



ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY BEYOND
ETHNICITY? THE CASE OF KIWA AND THE
STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT
LOW-WAGE WORKERS.

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Introduction

It is traditionally argued that the basis of legitimization in American urban politics, whether grassroots or more formalized, generally remains confined within the precinct of ethnic and racial representation. Immigrant organizations have long been described as building political power in a similar way, that is by claiming to be *legitimate* representatives of a constituency specifically defined in ethnic terms (Portes, Escobar and Arana, 2008). Nevertheless, an increasing body of literature has pointed out to the existence of specific immigrant organizations where the focus of action is not on ethnic communities, rather on immigrant workers and workplace issues (Milkman, Bloom and Narro, 2010; Milkman, 2006; Fine, 2006; Narro, 2005-06). How can we explain the way in which such organizations construct their own legitimacy? In this paper I am interested in examining the cultural and socio-economic conditions that shape immigrant organizations' struggle for legitimacy over time. How do immigrant organizations construct their legitimacy in the arena of urban politics? What are the cultural and socio-economic bases that inform the construction of organizational legitimacy in the urban space for such groups? How can we understand the way in which, beyond external constraints, such organizations draw and re-draw the boundaries of the 'community' they claim to represent?

I here build on a theory of legitimacy that emphasizes the desirability and appropriateness of organizational actions within a specific normative context. I further distinguish between cognitive legitimacy, which refers to the act of building legitimacy through the support of an internal constituency, and socio-political legitimacy, which refers to the acceptance of the organization within a wider institutional context. Moreover, I analyze the first in relation to the ideological background of the organization and in relation to the resources that its community of reference is able to provide; I analyze the second in relation to the shifting network of support and multi-organizational field in which the organization is embedded.

Drawing on organizational archives and qualitative interviews, this study focuses on the history of the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), a non-profit immigrant organization based in Los Angeles. The case of KIWA, an organization established within an ethnic enclave that adopted an explicitly cross-ethnic agenda, is particularly suitable to shed a light on the constraints and opportunities that shape the discourse and practice of immigrant non-profit organizations. Specifically, I first describe how KIWA was able to construct its multiethnic constituency by redefining traditional ethnic allegiances within the Korean community, as well as by emphasizing commonalities on the basis of shared class consciousness and racial oppression with other ethnic groups. Second, I emphasize how the development of KIWA's network of relations, particularly with progressive labor unions, advocacy organizations and immigrant rights groups, impacted KIWA's activities by steering them in the direction of workplace issues and multiethnic alliances. KIWA's embeddedness in such a network provided an organizational space where shared practices, ideas and strategies kept the organization firmly anchored within the labor and the social and economic justice movement.

Literature Review¹

Organizational legitimacy is inherently linked to organizational survival. Immigrant organizations are no exception in this respect, as their struggle to be seen as *legitimate* by other social actors is strongly linked to their need for material and symbolic resources (Vermeulen and Brünger, 2013). Building on Suchman (1995; in Vermeulen and Brünger, 2013), I here define legitimacy as the “generalized belief that an organization’s actions are desirable, suitable and appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs” (2013: 980). As Vermeulen and Brünger point out, organizations often achieve that by “incorporating structures and procedures that match widely accepted models in society [...], or] when relevant stakeholders, which comprise both internal and external audiences, endorse and support the aims and activities of an organization” (2013: 981).

Immigrant organizations do not necessarily seek legitimacy from all the possible range of audiences they are addressing, rather a selected few that are thought to best embody the values and interests of the organization (Vermeulen and Brünger, 2013). In fact, specifically in highly polarized contexts, strongly ideologically-driven organizations may be particularly selective in choosing the segment of the immigrant population (or of the broader society) they are trying to speak to (Vermeulen and Brünger, 2013). In order to give the concept of legitimacy more analytical traction, I build on the distinction highlighted by Vermeulen and Brünger (2013) following Aldrich (1999) between *cognitive legitimacy* and *socio-political legitimacy*. While cognitive legitimacy refers to the process through which an organization builds its legitimacy upon support from an internal constituency, usually directly affected by the activities of the organization, socio-political legitimacy refers to the broader acceptance of the organization within the society – in particular by external audiences such as private and public funders, governmental institutions, organizations involved in other activity sectors such as NGOs or trade unions, the media.

When we look at the processes through which organizations build different kinds of legitimacy, we can see that their organizational narrative is essentially the product of two levels of interaction. In the case of cognitive legitimacy, the organization’s decision to cater to a certain group seems to strongly depend on the ideological background of the organization and of its staff, as well as on the level of resources that such group can provide to the organization. Nevertheless, the construction of a reference group is rarely a straightforward process, rather the product of complex and never-ending dynamics of boundary-making (Wimmer, 2009; Brubaker, 2002) to which both insiders and outsiders contribute to.

