

10-2-2016

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Recommended Citation

Herne, Emily, "Comparisons of Organizations that Organize around Issues Facing Immigrant Women" (2016). *Undergraduate Research in Sociology*. 4.

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Comparisons of Organizations that Organize around Issues Facing Immigrant Women

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Abstract

This paper analyzes organizations that organize immigrant women to address issues in the workplace. Strategizing differences and policy goals will be analyzed in order to assess which strategies have acquired lasting policy changes that benefit immigrant women. Two organizations in California and Minnesota that are representative of the different types of groups that organize women immigrant workers will be examined. These groups were selected because they have a strong media presence, which facilitated the collection of data through content analysis of news articles, organization websites, and social media. The Minnesota organizations include La Asamblea de Derechos Civiles and Mesa Latina. These are both fairly new organizations that aim for change at different policy levels for immigrant women workers. The California organizations I will compare them to are Asian Immigrant Women Advocates and the Garment Worker Center. These groups both focus on local demands and are prominent organizations that organize immigrant women. My findings reinforce Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's thesis that changing policies in the workplace with positive outcomes requires collective acts of disruption in the workplace

Comparisons of Organizations that Organize around Issues Facing Immigrant Women

Immigrant workers in America face problems that are similar to other economically disadvantaged groups. They are all fighting for the right to a livable wage, safe worksites, and an end to wage theft from subcontracting (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2010). Immigrant women face very specific and complex problems, as they are vulnerable to different forms of abuse and exploitation in the workplace. Speaking out against the abuse becomes even more complicated when adding in the identities of wife or mother. Immigrant women face many trials and challenges as the main care providers that increases difficulties in organizing (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2010).

The segregated labor that is designated for immigrant women also has seen very little research, and few organizations work to fight these issues (Matthei, 1996). These workers have unique problems that must be faced, this requires a proper analysis of the issues and the solutions. There are not enough resources for women that deal with issues of immigration and language barriers to leave unsafe working conditions. Safe spaces are created by a number of great organizations to protect these women and implement policies in order to prevent future dangerous and exploitative situations. This research focuses on the policy goals and organizing strategies of different groups that focus on women immigrant workers' rights. I will be asking what are Minnesota organizations accomplishing and maintaining regarding to policy change. What is their impact on immigrant women workers? And how do Minnesota organizations compare to California organizations?

Differences in Organizing

Since the 1930s, women immigrants have traveled in large numbers into the United States in search of work. Although a great deal of the low-wage and precarious work has been secured by

immigrant women, their voices and bodies in organizing for their rights have been lacking (Matthei, 1996). Women consistently make less than men, with less opportunities to work secure jobs (Batalova, Ruiz, & Zong, 2015). Service and industry jobs are becoming more relevant as the only opportunities for immigrant women. These jobs are often not part of standard employment and leave women in vulnerable positions (Chun, 2008).

Securing decent jobs is only a part of the problem. Other key issues that organizations focus on include: protection from abuse and harassment, obtaining health care, reliable transportation, childcare, and learning English skills. Others focus on the Violence against Women Act, comprehensive immigration reform, and policies to allow children of undocumented immigrants the right to education (Henrici, Hess, & Williams, 2011).

A common debate between organizations that work to empower women immigrants in the workplace is deciding on strategies and what level they will aim to change. Some organizations look to implement changes from the smallest unit such as in the individual up to policy change through the federal government (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2010). Some goes as far as working internationally. Others like to keep their goals focused in a particular area and only challenge one part of the issue. The debate is looking at which level has shown the most beneficial impact for women immigrant workers. Although many organizations lobby and focus on media attention to gain support, others focus solely on action through demonstrations and education of the workers and their community. In this paper I will challenge the idea that identity politics and challenging social inequality will gain the support necessary to mobilize and change policies. I will argue, instead, that organizations must work with immigrant women to engage in collective acts of disruption in the workplace in order to make important policy changes.

