

*Grassroots Leadership, Grassroots Expertise: Asian Immigrant Women Workers at the Center of Social Change*

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**ABSTRACT**

Long before many labor unions began prioritizing the need to organize immigrants, community-based organizations such as Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in the San Francisco Bay Area were established to improve the working and living conditions of immigrant women workers employed in low-paid, precarious and socially devalued jobs. Drawing upon AIWA's 30-year history, this paper explores the process and impact of cultivating grassroots leadership and expertise among Chinese and Korean immigrant women workers, the majority of whom are employed as seamstresses, electronics assemblers, hotel cleaners, cafeteria and restaurant workers and homecare workers. In particular, it examines the significance of AIWA's Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS), a systematic approach for transforming low-income, limited-English speaking Asian immigrant women into the primary agents of social change. By emphasizing the centrality of individual empowerment in collective projects for social and economic change, AIWA's CTOS model provides insight into the kinds of organizational strategies that can help overcome the intensification of inequality and polarization along race, gender, class and migration on the bottom rungs of urban labor markets – dynamics that are not only pervasive in San Francisco but increasingly around the world.