

THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE: BATTERED MIGRANT FARMWORKER WOMEN CREATING SAFE SPACES

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In this article I describe the use of a participatory action research (PAR) methodology to address the problem of domestic violence among migrant farmworker (MFW) women in California. The article was generated from a variety of data sources used by the investigator over a 4-year period. These include the investigator's observations, field notes, informal conversations, written stories from the women, and interviews. The "power of the collective" is discussed as the development of a power base for battered MFW women to support and take care of one another. The concepts of liberation, enlightenment, and "conscientizacion" are used to describe the evolution of the collective.

"No hay mal que por bien no venga." The literal translation of this "dicho" is that something good always comes from a bad situation. Dichos are proverbs used in Mexican culture to pass on the wisdom and experiences of our elders. Although they have a universal purpose, women often use dichos to warn their daughters of the pitfalls of marriage and relationships. I am using this particular dicho to tell the story of how MFW women in California have created a safety net for battered women in their communities, what I call the power of the collective. This power was generated from the work of a project entitled, *Lideres Campesinas*

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Domestic Violence Outreach and Education Project. It is a statewide project in California that has been in existence since 1995.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The “Invisible” Population

MFWs are often referred to as the “invisible population” because they travel throughout the United States preparing the land and harvesting the crops that feed all of us. Many of us have never noticed these people working the fields. When we go to our supermarket to buy fresh fruits and vegetables we are unaware of the difficult conditions under which these people have lived and worked in order for us to get these foods at a good price. How many of us know that the average annual salary for a MFW family is \$6,500 (Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs [AFOP])? How many of us have thought about the impact of migrant life on a child’s education?

It is even difficult for the government to tell us how many MFWs are living in the United States. Statistics report that there are approximately 3 to 5 million MFWs (AFOP, 1998). The variation in the numbers is related to the difficulty in counting this transient population and in the different definitions of an MFW depending on which government entity is doing the counting. For purposes of this article, the definition of an MFW is taken from the Migrant Health Program of the U.S. Bureau of Primary Care, Department of Health and Human Services. An MFW is described by the federal government as “an individual whose principal employment within the last 24 months is in agriculture on a seasonal basis . . . and establishes a temporary abode for employment purposes” (Migrant Health Program, 1992). The majority of MFWs in the United States are Latinos. There are also migrant farmworkers who are Southeast Asian, Eastern European, African American, and Afro-Caribbean. There is a stereotype in the United States that all migrant farmworkers are undocumented immigrants. In fact, about one-half are U.S. citizens (AFOP, 1998).

MFW Women and Domestic Violence

MFW women in the United States did not appear on the domestic violence agenda until the early part of this decade. When I began this work in 1990, there were no references to MFW women in the domestic violence literature. Migrant farmworker women were an unknown entity to national and state domestic violence coalitions and advocacy groups. Many shelter workers had never heard of MFW women. Although they

were a critical part of the migrant labor organizing movement of the 1960s and 1970s in California (Martinez, 1991), they were not a part of the mainstream U.S. feminist or battered women's movement of the same time. Even today, the MFW women I have worked with do not describe themselves as "feminists," but as the protectors of women's human rights.

The view of farmworker women as defenders of human rights is consistent with their history and lived experience. Life as an MFW means that one must traverse many layers of oppression in order to survive. In some forms, these layers are not gender specific. All MFWs, regardless of whether they are U.S. citizens or immigrants, have felt the assaults on their dignity and human rights. All MFWs know the effects that racism and poverty can have on the human spirit. All MFWs know that strength means survival and strength comes from family.

Living, working, and traveling as a family are critical to the survival of MFWs. Wages are often paid for piecework, so the more hands, the better. If a male goes to "el norte" (the northern United States) to work the fields alone, the woman must remain behind to take care of the home and family (Salgado de Snyder, 1993). Decisions are made based on the good of the family unit, not the individual. This is the burden a battered MFW woman must carry with her as she considers her options for leaving or staying in the relationship.