Background of Problems and Policy Issues

To analyze the social policies that affect women immigrants, we must first start at the cause of the 'sudden' influx of immigrant women to America. In a time of neoliberalism, free markets and the demand for workers in the service sector and assembly lines contributed significantly to women migrating for informal work. These jobs subject women immigrant workers to very low wages in unsafe worksites (Lowe, 1998).

In efforts to ensure competitive prices in business, free market policies became the norm between the north and south. Due to free trade agreements such as Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), less powerful countries suffer and their citizens face poverty with few opportunities for employment (Flynn & Kofman, 2004). The poorer countries could not compete with America in the marketplace. Soon, male-dominated work became scarce in southern countries (Debrowolsky and Tastsoglou, 2006. P. 3) This forced women to also look for income in wealthy countries, as families no longer had the means to support themselves and the governments did not have the money to provide aid. These trade agreements commodify people and trade them for temporary work.

Women Migrating for Work

As native women in developed countries gained careers, a new sector of work opened up: domestic work. With women out of the house most hours of the day, children and the elderly required care and housework needed to be done. Women with all different levels of education ended up leaving their homes and countries in search of work (Latapi, 2001). They were the perfect candidates to supply cheap labor to middle class women that were busy making an income. Hotels, restaurants, garment industries also relied on this group as an exploitable workforce (Lowe, 1998). These changes had a wide scale effect on women immigrant workers

and their countries of origin, which were left without care providers. The gap between the health, education, and wealth continues to grow inside and between countries. The lack of support in health and education from the government is adding even more work for women to provide (Debrowolsky and Tastsoglou, 2006, p. 15). This only creates more unskilled and undocumented workers available for industrial countries to exploit.

In the United States, policies on subcontracting affect all workers. Instead of companies hiring their own workers and taking responsibility for them, they form a contract with a business that supplies workers. Due to competition between the companies that subcontract, workers are subjected to very low-wages and dangerous worksites. More often than not, the businesses that hire workers seek out the most vulnerable population, women immigrant workers with little proficiency in English (Ong, 1987).

Immigration Reform Act

As more men and women were traveling to the U.S. to work, they also started to seek citizenship to ensure their rights while living in North America. The Immigration reform act (IRCA) of 1986 was put in place to pave a way to become a documented citizen; unfortunately this act completely focused on male immigrant workers. The IRCA, implemented by Reagan, primarily was motivated by profit increase for employers via immigrant workers (Perry, 2014). As a capitalist system, a surplus of labor is required to keep wages low and minimize worker resistance (Barrera & Robinson, 2012). There were two options to obtain citizenship; through proof of living in the United States since 1982 after entering without proper documents or becoming undocumented after overstaying visas, or through working in agriculture for 18 months. It was mostly men that applied for legalization and that were qualified under this act (Arp, Dantico, & Katz, 1990).

As a law, the IRCA provided women even less of a chance for approval as they denied anyone that received public assistance. As welfare recipients are made up of an overwhelmingly female majority, this policy helped ensure undocumented women as the pool of workers for low-wage jobs (Perry, 2014). Women immigrants have a history of subordination due to lack of citizenship as well as sex and racial segregated labor that requires specific rights to counteract these multidimensional forms of oppression (Debrowolsky and Tastsoglou, 2006. P. 10). Citizenship is a social construct, which allows freedoms and an identity that encompass all realms of a person's life (p. 12).

Gaining Citizenship

Another factor that added to the challenges of women receiving citizenship is the documentation required. The work that women did left them without records such as service work or under the table work in garment industries. If immigrant women workers left their husbands, as many did, they no longer had access to any records of housing payments, taxes, or schooling. The IRCA was a great deal more likely to approve citizenship if the immigrant had a stable job since 1982. This was more frequently the case for men than women, as it was common for female immigrant workers to work in many different part-time jobs and take time off for pregnancy.

By 1996 the situation only worsened for immigrant women when Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (Perry, 2014). This act ended many benefits and services to documented and undocumented immigrants. Following this, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Response Act was also passed by Clinton to increase punishments for undocumented immigrants.

