



NO ONE LEFT BEHIND?

An intersectional analysis of
the 2030 Agenda in Canada



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Executive Summary

REPORT OVERVIEW

Using intersectional and equity lenses to examine the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we learned from the experiences of those most impacted by pandemic disruptions. In particular, we focused on the experiences of migrant workers in Canada and youth aged 15 to 29 years. We uncovered troublesome patterns found in intersections between SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 11 (infrastructure – housing). The pandemic exacerbated existing injustices in Canada, highlighting barriers to social, health, and economic well-being for marginalized persons and groups.

Climate change has had and will continue to have, similarly disruptive impacts on individual lives, society, and the economy. These parallels impel us to learn from the pandemic so that the climate crisis, and future disruptions, do not further exacerbate inequalities but rather compel us to address the root causes of existing inequalities.

KEY LEARNINGS

SDG 1 (No Poverty)

Climate change spotlights the inequities which flow from the gap between rich and poor. Food and water insecurity have worsened, contributing to increased poverty and unaffordability. While the SDGs are focused on eliminating extreme poverty, it must be recognized that extreme wealth is a driver of climate change. The world's richest ten percent are responsible for an estimated 47 percent share of global CO2 emissions. A more equitable tax system would lessen the gap between rich and poor and allow us to invest in more robust social protections, which are crucial during times of disruption.

SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)

Food insecurity is not a new challenge in Canada. Currently, women-led lone-parent families, low-income groups, Indigenous people, newcomers, and individuals with disabilities report higher levels of food insecurity than the overall population. Climate change further impacts food security and food safety by disrupting food systems, impacting food prices, and affecting the ability to access quality and nutritional food. Adequate income levels for all are essential in addressing food insecurity.

SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being)

All parts of the world have experienced increased numbers of mortalities due to extreme heat events and increases in climate-related food-borne and water-borne diseases. Mental health challenges and trauma due to rising temperatures are also increasing. As we saw during the pandemic, children and youth are more vulnerable to the mental health impacts of disruptions and are negatively impacted by job losses in the labour market. Governments must invest in robust mental health services and resources.

Executive Summary

SDG 4 (Quality Education)

Due to the pandemic, youth experienced educational deficits as a result of online learning, especially youth from lower-income families. Many youth reported feeling behind in their studies when in-person learning resumed. These deficits are felt even more acutely by newcomer youth who face additional barriers to accessing education such as language, culture, and immigration status. Disruptions to education will continue due to climate change events if we do not strengthen our education systems and build climate change resilience.

SDG 5 (Gender Equality)

Climate change has adverse effects on gender and social equity. As climate change drives conflict across the world, women and girls are increasingly at risk of all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, child marriage, and other forms of violence. Gendered differences experienced by youth and migrant workers in Canada need to be assessed and require gender specific responses.

SDG 8 (Decent Work)

Climate change has affected individual livelihoods and caused economic damages, especially in climate-exposed sectors, namely, agriculture, forestry, fishery, energy, and tourism. Disruptive events can make workplaces unsafe, reduce labour productivity, and slow economic activity. The implications are felt unevenly across geographic regions and social groups— with people already working in precarious or low-wage employment more vulnerable to the impacts. Canada's climate adaptation and mitigation plans must be attentive to how the most marginalized social groups are being affected.

SDG 11 (Reduced Inequalities)

Extreme weather events are contributing to involuntary displacement and increasing migration. Within Canada, Indigenous communities have been severely impacted by disruptions related to climate change. People experiencing homelessness are the most exposed to weather extremes and the least supported in crisis response and risk mitigation efforts. Access to housing is not only a human right to which all people are entitled but becomes even more critical as we deal with climate change.

SDG 13 (Climate Action)

Youth identified climate change as the most pressing SDG for governments and the international community to address. Youth said, "Making sure we handle climate change immediately will ensure that our generation and our kids will have a safe future on Earth." Their concerns point to the need for much stronger climate action from the federal government.

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)

To date, there has not been a robust multi-sectoral engagement (Indigenous organizations, civil society, private sector, academia, etc.) that promotes partnerships and collaboration to create equitable distribution of investments and truly monitor and promote progress 'on the ground'. With only seven years remaining to achieve the SDGs, enhanced multi-sectoral collaboration is essential.

Methodology

In 2015 all UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a plan for action to ensure the prosperity of all people and the planet, which proposes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All Member States are encouraged to conduct regular reviews on their progress in implementing the SDGs. Canada will present a Voluntary National Review (VNR) on its SDG progress at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2023. The last VNR was submitted in 2018.

This report provides an ‘on the ground’ perspective of how Canada is achieving the SDGs. It is informed by current policies, research, and the experience of frontline and grassroots organizations, including youth voices.

Thirteen grassroots organizations from across Canada serving diverse newcomer populations, including migrants with precarious immigration status, such as workers on closed work permits, non-status migrants; women; and newcomer youth, provided responses to our survey. Those organizations provide a wide envelope of services, such as information and referral, language classes, workshop and education, advocacy, and legal and immigration support. The survey included open-ended questions aimed at understanding the intersectional experiences of those populations in accessing decent work and social protection and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was shared through different networks within Canada.

This report also includes self-reported input from 53 youth between the ages of 13 and 29 years old, primarily from the Greater Toronto Area. Youth engaged in focus groups using a Conversation Circle methodology to discuss the intersections of economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, decent work and employment, and their impacts on youth. These focus groups were led by youth to create safe spaces for productive dialogue. Youth submitted summary reports of their conversations which comprise the youth content of this report. Youth participants reflect a diversity of backgrounds, including many newcomer and refugee youth.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all youth groups and frontline service-providing agencies for their crucial input and support in making this parallel report possible.

Thank you to all who contributed to this report.

Frontline service organizations

AMIGRAR
Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers (ARHFW)
Barbara Shclifer Commemorative Clinic
Conseil Migrant
FCJ Refugee Centre
Fontbonne Ministries
Hispanic Development Council
Migrante Alberta
Migrants Resource Centre Canada
Legal Assistance of Windsor
PINAY (Filipino Women's Organization in Quebec)
SWAN Vancouver
S4 Collective

Youth focus group contributors

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University of Toronto / Loretto College
The Awakening Project

Drafting organizations

Mary Ward Centre - *Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary /Loretto Sisters*
Ministry for Social Justice, Peace, and Creation Care- *Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto*
Office for Systemic Justice - *Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada*



SISTERS of ST. JOSEPH of TORONTO



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was disruptive to individual lives, society, and the economy. It also affected progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Canadian government has committed to reaching those left furthest behind in the achievement of the SDGs.

Using intersectional and equity lenses, this report is attentive to the voices of people who were among those most impacted by pandemic disruptions, seeking to learn from their experiences and insights.

In particular, we focus on the pandemic experiences of migrant workers in Canada and youth aged 15 to 29 years. These experiences point to troublesome patterns found in intersections between SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 11 (infrastructure – housing).



The report also argues that climate change has had, and will continue to have, similarly disruptive impacts on individual lives, society, and the economy. These parallels impel us to learn lessons from the pandemic so that we might respond more effectively and fairly to the climate crisis and related SDGs 13 (climate action), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land).



The main themes in our report are directed by the feedback we received from frontline service organizations and input from youth.

Part One

Affordability, Intersectionality and Exclusion

Affordability describes the interaction of income and access to basic goods and resources such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, transportation, adequate housing, recreation, and more. In Canadian society, affordability is, to a great extent, dependent on the quality of one's job and the robustness of social protections. Using a wider lens, affordability depends on how well SDGs 1 (no poverty) and 8 (decent work) have been fulfilled and whether some people have been left behind.

Widespread, Growing Unaffordability in Canada

The economic disruptions which accompanied the pandemic have been so substantial that the Canadian population, in general, has been impacted. Indeed, the high inflation which emerged from the pandemic has made affordability a major issue for many households, leading to ongoing financial stress even as inflation rates begin to slow.

Low-Income Earners More Deeply Impacted (1)

DECREASE IN NET SAVINGS

- 12% down for the bottom 40% of income earners in the third quarter of 2022 compared with the start of COVID-19.
- Higher-than-average increases in the debt of economically vulnerable households.

RISING BORROWING COST

- Many potential homeowners pushed out of the market.
- Strain on an already hot rental market, Even the lower-end rents unaffordable for lower-income households. By late 2022, 44% of Canadians were very concerned with affording housing or rent.