In a similar fashion, in the case of socio-political legitimacy, organizational legitimacy hardly depends on the organization alone. Rather, it depends on the broader multi-organizational network within which the organization is embedded (Curtis and Zucher, 1973; Evans, 1997), and on the resources that other allied or supporting organizations can provide. This certainly includes circulation of symbolic resources, such as discourse, practices, ideas, which over time may result in clustering together a number of organizations around similar values, narratives and audiences. Depending on the level of shared articulation, strength

¹ [To be reworked and expanded]

and cohesiveness of such practices and political discourses, such network of organizations may come to be considered as a unified *movement* (or community) in its own terms (Melucci, 1995). – e.g. the immigrant rights movement, the labor movement, the pro-choice movement, and so on. While I assume that all active organizations enjoy, to a different degree, both kinds of legitimacy, I am here interested in examining on *what basis* do immigrant organizations construct their legitimacy. The literature on urban politics stresses how, in the United States, organizations of all kind have traditionally built political power by claiming to represent specific groups defined in *ethnic* or *racial* terms (Mollenkopf, 2013; Katznelson, 1981). Scholars have often resorted to political opportunity structure theory (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2004; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996; McAdam, 1996; Koopmans, 1999; 2004) to explain the strong role of ethnicity in U.S. politics, which is seen as a legacy of the specific way in which the American model of capitalism has developed since its early years (Katznelson, 1981; Mollenkopf, 2013).

This is not to say that ethnicity is the *only* ideological resource mobilized by immigrant organizations to gain legitimacy – Chung, Bloemraad and Tejada-Pena (2013) for example, show how different immigrant organizations were able to cater to different members of the same ethnic community by mobilizing different notions about social and economic justice, gender, cultural identity or language – but rather that it is always considered as the *primary* one. Nevertheless, an increasing body of literature has suggested that immigrant organizations over the last decades have adopted a wider range of legitimization strategies, as much ethnic-based as class- or legal status- based. The rise of a number of immigrant-led organizations – the so-called worker centers (Fine, 2006) – who specifically target communities of *immigrant workers* is a process that traditional political opportunity structure cannot fully account for, and that I am therefore interested in explaining.

Research Methodology

My research covers the history of the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), a non-profit 501(c)(3) immigrant organization established in Los Angeles in 1992, from its establishment till 2014. In order to conduct this study, I relied on a number of data resources, including: a) archive material (grant applications to funding organization and internal organizational archives); b) interviews with KIWA former and current staff, as well as with staff from other organizations who collaborated with KIWA; c) organizational material available online (internal reports, press releases, newsletters, website and other digital information; d) previous case-study literature about similar organizations active in Los Angeles.

In order to see how KIWA constructs its organizational legitimacy over time, my objective is to examine KIWA's organizational narrative over time in relation to the three factors highlighted above: the ideological background of the organization's staff, the resources of the internal constituency, the inter-organizational resources.

As my research covers a considerable span of time and looks at fluctuating elements such as organizational narratives and discourses, archive material collected onsite represent my main data source. The Liberty Hill, a private philanthropy, has funded a number of Los Angeles-based immigrant

organizations in the last forty years, including KIWA, and kept detailed record of the whole funding process. Application folders are ranged per year and per organization. A typical folder includes: the grant application for a specific year and submitted by a specific organization, a number of reports drafted by the applicant itself, campaign material and letter exchanges between the applicant and the foundation, as well as other miscellaneous material (leaflets, surveys, strategy manuals, newsletters and bulletins). The reports are arguably the most interesting material, as they include the organizational narrative (mission and vision of the organization, its history, activities, etc.), their financial statement, their collaborative networks with other organizations, their organizational boards and staff charts. As far as KIWA is concerned, the data was present from 1992 till 2014 with some minor gaps, as records are present only as long as the organization submitted an application and was awarded funding.

KIWA has also donated a large bulk of its internal organizational files to the Southern California Library in Los Angeles – those files are freely accessible. Despite covering a time span from 1992 to 2006, such files are much more sparse and less consistent over time, however containing some very detailed information about certain moments in the history of the organization. The reason for complementing the Liberty Hill archives with such material is not so much to include it as primary source, but rather to ensure that KIWA's internal organizational narrative is consistent with the one presented to the funding agency. As a matter of fact, the organization's internal material revealed to be surprisingly consistent – and in many cases overlapped – with the one collected by the Liberty Hill.

Overall, those archives detail the organizational narrative of KIWA, its self-presentation as well as its reading of a particular issue and the way to address it. Such material is taken as to represent the way in which the organization creates its own discourse about a particular event. At the same time, since those archives relate to funding applications, I assumed that they contain relevant information about the way in which the organization *perceives* to be legitimate, for which group and why. Building on this assumption, I analyzed and coded the textual data by highlighting the different audiences in relation to which the organization claims to be a legitimate actor: its internal constituency (its different levels of membership) and its external one (allies, supporters and funders).

