



**Hear Us. See Us.
Believe Us. Respect Us.**

Latina Farmworker Experiences of Sexual Violence in Rural Washington

2018 Report

**Sexual Violence Justice Institute @ MNCASA
& YWCA Walla Walla**

An exploration of survivors' experiences with the system response to sexual violence in one rural Washington state community.



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PROJECT OVERVIEW

What did they say? What did they do?

What helped?

How could they improve?

These basic and essential questions (above) guided this project. Research tells us that how a responder reacts to a victim/survivor of sexual assault matters. Through this project, the Sexual Violence Justice Institute (SVJI) at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault worked with community-based advocates at the YWCA Walla Walla in rural southeast Washington to collect information and share a deeper understanding of the experiences of female-identified Latina farmworkers with advocates and law enforcement.

The information gathered from this project is for local communities to help them create and promote promising practices for a more victim-centered response to sexual assault. Results will also be combined with data collected from victims/survivors and responders across the country and presented with recommendations for how law enforcement and advocacy can improve their practice and influence the system response to sexual violence in their community through changes in policy, protocol, and routine practices.

BACKGROUND

SVJI staff partnered with community-based advocacy organizations in two states to implement a community-led research project to explore the experiences of adult victim/survivors of sexual violence. We sought out participants who have had experiences with law enforcement and victim advocates in rural culturally and/or language specific communities.

SVJI staff developed this pilot project, with the support of OVW and Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence, after identifying gaps in information. We found that the voices of people in rural and culturally/language-specific communities are not well represented in our understanding of victims/survivors' experiences with the system response to sexual violence. We also realized that the best information collector for this project was someone who was local, experienced in community-based advocacy, and shared the culture and language of the community. SVJI staff needed to partner to get good information in a culturally responsive process. As a result, SVJI staff designed a project to provide the frame, training, support, and materials to community-based researchers. Partners identified the target audience, recruited participants, co-created tools, conducted interviews, and interpreted the data.

Participants were recruited by community-based advocates that shared their culture and language. Participants have all experienced sexual violence as adults and sought out help from law enforcement and/or advocacy. Many had experience with nurse examiners and prosecution as well. All participants identified as Latinx¹ (most pinpointing Mexico as their nation of origin), farmworkers, and women, including one trans-identified woman. Eight participants engaged in an individual in-depth interview and other four people participated in a group interview. SVJI staff worked with the community interviewers to develop tools that were based in findings from a literature review. The community researchers conducted the interviews in Spanish and, then, translated and organized the information. They worked with SVJI staff to analyze and make meaning of the data. Data was also reviewed by Latinx advocates in Minnesota..

CULTURAL RESPONSIVE ADVOCACY MODEL

At its core, community-based advocacy supports the choices and needs of victims/survivors. Advocates are specially trained to offer supports for victims/survivors that provide a path for healing, resources, and information about their rights. Their practices are generally considered trauma-informed. That is, they have the understanding, commitment, and practices to successfully address the trauma-based needs of victims/survivors. Advocacy is unique (compared to other responders) in that their communications with victims/survivors are usually confidential and privileged. This means information shared is protected and, in most states and territories, cannot be shared without the express written consent of the victim/survivor.

In southeastern Washington State, many advocates operate under the Crossing Borders² program approach, designed by Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. This program provides mobile, survivor-driven advocacy that serves immigrant women and their children. The services are centered in Latinx cultures and beliefs, which help guide the provision of culturally appropriate services. Advocates describe this powerful approach as important, so that these “[Victims/survivors] are not forgotten. Their circumstances are not taken for granted” as they are receiving services.

The YWCA Walla Walla also engages victims/survivors as community outreach advocates using the Promotores model. The Promotores model, developed by Casa de Esperanza, trains and supports volunteers to provide peer-to-peer advocacy in their everyday lives, including church, school, and within their families.

In addition, the YWCA Walla Walla has intentionally created wrap-around services to engage and support victims/survivors. Advocates describe a community organizing-type of approach to engage people by addressing their immediate needs. These needs-driven services include information sharing on topics such as their legal rights and reproductive health care, including birth control and emergency contraception. Once trust is built, it creates an opportunity to address their more complex challenges, such as trauma experienced as a result of a sexual assault.

Advocates in Walla Walla describe the foundational elements of their practice as:

- Supporting resiliency and recovery
- Recognizing the impact of historical and intergenerational trauma influences
- Providing options for healing
- Promoting wellness, resiliency, and protective factors

There are many ways in which victims/survivors can heal and connect with the agency. One of the unique ways the YWCA Walla Walla support healing for this population is through the integration of opportunities to engage in culturally relevant activities. In November, they host a Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) celebration. During this traditional Mexican celebration which is focused on honoring relatives that have passed away, it is an opportunity for advocates to help victims/survivors reflect on the harm they have experienced and begin healing with intention.

