

Examining the Sexual Harassment Experiences of Mexican Immigrant Farmworking Women

Violence Against Women

16(3) 237–261

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DOI: 10.1177/1077801209360857

<http://vaw.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

This study examined sexual harassment experiences of Mexican immigrant farmworking women ($n = 150$) employed on California farms. Of the estimated one million California farmworkers, 78% are Latino, mostly from Mexico, and 28% are women. Unlike gender-segregated worksites of Mexico, women farmworkers in the United States labor alongside men, facilitating harassment from coworkers and supervisors. Simultaneous sexist, racist, and economic discrimination are comparable to converging lanes of automobile traffic (Crenshaw, 2000) that women, standing at the intersections, manage to avoid harm. Findings highlight how discrimination shapes women's experiences and demonstrate the need for institutional policies to protect them.

Keywords

Latina, Mexican farmworker, sexual harassment, women immigrants

Ever since Laura, a farm laborer, was 13 years old she has endured men's sexually degrading comments and behavior while working in the fields. As a 24-year-old single mother and the sole supporter of her children, meager though her pay is, quitting her job is not an option. Her predicament is similar to that of many low-income women confronting sexual harassment and striving to provide for their families. Situated near the bottom of the labor market, Laura's socioeconomic position limits her access to higher paying jobs and makes leaving her current work risky. As a field worker with little workplace oversight, she is far removed from the sexual harassment policies outlined by corporate human resources departments (Waugh, 2001).

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As a low-income Latina, Laura's experiences of harassment are seldom the focus of mainstream social scientific research (Lott & Bullock, 2001). Instead, much social science literature examines White middle-class women, whose experiences are considered normative and universal (Harris, 2001; Russo, 1991). Consequently, little is known about the experiences of sexual harassment that Latinas face in the workplace or how the sexism, classism, and racism they routinely encounter affects their harassment experiences. The purpose of this study was to provide a contextualized understanding of the experiences of sexual harassment among Mexican farmworking women employed on central California farms. The author begins with a discussion of a conceptual framework for understanding sexual harassment followed by a description of the conditions under which farmworkers labor. She then presents the results of a qualitative study of Mexican immigrant farmworking women.

Crossing Intersections: A Conceptual Framework for Studying Sexual Harassment

The guiding framework for this study is intersectionality theory that examines how racism, patriarchy, economic disadvantages, and other discriminatory systems form layers of inequality that structure the relative positions of women and men, racial/ethnic groups, and other social categories (Anderson & Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1993; Deaux & Stewart, 2001).

Crenshaw (2000) describes this layered effect by means of a "traffic intersection" metaphor. She writes,

In this metaphor, race, gender, class and other forms of discrimination or subordination are the roads that structure social, economic, or political terrain. It is through these thoroughfares that dynamics of disempowerment travel. These thoroughfares are sometimes framed as distinctive and mutually exclusive avenues of power. (p. 9)

These avenues overlap, creating complicated intersections where two or more "thoroughfares" meet. Marginalized women located at these intersections because of their group memberships must manage the "traffic" they confront to avoid harm. When multiple disadvantages interact or "collide," they create a unique and composite dimension of disempowerment.

The division between the "powerful" and the "powerless" is not always clearly cut. An intersectional approach to understanding farmworking women illustrates the relational nature of power (e.g., women's shared experiences of race and class oppression alongside male coworkers). At the same time, it can illuminate how women farmworkers may be differentially disadvantaged because of gender, including sexual harassment they confront from male coworkers and supervisors.

Intersectionality theory also affirms personal agency demonstrated by women within constrained groups. Fine (1989) argues that persons of relatively low ascribed social power cannot control those forces that limit their opportunities, but they do assert control in ways

ignored by researchers. Scott (1991) maintains that individuals are not autonomous and able to exercise free will, but rather “agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them” (p. 793). Subordination and oppression have negative consequences, but not responding in “expected” ways does not indicate a failure to exercise personal efficacy or control. Individuals in all contexts, even in one of relative powerlessness, make choices and resist oppression (Lamphere & Zavella, 1997).

Low-income women may recognize that one’s social supports are too vulnerable to be relied on or else not possess necessary economic resources to make a preferred choice. Thus Mexican farmworking may utilize skills they call on to help them navigate sexually harassing experiences. Accounting for alternative behaviors may enrich understandings of sexual harassment responses, aiding in the construction of models that more accurately reflect the experiences of economically and socially marginalized women.

Farm Labor in California: Living in Poverty

An estimated one million farmworkers, considered the second most dangerous occupation in the United States, labor in California (Villarejo, Lighthall, Williams, Souter, & Mines, 2000). Of these, 78% are Latino, and approximately 28% of farm laborers are women (Bugarin & Lopez, 1998). Although California is the leading agricultural state in the United States, producing 250 crops valued at almost US\$25 billion annually, farmworkers do not share in this wealth. Earning approximately US\$6.15 an hour, most farmworkers, having no more than a sixth grade education, live far below the poverty thresholds (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009; U.S. Department of Labor, 2005; Villarejo et al., 2000). Poor nutrition and health, limited access to medical care, exposure to pesticides, and substandard housing are pervasive (Bullock & Lott, 2001; Lott, 2002; Lott & Bullock, 2001, 2007; National Center for Farmworker Health, 2002).

The economic demands of seasonal employment make farmworkers reluctant to miss work, particularly because farm laborers do not have sick leave. Any missed work could lead to loss of employment. For many farm laborers, additional fears of deportation are a material reality shaping their behavior and perceptions on the job, concerns also preventing them from seeking out health care and government assistance (Castañeda & Zavella, 2003; Villarejo et al., 2000).

Farm-Laboring Women Facing Racist, Classist, and Sexist Discrimination

Farm laborers currently working on California farms are a heterogeneous group, including older Mexican men who originally migrated as part of the Bracero Program that began in 1942, those who are younger and who have migrated more recently and settled permanently, some born in this country, and those who migrate annually, returning to Mexico after the harvest season. Although a majority of California farmworkers are from Mexico (between 75% and 90%), workers also include those from Central America and Asian countries (Bullock & Waugh, 2005; Griffith & Kissam, 1995; National Center for Farmworker Health, 2002; Villarejo et al., 2000).

