AIWA's systematic approach to grassroots community organizing is designed to enable participants to recognize, analyze, and address the overlapping layers of marginality and discrimination in their lives. The community transformational organizing strategy (CTOS), which AIWA pioneered after two decades of organizing Asian immigrant seamstresses and electronics assemblers, establishes a clear and transparent framework through which AIWA members can envision their transformation from a subordinated state of voicelessness and devaluation into an empowered state of self-representation and self-activity. By outlining the aims, expectations, and activities of distinct stages of grassroots leadership development—both within the organization and in the broader society—the CTOS model enables immigrant women to visualize how a simple decision such as taking an English or computer class can lead to a community-driven campaign to improve workplace health and safety conditions, ensure access to public space for low-income communities, and reform state and federal health care policy. The CTOS model also establishes new forms of relationality among immigrant women based on mutuality and respect rather than competition and fear. Helen, one of AIWA's most senior immigrant women leaders, moved to Oakland from Hong Kong in 1988 and began working as a housekeeper in one of San Francisco's major corporate hotels. She recalled that before joining AIWA in the early 1990s, she did not care whether she or her co-workers were exploited or how low their wages were; she "just wanted to take care of [herself] and [her] own income."¹ But, after having a chance to

¹ In this article, we draw on in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with thirty-eight immigrant women who participate in AIWA programs and activities from four different

study and participating in numerous AIWA initiatives, including the Justice for Garment Workers Campaign (1992–98), which demanded that clothing retailers such as Jessica McClintock accept corporate responsibility for violations of subcontracted workers' rights, she realized that "the most important thing is that we unite and work together to secure our rights." Another dynamic leader, Hai Yan, explained that when she first walked into AIWA's doors in 1996, she had a "very selfish mentality." She was singularly focused on keeping her job as an electronics assembly worker, which was a step up from her previous jobs as a seamstress and a kitchen worker. She started taking English classes at AIWA only so that she could learn enough English to pass her US citizenship test, not to meet and socialize with other Chinese immigrant women—an undertaking her relatives warned her against. But, as she learned about the history of white settler colonialism, the 1960s civil rights movement, and California migrant farmworker struggles, she began to see her personal troubles as part of larger structures of domination and oppression. Hai Yan was particularly moved by AIWA's seminar on English-language dominance, stating "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."

AIWA believes that these women's experiences at the intersections of sexism, racism, class oppression, nativism, and language discrimination equip them with evidence, ideas, insights, and ambitions that can help solve serious social problems. The group seeks not only to develop new leaders but to create new definitions of leadership appropriate for an inclusive and democratic society. AIWA's founding director, Young Shin (2010), emphasizes the need for a "paradigm shift" in the way social movement organizations do social change work that entails more than simply giving voice to the voiceless or reacting to every crisis women face: "It [is] time for immigrant women to sit in the driver's seat and be empowered to bring positive change proactively." Because everyday problems such as the inability to speak English or time-consuming family obligations and work schedules create barriers to participation, AIWA's grassroots leadership development model seeks to provide members with the practical skills, knowl-

ethnic groups (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Latina) and fifteen AIWA staff, former staff, and allies. All interviews and focus groups were conducted by Jennifer Jihye Chun and took place in the San Francisco Bay Area between December 2006 and August 2009. Interviews and focus group meetings were transcribed and translated with the organizational support of AIWA staff and members and with the research assistance of undergraduate and graduate students from the University of British Columbia. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity and confidentiality, except when interview participants gave voluntary consent to use their first names. Interview transcripts are on file with Jennifer Jihye Chun.

edge, and experience needed to overcome the conditions of their everyday exclusion. By directly challenging the values that shape who can and should participate in changing our society, AIWA foregrounds the intersectional optics of low-income immigrant women workers' lives as crucial political resources that can reveal how power actually works and can promote struggles against power's multiple and differentiated effects. From their perspectives as eyewitnesses to low-wage labor, to war, empire, and migration, and to language discrimination, sexism, and racism, AIWA members recognize that the identities that disadvantage and disempower them in many different ways also position them to be at the center of meaningful social change. They see how gender, immigration status, and poverty are used to exacerbate labor exploitation; how language is used to confine limited-English-speaking women to jobs below their skill levels; how gender hierarchies at work and in the home hinder the development of women as leaders. Through AIWA, they redefine their status from members of devalued social groups into grassroots leaders with the experiences, skills, and knowledge to change policy and spearhead innovations in the workplace, industry, and broader society.

We argue for the importance of intersectionality as a social movement strategy through an in-depth case study of AIWA's organizing model and campaigns. The first section discusses the origins of the concept of intersectionality, both in scholarly circles and as part of a long history of social movement struggle. The second section draws upon ethnographic and archival research to illuminate how AIWA has embraced intersectionality as a vital part of the everyday work of social movement mobilizations. Intersectionality is deployed in three key ways: as a framework for analyzing the interlocking arenas of gender, family, work, and nation; as a reflexive approach for linking social movement theory and practice; and as a guiding structure for promoting new identities and new forms of democratic activity among immigrant women workers.

