

Sexual Harassment in the Agricultural Workplace:

Recommendations based on Preliminary Findings from a Binational Study

The University of California Davis (UCD) and the University of San Nicolás de Hidalgo (UMSNH) in Michoacán México began researching this topic in 2016 for the “Sexual Harassment in the Agricultural Workplace” (SHAW) study. These efforts were supported by [WCAHS Emerging Issue funding](#) and PIMSA (the [Programa de Investigación en Migración y Salud - The Migration and Health Research Program](#)). The study is led by Dr. Stephen McCurdy (UCD) and Dr. María Elena Rivera Heredia (UMSNH). Co-investigators include Lizeth Guadalupe Martínez Servín (UMSNH) and Kimberly Yamilet Prado (UCD), with the help of Teresa Andrews (UCD).

Women are steadily becoming a greater part of the farm labor force. In 2014, women represented approximately [28%](#) of the farmworkers in the US. Women comprised [26%](#) of the California farm workers sampled by the National Agricultural Workers Survey in 2014. In one study, 150 farmworker women in California’s Central Valley revealed that 80 percent had experienced some form of WSH. The findings described victims experiencing gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention from both supervisors and coworkers (Waugh, 2010). WSH experiences can include rape, stalking, unwanted touching, exhibitionism, and vulgar and obscene language by supervisors, employers, and others in positions of power. Women farmworkers in Oregon revealed an awareness of WSH behaviors and reasons why victims do not speak up such as social economic and family pressures (Murphy, Samples, Morales, & Shadbeh, 2015).

Women farmworkers in Washington revealed WSH such as “quid pro quo” and a hostile work environment (Kim, Vásquez, Torres, Nicola, & Karr, 2016). Women farmworkers in Tamaulipas and Sinaloa, Mexico, reveal an economically induced vulnerability and increased risk of WSH (Arellano Gálvez, 2014) and victims reporting sexually objectification with stares, degrading language, suggestive behaviors, and sexual requests from transporters, co-workers, supervisors, and crew-leaders (Andrade-Rubio, 2016).

The purpose of the study is to investigate attitudes, perspectives, beliefs, and experiences of men and women farmworkers regarding WSH in agriculture with the goal of improving education and prevention practices.

Methods:

As an initial step, UCD and UMSNH researchers formed respective community advisory boards consisting of community leaders, industry members, farmworker advocacy groups, farm workers, academics, legal entities, and outreach organizations to contribute expertise and input for study strategies, materials, and a discussion on their retrospect and experiences.

Study procedures included focus groups and surveys on farmworker men and women on both sides of the border. Although we are still analyzing data, preliminary findings mirror previous findings on WSH in agriculture.

Results and Findings:

Themes and notable findings in UMSNH focus groups (n=13, 8 men and 5 women)

- Women said that WSH is a complicated topic, and there is a common assumption that a woman targeted with WSH provoked the situation.
- WSH is rarely reported.
- Crews with family members were viewed as protective against WSH, whereas non-family mixed-sex crews were viewed as a risk for WSH.
- Women felt it appropriate to get away from the harasser even though this implies abandoning the job, a change of labor type, or crew.
- Men felt that women could protect themselves against WSH by sharing those experiences with other coworkers, causing the women to be alert and vigilant, protect themselves better, and reduce the risk of the situation repeating itself.

Themes and notable findings in UCD focus groups (n=20, 10 men and 10 women)

- Men and women emphasized the need for WSH reporting options.
- Men and women noted that reporting efforts may result in reprisal (e.g., reduced working hours for the complainant) or in successful corrective action (e.g., reprimand or dismissal of the harasser).
- Men and women described reporting barriers victims face (e.g., threats, fear of reprisal in the form of job loss, reduced pay, reduced work, shame, social isolation from family and their community, and economic pressures to keep their job and support family).
- Men and women cited factors increasing vulnerability for women (e.g., young age, unmarried, single motherhood, low income, low employment status) and men (e.g., outnumbered by women in a crew, low employment status).
- Male farm workers suggested increasing the frequency of WSH trainings given high turnover in laborers and a lack of formal education on US legal and employment systems for recent arrivals.
- Women suggested 5-minute crew talks on behavioral expectations before each day's work and tougher consequences for perpetrators and negligent employers.

UCD's farmworker survey sample (n=97, 38 men and 59 women) findings

- Men and women farmworkers had non-statistically significant differences in their reactions to all but one WSH scenario with large proportions of both men and women reporting feeling “uncomfortable.”
- Although all farmworkers, regardless of gender, reported being exposed to at least one type of WSH during the past 12 months; a greater proportion of women reported exposure than men. And significant gender differences were found for five WSH types related to unwanted sexual attention and the reporting of man on women WSH and women on women WSH.
- All farmworkers agreed with at least one WSH myth item. All but one item was non-statistically significant by gender indicating overall uniformity among men and women.

UMSNH's farmworker survey sample (n=100, 40 men and 60 women) findings

- Men and women farmworkers had non-statistically significant differences in their reactions to WSH scenarios with large proportions of both men and women reporting feeling “uncomfortable.”
- All farmworkers, regardless of gender, reported being exposed to at least one type of WSH during the past 12 months and no significant gender differences were found.
- We found many WSH myths that significantly differed statistically by gender with the majority showing men reporting greater agreement proportions than women.

Findings mirror conclusions drawn in other studies on this topic (Murphy, Samples, Morales, & Shadbeh, 2015; Kim, Vásquez, Torres, Nicola, & Karr, 2016; Andrade-Rubio, 2016; Arellano, 2014). Addressing male farm worker engagement, a major research gap, is a critical contribution of our study. Women are the major targets of WSH, however, experiences, reactions, and perceptions were similar between men and women.

UCD and UMSNH's preliminary study findings assist in the development of WSH prevention materials and prevention practices. Findings support the continued promotion and implementation of WSH prevention efforts.

Future efforts will include employer interviews to explore the business administrative infrastructure for preventing and responding to WSH. UCD and UMSNH have begun identifying partners and are discussing plans on how to proceed with data collection.

The information gained from Women and Men farmworker's perspectives, partnership, and input in Mexico and USA will aid in the development and implementation of accessible and effective prevention programs.

Some recommendations:

- Development of training materials specific to MX and CA that include input from respective men and women farm workers.
- Those materials should include clear definitions, examples, and “red lines.”
- Materials that make it easy for this population to understand the content effectively and efficiently of WSH prevention as well as the consequences of and penalties for committing WSH.
- Evaluation and testing of preventive educational programs to identify and improve best practices.
- Emphasis on reporting procedures that protect the complainant and allow fairness to the accused.
- Further research involving larger populations in different geographic areas.

Preliminary data from UCD and UMSNH’s study reveal that there is still much room for improvement on reducing the risk of WSH among farmworkers. Ultimately, a collaborative effort between academia, industry, governmental, and organizational sectors that incorporate farmworkers experiences, input, and partnership is essential to addressing this problem.

References:

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