

Women Creating Change: The Center for Immigrant Families' English Literacy Project

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## Who We Are: The Center for Immigrant Families

In 1996, the Clinton administration enacted three laws that, together, had dire consequences on the lives of poor and working class people of color and immigrants, particularly women.<sup>1</sup> In response, community members, community mental health workers, and activists came together and began a process of exploring the ways in which the multiple impacts of these laws and the country's increasing xenophobia affected not only the material conditions but also the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals and communities. We also believed deeply that those most negatively affected needed to be at the forefront of the responses driving the solutions – not as victims but as agents of change. These discussions laid the foundation for the Center for Immigrant Families (CIF).<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the interconnectedness of the social, political, legal, and psychological realities facing our communities, CIF was established in 1997 as an independent organization that would address these multiple dimensions in our struggle for social justice and community self-determination.

In 1999, CIF officially became a collective where poor and working class immigrant women of color could come together and organize for personal and social transformation.<sup>3</sup> Over the past several years, CIF has forged a political analysis and practice that relies on the power and meaning of communal storytelling rooted in the lived experiences of working class immigrant women of color and has developed a holistic approach through which we address the multi-layered impacts of injustice. With a profound commitment to a process based on popular education and Participatory Action Research and drawing inspiration from liberation theology and popular education-based social movements throughout Latin America and the Global South, we work to unlock our collective imaginations and our dreams and visions of the society we want for our families and communities to thrive.<sup>4</sup> Building from an approach that recognizes the

intersectionality of oppressions, we locate our most powerful resistance as one that can emerge from the strength of who we are as women, caregivers, economic providers, survivors, and, essentially, as the glue that holds many of our communities together.

#### CIF's Women Creating Community English Literacy Project

In 2001, we engaged in a community assessment where the development of English language literacy was identified as an issue of priority among immigrant women of color in our community of Manhattan Valley, an Uptown Manhattan neighborhood in New York City that is largely made up of working-class Black and Latino families. The 1996 reforms and the precedents that they set were now combined with a post-9/11 New York where racism and anti-immigrant sentiment had dramatically mushroomed. We found, across the spectrum of needs, dwindling ESL/ESOL services and increasing restrictions on those that were available. Adult education and literacy programs – whose participants are largely immigrants, single mothers, people of color, and poor people – were, and continue to be, severely under funded (Greene, 2006). And those programs that received governmental funding were offering limited access to undocumented immigrants and to women with young children.

Furthermore, many of these remaining programs increasingly subscribed to conservative pedagogical approaches and seemed to conflate English literacy with assimilation and citizenship. Too often, CIF and other community members who had participated in these programs shared with us that, finding themselves approached as blank slates upon whom dominant notions of language, race, culture, and citizenship were to be inscribed, they were subjected to yet another assault. In fact, the discrimination they faced, which was often articulated via language, were reinforced and intensified in many adult education and English literacy programs. When someone did access a program, the treatment they received was usually

disrespectful and humiliating to them, for example, casually being referred to as illegal or having their accents or cultural traditions ridiculed.

As a response, in 2002, CIF launched the *Women Creating Community English Literacy Project*.<sup>5</sup> This project is one of the few in our community that is accessible to poor and working class women of color, including those with young children, regardless of immigration status and income.<sup>6</sup> Our literacy workshops place English language learning within a community-building and social justice framework. The situation of working class immigrant women of color learning English within the borders of the United States is, indeed, a part of the legacy of oppressed communities throughout history. As Frantz Fanon (1967) has written, "Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation..." (p. 18). Thus, the dominant language, how it is learned, and what it enables us to communicate become *political* questions.

At CIF, as we engage in the process of English language learning, we also actively seek to promote the value and sustenance of our own languages, our mother tongues, and cultures. It is in our mother tongues that we convey our deepest sentiments and selves. Our own languages are the expression of our hearts, our families, our memories, and the legacies of which we want our children to be proud. Learning English in this context, we locate the language as a tool of resistance and, sometimes, of survival, one that also has a particular use-value for us. It has a function in our lives. As we consider the significance of learning English in our lives, we focus on our own and our community's reasons for wanting to advance English language skills. For many of us, English language literacy skills mean having a tool to defend ourselves and greater confidence and independence as women. It also means access to jobs, being able to help our

children with their homework, and enabling communication and building with people and groups from different communities. We also work to challenge popular and internalized notions of who knows English by promoting the practice of women of color teaching and learning together.

