

**PICKING THE FRUIT OF KNOWLEDGE: WASHINGTON APPLE FARMWORKERS,
WORK, FAMILY, AND POLITICS.**

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Introduction

Apples are an important fruit for American society. They are constantly referred to as the nation's fruit; and therefore, most of its dishes like apple pie are considered traditional. Furthermore, apples become symbols of the dominant culture – represented in poems such as “After Apple-Picking” by Robert Frost, myths like Adam and Eve, and more. The problem arises when one researches the trajectory of the apples from the orchard to the family's table and the power relations involved. For this study, I am looking at female farm workers in the apple industry in Washington State and their narratives on work role, family identity, and political status. My research question is: what are the conditions affecting Latino farm workers, particularly in Washington's apple industry, and what can be done to alleviate such problems? Along those lines, how are these female workers's perceptions of their experiences (subjective identity) shaped by their conditions (objective problems)? The way in which I went about collecting my research was through literature research, database research, and conducting interviews. In my research, I found that Latina farm workers face a number of problems including low wages and inadequate housing derived from their political marginalization, which in turn affects the construction of their identity through work and family. In order to alleviate such conditions, it is imperative to provide the legal conditions for individuals to become self-empowered and advocate for change to their social conditions.

Methods Discussion

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the help of my Community Partners Jan Foster, ESL/Basic Writing Teacher for Walla Walla Community College, and Ben Hooper, Managing Attorney for Columbia Legal Services of Kennewick. They helped me guide my research by providing basic information about farm work and the conditions affecting the workers. In addition, they supported my decision to focus on female farmworkers and helped with the editing process. With that said, I would like to briefly discuss the structure of this paper. After discussing the methodology of this paper, I will present the objective conditions of farmworkers both in the United States and in Washington. This information will be discussed in the Data Presentation section. Second, I will bring up the subjective narrative and identity as revealed by the interview material. Lastly, I will provide a brief summary of the main findings and present recommendations for future action.

First of all, I decided to look at this literature research in order to understand what others have said about this topic. The problems discussed in these studies were plenty, and therefore, I decided to focus on specific issues. I divided these main findings into three categories: wages and working conditions, family living conditions, and legal and political status. First, with regard to working conditions, I encountered studies about how farm workers are living under the poverty level, suffer from low wages and no overtime pay, and incur problems with employers' strategies such as fear of deportation. Second, female farm workers live in circumstances that lead to family separation and in inadequate housing. Lastly, I found that although the industry needs immigrant labor, these workers lack protection under the law, suffer from low level of education and the language barrier, and are perceived as second-class citizens. Nonetheless, I found that these women construct their identity based on their experiences of taking pride in

being a farm worker, their family responsibility as providers, and struggling to overcome political marginalization.

The next step toward gathering the research was to collect quantitative data. In order to find statistics and other pertinent information, I resorted to private studies and governmental databases. There were plenty of studies that focused on farm workers in the United States; however, the studies with Washington State as their focus were limited. My primary data sources were the U.S. Department of Labor website and the National Agricultural Workers Survey as governmental agencies, and also the Northwest Justice Project website and the Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch website as private organizations. When I researched the governmental databases I wanted to find information that would represent the dominant perception of the conditions of farmworkers. On the other hand, private organizations provided the more liberal conclusions from the data they collected. This way, I was able to collect data from both ends of the political spectrum that gives my research balanced views. Some of the limiting aspects of the data from these sources are that they did not focus on Washington, they discussed all fruits together, or they did not have enough information dealing with gender differences. However, it was the best way of acquiring the categories of data necessary to support the conclusions I gathered from the different literature and studies.

Lastly, I gathered information through personal research. I was able to collect information about the local conditions by visiting the Walla Walla Farm Labor Homes and by interviewing two apple packers from Washington. The Walla Walla Farm Labor Homes (also known as Labor Camp, Labor Housing, El Campo de Walla) provided me with first hand experience of the housing conditions of farm workers in this area. I was able to connect my scholarly research to the realities of housing and family through my visits to these homes. Finally, I collected local data an interview with Graciela Rodriguez who works at an apple warehouse in this area and with Maria (not her real name) who works at an apple warehouse in Yakima County. I connected with these workers through a friend. Both interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted for about an hour. I interviewed Graciela at her house in the Labor Homes with her two infant children present and her 14 year old daughter in the room. The interview with Maria was over the phone and both her husband and her youngest daughter were present. Due to technical difficulties I was unable to record either interview; however, I took extensive notes in order to capture these workers' insight. The reason behind doing personal research is because I was seeking for information to show how these women saw their situation. I wanted to go beyond the facts.

Data Presentation

First of all, it is imperative to have a general understanding of farm work and the apple industry in Washington. According to the Washington Apple Commission, there are about 10-12 billion apples handpicked each year in the state of Washington.¹ There are about 40,000 pickers and 15,000 packers in the apple industry.² There are about 52 million apple trees growing in

¹ *Washington State Department of Labor and Industries*, 28 September 2005, <<http://www.lni.wa.gov/default.asp>>.

² Lance A. Compa, *Unfair Advantage: Workers' Freedom of Association in the United States under International Human Rights Standards*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000) 136.