The information contained in the archives has been also used to understand the underlying networks of relations among KIWA and other organizations, and among KIWA staff and activists or staff from other organizations. As much as political discourse is generally seen as the subjective and non-neutral attempt of an organized group to shape reality in a specific way, the construction of organizational and personal networks is equally characterized as a dynamic and interactive process. For this reason, I complemented the above mentioned information with a number of interviews conducted with former staff and member of KIWA, as well as with staff and activists of other organizations connected to KIWA. Interviews broadly focused on individual experiences in relation to specific campaigns coordinated and/or participated by KIWA between the early 1990s and the early 2010s. Respondents provided their own perspective on the development of specific webs of relationship that proved crucial, at least in their understanding, for the development of the campaign. Interviews were also used to understand the

ideological background and career of activists. Where available, I added further information about the activist career based on previous case studies.

The Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance and Korean ethnic politics

The Koreatown Immigrant Workers' Alliance (KIWA), formerly known as Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, is a Los Angeles-based, non-profit organization founded in 1992 by South Korean-born activists Roy Hong and Danny Park. KIWA may be defined as a hybrid community-based organization which has used direct organizing, advocacy work, service-provision and political education to improve the life of a *community* of immigrant members and promote broader social change (Chung et al., 2013; Bum Kwon, 2010). Despite the importance of service provision, KIWA has been intensively campaign-driven for a large span of its existence, with a specific focus on workplace issues and direct action against abusive employers (Bum Kwon, 2010).

The organization initially pledged to pursue two main objectives: the *empowerment* of Korean immigrant workers² and the development of a “progressive constituency and leadership in the Korean community which [could] join in solidarity with the struggles of other communities of color”³. Over the years, however, KIWA’s mission has gradually shifted from an ethnic to a spatial focus, as it now addresses *all* low-wage immigrant workers residing and/or working in the L.A. area of Koreatown – an extremely diverse neighborhood that comprises of immigrants from Central America, Mexico, South Asia and South-East Asia.

Chung (2005; 2007) argued that political ideology has played a very important role in KIWA’s work, since the organization has relied on a small informal structure and on the militancy of its staff, members and volunteers to aggressively target opponents. KIWA’s main source of inspiration has been described as a “leftist framework of ‘social justice’ politics, which conceptualizes social problems within the context of broader power structures and is often based on a complex understanding of the multiple bases of oppression, including race or ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation” (Chung, 2005: 923).

Chung (2005; 2007), and later Chung et al. (2013) mainly studied KIWA’s role within the context of Korean transnational and local ethnic politics. Headquartered in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Koreatown’ – an area of the city which gained its name due to the high concentration of Korean-owned businesses, from small- and medium-size businesses to transnational corporate conglomerates – KIWA emerged as part of a group of 1.5 and 2nd generation-led Korean organizations which challenged and eroded traditional Korean leadership in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. On the one side, stood a group of conservative, “middle- or upper-class Christian males from Seoul who were well positioned to mobilize the social, financial and human resources of the ethnic community” (Chung et al., 2013: 845). On the other side, a group of mostly highly educated children of immigrants, as well as immigrants who moved to

² Grant application, 1992

³ Grant application, 1992

the U.S. at a very early age, who were able to use to their advantage their socio-cultural skills and a series of external circumstances⁴ to redress intra-ethnic relations of power.

Chung convincingly argues that different ideological backgrounds, generational divides and external networks of support played a role in allowing organizations such as KIWA to claim a political space in the 'Korean American' arena. Such resources, however, have been analyzed exclusively as instruments to be used in the battle for ethnic legitimacy within the Korean community. In this study, however, I contend that such resources have also allowed KIWA to construct different types of organizational legitimacy over time, and that that has ultimately blurred the identitarian boundaries of the organization beyond an ethnic *raison d'être*. This appears to be true in both cases – whether we look at how KIWA's constituent base has changed across time (cognitive legitimacy) to include immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, or at how its external base of support (socio-economic legitimacy) has shifted from including ethnic Korean organizations to a wide range of other groups such as labor unions, immigrant rights organizations, advocacy or legal organizations, etc.).

