



INTERNATIONAL LABOR RIGHTS FORUM  
BUILDING A JUST WORLD FOR WORKERS



Women in the Honduran Melon Industry



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent reforms to the melon industry have created higher product quality standards, but have failed to improve labor standards. Workers in the melon industry remain subjected to precarious employment, unsafe working conditions and wages that are both illegally and unethically low.

The situation is especially pronounced for the 25,000 melon workers in southern Honduras. In an attempt to remain profitable amidst growing competition from Mexican producers, Honduran companies have looked to cut production costs. All too often, however, these cost cutting strategies come at the expense of their workers. For the thousands of predominantly female, poor, uneducated melon workers this means twelve to fourteen hour work days, seven days a week; salaries below minimum wage with no overtime pay; exposure to dangerous chemicals and inhumane working conditions; and no access to social security.

This report presents key findings of COSIBAH's (Coordinadora de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales de Honduras) research into the working conditions of female melon workers in southern Honduras. This report also serves as a call to action, suggesting ways in which workers' rights to fair wages and decent working conditions may be brought to the fore of melon companies' corporate strategy, government prerogative, and consumer consciousness.

## Wages

COSIBAH discovered that over 85% of female melon workers receive less than the minimum wage. In addition, 69% of these women work overtime hours for which nearly half of them are not paid, and the majority work Sundays and holidays without pay. The Honduran minimum wage for farmworkers is 112.33 lempiras (US\$5.90) per day; however, the majority of melon workers scrape by on well below a dollar a day per person for the average family of six.

## Temporary Employment

Melon farming is seasonal work, and almost all labor is hired on contracts of six months or less. Despite the brevity of the contract, most women return to work on the same plantation year after year. In keeping contracts short-term, employers are able to maintain the upper

hand on workers, with the threat of not renewing employment the next season. Temporary contracts also make it difficult for melon workers to organize and collectively claim their rights. Melon workers thus become more vulnerable to hazardous working conditions and sub-minimum wages.

## Working Conditions

Days are long for melon workers: most report working twelve to fourteen hour days and just over half receive a break for lunch. Only 30% of workers interviewed are provided with potable water, restroom facilities, or cafeterias. Most of the workers are employed in the cutting of melons from the vine, but despite frequent exposure to strong chemical fertilizers and insecticides, scarcely half of them receive protective equipment or appropriate safety training. As a result, many workers suffer from work-related illnesses and injuries.

## Social Security

Melon companies are required to pay into Social Security and guarantee that their employees have access to its benefits. Currently, melon companies are disregarding this law and their workers are suffering the consequences. Without social security benefits, women are forced to use the company's medical facilities, leading to illegal layoffs without compensation for pregnancy or work-related injury.

## A Call to Action

This report calls on melon companies to reform their practices to align with national law and international labor standards. Companies' desires to reduce costs should not take precedence over their obligation to provide a safe and fair working environment. The Honduran government should not bow to the economic strength of powerful agricultural companies. Instead, monitoring commissions should identify abuses and hold the responsible companies accountable. Committees and organizations that fight for workers' rights must be protected so that they can freely promote labor and human rights.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international community successfully achieved the implementation and monitoring of consumer health standards in the melon industry. The same preoccupation for consumers' safety should extend to the health, safety and well-being of the individuals whose hard work brings melons to our homes.

### **COSIBAH, A Labor Rights Watchdog**

Coordinating Body of Banana and Agroindustrial Workers' Unions (COSIBAH), was founded in 1994 and has documented working conditions and educated farmworkers in southern Honduras since 2007. Their team of researchers designed and carried out a comprehensive worker survey in Choluteca. They individually surveyed 310 female melon workers and conducted fifteen separate meetings with community leaders and focus groups. The International Labor Rights Forum then worked with COSIBAH to write and publish this report.



# INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the melon industry captivated national and international audiences with one of the worst food-borne illness outbreaks in recent decades. The listeria virus claimed the lives of 25 people, hospitalized 123 nationwide and led to the recall of some 300,000 cases of fruit. Even though the virus was linked to U.S.-grown cantaloupes, both foreign and domestic melon companies soon came under intense public pressure to implement higher standards in planting, harvesting and production to protect consumers – without addressing the health and safety of the workers who grow and harvest the melons.

Melons are the United States' second-largest import fruit from Honduras, after bananas. Although the United States produces several thousand tons of melons for domestic consumption and export each year, the nation is still a net importer of honeydew, cantaloupe, cucumber, watermelon and several related melon species. Honduras is the fourth largest exporter of melons to the U.S., providing 14% of U.S. melon imports. Melons are Honduras' fourth-largest agricultural export, an important source of income for the country. These melons are grown in southern Honduras, in the region of Choluteca.

## Melons and Choluteca

Melon cultivation was introduced to Honduras by large corporations in the 1980s. The production rapidly expanded to an estimated 1000 small producers. Over time some farms consolidated and others left the market due to price and market restrictions, leaving about 150 farms, which sell their melons to four large companies -- Montelibano, Hondex, Suragro, and Agrogolfo -- for export. These four companies determine the industry standard for production quality and labor regulation. And, to a large extent, they determine the standard of living for Choluteca laborers.

