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ORIGINAL PAPER

"They Talk Like That, But We Keep Working": Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Experiences Among Mexican Indigenous Farmworker Women in Oregon

Jeanne Murphy · Julie Samples · Mavel Morales · Nargess Shadbeh

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Abstract In order to examine the experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault among indigenous and non-indigenous Mexican immigrant farmworkers in Oregon's Willamette Valley, a community–academic participatory research partnership initiated a study, which included focus groups, conducted and analyzed by skilled practitioners and researchers. The themes that emerged from the focus groups included direct and indirect effects of sexual harassment and sexual assault on women and risk factors associated with the farmworker workplace environment, and the increased vulnerability of non-Spanish-speaking indigenous women due to low social status, poverty, cultural and linguistic issues, and isolation. Recommendations for prevention and improved services for vulnerable women will be discussed as well as limitations and future research directions.

Keywords Indigenous · Mexican · Farmworker · Women · Sexual harassment · Sexual assault

J. Murphy (✉)
Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, 525 North Wolfe Street, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA
e-mail: jmurph60@jhu.edu

J. Samples · M. Morales
Oregon Law Center, 230 N.E. 2nd Ave., Suite D, Hillsboro, OR 97123, USA
e-mail: jsamples@oregonlawcenter.org

M. Morales
e-mail: mmorales@oregonlawcenter.org

N. Shadbeh
Oregon Law Center, 921 SW Washington, Suite 516, Portland, OR 97205, USA
e-mail: nshadbeh@oregonlawcenter.org

Background

Approximately 68,000 indigenous farmworkers from Mexico currently live in Oregon [1]. National data suggest that about 20 % of farmworkers are women, but there are no reliable estimates of the number of female indigenous Mexican farmworkers [2]. Indigenous farmworker women often do not speak English or Spanish, but one of many indigenous languages like Zapotec, Mixtec and Triqui which are common in villages in southern and western Mexico [1].

In recent years female farmworkers in Oregon's Willamette Valley have reported sexual harassment and sexual assaults at the workplace to local community service providers and farmworker advocates. In April 2009, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Oregon Law Center (OLC) filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against Oregon's Willamette Tree Wholesale Company in response to complaints of sexual harassment and rape. EEOC filed the lawsuit in Oregon after successful prosecution of a sexual harassment case against a farm in California that resulted in a large settlement for the Latino woman farmworker. The verdict was reaffirmed on appeal in 2008 [3].[1]

A review of the scientific literature on sexual harassment of indigenous Mexican farmworker women revealed no results. A wider search on sexual harassment of farmworkers yielded a 2010 qualitative study by Waugh [4] on sexual harassment among immigrant non-indigenous

[1] Over the past decade, the Oregon Law Center has represented a number of agricultural workers, including indigenous farmworkers, in a number of discrimination (sexual harassment/assault) cases throughout the state of Oregon, in response to complaints of verbal sexual harassment, graphic images, assault, retaliation for complaining about harassment, and quid pro quo.

Mexican farmworker women highlighted a lack of workplace protections against sexual harassment. Women reported engaging in tactics including ignoring or even pretending to consent to harassment, worried that reporting the behavior would lead to losing their jobs. A broader search included important work by Krieger et al. [5, 6], which demonstrated high prevalence of sexual harassment among low income workers, and places it in a continuum of harassment and other structural sources of oppression that can result in health problems like high blood pressure.

Because of this lack of information about the problem and strategies for prevention and intervention, community and academic partners collaborated to implement a community–academic participatory research study to investigate the experience of sexual harassment among indigenous Mexican farmworker women in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.[2]

Methods

Community-Based Participatory Research

The study methods follow the goals of community-based participatory research, where the research team includes community members who are integral to all aspects of the research process. Community and organization members and researchers engaged in a process that was designed to ensure shared decision-making and mutual ownership of the research procedures and results [7]. Indigenous farmworkers were already permanent members of partner organizations, working as community educators. They served an essential role in this study by participating in all planning activities of the study and by moderating focus groups. They also participated in data analysis and interpretation.

Participants

Investigators used focus groups to identify issues and understand farmworker experiences and perception regarding sexual harassment and assault. Focus groups consisted of 3–16 women who self-identified as indigenous Mexican farmworkers. Purposive snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit women farmworkers from local farms.