As we engage in our learning together, reclaiming our memories and stories of survival (including, how we become immigrant women in the United States) is, therefore, central to our methodology and intention. For us, these stories are not mere reminders of when we arrived or of our cultural heritage, but they are also about why we came, who and what we left behind, our expectations for life here, and what we found when we arrived. As we share our migration stories among a community of women whose stories resonate with our own, a generative process of individual and collective empowerment unfolds as we speak and narrate our own lives for ourselves and with each other. Our individual stories, shared with one another, allow us to explore both the similarities and differences among us as we forge analyses of the many profound impacts of migration. Through our stories and the analyses that build from them, we understand the different issues and challenges affecting us within a larger structural and historical context of immigrants' rights, racial justice, and women's empowerment, rather than in terms of personal failings.

Emerging from this process, a community of women with strong ties of support and trust is nurtured. We recognize our power, wisdom, and strength as *luchadoras*, or women warriors. The curriculum is structured to culminate in a final project that draws upon the English language skills participants have acquired as well as their collective reflection and learning that come from the shared stories and realities as immigrant women. The projects that we have developed and engaged in together have ranged from a social justice campaign to a photography and storytelling exhibit to newsletter publications.

## *Application and Practice*

CIF's English Literacy Project has been marked by a process of growth and evolution that is shaped and molded by the courageous women who put their faith in the process and leave their contribution for the next group of *compañeras* to absorb and build upon. The section below outlines some of the ways that our process and principles come to life in our practice.

*Facilitating a community of learners.* CIF's English Literacy Project works to strike a delicate balance between teaching and facilitating. The facilitators strive to ensure that the sessions reflect the belief that we are all teachers and learners. That is not to suggest that we all exercise the same role. Facilitators locate their knowledge of the English language as one tool to which they have access and can share, while, simultaneously and proactively, making explicit that participants' many different experiences, skills, knowledge bases, and wisdom are equally valued. To that effect, the conscious and intentional role of facilitators is to value each learner's knowledge and not to promote expertise based, for example, on formal education.<sup>7</sup> The intention of this community of support and mutuality is communicated from the outset and in the initial orientation, where facilitators make clear the goals of the project as a process that is about personal and collective growth and learning based on a commitment to one another as individuals and as a community.

Indeed, the facilitators' roles are to find the best ways to bring out what participants already know. Although some participants may locate themselves as Level 1 Beginners, this is often in response to experiences of being ridiculed or made fun of when trying to speak English. Many, in fact, already speak and understand some English. To encourage participants' voices, facilitators make a point of not correcting pronunciation or grammatical mistakes while a participant is speaking. Additionally, facilitators integrate regular one-on-one sessions in which,

individually, each learner's particular level and needs are addressed as related to writing, grammar, and conversation. Through this practice, we have witnessed the ways in which learners' confidence, which grows tremendously as the sessions progress, has an immeasurable impact upon their English language learning and acquisition.

Finally, as part of our model, we have co-facilitators for every cycle. Co-facilitation reflects popular education principles, such as building collaboratively upon each other's wisdom and knowledge. Together, the co-facilitators work to ensure that the content connects and builds from session to session; that each member of the group has the opportunity to express herself and share her stories and experiences; and, overall, that a supportive environment is created and builds a beautiful community of learners.

*Our Curriculum Themes.* Thematically, our curriculum is based on a three-part process.<sup>8</sup> We have discussed how the first part of this process, which begins with our migration stories and all that they encapsulate, creates a framework through which we explore, in the second part of our process, the factors that drive migration, the consequences of migration, and the conditions that we confront as we assume the identity of immigrant. The dimensions of our stories become the actual thematic content that we explore as we build English language literacy skills. For example, as we tell our stories, we discuss how the decision to migrate is often shaped by social, economic, and political conditions and global realities. Themes of globalization and neoliberalism grow from participants' own experiences – many of whom have had experiences working in Free Trade Zones. As our stories continue to unfold, we make connections among the feminization of industrialized labor, the discrimination women face in both our home countries and in the US, and patterns of migration to the US. And as we locate our stories in the context of issue analysis, we then move to the third part of the process. Driven by a belief in and

recognition of our community's strength and ability to bring about change, we explore possibilities of strengthening communal ties and organizing together for justice. An exercise that we use in the third part involves reflecting upon the many ways we are already organizers in our lives, making our lives and communities more visible, and building upon each other's knowledge, experience, and fortitude.

*Mother Tongue Sessions.* The Mother Tongue Sessions are integrated into the curriculum approximately once a month throughout each twelve-week cycle and recognize, as we engage in the process of developing English language skills, the importance of valuing our mother tongues as a part of who we are. These sessions, held in participants' native languages, enable us to build a deeper and more trusting community with one another as we explore our experiences and stories around key issues and themes. Through the Mother Tongue sessions, we also create a context and content for the English language literacy sessions that follow, experiencing our own languages as a strength and not a weakness.

