



Líderes Campesinas: Grassroots Gendered Leadership, Community Organizing, and Pedagogies of Empowerment

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Ethnography of *Organización en California de Líderes Campesinas*

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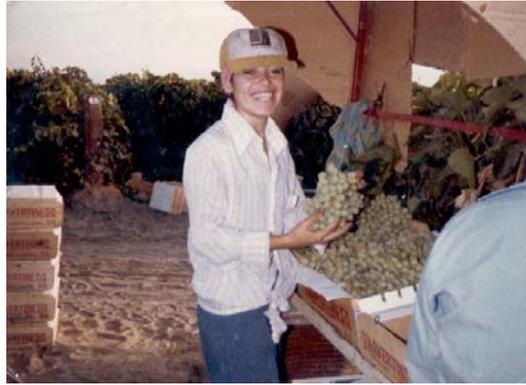
Chronicles of Campesina Leadership

The story of how Líderes Campesinas emerged as an organization is the story of the process of empowerment and collective action.¹ The roots of Líderes Campesinas are profoundly intertwined in the intimate connection between power and knowledge. The organizational precursor to Líderes Campesinas was a group called Mujeres Mexicanas founded in 1988 in the Coachella Valley. Mujeres Mexicanas emerged within the process of conducting a needs assessment survey, as part of Maria Elena Lopez-Treviño's master's thesis in Psychology at California State University, Long Beach. The survey was conducted as a way to understand the major problems and needs of women farm workers in order to design a community-based educational radio program. Interestingly, it was the research process, including surveys and interviews, which encouraged women to talk about the issues and problems they were facing. This dialogue was how many participants and community-based researchers began to develop their consciousness. Further, these dialogues inspired the desire for an organization or union of women farm workers.

Shifting the notion of leadership from an individual act to one of collective empowerment is the wellspring of Líderes Campesinas model and sustained practice of leadership development. Mily Treviño Saucedo, current Executive Director of Líderes Campesinas, played a pivotal role in transforming the experience of participating in the

¹ This project is based ethnographic research that included participant observation and ten oral histories and ten informal interviews with key historical actors, members, and staff of Líderes Campesinas. We also draw on primary organizational and archival documents as well as print media and scholarly sources to forge our analysis. The fieldwork was carried out between the months of July and October of 2005 in a collaborative research process led by myself (Maylei Blackwell) in collaboration with a team of graduate and undergraduate researchers from UCLA who participated in the research phase of the project. This team has included our project's Research Assistant, Janyce Cardenas, Yvette Morales, Juli Grisby, Crystal Alvarez, Yvette Morales and Rosie Lopez. The great majority of the interviews were conducted by Janyce Cardenas and me.

study into a different mode of organizing campesinas. Born in Bellingham, Washington as the daughter of migrant farm workers, Mily grew up working the fields and attending school in Idaho and Nuevo Leon, Mexico before settling in Indio, California.



Mily Treviño-Sauceda, Archives of Líderes Campesinas

While she began to become active as a member of the UFW in California with her father and brothers, who were labor leaders, it was not until later – after she received her GED and began working as a community outreach worker with California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) – that she was able to name the gendered conditions of field work like sexual harassment in the fields after she learned that many other women faced similar conditions. It transformed her to learn that harassment is not the victim’s fault and more than that, it is illegal. Mily assisted Maria Elena Lopez-Treviño, her sister-in-law, with the study by assisting in the design of the questionnaire, recruiting, organizing, and orienting the community-based researchers to administer the survey, and conducting many surveys herself. Ultimately, Mily served on the academic thesis committee as a community representative with the professors.

The findings of the needs assessment reported that women identified two major problems 1) low wages (the average income of the women interviewed was about \$5,000 per year) and 2) 60% of women reported having been exposed to pesticides and

experiencing related health problems.² Lopez-Treviño found that the women were in “cooperative rather than traditional marital relationships” countering the claim that rigid gender roles are responsible for women’s poverty and poor working conditions. Finally, the study foregrounded the need and desire for women farm workers to be active in community and labor organizing as part of their own empowerment. The barriers to participation that women identified were 1) lack of childcare at the meetings; 2) no car or transportation to meetings; and 3) partner resistance to participation.

The study employed nine volunteer interviewers that were or had been campesinas so they drew from their own experiences to frame questions and the format of the interviews was “La Charla.”³ This seemingly innocuous process of “charlando” had a deep impact on the women interviewers involved. In addition to finding the need for higher earnings and better living conditions like housing and health care services, stronger protective labor laws, and higher sanctions against those that violate the law, the study found that collective organization or unionization of farm workers would be a critical step in addressing these issues. About 50% of all the women interviewed explicitly stated that women needed to organize, engage in dialogue and problem solving together, and unite to address the conditions that negatively shape their lives. Participating in the study transformed some of the interviewees by giving them new forms of political consciousness and transforming their own sense of their roles in the community, especially in terms of leadership.

² Maria Elena Lopez-Treviño, *A Radio Model: A Community Strategy to Address the Problems and Needs of Mexican American Women Farm workers*. Master of Science Thesis in Psychology California State University, Long Beach, 1988.

³ Translation: The dialogue.

The idea to begin *Mujeres Mexicanas* stemmed from what the campesinas were sharing about their need to organize and engage in dialogue. She convened other interviewers and convinced them to unite in order to address some of the issues, conditions, and findings that the study revealed. From there, the organization evolved. Mily's participation in the study transformed her sense of leadership, as she explained during her recent visit to a UCLA Chicana and Chicano Studies class.

Before I saw myself as the leader of my community but after I saw that I just had a big head. Participating in the study helped me to understand leadership differently. The women did not need me to come around and help them. They were asking for information so that they could solve the issues and problems themselves.⁴

Ultimately, by listening closely to the women, Mily saw that instead of seeking answers, they were giving her insights and new perspectives that radically altered her notion of leadership and community work. Mily noticed that for most of the women, this was the first time anyone had stopped to ask anything about themselves or their opinions about their living and working conditions. Because of her role as a community organizer and advocate, the women would ask her what she thought or felt. Mily explains in depth how she began to question herself and her role:

Through the interviews they had complained about how the public services would treat them. You know, being hostile. People coming into their lives, asking them questions or getting information so they could start programs that didn't even work, you know? Or [the agencies] would hire someone who was not even from the area and they [the women] would be under the impression that this program was going to be helping them with something and then nothing [would happen], right? ... Towards the end, when I asked [the women] 'what do you think? Do you think something needs to be done?' They would end up not even asking me, 'what do you think?' To the contrary, I think that's what made me realize, you know,

⁴ Mily Treviño Salcedo, Class Presentation with Esperanza Sotelo, Doña Mari, and Ramona Felix, members of the Coachella Site Committee, for Chicana/o Studies 188-2, *The Chicano Movement and its Political Legacies*, February 13, 2006.

Mily, you have a big head. Why do you want the women to keep asking you? You want to feel good about other people asking you?

Maylei: How did it change your thinking? It seemed like it changed you.

Mily: It changed me because it made me realize that I had thought for several years that being a community worker, being someone known in the community [and] being recognized for the work I had [developed] the mentality ... the savior type. The women were very humble and because they were very polite and they showed that, had this gratitude that you were there and asking them about their lives. They made me analyze myself.⁵

In the process of conducting the interviews over a relatively short period of three weeks, the interviewers found that:

sixty-three percent of the women in the study felt that they were treated in an inferior way by staff from social service agencies. Forty-eight percent reported feeling humiliated when seeking [low income] services... the most common complaint that women expressed about the attitude of the social service personnel was that they do not listen to farm workers.⁶

The interviewers became the founding members of Mujeres Mexicanas and their first step was to design a resource book or migrant women's worker's guide to social services.

The pamphlet was created in response to the working, health, and housing problems that campesinas spoke of during their interviews. The pamphlet was provided to all women contacted regardless of whether they were actually interviewed or not. Mily understood the powerful potential the women showed to transform and act on the conditions shaping their lives when she learned that more than two thirds of those who were given the pamphlet contacted the legal aid and social services agencies.

Many of the interviewers were transformed by recognizing first hand the knowledge and deep understanding campesinas have about the conditions of their lives

⁵ Interview with Mily Treviño Saucedo, Interview II, September 21, 2005, Líderes Campesinas headquarters, Pomona, California.

⁶ Lopez-Treviño, 1988, 77.

and work and the high level of awareness among campesinas about the need for collective organizing. The study remarked on how Mujeres Mexicanas began with the understanding that “social change requires a comprehensive political empowerment program.”⁷ Several of the participants in the study remarked on the need for *una unión de mujeres campesinas* (a union of women farm workers). This observation led to the founding of Mujeres Mexicanas as a grassroots political organization or a political women’s support group.



Silvia Berrones becomes Board President of Mujeres Mexicanas
Archives of Mujeres Mexicanas



Installation of Officers of Mujeres Mexicanas (1991),
Archives of Mujeres Mexicanas

Central to this chronicle is how really listening to the campesinas’ life stories, dreams, and strategies for social justice changed the interviewers; here is the seed of the story of how Líderes Campesinas emerged out of a needs assessment study. Pivotal to the Líderes Campesinas story is how the early participants developed a leadership model and practice out of the idea that it was not enough to study the needs of campesinas, if women did not organize themselves to address those needs. As they began listening to the women who shared their stories of how they dealt with their problems, they heard study participants say that they were tired of being questioned, used by researchers and social service agencies that did not represent their own concerns and their problems,

⁷ López-Treviño, 1988, 109.

much less work to change their situation of poverty. We focus in depth on this thread of analysis throughout this ethnography because it was the origin of Líderes Campesinas and shaped their history, their models of leadership development, and their innovations in popular education and multi-sited pedagogies of liberation.

Through the words and actions of the interviewees, the original members of Mujeres Mexicanas noted a new model of leadership by in the way the women reflected on possible solutions to their problems. When asked to identify the issues they would like to see addressed (in this case in the form of a radio show), the participants in the study identified the need to receive information about their rights and about community services available to them. They did not want more experts coming to their community and they continued to see little change in a situation where they lacked opportunities and respect for their basic dignity and human rights. The interviewers discovered that leaders must not only respond by listening but must believe that the women themselves are capable of shaping their own lives and destinies. By learning about their histories and gaining new tools and access to available options, campesina women are better able to confront the issues and conditions that limit their life possibilities.



Mujeres Mexicanas & Mujercitas Mexicanas demonstrating against the "Storm" in 1991;
Archives of Mujeres Mexicanas

Not only was this the founding moment of the group, Mujeres Mexicanas, the organization that gave birth to Líderes Campesinas, it was the birth of a new kind of relationship that campesinas created by telling service providers, NGOs, and professionals that they could no longer speak for them. Mily describes this process:

They wanted to get ... clear information about all the different issues ... so for them it was more of what way could they be involved. If they had the knowledge maybe they could do something different around their life. If they had what they needed their lives would have been different ... So that really made me think. I felt like [receiving] recognitions was getting to me, ... I was thinking like I was, 'muy chingona.'

... I realized people really knew more about themselves than what we 'leaders' think that they know about them. We think that we know more about the community and what they need to be doing or what needs to be done for them ... instead of listening to them and really hearing what they want to do with their lives.

It took me several weeks de agarrar la onda de que, you know, I was doing everything the wrong way. So we had debriefings and I pushed for us to start a group and not only for us to report out the findings of that needs assessment but a group to invite women so that we could talk about our issues and then try to bring solutions to our issues. ... Having been seven years with CRLA,⁸ I really got it why we didn't have as many clients as the many problems that were out there, you know. Do people just want to file lawsuits or do people really just want to, you know, to have a better life, a good life, you know, a quality life?

This understanding and the need for campesinas to organize themselves and validate their own expertise about their living conditions, problems, and solutions was the founding impulse for Mujeres Mexicanas. The women who came to make up the membership of Líderes Campesinas (LC) had been members of church groups, parent advisory committees of local schools districts, and members of the United Farm workers Union (UFW) who came together out of the shared recognition of the need to have a women farm worker's organization led by women farm workers themselves. The organization

⁸ California Rural Legal Assistance.

eventually led to the founding of a first statewide campesina organization, Líderes Campesinas, which remains the only one in the country. The transition and continued history of Líderes Campesinas is documented in the chronology that appears at the end of this report.

Breaking the Persistence of Silence: Telling Stories of Work, Gender and Migration

A chronicle of Líderes Campesinas is more than the organization's history, challenges, and successes. The stories the women share of migration, labor, family and organizing describe the conditions that motivate them to action and bear witness to how campesinas have survived injury, humiliation, low pay, long hours, and exposure to pesticides and chemicals. They perform double days of work rising as early as 3:00 AM to prepare meals, labor the whole day in the fields and return home to perform the gendered labor of childcare, meals, cleaning, and socialization. The women share stories of how they have navigated the gender and family roles expected of them and how they shift the gender scripts that limit their own agency, education, or ability to organize. While their work involves a transformation of gendered roles and structures of family and community, they simultaneously utilize female familial and communal roles within their organizational tactics and their models of leadership. The following are examples of how the women give voice to and make visible the working conditions they endure, as well as stories of how they began to organize.



Jesus Maria Nuñez, working from home.
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

Bearing witness to the kinds of working conditions campesinas face is part of naming the oppressive work conditions shared by all farm workers. Yet as we conducted interviews in the fields, living rooms, trailers and offices, what unfolded through the women's narratives was the harshness and the silence around the conditions that women workers specifically face. They named gendered conditions such as lack of access to bathrooms in the fields, the detrimental effects of pesticides on women's reproductive health, and how obedience was extracted through sexual harassment. Rather than use the impersonal academic voice, I shift narrative strategies here in an attempt to convey the power of the stories and how they were shared with me. Following this section is an analysis of how the women in Líderes Campesinas began organizing despite multiple, simultaneous, and layered forms of oppression and how they have created a multi-layered form of leadership to combat multiple forms of discrimination.