*“We went into this investigation more-or-less knowing that the working conditions would be very bad, but we never anticipated being confronted by such misery and injustice.”*  
~COSIBAH

Although melon sales total upwards of \$55 million annually, Choluteca is one of Honduras' most impoverished regions. Choluteca's economy is based almost exclusively on the foreign export of melons, mango, rice, cotton, sugar, bananas and shrimp. The seasonal crops demand a temporary 'unskilled' labor force that is contracted for the labor-intensive planting and harvesting months. As a result, job placement is competitive and most people find work for only a few months at a time. Choluteca suffers from a 44% unemployment rate and even higher under-employment rate.

*“During melon season, women work as temporary laborers. The rest of the year, they are street vendors, clothing washers and domestic servants – where they are also exploited.”*  
~COSIBAH

Melon workers are hit hard during the lean months between the planting and harvesting seasons when work dries up. Their families scrape by on whatever meager savings they were able to hold onto during the melons season. The estimated cost of living for a family of six in this region is 6,198 lempiras, or about \$325 a month. The average family, however, is only able to earn about a third of that. For that reason, 60% of the population say that their entire paycheck goes towards putting food on the table, with not enough remaining for health care, education, clothing, and sanitary supplies. Powerful owners hold almost all of the region's land, leaving ordinary people without the ability to establish farms, orchards, or gardens as an additional source of food. As a result, **malnutrition affects one in three people in Choluteca.**



# INTRODUCTION

## ON GETTING BY:

Families that struggle to make it through the lean months employ various strategies to cover their basic necessities, including:

- eating cheaper, less-preferred food,
- decreasing meal size,
- cutting meals,
- taking out loans,
- being paid in food,
- selling domestic animals,
- prioritizing children's food intake over parents,
- eating next year's seed reserves,
- migrating in search of work,
- having more family members work, and
- selling off their possessions.

*"Many workers sadly told us that they no longer own the land that they used to use to cultivate corn, beans and yucca... They now have to rent that land."*  
~COSIBAH

## Workers and Workers Rights

The poverty of Cholutecan workers' living conditions is the result of melon companies' failure to typically pay even the legal minimum wage. Honduran law sets clear labor standards for agriculture; however, the economic power wielded by melon companies in practice exempts them from the consequences of noncompliance. Honduran Labor Law stipulates that farmworkers cannot be required to work more than twelve hours a day and they must be provided breaks totaling one and a half hours. In addition, Honduran labor law is explicit as to the minimum wage and benefits that are to be included in any labor agreement, the violation of which places the employer at fault and subject to fines. Unfortunately, these regulations frequently go unenforced. The major

melon companies have such a significant role in the regional and national economy that often their labor practices go unmonitored and their wrongs unpunished.

*"The labor situation in this region has always been precarious because the State does not seem to understand its role as defender of human and labor rights... Melon companies act with impunity like feudal lords whose interests cannot be meddled with."*  
~COSIBAH

Workers at Suragro have indicated that although the Secretary of Labor has inspected the company and identified violations of labor and minimum wage laws, Suragro would rather pay fines than reform their employment practices. Suragro is not alone: all the major melon companies knowingly and willingly subject workers to illegal and debilitating working conditions. These same companies operate with relative impunity. They face little or no repercussion from government authorities and they have effectively stifled union organizing. Amidst this anti-worker and anti-union climate, **there is only one workers' union comprised of 65 members representing the plight of Choluteca's more than 50,000 poor and exploited farmworkers.**

*"Melon companies are not interested in the health of their workers; they are only interested in what they produce."*  
~COSIBAH

Given the indifferent actions of the Honduran government, the lack of union organization, and the limited public knowledge of the issue, much more needs to be done to correct the grave labor violations of Honduran melon companies.

## Employment and Hiring

The exploitation of melon workers begins with the hiring and contracting process. Workers are hired on short-term contracts, with the terms of employment often not adequately disclosed, making it difficult or nearly impossible for workers to denounce violations of their rights.

Of the 25,000 melon workers in Choluteca, 98% are employed on temporary contracts. According to workers, these contracts are valid for a maximum of six months. Contracts are often entered into verbally, leaving no formal documentation of the labor agreement. This violation of Honduran law means that workers are in a vulnerable position with minimal possibility of legal recourse for abuses committed by their employers.

## Precarious Work

**Labor rights protections are undermined worldwide as permanent, regular jobs are replaced by contract labor and temporary, unstable work – a pattern and practice known as “precarious work.” These workers are subject to unstable employment, low wages and dangerous working conditions. They rarely receive social benefits and are often denied the right to join a union. Even when they have the legal right to unionize, workers are afraid to organize if they are easily replaceable.**

Although many melon workers have been with the same company for three years or more – some even upwards of 30 years – they are denied job security. They do not sign long-term contracts but instead are hired for only a year at a time. Most melon workers are young mothers – nearly a third are single mothers raising two or more children. Their inability to depend on a stable, continuous income leaves their families in a constant precarious state.

Honduran law requires justification for firing an employee, establishes severance pay, and creates social security benefits for employees. But by keeping contracts short-term, companies can get around many of these requirements by not re-hiring workers or threatening not to contract with them again. Any woman brave enough to speak up could find herself without a job the following season. Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable. It is against Honduran law to test for pregnancy as part of

the hiring process or to fire an employee for becoming pregnant. Despite this law, **one fifth of the women surveyed were forced to take a pregnancy test before being hired.** 17% reported having been fired for becoming pregnant and 37% knew a coworker who had been fired for pregnancy.

