



WOMEN ON THE LINE

A REVIEW OF WORKPLACE GENDER ISSUES
IN THE US POULTRY INDUSTRY



OXFAM
America

Women on the line

A review of workplace gender issues in the US poultry industry

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Executive Summary

Working on the line in a poultry plant is grim at best. The strenuous and repetitive work takes a terrible toll on workers' bodies and minds. These people clock into work and 1) suffer high rates of illnesses and injuries that rob them of strength and dexterity; 2) earn low pay; and 3) experience a climate of fear that prevents them from speaking out.¹

Workers stand at processing lines for hours on end, making the same motions tens of thousands of times a day. The plant is cold, humid, and slippery with grease, blood, offal, and water. The air is full of chemicals from cleaning, processing, and cooking. The line moves rapidly while workers wield sharp tools. As a result, workers suffer occupational illnesses at five times the national average, carpal tunnel at seven times the average, and amputations at three times average.² They also suffer from trigger finger, "claw hand," tendinitis, and ganglionic cysts.³

While these conditions threaten the health and safety of all workers, there is increasing realization that they may pose more dangers to women than to men. Roughly half of the 250,000 workers in the poultry industry are women, and the hazards in the plant threaten their safety every day.

The reasons why women suffer more are many: multidimensional factors of biological differences between the sexes, including menstruation and pregnancy; culture, age, societal gender roles; social, familial, and economic ties to their geographic location, which limit employment options; and power dynamics which increase the vulnerability of women to injury, infection, mental health issues, sexual violence, and pregnancy complications. These problems have an impact far beyond the workplace; they reach homes, family lives, and communities.

About the report

Despite the fact that the problems facing poultry workers are well-documented in many works, few studies have examined the special circumstances of women poultry workers. This report offers a step forward in pointing a gender lens at the industry; it is based on new interviews with workers, advocates, and experts, and provides a comprehensive review of the existing documentation.

Health risks in poultry plants

Although all poultry workers are vulnerable to repetitive strain injuries and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), women have characteristics that both increase their likelihood of suffering, and decrease their ability to recover. Among the differences:

- **Differential rates of exertion:** Working on the poultry processing line requires gripping scissors and knives while cutting through meat and bone, trimming skin, and pulling tenders. While this work takes a variable toll on individuals, on average, women need to work harder to accomplish the same strength-based tasks as men.⁴
- **Size and industrial standards:** Most production lines are one-size-fits-all, and that size is usually the average male. The height of lines, work surfaces, and tools are oriented to accommodate larger people. Many women struggle to reach further and higher, and end up in awkward positions.⁵

- **Policies that prevent rest and recovery:** For workers in most poultry plants, breaks are brief and scarce. The failure to provide adequate breaks may pose particular risks for pregnant workers.
- **Responsibilities at home:** Women spend more time than men performing household and caretaking work, even if both work outside the home full-time.⁶ Lack of recovery time, especially a lack of muscular relaxation, may increase the risk of disorders.

Denial of bathroom breaks

Most poultry workers report that they are routinely denied permission to leave the line and go to the bathroom. Under pressure to meet daily quotas, supervisors need to keep the line going; there are seldom enough “floaters” (assistant workers) to stand in for the person on the line, even for a few minutes.

Workers report that people cope in many ways: by dehydrating themselves, urinating on themselves while standing on the line, or even wearing diapers to work. The lack of sufficient bathroom breaks is of particular concern for women, who have special needs during menstrual periods and pregnancy, and are especially susceptible to urinary tract infections (UTIs).

The risks can be grave if women do develop infections. Studies show that poultry workers who handle chicken flesh that is treated with antibiotics may build a resistance to those antibiotics;⁷ this can lead to serious health problems if a worker suffers from a UTI that is untreatable.

Sexual harassment

Women poultry workers report an unusually high degree of sexual harassment and abuse. In one survey, a fifth of workers said they or someone they knew was subjected to unwelcome touching of a sexual nature.⁸ Thirty-four percent reported that they or someone they knew had been subjected to unwelcome sexual comments. Many workers have reported that supervisors walk down the line rubbing the backsides of women.

Sexual assailants take advantage of the fact that many women workers are undocumented, unable to communicate in English, and economically vulnerable; they believe that unwanted advances will likely go unreported and unpunished.

Conclusion

Women poultry workers face challenges to their physical and mental health every day. The industry must change company policies and practices to accommodate gender differences and ensure that both workers and supervisors are aware of and abide by them. In general, the industry should change the way it treats workers, by:

- compensating workers fairly;
- providing a healthy and safe environment in plants, and caring for workers properly when they’re injured; and
- allowing workers to have a greater voice in the workplace, ensuring they understand their rights, and providing an atmosphere of tolerance to act on those rights.

In addition, the federal government should pursue greater oversight of the industry and safeguard the health and welfare of the roughly 250,000 workers in the processing plants.

The problems identified in this report in no way suggest that women, including pregnant women and family caretakers, should not work in poultry plants. Rather, it is incumbent upon the poultry plants to address these problems, to make working in the plants a safer and healthier experience for all workers.

