



Female Farmworkers Raise Issues

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Complaints of poor working and living conditions as well as sexual harassment and abuse are heard at first statewide conference.

More than 80 female farmworkers discussed issues such as working and living conditions, and discrimination during the first Statewide Female Farmworkers Conference in Fresno July 30-31.

The event was organized by the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation. No specialists were invited—female farmworkers, who came from Oxnard, Sacramento, Coachella, Salinas, Blythe, Santa Rosa, Santa Maria, Sanger, Merced, El Centro, Yuba City and other rural areas of California, were the only players. "They wanted this way," said Gloria Hernandez, main organizer of the event. "Its important that they discuss their issues, problems and solutions to their concerns."

The keynote speaker was Maria Echaveste, Director of Salaries and Hours of the U.S. Labor Dept.

Among the topics discussed were labor rights, sexual harassment, health, domestic violence, organization, migrant education and housing.

The participants agreed that "only a labor contract can guarantee the minimum wage and normal working conditions," as Teresa Sandoval, one of the participants, put it. And she added that farmworkers can't accept being divided into "legal" and "illegals," because "this is the way they want us to think about and to fight one each other. The problem is exploitation, not documents."

Several farmworkers complained about poor working conditions, low salaries and lack of drinking water, bathrooms and hygiene in the fields. One of the most discussed issue was sexual discrimination. Many of the participants said women have already proven to be capable of handling "men's jobs" and still suffer discrimination. Laura Gil, from Oxnard, explained her experience in this matter, including a legal action against Oxnard Lemon Packing Co. for sexual discrimination.

Sexual harassment was another hot issue at the conference, especially the harassment

committed by foremen and other supervisors. Many of the assistants explained the psychological, physical and labor consequences of the harrassment they face daily at work. Some of the conclusions about this issue includes the need for more education, legal action against those responsible for harrassment, and permanent legal advice.

During the domestic violence workshop, several women said they still are victims of physical and/or psychological violence at home. They called for all women to break the cycle by stopping educating their daughters to "totally obey their husbands." Virginia Ortega, one of the participants in this workshop, said "women aren't just mothers, but also fighters for justice." She explained that many women don't fight for their labor rights because of their husbands.

Due to the success of the event, the organizers said they will keep it as an annual one.

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