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The Green Motel

That's what some women farmworkers call the fields and orchards in which they face persistent sexual assaults. As if backbreaking work, low wages and pesticide poisoning weren't enough. . .

by Rebecca Clarren

Farmworker Olivia Tamayo clasps her hands in a tight ball, as if to suffocate painful memories. Her lean, strong fingers are lined with the wrinkled wear of more than 30 years of picking and weeding vegetables in the hot sun. As she talks quietly in Spanish, surrounded by her daughter and several other women at a table in a community hall in the cramped farming town of Huron, Calif., her story spills forth.

In 1975, Tamayo arrived in California's Central Valley from Mexico, newly married, newly pregnant, with a third-grade education and and hope that life in America would provide more opportunity than the place she left behind. She was 15. By the time she was 36, she had five children, a stable marriage and steady work at Harris Farms, the Fresno County-based agricultural behemoth that annually raises 250,000 head of cattle and produces thousands of acres of tomatoes, cotton and almonds. Her job provided benefits, on-site housing and year-round employment as a crew leader. It paid only \$5 an hour, but that was 25 precious cents more per hour than regular workers earned. Even so, her dream of a better life had turned to despair.

Between 1993 and 1999, according to her law-suit against Harris Farms, Tamayo's direct supervisor and the man who had elevated her to crew leader—a Mexican immigrant named Rene Rodriguez—threatened Tamayo on an almost daily basis. Once he offered to drive her to a work site, and instead raped her under a stand of almond trees. Another time, while she was going to work on an isolated dirt road, Rodriguez blocked her way with his truck, then raped her. A third time, he came to her home while her children were sleeping. Knowing that her husband would be at work all night, he raped her again. He threatened to kill Tamayo and her husband if she ever told anyone.

"He was like the devil," Tamayo says, reiterating the testimony she gave. "I was really scared. He had a gun and a knife that he would show me. He said, 'If I wanted to, I could kill you at any moment.' He said that ever since he met me he liked me and that he wanted to take this opportunity. He always said, 'You are mine and you will never leave.' I was afraid for not only my life but for my children and my husband, what would happen if I told. He said, 'No one will believe you if you tell anyone anyways,'" says Tamayo, tears welling in her dark eyes. "I endured it all without knowing I could ask for help," Tamayo continues.

"I didn't even know there were laws or anything that would protect me. He took advantage because he knew I wasn't going to say anything. It was a trauma that followed me everywhere."

Finally, frustration and anger goaded her to action: She went to the main office to report the assault. But, according to the lawsuit, her bosses said she had no proof and wouldn't believe her. Instead, they assigned Tamayo to work in a field across from Rodriguez's house. Alone.

"They knew he was an abuser, but they covered for him," says Tamayo, her voice quaking. "I didn't want anything more than to be protected. Honestly, I really thought the company was going to help me. When they didn't, I felt betrayed."

Tamayo's story is not an anomaly. Every year, an estimated

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500,000 women toil in U.S. fields, picking crops or packing fruits and vegetables. Many are subjected to sexual harassment or assault, usually from male supervisors who control whether they get or keep their jobs. While no reports show the extent of this exploitation—which ranges from rude comments and propositions, to groping and rape—those in close touch with farmworkers say the problem is ubiquitous and may affect thou-sandsof women.

Workers in Salinas, Calif., refer to one company's field as the field de calzon, or "field of panties," because so many supervisors rape women there. For the same reasons, female farmworkers in Florida call the fields "The Green Motel." In Iowa, a group of women who recently settled a lawsuit against an egg-packing plant told their lawyer, "We thought it was normal in the United States that in order to keep your job, you had to have sex."

Sexual assault and harassment at work is not unique to agriculture, but female farmworkers are "10 times more vulnerable than others," says William Tamayo (no relation to Olivia), regional attorney for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, San Francisco District, the agency charged with protecting employees from sexual harassment and discrimination. The vast majority of victims are non-English-speaking immigrants, more than half undocumented and a slim slice unionized. Many fear that if they report their bosses for sexual harassment, they will be deported, or at the very least, lose their jobs. For women with relatively few options for employment, there's little choice but to remain silent.

