

FARM WORKER ISSUES: WOMEN'S ISSUES

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.

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.

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 sexual harassment and violation of reproductive rights faced by farm worker women.

Sexual Harassment

One of the biggest issues that women farm workers face is sexual harassment. In a [Human Rights Watch](#) report nearly all of the participating farm workers said they had experienced sexual violence or harassment or knew someone who had. Another study by the [University of California-Santa Cruz](#) found that of 150 Mexican women working in the Central Valley in California, 80 percent had experienced sexual harassment.

Anecdotal evidence from the fields provides a further glimpse into just how common these occurrences are. According to the study "[No Free Pass to Harass](#)", an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lawyer reported 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 the same study, farm worker women refer to the field where they worked 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. As the “Me Too” movement gained momentum in 2017, the voices of more low-wage working women were heard across the country. This included farm worker women, especially through the [Alianza Nacional de Campesinas](#) and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers [Harvest without Violence](#) campaign.

Violation of Reproductive Rights

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. A study by [Wellesley College](#) links pesticide exposure to infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects in babies.

In the words of Gloria, a 37-year-old woman from Mexico, in the same [Southern Poverty Law Center 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.”

The grave effects of pesticide exposure are reflected in the ‘Immokalee babies’ in Florida, the children of three mothers who were all exposed to pesticides while harvesting tomatoes, and whose children were all born with severe birth defects. The three mothers, expecting children within 2 months of each other, were neighbors who lived within one hundred yards of each other. They worked in the same field, picking tomatoes for the same company: Ag-Mart Produce, Inc.

The first baby, named Carlitos, was born with a rare condition called tetra-amelia syndrome, leaving him without arms or legs. About six weeks later, a baby named Jesus was born with a

lower jaw deformity called Pierre Robin Sequence, necessitating feeding him through a plastic tube to prevent his tongue from falling back into his throat. The third baby, Jorge, was born two days after Jesus, missing a kidney, an ear, a nose, an anus, and any visible sex organs. He was later named a girl, Violeta, but survived for only three days.

The fields where all three women worked had been sprayed with at least thirty-one different chemicals during the growing season. Many of these are named “highly toxic” and at least three labeled by [Pesticide Action Network](#) (PANNA) as “developmental and reproductive toxins.” Regulations requiring gloves, aprons, and respirators were not enforced; the women wore bandanas over their mouths to try to prevent breathing in the chemicals but were not warned of the dangers of exposure.

For sources and to learn more:

- [National Agricultural Workers Survey \(NAWS\)](#), U.S. Department of Labor
- [Injustice on Our Plates: Immigrant Women in the U.S. Food Industry](#), Southern Poverty Law Center
- [US: Sexual Violence, Harassment of Immigrant Farmworkers](#): Human Rights Watch
- [Examining the sexual harassment experiences of Mexican immigrant farmworking women](#): University of California-Santa Cruz
- [No Free Pass to Harass: Protecting the Rights of Undocumented Immigrant Women Workers in Sexual Harassment Cases](#), ACLU & NELP
- [Rural Women’s Health Project](#)
- [Alianza Nacional de Campesinas](#)
- [Harvest without Violence](#) page

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