The women we interviewed have worked the wide spectrum of jobs in California's low-skilled agricultural labor market. They range from women like María Reyes who, in her 20 plus years of field work, picked every crop grown in California before eventually landing one of the coveted full time year round jobs in a winery, to others who spent twenty plus years as field packers, or those who labored for over a decade in the chilled agricultural packing houses. The women worked picking, cropping, weeding, thinning out, packing, spraying, cleaning equipment and wine barrels, and even as cooks preparing meals for other workers when, because of age discrimination, employers would no longer hire them.

When asked about what it was like to face the working conditions in the fields when she first came to the U.S., Teresa Aviña – who came to the U.S. from Michoacan, Mexico eight years ago with the assistance of her mother who is a U.S. citizen, says:

Very hard, because I came during the August time, when the heat was intense. And because for many years I did not work in the fields, since I got married ... It became very hard for me... then the contractor at times would not bring water for us. And then, at times we would end up drinking water even with small parts of trash in it, which would be at the bottom of the cup. This was something we suffered over much.⁹

These conditions have continued and during the heat wave of the summer of 2005, three farm workers died of heat exposure, all of whom were workers with literally decades of fieldwork experience.¹⁰ Other unfair labor practices are just par for the course of how campesinas are often cheated out of their wages. Mily recalls,

I remember going to places, starting that day and then the supervisor firing us and telling us that we were not doing good work. Then we found out that it was not that, it was that they did not want to pay us. It was five, six of us working and doing an all day job and then not paying us.¹¹

Workers are not only cheated out of wages, but many times workers work in teams and only their contractor negotiates the wages so there is little information that workers receive about wages and a lot of room for being cheated.

This is especially true for many of the estimated 75,000 migrant indigenous farm workers who are largely Mixtec from Oaxaca, Mexico, many of whom do not speak Spanish.¹² While many indigenous women migrant have lower rates of literacy and are more likely to be monolingual Mixtec speakers, they also share the gendered effects of lack of access to education with mestiza (a woman of mixed racial / ethnic ancestry)

⁹ Interview with Teresa Aviña, September 22, 2005, Huron, California.

¹⁰ For more information, see Marc Cooper, "Sour Grapes: California's Farm Workers' Endless Struggle 40 Years Later," *LA Weekly* (August 12-18, 2005).

¹¹ Treviño 2005.

¹² For more information please see, Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, eds. *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*. San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies, 2004.

migrants. While cheating workers out of wages impacts all workers, many of whom are not completely literate or have had only a few years of education, this affects women differentially due to their lack of full access to education. María Elena Valadez said that when she worked the tomato fields, she received .45 cents per bucket of tomatoes, “*asi que, para tener que hacer bastante, tenia uno que andar corre, corre, corre.*”¹³ Yet, she was unable count if her checks were correct, because she did not know how to calculate the wage in dollars or what the wage should be by law. She just remembers working hard until sun down but not knowing precisely the amount of pay that was due to her. The lack of access to education for girls who often quit school to help the families survive economically affects the ability of women workers to learn about the legal codes involving wages, hours and occupational safety.

There are long hours of work without breaks. While by law farm workers should receive a half hour lunch and two 10-minute breaks during an eight-hour shift, Virginia explains:

[It was exhausting] If you wanted to rest [could try to catch some sleep] before you began work at five in the morning, or at the end your work at four thirty in the afternoon. They would only give you a half hour to eat lunch at noon. Those were the conditions in the grape fields, in the palm tree fields.¹⁴

Repetitive injuries and serious work-related injuries affected María Elena Valadez, who was injured at the age of seventeen and who has never fully recovered because of lack of access to worker’s compensation for injury on the job or even basic health insurance.

She said, “*Si sufre uno mucho, inclusive en Calexico fue cuando me tuve una caída bien*

¹³ Translation: "so that in order to make more money, one had to be running and running."

¹⁴ Ortega 2005.

fuerte y me quiebre el tobillo de el pie derecho en tres partes.”¹⁵ After the boss told her he would pay for her medical expenses because it was a work related injury, he ultimately refused to pay for the treatment. María received the bills at her house, leaving her with a bill she could not pay, which prevented her from receiving the follow up medical care she needed. The accident left María unable to do heavy jobs for many years. Even now, her foot is still not completely better.

Injury, long hours, heat exposure and unfair labor practices are conditions that campesinas share with their male counterparts but there are some conditions that affect women differently, like not having access to restrooms. Many campesinas develop kidney and liver problems as well as urinary tract infections due to not having access to restrooms or proper sanitary facilities. On her first day of fieldwork, María Reyes says her initial response was “*no, yo no voy a ir detrás de las hierbas! ¿Que tal que si me mira alguien? Ese día, todo el día me aguante de ir al baño. ¡Todo el día!*”¹⁶ Mily explains:

There were no restrooms. You would have to hide behind a tree. And at times I found myself going behind a tree and then finding out people were watching, you know it was kind of humiliating.

Menstrual periods without restrooms are especially difficult.

When you were on your menstrual cycle, you had to walk - always two of us women - you had to change pads and bury the pad underground. Look for the area of lots of bushes where no one could see you, it was horrible. The foremen would scream insults at you.¹⁷

María Elena Valadez notes that there has been a change in some union workplaces.

¹⁵ Translation: “one suffers a lot. In Calexico was when I fell hard and broke my ankle on my right foot in three parts.”

¹⁶ Interview with María Reyes, August 8, 2006, Salinas, California. Translation: “*no I am not going to go behind those bushes! What if someone sees me? That day, during the whole day I endured without going to the restroom. All day!*”

¹⁷ Ortega 2005.

Prior to the UFW there were no restrooms or water. In order to go the restrooms, there would have to go three at a time, so that one could squat while the others covered the woman. They would have to go by a tree or a truck.

Exposure to pesticides was a condition that every woman interviewed discussed.

Everyone had been either sprayed on while working the fields, suffered from chemical drift, or been exposed to some harsh or toxic chemicals while working in packinghouses.

Mily describes her experience in the lemon groves:

There was also *tambien*, spraying going on when we were working, you know, chemicals being sprayed ... [One time when this happened] we went running outside and we thought it had not sprayed us, but for us to even smell it meant that the drift got all the way where we were. Some of the workers there got very ill. But what happened is that for whatever reason, [the plane] came back and sprayed over us. And I remember ...coughing, trying to get off the ladder and stumbling..., and then the worst [was the burning of the skin and eyes] ...My eyes would itch a lot because, you know. Just pouring water was not enough. And then I was itching all over. I felt very uncomfortable ... We had a lot of headaches. I felt dizzy, and everybody was feeling that same way. They just put us in a bus and took us back. Everybody was having headaches during the two-hour trip to get back.¹⁸

There is no worker education on pesticide exposure and the effects are often long term and not always immediately apparent. Maura Salazar said that even though she does not work in the fields any more, she still gets the rashes that started when she did.

While working in the field, my arms got ugly, and my hand up to my face, with rashes and itching. And I thought this was going to be for a while and that she would get better. I did not think that it would become all the time; that one cannot get better. Because this is the symptom that I have now, the one where rashes would appear on my arms and sometimes the rash still comes even today even though I do not work in the fields but, I still have the itching.¹⁹

Pesticides remain tough challenges because of the power of the growers, the petrochemical industry, and because the impact is cumulative and not always

¹⁸ Treviño 2005.

¹⁹ Maura Salazar, Tape recording. Lamont, CA. 23 September 2005.

immediately apparent or easily identified. Another challenge involves making medical knowledge accessible to campesinas and the ways foremen and social service and medical providers treat campesinas as ignorant or hysterical women.

In addition to the pesticides in the fields, campesinas also contend with the chemicals used in packinghouses where they work seasonally or year round. Paula Placencia mentions that chemicals are not only used in packaging but to clean the machines and disinfect work areas. Workers are rarely given protective gear or told of the harmful impact.²⁰ For instance, there were times that she would go into work and it looked cloudy inside the building, because they had sprayed down the equipment and the broccoli. To this day, she still has allergic reactions to strong chemicals and she has to take medicine to help her with the reaction. Paula's eyes have become very sensitive and she has begun to lose her vision because she worked all day in the cold refrigerated packinghouse with exposure to intense chlorine. Over María Reyes kitchen table, she comments that many women think that they have not been affected with pesticide exposure. She points out that workers are exposed all the time, but most do not recognize the relationship with the chemicals at their work and the health conditions they develop.

In the cauliflower packing plant, they were given spray bottles filled with chlorine that they would have to spray the cauliflower while their mouths, nose, and eyes were exposed. She trains the women she works with about the importance of writing their experiences down when they are exposed to chemicals so that they can understand the causes for the sicknesses as well as have a form of documentation. She shows me the tattered training manual with multi-colored tabs she uses to access information to share

²⁰ Paula Placencia, Interview, August 9, 2005, Salinas, California.

with women in her popular education work on the radio, at house meetings with the membership, and in educational presentations in the community.

While many agricultural workers are exposed to chemicals and pesticides, women bear an uneven health risk because they are often the ones who work in the packinghouses where chemicals are used to process the produce. This exposure along with the pesticides that many fieldworkers are exposed to by direct spraying, pesticide drift of spraying in neighboring fields, or residues, has the risk of affecting women's reproductive health and the health of their children as many women must continue to work while pregnant. After many years as a fieldworker, María Inez Catalán, a long time member who currently serves on the Board of Directors of Líderes Campesinas, turned to organic farming; after many years training to gain the education she needed, María became California's first Latina organic farmer.



María Inez Catalán , one of California's first Latina Organic farmers.
Photo by: Maylei Blackwell



María Inez Catalán at her farm – Catalan's Farm.
Photo by: Dana Serrato for Praxis International

As we sit on the side of the field, her family working to get a tomato harvest to the farmer's market in Watsonville for Catalán Farms, she shares why she turned to organic farming and spent much time and money when her family was short on both to learn

organic farming and start her own business. She told the story of when she worked the fields with her sister.

During those years one of my nieces was born... she was born without an upper palate. All of that part in that area she did not have. It was a very hard process for all her family... Another of my nephews was born with respiratory problems. His lungs were like he was during four months of gestation, when he was already form. His small lungs were not developed. Therefore, all these things and what I personally learned as to how we are being affected.²¹

In addition to birth defects, many women share stories of miscarriages or stories of campesina women who died in childbirth. There has been a dreadful silence about women's health, as reflected in Mily's recollection:

Going back to the harvesting of lemons, there was a pregnant woman there who could not get on the ladder because she was pregnant. She would work on the downside the husband would be on top of the tree. One day, I did not see her and then we found out that she ended up in the hospital and delivered [her child] but then she died. It was kind of like a shock for several weeks after that incident...I think it was ...her doing that type of job. You know, just very bad conditions. ... [and] we did not have any rest periods, or anything like that.²²

The day I am leaving María Reyes' house, after she had generously hosted me while doing the interviews in the Salinas and Watsonville area, we sit on her couch to talk about a few things she had not shared before. Through her tears she shares how her work in the wineries cleaning barrels affected her daughter by giving her severe asthma as an infant and a skin condition with which she continues to struggle. Throughout the days I have worked out of Maria's house interviewing the local Líderes Campesinas members, her daughter has been my unofficial helper, hanging out with me, going through my equipment bags, performing shows in front of the video camera with her cousin.

²¹ Maria Inez Catalán, Tape recording, Hollister, California, August 9, 2005.

²² Treviño 2005.

The work María was doing involved washing the barrels out with a chemical solution of water and sulfur used to burn out the inside of the barrels to disinfect and clean them. The process of draining the barrels involves drawing the remaining sulfur and water at the bottom of the wine barrel by sucking it out through a tube. Sometimes it would get in the workers' mouths and when she was first learning to do it, accidentally, María would ingest it. María developed symptoms from working with the sulfur solution that included wheezing, restricted breathing, and headaches.

I remember that I suffered and felt something like being kind of asleep. I did not have saliva, like if I could not move my tongue ... And I had a strange headache. I do not know how to explain this. Then I felt like vomiting. Then I learned that I had become ill because when I would swallow, I felt even the little pieces of sulfur that were going through [the tube into my mouth].²³

María worked picking grapes outside during the second trimester of her pregnancy and she could not turn down the steady employment she was offered working in the winery. Although she was in the last trimester of her pregnancy, the owner assured her that the chemicals were perfectly safe. María felt blessed when her daughter was born seemingly healthy. But within three months, while the baby was sleeping she heard her wheezing and gasping for breath. The doctors said she had asthma and every fifteen days or so María would have to go to the emergency room to get her daughter treatment so she could breathe. For four years it was the same and then the asthma finally seemed to pass. After that her daughter developed a mysterious skin disease that they initially diagnosed as psoriasis but after going to many doctors and specialists, no one has been able to treat the rashes that get so bad that the child would bleed from scratching. She searched for every kind of medicine and treatment in California, Mexicali, and Tijuana

²³ Reyes 2005.

but it was not until the Líderes Campesinas pesticide trainings that she realized the impact.

I felt desperate. My child still had that illness when I began working with this organization. When I heard during the trainings on pesticides and chemicals there I felt like falling backwards because there is where I began to see that all I had swallowed, the consequences my child had paid for that. Because at the trainings you hear that you can be affected when you get dust on you, but eating it makes it much worse.

And, there is always the big fight with my child who could not go out and play under the sun. Because if she would get exposed just a little she would begin with her scratching. There was much bleeding, so much ugly bleeding.²⁴

These conditions create a context of impunity where campesinas can begin to feel hopeless. Yet, Líderes Campesinas has created many innovative strategies using popular education and mass outreach. For example, there is an educational call-in radio show called *Placita Bilingue* on Radio Bilingue in Salinas with María Reyes and Paula Placencia, who is the program coordinator for Líderes Campesinas' Pesticide Program. In one instance, Paula and María gave an educational presentation on how to avoid pesticide exposure and how to not bring residual chemicals from the fields home to children and families by explaining how to remove and segregate work clothes before coming into contact with children or furniture, as well as how to launder work clothes separately.