One would think women farmworkers would have far more pressing worries than harassment. Low wages plague these women's lives: More than half of all farmworkers earn less than \$12,500 annually, and nearly a quarter earn less than \$7,500, according to the federal government's National Agricultural Workers Survey. This poverty, married to frequent mobility, impedes the ability of female farmworkers to find health care for themselves and their children. Without the option of sick leave, many women risk losing their jobs if they miss a day of work, and so many postpone getting medical help. Ultimately, if they do seek health care, they may be turned away: Existing migrant clinics have the capacity to serve fewer than 20 percent of the nation's farmworkers.

And members of this workforce are often in dire need of medical attention. Pesticides, sprayed to protect fruits and vegetables from insects, injure as many as 300,000 farmworkers annually. While relatively little research has been done on the long-term effects of these chemicals, the science that does exist indicates that farmworkers and their children are vulnerable to developmental delays, birth defects, infertility and a slew of cancers.

Yet despite all the burdens they bear, the campesinas still say that sexual assault and harassment is often their heaviest. "Their stories are tremendously awful," says Mónica Ramírez, director of Esperanza, a Florida-based legal organization that works with female farmworkers who have been sexually harassed on the job. "Whether in a nursery in Ohio, a packing shed in California or the fields in Florida, this problem exists. All these women want to do is make a living and provide for their family. They shouldn't have to trade their dignity for the opportunity to have a better life."

Some 100 miles east of Los Angeles, far from Palm Springs' golf courses and escalating real estate, mountains give way to citrus groves dotting the Coachella Valley. In the summer, 120-degree temperatures bake the ground, and the air under the thousands of lemon, orange and grapefruit trees is still and thick.

Many think of farmwork as a communal endeavor where entire families labor side by side. Not so. Inside the citrus groves, people work alone amid dark, obscuring fo-liage. Add to this isolation the fact that many farmworkers aren't paid hourly, but by the pounds of fruit they pick, so each day is a furious race of snipping, say, lemons, and scurrying up and down a thin ladder. No one has time to watch out for others. While the workers race against time, the foreman walks around to supervise. These mayordomos are almost always men and can easily take advantage of the circumstances.

"The mayordomos would come to talk to you; they'd touch your butt or your breasts," says Mily Treviño-Sauceda, a former farmworker who moved from Mexico with her parents and nine siblings to a Coachella Valley labor camp in the 1970s. "It was very humiliating, very hard. But they knew I wasn't about to

yell.”

Many women say they don't report such harassment for fear their husbands or male relatives might retaliate violently against the attacker and end up hurt or in jail. Moreover, within traditional Latino culture, there is a tendency to hold women responsible for any expression of sexuality, explains Treviño-Sauceda, who now directs Líderes Campesinas, a support organization for female farmworkers. She says that if a man propositions a woman or touches her inappropriately, she might be blamed; asking for help, therefore, is unthinkable.

“My dad would tell me, ‘Women are like white paper—if someone writes on it, it can't be erased,’” says Treviño-Sauceda, laughing in dismay as she remembers her Catholic upbringing. “We were taught not to talk about sex. There were no mirrors in the bathroom at our house in Mexico so that you couldn't see yourself naked. I was taught that even when you take a shower or bath, you don't take off your undergarments.”

This secrecy around sex breeds a dynamic in which women, full of shame, rarely talk to each other about their shared experiences in the fields—let alone tell their husbands or legal authorities. Without such conversation, many women don't realize that the behavior of the mayordomos is unacceptable, says Maria Reyes, 43, a Mexican immigrant and single mother of five. For seven years, while she pruned and picked grapes in California's Salinas Valley, her direct supervisor—a married man—would compliment her on her figure and touch her in a sexual manner. He offered to give her a substantial raise and a car if she would have sex with him twice a week—which she refused to do.