The rights of foreign-born women workers specifically have been severely lacking in America. Time and time again this group of workers have been subjected to cruel work environments without any rights or support to resist. The ideals of neoliberalism that put businesses interests' first, and anti-immigration rhetoric have been detrimental to women in non-industrial countries.

Key Organizations and Debates

In this paper, some key organizations in Minnesota and California that work to improve women immigrant workers rights will be discussed. The different strategies and policies used by California organizations will be compared to those pursued by Minnesota organizations. I have picked two organizations in both California and Minnesota that partially represent the different types of groups that organize women immigrant workers. I chose groups that have a strong media presence in order to collect data through content analysis of news articles and organization websites and social media. This analysis is critical to determine the effectiveness of strategies to implement policy change for women immigrant workers and understand the outcomes and unintended consequences of their actions.

The sector of work that the groups focus on in California and Minnesota are largely different because of the industries that are common in their state. This is something to consider when comparing organizing strategies. Workers of garment centers are often the women organizing to change policies for women immigrant workers in California. This is still a priority as the ever growing retail outlet Forever 21 receives 95% of their garments through subcontracted work in California (Bahar & Carracedo, 2007). A great deal of immigrant women start working in the garment industry in California as they are often not required to produce documentation or experience in order to be hired. On the other hand, many Minnesota

organizations focus on numerous industries including custodial work, food service sector, and retail jobs. The lack of a unified sector of labor in Minnesota may be a disadvantage for organizers who are demanding different rights for the workers.

California-Based Organizations

AIWA.

Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) is an organization in California that got its start in 1983 from organizing Asian immigrant women in the garment industry. Since then it has broadened its goals to help women in all low-wage sectors of work such as domestic, service, and assembly work (Asian Immigrant Woman Advocates [AIWA], 2016). AIWA looks to develop leaders through skill training and political education (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2010, p. 127). They focus on communicating with the workers to understand their needs and help them demand policy changes to labor laws and health care services.

This organization seeks to distribute power equally in order to step away from bureaucratic leadership. Through campaigns and boycotts, AIWA has won wages back to the employees taken from subcontractors and set up a corporate funded hotline to report violations of health and safety at the workplace (Chun et al., p.128). In October 2015, AIWA helped lead a group of homecare workers to hold a collective action through a meeting with their local county authority. In this meeting, the group demanded access in the county for English education and a commitment to improve worker rights such as job security. This action was done at a crucial time, right after the Supreme Court ruled that homecare workers are required to be paid overtime pay and pay for travel time (Alameda County Social Services Agency, 2016).

Strategizing to put pressure on the local government after a federal law passed regarding home

care workers helped achieve the outcomes AIWA were reaching for. The local county in California agreed to work with the group of homecare workers on the issues that were brought up.

This group prioritize organizing women workers to speak out and lead at the grassroots level. To organize women, AIWA seeks to educate workers with computer classes, English literacy and leadership trainings. The women also organize to end the devaluation and discrimination of non-English speakers (Chun et al., p. 127). They started a grassroots leadership program to give workers the skills to organize and know how to ask for their rights. AIWA seeks to aid women in education not only to change their work conditions but to improve their whole lives. They encourage women to take time to themselves and gain education instead of just going through the daily routine of working and completing household tasks (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2010, p. 134). There are seven stages of leadership to go through, from basic knowledge of the organization all the way to becoming a leader in the community.

GWC.

The Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles is another key organization that is directed specifically at organizing immigrant Latina workers in the garment industry to stand up for their rights. The organization started in 2001 by gathering workers to listen to their stories and fight for socio-economic justice as residents and laborers of America (Garment Worker Center [GWC], 2016). This worker center tries to change policy that affect immigrant women workers such as affordable childcare, implementing worksite safety, and putting on actions to discourage the community from purchasing clothes made by sweatshop labor.

