Women and Minorities in Meat Packing

Demographics changed in the meat industry as regulations were reduced. The slaughter, preparation and packaging of meat is a dirty job. Conditions have markedly improved in North America, and injuries to workers have declined somewhat since the early part of the 20th century, but pay remains low. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Texas meatpacking companies employ the highest number of workers, who earn a mean average of $22,700 per year.

History
Few regulations covered the meat industry in the early 1900s, and by the 1930s unions began changing the face of the industry. The mostly white workforce consisted of men, women and children. The United Packing Workers of America, or the UPWA, worked to improve the working conditions and pay of meatpacking workers and participated aggressively in civil rights for all Americans, leading the way to racial equality in the meatpacking houses.

Women
During World War II, women took jobs in the slaughterhouses beside the minority male workers. The shift continued, according to the Human Ecology Review, maintaining a place for women on the slaughterhouse lines and increasing the number of nonwhites. As wages continued dropping in the meatpacking industry, slaughterhouses attracted more and more undocumented women, who experience the same safety issues as men as well as sexual harassment, according to the Harvard Latino Law Review.

Immigrants
Immigrant laborers joined the meatpacking workforce in the 1980s and their numbers continue to grow. In the 1980s, about 10 percent of the meatpacking workforce was Hispanic. By 2003, that figure rose to nearly 41.5 percent. About 4.1 percent are Asian and 12.7 percent are black. Workers who don’t speak English are at a higher risk of injury because of language barriers, according to Human Rights Watch. Many are undocumented and are not aware of their rights. In meatpacking plants, workers often are dismissed when injured, so many injuries go unreported.
Excerpt from, “The Most Dangerous Job in America”
In some American slaughterhouses, more than three-quarters of the workers are not native English speakers. A new migrant industrial workforce now circulates through the meatpacking towns of the High Plains. A wage of $9.50 an hour seems incredible to men and women who come from rural areas in Mexico where the wages are $7 a day. These manual laborers, long accustomed to toiling in the fields, are good workers. They’re also unlikely to complain or challenge authority, to file lawsuits, organize unions, and fight for their legal rights. They tend to be poor, vulnerable, and fearful. From the industry's point of view, they are ideal workers: cheap, largely interchangeable, and disposable. Immigrant women are especially susceptible towards abuses.

Excerpt from splcenter.org
In a 2005 trial, Tamayo told the jury she was raped repeatedly by a supervisor who threatened her with a knife and gun and said he would kill her husband if she told him. She tried to tell a deputy sheriff, but a company representative intervened, and no criminal charges were ever filed. The EEOC said she was subjected to repeated verbal sexual harassment and intimidation, sexually offensive and threatening gossip from co-workers, and retaliation from the company, including suspension after she reported the harassment. Eventually, she was forced to resign. The jury awarded her nearly $1 million in lost wages and other compensatory and punitive damages. The decision was upheld by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 2008. To date, Tamayo’s case is the only one to reach a federal jury.

 Unlike Tamayo’s slight retribution most undocumented female workers facing sexual harassment are unable to get any justice. They do not know their rights. They often fear, quite rationally, that reporting abuses will lead to job loss and, in some cases, deportation and separation from their children. Some feel too much shame to report harassment or sexual violence, leaving them extremely vulnerable to exploitation by male co-workers or supervisors. Often, they are faced with threats of firing or offers for jobs in exchange for sex. Their abusers use their lack of legal status against them, knowing they are not likely to report sexual harassment or even violent attacks.

 Because of the many obstacles arrayed against them — fear, poverty, shame, lack of access to legal resources, language barriers, immigration status and cultural pressures — few immigrant women ever come forward to speak out against the wrongs committed against them. Too often, they are forced to compromise their dignity — to endure sexual harassment and exploitation — to obtain a better life and a measure of economic security for themselves and their families.

Uneducated
The demographics in the meatpacking industry may be multicultural in the 21st century, but workers share many of the same characteristics. They are uneducated and work in extremely unsafe work conditions. Nearly every worker in meatpacking plants has injuries. Cutting stations are located close to each other, automated lines move too quickly for workers to keep up, and workers must put in long shifts or fear losing their jobs. Men and women must wear goggles, hardhats, stainless steel mesh gloves, rubber aprons and chaps. Still, every worker from the line cutter to the cleaning crew is in danger of suffering amputations, body part crushing, burns, punctures and other traumatic injuries. Though
the demographics have opened up to include all segments of society, poor safety conditions in the plants continue to plague workers. According to Human Rights Watch, the poor labor market has caused safety concerns to backslide in the United States. Collective bargaining eroded, and by 2005, the injury rate was twice as high in the meatpacking industry as any other industry in the country.