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# Migration, Marginalization, and Institutional Injustice in the Rural South

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ABSTRACT
At the new beginning of the next 50 years of the Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA), the SRSA Presidential Address calls for attention to the issues that rural immigrants have faced – the everyday experiences of international migrants, their marginalization, and institutional injustice in rural America, particularly in the rural South. These issues have often been ignored or downplayed in the larger dialogue on rural issues and in the public debates about immigration policy, even though these social problems have been a perennial issue. Rural social scientists are challenged to be organic intellectuals who do not hide in the ivory tower of the academy, but rather use our intellect to diagnose the ills of society and help exploited rural migrants better understand their situation and the most fruitful strategies available to them to improve their lives and achieve a more just and humane society.

KEYWORDS
Institutional injustice, marginalization, rural immigrants, rural migration

The Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) has made numerous contributions to research, practice, education, and policy related to rural issues for the past 50 years. The former SRSA presidential addresses reflect well the important issues that the rural South has faced, as well as the roles of rural social scientists and the SRSA in addressing these issues. After completing the first 50 years of our history, we now look forward to the next 50 years. At the starting point of the new beginning, it is important to talk about a salient issue that has often been ignored or downplayed in the larger dialogue on rural issues and in the public debates about immigration policy, even though the issue has been a

perennial issue. I refer to the everyday experiences of international migrants, their marginalization, and institutional injustice in rural America, particularly in the rural South.

## UNHEARD VOICES

Here are some stories of international migrants in rural areas. These stories depict well what they are undergoing in their everyday lives as the new members of rural America.

*Case 1:* I will start with a little story of my friend, Jay. He was a middle-class government officer in South Korea, but in his mid-40s he decided to quit the job and come to the United States to further his two sons' education and secure a better future for them. Jay had limited English proficiency and job skills. He was introduced to a Korean immigration agency who charged $30,000 to find him a job in a poultry processing plant in a rural community in North Carolina. This company has sponsored foreign workers through a green card program (known by its category EB-3) designed to meet unskilled labor shortages that U.S. employers have faced. He recalled that it was a horrible place to work, paying less than $20,000 a year with freezing cold temperatures, long periods of standing and repetitive motion, rapid line speeds, chicken odors, and strong chemical smells, as well as constant humiliation and discrimination. He took a steep fall down the economic ladder for the chance to live in the United States. He got carpal tunnel, which later required surgery, but luckily, he did not get any other injuries such as losing fingers as did many of the other workers. He completed his one year required term in the company and now runs a small take-out restaurant in Houston. Despite the hardships he endured, his case was the most fortunate and *best* story about the poultry workers that I have studied for many years.

*Case 2:* Another story is about Sam, a young Marshallese migrant who worked in a poultry processing plant in northwest Arkansas. Marshall Islands is a small island country in the Pacific with a special relationship with the United States. Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. conducted 67 nuclear bomb tests within the Marshall Islands, which resulted in significant environmental contamination and serious negative health issues for the Marshallese. Based on the Compact of Free Association agreements between the U.S. and Marshall Islands in 1986 and 2004, the U.S. was granted exclusive use of Marshallese territory for its military operations. In exchange for this, the U.S. granted Marshallese citizens a unique migration status including the right to work, live permanently in,

and travel freely to the U.S. without visas (Riklon et al. 2010). Due to this special legal status, many Marshallese migrants were recruited by poultry processing plants in northwest Arkansas. According to a report on the Marshallese community in Arkansas (Jimeno 2013), more than three-quarters of Marshallese immigrants in northwest Arkansas were working for poultry processing plants.

Sam came to Springdale to get a job in a poultry plant. At that time his aunt already worked in a poultry plant in Springdale. She took him to a recruiting center two days after he arrived. Due to his special legal status he could start working right away as a line worker. Sam was not able to understand most of the information provided in English during the video orientation session because of his limited English ability. He did not receive any proper safety trainings, except his line supervisor's brief demonstration of his work tasks. Sam worked two and half months until he lost three fingers. However, he was not eligible for health insurance coverage provided by his company because it only applied after a three-month probationary period. He had to pay out of pocket the large medical bill for visiting an emergency room and suffered from enormous debts. The company blamed Sam for not following the safety regulations and subsequently fired him without workers' compensation. There are many stories with even worse outcomes from my numerous interviews with Marshallese workers over the last ten years.

