



## IMMIGRATION

A solitary woman works in an orchard.  
(Photo by Andrés Cediel.)

# Rape in the Fields

by Bernice Yeung and Andrés Cediel

**T**o Guadalupe Chávez, the roads that snaked around the endless acres of farmland in California’s Lost Hills had begun to take on a cruel similarity. Almond orchards gave way to yet more almond orchards, which bled into unending stands of pistachio trees, their branches a blur of leafy green as she drove.

As a recently widowed mother of two from Mexico with no papers and little English, farm work was how Chávez supported her family. But she did not know these orchards.

In the red pickup truck ahead was the man who stood between her and an overdue paycheck. He was a supervisor with a local farm labor contractor, and when they met near the farm, he had told her the missing check was with his brother, and they needed to find him. Follow me, he said.

She thought of her unpaid bills and two sons. She started the car engine. He led her down one road, then another before directing her into the orchards themselves.

As she drove deeper into the grove, she became befuddled by its symmetry. She began to feel scared.

It was here that the man sexually assaulted her, as Chávez later told authorities. She could scream, she remembered the supervisor telling her, but “it’s not going to make any difference, because nobody can hear you way out here.”

At the end of it all — as she sat battered by fear and shame — he gave her the \$245 paycheck she had earned for a week of picking pomegranates.

Stories like Chávez’s are emblematic of what we discovered through “Rape in the Fields,” a yearlong, multi-platform reporting project. They’re why some of the 556,000 female farmworkers in the United States have taken to calling their workplaces the *fiels de calzón* or the fields of panties.

From the cantaloupe fields of California to the egg processing plants of Iowa, the stories we heard were as chilling as they were consistent.

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We learned of cases where workers said they were isolated in distant fields or packing plants so they could be sexually harassed, assaulted, and even raped on the job. It's a commonplace occurrence, agricultural worker advocates told us, and it's happening everywhere.

A hidden phenomenon like this makes for a shocking story, but it's a difficult one to report out, which is part of the reason it has gone overlooked for so long. Rape and sexual assault in America's fields and packing plants is an entrenched problem in a distant and dusty world beyond the view of most consumers, powerbrokers, policymakers, technologists, and journalists.

But the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and The Center for Investigative Reporting decided to commit to telling this story. Both organizations dedicated numerous reporters and researchers to investigate the issue for a year, in collaboration with PBS Frontline and Univision, as well as various public radio and newspaper outlets.

Despite pledging serious time and resources to the project, it was not an easy one to execute. As soon as we began reporting, we were confronted with two significant challenges: quantifying the problem and convincing sexual assault victims to discuss what had happened to them publicly.

The majority of agricultural workers are undocumented, and they tend to keep silent, hoping to keep their jobs and to avoid deportation. That Guadalupe Chávez went to the authorities was an anomaly. Law enforcement only got involved because she went to the hospital after the incident, and a nurse called the police. Chávez said she was scared and nervous about talking to the police, but the nurse told her, "Honey, you shouldn't stay quiet."

This hesitancy to report the crime ultimately creates a dynamic where a bilingual supervisor with a paycheck or a job to hand out is in a position where he can extract just about anything from his workers.

So while anecdotes are abundant, official statistics are scarce. Sexual assault is notoriously underreported, and undocumented farmworkers are less likely than citizens to complain to their bosses or to law enforcement.

Data and documentation are the lynchpins of sound investigative journalism, but none of the existing datasets on farmworkers or workplace violence addressed this issue directly. We became aware of a UC Santa Cruz study of 150 California female farmworkers that found that 40 percent reported experiencing sexual harassment that ranged from verbal advances to on-the-job rape. We also obtained access to 100 surveys on the sexual harassment of female agricultural workers conducted by a nonprofit in Iowa.

A woman works rows of table grapes.



Photo by Andreea Cedeli.



Photo by Vicente Franco.

An Iowa chicken farm where female workers alleged rampant sexual abuse.

Forty-one percent of the women said they had experienced unwanted physical contact, and 30 percent said they had been sexually propositioned at work, according to our analysis of the surveys. Recent national polls of women workers put the rate of workplace sexual harassment at about 25 percent.

We also decided to look at a specific sample of lawsuits to empirically identify trends. By analyzing all of the civil sexual harassment lawsuits filed against agricultural businesses by the federal government — 41 cases in all — we found that more than 85 percent of the cases involved what would be considered sexual assault or rape. The vast majority of cases involved supervisors who had been accused of harassing or assaulting multiple workers. None resulted in criminal prosecutions.

This detailed look at the federal lawsuits confirmed what we were hearing anecdotally from the workers and advocates we interviewed: in the agricultural industry, sexual harassment at the hands of recidivist supervisors can be extreme and violent.

Although it is impossible to identify precisely how many farmworkers have been sexually assaulted or raped at work — as it would be for any population — the survey and lawsuit analysis enabled us to provide numerical detail to a specific universe of cases. In a space where very few had cared to count and quantify, it was a start.