Introduction

Life on the line in a poultry plant is grim at best. Processing jobs are dirty, dangerous, and difficult. They take a terrible toll on the bodies and minds of workers.

As the industry pushes for maximum productivity, workers 1) suffer high rates of illnesses and injuries that rob them of strength and dexterity; 2) earn low pay; and 3) experience a climate of fear that prevents them from speaking out.

Workers stand at processing lines for hours on end, making the same motions tens of thousands of times a day. The plant is cold, humid, and slippery with grease, blood, offal, and water. The air is full of chemicals from cleaning, processing, and cooking. The line moves rapidly while workers wield sharp tools. This work takes a toll: workers suffer occupational illnesses at five times the national average and carpal tunnel syndrome at seven times the average. The dangers are exacerbated by the cold temperatures and the humidity inside the plants, each of which contributes to the development of musculoskeletal injuries (MSDs).⁹

Most poultry plants use a “point system” to monitor workers and enforce rules, keeping track of infractions such as absences, mistakes, even injuries. In practice, workers experience the system as unfair and dehumanizing; they are often anxious and confused about how the system works. When the company wants to penalize or dismiss a worker, they can refer to the points, with no other explanation. Rarely is the system explained or documented; many workers don’t know how many points they have or how close they are to being fired. The lack of clarity makes it difficult for workers to understand and cope with how they are treated.¹⁰

While these conditions and practices threaten the health and safety of all workers, they may pose more dangers to women than to men. Roughly half of the 250,000 workers in the poultry industry are women, and the hazards in the plant threaten their safety every day.

The reasons why women suffer more are many: multidimensional factors of differences between the sexes, including menstruation and pregnancy; culture, age, societal gender roles; and power dynamics which increase the vulnerability of women to injury, infection, mental health issues, sexual violence, and pregnancy complications.

In addition, women more often than men report that working in the local poultry plant is their only option. They are more likely to be geographically tied to the town where they live, by such things as children in school or extended family providing childcare. Most plants are located in rural areas, where employment options are few. Men may have more flexibility to relocate or to travel; and there are usually more jobs available in historically male-dominated occupations, even within the poultry plant (eg, truck driver).

These problems have an impact far beyond the workplace; they reach homes, family lives, and communities.

History of the poultry workforce

The poultry industry has a complicated history of tapping marginalized populations for its workforce. Today, most of the 250,000 workers in poultry processing are minorities, immigrants, refugees, or even prisoners.¹¹

Angela Stuesse, who has written several works on the poultry industry, says that as the industry started industrializing after World War II, the workforce was primarily composed of white women. As African Americans pushed for a greater place in the industry, African American women were the first to integrate the plants. During the 1970s, as these workers began to organize and fight for their rights, the industry started to look for new workers. Stuesse reports that industry executives decided at first to encourage the recruitment of Latino immigrants; today, poultry workers come from countries all over the world (from Asia, Africa, Pacific Islands, Latin America).

LaGuana Gray reports that black women were the source of most of the workforce in many Southern poultry plants for decades (until the end of the twentieth century). “The industry capitalized both on their status as women, constructed as more compliant and docile than men, and on the historical defeminization of black women, which characterized them as fit for the dangerous, arduous, often grisly work usually reserved for men.”¹²

About the report

Despite the fact that the problems facing poultry workers are well-documented in many articles, research reports, and books, few studies have examined the special circumstances of women poultry workers. This report offers a step forward in pointing a gender lens at the industry; it presents a comprehensive review of the existing documentation, and adds information from interviews with people knowledgeable about the issue.

Research for this report included a comprehensive review of existing literature, including peer-reviewed studies, reports from non-profit and advocacy organizations, surveys, media coverage, educational materials, and medical studies.

The report draws most heavily on four relevant reports:

- *Lives on the Line: The human cost of cheap chicken* by Oxfam America;
- *Wages and Working Conditions in Arkansas Poultry Plants* by the Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center;
- *Injustice on Our Plates* by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC); and
- *We Just Keep Running the Line: Black Southern Women and the Poultry Processing Industry* by LaGuana Gray, Louisiana State University Press.

Interviews were conducted with these experts:

- Magaly Urdiales is a worker advocate at the Western North Carolina Workers’ Center in Morganton, NC, where she coordinates programs that educate and empower workers.
- LaGuana Gray is assistant professor of history at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the author of *We Just Keep Running the Line: Black Southern Women and the Poultry Processing Industry*. The book uses oral histories to illustrate the physical and psychological dangers that black women endure in southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana while working in poultry plants.

- Ahmed Ali is lead organizer at the Greater Minnesota Worker Center in St. Cloud, MN. He regularly works with current and former poultry workers.
- Liz Chacko is supervising attorney at Friends of Farmworkers, an organization headquartered in Philadelphia that provides free legal representation and community education to low-wage agricultural workers in Pennsylvania. The organization has represented more than 150 poultry workers over the past ten years.
- Marielle Macher is staff attorney at the Community Justice Project in Harrisburg, PA, and practices in the areas of civil rights, immigration rights, and employment law. She has worked with former and current poultry workers.

