

# FROM THE GROUND UP

a publication of STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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## Focus on Farmworker Women

### Working With Farmworker Women: Reflections on my SAF Summer Internship

As I look back over my summer experience with SAF I am "blown away" by the countless things that I have learned. At the beginning of the year I thought that the videos I had seen and the materials I had read had given me a firm foundation for a lifetime of farmworker advocacy. That was before I met Clara Hernandez.

Clara was born in Mexico City and came to the U.S. with her family to work in the fields of Florida. Throughout the seasons, she and her family followed the migrant stream through North Carolina, and eventually settled here. Clara studied nursing at a local community college for two years until she decided that she wanted to open a Mexican food store. So far, her store, "La Charrita," has been a huge success and has proven to be a central gathering place for the migrant community. Clara's involvement with this project has made her a central community figure.

This summer I attempted to coordinate a discussion group for farmworker women in

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### What You Need to Know about Women Farmworkers:

- More than 1/4 of the estimated 2.5 million migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States today are women (U.S. Dept. of Labor. "Migrant Farmworkers: Pursuing Security in an Unstable Labor Market." Research Report #5. May 1994).
- About 57% of all women farmworkers are U.S. born, as compared with 34% of men (U.S. Dept. of Labor. Research Report #4. March 1993).
- The discrepancy in income between male and female farmworkers is caused by the confinement of women to lower-paying tasks, resulting in incomes 2/3 less than those of male farmworkers (The California Commission on the Status of Women. "Campesinas: Women Farmworkers in the California Agricultural Labor Force. 1978).
- The average work year of farmworker women is 4.9 months, although 61% say that they would like to be employed year round (The Committee on Women in Agriculture. "A Study of Agricultural Workers in Ventura County, California." 1993).
- Farmworker women are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than men (Ibid).
- 24% of farmworker men have paid sick leave and 49% have health insurance, while only 11% and 35% of farmworker women (respectively) have the same benefits (Ibid).
- Over 1/3 of farmworker women have experienced domestic violence in the past year (Evaluation of the Migrant Clinicians Network, April 1995).

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## SAF Mission:

*To bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.*

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For more information or to submit articles, contact:  
SAF, P.O. Box 90803  
Durham, NC 27708  
Phone: 919-660-3652  
FAX: 919-681-7600

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order to form a support system and forum through which they could identify their own needs. Since Clara already had played a large role in the lives of many migrant women, we asked her if she would be interested in serving as the group leader for this project. She was excited about the idea and we quickly immersed ourselves in planning. We thought that we were going to have a huge turn-out based on the responses of the women we had talked with and invited to the group.

On the day of the meeting, no women showed up. I thought we had covered all of the necessary bases needed to get the women there. But as we were trouble-shooting, Clara mentioned that it was possible that the women didn't come because their husbands didn't want them to. Latino men, she explained, often do not want their wives or girlfriends to go out and do things by themselves.

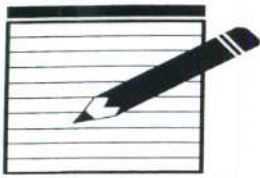
Clara's input was based on her first-hand experience and proved to be extremely useful in our plans to re-structure the meetings so that more women would be able to participate. To make the discussion groups accessible to a large number of women, we decided that instead of asking the women to come to our meetings, we would take our meetings to them. We thus "piggy-backed" our meeting with another event that Latinos in the area were already

attending. The Hispanic church in Stem, NC had activity days on Sundays for the local Latino community, and we saw this as the perfect opportunity to gather large numbers of women together for our group, and at the same time, have the men nearby so that they would not be concerned about their wives or girlfriends.

Since the "catastrophe" of the first-ever Farmworker Women's Discussion Group in Oxford, NC, four successful meetings have been held at the Hispanic church with fifteen to twenty women participating each time. These meetings have focused on health issues, dental care, and nutrition. More importantly, the women have been able to get together for the first time as a group to identify their needs and concerns about their lives and their families. The goal of the discussion group is to do away with feelings of isolation and provide the Latino women with a sense of community that all-too-often is not felt in their lives here in the United States.

Without Clara's insight, we might have lost hope in the success of the discussion group—thus depriving the women of a wonderful opportunity to establish valuable relationships and to realize that they are not alone.

*by Palmar Plonk, 1995 SAF Intern*



# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

## Women on the Move

For the American teenager, the Driver's License is a symbol of freedom that ends years of dependency on parents and older siblings who must chauffeur him/her around. America is so car-centric that few Americans could imagine being without one. While being able to drive is less important in a city with good public transportation, driving becomes essential for life in America's rural areas. For those folks without transportation, such as the elderly and newly-arrived immigrants, living in rural areas is wrought with isolation.