*“When we are pregnant, they fire us. For that reason, women don’t look for work when they are pregnant and if they become pregnant, they don’t say anything to anyone because they know that they will surely be fired.”*  
~COSIBAH A

Gender discrimination does not end there. 12% of the women interviewed disclose that they have been discriminated against on the basis of their gender, most commonly through verbal abuse. 6% report being subjected to sexual harassment at work by a boss or co-worker. The few women brave enough to report this harassment to management saw no result. The fear of being fired or not re-hired deters many women from denouncing workplace discrimination. Others are unaware of their labor rights and of what behavior is legally permissible in the workplace, and do not file complaints of harassment for this reason.

*“Thank goodness that you are interested in doing something for us. You will see how poorly they treat us... they are shameless.”*  
~COSIBAH

Melon companies capitalize on employees’ lack of knowledge of their rights. The worker interviews showed that only limited information is disclosed to workers in the hiring process. 16% of workers were unable to name the company that they work for and 39% did not know the exact length of their contract. Most women were hired with just a photocopy of their ID card and did not receive a copy of their contract. Just over half of the workers could name Sol and Mike’s Melons as the brand names of their melons. This lack of knowledge suggests a deliberate attempt by the melon companies to keep workers in the dark.

## WORKING CONDITIONS

Not only are melon workers uncertain of the terms of their employment, they are unaware of their rights as workers and as people. Only 18% of the surveyed women were able to identify a single labor right. They were equally hard pressed to identify their human rights: 18% could name one or two human rights; 82% provided no answer. Without knowledge of the rights to which they are entitled, workers will continue to be exploited.

### *Working Conditions Illegal, Unethical, Inhumane*

Each day, melon workers in southern Honduras toil for up to 14 hours, often in dangerous, unsanitary and illegal conditions. They face long hours, exposure to toxic chemicals, and an inhospitable work environment. Unable to unionize and without knowledge of appropriate legal recourse, they continue to work in spite of these deplorable conditions. As a result, on-site injuries, job-related health problems and worker exploitation occur on a regular basis.

Days are long on the melon plantation. Most workers get up at 4 a.m. to begin the trek to the bus stop or meeting point where they will catch a bus or jump in the back of the company pick-up truck to be driven up to 75 kilometers to work. The workday starts around 6 a.m. and can range from 8 to 14 hours. Only 37% of workers report leaving at the end of an 8-hour day. Most finish their work day around 4 or 5 p.m. and arrive home as late as 8 or 9 p.m.

*“When I leave before dawn, my children are sleeping and when I return home, they are sleeping. I don’t know if they ate, if something important happened in their day... I feel totally disconnected from my family.”*

*~Anonymous Worker*

Most melon workers spend the entire day out in the fields under the hot sun, cutting fruit. Despite the physically demanding and exhaustive nature of their work, half of all workers say that they do not receive a break, even for lunch. Less than one in five workers receive an additional rest break in addition to lunch. Those women

who are permitted a break of any sort are generally not provided with adequate rest facilities. **Two thirds of**

**the workers report not having access to running or potable water, a cafeteria or designated eating area or restroom facilities.** They are forced to bring with them enough water to support eight or more hours of intense work in direct sunlight. They are humiliated by having to relieve themselves in the fields without the privacy of a restroom or outhouse. They are not provided any place to rinse off or clean up.

*“There is no shade, even during our lunch break. There are no restrooms, nor water to drink or wash our hands. We must relieve ourselves out in the open.”*

*~Anonymous Worker*

Women generally work as fruit planters, cutters, planters, cleaners or in other related capacities. **The work is monotonous, strenuous and without the proper training, dangerous.** Fruit cutters work with sharp tools that require proper training and protective gear. The benefit of proper training in safe cutting practices hardly needs be underscored. The work of planters and cleaners typically involves the use of powerful noxious chemical fertilizers, pesticides and cleaners. Honduran law requires companies to establish occupational hygiene and safety committees to train and supervise employees in the proper use of potentially dangerous equipment and activities. While most workers report that there is such a committee at their workplace, they express concerns about them, saying: “They do nothing but chat with company officials.” Workers generally know very little of their labor rights in the areas of occupational health and have limited understanding of safety and hygiene regulations.

When hygiene and safety committees fail, workers suffer. **Few are properly trained to handle the machinery or tools that they operate, and just over half of all workers receive any sort of protective equipment for their work.** This means that many women spend all day cutting fruit from the vine without so much as gloves, masks, goggles or sun-protective clothing. The statistics are telling: 40% of workers have been in an accident caused by damaged tools or faulty machines; 16% have

### WORKER TESTIMONY: AGUSTINA ALVAREZ MARTINEZ

“I lost a finger due to the irresponsibility of the Suragro-Fyffes Melon Company.

I have worked with the company for 15 years and in all that time, the company has never paid us the minimum wage nor afforded us the rights established by the labor code.