Although very little is known about the problem of domestic violence among MFW families, surveys conducted between 1995 and 1996 using an adapted version of the Abuse Assessment Survey (McFarlane, Christoffel, Bateman, Miller, & Bullock, 1991) indicated that 1 in 5 (20%) migrant farmworker women reported being physically abused within the past year. Ten percent reported forced sexual activity within the past year (Rodriguez, 1998). Over the last several years, anecdotal reports from both MFW women and health care providers describe the problem as much greater than what has been reported through quantitative methods. This is especially true for the women working through the *Lideres Campesinas* Domestic Violence Outreach and Education Project.

The focus of this project is grassroots organizing around the issue of domestic violence. From their work in the migrant labor movement, these women had learned the techniques necessary to bring people together around an issue. But an interesting dichotomy developed. Here were women who were not afraid to confront corporate America, but were afraid to confront their husbands. They could march in solidarity for their rights in the fields, but were not allowed to talk to their "companeras" (other women) about the violence they experienced in their own homes. When they conducted their own needs assessment in 1993, identifying the problem of domestic violence was easy. Addressing it was another story.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding that these farmworker women came from a life experience based in the struggle for justice and liberation, it seemed reasonable that their struggle for personal emancipation should incorporate a critical theory perspective. Critical theories are based in the everyday struggles of a particular group of marginalized people. Since there is not simply one explanation to describe the cultural, political, or historical roots of oppression, critical theory is described as critical theories. They have been created from numerous perspectives that share “a common historical pattern of originating within resistance movements such as fascism, colonization, racism, exploitation of women, and prejudice against lesbians and gays” (Stevens & Hall, 1992).

The basic tenet of critical theory is that of liberation from oppression that occurs as a process of action and reflection (Stevens & Hall, 1992). Friere (1970) states that conscientization, or critical consciousness, develops when people work together through this process of action and reflection (praxis) to identify the social, economic, and political forces that are at the root of their oppression. At this point, people are ready to take action to change their circumstances. Liberation is the outcome. Through praxis the women who participated in this project came to an awareness of their experience with domestic violence. This was an awareness that their personal experiences were not unique, that their instincts had not been wrong, and that they were not alone. They were now ready to take action.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project was conducted using a PAR design. This type of research has no prescribed methodology; therefore, both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used. The research is conducted in the participant's natural setting and includes entire populations instead of trying to identify a particular sample (Small, 1995). It serves to create system change as it describes the phenomena of interest. Action researchers take a postpositivist view of research in that they reject the ideas of separation of the researcher and the researched, the assumption of researcher as expert, and the belief that research is value-free (Small, 1995).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE COLLECTIVE

In this article I describe my observations of the personal and collective evolution of the MFW women participating in this project. These observations have been synthesized from a variety of data sources, including

my field notes, informal conversations, participant observation, women's narratives, and interviews throughout the project period. In other words, this description comes after 4 years of working, traveling, eating, sleeping, laughing, and crying with these amazing women, i.e., my "sample."

Our First Meeting

In July 1994, I met the *Lideres Campesinas* for the first time. They were conducting their second annual conference in Riverside, California. At this conference, they discussed a series of issues that had been identified during their needs assessment. Along with domestic violence, issues such as housing, minimum wage, pesticide exposure, and sexual harassment in the fields were among the meeting topics. With their permission, I was allowed to attend the conference as an observer. At this point, it is important to note that, as a professional, as a doctorally prepared nurse whose research focus was domestic violence among MFW women, I was not brought in or viewed as the expert. I was a guest who was given permission to attend a gathering of experts—MFW women who had lived every problem they posed on their conference agenda. In later conversations with the women about our first meeting, they stated that their purpose in inviting professionals, i.e., experts, to this conference was not to tell them what they already knew about their problems, but to work with them in figuring out a solution.

