

11. Reproductive Justice and Agricultural Labor Migrants

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According to the United Nations, international migrants in 2019 comprised approximately 3.5 percent (272 million) of the world's total population.¹ While much of this migration is voluntary, it is also a result of the forcible effects of poverty, conflict, sexual and gender-based violence, and deep global economic disparities. Especially for those migrants in the US who live and work on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, the “American Dream” remains largely elusive. Vast numbers of them struggle not only with the physical challenges of hunger, poverty, and poor access to health care but also with the mental and emotional traumas of displacement, workplace exploitation, harassment and assault, and the psychological impact of a largely unwelcoming US immigration system.

Close to half of all migrants today are women—many of whom are of childbearing age. These women confront most, if not all, of the same challenges as their male counterparts, but they also face distinctive struggles that derive from their status *as women* in a culture that many would characterize as both anti-woman and anti-child.² In other words,

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “International Migrant Stock 2019: Ten Key Messages,” September 2019, www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationStock2019_TenKeyFindings.pdf.

² In the United States today, women experience large wealth and income gaps relative to men. They also very frequently encounter household dynamics that result in a gendered division of labor and ultimately disadvantage them with respect to material power. For a helpful discussion of these realities, see Mariko Lin Chang, “The Women’s Wealth Gap: What Is It and Why Do We Care?” in *Shortchanged: Why Women Have Less Wealth and What Can Be Done about It* (Oxford Academic online edition, 2012), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195367690.003.0001. In a similar vein, in 2019 approximately one in seven US children were

women of reproductive age are vulnerable in particular ways, not just individually but also on a *structural* level. It is therefore impossible to accurately consider these women's concrete realities without also considering the complicated social forces surrounding reproduction itself. Migrant women's struggles are not simply a matter of individual reproductive choices or even access to reproductive health care. Rather, these struggles involve communal and intersecting questions of gender, race, class, and, importantly, immigration status. Ultimately, reproductive health and well-being are deeply intertwined with these social realities.

Yet, in the US today, conversations about reproductive health rapidly devolve into culture wars that typically characterize the public conversation about abortion. Over the past fifty-plus years, both "pro-life" and "pro-choice" approaches have largely failed to appreciate women's social realities—especially those of socioeconomically struggling and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) women. On the one hand, pro-choice arguments tend to frame abortion in terms of privacy, individual choice, and legal access to abortion, while downplaying the broader societal factors that have led to the decision for an abortion in the first place. On the other hand, pro-life arguments too often frame the question as a matter of the "sanctity of life," effectively disregarding the agency of the pregnant person and even the concrete well-being of born children (and women). As Loretta J. Ross, reproductive justice scholar/activist and co-founder of Sister Song, contends, "In abortion debates of privacy, women's rights, fetuses, and the law, the isolation of abortion from other social justice issues like violence against women fails to incorporate the intersecting issues that actually determine how a

categorized as poor and seventy-one percent of these were children of color. These children disproportionately underperform on standard educational metrics and generally experience worse access to healthcare than their non-poor counterparts. Further, juvenile incarceration, escalating levels of gun violence, and domestic abuse can impact children from any economic or racial background, but poor, non-white, and disabled children suffer at disproportionately high rates. See Children's Defense Fund, "Resources: Fact Sheets and Issue Briefs," www.childrensdefense.org/policy/fact-sheets-and-issue-briefs/.

pregnant woman makes the decision to have a baby. . . . Perhaps the pro-choice/pro-life binary has outlived its shelf life in the past forty years, becoming obsolete. . . . Abortion presented as a choice became a co-opted neoliberal frame that denied government responsibility for providing healthcare.”³ In the end, it seems that neither approach—“pro-choice” nor “pro-life”—sufficiently addresses the complexity of abortion, and thus our society has remained deeply divided on this most contentious of social issues. And women and children have suffered for it.

Reproductive justice, on the other hand, with its central focus on social analysis, is a far more well-suited concept with which to approach the challenges faced by these very same women and children, including (for the purposes of this essay) poor migrant women. Their struggles ultimately have as much to do with housing, childcare, working conditions, domestic violence, and immigration status as they do directly with abortion. To be sure, it is not that the latter is of little or no significance to impoverished migrant women. But to understand the reproductive struggles of these women purely in terms of individual freedom of choice or even simply *access* to reproductive health care is, in fact, to *mis*-understand their struggles in crucial ways.

What is the role of Catholic teaching in navigating the reproductive struggles of impoverished migrant women? At first glance, the concept of reproductive justice may seem to be a poor fit with the teachings and more specific reproductive stances of the Catholic Church, for whom abortion tends to be the flagship contemporary social issue. Yet, digging a bit deeper reveals a more complicated picture. In fact, Catholic thought, particularly in its more liberationist iterations, contains robust resources for examining suffering within the context of structural injustice. Catholic social teaching (CST) offers various analytical themes—human dignity, the

³ Loretta J. Ross, “Conceptualizing Reproductive Justice Theory: A Manifesto for Activism,” in *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique*, ed. Loretta J. Ross, Lynn Roberts, Erika Derkas, Whitney Peoples, and Pamela Bridgewater Toure (New York: Feminist Press, 2017), 172 and 178–179.

common good, labor justice, the centrality of the family, hospitality to the immigrant “stranger”—that dovetail well with many of the elements and overall tenor of a reproductive justice approach. In these ways, contemporary Catholic thought can serve to redirect our focus not simply to struggling individual migrant women but also to the *social* and *structural* forces that contribute to or even create those struggles.⁴

In this essay, I examine these matters with special attention to women laboring in the agricultural context, especially farmworker women who are immigrants to the US from across its southern border.⁵ My focus here is particularly (though not exclusively) on women working in California’s Central Valley—one of the largest farming areas within the United States. Farmworker women here are almost exclusively non-white, and a significant portion of them hail from indigenous communities south of the US-Mexico border. This latter group often speaks neither English nor Spanish fluently; such language and cultural barriers may be added to a long list of other challenges.⁶ Moreover, for those who have immigrated without papers across this heavily militarized border, the dangers of farm work have been accompanied by the substantial dangers of migration itself

⁴ Several other essays in this volume, including those by Julie Clague, Kate Ward, and Kathryn Lilla Cox, point toward various dimensions of these social and structural forces.

⁵ As always, language is imperfect here, particularly in the usage of the term “farmworker.” Anyone who works on a farm is technically a “farmworker.” Yet, as others have correctly pointed out, the term most often refers not to farm owners, managers, administrative assistants, and crop managers but rather to those who labor in the fields to hand harvest fruit and vegetables. Moreover, in the US today the term frequently is used to indicate laborers who have immigrated from Latin America or (at a minimum) are of Latino ethnicity. I therefore employ the term mindfully, with the recognition of the racial, ethnic, and class-based associations it ordinarily conveys. On this theme, see Seth M. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 186–187.

⁶ Seth M. Holmes describes a predictable hierarchy of both power and struggle within US agriculture, in which “the more Mexican and the more ‘indigenous’ one is perceived to be, the more psychologically stressful, physically strenuous, and dangerous one’s job. Thus where a migrant body falls on the dual ethnic-labor hierarchy shapes how much and what kind of suffering must be endured.” Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 95; see also 180–181.

and, in some cases, maltreatment in US detention centers if they are unlucky enough to be apprehended in transit. Thus, examining reproductive justice in the concrete context of these women's lives entails attention not just to difficult agricultural labor realities but also to a broken and dangerous US immigration system which squarely intersects with those realities.