I suffered an accident at work on April 15, 2010. As I arrived at my place of work and went to get off of the truck, my hand became trapped in the bars of the truck bed and **my right-hand middle finger was dragged away with the truck until it broke off.** At this time, we could not find an immediate supervisor and some of my colleagues told the driver to take me to the Fergusson Clinic because they give medical attention to some of the Suragro workers.

They took me to this clinic, since none of the thousands of Suragro-Fyffes workers including myself, have a right to medical care in the Honduran Institute of Social Security (IHSS). Once they had treated me, the head of Human Resources, Juan Carlos Rosales, told me that **the obligation of the company ended here and that I should go home and once I had recuperated, I could return to the company to see if they could give me work again.**

[Soon after] a friend from work directed me to the offices of COSIBAH which she heard about on the Radio Paz “Union Torch” radio program that speaks to the rights of workers. She told me that they give free advice to workers and not to seek out a lawyer because they charge an arm and a leg.



The following day, Rosa Estrada (of COSIBAH) accompanied me to the offices of the Ministry of Labor. Rosa informed me that she would put my case on the COSIBAH web page because they already had a campaign to pressure Suragro-Fyffes to provide us workers with our rights. A few days later, Rosa brought me to an internet café and showed me a photo of my hand and read me the accompanying announcement.

To my surprise, a few days later Juan Carlos Rosales called me to inform me that the company was going to pay for my medical assistance and recuperation time and hire me back once I had healed- but that I had to stop working with COSIBAH because they were out to harm the company. **But I did not listen to Mr. Rosales because were it not for COSIBAH, he would not have offered me any assistance nor would he have paid for my injury leave.** I am being treated at the TELETON and I am awaiting a medical opinion that establishes my degree of disability so that the company will compensate me for the injury that I suffered.”



## WORKING CONDITIONS

Workers on melon plantations in southern Honduras receive only half an hour for lunch, are usually not paid the legal minimum wage, and often work 14 or more hours in a day without overtime pay. As they are not provided with protective equipment, many resort to buying gloves or using socks to protect their hands -- but these are often taken from them because, according to the supervisors, they damage the melons.

Still more dangerous is the threat of chemical exposure. At any given phase of production, workers come into contact with a number of different chemicals. Half of the workers reported receiving training in the safe use of agricultural chemicals. But it is unclear whether the training is comprehensive enough to prevent injury.

*“We women who work in the fields faint due to the strength of the chemicals – every day someone passes out due to the sun, the chemicals, or hunger.”*

*~Anonymous Worker*

For example, only one quarter of the workers who handle chemicals were able to identify exactly which chemicals they use on a daily basis. Of the remaining workers, half did not reply and 19% admitted to not knowing. Chlorine was the most identified chemical used on-site. Topical exposure to chlorine can result in rashes, burning and blistering of the skin. Long-term exposure can be even more serious, leading to sight-related ailments, respiratory problems and stomach illnesses. **When questioned as to their general health, nearly 20% of workers report suffering from a work-related disease.** Respiratory ailments, headaches, eye irritation and gastro-intestinal problems are the most frequently cited symptoms. A full 11% of workers have been directly poisoned at work, and 14% have suffered from food poisoning as a result of chemical exposure on the job.



*“The women do not receive training in the handling of chemicals. They don’t even know the names of the chemicals that they use. They just know that if they work in packing they wear a cap and overalls to protect the melons. Meanwhile, many of them have lost the hair on their hands and skin from the chlorine that they use to clean the melons.”*

*~COSIBAH*

When combined, these figures are astounding. An estimated three out of four workers has been exposed to dangerous levels of toxic chemicals, suffered a machine-related accident, or developed a serious health impairment due to their working conditions. Nearly all workers are exploited in terms of their paid work hours and an overwhelming percentage are subjected to inhumane and degrading working conditions.

### Payment

Adding insult to injury, melon companies usually fail to pay their workers the minimum wage and do not compensate them for overtime hours. **Each day 25,000 women in Choluteca labor non-stop for more than eight hours in a strenuous and potentially hazardous environment, for less than a dollar an hour.**

The raw data is telling: **85% of Honduran melon workers receive less than minimum wage.** The Honduran minimum wage for export-farmworkers is set at \$112.33 lempiras (US\$5.90) per day. According to Honduran law, overtime hours above 44 hours per week must be optional and entered into at the worker’s discretion. Likewise, workers should be compensated for these hours with equal or overtime pay. **But according to COSIBAH’s findings, most women earn around \$100 a month and work an average of 63 hours a week.**

*“You adapt to what you earn working in the plantations because, compared to earning nothing, at least this little bit helps me give my children something to eat.”*

*~Anonymous Worker*

## WORKING CONDITIONS

Nearly 70% of the women regularly work longer than eight hours a day, 41% of them without overtime compensation. Overtime work, both in the form of nine-plus hour workdays and six- or seven-day workweeks, is not optional but expected. Melon companies capitalize on the shortage of work and desperate condition of the Choluteca population to drive salaries down and work hours up. A majority of the women surveyed do not receive compensation for working Sundays (their supposed day of rest) or for working holidays. One worker said, “They are shameless. Sometimes they don’t pay us in full, telling us that the computer messed up, that it’s not their fault and that if we try to complain, they’ll fire us and will not hire us again.”

