

Women Agricultural Workers' Perceptions of
Workplace Sexual Harassment in Yakima Valley

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Abstract

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Background: Workplace sexual harassment of women agricultural workers has become an increasing concern in the U.S. Women agricultural workers are largely low-income, Latina, and work in predominately male environments, increasing the risk of sexual harassment.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to identify the risks, protective factors, and health consequences of workplace sexual harassment by eliciting the perspectives of women agricultural workers.

Methods: A longstanding campus-community partnership enabled a qualitative study using focus groups. Two focus groups with 20 women agricultural workers were conducted in Yakima Valley, Washington. Four coders analyzed and gleaned interpretations from verbatim transcripts using the grounded theory approach.

Results: Three major themes were gleaned from the focus groups. First, workplace sexual harassment is pervasive and frequent in the agriculture industry; 75% of participants shared a personal or peers' story of being sexually harassed while at work. Second, personal and work environment related risk and protective factors either perpetuate or prevent workplace sexual harassment, respectively. These risk factors also hinder workers from reporting harassment to authorities. Third, workplace sexual harassment leads to psychological, relational, and familial distress in women agricultural workers.

Conclusions: Sexual harassment has become a social norm in the agriculture industry. Cultural, economic, work environment, and interpersonal factors increase the risk of harassment. Several theories are proposed to help public health professionals, community health workers, legal advocates, and health providers intervene at the prevention, research, and policy levels to reduce the risk of sexual harassment in the agriculture industry.

INTRODUCTION

Background on agricultural workers

The U.S. agriculture industry currently employs over 2 million workers.¹ Agricultural workers include seasonal, migrant, permanent, and guest workers.² Seventy-eight percent of workers are immigrants, mostly from Mexico, and an estimated 20% are women.^{1,3,4} Many work in the fields and warehouses to pick and pack produce, respectively. In 2012, agricultural workers made a median wage of \$9.09 per hour, but the seasonal nature of the work leave many unemployed throughout the year.⁵ Nationwide, over 60% of farmworkers still live below poverty.⁶

In addition to economic and employment insecurity, many workers also face substandard work conditions. Despite long workdays, many do not have access to adequate washing facilities and timely breaks.^{6,7} The physical demands, use of technical equipment, and pesticide exposures also make agricultural work one of the most dangerous occupations in the U.S.²

Agricultural workers also face additional social demands. With an estimated 50% not authorized to work in the U.S., many live in fear of deportation.³ Furthermore, with an average education at the 7th grade level and majority speaking Spanish, literacy and language barriers are common.³ Access to health care is also minimal, with 77% of workers lacking health insurance coverage.^{3,7} The economic, occupational, and social circumstances make agricultural workers one of the most underserved communities.

Workplace sexual harassment

In recent years, workplace sexual harassment (WSH) of women agricultural workers has become an increasing concern in the U.S. Women workers in Salinas, California call one field the “*field de calzon*” or “field of panties” because of multiple counts of rape.⁸ According to the

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), women agricultural workers have been forced to have sex at gunpoint, threatened, and been fired after filing sexual harassment complaints.⁹ In Washington State, many women workers have also reported WSH to community leaders. Most recently, in *EEOC vs. Evans Fruit Co.*, multiple women farmworkers reported being sexually harassed by their ranch manager in the Yakima Valley.¹⁰

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it unlawful for employers to discriminate based on race, religion, national origin, and sex. In 1980, the EEOC defined sexual harassment for the first time, setting the precedent that employers may be liable for WSH.¹¹ Additional amendments in the 1990s allowed employees to file for sexual harassment compensation, such as emotional suffering and back pay.¹² Since then, the EEOC has represented many women agricultural workers in lawsuits and won millions of dollars in settlements. WSH cases currently make up 25-30% of the EEOC's national litigation panel.⁹

Legally, sexual harassment is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests of sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature”.¹³ The EEOC defines two types of sexual harassment. Harassment is considered “quid pro quo” when employment is contingent on an employee’s submission or rejection of sexual acts.¹⁴ Harassment is considered “hostile environment” if it creates an unsafe and uncomfortable work environment that interferes with an employee’s ability to perform at work.¹³ In some cases, sexual harassment may fall in both categories. In the published literature, sexual harassment has been defined as sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender based harassment.¹⁵ Sexual coercion is often considered an example of “quid pro quo”, while gender based harassment is considered “hostile environment”. Unwanted sexual attention can fall in either category.

Literature review

To date, literature on WSH has been largely limited to middle-income, educated, white women in non-agricultural settings. Only a handful of studies have focused on sexual harassment of low-income, racial and ethnic minority women; two have looked specifically at the issue among women agricultural workers. One study surveyed Mexican women agricultural workers in Central Valley, California using a mixed quantitative and qualitative method.¹⁵ The study found that 80% of women participants reported being personally sexually harassed at work.¹⁵ Another study used focus groups with non-Spanish speaking indigenous women agricultural workers in Oregon State and found widespread awareness of incidents of WSH.¹⁶ Despite limited focused literature, women agricultural workers in non-sexual harassment studies have also identified WSH as a significant concern.^{2,6,7}

General sexual harassment literature suggests that women are more likely to be sexually harassed than men. Most commonly, male supervisors and co-workers sexually harass female employees. In 2011, the EEOC received 11,365 WSH complaints and 84% were by women.¹⁷ Prior studies of general employees, former military reservists, and supervisors also found higher sexual harassment incidence and reporting rates among women than men.^{18,19,20,21} Additionally, 50% of women employees are expected to experience WSH at some point in their career.^{11,15,22,23,24}

Studies also suggest that minority women may be at higher risk of being sexually harassed than white women.^{11,15,21,25} This is because sexual harassment often co-occurs with racial harassment.²⁵ However, results are inconclusive; a study of low-income workers found that only blacks and other non-Latina minority groups reported higher rates of WSH than whites.²⁶

Interestingly, only 26% of low-income workers reported WSH, suggesting that women in blue-collar positions may be less likely to report WSH than their white-collar counterparts.^{26,27}

WSH is also more common when women are under-represented in the workplace. Sexual harassment is more likely in male-dominant work environments, like the military.^{24,28} Women employees are also more likely to perceive sexual harassment to be severe in male-dominant environments.²⁰

Literature also suggests that WSH can result in negative health consequences for female employees. Previously sexually harassed women are more likely to utilize a range of services for health and spiritual care.^{11,23,29,30} Female victims also have higher rates of non-specific physical symptoms, chronic pain, insomnia, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.^{11,29} Psychological distress, including fears of becoming a future victim of rape or crime, is common.^{11,25,29} Health consequences also last long-term; longitudinal studies found that sexual harassment was associated with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, poor general health, future injury, and substance use up to ten years after the incident.^{19,21,31} The psychological effects of WSH may be particularly challenging for women agricultural workers who experienced previous sexual harassment or assault while crossing the border.¹²

WSH can also negatively affect occupational well-being. Women reporting sexual harassment are more dissatisfied with their jobs, co-workers, and supervisors.^{11,24,25,32} They were also more likely to experience work withdrawal, have intentions to quit, and perceive higher organizational tolerance for sexual harassment.^{25,29,30}

Sexual harassment is harmful for women workers. However, few women, including women agricultural workers, ever report their experience to employers. Among white women, only 2-13% will ever report WSH.³³ Many turn to informal social networks, such as family and

friends.³³ In the Latina population, the idea of *familismo* or strong identification with the family and extended networks may encourage women to turn to informal support systems first.³³ This is especially the case if the woman fears that reporting will harm her family or children, either by termination of work or deportation.⁸ This is a valid concern, as over 25% of EEOC's WSH complaints include retaliation claims.^{2,9} Retaliation is more common in male-dominant workplaces.³⁴

Purpose of the study

Women agricultural workers, who are largely low-income and Latina, work in predominantly male work environments, which place them at higher risk of WSH. Despite WSH's known negative health and work consequences, few studies explore the issue from the view of women agricultural workers. Prior studies and recent legal attention suggests that WSH is widespread in the agriculture community. However, while many studies have focused on pesticide exposure, heat-related illness, and work-related injuries as occupational health concerns for agricultural workers, WSH has not yet received the same attention.