Table 1 Moderator guide

Aim	Focus group questions
Describe knowledge about workplace policies relating to overall safety and to sexual harassment and assault	1. Who tells you what to do at work—a supervisor? A more experienced co-worker?
	2. To whom do you report an injury when you are hurt at work?
	3. Have any of you received training at work where the company explained to you its policies regarding sexual harassment?
	4. Who gave the training? (rancher/mayordomo/other)
	5. What language was the training in?
	6. Was the training sufficient for you to understand what you should do if you were sexually harassed at work?
Describe the experience of sexual harassment and assault of indigenous women farmworkers	1. Do you think that sexual harassment/assault is a problem for women at work? Why?
	2. Do you think that it is a worse problem for indigenous women? Why?
	3. Have you heard or seen of sexual harassment/assault happening at work?
	a. Canneries/nurseries/field
	b. Bathrooms/lunchrooms/living spaces/parking lot
	4. If you know of anyone who was sexually harassed at work?
	a. What did the person who was harassed do about it?
	b. Did it fix the problem for her?
	5. Have you ever avoided going to the bathroom or taking a shower at work or in the labor camps because you were afraid?
	6. Who do women tell if they are sexually harassed at work? Why?
	7. Who do women not tell if they are sexually harassed at work? Why?
Assess attitudes about increased risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault of indigenous Mexican women farmworkers	1. Who do you think is to blame, if anyone, if a woman is sexually harassed or assaulted at work? Why?
	2. Do you think a woman's reputation is ruined if she is sexually harassed/assaulted at work? For example, would she be rejected by her community or blamed for what happened? Why?

[2] This partnership included Oregon Law Center, Northwest Treeplanters & Farmworkers United, Oregon Health Sciences School of Nursing, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing and Virginia Garcia Health Center. This article presents results from a qualitative descriptive study designed to describe the experience and knowledge of, and attitudes about sexual harassment and assault of indigenous Mexican women farmworkers.

Community partners publicized the focus groups through informing potential participants of the study, and soliciting participation of female farmworkers. Women were eligible for participation if they identified themselves as indigenous or Latina and indigenous, and had worked on a local farm for over 4 months. Sampling continued until new comments no longer emerged in focus group discussions. After initial analysis showed that more information was needed about farmworkers who only spoke indigenous languages, additional groups were convened to help reach saturation of information among this group.

Data Collection

Interested women were invited to participate in focus group interviews that were held at non-workplace sites in the area, and occurred in the evening or other non-working hours. Confidentiality was protected. When language was not a match for participants and the facilitator, interpreters in additional indigenous languages joined the group. Interpreters and group leaders were long-term members of the study team, and many were indigenous former farmworkers themselves.

Each focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed into Spanish from the indigenous language if the focus group discussion was not in Spanish. Then, all Spanish transcripts were translated into English. Participants received $25 grocery cards for participation. Institutional Review Board approval was given by Oregon Health & Science University, University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University.

Measures

Table 1 shows questions moderators used to lead focus groups, corresponding to the aims of the research.

Analysis

The analysis used techniques of open and theoretical coding from grounded theory analysis. [8] The group of collaborators reviewed all transcripts individually, and through multiple discussions the group developed themes and interpretations in a collaborative and iterative effort. Moderators did not regularly poll participants in answering questions, since group members were promised anonymity and were thus not necessarily identified in transcripts. Instead, moderators encouraged open discussion in response to interview questions. As a result, it was not possible to code individual responses and produce an exact number of responses to questions.

Table 2 Focus group characteristics

Focus group #	# of participants	Language spoken	Translation to transcripts
2006–01	10	Spanish	Spanish to English
2006–02	7	Spanish	Spanish to English
2006–03	16	Spanish	Spanish to English
2006–04	8	Spanish, Mixteco Alto, Triqui (translated in group to Spanish)	Spanish to English
2006–05	8	Mixteco Alto	Mixteco Alto to Spanish to English
2008–01	3	Spanish	Spanish to English
2008–02	7	Triqui	Triqui to Spanish to English

Results

There were seven focus groups; five were held in 2006, and 2 in 2008. 49 women participated in the 2006 groups, 38 indigenous and 11 "Latina." There were 10 participants in the 2008 groups, 7 indigenous and 3 "Latina." Table 2 shows details of group composition, with the languages spoken. Of the 49 participants, 20 women required translation from an indigenous language to Spanish.

Themes Knowledge about workplace policies relating to sexual harassment…

> Now, if we get hurt, cut ourselves, we have to let somebody know so they can dress the wound and not get blood in the fruit. We have to report that. But it doesn't say anything about sexual harassment. No. (Group 2008-01, Spanish)

All the women reported receiving some kind of supervision in the workplace, usually by Spanish-speaking foremen. Foremen were usually former farmworkers who were trained to oversee workers directly. At work, the women usually reported to a foreman, although in the absence of such a person they would report directly to the supervisor of the field or workplace. Women reported receiving training about safety and other workplace policies, and many spoke about the workplace's greater concern for the farm product than for their own welfare. The trainings were conducted in Spanish; none occurred in any indigenous language.

