



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **YOUR CHRISTMAS WREATHS ARE BUILT ON THE BACKS OF EXPLOITED WORKERS**

HARRINGTON, MAINE — While the Wreaths Across America caravan makes its way to Washington D.C., workers are feeling the impact of another tough season. Right as the wreath season started this October, multiple women reported being sexually harassed by a Worcester Wreath Company labor contractor. The women are part of the 700 workers, mostly from Latin America and the Caribbean, who are hired by the company and their contractors each year. Many workers are in the factory for over 15 hours a day making wreaths to meet the demand from the nonprofit Wreaths Across America, which has close family ties to Worcester Wreath Company.<sup>1</sup>

The women report that the labor contractor in the case mentioned above would stop by their rooms unannounced, offer them alcohol and repeatedly insist on having sex with them. The day after confronting him, a group of eight workers (a combination of the men and women who were directly impacted and those who supported them) were fired by a Worcester Wreath Company representative and immediately kicked out of their employer-owned housing.

Walesca Alicea Rodriguez, one of the women who experienced sexual harassment and was kicked out, says, “The abuse against women must stop. They think immigrant workers won’t do anything or speak up. I am not afraid. I am raising my voice so that other women don’t have to go through this.”

The women in the fields and factories speaking out at Worcester Wreath Company and their labor contractors are not on the frontpage of the #MeToo movement. And yet low-wage workers, who are majority women of color, are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual violence in the workplace.<sup>2</sup> It is time for this movement to center the experiences and voices of these women and the men, like Richard Rivera Oneill, who stand in solidarity with them.

“It’s one thing for Worcester Wreath Company to say they do not condone sexual harassment, but it’s another to stand by their words,” Richard stated in reference to a meeting he and workers had with the founder and management team of the company to discuss this incident of sexual harassment. He

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<sup>1</sup> As Wreaths Across America has grown, so has scrutiny about its practices (December 2018):

[https://www.pressherald.com/2018/12/09/as-wreaths-across-america-has-grown-so-has-scrutiny-about-its-practices/?fbclid=IwAR1WFs48rxwbp5pQcQMUGJ7q\\_q3yAHSf097XCqNOHg8REdXA-SMPsqAX8AA](https://www.pressherald.com/2018/12/09/as-wreaths-across-america-has-grown-so-has-scrutiny-about-its-practices/?fbclid=IwAR1WFs48rxwbp5pQcQMUGJ7q_q3yAHSf097XCqNOHg8REdXA-SMPsqAX8AA)

<sup>2</sup> There's a Sexual-Harassment Epidemic on America's Farms (January 2018):

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/01/agriculture-sexual-harassment/550109/>

continues, “They are still contracting with the abuser. They want us to work, but are not taking responsibility for when we are being mistreated at their company or by their labor contractors.”

“Workers at Worcester Wreath Company and their contractors have reported sexual harassment, wage theft, fear of retaliation for speaking up, and unfair treatment based on their race, country of origin, immigration status, and gender. There is an overall lack of respect for these worker’s humanity,” says Christina Ocampo from Mano en Mano. “They are asking for and have the right to fair and dignified work free from sexual violence.”

For the last two years, Mano en Mano has hosted a Welcome and Resource Center for wreath workers. It connects hundreds of people to clothing, food, health care services, legal assistance, access to the partner organizations, and more. “The center is an opportunity to thank workers for their contribution to this county while connecting them with vital resources that they can call on in instances like this. Of course, if people were paid a living wage, supplying these resources would be far less critical,” says Beth Russet, board member at Mano en Mano.

This group of workers has since reported the incident to the Maine Department of Labor and is currently considering other legal options. Their goal is to hold Worcester Wreath Company and their labor contractors accountable to the injustices occurring under their roof.

On Saturday, December 15<sup>th</sup>, “National Wreaths Across America Day,” thousands of wreaths were placed on the graves of veterans at Arlington National Cemetery, without any acknowledgement of the hands who made them. “It is because of the deep honor we hold for our veterans that we must recognize the disrespect that comes with placing wreaths that are built on the backs of exploited and harassed migrant and immigrant workers,” says Ian Yaffe from Mano en Mano.

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#### About Mano en Mano

Mano en Mano works with migrant, immigrant, farm and factory, and Latinx communities in Downeast Maine. We are a community-led organization that operates as a drop-in resource center, where we support immigrants and farmworkers in navigating and getting access to resources and services in their community. This means we help individuals and families meet their basic needs (medical care, housing, legal assistance, interpretation, transportation, etc.), while also challenging the reasons why those needs exist in the first place. We center the vision of the communities we work with and ensure community leaders have a voice in transforming systems of oppression that so often silence them. Through the Migrant Education Program, we work with migrant children and youth statewide, including families that moved to the area as recently as this month to families that have lived in the area since before colonization. We also manage the Hand in Hand apartments, Maine’s first affordable housing project for farmworkers. Website: [www.manomaine.org](http://www.manomaine.org)

#### Mission

To work with immigrants and farmworkers so that they may settle and thrive in Maine.

#### Vision

A stronger, more inclusive Downeast Maine where the contributions of diverse communities are welcomed, access to essential services, education, and housing are ensured, and social justice and equity are embraced.