Intersectionality, social movements, and women-of-color activism

As a category in scholarly arguments, intersectionality can seem abstract and complicated. Many use the concept without specifying its definition and emphasize its importance without clarifying its efficacy, resulting in its "underutilized potential" as a robust mode of sociological analysis (Choo and Ferre 2010, 130). Its diverse and disparate applications also diminish its political orientations. It is often reinvented at the scene of argument, embraced as a way for individuals to disidentify with larger collective strug-

gles, revised and refashioned with little regard for its origins in concrete campaigns for social justice. Yet the action imperatives of intersectionality that have not always been well understood in the academy have enjoyed a rich and flourishing existence inside social movements—especially those organized by women of color.

Organizing and activism among women of color have long recognized the importance of using the particular grievances of one group as a point of entry into a larger struggle. In the nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper insisted Black women should support every righteous cause that thus far has “lacked an interpreter and a defender” and to speak up against “every wrong that needs a voice” (Cooper [1892] 1998, 122). In the first half of the twentieth century, Claudia Jones, a Black communist, contended that a combination of race, class, and gender oppression produced superexploitation among Black women, a condition that could not be addressed successfully by attending only to race, gender, or class in isolation (Boyce Davies 2007, 12, 13, 39). Chicana feminist mobilizations during the 1960s and 1970s mounted complex campaigns around issues of class, race, nation, gender, and sexuality. These efforts helped forge the concepts of *nepantla* and borderlands advanced by Gloria Anzaldúa and others as key instruments for building what Maylei Blackwell identifies as a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” approach to social identities (Anzaldúa 2007, 237; Blackwell 2011, 208). Asian American activist Miriam Ching Yoon Louie remembers how significant the concept of the “triple jeopardy” of race, gender, and class formulated by the Third World Women’s Alliance was to her political development in the 1960s (Louie 2001a, 91). In the 1970s, Black women active in campaigns against sterilization abuse, for reproductive rights, and in support of women defending themselves from gender violence formed the Combahee River Collective and issued a “Black Feminist Statement” underscoring the interlocking nature of social identities (Combahee River Collective 1995; Kelley 2002, 144–50).

Ideas and understandings honed in the midst of social movement mobilizations and struggles set the stage for subsequent theories by women-of-color feminists in academia about intersectionality, interlocking oppressions, differential consciousness, and hybridity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity.² Scholars conceiving of gender not as a purely personal or biological state but rather as “a routine, methodological and recurring accomplishment” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126) created in interactional and institutional arenas credit “social movements such as feminism” for producing both the ideology

² See King (1988), Crenshaw (1989), Collins (1990), Lowe (1991), and Sandoval (1991).

and the impetus needed to create more equitable and just social relations (146). At the same time, decades of antiracist activism helped scholars to understand racial identities as constructed political projects rather than as purely personal reflections on fears of difference (Omi and Winant 1994). In her ground-breaking work on reproductive labor, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) emphasized that the race-gender nexus created troubling entanglements between white women and women of color. While it may be in white women's short-term interest to reinforce the racial division of labor, and thus protect themselves against dirty and less desirable forms of reproductive labor performed by women of color, Glenn argued that it is not in their long-term interest given that the racial division of labor reproduces the gender division of labor and reinforces the continued barriers that white women face in accessing higher-paid and more desirable "men's jobs" (1992, 36).

Intersectionality emerged in scholarship as one of many responses in different realms of society to the democratic and egalitarian social justice struggles of the twentieth century. Although sometimes grievously misinterpreted in the academy as a tool for crafting a kind of personal designer identity based on the complexities and contradictions of individual biographies, the concept of intersectionality emerged initially as a mechanism for revealing that power works in uneven and differentiated ways. Its earliest iterations promoted expressly political resistance to the dangers posed by the disaggregation and individuation that single-axis approaches brought to collective struggles for social justice (Crenshaw 2011; Lipsitz 2011). The idea of intersectionality helped shift the focus of academic feminist and antiracist contestations away from preoccupations with intentional prejudice and toward perspectives grounded in analyses of systemic dynamics and institutional power.

The core problems that intersectional analysis initially addressed came directly from engagement with the problems faced by members of aggrieved groups in concrete social movement struggles. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw introduced the term "intersectionality" in a pair of law review articles in 1989 and 1991. These essays were not philosophical ruminations about identity but rather empirically grounded analyses and critiques of the ways in which antidiscrimination law impeded efforts by Black women workers to secure better employment opportunities and the ways in which activist campaigns against rape and battering wrongly assumed a common experience among all women and failed to take into account the cumulative vulnerabilities faced by Black women and immigrant women of color. To be sure, the arguments Crenshaw advanced had important philosophical and theoretical implications, but she came to these important ideas by identifying with—and

seeking to help—women directly involved in political struggles. Intersectionality emerged out of and spoke to those struggles. It primarily concerns the way things work rather than who people are. As Crenshaw explains, “My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1991, 1245).