Mexican immigrant women began to settle in large numbers after the end of the Bracero Program (after 1964) and increased significantly beginning in the 1980s (Zavella, 2001, 2003). Some women migrate as a result of labor displacement, to follow family members, or to escape domestic violence (Bastida, 2001; Bullock & Waugh, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Zavella, 2003). Unlike their experiences in Mexico in mostly gender-segregated worksites, immigrant women farm laborers work in close proximity to men (Castañeda & Zavella, 2003; Yoon-Louie, 2001). Consequently, “just being female in the fields creates risks” as a result of living “outside the norms of protection of women” (Castañeda & Zavella, 2003, p.10). Moreover, poverty, migration, and new work environments also affect women’s family and social relationships (Belle, 1994; Lamphere, Zavella, Gonzales, & Evans, 1993).

Farm-laboring women’s distance from power places them in subordinate economic and racial positions, creating the circumstances facilitating sexual harassment (Clarren, 2005; Tamayo, 2000). Farm labor also situates them in different class positions as harassment may come from men, such as supervisors and contractors, who may share the same ethnic heritage as women workers but who are more economically and socially advantaged relative to women field laborers (Billikopf, 1997; Ise, Perloff, Sutter, & Vaupel, 1994). These conditions likely make responding to sexual harassment difficult to manage (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997).

Sexual Harassment: National Prevalence Rates and Dimensions

Approximately 35% to 50% of women are sexually harassed at some point in their working lives (Gutek & Done, 2001). Others report higher figures (National Council for Research on Women, 1992). Although fewer in number, studies involving women of color also document high rates of harassment, with some suggesting that for women of color, risk for harassment may be greater than for White women (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Wyatt & Riederle, 1995). Fitzgerald and her colleagues (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995) have conducted extensive research to document the psychological dimensions of sexual harassment (see also Cortina, 2001). They identify three broad categories of harassment: (a) gender harassment, which includes generalized sexist comments and behavior that convey insulting, degrading, and sexist attitudes; (b) unwanted sexual attention ranging from unwanted, inappropriate, and offensive physical or verbal sexual advances to gross sexual imposition, assault, or rape; and (c) sexual coercion (i.e., the solicitation or coercion of sexual activity by promise of reward or threat of punishment).

The Current Study

This analysis focused on qualitative data that were collected as part of a larger study examining Mexican immigrant farmworking women’s experiences of sexual harassment (Waugh, 2006). The goals of the current study were to (a) examine the factors that heighten women’s risk of sexual harassment in the fields, (b) highlight how these experiences are

similar to and differ from documented experiences of harassment in the larger social scientific literature, (c) inform public interest groups and various agencies focused on assisting women farmworkers, and (d) examine how power and agency are demonstrated in the face of social constraints that severely limit women's options and render farmworking women invisible. It is hoped that the distances between often-studied middle-class White women and Latinas and poor women will be reduced, allowing for greater identification with marginalized individuals (Bullock, 1995).

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty Mexican and Mexican descent farmworking women, ranging from 15 to 65 years of age ($M = 34.64$ years; $SD = 10.67$ years) employed in the fields of California's central valley, one of the state's leading agricultural regions (Bugarin & Lopez, 1998; Kuminoff, Sumner, & Goldman, 2000) completed a series of questionnaires about experiences of sexual harassment. Most participants were born in Mexico (97%; 3% were born in the United States) and had lived in the United States an average of 12.54 years ($SD = 9.76$ years). Eighty percent of respondents experienced some form of sexual harassment. This figure is higher than Cortina's (2001) analysis in which 60% of Latinas experienced some form of sexual harassment.

Farmwork is typically seasonal with many workers laboring primarily during harvest. Ninety-seven percent reported holding one job, while 3% worked multiple jobs. A typical workday was estimated at 8.17 hr, with most respondents working 5.9 days a week. Participants spent approximately 54 min ($SD = 32$ min) commuting to work one way. Average seasonal self-reported earnings were US\$1,349.76 per month (median income = US\$1,200.00), poverty level wages for a family of four (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2009). Respondents had worked in the fields an average of 8.84 years ($SD = 8.02$ years). Eighty-five percent of respondents reported working on medium to large farms, and the remaining 15% worked on small farms.

The majority of respondents had little formal education. When asked about their highest level of educational attainment, 17% reported completing less than a sixth grade education, 24.7% completed sixth grade, 13.7% completed some high school, 29.3% finished high school, and 7.3% reported taking some postsecondary classes. Eight percent reported no formal schooling. These figures are lower than those found in the general population of Latinos residing in the United States. The U.S. Census reports that 60.6% of Hispanics aged 25 years and above have a high school diploma (Crissey, 2009). However, these figures are consistent with previous investigations of farmworking populations (Bullock & Waugh, 2005; Villarejo et al., 2000).

All respondents identified as heterosexual. Seventy-one percent of participants reported being married or living with a partner. Fifteen percent were separated, divorced, or widowed. Fourteen percent had never been married. Ninety percent reported having children ($M = 2.5$ children) for whom they were financially responsible. Most respondents lived only with

their partners and/or their children (60%), while 35.3% lived with extended family members such as parents, brothers, and cousins. Approximately 5% did not respond to this question. Participants reported living with an average of 5.26 persons ($SD = 2.47$ persons), with the number of persons in each dwelling ranging from 2 to 18. Participants lived in a variety of dwellings. Most lived in houses (54%) and apartments (38.6%) with the remainder living in trailers (4.7%) and in labor camps (2.7%), crowded, substandard "housing" that may require persons to share common areas, such as bathrooms.

Procedure and Materials

To protect women's safety and confidentiality, the majority of respondents were contacted and interviewed at local flea markets at a rented booth advertising the chance to participate. A banner attached to a table read, "Women farmworkers: We want your opinions about your jobs." This provided an opportunity, away from their job sites, for women to participate without fear of retaliation from coworkers or supervisors. Moreover, farmworkers and low-income people frequent these markets. Participants were also contacted for participation at community markets on the weekends. Women were assured that individual responses were confidential and would not be shared with their foremen, supervisors, or community members. Each respondent was paid US\$10 for her participation. Two trained research assistants assisted the principal investigator. All researchers were of Mexican origin and had field labor experience in the central California valley.