KIWA's Membership Base – From Korean Workers to Immigrant Workers

In its early phase (1992-1995), KIWA intends to mainly target low-wage workers of Korean origin. Ideologically, the organization justified the choice through a sophisticated analysis of the Los Angeles political economy that articulated notions of *work*, *class* and *ethnicity* in two different ways. On the one hand, KIWA argues that Korean immigrants, particularly the more recent arrivals, remain trapped in work niches that are disconnected from the mainstream U.S. labor market because of racial and ethnic discrimination.⁵ Koreans, as a whole, are “forced to swallow exploitation, racism and sexism as experiences one must endure if one is to succeed in this country”.⁶ In KIWA's account, even 'positive' American stereotypes relying on ethnicity - such as the long-standing 'model minority' myth which credit Koreans for being exceptionally successful, highly educated and overachieving – serve no purpose other than hiding the fact that most Korean-owned small-size and subcontracting businesses average less than minimum wage and barely manage to stay afloat. In KIWA's early political ideology, racial and ethnic discrimination provide the justification for class-formation and the articulation of common class interests within those same ethnic boundaries. Often present in labor-intensive industries such as restaurants, dry cleaners, janitorial work, painting subcontracting, where work hours are long and profit margins are

⁴ Two events were particularly important: the rise of the pro-democratization and pro-labor movement in South Korea, and the outbreak of the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles, which resulted in the looting and destruction of several Korean-owned businesses in Koreatown/Central Los Angeles by Latino and African Americans crowds. While the emergence of progressive political actors in Korea gave second generation Koreans in L.A. the possibility to articulate an alternative vision of ethnic politics, the impact of the civil unrest on L.A. civil society prompted a number of foundations and philanthropies to pour significant funds into affected neighbourhood to address the situation.

⁵ Both categories are used by KIWA in their narratives, it appears quite interchangeably. In KIWA's documents, ethnicity is largely equalled to race, and seems to assume the existence of clear boundaries between different groups. Nevertheless, the term does not seem to have the same meaning for every group.

⁶ Interim Report, 14 Sept, 1993

narrow, most Korean employers are unable to “afford to pay overtime, medical benefits and workers compensation for their employees, let alone for themselves”.⁷

The central spatial context where these relations take place is *Koreatown*, an area of mid-Los Angeles where different waves of Korean immigrants settled over the decades, and where a wide range of Korean-owned businesses are most concentrated.⁸ Despite being an extremely ethnically diverse space,⁹ Koreatown is in KIWA’s narrative *the* Korean economic ethnic enclave. Economy and ethnicity are strictly interrelated in a “unique dynamic of symbiotic relationship”,¹⁰ in a space where the economic structure cannot be changed without addressing the relations of power that occur within the ethnically-bounded immigrant community. In fact, KIWA argues that ethnicity is used in this space to sustain exploitative relations among two groups of people with very different immediate class interests. On the one side small and large business owners, on the other their employees and subcontractors, who are at the bottom of an already underprivileged group. Ethnicity is for KIWA a specific type of power resource that the more powerful class, the *business owners*, can use against the weaker one, the *workers*, as a means of coercion and work exploitation. Through ‘appeals to Korean solidarity’ the business owners are able to effectively silence workers’ demands for improved working conditions or better salaries – using the argument that that would threaten the viability of the ethnic enclave business model as whole, and thus the survival of the community (Chung, 2007). While business owners have access to a wide range of “class resources”¹¹ – including ‘ethnic media’ and corporate allies – workers have no voice or representation within the ethnic community.

There are 22 active employer’s organizations in Korean community in the L.A. Koreatown area. Yet, there has never been an organization of workers’ own in the Korean community. KIWA’s ultimate goal is to empower the workers so that the workers can have the power to fight against exploitation, racism, poverty and sexism effectively.¹²

KIWA’s complex relationship vis-à-vis the Korean community is evident in the way in which the organization initially conceives its 3-part organizational structure, and the way in which such bodies are legitimized to operate. At the top a Board of Directors in charge of discussing and making decisions on the structure of the organization, creating and implementing projects, managing the annual budget, and handling public relations. KIWA stresses the point that such board is to represent a large segment of the Korean community, although “the majority of the board [would be] comprised of Korean immigrant workers, who bring their firsthand experience and insights to directing the work of KIWA”.¹³ In the

⁷ Grant application, 1992

⁸ In municipal records, Koreatown is bounded by: Fairfax Avenue (to the west), Melrose Avenue (to the north), Hoover Avenue (to the east), Pico Boulevard (to the south). The perimeter was established through census which outlined the contiguous areas where Koreans were at least 10% of the population.

⁹ where the majority of residents are actually of Mexican and Central American origin,

¹⁰ Interim Report, 24 Sept 1996

¹¹ Grant application, 7 January, 1994

¹² Interim Report, 14 Sept, 1993

¹³ Grant application, 1992

middle, the organization's staff and volunteers, implementing the decisions made by the Board and managing daily tasks and projects. At the bottom, the Workers' Fellowship or workers' membership base, which would "coordinate action with the staff and provides input to the Board".¹⁴ Despite having relatively less operational power, the Workers' Fellowship is described as "the concrete expression of the community base of KIWA and the vehicle of direct action against the injustice of the employers".¹⁵ In KIWA's plans, the membership structure is envisioned as the true core of the organization, with the prospect of transitioning from an "activist-driven organization [to] a democratic membership organization"¹⁶ within a few years.