While women farmworkers are not always immigrants nor even migrants and while even those who *are* migrants represent only a subsection of migrant workers more generally, it is reasonable to conclude that immigrant women farmworkers are among the most vulnerable of all migrants, socially and economically speaking. It is my contention that the concepts of reproductive justice, with its strong commitment to center vulnerable populations, and a Catholic-styled "preferential option for the marginalized" are both well-suited analytics with which to understand their situation. My central argument is as follows: to the degree that the Catholic Church, in its articulation of the above social themes, can redirect itself from a single-minded focus on abortion *per se* to the more holistic lens provided by reproductive justice, it will more effectively be able to address the challenges faced by these migrant women; and it will thus better be able to carry out its aims of love, justice, and the liberation of the oppressed within an unjust world.

Framing the Problem: Demographics

The contours of migration, especially international migration, form the backdrop for women migrants' situation within agriculture. Before the disruptions to immigration caused by COVID-19, immigration worldwide had been dramatically on the rise for several decades.⁷ Globally,

⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2020, "International Migration 2020 Highlights," UN Doc. ST/ESA/SER.A/452, 1, www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2020_international_migration_highlights.pdf.

the US is home to more international migrants than any other country, and roughly half of these are girls and women.⁸ An estimated 86 percent of agricultural workers in the US are foreign born, and 45 percent of all US agricultural workers are undocumented.⁹ Most foreign-born undocumented agricultural workers in the US come from Mexico and Central America and speak a language other than English at home. Approximately 37 percent of undocumented agricultural workers are female.¹⁰

Migration, including agricultural migration, is not driven simply by the individual needs (and wills) of migrants; economic and geopolitical systems have a massive impact on migration, creating and sustaining it in important ways.¹¹ For example, neoliberal economic policies over the past half century, including those encapsulated by NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade Agreement), have resulted in economic crises south of the US border that have necessitated migration northward. Further, US immigration processes have historically been racialized in complicated ways, where immigration policies have often functioned to create “desirable” and “undesirable” categories of immigrants, with the latter ordinarily hailing from largely non-white countries of origin.¹² Black and

⁸ Migration Policy Institute, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” March 14, 2023, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2024.

⁹ Raquel Rosenbloom, “A Profile of Undocumented Agricultural Workers in the United States,” Center for Migration Studies, August 30, 2022, cmsny.org/agricultural-workers-rosenbloom-083022/.

¹⁰ Rosenbloom, “A Profile of Undocumented Agricultural Workers.”

¹¹ Saskia Sassen, “The Making of Migrations,” in *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migrations of Peoples*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and Mary Teresa Davila (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 11–22; see also Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 17.

¹² Sassen, “The Making of Migrations.” See also Gwyneth Lonergan, writing in the U.K. context, “Reproductive Justice and Migrant Women in Great Britain,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 23, no. 1 (2012): 26–45. Ex-president Donald Trump’s 2018 heinous reference to African countries as “shithole” sources of immigrants merely laid bare the racist patterns of immigration policy that have prevailed for decades or even centuries. See Josh Dawsey, “Trump Derides Protection for Immigrants from ‘Shithole’ Countries,” *Washington Post*,

Brown immigrants are far more likely to lack documentation and thus more frequently live in fear of deportation—working in the legal shadows once they have arrived in the US.

Globally speaking, women have come to make up an increasing proportion of all immigrants—a phenomenon recognized as the “feminization of immigration.”¹³ Among these women, a large proportion are of childbearing age. Indeed, of specific relevance to the present essay, in 2020 the *average* age of farmworker women generally was thirty-nine years old—still within a potentially childbearing phase of life.¹⁴ In total, about half of all farmworkers are parents, but at least in California—the state that employs the vast majority of farmworkers in the US—this figure is far higher for women, standing at 69 percent.¹⁵ Nearly all (95 percent) of these women live with their children.¹⁶

January 12, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html.

¹³ Lígia Moreira Almeida, José Caldas, Diogo Ayres-de-Campos, Dora Salcedo-Barrientos, and Sónia Dias, “Maternal Healthcare in Migrants: A Systematic Review,” *Maternal Child Health Journal* 17 (2013): 1346–1354. This pattern of feminization has not been as obvious in the US; see, for instance, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2020, “International Migration 2020 Highlights,” 27 fig. 16, www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesapd_2020_international_migration_highlights.pdf.

¹⁴ US Department of Labor, “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2019–2020: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farmworkers,” Research Report No. 16, JBS International, January 2022, www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS%20Research%20Report%202016.pdf.

¹⁵ US Department of Labor, “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey”; and Aguirre International, “The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the National Agricultural Workers Survey,” www.alrb.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/196/2018/05/CalifFarmLaborForceNAWS.pdf, 21.

¹⁶ Charlene Galarneau, “Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice: Migrant Women Farmworkers in the US,” *Health and Human Rights* 15, no. 1 (2013): 144–160, 146, www.hhrjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2469/2013/08/Galarneau-FINAL.pdf, citing Aguirre International, “The California Farm Labor Force Overview,” 21.

These and other demographic forces combine to create particularly challenging socioeconomic and cultural situations for women migrants in the agricultural world. Thus, when we examine the difficulties faced by these women, it is imperative to adopt an intersectional approach. Such a method demands that we ask not simply what violations exist against individual migrant women but also what intersecting *structural* forces operate to threaten justice for these same workers. As theologian Jeremy Cruz claimed in the wake of the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, we must analyze "the complex and evolving intersections of social conditions that diminish and destroy life in uniquely gendered, classed, and racially disparate ways."¹⁷ Further, beyond gender, race, and class *per se* is the category of immigration, since residency status itself—and what some have termed the "crimmigration" of migrant populations—functions as a major determinant of precarity in the US workplace.¹⁸ The existence of such structural forces of violence means that any proposed interventions will need to adopt a lens that is both broad and nuanced, one that is truly intersectional.

Reproductive Justice as a New Lens

Reproductive justice, with its explicitly intersectional nature, is well-suited to such an analysis. Reproductive justice is usually articulated in terms of three general goals, framed as human rights: the right to have a child, the right not to have a child, and the right to raise children in safe and healthy environments.¹⁹ In doing so, it shifts the locus of conversation away from

¹⁷ Jeremy V. Cruz, "Avoiding Ethical and Social Conflict about Access to Abortion Care," Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church, Forum Blog, July 1, 2022, catholicethics.com/forum/access-to-abortion-care/.

¹⁸ Salina Abji and Lindsay Larios, "Migrant Justice as Reproductive Justice: Birthright Citizenship and the Politics of Immigration Detention for Pregnant Women in Canada," *Citizenship Studies* 25, no. 2 (2021): 253–272, doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1859186.

¹⁹ Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 9.

a narrow emphasis on the individual choice to access abortion, instead highlighting the broader context of childbearing/childrearing and an interpretation of justice that is laser-focused on the concrete realities of society's most vulnerable populations. Advocates of reproductive justice maintain that women cannot make meaningful choices about whether or not to have children if they lack the resources and supports necessary to raise children *well*. They therefore insist on examining the material contexts in which women have, or do not have, children.²⁰ The emphasis thus expands beyond individual vulnerabilities to structural ones, for instance, the effects on marginalized communities of white supremacy, settler colonialism, global capitalism, patriarchy, and heterosexism.