SHARP RISE IN COST OF GROCERIES

- Further pressure on low-income households.
- Grocery prices rose 8.6% from late 2014 to late 2019. But rose 15.8% between December 2020-2022.
- April 2022, three in four Canadians reported that rising prices were affecting their ability to meet day-to-day expenses.

YOUNG ADULTS

- Young adults among those most concerned over finances.
- Half of 35- to 44-year-olds found it difficult to meet financial needs during the previous 12 months.

Wider Patterns of Marginalization

The frontline service providers that responded to our survey all pointed to social and economic barriers as well as to restrictive policies, which made it difficult for their clients to meet their basic needs. In some ways, the barriers faced by their clients reflected wider patterns of marginalization in our country. For instance, we know that, even among people living with low incomes, the negative impacts of the pandemic were not equally distributed.(2)

RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES

- 39% of the racialized households had difficulty meeting basic needs.

RACIALIZED WORKERS

- 30% are employed in frontline jobs, compared to 21% of non-racialized workers.
- Overrepresented in low-wage and precarious jobs, which often lack paid sick leave and other protections.

OTHER MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

- 43% of persons with a disability or long-term condition and 42% of the LGBTQ+ population among those with the most difficulty meeting necessary expenses.(3)

BLACK AND INDIGENOUS HOUSEHOLDS

- 46% of Black households in Canada and 44% of Indigenous people were more likely to experience financial difficulty.

DIFFICULTY TO AFFORD BASIC NEEDS

- In the fall of 2022, 42% of adults aged 25 to 54 were more likely to live in a household with difficulties to afford basic needs.
- Adults aged 15 and older looking for work (50%), renters (48%), recent immigrants (45%) and people living with children (42%) were also more likely to face this hardship.

“I just arrived in Canada. For the past 10 years, I was in a refugee camp in Indonesia with \$5 Australian/month to live on. When COVID hit, we went to lockdown and were not allowed to leave the camp. Surprisingly, the price of everything went up and the financial assistance was not sufficient enough and we had to starve, skip a meal a day to have another one at night. I was sponsored to come to Canada – for 5 months I found a job and that is good. But as a newcomer, if you don’t have Canadian job experience, what qualifications do you have? First thing you apply to a job, they ask if you have Canadian work experience. There is a gap in my employment experience and no sense of understanding and as such they are not given an opportunity. Given the rising prices, how can these newcomers pay off rent?” Awakening Project

Unaffordability and Young Persons

Young people in Canada struggled to find employment during the pandemic



The struggle to access the labour market was a major theme in the youth focus group conversations organized to inform the findings of this report. Both high school and university youth reported that, during the pandemic, they struggled to find employment, especially secure jobs. Without using the language, these students pointed to the impacts of intersectional barriers, emphasizing that newcomer youth, including those who had no status or precarious immigration status, such as international students, found their status, among others, a barrier to accessing decent work. These youth are predominantly racialized and face additional challenges exacerbating unaffordability, including high tuition fees, poverty, and limited or no access to healthcare. Other factors which made it difficult to access decent work include language barriers, health conditions such as being immunocompromised, and the competitiveness of the job market.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

- Increased by 6 percentage points from 2019 to 2020, about twice that of older Canadians.
- By 2020, the unemployment rates of young people aged 15 to 30 and not in school full-time stood at 15.5% and 13.7% respectively.(4)

“Nowadays, when you first graduate or even the experience that it’s requested from us like we need to have so much experience, but we just graduated. It’s minimum wage, even though like many of us have like debt after paying school ... I don’t think that’s like the current situation is decent. Like that’s not a decent way to treat people. And that’s for everyone. Like that’s for people even with status, but people without status, it’s even worse.” S4 Collective

In addition, high school students who were able to find employment faced low wages. Youth under the age of 18 in the Province of Ontario noted discriminatory wage practices when performing the same work as someone over the age of 18 because of the Student Minimum Wage policy allowing this unfair treatment.(5)

"I think it's hard not to be so pessimist, but looking at the situation that we currently have in today's economy. It can be very discouraging to graduate or be about to graduate or be in school even, and start to think about what kind of jobs you're going to have. And even one job is not enough to pay the bills. So, I think all these definitions of what back in the day was considered decent or adequate have to be updated. It's not enough anymore. And that's for everyone and everyone is struggling, but definitely if you face certain barriers like immigration status, gender, race and all that, it's even worse."

S4 Collective

Future Employability of Young People

Of particular concern for both high school and university students during the pandemic was the impact of limited access to employment opportunities on their ability to find future work. They are concerned about a lack of competitive skills, on-the-job learning opportunities, and being able to compete to find jobs in the future. As one high school group said, *"...the pandemic has led to fewer job opportunities, making it a challenge for teenagers to gain valuable work experience. This lack of experience may put them at a disadvantage when competing for jobs in the future, which could have long-term implications for their career prospects."*(6) University students are concerned about being unprepared for the competitive job market and facing unrealistic expectations from employers. International students also experience biases or prejudices when applying for jobs because they are not Canadian citizens.

Precarious status youth such as refugee claimants are also facing lengthy immigration processes which worsened during the pandemic thus, adding additional uncertainty about their future employment opportunities.(7)

One of the survey respondents provided an example of an 18-year-old youth refugee claimant waiting more than two years for their refugee hearing to take place. Lack of recognition of school credentials or work experience from the country of origin is another barrier those populations face impacting their future access to decent work.

Non-status youth are further disadvantaged due to lack of access to post-secondary education.(8)

The future employment concerns of youth echo a Statistics Canada evaluation of youth employment trends indicating that *“these relatively high unemployment rates suggest that young high school and postsecondary graduates who entered the labour market in 2020 or who will do so in 2021 might see lower earnings in the years following graduation than they would have in a more dynamic labour market.”*(9) Moreover, it concludes that the increase in part-time employment which young people in Canada have experienced over the last few decades *“largely reflects their greater difficulty in finding full-time employment in recent years, rather than growing preferences for part-time work.”* (10)

Unaffordable Housing and Young Persons

Unaffordable Housing Contributes to Precarious Socio-Economic Status of Youth. The rapid rise of housing prices in many parts of Canada makes it difficult for young people to enter the housing market or afford rental accommodations. This brings onerous burdens to low-income students, many of whom need to work extra hours or take multiple jobs to pay rent, taking time away from academics and other activities, and increasing levels of stress.

“When we {non-status family} were renting a house we had to fill out a form and the form was asking for OHIP, for {immigration} status, a lot of things. It’s difficult.” S4 Collective

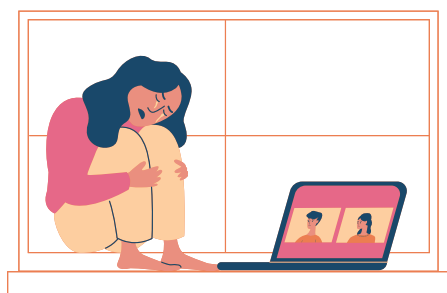


“There’s also the other side. There are also landlords who like to rent it to {precarious} migrants because they know that they can do whatever they want. And then people are not going to complain.” S4 Collective

In our focus groups, university students in the Toronto area emphasized that unaffordable housing in the downtown core of Toronto contributes to their precarious socioeconomic status. In major cities across Canada, rental prices are often beyond reach even for those who are employed. Having a precarious immigration status is a further barrier for students and others to access housing. In addition, the rising cost of transportation, reduced access to transportation as well as recent increased transit safety risks, impact their ability to commute to places of employment.

Social Protections and Young People

Lack of access to social protections, especially during the pandemic, was another factor that contributed to unaffordability for young people. In addition to employment, focus group participants pointed out that international students did not have access to social protections during the pandemic due to ‘red tape’ – excessively complicated procedures - and ineligibility for the pandemic benefits.(11) Newcomer youth also expressed that they had difficulty accessing social benefits like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) due to their immigration status. (12) Non-status youth and their families were reliant primarily on community organizations for limited financial and other support such as grocery gift cards to survive during the pandemic, since they were excluded from accessing those benefits. (13) High school youth noted that while social protection benefits such as CERB served as compensation to their families who were directly affected by the pandemic, these benefits were difficult to access. They shared that family members had to take leaves of absence from work or adapt to remote working conditions. (14)



Unaffordability for young people is multifaceted, touching many aspects of daily living for those with limited incomes. Unaffordability is also a consequence of a lack of access to social protections as well as to current employment opportunities and future job prospects. The narratives of students in our focus groups emphasize that their experiences of unaffordability were exacerbated by the pandemic and by the ways that lack of income as well as racial and immigration barriers, intersected in their lives. For example, one of our survey respondents shared that many racialized youth with precarious immigration status experienced severe setbacks in their quest to better their and their family's lives because they had to borrow money, in most cases from unlawful lenders here in Canada or relatives and friends back home to survive during the pandemic. (15)

Migrant Workers

Exploitation of Migrant Workers Deepened During Pandemic

Many migrant workers and workers without status live at the intersection of low-income barriers with racial and immigration barriers. Some also contend with gender barriers.