*Case 3:* The stories of *undocumented immigrant women* in rural areas are even more heart-breaking. In addition to enduring the terrible experiences that many immigrants have had, these women suffer from sexual abuse and violence on the job. They have to put up with constant propositions for sex, touching, and sexual assaults by supervisors. Sometimes they even have to tolerate having their young children being harassed by their supervisors in order to keep their jobs (SPLC 2010). The fields that they worked in were referred as the "green motel" (Clarren 2005) or "the fields of panties" in the mid-1990s because sexual harassment against female farmworkers was so pervasive (Ontiveros 2003). More recent studies documented that it is still ubiquitous (Waugh 2010). However, those female farmworkers could not speak out in order to obtain or maintain economic security for themselves and their families. They live with shame and the fear of being arrested, deported, and separated from their children. There is no hope that their situation could be improved. These are the stories of thousands of women facing such hardships every day.

The stories provided above are not uncommon in rural areas. Most of these workers were international migrants – recently arrived immigrants, refugees, undocumented immigrants, as well as those with an EB-3 visa or a special legal status such as the Marshallese. Regardless of immigration status and industry employed, foreign-born immigrant workers share similar experiences: they are forced to accept exploitation by employers and endure harsh and at times illegal conditions that few Americans would tolerate. Very few immigrant workers are willing to speak out about it, and instead, suffer in silence. Their voices are not heard. Their cry-outs remain as an empty echo, and they are left alone in our society.

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss the changes in rural America, various aspects of the marginalization of these new members of rural communities, and the injustice deeply embedded in social institutions.

## CHANGES IN RURAL AMERICA

During the past few decades, rural America has experienced substantial demographic changes. Most rural communities have experienced population loss from natural change due to the decreasing fertility rate and the increasing aging population and the related mortality rates. Thus, the overall population trends varied across local communities depending on net migration (USDA 2018). Rural communities with substantial domestic outmigration of young labor to urban areas have experienced a significant population decline. Such change brings hardships to these communities such as school consolidations and closures, and cut backs or closures of health care services, hospitals, grocery stores, and other services. On the other hand, some rural communities have experienced a population growth. It is often attributed to the influx of minorities and immigrants to the communities. A report from the Center for American Progress (Mathema, Svajlenka, and Hermann 2018) showed that about 32 percent of rural communities experienced a population increase, and immigrants account for 21 percent of their entire population growth. Compared to U.S.-born residents, these immigrants tend to be younger and belong to the labor force age group (Schaefer and Mattingly 2016).

Since the 1940s, the U.S. farming industry has been heavily reliant on international migrants for labor-intensive jobs such as harvesting crops, picking fruit and vegetables, and tending livestock (Orces 2019). According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) conducted in 2015-2016 (Hernandez and Gabbard 2018), about 76 percent of

farmworkers were immigrants. Mexico-born immigrants accounted for more than two-thirds (69 percent) of farmworkers. About 49 percent of farmworkers did not have work authorization. Another source estimated that undocumented immigrants accounted for at least 70 percent of farmworkers (Farmworkers Justice 2019). The meatpacking and poultry processing plants anchored in rural communities have also attracted many immigrants as new residents and new employees. These plants have had difficulties in attracting a sufficient number of U.S.-born workers due to poor work conditions (e.g., low-wage, hazardous work environment) and high turnover rates, and have thus relied on immigrants and refugees to meet their labor demands (GAO 2016; Grey 1997). The American Community Survey data in 2018 showed that 37.5 percent of the meat and poultry slaughtering and processing workers were foreign-born, compared to 17.1 percent of workers in the U.S. workforce (Stuesse and Dollar 2020).

Rural communities have been reshaped by the influx of immigrants. These communities are faced with opportunities, as well as challenges. Immigrant population growth provides a stimulus to rural economies and communities. It helps local economies revitalize (e.g., attract grocery, retail stores, and other businesses) and keeps schools and hospitals open in rural communities (Mathema et al. 2018; Wang 2019). As an indispensable workforce, immigrants work in food processing (e.g., meat packing and poultry processing) industries, manufacturing, and agriculture industries (e.g., dairy farms, or fruit and vegetable farms). The labor markets in these industries rely heavily on the cheap, exploited labor of immigrants and people of color because the work is usually dirty, demanding, and dangerous, which white native-born workers are reluctant to take (Bronars 2015; Quandt et al. 2013).

