



# Vulnerabilities of female migrant farm workers from Latin America and the Caribbean in Canada

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## Abstract

Canada's agricultural sector has relied on temporary foreign workers from Latin America and the Caribbean for more than 40 years. Since 1999, their numbers have tripled. Most temporary workers on farms are men, but the number of women is on the rise. Both depend on these work opportunities for the livelihoods of their families, yet women rely more heavily than men on this source of income since most are single mothers who have limited access to the labour market in sending countries because of persisting gender inequalities. In Canada, they endure precarious working and living conditions on the farms and face gender-specific challenges. This policy brief documents this new trend in temporary migration and highlights the vulnerabilities of female workers employed in Canada's agricultural industry. The analysis is informed by various research projects, observation work and interviews with female migrant farm workers conducted in rural Canada and in sending countries over the past 10 years.

## Essentials

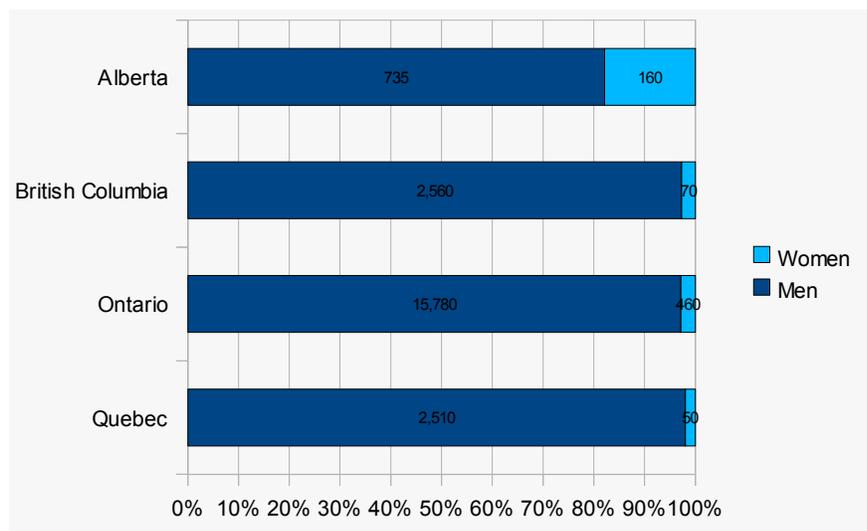
- Labour migration to Canada is an important source of economic growth not only for migrant workers and their families, but also for sending countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- The agricultural industry in Canada utilizes a temporary migrant workforce to contribute to its sustainability.
- Female migrant farm workers experience unique challenges that their male counterparts may not face.
- Gender intersects with socio-economic status and ethnicity to structure migrant women's experiences in Canada.

## Women in Canada's temporary agricultural workforce

Canada's temporary foreign workforce has expanded significantly over the past 10 years. In 2010, 283,096 migrants of all skill levels were granted temporary work visas in industries across Canada. In the agricultural sector, there has been a steady demand for migrant workers from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), whose numbers have tripled since 1999. Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) was initiated in 1966 through an agreement with Jamaica and has grown to include Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States in response to employer demand to sustain agricultural production in Canada. It has grown from 264 workers in 1966 to 23,375 in 2010. The SAWP has primarily employed men, reflecting some gendered assumptions: they are the family breadwinners; they can do arduous farm work; and it is socially acceptable for them to leave home to work abroad.

Women's participation in the SAWP began much later: in the case of Mexico, it was not until 1989 that female migrant workers came

**Figure 1**  
Composition of the SAWP by sex for selected provinces, 2009



Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), Facts and Figures, 2009. Available at [www.mappingmigration.com](http://www.mappingmigration.com)

to Canada under this program. Mexican female participation in the SAWP, for example, has fluctuated annually between three to four per cent of the country's migrant labour force under this program.

### THE SAWP HAS PRIMARILY EMPLOYED MEN, REFLECTING SOME GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS.

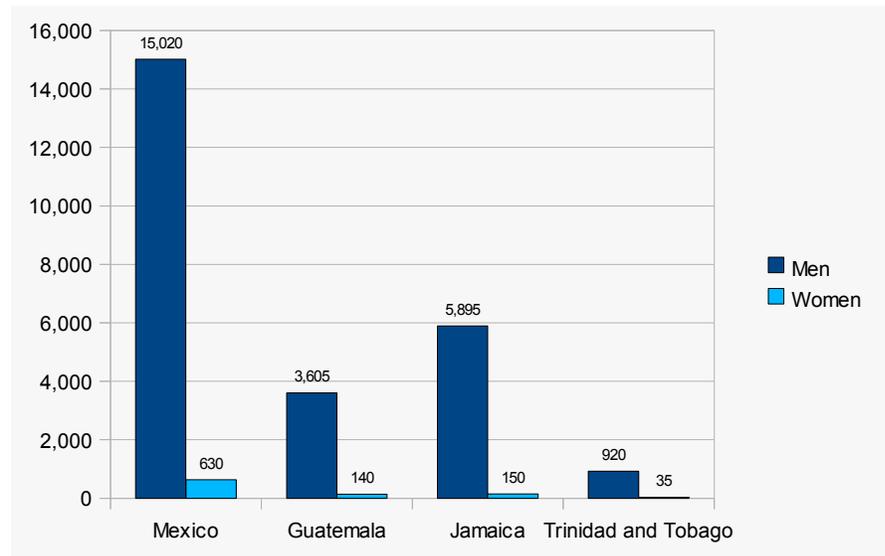
Recent data for 2010 from Citizenship and Immigration

