

# Temporary Workers, (Im)permanent Labour: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers in British Columbia

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## Abstract

The Canadian government co-manages the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) with the governments of Mexico and 11 Caribbean countries. The program brings in over 45,000 people at a time to work on farms and in greenhouses across Canada on a temporary basis. According to a review of the literature, workers' experiences under the SAWP are mainly characterized by poor living and working conditions, discrimination, and abuse (Binford, 2019; Choudry & Thomas, 2013; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Using the province of British Columbia (BC) as a case example, this paper explores the lived experiences of Mexican seasonal agricultural workers in BC. In-depth interview data were collected and analyzed from six workers who were recruited using quota and snowball sampling techniques. The findings indicate that workers' experiences have complex and intersecting political and racialized dimensions. Implications for policy and program changes are discussed.

**Keywords:** Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP); temporary foreign workers; migrant labour; immigration policy; precarity

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For well over a century, Canada has benefited economically from migrant labour in specific occupational sectors, which, according to Roberts (2019), has continuously shaped the country's immigration policies. Agriculture is one of the primary areas in which migrant workers are hired, a practice that began in the late nineteenth century with workers from South and East Asia coming to work on farm fields and gardens in British Columbia (BC) (see Lim, 2015; Preibisch & Otero, 2014, p. 178). Since the neoliberal turn of capitalism<sup>1</sup> in the 1980s and the increasing globalization of the agri-food market,<sup>2</sup> Canada's dependence on temporary labour migration has grown (Choudry & Thomas, 2013; Preibisch, 2007; Roberts, 2019). Temporary labour migration is a growing phenomenon that arises from the dependence of "developed" countries on foreign workers as a "flexible workforce" to remain competitive in the global market (Preibisch, 2007, p. 418), and from the changeable and precarious socio-economic and political conditions in "developing" countries (Cundal & Seaman, 2012; Roberts, 2019). Canada receives thousands of "lower-skilled" temporary foreign workers from the Global South every year, managed by the Temporary Foreign Worker Program's (TFWP) in-home caregiver and agricultural streams (Government of Canada, 2020d). There are four agricultural streams (Government of Canada, 2020c), of which the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) is the principal source (Cohen, 2019, p. 137).

The SAWP began in 1966 and has continued to expand in terms of numbers of workers, employers, and sectors of agriculture (Basok, Bélanger, & Rivas, 2014; Binford, 2019; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2017). Currently, over 45,000 workers from 11 Caribbean countries and Mexico are hired on farms and greenhouses across Canada for up to eight months at a time, with the possibility of returning every year (Binford, 2019; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020). Mexico has become "the largest provider of SAWP workers across Canada" (Gobierno de México, 2020b, para. 1). In British Columbia (BC), Mexicans<sup>3</sup> make up the majority of SAWP workers, with over 5,880 in 2017 (Gobierno de México, 2020a). This program is co-managed between the sending and receiving countries and is "employer-driven" (Strauss & McGrath, 2017, p. 203). This means that employers in Canada contact the recruiting authorities in the participant countries. In the case of Mexico, this authority is the Ministry of Labour (Gobierno de México, 2020b). Once the workers arrive in Canada, they are provided with assistance from Consulate liaison officers.

The SAWP has been promoted in Canada as an exemplary program, providing a "win-win" situation for the states involved, for the employers, and for the workers (Binford, 2019; Choudry & Thomas, 2013; Roberts, 2019). However, over the years, a number of researchers and migrant workers' advocates have raised concerns about the structure and regulation of the SAWP; specifically, evidence has emerged of different forms of inequalities, and there have even been cases of blatant oppression and abuse towards workers (see Binford, 2019; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020). In addition, the precarity of workers' labour and immigration statuses limit their access to-and protection of-their rights, limits their labour mobility, and prevents them from attaining permanent residence (PR) (Cohen, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Although the Canadian government recently launched the "Agri-food immigration pilot," which allows agricultural migrant workers to apply for PR (Government of Canada, 2020a), its eligibility requirements continue to disadvantage SAWP workers in the application process. Despite the numerous structural disadvantages that they experience in Canada, these workers only have to compare how much worse the economic and employment situations are in their home countries to decide to continue to participate in the SAWP (Binford, 2019). The precarity of labour and status and the lack of opportunities in their

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<sup>1</sup>Neoliberalism is an economic and political system that favours the interests of the "free market"-private for-profit-and is "largely unregulated" by the state (Malleon, 2016, p. 7).

<sup>2</sup>Globalization of the agri-food market refers to the economic interdependence and competitiveness between several countries regarding agriculture (see Preibisch, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Mexican-born people whose permanent or primary residence is in Mexico, but who temporarily reside in Canada during the length of their job contracts as part of the SAWP.

home country continue to render SAWP workers “very vulnerable to overexploitation” (Basok et al., 2014, p. 1398).