Despite immigrants' valuable contributions to rural communities, these rural communities with rapid immigrant growth have experienced challenges such as social tension, conflict, resistance, and anti-immigrant sentiments that give rise to a misconceived fear of immigrants (Wang 2019). The increased number of immigrants, particularly Hispanic immigrants, upsets the status quo of many of the destination places, raises concerns about potential job displacement of low-skilled local workers and immigrant integration, and brings new ethnic antagonisms (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2016). Additionally, under the current unfriendly political climate and anti-immigrant sentiment, including the militarization of the border and the crackdown on unauthorized workers,

immigrants have more difficulties in being accepted and integrating into their destination community.

## MARGINALIZATION

Rural America has been home to many racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants. However, these immigrants have often undergone geographical, social, and political isolation, which has prevented their full incorporation as members of the rural community.

### *De Facto Segregation*

The immigrant growth in rural areas does not mean that they share the same spatial and social places with natives. Lichter et al. (2016) found that there was a high level of residential segregation in rural areas. New immigrants often lived in places in close physical proximity to their employment. Many immigrant or seasonal guest farm workers lived in farm or work camps (Ferguson, Dahl, and DeLonge 2019). A large number of immigrants working in poultry plants lived in mobile homes, apartment complexes, or rental houses adjacent to the plants (Jimeno 2013; Lichter and Johnson 2006). This spatial segregation is a key indicator of integration (Waters and Pineau 2015). The new growth of the immigrants and their concentrated settlement patterns in rural areas may reflect a new kind of "*ethno-racial balkanization*"[2] over geographic space (Lichter and Johnson 2006). The residential segregation and the emergence of new ethnic enclaves (or ghettos) along with a continuing stream of immigrants to rural areas reinforce their social and cultural isolation and hold back their integration. These situations suggest a growing social distance and greater intolerance toward immigrants in some fast-growing rural areas (Parisi, Lichter, and Taquino 2011; Lichter et al. 2016).

### *Social Marginalization*

Despite the growing racial and ethnic diversity in rural areas, immigrants remain as outsiders in various social arenas. New immigrants in recent years were more likely to bypass traditional metropolitan gateways and move directly to rural communities (Kritz and Gurak 2015; Lichter and Johnson 2006). These newcomers were disproportionately poor and unauthorized and often had limited English ability and little previous exposure to American society (Lichter et al. 2016). Such language barriers and socioeconomic differences contribute to leaving many immigrants in a permanent state of being outsiders (Fennelly 2008).

Social distance that emerges from limited English proficiency and cultural differences, in particular, can contribute to stereotypes about immigrants, and viewing new immigrants as a “symbolic threat” to cultural or national identity and as a source of wearing down the “sense of community” and shared values (Lichter 2012). These perceptions about immigrants are often reinforced by politicians and the media. They often play on people’s fears about immigrants, especially during economic down-turns. For example, during the Trump era these perceptions were fueled by that president’s constant rhetoric about the necessity of a southern border wall to keep “undesirables” out. They facilitate public concerns about welfare dependence and reduced employment, as well as hostile attitudes toward new immigrants by characterizing them as a threat to the economy and national security. Under the current pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment and policy climate, immigrants experience massive prejudice or discrimination in daily living.

Rural immigrants are highly concentrated in a poverty bracket, low-paying and dangerous jobs, and the bottom fillers in the employment stratification ladder. The work available in rural labor markets typically comprises low-wage, less skilled jobs. These jobs have attracted immigrants, particularly those who have the most language and cultural barriers, and are most likely to be uneducated and unauthorized. According to a 2016 report (Schaefer and Mattingly 2016), about 39.4 percent of rural immigrants had less than a high school diploma, compared to their native-born rural counterparts (14.4 percent) and their urban immigrant counterparts (29.2 percent). They were more likely to be working poor (15.6 percent) and low income (43.5 percent), and live in poverty (23.7 percent) than their U.S.-born rural residents (8.0 percent, 40.3 percent, and 17.9 percent respectively) and urban immigrants (10.7 percent, 42.0 percent, and 18.2 percent respectively). The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS, Hernandez and Gabbard 2018) showed that immigrant and unauthorized farmers were more likely to live below the federal poverty level. Given the context of rural labor markets and the corresponding immigrant characteristics, it can be extremely challenging for rural immigrants to obtain upward social mobility (Lichter 2012). Undocumented workers, in particular those who are overrepresented in the rural labor force, are part of an underworld in the rural community. It is almost impossible for them to achieve social, political, and cultural integration. They are invisible and left out as permanent outsiders from the rest of the community.