Perhaps one of the greatest silences about women working in the fields revolves around sexual harassment and sexual assault. Although this is a daily working condition for many women, there has been a silence among most labor organizers. The attitudes learned from families and relatives have led women to internalize harassment as their fault. This sense of shame and self-blame emerges from larger social views the blame the

²⁴ Reyes 2005.

victim for all forms of violence against women. Unfortunately, many seemingly harmless strategies families employ to train girls how to take care of themselves in an all-male work environment feeds into this problem when the principal strategy tells young women that they are responsible for unwanted sexual attention. For example, Mily explained:

One thing always, always happened to me. [Sexual] harassment on the job. Always. But I always felt it could be my fault. I was always told that. There is a saying in Spanish, there is several sayings, and one of them is '*El hombre llega hasta donde la mujer quiere,*' and that is always telling women that men will go as far as women would want, and it's like, 'wait a minute, sometimes women do not want, and men keep saying that we do, and we don't!' ... But how to change that or how to think different, how to think you have options or whatever?. I always felt real angry because of that.²⁵

Even working a in a team with her father and brother with the guise of male protection,

Mily still faced sexual harassment:

...the work was piece rate.... I would end up getting eight trees this side, eight trees this other side....My dad would get eight trees over there. So he was far away. ...Whoever is a predator in that case, would know when to do it. It was [mostly] verbal harassment...Some of it was like getting near me, and the guys that were doing this were crew leaders, people that could go around and say 'oh well, I am just checking how you are doing, in terms of, if your harvesting, if your cutting the lemons the right way, or whatever,' you know? They would try to talk loud so that people would hear that that is all that they were doing. But then they would get close to me and try to make me feel very uncomfortable. At times when I would see... one of them on a tractor getting close, or hear the tractor, I would try most of the time to be on top of the ladder. I was always feeling very afraid that something was going to happen to me. And I could not talk about it. I could not tell my brothers. I could not tell my dad. I did not understand that my brothers did not feel the same way than my dad. But my dad was someone that would always not trust me. Like if anything is going to happen to you, it is your fault.

Of course because that happened a lot, I was always like, you know, kind of like wanting to do just a lot of work and get buried in that, in terms of just working a lot. And not wanting to go to the restroom, not wanting to

²⁵ Treviño 2005. Translation: "The man goes only as far as the women wants."

do anything that would just keep me on top of that ladder. And when I would go down, I would run into the bin, throws those [lemons in] and ...get up on the ladder again. And it was hard ... There were so many taboos in my family. We never talked about sex ... well, it's very Catholic, you know, very religious in that case, where you could not see your body because if you did then you were committing sin. I would try to punish myself if I would see my body, you know? Then having all these other things happening to me, it was like, 'oh my god, so it is my fault,' because I am allowing them to get close to me. So if I would get on top of the ladder, they could not [get as close], you know? But they would do things, you know? They would try whatever. It was very uncomfortable, very uncomfortable.²⁶

Many campesina women develop strategies for dealing with sexual harassment. María Elena Valadez says that before Líderes Campesinas she did not really know how to defend herself. She did not know her rights, she would defend herself from men that would make comments or whistle at her by telling them off. She also used this strategy when she was in a living situation where there were 40 women and 40 men in a housing facility. There was a kitchen and dining area in between their gender-designated sleeping areas, but she hated to go in there because she would have to listen to the men make comments towards her. María Elena would tell them to go whistle at their moms or to speak to their moms the way they would speak to her. Some men would be afraid of her but she argues that, "*asi es la forma de que yo encontré de protegerme, de retirarse.*"²⁷

María Elena would not only fear for her own safety but for that of her daughter who grew up in and around the fields along the migratory route. They migrated from Coachella once the grape season changed, but once they arrived in Salinas, they stayed because she could work the orange, lemon, garlic, tomato, lettuce, and onion harvest. Many of the narratives speak to how migrant farm work has an impact on women because they are responsible for childrearing and children's education as well as other

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Translation: "that was the form I found how to protect myself, by removing myself."

family relationships, all of which are subject to the constant disruption of migrating to follow the picking seasons. Some women, for example, immigrated as single mothers with children and share many harrowing stories of driving from Coachella to Oregon for the apple harvest with small children, living out of their cars, working in the fields, and taking care of her children as single mothers. In addition to the challenges of securing any sort of childcare and getting the kids in school, there are other dangers of having children in the fields with you as you work. For example, Esperanza Guzman comments that she is very happy to be involved with Líderes Campesinas and it was the best organization she could have come across “*por que le dan a uno un valor como mujer, muy grande, mas a las mujeres que hemos sufrido violencia doméstica, acoso sexual en los trabajos.*”²⁸ She continues on with her reflections on the issue of sexual harassment and assault in relation to the wellbeing of her daughter:

I am not saying that I was sexually harassed on the jobs. But I saw a lot. I saw a lot in my surrounding. And my oldest daughter, which I had her going to the fields, I would have her next to me, I never left her any moment alone, if she would go to the restroom I would accompany her. Because I would see around me how the foremen would behave or the ones that would be asked to help out the job, or would have a certain position and that would they had the right to put their hands over a woman.²⁹

Unfortunately, single moms are more vulnerable precisely because they are single; mothers and supervisors feel that they are more desperate for good hours and wages as well as more vulnerable without a male partner. María Reyes describes the sexual harassment she suffered for years. Not until working with Líderes Campesinas did she learn that sexual harassment is not only wrong; it is illegal:

²⁸ Interview with Esperanza Guzman, July 14, 2005, Coachella, California. Translation: "Because they give you value as women, very much, more than we have had as women who have suffered from domestic violence, sexual harassment on the job."

²⁹ Ibid.

Well him, the foreman and the supervisor - because there are the foreman, manager and the supervisor. An the older man knew that I was a single mother. Then he tried to take advantage of the situation. And I did not know much about harassment. I knew this was not good in terms of what he was doing but I would ignore him.

Time went on, I am not sure about months, but I am talking about years. I think that with time he got tired that I never paid attention to him. He took the liberty to offer me money in exchange to sexual relationships. And then he even saw that not even that, then he took revenge against me. He began sending me to do hard labor, to change me from crew of workers and to give me a different schedule.³⁰

Sexual harassment is not just a condition women face at work, but they also face punitive sanctions if they do not give into the sexual demands of supervisors. They suffer the abuse of power as superiors try to extract more labor from them as a price for not submitting themselves sexually in the workplace.

The emergence of leadership in multiple systems of power and exclusion

One prevalent theme in many of the oral histories is the layered nature of systems of power and exclusion that come together to shape the working, living, and organizing conditions members of Líderes Campesinas have confronted. Women of color feminist theory conceptualizes the matrix of oppression through an intersectional analysis of the simultaneous, overlapping force of multiple forms of oppression such as gender, class, citizenship status, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. These simultaneous layers of oppression are narrated within the women's testimonies as they describe the conditions that motivated them to organize and change their lives. Women identify how these multiple layers of oppression, based on economic, racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination, also coincide with the layered strategies of organizing and resistance that they developed and that ultimately inform their leadership model.

³⁰ Reyes 2005.

One node of this layering revolves around class and gender oppression in the fields, which echoes how some women have been socialized in the family to believe they are only meant to serve others. The life histories illustrate how internal family structures sometimes reproduce systems of patriarchy and asymmetrical relations of power for women in terms of labor and gendered work roles, thereby helping to socialize women into the notion that they should be docile laborers both inside and outside of the home.

Para Servirles (To Serve You): *La Fea* talks back

In a powerful interview, María Elena Valadez talks about how her family told her that she was *la fea* – or the ugly daughter – in the family so her role would be to work in the kitchen and to serve others. As the fourth of fourteen children and the second daughter, María Elena explains:

In Mexico it is the custom that because you are a woman you have to, and because I am the second-born daughter, I have to follow my role... My mother had her children, but I had to educate them. You would have to raise them... I was the little mother for them.³¹

María Elena began to fulfill this role when she was eight or nine years old because,

My mother would be in charge of having children. [First it was me] and my other sister, the one here now, but she is the beautiful one. Because I am the ugly one, the ugly one has to work for the beautiful one. Therefore, I would carry on like that³².

She was charged with the childcare and washing and cooking for her siblings because she was considered ‘*La fea*.’ After identifying a learning disability, a teacher told her mom that she was un-teachable, so she did not finish her schooling. The lack of (or not having access to) education led to her always feeling small. It was not until her participation in *Líderes Campesinas* that María Elena began to name the link between lack of educational

³¹ María Elena Valadez, Tape recording, Salinas, California, August 9, 2005.

³² Ibid.

opportunities for girls, imposed roles and patriarchal gender roles within families, and low self esteem. “*No tenía nada, no valía. Y aquí me hicieron ver que sí. [...] Mi auto estima estaba muy por de abajo.*”³³

The gendered labor that women workers carry out in the home continues because of socialization and training in the family. Labor conditions in the fields, long hours, and low pay exacerbate discrimination, labor expectations, and oppression against girls. This accompanies the continued expectation that they perform reproductive and domestic labor as well. For example, María Elena and her husband would get home from working the fields together and her husband would begin demanding dinner and clean clothes. María Elena says, “*Entonces, yo dije, pos ni modo, alguien lo tiene que hacer, y soy yo, por que pos como yo soy la mujer, y yo no ni escuela ni nada, yo sabia que no tenía valor, que no servía yo pa’ otra cosa, mas de servir.*”³⁴ María Elena’s reflection on her own experience illustrates how family expectations can socialize a young girl to associate a lack of access to education to ugliness or not being good for anything but serving others. This way of seeing oneself in the world is reinforced by larger institutional forms, as well as by economic, racial, and gender oppression in the fields and in the home. These interconnections between layers of gender and class oppressions help illustrate the conditions under which members of the Líderes Campesinas began to organize and develop their own leadership.

³³ Valadez 2005. Translation: “I had nothing, I had no value. And here I was made to believe that I am worth. My self-esteem was very low.”

³⁴ Translation: “Then I said, ‘whatever, someone has to do this work, and it is me, because I am a woman, and me with no school and nothing else. I had no idea I had worth, that I was not good for anything else but to serve.’”

El Otro Lado: Learning the Double Day of Campesinas

These structures of inequality and discrimination are replicated in migration and exacerbated by new forms of racism and exploitation of women workers. María Reyes speaks to the silence about labor and *el otro lado*³⁵. When her husband first began migrating to work en *el norte*³⁶, he never spoke about the working conditions. Typically migrants do not share the hardships they endure on *el otro lado*. These silences carried over when she left Mexico and crossed the border with young children to begin working in the fields with her husband. Her story elucidates how sometimes families, including mothers and mothers-in-law, help inadvertently reproduce conditions of exploitation. María vividly recalls the first day of work in the fields because her mother-in-law told her to wake up at four AM to make lunch for the whole family before going to the fields to work without explaining what the work expectations were or why she had to make lunches and pack water. María felt forced into labor and cried after her first day of work because of the arduous labor, the injuries to her hands and her mother-in-law's failure to assist her in acclimating to the particularly gendered experiences that women face working in the fields (such as having no access to restrooms). Becoming a farm worker meant learning the double day of campesinas which involves waged work as well as the domestic labor of preparing food, caring for children, cleaning houses, washing clothes, and caring for husbands:

[The work of] women is still the same. The women get up much earlier. One or two, two hours more, during the time they prepare food, meanwhile the mothers that take their children to childcare, we have to prepare their bottles - if they still use bottle - their clothes for all day. And they still have to prepare their food because there are people do childcare

³⁵ Translation: The other side

³⁶ Translation: The North

for children but request that bring their food. Then there is an additional job, right?³⁷

Yet, becoming empowered within families is part of how Líderes Campesinas changed their lives as they learned to organize and create leadership. For many women the initial blockages to participation and the development of their leadership comes from the resistance of their husbands. For example, an early participant in Mujeres Mexicanas and of Líderes Campesinas, Virginia Ortega, recalls that during her experiences of first organizing in the fields, she hid her actions from her husband. She worked in the grape fields and, ducking low, gathered signatures despite her husband's wishes. Eventually, they came to an agreement and Virginia continues to organize. Several women describe what it means to come to consciousness about violence in the family and understand that some of their low self-esteem was linked to abusive treatment in their current relationships. Even when relationships were not abusive, some husbands would not tolerate the shifts in time and dedication due to participation in Líderes Campesinas because it meant their dinner would not be cooked and served at the usual time. While many families and partnerships have become part of the women's process of empowerment and leadership, others have ended because of it. When I asked María Inez Catalan what the challenges were to becoming an empowered woman, she half jokingly said that one challenge was being single because it was hard to find a man who does not find the work threatening. I joked that Líderes Campesinas should start a progressive single men's dating service.

Despite these challenges, many supportive families have created vital survival networks and are essential to women's organizing. Mily learned to organize with her

³⁷ Reyes 2005.

father and brothers in the early UFW organizing in the California fields and she has mobilized her brothers and their families many times over the years to support Líderes Campesinas and give of their time and resources during pressing times. The multiple forms of oppression in the fields and larger society, as well as the gendered labor at home and the tension caused by some husbands or families, illustrate the need for one of the key organizing principles of Líderes Campesinas: organizing begins at home. Because the kinds of discrimination and violence campesinas face occur in the public and the private spheres, leadership begins for many women by informing themselves and organize their families.