Workplace Policies: Sexual Harassment

> -Where I work, [sexual harassment] is never explained. The only rules we hear have to do with the chores that we have to do but they have never explained anything about sexual harassment.
> (Group 2006-01, Spanish)

Women in the focus groups sometimes reported sexual harassment training, but most of the women in the groups had not heard of any training. One woman (Group 2006-03) reported an anonymous reporting system using papers put into a closed box, where women could name harassers. Another woman (Group 2006-04) saw a video in Spanish explaining company policy about reporting of sexual harassment. Others reported bosses encouraging them to report sexual harassment to them directly, not to foremen, perhaps because they viewed foremen as potential offenders.

Experience and Witnessing of Sexual Harassment of Indigenous Women Farmworkers

> [The foreman] does not treat us all the same; he notices a few younger women and sometimes may force them or grab them. As I said, it hasn't happened to me but I've seen it happening. Those who give into it get an easier job, and I get a harder one because I don't give into it.
> (Group 2006-05, Mixteco)

Many women had seen sexual harassment, and a common manifestation was that of supervisors picking a favorite woman and giving her lighter work. Women expressed feelings of resentment and anger, both towards the supervisors and to the women who "play along" (Group 2006-01, Spanish). The women reported feeling "bad" (Group 2006-01, Spanish), and that it was unfair that "we have to do the rest" (Group 2008-01, Spanish). While focus group participants spoke with frustration about the women who "really don't work very hard" and "like to chat with the men" (Group 2006-05, Mixteco), they also spoke about women who "for fear of losing their jobs participate and pay attention and chat using dirty words" (Group 2006-03, Spanish).

Fear and intimidation surrounded sexual harassment that women officially complained about: "…when it comes to supporting each other …they are afraid" (group 2006-03, Spanish). Despite this sometimes the women provided glimpses of hope. Here, one described support from her manager despite death threats she had received:

> What happens is that the new manager is a good person; he did not have to believe us because he saw it and kept it confidential… So he knew how to handle it because he watched from a distance and that man had no way of denying it. Later they said they were going to kill us once they were to find out who said it. I said it did not matter and I was going to speak up anyway that he was going to hit her. I told her she had to talk to the manager because you can't keep silent.
> (Group 2006-03, Spanish)

Backed by a manager who responded promptly and dealt with harassment appropriately, the woman who witnessed harassment spoke up and encouraged another woman to report abuse. Other women identified single women with children as a particular target for sexual harassment. While not a consistent finding throughout all of the groups, a few women spoke about single mothers' vulnerability because of their need to stay at a job despite harassment and aggression they experience there.

In the group of Triqui women, moderators asked whether or not the women had experienced sexual harassment and received resounding "No's". When moderators asked for women's specific experiences, the women spoke more:

> Moderator: Let's say that men are saying vulgarities. What do you think about that?
> - Sometimes we feel that we can't feel comfortable at work because they are talking about us.
> - All we tell our husbands is that those people sure use dirty language and continue with our work so we don't get behind.
> - They talk like that, but we keep working.
> […]
> - What we hear they are telling us is that we are ugly.
> […]
> Moderator: I want to know what you have seen or heard about the people who have suffered sexual harassment.
> - No. We don't know any.
> - No. (Group 2008-02, Triqui)

When the moderators used the term "sexual harassment," women did not seem to know what it was. When other terms like "vulgarities" were used, Triqui women could identify examples.

Indirect Effects of Sexual Harassment

> Voice 4: Yes. They say something like wanting to get better hours and going with the foreman. I only hear people talking. I don't know how that works. One can talk with more coworkers. People can help.
> (Group 2006-04, Spanish, Mixteco and Triqui)

Most women reported that they had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment. Women reported damage to goodwill in the workplace community even when they had no direct experience of harassment. As one woman complained, "The hard [work] is for those other ones who are ugly" (Group 2006-01, Spanish).

Harassment: Direct Experience

> -[They say] you are very pretty or are you married or do you want to go dancing. That kind of stuff and start looking at you the way they do.
> -Staring at you.
> -Yeah that's what they do. That's why that time I confronted him. I put a stop to it.
> (Group 2006-02, Spanish)

> Then he started doing it to me too, and I went to tell the manager and he wanted to fix things in private […] I never found out because I was pregnant and I left […] they did not listen to us. They did not do anything. And I think that man is still there.
> Moderator: […] So at the end you had to leave so that you would not have to put up with the situation.
> Voice 12: Yes. I left.
> (Group 2006-03, Spanish)

Women described situations of unwanted sexual advances and even menacing behavior as seen in the passages above. Some women recounted stories of assertive behavior that relieved the abuse, like the woman in the first quotation captioned above. More frequent, however, was the kind of story in the second quotation, where women who experienced harassment often faced disbelief and inaction. Leaving the worksite was a common response.