Health Risks in Poultry Plants

By nature, poultry work happens in a harsh environment that poses many dangers to workers on the line. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) lists some of the risk factors in what is officially labeled a “hazardous industry”: musculoskeletal disorders such as carpal tunnel syndrome; slips, trips, and falls on wet surfaces; cuts and lacerations; exposure to disinfectant chemicals or byproducts known to cause respiratory irritation and asthma; spices, flour, and coatings linked to bronchitis, cough, and allergic reactions; cold temperatures and humidity, associated with increased injuries; infectious agents, such as bacteria, linked to diarrheal diseases and other skin infections.¹³

By far the most commonly reported injuries result from the repetitive strain of doing the same task over and over, quickly, hour after hour. A line worker in a poultry plant repeats the same strenuous trimming, cutting, or hanging motion tens of thousands of times per shift. As poultry plants impose rapid and relentless line speeds, workers report having to perform their task at least every two seconds to keep up.

Not only do workers repeat the same motions at very fast speeds, but they also often have to use significant force—pulling, hacking, and twisting—to accomplish the task. The tools provided by the poultry plants (knives, scissors, and other tools) are often inadequately sharpened, requiring workers to exert even more force to accomplish the same task. In addition, workers are allowed few breaks throughout the day, and rarely if ever are given the chance to change or rotate positions; they use the same muscles and nerves for hours on end.

As a result, poultry workers incur pain, injuries, and illnesses at alarming rates. They suffer occupational illnesses at five times the national average, carpal tunnel at seven times the average, and amputations at three times average.¹⁴ They also suffer from trigger finger, “claw hand” (in which the injured fingers lock in a curled position), tendinitis, and ganglionic cysts (fluid deposits under the skin).¹⁵

Despite widespread reports of people consistently “working through pain,”¹⁶ most workers report that medical personnel in the plants most often treat their ailments with basic first aid care. They say they usually get “Advil and Ace bandage” treatments,¹⁷ which are often inappropriate for the severity of the injury or illness. Both women and men report that the pain can be debilitating to the point of limiting their mobility and their ability to accomplish tasks in the workplace and at home. Studies suggest, however, that women on average may subjectively experience greater levels of pain.¹⁸ ¹⁹ Therefore, while all poultry workers would benefit from improved work conditions, the average woman would benefit somewhat more than the average man.

Although all workers suffer from repetitive strain injuries and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), women are disproportionately harmed by policies that are bad for all workers. In noting that women are more likely than men to experience upper body MSDs, one study noted, “The gender difference in symptom severity was explained by risk factors at work (repetitive work, poor ergonomic equipment), and at home (having less opportunity to relax and exercise outside of work). Parenthood exacerbated this gender difference, with mothers reporting the least time to relax or exercise. There was no suggestion that women were more vulnerable than men to pain.”²⁰

Differential rates of exertion

Working on the poultry processing line involves many hours gripping scissors and knives while cutting through the poultry meat and bone, trimming skin, and pulling tenders. Workers need to forcefully hack, twist, and pull thousands of times a day.

While this work is strenuous for everyone, it takes a variable toll on individuals, according to their different levels of strength, stamina, and pain thresholds. On average, women need to work harder to accomplish the same strength-based tasks as men.

For example, one study found gender differences in registered muscular activity. To perform identical tasks, women had to exert their forearm extensor muscles over 12 percent more relative to their maximum effort than men had to.²¹ These same women workers also showed less muscular rest in the forearm extensors. Therefore, their muscles had less chance to recover after the high-force exertions. Since “force exertion” is a well-known risk factor for work-related musculoskeletal disorders,²² women using higher levels of exertion with fewer opportunities to rest have a higher risk of developing these painful conditions.

Workplace design, equipment, and ergonomics

Most of the equipment made for the poultry processing line is designed for one size--and that size is the average man. This includes work surfaces, protective gear, tools, space between workers, and more.²³

Workers who deviate from the “average” male size (taller, shorter, thinner, heavier) must make extra efforts; these moves may bring additional risks to themselves and their co-workers. One worker explained, “We come in all different sizes, but the hooks and the cutting table are the same for everybody. The short ones have to reach more, and they hurt their backs and shoulders. The tall ones have to stoop down more, so they hurt their backs and shoulders. Everybody walks out of the plant hurting at the end of the shift.”²⁴

As women are, on average, shorter than men, they are more susceptible to injuries resulting from strained posture and improper alignment.

Policies that prevent rest and recovery

Working on the poultry processing line requires workers to stand for hours on end; they rest, and sit, only during short, prescribed breaks. For workers in most poultry plants, breaks are brief and scarce. Some workers report having one 30-minute break in a 12-hour shift.²⁵ Others report going six hours without a break.²⁶

The failure to provide adequate breaks may pose particular risks for pregnant workers. Many pregnant women can continue to work even in physically strenuous jobs up until they are ready to give birth. However, when poultry plants require the worker to stand in one spot for hours on end, it becomes more likely that pregnant workers will face complications or be pushed out of their jobs unnecessarily.