Myles Horton (Horton & Friere, 1990) talks about the use of expert knowledge in working with communities. Once community members have identified their problems, they may need the help of professionals to take action. Professionals often see themselves as experts brought into the group to solve their problems, to tell the people what to do. Horton takes a different approach to the use of this expert knowledge. He states that there is a difference between providing information to people and telling them how they should use it. If this so-called expert tells the people how they should solve the problem, Horton suggests that this will take the power away from communities to make their own decisions. This was exactly the point of the *Lideres Campesinas*. They wanted me to provide them more information about domestic violence, but they would develop their own approach to the problem.

At this first meeting, I was surprised and disturbed to note that the women were using the common myths and stereotypes about battered women to describe one another's experiences. Comments such as, "I got out of my relationship; she must like it or she would leave" or "She will just go back to him anyway" were frequent. It was very difficult for me to hold back and not tell them they were wrong! I knew that they had a genuine desire to help battered women, but it was clear that a community

of trust would have to be created before any progress would be realized. Women would have to be able to talk openly about their experiences without the fear of being judged or scrutinized by their “companeras.”

The Training

We decided that our first intervention would be training regarding basic information about domestic violence. Basic information included the types of violence, the dynamics involved, i.e., power and control, the cycle of violence, and the legal rights of battered immigrant and undocumented women. The training lasted 3 days. It was at this training session that the collective started to form, although it was not apparent to me at the time. It is only in retrospect that I can see the powerful evolution of these MFW women as leaders and protectors of the collective.

At the training, the women began to share their stories and blend them with the information they were receiving to come to a new understanding about the lives of battered women. Of the 26 participants, 23 revealed, and some for the first time realized, that they had experienced one or more forms of abuse in their lifetime. For example, several women revealed that this was the first time they had heard that a husband's forceful insistence for sex on demand was a form of abuse. They believed that this was a wife's obligation. I learned in later interviews that, until the time of this training, they believed that women were the property of men and that men and women did not have the same rights as human beings. What was happening here was much more than a domestic violence training; it was a time of “conscientization.”

Although we did not purposely use a praxis model during the training, the process of action and reflection occurred nonetheless. The design of the training by the participants, i.e., the number of days, the setting, and the group process created the space for this praxis to occur. The 3 days allowed for us to work without feeling too rushed to cover the content. We were able to have discussions, share experiences and ideas, answer questions, and role-play. The setting was a quiet retreat that provided the women privacy. In this case the privacy the women wanted was not as individuals, but to be free as a group (without their children) to laugh together, to cry together, and to share meals and stories. The last day of the training was used to develop a plan of action. The women decided how they were going to use their newly discovered knowledge to take action against the problem of domestic violence in their communities.

THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE COMES ALIVE

When the Lideres Campesinas realized that they could help battered women through their difficult times regardless of whether the women de-

cided to leave or stay in the relationship, they became aware of their power. They now had the knowledge and skills to understand the dynamics of domestic violence and knew they had legal rights as women and as human beings. Here are the stories of two women who realized their power and helped bring the collective to life.

JUANA

Juana is a woman in her late fifties and is one of the original group of *Lideres Campesinas*. She is married and has 6 children. Over the last 4 years in this project, she has helped many battered MFW women in her community. She takes advantage of any occasion where a group of women are gathered to share her knowledge with them. For example, she gathered a group of women at her daughter's wedding reception and talked to them about domestic violence. She says that she now feels confident working with battered women, but that this was an evolution.

After the first few cases, I got more courage; then more and more courage. I even have the courage to confront the men. For example, at school [where she is taking English as a second language classes] I was asked to help give some classes in Spanish. I was helping a man and he got mad and said he was "not about to listen to any woman." I said to him, "Oh, you're one of those 'machos' from Guanajuato [a state in Mexico]. Well, I was told to hold your hand and teach you how to write. I am going to teach you and you are going to be quiet." He then said to me, "no vieja [old lady] is going to make me be quiet." I told him that I wasn't a "vieja," I was a woman, and if he wanted to act like a "macho," he could leave.

When the teacher heard this exchange, she was shocked that Juana would stand up to this man. But Juana said, "a woman doesn't have to take this from any man." I asked her if she felt like she has always had this courage. She said, "No, before I used to think that talking back to a man was a sign of disrespect. I thought that because he was a man, I had to keep quiet. But not anymore. Now I say, 'We are equal.'"