Frontline service organizations working with migrant workers and workers without status pointed to ongoing concerns, including unjust working conditions and unhealthy living situations, lack of access to proper nutrition and difficult or impossible access to healthcare services, all of which worsened during the pandemic.

"I signed a contract with my employer but was not allowed to keep a copy of it. There were unexplained deductions under the category 'miscellaneous' on my paycheck."

(A migrant worker working at a mushroom farm in Canada)



"That's when I find the first time that I step inside the greenhouses, this is going to be like jail. The smells, the heat inside the greenhouse. The temperatures are insane, total insane. So, I was get used to work hard. And I was saying to myself, okay, just do it, somebody needs to...I was trying to do as fast as I can, just like the rest of the guys, but never is enough with the owners never enough. They say something and another thing happens to control you inside the greenhouse. I started working like from 7am to 7pm and sometimes after that they send us back in for another three or four hours finishing at 11 o'clock every day, every day. And never have a day off. After six months of work. In your contract they say you're going to have one day off at least per week but never have. It was just work, work, work. And they want to see if you are capable to do it. And after that they tell you well, they say that they pay you per hour. But that then it's you are working by piece." Alvaro from Mexico



"I used to pick strawberry and it, it was really hard like there was this supervisor there that treat people really bad when I say bad, I mean, she would swear at you. She would give you days in the house to sit down if you do anything that she doesn't like. And, it was just rough and we had to work in the rain, no matter how hard the rain is, we have to go out there no matter how hot the sun is, we have to go out there. So when it rains all the roads looks like a river. So the water settles there. So when we try to, like, go around the water, like, step on the strawberry bed to go around the water, she would get really upset and she was like, swearing and send you home to stay in the house for one week. Don't come to work until we, until the one week is finished. Without pay. She would have suspend us if we step on the strawberry bed for a week without pay." Ronica from Jamaica

Labour Market and Migrant Workers in Canada

It should be noted that temporary foreign workers (TFWs), that is, those holding work permits as of December 31 in each year - and international students comprise significant populations in Canada and have become an integral part of the labour force. (16)

The number of TFWs increased seven-fold from 111,000 in 2000 to 777,000 in 2021, suggesting that the Canadian economy is becoming increasingly reliant on these workers.

Similarly, between 2000 and 2019, the number of international students with T4 earnings increased from 22,000 to 354,000, a result of both a higher number of international students and their rising labour force participation rate (from 18% to 50%).

The increases were particularly large at the non-university postsecondary level, where the labour force participation rate rose from 7% to 58% and the number of participants rose from 3,000 to 173,000.

Precarity for Migrant Workers Existed Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Accessing decent work remains elusive for the majority of migrant workers in Canada. Organizations that participated in our survey pointed out some of the barriers migrant workers experience, including burdensome regulatory processes, such as the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) (17), racial discrimination, sexism and sexual harassment at work, and language barriers. For a detailed analysis of the exploitation experienced by migrant workers in Canada please see ANNEX 1.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrant Workers and Workers without Status



The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the exploitative conditions under which many migrant workers live and work.

Many migrant workers were labelled essential and forced to work without proper safety precautions, social protections, or employer support. According to survey respondents, non-status workers experienced inadequate income due to job losses caused by the economic shutdown. Workers did not have access to monetary benefits from the federal government and were excluded from other government relief programs, unable to access healthcare services, COVID test kits, and vaccines.



Survey respondents pointed out that migrant care workers, predominantly racialized women from the Global South, were subjected to increased workload without additional pay during the pandemic. Employers and their children were home more often, and care workers were tasked with the additional duties of disinfecting and cleaning the house. They were forced to care for sick family members and exposed to the risk of contracting the illness due to a lack of protective equipment and an inability to isolate. Employers limited their movements. They were not allowed to leave their employer's home, take public transportation or seek medical treatment. Workers that fell ill with COVID-19 were unjustly terminated, which meant they were evicted with no notice from the employer's residence and lost their housing. Those that lost their jobs also had difficulty accessing CERB or Employment Insurance.

Migrant farmworkers experienced worsened living and working conditions. For example, during the mandatory quarantine upon arrival in Canada, many were left without medical supervision in hotels or apartments. One of our survey respondents shared that as a result, at least two farm workers died alone without anybody knowing until food boxes piled up on the doorstep of their room. (18) After the quarantine, there was no possibility of self-isolation of workers who fell sick since all workers were sleeping together in bunkhouses. Because social distancing at work is not required for individuals who live together, employers increased the number of workers sharing housing at the end of their mandatory quarantine after arrival to maximize productivity. This increased housing density was one of the key reasons that farm workers saw an increased number of outbreaks during the pandemic. (19)

Many migrant workers were forced to work even when sick. Access to doctors proved difficult, whether due to their geographical location or because they did not have health insurance or were not provided with translation services. Many employers also constrained workers from leaving the farms. The increased isolation limited access to labour rights information and other services.



“When I had the COVID, there were six of us in the house that catch COVID at that time. And six days during COVID quarantine, they didn't even take us to a hotel. So they separate us people with COVID upstairs and people without COVID downstairs using the same entrance to come out. So when the health team call and we explain to them what happened that we are using the same entrance, and some people downstairs had COVID. And the health team send some transportation to get all the people that doesn't have COVID to bring them to the Best Western.

They [employers] were mad about that because they said we shouldn't have told the health team nothing. They was trying to get around the health team to say, ok, you know what they called me this morning and tell me that you and the other 45 girls were supposed to come back to work today. And I'm like, no, because it's the six days of quarantine and we're supposed to quarantine for 14 days. So we couldn't go. They said we are ok to come back. I said, no, the health team tell me I'm not supposed to go back until next week, Tuesday. So she [employer] was very upset. She was very upset. She, she bring us and say she don't think she will renew back our contract. She don't think she been using any more Jamaicans because of that.” Ronica Jamaica

Research Supports the Narratives of Migrant Farm Workers

The narratives provided by migrant farm workers are substantiated by larger trends of exploitation and inadequate protections during the pandemic.

ESSENTIAL WORKERS

- During the pandemic, migrant workers were deemed essential workers. Yet they were left to endure a disproportionate number of outbreaks on farms and other closed proximity working spaces, such as meat processing facilities. Three workers from Mexico died.(20)

OUTBREAKS ON FARMS

- Outbreaks on farms continued into the 2021 season and by June 26, 2021, Public Health Ontario (2021) documented 3056 positive COVID-19 cases associated with on-farm outbreaks (cumulative since April 2020). Between March and June 2021, 5 workers died during the mandatory quarantine period upon arrival in Ontario, at least one of which, Fausto Ramirez Plazas, from Mexico, from complications arising from COVID-19, which he contracted while quarantining upon arrival in Canada. (21)

COVID INFECTIONS AMONG MIGRANT WORKERS

- In Ontario, although estimates vary by source, over 1000 migrant farm workers in Ontario tested positive for COVID-19 between April and July 2020. Thus, while Ontario documented 36594 cases by July 2020 (i.e. 250 per 100000) (22), the rate of infection among migrant farmworkers, 20,015 of whom entered Ontario during the spring and summer growing season, was approximately 4996 cases per 100000 people. (23)

DELAYED MEDICAL TREATMENT

- Medical treatment was often delayed or denied. More than 450 complaints cited that, when migrants fell ill, the medical treatment they are entitled to as Canadian taxpayers was denied or delayed — sometimes with life-and-death consequences.(24)

Migrant Workers And Social Protections

Federal and provincial assistance was given to employers, not to employees. Our survey respondents highlighted that money provided to employers to ensure protections in the workplace were often not used for that purpose. Access to CERB and other pandemic supports were determined by immigration status and so remained inaccessible.