Studies have shown that standing more than five hours at a stretch can increase the risk of premature delivery.²⁷ Standing for lengthy periods without a break can lead to an increased rate of placental infarcts in the third trimester (caused by the interruption of blood supply to the placenta, which causes cells to die).²⁸ Women who stand at work without adequate rest breaks

are also at a higher risk of having babies with low birth weight.²⁹ Prematurity and low birthweight are leading causes of infant mortality in the United States.³⁰

Moreover, the growing uterus and fetus press on the vessels coming out of the pelvis and diminish the return of blood from a woman's legs to her heart. This may lead to increased incidents of clots, dizziness, and fatigue. It may also compromise the blood-driven nutrition to the developing fetus. The American Medical Association suggests that pregnant women who stand at work take a break every four hours.³¹ The AMA also advises that work positions be varied, from standing to sitting to walking around.

Household and caretaking responsibilities

All over the world, studies report that women spend more time than men performing household work, even if both work outside the home full-time.³² Naturally, this allows women less time to recover after a strenuous day at work. Lack of recovery time, especially a lack of muscular relaxation, may increase the risk of disorders, especially when the work is as strenuous as poultry line work.³³ One survey linked a higher risk of musculoskeletal symptoms among women to ergonomic risk factors at work, in combination with conditions at home.³⁴

One study noted, "Work-related musculoskeletal disorders have a significant impact on workers' time spent in unpaid caregiving activities, an example of the social consequences of occupational injuries."³⁵

After enduring repetitive strain at work, many women go home to responsibilities that continue the muscular strain. The *2015 American Time Use Survey* from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that women spend substantially more time than men each day on such tasks as cleaning, doing laundry, bathing and feeding children, and yardwork (50 percent of women vs. 22 percent of men).³⁶

Both Magaly Urdiales of the Western North Carolina Workers' Center and author LaGuana Gray say that it is not uncommon for women poultry workers to be single mothers.³⁷ These workers are often alone in caring for children, supporting family members, and maintaining their homes and households.³⁸

After weeks, months, or years working in the plants without rest from repetitive strain, workers report that their families and households are often negatively impacted by their constant pain. It becomes difficult just to perform household chores and simple personal tasks, and to care for children.³⁹ In one survey, Latino poultry processing workers report that they are awakened by pain and cannot sleep; they are limited in performing household chores; they are often in bad moods and feel shame; they cannot pick up children or things; and they are tired or sluggish.⁴⁰ The physical pain depletes their ability to effectively keep up at work and in the home, creating feelings of inadequacy, stress, and depression.⁴¹

Denial of Bathroom Breaks

Throughout almost every interview, survey, or workshop that has profiled poultry workers, limited and restricted bathroom breaks are a clear issue. Supervisors often deny breaks; they are under pressure to meet daily quotas, and the poultry plants regularly do not hire enough “floaters” who could be called on to stand in for workers for a few minutes so they can use the bathroom.

In addition, workers report that lunch breaks are short and timed to the second, so they often have to choose between eating and using the bathroom.⁴² Workers say that many of them cope by dehydrating themselves, urinating on themselves, or even wearing diapers to work.

Alma, a 39-year-old woman from Guatemala, said her supervisor repeatedly told her that she would risk her job by taking a bathroom break. She did the only thing she could. “I urinated on myself,” she says. The supervisor laughed at her.⁴³

What does the law require of employers?

OSHA has a “sanitation standard” (29 CFR 1910.141(c)(1)(i)), which “requires employers to provide their employees with toilet facilities.” In a legally binding memo in 1998, OSHA clarified that “this standard requires employers to make toilet facilities available so that employees can use them when they need to do so.”⁴⁴ The agency stated clearly that “the sanitation standard is intended to ensure that employers provide employees with sanitary and available toilet facilities, so that employees will not suffer the adverse health effects that can result if toilets are not available when employees need them.”⁴⁵ OSHA has consistently interpreted this standard to require that “employers allow employees prompt access to sanitary facilities. Restrictions on access must be reasonable and may not cause extended delays.”⁴⁶

The memo further explains, “A number of employers have instituted signal or relief worker systems for employees working on assembly lines or in other jobs where any employee’s absence, even for the brief time it takes to go to the bathroom, would be disruptive. Under these systems, an employee who needs to use the bathroom gives some sort of a signal so that another employee may provide relief while the first employee is away from the work station.”⁴⁷

Research into the poultry industry indicates that plants rarely employ enough “relief workers” (also known as floaters or line assistants), and that thousands of workers struggle to deal with this every day: they hold it too long, restrict liquid intake, urinate on themselves, or wear diapers. Sadly, most workers report that it is hardly unusual to wait a long time, or to be denied a bathroom break.