If we look at the actual descriptions and socio-economic status of the board of directors in 1992, we can see that its members are indeed supposed to reflect different interests within the Korean community. Among others, we find a shop owner, an attorney, a student, two religious ministries – one of them connected to the influential United Methodist Church – a retired senior.¹⁷ However, only a couple of years after, the 15-member body has reduced to 9, and mainly comprised of low-wage workers in different sectors such as a construction worker, a seamstress, a street vendor and an accountant.¹⁸

Already in its early years, KIWA strongly antagonizes the Korean corporate community because of its confrontational tactics and choice of targets. The organization mostly relies on different kinds of service provision – legal advocacy to claim backwages or improve working conditions, rights' awareness trainings, language and computer literacy classes – to gain the trust of, and organize a constituency that never seriously challenged the *status quo* before.

For example, between 1992 and 1995, KIWA directly challenges the power of Korean ethnic elites through its "4.29 Displaced Workers' Rights Campaign",¹⁹ an effort directed at exposing the malpractices and corruption of the Korean American Relief Fund (KARF) in handling the distribution of the disaster relief fund to businesses affected by the 1992 civil unrest (Chung, 2007; Bum Kwon, 2010). The victorious campaign, which forces KARF to include a larger number of small businesses, as well as Korean and non-Korean employees in the relief provision, proves a stepping stone for building KIWA's reputation among low-wage workers and small business owners. More or less in the same period, KIWA gets involved in a number of labor union-led campaigns targeting Korean-owned businesses, which were accused of labor law violations and abuses vis-à-vis their employees.²⁰ During those years, KIWA already starts expanding its membership base, as many of the workers employed by these companies are immigrants from Mexico or Central America. This course of action, partly driven by pragmatic reasons, is ideologically justified by KIWA as a necessary means to ease racial tensions between the Korean community and other groups, mainly African Americans and Latinos, particularly in the aftermath of the 1992 civil unrest.²¹

¹⁴ Grant application, 31 Aug 1993

¹⁵ Grant application, 31 Aug 1993

¹⁶ Follow-up questionnaire, Feb 18, 1993

¹⁷ Follow-up questionnaire, Feb 18, 1993

¹⁸ Follow-up questionnaire, Feb 18, 1993

¹⁹ Grant Application Form, 31 Aug, 1993

²⁰ This include, among others: the US Magnetics Corporation (USMC) Campaign, the Koreana Hotel Campaign, the Korean Community Broadcasting (KCB) Campaign. Report, 30 Nov, 1994. See, for more information, Bum Kwon (2013)

²¹ Grant application, 31 Aug 1993

It is only from the mid-1990s onwards, however, that KIWA starts to consciously include Latino immigrants in its constituency more systematically. Building on previous case management work and research that highlighted major labor law and minimum wage violations in the restaurant sector, KIWA decides to launch an industry-wide campaign (1997-2000) that targets all restaurant businesses in Koreatown, and which aims to mobilize all its employees across ethnicities. In KIWA's reasoning, the only way to change the conditions in the industry is to involve all workers employed in the restaurant business. What the organization realizes in the making, however, is that Latino workers are much more prone to mobilizing than Korean workers themselves, as the ethnic ties make the latter much more vulnerable to retaliation from the employees.

KIWA places a high value on its constituents' political empowerment, arguing that through a process of rights' awareness training, leadership development and direct organizing practice, workers can eventually learn to resolve workplace issues collectively on their own without the assistance of the organization. One of the most notable achievements of the campaign, in addition to its settlement agreement with restaurant owners,²² is the establishment of the Restaurant Workers Association of Koreatown (RWAK) in 1999. The association replaces the membership-based structure of KIWA, and by 2001 it has already grown to include 170 members, 120 Latino and 50 Koreans.²³ The Association represents the highest expression of immigrant workers' participation within the life of the organization, and its structure the one that most closely resembled the participatory, quasi-hierarchical and democratic model ideal which KIWA's founders envisioned since 1992. Collaboration across ethnic lines, particularly among workers, proves nonetheless challenging in the association. Language and culture barriers, gender differences (most Korean workers were female, while the Latino workers were overwhelmingly male), different levels of political education force KIWA organizers to keep committees separated along ethnic lines and have them work mostly autonomously.²⁴

While part of KIWA's staff is involved in the development of RWAK, the organization also works on preparing and launching an even more ambitious organizing effort in the Koreatown supermarket industry. The Market Workers Justice Campaign (2001-2003), which aims at establishing the first independent union in Koreatown and to bring workers' condition beyond minimum wage standards, is a transformative campaign for many reasons. As Bum Kwon has argued, the campaign crystallizes KIWA's shift from an organization working within *ethnic* boundaries to an organization working within the *spatial* boundaries of Koreatown (Bum Kwon, 2013). In a 2001 grant application, KIWA prides itself on being "inarguably the first and only organization in the nation that is working to build a grassroots community base of low-wage immigrant workers across ethnicities and industries [...], [whose mission] is to *empower low wage immigrant workers* and to develop a progressive constituency and leadership in L.A.'s immigrant communities".²⁵

²² [To insert overview of the campaign results]

²³ RWAK Grant Application, 2002-2003

²⁴ Interview with Ms. Lee and Max Mariscal, KIWA organizers.