Melon companies have such a great influence over the local government and economy that they do not even attempt to hide their corrupt wage and overtime practices. Between 2009 and 2011, the Choluteca Ministry of Labor inspected affiliates or branches of all four of the major melon-export companies. **Every single company was cited for failure to produce valid worker contracts and/or failure to pay minimum wage and overtime hours.** Industry leader OKRA SUR was visited twice during this period and was cited both times for failure to reform wage violations. Suragroh, owned by transnational fruit company Fyffes, has paid a 90,000 lempiras (\$4700) fine several times, but workers report that it prefers to pay these small sums rather than reform its policies to comply with the minimum wage and other labor laws.

*“Representatives of the Ministry of Labor are the melon companies’ unconditional lackeys because of the economic power of that they possess. For that reason, there is no respect for labor laws, no recognition of social security dues, no Sunday pay, no safety and sanitation, no written contracts, no internal supervision of work, no employee registration – in essence, **nothing.**”*  
~COSIBAH investigator German Zepeda

The dominant companies’ collective decision to ignore citations and openly defy labor laws makes it nearly impossible for workers to demand fair wages. Without the support of the government and with no labor union

representation, melon workers have little chance for recourse. Workers cite cases in which employees were fired for attempting to obtain their owed wages with work vouchers. Others note occasions of apparent blacklisting, incidents of outspoken workers not being able to find work the following season – either with their former employer, or with any other melon company. Unable to address these problems with their employers and with no support from authorities, workers are left in a seemingly hopeless situation.

*“I don’t think that this will ever change, because the owners of the plantations do whatever they want with their workers, and the Ministry of Labor does nothing when they visit – all they do is tell us off, tell us that we must be responsible workers.”*  
~Anonymous Worker

### Child Labor

Although the investigation did not uncover significant cases of child labor, workers acknowledged that minors are seen on farms in the area, without the permission of the Ministry of Labor. The long hours and overly strenuous conditions that workers in the fields face are especially hard on minors. The extreme poverty of the region makes it difficult for many of these children to stay in school, and they find themselves forced to work to support their families.

It is true that it is technically against company policy to contract child labor. After the last harvesting season, women were notified that they would not be hired unless they possessed identification indicating they are of age. However, one must question the sincerity of this sort of policy. COSIBAH notes that it is not uncommon for many boys and girls to borrow documentation from adults during the hiring process, a practice that the company recognizes but turn a blind eye to. Working contracts given to minors are usually subject to some kind of stipulation, for example having built up friendship or trust with supervisors. Reports published by the Ministry of Labor in the region confirm that melon companies are continuing to hire children.

### *Denial of Social Security*

Melon companies systematically deny women the social security rights and benefits entitled to them as employees. **89% of women surveyed report not receiving social security benefits through the IHSS (Honduran Institute of Social Security)** and the remainder did not answer, likely because they are unaware of the benefits due to them.

Instead of a single universal social security system, there are several private social security programs in Honduras. These programs entitle employees to various benefits dependent upon the type of work they perform and the length of their work contracts. In Choluteca, the Ministry of Labor requires that employers register their employees through the IHSS to ensure that they are provided with health and injury insurance, maternity leave, and education vouchers.

On paper, many companies endeavor to avoid paying their fair share for employee benefits. By hiring workers on temporary contracts, melon companies significantly reduce the coverage owed to their employees because temporary workers receive less benefits. In practice, companies outright refuse to pay social security. Four of the five companies investigated by the Ministry of Labor were cited for not complying with social security requirements.

Social security benefits are extremely important to workers because they guarantee access to services, which would otherwise be inadequate or too expensive. Take healthcare for example. Medical facilities in Honduras are amongst the worst in Latin America; hospitals are overcrowded and understaffed with extremely limited resources. Social security benefits help to ensure access to medical attention and to offset costs, including for work-related illnesses and injuries. 44% of melon workers report that their employer provides medical attention not tied to a social security program; however, by providing independent medical services, melon companies can easily take advantage of injured or ill workers while keeping knowledge of their health problems out of the public eye. (for example, see Agustina Alvarez's testimony on page 8.)

**When asked what the first changes that they would like their employers to make are, the women responded with the following:**

1. Pay the legal minimum wage
2. Increase workers' salaries
3. Improve supervisor treatment of workers
4. Comply with IHSS social security requirements
5. Pay bonuses and overtime wages

Maternity leave is another legally-provided social security benefit entitling women to 12 weeks paid leave. Melon companies largely ignore this law, firing pregnant women on the spot without any compensation. When employers do not register their employees with the IHSS, families do not receive education vouchers and are forced to bear the full financial burden of the children's education. Without the aid of vouchers, many families do not have the means to send their children to school, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In interviews with 310 Honduran female melon workers and fifteen separate group meetings, COSIBAH identified labor rights violations in the areas of temporary and precarious employment, wage violations, unsafe and inhumane working conditions, and failure to provide social security benefits.

COSIBAH attributes the deplorable working conditions suffered by the workers primarily to the indifference of melon companies. Without stronger recourse by the Honduran government and public pressure by the international community, melon workers will not escape from their lives of exploitation and extreme poverty.

The following table outlines some recommendations that COSIBAH and the ILRF believe are necessary to address the violations mentioned above.