One of the most notable actions that GWC held is the continuous disruption of local *Forever 21* stores over three years (GWC, 2016). GWC agitates retail companies that hire

subcontractors who regulate workers to create their clothing. The organization requires companies to take responsibility for the garment workers as much as their retail workers. Protests were held in front of local stores to educate the consumers about the unsafe conditions workers are suffering though at the manufacture plants that create Forever 21's clothes. The worker center supported laborers demands for compensation for wages under the legal minimum and the implementation of policies to ensure workplace rights and safety in the garment industry. The workers did accept a settlement from Forever 21 and ended their protests but the outcomes of the settlement is undisclosed.

Using protests did gain some attention from consumers and from the corporation, but there were some consequences to this strategy. Forever 21 failed to admit any wrongdoing or hold responsibility for hiring subcontractors with unethical working practices. The workers failed to affect the entirety of the retail chain through financial strain. Settling with the company did not lead to the results the workers anticipated and they already discontinued public actions that could have supported their cause.

This strategy that GWC continually employs did not come through completely for Forever 21 but did seem to make an impact for Ross stores. Workers once again stood in front of stores that supplies clothes from sweatshop labor to inform the public of this issue as well as hand demands to the board of directors of the stores. This is a really important step they take to pressure companies to take accountability for all their workers, including the immigrant women that make the clothes. Their most recent action at Ross stores won \$212,000 in wages back to the workers due to subcontractors violating of workers' rights. This organization continues to fight and stand up in the streets to demand more from Ross (Belgum, 2016).

Minnesota-based Organizations

ML.

Two organizations stuck out to me during research, which are Mesa Latina and La Asamblea De Derechos Civiles. These are both fairly new groups in the Minnesota scene that organize immigrant workers with a great deal of women leaders in their group.

Mesa Latina Minnesota (ML) is a militant immigrant focused group founded in 2012 to pass the DREAM act. They are centered on partnering with other organizations to build a better future for Latinos in Minnesota by fighting and providing the means for a good life (Mesa Latina, 2016). This organization seeks to aid women immigrant workers through policy change inside and outside the worksite. They are searching for the government to allow all residents of Minnesota to gain driver's licenses to keep roads safe and provide opportunities for documented and undocumented workers. This significantly affects women immigrants who are not able to give their children the best opportunities, get them to doctor's appointments, or obtain jobs to feed their families due to fear of being picked up without a driver's license (Rosa, 2016).

The actions they take to change this policy has included a 13 day hunger strike by mostly immigrant women, an action at the Minnesota capitol, training community members to lobby, meeting with political leaders in Minnesota such as Governor Mark Dayton to commit to America Mesa and the driver's license-for-all proposal, and connected with multiple organizations to help in their fight for Latino safety and rights especially by coming together to answer questions about immigration in Community Forums (Mesa Latina, 2016).

One noticeable difference between this Minnesota organization and the California organizations is that Mesa Latina does require all members to abide by their values and list of guidelines when representing Mesa Latina during an action (Mesa Latina, 2016). Many of the

guidelines that ML follows are made to allow structure in the groups and solve conflicts. There are some intriguing guidelines to ensure their identity as a non-capitalist and people-based organization. This includes coming to complete consensus, using reasons instead of emotions in meetings, standing in solidarity with similarly aligned groups, and to find solutions instead of “winning.”

Although Mesa Latina does not strictly abide by any political party, nor a religious foundation, through examining pictures on their website, Facebook, and Twitter, it is clear that many members do have a strong belief in Christianity and use quotes from the bible and align with faith-based groups to represent their issue in actions. Although most of ML’s achievements align with issues of immigrants such as the Dream Act, comprehensive immigration reform, and a fight for \$15 minimum wage, one goal the organization worked on that stands out is the opposition of same gender marriage in October 2012 (Mesa Latina, 2016).

La Asamblea.