Rural immigrants also experience marginalization in social institutions and in their daily lives. They often have fewer interpersonal and community resources to help them adapt to their new environment, and face structural and social barriers to be embraced and integrated into the community (Waters and Pineau 2015). Institutional support (e.g., schools, legal aids, social and health services, and charitable organizations) of many destination rural communities are often inadequate and insufficient for immigrants, and thus they face hardships in the process of incorporation and remain as marginalized Americans in rural areas. In education, for example, rural local school districts could not accommodate the needs of the increased Hispanic immigrant children with the culturally appropriate support (e.g., English as a second language program) (Lichter 2012). The high school dropout rates in the U.S. published by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2018 (McFarland et al. 2018) provide a glimpse of the challenges faced by immigrant children. Overall, the high school dropout rate is much higher for foreign-born (9.6 percent) than for U.S.-born (5.0 percent). The gap in dropout rates by nativity for Hispanics in particular is 9.6 percentage points (6.5 percent for U.S.-born vs. 16.1 percent for foreign-born). Given that high school dropout is closely related to lower employment and salary, poverty, and higher risks of incarceration or criminal activity, immigrant children were more likely to experience few pathways for social upward mobility and full participation in the community (McFarland et al. 2018). Many immigrants who have a legal status are not able to receive social and health services because of the eligibility criteria against immigrants and the cultural incompetence of service providers, coupled with immigrants' limited English proficiency and lack of information about the services. Undocumented immigrants find it extremely difficult to get any services due to their precarious legal status.

*Political Marginalization*

While immigration policies and public dialogues about immigrant issues have received a large amount of attention from the media and society, many rural immigrants do not have a political voice because they do not have a right to vote and thus there is no political support for them. A research report based on the American Community Survey (Schaefer and Mattingly 2016) showed that 56.8 percent of rural immigrants did not have U.S. citizenship. Many of them were undocumented immigrants (Farmworkers Justice 2019). There is a very slim chance for rural immigrants to obtain permanent residency and citizenship under the

current unfriendly immigration policy and the increased scrutiny of the unskilled green card program by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Labor Department. For example, there is no path for farmworkers (H-2A) and seasonal workers (H-2B) in guest worker programs to earn permanent residency or citizenship, with the exception of immigrants with EB-3 that provides a Green Card. Even for the Marshallese migrants who have a special legal status in the U.S., it is extremely complicated and difficult to obtain citizenship. About 98 percent of Marshallese immigrants (non-U.S.-born) did not have a Green Card or U.S. citizenship (Jimeno 2013). Undocumented immigrants find it almost impossible to obtain legal status. In a 1960 CBS documentary, “Harvest of Shame,” broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow presented the plight of migrant farmworkers. His closing commentary clearly depicted their situation: “The migrants have no lobby. Only an enlightened, aroused and perhaps angered public opinion can do anything about the migrants. The people you have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation” (SPLC 2010). Sixty years later, not much has changed.

## INJUSTICE

### *In the Workplace*

The marginalization of rural immigrants in spatial, social, and political arenas is closely related to injustice deeply embedded in our social institutions and makes them especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Summers et al. 2015; Wadsworth, Courville, and Schenker 2018). The workplace is the most prominent space reflecting such injustice in social institution. Immigrants face exploitation, humiliation, harassment, and discrimination in their workplaces. They routinely experience low wages, wage and hour violations, long hours of work in bone-chilling temperature or unbearable sun, unsafe work environments (e.g., pesticides, chemicals, fast line speeds), and work-related injuries without adequate medical care or compensation. They are subject to an array of abuses in the workplace, including denied access to bathroom breaks, sexual harassment, and violence (Ferguson et al. 2019; Oxfam America 2015; SPLC 2010, 2013). In the case of undocumented immigrants, in particular, they make minimum wage or lower under terrible working conditions and outrageous mistreatment. Interviews with undocumented immigrants revealed that it was not uncommon for them to earn $6.25 for cleaning 900 chicken breasts per hour in a loud room

chilled to 47 degrees or making 80 cents for picking a 90-pound bag of oranges while exposed to pesticides and unbearable sun (SPLC 2010).