Quantifying the scope of the issue was a major challenge, but as reporters, we faced another significant problem: very few people wanted to speak publicly about this topic.

Accused supervisors were understandably hesitant to address the issue, though we were able to include the perspectives of two foremen who had allegedly assaulted or raped female workers. Meanwhile, growers were wary of discussing the subject because they said they feared that the industry would be misrepresented; some told us that sexual harassment and assault exist in every industry, and farming is no different.

But those most averse to being interviewed were the women who had been victimized. We nevertheless needed to find a way to convince women to talk openly about a traumatizing and painful experience.

So we traveled to far-flung farming communities to find the person who could put a human face on the issue. We drove across California — to towns like Huron, Santa Paula, Arvin, and Woodland. We also visited agricultural regions across the country, from Sunnyside, Washington, to Clarion, Iowa, to Immokalee, Florida.

Predictably, it was hard to find people who were willing to go on camera or to use their full names. But in the process, we spoke with dozens of women, shared meals together, and met with their lawyers, counselors, and families. In some cases, we were among the first people,

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Maricruz Ladino in Salinas.  
(Photo by Andrés Cediel.)

aside from their lawyers, with whom they had talked about the abuse they had experienced at work.

Over the course of many months and miles, we met courageous women and heard enough stories to convince us that we were onto a topic with wide reach. Some of the women agreed to tell us their stories anonymously by appearing in shadow or by releasing only their first names. But more than halfway into our reporting, we still had not found the woman who would lend her face and full name to the story.

Of course, these women had every reason not to make their stories public. They were worried about deportation, about losing their jobs, and in some cases, about their personal safety. Speaking out also meant exposing themselves to more shame and ridicule. Some even said they were afraid that their husbands or boyfriends would blame them for what had happened. And they feared that they would not be believed.

And yet, as journalists, there were few things we could promise our sources to allay their fears. All we could promise was that we would tell their stories truthfully and respectfully.

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It was some seven months into the project before the chance to capture the experiences of female farmworkers without obscuring their faces presented itself. We believed it was the payoff for spending many months developing relationships within a distrustful community. After multiple visits to the area, a half-dozen women who said they had been sexually harassed or assaulted at an apple orchard in Washington state finally agreed to go on camera. A three-member team flew up almost immediately.

But soon after we landed, we learned that the women had changed their minds — they decided it would be too risky to the lawsuits that the federal government and some of the women had filed against the company or the orchard foreman.

Two days later, we flew back home, beyond disappointed. But the experience was instructive: when it comes to asking vulnerable and potentially victimized sources to participate in a media project, we have to be both patient and persistent in finding the right people in the right moment of their lives to share their experience.

We would never have guessed that we would find that person the day after returning from our fraught trip to Washington state. We left early in the morning to make the two-hour drive to California's Central Coast for an interview with Maricruz Ladino, a Salinas farmworker who said she had been raped by her supervisor at a lettuce farm in 2006.



We had been in touch with Ladino and her attorney over the course of the reporting process, but we had not been able to connect with her. We assumed that it was because she, like so many other women we had encountered, was simply not interested in being interviewed.

But as it turns out, we did not initially hear back from Ladino for an entirely different and more mundane reason: she had changed her cell phone number.

Her interview that brilliant spring morning was memorable and moving. She was honest and human. She was someone with whom both female farmworkers and non-agricultural workers in faraway cities could relate. She was the substance of good journalism: through her, we could clearly and viscerally understand the human impact of a problem and why it needs to stop.

And Ladino understood this. We asked her why she was willing to tell her story so publicly. “I didn’t say anything for many years because of my job, to make money to support my daughters,” she told us. “But there came a time when I told myself, ‘No more.’ I am seeing that this type of thing did not only happen to me...and if I stay quiet then it is going to continue happening. That is why I now prefer to talk about it.”

Since the release of our reporting, we have been back on the road, this time screening the film in agricultural

communities throughout California. Audience members have told us they feel outraged, surprised, and unnerved by the film. They have also said that they are glad that we have told a story that has remained hidden for generations.

Each screening seems to spawn more events and dialogue. A wide range of organizations have hosted screenings, including farmworker groups, the California Department of Public Health, the Mexican Consulate in Fresno, and community colleges along the Central Coast.

Lawmakers have taken notice as well. California state legislators have begun the process of exploring legislation to address the issue, and Monterey County law enforcement officials said the film inspired them to improve outreach to the farmworker community in hopes of building better connections with a populace that is wary of them.

The public’s interaction with the project continues to grow. What seemed like the end goal — finding women, growers, and supervisors who would speak about rape in the fields — has turned out to be only a beginning.

**Bernice Yeung is a reporter with The Center for Investigative Reporting. She spent a year reporting on “Rape in the Fields.” Andrés Cediél is the producer of “Rape in the Fields” and a lecturer in the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism. They both spoke at the CLAS screening of the film on September 4, 2013.**

From left: Lowell Bergman, Bernice Yeung, Harley Shaiken, and Andrés Cediél lead discussion after a screening of the film.



Photo by Jim Block