Migrant Workers Excluded from COVID-related Social Protections

With respect to CERB, migrant workers were technically entitled to this benefit but prior income requirements and other eligibility criteria that assumed recipients to be citizens made it inaccessible to many. Language, literacy, and technological (cell phone-friendly websites and forms) barriers also circumvented workers' capacity to access this income support before and after the mandatory self-isolation period.(25)

From our survey responses we learned that:

NON-STATUS MIGRANTS

- Were excluded from CERB and other relief programs. In Ontario, they were allowed access to OHIP which was a positive measure.(26) Support and care from local communities, however, were the salvation of many non-status migrants.

MIGRANT SEX WORKERS

- Were excluded from COVID-related government financial supports when their income was immediately and totally cut off. One of the reasons for this exclusion is the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (IRPR), Sections 183(1)(b.1), 196.1(a), 200(3)(g.1), and 203(2)(a) prohibiting sex work, thus migrants found to be engaging in sex work are subject to arrest, detention, and deportation. The prohibition on sex work as an additional layer of criminalization .

MIGRANT WORKERS

- Some workers signed by their employers for financial assistance but never received the money. Other workers who were quarantined for 14 days when arriving in Canada were not paid during quarantine.
- Migrant workers in Quebec faced an additional barrier due to the French language and the reluctance of both federal and provincial authorities and their employers to provide timely and sufficiently accessible information in Spanish or Maya. (27)

The SDGs are rooted in the vision of leaving no one behind, and in fact, prioritize reaching those who are left furthest behind. However, in Canada, migrant workers are not only isolated from the economic and social protections associated with SDG 1 and 8, but disparities between government policies are contributing to and exacerbating this marginalization.

PART ONE CONCLUSIONS

There is no way to fulfill the SDGs without being attentive to whom, specifically, is being left behind. Regarding SDG 1(no poverty), SDG 11 (infrastructure – housing), and SDG 8 (decent work), the two social groups we have highlighted (youth and migrant workers), experienced significantly negative impacts during and immediately following the pandemic.

These negative impacts existed before the pandemic because they are rooted in inequitable social, immigration and economic structures, but they were made worse by the pandemic. When these impacts are viewed through an intersectional lens, it becomes clear that low-income persons, Indigenous and racialized persons, and newcomers, especially those with precarious immigration status, experience the most marginalization within the wider groups of youth and migrant workers.



THE GLOBAL GOALS

Part Two

Social Impacts, Mental Health Impacts, and Intersectionality

In this part of our report, we look at the broader impacts of the pandemic experience as they relate to SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) within our target populations of youth and migrant workers.

Social and Mental Health Impacts for Youth

The pandemic disrupted the social lives of young people with restrictions on gatherings. Social distancing made it difficult to connect with friends and participate in typical social activities. In addition, pandemic school closures meant the loss of sports and extracurricular clubs and increased isolation.

Reduced Access to Adequate Education

In our youth focus groups, youth shared that the curtailment of their education experiences not only impoverished their school experience but has led to significant stress as they now try to move forward with their lives.

The socioeconomic status of families affected the ability of high school youth to attend online education. For example, in one family, a young person was unable to use the family's one computer to attend schooling online because a parent needed that computer for remote work. As one high school group stated, *"Limited access to technology due to income restrictions made it challenging to complete online training or apply for jobs."*(28)

The disruptions to education resulted in poor quality learning for many young people with repercussions to be felt into the future.

In addition, high school and university youth shared that their educational experience during the pandemic has put them at a disadvantage when accessing decent work. They state that the online delivery of education required adaptation to a new way of learning that put responsibility on youth to be self-motivated learners, which was a challenge when experiencing heightened anxiety and uncertainty of the pandemic.

One high school group reported that *"the quality of our education was negatively impacted during the pandemic...we could not focus and were easily distracted when learning online. We felt bored and were not learning at the same level as we did in a classroom...When we returned to in-person learning, we felt that we were playing catch-up."* (29)

Access to Education for Precarious Status Youth

For many students in Ontario and other provinces, precarious immigration status is a major barrier to accessing education. Consistent with the trend we have identified in this report, access to education and inclusion within the school system worsened for precarious status children and youth during the pandemic.(30)

Even before the pandemic, precarious status children faced exclusion from, and within, the school system (see ANNEX II). Schools frequently use discretion to exclude or accept undocumented youth, leaving these crucial decisions up to individuals in administrative roles. Different bureaucratic barriers are erected to deny access, including the request for certain documentation such as ID, passport, proof of address, birth certificates, etc. Once students are able to register and enroll in schools, the schools usually do not directly ask for further proof of status. However after enrollment there is an absence of understanding of the specific challenges that precarious status students and their families might be facing, and consequently, a lack of appropriate learning support. This phenomenon is called “post enrollment status blindness”. (31)

“Like it’s hard to get into school and then to stay in school, like to afford and study and have so many responsibilities that wait on your shoulder like an immigration process while everything is happening and you just need to juggle everything at the same time.”
S4 discussion

Access to post-secondary education is just as challenging. Often, students without immigration status are simply denied entry into the post-secondary system. When international students are able to access post-secondary education, they are subject to significantly higher tuition fees and associated costs, which can put education out of reach for many.

It is encouraging to note, however, that two Canadian Universities, York University and Toronto Metropolitan University, have undertaken a groundbreaking new access initiative. These initiatives facilitates access through a specially designed bridging program and offers newcomer students the opportunity to study at domestic fees rates.

Young people participating in this initiative describe feelings of finally “being home”, and being able to look forward with certainty.(32)

When barriers to education are removed, positive impacts are immediate and noticeable.

Worsening Mental Health Outcomes

“it’s, like, very difficult because when you don’t get what you want it gives you so many things to talk about and so many things to think about, and you actually feel like somehow your goals are not being achieved. When I actually started thinking about that, I got myself into a depression state – which I actually sought help from my counselor and my doctors.”

– Navigating the Divide

The barriers to accessing education during the pandemic prevented students, especially precarious status students, from pursuing their career aspirations and entering the job market in an equitable way. These barriers also negatively impact youth mental health and well-being. This state of limbo causes youth feelings of anxiety around achieving their dreams, depression for not being able to pursue their goals, and for those with a precarious status, fear of an indefinite stagnant future.

The mental health concerns highlighted by the youth focus groups are all the more troubling when placed in the context of wider youth mental health trends identified by Statistics Canada.

Social isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future have all contributed to increased levels of stress and mental health issues among youth.

DECLINES IN MENTAL HEALTH

- Prior to COVID, youth were at risk for poor mental health. But, since the pandemic, youth aged 15 to 24 reported the greatest declines in mental health – 20 percentage point reductions from 60% (2019, pre-COVID) to 40% (July 2020) of those reporting excellent or very good mental health.(33)

INCREASED YOUTH MORTALITY

- Self-reported well-being and mental health were adversely affected by the pandemic, especially among young Canadians. From March 2020 to October 2022, there were 7.9% more deaths than would have been expected had a pandemic not occurred. (34)

YOUTH DEATHS FROM OVERDOSE

- While COVID-19 has been a main driver of excess deaths overall, deaths attributed to substance overuse has also increased, particularly among young people in Canada.
- Younger age groups made up a disproportionate number of deaths from overdoses. Among individuals aged younger than 45 years, there were 2,640 accidental poisoning deaths in 2020 and 3,600 in 2021.(35)

These alarming statistics confirm the concerning reality of a mental health crisis among young Canadians. The pandemic has worsened mental health outcomes of youth and has negatively impacted students’ educational attainment. The short-term and long-term dimensions of the negative impacts of the pandemic must be addressed by all levels of government.

Racism and Racist Violence Against Migrant Workers

The 2,669 police-reported hate crimes in 2020 were the largest number recorded since comparable data became available in 2009.

Another social impact of the pandemic is a rise in rates of racism and violence. The pandemic was accompanied by increases in racist attacks in Canada. The first year of the pandemic saw 718 more police-reported hate crimes compared with 2019, a 37% increase. The 2,669 police-reported hate crimes in 2020 were the largest number recorded since comparable data became available in 2009. This increase was largely the result of more police-reported hate crimes targeting the Black population (+318 incidents or +92%), the East or Southeast Asian population (+202 incidents or +301%), the Indigenous population (+44 incidents or +152%), and the South Asian population (+38 incidents or +47%). (36)

Racist supervisors called us “dogs” and other racial slurs.”
- a Black migrant worker

Migrant workers were one of the social groups impacted by increased racism and racist violence. They endured harmful rhetoric blaming migrant workers for spreading COVID-19 in Canadian communities as well as increased threats and surveillance during the pandemic.