“I became so depressed; I was so closed, so sad,” says Reyes. “Even though I didn't like it, I didn't know I could do anything.”

This tendency for immigrant farmworkers to be uneducated about their rights is perpetuated by the fact that, under federal law, employers aren't legally required to have sexual-harassment policies. According to investigators with the EEOC, many policies that do exist are not posted in Spanish, or are posted in places where few employees have access, such as a manager's office.

The regulatory process only exacerbates the problem. If a farmworker files a complaint with the EEOC, the investigative process can take months. This delay often deters migrant women, who move frequently to follow the harvest. Plus, federal and state agencies are woefully under-staffed: The Seattle office of the EEOC is charged to investigate all cases in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska. In California, where 90 percent of the 1 million farmworkers speak Spanish, the agency employs only three bilingual trial attorneys and 11 Spanish-speaking investigators. Even agency lawyers admit the system doesn't protect many migrant women.

“I don't think the system works. The laws exist but they're really difficult to enforce,” says Lucila Rosas, a former farmworker who's now a Phoenix-based attorney with the EEOC. “People don't know their rights. They can't get to the office during our business hours. Investigators have huge caseloads. Imagine how many farm-workers get lost in the shuffle.”

Under the current budget constraints of the Bush administration, additional funding for the EEOC is unlikely. In addition, current federal immigration laws may be more prone to hurt female farmworkers than help them (see sidebar).

Yet hope glimmers. Under the leadership of regional attorney William Tamayo, since 1996 the EEOC has made a concerted effort to seek out female farmworkers and represent them in sexual-harassment lawsuits against their employers. So far they have settled nine cases, and in December the EEOC took its first such case to trial—and won nearly \$1

New immigration laws—will they help or hurt?

Far from the fields, politicians in Washington, D.C., are cultivating new immigration laws that would affect the rights of farmworkers and their ability to stand up for themselves if assaulted or sexually harassed at work.

In January 2004, President Bush proposed a new temporary-worker program that would streamline the existing bureaucracy in order to match willing foreign workers with American employers. Open to undocumented immigrants, participants would receive a temporary-worker card that would allow them to travel back and forth to their

million for Olivia Tamayo, the woman who sued Harris Farms. The substantial sum, the stature of Harris Farms and the speed with which the jury reached its verdict—just five hours—will hopefully embolden more women to report harassment and assaults in the fields, says Linda Ordonio-Dixon, the EEOC's lead counsel in the case.

"We've been getting more and more charges coming in," says Ordonio-Dixon. "I think the word is out in the fields that there is liability, and there is an agency that is going to push the issue. The real change out there will be employers saying, 'Holy crap, this happened to Harris Farms; we better change what's going on now.'"

The smell of frying papas and frijoles rises from the stove as women of all ages bustle in the kitchen, joking in Spanish, reading files off a laptop computer and soaking fresh-made tortillas in spicy, bright-red salsa. From the street outside, the unassuming headquarters of Líderes Campesinas in Pomona, Calif., appears to be a two-story home. Here, in the kitchen and at the many desks that fill the rest of the building, farmworkers are launching an attack on sexual harassment in the fields.

For over 13 years, Líderes Campesinas (which translates to farmworker women leaders) has been educating women about their legal rights and encouraging them to break the cycle of silence. Based on a grassroots model, Líderes employs an organizer in at least 10 different re-gions of California. These women then train others through bimonthly meetings held in people's homes, where women bring friends and relatives. They learn how to protect themselves from sexual violence and domestic abuse and how to file complaints with various state agencies or the EEOC. The group now boasts over 500 members in approximately 60 towns throughout California, and in the last several years they've helped start sister organizations in Washington, Iowa, Arizona and Texas.

"Women tend to get together through networks of friends, so we modeled our program on Tupperware parties," says Treviño-Sauceda, the energetic cofounder and director of Líderes. "It's almost all word of mouth, but these leaders in the community find out about more women having problems, and they build a support system for the women undergoing the abuse."

homes without having to undergo an illegal border crossing through the Mexican and Arizonan desert.

