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Policy Brief 1

RETHINKING POLICY ON GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S ISSUES

REDUCING FOOD INSECURITY AMONG FEMALE FARMWORKERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

BY TANYA TRUMBULL



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Migrant and seasonal farmworkers grow the majority of our nation's food, but the low income and frequent undocumented status of these workers put them at high risk for food insecurity. Further inequities make female farm workers and their children especially vulnerable. Action is needed to provide these individuals with a path to legal documentation and increased access to federal safety-net programs.

ACCCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD is essential to good health. However, it is estimated that 14.1 percent of California households experienced food insecurity between 2007 and 2009.¹ Alarming, migrant and seasonal farmworkers in California experience rates of food insecurity several times higher than the state average, with recent studies confirming rates as high as 45 to 66 percent.^{2,3} If we extrapolate these percentages to the statewide farmworker population, as many as 586,000 to 860,000 farmworkers and their dependents could lack sufficient and nutritious food.⁴

Of these migrant and seasonal farmworkers, approximately one in four are women.⁵ While research has established a relationship between food insecurity and poor health, women and their children have additional vulnerabilities. Mothers who are food insecure face a greater risk of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.⁶ Food-insecure children are more likely to exhibit behavioral and academic problems.⁷ Pregnant farmworkers are also more likely to be underweight, increasing their risk for poor birth outcomes.⁸

CRITIQUE

Two important predictors of food insecurity—low income and undocumented status—disproportionately affect female farmworkers and their children. In California, 75 percent of farmworkers earn less than \$15,000 annually.⁹ A 2002 analysis found female farmworkers earn, on average, 86 cents

for every dollar earned by a male farmworker.¹⁰ Moreover, mothers who lack U.S. citizenship have children who experience food insecurity at rates more than twice that of children with native-born mothers.¹¹ This rate deserves notice given that 39 percent of farmworker women are undocumented and 97 percent of farmworkers who are mothers live with their children.¹²

To fight food insecurity among farmworkers, especially women, policies must address these economic vulnerabilities. Lawmakers, for example, must recognize the importance of documentation to gaining fair wages. Many undocumented farmworkers fail to report injustices for fear of wage theft, job loss, or deportation.¹³ Moreover, future policy must examine how to extend federal safety-net programs, including food stamps, to more farmworkers. While food stamps have been found to increase farmworker food security, only those who have been legal residents for at least five years are eligible to apply.

As anti-immigrant sentiments—driven, in part, by high unemployment—increase across the United States, there is a growing opposition to amnesty proposals. Yet, migrant and seasonal farmworkers have few other legal options for gaining residency status. While there are approximately 600,000 to 800,000 undocumented agricultural workers in the U.S., only 75,000 temporary H-2A work visas were given to seasonal farmworkers in 2007.¹⁴ Additionally, applications for residency through a relative can be delayed for years

because of processing backlogs. Given that women immigrate through family-based systems more than men, women are disproportionately impacted by such bureaucratic delays.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

A bipartisan bill introduced before Congress in 2009 would have offered undocumented farmworkers a path to legalization. The Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act (AgJOBS) sought to grant immigration status to undocumented farmworkers who agreed to work in U.S. agriculture for three to five years. While AgJOBS failed to become law, the act has been reintroduced this congressional session as part of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2011 (S.1258).¹⁶ Accordingly, lawmakers should use this opportunity to amend and strengthen AgJOBS. As the act is currently written, farmworkers who are granted permanent residency after their three to five years of agricultural service would still have to wait five more years to access most government benefits, including food stamps.

Food insecurity has serious implications for female farmworkers and their children and for the communities where they live and work. We depend on farmworkers for our own food supply, yet many do not have the resources to obtain sufficient and nutritious food. Farmworkers and their children need a quicker path to legal status and safety-net programs.

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NOTES

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