This study attempts to better understand WSH from the perspective of women agricultural workers. It aims to gather information about (1) how women agricultural workers identify and experience WSH, (2) what risk and protective factors exist for WSH, and (3) how WSH affects the health of women agricultural workers.

This is the first study to qualitatively explore WSH of Spanish-speaking women agricultural workers in Yakima Valley, Washington. The topic was chosen based on community concern and priority. The study was designed using the grounded theory approach to generate one or more theories about WSH of women agricultural workers.

METHODS

Study setting

In Washington State, an average of 87,249 people work in agriculture each month.³⁵ The state has the 5th largest agriculture industry in the nation and the Yakima Valley, located in south central Washington, accounts for over 26% of the state's agricultural workforce.^{35,36} Yakima Valley is also where several legal cases of sexual harassment, including the *EEOC vs. Evans Fruit Co.* case, have been reported.

This study involved a longstanding campus-community partnership (El Proyecto Bienestar) between the University of Washington School of Public Health, specifically the Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center (PNASH), and the Yakima Valley community in Washington State. It is the first part of a larger sexual harassment prevention project entitled *Health and Safety of Women Agricultural Workers in Yakima Valley*.

Research Team

The research team included four investigators (CK, VBV, ET, NK), three based at the University of Washington and one in the Yakima Valley. Two investigators were familiar with qualitative research methods; two investigators were fluent in Spanish and English. The team also included two community health workers (PZ, CM) and two undergraduate students (MM, IRP) with Spanish fluency who were from the Yakima Valley and had prior experiences in the agriculture industry. The community health workers were fluent in Spanish and the undergraduate students were bilingual in Spanish and English. All research team members were female and received training on sexual harassment from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

A Project Advisory Committee (PAC), consisting of the research team and various community stakeholders ensured a community voice in the study design. Stakeholders included representatives from various agricultural, legal, social service, and health agencies. The PAC met monthly to bi-monthly in Yakima Valley. All study procedures and materials were approved by the University of Washington's Institutional Review Board.

Conceptual model

The grounded theory approach was used to design and analyze the study. This approach is most useful when literature is limited and data allows for inductive analysis.^{37,38} Focus groups were used to gather information from open-ended questions and to promote discussion among women workers in ways individual interviews could not. The focus group design is a validated research method in the Latina population.^{39,40,41,42,43}

Selection of study participants

A purposeful sampling method was used. Three research team members (MM, PZ, CM) personally recruited potential participants from their own social networks over two weeks in early December 2013. Potential participants were invited to attend focus group discussions about being a women worker in the agriculture industry. Recruitment was done orally, away from agricultural workplaces using a study script. Eligibility was limited to female agricultural workers, aged 18 and older, who were fluent in Spanish, and had lived in the Yakima Valley for at least two years.

Data collection

Two evening focus groups, each with ten participants, were held at the Radio KDNA building in Granger, Washington in late December 2013. A sample size of twenty participants was chosen to allow for various perspectives and in-depth analysis.⁴⁴ Reminder phone calls were

made to each of the participants to increase turnout. The community health workers (PZ, CM) each facilitated one focus group in Spanish using a semi-structured guide. While one community health worker facilitated, one or more research team members (VBV, MM, IRP) observed and took field notes on non-verbal cues and emotional states. Informed consent was obtained and recorded orally before each focus group. The focus group lasted 2 hours and was audio-recorded for transcription purposes. Participants were assigned and identified by numbers during the study to enhance anonymity.

The focus group guide questions elicited perceptions of health and sexual harassment at the agricultural workplace. Questions included how they or others they know have experienced sexual harassment, what they see as enabling or protective factors for sexual harassment, and potential prevention messages for sexual harassment. Examples of the questions used are provided in the Appendix (Table 1).

At the end of each focus group, each participant completed a written, Spanish demographic survey regarding age, marital status, family size, religious preference, location of birth, years lived in the United States and the Yakima Valley, highest level of education attained, language fluency, years worked in agriculture in the Yakima Valley, type of agricultural work done, rating of health, and health concerns related to work (Table 2). Research team members were available to assist with the survey as needed. Each participant received a \$25 gift card to Walmart for her time.

All documents (recruitment script, oral consent/focus group guide, and demographic survey) were developed in English. Documents were then translated into Spanish and back-translated into English to ensure language quality and consistency by two bilingual research team

members (VBV, ET). An adverse event protocol was also developed in case participants expressed psychological distress during the focus groups.

Analysis

Two research team members (MM, IRP) transcribed the audio-recordings and field notes verbatim. The transcripts were then translated from Spanish to English and back-translated into Spanish by two other bilingual research team members (VBV, ET) to ensure language quality and consistency. Final analysis was done using English transcripts.

Four research team members (NK, VBV, MM, IRP) used the grounded theory approach to review the transcripts. Each member individually coded the transcripts before the team convened to achieve consensus on a code list. Three pages of the first transcript were randomly selected for discussion. Inter-rater reliability for codes increased from 78% to 100% after the discussion. The finalized code list included 65 codes and 14 code families. One member of the research team (NK) then finalized the code list and coded both focus groups. The same four members individually reviewed the coded transcripts before reconvening to discuss and extract themes. Atlas.ti qualitative software was used to assist with code organization, coding, and analysis. Additional focus groups were not held as theoretical saturation was attained.

RESULTS

A total of 20 women were invited to the study and 100% agreed to participate and attended the planned focus groups. Thirteen (65%) women were working in the fields and/or warehouses, while seven (35%) women were not employed, at the time of the study. All participants were either currently working or had previously worked in the fields and/or warehouses in Yakima Valley. The mean number of years worked in Yakima Valley was 12.6 (range 3-26). The mean age of participants was 41 (range 19-68). Eighteen (90%) participants were born in Mexico. Nine (45%) and six (30%) participants were married and divorced, respectively. Fifteen (75%) participants identified as Catholic. Seventeen (85%) participants only spoke and read Spanish. Twelve (60%) participants had received at least a primary school level education. Detailed participant demographic information is provided in the Appendix (Table 3 and 4). The adverse event protocol was not needed.

Many themes were gleaned from the focus groups. Three overarching themes were that (1) women agricultural workers were well aware of WSH (2) there were personal and environmental risk and protective factors for WSH, and (3) women agricultural workers experienced additional stressors due to WSH.

Awareness of workplace sexual harassment

Women agricultural workers described various forms of sexual harassment. Seventy-five percent of the participants shared a personal or another woman's story of being sexual harassed at work. When asked about what their understanding of sexual harassment was, they described unwanted staring, verbal taunting, and physical grabbing. Unwanted verbal comments were most common, followed by physical grabbing, then staring. Some women also reported that harassers threatened to terminate their employment if they did not comply with the harassers' requests.

Other women were offered better hours in exchange for sexual favors. Most harassers were male co-workers and foremen. One participant mentioned that the harasser was a female supervisor.

Foremen were more likely to use threats of termination or offers of employment.

“There are many ways, sometimes they stare at times...they are making flirtatious compliments but using dirty words and they keep doing this over and over. Or sometimes they get close to you... at some point just touch you... sometimes they make sexual insinuations with their lips and eyes and when they look at you from top to bottom that look alone sometimes makes you feel very uncomfortable”

“I worked on a farm that when I was left alone, there was this man and I was very scared of him. Every time I saw him, I used to run, I even left the ladder, because on two occasions, he grabbed me and I couldn’t move, he covered my mouth and he told me to be quiet otherwise he was going to fire me.”

“They intimidate you, by saying I will fire you, I will invent something, or I will call your husband to tell him even if it’s a lie”

“I was working by piece rate and one of the foremen told me if I wanted for him to give me more hours, I need to sleep with him”

Sexual harassment was frequent and persistent in the agricultural workplace. In some cases, women workers left their jobs in search of better work environments, only to find that other fields and warehouses were no different. Women workers understood that sexual harassment was wrong, but accepted that it came with working in the agriculture industry.