For example, sharing our migration stories, often for the first time, happens within a Mother Tongue session. In order to fully communicate our stories, we need to speak the language that really allows us to express our emotions, dreams, memories, and everything we carry deep inside of us. Requiring that these stories be spoken in English can make it too difficult to share many of our experiences or it can make us feel compelled to change how they are told, feeling pressured to be telling the story of our successful assimilation into American society.

As we come back to our English language literacy sessions, our stories are understood as content for learning, and, in that way our own voices and experiences remain at the center. To that end, Mother Tongue sessions have explored the emotional impact of other issues that emerge within the sessions, including violence against women and institutional violence;



immigration, such as documentation, raids, fear of detention and deportation; and negotiating language and power, often in relationships with children and their schools as well as with English-speaking family members. Then, in our English language sessions, we build upon the emotional experiences that have been shared without self-consciousness as we begin to build vocabulary and sentence structure in our writing and speaking.

### Un-locking Our Political Imaginations and Dreams

Indeed, throughout the curriculum, the themes, specific content of each session, and English-language learning are integrated. For example, as we develop a vision for a just world that is grounded in our realities, we work on being able to express intentions, desires, and needs through the future and conditional tenses. These sessions draw upon resources that include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech as well as Nina Simone's *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*. We engage in listening and reading comprehension activities, reviewing relevant vocabulary in order to explore the meaning of each piece and examine the particular role that collective visions and dreams have played in struggles for justice. As we highlight the rich legacies of resistance and connect our own struggles as immigrants to those of other oppressed communities, we return to our own stories, which we now understand within a structural and historical context. In the sessions that follow, which focus on addressing change, it is the collective articulation of our vision for a just world – for what we *want, hope, dream, wish, could do* and *would do* – that unites, sustains, and strengthens our ensuing community efforts.

### The Impact of CIF's Model

The impact of CIF's English Literacy Project occurs on multiple levels and demonstrates the ways in which personal and social transformations are, indeed, interconnected processes. When reflecting on the project's impact on their own individual lives, many participants have

talked about how they have come to view their own roles in their families and communities differently. Some have even taken steps to break the silence concerning domestic violence in their lives. Others have spoken about how much stronger they feel in general, and in particular in their interactions at work, in hospitals, with the police, and in their children's schools. Several other participants have envisioned continuing their education, and many are doing it. The sentiments of two participants echo those of so many others:

Being here [in the Literacy class] is like therapy for me. I am able to express my thoughts, share my story with other women, and feel support from other *compañeras*. We are all here to support each other.

Yes, I still feel lost in this maze, but now I have it clear that we have to struggle and fight, it made me conscious to see so many *compañeras* take control of their lives!

As noted earlier, each group of participants engages in a project that applies the English language skills we have built and addresses the themes we have explored together. While the nature of the projects we have engaged in has ranged from social action projects to newsletters, the character of the community that is built is consistent and key to the particular type of transformation that is found at CIF:

I've been to so many other places, and none has ever addressed my concerns or made me feel comfortable. It has also been great to make new friends here and talk about what matters to us. We all agree that we have to be united and support each other in our personal struggles and also in the larger struggle for everyone's survival. I really feel like I'm already becoming a new person, feeling more secure in myself.

Indeed, our own individual strength and growth is valued within a community based on principles of mutuality, justice, dignity, respect, and trust and love. An example of the power of this community comes from CIF's *Project to Challenge Segregation in OUR Public Schools*, an organizing initiative that was founded by English Literacy Project participants. Exploring together how we envisioned life to be in the US, we agreed that one of our primary expectations was that our children would have access to quality education. As our stories continued to unfold, we discussed our experiences with a different reality that has included limited access to our district's public elementary schools as well as discrimination within many of the schools our children attend. Out of the process of identifying the common threads in our stories and developing an analysis of the structural forces at work, we realized that the discriminatory treatment we experienced in the public schools reflected a pattern of systemic discrimination affecting our entire Manhattan Valley community. Centering our own visions, we recognized that our voices and perspectives—as parents, as poor and working class women of color, and as our children's first and primary educators—are essential in the struggle for equity and justice in the public education system and to create systemic change in our schools and school system.

Together, we committed ourselves to raising community consciousness and breaking what we have come to term the *normalization of segregation*. We engaged in participatory action-research, street theater, community events, media work, and the documentation of our parents' stories in a self-published and widely distributed report, *Segregated and Unequal: The Public Elementary Schools of District 3 in New York City*. As a result of our organizing, our families have felt more empowered to reclaim our human right to a quality and equitable education. In 2005, this shift in power became all the more real when, as a result of our work, the New York City Department of Education was forced to announce the implementation of a

policy for the following school year to address the racial and economic inequalities in our schools' admissions process. In retrospect, it is clear that this initiative could never have achieved the same success had our stories, our voices, our vision, and such a strong community of powerful and united women not been at the center of the entire process.