La Asamblea de Derechos Civiles de Minnesota (La Asamblea) is an organization founded about a decade ago based in the Twin Cities with a branch St. Cloud. Their primary goal is to bring Latinos together to make social change as a faith-based group. The co-founders Pablo Tapia and Antonia Alvarez were a part of other organizations such as ISIAH but their voices were not being heard so they joined a national organization that trains leaders (P. Keeling, personal communication, April 28th, 2016). Now their group gathers Latinos in a week long training to discuss what is holding them back from standing up and speaking out about their situations of exploitation and discrimination. They help community leaders stand up, learn how to raise money, do one-on-ones, and find people with common goals. They also strive to make

sure the members' and allied organizations' values align with the values of faith, discipline, and social responsibility (La Asamblea de Derechos Civiles de Minnesota [La Asamblea], 2016).

La Asamblea does not primarily focus on women immigrant workers, but it is made up of many women leaders that consider a comprehensive immigration reform a key element to improving their lives. For many Latina women, an immigration reform will fix many of the smaller problems that cause stress for families, specifically deportation, which is the largest stressor.

Patty Keeling, an organizer of seven years with La Asamblea, describes the numerous actions and goals of the organization as a way to keep families together and people safe. This group has supported driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants for ten years, pushing hard to keep Latinos from being deported, and constantly pressuring congress to a comprehensive immigration reform.

The local and state level organizing is imperative to keep specific Latino families safe by fighting deportations of family members, such as one member, Maria Gutierrez, who was able to get her brother, who was deported, back to America and out of jail. During that time his children were still here and that significantly affected Maria and the family. Pushing police in Minnesota to discontinue calling ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) when they pick up Latinos is a goal that La Asamblea has pushed through civil disobedience, rallies, and meeting with the police and Bishop in St. Cloud and Cold Spring (P. Keeling, personal communication, April 28th, 2016).

La Asamblea has been a part of the fight to allow all Minnesota Residents to obtain driver's licenses. This also includes training members how to protect themselves when they are

on the road. They seek affordable and reliable transportation to the twin cities in order to broaden opportunities for employment.

On a larger level, this group organizes demonstrations to pressure local state representatives and also taking a stand by traveling to Washington DC to press for immigration reform. They are working to stop raids at worksites that deport hundreds of undocumented immigrants. This organization seeks emancipation for Latinos and a five year path to immigration, workplace safety and justice, the right to higher education, a place to take part in voting, and end to hateful media messages. All of these goals work together to protect immigrant women workers by ensuring them their rights at work and in the community and the right to keep their families unified (La Asamblea, 2016).

Debates on Social Policy Change

Both of these Minnesota organizations follow specific values and are committed to creating a certain identity in their communities. This is not something found in AIWA and the Garment Worker Center in California. This brings up a key debate of whether identity-based campaigns are the most effective way to organize? Do these organizations in Minnesota benefit everybody or only a specific community? The unintended consequences of all organizations' actions must be analyzed to determine the impact on the entire immigrant community. It is important to note that all of the organizations looked to gather as part of an ethnic group such as being predominately Asian based or predominately Latino based. The context of each population will have to be considered when understanding why and how they organize the way they do.

AIWA approaches social change for immigrant women workers through individual leadership and activity rather than focusing on creating an effective organization that look to win structural changes in local government (Chun et al., 2010, p. 128). This tactic is similar to the

Garment Worker Center as well. The Minnesota organizations, La Asamblea and Mesa Latina, strive to make fundamental changes on a state and federal level as well as on a local level. Larger campaigns such as reforming immigration and smaller ones such as attempting to change the treatment of workers in subcontracting are vital in improving the lives of immigrant women workers. Whether campaigns should start at a local or federal level is an important debate to look into. Although both are important, it is necessary to see which organizing style results in achieving the goals a center set up and unintended consequences for women immigrant workers.