“It always has existed, that always has existed here. That always has existed in the fields when there are many people, men do not pay attention if there are women around or people that don’t like to hear that. They say things that we women shouldn’t have to listen to. And that is wrong, and has been happening too long”

“I did not like the harassment, I only stayed one week and I left because he harassed me constantly. I went to work at a [another] warehouse and it was the same story”

Women workers also mentioned that they felt disrespected when sexually harassed. They preferred to be acknowledged for their hard work, but instead felt sexually objectified by male co-workers and foremen. Sexual harassment was undeserved and it affected not only the individual being harassed, but also the individual’s family and co-workers.

“There should be rules and we all need to follow them, foremen and workers, we all deserve respect. We deserve that our dignity is respected when we work, we work hard and do our best.”

“It affects us in many ways, psychologically, our body, and psychologically because there is a lot of vulgarity spoken, sometimes there is no respect for you, or your family, and other workers.”

Risk factors for workplace sexual harassment

Both personal and environmental risks factors existed for WSH in the agriculture industry. Women workers mentioned they had to tolerate sexual harassment because of personal economic and social circumstances. They needed the employment to support their families. Most of them depended on the foreman’s bilingual language skills to communicate and keep their jobs. They felt that if they complained, they would lose their jobs or get deported. The lack of economic security, English literacy, and legal documentation increased their likelihood of being sexually harassed at work.

“We have to tolerate everything, because without legal documents and without anything to protect us, they are not going to believe in you, they going to believe what the foreman says. If they have years working there and you just arrived, they aren’t going to believe you. They consider you the liar.”

“And we need to survive...so many humiliations so many things that we go through because we don’t think about getting hurt, we think about the responsibility we have. And what, what are we to do?”

“This, this happens I believe on all the farms, but no one says anything, because they want to continue working...”

Women workers also felt that foremen took advantage of their difficult life situations. The foremen had the power to hire or fire them and even threatened and undermined their credibility by stating that no one would believe them even if they filed a complaint. In some cases, the foremen were related to the growers and owners and this made it more challenging for women workers to stop the harassment.

"I believe is the abuse of power, I believe that is a factor, they feel that they have the power and it is exciting for them. That's why they do it. Why don't they do it in the streets? Because they know they can go to jail. They do it here because they feel that they have the power to control, manipulate, and be able to take advantage. That's why it happens in the warehouses and fields and most of the time it is the foreman"

"One time I worked in a place where the foreman told us before we started to work, he said, "if you complain or sue the farm, you will not win because this farm has very good lawyers and lots of money and you guys are poor"

Physical appearance and choice of clothing also contributed to being at risk for sexual harassment. Women mentioned that male co-workers and foremen frequently commented on their appearance at work. In the fields, dress codes were not common. Participants felt that other women wearing provocative or revealing clothing suggested the wrong idea. As a result, some women purposely wore baggier clothing to hide their bodies and deter any unwanted attention from the men.

"They make fun of you, if you are pretty that you think you are better than everyone, if are ugly, they use nicknames to call you..."

"It's okay to dress up but not for work. I have seen women with their blouses and during the heat they take their shirts off, and there are some who bend over so you can see everything. And they let others look, even the foremen can see everything. And well, that's not right"

"I don't have a very nice body but I wear very big clothes, it doesn't matter if you don't like to have very big clothes, you put on pants that are bigger than normal, big shirts that cover your backside and sweat jackets, covering yourself they see you as an ugly woman, fat, and they don't bother you"

Women workers reported that physical isolation was another risk for WSH. This was particularly a concern in the fields because the foremen often separated women workers from their husbands and co-workers, leaving them alone in isolated areas.

"It is when women are by themselves and they are not with their husbands. The foreman will take advantage of women and do what he wants to do with the person..."

“The father of my children, when I lived with him, went to look for work on a farm and the foreman asked him, “are you working alone or bringing your wife?” and he said, “I’m going to bring my wife.” He [the foreman] said, “Oh yeah? Well the men go over here and the women work over there.” [My husband] said, “And why do you separate them?” and the foreman said, “because they are going to work by me where I can keep an eye on them to make sure they don’t get behind”.

Women also described that being sexually harassed was an emotionally and socially isolating experience. Female co-workers often reacted unfavorably towards harassed women. They blamed the woman for provoking the men, especially if the woman was single. They gossiped and started rumors. Women workers were sensitive to how their female co-workers perceived them. The lack of cohesion and support among female workers discouraged women from reporting the harassment.

“”They see you if you are alone [single] they say “that woman is looking for a man, be careful with your husbands.” When it’s not true and the only you want is to work because you have a need for the job”

“Their wives think that you are promiscuous – they harass you, they signal you, when you are not doing anything bad, they even say that you provoked them that you’re harassing them when it’s them”

“The lady that works with them saw me and told me that I like to gossip, I told her, “look, you have your husband here, not me. But I do not like it [going to the bathroom where others can see you] because it is disrespectful to other people.”

Protective factors against workplace sexual harassment

Both personal and environmental protective factors existed against WSH. A few women reported that they held different identities at work to prevent unwanted sexual attention. Women who were single or heterosexual pretended to be married and a transvestite, respectively. They felt that this prevented male co-workers and foremen from harassing them.

“Sometimes I had to say that I have a husband at home, even if it is not true, because they always bother you. And I say “if I like to talk and share things with people, it is because I like to, not because I am looking for a man. I have my husband at home.”

“If you say yes, and if you are married, they tend to stop and think you will tell your husband, so sometimes it scares them off”

“I found a strategy to be able to get those men off my back is when they start talking to me, I talk to them in a low voice like a man...I answer the same way they do and they are always surprised and they say “I didn’t say anything”. This makes them go away. And then they say, “that one is a transvestite”. It doesn’t matter that they call me a transvestite”

Education on workers’ rights also protected against WSH. Several women advocated for disclosure and encouraged other participants to speak up about the issue. One woman mentioned that workers had the right to file complaints. They discussed strategies for reporting WSH to authorities, such as bypassing the foreman and reporting directly to growers and owners. They saw themselves as agents for change.

“I say that they need to know what we have rights as workers, they need to respect us and we need to complain if they do not respect us. Because before, people had no rights to defend themselves, and now there are laws. If you complain, the foreman pays for it and those that are overseeing, even the company pays for it.”

“Break the silence, to not be afraid regardless of whether you have or don’t have legal documents, that harassment needs to stop everywhere and the silence is broken, now it is time to stop all this abuse that for all these years has been happening and if we want to stop it from happening, we need to break the silence. To speak without fear”

“I believe that if you work in a place where there are harassers and the foreman is one of them, we should look for the person who is higher than that foreman to take our complaints”

Workplace trainings and policies also prevented sexual harassment at work. Women working in warehouses were more likely to mention existing sexual harassment policies and dress codes. One woman mentioned that sexual harassment policies were implemented at her company after a WSH lawsuit. A few women also described supportive foremen, who were more responsive to complaints. However, both women working in the fields and warehouses called for additional enforcement of policies and resources. Participants wanted to know specific steps they could take when reporting WSH and requested they be included in current trainings for foremen and managers.

“Before they were sued, the company we worked at never had meetings before we would start working and now we have meetings to explain everything to us that we need to know. Since the lawsuit, the company brings all the people together and explains everything we should know... regarding, respect, amongst us, the foremen, and also the workers. [They instruct us that] if anything happens, we need to report it immediately, yes.”