Community Context

Walla Walla County is considered a conservative and rural area in southeastern Washington state. In 2015, there was 60,338 residents of the county, with 32,132 (2016) people residing in the city of Walla Walla³. It is named for the Sahaptin Native people of the Northwest Plateau. The name Walla Walla is often translated as place of “many waters⁴.”

The agricultural industry is a main driver of the area’s economy. Wheat, apples, and wine grapes are some of the crops that are grown in the county³. Over the past century, immigrant labor has played a crucial role in supporting the agricultural industry. Since the early 20th century, immigration policies have stretched with the needs of agriculture, including encouraging immigration from Mexico⁵. As a result, agricultural places like Walla Walla have a substantial Latinx population. The Hispanic or Latinx population hover around 21% of the total population, in both the county and city of Walla Walla. In 2008, an estimated 90% of the immigrant agricultural workforce in Walla Walla was Latinx, and up to 50% may be undocumented immigrants⁶.

This report focuses on the experiences of Latinx farmworkers that have experienced sexual violence as adults and sought help from community-based advocacy, law enforcement, prosecution, and/or medical care. This report does not focus on the issue of the legal documentation of victims/survivors, and the project did not seek this information from participants. The current environment - where immigrant labor is needed, but at the same time, their very existence is vilified - cannot be ignored. In fact, these are the factors that make people more vulnerable to sexual violence.⁷

“

We were illegal...it was easy [to hurt us] because nobody knew us and nobody cared. We were a face with no name, no identity.

”

This reality became clear as the political environment became increasingly negative towards Latinx communities through the course of our period of data collection and analysis. According to our community-based researchers, the current immigration rhetoric has created an increasingly unsafe environment for this population. In a political environment where even U.S. citizens of Mexican or Latin American descent are being denied passports⁹, Latinx people are avoiding any interaction with representatives of the government (including law enforcement and social services) at all costs. The recent NO MAS study looked at domestic and sexual assault in the Latinx community, and they found that fear is a major barrier to seeking help and fear of deportation one of the main reasons Latinx victims/survivors may not report⁸. Members of the community said, “[we] are not going to put reporting rape above the well-being of [our] children.”

FINDINGS

The in-depth individual interviews and group interview revealed some strong similarities to other research with victims/survivors⁹. We also discovered interesting insights into the distinctive needs, challenges, and strengths of this specific population - who identify as female, rural, Latinx, and farmworkers - in southeastern Washington state. In general, participants want to be heard and believed by responders, but also expect that their uniqueness as Latinx to be seen and that they, with their intersectional identities, be treated with dignity and respect.

From the interviews, four major themes emerged. These themes are listed below with supporting ideas and insights shared by victims/survivors.

1. victim/survivors benefit from connecting with community-based advocacy early for support and resources.

- Advocacy is a place where participants felt accepted, supported, and believed.
- Advocacy can help explain the options within cases.
- Advocacy provides long-term support and connections to other resources. Support groups and individual therapy were identified as important resources.

“ *Healing is a process. We may need help for years after.* **”**

2. Family is woven into the identities of the Latinx interviewed. If one person is victimized, the family feels it too. Family members can be an important element of the healing process. As secondary survivors, family and friends need advocacy and social services.

“ *Not only are we affected for life, but so is our family.* **”**

- Family is a source of motivation and strength in the healing process for victims/survivors.
- Family, friends, and spirituality can be sources of support for victims/survivors in the short and long term.
- Talking about sex is considered taboo in most Mexican families. In addition, victim blaming occurs. If the victim/survivor has witnessed a negative reaction to disclosing sexual violence to family or friends, they are unlikely to share their experiences. In some cases though, family and friends can be a safe place for initial disclosure. They have influence on the outside support victims/survivors seek.
- Reporting to the police can cause conflict within families because it draws attention to their immigration status. This can create feelings of extreme isolation and guilt for the victim/survivor.
- Secondary survivors, the family of victims/survivors, need access to advocacy to process their own experience and identify ways to support the primary victim/survivor.
- Families need a variety of supports, including: short-term financial, housing, skill development, and mental health treatment. Immigration status can impact their eligibility for these social services.

3. Language barriers, cultural barriers, and legal status creates challenges to accessing services and securing support and belief.

- Resources and information available in Spanish are needed
- There are few or no Spanish-speaking officers, which creates another barrier to reporting.
- All agencies need more bilingual staff to support the needs of Spanish speaking victims/survivors.
- Crisis lines are mainly in English. This can cause confusion and frustration to someone who is a non-English speaker in crisis. Language-specific hotlines could reduce this significant barrier to finding help.

