



WCSAP
Washington Coalition of
Sexual Assault Programs

RESEARCH & ADVOCACY REVIEW

Cultivating Fear: The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the US to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment

“Sexual violence and harassment in the agricultural workplace are fostered by a severe imbalance of power between employers and supervisors and their low-wage, immigrant workers. Victims often then face systemic barriers—exacerbated by their status as farmworkers and often as unauthorized workers—to reporting these abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice.”

This report from Human Rights Watch (HRW) discusses sexual violence and harassment routinely experienced by farmworkers. The report includes moving individual stories, an analysis of laws, regulations and practices that both create a climate in which the abuse can take place with impunity or are inadequate to effectively combat the problem. The report also includes specific recommendations for legislators, governmental agencies, employers and community services (see below for the recommendations to sexual assault programs).

Sexual Violence Continuum & Dynamics

The range of abuse includes supervisors who make crude or threatening comments repeatedly, to rape involving physical injury or the use of a weapon. Workers (and their families) are promised a better job or working conditions or threatened with a loss of job, loss of housing, or deportation in order to coerce sex. Poor working conditions, including a lack of access to bathrooms or a lack of training about sexual harassment and effective remedies for sexual harassment aggravate the conditions which support abuse. The abuse often continues for months or even years.

HRW's report makes clear that the dynamics of sexual violence among immigrant agricultural workers are similar to sexual violence in other communities, but involve uniquely challenging circumstances:

- The extreme **power differential** between supervisors and workers is huge, as those with any supervisory authority can affect wages earned, termination of employment, loss of housing, and deportation of the employee, family members, and even supportive co-workers.

- **Some workers are more vulnerable to abuse** due to actual or perceived race or ethnicity, immigration status, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status, spoken language(s), and educational level.
- These workers also encounter **barriers to services** for the same reasons that they are vulnerable to abuse, in addition to the rural nature of agricultural work creating geographic isolation.

The Agricultural Industry

For those unfamiliar with the agricultural industry in the US, the report includes information about the nature of the work, the variety of employers, the demographics of the workforce and other details. Washington State's agricultural sector employs the second largest number of farmworkers, behind only California. Only three states include agricultural workers in wage hour, rest and meal period protections, and Washington is one of those states. Here are some additional key facts from the report:

- There are almost 2 million agricultural (including produce & livestock) workers in the US
- 72% are foreign born, and of those, the majority are Latino; only about 30% speak English “well”; 15%+ report being indigenous, and so Spanish may not be their first language, or even a language which they can speak
- About 50% are unauthorized (likely much higher); even those with papers such as the H2A visa are often at the mercy of employers for their legal status
- 24% female; women earn about 70% of the average wages of male counterparts (\$11,250 to \$16,250)
- Employers can be the growers, or are problematically, contractors. Both range from huge companies to small “mom-and-pop” organizations
- Those in a position to abuse their power over workers include foremen, those who provide rides to the worksite, and those who weigh or count produce or track hours, and others.

Recommendations to Sexual Assault Programs

The report includes recommendations to sexual assault programs, specifically:

- “Conduct culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate outreach to immigrant workers, including, wherever possible, indigenous farmworkers who cannot communicate effectively in English or Spanish.
- “Advocate for additional resources to increase access by rural immigrant workers to bilingual therapists.”

Additionally, the report notes that, “In cases where workers we spoke to did report crimes, they most often did so because social and legal service organizations had conducted extensive outreach until ‘someone in the community said, *Go to them, you can trust these people.*’” The report goes on to explain:

Such trust typically cannot be gained simply through traditional outreach. For example, agencies serving survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault frequently create support groups for survivors, but these subjects are taboo in many farmworker communities... Amparo Yebra, director of an agency with a strong presence in its small Central Valley, California, community concurred, saying their approach is to convene support groups every Friday with speakers on topics as varied as nutrition and budgeting information. Her agency’s clients “stay here for years, even though their problems [are] solved, they still come back if they have a letter in English they don’t understand, with bills.... Anything that they need, they can come into our office.”

The bottom line is that same principles applied in community development work and work with historically marginalized communities applies to the work of supporting immigrant farmworkers.

Conclusion

The work of supporting immigrant farmworkers who have been victimized and pushing to create a climate of greater safety in your community is important, relevant, and possible with the use of knowledge, skills, and tools already in use at sexual assault programs across Washington State. This report includes specific information that can be used to educate staff and volunteers, and to advocate with employers, law enforcement, government organizations, and legislators in your community.

References

Meng, G. (2012). *Cultivating Fear: The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the US to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment*. Human Rights Watch.

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http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/us0512ForUpload_1.pdf