Washington³ and about 4,000 growers in the billion dollar a year industry.⁴ Most of these orchard workers are immigrants from Mexico. Some of the interesting numbers with regard to ethnicity for U.S. farmworkers are the following: 77% are Mexican born, 2% are Latin American born, and 9% are US-born Hispanic.⁵ That means that 88% of the farm worker population in the U.S. is considered Latino. In Washington, on the other hand, 69% of agricultural worker are Latinos (see *Figure 1*, Appendix D).⁶ This fact shows how Latinos are the vast majority of agricultural workers, both in the United States and in Washington. It is also interesting to point out that Mexico is currently the biggest consumer of Washington apples.⁷ Washington apples feed 60% of the US market and about 40% of Washington's apples are exported.⁸ Therefore, the apple industry and the abundance of its Latino workers make this topic important to research.

Wages and Working Conditions

Wages

When it comes down to work role, one of the most important issues to tackle is the low wages received by farm workers that. The average day for a typical worker ranges from 10-17 hours during the peak period without getting paid overtime. In the United States, farm workers' income ranges between \$2,500 and \$5,000 and 70% earned less than \$10,000 annually.⁹ This is well below the federal poverty level benchmark, something I will discuss later. In Washington, the average wage is \$7.88 an hour and about \$3,822 a season.¹⁰ Nationally, about 77% of all farmworkers are paid by the hour, 20% by piece, and the rest is a combination of the two methods (see *Table A*, Appendix D).¹¹ The different methods of payment make the issue of wages more complex than it really has to be. Even though most workers are getting paid by the hour, there is always the one company that decides to pay its workers by the piece leaving them with not enough income to meet a day's worth of work.

Women farm workers earn lower incomes than men.¹² In apple warehouses, women typically stick to sorting and packing, while the men generally stack.¹³ My research states that "the apple industry is increasingly segregated by a gendered division of labor whereby women are limited to packing and sorting jobs and excluded from higher paying work as forklift drivers,

³ David Guterson, "The Kingdom of Apples," *Harper's Magazine*. 299.7768 (1999) 1.

⁴ Karen Snyder, "Risk Perception and Resource Security for Female Agricultural Workers," *Socioeconomic Aspects of Human Behavioral Ecology*. 23 (2004): 271-292, 20 October 2005, <http://depts.washington.edu/pnash/files/Snyder_REA2004.pdf> 272.

⁵ Kala Mehta et al, "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 1997-1998: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers," *Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, U.S. Department of Labor*, (California: Aguirre International, 2000) 14 October 2005, <http://www.dol.gov/asp/programs/agworker/report_8.pdf> 5

⁶ Dave Wallace, "Agricultural Workforce in Washington State," *Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch*, June 2002, 14 October 2005, <http://www.workforceexplorer.com/admin/uploadedPublications/699_ag01.pdf> 28.

⁷ Compa 137.

⁸ Compa 135.

⁹ Richard Mines, Susan Gabbard, and Anne Steirman, "A Profile of U.S. Farm Workers: Demographics, Household Composition, Income and Use of Services," *U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy*, (April 1997) 10 October 2005, <<http://www.dol.gov/asp/programs/agworker/report>>.

¹⁰ Guterson 13.

¹¹ Mehta 32.

¹² Mines.

¹³ Snyder 273.

computer operators, or even orchard workers.”¹⁴ This data shows that female farmworkers are greatly affected not only by the low wages but also by the gender inequalities in the apple industry.

Poverty

These low wages leads to living under the poverty level for most of farmworkers. Actually, over three-fifths of the farm worker population in the United States lives under the poverty line.¹⁵ Larger families are even at larger risks to live under these precarious conditions. About 50% of farmworkers with five people in the family are poor, as compared to about 85% of those who have a family of nine (see *Table B*, Appendix D).¹⁶ The farmworker family range in size; however, something that seems to occur (which goes beyond the scope of this paper) is that parents are forced to have more children in order to increase the likelihood of extra help and income for the family as a whole.

Even though these workers are living under poverty, a very limited number of individuals use public service programs. According to findings by the National Agricultural Workers Survey, about 1% of workers use public housing, 1% general assistance, 10% food stamps, and 13% Medicaid (see *Table C*, Appendix D).¹⁷ This challenges the common perception that these workers are extinguishing all the social services provided by the government. There are many reasons as to why these workers are not receiving governmental help. One of them is the stigma attached to “being on welfare,” which only prevents those who truly need the help to seek for it. Other reasons could be legal status and literacy rates, which will be discussed later.

Legal Status

Another factor in the economic predicament of agricultural workers is that most of them lack proper work documentation. In the United States, about 52% of all farm workers lack work authorization, 22% are legal citizens, 24% are legal permanent residents, and 2% have some other type of work permit (see *Figure 2*, Appendix D).¹⁸ Those that have the proper documents to work in the United States earn about 15% more than undocumented workers.¹⁹ Therefore, this wage discrepancy contributes to the fact that the majority of immigrants without documents (80%) live in poverty.²⁰ The majority of farmworkers have to deal with poverty; at the same time, they also have to deal with problems derived from lack of proper documentation.

One of the most interesting facts is that those immigrant workers are using fake social security numbers and they will not be able to recover the taxes that they constantly pay. According to Wallace, “the Social Security Administration has counted \$265 billion in wages it

¹⁴ Snyder 274.

¹⁵ Mines.

¹⁶ Mehta 40.

¹⁷ Mehta 41.

¹⁸ Mehta 22.