Canada (CIC) indicate that an average 2.49 per cent of SAWP participants are women. The majority of these female migrant workers are employed in Ontario. It is interesting to note that although fewer women are employed in Alberta, they form as much as 22 per cent of the province's temporary migrant workforce.

In 2002, Canada launched the Agricultural Stream of the Pilot Project for Occupations Requiring Lower Levels of Formal Training (NOC C and D), which builds on the SAWP experience to include more countries in a similar

scheme. While most workers under this pilot project have arrived from Asia, significant numbers have come from LAC, including Guatemala, Jamaica and Mexico. Many employers —greenhouse producers notably— have found this program to be more cost-effective and flexible than the SAWP arrangement, allowing for 24-month contracts compared to the SAWP maximum of eight months and limiting government involvement in the recruitment process. Women continue to be in the minority under this pilot project, but their participation has continued to grow nonetheless.

**Figure 2**  
**Composition of the NOC C and D Pilot Project, by sex, 2009**



Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), Facts and Figures, 2009. Available at [www.mappingmigration.com](http://www.mappingmigration.com)

**WOMEN FROM LAC PLACE SIGNIFICANT VALUE ON THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK IN CANADIAN AGRICULTURE AS TEMPORARY WORKERS.**

Demand for workers is determined by Canadian employers and the labour ministries or by private recruiters in sending countries who select migrant workers using diverse criteria. Generally speaking, recruits are from rural areas, have low income and education levels, support dependants, and have work experience in agriculture. Female workers are usually selected to perform minute tasks such

as sorting tender fruits for packaging or seeding, transplanting and weeding for greenhouse horticulture. In comparison, men are hired to perform physical work such as picking and harvesting in open fields and heavy lifting.

Evidence gathered from extensive research and frontline community work in rural Canada and Mexico over the past 10 years supports the conclusion that women from LAC place significant value on the opportunity to work in Canadian agriculture as temporary workers. Many women participating in the SAWP, for example, are single

mothers from impoverished rural communities who have few economic opportunities in their home country and cannot count on social welfare programs to sustain their households. The wages they earn in Canada are significantly higher than what they could make in the few income-generating activities available to women in their country, such as petty commerce, domestic labour or work in export processing zones. Labour migration is among the survival strategies many of them adopt to secure an economic livelihood for their families. Temporary foreign worker programs offer a legal

avenue to securing income in the North and protect women from the gendered violence associated with unregulated border crossings, for example; women board a plane to Canada with a work permit, work for a designated employer and live in prearranged housing.

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Research has shown that many female migrant workers coming to Canada are the main breadwinners for their households and extended families. Repeated contracts in Canada make it possible for many to strengthen their roles as principal economic providers. For instance, it has allowed some to build houses of their own, to pay for their children's schooling and finance the health-care needs of their extended families. In numerous interviews, women have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to work in Canada and achieve economic goals that seem unthinkable for women from their impoverished rural communities. However, poverty and gender inequity follow women to Canada, and their non-citizen status, sex or

ethnicity can impact their experiences as farm workers in Canada.

## Women's vulnerabilities

Women who migrate to work temporarily in Canada experience challenges distinct from men. On the one hand, there are problems associated with the very structure of the temporary foreign worker programs, which has long favoured men's participation, coupled with the additional strains women participants have to cope with due to traditional gendered roles at home. On the other hand, there are difficulties related more directly to their experience in Canadian rural communities, with many women reporting gender and racial discrimination as well as sexual harassment.

Even though more and more women participate in Canadian temporary foreign worker programs, and their work is needed in Canadian agriculture, these women are constantly reminded of their disposability—arguably more so than men. This is partly due to employer biases in recruitment and the fact that they can structure the migrant labour force as they please, by choosing country, sex, number of workers and program type, creating an extremely

competitive environment for all migrant farm workers. However, female workers face the additional pressure of knowing there are fewer opportunities for them in Canada and little alternatives in their home communities. Research found that women try to keep their jobs in Canada by increasing their productivity, attempting to outperform men and sometimes acquiescing to exploitative and sub-standard working and living conditions. When asked, many women are adamant that they can do the same work as men, if not better and faster.