Women in Líderes Campesinas also challenge multiple forms of oppression caused by the ethnic discrimination and hatred perpetrated against indigenous Mexican migrants. Indigenous migrants confront the racial discrimination that Mexicans face in the US as well as deep-seated forms of anti-Indigenous prejudice held by many mestizo Mexicans that foremen use to segregate the labor market even further. This complex racial formation and set of power relations is enacted within agricultural labor and is further compounded by gendered discrimination. For example, Leonor López says foremen pit mestizos against Indigenous workers. She recalls an experience where people from Guanajuato and Michoacan were getting paid \$6 an hour while the Oaxaqueños were getting paid \$5.25 an hour. Leonor discusses other practices like how one foreman she worked for in the apricot harvest would divide the farm workers up by Mexican states. One time she got lost amongst the groups and began work with the Michoacan group and the foreman yelled at her to go back with Oaxacans.



Indigenous Members at Líderes Campesinas' *Convivencia* 2004
Líderes Campesinas' Archives



Leonor López leading a committee meeting
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

Another foreman yelled at a tall Indigenous man for grouping himself with the Oaxacans, even though the man was from Oaxaca, because stereotypically, the foreman assumed that because he was tall he was not indigenous.

Several indigenous women discuss how often mestizo Mexicans that have been in the US construct obstacles for indigenous people to gain jobs. One foreman told Leonor that if she did not know how to prune grapes, then she could not get a job even though he would train others. This speaks to the age-old tactic of divide and conquer that has a long history on US plantations and in agricultural work where bosses use ethnic or racial replacement to divide workers by nationality and/or language in order to prevent solidarity, collective action, and organizing. As Mexico has been profoundly hit by free trade and neoliberal policies, new areas of rural migration and new sectors of the indigenous population have been forced into the migrant stream. By exploiting these new conditions and vulnerabilities, growers benefit from new forms of labor segmentation and segregation.

Yet, Leonor's analysis illustrates that – on top of this complicated ethnic situation – there is another layer of gender discrimination that exists in the fields. “*La vida de la*

*Indígena es muy difícil,*³⁸ Leonor says about working conditions intensified by being a woman and the discrimination that she faces as an Indigenous person. When it comes to being hired, she explains that one time she convinced a foreman to hire her by attempting to prove to him that she could work as hard as the men. Yet, the men set about to undermine her because during her trial run, they would work even faster than normal to show that women were slower and weaker than men no matter how hard they tried. Leonor explains how indigenous women face the same kind of challenges around the *doble jornada*.³⁹

As a woman, one feels it harder, because you have to go to work in those hard jobs, you come home, and you have to attend your children, give them food. You feel like you never have time to rest because you go work in the field and then you have to go and work again at your house, you have to bathe them, change them, wash your clothes to go back to work again, it is very hard for a woman in this valley.⁴⁰

As largely monolingual Mixtec speakers, she speaks about the specific challenges indigenous campesinas face as the majority of the women do not speak Spanish because they are denied access to education. Accessing justice in the workplace or even accessing social services is nearly impossible if you do not speak English or Spanish.

[...] Even though it sounds bad, right? But more than anything, the women from Oaxaca need much more than the ones from other states, because the ones from Oaxaca, there are some that do not speak Spanish, then for them it is much more harder to work, it is much harder to go to a health clinic, and it is much harder to ask for help. All because you don't speak [Spanish].⁴¹

³⁸ Lopez 2005. Translation: The life of the indigenous woman is very hard.

³⁹ Translation: double shift

⁴⁰ Lopez 2005.

⁴¹ Lopez 2005.



Indigenous women organizing.
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

Indigenous women also share the problem with some other Mexicanas that some husbands resist their wives' participation. While her husband does support her, Leonor says that "*como mujer Indígena es mas difícil todavía por que dice verdad [...] mi cuñado le dice a mi esposo, 'como es posible que la vieja si anda y yendo dos, tres días, y llegue y tu la recibes como si nada, y tu que sabes que fue hacer[...]*"⁴² Her *cuñado* [brother-in-law] told her husband that he was going to hit him so that he can see how it is that he needs to educate his wife. She knows she is doing nothing wrong, but she still struggles against that attitude:

Everyone looks at you in a bad way when you are a woman who leaves the home, because you are supposed to be a woman who gets married to stay at home, to attend her husband, to attend her children, to work ... but does not have the right to learn, to educate herself. For an indigenous woman it is very hard ... Because a women that goes out to study, that woman is not worthwhile, because she already left, and [the community view is] how do we know what she went to do? But they do not think that it is to go out to learn.

For these reasons it is critical for the indigenous women in Líderes Campesinas to organize in a way that begins from their own cultural contexts, and they struggle to show how their differences require different organizing tactics. Indigenous women claim this difference in order to develop modes of leadership that are culturally relevant and to create forms of community organizing that account for the cultural context they occupy.

⁴² Translation: "As an indigenous woman it is much harder still because to be truthful ... my brother-in-law tells my husband, 'how is it possible that your 'vieja' [old lady] leaves for two to three days, and she arrives and you receive her as if nothing has happened, do you know what she went to do?"

Situating Líderes Campesinas within the Scholarly Traditions of Chicana Feminism, Agricultural Labor Studies, and Leadership

There is a strong tradition of studying Chicana and Mexicana workers from a Chicana feminist perspective. This scholarship breaks with “masculinist” labor studies to understand working class women not only within the context of workplace, but within the larger social worlds they create and inhabit.⁴³ Patricia Zavella work explores the impact of women’s labor experiences on the social world, structure, and roles within families.⁴⁴ Chicana feminist historian Vicki Ruiz work examines the broader impact of women’s work and labor organizing in other public spaces such as neighborhoods and churches.⁴⁵ Many labor scholars have also study and theorize about how the intersection of race, class and gender oppressions has an impact on women of color in the workforce.⁴⁶ While many historical studies integrate women into the study of rural farm labor in California, most scholarship on contemporary farm worker labor organizing tends to focus on César

⁴³ See for example Magdalena Mora and Adelaida del Castillo, eds. *Mexican Women in the United States* (Los Angeles: UCLA, Chicano Research Center Publications, 1980); Clementina Duron, “Mexican Women and Labor Conflict in Los Angeles: The ILGWU Dressmakers’ Strike of 1933,” *Aztlán* 15 (1984): 145-161; Patricia Zavella, *Women’s Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Denise A. Segura, “Ambivalence or continuity?: motherhood and employment among Chicanas and Mexican immigrant women workers,” *AZTLAN - A Journal of Chicano Studies* 20 (Spring-Fall 1991): 119(32); Maria Angelina Soldatenko, “Organizing Latina garment workers in Los Angeles,” *AZTLAN - A Journal of Chicano Studies* 20 (Spring-Fall 1991): 73(24); Vicki L Ruiz, “Una Mujer sin Fronteras: Luisa Moreno and latina labor activism,” *Pacific Historical Review* 73 (Feb 2004): 1(20); Karen Brodtkin Sacks and Dorothy Remy, eds. *My Troubles Are Going to Have Trouble with me: Everyday Trails and Triumphs of Women Workers* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

⁴⁴ Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987.

⁴⁵ Vicki Ruiz, “Claiming Public Space at Work, Church and Neighborhood,” in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, ed. Vicki Ruiz. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 2000. 13-39.

⁴⁶ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 17 (1985): 86-108, Patricia Zavella, “The Politics of Race and Gender: Organizing Chicana Cannery Workers in Northern California,” in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, eds. Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. 202-224.

Chávez and the United Farm Workers Union (UFW).⁴⁷ While studies attempt to document the historical role of Dolores Huerta as the co-founder of the UFW, the historiographic paradigm of the Chicano Movement is typically organized almost exclusively around the great man narrative.

The history of mass-based mobilizations of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 70s has been told through the convention of the hero narrative that focuses on the story of one man. Examples include heroic stories of figures such as César Chávez of the UFW, Reies Lopez Tijerina of the New Mexican Land Grant Movement, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez of the Denver Crusade for Justice, and Jose Angel Gutiérrez of La Raza Unida Party of Texas. However, this approach obscures women’s voices, as well as the effects of mass participation of communities and families. In fact, until recently, the development of an independent women’s agenda was historicized as supplemental, occurring “after” the pinnacle of the Chicano Movement. However, scholars have begun to document women’s pivotal role in the Chicano Movement and the emergence of Chicana feminism, and are challenging this inaccurate periodization.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See Devra Weber 1994 and Guerin-Gonzalez 1994. For contemporary labor organizing see, Sam Kushner, *Long Road to Delano* (New York: International Publications, 1975); Jacques Levy, *César Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975); Eugene Nelson, *Huelga, the First Hundred Days of the Great Delano Grape Strike* (Delano, CA: Farm worker Press, 1966); Peter Matthiessen, *Sal Sí Puedes, César Chavez and the New American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1969); Ronald B. Taylor, *Chavez and the Farm Workers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), *Fight in the Fields*.

⁴⁸ See Vicki Ruiz, “La Nueva Chicana: Women and the Movement” in *From out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in the Twentieth Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), Maylei Blackwell, “Contested Histories: *Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, Chicana Feminisms, and Print Culture in the Chicano Movement, 1968-1973” in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Readers*, eds. Gabriella F. Arredondo, Aída Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Nájera-Ramírez and Patricia Zavella (Duke University Press, 2003); Marisela Chavez “‘We Lived and Breathed and Worked the Movement’: The Contradictions and Rewards of Chicana/Mexicana Activism in El Centro de Accion Social Autonomo-Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA-HGT), Los Angeles, 1975-1978,” in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, eds. Vicki Ruiz and Chon Noriega (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 2000), 83-105; Dionne Espinoza “‘Revolutionary Sisters’: Women’s Solidarity and Collective Identification among Chicana Brown Berets” *AZTLAN: Journal of Chicano Studies* (Spring 2001), 17-58; Dolores Delgado Bernal, “Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968

In terms of women's participation in farm worker organizing, there has been little sustained examination of women's organizational and labor experiences, which illustrates the importance of documenting the work of Líderes Campesinas.⁴⁹ In order to do so, we must shift our analytical lens, as suggested by Dolores Delgado Bernal in her study that reconceptualizes grassroots leadership. Líderes Campesinas extends the work of women who organized in the Chicano Movement and gives us new models of political leadership that advances the thinking of feminist and Chicana scholarship on women's leadership.

Dolores Delgado Bernal's study of women's participation and leadership during the 1968 walk-outs by high school students in East Los Angeles, known as the Blowouts, led to a reconceptualization of leadership in the Chicano movement. For example, Karen Brodtkin Sacks argues that traditional models equate leadership with public speakers and negotiators.⁵⁰ However, Delgado Bernal challenges the narrow definitions of leadership of positions held exclusively by men by drawing upon the observations of prior feminist scholars who suggest that grassroots women leaders do not distinguish between tasks of organizing and those of leadership. Delgado Bernal identifies the five aspects of grassroots gendered leadership as "networking, organizing, developing consciousness, holding an elected or appointed office and acting as an official or unofficial spokesperson."⁵¹ This broadened concept of leadership more accurately captures

East Los Angeles School Blowouts," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* (May-August 1998) 19 (2): 113-142.

⁴⁹ See for example, Fran Leeper Buss, *Forged Under the Sun*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993), and Gary Soto, *Jessie De La Cruz: A Profile of a United Farm Worker*, New York: Persea Books, 2001.

⁵⁰ Brodtkin Sacks cited in Delgado Bernal, Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 19: 2 (1988): 113-142.

⁵¹ Delgado Bernal, 124.

grassroots leadership and cooperative leadership.⁵² Contrary to prior studies that conceptualized leadership in a way that made women's leadership invisible, Delgado Bernal found that if we move away from a narrow conceptualization of leadership based on individuals, we can develop a broader vision of women's leadership and the historical and pivotal roles they have played in the Chicano movements. While Delgado Bernal did not find these dimensions of leadership to be gender specific, this study contributes to the scholarship of grassroots leadership by understanding precisely how and why grassroots leadership is gendered by centering on the model of leadership developed by Líderes Campesinas.

Gendered Grassroots Leadership

The Practice and Philosophy of Leadership in Líderes Campesinas

[As women,] “we have practiced a different kind of leadership, a leadership that empowers others, not a hierarchical kind of leadership.”
Rosie Castro of the Texas La Raza Unida Party.

At the heart of Líderes Campesinas' leadership philosophy and practice is individual and community empowerment. This coincides with other forms of Chicana and Mexicana leadership. In the quote above, Rosie Castro, argues that many historians fail to understand their leadership fully because women “... practice a different kind of leadership, a leadership that empowers others, not a hierarchical kind of leadership.”⁵³ Líderes Campesinas has created a model of grassroots leadership that is a collective

⁵² Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *Caring By the Hour: Women, Work, and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), and “Gender and Grassroots Leadership,” in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, ed. Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 77-94.