In order to explore the lived experiences of SAWP workers in BC, this paper presents findings from the analysis of in-depth data from interviews conducted between February and March of 2020 with six Mexican men who work on Vancouver Island and the Mainland as part of the SAWP. The findings expose important issues of inequity and discrimination perpetrated against migrant workers by employers and the state, which have been rendered more visible in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

## Literature review

An analysis of the research literature highlights the salient issues regarding TFWPs, particularly the SAWP, and the related experiences of migrant workers in Canada. For example, according to researchers, there have been a number of reports of abuse towards temporary migrant workers, including labour exploitation<sup>4</sup> (Binford, 2019; Choudry & Thomas, 2013; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). There are structural reasons for this exploitation. To maintain its image of being a model program, the SAWP allows employers to demand higher productivity from seasonal agricultural workers than from citizen or resident workers (Binford, 2019). Employers have also been known to exercise great disciplinary control to ensure that workers are compliant (Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Basok et al., 2014; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020). For example, employers and on-site supervisors may use heavy-handed disciplinary practices to ensure that workers meet the required levels of productivity and that they behave and do not complain. Such practices include manipulating their working hours and “privileges” and threatening them with deportation and replacement (Basok & Bélanger, 2016).

According to the literature, deportation is the main fear of SAWP workers, and is sometimes reinforced, along with the fear of losing their place in the program, by the Mexican authorities that co-manage the SAWP (i.e., Ministry of Labour employees and Consulate liaison officers) (Basok et al., 2014; Binford, 2019). Workers’ responses to disciplinary practices vary as they try to “secure their well-being” and employment (Basok & Bélanger, 2016, p. 146). Indeed, Basok and Bélanger’s (2016) findings indicated that it is common for migrant workers to engage in “self-exploitation” as well as “monitoring” co-workers and “reporting [those who are] slow and non-compliant” (pp. 150–151). In other instances, workers might be defiant and practice subtle acts of daily resistance (Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020). In addition to having significant control over workers during their tenure in Canada, employers also have power over a worker’s future in the program through performance and attitude evaluations and requests for specific (compliant) individuals for future hiring (Basok et al., 2014; Cohen, 2019; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020).

Further, migrant workers hired under temporary labour are subject to “racialized hierarchies” that separate them from citizen workers (Cohen, 2019, p. 138), hierarchies that have existed historically in Canada and in BC’s agricultural labour market, in particular (Lim, 2015). Cohen’s (2019) research on Okanagan Valley farms showed that there are cases of racial segregation and colourism,<sup>5</sup> in which Mexican and Jamaican workers, principally, are not only segregated in the workplace and in living quarters, but are also treated differently. Moreover, according to Binford (2019) and Cohen (2019), racism and colourism are also often present in SAWP workers’ experiences and social interactions in the towns near their farms. These workers might also feel socially excluded

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<sup>4</sup>In the context of this research, labour exploitation is the act of forcing migrant workers to work faster than citizen workers to meet high levels of productivity. According to Binford (2019), SAWP workers are expected by employers to produce twice or more than Canadian workers (p. 355), while earning lower wages and having no freedom of mobility in the labour market (Binford, 2019, pp. 356–357).

<sup>5</sup>According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, colourism is defined as “prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin.”

from Canadian society due to language barriers, cultural differences, and geographical distance (Hennebry, 2012). SAWP workers are required to live in “employer-provided housing” (Cohen, 2019, p. 137), which, in most cases, is located on the farms where they work, far away from towns and shops. In addition, researchers, workers’ advocates, and media have raised concerns about poor and unsanitary housing conditions, some of which include overcrowding, pest infestations (e.g., rats and snakes), lack of furniture or broken furniture, and gas and water leaks (Mojtehdzadeh & Renwick, 2019). Furthermore, according to Cohen and Hjalmarson (2020), surveillance is conducted in employer-provided housing, and there have been reports of cameras inside and outside living quarters.

In addition to racism and colourism, sexism<sup>6</sup> is also present in the program and in the workplace. According to Hennebry (2014), the SAWP is oriented towards the recruitment of men with economic dependents, thereby lowering the percentage of women in the program (it is currently around 3%). The few women who enter the program are vulnerable to additional forms of oppression and control compared to their male co-workers (Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020). Some of them are sexually harassed or asked to perform tasks outside of their contract (e.g., cleaning their employer’s home) (Basok & Bélanger, 2016, p. 155). A “gendered culture of migration” is also present; that is, in the process of family decision-making, the husband/father is regarded as the one who needs to migrate, implying that the wife/mother needs to double her work at home for most of the year (Hennebry, 2014, p. 43). Mexican SAWP participants are required to have economic dependents, who are often their family members; however, they are not allowed to bring them to Canada. As Cohen (2019) has argued, the program forces the separation of workers from their families to ensure that they are willing to return to their homes after their seasonal work has ended.