In both academics and activism, the concept of intersectionality can be used to clear up the confusions about sameness and difference that dominant ways of knowing both permit and promote. It can be a tool for refining understanding of the relationships that link individuals to social groups. No individual lives every aspect of his or her existence within a single identity category. Every person is a crowd, characterized by multiple identities, identifications, and allegiances. Yet the process of racial formation set in motion by dominant racial projects brings individuals together in particular groups with shared and linked fates (Omi and Winant 1994). Collective political struggle requires the creation of strategic group positions adaptable to forging coalitions within and across identity groups. These positions are always partial, perspectival, and performative. They never encompass all dimensions of people’s identities. Yet as an analytic tool intersectionality can be used strategically to take inventory of differences, to identify potential contradictions and conflicts, and to recognize split and conflicting identities not as obstacles to solidarity but as valuable evidence about problems unsolved and as new coalitions that need to be formed. Group identities are vital for collective mobilizations for rights, resources, and recognition, yet every collective identity expressed through solidarities of sameness runs the risk of occluding differences within the group. In its most sophisticated articulations, intersectionality acknowledges both the plurality and diversity of identities that comprise any group and the common concerns that create aggregate identities. In Crenshaw’s deft formulation, the utility of intersectionality flows from its ability to mediate “the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics” (1991, 1296).

Without intersectionality, group unity threatens to degenerate into a compulsory uniformity that benefits some members of the group at the expense of others. For example, employment opportunities and promotions for Black workers do not necessarily provide justice for Black women. Antiracist organizing can be uncritical about misogyny. Homophobia can seep into feminist and antiracist mobilizations alike, while race and class privilege can be unexamined within queer politics. Still, Crenshaw does not advocate the abandonment of identity categories and the embrace of a disembodied universalism. Instead, she recognizes that identities can contain sit-

uated knowledges with valuable vantage points on power. In the tradition of Aimé Césaire, she rejects both parochial particularism and disembodied universalism. Instead, she argues for a “universal” that is contingent, provisional, and rich with particulars, that entails the dialogue of all, the autonomy of each, and the dictatorship of none (Césaire 2000, 25–26). Crenshaw’s intersectionality promotes struggles that are race-based but not race-bound, feminist but not essentialist, always pro-Black and pro-woman but never only pro-Black and pro-woman. Seeking unity without uniformity, mobilizing identities without demanding that people be identical, intersectionality matters from Crenshaw’s perspective because it is an indispensable tool for creating new democratic institutions, identities, and practices.

AIWA and the movement work of intersectionality

The ideas and experiences of AIWA can help us reconsider the relationships between intersectional activism and social theory. They help us see that intersectionality not only has credibility among academics as a vital analytic tool but that it is also applied every day to the concrete problems that aggrieved groups face in their struggles for social justice. The Asian immigrant women workers who participate in AIWA’s activities do not hold socially validated roles as theorists, but the practical needs of struggle compel them to engage in theoretical work. All of the organization’s projects have revolved around the idea of intersectionality as it has been developed and refined inside the democratic dialogues, deliberations, and actions required by the CTOS process. As the concrete manifestation of AIWA’s theoretical work, CTOS is the organization’s attempt to “develop a science out of [their] grassroots leadership model”—a science that is both reflective and systematic, as well as potentially reproducible, “encouraging other groups to adapt it” so that grassroots leadership development becomes a priority of social movement organizing, not just token lip service (Shin 2010).

As a systematic approach that links the organization’s programs and activities to a broader process of individual and collective change, CTOS seeks to move AIWA members through a series of incremental transformations based on their everyday struggles around low wages, job insecurity and job loss, gender and household burdens, access to health care and housing, public safety, and anti-immigrant sentiment and racism. AIWA members begin to embrace collective engagement and public action as vehicles for social change, not only due to their participation in political education seminars or skills and capacity building workshops but also as a result of their exposure to the leadership of other immigrant women. The CTOS

model trains veteran members to teach classes, facilitate trainings, and lead strategy sessions with new recruits, who then become veterans training others. New members also witness veteran leaders speaking out at public rallies and marches, giving presentations in university classrooms, making demands to elected politicians and government officials, collaborating with public health experts and other recognized public leaders, and winning prestigious awards in front of multiracial, cross-class, and multilingual audiences—all providing immigrant women with actual examples of CTOS's benefits. From AIWA's activism we can see that activism is not an alternative terrain unrelated to social theory but rather a productive generator of ideas dialectically and dialogically related to theory. The intersectionality that guides AIWA primarily focuses on power rather than personal identities; it neither evades nor embraces social identities in the abstract but promotes thinking strategically and situationally about which differences matter and why.

To further elaborate AIWA's reflexive approach to intersectional organizing, the following subsections discuss first, the interlocking arenas of gender, family, work, and nation with women's self-development; second, the relationship between collective action campaigns and grassroots leadership; and third, the significance of peer leadership models for immigrant women worker's activism and democratic participation. All three dimensions highlight how a commitment to intersectional organizing exposes shifting lines of solidarity and tension among and between AIWA's grassroots members, staff, and supporters in ways that continually deepen democratic practice. The empirical data were collected between 2007 and 2010 and draw primarily upon twelve focus groups conducted with thirty Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrant women and fifteen in-depth interviews with AIWA staff, former staff, and supporters, within the context of a collaborative self-study that AIWA initiated to evaluate the impact of its organizing work over the past twenty-five years. This academic-community research collaboration follows the tradition of participatory feminist action research (Smith 1987) and decolonizing methodologies (Smith 1999; Sandoval 2000).