When I asked her why she has this courage today, she said that it was because of all that she had learned at the programs. She related another story:

A very pretty young woman arrived in class and the men [at school] started saying, "ay madresita" [Spanish term for "oh baby"], and then I got up in front of the class and I said, "Did you all know that this is sexual abuse? You are not doing this in the bed, but you, all of you [including the teacher] are still sexually abusing her, humiliating her." I told her,

“Come with me.” She wouldn’t say anything. You see she was like all of the women who felt like they cannot talk back to a man.

We continued to talk and she told me about how her involvement with the program was beginning to have an effect on her own relationship. She stands up to her husband now even though he gets frustrated with her “sermons and sensitization talk” (Juana’s words). Women now come to Juana to ask her how they can start groups of their own to help battered MFW women.

Ana Maria

Ana Maria is a woman in her early thirties who has been working with Lideres Campesinas for the past 3 years. I first met Ana Maria at our training during the second year of the program. She related the following story about a visit she made to the social services office where she was seeking assistance.

I went to the office where they fill out papers. After a while, the social worker that was helping me received a phone call. After a few moments, the woman began to cry. After she hung up the phone she told me that her daughter had called to tell her that her husband had beaten her. I told her that I also had been abused for many years. I talked to her about Lideres Campesinas and I told her about our support group that I had been attending for 3 years and that it had helped me a lot. I told her what I know about domestic violence. I asked her if I could put out some brochures about domestic violence and she said yes, so that her clients could see them.

In this case, the tables had turned and Ana Maria “the client” became Ana Maria “the provider.”

In another case, a friend whose sister was being abused called upon Ana Maria.

I went with her to her mother’s house, I told her a little about my life, and then her mother asked me if there was any chance that the husband could take the children away from her daughter. I said that there was no way because the husband was an alcoholic and he was drunk every day. The woman told me that every time the [daughter’s] husband was drunk, he would hit her, insult her. . . . I talked to her about restraining orders and I offered to go with her to the police to make out the report against the husband. I assured her that she was not alone, that she could count on me and the support of our group.

As the Lideres Campesinas began their work, I observed an interesting occurrence. These women did not see their interventions as a separate action, as “something else to do.” I make the contrast to professionals who tend to have a professional life that is separate from a private life. For these women, there was no distinction between the work of the project and the work of their daily lives. The objectives of the project were subsumed into their everyday existence, and working with battered women became another one of their routine activities, much like going to the grocery store or picking up children from school. Wherever they were, they were attuned to the potential problem of domestic violence among the women they were encountering and used their daily activities to identify and help battered women. They were completely open and had no reservations about giving out their home addresses or private phone numbers to any woman who needed their help.

The two women whose experiences I have shared with you are representative of the commitment and the generosity of spirit reflective in the work of the Lideres Campesinas. As a result, they have touched the lives of hundreds of battered women throughout California.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

The observations I have described have served not only as research data, but also as lessons to me as a researcher and a nurse. I have seen the power that can be created by a group of women who are described by the health profession as “vulnerable populations.” They are seen by those who develop research agendas (i.e., “the experts”) as uneducated, illiterate, and poor. Working with these women has taught me that we, as professionals and researchers, are the ones who are poor if we deny ourselves the privilege of working with and learning from a strong, smart group of people with a rich culture and unwavering sense of community.

Finally, I must return to the dicho, “No hay mal que por bien no venga.” The genesis of this collective and the power that was created by it are the result of a very bad situation. The sad truth is that the women came together and found their power as a means of survival. They learned that together they could confront their abusers because there was another woman close by to protect her. They could now march, as they do during domestic violence awareness month, in solidarity with all women to end the violence in their lives.

Author's Note: I sent the original version of this manuscript to the women of Lideres Campesinas to share my observations with them and to check it for accuracy. They are now translating it into Spanish so that it can be shared with all of their members.

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