All materials, with the exception of the SEQ-L, which is published in English and Spanish (Cortina, 2001), were translated by a professional translating team. Materials took approximately 40 min to complete and were available in English and in Spanish. Only one participant questionnaire was completed in English. To address concerns about women's limited reading and writing skills and to ensure that the questions were understood, all materials were presented orally in Spanish or English to respondents by a researcher. Participants were encouraged to request clarification if they had difficulty understanding a question. Responses were written down verbatim and tape-recorded to ensure that no data were missed.

Each packet of materials contained measures assessing experiences of sexual harassment, responses to these experiences, characteristics of the perpetrator, questions about their work setting (length of time employed in the fields, number of jobs held, hourly wage, length of work week, commuting time to work, sex ratios, ethnic composition, employment position, size of employer's farm), and demographic information (gender, age, marital status, number of children, ethnicity, income, family income, education level, housing type, number of persons living in each home, country of birth, number of years residing in the United States, current place of residence). The occurrence of physical and psychological symptoms women experienced as a result of sexual harassment was also assessed.

Measures

Demographic information. Participants were asked the city/town where they lived, whether they lived in their own residence or in another's home, dwelling type (apartment,

house, trailer, labor camp, or other), number of persons living in their home and their relationship to them, years of education completed, age, marital status, racial/ethnic identity, place of birth, number of years residing in the United States, where they work, family income, the number of persons who contribute to their family's income, whether they have children and their children's ages, and the number of children for whom they are financially responsible. Participants were also asked why, if born outside the United States, they migrated to this country and the type of work they performed in their native country.

Work context. Participants were asked to report the length of time employed as field laborers, number of jobs currently held, hours worked per week, number of days per week worked, hourly wage, the type of work they currently performed, their primary mode of transportation, and the length of their commute time. Respondents also described how they found their current job.

Physical and psychological symptoms. Thirteen questions were adapted from Haney (1993) to measure possible physical and psychological symptoms (e.g., headaches, trouble sleeping, hands shaking, nervousness, nightmares) resulting from sexual harassment. The question stem read, "I would like to ask you about some feelings you may or may not have experienced after the unwanted sexual attention occurred. I also need to ask you how often you have been bothered by these things." Respondents rated the frequency of particular symptoms along a 5-point Likert-type scale with "1" indicating *never* to "5" indicating *frequently*.

Responses to sexual harassment. Respondents were asked to share one experience of unwanted sexual attention on the job that had occurred most recently or that had the greatest effect on them. Participants were asked the following two questions: "Can you please describe what happened?" and "What did you do when you experienced this unwanted sexual attention?"

Social coping. To assess social coping, a series of questions adapted from Pugliesi and Shook (1998) and Todd and Worell (2000) were used. Participants were given the following prompt, "Sometimes women look for support from a friend or a family member when they experience unwanted sexual attention. Now, I am going to ask you some questions about whom, if anyone, you might have sought support from and whether you found this helpful." Participants were then asked whom they talked to for emotional assistance (mother, father, sister, brother, friend, coworker, priest, other), how helpful they thought this was, and about the kind of assistance individuals may have provided. Participants were asked the following yes/no question, "Did you talk to your . . . (mother, father, etc.)?" Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale to rate the helpfulness of these sources of support with "1" indicating *not helpful* to "5" indicating *very helpful*. This was followed by the open-ended question, "If this person was not helpful, why not?" or "If they were helpful, how did this person help you?" One final question asked, "Is there anyone you feel that you just cannot talk to about sexual harassment? If yes, why?"

Sexual harassment experiences. The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire-Latina (SEQ-L; Cortina, 2001), an adaptation of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald et al., 1988) was used to measure the frequency of participants' experiences with sexual harassment.

Analyses

Descriptive analyses. Frequencies were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics of the sample, including current place and type of residence, whether they shared a dwelling with others outside their immediate family, number of persons living in their dwelling, education level, age, marital status, racial/ethnic identification, place of birth, years of U.S. residence, current income, number of persons contributing to family income, number of dependent children, and workplace sexual harassment experience. Summary statistics were also used to characterize participants' work setting (length of time employed in the fields, number of jobs they held, hourly wage, length of work week, commuting time to work, sex ratios, ethnic composition, employment position, and size of employer's farm) and physical and psychological symptoms they experienced as a result of sexual harassment.

Qualitative responses. Responses to open-ended questions were transcribed and translated by the principal investigator. As a first step toward understanding women's responses to sexual harassment, responses to open-ended questions were coded by two independent raters using Knapp et al.'s (1997) model as a guide. Initial interrater agreement was 96%, and differences were negotiated to 100%. Knapp's model focuses on four response patterns: (a) advocacy seeking; (b) social coping; (c) avoidance/denial; and (d) confrontation/negotiation. The author listened for themes that reflected these categories as well as for additional response strategies that did not fit into this paradigm. The principal investigator summarized all other data.

Results

Participants' work environment was a site of converging lanes of traffic, influencing the types of sexual harassment experienced and how women managed these. Participants related accounts that can be broadly categorized along the same dimensions outlined by Cortina (2001) and Fitzgerald and her colleagues (1988; i.e., gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion). However, experiences were also shaped by the intersections of respondents' race, class, and gender in ways atypical for Fitzgerald's middle-class White respondents and in ways that placed women at great risk for sexual harassment. Despite facing institutional and interpersonal discrimination, women were resourceful and negotiated solutions, minimizing harm to themselves and their families. Responses illustrate how participants endeavored to control their circumstances with limited social and economic resources. Factors that heighten farmworking women's risk of harassment are outlined and the ways these differ and are similar to documented experiences of harassment in the larger social scientific literature are highlighted. In doing so, the author draws attention to women's proactive, adaptive, and thoughtful responses.

Institutional and Interpersonal Discrimination: Farm-Laboring Women at Risk

The nature of farmwork makes women particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. Many respondents reported pulling weeds and picking fruit alongside men. Previous research has

demonstrated that, next to being a woman, working or learning in close proximity to men increases one's risk of sexual harassment victimization more than any other factor. This is because the majority of harassers are male (Dubois, Knapp, Farley, & Kustis, 1998). Male-dominated employment also increases the likelihood of being harassed (Morgan, 2001). Forty percent of participants in this sample reported that men were the majority in their crews. Statewide estimates of the gender ratio of farmworkers document even higher rates of male-dominated field teams with men comprising approximately 72% of laborers (Bugarin & Lopez, 1998). Clearly, women are rarely the majority of workers in the field. Only 3% of participants stated that women comprised the majority of coworkers in their crews.