Aim 3: Attitudes About Increased Risk of Sexual Harassment of Indigenous Mexican Women Farmworkers

> Moderator: Do you believe it is worse for indigenous women?
> -Yes.
> -[…] Because it's like I tell you. Because of how they see us, because we don't speak Spanish well, or they may think that they can say things to us and we are not going to understand and then it [inaudible] easier. […]
> -So, [inaudible] obey or sometimes just so they can work, right? For the money or out of necessity, I think. I don't see it but I have heard.
> -We see it.
> -Sometimes because we can't speak Spanish well, like she says, or we just arrived and don't know.
> -Or because we don't know English we can't speak, right?
> -No other way. I have to obey and if they fire me well they fire me […]
> (Group 2006-02, Spanish)

In every group, the consensus held that indigenous women who did not speak Spanish were more vulnerable to sexual harassment partly because of language. Women also mentioned that indigenous women are less educated, leading to vulnerability: "They don't know how to read and write and barely recognize money" (Group 2008-01, Spanish). Participants linked sexual harassment to threats of losing, or needing to leave, farm jobs. They often referred to the double burden of language isolation and a desperate need to work. In these data, the two contributed to indigenous farmworker women's sense of increased vulnerability to sexual harassment.

Discussion

In these focus groups, farmworker women reported widespread awareness of sexual harassment behaviors that they might not label as "sexual harassment." They did, however, recognize the behaviors and saw the deleterious effects of harassment on their lives. When women experienced harassment directly, it caused distress and disruption. When they witnessed it, it could lead to workplace conflicts. In general, women reported that these experiences made the workplace feel unsafe and unfair. While there was evidence that some workplaces provided sexual harassment training, many women reported that they had no idea how to deal with sexual harassment at work and the company did not inform them what to do. Women in these groups said that the vegetable or fruit product was more important than their own safety and welfare at the workplace. Women felt discouraged from speaking up because they did not know with whom to speak or report regarding sexual harassment, or did not think they would be believed.

Language isolation and poverty were consistent themes. In the farm work setting, women who did not speak Spanish or English were more vulnerable to harassment, sexual and otherwise. Poverty was identified as a key reason why women tolerated sexual harassment in order to better their situation at work. Farmworkers' social networks and traditional societal norms may have also isolated women who experienced harassment. These data

demonstrate that social and economic pressures interacted with social networks to amplify the impact of sexual harassment in the agricultural workplace.

Limitations

Focus groups by their very nature are designed to solicit general attitudes and opinions of participants, but in this study do not provide quantitative information about these attitudes and opinions. This is as expected for focus group studies. [9] Rigor in this research is assured by transparency of analysis and confirmation of findings with community partners, and review of developing codes with partners and qualitative experts within the advisory group. In addition, purposive sampling as employed here ensured that the target community is sampled. Because this is not probability sampling, results cannot be generalized to the entire community of indigenous farmworker women either locally or nationally.

New Contribution to the Literature

This research demonstrates the strengths of community-based participatory research to illuminate a problem facing a vulnerable and hard-to-reach community. In particular, it shows the importance of using the right questions when querying women about sexual harassment. Women in this study knew what sexual harassment was, but often did not use these words to describe it. This is essential information for planning services and future research on this topic with this population.

This study has implications for practice and policy. Clinicians and service providers need to be aware of and plan for communication issues arising from language, and social dynamics in the workplace that limit conversation about sexual harassment among indigenous farmworkers. Policy should be implemented to create provisions for requiring appropriate training about sexual harassment for farmworkers in their own languages, with sensitivity towards women's fears of reporting or even acknowledging harassment. Workplace protections against sexual harassment and abuse must be monitored by law enforcement, and intervention for complaints should be swift and consistent.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study is first study of indigenous Mexican farmworker women's experiences of workplace sexual harassment and sexual assault. It demonstrates that women are negatively affected by sexual harassment and assault, even if it does not happen directly to them. Indigenous women and single women with children may be particularly vulnerable.

In these interviews, women said repeatedly that they want and need to work. This study and future studies will provide evidence to inform the creation of interventions and services to benefit indigenous women farmworkers, but also the entire farmworker community. As community partners reach out to involve all partners in the farmworker community, including farm owners, health service providers, farmworker advocates and farmworkers themselves, their continuing partnership will contribute to preventing future sexual harassment and assault.

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