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Migrant workers reap bitter harvest in Ontario

**Women in particular
find themselves
vulnerable to
violence and
intimidation**

October 28, 2008

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I had to pick up
Laura at the apple
farm with two police
officers. We left the
farm in such haste
that Laura's
belongings were
scattered in various
plastic bags.

KEITH BEATY/STAR FILE PHOTO

Production of Ontario produce relies on migrant workers, who sometimes find their dream of better paid employment in Canada becomes a nightmare.

It was a rescue mission more reminiscent of a crime scene. She could not leave without lovingly saying goodbye to each of the women with whom she had shared that awful crammed bunkhouse.

When she was ready, she turned to me and said: "Let's go." We walked together, Laura on crutches and in much pain, tears flowing down her face, tears that quickly became contagious.

The tall, white, male police officers were shocked. They had no clue that migrant women lived and worked in their community, let alone what some had to go through to earn a living producing food that ended up on our kitchen tables. One of the officers said "apples are never going to taste the same again."

Laura's crime was to have been injured at work. She lost her balance, fell off a tractor and her legs were crushed by its wheels. As soon as she

regained consciousness after her first surgery, an official from the Mexican consulate in Toronto started harassing her.

She was pressured to sign forms that would withdraw her rights to treatment and benefits in Canada and would return her immediately to her rural village in the state of Puebla, east of Mexico City.

This way, her employer would not incur increases in workers' compensation premiums. The plan was to send her back to Mexico as soon as possible, essentially discarding her.

We advised her differently – of her right to lost wages and to treatment in Canada. Earlier that night, the employer had waited for me and my travel companion.

Clearly inebriated, he violently lunged at us, threatened me and physically assaulted my companion. He told us that he was the boss and he decided what was done or not done with his workers.

The only way to ensure Laura would not be repatriated against her will was to remove her from the farm. Since it was private property, the only way we could do that was with the police.

This was the same farm where two years ago another group of migrant women had fought back against the employer's insistence they could not leave the premises after work – not even for a walk down the road.

These stories are a part of a hidden reality among migrant women who work in rural Ontario through temporary visa permits. Most work through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, where men significantly outnumber women workers.

With few contracts for them, women seek to protect their place in the program because they are dependant on the wages to sustain themselves, their children and their families back in Mexico. Most dream of their children rising out of poverty through better education.

Sometimes women migrate, too, to escape violence, only to find it again in a different context with other actors, such as their employers, consulate officials and sometimes even co-workers. Many women prefer to endure inhumane living conditions, abusive treatment and dangerous working conditions in order to keep their dreams alive.

It is well-documented that migration is one of many household survival strategies Mexican women have had to undertake, not only in the U.S. but also in Canada.

Less is known about these experiences in Canada, a country renowned for its respect of human rights but, like many other Western economies, increasingly reliant on migrants as a form of cheap, flexible and subservient labour.

Migrant labour has indeed become a structural necessity for the agriculture industry in Canada. And poverty among women has become a disciplining factor for labour control that makes available workers willing to work for less money and with no rights.

Time and time again, women in the program confess that migration to Canada is like a trap. Even though they may want to stop migrating, they cannot because wages in Mexico keep them impoverished.

Since most of the women are single mothers, they have no choice but to leave their children for months at a time in order to provide for their basic needs.

In many instances, employers respond by punishing women by not hiring them at all instead of being responsive to their needs as human beings.

That night at the farm I realized how terrified women were of their employer and of losing their contracts.

When the employer was yelling and berating us, two other women looked on. Paralyzed by fear, they could not do a thing.

I realized then that collective action for migrant workers cannot be limited to workers rights but must extend to human life and dignity. I had heard this many times before among women workers in Mexico and Central America but that night the message was all the more urgent and tangible.

We have to create and support humane forms of generating a living so that we truly engage in the global project to eradicate poverty.

Evelyn Encalada Grez is a researcher with Rural Women Making Change, and is co-founder of Justicia for Migrant Workers.