¹⁹ Sabrina Ise and Jeffrey M. Perloff, “Legal status and earnings of agricultural workers,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 77.2 (May 1995), 10 October 2005, <http://web6.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/876/322/73454198w6/purl=rc1_EAIM_0_A17167792&dyn=13!xrn_8_0_A17167792?sw_aep=Whitman> 375.

²⁰ Mines.

is unable to match to valid social security numbers.”²¹ The importance of this fact is that it leaves Latinos more susceptible to old age poverty, something that the Social Security program tackles and that every citizen deserves. Even though most of these foreign-born workers who lack proper documents live an average of at least 10 years in the United States, they are not considered citizens of this nation.²² Farmworkers legal status is the most inhibiting factor when it comes to acquiring services other residents of Washington receive.

Family Living Conditions

Household Composition

The demographics of the farmworker family are important to understand their living conditions. Nationally, 52% of all farm workers are married and 45% of all workers have children.²³ Female farm workers are more likely to be married, especially to Mexican men.²⁴ About 81% of those parents who have small children are foreign-born.²⁵ Women are more likely to live with their children, about 91% of the women lived with their offspring as compared to 42% of the fathers.²⁶ What this data shows is that most of the farmworkers have a spouse and children. Furthermore, it is the mothers who are in charge of the well-being of their children since they are the ones residing with them for the most part.

Families are also constantly separated. According to a study on the demographics of farmworkers, about 45% percent of farm workers in the United States with a spouse and children are not living with their families.²⁷ This family separation is even greater when we talk about farmworkers who are not residents because about 90% of their families live in Mexico.²⁸ These families are not only divided by cities or even states, it is a whole country that separates them. This separation is also increased by the size of the family. The same study states that “the likelihood of separation from their children appears to increase with family size,” which can be caused by having to work two jobs.²⁹ Most of farmworkers have families; however, most of their families are separated in one way or another because of various reasons.

Migration Patterns

The nature of migrant work, having to travel many miles to their job site, leads to a high incidence of family separation. The patterns of migration of agricultural workers are divided into three categories: shuttle workers, those that move between two or more jobs that are not in the location of their home base; follow-the-crop migrants, those workers that stick to one crop and follow it throughout the season to various locations; and non migrants, those that have decided to settle.³⁰ Thirty-nine percent of migrants are shuttle migrants, 44% are non migrants, and 17% follow the crop (see *Figure 3*, Appendix D).³¹ Therefore, these numbers indicate that

²¹ Wallace 29.

²² Mehta 6.

²³ Mehta vii.

²⁴ Mehta 10.

²⁵ Mines.

²⁶ Mehta 10.

²⁷ Mehta 10.

²⁸ Mehta 10.

²⁹ Mehta 11.

³⁰ Mehta 20.

³¹ Mehta 20.

about 56% of farm workers in the US have to travel to secure their jobs. For the apple industry in Washington, there are about 43.2% seasonal workers (see *Table D*, Appendix D).³² That means that a high number of the workers must either file for unemployment or find another job during the off-season. As we have seen, the majority of these workers travel to other cities to fulfill their economic needs. This constant traveling necessitates that the families are left behind.

Housing

Not only are migrant families more likely to be separated, they are also more likely to live in houses not suitable for building strong family connections. The fact that farmworkers live under poverty affects housing options, especially because employers are not required to provide workers with housing. Therefore, apple farmworkers must find housing for themselves that happens to be “in squalid company housing” when provided or “on the banks of nearby streams.”³³ About 60% of the migrant population in the United States is considered homeless.³⁴ When they do have a residence, the physical conditions of the place are substandard. These houses are overcrowded, not well-maintained, and isolated from the rest of the society. Those workers born outside of the United States (49%) are more likely to share their homes with many individuals, five or more persons for example, than those born in the United States (19%).³⁵ It is important to note that the state of Washington “spent no money on migrant housing and stood to one side while migrant workers, literally by the tens of thousands, slept in cars, tents, and shacks throughout the harvest season” until a recent drive in the past 6 years to make the government spend money on migrant housing.³⁶ Farmworker homes are substandard and not conducive to an environment where the family can grow together as a unit.

Legal and Political Status

Dependence on Immigrant Labor

The political status of farmworkers comes from the long history of the dependence on immigrant labor by the agriculture industry. The fact that farm labor is left without protection by the state of Washington shows the lack of importance given to this work; and therefore, the group of individuals who work for it that happen to be mainly Mexicans. Vicki Ruiz states how Mexicans “perceived as cheap labor by Euro-American businessmen, they provided the human resources necessary for the city’s industrial and commercial growth” in which “education and economic advancement proved illusory as segregation in housing, employment, and schools served as constant reminders of their second-class status.”³⁷ The fact is that immigrant workers are considered disposable because a new wave of immigrants can easily be hired to work for less.³⁸ Research has shown that farmworkers continue to be seen as cheap labor in which economic advancement is not an option for these individuals because of the instability of their political bargaining power.

³² Wallace 13.

³³ Compa 137.

³⁴ Wallace 29.

³⁵ Mines.

³⁶ Guterson 8.

³⁷ Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 35.

³⁸ Russell O. Wright, *Chronology of Labor in the United States*, (North Carolina: McFarland and Co. Inc, 2003) 105.