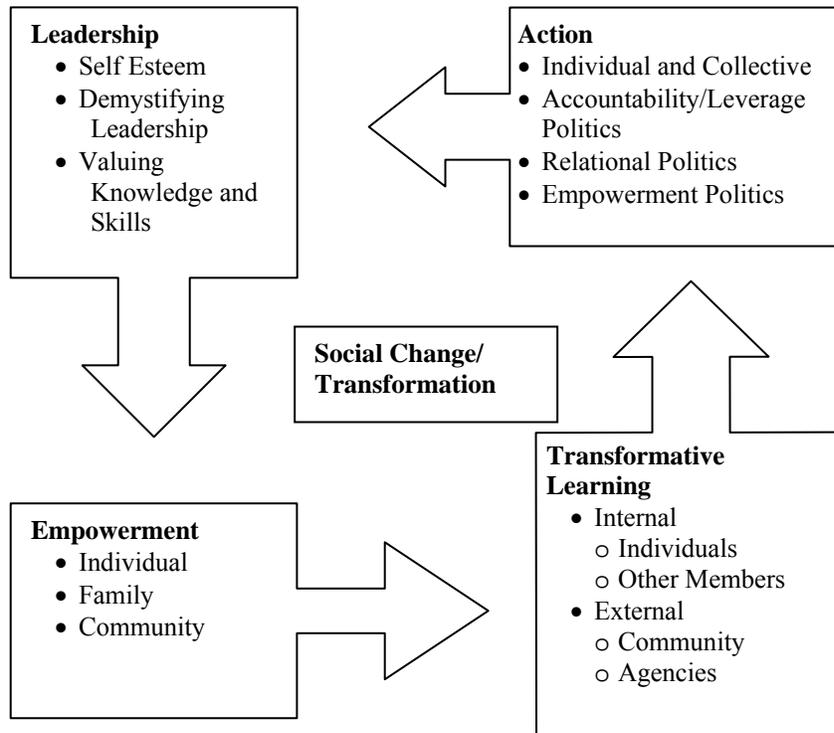
⁵³ Quoted in Elizabeth Martinez, “Chingón Politics Die Hard: Reflections on the First Chicano Activists Region.” *Z Magazine* (April 1990): 48, which is an article by veteran activist Betita Martinez who explores how women have been erased from historical memory while in attendance at one of the first activist reunions to take place.

notion of leadership. Leadership according to Líderes Campesinas is deeply embedded in community organizing with the goal of increasing the skill base and access to resources and knowledge that the members and their communities have. Many women describe and measure the efficacy of their leadership in terms of how it affects their families and communities. Leadership is based on radical learning and a pedagogical tradition where information and learning is part of the processes of empowerment and collective action.



By Virginia Ortega - Líderes Campesinas' Archives

Leadership Model Chart



Leadership

Líderes Campesinas’ philosophy and model of leadership includes the profound work of inspiring self-esteem by teaching women about their own “inherent” leadership skills. When a new person enters the group, members and staff shows her that she is already a leader and to value the knowledge and skills she already possesses. For example, at a house meeting or when they encounter potential members, they ask, “who here in this group is a leader?” When the new women do not respond or identify themselves as leaders, a facilitator will ask the women, “well, have you organized a quinceñera?” As many women have organized a quinceñera (or large family event), the facilitator will point out, “well, then of course, you are a leader, you have already demonstrated your leadership skills.” Together the group identifies which leadership

skills organizing a quinceñera entails, which thereby affirms and values the knowledge and “know how” the women possess and put into practice everyday. Through identifying their daily practice of familial and community leadership, Líderes helps improve women’s self esteem by demystifying leadership in a way which encourages women to share their own ideas and organizational skills. This simple exercise enables women to view themselves differently.

Another way facilitators engage new women around their leadership skills is to ask them to recall a time when they helped a neighbor, co-worker, or family member. Through this exercise, women explore the values of advocacy and show women that are leaders because they advocate for others and help their families and communities. Líderes works to demonstrate women’s histories of leadership and community advocacy while simultaneously demystifying leadership and naturalizing it in the social worlds and lives of their members. While many of these qualities are associated with traditionally constructed gender roles, Líderes Campesinas takes these “traditional” roles as a point of departure for empowerment and transformation. They illustrate how women demonstrate leadership “naturally” through the material, affective practices of every day family and communal life, through their roles as wives, mothers, sisters, *comadres*, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or community members.

Empowerment

The Líderes Campesinas model of how to create leaders for social change and transformation begins through both individual and collective empowerment. This model assumes women will begin their own leadership and organizing experiences within their own immediate social contexts of families and communities and, as illustrated in the

diagram above, they conceive and practice empowerment at the individual, familial, and community level. When Ramona Felix spoke of empowerment, she states, “Estamos empoderando la miembra.”⁵⁴ She explained further how empowerment is individual and something to be shared collectively.

Empowerment is something that flows inside of you, that is always constantly there; that you convey. It's something you [will always] have...that no one can take away. Like my leadership, what I have learned I will always have it and will share it.⁵⁵

Transformative Learning and Knowledge Sharing

The next aspect of leadership in the model is empowerment through knowledge based on popular, grassroots models of pedagogy that create new contexts of learning on levels both internal and external to the organization. Learning and knowledge sharing within the organization occurs on two levels: 1) individual members develop their own capacity and knowledge and 2) education of members on a range of issues such as domestic violence, organizational development, HIV/AIDS, pesticides, political issues, labor and immigrant rights, women's rights, and women's health. A second layer of learning and knowledge sharing is external to the organization and will be explored in the next section focusing on pedagogy. The external layer involves two aspects as well: 1) teaching and educating community members and 2) working with agencies and service providers to teach them how to be effective in working within the cultural context of the campesina populations.

Action

Within the Líderes Campesinas model of leadership, taking the steps from the demystification of leadership and advocacy to empowerment and learning leads to taking

⁵⁴ We are empowering the member.

⁵⁵ Ramona Felix, Interview, Coachella, 14 July 2005.

action both on the individual and collective levels. In terms of collective action, Líderes Campesinas does engage in grassroots organizing work around its core programs (such as labor conditions like sexual harassment and pesticides, domestic violence prevention and health) but many of its campaigns and efforts are done in partnership with broader coalitions. For example, Líderes Campesinas has worked for the passage of The Domestic Violence Act with Legal Momentum (formerly NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund) and carries out its environmental justice and pesticide work by being a key member in the Pesticide Action Network or serving on the Environmental Justice Workgroup of the Department of Pesticide Regulation of the state of California.

Illustrating how action follows the steps of empowerment and learning is best illuminated in the work the organization does surrounding violence against women. After seeing a skit that illustrates various forms of violence or participating in trainings, members often begin to take action first on the individual level. While much of this action usually involves referring campesinas to other agencies, these actions have led to Líderes Campesinas making vital contributions towards collective protections and rights. For example, in their work providing legal assistance to individual battered women and referring them to community resources, the organization played a key role in calling attention to the predicament of many abused women who are undocumented and married to legal citizens or permanent residents. Demonstrating the ways in which abusers use citizenship status to retain control and maintain silence about abuse in a relationship, Líderes Campesinas was able to work with other immigrant women's organizations to provide the documentation to Legal Momentum so they could make sure that later versions of The Violence Against Woman Act dealt fairly with the issues that migrant

women face.⁵⁶ In turn, Líderes Campesinas feels that it has not only gotten a better piece of legislation out of their participation, they can also be better advocates because many members now know the “ins and outs” of this law because of their participation.

In terms of taking collective action in their own organizing, they are the first group to organize large-scale events for Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October in farm worker communities that are both large, like Coachella and Ventura, and small like Huron, Madera, and Lamont. These actions include press conferences, marches and vigils for the entire community to attend including families, children, men, and women. Organizers begin with a skit so that community members have the opportunity to learn what violence against women is and community members and farm worker women give testimony to the forms of abuse they have suffered, how they had the courage to stop it, and what steps they took. These demonstrations have created not only a visibility within the community surrounding violence against women, but visible advocates. For example, on three different occasions when women were murdered by their abusers in Madera, Coachella, and Lamont, the families contacted chapter members of Líderes Campesinas who then work with them to hold public vigils for the victim in order to call attention to the fact that the murder was the result, and most extreme form, of domestic violence. Members carried out such vigils with family members who know that making it public is the only way to prevent violence from happening to others and many go on to join the organization. The goal of Líderes Campesinas is to engage families at a very grassroots level, not just about power and control of men over women, but putting the issues women

⁵⁶ For example, Mily reports that when they were first began to participate in this coalition in 1998 and 1999, the members felt that rural and migrant women would not benefit from the law because it often meant that reporting violence would mean losing the family sponsor for legalization. She says it is a triumph that the 2005 version includes a provision for women who are victims of stalking, assault or trafficking to apply for a special U Visa or T Visa with proper documentation like a police, crisis center or shelter report.

face into a larger context of what is happening to them as migrants and laborers in order to work towards a broader vision of healthy women, families, and environments.

While there is a wide range of actions for social change that Líderes Campesinas engages in, much of it would be considered “under the radar” and includes organizing other workers to advocate with foremen to guarantee that basic labor rights are observed without direct confrontation. In a recent case, after learning about labor laws, workers gained a sense of whether their co-workers had a basic knowledge to their rights to sanitary conditions, water, and breaks. When they found out that most workers knew these rights, they devised a collective strategy of talking about these conditions in front of the foreman, incrementally mentioning one kind of demand then another. The fact that all the workers agreed to “talk up” these rights applied subtle pressure which eventually ensured that the restroom and water were available in the morning when their shift started instead of mid-day, and that they did get really get the breaks and a lunch. Their biggest victory was to have the conditions in the fields change and still be hired to work with the same foreman the next season. For Líderes Campesinas members, a win is defined by workers as changing the working conditions while retaining their job, getting hired on for the next season, or keeping the plant in the same location instead of having owners respond with shop flight, as is commonly the case in our current context of globalization.⁵⁷

These actions use collectivity and a tiered kind of action that attempts to vindicate a claim in the calmest fashion before attempting more extreme measures. This follows a

⁵⁷ For a fuller analysis of these strategies, see Jennifer Mendez Bickham, “Creating Alternatives from a Gendered Perspective: Transnational Organizing for Maquila Workers’ Rights in Central America,” in *Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*, eds. Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 121-141.

strategy expressed by members of Líderes Campesinas as “podemos ser calmadas pero tambien podemos ser cabronas.”⁵⁸ In this “calmada/cabrona” strategy, organizers use tiered actions that become incrementally more forceful if they do not see the results they are seeking. One example of this is in the way Líderes Campesinas engages in accountability/leverage politics, making sure governmental agencies and social service providers are responsive to campesina needs and issues. If forms of racism or unaccountability continue, a next step in this strategy is to move towards a politics of leverage that includes finding out who the fiscal sponsors of the governmental agency (or funders or social service providers) are, and applying pressure at that level. Using these tactics, Líderes Campesinas trades on its established reputation and has had several successes where a director who had not previously been responsive suddenly calls and asks to set up a meeting with Líderes Campesinas.

The first draft of this report asked for feedback about whether the organizing work and collective action of the organization goes beyond education and empowerment. Sylvia Berrones, one of the original members of Mujeres Mexicanas and a staff member of Líderes Campesinas, shared, “Our work is hard to measure because unlike the UFW, it is more than just how many new members we have registered.”⁵⁹ As a former UFW organizer, Sylvia shared that their approach reflects a deeper, more holistic kind of social change work that recognizes that campesinas are not only workers but also whole people who operate in multiple contexts outside of the workplace. This is not the kind of labor militancy that is easy to measure because much of the work is not visible in the same

⁵⁸ “We can be calm but we can also be bastards.”

⁵⁹ “Community-Based Collaborative Research.” Discussion following the presentation of the research findings of this report with members of Líderes Campesinas (Maria Elena Valadez, Maria Inés Catalán, Hermelinda Guzmán, Esperanza Sotelo, Silvia Berrones). Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) Summer Institute, Santa Cruz, California, August 2-5, 2006.

ways it is among the strategies employed by Líderes Campesinas that I call underdog strategies. These strategies recognize the disadvantages that organizers confront as rural (often undocumented) women and yet allow for innovative ways to create social change at the individual and collective, as well as the micro and macro levels.

It is based on recognizing that confrontational, direct action may not always be the best course of action for every context and may reflect the stage of development of the organization. Instead of engaging in confrontational politics that directly pressure large structures and institutions to change, Líderes Campesinas often uses a coalitional politics that marshals support from regulatory agencies, NGOs, and other social movement organizations, often larger and better financed, to act in coalition with them and work together to change practices, ideas, policies, and practices that oppress campesinas. Líderes Campesinas intervenes quite directly with agencies or other organizations that attempt to implement what the organization sees as “mainstream” programs that do not take into account the specificity of campesinas’ needs. For example, Líderes Campesinas will “school” an organization or agency, a pedagogical strategy explored at length in the last section of this report, and hold them accountable to serving the needs of campesinas. They will also be the on-the-ground actors in environmental justice, pesticide, or anti-violence networks that provide the kinds of documentation and experiences that help to make policies more relevant for campesinas. This network politics allows a relatively small organization to amplify its impact vertically towards more powerful actors but also laterally among other social movement organizations and NGOs. To illustrate, currently Líderes Campesinas participates in the following kinds of coalitions, alliances, committees, networks, and advisory boards: four Violence Against Women or Anti-

Trafficking networks, two women's health partnerships, four pesticide regulation or environmental justice coalitions, and five rural or farm worker alliances, in addition to collaborating with over twenty-five individuals and organizations on these same issues.

In conclusion, Líderes Campesinas rarely organizes a campaign to directly confront a grower or a sexual harasser but will advocate for an individual or group of campesinas (through empowerment, learning, and/or advocacy) by working at the level of individual action. This strategy uses the philosophy of empowering campesinas to take their destiny into their own hands and to take action accordingly. Rather than seeking to organize others, this approach uses education and empowerment so that others will organize themselves and take ownership of social change processes. It often involves a practice of referral to other agencies partnered with advocacy and accompaniment. When no way to access justice exists or the structures are inadequate for rural, undocumented, farm worker women, then Líderes Campesinas works with coalitions to create new procedures, relationships, knowledge, or legislation in collaboration with others to engage in broader collective action for social change.

| | |
|---|---|
| Accountability and Leverage Politics include: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-confrontational collectivity with incremental action • Calmada/cabrona strategies |
| Relational Politics include: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coalitions and Networks • Documentation and leveraging experience • Equal participation and input |
| Empowerment Politics include | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral partnered with advocacy and accompaniment • Education and empowerment so that others will organize themselves and take ownership of social change processes |

Beyond Social Motherhood: Blurring the Boundaries between Public and Private Leadership

In this section, we document and analyze the gendered quality of the leadership model built by Líderes Campesinas and how their grassroots gendered leadership builds on traditionally gendered roles to organize families and communities, while simultaneously challenging the ways in which these traditions limits women’s participation, agency, and empowerment. While Líderes Campesinas uses family structures to organize, they challenge patriarchal norms and family expectations that lead women to believe that they were born to serve others, be submissive, endure abuse, and work at the cost of their own health, education, and full development as human beings. There is a favorite saying that leadership and organizing begin in the home, and members have many experiences of success utilizing both family-based mobilization and multi-generational organizing. For example, María Inez Catalán says that her family has

enabled the success of their organic family farm. Ramona Felix emphasizes the importance of organizing the family as a way of being a community organizer and leader.