Interlocking arenas of gender, family, work, and nation

AIWA mobilizes around the panethnic marker of Asian identity rather than the ethnic-specific categories of being Korean or Chinese. Yet the organization connects its general Asian identity to specific subgroups: immigrants, women, and workers. Garment factories in Oakland were one of the first points of entry for Chinese immigrant women moving from Hong Kong and the southeastern coastal regions of mainland China. Many women said they were told prior to moving that "if you came to the U.S., you either sew

or wash dishes.” In San Jose, the slogan “small, foreign, and female” was Silicon Valley’s “simple formula” for hiring Asian and Latina women workers in the low-paid electronic assembly industry (Hossfeld 1994, 66). In San Francisco’s corporate hotels, Chinese and Korean immigrant women, among other groups of immigrant women of color, were concentrated in the “back of the house” as hotel maids, while white, college-educated receptionists and restaurant servers worked the “front of the house” (Louie 2001b, 204).

From the very start, AIWA prioritized the needs of immigrant women workers. Organizers, who at the time were mostly college-educated, 1.5- and second-generation Asian American women, traveled to garment factories, restaurants, and hotels in the region to ask immigrant women about what kinds of programs and activities would best address their needs.³ During a workplace outreach, Young Shin recalls that she was initially surprised to hear about the significance of learning English for immigrant women workers: “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 friends and families. I soon realized and understood that learning how to speak English was a symbolic need for some women to feel like they were part of their adopted country, the United States” (Shin 2010).

Soon AIWA began offering workplace literacy (WPL) classes. In addition to offering basic English-language education, AIWA developed a curriculum based on popular education principles that sought to educate women about their rights as workers, as women, and as immigrants. While some women were motivated to study English to improve their job prospects, others emphasized the importance of knowing English as a form of self-defense and self-affirmation. One Korean immigrant working as a room cleaner in an opulent San Francisco hotel explained that she wanted to learn English “so we can tell the boss to stop yelling at us. We are not machines but human beings who deserve some respect” (Shin 2000). By challenging employers’ assumptions that workers with limited mastery of the English language will not talk back, make complaints, or file written grievances, Asian immigrant women workers begin to disentangle the nexus between language ability and workplace discrimination.

Once women set aside a few hours per week for their own self-education, small shifts begin to take place in AIWA members’ everyday lives. Many

³ The so-called 1.5 immigrants come to the country of arrival as children or teenagers.

women describe AIWA classes as a rare opportunity to break the monotony and isolation of their daily routines, which consist primarily of waking up, going to work, preparing dinner for their families, and going to sleep. They also describe AIWA as a place where women can forge relationships outside of work and family life. Fan moved from Hong Kong to Oakland in 1975 to join her husband's family, who were already living in the United States. Like many of her peers, she worked in a garment shop before getting a job as a cafeteria worker in a local school. Her husband's family advised her not to discuss any personal matters with neighbors or coworkers to avoid getting into trouble. Her suspicious attitude, however, slowly began to change after she started taking classes and leadership trainings at AIWA. She explains: "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 participate in activities that lack that kind of competition." Fan especially enjoyed the opportunity to share experiences with her peers about a range of dilemmas, from problems with supervisors to difficulties raising children in America. By creating social settings that are not mired in competition and unequal power dynamics, AIWA promotes cooperative and supportive relationships, laying the groundwork for new ways members can relate to each other and, eventually, new ways of working collectively on community-driven campaigns to improve workplace and industry conditions and change public policy.

Working together with other women also helps immigrant women workers craft new understandings of gender. The second shift is an omnipresent reality for most AIWA members, who are expected to cook, clean, and care for their families, including extended family members, in addition to their waged work. The long hours they put in on the job can isolate them from the broader life of the community, as well as restrict their sense of self and identity to their care-giving roles. Participating in AIWA activities offers women opportunities for purposeful and caring relations with other women who are not blood relations, building a new sense of personhood and possibility among women accustomed to pressures to define themselves exclusively in relation to family roles and identities. Sunhee, one of the most senior Korean immigrant women leaders, explains:

I think I discovered what "woman" was after coming [to AIWA] and that empowers me. If I tell people to educate themselves and hear them reply that they should stay home to cook, I tell them "Put aside only two hours a week for your own sake. Come for your own good." We are too full with our families, children. . . . Yes of course, we have

our duties. I don't mean you should neglect them. But if you can spare just two hours for yourself, life will be more beautiful. "Find yourself" is what I always tell people. And when they do, they tell me they feel so good. To come here for two hours' English lessons, for their own sake. Learning English is not necessarily the only purpose. When you come here you discover yourself.