With that said, employers also benefit from immigrant labor because it provides them with a group of people whose conditions can be easily manipulated to the employers' advantage. According to Mark Reisler, talking about the immigration waves, "employers also contended that only the Mexican could supply agriculture's unskilled labor needs" when labor begins to get scarce.³⁹ One of the strategies of employers, even today, is to hire workers that recently immigrated because they are unaware of their rights.⁴⁰ The reason behind this is because they cannot communicate their problems, and thus they are easier to control. In addition, these workers "are less likely to assert their rights."⁴¹ This need for undocumented workers is part of the strategy for the agricultural labor process because it is what helps the market avoid higher labor costs, basing their strategies "on disinformation [and] unequal power relations between workers and their employers."⁴² Once workers begin organizing and understanding their rights, they are a less desirable work force, which leads to the intimidation tactics discussed earlier. Employers know that those workers who are most susceptible to manipulation are those that lack the protection of the law.

Labor Regulations

The agricultural workers are the most vulnerable to political marginalization for various reasons including lack of civil enforcement. Added to the fact that most of the workers are undocumented, agricultural workers are excluded from many labor regulations. Washington apple pickers, like all agricultural workers, are excluded from coverage by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) since "they are not defined as 'employees' meriting the law's protection."⁴³ One of these laws is the right to receive overtime pay because of the nature of agriculture having harvest intensive seasons. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is the body in charge of ensuring the enforcement of these laws. Even though the state of Washington has made sure that these workers have certain rights – for example a minimum wage of \$7.35, so that even if they are paid by piece rate basis, they should be averaging this minimum – they are not protected by law.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Washington does have a statute benefiting farm workers titled the Little Norris-La Guardia Act. This Act protects farm laborers who might be fired by their employers after organizing.⁴⁵ The problem arises with the fact that there is no enforcement of workers' rights by the federal law because they are not covered under the NLRA. This lack of protection leaves workers susceptible to employers' retaliation and not on the same footing with other workers.

Recent initiative drives aiming at helping farm workers in the state of Washington have failed. Bill 5823 for prompt payment of final wages and Bills 1311 and 5240 for authorizing penalties for wage payment violations did not pass.⁴⁶ The fact is that there is no civil enforcement of labor regulations because agricultural workers are excluded from the NLRA;

³⁹ Mark Reisler, "Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s," Class Reading 35.

⁴⁰ Philip L. Martin, "Immigration and Agriculture," Class Reading 188.

⁴¹ Miriam J. Wells, *Strawberry Fields*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 66.

⁴² David Griffith and Ed Kissam, "Characteristics of the Farm Labor Market," Class Reading 247.

⁴³ Compa 135.

⁴⁴ "Farm Worker Rights Handbook for Washington State," *Northwest Justice Project: Farm Worker Unit*, January 2005, 22 September 2005, <<http://www.washingtonlawhelp.org>> 2.

⁴⁵ Ben Hooper, Personal Email, 17 November 2005.

⁴⁶ Ben Hooper, Personal Email, 22 September 2005.

therefore, leading to plenty of cases of wage payment violation. These bills are attempts to alleviate this gap between having rights and actually being able to practice them. Nonetheless, the fact that these bills did not pass into legislature shows the lack of priority given to farmworkers and their needs. Another reason could be that the workers are not organized, and thus unable to have a collective voice and bargaining power. Even if these workers were to claim the rights, they must engage in private lawsuits. These lawsuits are expensive and low wage workers do not have resources to spend on private lawsuits. Another limiting factor to potentially filing a claim is that there are not many non-profit legal organizations. There are a few legal aid agencies in Yakima but not enough to fill the high demand for these services, and no organizations of this sort in the Walla Walla area.

Education and Language

Another aspect of farm workers' vulnerability is their lack of education and the language barrier. These farm workers lack proper education because these workers have been schooled between 1-7 years at most (see *Figure 4, Appendix D*).⁴⁷ Sixth grade is the highest grade that most of these workers have attended in school on average.⁴⁸ The language barrier is also an obstacle for these workers since most of the 60,000 Washington apple industry workers are Spanish-speaking.⁴⁹ Actually, about 84% of all farmworkers have Spanish as their native language.⁵⁰ Nationally, less than 5% believed they could read and speak English well.⁵¹ A consequence of language ability is that those "workers with bilingual language skills have more opportunities for higher paying and less risky jobs, both within and outside the apple warehouses," proving that language is an important tool for farmworkers.⁵² However, due to low literacy rates, 85% of these workers would have a hard time acquiring information in the language of their choice.⁵³ Many state and community programs tackle this lack of education, literacy, and the language barriers through adult education. However, only one out of five farmworkers took at least one class for adults.⁵⁴ It also impedes parents in providing their children with the social capital that other more instructed parents can give to their children. The importance of education is that it is a political tool. Farmworkers who are aware of their rights are more likely to fight for them if they are being disregarded.

Interview Discussion

The data presented here demonstrates how farm workers are affected by many social problems that aid in constructing these workers' identities. The truth is that agriculture is a very dangerous industry; at the same time, it is one of the most economically efficient industries in Washington State. According to a Human Rights Watch report, "farmworkers confront low wages, bad housing, poor health care, workplace hazards, unfair treatment and other abusive conditions on a massive scale" that are often overlooked by policy makers.⁵⁵ These conditions

⁴⁷ Wallace 28.

⁴⁸ Mehta 13.

⁴⁹ Ben Jacklet, "Apple Workers Spurn Teamsters Union," *Inter Press Service*. (New York: Jan 31, 1998) 2.