More important, supervisory roles were predominantly held by men (92%), another major risk factor for sexual harassment (Dubois et al., 1998). The risk is further increased when a woman lives in poverty (Morgan, 1999). The Mexican women farm laborers in this study were locked into low-wage, low-prestige jobs, were dependent on men for their employment, performed tasks that were evaluated by men, and worked in crews and teams organized by men.

Women farmworkers are also vulnerable to sexual harassment because field laborers often work in remote areas, isolated from their coworkers. It may also require laborers to assume exposing physical positions. This was the case for many of the participants in this study who were employed on strawberry (35%), grape (26.8%), and various berry (15.4%) farms. In some cases, a tall and leafy berry bush or a full-grown grapevine concealed harassers' actions and concealed women from others' view. Moreover, women reported receiving work assignments from foremen in isolated areas, such as orchards and fields, far from coworkers and far from where their vehicles or coworkers' vehicles were parked. In other cases, stoop labor necessary to harvest crops such as strawberries, lettuce, and broccoli required women to bend over, rear end in the air and in male coworkers' plain view. These daily circumstances made respondents vulnerable to sexual stares, verbal comments, and unwanted grabbing.

For a majority of women, such working conditions differed dramatically from their lives in Mexico. Fifty-five percent of participants were too young to work when they lived in Mexico or did not work outside the home. Another 11% worked outside of their homes performing small jobs such as selling fruit or garments at markets or on the streets. Seventeen percent of respondents worked in factories and in retail, such as small stores or offices. The remaining 17% worked on family farmland with siblings and parents. Working in the fields of California required women to adapt and to develop new skills, such as "learning to defend themselves" (Castañeda & Zavella, 2003).

Economic vulnerability heightens risk of sexual harassment (Morgan, 1999), and this was certainly true for the women in this study. When asked why they came to the United States, 80% mentioned the desire to escape poverty and earn money to support their families. Yet, as U.S. fieldworkers, women remained in deep poverty. Low pay, in addition to the seasonal nature of fieldwork, left workers unsure as to whether they would have another agricultural job after the harvest. Regardless of whether a woman was the sole wage earner or contributed to the family's income with her partner, she remained below the poverty threshold. Staying employed was crucial to her family's survival and a factor

women seriously considered when contemplating how they would respond to sexual harassment. Moreover, participants were aware that sexual harassers recognized the precariousness of their financial situation and reported that their poverty was used to leverage power against them. A 35-year-old married woman and mother of three children described the power a perpetrator holds:

I didn't like that that happened to me, that the *mayordomo* [foreman] told me to go with him that night . . . that he would pay me. . . . That's because he was the *mayordomo* and he said he would give me money so that I would sleep with him and I wouldn't have to work because he knew I needed the job.

Until this time, she had been able to survive on poverty wages pulling weeds in the tomato fields. She came to the United States at the age of 24 to "look for a better life." Tragically, the foreman seriously threatened her efforts to achieve even a substandard living for herself and her children.

Field labor differs dramatically from typical middle-class employment in that coworkers are frequently neighbors, close friends, and family members. Sixty-seven percent of participants reported that they acquired their current jobs through family members and friends. Fifty-five percent also traveled to and from work with their coworkers. Another 42% drove their own vehicles, likely taking workmates along with them. These factors complicated how women responded to sexual harassment, creating a "double-edged sword" and a "traffic intersection" that women confronted daily.

Consistent with previous research (Castañeda & Zavella, 2003; Lamphere et al., 1993), data from the current study demonstrate that a majority of participants relied on coworkers and friends for emotional and practical support to assist them with the sexual harassment they faced. Respondents reported talking to their friends or coworkers (59%), husbands (11%), sisters (10%), and mothers (4%) about harassment. Women also expressed that close others listened and consoled them, and/or gave them the courage to confront the perpetrator (61%). Respondents further stated that others provided practical help, such as accompanying them to work, talking to the supervisor or perpetrator on their behalf, and/or helping them find other employment (20%).

Yet, 22% of participants told no one of their harassment experiences. Thirty-four percent (41 respondents) stated there were individuals they could not talk to about their sexual harassment experiences. Of these, 10 participants stated they would not tell their husbands because they believed their husbands would hold them responsible for the incidents. Eleven participants would not tell their husbands for fear that they would retaliate against the perpetrator for bothering their wives. These findings are understandable considering that, in some instances, participants, harassers, and harassers' wives and/or family worked in the same crew and were well known to the participant. In other cases, the knowledge that a harasser's wife and family worked in the same crew caused participants anxiety, including worry that rumors and gossip could cost them their jobs and their reputation. Similar to previous research (Belle, 1994), responses indicate that for some participants, social support is not a resource they possess. Unlike middle-class women, farmworking women may

not receive the same protective factors of “social support” because of economic and family responsibilities. This appears to be the case in this study as women both relied on coworkers for assistance and also kept from them their sexually harassing working conditions.

Farmworking Women’s Experiences of Gender Harassment

Similar to previous studies (Cortina, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 1988), 97% of respondents reporting sexual harassment experienced gender harassment from coworkers and superiors. Participants described sexist comments and behaviors that were insulting and degrading.

For example, one single 29-year-old mother of two children who worked in the grape harvest stated, “There are always these jokes. They make sexual jokes or insults saying, ‘women aren’t worth anything except for having children and cleaning the home.’” Another 21-year-old married strawberry picker with three children described feeling anger and indignation at the comments a coworker made to her and her female workmates, “You are all prostitutes. Women don’t have morals so you don’t deserve respect . . . that’s why you are alone.” This respondent reported feeling embarrassment for the mothers in the group who worked in the fields with their young daughters. A 26-year-old berry picker with four children also reported sexist remarks, “One day we arrived to work and one guy said there was a car accident. He said it had to be a ‘fucking old lady’ driving because women don’t know how to drive.” A 35-year-old berry picker with three children recounted her experience, “In a job [a coworker] told me that I was too fat for the work that was being done. He would stare at me in a bad way and well, I would feel bad.”