ADDRESS	ACTORS	ACTIONS
Temporary, Precarious Labor	Melon Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt a hiring scheme that offers long-term employment to workers</li> <li>• Strictly enforce documentation requirements for job applicants and do not contract with children</li> <li>• Comply with all national standards for employment, including the prohibition of pregnancy testing</li> <li>• Enter into formal employment contracts with workers and ensure that all workers receive a formal appointment letter setting out the terms of their contract</li> <li>• Fully disclose to employees all terms of work contracts and ensure that they understand them by reviewing contract terms verbally in consideration of illiterate employees and publically posting labor rights and applicable Code of Conduct information</li> </ul>
Temporary, Precarious Labor	Honduran Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that every worker is documented in formal written employment contracts and that all workers receive a copy of their contract</li> <li>• Perform regular monitoring visits to plantations in order to verify appropriate company documentation of employees and include independent interviews with workers in order to formulate an unbiased assessment of company compliance with labor laws</li> <li>• Develop and implement tougher repercussions for labor violations: incrementally increase fines for violations and introduce serious non-monetary punishments for non-compliance, such as closing the plantation</li> </ul>
Temporary, Precarious Labor	COSIBAH/Unions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with labor unions in other regional agricultural sectors in order to demand that employers comply with labor rights</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ADDRESS	ACTORS	ACTIONS
Temporary, Precarious Labor	Buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt a Code of Conduct and incorporate a clause prohibiting the use of unfair labor throughout the entire supply chain and requiring mandatory registration of all workers for long-term contracts when possible</li> <li>• Report publicly on the company's policies for supplier/ vendor selection, management, and/or termination</li> <li>• Publicly release the list of melon plantations</li> <li>• Set up an internal monitoring system and report publicly on auditing policies, mechanisms and results. The auditing agenda shall include but not be limited to the following topics: precarious contracting, wages, child labor, working hours, social security benefits, working environment and workers' right to organize and bargain collectively.</li> </ul>
Wage Violations	Melon Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate a living wage clause in the Code of Conduct</li> <li>• Ensure that the salary and benefits, which must be at least equal to the legal minimum wage, are clarified and guaranteed in the formal appointment letters</li> <li>• Work with unions and NGOs to conduct internal auditing and report publicly on the auditing results. The auditing agenda shall include but not be limited to the following topics: precarious contracting, wages, child labor, working hours, social security benefits, working environment and workers' right to organize and bargain collectively.</li> </ul>
Wage Violations	Honduran Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate a living wage clause into regional and national minimum wage law and ensure that it is incorporated into employee contracts</li> <li>• Strictly enforce all labor requirements, including eight hour workdays and 44 hour workweeks. Ensure that workers are not forced to work overtime, which otherwise is a violation of the existing forced labor prohibition.</li> <li>• Perform both disclosed and discrete audits to ensure that payment schedules, including Sunday pay and bonus programs, are set out in labor contracts and provided accordingly, and that payments are made on time</li> </ul>
Wage Violations	COSIBAH/ Unions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with labor unions in other regional agricultural sectors in order to demand that employers comply with labor rights</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ADDRESS	ACTORS	ACTIONS
Wage Violations	Buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buyers</li> <li>• Incorporate a living wage clause in the Code of Conduct</li> <li>• Ensure that payment schedules are set out in supply contracts and that payments are made on time</li> <li>• Work with local NGOs to initiate and sponsor research on the current payment system to identify the impact of fair pay on the workers' livelihoods</li> <li>• Include regular surprise internal audits and report publicly on internal auditing policies, mechanism and results</li> </ul>
Unsafe and Inhumane Work Environment	Melon Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsafe and Inhumane Work Environment</li> <li>• Melon Companies</li> <li>• Incorporate a health and safety standard in the Code of Conduct and ensure that the standard meets national labor law requirements, international labor standards, and melon certification standards</li> <li>• Provide occupational and safety training to all workers at the beginning of their employment and ensure that occupational safety and hygiene committees actually function as intended</li> <li>• Equip all employees with the necessary protective equipment and safety gear</li> <li>• Work with unions and NGOs to conduct internal auditing and report publicly on auditing results</li> </ul>
Unsafe and Inhumane Work Environment	Honduran Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that all health and safety codes are comprehensive and mandate that companies publicly post safety requirements</li> <li>• Perform more thorough auditing practices including surprise or non-disclosed audits and ensure that repercussions for health and safety violations are sufficiently bold.</li> <li>• Protect NGOs and unions to ensure that they can effectively represent workers rights in regards to a safe working environment</li> </ul>
Unsafe and Inhumane Work Environment	Buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate a health and safety standard in the Code of Conduct and ensure such standard meet the requirements as laid down in national labor laws, international labor standards, and melon certification standards.</li> <li>• Work with local NGOs to audit plantations and report publicly on auditing policies and results.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ADDRESS	ACTORS	ACTIONS
Unsafe and Inhumane Work Environment	COSIBAH/ Unions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish alliances with local NGOs to ensure cross-sector worker protection</li> </ul>
Social Security Benefits	Melon Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate a social security standard into the Code of Conduct and ensure that employees are provided with access to health, injury, maternity leave and educational benefits</li> </ul>
Social Security Benefits	Honduran Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure that companies comply with regional and national requirements for the provision of social security</li> <li>Perform more thorough auditing practices including surprise or non-disclosed audits and ensure that repercussions for social security provision violations are sufficiently bold</li> </ul>
Social Security Benefits	Buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate a health and safety standard in the Code of Conduct and ensure such standard meet the requirements as laid down in national labor laws, international labor standards, and melon certification standards.</li> <li>Work with local NGOs to audit plantations and report publicly on auditing policies and results.</li> </ul>
Social Security Benefits	COSIBAH/ Unions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with labor unions in other regional agricultural sectors in order to demand that employers comply with labors rights</li> </ul>

