

# FARM WORKER ISSUES: WOMEN'S ISSUES

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Women are the keystone in the American food system: they hold their own families together while simultaneously making up 22% of the agricultural workforce in the U.S.

While they play a vital role in harvesting the food on our plates, farm worker women are arguably the most exploited workers in this country, even more vulnerable than male farm workers. Females in the fields are often given the least desired, lowest-paying jobs, are the first to be laid off, receive fewer opportunities to advance, and face a culture of discrimination and machismo in the workplace.

In other words, female farm workers endure nearly all the issues male farm workers face, as well as some that are largely unique, such as sexual harassment, pregnancy and gender discrimination, and the extra responsibility of being the primary caregivers of children.

## Sexual Harassment

One of the biggest issues that women farm workers face is sexual harassment. In one survey of farm worker women in California, 90% of the women identified sexual harassment as a major problem.

Anecdotal evidence from the fields provides a further glimpse into just how common these occurrences are. According to an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lawyer reporting on farm worker women in Fresno, CA: "We were told that hundreds, if not thousands, of women had to have sex with supervisors to get or keep jobs and/or put up with a constant barrage of grabbing and touching and propositions for sex by supervisors."

Women resort to dressing like men in order to reduce chances of these unwanted, unsolicited advances. In one company, farm worker women refer to the field as the "fil de calzon", or "field of panties", because so many women have been raped by supervisors there.

These incidents of sexual harassment are exacerbated by documentation status. For instance, fear of being reported to immigration authorities can make women hesitant to report violations of their rights. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "[Undocumented women] are often the primary caregivers for children, making them less likely to assert their rights for fear of being fired or, worse, being deported and separated from their families. And because of their fear of being reported to immigration authorities, they are reluctant to report wage violations, sexual violence or gender discrimination, or to take legal action to stop it."

Undocumented farm worker women also generally earn minimum wage or less, have no health insurance, and receive no sick or vacation days, in addition to the other challenges they face.

## **Violation of Rights and Reproductive Rights**

The few rights that female farm workers do hold can be violated merely based on gender discrimination. For instance, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports that some employers take advantage of married women to evade extra payments like Social Security. By illegally paying women on their spouse's paychecks instead of issuing individual payment, women are prevented from qualifying for certain benefits and denied minimum wages. Above all, this illegal practice also robs women of financial autonomy, giving their husbands an unjust amount of power.

Perhaps even more troubling than the violation of economic rights is the violation of reproductive rights faced by farm worker women. Women in the fields are exposed to toxic pesticides through direct spraying, breathing in pesticide drift, and touching pesticide residue on the skin and clothing. This exposure has been linked to causing infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects in babies.

In the words of Gloria, a 37 year old woman from Mexico, in the same SPLC report: "When the fruit arrives, it has the white powder on it from the chemicals, and we have to clean it off. And in one way or another, we're breathing it in. you feel that your throat and chest is filling up. We don't have anything to cover our mouth and nose with. We're in constant contact with those chemicals."

## **Sources:**

- *Injustice on Our Plates: Immigrant Women in the U.S. Food Industry*, Southern Poverty Law Center
- 'Bandana Project' (spotlighting sexual exploitation of farm worker women), Southern Poverty Law Center
- *Rural Women's Health Project*