Although being away from home can be difficult for workers and their families (Cohen, 2019; Hennebry, 2014) and despite the precarity in their labour and legal status, the economic and labour situation in Mexico is much worse (Binford, 2019). The economic boost that SAWP workers experience, along with the provision of rights, such as health care access, are highlighted by the program’s promoters. However, as scholars have argued, while the program appears attractive to potential applicants on paper, in practice it is highly restrictive and disadvantageous for workers (Binford, 2019; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2017). In particular, their temporary status makes workers vulnerable to exploitation because they have unequal access to privileges, such as rights protection and fundamental freedoms, compared to resident and citizen workers (Cohen, 2019, p. 137; Roberts, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Moreover, the way that the program is designed renders workers ineligible for PR or citizenship (Binford, 2019; Cohen, 2019). They can be in Canada for up to eight months each year, but even if they return every subsequent year, they do not accumulate “continuity of residence in Canada,” which is a requirement for PR (Horgan and Liinamaa, 2017, p. 716). As previously mentioned, researchers have noted that there is a hierarchization of immigrants: those in “high-skilled” occupations have preferential access to PR, while agricultural workers are only eligible for temporary status (Cohen, 2019; Roberts, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017).

## Methods

This study focuses on the lived experiences of Mexican seasonal agricultural workers in BC. The main research question is “what are the racialized and politicized dimensions of Mexican temporary workers’ experiences who come to BC as part of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program?” The research sub-question is “how do workers’ experiences vary according to gender, age, Mexican province of origin, English proficiency, family and economic situation, and place of employment (i.e., whether they work on Vancouver Island or on the Mainland)?”

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<sup>6</sup>The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines sexism as “prejudice or discrimination based on sex, *especially*: discrimination against women.”

In order to explore the lived experiences of migrant workers, this research uses phenomenology as a methodological framework. Phenomenology is a method that focuses on emphasizing how people understand and give meaning to their lived experiences, to a particular idea, or to phenomena (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). To this end, the data collection involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews focused on narratives, with a sample of six Mexican citizens who are currently participating in the SAWP in BC. Following the University of Victoria’s requirements for conducting research with human participants, the study received approval from the university’s Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) to ensure the safety and privacy of participants and their data. The recruitment of participants took place through contact with a gatekeeper, who helped to identify potential participants on Vancouver Island and eventually to recruit three workers. Three more participants were recruited through snowball sampling, two of whom worked in the Okanagan Valley, and one in the Fraser Valley. All participants also consented to have their interviews recorded.

The interviews consisted of three parts. First, each participant was asked for relevant demographic information (e.g., gender, age, marital status). Second, they were asked how long they have been a part of the SAWP, why they had joined the program, and where they worked in BC. Finally, they were asked to share their story and experiences living and working in BC under the program. Data collected from the interviews were analyzed thematically according to the coding methods of Grounded Theory. First, the interviews were transcribed, omitting the names of people and cities and using pseudonyms to ensure participants’ anonymity. Then, a system of colour coding was used to highlight recurring words and topics, forming categories. An analysis of the interconnections between categories led to the construction of central themes, which then were grouped into the politicized dimensions, the racialized dimensions, and the positive aspects of participants’ experiences. Subsequently, the themes and highlights of each interview were sent to participants as a validity check. The goal here was to validate the researcher’s interpretations of participants’ narratives. Upon approval, the prominent themes were deemed to be valid or confirmed.

## Findings

Table 1 presents profiles of the six participants.

**Table 1.** *Profiles of participants*

Participant	Héctor	Leonel	Pedro	Santiago	Andrés	Miguel
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
<b>Age</b>	50	36	46	29	32	42
<b>Mexican State</b>	Tabasco	Tlaxcala	Querétaro	Tlaxcala	Morelos	Mexico City
<b>English level</b>	“Around 40%”	“Around 70–80%”	“Around 30%”	Low-“Basic”	Minimum-“Beginner”	“Almost nothing”
<b>Family situation</b>	Partner 2 children	Partner 2 children	Married 3 children & 1 grandchild	Partner 2 children	Married 2 children	Divorced 3 children & 2 grandchildren
<b>Current economic situation</b>	“Regular”	“It’s getting better”	“Good-not excellent but stable”	“Good in Canada, bad in Mexico”	“Good for the moment”	“A little hard”
<b>Time in the SAWP</b>	10 years	5 years	7 years	2 years	5 years	3 years
<b>Work in BC</b>	Okanagan Valley	Okanagan Valley	Fraser Valley	Vancouver Island	Vancouver Island	Vancouver Island

When participants first arrived in Canada, they did not know more than a few words or sentences in English—the SAWP does not require workers to speak English. As a result, five workers continued to struggle to communicate with their employers and/or citizen workers. All participants commented on how bad the economic and employment situation is in Mexico, noting that it was the main reason they joined the SAWP, and, for five of them, the situation in Mexico was also the reason why they stayed.