“Where I work there is nothing like that happening...the foreman always said, “if anything happens let me know, call me, talk to me and I will take care of it”

“Before we start working they should give us a training and give us information of where to go to report if there is any sexual harassment happens. They say, “no, well that’s not permitted” and this and that but they don’t give us a phone number or some document you can reference while they are talking”

“In some places, they are already offering the training to the foreman and managers, but they should offer this training for all the employees, not only to the persons who are in charge. Besides, they take the training but they are not paying attention to it, they need to be stronger in enforcing the rules”

Health consequences of workplace sexual harassment

Women agricultural workers reported that working in agriculture has had negative impacts on their health. Participants, on average, rated their health as fair to good (Figure 1). Concerns included lack of access to care and health insurance, and exposure to pesticides and unsanitary conditions at work. Additional issues included allergy exacerbations, eating with pesticide contaminated hands, miscarriages due to delayed care, and potential for amputations while working in the freezer.

“I believe that the most important thing is our health, our body, the thing is that we don’t have medical insurance and without medical insurance and not having legal documents, you don’t get the same benefits as everyone else. Besides, the cost of medical insurance is very high and if you work in the fields or warehouses salaries are very low and you can’t afford to pay.”

“It affects me a lot when I work in the fields, because I was well, contaminated by pesticides, pesticides entered my eyes. Well, they don’t give you protection...it’s um it’s anti-hygienic when you go to the bathroom. They never clean the bathrooms, it takes weeks to clean them, it is unsanitary. There is nothing to wash your hands with. Well, you in the field and do it fast, they don’t give you time to eat.”

Women workers also described feeling stressed due to existing family responsibilities. After a long day of work, many women were expected to return home to cook, care for the children, and prepare for the next day. Women with young children who worked in the fields also constantly worried about their child and babysitting needs. Babysitting was not affordable.

“We arrive late [at home], all stressed to prepare the food, take care of the children, bathing them, getting everything ready for the next school day” (other women nodding)

“For example, I have a baby who is five years old and I struggled a lot to look for who was going to take care of him and I worry because I didn’t know how my baby was going to be – where I work they work a lot of hours... almost 16 hours a day, once we worked 23 hours”

Sexual harassment led to additional physical, psychological, and relational distress among women agricultural workers. Several women described feeling depressed and disengaged. Others were afraid to go to work because they feared they would be harassed again. Emotional reactions included anger, shame, and self-blame. Many felt stuck in their situation. However, women prioritized family and relational health over their own health. They mentioned that WSH strained family and marital relationships, leading to separations and divorce. One woman also reported she no longer trusted men.

“I feel, that it has affected me psychologically, physically, it affects you when you fall into depression, when you least expect you fall into depression and you have no desire to see anyone. Wherever you go it’s the same, wherever you work it’s the same. Suddenly you do not feel like seeing anyone, and canceling on people is like saying you don’t feel like having anyone look at you because everywhere you go it’s the same. Any work place you go they always say, “Uh, shut up, you’re always with your opinions, as if you know everything”, so you just shut up.”

“The sexual harassment from the men, them making fun of you, that affects me. I worked here in various fields and at various warehouses and the truth is that it’s like you’re in the shadows because there are many things that you want to do but the opportunities are not there. People get used to, but they are tired like asleep and up to here about being there but well they have the need to continue working there because they need to.”

“To me, it has affected me a lot because like I have become more aggressive, umm more hostile, because I feel like they always want something...you always think that they are looking at you with a dirty mind. You expect that they are going to say bad things to you, you don't trust, and it's hard to trust in men again, now you see them with repudiation because you've lived so much harassment...”

“It affects us always because you are always in fear when you return to your work. You are afraid of those people who have harmed you, and if it's not those people it could be another person, because just like that person turned up and treated you, another can do the same because their mentality is that they only see us as sex objects, not as a woman struggling to survive with her family”

“That's why there are so many separations of families and couples” (other women nod)

DISCUSSION

Findings from the focus groups suggested that WSH had been a longstanding norm and concern in the agriculture industry. Women workers faced both quid pro quo and hostile environment forms of harassment, mostly from male co-workers and foremen. This was similar to findings from Waugh's study in Central Valley, California.¹⁵

Women workers also described WSH as disrespectful, pervasive, and frequent. This was consistent with prior studies in non-agricultural settings, where women reported feeling insulted and chronically harassed.^{7,21,22} However, despite continuous harassment, few women workers reported their experiences to authorities. Instead, many dealt with WSH individually by either putting up with the harassment or leaving the workplace. In non-agricultural settings, sexually harassed women have coped with WSH by avoiding the harasser, denying its occurrence, or choosing to tolerate the harassment.^{22,29} Unlike prior findings, women workers in this study were unable to avoid the harasser due to the hierarchical nature of their work environment and were vocal about their experiences of being sexually harassed.

Analysis of the focus group findings suggested that there were three sets of factors that contributed to WSH in the agriculture industry. The three sets included predisposing cultural and economic factors, enabling work environment factors, and reinforcing interpersonal factors; these factors augmented one another to ultimately increase the risk of WSH (Figure 2). Once WSH occurred, women workers felt empowered to report the incident to authorities, but often lacked the tools to follow-through, suggesting opportunities for intervention. Women workers were well aware of the negative health consequences of WSH.

Predisposing cultural and economic factors

In the agricultural setting, where the majority of workers come from the Latino community, culturally influenced gender dynamics and the need for economic stability act as predisposing factors for WSH. In the Latino community, *machismo* and *marianismo* define separate roles for men and women; men are expected to provide for and protect the family, while women are expected to raise children and practice chastity.⁴³ However, the need for economic stability has forced many Latinas in the U.S. to enter the workforce, where they often work alongside men.^{15,45,46} In this study, women workers frequently mentioned their need for employment. As women workers are forced to balance work and family responsibilities, traditional gender roles are challenged. Thus, male co-workers and foremen may target and sexually harass women workers to preserve male masculine and female feminine gender attitudes. The act of sexual harassment itself may be a way for male workers to practice and retain *machismo* characteristics.

Several theories have been previously proposed to explain how gender roles influence sexual harassment of women employees in non-agricultural settings. The sex role spillover theory suggested that WSH occurred when gender roles outside of work were inappropriately carried over into the workplace.²⁸ The intersectionality theory stated that the combination of race, gender, and economic status converged to create power disparities between the harasser and the harassed.¹⁵ In 2004, Hoffmann introduced the concept of “selective sexual harassment”. In selective sexual harassment, male workers purposely targeted and avoided female workers they perceived to be heterosexual and homosexual, respectively.⁴⁷ Thus, WSH may be a way to reinforce traditional gender roles in the workplace.²⁸ Findings from this study further support this

concept. Several women workers shared stories of pretending to be married or non-heterosexual at work to deter unwanted sexual attention.

Aspects of both the sex role spillover and the intersectionality theory contribute to WSH in the agricultural setting. When culturally bounded gender roles are carried into the workplace and gender and economic status converge to create power disparities between men and women, women workers are more likely to be sexually harassed.

Enabling work environment factors

Focus group findings suggested that predisposing factors alone were insufficient to cause WSH. A prior study of women agricultural workers recommended assessing the workers' awareness of workplace sexual harassment policies and trainings.¹⁵ Women workers in this study identified that sexual harassment policies, trainings, and dress codes protected women from WSH. Many of the women knew whether or not their companies had policies in place and felt that enforcement of policies was just as important as its implementation. Policies were more likely to be in place in warehouse settings than in the fields. When the companies lacked sexual harassment related policies, trainings, and dress codes, WSH was more likely to occur.

Women workers in this study also reported that responsive foremen prevented WSH. Foremen who actively enforced dress codes, told harassers to stop, and partnered with workers, created a friendlier and more supportive work environment. This is consistent with prior studies in agriculture. Poor supervisor-employee relationships have been associated with higher risks of work-related injury and poorer work performance.⁴⁸ When organizations and subsequently supervisors and managers promoted farmworker safety, workers perceived greater trust and security at work.⁴⁹ Thus, an organization's lack of commitment to worker safety and unhealthy foremen-employee relationships further enable WSH to occur in the fields and warehouses.

