

## NATIONAL FARM WORKER MINISTRY

# FARM WORKERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: WOMEN & CHILDREN

### Voices from the Field

"What I didn't realize was the real danger was actually the pesticides that were all around us." During Juana's first pregnancy in her early 20s, she worked in the lettuce harvest. "I was in charge of packing the boxes with heads of lettuce. It wasn't heavy work; I just had to be quick. At that time, I didn't know how important it was to wear gloves and protect myself from those pesticide residues. I would lean right into the boxes, breathing those residues in. I thought it was important to do the work as quickly as possible; I didn't realize it was more important to think about protecting myself and my baby." Juana lost her baby when she was well into her pregnancy and even now wonders if her miscarriage was due to working so intensely with a crop loaded with pesticides. About 10 years after her miscarriage she was diagnosed with lymphoma, and shortly thereafter her youngest son was diagnosed with the same disease. "Our house was (and still is) right along the edges of the lettuce fields. When we started living there I still didn't know about how dangerous

pesticides could be. I would hang the clothes outside to dry in the fresh air, and my son would play in the water that collected in the irrigation ditches. We didn't know the risks." Both she and her son have been cancer-free for a number of years, but she still fears for their health because they are living in the same house, and Juana continues to work in the lettuce harvest. "I try to be so much more careful now. I understand how important it is to wear clothes that can help protect me when I'm working. We drink bottled water instead of the water from our land because I just don't trust it. And I try to have my son play in places that are truly safe for him and won't cause him any more danger. I think it's so important that every single person knows about how dangerous pesticides really are. If you are living in our community or any other farming community in this country, you could be at risk because pesticides don't have boundaries. They can freely cross wherever they want and we all need to know this."

*Names have been changed..*

Women are the keystone in the American food system: they hold their own families together while simultaneously making up 28% 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.

Juana's story shows the intersectionality of the obstacles facing women farm workers. 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. Climate change is leading to the increased use of pesticides due to faster evaporation rates and more pests, putting women at even more risk of reproductive health problems and cancers. The pressure to provide for the family while making very low wages pushes women farm workers to work through breaks, putting them further at risk for heat stress related illnesses.

Farm worker children playing in the fields and living in close proximity to the fields are also at risk. Child labor laws include long lists of the "hazardous conditions" in which children under the age of 18 cannot work, yet exposure to high heat, pesticides and nicotine (uniquely from tobacco field work) are not on that list. A Human Rights Watch report noted an alarmingly high rate of death and injury for young workers. From 2005 to 2008, 43 children under age 18 died from occupational injuries in crop production—27 percent of all children who were fatally injured at work during this period.

Physiologically, differences between adults and children place children at even more risk to heat related illness and the effects of pesticides. The Natural Resource Defense Council, in a 1998 report, determined that children are "disproportionately exposed to pesticides compared with adults due to their greater intake of food, water, and air per unit of body weight."

NFWM recognizes the inherent dignity in all people and is committed to justice for all farm workers, especially women and children.

## Act!

Join NFWM in advocating for the Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety, H.R. 3394, which would end exploitative child labor in U.S. agriculture.

## Learn More!

Citations, event planning resources, and links to additional resources; <http://nfwm.org/resource-center/harvest-of-justice/>

## About Us

National Farm Worker Ministry educates and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to support farm worker led campaigns to improve farm workers' working and living conditions.

To learn more, visit [nfwm.org](http://nfwm.org)



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