While immigrants must struggle with cultural and linguistic barriers in their new country, their lack of transportation compounds the isolation they experience. In many immigrant Hispanic families, if a family member learns how to drive, it is usually the husband. Hispanic women are often timid about learning to drive or are dissuaded from doing so by other family members. In order to help Hispanic women break down these barriers of isolation, the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry and SAF intern, Veronica Baeza, offered Spanish Driver's Education classes in Newton Grove, North Carolina during the summer of 1995.

The classes were "Women Only" in order to provide women with an environment of comfort and camaraderie in which to learn. Many of their husbands also felt more comfortable knowing that their wives were not attending class with other men. Since these women did not have transportation to the classes, and had the responsibility of caring for their children, the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry offered transportation and child care. For four hours each day, the Ministry's staff traveled along country backroads picking up students, adjusting child car seats, and dropping everyone off at the day's end. During the classes, other SAF interns supervised the children, enabling their mothers to concentrate on learning the rules of the road.

For many of the women, this was a daunting task, requiring a lot of effort. Some of the women had only a few years of formal schooling, which made it difficult even to read the material in Spanish. Other women lacked self-confidence, and didn't believe that they could get their licenses. Ms. Baeza, herself from a farmworker family, was a veteran instructor of Driver's ED, having taught her own

mother how to drive. She coaxed the women through the course with lots of encouragement and personal anecdotes, instilling in them a budding sense of self confidence. Once the women had learned the street signs, sat in a car to practice the hand signals, and learned about child safety laws, they were ready to get their permits and went to the DMV office together.

Half of the women got their licenses that day, and the others who had missed a few points, planned to try again soon. They told Ms. Baeza that by taking the class, they had developed confidence in their abilities and felt more self-reliant. If they had not passed the exam that day, they would do so eventually. One of the women thanked Ms. Baeza and hoped that she would "continue preparing women to better themselves."

Ms. Baeza had this advice for the next SAF intern: "This is going to be a challenging and, at times, frustrating project, but the emotional rewards you will receive when you see your students get their permits is unforgettable."

*by Holly Christofferson, Director of The Episcopal Farmworker Ministry*

*Thanks to the Presbyterian Church Women's Ministries and Church Women United for their support of this project.*

➔ SEE PHOTO ON PAGE 5

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# Living In Fear: Domestic Violence in Farmworker Communities

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The poster provides a beacon of hope in a place that deals with a darker side of life.

It says, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Tacked up for inspiration in an office of the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCCADV), these words ironically illuminate just how difficult it is for migrant farmworker women to fight the same cycle of spousal abuse that many other women successfully escape from.

In a transient, migratory community composed of recent immigrants, some of which are not citizens, how can any meaningful and lasting organization, discussion, or group action ever take place?

This is just one of the factors that makes domestic violence even more serious and inescapable for farmworker women.

In a 1995 survey conducted of 112 farmworker women by the Migrant Clinicians Network, approximately one in three reported being hit in the past year.

However, according to Kathy Hodges, the Executive Director of NCCADV, it is not differences in how often domestic violence occurs in farmworker communities that makes it more destructive. "I expect that the frequency is not much worse," she says, "but when it does happen, the consequences are much more difficult to deal with."

Most problems stem from the fact that farmworker women live for relatively short periods of time in isolated, "close knit" communities of people who they do not know very well, says Hodges. These women's traditional unit of security and protection, the family, is often broken up or left behind as they and their husbands migrate from place to place. In such transient communities, a vacuum of support often forms, and women are left to fend for

themselves when faced with dangerous domestic situations.

In most Latin American countries, networks of family support are particularly strong and often serve in part to fill the needs that battered women's shelters in the United States cater to, Hodges says. So when a woman comes to the U.S. and is thrown into the migrant stream, she finds that such support is gone and that "the community often just looks the other way and, if anything, supports her husband in continuing to batter her," she says.

The vacuum of support that forms in farmworker communities is not one that is easily filled. Most domestic violence programs do not have bilingual staff or bilingual materials. Thus, "although they often will try to work with women who don't speak English, most centers have a very difficult time doing that," Hodges says.

"Even if a woman can find a Spanish language support group in her area, she might not have transportation and she might have to depend on somebody else at the camp to get her there and get her back. Her confidentiality is often just blown by the situation," she says.

Additionally, the interpreters used in such domestic violence agencies often live in the same communities and know the same people as the women for whom they are translating. Farmworker women are often reluctant to tell such people the whole truth about their situation, because gossip spreads quickly within the tightly constructed labor camps. Domestic violence is a very private issue, and these women don't want information to spread that would taint their family's honor, said Rachael Rodriguez at the 1994 Migrant Farmworker Women Conference.

Women farmworkers often find that it is just as difficult to separate from their husbands as it is to stay with them and deal with the violence. Battered women often have difficulty getting abusive husbands removed from the house