To be sure, the right *not* to have a child is ordinarily interpreted to include the right to access safe (and legal) abortion. Moreover, women with greater financial resources are far more likely to be able to circumvent legal restrictions on abortion for unwanted pregnancies than are working class and impoverished women. Thus, the burden of restricted access to abortion falls disproportionately on those women and girls who are already most vulnerable. Sometimes this restricted access takes place in ways directly targeting immigrants. For example, the US government has repeatedly taken steps to prevent undocumented minors from accessing abortion. In 2017, under the Trump administration, the Office of Refugee and Resettlement instituted a blanket ban on abortion access for minors in its custody—even in the case of rape.²¹ This is a troubling reality on its own, but it is even more problematic when considered alongside the high incidence of sexual violence that takes place within immigration detention

²⁰ Lonergan, "Reproductive Justice and Migrant Women," 28, citing Dorothy Roberts, "Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality and the Right of Privacy," in *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950–2000*, ed. Rickie Solinger (Berkeley, California and London: University of California Press, 1998).

²¹ Ariella J. Messing, Rachel E. Fabi, and Joanne D. Rosen, "Reproductive Injustice at the US Border," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 3 (2020): 339–344, 341.

centers.²² In this context, abortion bans have been used in an especially unjust fashion, as a tool of immigration enforcement to punish and deter future migrants, as well as to reinscribe the deep sexual injustices that already characterize women immigrants' reality.

However, we must be quick to remember that the concept of reproductive justice goes far beyond abortion access. The right *not* to have a child encompasses comprehensive sex education and access to contraception. The right *to* have a child includes the ability to initiate and continue pregnancy safely, accessing necessary maternal and fetal health resources, including prenatal care. The right to parent in safe and healthy environments mandates adequate maternal and infant postnatal care; but it also requires practices and policies that oppose family separation and the mistreatment of children and families, as well as the housing, education, and safe working conditions that protect and benefit women and children. As Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton summarize, "reproductive violence does not manifest solely in restrictions to abortion; rather, from a Reproductive Justice perspective, reproductive *injustice* at the Mexico-US border manifests through child abuse, maternal abuse, family separation, the restriction of necessary medical practices, and violence against *all* women and families."²³ This more holistic approach demands that we move the conversation beyond an analysis of abortion itself and think more systemically about why women might be driven to seek out abortions in the first place.

²² Human Rights Watch, "Detained and at Risk: Sexual Abuse and Harassment in United States Immigration Detention," August 25, 2010, www.hrw.org/report/2010/08/25/detained-and-risk/sexual-abuse-and-harassment-united-states-immigration-detention. See also Human Rights Watch, "US Records Show Physical, Sexual Abuse at Border," October 21, 2021, www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/21/us-records-show-physical-sexual-abuse-border.

²³ Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton, "Migrant Gender Violence, Reproductive Health, and the Intersections of Reproductive Justice and Health Communication," in *Communicating Intimate Health*, ed. Angela Cooke-Jackson and Valerie Rubinsky (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 201–210, 203.

Reproductive Justice and Migrant Farmworker Women

In a 2013 article published in *Health and Human Rights*, ethicist Charlene Galarneau relates firsthand the story of Luz, a teenager working in the Colorado fields who procured an abortion for an unexpected pregnancy. Galarneau describes:

Summer 1978 in rural Colorado: Luz was 14 years old, working in the melon fields, and pregnant. . . . Family poverty meant that Luz had little choice about working in low wage and relatively dangerous fieldwork without health insurance during summer months and some school weeks. She did not learn about sexuality, reproduction, or contraception in school, from her family, or from the health care provider she occasionally visited. She did not understand how pregnancy occurred until after she was pregnant. An evening migrant education program for teen workers included bilingual (Spanish-English) health screenings and meant that Luz had access to pregnancy testing. Luz and her mother agreed on Luz's decision to end her pregnancy but withheld her pregnancy from Luz's father for fear of his reaction. The unusual presence that summer of a student health worker team with a mandate to expand health care services to migrant farmworkers meant that Luz had reproductive options beyond those typically available. That said, the services that Luz needed cost money and were three hours away by car. She had no money, no car, and no time off from work. This situation imperiled Luz's physical and mental health and constrained her ability to make healthy decisions about her body and her reproduction. . . . Certainly, Luz benefited from reproductive health and rights efforts that had helped make abortion legal and supported the presence of women's reproductive health clinics. That said, these efforts did not enable Luz to prevent her unwanted pregnancy.²⁴

²⁴ Galarneau, "Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice."

It is unclear in this account whether Luz was an immigrant to the US. However, born domestically or abroad, her story resonates with those of countless other young farmworker women who face poverty, lack of health care, and a lack of meaningful and empowering information about pregnancy and childbirth. A minor herself, Luz is still very much subject to the support (or lack thereof) of her own mother and father. It is misguided to imagine that the sole relevant concern for Luz is her personal choice to have an abortion or even whether she has access to abortion services.

To begin with, the family poverty in which Luz is enmeshed is the norm for farmworkers.²⁵ In 2020, the mean personal income of US farmworkers was between \$20,000 and \$24,999, and 8 percent of workers earned less than \$10,000 per year. Migrant and undocumented farmworkers were far more likely to have family incomes below the federal poverty level than “settled” or authorized workers.²⁶ While exact breakdowns by gender are difficult to find, women are at an additional disadvantage, as they are in most sectors of society. Farmworker wages are often paid in piecemeal fashion, benefiting those of greater physical strength—ordinarily men. In another first-person account, Lucrecia, an immigrant from Oaxaca who spent her entire life picking strawberries, describes how picking expectations have shifted over the course of her own life: “The regular box rate was \$1.25, the little box was \$1 and the two-pound box was \$1.50. If I was able to fill 40 boxes, it was a good day. The younger faster men can pick 70 or 80 boxes a day. . . . The foremen now choose workers who can pick 100 to 130 boxes per day.”²⁷ To complicate the financial picture further, women who have immigrated illegally to the US across its

²⁵ Kate Ward, in her essay in the present volume, “Never Just a Choice: Three Theoretical Approaches to Economic Constraints on Family Formation,” 55–89, discusses the ways that economic constraints undermine reproductive flourishing more broadly.

²⁶ US Department of Labor, “Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey,” 41, 43.

²⁷ Farmworker Justice, “Stories from the Field,” www.farmworkerjustice.org/stories-from-the-field/.

southern border are more likely to have debts incurred from using the services of a “coyote”—a paid smuggler to usher them across the US-Mexico border. This of course results in additional financial burden, not to mention a high level of personal and physical vulnerability.

Directly connected to women’s elevated poverty is an egregious absence of access to adequate health care, including reproductive health care. Generally speaking, farmworkers in the US are sicker than other groups. As physician and medical anthropologist Seth M. Holmes highlights, “these health disparities fall along citizenship, ethnicity, and class lines.”²⁸ Like most farmworkers, Luz lacks health insurance as well as the financial and logistical means to obtain regular health care. In fact, the 1999 California Agricultural Worker Health Survey found that farmworkers and their families had the worst access to health care in the entire state.²⁹ For undocumented farmworkers, even the adoption in 2010 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) did little to improve access since the ACA explicitly excludes undocumented persons from its coverage. Notoriously high barriers to Medicaid—including the need to reregister when migrants move around from place to place—and the increasingly common closure of community and low-cost health clinics such as Planned Parenthood translate into dramatically reduced access to reproductive health care, including prenatal health care, for migrant women. Further, the 1976 passage of the Hyde Amendment ensured that while abortion services may have remained legal nationwide until 2022, in most cases only those with private health insurance or the ability to pay out of pocket were actually able to access them. Beyond restricted abortion access, the lack of access to health insurance more generally has meant that migrant farmworker women experience lower access to prenatal care, higher rates of maternal

²⁸ Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 99.