AIWA has been especially attentive to the intersections that complicate women's status as workers with their socially defined roles as mothers and wives. Participating in AIWA activities often requires women to persuade children and spouses to shoulder more domestic responsibilities. For some women, the lack of support from family members prevents them from becoming more involved in leadership activities. For other women, family members play a crucial role in supporting women's self-development. Soonkyung attended WPL classes every Wednesday night with other Korean immigrant electronics assemblers at AIWA's San Jose office. When she first began taking classes, she recalls feeling guilty about leaving her husband and children home alone for dinner. She explained that she would "rush home" after finishing her shift at 3 p.m. and picking up her children, and meticulously prepare dinner "much better than usual, wrapping the plates in plastic wrap, setting the table, even folding the napkins." But, after one particularly grueling day at work, she recalls: "As soon as I was done at work, I picked up the children and was about to make dinner really fast and go. My children knew it was too much, and my husband knew it too. So, my husband said, 'You don't have to worry too much . . . because [the children] could just order pizza or go buy burgers.' [I said,] 'But how can I let you eat McDonald's after a long day of work?' He just replied, 'One doesn't die from eating McDonald's once in a while.' . . . So now, I take it easy on Wednesdays. I leave home with confidence." Building confidence translates into new sources of empowerment for many immigrant women who routinely feel devalued by their inability to speak English, their low-paid jobs, and normative gender roles.

Participating in activities outside the spheres of work and home results in unexpected shifts in the relationship between immigrant mothers and their children. Working-class immigrant children often shoulder extensive responsibilities early in life as English-language translators for their parents, inverting prevailing patterns of authority and respect between parents and children. Activism in AIWA allows some women to challenge these inversions. Jinmee moved to Santa Clara from Korea with her husband and two children in the mid-1980s and began taking WPL classes soon after.

Assigned to write a short paper about the experiences of Rosa Parks in the 1955 struggle to desegregate public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama, the woman asked her daughter, who was in high school at the time, to proofread her paper for spelling and grammatical errors. The daughter noticed something more important than the typos, however; her mother remembers: “She read it over and asked ‘Do you always read stories like these in class?’ And I said, ‘Oh, so 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, but my kids now got to see it differently. So then the kids gave me support and then my husband started to show support.”

Creating spaces that allow women to renegotiate their relationships in multiple arenas emphasizes the intersecting nature of their lives as women, workers, mothers, wives, and immigrants. Getting men to accept changes in domestic responsibilities; winning new respect from children for developing new knowledge and skills; viewing their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters as important conditions of existence rather than their total identities; and developing trusting, purposeful, caring relations with people outside their families all contributed to building a new sense of personhood and possibility. Just as Crenshaw uses the particular experiences of Black women to show that they do not experience discrimination as a simple and singular event but as a product of the ways in which patterns of power converge, AIWA uses its privileged composite identity as a starting point for critique and contestation and as a unique and generative space from which power can be challenged in multiple sites and on multiple scales—from the body and the household to the workplace and the broader life of the community.

Recentering grassroots leadership in workers’ collective action campaigns

AIWA’s intersectional optic operates as a crucial mechanism for exposing how power works in uneven and differentiated ways, but it also discloses new dimensions of political struggle, reveals new targets for collective struggle, and activates new solidarities and affinities across race, gender, social status, and generation. The group’s earliest experiences organizing in the garment and high-tech industries highlight the specific dilemmas that Asian immigrant women workers faced when trying to exercise their rights, and these experiences emphasize the need to develop alternative solutions situated in everyday experiences of marginalization and oppression. In the gar-

ment industry, AIWA quickly recognized the consequences for individual workers who tried to demand their legal rights. After learning about what the minimum wage was during a WPL class in Oakland, one Chinese immigrant garment worker asked her boss to pay her the minimum wage, only to be fired the next day. This incident highlighted the dangers of simply informing workers of their legal rights without transforming broader social, economic, and political structures. The lack of basic worker protections in Silicon Valley's high-tech assembly industry also exposed the limits of conventional union approaches to organizing immigrant women workers. Alfredo Avila de Silva, a veteran organizer with the Texan Farm Workers Union and a former organizer at the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO) in Oakland, recognized AIWA's novel strategy toward approaching anti-union electronics assembly factories. He explained:

When union organizers were trying to penetrate the high-tech industry [in Silicon Valley], a union organizer would appear [on company grounds] and within days, they'd be closed out of the plant and access would vanish. They would hit this wall; they just had no access to the workers. . . . Those few workers that they would find would be quickly isolated and the union campaigns would sputter and go out because they just weren't able to reach enough of the workers. . . . Very interesting enough, when AIWA would approach factories about teaching onsite English classes, the employers, the subcontractors, actually invited [AIWA] in. . . . No one understood what was going to be the impact of these classes, right?

Although the high-tech industry proved to be much more resistant to AIWA's community organizing approach, the organization's analysis of masked employment relations in the garment industry resulted in historic victories against sweatshop labor abuses. AIWA's growing profile as an immigrant workers' rights organization in the early 1990s led twelve seamstresses from Oakland's Chinatown into AIWA's office seeking assistance for unpaid back wages. While the nonpayment of wages was not an uncommon story for garment workers, AIWA saw its opportunity to support a courageous group of garment workers in demanding that clothing retailers such as Jessica McClintock acknowledge corporate responsibility for wage theft in the garment industry, even if they were not the immediate and legally accountable employers. To expose how the subcontracted structure of the garment industry squeezed the labor of garment workers, AIWA drew upon participatory action research methods. AIWA staff organized a field trip to the Jessica McClintock boutique in San Francisco's Union Square. When women spotted the dresses that they had previously sewn with extravagant

\$175 price tags, Shin recalls, “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” (2010).