⁵⁰ Mehta 13.

⁵¹ Mehta 18.

⁵² Snyder 285.

⁵³ Mehta 16.

⁵⁴ Mehta 15.

⁵⁵ Compa 173.

reflect the objective conditions in which farmworkers live. It is imperative to take it a step further and analyze the way in which these farmworkers themselves experience these conditions. By doing so, one can understand the ways in which these workers could be motivated to organize for their rights and the ways to support such mobilization.

Work Role

Unstable Job

The most obvious problem is that these farm workers are suffering from low wages and no overtime pay pushing them to live under the poverty level. Low wages always seem to create problems for workers. However, these workers do not have the alternative of finding new jobs due to factors such as lack of education or documents. When I asked Graciela how much she got paid, she answered that she got minimum wage; however, she did not know how much that was, and apparently she never looks at her paycheck.⁵⁶ These workers are getting paid minimum wage – or at least that is what they believe – and are still working 10-15 hour day shifts without being compensated for their overtime work. Furthermore, these wages are not high enough to get these workers out of poverty. According to Karen Snyder, a researcher of female agricultural workers, Latina apple farm workers live in “an environment of uncertainty about steady resource acquisition or unpredictable variation in economic conditions.”⁵⁷ These farmworkers are living under poverty, getting minimum wage, and no overtime pay; as a result of this combination of factors, they are unable to get out of this unstable situation.

Fear

One of the reasons why these workers do not have an alternative to farm labor is their lack of proper work documents. As was mentioned earlier, more than half of farm workers are undocumented. Employers are very aware of this condition and use this to their advantage. According to Graciela, at her previous job, the supervisors were constantly yelling to the workers that “la migra” would come and take them if they did not continue to work.⁵⁸ “La migra” is a Spanish term given to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which has recently changed its name to Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). The fact is that the threat of ICE raids is constantly used by the employers.⁵⁹ Furthermore, undocumented farm workers fear that if they make any complaints about their working conditions, the employers can easily fire them.⁶⁰ Not only are the workers afraid of losing their jobs when they are threatened with being reported to the ICE, they also suffer from the fear of deportation.

Overwork

One of the main effects of this work is that these women work for long periods of time. The lady I interviewed (Graciela) discussed the nature of farm work and how that reflects her identity as a farm worker. Graciela described her life as: wake up, go to work, take care of the children, make food for the family, go to work again, take a shower at 10pm and then wake up at

⁵⁶ Graciela Rodriguez, Personal Interview, 11 October 2005.

⁵⁷ Snyder 275.

⁵⁸ Rodriguez.

⁵⁹ Compa 144.

⁶⁰ Fabiola Estrada, “An Exploratory Study of the Incentives and Disincentives for Latino farm workers in the State of Washington to Participate in the Workers’ Compensation System,” MA thesis, (University of Washington, 2004) 21.

4 am the next day to start it all over again. She also mentioned that there's no rest, only work for these women.⁶¹ This shows us how these farm workers live an exhausting life. Apple packers and sorters are expected to perform their job "expeditiously, with frank speed, flashing hands, and the unconscious dexterity of experience."⁶² This expectation of efficiency only leads workers to be constantly overworked. It would be a different story if these workers were given overtime pay for the long hours they work.

Taking Pride

Both of the workers I interviewed defined part of their identity in their work. Graciela said that at her work "one goes to apply what one knows" in the field and that she likes what she does even though people see her job as very hard. When I asked Graciela if she thought her work was valued in society, she said that it was not but that she still takes pride in it because she has been able to become really good at it.⁶³ On the other hand, Maria argued that she does enjoy her job since it is much respected in her town; however, she likes her job because there is no other alternative.⁶⁴ For both of these women, their job becomes part of their identity since they spend most of their life working. Identity is complicated by the internal tensions in the sense that workers do not see themselves as mere victims. They recognize their situation and find strength in the fact that farm work is part of their life.

Family Identity

Family as Priority

Another major aspect that shapes part of the identity of female farm workers is the family. As mentioned earlier, it is mostly the female that takes care of the well-being of the children. This factor defines the identity of women because they constantly have to look after their offspring. Maria, a Yakima farmworker, believes that family "is the basic of living."⁶⁵ She went on to say that family is "very important for the Mexican people" because Latinos have warmth to them that makes them want to be united in this structure.⁶⁶ Even if these families are constantly separated or living in substandard housing, women believe that family is their priority, which is one of the reasons why they remain in such jobs.

Not a home

For farmworkers, their housing is not conducive to the establishment of a home; on the contrary, these houses and apartments only serve as shelter. It is obvious how families being separated due to the migration patterns of agricultural jobs affect the way a family is structured; however, the homes also play a major role. Graciela portrayed the instability enforced by these migrant family homes this way: sometimes she had her eight children in a three-bedroom apartment but sometimes she only had one there. The rest of the time they would be at their father's house. Graciela's narrative presented the unstructured home life for kids since she mentioned how they would eat dinner wherever they wanted, possibly watching T.V. According

⁶¹ Rodriguez.

⁶² Guterson 5.

⁶³ Rodriguez.

⁶⁴ Maria, Personal Interview, 14 November 2005.

⁶⁵ Maria.

