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Book Review

Daughters and Granddaughters of Farmworkers: Emerging from the Long Shadow of Farm Labor

Barbara Wells

2013

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

220 pages

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Working long hours in the hot sun in a field is not everyone's ideal job; nor is being a single mother or sole family provider seeking the typical American Dream. Specializing in diversity among Latino families, sociologist Barbara Wells interviewed U.S. born Mexican women caught in the routine of working as farm laborers in her book *Daughters and Granddaughters of Farmworkers: Emerging from the Long Shadow of Farm Labor*. Wells wrote this piece because she believed the United States needed to be more aware of the daily problems that second to fourth generation Latinas face. Wells analyzed why they stay in their communities despite the hardships they face supporting their families.

The Structure of Agriculture and the Organization of Farm Labor

Since 1964, there has been a steady flow of immigrants from Mexico into the California labor force. Whether legal or illegal, immigrants have been justifiably considered cheap labor, especially in the farm labor work force. Many women interviewed were born in America. Their grandparents or parents immigrated to America to find better jobs which subsequently were in farm labor. Even these underpaid and hard labor jobs are valued because other immigrant workers stand ready and willing to take them. The continuous flow and cycle of available labor never stops.

Farmworker Origin

In the second chapter, Wells describes stories of how the women entered the farm labor force. Some women had parents who worked in fields and on farms. The women helped with farm work so they could earn an income. The husbands of other women got a different job while the women picked fruit or vegetables since picking was easy and quick. Work outside of farm labor is hard to obtain because stores near the border require workers to be bilingual, something that some U.S. born Mexicans lack.

Life in a Border Community

Interviewing U.S. born Mexican families, Wells found that living near the border created problems because of job competition from daily border crossers. In reality, the border is only a physical and political boundary. People from the Mexico side would cross daily to work in the United States; and after collecting their wages, they returned to their home country. The United States does not seem to be addressing this, but rather encouraging it by issuing border crossers cards that allow day workers into America. Not only are these border crossers taking jobs away

from the U.S. born Mexican citizens, they also bring the fear of drugs which worries many women interviewed.

Negotiating Work and Family

In Mexican culture, women are supposed to stay at home to cook, clean, and raise children. In this chapter, Wells explains the many factors challenging this tradition for second and later generation Latinas. American living standards require additional household income. Childcare, absence of extended family support, and eldercare make the decision to work more difficult. These women must consider conflicts between family issues, cultural values, and financial need. Work outside of the farm labor force is preferred, but no matter the circumstances, they are determined to build a better life.

The Legacy of Farm Labor

In previous chapters, Wells told stories of how these women began in farm labor. Usually this was because their parents or grandparents had been employed in farm work. Now, these women aspire to find a job they think is better than working in the fields, which is difficult to accomplish in their small, rural, agricultural community. Most women think that once they no longer work in the fields they are removed from farm work, but they can never really forget the lifestyle as some parents and spouses still are employed as farm laborers. The legacy of the farm not only pervades their personal sense of identity, but the communal nature of farming forms a network of social obligations that continues to be a part of them willingly or not.

Surviving Now and Building a Better Life for Later

Upward mobility becomes a challenge for these women. If they leave the farm and do not find other employment, it has become normal for them to receive food stamps and other government assistance. These benefits, however, do not lift them out of near poverty. Education is thought to hold opportunity, but conflicts with their drive to be wives and mothers. Some who were obtaining a higher education degree became pregnant and had to change their plans. Few seemed to realize that the promise of opportunity associated with an education would conflict with the legacy of farm labor and farm community.

Why Do They Stay?

This last chapter explores why these women have stayed in their community. One reason is their strong sense of family and community. They like the support of family. They also like the closeness they feel in a small community where everyone knows and helps each other. Even though there are problems within the community, it is hard for some of the women to imagine living elsewhere, especially if they are single mothers. They cannot envision moving to another area by themselves to start over on their own. In a sense, the farm community that nourished them, now constrains them.

Conclusion

The author's stories of U.S. born Mexican families captivates her audience by telling their heart wrenching stories and struggles as they strive toward a better living. Although this

book can touch anyone's heart, people who will benefit the most are those providing the best services possible to U.S. born Mexicans. Others who will benefit are those living near the Mexican/United States border and want to better understand this group's way of life. A situational benefit from this composition is that those who work with families can compare U.S. born Mexicans to other groups, such as low-income families. Many situations are comparable and one can better understand the daily challenges they face and help them accordingly.

Anyone with a strong sense of family and community will find much to consider. Low-income families often reside in interlocking communities of mutual support that are both nourishing and constraining. Many families are challenged by the same situations faced by their parents and grandparents. Even though some want to get out of their arrangement and find a better life, they are comfortable with their lifestyle and associating with others who are familiar. Some are afraid to change or step out of their comfort zone and take the challenge of further education or moving away. Others do not know and cannot imagine any other lifestyle. They are stuck in their situation and cannot escape. Social workers who reflect on this book will gain a deeper appreciation for the role community and family legacy play in sustaining low-income families. Those working with rural populations are encouraged to give this book serious consideration.

Reviewer Information

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