

Addressing Worksite Sexual Assault and Harassment of Indigenous Farmworkers

by Nargess Shadbeh, Farmworker Program Director, Oregon Law Center & Cassie Caravello, Program Assistant, FHSI



Farmworkers face high risk factors for sexual assault in their work place. Workers who fear losing their job and home, and face the possibility of deportation, will hesitate to report violations of any legal provisions protecting them from sexual harassment and assault at work. Even this assumes that the workers are informed about the basic protections available to them and that they are able to operate linguistically and culturally within our systems to report such incidents in the first place.

Indigenous farmworkers, however, face a particularly high degree of risk, due to increased linguistic and cultural isolation. Our systems of health care, justice, and social services are also often unprepared to serve them. In addition, a long history of discrimination brought from Latin America has given indigenous people from remote areas of Southern Mexico or Central America the lowest status and least desirable jobs among farmworkers in the United States, making them even more susceptible to exploitation of every kind, including sexual harassment in the workplace.

A collaborative partnership based in Oregon called Proyecto en Contra de Acoso Sexual en el Campo (Project Against Workplace Sexual Assault in the Field) has an outstanding and in-depth model to address workplace sexual assault and harassment of indigenous farmworkers. The indigenous community educators are the core of the project; together they speak three indigenous languages of Mexico (Mixteco Alto, Mixteco Bajo, Triqui) as well as Spanish. This collaborative project, led by the Oregon Law Center, seeks to:

- Inform indigenous farmworkers about sexual assault and harassment in the workplace and provide them with the steps (with legal, medical, and other types of support) they can take should it occur, and
- Increase the indigenous and Latino farmworker communities' support of victims and participate in building a model to break through a variety of barriers. These barriers may include taboos on discussing sexual issues and the lack of cultural and linguistic services available through U.S. justice and health care systems.

Set Up Strong Collaborations

The Oregon Law Center's Farmworker Program, the farmworker union PCUN, and the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center are partners in this project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Funding Partnership (LFP) and the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund at Northwest Health Foundation. A number of universities also participate, lending in-kind support such as nursing students and researchers. Together they are forging a model for a multidisciplinary collaboration that can be replicated in other regions.

Learn Farmworker Needs

The indigenous community educators have been vital to the success of the program since its inception. With their help over the past three years, the the Proyecto en Contra el Acoso Sexual en el Campo has conducted a series of focus groups with indigenous farmworkers to provide the project with a better understanding of

the needs of indigenous Mexican and Central American communities in Oregon regarding sexual harassment and assault.

As a result of the focus groups, the project now conducts targeted outreach, including home visits or



The Proyecto's Community Educators, photo courtesy of Oregon Law Center

visitas caseras. Sexual assault is particularly difficult to discuss in indigenous farmworker communities. The project focuses on gaining support from within the communities for victims of sexual harassment or assault in the workplace. After numerous *visitas*, the project's community educators have found that not only women, but also entire families are anxious to learn about the protections offered to them under the law. For this reason, both male and female farmworkers participate in the *visitas*.

Conduct Multi-Tiered Outreach

The Project's community educators, with assistance from the project coordinator, have developed a variety of outreach activities in order to respond to the unique needs of indigenous farmworker communities, including the following:

1. Home visits, called *visitas*, are small-group conversations addressing sexual assault or sexual harassment, conducted in the home of a farmworker.
2. Radio *novelas* are multi-chapter stories about worksite sexual harassment and assault and what to do about it. They will eventually be adapted into Mixteco Alto and Bajo, and Triqui.
3. Picture *novelas* visually explain scenarios, and are a useful outreach tool for low-literacy groups.
4. 30-second radio announcements help spread the word about the issue and the project.
5. CDs with *novelas* and legal information are distributed widely to the community.



Community Educators broadcasting a Radio Novela, photo courtesy of Oregon Law Center

Establish Organization-Wide Protocols

The project is drafting a protocol to help a health center identify and respond to this issue. The protocol is based on the Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force Community Protocols for Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations. They are being adapted to respond to the specific needs of indigenous communities. The protocols will attempt to mediate the forensic need for physical evidence in a sexual assault case with the cultural considerations necessary when treating an indigenous victim. For example, a cultural belief may call for a *limpia*, or ritual cleansing, after a traumatic sexual

experience. Although a provider will not provide a *limpia*, understanding this cultural belief could increase the trust between the victim and provider. In addition, the protocols will include a trained patient advocate on call for providers in order to assist in addressing the cultural health beliefs of the patient.