## Politicized dimensions

Five of the participants felt that the SAWP was “good” in general, but some found flaws in its design and regulation. They suggested different ways the program could be improved. According to Leonel, one of the “many flaws in the [system]” had to do with the regulation of housing conditions for workers. He argued that “[program authorities] are supposed to verify that the houses are in good condition, but they do not seem to do it [or to do it properly].” The contracts that SAWP workers sign state that housing, with all of the necessary commodities, will be provided by the employer. Indeed, four of the participants reported that their current housing situation was acceptable. The three participants on Vancouver Island said that their accommodations were in excellent condition. However, when Leonel first arrived in BC, he lived in an “extremely small basement, with only one tiny window for sunlight, and no kitchen utensils [even though the contract said there should be].” Similarly, Pedro’s housing situation was described as uncomfortable:

We would like to have a bit more space, right? But that’s how the terms are in the contract that we signed—it says they must give us a place to sleep, a bathroom, [and all the necessary housing commodities]. [In] each room there are four people, and we have to share a bathroom between ten people [...]. The mattresses [are very old], but we find ways to adapt to them. We also suffer from a lack of privacy when we want to call our families.

Moreover, four of the participants felt isolated from nearby communities. Given that they lived at the farms, most of them resided a long distance away from the towns and shops. Their employer provided them with transportation when they needed to go grocery shopping. However, they found it difficult to leave the farm on their own, particularly given the lack of available public transportation, which one half of participants regarded as a limitation to their freedom. Santiago explained that

We are quite isolated because [our house] is far [from the town]. [...] Sometimes the bus doesn’t arrive, and I have walked for over an hour and under the rain to arrive [there]. [...] Sometimes we get bikes, but they are often broken [or occupied by someone else].

Further, the program requires workers to have economic dependents (i.e., family members) but forbids workers from bringing their dependents to Canada. This situation, along with having to adapt to a new culture and living environment, can cause unhappiness and loneliness among workers, as was the case for most participants. It was particularly hard for Santiago and Andrés, whose children were very young, to be separated from their families for several months. Moreover, according to Pedro, this separation may also lead to depression:

We suffer or deal with the issue of loneliness in different ways. Because we really are alone [in Canada]—maybe you have more co-workers and housemates from your home country, but they are not your family. So you share and talk [with them], [...] but at the end of the day you are alone [for] eight months. [...] [there should be professional help available in cases of depression because] when a person is depressed, that can really complicate their working life.

Two of the participants also complained about the fact that SAWP workers receive lower wages than citizen workers and that exploitation in the workplace is not uncommon. In the words of Leonel,

I do find Canadian laws to be very unjust in [the aspect of wages] because we go [to Canada] with the minimum wage, and we see that Canadians earn \$18 or \$19 per hour easily [doing the same job] and we are always going to be at the bottom. [...] Also, Canadians can access better services because they have better wages.

According to Leonel, the minimum wage forces workers to restrain their spending because they send most of their earnings to their dependents in Mexico. Additionally, Pedro complained that SAWP workers do not receive “overtime” pay:

We do very hard work—[...] we really do the work that most of the time [Canadians] don’t want to do. [...] [And yet] we can work 12, 14, sometimes even 16 hours, but they will pay us exactly the same [minimum wage], because that’s the agreement between Mexico and Canada.

According to Miguel, employers in Canada prefer to hire Mexican seasonal workers over Canadian workers “because Mexicans only come to work [hard], and have to comply with the contract.” SAWP workers are required to comply with the employer’s requested hours of work. However, since the SAWP does not require workers to speak English, the majority of Mexican workers arrive in Canada without being able to speak or understand English. This language gap creates a communication barrier between workers and their employers and supervisors, limiting their understanding of job instructions and rules. Leonel complained about the fact that workers do not receive any English lessons or work training upon arrival at a new farm, leaving them feeling unprepared for the type of labour they are expected to do.

In addition to low wages, other policies and requirements of the SAWP were also deemed discriminatory and unjust by participants. For Leonel, “[it is] not fair” that they are obligated to have a clinical examination every year in Mexico because if workers become ill, it is probably during their stay in Canada, where they spend most of the year. However, regardless of where a worker gets ill, they will not be admitted back into Canada “because they see [me] as an economic burden,” Leonel said. Moreover, he also felt that it was “unjust” that workers have to pay taxes for Canadian pension plans and employment insurance (EI). He maintained that when they lose their jobs, they are sent back to Mexico and do not have access to the money from EI: “that money goes to Canadians [because] we don’t have the same benefits.” And regarding the pension plan, workers do not receive clear information on how to access it, he argued.

One of the characteristics of the SAWP that five of the participants complained about was the limited labour mobility they experienced due to their closed-work permits. Such a permit only allows participants to work for one employer for the duration of their time in Canada (around two to eight months). However, most workers will be re-hired by the same employers every year, and, according to participants, it is not easy to successfully request a change of employer. While some participants complained about the tediousness of being tied to one farm, for others, it meant having to endure an abusive workplace or poor housing conditions. “If I get [punished at work], I cannot do anything about it because I am there with a closed contract,” said Leonel. Pedro believed that having open-work permits would help work to ensure that there is no abuse, as

[A closed-work permit] forces me to work at the farm where I am now, [and]—sometimes—that basically gives employers the opportunity to abuse, right? They can say, “you have to work here with me, in the conditions that I put because otherwise, I send you back to Mexico.”