In particular, Caribbean workers were disproportionately targeted with surveillance and threat.(37)

“I hate to say it but it's a lot of racism here towards the migrant worker, towards the migrant workers. Every farm that I go, I experience racism. it's, it's hard like it's hard. I just asked the question my sister, why, why we black people have to suffer so much like everywhere, every creature and corner that I turned. It's racism. They treat the same black guys the same way, same way. No difference.

-Ronica, Jamaica

Part Two Conclusions

It is apparent in our analysis that the pandemic also exacerbated many conditions related to SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities – racism and violence). Youth, regardless of immigration status, experienced reduced access to quality education at the secondary and post-secondary levels during the pandemic, which has implications for their overall educational attainment and pursuit of career aspirations. Their educational experience intersected with health outcomes, resulting in poorer mental health outcomes and increased incidence of substance use and death. Migrant workers bore the brunt of rises in racism and racist violence in Canada exacerbated by the pandemic.

Interventions are needed from all levels of government to mitigate the negative social impacts of the pandemic, with provincial and territorial governments primarily responsible for education and health responses. The federal government must play a coordination role to ensure harmonized approaches across Canada so that no one is left behind in the achievement of the SDGs.



THE GLOBAL GOALS

Part Three

Learnings to Apply to Climate Change Response and Transition

In its 2023 VNR, the federal government states that “[i]t is working to accelerate progress for those left furthest behind, including Indigenous Peoples, racialized and religious minorities, 2SLGBTQI+ people, those with a disability, official language minority communities, and other groups in vulnerable situations.”(38) In addition to the aforementioned social groupings, our report has argued that youth and migrant workers also have been left behind on SDG progress.

Youth and migrant workers, along with other intentionally marginalized groups who were significantly impacted by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, will be further impacted by future disruptions such as those from climate change. The vulnerability of both people and planet are inextricably interconnected. And climate change, with its wide range of adverse effects, disproportionately affects those most vulnerable in society.

Therefore, if we are to make progress on the SDGs for the social groups left furthest behind, it is essential that we address the root causes of climate change along with its political, social, cultural, and economic impacts. Likewise, efforts to mitigate, adapt, manage risk, and build climate resilience must give priority to racialized and Indigenous persons, women, newcomers, people living with low-incomes, and individuals living with disabilities, migrant workers and youth who are at risk of experiencing worse impacts from climate change.

Response to Canada's Voluntary National Review

In this section, we examine the interaction of climate change and SDG development through an intersectional lens.



NO POVERTY

Perhaps the most oft-used phrase from the pandemic was the way it 'exacerbated the injustices which already existed in Canada,' putting a spotlight on the barriers to social, health, and economic well-being for marginalized persons and groups. Likewise, climate change is already drawing our attention to the inequities which flow from the gap between rich and poor.

Climate change has worsened food and water insecurity (39), contributing to increased poverty and unaffordability of basic needs. In addition, those experiencing poverty are more vulnerable to the impacts of extreme weather events or disasters caused by climate change.(40)

While the SDGs are focused on eliminating extreme poverty, it must be recognized that extreme wealth is a driver of climate change. We know that the world's richest ten percent are responsible for an estimated 47 percent share of global CO2 emissions. (source: Carbon Brief). Developing a more equitable tax system to lessen the gap between rich and poor is not only good for addressing climate change, it will allow us to invest in more robust social protections; protections which will be crucial during times of climate change disruption, just as they were during the pandemic.

While the VNR indicates that Canada has already reached its interim target of a 20% reduction in poverty, the impact of the covid-19 pandemic and risks related to climate change remains a considerable challenge to the elimination of poverty in Canada.(41)

ZERO HUNGER



Food insecurity is not a new challenge in Canada. Currently, women-led lone-parent families, low-income groups, Indigenous people, newcomers, and individuals with disabilities report higher levels of food insecurity than the overall population. Climate change further impacts food security and food safety by disrupting food systems, impacting food prices, and affecting the ability to access quality and nutritional food.



GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The IPCC states that all parts of the world have experienced increased numbers of mortalities due to extreme heat events. In addition, climate-related food-borne and water-borne diseases are increasing. Mental health challenges and trauma due to rising temperatures are also increasing.(42)

Children and youth today not only will face the worst impacts of climate change in the future but, as we saw during the pandemic, their social lives are severely impacted by widespread disruption. They are more vulnerable to the mental health impacts of disruptions and they are among the first to be negatively impacted by job losses in the labour market.

QUALITY EDUCATION



A UNESCO study suggests that climate change has significant impacts on education. There can be a direct impact on school buildings when they are destroyed due to extreme weather events or schools are used as emergency shelters. In addition, climate-change induced poverty creates even more barriers to accessing education.(43)

Due to the pandemic, youth experienced educational deficits as a result of online learning, especially youth from lower-income families. The disruptive change to online learning negatively impacted their learning experience such that many youth reported feeling behind in their studies when in-person learning resumed. These deficits are felt even more acutely by newcomer youth who face additional barriers to accessing education such as language, culture, and immigration status. Disruptions to education will continue due to climate change events if we do not strengthen our education systems and build climate change resilience.



GENDER EQUALITY

Climate change has adverse effects on gender and social equity.(44) As climate change drives conflict across the world, women and girls are increasingly at risk of all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, child marriage, and other forms of violence. In addition, climate change-driven emerging diseases increase risks related to maternal health.(45)

According to UN Women, “climate change risks are acute for indigenous and Afro-descendent women and girls, older women, LGBTIQ+ people, women and girls with disabilities, migrant women, and those living in rural, remote, conflict and disaster-prone areas.”(46) Gendered differences experienced by youth and migrant workers need to be assessed and require gender specific responses.

Climate change has affected individual livelihoods and caused economic damages, especially in climate- exposed sectors, namely, agriculture, forestry, fishery, energy, and tourism.(47)

In terms of the labour market, climate change can render entire regions unproductive due to flooding, extreme weather, and wildfires. This in turn can make workplaces unsafe, reduce labour productivity, and slow economic activity. The implications are felt unevenly across geographic regions and social groups – with people already working in precarious or low-wage employment more vulnerable to the impacts.

The number of displaced people due to climate change will continue to increase. Inevitably, due to increased border control and the reluctance of states to fulfill their international commitments towards refugees, those people will become non-status migrants in the destination countries. As such, they can be easily exploited by employers looking to reduce costs and maximize their profits.



REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Across the world and in Canada, extreme weather events are contributing to involuntary displacement and increasing migration. Within Canada, Indigenous communities have been severely impacted by disruptions related to climate change.

People experiencing homelessness are the most exposed to weather extremes and the least supported in crisis response and risk mitigation efforts. They cannot turn to the comforts of home when temperatures soar to new heights or torrential rains fall or wildfire soot blankets the earth around them. Access to housing is not only a human right to which all people are entitled but becomes even more critical as we deal with climate change.

Climate action targets identified in the VNR include a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 40%-45% below 2005 levels by 2030, and reduction of carbon pollution to net zero by 2050. Investments include \$8 billion in community adaptation, disaster response, and climate resilience.

Youth identified climate change as the most pressing SDG for governments and the international community to address. Youth said, “Our generation is the future of the world, but with no safe world to live in, everyone will suffer. Making sure we handle climate change immediately will ensure that our generation and our kids will have a safe future on Earth.”(48) Their concerns point to the need for much stronger climate action from the federal government.



PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

The Government of Canada is providing a \$60 million investment to support a whole-of-society approach to achieve the SDGs, however, it is not clear how and to whom this funding is being disbursed. To date, there has not been a robust multi-sectoral engagement (Indigenous organizations, civil society, private sector, academia, etc.) that promotes partnerships and collaboration to create equitable distribution of investments and truly monitor and promote progress ‘on the ground’. With only seven years remaining to achieve the SDGs, enhanced multi-sectoral collaboration is essential.

The Government of Canada acknowledges gaps in its progress to achieve the SDGs, including significant health inequalities for Indigenous Peoples. The intersection of gender equality and disability status remain barriers to achieving the SDGs. Finally, poverty and related impacts such as food insecurity, and affordability of housing impede progress.(49)

As much as we need to transition away from a fossil fuel economy, we also need to be aware that this transition will have greater negative impacts on groups and people already experiencing social and economic marginalization.