²⁵ Grant application, 2001

Partly as a result of those two campaigns, and of a dialectic process between the organization and its base throughout the years, KIWA begins to realize that tackling working issues is not enough. Not only immigrants are exploited as workers, because of ethnic and racial discrimination, but also because of their very status as immigrants. Both the restaurant and market campaigns confront KIWA with the fact that many immigrant workers (both Korean and Latino) are undocumented, and are not willing to stand against their employers for fear of being reported to immigration authorities and being deported.²⁶ For this reason, the organization starts to get involved in advocacy and policy efforts which aim at securing certain privileges for undocumented immigrants, such as access to the state drivers' license, or at pushing for wider federal immigration reforms. Within the framework of the Multiethnic Immigrant Workers Organizing Network (MIWON), which will be discussed in the following section, KIWA's membership base takes part in rallies and demonstrations both in Los Angeles and in Sacramento, seat of the California state assembly, and is part of collaborative efforts to organize an L.A. Immigrant May Day March from 1999 onwards. RWAK and KIWA are working almost symbiotically at this stage, with RWAK providing the indispensable connection to the manpower required to stage actions, rallies and demonstrations.²⁷ Nevertheless, following the unsuccessful attempt to establish an Immigrant Workers Union (IWU) at the Assi Supermarket,²⁸ which results in the suspension of a number of workers and an unsuccessful boycott to get them reinstated in 2003, the organization enters a period of profound financial and legitimacy crisis. The poor state of KIWA's finances, heavily impacted by months of strenuous campaigns and the gradual decrease in individual donations and foundation funding, obliges the organization to radically redefine its structure and priorities. Salary cuts, staff reduction and three years of intense strategic planning with the help of an external consultant profoundly change the nature of the organization. By the end of 2005, KIWA has made official its commitment to workers *and* Koreatown residents by changing its name to Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance. Ironically, however, this coincides with the organization abandoning most of its direct organizing activities. By 2004, RWAK, which represents the most important avenue for workers to voice their concerns, to get involved in decision-making and to take part in the life of the organization has been disbanded due to lack of funding and organizational capacities. More or less at the same time, KIWA resumes its market campaign, this time advocating for an improvement of workers conditions in major supermarkets in exchange for supporting corporate plans of urban redevelopment in the neighborhood. Such campaign is mostly fought around urban planning regulations and living wage agreements, and concerned workers are hardly part of it. In the last few years, KIWA has continued along this path, with a new interest in addressing immigrants as *residents* as much as workers. This shift has meant that the organization has increasingly taken on projects on tenants' rights, anti-gentrification campaigns, and environmental issues, but has abandoned its more contentious role as 'political instigator' (Chung, 2005).

²⁶ Interview with Vy Nguyen, former KIWA organizer.

²⁷ [to be developed]

²⁸ [to insert additional information]

All those transitions have not been easy. Part of KIWA staff, particularly a Latino and a Korean organizers who spent lots of energy in keeping RWAK alive and in maintaining a connection with the workers throughout the restaurant and market campaigns, have felt betrayed by these last developments. One of them defined the Supermarket living wage campaign as a ‘rotten campaign’, which strongly damaged KIWA’s reputation among workers in exchange for more peaceful relations with Korean ethnic elite and mainstream institutional actors in Los Angeles.²⁹ Following recent change at the top of its management structure, with founder and long-standing executive director Danny Park stepping down in favor of Alexandra Suh, a community organizer with a background in advocacy work and service management, KIWA has also tried to diversify its funding sources and expanded its donor base. Unlike the 1990s and early 2000s, when the organization prided itself on not receiving any kind of government funding, the organization has also warmed up to the idea of institutional collaborations.

KIWA’s Support Base and Collaborative Work

KIWA’s shifting internal base of legitimization, as I have shown, owes much to the ideological background of the organizations’ member, as well as to the development of its internal dynamics over time. However, we can better understand the organizational trajectory of KIWA by placing it within a broader multi-organizational field in which the organization has operated throughout more than two decades.

Both KIWA’s founders, Roy Hong and Danny Park, had worked or collaborated with U.S. labor unions before starting their own organization. It is not by accident that KIWA would later adopt a strategy of industry-wide direct organizing (Erickson, Fisk, Milkman, Mitchell and Wong, 2002), which was strikingly similar to the groundbreaking SEIU Justice for Janitor’s campaign –for which Roy Hong worked in Denver. This also meant that KIWA was deeply aware of the ambiguities of organized labor vis-à-vis immigrants in Los Angeles and generally mistrusted mainstream labor unions, but was interested in gaining support from more open and progressive ones in order to break out of the Koreatown ethnic boundaries. Through its initial (and highly visible) victories, KIWA was able to quickly establish itself as an exceptionally active and successful organization, particularly in the context of the relatively apathetic Asian communities.

