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**UNVEILING THE  
SHADOWS OF CANADA'S  
MIGRANT FARMWORKER  
PROGRAM**

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## UNVEILING THE SHADOWS OF CANADA'S MIGRANT FARMWORKER PROGRAM

Canada's international reputation as a fair and just country attracts thousands of migrant workers annually. With aspirations of better social and economic opportunities, many who enter as part of the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) Program arrive to a harsh reality: they are underpaid, subject to exploitative working conditions, and have limited labour rights and mobility when compared with Canadian workers.

One sector which recruits foreign labourers en masse is the agricultural industry. The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), part of the TFW, employs thousands of foreign labourers from Mexico and the Caribbean for eight months every year in farms across Canada (Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, 2015). This policy has created a two-tiered labour market which has resulted in foreign workers facing vast inequities relative to their Canadian counterparts. This report will focus on how the TFW program affects the social determinants of health, notably income, working conditions, physical environments, and access to healthcare of migrant farmworkers, and then provide policy solutions for alleviating health disparities.

The SAWP began in 1966 with the aim of alleviating short-term labour shortages due to the lack of Canadian workers' interest in low-wage jobs (Puttick, 2022). Despite Canada's use

of foreign labour increasing by 600% since 2000, little has been done to improve the working conditions of migrant workers (Lundy & Subramaniam, 2022). Instead of increasing wages to incentivize Canadian workers and investing in long-term improvements (e.g. productive technology), employers turn to the TFW program where they can take advantage of the TFWs' precarity and limited labour protections. The lack of permanent residence status, threat of deportation, and closed work permits (i.e. workers' contracts being tied to specific employers) contribute to many companies profiting from low-wage labour provided from foreign workers (Lundy & Subramaniam, 2022).

Income is recognized as the greatest determinant of health worldwide as it strongly correlates with several health outcomes including life expectancy, most major categories of disease, and subjective well-being (What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy?, 2013). TFWs typically earn provincial minimum wage despite working in "dirty, dangerous, and demeaning" essential industries (Ontario Wage Rate, 2023; Basok et al., 2014). However, workers often have no choice but to accept the wages due to limited economic opportunities at home, fear of deportation, and/or prevention from future participation in the program for speaking out against employers (Pysklywec et al., 2011).

Fear of repatriation and closed-work permits also result in employers taking advantage of employees and forcing them to endure terrible working

conditions. A recent letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau from 47 Mexican farmworkers across Canada outlines several human rights injustices they face on a daily basis and states: “We are considered disposable to the [Workplace Safety and Insurance Board], the government of Canada, employers, and our liaisons” (HARVESTINGFREEDOM, 2022). These conditions can include long hours with no overtime pay (up to 17 hours daily, seven days per week), cruel and racist treatment, and immense competition between employees where statistics on the number of daily crops harvested are displayed in front of everyone (Keung, 2023). These toxic workplace environments take great physical and mental tolls on farmworkers (Orkin et al., 2014).

The TFW Program also affects physical environments which influence the health of TFWs. As part of their jobs, many farmworkers have to use toxic chemicals and operate dangerous machinery, which carries a risk of physical injury (Orkin et al., 2014). Orkin et al. (2014) find that, of some 787 Ontario farmworkers who were deported for medical reasons between 2001-2015, 41.3% were for medical or surgical reasons and 25.5% for external injuries. Those who are physically injured are less likely to access healthcare because of lack of transportation and time to attend appointments, fear of losing work or pay by taking time off, and fear of repatriation if serious injury occurs (Pysklywec et al., 2011). Furthermore,

overcrowded living conditions in bunkhouses, which can often have up to 24 beds, contribute to proliferation of COVID-19 and other transmissible diseases (Puttick, 2022). For instance, several outbreaks were reported among farms across Canada with upwards of 200 workers testing positive at one farm in Niagara (Vosko & Spring, 2022).

Ensuring that migrant workers are treated with dignity, fairness, and respect is the responsibility of all Canadians, especially since our wellbeing and access to essential services and products (namely food) depends so heavily on their labour. Leaving this issue unaddressed renders us complicit in the exploitation of foreign labourers. In addition, Canada contributes to the unequal global power dynamics and inequities that force workers to migrate to begin with. Several migrant rights groups and researchers advocate for policy changes to the TFW program including creating open (or at the very least sector-specific) work permits to allow migrants to choose where they work. Additionally, many groups believe in adopting a “Status for All” policy, which would grant permanent residency, and therefore create more sustainable pathways for migration, better economic opportunity, and allow family reunification for migrant workers in Canada.

Many Canadian businesses profit from TFWs who provide a cheap labour source. However, despite being the backbone of many critical sectors of the economy, migrant workers are continuously used, neglected, and

hidden from the rest of Canadian society. The TFW Program continues to harm the health and wellbeing of migrant farmworkers through restricting income, creating exploitative working conditions, and dangerous physical environments. Developing open-work permits and granting permanent residency for all workers will allow migrant farmworkers to no longer live in fear, and instead have equal access to the health, labour, and human rights they are entitled to.

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