²⁹ Margaret Reeves, Terra Murphy, and Teresa Calvo Morales, *Farmworker Women and Pesticides in California’s Central Valley*, joint report by Pesticide Action Network North America, United Farmworkers of America AFL-CIO, and Organización en California de Líderes Campesinas (San Francisco: Pesticide Action Network, 2003).

mortality, stillbirth and early neonatal death, and increased incidence of postpartum depression.³⁰ These health challenges do not end at birth but rather potentially result in developmental challenges for born children—and thus long-term struggles for farmworker families.

It is not only the lack of health insurance that leads to poor access to reproductive health care, however. Gendered access to education and other practical hurdles often disempower girls and women from a young age, with reproductive consequences. Indeed, as Holmes describes for some Mexican indigenous communities, “Due to the assumed role dichotomy . . . between the private, domestic sphere for women and the public sphere for men, women have fewer opportunities for education.”³¹ As in the case of Luz, low education levels, a lack of information, and poor English (or sometimes even Spanish) skills can deeply compromise migrant farmworker women’s ability to access supports for their reproductive health or even to understand the science behind pregnancy itself. Among Latino/a people more generally, Spanish-dominant and immigrant workers (particularly undocumented ones) have a higher health risk profile than English-dominant, domestic-born workers.³² Further, a lack of cultural competency among health care workers can manifest as misunderstanding of, and intolerance for, indigenous practices in medicine, which may negatively impact both overall and reproductive

³⁰ Hinojosa Hernández and De Los Santos Upton, “Migrant Gender Violence,” citing Lily Daniel, “Reproductive Rights Endangered at the Mexico-United States Border,” *Urban Legend News*, May 4, 2019, www.urbanlegendnews.org/features/2019/05/04/reproductive-rights-endangered-at-the-mexico-united-states-border/, and citing Daniel Gonzales, “28 Women May Have Miscarried in ICE Custody over the Past 2 Years,” *AZ Central*, February 27, 2019, www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/immigration/2019/02/27/28-women-may-have-miscarried-ice-custody-over-past-2-years/2996486002/; Almeida, Caldas, Ayres-de-Campos, Salcedo-Barrientos, and Dias, “Maternal Healthcare in Migrants,” 1346.

³¹ Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, 86.

³² Almeida, Caldas, Ayres-de-Campos, Salcedo-Barrientos, and Dias, “Maternal Healthcare in Migrants”; Patricia Zavella, “Contesting Structural Vulnerability Through Reproductive Justice Activism with Latina Immigrants in California,” *North American Dialogue* 19, no. 1 (2016): 36–45.

health.³³ Cultural taboos and shame about sex and the body can also contribute to misinformation among young women such as Luz, leaving them ill-prepared to avoid unwanted pregnancy.³⁴ Finally, a simple lack of transportation and the inability to take time off of work to get to health care facilities means that many migrant farmworker women like Luz find it close to impossible to physically access health care, even when that care is technically available to them.

This compromised access to reproductive health care directly translates into material precarity for these women. Ideological opposition to contraception and abortion aside, the inability to have a predictable measure of control over one's fertility—and the resulting higher rates of unintended pregnancy—further deepens inequality. As psychologists Nancy Felipe Russo and Julia R. Steinberg argue, “the interconnections between women's ability to control reproduction and their ability to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities means that reproductive rights provide a basis to attain the related rights of health, equality, and nondiscrimination, among others. . . . The interconnecting web of reproductive rights with other human rights means that disparities in reproductive justice can undermine efforts to achieve social and economic equality for women, particularly for poor women.”³⁵

Beyond inadequate access to reproductive health care, what other components of well-being does a reproductive justice lens direct us to examine? This more holistic and interconnected approach asks us to consider the impact of housing and working conditions on the

³³ For a fuller discussion of the role of cultural competency in health care, see the materials on Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics website: Karen Peterson-Iyer, “Culturally Competent Care in US Clinical Health Care Settings,” www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/bioethics/resources/culturally-competent-care/, and more specific to Latino communities, “Culturally Competent Care for Latino Patients,” www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/bioethics/resources/culturally-competent-care/culturally-competent-care-for-latino-patients/.

³⁴ Zavella, “Contesting Structural Vulnerability.”

³⁵ Nancy Felipe Russo and Julia R. Steinberg, “Contraception and Abortion: Critical Tools for Achieving Reproductive Justice,” in *Reproductive Justice: A Global Concern*, ed. Joan C. Chrisler (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 145–171, 145.

reproductive decision making of farmworker women. Farmworker housing in the US is notorious for its poor quality. Many farms house their workers in overcrowded, dilapidated, unsanitary, and otherwise substandard employer-owned housing, often located far from town centers and community services.³⁶ Lucrecia (referenced above) describes the high degree of overcrowding she personally experienced: “If you want to get ahead here, you have to live in cramped quarters. Here, the rich even have rooms for their pets, but we have no room for ourselves. When we first moved here, there were about twenty people living in this house. Now that my kids have moved on, there are ten now. We needed to share the cost of rent as much as we could.”³⁷ Indeed, in June 2018, the California Institute for Rural Studies concluded that for the Pajaro and Salinas valley alone, a full 45,560 units of farmworker housing would be needed in order to alleviate “critical overcrowding in farmworker households.”³⁸ For migrant families, the burden is particularly heavy for women, who frequently are in charge of the repeated set-ups of new short-term households as migrants must move around to access work opportunities.³⁹

Conditions at the workplace itself do not fare much better. The overall poor working conditions in most fields—the backbreaking nature of the work, poor field sanitation, and inadequate safety measures—are widely known. Lesser discussed, however, are the particular burdens that these conditions place upon women. The prolonged standing, bending, dehydration, and general exertion of farm work can entail serious outcomes for pregnant women—including premature labor, miscarriage,

³⁶ See Peterson-Iyer, “Human Trafficking, Coercion, and Moral Agency in Agricultural Labor,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 2 (2022): 245–270, 248.

³⁷ Farmworker Justice, “Stories from the Field.”

³⁸ California Institute for Rural Studies, *Farmworker Housing Study and Action Plan for Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley*, June 2018, www.cityofsalinas.org/sites/default/files/departments_files/community_development_files/farmworker_housing_study.salinas-pajaro.june_15-2018.complete.pdf, ii.

³⁹ Galarneau, “Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice,” 149.

or neonatal death.⁴⁰ Further, a lack of easy access to toilets—a frequent complaint in farm work—has a disproportionate impact upon women and especially pregnant women, who are subject to more frequent urinary tract and kidney infections.⁴¹ In a similar vein, the piecemeal nature of the work disincentivizes all workers from walking long distances to use toilet facilities, but this places a heavy burden on women relative to men because of cultural taboos surrounding public urination.⁴² Physical challenges such as these, dangerous for any laborer, are particularly disastrous for pregnant women.

Adjacent to these physical dangers are the notorious sexual harassment and abuse that women farm laborers face on a routine basis. Intimate partner violence—sometimes fueled by substance abuse—and the health problems that stem from it are alarmingly high in farmworker communities.⁴³ In the workplace of the fields, the problem is endemic. Between 80 and 90 percent of women working in California's Central

⁴⁰ Galarneau, "Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice"; Farmworker Justice Fund, *Farmworker Women Speak Out* (Washington, DC: Farmworker Justice Fund, 1994).