By 1996, KIWA had already developed relations with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and International Brotherhood of Teamsters, but also with prominent legal advocacy groups like the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) and the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), or with long-standing immigrant rights groups, including the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN). This is not to say that KIWA did not have any anchors within the Korean community. Particularly in its early phase, when the organization was hoping to reach

²⁹ Interview with Mrs. Lee, former KIWA organizer.

out to large segments of the ethnic community, KIWA acted as coordinator of the Korean American Council - a coalition made up of 8 ethnic-based advocacy and service organizations in Koreatown – and engaged in collaborative work with local service providers such as the Korean American Food and Shelter Service, the Koryo Health Foundation or the Korean Youth and Community Center (KYCC). However, by 1999, KIWA had abandoned most of its partnerships with Korean organizations.

On the contrary, KIWA's external network of support grew exponentially between 1995 and 2003, both in the direction of pan-ethnic and mainstream support. In 1995, in collaboration with organizations such as the National Center for Redress and Reparation (NCRR), the Thai Community Development Center (TCDC) and the Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates (AIWA), KIWA launched a summer training for activists of Asian origin (1995-2014) with the aim of building a *pan-ethnic* base of support for its campaigns.³⁰³¹ Building on the shared perception that Asian communities were dominated by conservative leaderships and characterized by a general political apathy, KIWA and the other organizations emphasized the importance of building a community of *Asian and Pacific Islander (API)* leaders capable of challenging internal relations of power, as well as of building bridges with other ethnic communities.³² Several prominent activists attended this training, including Liz Sunwoo, KIWA staff member and general MIWON coordinator from 1999 till 2006, as well as Aquilina Soriano Versoza and John Deloro, who founded the Pilipino Workers Center shortly after their participation in 1997.³³ Rather than through official and formal channels, the relationships between many of these people had mostly solidified in the informal settings of student activism, as proved to be the case for Paul Lee (KIWA), Aquilina Soriano (PWC) and Chancee Martorell (TCDC) during their time at UCLA University.³⁴ KIWA practically incubated both the Thai Community Development Center (TCDC) in 1995 and the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC) in 1997, agreeing to act as fiscal sponsor for both organizations and to share office space with them within its premises. Although the TCDC gradually showed more interest in service provision than in community organizing, it became an important partner of KIWA, particularly in exposing sweatshop conditions in the garment sector. The PWC, on the other hand, later became a strong partner within the Multiethnic Immigrant Workers Organizing Network (MIWON) in the early 2000s.

In addition to the longer term and profound commitments outlined above, KIWA took part in countless coalitions and alliances between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. We can just mention the most important here: Sweatshop Watch, a statewide coalition of more than 40 organizations which monitored abusive labor conditions in the garment industry;³⁵ the Metropolitan Alliance, a coalition led by the Action for Grassroots Empowerment and Neighborhood Development Alternatives (AGENDA) to promote

³⁰ Grant application, January 1995

³¹ KIWA News Bulletin, Summer 1996

³² Interview Summary, 10 Feb, 1995. The emphasis on a Pan-Asian leadership can be also seen in the high number of related coalitions which KIWA is part of. Those include, among others: the Asian Pacific Planning Council (APPCON), the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), the Asian Pacific Americans for a New L.A. and the Asian Pacific Islanders for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment.

³³ KIWA News Bulletin, 1996

³⁴ Interview with Aquilina Soriano, PWC executive director and organizer

³⁵ KIWA, Interim Report 1998-1999

voters' education and a progressive political agenda in Los Angeles;³⁶ the Coalition of Immigrant Workers Advocates (CIWA), a collaborative effort of different workers centers to pressure local labor agency to implement regulations in the garment industry; the Multiethnic Immigrant Workers Organizing Network (MIWON), a coalition of organizations addressing immigrant status issues. Despite the different objectives, KIWA was often involved with in different coalitions with the same organizations, this creating strong inter-dependencies among a core group of allies.