Reinforcing interpersonal factors

In addition to work environment factors, women workers in this study also described the importance of work-related interpersonal factors. Women workers mentioned that physical isolation and the lack of co-worker support made sexual harassment a challenging experience. Female co-workers blamed and criticized other co-workers for being sexually harassed. Some felt that other women workers brought sexual harassment upon themselves by dressing or acting promiscuously. Consequently, women workers experienced stigma after being sexually harassed, making it difficult to seek support and report the incident to authorities. When the combined effect of culturally influenced gender roles, economic insecurity, and unfriendly work environments lead to WSH, the lack of co-worker community further reinforces WSH by blaming the victims.

The social disorganization theory, initially introduced in criminology, best explains how work-related environmental and interpersonal factors allow and maintain WSH in the agriculture industry (Figure 3). In criminology, this theory stated that neighborhood structures contributed to crime rates and social cohesion mediated this relationship.¹⁸ In a more recent study, Snyder et al. found that fewer work resources, less administrative support, and poorer co-worker and manager relationships were associated with higher risks of WSH.¹⁸ However, improved social cohesion could mediate the risks of harassment associated with poor organizational support.¹⁸ Similarly, developing a stronger sense of community among women agricultural workers may help compensate for the lack of sexual harassment policies and enforcement at some companies. Greater social cohesion would reduce stigma, which would encourage more women workers to report WSH to their peers and authorities. The act of reporting could then put pressure on companies to implement and enforce sexual harassment policies more effectively. Co-workers

would also be reassured that their decision to act as a witness to a WSH claim will not result in further social isolation.^{34,45}

The social disorganization theory model will need to be further validated for its use in sexual harassment contexts, but its application towards workplace sexual harassment appears promising. Future studies should explore the relationship between WSH, company policies, and co-worker support to determine how social cohesion mediates work environment factors. Health and legal advocates should use the social disorganization theory to improve the workplace climate and reduce the risk of WSH.

Decision to report workplace sexual harassment

Women agricultural workers consider a number of factors before deciding to report WSH to authorities. The Health Belief Model, a type of value expectancy theory, best illustrates this thought process (Figure 4). This model was originally designed to increase utilization of chest x-rays for tuberculosis screening but since then, has been widely used to promote health behaviors; it states that health behaviors, in this case reporting WSH, depends on the combination of the value an individual places on the outcome, in this case WSH, and the expected likelihood of the outcome.⁵⁰ The model consists of six constructs: perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy.⁵⁰ Deficiencies in one or more of the constructs can be addressed using interventions to create an environment more conducive for the health behavior.

In this study, women workers were already aware that they were highly susceptible to WSH (perceived susceptibility) and that its consequences could be severe (perceived severity). Women workers expected sexual harassment to occur in agriculture and explained that they had to tolerate it due to their life circumstances.^{16,26,27} They prioritized their family's needs over their

own, despite knowing that ongoing WSH could negatively affect their marriages, physical health, and psychological health.^{15,16} Women workers also acknowledged that reporting WSH could prevent future harassment through policy development (perceived benefits).²³ However, the barriers to disclosure outweighed the benefits, preventing women from speaking up. As described in prior studies, women agricultural workers did not report harassment due to risks of retaliation, such as deportation, job loss, and community isolation (perceived barriers).³⁴ They also felt they lacked credibility against the foremen.¹⁵ Negative reactions from co-workers further discouraged women from reporting harassment (cues to action).^{2,33} This behavior supports the Latino concept of *familismo*; participants valued the support and reactions they received from their family and peers. Thus, despite their desires to advocate for change and their beliefs that disclosure was necessary, few women were actually able to report WSH to authorities (self-efficacy). Financial, legal, and familial circumstances compounded by power dynamics and workplace climate increased the risk of unreported WSH.

To our knowledge, the Health Belief Model has not yet been used to explain sexual harassment experiences. The model highlights several opportunities for future interventions and prevention programs. First, workplaces changes can be made to reduce perceived barriers and increase perceived benefits. Prior findings suggest that women are more likely to report WSH when they perceive that the organization is intolerant of sexual harassment.³⁴ Second, as described earlier, interpersonal relationships can be strengthened to improve cues to action. If women co-workers encourage rather than belittle each other, reporting WSH may be easier. Lastly, women workers can be provided with phone numbers and specific steps to follow when reporting WSH to improve self-efficacy. Women workers are more likely to report sexual harassment when they are aware of formal policies and reporting procedures.³⁴ Application of

the Health Belief Model's six constructs suggests that women agricultural workers are almost ready to advocate for their rights as women and workers. Public health professionals and community health workers can equip women workers with the last few tools to report sexual harassment.

Negative health consequences of workplace sexual harassment

Women workers identified limited access to health care services as a major hurdle to good health. Like prior studies of agricultural workers, participants listed the lack of health insurance, time, affordability, language assistance, and knowledge of the U.S. health care system as barriers to care.^{41,51,52} In our study, women on average rated their health as fair to good, slightly below the average U.S. Hispanic rating of good.⁵³

The qualitative nature of our study did not encourage women to list specific symptoms related to WSH. However, participants did report concerns for physical, psychological, and relational distress. Women described depression, anticipatory fear, and hostility. They also worried about the potential for divorce once spouses found out about the sexual harassment. One woman also felt she could not trust men anymore. These findings are consistent with previous literature on sexual harassment. Sexual harassment early in one's career has been associated with future stress, depression, and poor coping skills, which subsequently led to career instability and poor work performance.³⁰ Sexual harassment has also been associated with headaches, hand shaking, sweating, heart palpitations, fatigue, and future psychological distress.^{15,54}

Women agricultural workers faced significant baseline stress related to their social, financial, and family circumstances. Fears of deportation and economic insecurity were constant stressors. Sexual harassment added another layer of stress. One participant described being "up to here" about sexual harassment while gesturing towards her face. Thus, given the

pervasiveness of WSH, we suspect that women workers experience significant chronic stress due to WSH.

McEwen's allostatic load model helps illustrate the relationship between stress and health outcomes. Allostatic load, measured by a panel of biomarkers, refers to the wear and tear to the body that results after exposure to chronic stressors.⁵⁵ The body normally adapts to acute stressors. However, repeated stressful insults can overload the body's stress response and negatively affect the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, sympathetic nervous system, and the immune system. This increases allostatic load, which in turn increases the risk of diseases like depression, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and even death.^{55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62} This is especially the case when individuals feel they have little control over their stressors.⁶²

Prior studies have found that chronic stress related to employment, finances, and family caregiving were associated with high allostatic loads and poorer health outcomes among Mexican American women.^{39,52,57} Another study found that even intermittent WSH was associated with cumulative stress, leading to negative job-related and psychological outcomes.²² Thus, we'd expect women agricultural workers to have high allostatic loads and consequently, high risks of negative health outcomes (Figure 5). Medical and mental health providers should refer to the allostatic load model to understand WSH's implications on physical and psychological illness. Future studies should measure the allostatic load of women agricultural workers to quantify the association between WSH, chronic stress, and health. Validated audiotaped mental health evaluation tools already exist to measure depression and psychological distress among farmworkers.⁶³ Such tools and longitudinal studies will help determine the temporality of health consequences associated with WSH.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the findings may not be generalizable to all women agricultural workers in Washington State or the U.S. The inclusion criteria may have excluded newer immigrants and indigenous women workers who did not have the transportation or Spanish language ability to attend or understand the focus group study, respectively. This study also used purposeful sampling to avoid potential harm associated with widespread knowledge of the study, so women who were not within the research team members' networks were not included. Given the participants' mean length of residence in Yakima Valley, participants were also more likely to be seasonal or permanent agricultural workers. Future studies are needed to understand the experience of WSH among subgroups of women workers, such as non-Spanish speaking, migrant, or guest workers, in Yakima Valley and other areas of Washington State.

Second, analysis and interpretation of the data may not be comprehensive of all cultural nuances expressed during the focus groups. Research team members familiar with both Latina and farmworker cultures, who were present during the focus groups, conducted a rigorous process of translation and back-translation to minimize omissions, but the possibility of an omission cannot be ruled out completely. The value of qualitative research is derived from the stories shared by the participants; the benefits of conducting the study in the preferred language of women workers outweigh the negatives associated with minor omissions.