⁶⁶ Maria.

to the Graciela, her house is “only a place to live, the basic.”⁶⁷ Maria said that her dream was to have a mansion so that her whole family could be comfortable and enjoy the comforts of each other.⁶⁸ This narrative implies that her current house is not a comfortable environment for her family to enjoy each other. Consequently, these homes do not serve the purpose of building strong family connections by providing a place where the family can share activities and experiences.

The farm labor homes are also creating enclaves of poverty that are reserved for migrant workers. The fact that wages are very low leads to the inability of these workers, at least those who have settled, to live in adequate housing. Diego Vigil discusses the roots of Chicano gangs in Los Angeles and a major part of his argument is focusing on housing and how Mexicans had to settle in labor camps. He argues that “whether old or new, urban or rural, all of the camps exhibited the qualities noted earlier: spatial separation and visibly inferior housing.”⁶⁹ These substandard living conditions are having the effect of creating areas where poverty is concentrated, which happens to be the areas where Latinos live. An example comes from Yakima, a city with a numerous Latino population, where “most Hispanics live in sweltering, squalid camps or in Yakima’s east-side barrio.”⁷⁰ Maria lives in a two-bedroom apartment in a community of predominantly Latinos. She let me know that at her home there could be between 3 to up to 6 people staying there.⁷¹ This overcrowded apartment contributes to the construction of communities of despair. Another example can be seen in the physical qualities of the Walla Walla Farm Labor Homes. These homes are substandard, as I mentioned earlier; they are overcrowded, not well-maintained, and isolated from the rest of the community. Graciela said that outside of her house, “it’s very dirty over there, it looks ugly.”⁷² These homes are not allowing workers to base their family interactions properly because of the inadequate housing conditions and are only creating communities where poverty is concentrated.

Place of Women

The last factor that plays a role in constructing female workers’ identity is their family responsibility as women. Women are considered the backbone of the family; they are constantly taking the role of mothers, and ensuring the well-being of their children. Women, however, are not valued in the dominant society for their work. Maria stated that “there are very few [people] who think well of women.”⁷³ I found this claim disturbing but accurate because women are constantly discriminated against and seen as the subservient gender. Here is where I found a major difference between the conditions of Mexican women and the narrative they shared. Graciela said that she saw that in farm work, women and men were seen as equal because they were both required to do the same work.⁷⁴ However, my research states that women are affected by unequal gender differences such as not being allowed to work on certain sectors of the industry.

⁶⁷ Rodriguez.

⁶⁸ Maria.

⁶⁹ Diego Vigil, “Community Dynamics and the rise of Street Gangs,” Class Reading 100.

⁷⁰ “Hispanics: Bad Apples?” *The Economist*, 324.7768 (Jul 19, 1992) 29.

⁷¹ Maria.

⁷² Rodriguez.

⁷³ Maria.

⁷⁴ Rodriguez.

These farmworkers also face the struggle against the common perceptions in the dominant culture of Latina women as a whole. I posed the question to Graciela: If you could make a movie about your experience as a farm worker and as a Mexican woman, what things would you want to be included in this movie? Her answer was “I don’t know, they haven’t made one that truly portrays the Latina woman, in reality, they don’t present life. If they were going to do it, they would be disappointed.”⁷⁵ The reason for this disappointment is because it is not what people would want to see, and thus not what would sell. The fact is that the society as a whole does not understand the importance of Latina women to agriculture and to their families. In addition, Maria argues that the dominant perception is to see Latina women as “sufrida” (a victim, someone who suffers). She argues that women are not constantly suffering because “there are many women who have succeeded.”⁷⁶ Women are taking major roles in the family which forms part of their identity; however, the literature and data show that their role is often devalued and misrepresented in this society.

Political Marginalization

Lack of Protection

Even though Washington farmworkers are protected by state law, agricultural workers as a whole are not protected under the federal law. They are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act for example, and thus are the target of discrimination against rights that other workers have such as overtime pay and wage payment. In Maria’s case, her lack of proper work documentation, leaves her with limited rights and even more vulnerable to discrimination. When I asked Maria if there needed to be a change in the way individuals fight for their rights, she answered “if laws changed that would be best, it is the only thing that can protect those who do not have a social security.”⁷⁷ It is imperative to point out how this worker notices the lack of protection of the law. This might have to do with the fact that she has to constantly worry about her immigration status and is fully aware of what privileges are not presented to individuals like her, which happen to be more than half of all farmworkers. Maria goes on to say that with the law’s support, “one feels more protected and can fight for one’s rights.”⁷⁸ Her suggestion for change in law was amnesty, which means legalizing the undocumented individuals that already reside in the nation. In short, workers are aware of their political marginalization derived from the lack of support by the law.

Lack of Knowledge of Rights

Agriculture depends on the work of immigrants who are not protected by the law and who lack the education to fight for the few rights they do hold. As mentioned previously, farmworkers lack the education necessary to fully understand documents being presented to them. They are also influenced by the language barrier in this respect. Maria believes she has full knowledge of all her rights and that language is a barrier to her everyday life. It is important to note that she would like to continue learning English; however, due to the fact that she has to work for a living, she cannot devote her time to attending classes.⁷⁹ I would argue that most of

⁷⁵ Rodriguez.

⁷⁶ Maria.

⁷⁷ Maria.

⁷⁸ Maria.

⁷⁹ Maria.

farmworkers, unlike Maria, do not have a full grasp of their rights and the many acts and bills that affect them both negatively and positively. The result of this need for docile workers is the subordination of a group of people in the political realm.