Towards a Just Transition

The ILO (International Labour Organization) has developed **Guidelines for a Just Transition towards environmentally low-carbon economy and a more equitable society**.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The guidelines are based on the following six principles:

SOCIAL DIALOGUE

- Governments, workers and employers' organizations should participate in consultations and negotiations throughout the policy making process at all levels.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

- Governments and social partners should invest in education and training to equip all workers with the skills needed for the green economy, knowing that there will be significant and ongoing mobility across sectors and regions.

ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

- Governments and social partners should foster the development of new sectors, industries and services that are low-carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive.

STRONG SOCIAL PROTECTION

- Governments should provide adequate income support, health care, skills development and other services to workers and communities affected by the transition.

ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICIES

- Governments and social partners should implement measures to create decent jobs, support job search, match labour supply and demand, and promote entrepreneurship and innovation.

RIGHTS AT WORK

- Governments and social partners should respect, promote and realize the fundamental principles and rights at work, such as freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination, occupational safety and health, and social dialogue.

These principles are intended to ensure that the transition to a low-carbon economy is fair, inclusive and beneficial for all individuals, and social groups.

Keeping these principles in dialogue with the intersectional impacts experienced by the social groups highlighted in our report (youth, migrant workers, including workers without status), we make the following recommendations to the federal government.

Part Four

We need bold action now!

Where do you go from here? Without the necessary political will and corresponding investments, Canada will not meet its targets. The SDGs are our pathway to prosperity for all people and the planet.

We are now more than halfway to 2030, and much remains to be done if we are going to achieve the SDGs. The recommendations below are structured within the just transition principles outlined above that Canada committed to during COP26.

01 — Social Dialogue

The SDGs will only be achieved in partnership with all stakeholders. We need local and national social dialogue on the SDGs that is evidence-based, focussed on accelerated action, and inclusive of Canada's geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversities. Specifically, we urge the Government to:

- Create a national multi-language platform to engage diverse groups, especially those left furthest behind, including children and youth, racialized communities, 2SLGBTQ+, and newcomers, in dialogue and action to achieve the SDGs. (All SDGs)
- Establish regular and ongoing multi-stakeholder engagement processes within the SDG Unit's mandate at Employment and Social Development Canada to ensure no one is left behind. All levels of government, Indigenous organizations, civil society, the private sector, academia, and the aforementioned diverse groups should participate in policy-making processes to ensure broad, intersectional lived experiences and challenges are considered. (All SDGs)
- Implement an intersectional policy lens to ensure the inclusion of intersectional experiences of individuals in economic recovery policies, acknowledging the interconnectedness of race, immigration status, and socioeconomic status. (All SDGs)

"The government should be more involved in the lived experiences of the citizens of Canada. Our current systems are not competent to address the intersectional experiences of people coming out of this pandemic." {Awakening Project}

"The affected groups should be consulted in making policy on the road to recovery. We may continue to feel the effects of COVID over the next decade." {Awakening Project}

02 ——— Strong Social Protection

- Ensure migrants with precarious immigration status have access to adequate housing, health care, education, and social protection benefits from all levels of government. (SDG 1, 3, 4, 11)
- Implement legislation to protect non-status migrants from detention and deportation, including in situations where their continued presence in Canada is necessary for their own safety or the safety of their families. (SDG 11)
- Provide youth access to immediate, affordable health care in response to the current mental health crisis. This crisis worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is also exacerbated by climate anxiety. We ask the federal government to work with provincial and territorial governments to ensure that youth are able to access the mental health support they need free of cost. (SDG 3)
- Repeal IRPR sections 183(1)(b.1), 196.1(a), 200(3)(g.1) and 203(2)(a) which unfairly put migrant sex workers at elevated risk of violence and danger by making them unable to report these incidents without fear of deportation.
- Consider how to best address the exploitation of migrant sex workers and to prevent findings of inadmissibility and deportation when they report being victims of crime.

03 ——— Skills Development

- In partnership with provincial and territorial governments, conduct a review of COVID-19 pandemic learning deficits of primary, secondary, and post-secondary students, paying special attention to students belonging to marginalized communities, and strengthen educational systems and curricula to ensure resilience in the event of future disruptions. Invest in improving the delivery of online education as an alternate means of learning; address grade inflation that may negatively impact learning; and ensure that graduates possess the necessary skills demanded by the job market, especially for the transition to a green economy. (SDG 4)
- Mitigate the costs and requirements associated with access to school, including student loans, to alleviate the financial burden on students and create more equitable access to education.. In addition, remove barriers for precarious and non-status youth accessing education opportunities and provide access to student loans for this population (SDG 4)
- Mitigate or eliminate status concerns to remove barriers allowing precarious youth to access education. (SDG 4)
- Provide appropriate training and information to school staff and administration to better support precarious status students and their families. (SDG 4)
- Provide provincial funding with stipulation for precarious youths to access post education at domestic fee rates. (SDG 4)
- Strengthen employment insurance and provide ongoing training opportunities and employment support for all workers who are in periods of transition from one job to another. (SDG 4, 8)

04 ————— Active Labour and Market Policies

- As a signatory to the UN Global Compact on Migration, the Government of Canada must uphold its principles, including revising or strengthening legislation and implementing policies that provide undocumented migrants with access to basic rights and creating a fair pathway to permanent residency for those who have been living in Canada for a significant period of time and are contributing to Canadian society. (SDG 8, 10, 11, 17)
- Sign and ratify the UN Convention for the Protection of Migrants and Their Families (SDG 17).
- Abolish Employer-specific work permits (SDG 8)
- Provide incentives to employers to hire new graduates for full-time positions at equitable wages across industries/sectors (SDG 8)
- Increase accessibility to jobs, especially for youth with refugee status or other immigration status (SDG 8)
- Work with Provincial and Territorial Governments to ensure equal and fair wages for work performed regardless of age, sex, race etc. (SDG 5, 8, 11)

05 ————— Rights at Work

- Improve regulation of corporations who hire migrant workers to ensure their rights are respected and receive fair remuneration from employers (SDG 8)
- Provide sufficient funding to ensure that federal and provincial worker protection agencies can do their job in a sufficient, timely, and effective manner across the country.

06 ————— Economic Diversification

- Incentivize on-the-job training, paid internships, and the hiring of entry-level employees, including newcomer youth with variable immigration statuses, to address educational and job access inequities faced by this generation of youth. (SDG 4, 8)
- Expand opportunities for hands-on learning and internships to supplement academic education and improve employment prospects. These measures will promote job creation, enhance training programs, and increase access to different types of employment. (SDG 4, 8)

07 ————— International comprehensive perspective

- Recognize that in the case of agricultural and undocumented workers, an international approach is needed to ensure that there are no “gray” or ambiguous areas that unscrupulous employers and criminals take advantage of in Canada or abroad
- Improve labor protection legislation in Canada and promote it in their home countries.
- Ensure labor mobility for the workers and their families.
- Monitor migrant farm workers’ health and ensure that they have adequate, timely, and easy access to healthcare both in Canada and in their countries of origin after working here.

Annex I

Longstanding Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Canada

“I worked more than 12 hours a day for the minimum wage. There were always differences between the hours I worked and the hours I was paid.” (migrant farm worker)

While there are a few labour mobility programs through which migrant workers enter Canada, the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) is the main vehicle for hiring migrant workers in low-wage sectors. These workers contribute beneficially to a wide range of industries in Canada but are exposed to widespread mistreatment and exploitation.

It is important to note that these vulnerabilities are not inherent to the workers or the jobs that they do but rather are actively created and perpetuated by policies, programs and regulations put in place by different levels of government.⁽⁵¹⁾ The abuse taking place within the TFWP is well documented. Workers are subjected to widespread financial, physical, psychological, emotional and, at times, sexual abuse. They are forced to work long hours, paid less than the minimum wage or sometimes not paid at all. Leaving the situation can lead them to lose their status and potentially lead to further victimization and exploitation.⁽⁵²⁾

The major barrier experienced by migrant workers remains their precarious immigration status, which creates vulnerabilities to exploitation and limited access to equitable work opportunities and social protections. The so-called closed work permits keep them tied to one employer, making it almost impossible to leave an abusive workplace. The narratives we heard from migrant workers reflect troubling patterns of injustice and exploitation.