Additionally, the temporality of WSH and its health effects cannot be accurately ascertained. As a qualitative study, women workers were asked about any prior experiences of WSH and health effects. It is difficult to determine whether the sexual harassment or experiences of depression occurred first. Prior sexual harassment studies suggest that psychological distress

occurs after experiencing harassment. However, future studies of women agricultural workers should use a prospective design to determine this relationship.

Conclusions

Many women agricultural workers experienced WSH and understood its harmful effects on personal and community life. Predisposing cultural and economic factors, enabling work environment factors, and reinforcing interpersonal factors increased the risk of WSH in the agriculture industry. Nevertheless, efforts to report and prevent WSH were low due to significant personal and environmental barriers. This study's qualitative and grounded theory approach helped identify several models that explained the foundation and implications of WSH in the agriculture industry. Public health professionals, community health workers, legal advocates, and health providers should refer back to these models to design and implement prevention, intervention, and policy programs.

Qualitative data is valuable in understanding the context of health risks and behaviors, but cannot quantify the magnitude of WSH. In addition to the recommendations made earlier in this discussion, future studies should assess the prevalence of WSH among women agricultural workers not only in the Yakima Valley, but also in Washington State and nationally. One method may be to use the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire-Latina (SEQ-L), a culturally appropriate and validated tool to measure sexual harassment experiences among Hispanic women.⁴⁵ To date, there are also no studies about WSH that elicit the perspectives of male foremen, co-workers, or growers. Future studies with men may contribute valuable insight about sexual harassment in the agriculture industry. A summary of key findings and its associated theories and implications are provided in the Appendix (Table 5 and 6).

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS	
QUESTIONS ON HEALTH	
Q1	What is most important to you about your health?
Q2	How does working in the (fields or packinghouses) affect your health?
QUESTIONS ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT	
Q3	What is your understanding of sexual harassment?
Q4	Sexual harassment means any unwanted sexual attention, including sexual advances, request for sexual favors, or verbal/physical harassment based on sex. Have you or someone you know ever been sexually harassed at your agricultural workplace?
Q5	In what ways has sexual harassment at work affected you or someone you know? Potential probes: physically, psychologically, emotionally
Q6	What makes sexual harassment more likely at work?
Q7	What might prevent sexual harassment at work?
QUESTIONS ABOUT PREVENTION	
Q8	What do you think other women should be told to help them prevent sexual harassment in the agricultural workplace?
Q9	What do you think supervisors/managers/foremen should be told to prevent sexual harassment at work?
Q10	What do you think farmers/owners/growers should be told to prevent sexual harassment at work?

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY	
PERSONAL INFORMATION	
Q1	Age
Q2	Current marital status (circle one): Never Married Married Divorced Widowed
Q3	How many people are in your family?
Q4	What is your religious preference, if any?
Q5	Where were you born?
Q6	How many years have you lived in the United States?
Q7	How many years have you lived in this community (Yakima Valley)?
Q8	What is the highest level of education you have completed? (select one) Some primary school Finished primary school Some middle school Finished middle school Some high school High school graduate Some college College degree Graduate school or more
Q9	Which language/s can you speak? (circle all that apply) Spanish English Other (please specify)
Q10	Which language/s can you read? (circle all that apply) Spanish English Other (please specify)
Q11	Which language/s can you write? (circle all that apply) Spanish English Other (please specify)
WORK INFORMATION	
Q12	How many years have you worked in agriculture in this community (Yakima Valley)?
Q13	What type of agricultural work have you done?
Q14	Where do you currently work?
HEALTH INFORMATION	
Q15	How would you rate your overall health compared to other women your age? Poor Fair Good Excellent
Q16	What is your biggest concern for your health related to your work?

TABLE 3. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS (N=20)		
	Mean	Range
Age	41	19-68
Family size	4.25	1-7
Years lived in U.S.	18.2	6-34
Years lived in Yakima Valley	15.8	4-26
Years worked in Yakima Valley	12.6	3-26

TABLE 4. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS* (N=20)		
	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Marital status		
<i>Never married</i>	3	15%
<i>Married</i>	9	45%
<i>Divorced</i>	6	30%
<i>Widowed</i>	1	5%
Religious preference		
<i>Catholic</i>	15	75%
<i>Christian</i>	2	10%
Birthplace		
<i>Mexico</i>	18	90%
<i>U.S.</i>	1	5%
Educational attainment		
<i>None</i>	2	10%
<i>Some primary school</i>	4	20%
<i>Primary school</i>	6	30%
<i>Some middle school</i>	2	10%
<i>Middle school</i>	1	5%
<i>Some high school</i>	1	5%
<i>High school</i>	2	10%
Language literacy		
Oral		
<i>Spanish</i>	17	85%
<i>Spanish & English</i>	3	15%
<i>English</i>	0	0%
Reading		
<i>Spanish</i>	17	85%
<i>Spanish & English</i>	2	10%
<i>English</i>	0	0%
Written		
<i>Spanish</i>	14	70%
<i>Spanish & English</i>	1	5%
<i>English</i>	1	5%
* Number and percentage of participants do not sum to 100% due to missing survey fields		

TABLE 5. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ WSH* has been a longstanding norm and concern in the agriculture industry➤ Women agricultural workers experience both quid pro quo and hostile environment forms of sexual harassment➤ Cultural, economic, work environment (organizational climate, supervisor), and interpersonal (co-worker) factors increase the risk of WSH in agriculture➤ Perceived barriers and the lack of knowledge about proper reporting procedures prevent women agricultural workers from reporting WSH to authorities➤ WSH adds additional chronic stress to women workers, leading to negative psychological, relational, and familial consequences <p>*Workplace sexual harassment</p>

TABLE 6. THEORIES AND NEXT STEPS			
FINDING	THEORY	FUTURE INTERVENTION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS	FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS
Predisposing Factors: Culturally influenced gender dynamics; economic insecurity	Sex Role Spillover, Intersectionality		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Further explore the relationship between perceived sexual orientation and experience of WSH
Enabling & Reinforcing Factors: Workplace policies, trainings, dress codes; supervisor-employee relationships; co-worker support	Social Disorganization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advocate for WSH policies, trainings, and dress codes ➤ Advocate for better enforcement of existing WSH policies ➤ Promote female co-worker support systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Validate the social disorganization theory in additional WSH contexts ➤ Further explore the relationship between workplace policies and WSH incidence ➤ Further explore social cohesion as a mediator
Decision to report WSH: Reduce perceived barriers; increase perceived benefits, cues to action, and self-efficacy	Health Belief Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advocate for better enforcement of WSH policies ➤ Promote female co-worker support systems ➤ Provide printout resources containing phone numbers and reporting procedures to women agricultural workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Study the efficacy of interventions designed using the Health Belief Model in the agricultural setting ➤ Explore the relationship between printout resources and actual reporting outcomes
WSH as a chronic stressor: High allostatic load; high risk of developing illness	Allostatic Load Model		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Measure the allostatic load of women agricultural workers ➤ Conduct prospective, longitudinal studies to assess the magnitude, direction, and temporality of health consequences associated with WSH
Other: Limitations of the study			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Expand WSH studies to include sub-groups of women agricultural workers and different regions ➤ Assess the prevalence of WSH in the agriculture industry ➤ Assess male foremen and co-workers' perspectives on WSH