Second-Class Citizenship

The identity of these farmworkers becomes constructed from the common perception that they are second-class citizens in U.S. society. Throughout history, “to most Anglos, the immigrant from south of the border was always the peon laborer and never the potential citizen.”⁸⁰ This remains true to this day; the expectation that immigrants will satisfy labor needs without needing to be considered citizens of this nation, even though these individuals contribute to their communities. Both Maria and Graciela mention the fact that Mexicans are seen as the disposable class. Graciela believes that the dominant group expects Mexicans to be working in the agriculture sector because they are the owners of the land, and thus they can easily take away the workers.⁸¹ Maria also mentioned that Mexicans were treated as second-class citizens. She said that employers constantly fire individuals and then hire new workers, and thus showing how the company felt they can easily change workers. When I asked her how she felt about this dispensability, she said that it made her extremely sad because “they make us feel like we have no worth.”⁸² Once immigrants are not meeting labor needs, they are replaced by a new wave of immigrants leaving a group to feel like they belong in the margins of society. The result of this second class citizenship is that farm workers hold on to things, such as their national identity, that help them alleviate the social exclusion from the dominant culture they experience.

Recommendations

Latino farm workers in the Washington apple industry suffer the same problems that any farm worker in the United States does. Some of these problems are: receive low wages, live under poverty level, fear deportation, inhabit inadequate housing, lack legal protection, suffer from lack of education and language barrier, and are seen as second class citizens. The identity of the workers is definitely shaped by these conditions. The next step for this research is to find a way in which we can alleviate the social conditions of these farmworkers. There are at least two paths one can take to tackle these problems. First, one can target this problem as a labor regulation problem and fight for unions and state labor regulations as the solution. On the other hand, one can argue that it is a social welfare problem which can be solved through spending on housing, public services, and more. The difference lies in that the state assists the workers in empowering themselves and not by temporarily meeting their needs. I have decided that one must tackle it as a labor regulation problem, fixing the social conditions derived from their political marginalization as a result. This way, the state would be setting the legal provisions motivating workers themselves (all farmworkers, not just women) to self-empowerment in order to advocate social change.

Direct Government Action

With regard to state action, an attainable goal is to attempt to pressure state legislatures to pass bills that benefit farmworkers. The first Bill to address this question is Senate Bill 5240 that

⁸⁰ Reisler 38.

⁸¹ Rodriguez.

⁸² Maria.

requests “the director of labor and industries to issue and enforce civil penalties for violations of the minimum wage act.”⁸³ This Bill gives us the statistic that there are over 5,000 complaints of state residents saying they have been denied payment and that there are no “effective means of addressing these complaints in order to ensure workers are paid the wages they are owed” or penalties for the violators.⁸⁴ This Bill seeks a system in which employers that are not complying with minimum wage provisions can be penalized. It is very important for farm workers because there are no penalties for employers who do not provide the rightful wages. The second Bill is Senate Bill 5823 which also deals with wage enforcement. This Bill is “an act relating to requiring prompt payment of final wages.”⁸⁵ It argues that when an employee ends his job, he should be paid in the next 24 hours, and the employer should be responsible for paying a fine of \$100 a day until he pays the debt to the worker. The importance of this document in particular is because the migration patters of farm work. Migrant workers might need to move, and thus they cannot wait until they can collect their paycheck. Both of these bills tackle the problems of wages because when workers live under the poverty line, they have no economic means to change their social conditions.

At a national level, it would be good to encourage the federal government to include agricultural workers into the National Labor Relations Act as a group deserving the protection of the law. This would lead, for example, to overtime pay, possible increases in wages, and civil enforcement of when rights are disregarded. Workers would be able to organize because it might be easier for unions to start up, and thus workers would no longer be afraid of losing their jobs for getting involved. Unfortunately, the problem with regard to lack of legal work documents is a more complex issue to tackle. Even though ideally I would want to argue for legalization of all workers, which is something that would solve the problem at its root, there would be extensive opposition to this option making this an unrealistic goal. At the same time, I do not agree with temporary worker programs because it is only fixing the problem temporarily and creates a class of individuals whom it is acceptable to overwork and then dispose. Erik Nicholson, Director of the United Farm Workers (UFW) of Oregon and Washington, mentioned how one can prevail within the existing legal framework by not attempting to change it drastically but to make sure it does not get worse.⁸⁶ By setting practical goals, such as the support (and maybe lobbying) of the previously mentioned bills, we can struggle to not allow conditions for farmworkers to be aggravated and ensure some change to their lives.

Unions and Self-Empowerment

The first step towards seeking change is through individual organization in the very complex idea of unions. First of all, the point of the union is to serve the people fight for their rights. This claim goes back to Cesar Chavez and his support of the UFW union saying that it was not just about “agricultural unionizing but in a moral cause – La Causa – a crusade to reclaim the dignity and civil rights of Mexican-origin farm laborers.”⁸⁷ This crusade continues to this day. Nicholson says that the ways in which the union tackles these issues consists of the

⁸³ Authorizing Penalties for Wage Payment Violations Bill, Senate Bill 5240, 18 January 2005, 22 September 2005, <<http://www.leg.wa.gov>> 1.

⁸⁴ Authorizing 1.

⁸⁵ Requiring Prompt Payment of Final Wages, Senate Bill 5823, 8 February 2005, 22 September 2005, <<http://www.leg.wa.gov>> 1.