Denial of regular access to the restroom may also violate US anti-discrimination laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act and civil rights laws outlawing gender and sex discrimination.⁴⁸ The harm that results from this denial can be especially acute for women—pregnant women, in particular—and workers with disabilities.

Risk of infections

Workers often feel compelled to hold in their urine for extended periods, or to reduce intake of liquids.⁴⁹ Urinating infrequently can lead to urinary tract infections (UTIs).⁵⁰ These infections are ten times more common in women than in men.⁵¹ The most common symptoms are burning and painful sensations when urinating, and increased frequency and urgency to urinate.⁵² Untreated, a UTI can lead to a kidney infection.⁵³

Pregnant women are particularly at risk of developing UTIs; as the uterus grows, the weight of the fetus can block the drainage of the bladder, causing infection.⁵⁴ Without proper treatment and effective antibiotics, UTIs can become harmful to the mother and the growing fetus.⁵⁵ Kidney infections resulting from UTIs can also cause low birth weight and early labor.⁵⁶

To add to the risk, studies show that poultry workers in many plants may absorb so many antibiotics from handling chicken flesh that they build up a resistance to antibiotics, which are often used to treat UTIs. This is especially serious for antibiotics used to treat E Coli infections, which cause the vast majority of UTIs.⁵⁷ An E Coli infection can result in miscarriage, preterm birth, low birth weight babies, hypertension, preeclampsia, anemia, and amnionitis.⁵⁸

Menstruation

When menstruating, women may need to visit the bathroom more often, and may need more time for their breaks. Many women are uncomfortable expressing this to male supervisors; and they report that they often do not get any sympathy when asking for bathroom breaks.

In northwest Arkansas, one woman worker said, “The supervisors gets mad at us because we take longer, but we are women, and our needs are greater than those of men. They don't consider that we have more gear to remove, or the fact that the bathrooms are too far away; just walking towards them our time is up. When we have our [menstrual] cycle, we need to go more often to the bathroom, but they don't let us, they don't like it.”⁵⁹ Another worker reiterated this by stating, “When we are on our period, we need to go to the bathroom to [change] our feminine products, but supervisors don't like that, they don't let us go to the bathroom.”⁶⁰ The women feel that the male supervisors do not understand their need for additional time to use the facilities, noting that, “Instead of letting us use the bathroom, they threaten us, humiliate us to the point of filing claims with human resources to discharge us.”⁶¹

Pregnancy

Most workers and advocates report that pregnant women are not given reasonable access to the bathroom while working on the line, even though it is often needed in order to maintain a healthy pregnancy.⁶²

Both the volume of urine and the frequency of needing relief progressively increase throughout pregnancy. Beginning in the sixth week of pregnancy, hormonal changes cause a woman's blood to flow more quickly through her kidneys, causing her bladder to fill more frequently and increasing the need for bathroom breaks. As pregnancy progresses, the amount of blood in the body increases, which increases the amount of fluid passing through the kidneys, which results in more urine.⁶³ By the last trimester, the growing uterus puts pressure on the bladder, making it more difficult to delay bathroom breaks.

Urdiales reports that, in North Carolina, workers say that pregnant women resort to wearing diapers on the line more often than other workers.⁶⁴

A former poultry worker in Virginia stated that “bathroom breaks are particularly bad with pregnant women. One time when my wife was pregnant [and working at a poultry plant] she had to urinate [while working] on the line.”⁶⁵ Sandra, a former poultry worker, reported that when she was pregnant, she was only allowed the standard two breaks per shift, which was not sufficient. She noted that “if you come back one or two times late from a break, you get fired.”⁶⁶ A woman in northwest Arkansas said that “when I was pregnant, I had to constantly go to the bathroom, and a male supervisor told me ‘why don’t women hold it like I have to hold it all day?’ I felt there was a factor of discrimination taking place.”

Bacilio Castro, who worked at a Case Farms plant in North Carolina, talks about a woman who was eight months’ pregnant being denied a bathroom break. She asked, and then, “an hour went by, then two hours. The lady asked again. The supervisor told her that he was sorry, but there was no one available to take over for her. She couldn’t hold it any longer, and let it go-- and started to cry. The supervisor came over and started to scream at her. ‘You know that in this company we work with food products, what do you think you are doing?’”⁶⁷

Because workers are so often denied bathroom breaks, some workers intentionally avoid drinking water before their shifts to avoid needing to use the bathrooms.⁶⁸ As a result, they often suffer from dehydration, and its various side effects. While this poses a potentially serious risk for all workers, it carries particular dangers for pregnant workers. Dehydration during pregnancy may lead to pregnancy complications such as neural tube defects, low amniotic fluid, inadequate breast milk production, and premature labor. These complications can lead to birth defects due to lack of water and nutritional support for the fetus.⁶⁹

Given poultry plants’ frequent failures to provide reasonable breaks for bathroom use, it is no surprise that many women who return to the plant after giving birth do not feel they can request breaks for pumping breast milk (despite clear law permitting them to take these unpaid breaks). A lactating mother who does not have the opportunity to take such a break may well experience painful and potentially dangerous engorgement and infection.⁷⁰

Sexual Harassment and Discrimination

Nearly every interview with workers and advocates confirms that sexual harassment of women poultry workers is a widespread problem.

