

Enough Injustice:

Voices of Central Coast Working Women



ABOUT CAUSE

CAUSE's mission is to promote economic and social justice for working families in the Central Coast region through policy research, advocacy, organizing, leadership development and community building. Established in May 2000 by the Ventura County Living Wage Coalition, a broad based multiethnic coalition of faith, union, student and community based organizations, CAUSE has emerged as an important force for positive social change. Opening its doors in February 2001, CAUSE program areas include: Living Wage and Accountable Development, Health Coverage Expansion for the Uninsured, Women's Economic Justice and Fair Representation.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC JUSTICE PROJECT (WEJP)

The 2001 exclusion from the Ventura County Living Wage Ordinance of In Home Support Service (IHSS) workers, who are predominantly women, led to the creation of the Women's Economic Justice Project (WEJP). A regional community and labor organizing and policy planning project, the WEJP is dedicated to prioritizing and addressing the multiple economic injustices faced by low wage working women in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. From its inception in November 2001, WEJP has sought to improve the economic conditions of working women through leadership development, coalition building, participatory action research, community and labor organizing, and public policy.

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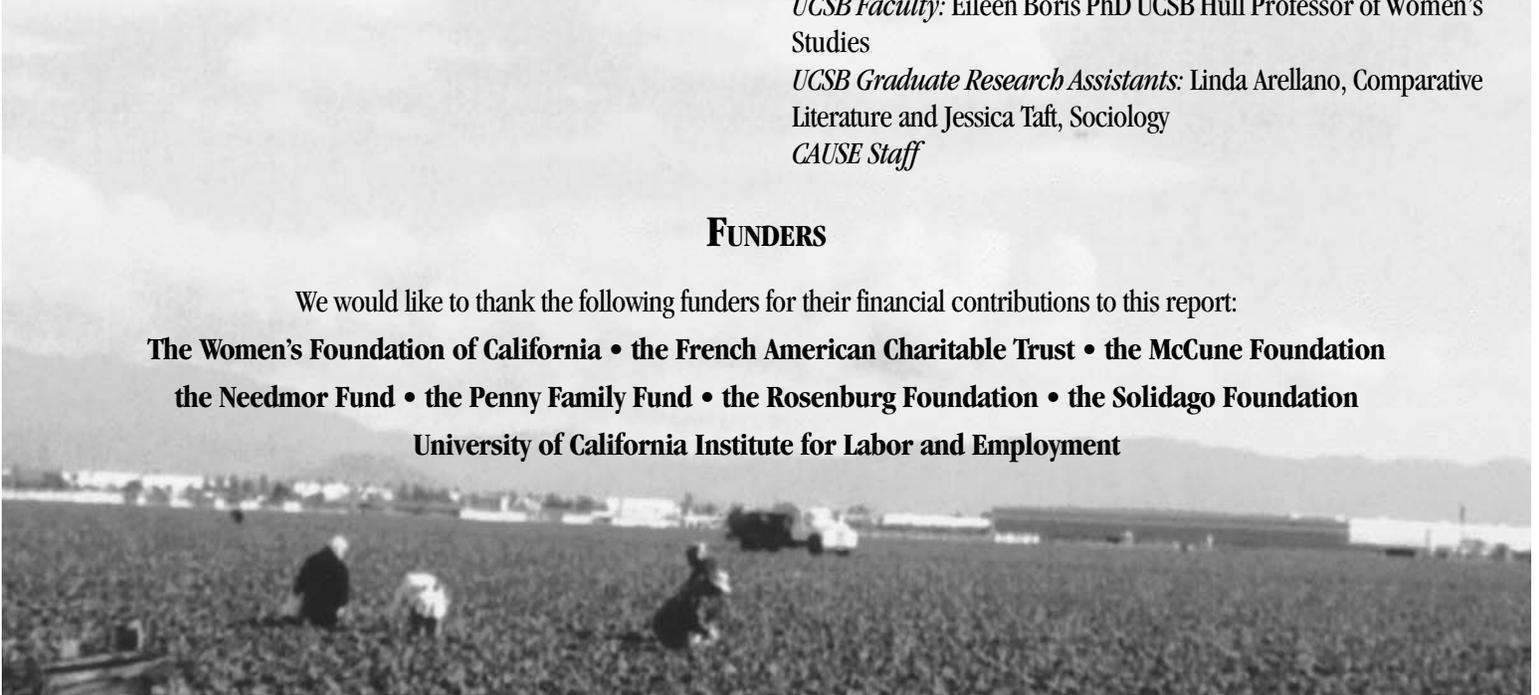
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*“I go from home to work and work to home . . .
Just like that I’ve been living my life for six, five years.”*

