

Report finds sexual abuse of female farmworkers is prevalent

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Body

FRESNO, Calif. - **Female farmworkers** across the United States are commonly sexually harassed and assaulted, in part because their immigration status makes them fearful of calling police, according to a **report** being released Wednesday by Human Rights Watch.

The survey by the international rights group mirrors two previous **reports** on the risks facing women and girls that had focused on California, where most of the nation's **farmworkers** reside.

"Our research confirms what **farmworker** advocates across the country believe: **sexual** violence and **sexual** harassment experienced by **farmworkers** is common enough that some **farmworker** women see these **abuses** as an unavoidable condition of agricultural work," the **report** said.

An estimated 630,000 of the 3 million people who perform migrant and seasonal farm work are **female**. The federal government estimates that 60 percent of them are illegal aliens.

"It's easiest for abusers to get away with **sexual** harassment where there's an imbalance of power, and the imbalance of power is particularly stark on farms," the **report's** author, Grace Meng, said.

The **report** calls on Congress to pass laws protecting immigrant **female farmworkers**, and for the Department of Homeland Security to repeal rules that encourage local police to **report** federal immigration violations.

The **report** describes incidences of rape, stalking, fondling and vulgar language used against women, who say they often don't **report** it because they are afraid of being fired or, worse, deported.

Meng interviewed 52 **farmworkers** and 110 attorneys, social service providers, law enforcement officials and members of the agriculture industry in New York, North Carolina, Florida, Texas, Colorado, Ohio, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and the state of Washington, but focused primarily on California because of its large **farmworker** population.

Women who work for labor contractors are more vulnerable than those who work directly for a farmer, the **report** said.

"The goal of our **report** was to show that this was a national problem and to show the governmental barriers that exist to **reporting** these crimes and **abuses**. And to demonstrate it's a human rights problem," Meng said.

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While previous studies have said that up to 80 percent of women who work in the fields have been harassed or assaulted, a counselor in the heart of California's agricultural region says her experience puts it at closer to half. She said the problem exists in all businesses where immigrant women may lack English language skills and trust in law enforcement, but that farms are the biggest employers so the abuses occur more frequently there.

- Associated Press

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