Photos: Multi-generational Organizing



Domestic Violence March
Photo by: Dana Serrato for Praxis International



Domestic Violence Campaign – “Children have a voice”
Photo by: Dana Serrato for Praxis International

Ramona’s interview reflects the gendered grassroots leadership model as both her daughters participate in the state-wide youth network of Líderes Campesinas, and since all the women in her husband’s life have dedicated themselves to Líderes Campesinas, he supports them all. There are several powerful teams of mothers and daughters who participate together in the organization. For example, Hermelinda Guzmán, who serves as the Board President, joined only after her mother Maria Castro, an officer in the Watsonville chapter, began participating and encouraged her siblings and daughter to join.

Unfortunately, much of the literature on Chicana and Mexicana grassroots women’s mobilization reinforces the dichotomy between the public and private sphere within women’s lives and fails to capture the ways in which grassroots women’s organizing blurs these boundaries. For example, in one of the only essays on women’s participation within the UFW, Margaret Rose theorizes women’s participation based on

the roles of Helen Chavez, the wife of César Chavez, and Dolores Huerta, co-founder and long time leader of the UFW. Rose posits two models based on the history and contribution of these two women: one as a supporter, playing a key role, but behind the scenes and rarely speaking publicly; the other playing an active visible leadership role. Her analysis revolves around differences in class, immigration history, and education, and presents a framework in which women have to choose between either supposedly traditional or non-traditional roles, each of which are based on conventionally defined gender roles. The framework does not imagine a form of women's organizing that works toward social transformation in both the public and private spheres in ways which blend women's familial and community roles with new public leadership roles, and which challenges the ways patriarchy, racism, and class bias limit campesinas' full democratic participation in their homes, workplaces, communities, and society at large.

Mary Pardo's critical work documenting and theorizing the work of the Mothers of East Los Angeles claims that women activists engage in community-based organizing and environmental justice struggles only as extensions of their roles as mothers and other traditionally defined gender roles. While not necessarily challenging the confines of these gendered roles, their mobilization expands, transforms, and empowers them while changing how family and community members view them. This form of activism has been studied extensively in Latin America as a form of social motherhood but the theoretical debate has complicated a simplistic understanding of this kind of political organizing as being based on "practical gender interests" rather than "strategic gender interests."⁶⁰ Practical gender interests are forms of activism based on the extension of

⁶⁰ See Tema Kaplan's formulation of female vs. feminist consciousness in "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: the Case of Barcelona 1910-1918," *Signs* (Spring 1982). Maxine Molyneux

women's gender roles, whereas strategic gender interests challenge gender hierarchies and gender-based discrimination. Many social movement scholars critique this formulation on the grounds that it creates a false dichotomy between forms of organizing (e.g. practical versus strategic interests; non-feminist versus feminist; private versus public sphere issues) in ways that do not accurately reflect the range of women's political practices.⁶¹ There is a rich theoretical debate on the ways in which Latin American popular women's movements have blended immediate daily survival issues with broader agendas for social change in ways that bridge the private sphere with broader political, economic and social concerns.

Given this binary way of understanding working class women's grassroots activism, Líderes Campesinas' breaks through this theoretical conundrum about women's activism by blurring the boundaries between public and private and blending traditional and non-traditional roles. The organization does use women's "traditional" family and community roles in its organizing which simultaneously reinforces and transforms those roles. This model ruptures traditional expectations of women, even those imposed by social scientists, because Líderes uses gendered forms of organizing based on women's traditional roles within families and neighborhoods, which positively reinforces women's centrality. It simultaneously challenges the sexism that limits women only to those roles by empowering women to become leaders outside of their homes in public and civic

complicated this argument in "Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women's Interests, State and Revolution in Nicaragua," in *Feminist Studies*, 2 (Summer 1995); and an application of this framework, see Sonia Alvarez *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990 as well as Devra Weber, "Raiz Fuerte: Oral History and Mexicana Farm workers," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, eds. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol Dubois. New York: Routledge, 2000, 393-402.

⁶¹ For critiques see Jennifer Schirmer "The Seeking of Truth and the Gendering of Consciousness" in *'Viva' Women and Protest in Latin America* edited by Sarah A. Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood. 30-64. New York: Routledge, 1993; and Lynn Stephen *Women and Social Movements in Latin America; Power from Below*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.

arenas where they organize in the fields, their workplaces, in the community, at marches, with agencies, and even nationally and internationally. This helps the farm worker women's movement not only to build its base, but also to forge different and creative models of grassroots gendered leadership.

Líderes Campesinas accomplishes this transformative work through modes of gender organizing that include in-home community meetings that utilize food, socializing, and information sharing to organize women and give them resources. These meetings (part family reunion part neighborhood gathering) use family, kin, and community networks to bring together and organize sisters, mothers, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, *comadres*, *vecinas* (neighbors), and girlfriends. Líderes uses cultural forms such as tamaladas, theatrical skits, or novelas in meetings to help women gain knowledge and build capacity as well as develop other forms of sociability and cultures of resistance. Such meaning making exercises are structured into each meeting, especially as each one begins with a reading of Líderes' Mission Statement and each woman present shares a reflection on what being a leader means to her individually. Ultimately, these modes of organizing are apparent in the Pomona headquarters and at meetings where the members, staff, and Board of Directors cook together as a way of creating a social context to their work together. This pedagogy of leadership has taken the best of many traditions and looks part Mary Kay (minus the pink Cadillac), part Tupperware party, part teatro campesino, part neighborhood association, and part family dinner or community potluck.

Levels of Empowerment: Negotiating Leadership and Empowered Families

While layers of oppression shape the living, working and organizing conditions of the members of Líderes Campesinas, these same layers of oppression have the potential to become layers of empowerment. Esperanza Sotelo, before her involvement with Líderes Campesinas thought that as a wife she was obligated to give her husband sex whenever he demanded. When she learned of her rights, she told her husband, “I know my rights and you do not own my body. From now on if we have sex, it is because I agree to it. If you ever force yourself on me again I will call the police and have you arrested because it is sexual assault without my consent.”⁶² He never questioned her again nor did he ever try to exert himself sexually against her will. When leadership begins at home, it contributes to coming to a shared understanding of what empowerment is within families, between husbands and wives and parents and children. Exercising human rights is part of empowerment, but it is not easy. Members focus on encouraging one another to be “intelligent, strong, and patient; and changes in the family happen little by little in order to ensure a healthy and peaceful environment.”⁶³ Reflecting on how stopping violence and coercion in her home changed her, Esperanza said that sharing what she learned with her partner empowers her within her most intimate relationship.

Since I began participating with Líderes I brought back what I learned to my house. Then my life began to change emotionally, financially and sexually. Everything changed within the organization. I no longer had domestic violence problems any longer.⁶⁴

I changed completely. This person has become empowered and I said, ‘no longer will you abuse me, ever.’ I have the power to decide what I want. The person who contributed to these changes is my partner. He has always appreciated

⁶² Sotelo 2005.

⁶³ Mily Treviño, personal correspondence, May 21, 2005.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

education, even if it was the education that I was bring to him. He has changed so much. That was the first step and being in the organization changed my life.

My home life changed since the first moment I decided to stop abuse. So that was a complete change. If you empower other women, they will see their lives change. The bad things that are happening to them will no longer happen. They look for help. They will live differently. That is important because they will discover the power to make their own change.⁶⁵



Esperanza Sotelo advocating to End Domestic Violence
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

While Esperanza's individual empowerment is critical, her sense of empowerment transformed her familial relationships that she passed on to her children. She states, "*Cambio mi vida dentro de la organización porque no nomás me empoderé yo. También les enseñé a mis hijas.*"⁶⁶ Teresa Aviña appreciates the opportunity to share her experiences with other women in Líderes and teach them the lessons she has learned.

Because I always have been living under domestic abuse in Mexico, I lived approximately forty years under violence, then, this way I learned how to help other people to stop violence. I did not want other people to suffer what I suffered.⁶⁷

Several women have daughters who participate in the organization through a youth network which is empowering young women and developing a new generation of leaders. In developing an intergenerational approach to organizing, women use their

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Translation: "My life has changed in this organization, because not only did I Empower myself, I also showed my daughters."

⁶⁷ Teresa Aviña, Interview, Huron, California, September 25, 2005.

roles as mothers and utilize the cultural context of this role to anchor children in this transformative work. Many girls who are nieces, daughters, and granddaughters of members are drawing strength from the leadership they see in the members of Líderes Campesinas.



Photo of youth organizers of Líderes Campesinas
Líderes Campesinas' Archives



Photo of youth organizers of Líderes Campesinas
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

For Esperanza Sotelo, organizing experience has given her partner and children tools to make different choices for their lives, as well as develop more equitable relationships. Her sons, for example, know how to identify domestic violence and have assisted friends and community members to access support and assistance. They have even brought women to Esperanza's doorstep for assistance and guidance regarding domestic violence. Her sons are serving as community resources. Another example of how leadership is generated within the social context and web of relations that surround the women in Líderes is the case of Maura Salazar-Paz, who was the Indigenous Specialist within Líderes Campesinas until she recently resigned. Maura discussed the racism she faced as an indigenous woman but she felt isolated not only in the organization but within her family that initially was not happy about her organizing. Confronting cultural values that proscribe women's place in the home, she faced her

community's perception that women who work outside of the home and travel away from the community are often viewed as questionable women. Maura described that this changed when she was recognized for her work in the community. After that, her son told her that he supported her and "que sigue adelante."⁶⁸ This suggests the ripple effect of educating youth and families and their potential for changing gender relations in later generations. Leadership does not occur in a vacuum outside of the complex web of relations that must be renegotiated to assume leadership but the Líderes Campesinas model has proven that it also promotes collective family and community empowerment. Maura measures her success as a leader through her relationships to family and community. When asked how her son's acknowledgement made her feel, she wept and said that she felt very proud. While initially, Maura's sons and even her brothers questioned her public activities and civic involvement, with time, they saw that what she was learning developed her personally and they have begun to see her leadership as a positive contribution to her role as a mother and as a woman in their community.



Indigenous Women in Lamont – DV Awareness Campaign
Líderes Campesinas' Archives



Mixteco Women Marching Against Domestic Violence
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

⁶⁸ Translation: continue onward.

Pedagogy of Leadership: Transformative Learning and Collective Capacity Building

Líderes Campesinas' philosophy that leadership is an act of collective empowerment is perhaps most evident in their practice of pedagogy. In terms of external learning, the first level is aimed at a broader campesina community in rural California where Líderes Campesinas distribute information and advocate for farm worker women. Campesinas participate through critical reflection and feedback, which is then integrated through continual renewal of teaching materials and approaches. The organization's pedagogical strategy centers on campesinas and ensures that information is accessible to campesinas and that social service providers are "campesina-friendly," meaning that access to services are without racism, sexism, or condescending attitudes that many women encounter. This leads to their second layer of external pedagogy, which is aimed at the agencies and social service providers themselves. Líderes Campesinas positions itself to "school" the professionals, academics, and lawyers that work with campesinas so that information is intelligible from the point of view of campesinas.

The second aspect of transformative learning and information sharing that informs Líderes Campesinas pedagogy occurs on the internal level of the organization and also has two layers. First is the individual information sharing and skill building crucial to the growth of the individual members of Líderes Campesinas who have had limited access to gaining language, literacy, and communication skills and is part of their own internal leadership development and capacity building. A second level of internal teaching occurs among the general membership about a wide variety of issues including human rights, pesticides, and labor rights. These also include women's rights in the workplace, HIV/AIDS, women's reproductive health such as breast and cervical cancer, immigrant

rights, domestic violence, and how governmental agencies work, as well as social service providers.



Leonor López welcoming members and agency representatives
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

Learning as Community Organizing and Neighborly Advocacy
“We are the guides” Paula Placencia

Líderes Campesinas' pedagogy differs from that of the village health promoter or promotora sponsored by the Mexican government. Based on insights gained from my own research in Mexico, I would suggest that their promotora model is aligned with social movement-based modes of rural and indigenous women becoming promoters of their own wellbeing and rights by addressing key issues such as health concerns or labor rights as a mode of community self-determination. Instead of relying on top-down models where foundations or governmental institutions train community women to promote healthcare or a specific knowledge, Líderes Campesinas bases its teaching model on a bottom-up or grassroots form of pedagogy. In Mexico, the government health agency identifies someone from a community that government workers feel might be a leader and selects them to be a promotora. She is removed from the community to receive training on specific health issues according to the governmental agency's programmatic. Upon returning to the community, the promotora holds workshops, distributes the governmental information, gathers signatures from participants, and is paid

per head or per project. While health and medicine are part of basic human rights, they can also form regulatory discourses that governments use to construct governable subjects and well-disciplined citizens through regulation and discipline in the areas of nutrition, health access, and reproductive health. Other forms of medicinal knowledge can encourage new forms of leadership in scenarios in which community members take the information and develop their own community-based models.