⁸⁶ Erik Nicholson, Class Speech, Whitman College, Politics 402, 2 November 2005.

⁸⁷ Wells 76.

following tactics: appeal to the public and the companies that are buying the products, support personal lawsuits, and articulate a global strategy.⁸⁸ An example of this global strategy with regard to the apple industry is targeting Mexican consumers. After the penalty tariff on American apples was lifted in 1997, Mexico began to buy apples to the point of becoming the top importer for this market.⁸⁹ The UFW attempted to change the patterns of Mexican consumerism by presenting them with information on the conditions of Mexicans in Washington.⁹⁰ These tactics have proven efficient because throughout the years, unions have been able to enact policy change.

A controversial topic of discussion with regards to unions is if they require legal work documents, and thus limiting the participation of most foreign-born farmworkers. From the beginning of the UFW, the issue of citizenship has been a delicate subject.⁹¹ The union often battled between including undocumented workers or take a position against them. Nicholson mentioned how the union attempts to create a community between workers. He also stated that membership is not exclusive to those with proper work documentation.⁹² This claim is very problematic because both of the workers I interviewed stated the perception that unions required valid work documents. The reason for this can be explained by the following: first, there is a requirement of documents in certain unions during specific times that contributes to this perception; second, there is a misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge as to what the union does and who it benefits; and lastly, employers are utilizing the fear of deportation to demobilize the union. Nonetheless, workers need to be motivated to organize in order to change their living conditions.

All these recommendations are beneficial to both male and female farmworkers. The only extent to which women will be affected more than men is because women are more likely to be part of a union. In the union, some of the “strongest leaders are women,” and organizers ensure that the family struggles are looked at in order not to undermine the movement.⁹³ However, most of these women are not holding positions of power. This fact shows how the union itself has many issues to work out in order to fully accommodate everyone’s interests. Union organizing, nonetheless, is an effective way of changing living conditions. For this reason, it is important to push companies and the state to recognize the right of workers to unionize and that under Washington law it is illegal to retaliate for their organization. Supporting the union is a feasible goal for individuals to strive for, and a practical way of changing farmworkers’ living conditions.

It is important to understand the objective conditions of female farm workers in the apple industry in Washington in order to understand what needs to change to improve the life of these workers. Latina farm workers face problems such as low wages and inadequate housing in which political marginalization is at the root of the problem. These conditions shape their identity based on work and family. From the subjective narrative, we found that farmworkers

⁸⁸ Nicholson.

⁸⁹ Wallace 11.

⁹⁰ Wallace 29.

⁹¹ Wells 89.

⁹² Nicholson.

⁹³ Nicholson.

themselves would be willing to fight for their own rights if they felt that the law protected their interests as well. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a legal and political environment in which these workers can organize and advocate for change. Some of the ways we can achieve this goal is through support of bills benefiting farmworkers and by fully supporting union organization. Furthermore, we cannot keep this knowledge to ourselves; instead, we must share the apple, the fruit of knowledge, like Eve did with Adam. We must spread the knowledge on the conditions of these workers in order to enact government efforts that will lead to social change.

Appendix A. Interview Question List (Revised Nov. 14, 2005).

A. Basic Questions

- Name. Age. Place of Birth
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B. Family Identity

- Are you married?
- Do you have any children?
 - Yes: How many? Do they attend school? Do they participate in after-school programs? Can you tell me about a time when you visited your child's school?
- How important is family to you?
- Where do you live?
- How many rooms?
- How many people live in your place?
- What are some of the activities done around the house, as a family, together?
- Can you tell me about an experience where you felt like this place was your home?
- If you could make a movie about your experience as a woman in this society, what aspects of your daily life would you want to share, and not share?

C. Employment and Wages

- Are you employed?
 - Where? How long are your work days? What crops? How long are the seasons? How long have you had this job? Where else have you worked?
 - Can you tell me about your work environment? Like do you work next to people? By yourself?
- How much do you get paid? Do you get paid by the hour or by the piece? Is it weekly or monthly? How do you receive your payment (check, cash)?
- Have you ever had a problem with receiving your wages?
 - No: If you ever had a problem with your job, where would you go for help?
- Do you have health insurance?
- In what ways is your work recognized in society? In what ways is your work valued in society?

D. State and Rights

- Can you tell me about some of the rights farmworkers have?
 - Required by law to receive any information by your employer in your native language?
 - Entitled to a minimum wage of \$7.35?
 - You can receive unemployment benefits?
- Have you ever seen or read the farm workers rights handbook for Washington?
- Why do you think bills that ensure that employers will pay the workers on time and penalize them if they don't didn't pass?
- Do you speak English fluently?
- Can you tell me about a time when language ever been a problem in your work?
- Can you tell me about a time when you (or anyone you know) have had to get legal help?

- What are some helpful things that could be provided by a legal agency in town?
- Have you ever been a part of a union?
 - Yes: Have you taken a leadership role in these groups?
- Have you ever participated in a strike?
- How do you feel about people participating in social activism? Do you think that there needs to be changes in the way we fight for workers' rights?
- If you could talk to the Governor, what are some of the things you would like her to know about your situation as a farm worker?
- Ethnic Identification (Latina, Mexican, Mexican-America, Hispanic, Chicana, etc).
- Can you tell me about how your national identity is represented in society? (Do you feel that Mexicans are seen as second-class citizens?)

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