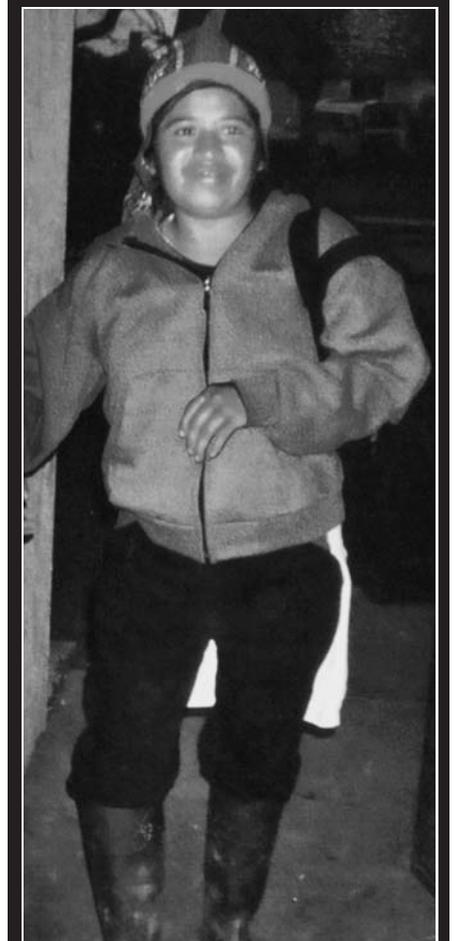
*“Also, being at home, women say ‘I’m not working’, but in
the home one is always working and it’s also for the
community. . . But they say women aren’t working,
they’re just out there being lazy, but when they get home,
the house is clean, the food is ready.”*

*“All of the body gets tired although the mind is there as if it
were frozen, you’re not using it, just your hands.”*

“I would tell them that, as women, they have to do what it takes.”

THESE ARE THE VOICES OF LOW-INCOME WORKING WOMEN IN VENTURA AND SANTA BARBARA COUNTIES. They care for children, the ill, and the elderly; clean other’s homes, hotel rooms, and offices; pick, sort and pack fruit and vegetables; and sew garments or assemble parts at piece rate from home. Their toil makes our businesses, cities and counties work. They return home after long or unstable hours on the job to cook, clean, and care all over again, this time for their families. They seek comfort in churches and save little by little for that one special celebration at a community center. Some take action in unions, others through grass-roots organizations or at the ballot box. This report documents their lives and labor as they experience it. It illustrates through their words and photographs what it is like to barely survive in our region on less than a living wage, in stifling working and living conditions.

In November 2001, the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) initiated the Women’s Economic Justice Project (WEJP) to address the deepening and neglected feminization of poverty in our region and its devastating impact on the families of those who work hard for low wages and for no or limited benefits. WEJP is a regional coalition of progressive community, student, interfaith, and labor organizations, with an emphasis on women’s organizations and women’s leadership; it reflects the mission of CAUSE to promote economic and social justice for working people by investigating the root causes of poverty, strengthening the leadership capacity of ordinary people, and organizing for social change. To that end, the WEJP provides a space for low-income working women, many of them Spanish speakers, to share their stories and act together as working women. Over the course of eighteen months, from September 2002 to March 2004, nineteen members of the South Oxnard-Ventura community became researchers of their own lives, producing knowledge that serves as a basis for action.





“Oh, yes, I would like to have a washing machine here in my house. Oh yes, yes if I could have a dishwashing machine too.”

“Yes, and also sometimes we arrive, two hours we work and they only pay one hour and send us home.”

“I’d like a regular schedule.”

“In the afternoon, I arrive, prepare dinner, and well clean for the following day...I leave the food prepared for when one arrives hungry. I try and I like to maintain order in the house.”



“I enter at seven (am) but I don’t know what hour I leave, sometimes I can leave at eleven, I can leave at ten at night, nine, I don’t have a fixed schedule, depends on the work, if there’s a lot of work I have to stay more than twelve, it’s a place where well, not very convenient right, but it’s work...”

“Well, the boss is the one that decides... tomorrow don’t come, depends how it looks, if there’s fruit... The other day he informed us and said yes we have to work Saturdays – he told us – ladies, looks like we have to work Saturday. And well we have to work another day, right, Saturdays also...”