Critics say the proposal does no favor to farmworkers, especially women. In the history of the current guest-worker program, around since World War II, 99.9 percent of people hired have been men. Even if employers did hire women, workers would be extremely vulnerable to the will of their bosses, since the work visa is tied to employment with a specific company.

"Bush's proposal would leave most immigrant women to continue living in the shadows with undocumented status," says Shelley Davis, co-executive director of the Farmworker Justice Fund. "Those who did participate in the program would be like indentured servants, at the mercy of their employer without legal protections."

Farmworker advocates such as Davis favor bipartisan legislation sponsored by Sens. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Larry Craig (R-Idaho) that would give agricultural immigrants rights in federal court and better access to labor unions. It would allow those who have been working at least a year without documentation to apply for temporary-residency status and, after three to six more years of work in agriculture, a green card for both themselves and their immediate families. Both this bill and Bush's proposal are likely to be considered for a vote this year.

Take Action!

These farmworkers' organizations could use your support and contributions.

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Líderes Campesinas

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Esperanza: The Farmworker Women's Legal Initiative

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(561) 582-3921 • www.esperanzafwli.com

Farmworker Women's Institute

Farmworker Legal Services of New York
80 St. Paul St., Room 620, Rochester, NY 14604
(585) 325-3050 •
www.flсны.org/Projects1.html#FWI

Latinas Unidas Por Un Nuevo Amanecer

[Latin Women United for a New Dawn]
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(515) 271-5060

While such support has been critical to hundreds of women, some advocates say leaving men out of the conversation doesn't get at the root

Las Amigas
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problem: the lack of respect for women inherent in parts of the macho Latino cultures. Until Latino men are taught to clean and cook and wash for themselves, to understand that women are not sex objects but equals, sexual harassment in the fields is likely to continue, they say.

Dolores Huerta believes that men in farmworker communities need to be educated about sexual abuse almost as much as the women who suffer from it. "If you simply ask women to make change, you're asking for trouble in the family," says Huerta, the 75-year-old iconic cofounder of the National Farm Workers Association, precursor to United Farm Workers, an organizer for 50 years and the mother of 11 children. (Huerta is also on the board of the Feminist Majority Foundation, which publishes Ms.) "We have this macho culture that just sees women as sex objects. My son-in-law's from Guatemala and he told us that when they get married, they're told to beat their wives to keep them under control. The only inroads made in macho culture are with the feminist movement, and I would say in this culture the feminist movement is in its nascent form."

In January 2003, Huerta and her youngest daughter, Camila Chavez (whose father is Cesar Chavez's brother), created the Dolores Huerta Foundation to cultivate local leadership in poor and working-class communities and address issues of health-care access, housing, jobs and education, with an emphasis on women and youth. Huerta insists on gender balance of the co-chairs, in order to demonstrate sexual equality and develop women as leaders. Using a \$100,000 award from the Puffin Foundation and the National Institute as seed money, Huerta hopes that as feminism and gender equality flourish, the incidence of sexual abuse and harassment will decrease.

Such institutional and cultural change is a huge undertaking and, as veteran organizer Huerta knows all too well, real progress will take decades. Yet for women in the fields, these groups and others throughout the country (see sidebar) offer the potential to shut down the "green motels." Olivia Tamayo says she realizes now that the only way things will ever change is if more women speak up.

"Inside of my chest it's like there's a wound, but when I am talking about it and getting my feelings out, it feels better," she says, offering a small smile as her eyes again flood with tears. In recent months, as her case went to trial, she lost 75 pounds under the strain of the legal proceedings and 13-hour court days that included traveling 45 minutes to and from Fresno for six weeks. Even so, it was worth it—and not because of the large settlement.

"What I earned, the money, didn't interest me," says Tamayo. "I only wanted justice."

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