Immigrant workers, particularly unauthorized immigrant workers, are often the victims of the highest minimum wage and hour violations (Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center 2016; Oxfam America 2015). According to a 2016 report about wages and working conditions in poultry plants in Arkansas (Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center 2016), 62 percent of workers experienced some form of wage theft (e.g., unpaid for all hours worked and overtime, deductions from pay checks for supplies), 91 percent had not earned sick leave, 62 percent had to work when sick because they were directly threatened with disciplinary action and afraid of disciplinary action, and they could not afford to take a day off. More than 51 percent of workers experienced discrimination, and 44 percent experienced verbal or sexual harassment in the workplace. Overall, much higher proportions of immigrant workers experienced wage theft, unearned and unpaid sick days, and discrimination compared to U.S.-born workers. About 96 percent of foreign-born workers have not earned sick leave.

Rural immigrants' work environments are dirty, labor-intensive and full of risks and potentially life-threatening dangers. They are often pushed to work exceeding their physical limits and suffer from a high incidence of work-related injuries and illnesses. Immigrant workers in meat and poultry slaughtering and processing industries suffer from serious injury and illness, including the traumatic injury or loss of body parts from machines and tools, distended, swollen joints, musculoskeletal illnesses due to rapid line speeds compounded by highly repetitive motions, chronic respiratory and other health issues due to exposure to chemicals and pathogens, and sometimes death (Human Rights Watch 2019). Farmworkers are at high risk of illness and injuries due to their exposure to toxic chemicals and pesticides, heat stress conditions, and combination of those two in the fields (Ferguson et al. 2019). Exposure to chronic pesticide exposure has increased the risks for cancer, diabetes, neurodegenerative diseases, reproductive health problems, and depression (Beard et al. 2014; Kim, Kabir, and Jahan 2017).

Many incidences of workplace injuries and illnesses are unrecorded and under-recorded. According to Fagan and Hodgson (2017), more than 66 percent of the establishments audited by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had injury recording violations. In agriculture, 79 percent of nonfatal injuries and 74 percent of deaths were not reported in the U.S. government reports of work-related injuries (Leigh,

Du, and McCurdy 2014). Workers rarely reported or underreported workplace injuries or illnesses because of fear of retaliation and job loss, as well as employers' discouragement (Choi and Constance 2019; Ferguson et al. 2019).

In addition, rural immigrant workers disproportionately lack health insurance (Choi and Constance 2019; Hernandez and Gabbard 2018; Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center 2016; Human Rights Watch 2019). The majority of workers do not receive proper medical care and compensation for workplace injury or illness, and they are often penalized for seeking care (Arcury and Quandt 2011; GAO 2016; Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center 2016; OxFam America 2015; Prado et al. 2017). In the study with Marshallese immigrant workers in the poultry plants, Choi and Constance (2019) found about 65 percent of workers experienced work-related illnesses and injuries, and 63 percent of them did not report it to their employers. The majority of migrant workers (52 percent) were reluctant to report work-related illness and injury because of fear of being fired, suspension, and getting points resulting in disciplinary action or employment termination.[3] Less than 14 percent of workers who were injured in the workplace received workers' compensation. Another report (Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center 2016) showed that more than one-fifth of poultry workers were fired after they were injured. The statement of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2010:23) depicts such immigrant workers' situation well: "they all reported feeling like they were seen by their employers as disposable workers with no lasting value, to be squeezed of every last drop of sweat and labor before being cast aside."

Despite the high injury and illness incidence rates and the dangerous nature of work, many rural immigrant workers are exposed to workplace hazards without protection. Studies (Choi and Constance 2019; Human Rights Watch 2019; OxFam America 2015) have documented that many meat packing and poultry processing plants did not provide proper safety instructions and job training, or adequate safety equipment for their jobs. Many farmworkers did not receive training or instruction in the safe use of pesticides and protective gear (Ferguson et al. 2019; Hernandez and Gabbard 2018; Prado et al. 2017). Coupled with their limited English proficiency, many immigrant workers were not fully aware of the risks and understood little about the safety precautions in the hazardous work environment (Choi and Constance 2019; Ferguson et al. 2019).