Many women reported being leered at or stared at. For example, a 37-year-old married woman with two teenage children described the nonverbal hostility she perceived from men as she walked past them on the tomato farm where she worked. She observed, “Well, uhm . . . they don’t remove their gaze from us, when they stare at us with *malicia* [malice] . . . well . . . one feels uncomfortable. And it’s not just one, it’s all the men.” Similarly, a 37-year-old mother of two related, “Yes . . . well . . . they do stare . . . you know that there are men who just stare. When we are passing by them or moving from rows they [coworkers] . . . they just stare, they follow us with their eyes.” Women in this study reported sexist and degrading experiences more frequently than experiences with unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion.

Farmworking Women’s Experiences of Unwanted Sexual Attention

Fifty-three percent of respondents reporting sexual harassment also described experiences of unwanted sexual attention that ranged from inappropriate and offensive physical or verbal advances to gross sexual imposition, and even rape. A young, single 18-year-old woman who picks lettuce described an incident of verbal harassment while walking by groups of men to get to her row, “A coworker started bothering me by whistling and telling me sexually vulgar things. I never gave him a reason to, but he always continued, especially in front of his friends.” Participants frequently reported this type of unwanted sexual attention from coworkers and superiors alike.

Participants' clothing sometimes played a relevant role in women's experiences of unwanted sexual attention. Women who work in the fields must wear heavier clothing to protect themselves from the dust, dirt, pesticides, and heavy sun that beats on them. Their clothing includes long-sleeved shirts, jeans, heavy boots, wide brimmed hats, and bandanas worn to protect their hair and face. Often their faces are covered so completely that only the eyes and nose can be seen. Castañeda and Zavella (2003) observed that farm-working respondents in their study reported wearing heavy clothing and facial scarves to protect them from sexually harassing men as well. One respondent in the current study who works packing grapes into boxes, a 33-year-old divorced mother of four, described the ongoing sexually harassing behavior the crew foreman subjected her to:

The foreman "checked" my work and got really close to me, pulled down my face scarf and tried to kiss me. He always asks me out and says I will really enjoy having sex with him, and that I would not regret it. . . . He has done so many things, I can't even remember them all. . . . once, I was bending down and he said, "Hey, I'm going to insert a very pleasurable stick into you." This has been happening since last year. He's married, too. He knows that I'm divorced, and so he thinks I will go out with any *baboso* [drooling pervert].

This account also highlights the power foremen have relative to women farm laborers. Foremen inspect the "quality" of women's work and in the process abuse the responsibility by harassing women workers, including women who are the sole support of their families.

One participant who wore heavy clothing to protect her while working in the damp and cold mushroom caves recounted the following experience, "Men that I work with make remarks about my clothing. They tell me I wear too much clothing. They say, 'Take something off so we can see more of you'" (40-year-old mother of two children). These experiences make obvious that women are not "asking for it" by wearing "seductive" or "sexually alluring" attire.

Sometimes perpetrators did not directly comment on women's clothing, but instead focused on items worn on their bodies. Farmworkers frequently listen to small radios while working. Men in one crew even commented on this piece of a woman's apparel:

I was walking to my row [of grapevines to harvest], and I crossed the main row. I passed the first [fruit] packers [workers stationed at the end of the rows to collect and pack workers' fruit into boxes], and I went by them. I had a radio hanging from my hip that I would listen to with my headphones as I was working in my row. A man said really loud to his friends next to him, "Wow, that radio moves very beautifully, doesn't it?" From that time onward, I moved my radio into my pocket.

To protect herself, this 49-year-old separated mother of five children felt compelled to move her small radio to a pocket so as not to attract attention.

Some women's experiences of unwanted sexual attention involved sexual grabbing and touching. A 25-year-old strawberry picker and mother of one child explained, "One man tried to grab my breasts. This is the experience that had the most effect on me. This affects

women the most.” Another participant, a 40-year-old married strawberry picker, mother of four, plainly stated, “One day, I was walking toward my row, and this man I worked with grabbed my buttocks. He said, ‘I really like them.’ I told him he was crazy.”

Similarly, a 36-year-old separated mother of five children who worked picking strawberries noted,

At that time, I didn’t understand what sexual harassment was. This man at work, a couple of times, said he wanted to have sex with me, and he would stand very close to me. I would tell him I didn’t want him to stand close to me, and he’d say, “What can I take away from you by standing close?” He would constantly bother me. One day, he said, “You know, I’m not wearing any underwear.”

She later commented that she felt bothered and fearful, and at the same time thought he was ridiculous.

Women utilized a variety of strategies to respond to sexual harassment. Six were identified: (a) confronting the perpetrator by telling him to leave them alone or to stop bothering them (this included actions such as striking the perpetrator and/or threatening to tell; 46%); (b) ignoring the person, not responding to the perpetrator or walking away (21%); (c) reporting him to the office, supervisor, or to another person with authority (19%); (d) avoiding the perpetrator (12%); (e) telling coworkers or other family members (9%); and (f) quitting their jobs (11%). Three percent of participants were fired after the incident occurred. Confrontation, the most frequent strategy women utilized, countered cultural stereotypes of Latinas who are portrayed as “passive” and deferent to men in their communities.

For example, stories of unwanted sexual attention at times included women’s decisive responses to perpetrators’ crude behavior even though 60% of men held higher work status and 22% of women reported experiencing feelings of anxiety and fear of retaliation. Some respondents contemplated physically harming their harassers to stop the abuse. One described using a pair of shears (special scissors used when working with table grapes to clip bunches off the vines and to snip the ends of the stems after they are packed in shipment boxes) against a foreman who approached her from behind. A 45-year-old married mother of two related her experience:

[A] foreman, on several occasions, grabbed my legs. He grabbed me from behind and touched my breasts and rubbed his genitals into my rear end. I had a pair of scissors in my hand . . . and if he hadn’t moved at that very moment, I would have stabbed him in the neck. I was packing grapes and had scissors to trim the stems out of the boxes. I said, “What are you doing?” He became very afraid when he saw the scissors. I said, “I don’t think you’d want someone to hug your wife like that at work.”

