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Spain: strawberries with a strong taste of sex and pesticides...

Until recently, strawberries produced in Spain were known to have a strong taste of pesticide. They had the doubtful reputation of being characterised by the pervasiveness of pesticide residues - some of which totally forbidden in Europe -, among which some are endocrine disruptors. From now on, we know from an article published by the Guardian, that they also have a strong taste of sex. Indeed, the British paper puts forward another sordid aspect of this industry in an article entitled "Rape and abuse: the price of a job in Spain's strawberry industry?"

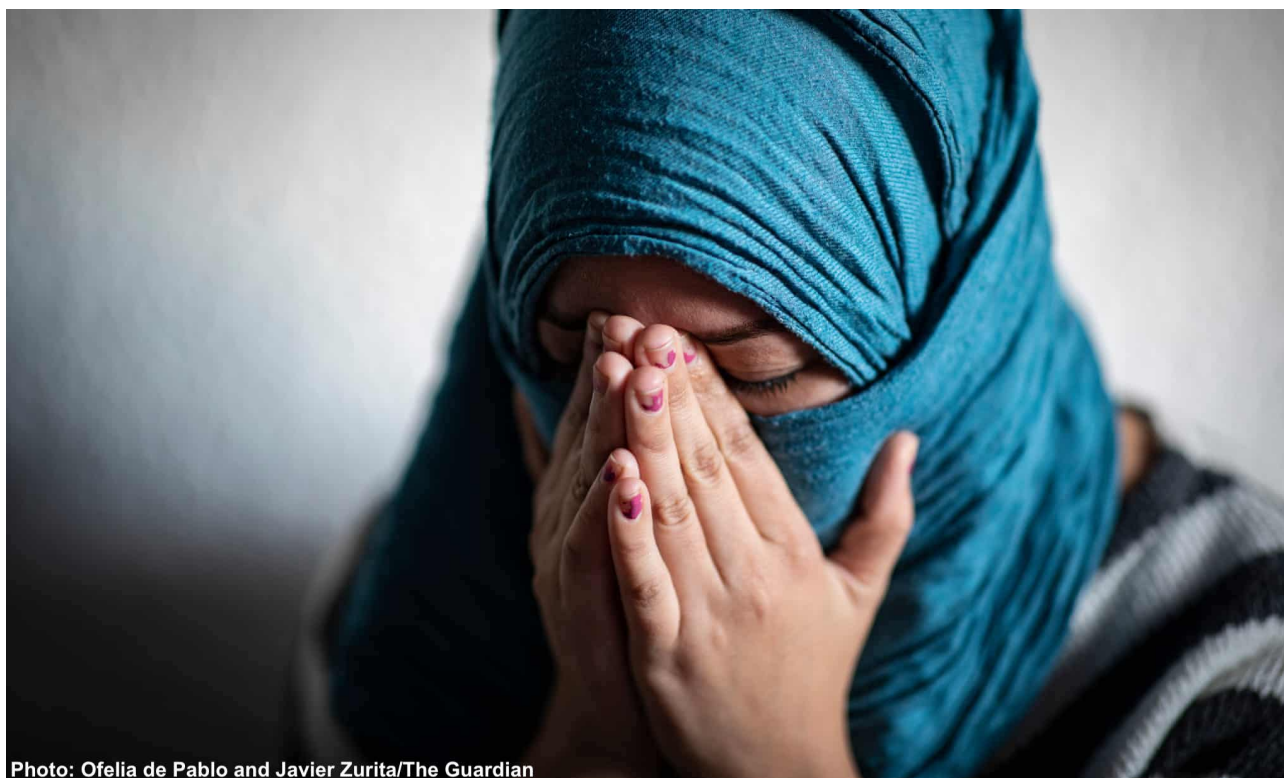


Photo: Ofelia de Pablo and Javier Zurita/The Guardian

There are many women from Morocco, approximately 20,000, who work every year in Spain for picking strawberries that will be exported everywhere in Europe (Spain is the main strawberry exporter in Europe with more than 314,000 tons in 2016, followed by The Netherlands with 48,000 tons [[FAOSTAT](#)]).

According to the article of the Guardian, in the framework of a joint programme of the governments of Spain and Morocco that operates since 2001, these women are promised to be paid 40 euros per day, with appropriate food and accommodation, during the three months of the harvesting season in Andalusia.

There is something that had not been foreseen in the clauses of their contract but that is now increasingly mentioned in the media, pressured by various associations, and that is that these women, often accommodated in unsafe shelters in isolated areas, in addition to

having to work in extremely harsh conditions (in permanently crouched positions, limited break, obliged to stay long periods of time in high temperatures) have been victims of harassment (food and water deprivation) and frequent sexual abuse and rape, sometimes in exchange for food, and have even been obliged in some cases to work as prostitutes at night.

And if ever these women complained to authorities, they were generally not granted the support to which they are entitled.

Many of the women who were abused have seen their life destroyed, abandoned by their husband and marginalised in their society, once back in their country.

Unfortunately, these practices have not been limited to strawberries in Spain. For example, cases of sexual harassment and rape have been reported in a Unilever tea plantation in Kenya (Lipton brand) which is certified « sustainable development » by Rainforest Alliance, an organisation that is known to have recently specialised in the certification of products for some large multinational agrifood companies all over the world [see video in French, last half hour beyond 55 minutes].

To revert to our strawberries, they are among the fruits and vegetables in which there is a pervasive presence of pesticide residues. In the US, the Environmental Working Group, an independent non-profit organisation whose objective is to protect human health and the environment, has been analysing since 2004 results of tests made by the US Department of Agriculture [read their 2019 report]. The Group ranks strawberries as worse among the so-called Dirty Dozen, just before spinach and kale, with presence of pesticide residues in more of 90% of the samples analysed.

In France, in 2013, Générations futures, an association approved by the Ministry of Environment, published a report on pesticide residues in strawberries [read in French] that states that out of the 49 samples analysed, more than 92% had one or two pesticide residues and, in total, 71% of the samples had in them endocrine disrupters that change the production of hormones in the body. Among the fruit samples analysed, presence of endocrine disrupters was higher in strawberries from Spain (78%) than in those produced in France (65%). Results also detected presence of chemicals that were forbidden of use for strawberry cultivation and of pesticides that were absolutely forbidden in Europe. These results confirmed a documentary on strawberry cultivation in Spain [see video in French].

Let's hope that the promise made by the Spanish government to increase the number of inspections in the future - including in presence of cultural mediators, other Moroccan women - will help strawberries to recover their natural taste and that the current taste of sex and pesticide will disappear for ever.

These facts should encourage consumers concerned with their own health, with the environment and with the well-being of agricultural workers, to collect information on the origin of fruits they are about to purchase and thus avoid consuming problematic products.

To know more:

- Kelly, A., Rape and abuse: the price of a job in Spain's strawberry industry? The Guardian, 2019.

- Environmental Working Group, Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce, Environmental Working Group, 2017.
- Lemaître, D., Le business du commerce équitable, documentary shown on ARTE, 2014 (in French).
- Générations futures, Enquête EXPPERT 2 : Des pesticides interdits et des Perturbateurs Endocriniens (PE) dans des fraises, Générations futures, 2013 (in French).
- Capital - Les Fraises importées d'Espagne, documentary shown on M6, 2011 (in French).

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Production and use of pesticides: an infringement on the rights to food and health, 2017.
- Food, Environment and Health, 2014/2017.
- The dark side of chocolate: a comparative study of 'conventional', 'sustainable' and 'fair trade' cocoa value chains, 2016.