These networks of support help us understand how KIWA's work develops across ethnic lines, or why the organization increasingly gets involved in immigrant rights issues. Coalitions such as CIWA and, even more importantly MIWON, are important not only because they provide a fast avenue to external material resources.³⁷ They are also spaces for organizations with similar constituencies to share and discuss experiences, practices and strategies. However, they are also places where ideological disagreements, organizational competition and personal jealousies can lead to conflicts that cannot be reconciled. KIWA's organizational crisis in the mid-2000s can also be seen in the context of tightly clustered coalitions such as MIWON, where the larger and more resourceful CHIRLA was able to gradually silence the claims smaller organizations such as KIWA, PWC or the Garment Worker Center (GWC) and partially exclude them from collaborative resources. Despite being formally still active, MIWON has long ceased to play an active role, replaced by other coalitions. KIWA's new focus on housing and resident's rights is exemplified by the new alliances that the organization has been able to build over the last few years, from the Right to the City Alliance to the Koreatown Tenants Defense Network and the Healthy Homes Collaborative.³⁸

Conclusion

Organizations of all kinds are constantly struggling to be perceived as legitimate actors by their constituency and their supporters. Different organizations build their legitimacy through varying combinations of symbolic and material resources. KIWA's history shows the importance of a number of factors in shaping strategic organizational choices: individual ideological trajectories of members and staff; the resources that the primary constituency is willing to pool and commit to the organization and its political project; the wider inter-organizational networks in which the organization is embedded.

Since its establishment, the founders of KIWA have firmly placed the organization within a social and economic justice ideological framework. Their previous experience as labor union organizers, particularly during campaigns that experimented with innovative strategies, paved the ground for KIWA's militant industry-wide campaigns. Despite adopting a strong class-based perspective, KIWA's members initially

³⁶ KIWA, Grant Application 2001-2002

³⁷ The soon-to-be MIWON coalition, for example, heavily supported KIWA's Elephant Snack Restaurant Campaign in 2000. Organizations such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC) and the Garment Worker Center (GWC) sent their staff and their membership to attend a march ending in front of the restaurant. Later on, they also heavily supported the picketing of the Assi supermarket, participating in actions and rallies during the Market Workers Justice Campaign.

³⁸ KIWA Grant Application, 2011-2012; Grant Application, 2013-2014

envisioned to target exclusively ethnic Koreans, presenting themselves as the voice of the oppressed low-wage workers within the ethnic community.

The decision to eventually represent immigrant workers across ethnic lines was influenced by two important factors: the partial refusal of Korean workers to support KIWA's highly militant and confrontational campaigns, especially in light of the strong backlash on the side of the ethnic elites; the relative ease with which Latino workers could be mobilized, providing KIWA with: the manpower to support its struggle, organize demonstrations, carry out project activities; the legitimacy necessary to access specific types of external resources – such as the support of Spanish-speaking media, Latino organizations, Chicano advocacy groups, and so on – which would eventually dramatically increase the visibility of the organization.

At the same time, KIWA carefully built and developed over time a dense network of relations with other progressive organizations in Los Angeles. Since its establishment, KIWA was embedded in a set of relations of mutual support outside the ethnic enclave which enabled the organization to heighten the level of political conflict within Koreatown and refuse to compromise.

However, legitimacy is highly unstable. By keeping its focus on highly visible and transformative campaigns, KIWA was successful in offering an alternative political vision of Koreatown and in challenging its symbolic economy (Bum Kwon, 2013). Nonetheless, that came at a high cost, as the organization had to focus all its energies on the Market Workers Justice Campaign and the Assi boycott instead of continuing the leadership development and political education of its membership base. The demise of the Restaurant Workers Association of Koreatown was a particularly fateful event, as the organization dismantled its most immediate connection to a cross-ethnic base of workers and proved unable to restore it in the years that would follow. The discussion that followed, and the decision to refocus KIWA's core activities around Koreatown residents, signaled the strong internal disagreements on the organizational strategy. By 2006, virtually all organizers had left the organization.

KIWA's network of supporters and allies proved crucial in sustaining the organization's strenuous efforts during the groundbreaking restaurant and market workers campaign. At the same time, they also 'trapped' KIWA in a number of coalitions and collaborative efforts which the organization did not have the capacity to honor. Not only this subtracted important resources from the internal life of the organization, but it also magnified KIWA's internal problems as they became discussed within certain platforms, such as MIWON. The abrupt departure of a number of staff in the mid-2000s forced staff from allied organizations such as CHIRLA, PWC or the GWC to pick sides, eventually disrupting a number of personal relations that had been built over ten or twenty years of common activism. Moreover, from a financial point of view, by failing to develop a sustainable membership base, KIWA found itself obliged to diversify its funding sources. However, the emergence of a variety of workers centers and immigrant organizations between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s meant that KIWA had to face a much stronger competition for funds than in its early days. By diversifying its funding streams, particularly in the direction of foundations that had much stricter donor policies than the Liberty Hill, the organization also became less autonomous in its activities.

KIWA's latest phase, despite a focus on multiethnic neighborhood residency, affordable housing and tenant's rights, seems to indicate a renewed interest by the organization in rebuilding relations with the mainstream Korean community. One of KIWA's latest project, a partnership with Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) to build affordable housing in Koreatown, also appears to suggest that the group has quietly transitioned to a service-oriented organizational model, and that has lost its more radical political vision.

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