Sexual harassment generally falls into three categories: “(a) gender harassment, which includes generalized sexist comments and behavior that convey insulting, degrading, and sexist attitudes; (b) unwanted sexual attention ranging from unwanted, inappropriate and offensive physical or verbal sexual advances to gross sexual imposition, assault, or rape; and (c) sexual coercion (i.e., the solicitation or coercion of sexual activity by promise of reward or threat of punishment.”⁷¹ All three types have been seen in the poultry industry.

Sexual harassment, according to women who worked at the plants as early as the 1970s, has been a persistent problem. One woman remembers being fired from her job when she refused to sleep with a supervisor. Another shared how “the supervisors mistreated [the workers]. When a young lady would come in looking for work, they would tell her they had to examine her in order to get the job.”⁷² Donna Bazemore, a former worker in North Carolina who has been advocating for poultry workers’ rights since the 1990s, says that supervisors told women to wear tight, revealing clothing to distract visiting poultry inspectors “so [they] won’t be stopping the line.”⁷³ Many workers, especially Latinas, share stories that show that sexual harassment is still very much a common problem in the plants.

One-fifth of workers in a survey conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) said they or someone they knew had been subjected to unwelcome touching of a sexual nature. Thirty-four percent reported that they or someone they knew had been subjected to unwelcome sexual comments. Less than half of those incidents were reported to management, likely due to fear of retaliation. And of those reported to management, the harasser was disciplined in only 24 percent of those cases.⁷⁴

Liz Chacko, a lawyer who works at Friends of Farmworkers, has heard many reports of supervisors walking along the line, rubbing against the backsides of women—secure in the knowledge that the women are compromised in their ability to fight back (holding tools, working fast, standing close to each other).⁷⁵ Chacko says, “It is common for the assailant or harasser to have some level of English language ability, where the victim has none. In fact, in almost all my cases, the harasser is the only (or one of the only) bilingual employee at the plant, is the victim’s superior, and is often the person to whom the victim is supposed to go to in order to make workplace complaints.” Gray says her interviews indicate that generally older women are harassed by male supervisors and younger women are harassed by male co-workers.⁷⁶

Workers at the Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center also report that supervisors will walk down the production line, feeling the backsides of women as they go. They also say that some supervisors will request sexual favors for preferential treatment (something as simple as a break to visit the doctor).

In a report from a workshop in Western North Carolina, workers say bathrooms and dressing rooms are of particular concern to women.⁷⁷ Women say that men stare at them at the door and watch them change. They also say these issues are worse during the night shift. Women often postpone using the bathrooms to avoid the men staring at them and approaching them, talking to them “very dirty.”⁷⁸

Personal accounts

Rosa, a woman from Guatemala who worked at a poultry plant in Postville, Iowa, says that her shift supervisor would sneak up behind women and grab their breasts and backsides. “I felt very ashamed,” Rosa recalled.⁷⁹

Marta, who worked in a plant in southeast Alabama, was harassed by her supervisor for years; he repeatedly pressured the 48-year-old Latina to have sex with him, telling her that she could have any job she wanted – if she gave in to his advances. After finally reporting him, she and her two sons, who also worked in the plant, were transferred to lower-paying jobs. She was fired a year later. Her harasser told her that if she had given in to his advances, she would still have her job at the plant.⁸⁰

Patricia, who worked for seven years at two different Alabama poultry plants, said her supervisor offered her an easier job in exchange for sex. She was also told that management would not listen to her and, as a result, endured the abuse until she moved out of the state.

LeeAnn Johnson, who has worked in the industry since 2008, said, “Men patt[ed] on women’s behinds and grabb[ed] at them. I was harassed; a man was telling me he was going to do to me and all this mess. Some of the men was rubbing me on my butt. It made me feel uncomfortable.”⁸¹

At a Koch Foods plant in Morton, Mississippi, sexual harassment escalated to a point where a group of women filed a discrimination claim against their supervisor; they say he subjected workers to various forms of sexual harassment and assault between 2004 and 2008. The supervisor would approach the line workers from behind and rub their bodies. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which officially sued Koch Foods in 2011, stated that, “Employees were warned that they would be subject to reprisal if they complained, and when they protested the conduct, the employees were subjected to escalated and more frequent physical and/or sexual assaults from their supervisor.”⁸²

Some plants have a policy that requires terminating a supervisor who is written up three times, but workers say this rarely happens, even after repeated grievances.

Historical and cultural information bias

Historical and cultural factors often restrict or prohibit women from recognizing, speaking about, or reporting instances of sexual harassment. These factors vary depending on the race, ethnicity, religion, education level, and/or socioeconomic status of the women. Many women, especially those who were raised outside the US, are not aware of how to define, recognize, and acknowledge sexual harassment, especially unwanted verbal advances. These factors can contribute to the lack of information, statistics, and personal testimonies about sexual harassment in the workplace.