Immigrant women are even more vulnerable in the workplace than their male counterparts. According to SPLC (2010), virtually all immigrant

women reported that sexual violence in the workplace was a serious issue. Nevertheless, most female immigrant workers on the farms and in meatpacking and poultry plants keep silent and never come forward to speak out because of fear, shame, language barriers, lack of understanding about their rights, limited access to legal resources, precarious immigration status, and economic hardship.

*Flaws in Laws*

International human rights laws specify that all workers are entitled to workplace protections, including safe and healthy working conditions and the highest attainable health. The newly adopted International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190, "Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work" reaffirmed the right for violence and harassment free work environments (Human Rights Watch 2019). In the United States, immigrants are entitled to the right to a minimum wage and overtime pay by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 and the protection from employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Although the international human rights laws and the U.S. labor and human right laws indicate that workplace protections apply to all workers regardless of citizenship status, immigrants are often left out from the legal system and protection. Farmworkers, in particular, have been the least protected workers, even in laws in the United States. They were excluded from legal protections for most private sector workers secured by major federal labor laws passed during the New Deal Era. The exclusion of farm labor was part of a compromise between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Southern lawmakers who wanted to protect the white economic dominance and exploitation of Black sharecroppers in the South (Ferguson et al. 2019; Perea 2010). Some of these laws have been amended, but many exceptions still remain. For example, overtime pay for farmworkers is not protected by federal laws, and workers' compensation is not covered by laws in many states. While workers on large farms are entitled to the federal minimum wage, small farms workers are still excluded from the federal minimum wage protection (Ferguson et al. 2019). Farmworkers are not entitled to the right to engage in collective bargaining and protection against unfair labor practices in the National Labor Relations Act (NRLA) of 1935, except in some states with NRLA-type protections for agricultural workers. Many rural immigrant workers are socially and politically marginalized and do not have the legal protections

that other workers take for granted in the United States. The absence of the recognition of their basic rights and limited legal protections are the fundamental sources of exploitation and injustice toward immigrant workers. Undocumented and unauthorized workers are rarely protected against many of the abuses and exploitation by the laws.

With respect to workplace health and safety, under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, OSHA was created to ensure workplace health and safety by setting and enforcing workplace safety and health standards, providing training, outreach, education and assistance, conducting inspections, investigating complaints from workers and reports of injuries and deaths in workplace.[4] However, OSHA has not been able to exercise its statutory power and has lacked sufficient enforcement capacity of relevant domestic laws (Human Rights Watch 2019).

*Powerless to Enforce Legal Actions*

Having legal rights in the workplace does not necessarily mean being able to exercise those rights. In reality, many rural immigrant workers do not know about their legal rights even if they have the rights, and practically have little way to exercise or enforce their rights in the current legal system due to their limited legal resources, cultural and language barriers, and their precarious economic and legal standing. Most immigrant workers did not come forward to complain about violations of the law because the workplace issues were often ignored and lead to retaliation (e.g., termination of work) and potential immigration consequences, and the legal system frequently fails to protect them (Human Rights Watch 2019). Thus, they remain silent, not taking legal action. According to SPLC (2010:25), “law enforcement is far more likely to support an employer in getting rid of a difficult worker than to inquire more deeply and discover the underlying exploitation that led to the disagreement.”

For undocumented immigrants, the courts have consistently held that they are entitled to the protection of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but they have no way to exercise these legal protections (Human Rights Watch 2019). Their immigration status overrides the protection of labor laws and doesn’t allow them to make legitimate claims of violation (e.g., discrimination, wage cheating, sexual harassment). The SPLC report (2010) presented several cases in which crime victims (e.g., victims of rape and trafficking) were prosecuted and deported by both state and federal law enforcement entities instead of being protected. In the areas with the 287(g) program,[5] in particular, undocumented immigrants find it even more difficult to report violent crimes committed against them