WOMEN'S DOUBLE DAY

Most of the low-income women participating in this project work a “double day.” In addition to laboring an average of 7.5 hours a day outside their home, a significant amount of time is also devoted to doing household chores, caring for children and elderly, preparing meals for everyone, including extended family living in the same home.

The work loads at home and for an employer are labor intensive, leaving women physically exhausted at the end of the day.

And well my work is not very difficult, but yes, very tired, all day standing in only one position; all the time working with our hands, moving boxes – All this, moving so fast because there's so much fruit and that makes you very tired.

Despite the constant physical work and caretaking demands upon low wage working women, they expressed a satisfaction in earning any paycheck:

“Yes, that's what I like, that I earn my money.”

Working a double shift – one low paid, and one non-paid makes on average only one hour per day available for education or training. The demanding work load and lack of time leaves low wage working women with an the unfulfilled desire to develop their skills. A WEJP survey completed by nearly 200 women found that 71% would like additional education or training.

What would I change in my work? Well, I like my work. What I would like is to learn the English language and that one day I am the one that tells the class, “I am in charge of all the class,” – to be the teacher, not the assistant of the class, to be the teacher.

POOR WORKING CONDITIONS AND COMPENSATION

This wage doesn't feed my children.

Interviewer: *How much do they pay you?*

Woman: *\$8.00 an hour.*

Interviewer: *Okay. What benefits?*

Woman: *None, absolutely none.*



Nationwide women account for 48% of the labor force and 59% of workers earning less than \$8 per hour. This disproportionate representation of women amongst low wage workers leads to disproportionate exposure to poor working conditions. Without union representation, low wage working women, particularly immigrants, are much more likely to experience an oppressive combination of poor working conditions and inadequate compensation, such as:

1. Authoritarian and deeming supervision/management approach
2. Gender discrimination and sexual harassment
3. Absent or inadequate safety materials and equipment
4. Expected to pay for standard or necessary work related materials
5. Increasing productivity demands (ever faster workpace and ever increasing workload)
6. Static or further reduced low wages
7. Rare cost of living adjustment (COLA), much less merit pay
8. Inadequate wage compensation for all hours worked or overtime
9. No pension or retirement compensation



From a list of 14 conditions that could help improve their paid work life, 76% of the women identified ending discrimination as relevant to improving the workplace, 73% selected higher wages and 73% selected safe working conditions.

With respect to the interpersonal work environment, women described persistently stifling and numbing work experiences such as this:

We cannot speak. Because they don't want to let the bad fruit pass by. They're just watching us. So we can't talk.

“Nice” bosses were rare.

And the boss is very approachable, he's not a very difficult person. All the time he asks us how we are, how everything is going, things like that, details that make you feel good; really, that's someone that you don't find often...

CHILDCARE AND HEALTHCARE

Children constantly are at the forefront of the women's mind. Issues concerning paid employment often centered around or were linked with concern for their children. For instance, one woman spoke of higher wages as important because she would then work less hours outside the home in order to be with and attend to her children. Another wanted less physically taxing work not so much because of the impact on her physical health but more so because she wants to have more energy to interact with her children.

Aside from time and energy to care for or be with children, the women also identified child care as a challenge for them when working for pay outside the home. According to a January 2005 report on The Economic Impact of the Child Care Industry in Ventura County, there is only a 29% childcare capacity. Low wage working women are most negatively impacted by lack of affordable childcare.

Related to self care and care for children is the absence of benefits or family supportive employment. Low wage working women are frequently:

- Unaware of legal protections such as Family Paid Leave Act or Workers Compensation
- Do not have basic medical benefits, much less dental or vision benefits
- Do not have paid time off of any kind: sick leave, holidays, vacation, family death

This is what I understand correctly, that the truth is they don't pay vacations, they don't pay for time if you are sick, if someone dies...

Research findings of the Berger Institute for Work, Family and Children of the Claremont McKenna College, reported in Fall 2004, found that One-third of those who had taken time off work to care for a sick family member stated that their job had been threatened or they had lost their job.

Only 33 % of Anglos and 14% of Latinos are familiar with the California Paid Family Leave Insurance Program although 56% of Anglos and 80% of Latinos reported children in the household and 10% of Anglos and 23% of Latinos reported care responsibility for a live-in disabled person.

