



CALIFORNIA RURAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

ENDING THE SILENCE

#NoMás



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“He grabbed me and told me not to fight. He said that it was time to repay him for having hired me... I was shocked, frightened, almost paralyzed.”

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Beatrix didn't complain to management right away. I was too shocked. I just wanted everything to be OK, and I needed my job. For the first time, I had a job that paid more than minimum wage, and I needed every penny to take care of my family.”

Instead, she tried to handle it by ignoring or reacting angrily to her supervisor's continued attention. “But in private, I cried,” she said. “I didn't want my daughters to learn what had happened.”

Beatriz's nightmare had not ended with the rape or when the supervisor hired another woman for Beatriz to train. But the nature of the harassment changed. The supervisor switched Beatriz's schedule to give more desirable hours to the new hire who then began to harass Beatriz as well.

So she mustered her courage and went to the general manager against the foreman's strict orders. Although initially supportive, the general manager finally told Beatriz (after a month's delay and a reminder visit from Beatriz) that he believed there had been no sexual harassment. He merely promised to tell her supervisor not to drive her anywhere and not to ask for massages.

“I was stunned,” says Beatriz. “How could it not be sexual harassment? I called in sick for two days to try to recover. When I returned, I was told that I was being fired because I had a bad attitude and because I had missed two days of work.”

**ONLY 2 OUT OF 3
of sexual assaults are
actually reported**



Female farmworkers are often left vulnerable to attacks by sexual predators. Photo by David Bacon.

Beatriz, a struggling single mother with three daughters between the ages of eight and fourteen, could only turn to her friends for support—until she spoke with Jesus Lopez, a longtime Community Worker in CRLA's Salinas office.

“Jesus has been with CRLA about 15 years, and he's built a very strong reputation in the farm worker community here,” says Michael Marsh, the Project Director for the Agricultural Worker Project at CRLA. “People trust him.”

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"The number of sexual harassment cases we're informed of and pursue says a lot about the work that this office has done over the years," Michael adds. "You don't have this kind of rapport with the community overnight. I see my work as a small extension of the work that's been done by a string of wonderful female attorneys who made it a priority in the Salinas valley to reach out to women who were facing sexual harassment. Educating farm workers and doing community outreach has really paid off. People know we'll listen."

CRLA's community workers have played a key role in this outreach effort, speaking regularly on Radio Campesina and Radio Bilingüe. In June, CRLA and Radio Bilingüe began extensive community outreach—including broadcasting a live community meeting on the topic—in response to a rash of recent reports of sexual harassment in Southern Fresno and Northern Tulare Counties.

For women farm workers, Beatriz's story is legion.

"You've got the makings of a perfect storm for sexual harassment in the farm worker community," says Michael. He ticks the ingredients off one by one.

"You've got monolingual women who may not know their rights, who have families to raise, who may not

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be in the country legally or have family who are not here legally. You've got additional cultural issues with foremen who are immigrants themselves."

"Plus two other factors. The hugeness of the environment provides the opportunity for harassment to occur without witnesses. And growers don't want to weaken the foreman's authority, so they don't investigate. It's not only wrong under the law, it's morally wrong!"

Michael's vehement speech is underscored by evidence gathered from EEOC interviews in California. In one notable instance, a farm worker described an existing



Photo by David Bacon

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horror as the field de calzón or “field of panties,” the name given to a company’s field by farm workers because so many women were raped there by their supervisors.

In 1995 when the EEOC began to focus their efforts on sexual harassment and meet with farm workers and their advocates to gather information, they were told that hundreds, if not thousands of women had to have sex with supervisors to get or keep jobs and/or put up with a constant barrage of grabbing, touching, and propositions for sex by supervisors.

But Michael is quick to point out that CRLA and others are working to remedy the situation.

“For the first time in history,” says Michael, “a national conference [Transforming Hope into Power: The First National Conference to End Sexual Harassment Against Farmworker Women, June 4-5, 2007] was held in Atlanta, Georgia—birthplace of civil rights—to give voice to the workers.”

Out of the conference came a sexual harassment best practices manual, with chapters written by CRLA attorneys, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and others. CRLA staff, including Michael, Community Workers Jesus Lopez and Monica Chavez, and Mike Meuter, Director of Litigation, Advocacy, and Training also presented workshops at the conference.

“It was a chance for people from different backgrounds—immigrant activists, advocates against sexual and domestic violence, employment lawyers and EEOC representatives—to sit in a room together and share resources, to really do something historic,” says Michael, his words spilling forth with a sense of urgency. “I look at what we did and what we’re now doing as a huge first step toward ending the sexual harassment of women farm workers.”

“It’s hard,” says Beatriz. “I still don’t sleep very well, but you have to report sexual harassment. That’s the only way it’s going to stop.” ■



Female farmworkers make up a large part of the farmworker workforce. Photo by David Bacon.