“In Canada, if you have status, you have rights. In Canada, if you have status, you know, the immigration vulnerability that I have, if I have status, I am not concerned about being deported or repatriated back to my home country with status. Status takes care of both my labor and immigration vulnerability. If I have status, I'm not concerned about being sent back home. If I have status. If I have status, I have an open work permit. And if I have an open work permit, my employer knows I have an open work permit. So that means that they know I can work if anybody is willing to employ me. So that put pressure on my employer to create conditions that attract me and keep me. But not having status means we are tied to one employer. We are tied to one employer. It puts the burden on us to please our employer. And that is by design. That's not an accident. That's by design. The issue of the continuation of exploitation of people from the Global South to keep that wide divide.” Gabriel

Migrant Farm Workers

Frontline service organizations responding to our survey drew our attention to legislated labour precarity, particularly for migrant farm workers. For example, in Ontario, migrant farm workers are subject to special rules and exemptions with respect to minimum wages, vacation and leave entitlement, public holidays, hours of work and breaks. In addition, they are forced to speed up their work at various stages in the production cycle without adequate remuneration. This lack of basic protections, combined with work permits tied to single employers, make it nearly impossible for workers to assert their rights to safe work.

“Imagine in Ontario, for example, migrant workers are excluded from minimum wage. Minimum, you know, the bare minimum. We are excluded from that. Migrant workers are excluded from overtime pay. We work long, very long hours. We are excluded from overtime pay. Rest period in Ontario, we are excluded from rest periods. Can you imagine that? From sick leave? We are excluded from that. From statutory holiday. Look at that ... A culture that prides itself on diversity, on inclusiveness and on multiculturalism, right? We are excluded from those great things, right? Does that make us a human being in Canada?” Gabriel From Caribbean



“The employer always say that he past the inspections so then we are all to live in the buildings. Some of these buildings could be in deplorable conditions. I knew about a couple of friends of mine who did not even have hot water in their place of residence. The amount of space shared between the dormitory space is limited for grown men. When it comes to the kitchen area now, there was not always enough space for everyone to cook at the same time or we would have to cook by turns. That really affected [our] quality of life.” Jim from Caribbean

Migrant farm workers are also confined to living in housing provided by their employers. Very often, they have to endure substandard housing, including crowding, lack of amenities, bedbugs, cockroach and rat infestation, gas leaks, lack of proper spaces to store and prepare food, and sewage issues, among others. It is not unusual for 20 or 30 workers to share one bunkhouse without any privacy, and endure long lineups to use bathroom facilities or prepare their food.

“They put a trailer on the farm like a container and that's where we live, that's where they set up the house for us inside the trailer. Very cold. Rats upon rats. You cook, you put your pot with your food on the stove and there go rats eating up. If you buy a bread, the rats eat up all the bread. For the last farm I lived, I have a number of pictures, a whole bunch of cockroaches and you know what, when we reported it and sent pictures and everything to the HR she told us that the roach comes with us in our suitcase from Jamaica. And the first night we stepped in that house, we saw roach, even when we were sleeping, roach crawling under our beds, our clothes in the trailer.” Ronica

Migrant women engaged in farm work are further exposed to sexual harassment by employers and supervisors during work and outside work hours. Women report inappropriate touching, text messages with sexual content, and late night phone calls. Women hesitate to complain, fearing that they will lose their jobs due to the precarious immigration status and threats of reprisal and deportation. Those women who eventually submit a complaint have their experiences minimized or dismissed. As one survey respondent indicated, there is a “silencing culture around gender-based violence.”(53)

We also heard on multiple occasions from workers that, for the moment, the TFWP is the only viable option for migrant workers from the Global South to earn an income and support their loved ones. Migrant workers are not seeking to abolish the TFWP but to reform it to ensure that their basic needs and human rights are realized.

“You know what? I wouldn't give up the program for nothing. But if they only could change how they treat people on this program.” Ronica, Jamaica

Migrant Care Workers

Organizations working with migrant care workers note that care work is a gendered and racialized occupation. It is characterized by low pay, poor working conditions, and a high level of precariousness. The temporary immigration status of migrant care workers and closed work permits make it difficult for care workers to demand the respect of their basic workplace rights or to seek legal redress when those rights are violated. As such, women regularly see their employment and contractual rights violated by employers. For example, unpaid and excessive overtime, illegal deductions, wage theft, lack of health and safety precautions, psychological and sexual harassment are common practices. The fact that they perform work and often live in the private residence of their employer also contributes to the difficulty in accessing decent work.

Non-status workers

While the current TFWP enables conditions for widespread exploitation and abuse, employers use other immigration tactics to bring workers to Canada and exploit their labour. We heard many migrant workers were recruited to work in Canada with the promise of work permits, only to find there were no work permits for them upon arrival and they did not have options to attain a valid one. These workers were then threatened with deportation by their employers because they were working without authorization.

"I came to the country because a employer from Canada contacted me through one friend and tell me that it's a good opportunity for me to come to the country to get a job and become permanent resident in less than one year because I'm going to be hired by him on his, on his company. So he said, just get like your tourist visa, come to the country. Don't worry, you're going to stay on my house till we figure it out about your work permit.

And after some time we start like realizing that the way that he brought us to the country is not like the right one. He also started like keeping money from our paychecks. Every single paycheck he take money from us because at the beginning he said that he is going to pay our taxes. Then he changed it. He said that this money is going to pay for the immigration advisor that he hired to get like the all LMIA process to being able his company to hire us as foreign workers. Then he changed it again. He said that we have to pay to his company, \$20,000 to being able to do the stuff like the LMIA and the sponsorship for us to get the permanent resident." Arso, Mexico

According to frontline service organizations, “Undocumented migrants are the most precarious workers as they are always at the mercy of their employers if they have employment. “ Those workers depend on their employment, and they fear that such abusive workplaces may be their only option for work.

“There are biases within the work with not only staff but also authority figures. There are certain stereotypes... depending on your race, of course, mine is black. And there's also a difference in pay, especially when it comes to immigration status. Because you don't have particularly the protection or what we consider the protection of the [permanent immigration] status, you don't have rights. So, therefore, you're being paid way less, or you're being told to your push to work in extreme conditions and workplaces, longer hours, just because you don't have that protection of an [immigration] status.” S4 conversation

Migrant Sex Workers

Migrant sex workers are subjected to additional barriers and work precarity due to policies that are directly or indirectly criminalizing sex work and sex-related industries.(54) Frontline service organizations put a spotlight on those barriers noticing that both the criminalization and stigmatization of the sex work sector impede women from accessing decent work and labour and legal protections. Sex workers, including migrant sex workers, do not have access to social protections such as worker's compensation, paid leave, government supports, occupational health and safety, and employment standards protections. In addition, restrictive immigration policies are preventing migrant women from legally engaging in sex and related industries, which is increasing the instances of violence by clients, detention and deportation.(55)

Annex II

Access to Education for Precarious Status Children and Youth

Access to Primary and Secondary Education

Primary and secondary education is seen as a right and an obligation in Canada. For example, the Ontario Education Act reflects this by including a provision in section 49.1 stating that any child under the age of 18 “shall not be refused admission because the person or the person’s parent or guardian is unlawfully in Canada.”(56) However, the various ways that precarious status children face exclusion from, and within, the school system challenges their sense of belonging. Schools frequently use discretion to exclude or accept undocumented youth, leaving these crucial decisions up to individuals in administrative roles. Different bureaucratic barriers are erected to deny access, including the request for additional documentation such as ID, passport, proof of address, birth certificates, etc. Once students are able to register and enroll in Ontario schools, the schools usually do not directly ask for further proof of status, but occasionally some schools do ask. Students continue to face barriers after enrolling.

**“My education in Mexico is not good enough, so I struggled with many classes like history and geography.”
Student from focus group**

Post- Secondary Education

While there are provisions in the Ontario Education Act to provide access to students with precarious immigration status, there are no such provisions at the post-secondary level. Most post-secondary institutions (57) continue to deny entry to those populations, many of whom are youth, due to eligibility requirements based on immigration status. While prospective students, such as refugee claimants, must pay international student tuition fees that are considerably higher than domestic fees, non-status youth face additional barriers to enter post-secondary school.(58) Furthermore, those prospective students are not eligible to access any student financial supports such as the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), provided by the government of Ontario and available to others.

“I think there are barriers to getting into schools. There are opportunities that aren't even open for folks without status. We know that there are only two universities in Canada that are {there are nuances beyond that}, but there are two main universities in Canada that welcome students without status. Colleges, once in a while, a student might get in somehow, but things like upgrading programs and all those other things are difficult to get in. And then there's a whole other set of challenges and issues for folks that are in and on campuses and attending classes and the curriculum and navigating student services and student life and all of those things as well.” S4 Collective discussion



“Another major issue I think for sure is financial. Because you're not able to get a particular job or you're being paid under the table or less, you're not able to support for yourself even within the university life, because you're not able to get these particular grants like OSAP that are normally available to you with {permanent immigration} switch status. So your, your financial options are limited.” S4 Collective discussion

Footnotes

- 1 Statistics Canada has provided some valuable snapshots into the pressures faced by low-income earners in Canada. Statistics Canada-Statistics Canada, Research to Insights: A look at Canada's economy and society three years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2023 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2023004-eng.htm?s=09>
2. Statistics Canada, More Canadians are finding it difficult to meet food, shelter and other necessary expenses, March 2023 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230307/dq230307b-eng.htm>
3. Ibid.
4. Statistics Canada, Study: Youth employment in Canada, July 2021 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210726/dq210726b-eng.htm>
- 5 The Student Minimum Wage applies to students in Ontario under the age of 18 years who work 28 hours per week or less during the school year or during school breaks and summer holidays <https://www.ontario.ca/document/your-guide-employment-standards-act-0/minimum-wage>
- 6 Loretto Abbey Youth Conversation Circle
- 7 Average wait time for a refugee hearing during the pandemic was two years and continues to increase. https://irb.gc.ca/en/transparency/pac-binder-nov-2020/Pages/pac8a.aspx?_undefined&wbdisable=true
- 8 See Appendix 2
- 9 Statistics Canada, Study: Youth employment in Canada, July 2021 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210726/dq210726b-eng.htm>
- 10 Ibid
- 11 University of Toronto Youth Conversation Circle
- 12 FCJ Refugee Centre Youth Conversation Circle
- 13 S4 Collective report survey discussion
- 14 Loretto Abbey Youth Conversation Circle
- 15 Conseil Migrant, partner agency input
- 16 Statistics Canada, Immigration as a source of labour supply, June 2022 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220622/dq220622c-eng.htm>
- 17 LMIA- authorization document issued to Canadian employers hiring foreign workers. More here: <https://www.cic.gc.ca/english/helpcentre/answer.asp?qnum=163>
- 18 Conseil migrant, partner agency input
- 19 Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19&Migrant Workers in Canada, Report, 2020 <https://migrantworkersalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Unheeded-Warnings-COVID19-and-Migrant-Workers.pdf>
- 20 Vosko, L.F., Spring, C. COVID-19 Outbreaks in Canada and the Crisis of Migrant Farmworkers' Social Reproduction: Transnational Labour and the Need for Greater Accountability Among Receiving States. Int. Migration & Integration 23, 1765–1791 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-021-00905-2>
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Detsky AS, Bogoch II. COVID-19 in Canada: Experience and Response. JAMA. 2020 Aug 25;324(8):743-744. doi: 10.1001/jama.2020.14033. PMID: 32790824.
- 23 Vosko, L.F., Spring, C., 2022

- 24 Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP)
- 25 Vosko, L.F., Spring, C., 2022
- 26 The government of ON recently reverted back that policy.
- 27 Conseil migrant, partner agency input
- 28 Loretto Abbey Youth Conversation Circle
- 29 lbd
- 30 Precarious migrant populations include those on work or study permits, inland refugee claimants, refused refugee claimants, sponsored spouses or children, visa overstayers and others not authorized to enter the country. Philip Ackerman&Ruth Naomi Damdar, Navigating the Divide: Uncovering Barriers to Post-Secondary Education for Newcomer Students, Report, 2019 https://472be72f-ee8f-46c3-861a-9e6638e1c844.usrfiles.com/ugd/472be7_d147cadedf04c4f0bbb51231c66c5f55c.pdf
- 31 Borrás, Jana, Luin Goldring and Patricia Landolt, Pandemic Precarities: Immigration Status, Work, Housing, and Health Among Current and Former Non-status Residents of Toronto. Toronto: FCJ, Refugee Centre and CEP Project, 2021
- 32 Philip Ackerman&Ruth Naomi Damdar, Navigating the Divide: Uncovering Barriers to Post-Secondary Education for Newcomer Students, Report, 2019 https://472be72f-ee8f-46c3-861a-9e6638e1c844.usrfiles.com/ugd/472be7_d147cadedf04c4f0bbb51231c66c5f55c.pdf
- 33 Statistics Canada, Impacts on Mental Health, 2022 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/2020004/s3-eng.htm>; Statistics Canada, Impacts on Youth, 2020
- 34 Research to Insights: A look at Canada's economy and society three years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2023
- 35 lbd
- 36 Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00013-eng.htm>
- 37 "Racist attacks surge as COVID-19 spreads around the globe." CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/racism-coronavirus-1.5507033> ; "COVID-19 racism is now Canada's pandemic, too." The Globe and Mail <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-covid-19-racism-is-now-canadas-pandemic-too/>
- 38 Canada's Voluntary National Review Main Messages, 2023 <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/canada/voluntary-national-reviews-2023>
- 39 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, 2022-2026 <https://www.fsds-sfdd.ca/en>
- 40 IPCC Report, Synthesis Report of The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) Summary for Policy Makers, https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf
- 41 Canada's Voluntary National Review Main Messages, 2023 <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/canada/voluntary-national-reviews-2023>
- 42 IPCC Report, Synthesis Report of The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) Summary for Policy Makers, https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf
- 43 How climate change and displacement affect the right to education, <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-education/climate-change-displacement>
- 44 IPCC Report, Synthesis Report of The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) Summary for Policy Makers, https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf
- 45 UN Women, Explainer: How Gender Inequality and Climate Change are Interconnected, February 2022 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected>
- 46 lbdj

47 IPCC Report, Synthesis Report of The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) Summary for Policy Makers, https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf48 Youth input, Loretto Abbey

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<https://hlpf.un.org/countries/canada/voluntary-national-reviews-2023>

51 Strauss, K., & McGrath, S., Temporary migration, precarious employment and unfree labour relations: Exploring the 'continuum of exploitation' in Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program, *Geoforum* Volume 78, January 2017, Pages 199-208. The authors concluded that "unfreedom is not an intrinsic attribute of migrant workers themselves, or of the jobs they do, but rather describes relationships that are actively produced and institutionalized by employers and the state." <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718515301342>

52 More on various abuses and vulnerabilities within the TFWP: Roberts, S.E. The Bureaucratic and Political Work of Immigration Classifications: an Analysis of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program and Access to Settlement Services in Canada. *Int. Migration & Integration* 21, 973–992 (2020); Vosko, L.F., Spring, C. COVID-19 Outbreaks in Canada and the Crisis of Migrant Farmworkers' Social Reproduction: Transnational Labour and the Need for Greater Accountability Among Receiving States. *Int. Migration & Integration* 23, 1765–1791 (2022); Zwaigenbaum J., Tulli M., Dr. Salami B., *The Ongoing Exploitation of Temporary Foreign Workers, Women in Scholarship, Engineering, Science, and Technology*, 2021

53 Barbara Schleifer Commemorative Clinic, partner agency input

54 Canada's current prostitution law, Bill C-36, the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), bans the purchasing of sexual services and receiving material benefits from prostitution and procuring services. It also makes it illegal for newspaper and magazine publishers, website administrators and web-hosting services to publish advertisements for any sexual services, and prohibits communicating for the sale and purchase of sexual services in a public place next to a school ground, playground, or daycare centre. Government of Canada, Technical Paper: Bill C-36, Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act,

55 Butterfly, Work Permit Restriction On "Employment In Businesses related To The Sex-Trade" June 2018 <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/JUST/Brief/BR10006331/br-external/ImmigrationLegalCommittee-e.pdf>

56 Ontario Government, Ontario Education Act. RSO 1997, Chapter E2. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.

57 Except York and Toronto Metropolitan Universities which have implemented a similar initiative facilitating access through a specially designed bridging program and offers students with precarious status the opportunity to study at domestic rates. Navigating the Divide (above)

58 Permanent resident and Convention refugee students can enter university or college as students subject to domestic tuition fees. However, they experience additional barriers to equitable participation once admitted.

**We thank you for your
continued support in our
efforts to contribute to
the SDGs.**



THE GLOBAL GOALS

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