Líderes Campesinas' model of community pedagogy is based on different principles. The organization puts campesinas at the center and works through a process of assessing the needs of campesinas and developing pedagogy and advocacy based on critical reflection by members working together to identify the content and the form of its pedagogical materials and approaches. The staff and members are trained in specific issues and use theater, home meetings, community gatherings, and art to teach a wide variety of issues such as the prevention of violence against women, breast and cervical cancer awareness, the prevention of pesticide exposure, and how to avoid transferring residual chemicals to family members. These community leaders follow up with women, accompany them to their appointments, help them find the right resources or referrals and then check back with them. Because they base their work on a broader framework of human rights, they differ from other community health outreach workers or promotora because they engage the immediate "how to" from the perspective of the women accessing resources and knowledge in the community. Then they share the information and accompany other women on their process of learning. Rather than just focusing on health, their organizational focus is on dignity and respect and through this method they have been able to live in more healthy and peaceful environments.

Staff member Paula Placencia explained the philosophy of community education which blends qualities of neighborly advocate with those of an outreach worker and community-based educator, developing a more holistic approach for marginalized women. Paula described her work to me step by step: If a woman calls to inform her that she has been exposed to pesticides, Paula discusses the options a woman has and does not feel compelled to force her to do anything. However, Paula will call the woman back in a few days check in with her to see if she went to the doctor or has she filled out the appropriate paper work. Many times Paula or a member of the local Líderes site committee will accompany the woman to the doctor's office, if the woman wishes, but, Paula emphasizes, it is up to each women to take action on their own behalf. "*Nosotras somos guías,*" Paula tells me.⁶⁹ The model that Paula described allows members and staff of Líderes Campesinas to work with campesinas starting from their own experience and serve as guides to processes of empowerment, rather than working as promotoras with an agenda imposed from outside of the community. Paula discussed other difference between Líderes Campesinas and other promotoras. First, many involved with Líderes Campesinas do not work an 8-5 day but are on call or available 24 hours a day. There have been times when Paula has been called at 10:00 or 11:00 pm. Promotoras distribute information but they do not follow-up like Líderes Campesinas does to understand how (or if) women used the information and be available to help women take further action. While women in Líderes identify themselves as "*trabajadoras de alcance*" or outreach workers the work blends community outreach, education, advocacy and accompanying campesinas on their paths towards resources, empowerment, learning, and leadership.

⁶⁹ Translation: We are guides.

Paula says that all the women of Líderes Campesinas have contributed to the development of this model. The ideas come about at the meetings, after convivencias, and the analysis comes forth in all the documents. This is an ongoing process, and as these ideas emerge, they shape and re-shape the model that Líderes uses. When a certain component to the model is not functioning, they revisit it, seek alternatives, discuss it thoroughly, and often create a ‘Plan B.’ Paula describes how trainings and forms of knowledge are first introduced into a new community, and how the members utilize the views of women in the community to assess the need for that information. Then they decide whether they should hold a training session for mass dissemination in the community.

Many new members that need training. Statewide there are about 500 members. Some committees are as large as 30-40 active members. So the training is given to 2 women from each region, and the 5 youth [sic]. When the trainees return to their area with the new material, they are responsible for receiving 15 contacts a month. This is how they are able to reach out to over 3,000 women. The contact is a 3-page questionnaire, which is presented by the trainee. The questioner has very specific questions, such as, ‘have you ever had training on pesticides?’ ‘do you know what pesticides are?’. Depending on the knowledge that the women have, the trainee (member of Líderes Campesinas) shares the information that she received at the training. The women are then asked to fill out another paper that discusses what they learned and how their experience was with the trainee. Every trainee is given \$50 for every 15 contacts that they receive, per month. After receiving all the contacts, they analyze the surveys to see what it is that the community needs or what they know and don’t know. This will determine how often they will hold trainings in the area.

Beyond the Pamphleteer: Reuniones Educativas as Community-based Learning

Líderes Campesinas’ method of transformative learning and leadership development is based on generating and applying knowledge within the community setting. There is an ongoing process of support as members put knowledge into practice.

Staff and members assist women to find solutions, support, services, or additional information in their own communities. Informed by many of the principles elaborated by liberation theologian and founder of the Brazilian popular education movement, Paulo Freire, Líderes Campesinas' pedagogical work involves women utilizing critical thinking skills, feeling empowered to assess their own situations and living conditions, and acting collectively to problem solve and create or share resources within the community.⁷⁰ For example, María Aguirre said she has been empowered by the organization as a woman. She feels that her role as a leader involves critical thinking, and assessing and articulating her own analysis in relation to taking action, instead of just distributing flyers or acting as a pamphleteer, as the saying goes in Spanish. She described how her community organizing involves going door to door and sharing information with women, slowly making her way into their homes by offering her help in anything around their house. While most promotoras visit rural areas only periodically or give one-time workshops, Líderes Campesinas grounds the knowledge they are imparting in the lives (literally on the front steps) of the women they are trying to reach and part of their teaching (or enacting leadership) is empowering community women to engage in their own processes of advocacy and information.

One of the most successful educational efforts undertaken by Líderes Campesinas is their work surrounding domestic violence prevention. While domestic violence is not necessarily higher among Latino communities or among farm workers, other factors such as language barriers, isolation, the fear of deportation, and a lack of bicultural and

⁷⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1972).

bilingual services make it difficult for campesinas to leave abusive situations.⁷¹ Líderes Campesinas was among the first organizations to develop a Spanish-speaking prevention program within the lived context of rural Latina and indigenous women. For their innovative leadership on preventing domestic violence they were honored with a national Marshall's and Prevention Fund award in the amount of \$10,000 in 1994. Líderes Campesinas trains women to identify the causes of domestic violence and its symptoms, and explains the resources available to community women. Because educators are campesinas themselves, they know how socio-economic and cultural factors shape the context of violence and the options farm worker women have. As members of the communities, they are uniquely positioned to work to overcome the isolation and linguistic barriers many women face. Moreover, they can build relationships of trust because they are part of the communities and often neighbors with the women they are doing outreach work with. Esperanza Guzman, for example, does much of her community education work and distributes information in the beauty shop, laundry mats, restaurants, and grocery stores. Many women do not initially open their doors for Líderes women because they do not want their husbands to know they are talking about private issues. This is especially true in issues of domestic violence. But with persistency, Esperanza finds, little by little the women open up their doors. This is how they organize women and get them to go to the meetings.

⁷¹ "Three Success Stories," Community Mobilization for Domestic Violence Prevention, Marin Abused Women's Services, 1998.



Educational Meeting. Líderes Campesinas' Archives



Educational Meeting. Líderes Campesinas' Archives



Educational Meeting. Líderes Campesinas' Archives

Over the years, Líderes has developed different pedagogical methods for community education. They use teatro and mini-dramas or skits, visual techniques such as drawing and visual learning cues, as well as utilizing the orality of bilingual radio stations heard throughout rural farm worker communities in California. Esperanza Sotelo recalls when they first began to think about using teatro in Coachella.

In a committee reunion we were asked in which other ways we could educate the community. The answer was knocking on the doors; in the super markets, but then somebody had the idea of a theater. They said how do you write a skit or a mini-drama. And I said, I love it. Yes, I can write a poem or a paragraph. Yes I can write something. I am going to write a skit.

And we started to see that a skit was educating, because you can see people crying. And at the end of the presentation, you can talk a little to make sure people identify with the topic.⁷²

Educational community outreach theater is a key tool in their repertoire. They have developed skits regarding pesticide exposure, labor conditions, sexual harassment,

⁷² Sotelo 2005.

domestic violence, and reproductive health issues. Some skits cover multiple topics. Working through the drama of skits or teatro, the issues they teach become more tangible when placed in the lived context of the women’s lives in a member’s house, at an educational meeting or community conference. For example, the members create scenarios in Spanish about domestic violence, teen pregnancy, or sexual harassment. Instead of an abstract construct, the subtle power relationships and forms of abuse become visible through skits, and audience members often recognize patterns of behavior in their own lives and identify with the performers. Teatro is then followed with presentations and discussion on sexuality, taboos, and the cycle of domestic violence, sexual harassment law, or information about pesticide exposure as well as community resources. Identifying and publicly discussing one kind of abuse often makes it easier to talk about other forms of abuse.



Coachella members preparing to present a drama
Líderes Campesinas’ Archives



Drama on Domestic Violence
Líderes Campesinas’ Archives

Esperanza Guzmán has taken part in some of Líderes dramas. She believes that teatro is integral to their organizing. *“por que la gente entiende y aprende tanto con el teatro, que es increíble. Lo que puede uno a veces hablar, se les olvida, hasta leer. Pero lo que mira una actuar, como que no se les olvida [...] que saben que no son artistas. Pero sin embargo, lo hacen tan bien, por que la mayoría de ellas lo han vivido, o lo hemos vivido.*

Por eso lo actuamos bien."⁷³ They improvise in their theatrical skits but draw from their lived experiences. Esperanza continues, "*como los pesticidas, lo hemos vivido. Han estado roseando casi arriba de nosotros lo pesticidas, y no tenemos que memorizarlo ni que estudiarlo.*"⁷⁴

Visuals and teatro are key for many campesinas who are not literate or have had extremely few opportunities for formal schooling beyond grade school. Drawings are also an important pedagogical tool used in Líderes Campesinas community educational work, curriculum, and training. Líderes uses drawings in their flyers and educational materials to convey messages visually. Virginia Ortega was the main artist and visual creator in the organization whose images appeared on many of the organization materials, for the Convivencias, and as part of the curriculum. Virginia narrates how she comes to her drawings.

I was thinking how to present a graphic about all the barriers that farm worker have to be serve by agencies. I am dreaming in a draw of a farm worker in the middle of a labor camp and then the title, "The Barriers that Farm worker Women Confront."⁷⁵



By Virginia Ortega
Líderes Campesinas' Archives

⁷³ Guzman 2005. Translation: Because the people understand and learn so much with the theater, it is incredible. What someone can talk about, you forget if you read it. But what we see acting you don't forget it.... We know they are not actresses. However they do it so well because most of them have lived it, or we have lived it. That is why we portray it well.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Translation: We have lived with pesticides. They have sprayed pesticides almost on top of us so we don't have to memorize or study this.

⁷⁵ Ortega 2005.

The new training manuals that Líderes Campesinas has been working to complete, presents information through visual images so that women can better retain the information. Visual images, as well as written text, go through a deliberative and critical reflection process. Paula explains that the new manuals use images that represent different situations of the women organizing. Staff members went all over the state to ask women which pictures best represent the message they want to convey. The members decided which of the images that were submitted were to become part of the new manuals that will be used at future trainings.

These strategies affect communities and individual women in direct and indirect ways. For example, Laura Gil shares how the information she learned at educational meetings affected her.

I liked because there are a lot of things that I have been learning from them. And even today, I learn something every day. We have trainings from different things and if there are things that we do not even imagine we realize how things happened. ... For example pesticides, all the harm that this can cause to several persons and people that live near the field. Before that was natural but now that we know all the harm that it causes, we say wow. Look what I did not know.⁷⁶

Lucia Molina, one of the original members of Mujeres Mexicanas and a participant in Líderes, for nearly twenty years, has a long range view. When asked if she has seen changes in her community and in her family because of the work, she answers,

Yes, the change is evident since I work with young girls. They are really involved and many of the girls do not aspire to just get married [anymore]. They are thinking instead of their studies. So then I see this change in the girls. The mothers get involved and come up with their own ideas. They volunteer their homes to have meetings or activities. People of the community are impressed by the theatre work of the girls, as visual communication. Theatre has helped many understand the plight--- struggle of the campesinas and what we do, such as gringos who don't speak Spanish[but can see the actors]. We see our work is effective, our work

⁷⁶ Laura Gil, Interview, Ventura, California, November 12, 2005.

shows and we are known, we are often asked to collaborate with other organizations. 10 years ago, Coachella Valley had the 2nd highest youth pregnancy rate in the nation. Not any more. They are only 4th now. Therefore, changes are evident.⁷⁷

Individual Capacity Building and Líderes Campesinas as a Community of Learning

Empowerment is not measured in the women's lives through the conventional ways power is measured in our society, such as electoral power or money. In our interviews, we see a close relationship between collective empowerment and leadership, measured by how women provide their children with different options, counted by every new word learned, read and written, and tallied in every new voice they help raise in their on-going efforts as community organizers. In terms of pedagogy, it is important to speak of how that the organization helps teach the community but also the palpable ways in which women learn and build capacity within the organization. When asked about her own leadership development, for example, Herminia Arenas, a Mixtec indigenous member, speaks of the skills she learned participating in Líderes such as improving her ability to speak, read, and write in Spanish. While she has been denied the opportunity to study formally, this learning within the organization is a pedagogy of leadership and liberation.

Another indigenous member, Leonor Lopez, speaks directly about the barriers to education she faced and how Líderes Campesinas provided her with an alternative community of learning and capacity building, which has been essential for becoming a leader. The topic of education came up as Leonor recalled an experience she had at a meeting she attended in Fresno where there were white women present. They began discussing why farm worker women do not get an education. Leonor said the white

⁷⁷ Molina 2005.

women claimed that farm worker women are not educated because they must not really want to be; if they did want to, they could do it. Evidently oblivious to the particular barriers faced by farm worker women, the white women rationalized that if they as single mothers or divorced women could get an education, campesinas should be able to do so as well. Leonor shared her frustration that the women did not recognize their privilege based on race and citizenship status, as well as the resources available to them such as financial aid or student loans. She said “*No pusieron atención a lo que nosotros estábamos diciendo, por que para la vida de una mujer anglo-sajona a la vida de una mujer campesina es muy difícil y muy diferente. Por que ellas por ser de aquí tienen mucho ayuda del gobierno, les cuida los niños para que vayan a la escuela, les pagan para que vayan a la escuela [...] todo lo tienen [...] en charola de plata, se los ponen bien fácil para que ellos haga sus estudios.*”⁷⁸ Despite her frustration because she came to the U.S. with the dream of education, one that she has not yet been able to fill, Leonor said that “*Líderes si me educó, aunque no sea una escuela formal.*”⁷⁹ So even though Líderes is not a school in the formal sense, she regards it as a space for learning where she has learned the law, and about human rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, and men’s rights as well.