⁴¹ Galarneau, "Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice"; Farmworker Justice Fund, *Farmworker Women Speak Out*; and Julia L. Perilla, Astrid H. Wilson, and Judith L. Wold, "Listening to Migrant Voices: Focus Groups on Health Issues in South Georgia," *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 15, no. 4 (1998): 251–263.

⁴² Rosalind P. Petchesky, "Human Rights, Reproductive Health and Economic Justice: Why They Are Indivisible," *Reproductive Health Matters* 8, no. 15 (2000): 12–17.

⁴³ Lisa R. Fortuna, Carmen Rosa Noroña, Michelle V. Porche, Cathi Tillman, Pratima A. Patil, Ye Wang, Sheri Lapatin Markle, and Margarita Alegría, "Trauma, Immigration, and Sexual Health among Latina Women: Implications for Maternal-Child Well-Being and Reproductive Justice," *Infant Mental Health Journal* 40, no. 5 (2019): 640–658, doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21805; Jonathan B. Wilson, Damon L. Rappleyea, Jennifer L. Hodgson, Tana L. Hall, and Mark B. White, "Intimate Partner Violence Screening Among Migrant/Seasonal Farmworker Women and Healthcare: A Policy Brief," *Journal of Community Health* 39 (2014): 372–377, doi.org/10.1007/s10900-013-9772-z; and Nikki R. Van Hightower, Joe Gorton, and Casey Lee DeMoss, "Predictive Models of Domestic Violence and Fear of Intimate Partners Among Migrant and Seasonal Farm Worker Women," *Journal of Family Violence* 15, no. 2 (2000): doi.org/10.1023/A:1007538810858. See also Keiko A. Budech, "Missing Voices, Hidden Fields: The Gendered Struggles of Female Farmworkers," *Pitzer Senior Theses*, paper 54, scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/54.

Valley have reported experiencing sexual harassment, compared with 50 percent in the US workforce more generally.⁴⁴ Lucrecia notes her own observations in this regard:

As a woman working in the fields, if you didn't have a good foreman, you were treated badly. . . . I've also heard complaints by other farmworker women of being sexually harassed. Sometimes women don't want to speak up. There are a lot who have lived through it, but are afraid to say something for fear that they'll be reported to immigration officials. When I was young, I had a foreman who always sought out women to be alone with. He told me he liked me, but I told him I knew he had a wife and mistress. He told me that if I let him do what he wanted to me, I would still have a job. If not, I needed to look for another job.⁴⁵

Sexual harassment and abuse are perpetrated by foremen, supervisors, owners, and even other laborers. Their consequences extend far beyond the fear that they engender; injury, sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, substance use, mental health deterioration, and PTSD all potentially result from these forms of abuse.⁴⁶ The reality of sexual violence therefore reaches far beyond the immediate harm it perpetrates; it deeply impacts the reproductive lives of farmworker women over time. Thus, to fail to consider it would be to miss an important aspect of what reproductive justice demands altogether.

⁴⁴ Kristin Heyer, "Familismo Across the Americas: En Route to a Liberating Christian Family Ethic," in *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migrations of Peoples*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and Mary Teresa Davila (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 121–131, citing Irma Morales Waugh, "Examining the Sexual Harassment Experiences of Mexican Immigrant Farmworking Women," *Violence Against Women* 16, no. 3 (March 2010): 237–61; Galarneau, "Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice"; see also *Frontline*, season 2013, episode 11, "Rape in the Fields," produced by Andrés Cediél and Lowell Bergman, June 25, 2013.

⁴⁵ Farmworker Justice, "Stories from the Field."

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Cultivating Fear: The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the US to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment* (Human Rights Watch, 2012), www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/15/cultivating-fear/vulnerability-immigrant-farmworkers-us-sexual-violence-and, esp. 41–46.

Again, most if not all of these struggles are deepened for undocumented immigrants. Even the process of immigration itself is fraught with unique dangers for women. Punitive deportation policies in the US have tended to force migrants to use increasingly isolated routes to enter the US, and rape has become so prevalent along those routes that many women straightforwardly consider it the price one pays for crossing the border.⁴⁷ For women who do manage to cross the border but are subsequently detained, further mistreatment awaits. US border detention facilities have been accused of providing inadequate prenatal care to pregnant women and exposing them to elevated miscarriage risks, refusing detained women their necessary gynecological care, forcibly sterilizing detained women, and even shackling pregnant women while giving birth. If true, these all represent examples of state failure to provide the conditions of reproductive justice to these immigrant women.⁴⁸ Indeed, some immigration scholars have concluded that the specific mistreatment of pregnant women and families with children is a targeted strategy by the US immigration system to punish and deter future migrants.⁴⁹

Even those undocumented women who are not detained at the border routinely endure a high degree of exploitation once working. The fear of deportation or simply of not having a job the next season haunts many

⁴⁷ To give but one example, some estimate that 80–90 percent of migrant women have suffered sexual violence in the process of crossing. See Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Michelle Keck, “A Dangerous Journey to the US and a ‘New Deal’ for Migrant Women and Girls,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 28, no. 2 (2022), bjwa.brown.edu/28-2/a-dangerous-journey-to-the-u-s-and-a-new-deal-for-migrant-women-and-girls/, 4.

⁴⁸ Brittany R. Leach, “At the Borders of the Body Politic: Fetal Citizens, Pregnant Migrants, and Reproductive Injustices in Immigration Detention,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 116–130, 116, citing American Civil Liberties Union, “Joint Complaint on ICE Detention and Treatment of Pregnant Women,” September 26, 2017, www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/joint-complaint-ice-detention-treatment-of-pregnant-women/, and citing Southern Poverty Law Center, “Trapped, with No End in Sight: A Detained Mother’s Struggle to Get Home,” February 8, 2019, www.splcenter.org/attention-on-detention/trapped-no-end-sight-detained-mother%E2%80%99s-struggle-get-home.

⁴⁹ Messing, Fabi, and Rosen, “Reproductive Injustice.”

undocumented farmworker women (and men) and keeps them from reporting mistreatment. The situation is particularly bad for those who migrate from place to place. According to Brinton M. Lykes, many protections ordinarily available to women and girls who live in stable environments—protections such as social services, supportive family structures, and various cultural supports—are not available to migrants.⁵⁰

Of course, reproductive justice in the fullest sense entails not just access to reproductive health care and the remediation of poverty, poor housing, and dangerous treatment and working conditions for women of reproductive age. The third prong of reproductive justice—the right to raise children in a safe and healthy environment—widens our gaze even further to the health and safety conditions of farmworkers' children. In the above example, Luz, who is still a child herself, is certainly not well-equipped to raise a child of her own. As Galarneau notes, childcare is “virtually never an employment benefit of agricultural work, and thus farmworker children either work in the fields, ‘play’ around the fields while their parents work, or are cared for at home by grandmothers, aunts, or siblings.”⁵¹ Thus care for any children Luz may bear would likely fall to her older female relatives, who themselves are likely to be ill-equipped to provide full-time childcare in this way. Even once children are themselves older, the financial burdens are likely to continue. Lucrecia, for instance, describes the added expense she incurred by the need to ensure that her older children were able to attend school.

I brought my oldest daughter and son with me, and the three of us worked [in the strawberry fields]. They would get out of school in June

⁵⁰ Brinton M. Lykes, “No Easy Road to Freedom: Engendering and Enculturating Forced Migration,” in *Driven from Home: Protecting the Rights of Forced Migrants* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010). See also Hightower, Gorton, and Dem “Predictive Models of Domestic Violence.” See also Hightower, Gorton, and DeMoss, “Predictive Models of Domestic Violence and Fear of Intimate Partners Among Migrant and Seasonal Farm Worker Women.”