SAWP workers also have little to no possibility of attaining PR. While not all participants were interested in becoming permanent residents, those who were interested were aware of the limitations and maintained that with the number of years SAWP workers usually work in Canada, migrants under other categories would actually get PR. “It’s like we were not even here, so it doesn’t count,” said Leonel, referring to how they do not accumulate years of work, given that their job is “seasonal.” However, three of the participants mentioned that they knew of a new opportunity launched by the Government of Canada that could allow a number of SAWP workers to attain PR, as long as they met specific requirements. Leonel reported, though, that this “opportunity” looked more like “a joke” because it is open only for workers in specific areas of agriculture, and he said that most SAWP workers do not work in these sectors, nor do they meet most of the requirements.

## Racialized dimensions

The racialized dimensions of SAWP workers’ experiences are rendered visible through different forms of abuse of power from the program’s authorities. These are present in workers’ living and working conditions, as well as in the lack of information they have about their rights. Four of the participants complained about the Mexican authorities that co-manage the SAWP (i.e., the Ministry of Labour and the Consulate liaison officers), pointing out that their actions and motives could be deemed questionable and even corrupt. Santiago indicated that he knew of several cases of people bribing authorities to gain access to the program:

There are workers at the Ministry that let you in the program without doing the required procedure—that we had to do—if you pay them. There are people that pay even \$20,000–\$30,000 pesos to enter... [even people with university degrees]. [...] I find it wrong that some use money for that, when there are people who really need [the economic opportunity that the program gives].

Other complaints about Mexican authorities related to mistreatment towards SAWP applicants and workers, either overtly or covertly. According to three of the participants, these authorities were also corrupt in the sense of “siding” with employers, that is, by oppressing workers and ignoring their complaints. Héctor and Pedro reported that the Ministry of Labour sometimes pressured workers into not complaining about their employer and threatening their place in the program. In Miguel’s experience, officials at the Ministry of Labour had been very rude and had once tried to punish him. Andrés, however, said that his experience with the Ministry had always been positive, in general, even though they could be a bit stubborn. Participants’ perceptions of Consulate liaison officers in BC varied. While Miguel said that he had always received fair treatment from them, Leonel and Pedro had had negative experiences, and Andrés mentioned that he had never even seen them. According to Leonel, the majority of his peers had issues with the Consulate: “they are supposed to support us, to have the workers’ best interests in mind, but their actions show otherwise.”

Regarding their living conditions in BC, one half of the participants had at least one complaint about their current housing situation. As previously mentioned, Pedro indicated that some of the furniture in his house was old and uncomfortable, and that there was a lack of space and privacy due to overcrowding, which was also the case for Héctor. Leonel said that the house he lived in had issues with pests (mice) and the sewer system and that his employer had refused to get professional help to fix the house. Moreover, since they all lived on their respective farms, sometimes workers felt surveilled coming in and out of their houses. For example, Leonel said that his first accommodation was in the basement of his employer’s house, and he felt very uncomfortable sharing the main entrance to the home with his employer. He also said that he knew of other workers whose



employers prohibited them from going into neighbouring towns without their permission or without a chaperone and did not let them speak to anyone else. “[It’s] like if they were kidnapped,” he said.

Exploitative working conditions are not uncommon in farms and greenhouses that hire SAWP workers. Leonel and Pedro indicated that their employer demanded that they put in many hours of work, pressuring them to meet high productivity levels, and sometimes that they would work for months without a day off. Pedro complained that his labour situation was one of constant pressure and punishment for those who were not as productive, which often made workers feel “stressed all the time,” as well as exhausted or even sick. Leonel added that

[The employer] does demand a lot [of work] per hour, which is more than what is physically possible, and sometimes the weather makes it worse. But this is something [employers] don’t care about. [...] In this aspect, they never take care of us, because they don’t give us the [necessary tools] [or] additional breaks that the weather requires.

Leonel also indicated that safety in his workplace was “deficient.” He was not given adequate information nor personal protective equipment to use the chemicals that were required in his orchard work, making him feel “uncared-for.” However, in contrast, the three participants on Vancouver Island reported that their working conditions were safe and that they worked at a “calm” pace. Also, these three also stated that they had Canadian co-workers with whom they all got along very well. Two of these workers, Leonel and Héctor, worked solely among Mexicans, although Héctor had previously worked with people from different countries, and he reflected that all workers were treated equally and worked as a team. Pedro, however, noted that “there is a bit of racism” in his workplace, since his South Asian co-workers, who were of the same ethnic origin as their employer and supervisors, received preferential treatment. “There are no equal conditions,” he said because Mexican workers were expected to work faster and were punished for more things. Further, he mentioned that his Guatemalan co-workers were treated even worse. Mexicans and Guatemalans were actually placed side by side to compete. Employers took advantage of the rivalry that they constructed between the two groups, creating a competitive environment to increase productivity, he stated.