For more information about the Proyecto, contact Nargess Shadbeh, Farmworker Program Director at Oregon Law Center: nshadbeh@oregonlawcenter.org (503) 473-8328.

Considerations When Discussing Sexual Harassment and Assault with Indigenous Communities:

- **Language**—Mixteco Alto, Mixteco Bajo, and Triqui are among the languages spoken by the project's target community. Every attempt is made at a 'language match,' in which the community educator speaks the preferred language of the host.
- **Translation**—the words "sexual assault" or "harassment" may not exist among some indigenous communities. In this case, the community educator will explain the concept through a story or example.
- **Literacy**—many indigenous languages are no longer written in a common form. For this reason, outreach and education are provided one-on-one orally or through audio outlets such as radio and CDs.
- **Icebreakers**—because sexual assault is a sensitive topic, it is best to begin a home visit with an icebreaker, or *dinámica*, to increase the comfort of those present.
- **Bringing food**—on home visits, taking some culturally-appropriate food to the gathering can lighten the mood and increase trust and comfort.
- **Provision of childcare**—a host may feel more comfortable sharing experiences when children are out of earshot but in a safe place with supervision.
- **Knowledge of sending communities**—learning as much as possible about the dynamics, history, and customs of indigenous communities helps the community educators conduct outreach. A lot of knowledge comes from the educators' own experiences, but much is also gathered through work with the communities.
- **Cultural health beliefs**—many indigenous farmworkers have never received formal health care services, but instead trust and rely on traditional healers. Knowing and respecting such beliefs is vital to breaking barriers to care.
- **Patience, the process can take time**—sexual assault and harassment are difficult topics regardless of culture. It may take multiple visits for someone to open up.

Understanding and Identifying Alcohol Abuse & Dependency

By Liberty Rwhley, Project Manager

Current research suggests that substance abuse, particularly alcohol use, is a topic that warrants serious consideration when working with migrant and seasonal farmworkers. According to the Migrant Clinicians Network, adult migrant men are susceptible to substance abuse due to several factors, including: poverty, stress, lack of mobility, and lack of recreational opportunities.¹ One recent study in North Carolina reported that as many as 27% of the Latino male farmworkers surveyed engage in heavy drinking, while nearly 40% may meet criteria for alcohol dependence.²

Because alcohol abuse has emerged as a major health concern in the migrant and seasonal farmworker population, outreach workers should

have a basic understanding of alcohol-related issues. It is important to recognize that not everyone who drinks alcohol experiences problems. There are people that consume alcohol in low quantities who will likely experience few or no problems as a result. However there are patterns of alcohol use that do increase a person's risk for experiencing alcohol-related problems. The following definitions have been provided to help clarify some commonly-used terms associated with patterns of drinking that may produce negative consequences. Information from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's (NIAAA) most frequently asked questions about alcohol is incorporated into the definitions below.

Alcohol abuse occurs when a person drinks too

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Health Initiative of the Americas: Binational Community Health Worker Exchange Program

By Judy Cervantes-Connell, Project Manager

During the summer of 2008, I accompanied seventeen American community health workers to the Health Initiative of the Americas' (HIA) weeklong Binational Community Health Worker Exchange Program in Mexico. Though I am not a community health worker, I consider myself lucky to have joined the HIA's Exchange Program. During this week-long event, I had the opportunity to improve my understanding about migrant health issues, available resources, and strategies for better serving the migrant population. This exchange program is designed to unite community health workers from Mexico and the United States. I, along with other participants of this unique exchange, left the program with:

- A thorough understanding of the Mexican health care system;
- An awareness of different socio-cultural and environmental factors that affect the health of Mexican migratory populations; and
- Opportunities for networking with Mexican-based community lay health workers.



Photo courtesy of Judith Cervantes-Connell

Adventures in Mexico City and Puebla

During this exchange program, participants were graciously hosted by local Mexican government officials; they were treated as guests of honor and enjoyed informative presentations, lunches, performances, and cultural events. Following are highlights from this year's exchange program:

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