In summary, improving the conditions of female melon workers in southern Honduras will require the conscious effort of melon buyers, Choluteca government officials, local workers' unions and melon buyers. Existing laws and standards must be enforced and stronger auditing and reporting mechanisms must be created in order to ensure that the women may live healthy and dignified lives.



## Survey of Women Melon Industry Workers, Southern Region

### A. General Information

1. First and last names of interviewed worker:  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age:  
 A. \_\_\_\_\_ years of age
3. Marital Status:  
 A. \_\_\_ Single  
 B. \_\_\_ Married  
 C. \_\_\_ Common Law Marriage  
 D. \_\_\_ Single Mother  
 E. \_\_\_ Other (divorced/separated/widowed)
4. How many children do you have?  
 A. \_\_\_\_\_ Number of boys  
 B. \_\_\_\_\_ Number of girls
5. Do you know how to read and write?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No. *Skip to question 7*
6. What was the last year of school that you completed?  
 A. \_\_\_ None  
 B. \_\_\_ Did not finish primary school (up to 8th grade)  
 C. \_\_\_ Finished primary school  
 D. \_\_\_ Did not finish secondary school (up to 12th grade)  
 E. \_\_\_ Finished secondary school
7. Approximately how far away do you live from your place of work?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ kilometers.
8. List three rights that you have as a person, and as a woman:  
 A. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 B. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 C. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ *Number of rights correctly listed.*

9. List three rights that you have as a worker:  
 A. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 B. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 C. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ *Number of rights correctly listed.*

### B. Working Conditions:

10. How much do you earn?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Lempiras/ month
11. Does the company that you work for pay you the minimum wage?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No
12. Do you work overtime?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No
13. Does the company pay for overtime worked?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No
14. Does the company pay extra if you work Sundays?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No
15. Does the company pay you for holidays?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No
16. Does the company compensate your travel costs, or provide you with transportation?  
 A. \_\_\_ Yes  
 B. \_\_\_ No. *Skip to question 18.*
17. What kind of transport does the company provide you with?  
 A. \_\_\_ Bus  
 B. \_\_\_ Pick-up truck  
 C. \_\_\_ Truck  
 D. \_\_\_ Other. Please Indicate: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX A

18. Does the company pay you for “the thirteenth and fourteenth” (a legally-required bonus in Honduras provided for December and June)?

- A.  Yes  
B.  No

19. What time do you start work?  
\_\_\_\_\_ am

20. What time do you leave work?  
\_\_\_\_\_ am/pm

21. How much time do you have for lunch?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Minutes

22. Other than lunch, do they give you any other breaks?

- A.  Yes  
B.  No

23. Within your company, if you do the same kind of work as a man, do they pay you equally?

- A.  Yes  
B.  No

24. At the end of the working season does the company pay you any kind of bonus or benefits?

- A.  Yes. How much? \_\_\_\_\_ Lempiras  
B.  No

25. How many times have you signed a contract with the same company?

\_\_\_\_\_ times.

How long are the contracts good for?

\_\_\_\_\_ months

26. How many days does the probationary period last for?

- A.  Less than 60 days  
B.  60 days  
C.  More than 60 days. How many? \_\_\_\_\_ days

27. Last year after the melon harvest, what did you do for work?

A.  Another agricultural activity. Specify which:  
\_\_\_\_\_

B.  Employment not related to agriculture. Specify:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

C.  Self-employed. Specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

D.  Housework only

28. How many years have you been working in the melon industry?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

29. Do you have social security?

- A.  Yes  
B.  No

30. Does the company provide you with medical services?

- A.  Yes  
B.  No.

31. What are the most common ailments suffered by women working in the melon industry?

- A.  Stomach related, gastro-intestinal illnesses  
B.  Cough, colds, sore throats and other respiratory ailments  
C.  Headaches, hearing problems, or irritation of the eyes  
D.  Carpal Tunnel (problems moving ones' hands)  
E.  Dermatological ailments (problems with the skin)  
F.  Varicose veins and other leg problems  
G.  Poisoned by exposure to agrochemicals  
H.  Back pains and other muscular and bone ailments  
I.  Other, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

32. While working with this company, have you been treated for some kind of ailment associated with the work you do?

- A.  Yes  
B.  No

## APPENDIX A

33. What work related accidents are most common in this company?

- A. \_\_\_ Injuries (cuts or bruising) through use of tools and other machines
- B. \_\_\_ Injuries provoked by falling objects
- C. \_\_\_ Injuries provoked by slipping or falling
- D. \_\_\_ Electrical shock
- E. \_\_\_ Bloodshed or other due to exposure to toxic chemicals
- F. \_\_\_ Other. Please Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