Health insurance was the number one issue – above higher wages – selected by women as being very important to improve employment. A March 2002 American Journal of Public Health documents that over a ten year period the number of health care personnel who did not have health coverage, such as entry level and certified nursing assistants (who mostly are women) increased by 84%. The July 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation report, Women and Health Care: A National Profile shows persistent inequities amongst low wage working women. Thirty seven percent of poor women were uninsured compared with only 6% of higher income women.

I think I have good benefits, really, because there are many that don't give insurance, they don't give a person anything.

PRACTICAL PUBLIC POLICY FOR LOW WAGE WORKING WOMEN:

- **An established commitment to respectful, nondiscriminatory, and nonabusive supervision and management.**
Based on the experiences of low wage working women, extensive training for management and immediate supervisors is lacking concerning legal standards related to gender discrimination and sexual harassment. In addition, just as “customer service” is recognized of value to employers and their business, training is also needed to develop an environment of “worker respect.” Worker respect is relevant to productivity, but also to basic human dignity.

- **Just Wages**

Starting Wage

Minimum wage, worth less today than 40 years ago, is inappropriate for today's working families. Alternative wage standards are needed, such as a Living Wage or a Self-Sufficiency Wage based on the local cost of living including housing, child care and transportation.

Wage Increases

Aside from the base or starting wage, policies are needed to address a fair systematic process of wage increases for regular and seasonal workers in “entry level” jobs. Currently, low wage workers loyal to one employer are essentially penalized through static wages that ignore increased skill developed through years of dedicated service to their employer.

Other workers who develop skills while remaining in an entry level position are contract or contingency workers, such as farm workers or factory workers employed through a “temporary” employment agency. While such workers may not remain with the same employer, they generally remain in the same job sector, often throughout their working lives. Dedication to one employment sector enhances their job skills through years of experience. This skilled tenure is rarely acknowledged and respected as reflected by their stagnant “entry level” wages.

Starting wages and wage increases for low wage workers must recognize that it is skilled labor and take into account work experience as is common in professional, white collar or management level positions.

- **Basic Benefits**

Ironically, workers who bare the brunt of intensive, repetitive physical labor and earn low wages are the least likely to have benefits to protect their health and quality of life, much less a pension. As women, with personal, family and community demands and commitments, low wage workers have earned yet do not receive the following benefits:

- Health insurance for themselves and family members
- Paid time off (e.g. sick leave, holidays, family leave, funeral leave, vacation)
- Retirement



- **A Family Friendly Work schedule**

While some workers benefit from a family friendly work schedule, low wage working mothers do not, and yet have a greater need because of the lack of childcare and transportation, making it difficult for them to accommodate irregular work schedules. Financially, an inconsistent work schedule also makes budgeting near impossible. If work hours are randomly changed, surviving on low wages is made all the more stressful.

- **Increase Accessible Work Force Training and Education**

Low wage working women have a desire to continue their education and develop their employment skills. They identify courses and training in English as a second language, computer literacy and child development as particularly useful. Given historical gender and class stratification that is commonly internalized as personal inferiority or inadequacy, personal development courses (eg assertiveness, self esteem, public communication) are also relevant to low wage working women's self agency and even necessary for basic protection in the workplace from sexual harassment or abusive supervisors. Training and educational courses must take into account women's double day: stress from poor working conditions and the difficulty of making ends meet combined with child care and transportation barriers. To improve low wage working women's access to training and education, it is necessary for adult education institutions to offer neighborhood and job based courses and increased outreach in their native language.

- **Affordable Quality Child Care**

For low wage working mothers, children are often their main concern and considered their main responsibility. They frequently worry at a work about their children's safety, education and supervision. Numerous business, government and childcare industry strategies, as recommended by the Ventura County Local Investment in Child Care (LINCC) project, would greatly benefit low wage working mothers.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

The purpose of the WEJP is to bring about practical changes that protect and improve the lives of low wage working women. Our theory of social change prioritizes the leadership role of low wage working women themselves supported by community and labor organizations. Through the process of participatory action research and women-centered organizing, publicly silent and politically marginalized women have begun to speak for themselves:

Our voice counts.

We are also people and we matter.

The world also belongs to women.

Every woman has the right to realize her potential.



Presently, the four strategies for change, informed by low wage working women's voices and experience, have emerged;

1. **To Establish *Centro Mujer***

Centro Mujer is envisioned as a physical place to provide a women-centered, neighborhood based, regional resources for low wage working women to collaboratively promote public policy relevant to them. South Oxnard was selected as the location for *Centro Mujer* because of the high number and concentration of low wage women working in a variety of low wage industries including janitorial, manufacturing, farm work, domestic care, and child care. An executive committee of low wage working immigrant women has been established to provide leadership for central *MUJER*.