Four of the participants also noted that having Mexican supervisors or managers in their workplaces was not as beneficial as they had originally thought it would be. Although they were able to understand each other better (in Spanish), Mexican supervisors tended to put extra pressure on them and avoided translating or passing on important messages from workers to employers. These participants expressed that other Mexicans with positions of power actually treated them worse than employers or supervisors from Canada, and they believed that they acted the way they did because they were trying to “look good with the employer.”

One half of the participants complained about not being informed by their employers or Mexican authorities about many of their rights. Indeed, they said that they had to find out about their rights on their own. For example, Leonel reported that he was not told from the beginning when he would be paid and expressed feeling “desperate” because he never knew when he could send money to his family. He also said that workers received very little information regarding how and when they would be able to benefit from the pension plan, so many did not even access it. Further, according to all participants, many workers did not have clear or sufficient information regarding their right to access health care services, nor how their insurance worked: “there is no intention [from the employer] to tell us [about the medical services].” Moreover, in situations where there were abuses of power perpetrated by employers, many SAWP workers did not know how to defend themselves, nor whom to talk to or ask for help. “The majority [of workers] don’t know their rights,” said Leonel.

Participants in the study responded in different ways to experiences of abuse. The majority complied with overtime hours of labour without rest because they wanted to send as much money as possible to their families. As Leonel said: “obviously not all of us want to have too much rest because [...] [we earn] the minimum wage [and] work hourly, so we try to do more hours to send a little more support to our homes.” Nonetheless, he recognized that having a scheduled day off every two weeks would probably be beneficial to the health and well-being of workers. However, participants on Vancouver Island argued that they actually wanted to work more hours to earn more per week. According to Pedro, some Mexican workers tended to pressure each other, especially when competing with workers from other countries, to prove that Mexicans were very hard-working. In addition to complying with long hours of hard labour, the majority of participants in the study noted that many of them tended to stay silent because they feared that if they complained or expressed their exhaustion, they would be sent back to Mexico and probably would not be hired or admitted in the SAWP again. As Pedro commented, the fear that they might lose their jobs and “disappoint their families” forced them to “tolerate” different forms of abuse:

The truth is that we don’t want to risk it [by complaining]. You know that if you bother an employer a few times he will not hire you again, and sometimes [the Ministry of Labour] blocks you, that means they give you a bad record because [...] unfortunately, we are exposed to the corruption of government authorities in Mexico, [...] and of consulate liaison officers. [...] I would call this “suffering in silence,” as many of us don’t want to speak up because our economic situation restrains us.

All of the participants were well informed about their rights, but four of them acquired the information from their friends, co-workers, or migrant workers’ advocates. Andrés and Héctor said that they were not afraid of demanding better living and working conditions because, as Andrés noted, they are “working under a contract, not illegally.” Andrés had asked previous supervisors for better housing conditions and had also requested that the Ministry of Labour relocate him to a different farm when he felt that he was working under abusive conditions. Further, regarding Pedro’s point about competition in the workplace, he was aware that his employer pit Mexicans and Guatemalans against each other in order to increase each group’s productivity on the farm. Therefore, he had spoken with his Guatemalan co-workers about the situation. They agreed that the rivalry between the two groups was negatively affecting their working and living relationships and thus had agreed to put their differences aside and instead help one another.

## Positive aspects

Four of the participants mentioned that overall they had a positive experience in British Columbia working under the SAWP. Neither Héctor, Andrés, Miguel, or Santiago had experienced any form of abuse or discrimination on their farms. The three participants on Vancouver Island, who worked at the same farm, were content with their housing and work situations. Five of the participants had observed an improvement in their family’s economic situation since they joined the program, although for two of them, the improvement was not as significant as what they had expected. As previously stated, all of the participants experienced economic challenges in Mexico before working under the program, which is what motivated them to participate. Leonel said that although it was “exhausting” to work at a fast pace and under pressure, “everything has its reward because the [money] that I send to Mexico—maybe 12,000, 15,000 pesos—would be impossible for me to earn [back there].”

Four of the participants also indicated that they had formed good relationships with Canadians during their work tenure. The three participants working on Vancouver Island had become friends

with their Canadian co-workers. Santiago noted that he had taught them Spanish, while the Canadians had taught him English. They also did not experience discrimination at work. None had felt that they had been subject to discrimination or hostility from local people when they went grocery shopping or when they spent time in the communities near their farms. Two also mentioned that they had Canadian or resident friends outside of the farm, as well.