A report by the Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center says that 70 percent of white workers reported experiencing verbal or sexual harassment at work; however, only 43 percent of Latino workers, 36 percent of black workers, and 25 percent of Asian-Pacific Islander workers reported such harassment. US-born workers reported harassment at a slightly higher rate than foreign-born workers (51 percent versus 40 percent).⁸³ These figures are more likely reflect the biases of the person reporting, than the actual rate of incidents: minority workers and foreign-

born workers may be either hesitant to report harassment, or unsure or uninformed about sexual harassment laws and definitions.

Sexual assailants often know to take advantage of the fact that many of the women working in the poultry plants are undocumented, unable to communicate in English, and economically vulnerable; they believe that their unwanted advances will likely go unreported and unpunished. In western North Carolina, where there is a large indigenous Guatemalan population, it has been reported that some Guatemalan men take advantage of the fact that the women from their culture may be submissive and shy. Uridales says that supervisors know that women will “let [the supervisors] touch or talk to them the way they want to because they know the women will not report anything.”⁸⁴ Ahmed Ali of the Greater Minnesota Worker Center reports that the line leaders “are like semi-gods and are very powerful over the workers.”⁸⁵

Effects on Families and Communities

Most women do not stop laboring when they leave their workplace; they get home to household and family responsibilities that keep them on their feet for hours on end. Gray says that when poultry workers leave the plant, they are often exhausted and hurting, and find it challenging just to keep moving. In her book, she notes, “Erratic work, exhausting labor, and company policies that penalize ‘taking a day’ are some of the factors that infringe upon the multiple roles women in poultry processing fill away from work.”⁸⁶

She reports that these women often feel acute stress about not being able to care for their children and their households as they would like to. They often cannot do the tasks necessary to keep households and families running smoothly, such as cooking, home maintenance, driving, gardening, or even “combing their kids’ hair or their own hair.”⁸⁷ All of this can contribute to mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety.⁸⁸

Mothers of dependent children feel the strain of competing demands keenly, especially when their schedules are erratic or uneven. Urdiales notes that new hires are often assigned to the night shift,⁸⁹ leaving mothers in difficult situations. Vivian West, a former poultry worker in El Dorado, Arkansas says, “It was very hard, and I really couldn’t [balance my work and family lives]. I didn’t give my kids enough time like I should have.”⁹⁰

A teacher in the poultry town of Bernice, Louisiana observed “If [my students’] parents work the night shift, they are probably up when the kids are at school, trying to take care of home. By the time the kids get home, the parents have gone back to sleep or are getting ready to go to work. If their parents work day shift, a lot of the time, they are too tired to cook or clean, much less look over homework or sit down and just...have a conversation. Some of my [students] feel like they are raising themselves.”⁹¹

Urdiales says that one of the chief economic struggles and sources of stress is childcare.⁹² Single mothers earning line worker wages find it nearly impossible to afford rent, food, and basic expenses, let alone childcare costs.⁹³ To cope, some choose to move in with other single mothers and their children. This disrupts the dynamics of families and often leaves children feeling uprooted and uncomfortable.⁹⁴

One worker in Minnesota, a single mother with four children, developed carpal tunnel syndrome from working on the line and lost the ability to use her right hand. On occasion, her babysitter would arrive late to her house, causing her to get to work late and generating more stress. Eventually she quit because of the injury to her hand, and now she is unable to find a job.⁹⁵

Most poultry workers have no sick or personal time; many say that the unpredictable and constant demands from the plant become an “intrusion in their personal lives.”⁹⁶ Gray reports that workers will frequently be notified on Tuesday or Wednesday that they are scheduled to work that coming weekend. Since they cannot make or commit to plans, they’re unable to include celebrations, vacations, or family time in their scheduled priorities.⁹⁷

The point system that the companies use to discipline workers adds stress and complications. Many workers note that supervisors will not excuse them for any reason, even for urgent and legitimate matters (caring for sick children, doctor appointments). The SPLC survey reported that 97 percent of workers report that a point system is used in their plant, and 81 percent said their plants assess points for any absence, including medical reasons.⁹⁸

One worker reported that the plant received a call from her child's school to notify the mother that her child was sick, but the supervisor did not inform the mother until her scheduled break.⁹⁹ Mary Goff, an attorney who works with poultry workers in Arkansas, notes that the point system related to absences "is anti-human in that it doesn't account for the realities of living in that a person can get pointed for being absent, for someone being sick. Sometimes it's excused, sometimes it's not."

Many working mothers are put into stressful situations where they have to decide between adequately caring for their children and keeping their jobs. The pressure and strain they feel brings out a lot of "worry and guilt about not spending enough time with their children and not knowing the outcome of the kids not having enough supervision" and "missing out on important things going on with their kids."¹⁰⁰ This brings on many mental health issues from the "guilt the women feel toward their children and feelings of inadequacy and anxiety" coupled with depression and stress.¹⁰¹

Many women say they have been encouraged by supervisors to quit their jobs in preparation for childbirth, or when they are needed to care for a sick family member. Such suggestions and policies are outlawed by the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (which prohibits sex discrimination based on pregnancy) and the Family Medical Leave Act (which permits covered workers to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid time off to care for oneself or a seriously ill family member).