⁵¹ Galarneau, “Farm Labor, Reproductive Justice,” 148.

and worked July and August with me to earn money for their school clothes. They went back to school the 15th of September, so they worked with me 40 days. I would bring them back to start school, which is why I couldn't just leave my other apartment. I'd pay \$775 rent for my children to stay near their school and then \$600 for myself in another town where I was working. I never had any money left after that, but I had to do it.⁵²

To complicate matters further, high exposure to pesticides poses an enormous health risk for both farm laborers and their children. Pesticides are responsible not only for high cancer rates and other diseases but also for birth defects, infertility, menstrual dysfunction, and spontaneous abortion.⁵³ It is likely that women farmworkers have even greater pesticide exposure than men since they are exposed both in the fields and in the home, via cleaning products as well as residual pesticides that settle in indoor spaces. Children are not free from this even in the school setting. Beginning in 1999, a series of lawsuits were raised against the US Environmental Protection Agency, calling for larger buffer zones and tighter restrictions to protect schoolchildren from the harmful effects of pesticide use in farmworker communities throughout California.⁵⁴ Together, harmful conditions such as these (lack of affordable childcare, lack of access to decent schools, and disproportionate exposure to dangerous pesticides) directly threaten the health and safety of farmworker women and children and thus directly threaten reproductive justice.

⁵² Farmworker Justice, "Stories from the Field."

⁵³ Reeves, Murphy, and Morales, *Farmworker Women and Pesticides*.

⁵⁴ Sara Rubin, "Latino Families Sue EPA, Seeking Environmental Justice for Exposure to Pesticides," *Monterey County Weekly*, September 19, 2013, www.montereycountyweekly.com/news/local_news/latino-families-sue-epa-seeking-environmental-justice-for-exposure-to-pesticides/article_5a8692bc-209d-11e3-8231-001a4bcf6878.html; and Talia Buford, "In California, an Unsatisfying Settlement on Pesticide-Spraying," *The Center for Public Integrity*, August 11, 2015, publicintegrity.org/environment/pollution/environmental-justice-denied/in-california-an-unsatisfying-settlement-on-pesticide-spraying/.

Once again, the health and safety burden is even greater on immigrant children who cross the United States' southern border without documentation. Since the early 2010s, most migrants apprehended at this border are families or unaccompanied minors, primarily from Central America.⁵⁵ The burden on these families and minors shot up during the years of the Trump administration, when new policies of family separation at the border resulted in thousands of children being separated from their parents and detained for prolonged periods of time in unsafe, prison-like conditions.⁵⁶ Accounts proliferated of nursing babies being taken from their mothers and migrant children being transferred to foster care—often never to be reunited with their families.⁵⁷ While this horrendous situation was certainly not limited to farmworker communities, the high percentage of farmworkers who are themselves undocumented immigrants means that it is impossible to separate the health and safety of farmworker families from heinous border practices such as these.

Catholic Social Teaching and Justice for Farmworkers

What does Catholic ethics have to contribute to this conversation? Traditionally, Catholic ethics—particularly as it has been engaged in by

⁵⁵ Correa-Cabrera and Keck, "A Dangerous Journey."

⁵⁶ Messing, Fabi, and Rosen, "Reproductive Injustice."

⁵⁷ Hinojosa Hernández and De Los Santos Upton, "Migrant Gender Violence," 203, citing Tom Barnes, "US Officials Took Baby Daughter from Mother While She Breastfed in Immigration Detention Centre, Says Attorney," *Independent*, June 14, 2018; see also Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton, "Critical Health Communication Methods at the US-Mexico Border: Violence Against Migrant Women and the Role of Health Activism," *Frontiers in Communication* 4, no. 34 (2019): 3, citing Dara Lind, "Hundreds of Families Are Still Being Separated at the Border," *Vox*, February 21, 2019, www.vox.com/2019/2/21/18234767/parents-separated-children-families-border-trump-jails; and Leandra Hinojosa Hernández, "Feminist Approaches to Border Studies and Gender Violence: Family Separation as Reproductive Injustice," *Women's Studies in Communication* 42, no. 2 (2019): 130–134, 132, citing Dara Lind, "Trump's DHS Is Using an Extremely Dubious Statistic to Justify Splitting Up Families at the Border," *Vox*, May 8, 2018, www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/5/8/17327512/sessions-illegal-immigration-border-asylum-families.

the Roman Catholic magisterium—has placed a disproportionate emphasis on opposing abortion as *the* defining feature of reproductive ethics. Yet the struggles of farmworker women bring into sharp relief just how impoverished such an approach is. To return to the case of Luz, a narrow focus on the ethics of abortion causes us to miss the root causes and central features of her reproductive struggle: her lack of knowledge and information about pregnancy itself, the grinding poverty that deprived her of both quality education and health insurance, the logistical hurdles that stood between her and adequate health care, a culture that led others to assume free access to her sexualized body, and the challenges to mental health that likely kept her from strong sexual decision making. In addition, if Luz herself is an undocumented immigrant, the fear of deportation would compound all of these problems and place Luz in an even more precarious position vis-à-vis her own and her family's well-being. To ponder abortion and emphasize only the innocent fetus inside of Luz, in isolation from this broader context, is to miss essential components of her concrete reality.

In fact, on many social matters, including those most directly pertinent to agricultural labor, Catholic teaching has a long history of avoiding this sort of narrowly-focused thinking. The history of Catholic labor ethics reveals a framework that digs much deeper than the immediate struggles of poverty and labor rights violations that characterize farm labor; rather, CST at its best frames work itself as an enactment of human dignity and an opportunity to participate meaningfully in the common good.⁵⁸ The insistence on a living wage and access to a dignified livelihood are absolutely central to the Catholic understanding and are framed as matters of *justice*, not charity. Thus, the focus here is not simplistically on the struggling individual but also on the systemic and structural issues that pave the way toward those struggles in the first place. Moreover, Catholic thought generally rejects an abstract economic approach to labor ethics,

⁵⁸ For further discussion of these themes, see Peterson-Iyer, "Human Trafficking, Coercion, and Moral Agency," 260–265.

one that isolates markets from their political and social context; rather, it insists “that economic processes be evaluated in connection to their embodied, material bases and consequences.”⁵⁹

This dialectical focus serves as a holistic expression of solidarity. As Catholic ethicist Christine Firer Hinze describes, solidarity “bespeaks individuals’ and communities’ duties to take appropriate responsibility for the micro- and macro-relations and interdependencies that enmesh them.”⁶⁰ Alertness to the dynamics of power relations and group identities thus necessarily contributes to Catholic social policy regarding labor. For example, a historical survey of Catholic thought reveals strong support for labor unions and worker cooperatives as tools for everyday workers struggling against systemic injustice. Indeed, the framing of labor ethics as partially a matter of addressing *social structures of sin* spotlights the injustices faced by those who work and live on society’s lower economic rungs. Although that power analysis arguably could and should be deepened and made more robust—particularly when it comes to the category of gender—its very existence within Catholic labor ethics indicates a structural sensibility that is, by contrast, lacking when it comes to reproductive (vs. productive) labor.

In a similar way, Catholic teaching regarding immigration commonly takes a structural, and often markedly radical, posture. In the US, the bishops’ 2003 *Strangers No Longer* describes in detail the plight of immigrants to the US from across the US-Mexico border. This document stresses not simply the struggles of individuals but rather the social structures and laws that are largely responsible for those struggles and which might ultimately be used to address them. Here, the church takes a human rights orientation towards migrants while simultaneously highlighting the root causes of migration; it also promotes the rights of refugees and asylum seekers to be reunited with their families, to a

⁵⁹ Christine Firer Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors: Women, Work, and the Global Economy* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 39.