AIWA’s Justice for Garment Workers Campaign (1992–98) activated a dense network of movement allies and student activists both locally and nationally to publicly shame Jessica McClintock for refusing to take responsibility for sweatshop labor abuses. Gary Delgado, the founding director of the CTWO and the Applied Research Center and a former organizer with the National Welfare Rights Organization and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) recognized AIWA’s pioneering approach to worker and community organizing. He stated:

This was a women’s campaign. It was different because most of the other [campaigns] were owned and operated by men. You not only had a multiracial constituency of Asian women, which is hard for people to wrap their heads around, but you would go to college campuses and people would be doing stuff. The external campaign, which Helen [Kim] had a fair amount to do with, was very important and impressive. It was prior to all the sweatshop stuff. It’s what a bunch of young Asian women activists cut their teeth on, trying to throw off the “model minority” yoke and all that. Not only was it a very interesting campaign, straight up, in terms of the ethnic bosses against McClintock, it also inspired a large constituency: people who saw their mothers in the thing.

Overlapping lines of similarity and difference were especially vital to mobilizing second-generation Asian American youth in support of Chinese immigrant women garment workers. Vivian Chang, who worked as a campaign coordinator and whose own grandmother from Taiwan was a garment worker, explained that when she made campaign presentations to high schools, universities, and support groups, she would start by asking, “who here has a family member that is employed in the garment industry?” Helen Kim, a 1.5-generation Korean American woman, and Stacy Kono, a third-generation Japanese American woman, were also key AIWA staff members centrally involved in the campaign. While neither directly had family members who were garment workers, each emphasized the importance of multiple points of entry and identification, especially for those who grew up in immigrant families. When describing the enormous support AIWA was able to generate among Asian American students from Los Angeles to Chicago to New York to Atlanta, Kim explained, “I think people related to the difficulty and sacrifice of the first-generation immigrants. So even if their direct family didn’t work in the sweatshops, they

could certainly identify with both the discrimination and lack of opportunities.”

AIWA's public and dramatic three-and-a-half-year campaign resulted in new standards and protections in the garment industry. In February 1996, AIWA and Jessica McClintock signed a cooperative agreement with the assistance of Robert Reich in the US Department of Labor that established a garment workers' education fund and a toll-free, multilingual, and confidential hotline for garment workers in the United States. In 1997, AIWA secured the participation of three more clothing retailers, Esprit de Corp, Byer California, and Fritzi of California, to establish hotlines for subcontracted garment workers to report labor violations. However, as the organization began to wind down from an intense period of crisis-driven organizing, staff leaders began taking inventory of the campaign's strengths and weaknesses. Although the courage and resilience of immigrant women workers, who testified at public hearings and spoke at public rallies and marches, formed the heart of the public campaign, they played limited roles in the actual resolution of the campaign. Moreover, given the importance of broad-based mobilization in support of the campaign's message, much of AIWA's time and resources were spent on escalating the public drama rather than on developing the capacity of immigrant women to advocate on their own behalf. To refocus organizational activities on its core mission, AIWA shifted from an issue-based to a relational approach for organizing. The relational organizing approach does not prioritize “mobilization on issue campaigns,” as Mark Warren (1998, 87) explains, but rather involves the deliberate building of relationships and the sustained participation of community actors “for the purpose of finding common ground for political action” (86).

Between 2000 and 2006, AIWA engaged in innovative efforts to foreground the active participation of immigrant women workers in collective campaigns for social change. At an annual membership retreat in 2000, AIWA members identified the need to address the chronic pain and injury of workers whose bodies were deteriorating after years spent sewing in garment shops. Building on its peer health promoter network, which involved members in identifying and challenging occupational health and safety hazards in the workplace, AIWA established a garment workers' clinic in Oakland's Chinatown. The clinic not only provided immigrant garment workers with basic health services and screening of occupational injuries, it also created new collaborations that placed immigrant women garment workers in more horizontal and collaborative relationships with medical professionals from the University of California, San Francisco, and public policy officials from the California State Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Immigrant women used their situated knowledge as workers who had ac-

cumulated years of backaches, repetitive stress injury, eye strain, and headaches to design a model ergonomic garment work station. AIWA launched its ergonomic improvement (ERGO) campaign to convince subcontracted garment shops to upgrade their work stations through the installation of ergonomically engineered chairs, tilt tables, foot rests, and tool kits at workstations aimed at combatting the painful injuries workers routinely suffered in the garment industry.

The ERGO campaign combined key elements of AIWA's grassroots organizing approach. After women identified ergonomics reform as the main issue, they were responsible for studying the topic and carrying out the campaign from beginning to end, responding to setbacks and devising innovative solutions. One of the most unexpected alliances occurred between AIWA, subcontracted employers, and local city government. When immigrant women first approached employers about the need to make ergonomic reforms to garment workers' stations, employers balked at the cost of purchasing \$250 ergonomic chairs. Just as AIWA developed an innovative approach for demanding corporate responsibility in the garment industry, AIWA worked with subcontractors to lobby the City of Oakland and Alameda County to allocate taxpayer dollars to improving health and safety conditions for its low-income residents.

