

Pizcando Sueños/ Harvesting Dreams

The Voices of Mexican Migrant Women

by Fabiola del Castillo, Fran Ricardo and Robin Lewy of the Rural Women's Health Project
Article Three in a Series of Five

"Pero siempre hay que tener esperanza, ¿verdad?"

("But you always have to have hope, right?")

Farmworking women carry a triple load of pressures as laborers, as mothers/wives and as the key link to the family south of the border. These pressures are often manifested in the high incidence of physical health problems such as Diabetes, high blood pressure, etc. However, *Pizcando Sueños*, a project documenting the lives of Mexican farmworker women in Florida, the concerns expressed by these women reflected much more their mental health realities, than the physical health obstacles they face.

In the testimonies gathered during this project, references which reflected anxiety and stress were intertwined within their discussions of work, their pueblos, their family relations and their dreams for their children.

The physical deterioration experienced by many farmworking women, is usually attributed by them to "la labor" (work in the fields). We found that often these physical or emotional discomforts are exacerbated by the stress of their many roles, which usually result in increased anxiety. From the testimonies given, it becomes difficult to know what comes first, their physical or mental health issues. Expressions reflecting sadness or worries flowed through the women's interviews and were intertwined in their concerns about their families that were left behind, their marriages, their relationships with their children and their struggle to survive in this foreign environment. As you listen to their voices, you can hear their struggle for strength as they deal with the barriers of their realities:

"Desde que yo vine aquí me empecé a enfermar...porque yo allá en México yo era un mujer que ni uña me dolía y no más llegué aquí, muy enferma yo he sido ... cuando no de una cosa, de otra ... le digo, hay mamá mejor me hubiera puesto Doña Dolores...y estoy en mi casa y no más estoy pensando en la enfermedad que tengo y me pongo más nerviosa, pero ya ahorita gracias a Dios ya estoy más, más controlada si."

"Since I came here I began to get sick, ... because in Mexico I was a woman that never suffered a hang-nail and no more



do I arrive here that I have been very sick... when it's not one thing, it's another. I said to my mother, 'better that you had named me Doña Dolores (Miss Pain)'... and at home in my house, I sit and think and think about the sicknesses I suffer and it gets me even more nervous. But now, thank God, I am a little more controlled."

"...aquí me preocupo, cuando no trabajo me preocupo por que solo mi esposo trabaja y que tenemos que pagar la renta...la luz...el seguro del carro... en México nada más uno se preocupa por pagar la luz y por comprar comida y ya. Aquí hay más mortificaciones que allá."

"...here I worry, when there is no work...I worry because only my husband is working and we have to pay the rent, lights, car insurance...in Mexico you only worry about paying the lights and buying food and that's it. Here there are more struggles than there."

"Aquí me preocupo por mis hijos, por que en la escuela, que ya les ofrecen esto (alcohol, cigarrillos) que ya les ofrecen el otro (drogas)."

"Here I worry about my children, because in the school they are offered some of this (alcohol, cigarettes) and a little of that (drugs)."

"...yo de que se me mete en la cabeza cosas,

me siento mal, de tanto que estoy pensando me baja el azúcar y pues me entran muchos nervios. Me siento bien desesperada a veces y me falta aire y poco a poco trato de echarme las cosas al lomo y trato de no preocuparme. Me siento bien mal."

"...the things that I get in my head, I feel bad, and with all the worrying my sugar level drops and then I get all nervous. I feel really desperate and sometimes I can't get enough air and then little by little I try to let go of all the weight on my shoulders and I try not to worry. I feel really bad."

"...últimamente me he sentido mas decaída y yo creo que es por la edad, por el yo me imagino que es por la tristeza que tengo los problemas."

"...lately I have been feeling more exhausted and I think it is because of my age, because of it I imagine that my sadness is what causes my problems."

"Allá en México no tenía preocupaciones, es aquí donde las he tenido."

"There in Mexico I didn't have any worries, its here that I have had them."

"Pues todo duele en cuanto uno tenga vida."

"Well everything hurts as long as you are alive."

"Allá en mi pueblo es más sano."

"Back in my pueblo it is so much healthier."

It is impossible for women to separate themselves from what is happening here in their daily lives and back home on the other side of the border. Doubts and worries abound even when the women receive communication from "home."

"Cuando ellos me manden una carta la leo 3 o 4 veces al día, mire y mire y pienso- ¿Será que me pase de algo? Y la repito de nuevo y ahorita ya hablándonos por teléfono se queda uno ya conforme."

"When they send me a letter I read it 3 or 4 times a day, I look at it over and over and think, is there something that I missed? And then I read it again, and then when I speak with them by phone, I calm down."

Staying Healthy

"Yo soy como los pájaros que si no vuelan se enferman."

"I am like those birds that if they can't fly, they get sick."