Hermelinda shared another example of learning and capacity building that occurs that impacts individuals in the organization. Her participation taught her new skills such as being able to facilitate a meeting and lead the leaders. Hermelinda told me how she became aware of just how far her leadership skills had come.

⁷⁸ Lopez 2005. Translation: “They did not pay attention to what we were saying, because compare to the life of an Anglo-Saxon woman, a farm worker woman’s life is harder and very different. Anglo-Saxon woman have many more help from the government because they were born here, they have child care so they can go to school, they get paid to go to school (...) they have everything (...) like in a silver platter; they have an easier way to finish their studies.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Translation: Líderes did educate me, even though it is not a formal school.

*Ya después cuando me di cuenta que*⁸⁰ I was the one running them without nobody having to tell me this or have nobody having to tell me *que es lo que seguía.*⁸¹ Oooh I was just like wow, this is what I wanted you know, this is leadership in me, leadership in the board, running in unity.⁸²

Young and older women alike learn new skills and capabilities through language, and they gain new confidence in their verbal skills. For example, while Hermelinda did speak Spanish before she came to Líderes, working with the organizing through her participation as the statewide adolescent representative (as well as through her role as President of the Board of Directors) helped her to gain English/Spanish bilingual reading and writing skills. She now presents her oral and written reports in Spanish and has gained bilingual proficiency and a sense of cultural belonging. Maria Inez Catalán also speaks about how learning led to her coming into her own voice by saying, “*El ser yo, que se que no tengo miedo de decir lo que yo quiero a cualquier persona o político.*”⁸³

Teresa Aviña also draws the connection between learning and speaking back:

I like it a lot, because I learn, and then there is no fear of talking because I was one of the persons that didn't talk when I came to Líderes. I was afraid of talking, I was afraid of communicating with people, I was living with a very low self-esteem. But now, I can communicate with any person.

As individuals change, community perceptions also change. Community members come to rely on members like Maria Aguirre for sources of information. María's life has changed significantly since her involvement with Líderes. Before she was not engaged in the community, she rarely spoke to people. Now, everyone trusts her and she can talk to

⁸⁰ Translation: After I realized.

⁸¹ Translation: What was next.

⁸² Hermelinda Guzmán, Interview, Salinas, 8 August, 2005.

⁸³ Translation: Being myself, I know that I am not afraid of saying what I want to any person or politician.

anyone. She has become a community resource. She has noticed the change in her neighbors as they often ask her “¿Oye cuando nos traes mas papelitos?”⁸⁴

Teaching “Experts:” Pedagogical Strategies for Agencies, Professionals, and Social Service Providers

Líderes Campesinas also serves as a bridge to facilitate better teaching between agencies and social service providers and campesinas. Líderes meets with agencies and social service providers, and invites them to make a presentation to the membership with all the relevant materials. Líderes invites a few members to serve as a focus group to evaluate the presenters from the agencies who are usually positioned as “experts.” This process of campesinas giving feedback to the “experts” utilizes and validates campesina expertise and life experience while also teaching the agencies how to reach out more effectively to farm worker women. Paula emphasizes that prior to the agencies coming to give a training session to the membership, the staff asks the agency about the kind of information they are bringing. This ensures that the resources are adequate for campesinas in terms of language and accessibility. She finds that because the materials about pesticides, for example, tend to be quite technical, it is extremely important that the information is accessible for the campesinas.

Mily says that it usually takes more than one meeting to convince the agency experts to listen to the campesinas’ feedback. Remarking about how experts view campesinas’ suggestions to make the material more accessible and relevant which challenges their position, she says, “It’s Chingona! You are telling them you know more about your own community than they do. The experts do know about the topic but they don’t always know how to teach it to the community.” In some instances relationships

⁸⁴ Translation: Hey, when will you bring more flyers?

they have developed with agencies have turned into lasting partnerships. For example, after many meetings with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and working with them, Líderes finally just became a co-presenter with them.

Líderes Campesinas began to ‘teach’ the experts out of frustration with a number of experiences when service providers and agencies had treated campesinas poorly. Before meeting with an agency to help train their agents, Líderes Campesinas does research on how these agencies have treated campesinas and the community reputation of their personnel. While Paula believes agencies offer important services, sometimes the agency workers treat people unfairly. If that’s the case, she will speak to the director, or simply not refer women there. Líderes Campesinas does not work with the agencies to provide “cultural competency” workshops to professionals. They work with them in planning meetings to prepare training curricula on various health subjects. These meetings, conversations, and interactions serve to develop trust with staff, members, and constituents. These in turn help Líderes Campesinas conduct informal, hands-on training about working in the community within the cultural context of how people live.

In the face of poor treatment from social service providers, many women from marginalized communities feel disenfranchised and simply do not make use of the social service provider or governmental agency. Líderes Campesinas, however finds ways to hold the agencies accountable by advocating for community members and/or guiding them to advocate for themselves. Examples include helping or guiding people to fill out paperwork correctly or speaking to the agency director about any abuse or mistreatment. Líderes is also consolidating information about statewide resources in the form of a directory. The directory, to be distributed at each training, will contain the details on the

different agencies and resources relevant to campesinas. Paula stressed the importance of visiting agencies before sending women there, because they do not want to send the women to an agency or public service provider where they will have a bad experience.

Esperanza Sotelo stresses that it is as important to educate the agencies as it is to educate campesinas and their communities. “*Deseamos no nada mas educar a la mujer campesina, a la familia de ella, pero también se educa a las agencias.*”⁸⁵ She further comments on the historic role Líderes has undertaken in relation to the agencies. “*Y eso tiene que ser parte de la historia de la organización de Líderes Campesinas porque ninguna agencia ha educado a agencias como lo hizo Líderes. Entonces también educamos a las agencias. También les hemos enseñado, mira esto es lo que piensa la mujer campesina. Esto es lo que quiere en su comunidad.*”⁸⁶ When asked about what the agencies learn from Líderes Campesinas, Teresa Aviña replied, “*Otra agencias pueden aprender de Líderes, como Líderes puede aprender de las agencias.*”⁸⁷ This speaks to the dialectic of learning that Líderes Campesinas uses in its popular education and pedagogical methodologies. Further, it illustrates how Líderes shifts the relations of knowledge and power with service providers and agencies by including them in their pedagogical model.

This study documents the history of Líderes Campesinas, as well as how the multiple forms of oppression campesinas face shape their multidimensional approach and diverse repertoire of organizing strategies. It documents the leadership model of this

⁸⁵ Sotelo 2005. Translation: “Our wish is not only to educate farm worker woman, their family, we also educate agencies.”

⁸⁶ Ibid. Translation: And this has to be part of the history of Lideres Campesinas because no agency has educated other agencies like Lideres Campesinas has done it. Then we also educate agencies. We also have thought, look this is what a farm worker woman thinks. This is what she wants for her community.

⁸⁷ Aviña 2005. Translation: Other agencies can learn from Lideres Campesinas, like Lideres can learn from agencies.

organization based on empowerment, education, and action. Finally, it analyzes the pedagogical models and strategies Líderes Campesinas employs in their teaching, which is both external and internal to their organization. While Líderes Campesinas has a rich history, it also must face the challenges that most organizations confront at this stage in their development: leadership transition. However, the members and staff of Líderes Campesinas are well positioned to tackle this challenge. The 10-15-year mark is often a “make or break it” time for organizations when the founding leadership and/or director rotate out of their tenure at the helm; a crossroads that many organizations face unsuccessfully. Additionally, the farm worker movement faces a multitude of challenges – including a different worker population that is largely undocumented – in the face of heated debate on immigration reform, as well as an anti-immigrant backlash. While, the UFW has been criticized recently by the press for abandoning their original organizing mission, Líderes Campesinas offers an important model of grassroots mobilization that takes a multidimensional approach to addressing the issues, challenges, and problems farm worker women face in their workplaces, communities, and homes.⁸⁸ This does not mean there are not new organizing challenges. For example, Líderes Campesinas needs to create more profound bridges among the growing Mexican indigenous population in the state, which is estimated to be 20% of the farm worker population by 2010. To avoid the ethnic discrimination and competition growers use as they attempt to substitute and pit one labor group against the other, this organization, along with many social justice groups, must find new ways to combat racism and sexism that is both external in the

⁸⁸ See for example the four part series published by the *Los Angeles Times*: Miriam Pawel, “UFW: A BROKEN CONTRACT: Farm workers Reap Little as Union Strays From Its Roots,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2006.

larger dominant society as well as internal to their community. Given their vibrant record of creating leaders for the 21st century, they have a strong tradition and effective models to draw upon to create a new generation of leaders to meet these continuing challenges.

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Chronology

1981

- October, Mily became “community worker” with CRLA (California Rural Legal Assistance)

1988

- Several Coachella women began organizing the questioner for the needs assessment of farm worker women for Maria Elena Lopez’s Cal State Long Beach Masters Thesis.
- Questioner consisted of 144 questions.
- May/June, the interviews for the needs assessment were conducted, lasting 6 weeks.
- June/July, formation of “Union de Mujeres Mexicanas” (MM)
- Members of MM had an idea to name a local elementary school after Cesar Chavez

1990

- With the help and organizing efforts of MM, the first school to be named after Cesar Chavez was built in Coachella.
- First conference held by MM

1991

- MM continued with Sylvia as the 2nd president of MM
- March, the Farm worker Justice Fund (FWJ) held national meeting for farm worker women.
- April, Mily proposes the idea to begin organizing farm worker women in other rural areas around California to the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation’s (CRLAF) Executive Director, Marion Standish.
- August, Mily left Coachella to Pomona for school at Mt. SAC

1992

- CRLAF received \$8,000 from the Ms. Foundation to start a project and organize farm worker women, providing training on various topics such as media, finances, organizing, etc. and form groups of farm worker women.
- October 31, Mily signed contract with CRLAF to start organization as a statewide organization under their Farmworker Women in Leadership project.
- November, 1st committee was formed in Coachella.

1993

- February, more than 15 committees were active in different areas and regions of the state
- July, 1st Convivencia held in Fresno, CA. Women from 18 different areas were present.
- July 30, City of Fresno presented LC with the City Key proclaiming July 30th “*Dia de la Mujer Campesinas*”

1994

- 2nd needs assessment was prepared and done by the CRLAF farm worker women's leadership project. Project was done in seven rural areas of California.
- February, with the funding from the Farmworker Justice Fund, HIV training was provided in San Juan Bautista.
- March, statewide advisory committee in Fresno. The FWJ attended. There was an HIV project.
- July, 2nd Convivencia
 - Youth program was requested.
 - Larger and longer than the last.
 - Women from 15 different areas were present.
 - Formation of 3 different committees (finance, training, executive)

1995

- September, Beijing conference
- October, Family Violence program was granted a \$10,000 national award from the Prevention Fund and Marshals
 - Same time Clinton announced that October would be domestic violence month.

1996

- Líderes was able to be a spin off from CRLA towards a non-profit organization
- May, advisory committee with support from Grizelle Apodaca, pushed for non-profit status, with the support of The Women's Foundation, Patti Chang, Executive Director met with Mily, Claudia Galvez and Gloria Hernandez (co-workers under CRLA)
 - formation of board of directors
 - beginning to understand the mission of Líderes Campesinas, its structure, titles, names, etc.

1997

- September, official formation of "Organización en California de Líderes Campesinas"
- March, gained non-profit status
- Mily named executive director
- Under an economic development project, funded by Oxfam America, Líderes Campesinas began hiring campesinas as staff
 - The following were trainees were outreach workers and became Specialists after their first year of training: Virginia Ortega as a specialist in domestic violence, Laura Caballero as a specialist in pesticides, Raquel Sotelo to help build HIV and Sexual Assault program under the economic development project
 - fundraising began to start developing programs and structure
- Esperanza Sotelo, 2nd board president
- Paula Placencia, 3rd board vice president
- Fundraising

1998

- Hired 3 more campesinas to train
- Statewide advisory committee of youth

- May/June, retreat in Madera facilitated by Grizelle Apodaca as consultant
 - Worked on a 3-5 year strategy plan
 - Hold a Convivencia soon
 - Double amount of money
 - Double amount of staff

1999

Youth maintained a vote on the board

2000

- From 1994-2000, a Convivencia had not been held as a response to a resolution made in 1994.
 - The 1994 resolution stated that another Convivencia would not be organized until they were able to build a non-profit organization, fundraise, provide training to membership and issues with priority, etc.
- Continued hiring under economic development program
- 3rd Convivencia
 - Líderes Campesinas developed programmatic structure: Working Conditions, Family Violence, Youth, Women's Health – called for two other programs such as Elders (Terser Dead), Education (Farm worker Women Institute). In addition, they worked towards the development of a program that would provide accreditation and validate trainings.
- 1st time youth member, Cynthia Flores becomes VP of the board of directors, pushing for internships, scholarships and funding for programs

2001

- Lucy's annual budget reached one million dollars.
- LC was able to start building true collaborations with agencies and law enforcement so they can begin system changes with outreach methods, agency priorities, training methods and materials.

2002

- Terser dead was named under Julia Medina (deceased 2002); Mrs. Medina was the First Sergeant of Arms and co-founder in 1993.
- Agreement that Convivencias would be organized every 2 years
- 4th convivencia held in Visalia, CA

2004

- March, 5th Convivencia held in Monterey County, at the Sylmar Conference Center
- September, board election determined the first time a youth member, Hermelinda Guzman is president of board