“ Automated systems can get us killed...once you get up the nerve to call... and it is not in your language and you don't know how to use it or don't have the time. ”

- The stereotypes that exist about Latinx people as well as the fear of detention or deportation creates barriers to reporting. Victims/survivors must trust that they will be believed and treated with respect when they report.
- Latinx people are not a monolith. Their intersectional identities cannot be ignored when they seek help after experiencing sexual violence. Latinx people who identify as gender non-conforming or trans in rural areas have legitimate fears of talking to responders or being examined by medical personnel. They may fear experiencing additional physical or emotional trauma from insensitive, uninformed, or biased responders.
- Agencies need to train staff on the challenging realities and strengths of Latinx people in their community.
- Participants interacted with support staff that were not trained in trauma-informed practices so they are equipped to treat victims/survivors with kindness and understanding of what they have been through. This also helps them consider the other fears that Latinx victims/survivors may bring to these interactions.

“ We want to have people that speak our language, and trained how to treat us at the front desks, phone lines. Sometimes people make us feel that we are the problem. ”

4. Responders are most effective if they are culturally-responsive and trauma-informed

- It is not only important to have language-specific services, but also culturally sensitive staff and culturally relevant healing options.
- Victims/survivors can feel isolated and alone when they choose to report. They can feel cut off and not supported from their family and friends. Responders can help by developing or sharing options for support, including advocacy, support groups, and culturally-specific healing activities.
- Believe that victims/survivors are telling the truth about their experience to the best of their ability.
- Use open-ended and non-leading questions to help victims/survivors share their experiences.
- Be knowledgeable about the reasons why all the details of their experience may not come out right away. A few of the reasons include: the victim/survivor's trauma response, other traumatic experiences, family is present, familiarity with interpreter, or not feeling accepted because of gender identity, sexuality, or beliefs.

HOW CAN RESPONDERS IMPROVE?

A main driver of this project was to better understand how responders can best support victims/survivors of sexual violence. As is evident in the design of this project, we value the lived experience of victims/survivors. We believe that their experiences provide critical information on how we can create positive change in the response that is relevant to people's lives.

Participants agreed that being heard and believed was the most important thing for them. In the sections below, we outline the strongest themes that came from the individual and group interviews. We share these themes as recommendations for responders in general, but in particular for law enforcement and advocacy.

WHAT DOES SUPPORT FEEL LIKE?

When asked what feeling supported looks like, participants shared that they "felt relieved that someone believed" them. They expressed a "sense of HOPE since SOMEONE CARED about what happening to them." They "felt SAFE TO TELL their story."

Elements of a positive experience with Law Enforcement

- Involve victims/survivors in defining justice, safety, and support for themselves
- Ensure that victims/survivors have opportunities to connect with advocacy throughout the case, including support during interviews.
- Law enforcement should pursue a positive collaborative relationship with community-based advocacy, within the scope of professional ethics and responsibilities. This helps in staying connected with the victim, coordinating areas of support for the victim/survivor, and ensuring respectful treatment.

“ *This was my first time talking with the police. I was really scared. I didn't know what was going to happen. The advocate never left my side.* **”**

- Consider formalizing a collaborative relationship with other system responders. Sexual Assault Response Teams work together to establish the criteria for the response and create the conditions for an ever-improving response and supportive relationships amongst team members.
- Ensure sworn officers and non-sworn support staff that treat all people with dignity and respect. Compassion, good communication, and non-judgmental engagement with the victim/survivor is key to building trust.
- Spanish speaking officers are essential to keeping victims/survivors engaged in the case. Ideally a Latinx officer could provide culturally sensitive services, understanding the cultural context.
- Provide trauma-informed victim interviews. Be sure to let them tell you their experience in their own time. Use open-ended and non-leading questions to help victims/survivors share their experiences.
- Explain the scope of the investigation. Share the options in moving forward, the actions law enforcement can take to protect them, and the next steps in the criminal justice system.
- Be knowledgeable of the community context in which Latinx people live. Consider the reasons why they may not share their entire experience right away, including:
 - ◇ Trauma of sexual violence
 - ◇ Trust of systems, fear of mistreatment, or fear of detention
 - ◇ Family present
 - ◇ Familiarity with interpreter
 - ◇ Negative experience with law enforcement in other countries

“ *I was afraid that immigration was waiting outside to take us back to Mexico. I wanted to run and not look back....The officer knew I was nervous and sat me down to talk to me. He talked in a smooth quiet way.* ”

Elements of a Positive Experience with Advocacy

“ *[The advocate] never forced me to share more than I wanted to share until I was ready.* ”