This account confirms previous research demonstrating that women are more likely to confront the perpetrator when harassment involves more “severe” types of harassment, such as touching and grabbing (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Knapp et al., 1997). However, in

spite of research suggesting that women are less likely to confront perpetrators with greater workplace authority (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Knapp et al., 1997), this respondent acted to protect herself against the foreman, calling attention to his obscene behavior.

Women's accounts of sexual harassment recurrently described the difficulty of standing at the intersections of economic and gender oppression, facing worries about coworkers' reactions. The following participant, a grape box puncher (grape boxes are stapled shut or "punched" and the correct labels attached before they are taken by truck to cold storage for shipment) and 33-year-old separated mother of four children, related her experience and her feelings about her position:

When I first started being a puncher, a foreman from Mexico kept insisting on asking me out and would always make passes at me. Because I was a puncher, he always had to review my work. So, he always had an excuse to be at my area. He said that if I went out with him, he would make sure that I worked at that job always, that I would never have to worry about having a job. He would always tell me how beautiful I was and that I could work there year around, not just seasonally. He was a man who wanted sex, but I didn't give in. I was afraid of losing my job. I was afraid that if I said "No," he'd start to talk about me to others in the crew and to the boss. So, I figured if he did that, then I'd have to defend myself. I had to think of my children first. I needed my job. So, I decided that I wasn't going to let him get away with anything, especially if he said something or some lie about me to others. That had never happened before or since.

Her concern over her family's economic survival overrode her fears of slander and coercion by her boss. Although the foreman offered her year-round work, she concluded that she would "defend herself" and speak to the supervisor, if the need arose.

Some women's accounts of unwanted sexual attention included information about the complexity of working with immediate and extended family members, neighbors, and close family friends. The following report highlights one participant's concern over her family relationships, damaging rumors, and the serious implications of refusing a perpetrator's harassment. At the same time, it emphasizes deep concern about her economic situation.

What happened was . . . well, this man began saying that he liked me because I was Latina and from this certain state. He was also Latino, but we were from two different states in Mexico. Then he would tell me *chistes picarros* [dirty jokes]. First he would tell jokes among other women coworkers and me. Then he started to tell me these jokes alone. I wondered why he didn't talk to me very much when his wife was around. He would say, "your husband would forgive you if you slept with me" and "come on, let's just have a quickie . . . no one will know. Come and meet me somewhere in X camp. I will wait for you." I'd say, "Leave me alone, I'm here to work. Leave me alone." I never told anyone, not even my husband. I just told one cousin, and she turned out to be a big gossip. . . . One time, he got into the bathroom with me. When I got out, he held me by my arm. He tried to force me to kiss him. I told

him I was going to call the supervisor. He said, "They'll never believe you. It's my word against yours. Just once be with me." . . . I would always tell him to stop and to leave me alone. Finally, I told him one day maybe, but not until I leave work. My husband is here and your wife is too. That was how I handled it.

Then, three days later, they fired me. I asked the supervisor why they fired me. The supervisor said, "because there are stories too terrible to mention about you that we've heard." I liked his wife very much before this all happened. After they fired me, she would call me and say I should come back to work. I couldn't bear to tell her any of this . . . I mean, the reason why I got fired. . . . I was alone here in [this town] without my sisters or brothers. I tried to forget this and pay attention to my husband. The foreman would actually phone me, and he talked to my husband. He said, "Let me talk to your wife." My husband would say, "What *confianza* [familiarity] he has . . . he wants to talk to you." This was three days after I was fired, and I hadn't told my husband I was fired yet.

This participant managed harassment by leaving the foreman's offer "open-ended," in the hopes that he would leave her alone. At 54 years of age and with three children, she was fired at the foreman's whim. He continued to harass her after she was no longer employed and also had the power to start malicious rumors about her at work. He also directly interfered with her family life, leading her husband to believe that she was having a romantic relationship with the perpetrator. This account makes clear the amount of power foremen and superiors have over vulnerable women employees, with little or no oversight or involvement from agricultural companies who have the most to gain.

Further demonstrating the combination of sexual imposition, family relationships, and poverty, a 32-year-old berry picker and married mother of two related,

My husband and I worked together, but my supervisor always tried to separate us. In front of my husband, he would get really close to me and wanted me to pick fruit by myself in a row far from my husband. He would get angry with me about my work even though I knew I was doing a good job. He was very hard on me. He would come to my row and inspect my work. He wanted me to bend over in front of him and pick the fruit that he said I was missing way down underneath the vine . . . well . . . you obey and bend over with him looking at you from behind because you need the money, and you think, "Boy, my rent is coming due, and I need this job!" . . . He was always looking at me. . . . One day, my husband asked him why he wanted to separate us. With that he fired us both from work.

The family's entire livelihood was lost because the supervisor had the power to sexually harass his employees and fire them at will. These experiences differ dramatically from typical middle-class accounts of workplace sexual harassment in which employee misconduct must be documented before firing and where family members generally do not work with one another.

Similarly, a 45-year-old lettuce picker and mother of two children recounted her experience of attempted rape by a foreman who was related to her by marriage:

The first thing that happened was that I went to the restroom, and he approached me and said, "When are we going to dinner?" Another time, we entered a storage shed, and he tried to take my clothes off. It was horrible. We were practically related—we had family that were married to each other. I asked him, "Why are you doing this?" I know all his family and his wife's family. This really left me traumatized. When I see him now, I feel very nervous. He tried to force me to have sex with him, and then he became angry when I refused and told him, "No!"

As these accounts demonstrate, for many farm-laboring women, experiences of unwanted sexual attention profoundly influenced their immediate and extended family relationships as well as their economic well being. Knapp et al. (1997) consider avoiding the perpetrator the "most passive response" (p. 687) to sexual harassment. They define "avoidance" as including behaviors such as ignoring the sexual harassment or doing nothing, altering the job situation by quitting or transferring, going along with the behavior, or treating the incident as a joke. If social researchers view responses through this lens, women's agentic behavior may be missed. The qualitative data suggest that, far from being a "passive" response, ignoring, quitting, avoidance, and complying were deliberate resistance strategies that women utilized to survive and to take control of their situations. Given their limited social and economic resources, women purposefully "chose" these actions, considering them the best possible approach to a complex set of circumstances.

