For five years, Sophia Cheng served as a community organizer for Restaurant Opportunities Center of Los Angeles (ROC-LA), a chapter of the national non-profit, community-oriented organization dedicated to improving wages and working conditions for restaurant industry employees, many of them low-income workers of color and immigrants. In 2018, Cheng began working for Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), which serves the needs of mostly Korean and Latino immigrant workers. Both organizations have successfully advocated for a $15 minimum wage, paid sick days, and anti-wage-theft ordinances. A graduate of Pomona College, Cheng earned her M.A in Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she currently lectures.
“Find your ‘partners in crime’—the organizers, worker leaders, and other people who cheer you on.”

Sophia Cheng, 34, is the daughter of immigrants from Guangzhou, China, who worked mostly in construction. “The biggest impact my parents had on me was to instill a strong sense of fairness, justice, and right and wrong,” says Cheng. “There’s a stereotype that immigrant parents push their children to be very practical as a matter of survival and necessity, and don’t encourage dreaming. That is not my experience. I never saw blue-collar jobs as inherently ‘less than,’” she says. “My respect for hard work definitely stems from seeing my parents do ‘real things’ and also be smart, philosophical, whole people.”

Cheng has worked as a community organizer for a decade. In that role, Cheng has witnessed the evolution of restaurant employees—who work in every sector from fast food to full service, mom-and-pop shops to fine-dining digs—who typically come to her with a specific, individual problem such as wage theft. “They have a chance to analyze their individual problem in a broader context, plug into campaigns, recruit and develop their co-workers, and become leaders to transform the conditions that caused their initial problem,” she says. “I always say that through my job, I get to see the best in people.”

Cheng was recruited by ROC for street outreach to restaurant workers. She learned from Asian American activist mentors that the privileges and social advantages she enjoyed as a second-generation Chinese-American were the result of social movements and community organizing. “I was interested in organizing from the start because conditions in restaurants mirror and influence standards across the growing service sector,” she says. “Also, the racial, gender, language, and age diversity in the restaurant industry provides an opportunity to bring together people who may work next to each other every day, but don’t have a chance to connect personally outside of work.”

Cheng points to community organizing wins such as a 2016 anti-wage-theft ordinance in Los Angeles, the result of a seven-year campaign, as an example of the power of collective action. The law quickly became a regional template, she says, leading to similar legislation in Pasadena, Santa Monica, and unincorporated LA County. “This was an important win for restaurant workers, who identified early on that wage theft, in the form of denied meal and rest breaks, unpaid overtime, and off-the-clock work, is a huge problem in the industry.”

Labor battles aren’t easy: Progress can be slow and there are frequently significant setbacks along the way. Cheng takes it all in stride.
I remind myself that I’m in this for the long run, and for my own mental and emotional health, I need to distinguish between what I can and cannot control,” says Cheng, who, as a graduate student, also served as a researcher for the Food Chain Workers Alliance, a national coalition of worker-based organizations across many sectors of the food system, including agriculture, processing, sales, and serving.

Educating employees about their rights—and the agencies they can contact when workplace violations occur—is all in a day’s work for Cheng. Over the course of her career, the Angeleno has gotten savvy about how to set herself, and those she represents, up for success. Teaming up with like-minded people and organizations is critical. Case in point: the players behind the “Fight for 15” campaign, a national worker-based effort that includes fast food employees credited with pushing lawmakers into adopting higher minimums. California leads the way on minimum wage hikes: The grassroots initiative successfully lobbied for a $15 minimum by 2020 in Los Angeles. In 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill for $15 by 2022 across the state. “Find your ‘partners in crime’ – the organizers, worker leaders, and other people who cheer you on,” says Cheng, who also serves as a lecturer at UCLA in Asian American Studies. “We are outspent by the corporate restaurant lobby and the obstacles can feel overwhelming, but to succeed we have to support each other and celebrate the small victories.”

Cheng joined the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance in February 2018 and continues to focus on restaurant and market workers. The local nonprofit, says the Koreatown resident, is at the forefront of building strong ties between labor unions, worker centers, and other community-based organizations and addresses needs beyond traditional workplace concerns, including housing and transportation for low-income workers. The mother of young children, Cheng is currently working part-time; 60-hour workweeks as an organizer don’t mesh well with family life, hence the shift in her workplace and schedule.
“Being on the margins gives me a unique vantage point. Sometimes you can see more from the outside.”

As an Asian American woman, Cheng says she often feels invisible in a male-dominated society that sees racial and ethnic concerns in black-and-white terms. But she’s turned that reality into a positive. “Being on the margins gives me a unique vantage point,” she says. “Sometimes you can see more from the outside.”

Cheng’s advocacy has extended to sexual harassment in the restaurant industry. In 2014, ROC released a report on the pervasive problem. The group analyzed Equal Employment Opportunity Commission claims and found that women restaurant workers file claims at a rate five times higher than the general female workforce. ROC’s “Not on the Menu” campaign rallies around the country, including in LA, predate the current, widespread national discussion of the issue.

Four out of five female restaurant workers have experienced some form of sexual harassment from their customers, according to the ROC report. And two out of three experienced sexual harassment from management on a monthly basis.

The emergence of high-profile sexual harassment cases across the country has helped highlight the seriousness of an issue that is a widespread and longstanding problem in the service sector, says Cheng, “There’s a greater understanding that these practices are unacceptable and workers should be treated with respect and dignity.”

“Harassment is baked into the culture of many workplaces from the start,” says Cheng, who adds that women, trans, and gender-nonconforming workers face greater barriers to employment, promotion, and safe workplace environments than men. “In a tipping culture, especially in states where tipped workers earn only the $2.13 an hour federal minimum wage, some employees feel that putting up with harassment from customers because their income depends on tips is just part and parcel of the job.” Such behavior, says Cheng, should never be allowed to “normalize” in a work environment. (California is one of only seven states that pay tipped workers their state’s minimum wage instead of the $2.13 federal minimum.)

This community organizer’s biggest lesson from her years of representing restaurant workers: “Every single person is valuable, needed, and can contribute something.” —Sarah Henry

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