## Discussion

The findings from the study provide important insights into participants' lived experiences in the SAWP. In particular, they highlight the inequities and abuse that are reflected in the policies that make up the SAWP and the way it is regulated. As shown in Table 1, all of the participants are male. Employers in Canada and recruitment authorities in sending countries give preference to male candidates over females, which is why women make up less than 5% of agricultural migrant workers (Hennebry, 2012, 2014; Roberts, 2019). It could also be argued that the number of Mexican women who seek to participate in the SAWP is low because, culturally, the responsibilities of childrearing and for household labour fall disproportionately on them. Since it was not possible to recruit women for this study as none came forward as candidates to participate, a comparison of experiences based on gender cannot be presented. Nevertheless, sexism is notable in the SAWP's structure and practices.

Regarding the politicized dimensions of participants' experiences, it is important to note that these dimensions manifest in various forms of precarity that are linked to the design of the program and its related contracts. For example, one of the program's requirements is that employers provide housing for all SAWP workers (Government of Canada, 2020b). This housing provision can be considered convenient for workers, as they do not have to look for housing on their own nor do they have to pay rent. However, not all housing is up to standard; those who live in sub-standard conditions have no other choice but to live precariously (Cohen, 2019). The Government of Canada is supposed to ensure that an authorized inspector has deemed the housing adequate before employers are allowed to hire workers under the SAWP (Government of Canada, 2020b); however, as participants have noted in this study, this assurance is certainly not true in all cases.

Given that the program also requires workers to have dependents but forbids them to bring family members to Canada, many workers experience emotional distress due to forced separation from their loved ones. The separation also negatively affects the lives of the workers' children, spouses, and partners. According to Cohen (2019) and Roberts (2019), the SAWP is specifically designed to separate workers from their families to ensure that workers will want to stay in Canada until the end of each season, to earn enough money to support their families, and then return home to them. Therefore, the SAWP's design to keep workers as temporary has a negative impact on workers' mental health and on their family relationships. Further, the program not only ensures that workers remain temporary migrants but also a source of cheap labour as workers earn minimum wage with no overtime pay. That is, regardless of the number of hours they work a day, which is usually over 10 and sometimes over 14, they will get paid the same hourly rate and no more. This issue lays bare the unequal conditions of labour for SAWP workers compared to Canadian residents and citizens. It also contradicts the information presented on the Government of Mexico's website, which states that Mexican SAWP workers will have the same conditions and rights as Canadian workers (Gobierno de México, n.d.). The Government of Canada's (2019) website also indicates that employers "must" provide "the same wages and benefits as those provided to Canadian and permanent residents." In the spirit of transparency, there is a need to revise the content of these websites and the program's policies to more accurately reflect the lived reality of the SAWP. Anything less than this is deception.

According to Strauss and McGrath (2017), "migrant workers are subject to structural forms

of subordination that make them vulnerable to exploitation” (p. 200), which is visible in the different forms of abuse of power mentioned by participants. In addition to receiving no overtime pay, workers must work quickly and produce to the standards set by their employer. Indeed, the program provides employers with great power over workers (Binford, 2019). The scope of this power is extended as the majority of SAWP workers have very little to no proficiency in the English language. This lack of proficiency negatively affects workers’ performance in the workplace and their daily interactions. Support for language acquisition through lessons before and during the start of the work season would undoubtedly boost workers’ morale and elevate their voices on issues of inequity and inequality.

The findings from this study suggest that the program’s authorities do not regard workers as people with rights, but rather as a medium for production and economic gain. This aspect of the program is evident in Leonel’s comment about the “economic burden” workers feel they become when they fall ill while in the program and speaks to their replaceability. Further, while employers can easily replace workers, it is not easy for workers to successfully request a change to a new farm if they are not happy. As Cohen (2019) maintains, the workers are “essentially bonded laborers” (p. 137). The lack of freedom of labour mobility of temporary migrant workers in Canada’s private economy is “systematically institutionalized by state immigration policies” (Strauss & McGrath, 2017, p. 205). The program is underpinned by discriminatory policies that disadvantage workers on the basis of race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Roberts (2019) notes that the SAWP recruits workers who are economically disadvantaged in their home country and who find the wages in Canada significantly better, thereby capitalizing on their economic need.

Although SAWP workers may work in Canada for over 20 years (Binford, 2019, p. 349), their seasonal labour does not count toward “continuity of residence,” a criterion for attaining PR (Binford, 2019; Cohen, 2019; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2017, p. 716). As mentioned by one half of the participants, a new opportunity for PR has recently emerged for a number of agricultural migrant workers who meet specific requirements. The Government of Canada’s (2020a) website states that the “Agri-Food Immigration Pilot” is designed to

help address the labour needs of the Canadian agri-food sector particularly in year-round mushroom and greenhouse crop production, meat processing and live-stock raising industries, and attract experienced, non-seasonal workers who can settle in Canada. (modified on 2020-03-31)

Although seemingly a step in the right direction towards addressing some of the concerns around PR requirements, this pilot program does not apply to the vast majority of SAWP workers, as some of its requirements—such as having at least one year of “non-seasonal, full-time work” (Government of Canada, 2020a)—are not feasible for them. This issue reflects what previous authors have called a “hierarchization” or “classification” of immigrants in Global North countries, including Canada, in which certain types of immigrants are given preferential access to PR and citizenship over others (Binford, 2019; Cohen, 2019; Roberts, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017).