Farmworking Women's Experiences of Sexual Coercion

Twenty-four percent of women reporting sexual harassment also described experiences of sexual coercion, or on-the-job blackmail. This is considered a severe, yet less frequently reported form of harassment in the literature (Cortina, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Only those individuals with sufficient organizational authority to affect the condition of another person's employment have the power to perpetrate this type of sexual harassment (Morgan, 2001). For this reason, the majority of quid pro quo reports involve harassment of a subordinate by a person with the power to hire, promote, or assign benefits. This was true for women in this study. Women's poverty also made responses to sexual harassment complex. Note the following description by a 38-year-old married woman of five children who pulled weeds on a berry farm:

The supervisor offered me money to have sex with him. I thought it was a joke, only because I thought he was a trustworthy person. Well . . . I felt very bad . . . I felt my blood go through to my toes. He always said these sexually gross things in front of many people. It was usually on a regular basis that he told single women really sexually offensive things. He did this just because he thought he could get away with it . . . he wanted to treat me like a prostitute!

The supervisor's privileged employment position made him feel entitled to sexually abuse this participant and other female employees. Not only did she have lower job status relative to the supervisor, but she was also unmarried. Living outside the "norm" of marriage, she was unprotected and treated like a prostitute.

Participants who appeared to renege or who failed to deliver sexual favors risked punishment in the form of demotion, dismissal, or the denial of basic necessities for performing their jobs. This was the case for the following participant who pulled weeds on a berry farm, a 44-year-old divorced woman of three children:

I was harassed for 7 years. I didn't take it seriously at first. I looked at it as a joke. He [the foreman] offered me US\$1,000 per month, and told me he would only visit me two times a week for one hour each time. He said he would give me a car, too. He noticed that I was alone and cared for my kids alone, and he knew I needed the job. When I realized he was serious and I refused, he told the manager I was going to work late and drunk. My coworker told me he had said this to the manager. This made me really angry. I never drank, especially on the job. So I went straight to the foreman, and I asked him when it was that I came to work drunk . . . and . . . uhm . . . looking back I realize that the manager was testing me out, to see if what the foreman was telling him about me was true. . . . As we went from one field to another, the manager would get into my car for a ride to the next field. He would check to see if I was drunk. I never knew this is why he would ask for a ride. It wasn't until later that I realized this. I thought for one week. I asked to see the manager, and I told him, "I need to tell you what's happening. I need you to help me." Eventually, I was fired. I was so upset that I was hospitalized twice. I couldn't stand to lose my job. I didn't know what to do. I cried all the time. I should have never complained.

This participant initially attempted to resolve the situation by approaching the office secretary to report the harasser. The secretary concluded that it was the participant's word against his and told her to forget about the abuse. She next spoke directly to the farm owners, a White English-speaking married couple, taking along her son to interpret. She pleaded with them to believe her and to take some action. She told the wife, "I know I am poor and you are not, but I am a woman just like you. Would you want this to happen to you?" The respondent reported that the wife said nothing. Although the perpetrator was eventually "fired," she reported that he was rehired and remained on the owner's property in an employer-provided home. Similar to cases that document the results of formal complaints (Morgan, 1999), this experience left the participant unemployed and physically ill, feeling that she "should have never complained."

This account, along with the others cited here, underscores the lack of institutional support for women field laborers. Frequently, language barriers make women reluctant or unable to speak out about their workplace harassment. Women field laborers' economic immobility often makes them targets of sexual harassment by foremen and supervisors who, although sharing the same ethnic heritage, have lived in the United States longer and have greater social and economic power relative to the women. Women reported that

92% of the harassers were of Mexican origin, with the remaining 8% from Central American or Asian origin. Anecdotally, some participants commented either during or after the interview that often women farm laborers do not speak of their sexual harassment experiences because of their undocumented status. Silence and vigilance are resources that women laborers utilize to survive.

This experience of sexual coercion also draws attention to another distressing consequence of sexual harassment. Regardless of the type of sexual harassment women reported, their experiences affected their physical and psychological health. In this study, women field laborers experienced headaches (49%), trouble sleeping (52%), shaking hands (51%), perspiring or sweaty hands (49%), heart palpitations (48%), and chronic tiredness (48%) as a result of sexual harassment. Sixty-two percent experienced nervousness or feeling on edge, with 34% experiencing this symptom often or frequently. These findings are not surprising, given the severity of their experiences and their limited resources, social, economic, and otherwise.

Discussion

For a majority of participants in this study, the desire to escape impoverished conditions and improve their lives motivated their migration to the United States. Limited education greatly reduced their chances, locking them into male-dominated field labor acquired through social networks consisting of family and friends. As if living in poverty, performing back-breaking jobs, and having the worst health of any population living in the United States were not enough, women further suffered emotionally and physically, enduring men's sexually abusive behavior. These circumstances created a multiway traffic intersection whereby women both relied on and avoided speaking about their sexually harassing experiences to family, friends, and community members.

Field work, largely unsupervised and with few, if any, employee harassment policies to deter perpetrators (Clarren, 2005; Tamayo, 2000), left a majority of women open to a range of sexually harassing experiences. Sexual harassment in turn affected women's livelihoods and the livelihoods of their partners and families as perpetrators with workplace authority separated workers, gave them more difficult tasks, withheld wages and bonuses, and even fired them.

Understanding Mexican farmworking women's social structural positions and their responses to sexual harassment is complex and must be understood in relation to intersecting forms of discrimination. Respondents utilized a variety of methods for managing sexual harassment, indicating that Mexican immigrant farmworking women are not a homogeneous group. Results of this analysis suggested that a majority of women do not live the stereotypes held about Latinas. They were neither deferent nor beholden to men in their communities, particularly to men who held workplace authority. Understanding the working and living conditions of farmworking women will advance knowledge of low-income, ethnic minority immigrant groups residing in the United States. It will also assist community agencies and other public interest groups in improving the working lives of farmworkers.