Gaps between Goals and Outcomes

Understanding the impact of actions and organizing strategies on immigrant women can be difficult. La Asamblea is an exclusively faith-based group that often relies on IATs or Immigrant advocacy tropes (Bejarano, Greene, & Lara, 2009, p. 21). "They are not criminals" and "who will do our jobs" are ones that are often used. One sign featured on the homepage of La Asamblea's website says, 'Who will mow your lawn when we are gone?' (La Asamblea, 2016). One article suggests these tropes keep people from uniting and making large sustainable changes and delegitimize the groups. This specific trope works best when the economy is strong; but when it is not severe consequences hit. Many Americans start to blame immigrants for stealing their jobs and this increases the calls for more deportations (Bejarano, Greene, & Lara, 2009, p. 30).

This may explain how La Asamblea and similar groups that use these tactics have not had success in their Federal battles. Although groups need to have solidarity, which requires specific ideals and demands, sometimes their message actually stands in the way of making lasting policy change (p. 22). This is a problem that California Organizations AIWA and GWC do not often

face as their battles are done through disrupting the workplace and demanding compensation for wage theft. This is a universal issue that can help bring together a mass of low-wage workers.

La Asamblea has won many local battles over deportation and gained a great deal of support from all walks of life on passing the bill, drivers' licenses for all. Still there is no luck with complete immigration reform, which happens to be their most significant battle. Still every summer they travel to Washington to keep on pressuring congress for this comprehensive reform that allows a five-year plan to immigration. Organizers believe that using constant pressure and focusing on state-level issues meanwhile will help women immigrants gain support now in some ways while building up their political support to move to federal issues (P. Keeling, personal communication, April 28th, 2016).

Local and state level organizing regarding immigration and policies that affect immigrant women workers allows a great deal of changes to be made at a faster pace. It also allows more organizations with fewer resources enter into the sites of action (Nicholls, 2013, p.149). Most protesters look for formal organizations that have resources at their disposal and they assume the upper class will have to give in to the demands of a great masses. This is untrue though. And when they lean on the elite for support they often lose momentum when one part of the problem is solved (Cloward & Piven, 1977, p. 163). This is a challenge that organizations such as Mesa Latina and La Asamblea may face when they are organizing politicians and training people to lobby and vote for change. Mesa Latina claims to be people-based, but they are still looking to work in the system of capitalistic democracy to gain rights.

Still, for protests to really make a change it has to affect the whole society not just one neighborhood or group. When there is electoral instability then power due to major disruptions and people sympathizing with the poor, the elites are weakened and the poor can make some

changes (Cloward & Piven, 1977, P. 30). La Asamblea is looking to make nationwide change through large sit-ins in Washington DC, but it is neither in the workplace nor disrupting the whole society.

The disruption of the majority of society rather than just one neighborhood is a mark that all organizations miss. This may be due to lack of resources or lack of solidarity. To put on an action that affects the whole nation economically requires many worker centers all over the country working with the same goals in mind and the same demands. All workers, including immigrant women, are looking for economic equality first. This allows an enormous group of low-wage workers to stand up and make changes because they are threatening the stability of the economic system. The fight for immigration is imperative in order to keep families safe, but it is not an issue that can be so easily fought for as it in some ways calls for social understanding and empathy in the way that Mesa Latina and La Asamblea fight for it.

Starting research on these organizations was similar to seeing a one page advertisement and thinking you understand who they are and what they do. When you start to dig deep, a lot more complex and intriguing information surfaces and it feels odd to miss it in the first place. The goal of this research is to compare organizing strategies and the impact of immigrant women workers. What one organization is doing is not necessarily better because of one strategy though.

Each group uses multiple strategies and does a lot of different work, some which may be beneficial for a few people, and some which may be beneficial for hundreds of people. All four organizations I looked at are taking a stand to help immigrant women workers in their own way. There are definitely strategies to dispute further, especially regarding IATs the group uses and disrupting worksites versus pushing for political support on a bill. Although I gave some comments and critique on these strategies, the research is far from done. More one-on-ones are

necessary with group members to examine strategies completely and understand the reasons for the gap between an organization's goals and their outcomes.

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