Another example of the particular type of personal-community transformation that is indicative of CIF's process comes a photography and storytelling exhibit, "Luchadoras\*Women Warriors\*Mohila Joddha" that grew out of our 2005-2006 Literacy Project. Through a collaboration with unseenableamerica of Bread and Roses Cultural Project of 1199, CIF had the exciting opportunity to integrate photography into our curriculum, which gave us a creative medium to capture a range of powerful experiences, realities, and emotions. Curated by participants, the exhibit features participants' everyday forms of resistance - to find community and sustenance, preserve and pass on their cultures, persevere for joy, communicate with others, advocate for their children, and support family – and challenges dominant portrayals of immigrant women as victims.

The accompanying texts to each photograph, written in participants' own languages as well as in English, are not direct translations of each other. The two versions of each text emphasize the different role each language plays in our lives and in determining the multiple dimensions in which our stories can be told. Participants from this group also planned the opening reception of the exhibit, which drew hundreds of people, and later went on to travel to Boston and to the US Social Forum in Atlanta.

## Conclusion

The interconnected process of personal and collective transformation that is at the heart of CIF's Women Creating Community English Literacy Project enables a strong and sustained

community of women dedicated to working alongside one another for community and justice. Our project has become a reality because of the profound commitment of participants, facilitators, CIF members, and others who have shared their experiences and wisdom and worked to ensure that English language learning is fully, creatively, and imaginatively integrated and intertwined within our community-building work and struggle for dignity and respect.

#### Acknowledgments

While we are writing this article as members of CIF's collective who have helped shape and facilitate the English Literacy Project, there have been many different voices, inspirations, and contributors. In addition to those already noted throughout the piece, we would also like to acknowledge the contributions that Liz Werner, Priscila Torres, Dina Lopez, Prita Lal, and Sarah Eisenstein have made to this project. Additionally, we would like to recognize that some of the sections of this article draw from one of our collective member's doctoral work.

## References

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act drastically limited access to public benefits and legal protections for non-citizens and, in effect, criminalized working-class people of color. The effects continue to be felt today.

<sup>2</sup> The roots of CIF grew out of a collaboration with the Roberto Clemente Center. Additionally, the Bloomingdale Family Head Start Program played a significant role in shaping the vision and mission of CIF and of our Women Creating Community English Literacy Project.

<sup>3</sup> CIF's collective evolved through a long process of creating and implementing meaningful change within our structure. Becoming a collective seemed to us to be the most genuine way to have a process and structure that reflected our principles and ideology.

<sup>4</sup> Popular education and participatory action research are methodologies that emphasize the centrality and importance of people's own histories, cultures, and experiences in their organizing and activism and are based on a profound belief in self-determination.

<sup>5</sup> For this project, we have drawn significant inspiration from many places, including El Barrio Popular Education Center, the Bloomingdale Family Program's literacy classes, the Highlander Center, and the work of Ella Baker and Paulo Freire, among others. In addition to visiting El Barrio Popular Education Center, we had a number of valuable conversations with its founder, Klaudia Rivera.

<sup>6</sup> Often, literacy programs fail to recognize some of the particular and basic needs of poor and working-class women, such as the reality of childcare and juggling multiple schedules and responsibilities, which reflect the inequalities we face. CIF works with the Regeneración

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Childcare Collective NYC, a network of organizers that provides childcare to facilitate the participation of low-income mothers and queer parents of color in building movements for collective liberation.

<sup>7</sup> CIF has developed an extensive training for facilitators on literacy, popular education, and facilitation.

<sup>8</sup> Issues and themes are explored through a wide range of exercises and resources that include poetry, films, and Theatre of the Oppressed. We have found that, in the opening up of our stories, beginning with a poem or resource about someone else's story has been particularly meaningful. This makes it possible for us to first discuss our own lives in relation to others and facilitates a greater depth of sharing and exploration. We choose poems and resources based on their English language accessibility as well as the ways in which they speak to different migration experiences and interweave issues of race, class and gender.



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### Meet the Contributors

Ujju Aggarwal, Priscilla González, Donna Nevel, and Perla Placencia are collective members of the Center for Immigrant Families, which is a collectively run organization for low-income immigrant women of color that organizes to transform the conditions of injustice we face and their multi-layered impact on our own lives and that of our communities.