Farm-Laboring Women's Physical Work Environment and Attire

The current study further confirms the ways in which the physical nature of field labor facilitates sexual harassment (Castaneda & Zavella, 2003). Apart from the physically exhausting and labor-intensive worksites, respondents reported being harassed when working with their backs exposed to men, concealed in bushes or vines, and in isolated orchards and fields.

Farm environments differ dramatically from the work settings and environments in which most women examined in the sexual harassment research literature labor. The dominant images of targets of workplace sexual harassment are that of a professional woman working in a corporate setting or an administrative assistant being pursued by a "skirt chaser." However, such conceptualizations must be broadened to include low-income, Latina immigrants. As the U.S. Latina population rises (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) and overrepresentation in field labor and other low-wage work continues (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2003), social scientific theories must be expanded to take into account the experiences of diverse populations.

Results of this study also highlight that women are not responsible for sexually harassing behavior by acting or dressing seductively. Women farmworkers are covered from head to toe in heavy clothing, and yet men sexually harass them. Findings demonstrate that sexual harassment is a way of intimidating and controlling women.

Family and Community Relationships: The Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

For women in this study, home, community, and work boundaries were blurred, creating critical lanes of merging traffic. Poor Mexican women farm laborers migrate with close others, live in communities with their family and friends, and work with partners, parents, and neighbors. As a consequence of poverty, many participants live under one roof with extended family members and family friends or in a labor camp. If a woman lives in a labor camp, then she likely travels around the state or beyond every few months, from camp to camp, working and living with the same individuals, including perpetrators. Farm labor is a family and community affair. Any response a woman makes to sexual harassment at work must include serious consideration about how close others in her integrated community are affected, particularly when the perpetrator is well known to her family, lives in the same community, and/or holds workplace authority.

A majority of participants told their coworkers and friends about their experiences and reported gaining courage to confront the perpetrator. However, participants also reported not sharing their experiences with close others. A minority of women voiced concern about their husbands' responses to their sexually harassing experiences, worrying that they would retaliate against the perpetrator or else not believe her. More research needs to investigate the extent to which patriarchal cultural beliefs exist and/or influence women's concerns. Future research also needs to investigate how women farmworkers navigate their intimate relationships when managing sexual harassment, particularly because husbands and wives often work together.

For participants in this study, sexual attention received from a perpetrator did not go unnoticed by fellow crew members. Coworkers detected when a woman was singled out for unwanted attention and special treatment, isolated to another field, or retaliated against. A perpetrator's attention was accurately interpreted by some as sexual harassment and by others as instigated and "asked for" by her. These complex intersecting avenues forced participants to consider how they would respond to sexual harassment and curb gossip, whether true or false, to preserve their jobs and support their families, maintain good working relationships with coworkers, and preserve their marital relationships.

Concern about not being believed or being ostracized is a recurring theme in the broader social scientific literature (e.g., Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002). However, the set of circumstances farmworking women face is vastly dissimilar to typical middle-class work and home environments. For example, policies regulating the hiring of immediate relatives, such as parents, partners, children, and in-laws, are standard at universities, financial institutions, and other businesses. These policies are intended to prevent favoritism and conflicts of interest and to limit the amount of influence family members have on employment, promotion, and firing. Although some institutions may not forbid employment of a close relative, they limit relatives' involvement in decisions about personnel matters relating to family members. Women working in settings with antinepotism policies are unlikely to encounter the problems that 80% of respondents in this study routinely experienced.

For many participants, staying in their jobs and confronting sexual harassment, when all possible roads were considered, was the "best" choice. For others, quitting and searching for other work helped them avoid problems in their marital and extended family relationships from which they could not escape. At times, entire families left their jobs because of the sexual harassment experiences of a single family member. Perhaps due to their undocumented status, family responsibility, or other undisclosed reasons, this drastic action must have been the best option available.

Farm Labor Contractors and Supervisors: Women at Risk

Research demonstrates that when men with workplace power behave in sexually inappropriate ways on the job, sexual harassment among employees also increases (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Pryor & Meyers, 2000). The great majority of women had little supervisory authority, adding to the risk respondents faced. Most had experienced some form of sexual harassment, testifying to the permissiveness of foremen and supervisors on the job.

Relative to women workers, men in supervisory roles have greater class privilege and also tend to be longer-term U.S. residents than laborers, with some men being U.S. citizens by birth (Billikopf, 1997; Ise et al., 1994). Men with workplace authority have greater English language skills than laborers, enabling them to communicate with company owners, who are usually White. All of these factors contributed to women's experiences, giving men considerable leverage to coerce women workers, including those who are undocumented and/or the sole support of their families. The power owners possess, which includes the lucrative and renowned table grape and wine industries, is further borne out by the fact that California agriculture, with the second largest economy in the state after the technology

industry, has largely escaped sexual harassment suits (Clarren, 2005; Tamayo, 2000; for a notable exception, see EEOC, 2008).

Limitations of This Study and Concluding Thoughts

This sample consisted of primarily Mexican immigrant women working on California farms. Generalizations about immigrant women from other countries of origin, or about Latino subgroups, women employed in other regions of the United States, or employed in other types of work should be made with caution. Factors such as reasons for migrating, country of origin, generation residing in the United States, economic status, and formal educational level have all been found to influence perceptions of employment in the United States (e.g., Lamphere & Zavella, 1997). The current study also utilized a convenience sample, which may have resulted in certain biases. For example, although respondents were not asked to provide legal status, perhaps undocumented women refrained from participating to avoid drawing attention to themselves or because they may not be in public spaces. Thus this research likely failed to capture experiences of undocumented immigrants.

The high rate of sexual harassment experienced by women in this study suggests that agricultural companies do not have or are not enforcing harassment policies. Future research needs to examine the extent to which farmworking women are aware of company sexual harassment policies and whether these policies are enforced. Women farmworkers must be informed of their right to work in an environment free from harassment. Perpetrators, labor contractors, and agricultural companies must be made aware of their responsibilities to workers and held accountable for their actions.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to recognize Yadhira Perez and Mariela Lopez for their assistance with data collection and to thank Heather E. Bullock for assistance on an earlier version of this paper. She would also like to thank community markets for allowing her to meet potential participants at their places of business. Most of all, she would like to thank the women who took time out of their work and family schedules to participate in this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This project was supported with funds from the University of California Labor and Employment Research Fund.

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Bio

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