because crime victims can be deported and instantly separated from children and other family members (American Immigration Council 2020). As of November 29, 2019, 90 total jurisdictions across 20 states currently have 287(g) agreements (Immigrant Legal Resource Center 2019). There are no legal protections to stop law enforcement officials from turning crime victims over to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). During the 2018 fiscal year alone, ICE made 158,581 administrative arrests for a civil violation of US immigration laws.
The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) created in 1986 to hold employers who hire unauthorized workers accountable for violating immigration law contributes to make workers more vulnerable to employers' unfair and illegal treatment in practice (National Immigration Law Center 2020). Workplace raids and similar enforcement activities have served mainly to terrorize low-wage workers and their children and families, as well as their local communities, while consequences for employers have been minimal. Under the Trump administration, worksite ICE raids and arrests of workers have increased, while the number of employers and managers arrested for hiring undocumented immigrants has decreased. In the 2019 fiscal year there were 2,048 worksite arrests, primarily of undocumented immigrant workers, including seven Mississippi plants owned by four companies (Peco Foods, Koch Foods, PH Food, and Pearl River Foods) (Immigrant Legal Resource Center 2019). The ICE raids in Mississippi plants on August 7, 2019 were the largest immigration raid of its kind in more than a decade. A total of 680 people were arrested, and about 100 of them indicted on nonviolent immigration-related criminal charges with potential deportation, and many of those arrested remained in jail as of early October 2019. In contrast to immigrants, the employers who violate laws are mostly sanctioned and sometimes even protected by laws. While those in federal custody and their families were devastated and lost everything, no fines or arrests took place for the companies and owners that hired unauthorized workers (Zohn 2019).[6]

## CLOSING REMARKS

To conclude, I will return to a personal story. I am a city girl from South Korea, born and raised in a high-rise apartment building with almost no contact with nature or rurality. For education, I immigrated to Hawaii, and now to Texas. With chain migration, I brought my siblings, who are health care professionals in Houston. We are the privileged immigrants who have faced marginalization but have suffered relatively few of the structural injustices of the people I have described above. My story could have

easily been one of the stories of the thousands like Jay, Sam, and the suffering immigrant women in the rural South.

I would never have dreamed or guessed as an immigrant woman that I would end up researching rural sociological issues, and that I would have the honor of serving as the President of the Southern Rural Sociological Association. I think past president Keiko Tanaka would have a similar perspective. As reflected in this address, rural America is changing demographically. The rural South is at the center of tumultuous social change, but it has long been the site of marginalization and injustice, as well as grassroots initiatives and policy development in responses, such as through the Civil Rights Movement.

As rural social scientists, we are sensitized to these social pathologies. Too often we become disillusioned about the future and about what we might do to bring about positive social change. To this I say, remember the words of the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci (1994:299) during his imprisonment: I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will. As intellectuals we see pain, suffering, evil and powerful structural forces around us that seem unstoppable, but we must be optimists and work to overcome the odds. Here I challenge all of us to be *organic intellectuals*[7] who do not hide in the ivory tower of the academy, but rather use our intellect to diagnose the ills of society and help exploited rural migrants better understand their situation and the most fruitful strategies available to them to improve their lives and achieve a more just and humane society.

## ENDNOTES

[1] I presented an earlier version of this paper as my Presidential Address at the 51st meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association in Lexington, KY in February 2020.

[2] *Balkanization* means that the new immigrant labor displaces the labor of native-born workers who move to other labor markets where competition with immigrants is low (Lichter and Johnson 2006).

[3] In the poultry processing plants, a point system is commonly used to monitor and keep track of workers (e.g., tardiness, absences, mistakes, or injuries), as well as enforce plant rules (Oxfam America 2015). When reaching a certain number of points, workers receive a disciplinary action or employment termination.

[4] See generally 29 U.S.C. §§ 651-678. https://www.osha.gov/aboutosha

[5] The 287(g) program is named for Section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. § 1357(g), 2008), which is part of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (Pub. L. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009-546). The 287(g) program

allows state and local agencies to act as immigration enforcement agents, collaborating with the federal government to enforce federal immigration laws (American Immigration Council 2020).

[6] As of June 14, 2021, only four higher-ups have been indicted and two of them – the owner and a manager of a contracting company providing employee management and payroll services to a Mississippi poultry plant – have pleaded guilty (AP News 2021).

[7] Gramsci argued that what he termed "organic intellectuals" were, unlike more traditional intellectuals, more closely linked to the dominant class and served to advance its political project by helping to win over subordinate classes. He felt that for the working class to achieve meaningful social change in society it too needed organic intellectuals to work to challenge the dominant assumptions and frames of reference that favored the capitalist social order and map out a workable alternative society.

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