Figure 1. Self-rated Health

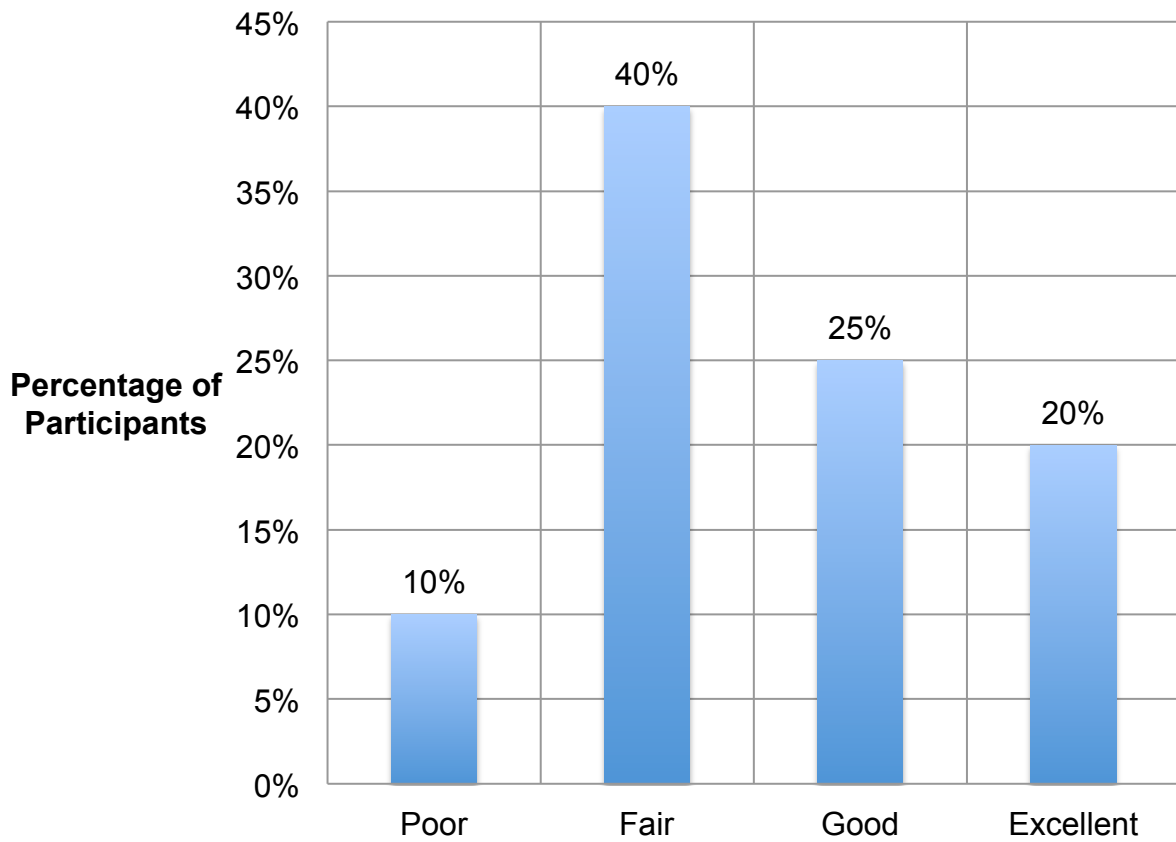


Figure 1. Self-rated Health

In the demographic survey, participants were asked to rate their overall health compared to other women in their age group.

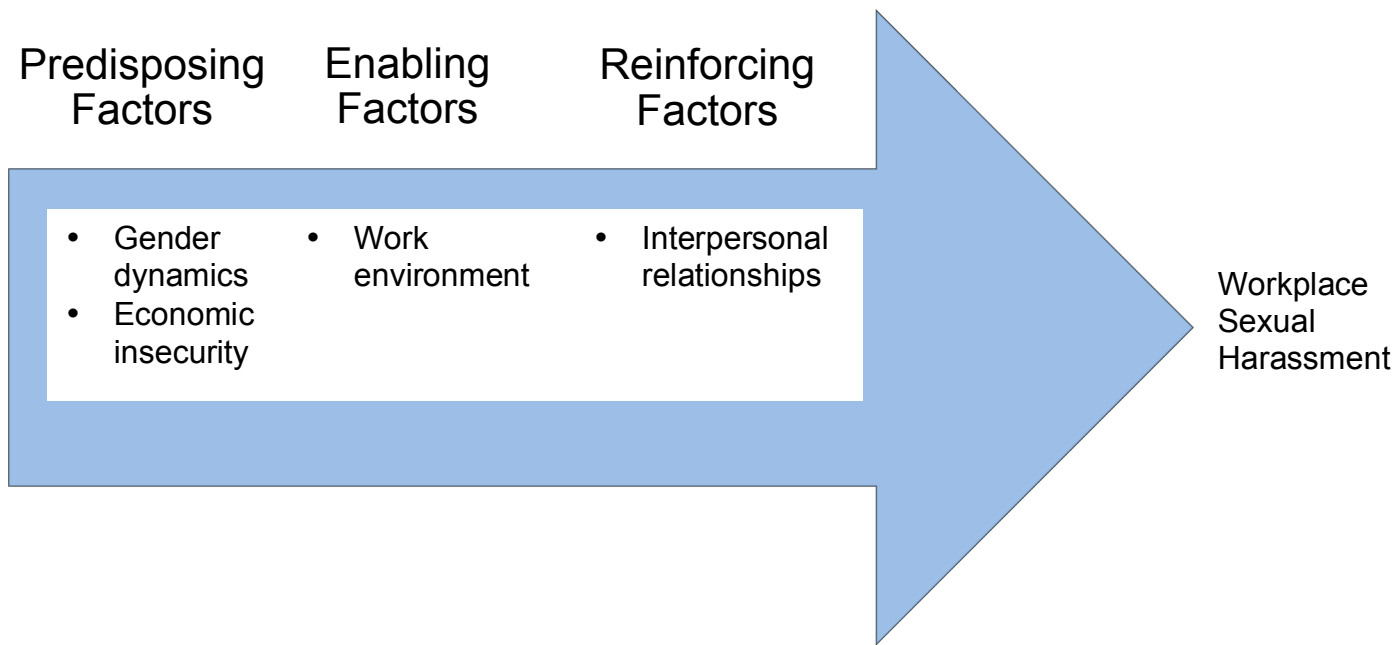
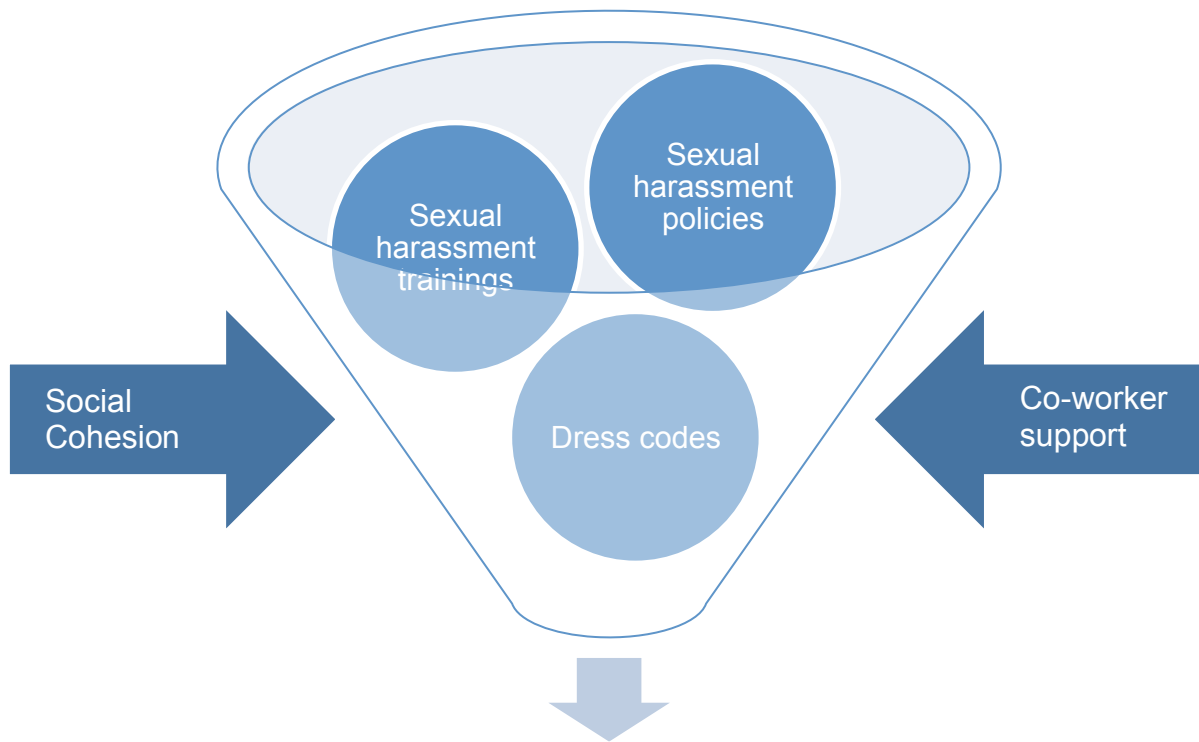


Figure 2. Risk Factors for Workplace Sexual Harassment
 There are three sets of risk factors for workplace sexual harassment in the agriculture industry. These include predisposing, enabling, and reinforcing factors.