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These women must meet or surpass the standard expected of men while living up to the standard expected of women. The fact that LAC women are generally assigned the gendered role of primary family caregiver frames their temporary work experience. In interviews, female farm workers have repeatedly stressed the difficulties of organizing their time away from home. While most male migrant farm workers leave

the care of their children to their wives, the many single mothers participating in the SAWP have to strategize for alternative care for their children and often for their elderly dependents also. Women have to re-negotiate their roles as primary care and economic providers at a distance, causing them heightened emotional strain. While family separation is difficult for male workers, female migrants from many rural communities have to live with the social stigma associated with the gendered expectation that they should be staying at home for daily care-giving and reproductive work.

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**FEMALE MIGRANTS FROM MANY RURAL COMMUNITIES HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE SOCIAL STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH THE GENDERED EXPECTATION THAT THEY SHOULD BE STAYING AT HOME FOR DAILY CARE-GIVING AND REPRODUCTIVE WORK.**

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In addition to the burden of gendered roles are cases of gender discrimination on Canadian farms, which have been well documented by academics and advocacy organizations. The most extreme scenarios have led to

arbitrary repatriation of women for engaging in romantic relationships or becoming pregnant. These isolated incidents have had impacts on other female workers, with some reporting hiding their pregnancies and continuing to perform back-breaking farm work out of fear of repatriation.

Some milder forms of discrimination are found in the control exerted by some employers over female migrant workers. This has included the prohibition for women to leave farm premises, the imposition of stricter curfews for women than for men, and the barring of women from attending church services to limit female interaction with male workers and the outside community, which some employers allegedly said could affect their productivity.

Sending governments and recruiters have been known to discriminate on the basis of gender as well. For example, some Mexican women participating in the SAWP have relayed in interviews that they had to sign contracts stipulating that they would not engage in romantic relationships with men while in Canada and that they would refrain from seeking support from advocacy groups.

Sexual harassment in the workplace and in Canadian rural

communities is also a common problem described by female workers, yet most cases go unreported. Women have little legal recourse to denounce harassment by male co-workers, supervisors and direct employers. Moreover, if they complain, they risk not seeing their contract renewed because employers have the final word.

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**WOMEN HAVE LITTLE LEGAL RECOURSE TO DENOUNCE HARASSMENT BY MALE CO-WORKERS, SUPERVISORS AND DIRECT EMPLOYERS.**

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Harassment is also fuelled by racism and linguistic barriers. For instance, indigenous migrant women from Guatemala have been ridiculed in Canadian rural communities for wearing their traditional dress, while Mexican and Jamaican workers perceive their racial difference as negatively affecting their dealings with the predominantly white residents of those townships.

Certainly, migrant farm workers in general encounter many barriers to integration in rural Canada such as language barriers and limited access to social services.

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**INTEGRATION STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS, IF AND WHEN DEVELOPED, ARE OFTEN DESIGNED FOR MALE MIGRANT WORKERS.**

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Host community integration strategies and programs, if and when developed, are often designed for male migrant workers. There are few, if any, spaces for women to come together across farms and to receive counselling on gender-specific problems. For example, health-care services are not designed to reassure migrant women about confidentiality when seeking sexual and reproductive care. Justicia for Migrant Workers, for example, is one of the few community groups that deliver specially designed workshops to address some of women's specific needs stemming from their gendered vulnerabilities as female migrant farm workers from LAC in rural Canada.

## Conclusion

The typically underemployed and impoverished women from LAC who participate in Canada's temporary foreign worker programs benefit greatly from these opportunities. Sending governments also

recognize the contribution of these programs to poverty reduction goals, notably through much-needed remittances. However, women working in Canada under this framework experience unique challenges that need to be addressed as their numbers gradually increase.

The non-citizenship status and stringent work visa requirements for temporary workers in Canada's agricultural sector render this group extremely vulnerable to labour and human rights violations, which have been documented by researchers and community groups over the years. Moreover, unlike the SAWP, the NOC C and D Pilot Project is less regulated. This employer-driven scheme favours labour flexibility sometimes to the detriment of human rights protection. For women, this has translated into discriminating by gender, limiting their participation in those programs and heightening their vulnerability as farm workers in Canada.

Fewer temporary farm jobs are available to women than to men. As women's participation in such programs contributes to development goals of economic growth and gender empowerment in sending countries, Canada could seek to grow their ranks in the SAWP and NOC C and D Pilot

Project. It could institute equity targets in collaboration with employers to counter discrimination based on gender, race and nationality in recruitment practices.

As a minority within an already-vulnerable migrant labour force, female migrant workers are virtually invisible in the rural communities where they work. The resources and services developed to ensure acceptable living and working conditions for the temporary labour force often do not address women's needs. New funding could be made available for community groups who offer gender-specific services.

These recommendations would call for a concerted effort among governments, employers and civil society. The receiving communities are crucial actors in promoting equity, well-being and human rights for the temporary foreign workforce. Community outreach to farm workers is also needed to create a sense of belonging and to counter the effects of isolation. Gender equity and justice need to inform current and future dialogue about Canada's temporary foreign worker programs.

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The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of FOCAL, its board or staff.

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## FURTHER READINGS

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