⁶⁰ Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 65.

dignified occupation, and to a just, living wage (nos. 31, 34, 35, and 42). Connecting immigration today to the liberation of the Israelites by God in the Hebrew Bible, the bishops insist that the ensuing command to “befriend the alien” be interpreted not merely as a “personal exhortation” but rather as itself structured into Israel’s legal system—even as it should be structured into the US legal system, today (no. 25).

Finally, and of great importance to the topic of reproductive justice, the Catholic tradition emphasizes the centrality of family life as a basic human good and as absolutely critical to human identity. Indeed, as Catholic ethicist Kristin Heyer argues, families “comprise our most intimate relationships such that protracted separation threatens our human subjectivity.”⁶¹ In other words, human identity itself is intimately bound up with our familial relationships, and a threat to those relationships is inseparable from a threat to the integrity of the human person. Perhaps this is part of the reason that the heinous “zero tolerance” immigration policies of 2018, resulting in the forcible separation of parents from their children and the brutal caging of large numbers of those children at the US-Mexico border, engendered such widespread anger across the US.⁶² Sadly, mistreatment of children at the border is not new; the US bishops criticized analogous (though less widespread) mistreatment fifteen years earlier as “shameful,” insisting, “Because of their heightened vulnerability, unaccompanied minors require special consideration and care” (*Strangers No Longer*, no. 82).

Yet, at the same time, Catholic understandings of family and reproduction have tended to incorporate unhelpful and essentialist characterizations of gender complementarity and reductive portrayals of motherhood as women’s feminine “genius.” A focus on self-gift as women’s “special” and natural contribution vis-à-vis parenthood

⁶¹ Heyer, “Familismo,” 124.

⁶² Nomaan Merchant, “Hundreds of children wait in Border Patrol Facility in Texas,” June 18, 2018, apnews.com/article/mcallen-texas-border-patrols-ap-top-news-us-news-9794de32d39d4c6f89fbefaea3780769.

reinforces a sanitized version of motherhood, one that effectively bypasses the material precarity of real, live farmworker women—mothers or not.⁶³ As Heyer points out, such problematic views function to legitimize unjust domestic caregiving arrangements and obscure the real yet unpaid work that women perform domestically.⁶⁴ Indeed, Hinze argues at length that the social critique embedded within Catholic labor ethics does not extend far enough in its analysis of gender and gender's relation to caring labor. Women—farmworkers or not—are responsible for a disproportionately high proportion of the caring work (both paid and unpaid) of modern life. And that work of care tends to be poorly remunerated and carry lower social status, thereby increasing women's economic vulnerability.⁶⁵

Such gendered short-sightedness, combined with the related, narrowly conceived opposition to abortion as the moral *sine qua non* of reproductive ethics, leads Catholic reflection about the reproductive struggles of women—including migrant farmworker women—to fall woefully short. What is needed instead is the more expansive and probing focus on root causes and systemic injustices which more often characterizes other aspects of Catholic ethics. Here is where Catholic thought would do well to take a page out of the reproductive justice playbook. Rather than narrowing in on abortion *per se*, Catholic ethics must widen its reproductive lens to incorporate the components of reproductive justice described above: sexuality education, health care access, safe housing, and freedom from poverty, gendered violence, and the fear created by unjust immigration policies. Indeed, these categories fit well with the more holistic approach that characterizes much of Catholic thought on labor and immigration ethics. If the elaboration of human dignity in the context of the common good is to include the holistic reproductive well-being of migrant farmworker women such as Luz, it must in solidarity call for pathways to live a safe and empowered life in

⁶³ See, for example, John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* ("On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year").

⁶⁴ Heyer, "Familismo," 125.

⁶⁵ Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors*, esp. 97–101.

which women do not find themselves facing unwanted pregnancies in the first place. In the final part of this essay, I offer some preliminary suggestions for concrete policies that such an approach might entail.

Joining the Issues: Suggestions for Change

Speaking from the Brazilian context, Catholic sister Ivone Gebara has argued against an approach to reproductive choice that focuses only on the moral principles embedded in narrow analysis of abortion itself. Gebara maintains that such an analysis has a very different meaning for poor women than rich women. She poses, “Moral principles are important, but what does any principle mean when today, at this moment, you are pregnant and you have nothing to nourish your three or four children already birthed? What does a moral principle mean when a woman is coerced by her partner to have an abortion, to choose between him and the as-yet-unformed child? What does it mean to honor a principle when you face the threat of the loss of your job because you are pregnant?”⁶⁶ Gebara’s incisive questions direct us away from a constricted individualistic posture, to attend more fully to the concrete reality of women’s lives—particularly those women laboring on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. In our own US context, there can be no doubt that this includes migrant farmworker women. Attending to these women’s concrete reality means attending to the matter of abortion *always and only* within a broader set of proposals promoting social structures that support their well-being and that of their children after birth. Along these same lines, theologian Thia Cooper insists that long before arriving at the matter of abortion, “we need first to move toward making sure our structures choose life, that they prioritize the lives of those already with us.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ivone Gebara, “The Abortion Debate in Brazil: A Report from an Ecofeminist Philosopher Under Siege,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11, no. 2 (1995): 129–135, 132.

⁶⁷ Thia Cooper, “Race, Class, and Abortion: How Liberation Theology Enhances the Demand for Reproductive Justice,” *Feminist Theology* 24, no. 3 (2016): 226–244, 240.

Let us again reflect briefly on the cases of Luz and Lucrecia. The lens of reproductive justice allows us to see that inferior access to reproductive health care extends the issue far beyond the question of abortion. Poverty, lack of safe housing and workplace conditions, the inaccessibility of quality education, the difficulty of accessing safe and affordable care for their children, and the precarity associated with immigration status all detract in substantial ways from their reproductive well-being. These all constitute *major*—not secondary—considerations that directly impact these women’s flourishing. To seek policies that meaningfully address these struggles is to attend to justice in a far more complete and holistic way than is accomplished by ensuring, or banning, the choice to abort a pregnancy.

What might be some of the concrete steps that society could take—and that churches could actively support—to promote justice for these women? We must begin by ensuring and extending adequate reproductive health services, holistically understood. For most proponents of reproductive justice, this will include safe, affordable, accessible abortion and contraception. But, even for those who, like some Catholic believers, reject such measures for ideological or religious reasons, there is so much more to be done. Women must have easy access to preventive health services such as pap smears, mammograms, and comprehensive sex education that includes STI prevention; pregnant women must receive adequate prenatal care; and new mothers must receive sufficient breastfeeding and perinatal support. The use of *promotores*—community health workers who themselves hail from the communities that they support—is an effective way to make headway on such changes.⁶⁸ But these changes also require an infusion of public funds if they are to be widely implemented and made truly accessible to women like Luz and

⁶⁸ Gloria Sayavedra, Ron Storchlic, and Bertha Sarmina García, “If We Don’t Speak, Our Voices Won’t Be Heard’: Organizing Farmworkers through Poder Popular,” National Center for Farmworker Health, October 2008, lib.ncfh.org/?plugin=ecomm&content=item&sku=7865. See also the gender-specific farmworker organizing work of Lideres Campesinas, www.liderescampesinas.org/.