Some plants have policies that prohibit workers from being re-hired within a certain time frame (such as six months). When they are re-hired, they lose any seniority they may have had.¹⁰² In *Scratching out a Living*, Angela Stuesse reports that, "Over time, situations like these result in workers being temporarily or permanently locked out of the only jobs in town."¹⁰³

Conclusions and Recommendations

Every day, thousands of women and men head to work on the line in the thriving and vital poultry industry. They process the chicken that lands on dinner plates in homes, schools, and restaurants. But they do not share in the bounty. Instead, they earn poverty-level wages, incur injuries and illnesses at elevated rates, and work in a climate of fear.

The recommendations listed in Oxfam America's report *Lives on the Line: The human cost of cheap chicken*, developed in consultation with workers and advocates, offer ways for the industry to improve the lives and well-being of poultry workers.

After uncovering issues faced by women poultry workers for this report, we encourage poultry companies to pay special attention to the additional recommendations below. A few simple steps can ensure that women have equal opportunity in the workplace.

The problems identified in this report in no way suggest that women, including pregnant women and family caretakers, should not work in poultry plants. Rather, it is incumbent upon the poultry plants to address these problems, to make working in the plants a safer and healthier experience for all workers.

Fair compensation

- Pay workers a fair wage that enables them to support their families without relying on federal assistance or charity;
- Provide health insurance coverage for workers and their families;
- Provide paid time off, especially sick time (for themselves and to care for family members).

Healthy and safe workplace

- Ensure that the work speed is at a pace that does not inflict damage on workers;
- Follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) recommendation for rest breaks for workers at risk of musculoskeletal injuries to prevent workplace injuries;
- Ensure staffing levels are high enough so workers who temporarily stand in for others on the line (floaters) are available when workers need breaks to use the restroom or to recover (as required by OSHA regulations);
- Rotate workers among different positions in the plant to reduce repetitive strain; and
- Ensure equipment is properly maintained to minimize risk (e.g., continuously sharpen knives to reduce force necessary to perform actions).

Injury reporting and treatment

- Ensure that workers are allowed to report incidents without fear of reprisal;
- Record incidents appropriately, along with recommended courses of action for medical treatment and steps taken by the company to address the hazard(s) that caused the injury or illness; and

- Minimize obstructions to individuals receiving workers' compensation for injuries incurred on the job.

Training

- Provide meaningful health and safety training and task training in appropriate languages, upon hiring, and at regular intervals thereafter;
- Provide notice to all workers of their rights under federal and state law concerning pregnancy and family care, including the Family Medical Leave Act, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act; and
- Train all workers (regardless of gender or position) how to identify, report, and deal with illegal sexual harassment in the workplace. Ensure that everyone is aware of the repercussions and consequences of being found guilty of harassment; and
- Train supervisors and line leaders in how to recognize and deal these situations when they are in management positions.

Appropriate ergonomic design of jobs

- Contract with ergonomics experts to analyze processing plants, involve workers in assessing problems and designing fixes, and implement changes; and
- Embrace the ergonomic principle of ensuring that the workstation fits the worker. "The worker" must not default to the height, weight, and stature of the average man. As women make up an estimated half or more of line workers, their size should be accounted for and accommodated by the equipment on the line.

The problems identified in this report in no way suggest that women, including pregnant women and family caretakers, should not work in poultry plants. Rather, it is incumbent upon the poultry plants to address these problems, to make working in the plants a safer and healthier experience for all workers.

Notes

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COVER: Women account for roughly half of the poultry processing workforce in the US. While all poultry workers face a variety of hazards in the plants, women may feel a greater impact from arduous conditions, relentless pacing, inflexible schedules, and harassment. *Earl Dotter / Oxfam America*

WOMEN ON THE LINE

Working on the line in a poultry plant is grim at best. The strenuous and repetitive work takes a terrible toll on workers' bodies and minds. These people clock into work and 1) suffer high rates of illnesses and injuries that rob them of strength and dexterity; 2) earn low pay; and 3) experience a climate of fear that prevents them from speaking out.

Workers stand at processing lines for hours on end, making the same motions tens of thousands of times a day. The plant is cold, humid, and slippery with grease, blood, offal, and water. The air is full of chemicals from cleaning, processing, and cooking. The line moves rapidly while workers wield sharp tools. As a result, workers suffer occupational illnesses at five times the national average, carpal tunnel at seven times the average, and amputations at three times average. They also suffer from trigger finger, "claw hand," tendinitis, and ganglionic cysts.

While these conditions threaten the health and safety of all workers, there is increasing realization that they may pose more dangers to women than to men. Roughly half of the 250,000 workers in the poultry industry are women, and the hazards in the plant threaten their safety every day.



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