The lifestyle and living conditions of the farmworking women have challenged them to call on traditional home remedies to deal with their aches and pains, or a delayed visit to the local clinic when they can no longer endure their ills. But, beating the oppressive stress and depression has required a combination of approaches to overcome, what for some women, have become a debilitating illness. With so many migrant farmworking women having to live their experiences in silence, depression becomes an even greater obstacle for women to overcome.

Paradoxically, many women found that hard work was a remedy for their preocupaciones (worries). Working and staying busy served as a key antidote to depression. Simple, yet successful strategies expressed by the women included maintaining constant activity, talking to a spouse or comadre and an unwavering reliance on their faith.

"Pues yo creo trabajar, porque al doctor casi no voy, pensar un poco positivo, -y el trabajar también te mantiene saludable..."

"I think it's the work, because I almost never go to the doctor, to think a little positive- and the work too helps to keep you healthy..."

"...yo creo que en México me enfermaba más. Yo no entiendo, yo creo que por que trabajo, por que voy y ya regreso hasta en la tarde así, pienso que es eso, y allá uno no trabaja en nada."

"...I think that in Mexico I got sicker more. I don't understand. I think it must be the work, because I go and I don't get home until late, I think it is this, over there no one does any work at all."

"Platicar con la gente, distraerme y jugar con mis niños...Porque si me quedo un rato sola a veces, que mis niños me duermen y pa' estar sola, mejor voy con me con cuña aquí vive luego, me voy con ella y ahí me agarro platicando...si me quedo yo sola, no pos no voy a estar a gusto. Fíjese que no más esta uno sola y nomás esta uno pensando en cosas que no debe (voz lenta) y más se altera uno de los nervios y sin embargo así de perdís me distraigo..."

"To talk with people, distract myself and play with my kids...Because if I stay alone sometimes, when my kids go to

sleep and I'm alone, better I go to my sister-in-law that lives close by, I go with her and we get talking...if I stay alone, I don't like being alone. You know, as soon as one is alone and you start thinking of things that you shouldn't (voice slows), your stability changes and you get lost...I distract myself..."

"Pues con mi esposo hablamos mucho, en la noche nos ponemos a platicar y en la noche yo le digo sabes que yo me siento así por esto y el me dice: Mujer, vamos a orar y vamos a pedirle a Dios."

"Well, with my husband I talk a lot, at night we sit and talk and I tell him that I feel this way and why and he says to me, 'Woman, we are going to pray and ask God for guidance.'"

Of the women interviewed, it was their faith that seems to be the consistent and overlying saving grace that helps them to work through both their mental and physical health challenges. Though many of their expressions are simply stated, they typify the depth of their strength.

"Esa fe que tu tienes, no la dejes para nada..."

"That faith that you have, don't ever let it go..."

"Por que con la fe todo se puede, que la fe es lo último que se pierde."

"Because with faith, you can make it, your faith is the last thing you lose."

"...pero siempre hay que tener esperanza, verdad?"

"...but you always have to have hope, right?"

"Qué a veces me deprimó un poquito de estar pensando, pues como quiera todas las noches yo oro y digo le pongo todas las cosas en manos Dios..."

"Sometimes I get depressed from so much thinking, so every night I pray and say that I put everything into God's hands..."

The journey made by Mexican farmworker women is full of struggles. But even with the stress and worries that the women experience, it is their strength and faith which allows them to move forward as they struggle to harvest their dreams.

Pizcando Sueños is a project of Fabiola del Castillo, Fran Ricardo and Robin Lewy of the Rural Women's Health Project. For more information about the *Pizcando Sueños* project, or to read other articles in this series, please check our web site at: www.rwhp.org/pizcando.

CALENDAR

Western Migrant Stream Forum

January 30-February 1, 2003

Mesa, Arizona at the Sheraton Phoenix

East Hotel & Convention Center

Wendy Nitta at the Northwest

Regional Primary Health Care

Association – (206) 783-3004 or

email (wnitta@nwrpca.org)

52nd Annual EIS Conference

Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS),

Epidemiology Program Office, CDC

March 31-April 4, 2003

Atlanta, GA

Erica Lowe at 404-639-4000

<http://www.cdc.gov/eis/conference/conference.htm>

National Farmworker Health Conference

May 1-3, 2003

Phoenix, AZ

NACHC

(301) 347-0400

www.nachc.org.

National Health Care for the Homeless Conference

May 29-31, 2003

Washington, DC

1-888-439-3300

hch@prainc.com

48th Annual Meeting American College of Nurse Midwives

May 30-June 5, 2003

Palm Desert, CA

760-341-2211

<http://www.midwife.org/meeting/>

National Conference on Asthma

"Meeting the Challenge of Healthy

People 2010: Preventing and

Controlling Asthma"

June 19-21, 2003

Washington, DC

Catherine Porterfield at 202-973-8679

<http://www.asthma2003.net/about.asp>