Immigrant women workers' participation in every aspect of campaign development and implementation defied conventional wisdom about the limits of grassroots organizing. Few AIWA staff organizers imagined at the beginning of their health and safety work that AIWA members would become the experts and innovators who improved ergonomic conditions in garment shops; yet through the self-education, strategic planning, outreach, and training of campaign leaders, garment workers made ergonomic reform a key change in the local industry. Campaign leader Kwiti Fong Lin stated: "We've done something we never thought we could do. The workers in Oakland now know there's an ergonomic chair that's good for their health. Everybody's talking about the chair" (Romney 2004, 126). Although the ERGO campaign did not force subcontractors and retailers to create healthy work environments on their own, the practical dilemmas of implementing ergonomic reforms did generate new analytics on how to hold local communities accountable for workplace standards in a transnational industry.

Immigrant women workers as peer leaders

In both individual and collective strategies for social change, the role of immigrant women as mentors and peer leaders was essential for reconfiguring more subtle and invisible forms of marginalization and subordination. Almost all of AIWA's leaders emphasized that when they first

moved to the United States, they were not interested in joining organizations and becoming involved in broader efforts to enact change. This did not mean that they anticipated that their new lives would be free from difficulty. Contrary to the idea that immigrants move to the United States for a better life, few Chinese immigrant women we interviewed perceived the United States as a place of economic opportunity. Stories frequently circulated in newspapers in China and Hong Kong about the miserable and tragic lives of new immigrants, and many expressed that they were aware that moving to the United States meant a life of isolation and hardship working long, grueling hours for low wages.

AIWA's leadership development trainings sought to expand immigrant women's reference points and provide concrete examples of alternative ways of living one's everyday life. Hai Yan used the metaphor of a cup to explain how AIWA changed her life, stating: "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." When asked to elaborate, she explained: "What is life like in a cup? Eat, sleep, go to work, finish work, come home. It's that simple. But since coming to AIWA, I meet a lot of people, come into contact with people from other racial groups, go into different groups and organizations to give speeches. Grassroots women like us have the courage to go to places like Berkeley to give presentations to students. And if we see something that is unfair, then we will fight to change it."

While deepening understanding of social, political, and economic injustice is a vital component of individual transformation, the direct experience of new forms of connection and solidarity with other immigrant women workers generated more flexible and strategic identifications across existing lines of similarity and difference. Chung Hee and Hung Ja, two of AIWA's senior trainers, traveled from San Jose to San Francisco to lead an English dominance workshop for the members of *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* (Women united and active; MUA), an ally organization aimed at empowering low-income, monolingual-Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant women workers. As monolingual Korean speakers, Chung Hee and Hung Ja had facilitated AIWA's English dominance workshop for many of their peers going through the CTOS leadership development process. However, they had never trained immigrant women workers who spoke another language. The twenty MUA participants were all monolingual Spanish speakers. Except for the translators, everyone at the workshop had only limited facility with English. Yet the workshop proved to be a great success. Despite the cumbersome process of having to wait for Korean-to-English-to-Spanish and Spanish-to-English-to-Korean translations, participants savored the new

recognition of what they had in common as limited-English-speaking, low-wage, immigrant women workers. Participants enjoyed speaking to and hearing from women who had come from different parts of the world, who spoke different languages, and who shared similar, although not identical, experiences. Perhaps most important, every aspect of the workshop, from setup and facilitation to discussion, was directed by limited-English-speaking, immigrant women, who were low-wage workers like the workshop participants themselves rather than the college-educated, native-English-speaking staff members or external consultants that typically characterize hierarchies in social justice organizing.

Seeing other immigrant women in action reframes workers' expectations of themselves and others. Chao Ju recently moved to Oakland from Guangzhou and did not see herself as a leader at the time of our focus group in 2009. But she recognized that she, too, could become a leader by learning from her peers at AIWA. She explained: "Like me, personally, right now I am not a leader. I am just a participant. I feel that the experienced instructors have a skill. So for now, I have to slowly learn from them." The transparency of the CTOS model revealed how immigrant women could engage in their own process of transformation. Chao Ju explained: "If you have a chart, it's easier for people to understand and to see. It makes things simple [and gives women] something to compare [themselves] to, like 'Oh, I'm at level 3 right now. If I learn this much more over the next few months, I will be at level 4.'" Another AIWA leader recalls feeling encouraged by the creation of a clear, simple, linear approach to membership participation, stating: "Hey, this is pretty good, I thought. We can follow [the CTOS model] and do things level by level. This helps to give us a system to do things."

Betty's ability to provide a quick explanation of the CTOS model highlights the model's accessibility and transparency. Pointing to a copy of the CTOS chart hanging on AIWA's office wall, she said:

This chart, if you look at it, looks like a spider's web, it's very complicated. But, actually, when we explain the structure carefully, then new members understand that AIWA proceeds and plans according to this structure. The first level is getting to know AIWA and giving more women the chance to participate in AIWA's activities. Second, after they have learned about AIWA, the second step is participation in some beginner's training classes, community outreach and activities, stuff like that. Then, we move from participation to education. Women get together to share their work experiences or inter-

esting things that have happened in their daily lives. . . . [For example], the English class isn't there for them to learn English, it's to teach them what kinds of words and phrases they can use to fight for their rights.

