

TEACHING TOLERANCE

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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

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The Experiences of Undocumented Workers

At least six in 10 farmworkers in the United States are immigrants who came to this country without legal status. Their lives are difficult. First, they make the wrenching decision to leave their homes to escape poverty and make a better life. Then, they make a treacherous journey that could as easily end with injury, deportation or death as with a job north of the border. Once they arrive, they take jobs in agriculture and food processing—jobs that pay well below the minimum wage. They often work in dangerous conditions, endure harassment from bosses and sometimes don't even get paid for the work they do. Their work, though, is essential to the American economy and to bringing food to our plates. Despite all that, many Americans see them as caricatures—lazy people who come here looking for a handout. Nothing could be further from the truth. To get a better sense of their experiences, read these stories of women who live in the United States and work in the food industry here.

Yazmin

To survive the crossing into the United States, Yazmin, 27, scooped water off the ground. Yazmin, then only 16, walked four days and four nights through the mountainous terrain near Tijuana, a journey that cost her \$1,600 in fees paid to the coyotes who guided her. “We were drinking water from ditches. Who knows if it was clean?”

When they reached California, Yazmin found work picking tomatoes, melons, cucumbers and chili peppers. “I’ve always worked,” she says. She didn’t stay on the West Coast long. Instead, she accompanied her father and brother to Florida, where they hoped to find a measure of prosperity.

Soon, however, Yazmin was initiated into the dark side of the immigrant experience. At an age when many teenagers are looking forward to a prom or college, Yazmin baked for long hours beneath the Florida sun while a supervisor stood over her stooped back, spewing out obscenities and insults.

“He mistreated us and said bad things. He would say horrible things, that we weren’t worth a [thing], very strong vulgar words. He would insult us, and he said that ‘broads’ were only good for cranking out kids. Really ugly. Then he fired me.”

Her next manager sought to squeeze as much labor out of his fieldworkers as possible. He would not permit any breaks, even for a drink of water. “I asked him for some water to drink. He said no, that there wasn’t any ... and for me to keep working.” When she complained, he silenced her by threatening to call immigration authorities.

“That’s where being illegal affects us a lot,” she says. “There are bosses who insult you, or they want to sleep with you because they’re bosses.”

A timid young woman, Yazmin did not speak out when the harassment grew worse with each job. One supervisor would physically restrain his workers, grabbing them by the head when he grew angry. Another manager would find ways to brush up against Yazmin when she was nearby.

“Unfortunately, many people are afraid to report [such incidents] because we’re illegal.”

Still not in the United States a full year, Yazmin had to fight off a sexual assault after accepting a car ride to work one day. “That man tried to rape me in his truck. He was touching me, and I asked him why he was doing that.”

The man threatened Yazmin. If she told anyone, he would see to it that she lost her job picking watermelons. Frightened, she did not seek out authorities. But

Yazmin’s teenage innocence was shattered.

She was still just 16 years old. “I had never been intimate with anyone. And he touched me, and I had to put up with it. That was a bad experience because I couldn’t find a way out. I didn’t feel safe enough to tell someone.”

After four months, she left that job. Yazmin eventually got married and had three children. But she remained in the fields—ignoring the filthy bathroom facilities, the haze of pesticides that engulfed her from time to time and, worst of all, the constant menace of sexual harassment.

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She's conscious of the contribution she's making to the U.S. economy and to our tables. But this contribution—her backbreaking labor in return for poverty wages—does little to improve her situation. She lives in constant fear. She is afraid of being arrested, of being separated from her children, of working for someone who will hurt her.

For an undocumented immigrant, “I think there’s more risk and not much safety.”

Margot, Carina and Catalina

Margot is a 19-year-old farmworker from Mexico who came to the United States at 14. She and her husband work seven months in Florida, then migrate to North Carolina and New Jersey as the crops there ripen. “If we stayed here [in Florida], we wouldn’t make enough money because there’s not enough work,” she says.

Each morning, she leaves her two children—a 3-year-old girl and an infant boy—with daycare before starting her long days in the sweltering Florida tomato fields. She says she makes \$2.50 for every tray of grape tomatoes she picks. During a typical 12-hour workday, if she manages to work at full speed under optimal conditions, she can gather as many as a dozen trays, about 300 pounds. That’s \$30 a day—far less than she would earn if paid the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. Her one-day tomato harvest retails for as much as \$1,000.

Conditions, of course, are never optimal. Employers “do what they want with you,” Margot says. “They mistreat you. When you’re working, you know how many trays you filled, but then the full amount of trays isn’t on your check.”

Carina, a 24-year-old Mexican woman who began working the Florida fields a decade ago as a 14-year-old girl, says she was told by a crew leader that she would earn \$6 for every box of green beans she picked. She worked seven days a week and kept track of the boxes she turned in. “At \$6, it comes out to be \$380 or \$400,” she says. “When you get your check, it’s for \$250. And we go and tell the crew leader. He says, ‘I don’t know.’”

She hears the same words told to others in her situation: “There are many people who need work, and if you want to work, fine. And if not, fine.”

Catalina, a 33-year-old Guatemalan who left three children behind in her homeland to work in Florida four years ago, says she doesn’t complain when she gets shortchanged “because I need to work and I don’t have papers.”

Women like Margot, Carina and Catalina make up about 20 percent of agricultural fieldworkers in the United States. They often find themselves subject to discrimination by employers who prefer male workers. It is not uncommon for them to experience pregnancy discrimination and to receive less favorable opportunities or work assignments than their male counterparts. They are often given fewer opportunities for advancement. They are assigned to the lowest-paying jobs. And they are typically the first to be laid off. Employers are keenly aware of the women’s desperation to get and keep their jobs, which makes them easy prey.

Like many others, Catalina doesn’t always understand how her pay is calculated. But she knows not to question her bosses.

“Yesterday, I did two [900-pound] tubs [of oranges] at \$10, because the trees are so bad there’s no fruit,” Catalina says. “So I earned \$20. But when you get the pay stub, it says eight hours. But they didn’t pay us for eight hours. I’m better off keeping quiet, even if they pay me \$20 or \$30. What can I do? They give me work. That’s what I want. I don’t want anything more. If someone wants to rob me, let them rob me. Only

God knows, and God will help me. That’s all I can say.”