**Organizational Climate:
Risk of Workplace Sexual Harassment**

Figure 3. Social Disorganization Theory

Social cohesion and co-worker support mediates the risk of workplace sexual harassment associated with organizational climate.

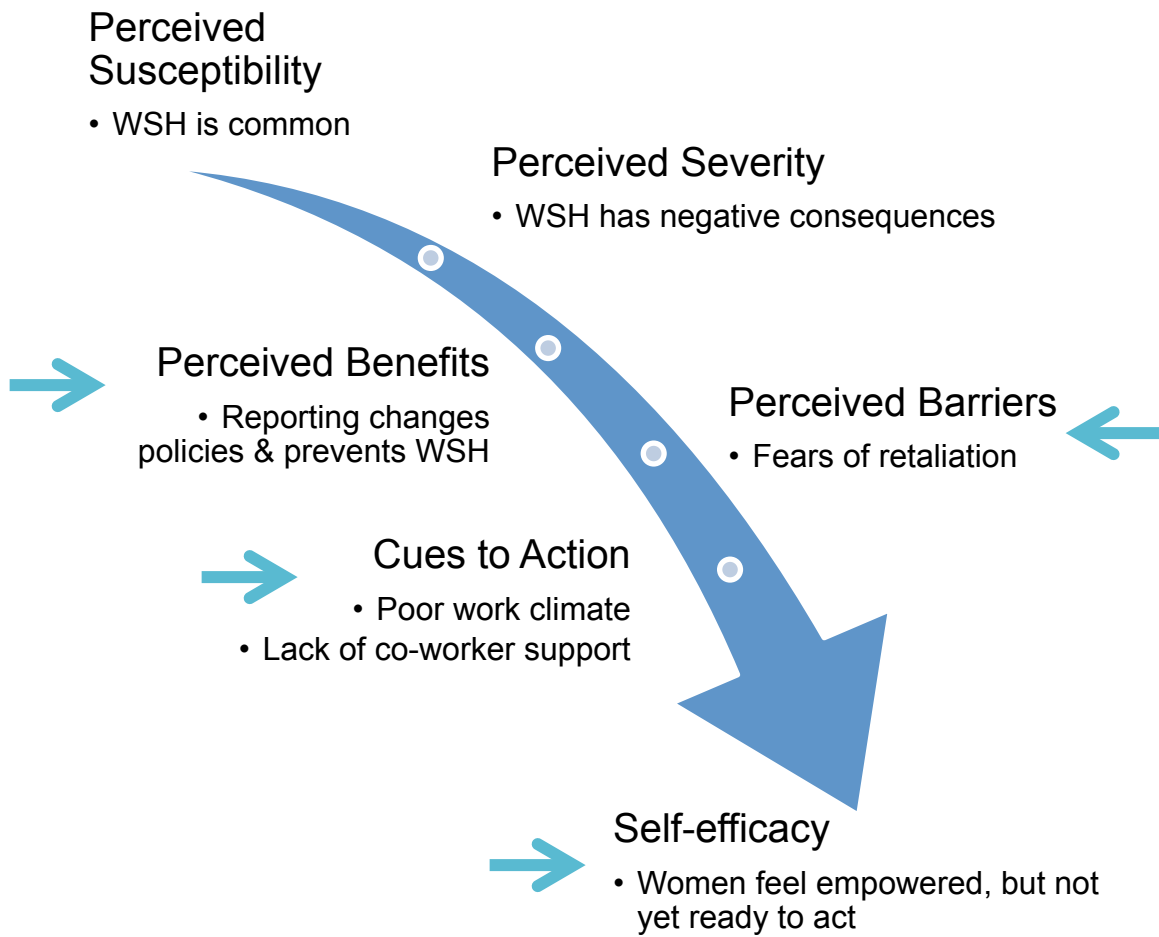


Figure 4. Health Belief Model

If the health outcome is workplace sexual harassment (WSH) and the desired health behavior is reporting WSH, the above diagram depicts the six constructs necessary to help women agricultural workers achieve the health behavior. Small arrows depict potential points of intervention based on findings.

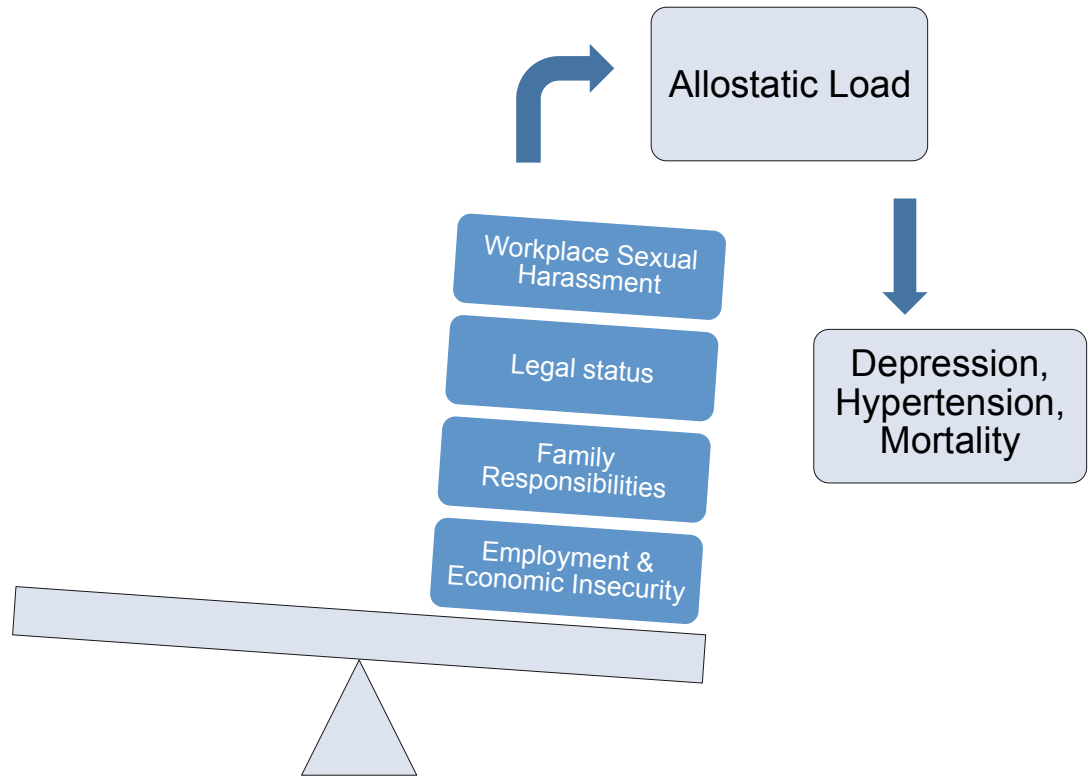


Figure 5. Allostatic Load Model

Chronic stressors result in allostatic load, which leads to poor physical and psychological health outcomes. Workplace sexual harassment adds an additional stressor to the women agricultural workers' existing stress load, increasing the risk of negative health consequences.