Immigrant Women Organize to Overcome Isolation and Fear

By Rachel Kahn

When Angela Carmona came to New York with her family, she dreamed of a life free from the poverty of her native Colombia. That dream has been only partly realized, but Angela found that the laws and organizations set up to assist immigrants were often more of an obstacle than an aid. As an undocumented woman, Angela was nearly powerless. When her husband was out of work, for example, she was not only unable to seek employment, but afraid to go to service agencies for help.

Sadly, Angela's story is not uncommon. A recent study of 400 women in the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, found that fear of detection and possible deportation caused 64 percent of Latinas and 57 percent of Filipinas to avoid seeking any social services. In her native country, Angela's extended family might have provided assistance in times of trouble. In the U.S., immigrant women often find themselves isolated and alone.

Experts estimate that half of current immigrants to the United States are women, a dramatic demographic change from even a decade ago, when most immigrants were men. Government agencies and service providers, however, have rarely made any adjustments in their services and policies, which are still oriented around the assumption of male immigrants and refugees. The particular circumstances of women remain largely unknown, their service and advocacy needs unmet. Needless to say, immigrant women are also largely unorganized.

Mujeres Unidas

In the San Francisco Bay Area, however, immigrant women are beginning to come together to overcome their isolation and powerlessness. One new organization is Mujeres Unidas y Activas (United and Active Women). Run by and for Latina immigrant and refugee women, Mujeres Unidas y Activas enables Latina immigrants in the Bay Area to organize themselves around survival issues they have named as top priorities. The group got its start with assistance from the Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Services (CIRRS) in San Francisco, which is also helping to develop an integrated community empowerment and leadership program spearheaded by Mujeres Unidas y Activas.

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Begun in September 1990 as a ten-woman volunteer project, Mujeres Unidas y Activas has grown to include 70 members, a substantial waiting list and two CIRRS staff members, Clara Luz Navarro and María Olea. Angela joined the groups after they counseled her at San Francisco General Hospital when a doctor asked her to take an AIDS test. This summer, twelve members of Mujeres are participating in a leadership development training to become Mujeres "promotoras," or organizers.

Mujeres Unidas y Activas has built a model that overcomes the underground nature, acute levels of fear and near total isolation of undocumented women that keeps them from accessing services or organizing to have their service needs met. However, undocumented women are not the only ones afraid and isolated from services.

The fact that the majority of Asian immigrants are documented refugees does nothing to change the fact that few Bay Area service providers have the linguistic or cultural understanding for adequate provision, outreach and care. Service providers with professionals that speak Asian languages and understand Asian cultures, like Asian Health Services, are rare. Translators, even for Spanish, are also uncommon and underfunded.

CIRRS has also helped to create the Immigrant Women's Task Force, a coalition of more than 85 organizations providing services to and advocating on behalf of immigrant and refugee women. The Task Force coordinated trainings, addresses service accessibility issues, respond to public policy affecting immigrant women, gathers information about issues particularly affecting this community and develop collaborative strategies to respond to these concerns. CIRRS and the Family Violence Prevention Fund will also sponsor a national conference in October in Berkeley, California that will for the first time bring together immigrant and refugee women, service providers, advocates, community organizers, lawyers, outreach workers and grassroots activists to focus on the issues confronting immigrant women.

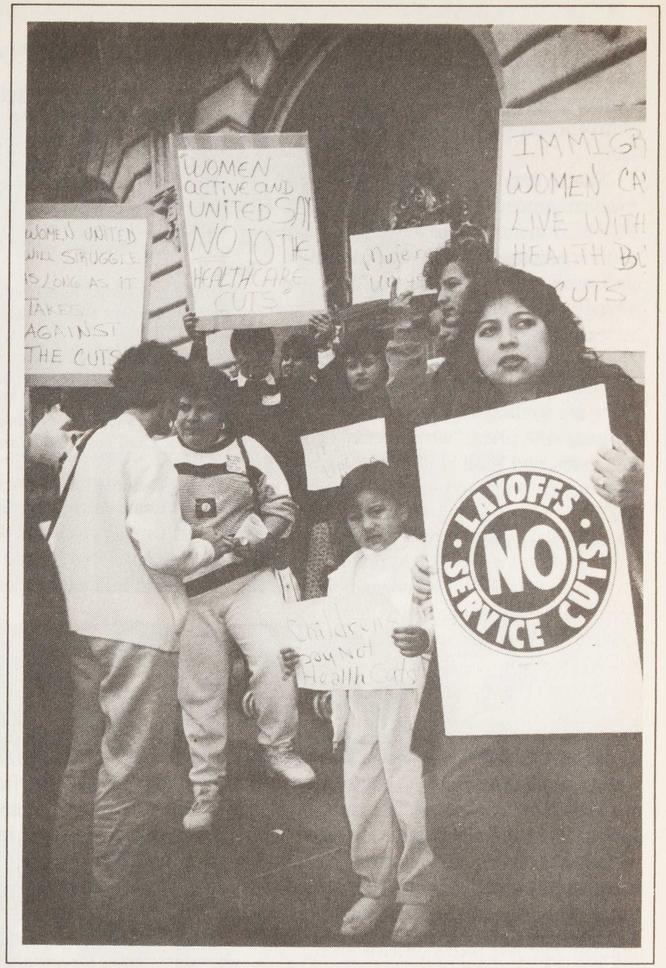

Photo: CIRRS

Leaders and members of the Latina womens' organization called Mujeres Activas y Unidas demonstrate outside San Francisco City Hall against budget cuts in health care.

Asian Immigrant Women

Asian women in the San Francisco Bay Area face problems similar to those of Latinas, with one big exception. Most have residency documents, so worries about deportation is not as great in the Asian community as in the Latino. Except for the Chinese community, where there is a large percentage of undocumented immigrants, Asian women immigrants do not have to live in fear of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

Asian women face similar barriers of language, culture, race and sex. Many are low-income, without the job and language skills that would enable them to move out of dead-end garment industry and factory jobs. Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), based in Oakland, has set itself goals similar to those of Mujeres Unidas y Activas. According to director Young Shin, "AIWA is a vehicle by which low-income Asian women can address their most pressing job and survival needs. We see building power and confidence as both an individual and a collective process."

Young points out that various chnages in immigration laws in recent years have made this increasingly difficult, especiallythe last "reform:" IRCA.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 is widely credited with creating a host of new problems for immigrants, both documented and undocumented. IRCA's biggest innovation, employer sanctions, was intended to stem the influx of undocumented immigrants from Mexic. Central America and the Carribean by penalizing employers who hired them. Studies have shown, however, that the real penalties have fallen on job applicants who "look foreign" or have accents, regardless of residency status.

Not as well known are the negative effects on women immigrants. At a very basic level, IRCA's requirements ignore the ways in which immigrant women's lives do not conform to the standard of the stereotypical single male migrant worker. The other major provision of IRCA was "amnesty" (legalization) for immigrants who could prove continuous residency in the U. S. since 1982.

Apart from effectively excluding Central Americans, who left their war-torn countries in large numbers from 1982-85, these requirements do not acknowledge that women tend to work in marginal economies, such as domestic work, where there is no employ