AIWA's emphasis on grassroots leadership development may seem to signal an overemphasis on individual or personal concerns at the expense of more explicitly oppositional and political ones. But AIWA rejects this false binary. The underrepresentation of Asian immigrant women workers as equal partners in social justice work is not a symptom of who they are; it is a product of how power operates in multiple arenas to devalue their full worth and potential. The "lack of parity of participation," as Nancy Fraser puts it, is a product of intersecting injustices in the economic, cultural, and political spheres (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 36). Asian immigrant women workers' subordination in the economic sphere denies them basic resources to participate as peers in movement work, institutionalized hierarchies of value in the status order deem them inferior, and their inability to exercise equal voice in public deliberations and democratic decision making results in a pattern of systemic misrepresentation. Fraser asserts: "On the view of justice as participatory parity, overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (2008, 404).

Conclusion

Asian immigrant women employed in low-paid and socially devalued jobs such as garment sewing, electronics assembly, nail care, and home-care work witness the cumulative effects of colonialism, war, racism, sexism, labor exploitation, and language oppression every day of their lives. The Cold War and hot wars in Japan, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have shaped the experiences, aspirations, and social reception of all Asian groups in the United States (Kim 2010). Hate crimes and housing discrimination alike evidence "racial lumping" through which hostility to particular Asian nationalities is generalized to all (Saito 1998, 60). Women in AIWA realize that some of the discrimination and harassment to which they are subjected comes simply from being targeted as women, yet their embodied identities and personal histories with war, empire, and colonialism are saturated with intersecting oppressions: the racially specific legacies of sexual racism that pervade the practices and processes of imperial conquest and domination, the images disseminated by the culture industry for amusement

and entertainment, and the ways employers utilize gender as a mechanism for augmented class exploitation. Their problems cannot be addressed by single-axis struggles for national liberation, peace, feminism, class justice, or multilinguality, yet every disempowerment they face reveals a different dimension of how inequalities are created and maintained.

Race, gender, class, and other situated identities do not become parts of a vague composite in AIWA's activism. Differences still make a difference. As Crenshaw argues, the advantages of intersectionality need to be tempered by recognition of the positive achievements of expressly race-based and gender-based politics in building intellectual, social, and political resources among aggrieved groups (1988, 1991). If used correctly, delineations of difference can well become sources of social empowerment and reconstruction under some circumstances. This stance was historically important in the 1990s, and it remains equally significant today in the face of searing critiques of the narrow nationalisms and gender essentialisms that many scholars associate with identity politics. These scholars argue that dividing people into groups on identity grounds weakens progressive forces and inhibits the development of a universal perspective capable of advancing the emancipation of everyone (Gitlin 1995; Rorty 1998). To be sure, there has never been only one way to be a man or a woman, straight or gay, white or not white. Progressive politics do not flow magically from aggrieved identities. On the contrary, it is important for progressive politics that people derive their identities from their politics rather than their politics from their identities, that activists recognize the need to give progressive new meanings based on political principles to embodied social identities. All politics are identity politics. All struggles over power concern the social meanings applied to constructed identities and identifications to some degree. The rights-bearing subject of law, the self-interested market subject of economics, the citizen subject of politics, the interior subject of psychoanalysis, and the working-class subject of Marxism are no less socially constructed than the woman of feminism or the raced subject of Black Power. Crenshaw argues that the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to overcome difference and create universal unity but rather that the partial unities it establishes ignore differences within groups (not all women are white, not all Blacks are male) and the discrete political agendas it promotes for specific groups can come at the expense of others and can ignore the interests of people with membership in both groups (1991, 1242).

Gender- and race-based movements like AIWA seek to give identity a political definition, to unite groups around common beliefs and experiences rather than common phenotypes or biological characteristics. As

Robin Kelley observes, successful race-based mobilizations have in reality been less concerned with shared bloodlines than with shared histories of blood spilled (Kelley 1999, 7). Politicized social identities are intentional creations, what Chela Sandoval calls “consensual illusions” (2000, 63). Positions and politics belittled as identity politics actually entail necessary efforts by aggrieved groups to turn negative ascription into positive affirmation. Identity-based mobilizations are tactical moves that draw their determinate logic and social force from the utility of emphasizing the things that unite a group rather than the things that divide it. They invite constituencies to inhabit the identities that have been imposed upon them in order to work through them. As Judith Butler explains, “The terms by which we are hailed are rarely the ones we choose (and even when we try to impose protocols on how we are to be named, they usually fail); but these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an imaginary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partly open” (1997, 38). Yet because every invocation of sameness covers over the realities of differences, race- or gender-based movements always run the risk of reifying the differences they seek to deconstruct.

The new democratic institutions, identities, and practices that are emerging in AIWA’s organizing and mobilizing are part of a broader shakeup in society. All around the world, small social movement groups like AIWA are engaged in projects of political education and contestation. The concept of intersectionality permeates their work, enabling the creation of new identities and identifications that can serve as important models for others aiming to deepen democracy and transform the unjust and increasingly indecent social relations of our time.

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