Lucrecia. Further, health insurance itself must be not just *available* but also *portable* across county and state lines, if it is to meaningfully help farmworkers who are migrant.⁶⁹ This is particularly true for undocumented workers who are currently blocked from the benefits of portability in part by their exclusion from the Affordable Care Act.

The environments in which these women work and live and raise children must also be made much, much safer. Reproductive justice requires that affordable housing specifically include workers and their families in rural areas. If owners themselves provide housing for their workers, such housing must be held to high standards of safety and livability, particularly where children are present.⁷⁰ At the workplace, better field sanitation (including more and closer toilet facilities) and readily available information (in their native languages) about how to protect oneself and one's family from excessive pesticide exposure are central aspects of reproductive justice. Society must insist that these measures are taken by growers and vigorously enforced by regulators.

In a similar vein, growers and crew members who harass or assault women farmworkers must be aggressively punished with deterrence as the goal; reproductive justice demands that we ensure women are safe to leave their homes and work without fear of such violence.⁷¹ Federal inspections to this end must be given funding and genuine "teeth" in order to serve as a more reliable tool of justice.⁷² On the flip side, empowerment initiatives—with leadership drawn from within farmworker communities

⁶⁹ Farmworker Justice, "Stories from the Field."

⁷⁰ In January of 2023, a spree of deadly shootings took place on two farm sites in Half Moon Bay, California; subsequent investigation of the shootings revealed deplorable housing conditions for farmworkers there and across much of California. See José Vadi, "Half Moon Bay Shooting Rehashes California's Historic Resistance to Humanely Housing Farmworkers," *Cal Matters*, February 13, 2023, calmatters.org/housing/2023/02/half-moon-bay-farm-housing/.

⁷¹ Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton, "Insiders/Outsiders, Reproductive (In)justice, and the US-Mexico Border," *Health Communication* 35, no. 8 (2020): 1046–1050.

⁷² Farmworker Justice Fund, *Farmworker Women Speak Out*.

themselves—should be funded, developed, and promoted, in order to educate women about their legal rights and options in the face of sexual harassment and other forms of violence. Such initiatives must also effectively take on the enormous issue of domestic violence that disproportionately characterizes the home lives of farmworker women and children.

Poverty, of course, exacerbates all the above conditions. Poverty is a major cause of suffering, direct and indirect, for migrant farmworkers. As political scientist Rosalind Petchesky argues, poverty creates enormous barriers to reproductive and sexual rights; it will be unachievable to try to protect such rights without also a strong campaign for economic justice and an end to poverty.⁷³ Along these lines, the achievement of reproductive justice relies upon support for grassroots organizing and unionization, particularly when the latter serves to move farmworkers closer to goals such as fair compensation, including a living wage. Catholic social teaching already includes strong support for labor justice, tightening the connection to reproductive justice. It is not difficult to see how the poverty into which Luz and Lucrecia were born contributed to the struggles they have experienced to provide for their families and to raise their children in safe and healthy environments.

A major part of such anti-poverty intervention, viewed through the lens of reproductive justice, is to provide for the care of children. This means high quality, affordable childcare as well as the promotion of *shared* caregiving duties. It is egregious that the care of children has been almost universally omitted from the employment equation for farmworker families. As long as women—individually or as a group—are understood to be the main (and often sole) providers of domestic caregiving, they will remain at a massive economic disadvantage. Thus, instead of raising up motherhood as women's defining role (and feminine "genius"), thereby burdening women with disproportionate caregiving duties and inviting economic struggle, Catholic teaching should stress the importance of

⁷³ Petchesky, "Human Rights."

mutuality in parenting. In this way, they could advance the goal of safer and more stable home environments for children and the genuine economic empowerment of women.

In addition, the deeply broken US immigration “system” intersects in real and painful ways with the reproductive lives of many or even most farmworker women. Heinous family separation policies at the border and the mistreatment of pregnant and breastfeeding migrant women are just the tip of an immoral iceberg, one whose effects will be felt far into the future. As Leandra Hinojosa Hernández poignantly writes, “US government-sanctioned separation of asylum-seeking migrant families at the US-Mexico border is reproductive injustice in its most extreme forms: It cages families; it traumatizes children and exposes them to mental and physical risks; and it erodes the central family unit in efforts to defend and protect the ‘sovereignty’ of the United States.”⁷⁴ Again, while not *all* migrant farmworker women are immigrants to the United States, many are. For these women, the challenges described above are compounded by living under the conditions of profoundly flawed immigration policies and practices.

Hence, immigration reform, including meaningful pathways to citizenship, are an indispensable part of the conditions of reproductive justice. Stable pathways to citizenship for undocumented workers would help alleviate the fear of deportation that causes them to accept mistreatment and forgo pursuing their rights. In particular, immigration policy needs to be altered in order to regularize the status of unaccompanied children as well as migrant women and girls, especially those who have been victims of crime, abuse, and exploitation.⁷⁵ Indeed, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops themselves call for US immigration policy to be reformed to help families to stay intact and parents to stay with their children and to protect immigrating children themselves who currently live under a state of extreme precarity (*Strangers*

⁷⁴ Hernández, “Feminist Approaches to Border Studies,” 132.

⁷⁵ Correa-Cabrera and Keck, “A Dangerous Journey.”

No Longer, nos. 66–67). Even more fundamentally, justice calls for a change in US geopolitical and economic policies, with an aim towards a more just and equitable international economy and an eye toward identifying the ways that globalization has contributed to political and economic unrest—and the subsequent need to emigrate in the first place.

Finally, the wide lens of reproductive justice asks us to critically examine the xenophobia and negative representation of immigrants, BIPOC persons, and LGBTQ+ communities that characterizes so much of US culture today. The construction of the US identity as primarily white and “native-born” directly translates into the injustices against migrants of color, who make up the vast majority of farmworkers in the US today.⁷⁶ Additionally, LGBTQ+ migrants, especially trans* migrants, experience extremely high levels of precarity and violence, including both in their countries of origin and once they arrive in the US—often by US immigration agents themselves.⁷⁷ In this context, cultural shift work done on both individual and organizational levels must be a part of any integrated strategy for change that seeks reproductive justice as its goal.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Examining and seeking to alter the root causes of unjust immigration practices and policies, poverty, poor housing and workplace conditions, and inadequate childcare provision and education may seem to be a long way away from strictly reproductive concerns. But the lens of reproductive justice shows that it is not. These considerations are absolutely essential to a truly effective strategy for women’s well-being, one that includes and promotes the genuine flourishing of migrant women farmworkers.

⁷⁶ Gwyneth Lonergan describes an analogous situation in Great Britain; see Lonergan, “Reproductive Justice and Migrant Women.”

⁷⁷ Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton, “Transgender Migrant Rights, Reproductive Justice, and the Mexico-US Border in the Time of COVID-19,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 7, no. 3 (2020): 142–150, esp. 146–147, doi.org/10.14321/qed.7.3.0142.

⁷⁸ Zavella, “Contesting Structural Vulnerability.”

Moreover, these more holistic concerns are *already* present within Catholic social teaching. Rather than its persistent and narrowly-focused proscription of abortion, Catholic ethics would do better to incorporate the structural themes of reproductive justice into its overall framing of ethical reproduction. Not only would such a move deepen and nuance the Catholic conversations and teachings surrounding abortion, it would also strengthen the connections between these teachings and aspects of the tradition which genuinely promote a “preferential option” for marginalized persons and groups—here, migrant women farmworkers. In this way, the incorporation of reproductive justice into Catholic teaching furthers its aim of *genuine human flourishing* in a world that too often seems bent on denying it.



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