Further, based on participants’ testimonies and supported by existing academic and grey literature, employers who use their authority to abuse seasonal migrant workers in one way or another are able to do so without any apparent legal consequences (see Binford 2019, Mojtehdzadeh & Renwick, 2019; Roberts, 2019). The different forms of abuse from program authorities (i.e., abuse of power) are categorized as “racialized dimensions” of participants’ experiences in the findings. This is because SAWP workers are extremely vulnerable to abuse given their subordinate position, an identity that is created by their economic dependence on the labour provided by the program as well as by their racialized status (as an ethnic minority) in Canada. The racialization of Mexican seasonal agricultural workers is a significant factor that leads to abuse, as they have access to very few human rights protections.

The study's findings also indicate that a large number of SAWP workers do not trust Mexican government authorities that co-manage the program. Participants indicated that people in the Ministry of Labour and the Consulates would usually protect the interests of employers and the economy over workers' rights. A number of participants also accused the Mexican Consulate liaison officers in Canada of disregarding workers' complaints. According to Binford (2019), it is not uncommon for liaison officers to side with employers rather than with workers because they are "expected to maintain and even expand their country's stake in the program" (p. 352). Therefore, if a Consulate liaison officer continuously defends workers' rights, employers might threaten to replace Mexican workers with workers from another country, threatening the interests of Mexican authorities (Binford, 2019). Pressure to protect the Mexican state's and employers' interests has caused workers to be mistrustful of authorities.

Relationships between employers and SAWP workers are also shaped by housing conditions and workplace dynamics. There are employers who abuse their power through exploitative working conditions. This was experienced by two participants who were pressured to work quickly and produce more in less time than their citizen worker counterparts. Although participants on Vancouver Island had positive opinions of their employer, those who were on the Mainland described situations of abuse and neglect from their employers. In addition to workplace issues, housing conditions were also the subject of discussion. Previous research and media articles have exposed and documented employers' abuse of power in relation to housing. Mojtehdzadeh and Renwick (2019) wrote in an article published in *The Hamilton Spectator* that there are thousands of concerns from workers who have formally reported poor and even dangerous housing conditions to the Mexican Ministry of Labour, but these authorities "do not share the vast majority of these complaints with the Canadian government" (para. 6).

Another issue that was highlighted by the participants was a lack of consideration from the program's authorities (i.e., employers and the Canadian and Mexican states) towards migrant workers' human rights. The consequences of authorities' neglect, in particular, of workers being forced to live and work under unsanitary and unsafe conditions, have become increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Outbreaks in farms across the country have resulted in the death of three migrant workers, prompting national media attention (see Beaumont, 2020; Mojtehdzadeh, 2020) and exposing overcrowded farms and a lack of or insufficient implementation of public health measures by employers (see Larsen, 2020). Not adhering to such guidelines among a vulnerable population is, arguably, a form of violence from employers. Mexican agricultural workers are not the only migrant workers who have been severely affected by these conditions. Other SAWP participants from the Caribbean as well as temporary agricultural workers from Guatemala and caregivers from the Philippines often experience similar living and working conditions (see Callon, 2016; Cohen, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). In the case of the live-in caregiver program, issues of labour exploitation in domestic settings and the feminization of this temporary labour force have been explored in the literature (Callon, 2016; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Although workers in both of these temporary foreign worker programs experience similar issues, there is one important difference: migrant caregivers have not had to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions during the pandemic.

SAWP workers can also be subject to direct forms of racial and ethnic discrimination in the workplace. One participant exposed the existing unfriendliness and rivalry between Mexican and Guatemalan workers, a historical divide that employers have been known to take advantage of. For example, this rivalry has, in the past, caused Mexican workers to exert undue pressure on themselves to prove that they are harder workers than the Guatemalans. Pedro argued, however, that his Guatemalan co-workers actually received worse treatment from employers and supervisors than workers in other groups, the main reason being that Guatemalan agricultural workers are

not hired through the SAWP but rather by private companies. This means that they have less official support from their government and are even more vulnerable to exploitation than Mexicans (Gabriel & MacDonald, 2017).

Mexican SAWP workers are also subject to neglect from Mexican authorities and employers, who are responsible for ensuring that they understand the implications of their temporary work in Canada and of their rights. As Cundal and Seaman (2012) argued, disclosing this important information to workers “[is] important in reducing vulnerability to abuse” (p. 203). In the face of various forms of abuse, workers may respond in different ways. While some focus on maintaining their precarious employment status at the cost of their mental and physical health (Basok & