



CLOSED WORK PERMIT POSITION STATEMENT

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Canada has acceded to, emphasizes the right to just and favourable work conditions where no one is exploited, and the opportunity to gain one's living through employment one freely chooses and accepts (Social Rights Ontario, n.d.; UN OHCHR, 1966; World Federalist Movement Canada, 2015). Yet, various investigations, including those conducted by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, as well as Amnesty International have found that closed work permits do not tend to foster such conditions, but rather they create a breeding ground for abuses and violence (Amnesty International, 2016; 2023a,b; UN OHCHR, 2023). While options may exist on paper, realistic and timely exit routes from such abusive employment situations are inadequate and ineffective band-aid solutions, due to immigration policies, bureaucracy, a lack of culturally-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches, as well as language and financial barriers etc.

For women and gender-diverse individuals with precarious or no immigration status, closed work permits promote prolonged and ongoing existence of power dynamics that can facilitate gendered forms of abuse related to sexual harassment, physical assault, reproductive health/pregnancy discrimination, economic exploitation, coercion, threats, and denial of resources. Under such circumstances, not only do women and gender-diverse individuals suffer from violence but due to the nature of being tied to one employer through closed work permits, they also experience a form of entrapment caused by a multitude of legal, financial, and social barriers which often prevent them from leaving ongoing abusive employment situations. Thus, not only are they cornered, but they find their back against the wall, no matter where they turn.

While over the years, the Canadian Government has introduced some measures in the face of migrant worker abuses occurring under restricted work permits, these have not been successful in addressing the root causes and power imbalances that enable violations (Amnesty International, 2023 a, b). It is imperative that systemic root issues

are addressed so that women and gender-diverse migrants, the very same people who ensure we have food in our grocery stores and take care of the children and elderly in our neighbourhoods, are protected from harms that have long-lasting negative effects for them but also for the communities they are embedded in. This includes women and gender-diverse people who have been trafficked, who are in Canada on a temporary work permit and are employed in low-paid, precarious jobs, who are refugee claimants, international students, or migrant sex workers, and those who have been exploited by unscrupulous recruiters and immigration practitioners.

Composed of members across Canada, the Alliance for Justice in Migration centres the voices of such women and gender-diverse individuals. We identify trends and promote policy solutions aimed at ending discrimination and violence against women and gender-diverse migrants in Canada. We are a network of people with lived experience, academics, advocates, and service providers who conduct research, develop policy solutions, raise public awareness, and advocate for change by centering the voices of those with lived experience. We are calling for the end of the use of employer-specific work permits in favour of open work permits to reduce the immense power imbalance between employers and women and gender-diverse migrant workers who, otherwise, are left vulnerable to experiences of violence.

Closed Work Permits: Breeding Ground for Abuses for Women and Gender-diverse Migrants

Gender inequities, stereotypes and discrimination are perpetuated throughout the migration cycle, which can lead to women and gender-diverse people being concentrated in low-paid work and in the informal economy-places where greater violence and exploitation can occur (International Labour Organization, 2023).

While filling these occupations is crucial to maintaining the lifestyle of Canadians (e.g., in the case of care work; Wadehra, 2021), women and gender-diverse migrants' work and contributions are often devalued. In many provinces, workers with precarious status are disproportionately working in occupations excluded from protections under provincial Employment Standards, most notably care work and farm work (Gesualdi-Fecteau & Nakache, 2017), discussed in more detail below. Furthermore, these exclusions from guaranteed labour rights disproportionately affect racialized migrant workers who predominantly serve in sectors excluded.

Women and gender-diverse individuals under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) are especially vulnerable to abusive practices by employers and recruiters, as they receive tied work permits associated with one single employer. Approximately, 2/3rds of women under the TFWP are categorized as lower skilled workers and are most vulnerable to exploitation (IRCC, 2015-2023). The conditions behind gendered

experiences of violence are maintained by dynamics marked by power differentials, resulting in various forms of abuses that are physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, economic etc. (Canadian Women's Foundation, n.d.; UNHCR, n.d.; UN Women, n.d.).

Dynamics maintained and exacerbated by the closed work permit are uniquely dangerous to women and gender-diverse individuals with precarious status. For example, research shows that women migrant workers have higher levels of depression, stress, obesity, and hypertension compared to their male counterparts (Edmunds et al., 2011). Poorer working conditions (e.g., long hours, little time off), low pay, harassment etc. are, generally, more likely to be experienced by them than by their male counterparts (ibid). In addition, women and gender-diverse workers are far more likely to suffer certain forms of violence at work, such as those sexual in nature (UN General Assembly, 2019).

Despite the well-documented abuses taking place under the TFWP, permits distributed have increased in the past years. For example, while about 98,000 were issued in 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic, the total number for 2023 was reported to be over 177,000 (IRCC, 2015-2023). Temporary Foreign Workers, in the past years, have been relatively highly concentrated in agricultural sectors but have also been over-represented in private household services (e.g., domestic/care workers; see sections below).

Regardless of the different subprograms under the TFWP, the fundamental features of the program, namely that workers are tied to employers to have a legal right to remain and work in Canada, creates conditions under which coercion and trafficking is possible (Strauss & McGrath, 2017) and encourages women and gender-diverse migrants to accept unsafe and unfair working conditions. Intersecting social positions, together with a lack of protection and access to justice often leave such women and gender-diverse workers with precarious status vulnerable to sexual harassment, reproductive health/ pregnancy discrimination, physical and psychological abuse, as well as economic exploitation by employers and recruiters.

Women and Gender-Diverse Migrant Care Workers

Care work is highly gendered and racialized. Over 90% of care workers in Canada are women, most of whom are from the Philippines, but also from African, Latin American, and Asian countries (Hanley et al., 2017). Although current work permits issued to care workers coming from outside of Canada are no longer employer-specific, migrant care workers who are already inside of the country are still being issued closed work permits (Aziz, 2022). For many, therefore, the reality of being tied to a single employer who sees them as property affects their everyday working and living conditions.

Migrant workers in the care industry are often subjected to poor working conditions, low wages, long hours, and limited access to health care, housing, and other essential services. These issues stem from several factors, including a societal-wide devaluation of the work of care, limited legal protections, and lack of government regulation of the care industry. These factors work to keep migrant care workers vulnerable and at-risk for exploitation. Migrant care workers often work long hours without overtime pay. Even during their days off, they may be required to help their employer. Women migrant care workers report that their work responsibilities, long work hours, living-in arrangements, and separation from their families negatively impact their health (Carlos & Wilson, 2018).

Living on-site or with an employer exacerbates unequal power dynamics and puts women and gender-diverse migrants in positions of intense vulnerability and exploitation at work. These individuals are particularly at risk of abuse and exploitation due to the invisibility of their labour, which is performed in private settings for employers who are poorly regulated (Wadehra, 2021). Even when there is no live-in requirement, many care workers continue to live in their employer's home due to high housing costs and low wages (Bhuyan et al., 2018). Many employers may require care workers to live in the home to take care of children and/or the elderly. In such circumstances, personal and professional boundaries become enmeshed such that migrant care workers lose their privacy and autonomy (ibid).

"I have my off, but I don't consider it as my off because I stay with her just like, working ... It's depressing, you know?" (UBC Global Migration Podcast, 2022, Season 3, Episode 1)

The psychological impact of these living and working conditions cannot be overstated. This was especially exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic as restrictions tightened (Banta & Pratt, 2022). Many women and gender-diverse migrant workers during the pandemic were barred from leaving the house, taking public transit, buying groceries, or visiting the doctor (Wadehra, 2021). The overtly patriarchal undertone to these restrictions related to leaving the house or having privacy reflects how racialized women and gender-diverse workers' bodies are treated as property by employers that they are tied to. Even in cases in which a care worker is able to live outside their workplace, they are often isolated from other workers. This isolation may also lead to conditions of exploitation and abuse.

The lack of oversight of the working environment puts migrant care workers at risk for physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse. When transgressions occur, the onus is placed on the workers to seek resolution. Even if women and gender-diverse migrant care workers leave their job due to unsafe working conditions, the process of finding

another employer may be lengthy and would not count towards the duration of time needed to qualify for Canadian work experience for permanent residency.

Women and Gender-Diverse Migrant Agricultural Workers

Much like migrant care workers, many women and gender-diverse individuals of precarious status in the agricultural industry who hold a closed/restricted work permit cannot protest the substandard living and working conditions they are exposed to. Speaking up can result in being fired, without the possibility of finding new employment, and can lead to deportation and/or not being hired in the next season. This jeopardizes their ability to support their children and families in their country of origin.

Restrictions are placed on women and gender-diverse workers in the agricultural industry where their bodies are seen as property, with instances where they have been deported for leaving the farm without permission from their employers, for attending social events, for receiving male visitors, or for being pregnant (Encalada Grez, 2018). Some women migrant farm workers face chronic sexual harassment at work, which includes unwanted physical contact, sexual demands, degrading words or gestures, and unwanted kissing or touching of a sexual nature (Ontario Women's Justice Network, 2014). In a more 'masculine' environment they can be seen as 'sexually available' by their male employers and co-workers (Noakes, 2015). However, they often will not report due to fears of losing valuable income.

Other discrimination includes pregnancy discrimination (Ontario Women's Justice Network, 2014). Having to go through their employer to access sexual and reproductive health services prevents them from accessing the care they need. A significant barrier is lack of access to health and reproductive rights, such as birth control and/or abortion. This is in part due to the remote locations of farms on which they work, but the gendered stereotyping of women's sexual and reproductive needs, and the dependence on their employers for health information and access, make it ever more difficult. Research indicates that employers view women temporary agricultural workers who arrive pregnant, or become pregnant during their employment period, as 'problematic' (Edmunds et al., 2011). This attitude results in increased monitoring and surveillance of these women. In some instances, pregnant migrant agricultural workers have been fired and have faced difficulties securing a new job due to their closed work permit (Hanley, et al., 2020; Larios, 2023). As we know, for example from BC-based research, female migrant agricultural workers are often explicitly told not to engage in sexual activities by officials in their home countries for this reason (Cohen & Caxaj, 2018). Given these various factors, women temporary agricultural workers are reluctant to seek assistance, which results in 'unmet needs and increased health risks' (Edmunds et al., 2011).

Although labour protections that protect pregnant workers and parents from workplace discrimination are generally applied to all workers, workers on employer-specific work permits that periodically expire may have employers who refuse to renew them if the worker is pregnant or takes a maternity or parental leave (Larios, 2023). These conditions may be exacerbated for people without formal immigration status due their reliance on informal work, which, generally, lacks protection.

Although private households (caregivers/domestic workers) and farms (agricultural workers) are distinct groups of sectors where Temporary Foreign Workers are often employed, there are also countless other women and gender-diverse Temporary Foreign Workers in a range of other occupations, often low wage, who are experiencing workplace violence (e.g., in hospitality, food sector).

Trapped in abusive employment conditions by closed work permits without adequate recourse

When the work environment becomes untenable or unsafe, women and gender-diverse migrant Temporary Foreign Workers with closed work permits often feel unable to speak up or seek justice due to fear of losing an important financial resource and/or delaying being able to apply for permanent residence.

Women and gender-diverse workers often cannot afford leaving such abusive situations. They often cannot 'choose' to take a leave or face periods of no work or income as they may be trying to accumulate Canadian work experience or education to eventually apply for permanent residency and do not want to prolong the precarity and family separation often associated with temporary work in Canada (Hanley et al., 2020). These circumstances are compounded by the trauma of separation from their children and families (Pratt, 2012), the stress of ensuring they maintain their occupations so that they are able to send money back to their families, and the pressure to get permanent status.

"I talked to my husband, I said you're so lucky because you get to see our children growing up. But for me, I feel like, you know, (I miss) their birthdays. Now it's Christmas time again. And still, I'm away from them." (UBC Global Migration Podcast, 2022, Season 3, Episode 1)

Women and gender-diverse migrant workers are taken advantage of due to their structural vulnerability maintained by closed work permits that tie their immigration status to working for a single employer, while, often, having dependents who rely on their income, and having the knowledge that they are legally vulnerable due to immigration laws (Beatson et al., 2017). In addition, a significant number of workers who find themselves in low-wage jobs after coming to Canada have experienced exploitation

at the hands of recruiters, including demands for exorbitant and illegal recruitment fees (up to \$50,000) and threats and intimidation for not paying fees (Dixon- Perera, 2020; Faraday, 2016). Indebtedness of this nature can force women and gender-diverse workers to stay in employment situations that are unfair and abusive, increasing the likelihood of forced labour, trafficking, and violence (Dixon-Perera, 2020).

Thus, the combination of tied work permits, recruitment fees/abuses, lack of protections as well as financial precarity they experience place women and gender-diverse workers with precarious status in an extremely vulnerable position which employers often exploit economically through wage theft, extremely long hours, excessive work demands etc. (Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, 2020). In the face of such abuses and violence, access to justice is often impossible to achieve.

One of the ways migrant workers can ostensibly seek assistance is through the Vulnerable Worker Open Work Permit Program (VWOWP), an initiative implemented in 2019 to allow immigration officers to issue LMIA-exempt open work permits to migrant workers who are experiencing abuse related to their employment in Canada. In reality, the VWOWP can continue to perpetuate harm against migrant workers in many ways. In a recent assessment, numerous issues were found in the program's decision-making processes and practices. Significant issues included gaps in understanding by immigration officers regarding what constitutes abuse, a lack of consideration or incorrect consideration of evidence, high evidentiary burdens, lack of procedural fairness, and enforcement action as a consequence of application (Aziz, 2022). All of these issues further disincentivize migrant workers from reporting abuse and keep them in situations where they feel they must endure abuse. Furthermore, even if applications are successful, women and gender-diverse migrant workers are forced back into the system after a short period of time, and thus, can become susceptible to the same abuses once again.

Thus, due to a lack of recourse addressing systemic root issues, women and gender-diverse migrants can remain trapped in employment contexts and employment cycles that are sexually, physically, economically and psychologically abusive.

Sectoral/Occupation-specific work permits: Not the answer

The sectoral (or occupation-specific) permit system, which is often seen as an alternative, has also failed to create labour mobility or improve the rights of migrant workers.

For example, since 2019, migrants who enter Canada as care workers under the current pilot programs (Home Child Care Provider Pilot and the Home Support Worker Pilot programs) hold occupation-restricted work permits that do not require an LMIA. Despite some positive changes, such as the elimination of the live-in requirement and

the change to occupation-restricted work permits, in many cases the problems identified have not been addressed in practice (Migrant Rights Network, 2020). Rather, migrant care workers continue to experience rampant abuse and mistreatment (Legal Assistance of Windsor & Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, 2023; Wadehra, 2021). Furthermore, the cap for these programs is often reached in a matter of a few days after opening every year. For example, in 2023, the cap for the Home Child Care Provider Pilot (HCCP) was reached on the very same day it was opened (January 1st; Singer, 2023).

Issues also exist for agricultural migrant workers under the SAWP Program, where, on paper, they are able to transfer employers without the need of a new work permit. In reality, however, bureaucratic processes involved are complicated to navigate and consulate liaison officers often prioritize economic relationships with employers over the well-being of workers (Legal Assistance of Windsor & Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, 2023; Migrant Workers Centre, 2023). In essence, the loss of employment means mandatory return to country of origin (Cajax et al., 2020). While many complaints are documented by non-governmental agencies, official complaints are rarely made due to the repercussions associated with coming forward for these workers (ibid).

Overall, any restrictive work authorizations, such as sectoral/ occupational, make women and gender-diverse migrants' right to livelihood in Canada dependent on maintaining a relationship with a specific employer, enabling employers to continue exposing migrants to substandard conditions, while retaliating against whistleblowers (Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers, 2023; Migrant Workers Centre, 2023). Sector-specific permits still empower groups of employers to maintain substandard conditions, to identify whistleblowers as 'troublemakers' and to essentially boycott or 'name' them amongst each other (Migrant Workers Centre, 2023).

Employers are reluctant to hire migrant workers who leave unsafe and abusive conditions, fearing these workers will be critical of poor working practices in general. Therefore, work authorizations with any kind of restrictions impose conditions on women and gender-diverse migrants' ability to earn a living free of fear of abuse and retaliation.

In addition, having meaningful labour mobility is uniquely important for injured migrant workers. Migrant workers who become seriously sick or injured as a result of their labour in Canada usually cannot sustain their occupation because of their work-related disabilities. This includes psychological injuries, such as trauma from Gender-Based Violence, caused within a certain occupation (e.g., care work). Such individuals should be free to change occupations and regions in order to heal and move forward without their personal decision-making around safety being restricted.

Furthermore, work permits restricted to a certain occupation, especially when low-wage and devalued, can lead to deskilling of women and gender-diverse migrants. It has been found that many skilled immigrants face deskilling, downward career mobility, underemployment, unemployment, and talent waste (Goldthorpe & Mayor, 2021). Immigrants may find themselves in low-skilled occupations that are not commensurate with their education and prior experience. Skilled immigrant women also face additional gendered disadvantages, including a disproportionate domestic burden, interrupted careers, and gender segmentation in occupations. As well, immigrants are often found working in jobs with greater COVID-19 exposure as they are likely employed in front-line, essential service jobs (ibid). Deskilling through caregiver programs, for example, also reaches into the next generation and affects the lives not just of individuals but entire families. One of the most troubling findings is that children separated from their mothers through various generations of caregiver programs have poor educational outcomes in Canada (Farralles, 2017; Kelly et al., 2014; Pratt 2012).

Therefore, given the demonstrated failures of the closed and sectoral work permit systems, we maintain that open work permits are the necessary solution.

Recommendations

Women and gender-diverse migrant workers ensure that we have food in our grocery stores, and they care for some of the most vulnerable people in our society, our children and our elderly. Yet, despite their important contributions, they continue to be hyper-exploited as a result of inadequate policies and practices. Closed work permits facilitate abuse of migrant workers with little to no options for recourse or justice. Vulnerability and abuse are not inherent to these workers or the jobs that they do, but rather they are actively created and perpetuated by policies, programs, and regulations (Strauss & McGrath, 2017).

The laws that organize women and gender-diverse migrants' lives produce or allow instances of physical, sexual, economic, and emotional violence to occur (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). The state does not necessarily have to be a 'direct agent of violence' in order to facilitate through its laws, the violence perpetrated by other actors (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011).

We believe that all women and gender-diverse individuals, regardless of immigration status deserve to live a life free of violence, abuse, and exploitation. We hope that the Government of Canada shares this belief. For as long as immigration policies and closed work permits facilitate conditions in which gendered forms of violence can occur, we

cannot pride ourselves in being fully committed to women's and gender-diverse communities' rights.

Systemic inequalities and barriers related to restricted work permits, employment regulations, and immigration policies that contribute to the marginalisation of women and gender-diverse migrants with precarious status need to be addressed. Considering the complex barriers discussed, the Alliance for Gender Justice in Migration recommends the following:

1. **End the use of closed work permits in favour of open work permits** to increase labour market mobility and reduce the immense power imbalance between employers and women and gender-diverse individuals with precarious status.
2. **Create new pathways to permanent residency for all workers, including for undocumented workers.** Workers who are already in Canada should be granted open work permits and pathways to PR should be introduced to all workers.
 - Also introduce ways for workers to apply to PR and open work permit at the same time. Remove the 2-step process for permanent resident applicants under the Home Child Care Provider, Home Support Worker and Agri-Food Pilots to apply for an open work permit. Currently, these applicants must wait for their Approval in Principle ("AIP") before they are eligible to apply for an open work permit (whereas applicants for permanent residence under other economic programs must only have submitted a complete application). Because of severe IRCC processing backlogs, the AIP can often take two years or more to receive, leaving many PR applicants struggling to maintain status in Canada while their PR applications process. These delays, and the strong desire not to jeopardize an ongoing PR application, leave these workers vulnerable to additional abuse.
3. **Ensure there are real consequences for recruiters and employers** who abuse workers. Increase deterrent value of repercussions to larger fines and more serious sentences. Implement a proactive rather than complaint-driven system where unannounced proactive inspections and investigations are the norm, rather than the exception.
4. **Implement a system for the Government of Canada to conduct its own labour market needs assessments**, rather than leaving this to employers. The current system relies, and places an additional burden, on employers, while giving power to unscrupulous recruiters and those motivated to undercut or depress market wage rates and sell labour market impact assessments to the highest bidder.

5. **The Vulnerable Worker Open Work Permit Program is a band-aid solution** that does not address the systemic issues that allow the conditions for rampant exploitation to occur. This permit has proven inadequate due to prolonged application processing times and the absence of organized financial and housing assistance for applicants.

We advocate for open work permits first and foremost.

- In the meantime, **simplify the process** of applying to the VWOWP and ensure the process is not retraumatizing to victims. Provide more comprehensive culturally-sensitive and trauma-informed support to victims of work/employer abuse within the process.
- **Additional funding** needs to be provided to **legal providers and agencies** to assist with these applications.
- We also request the provision of **income support and temporary housing** while awaiting the outcome of an investigation of labour or human rights abuses.

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