34. What kind of work do you do for this company?

- A. \_\_\_ Supervision of other workers
- B. \_\_\_ Fruit harvest
- C. \_\_\_ Fruit transport
- D. \_\_\_ Fruit selection
- E. \_\_\_ Fruit packing
- F. Other \_\_\_\_\_

35. Does the company provide you with protective equipment?

- A. \_\_\_ Yes
- B. \_\_\_ No. *Skip to question 37*

36. What kind of protective equipment are you given?

- A. \_\_\_ Gloves
- B. \_\_\_ Aprons
- C. \_\_\_ Masks
- D. \_\_\_ Boots
- E. \_\_\_ Overalls
- F. \_\_\_ Protective helmets
- G. \_\_\_ Belts
- H. \_\_\_ Other. Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

37. Do you know what work-related sexual harassment includes? I'll explain it to you quickly: It's when a person (woman or man) that is a boss or superior gives you compliments or tells you things that suggest sexual desire, or directly asks for sexual favors, taking advantage of his/her authority. In other words, there is sexual harassment, when someone wants to bribe someone else by giving them work or keeping them employed in return for sexual favors, which can be in the form of touching, kissing, or other sexual contact. Keeping in mind what I've explained to you, do you consider yourself to be a victim of sexual harassment in the workplace?

- A. \_\_\_ Yes
- B. \_\_\_ No *Skip to question 41*

38. Did you report this sexual harassment, if you do consider yourself a victim?

- A. \_\_\_ Yes
- B. \_\_\_ No

39. Who did you report the harassment to?

- A. \_\_\_ Another official in the company
- B. \_\_\_ The police
- C. \_\_\_ A human rights organization
- D. \_\_\_ Other. Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

40. Did reporting the harassment do you any good?

- A. \_\_\_ Yes. Explain the repercussions: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_ No

41. Have you been the victim of any discrimination or mistreatment as a woman at the hands of a male coworker or boss?

- A. \_\_\_ Yes. Please Explain: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_ No

42. Did this company demand that you take a pregnancy test?

- A. \_\_\_ Yes
- B. \_\_\_ No

# APPENDIX A

43. At some point in the past has this company fired you for being pregnant?

A. \_\_\_ Yes

B. \_\_\_ No

44. Do you know of any other coworker who has been fired for being pregnant?

A. \_\_\_ Yes. About how many cases do you know of?

\_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_ No

45. Do you know of any non-Honduran, foreign workers who have been contracted by the company?

A. \_\_\_ Yes. How many, more or less? \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_ No. Skip to question 48

46. Where are these people (this person) from?

A. Nicaragua

B. El Salvador

C. Another country. Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

47. Did these coworkers (or this coworker) begin working at the company on their own accord, or were they recruited by the company in their home countries?

A. \_\_\_ Began working at their own accord

B. \_\_\_ Were recruited in their home countries

C. \_\_\_ Other. Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

48. Of the following services that I'm about to read off to you, which ones are provided by the company you work for currently?

A. \_\_\_ Potable water

B. \_\_\_ Restrooms or porta-potties

C. \_\_\_ Showers or baths

D. \_\_\_ Cafeterias

49. What documents were asked of you before you began working for the company?

A. \_\_\_ Birth certificate

B. \_\_\_ I.D. card or passport

C. \_\_\_ Health insurance card

D. \_\_\_ Pregnancy test or proof of not being pregnant

E. \_\_\_ Proof of no criminal record

F. \_\_\_ Other. Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

50. During the time that you've been working here, have you seen inspectors from the Ministry of Labor visiting the company?

A. \_\_\_ Yes

B. \_\_\_ No Skip to question 52

51. Was there any change in the company after inspection?

A. \_\_\_ Yes. Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_ No

52. Please list the three things that you would most like to see changed in this company:

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

## C. Company References

53. Name of the company \_\_\_\_\_

54. Name of the plantation or packing facility \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

55. Address of the company \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

56. What brand is used by the company?

A. Chiquita

B. Dole

C. Fyffes

D. Other. Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

57. Do you know which chemicals are used by the company?

A. \_\_\_ Yes. Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_ No

58. Are the chemicals labeled?

A. \_\_\_ Yes

B. \_\_\_ No

C. \_\_\_ Doesn't know/ Didn't answer

## APPENDIX A

59. Are the instructions in spanish?

A.  Yes

B.  No

C.  Doesn't know/ Didn't answer

60. Time of day when chemicals are used:

\_\_\_\_\_ am

\_\_\_\_\_ pm

61. Does the company have a health and safety commission?

A.  Yes

B.  No

C.  Doesn't know/ Didn't answer

62. Do you receive training about what such a health and safety commission should do?

A.  Yes

B.  No

C.  Doesn't know/ Didn't answer

63. Do you receive training or information about the proper use and handling of chemicals?

A.  Yes

B.  No

C.  Doesn't know/ Didn't respond

64. At any time have you or any of your coworkers been poisoned by the use of any chemical?

A.  Yes, the interviewee was poisoned

B.  Yes, interviewee knows of the case of a coworker

C.  No

D.  Doesn't know / Didn't Respond

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and Last Name of Interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Place and Date