- Hire and train support staff that treats victims/survivors with care and respect, and doesn't judge others based on their English language ability or nation of origin.
- Collaborate with other system responders, including law enforcement, health professionals, and prosecution to improve the response and provide advocacy support during a victims/survivors interactions with the criminal justice and health care systems. Key times for support include: during a forensic medical exam, law enforcement interviews, and meetings with prosecution.
- Create a dedicated a crisis line number for Spanish-speaking victims/survivors.
- Community and system-based advocacy play different, but equally important roles in helping victims/survivors. System-based advocates (usually housed in law enforcement or prosecution) can increase communications between the criminal justice system and the victim/survivor, providing updates on the case or explaining the process of the criminal justice system. Conversations with them are not confidential or privileged. Community-based advocates provide confidential support, so their conversations with victims/survivors are protected in most states. This confidentiality is important because the victim/survivor deserves a space to share information that they want to keep private and out of a potential trial. Mental health, reproductive health, and legal residency status issues are examples of these issues.
- Provide Spanish-language support groups.
- Develop culturally-specific supports for secondary survivors.
- Provide specific resources to support gender non-conforming and Trans-identified victims/survivors.
- Provide choice and promote self-agency of each victims/survivor.
- Encourage resiliency through cultural practices and traditional wisdom, as appropriate.

“ *It took a long time for me to feel safe and trust before I could share my story. This support was the most helpful experience for me.* ”

CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Latinx victims/survivors of sexual violence must be supported when they come forward with their experience and treated with respect and acknowledgement of the needs, challenges, and strengths that they bring with them. Responding effectively to crimes of sexual violence against Latinx victims presents unique challenges. Latinx victims may be reluctant to report the crimes for fear of being mistreated or deported in the process. We can improve our response to sexual violence and our ability to serve Latinx victims by shaping existing practices to address Latinx issues and providing culturally relevant services. The YWCA Walla Walla suggests the following as a starting place for agencies aiming to improve their response to Mexican immigrants in rural areas of the U.S.:

1. Educate staff, families, and the community on the emotional and physical/ behavioral reactions to stressful/dangerous events and tips for addressing trauma.
2. Increase your understanding of typical reactions to severe stress or chaos created by traumatic events and loss. Consider how the victims/survivors’ intersectional identities may compound a person’s traumatic experience and require a different response.
3. Provide opportunities for culturally relevant recovery and healing. For example, participating in rituals such as honoring ancestors during Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) works to build resiliencies in Latinx communities, mainly Mexican, that observe that tradition.
4. Hire Latinx staff that speak Spanish and are trained in trauma-informed, victim-centered, and culturally appropriate practices.
5. Promote human-centered criminal justice policies and practices that prioritize addressing the crime of sexual violence over punishing the victim/survivor for their legal status.

“ *They want to report, they want to trust the police, but they need respect and protection in return.* ”

AFTERWARDS: FINDING HEALING WITHIN COMMUNITY

According to the NO MAS study, many Latinx people have done something to support a victim/survivor of sexual violence and have talked about domestic and sexual violence with their friends.⁸ This data coincides with what we heard in discussing alternatives for support when the fear of deportation keeps people from seeking the help of system responders. With so much at risk – including losing children and access to bank accounts - Latinx people are in a vulnerable position.

“

It's hard to find help, with deportation looming, you just see the barriers.

”

The lack of power that Latinx people are currently experiencing can also lead to abuse within workplaces, over reaches by social services, such as child protection, and increased interpersonal violence. With a lack of power, comes lack of choices for support from outside the Latinx community. Fortunately, many Latinx people are acting as informal advocates for one another, giving advice and support. Spiritual communities can provide support for victims/survivors of sexual violence and their families¹⁰ In addition, there are indications that some may be seeking medical care and advice from Latinx clinics instead of drawing attention to themselves by visiting an emergency room.

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Lorena Ault and Celia Guardado, as the community-based interviewers on this project, expertly designed and conducted the study, translated the data, and participated in analysis. Mercedes Moreno reviewed the findings and interpretations. Jessica Jerney drafted, and Jolene Engelking edited the final report. Finally, we thank the participants for sharing their experiences. Their honesty and bravery is a gift that we hope will improve the practices of responders across the country and territories.

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¹This report uses Latinx, replacing Latino and Latina, as the gender-neutral term to describe people from Mexico, Central-American, and Latin-American countries.

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OTHER RESOURCES

Arte Sana (Art Heals) is a national Latina-led nonprofit committed to ending sexual violence. www.arte-sana.org

Casa de Esperanza is a Latina organization that provides culturally-specific leadership, support and training for organizations working on issues of gender-based violence. <https://casadeesperanza.org/>

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