South Oxnard is also the place where *MUJER* was created. *MUJER (Mujeres Unidas pro Justicia, Educacion y Respeto / Women United for Justice, Education and Respect)* is a community based group of low wage working women who meet to learn about public policy issues and take action. *MUJER* members have participated in local living wage, health coverage expansion and fair representation efforts, including voter registration and education.

2. To Develop Multigenerational Women's Leadership

MUJER have identified skills they have as well as skills they want to develop. As their daughters have been involved, it is clear that young girls as well as adult women and working mothers desire an opportunity to develop skills.

3. To Organize Community and Labor Force

Public and workplace policies impact low wage working women on a personal individual and collective level. Low wage working women must be included to create policies that respectfully correspond with the valuable role of women in sustaining a healthy and viable economy and that are adequately aligned with the legitimate needs of low wage working women as workers, family caretakers and community volunteers.

Low wage working women must be welcomed into public and workplace policy making. They need to be acknowledged as legitimate decision makers in identifying the policies most relevant to them. This requires government and business leaders, civic organizations, and academic institutions to value and respect low wage working women – their contribution, human worth, and needs. Only then will resources of time, money and energy be prioritized to welcome and engage low wage working women as partners at work and in society.

Natural allies of women working for low wages or no wages (domestic care giving work) that can be strengthened include labor organizations, women's civic and political organizations, academic departments and the faith community.

With the heightened attention to family friendly workplace policies, there is common ground to explore collaborative vs. adversarial policy making relationships with the business community. For policymakers to work with low wage working women, barriers must be overcome including a) the overall neglect or fear of modifying entrenched and growing class differences and b) a dominant historical and institutionalized discounting of feminist oriented policies.

4. To Promote Political Representation and Accountability that is Inclusive of Low Wage Working Women

Engaging and including the voices of low wage working women in the policy making process is a necessary and transformative strategy to develop practical policies for this disenfranchised segment of the population. Another irrefutably needed strategy is to open and/or create positions of formal leadership for low wage working women.

THE PROCESS

This report represents collaboration between women from the South Oxnard-Ventura Community, CAUSE, the WEJP, and researchers from the University of California Santa Barbara affiliated with the Center for Research on Women and Social Justice, under the direction of Dr. Eileen Boris, Hull Professor of Women's Studies. It begins with a premise: low income working women are experts on their own living and working conditions. This assumption is the central premise of participatory action research, a research strategy that uncovers knowledge too often under the radar of other forms of social investigation.

Under participatory action research, the subjects of inquiry become researchers themselves—influential participants in defining the research agenda, carrying it out, analyzing data, and determining its use. While academic researchers offer training in research methods and serve as resource people, community members bring their local knowledge and experienced-based expertise to define problems and devise solutions. Rather than ending up with disinterested knowledge, the results of such research inform social and political action to benefit the community that helps to shape them. The goal is to advance social and economic justice; in this case that means to improve wages and working conditions, increase the power of laboring women at home and in the workplace, and lessen inequality. In the process, those who participate both enhance their own skills and build community leadership.

The community researchers met together in two focus groups—free flowing discussions in which they spoke about work, family, jobs and community, where they shared their aspirations, hopes, and concerns. Some became “community interns” who kept workplace diaries, interviewed other women, and helped construct a survey filled out by attendees at the 2003 Women Working for Economic Justice Conference, another project of the WEJP. From transcribed group sessions, interviews, and diaries, they determined the themes presented at the 2004 WEJP conference. They also selected representative quotations from the materials they generated to go with photographs that they took. The photographs, reprinted here, represent an additional form of knowledge, expressive as well as documentary, that offer understanding as powerful as the words of community women. These images and voices together convey meanings missing from statistical and economic data. A previous report presented demographic, labor market, and other indicators on the impact of low wages on working women and their families; this report conveys the personal behind the factual, expressing in voice and image knowledge that only insiders can tell.

The central issues that affect the quality of life for women working for low income are: heavy work loads at home and in the workplace; potentially hazardous and stressful working conditions; low wages that fail to support a family's basic needs; the lack of a reliable child care system; lack of health insurance, and difficulty organizing in the workplace and in the community. In addition, to identifying the primary issues for low-income women, this report can offer some suggestions on where to begin in order to make changes that would improve women's lives.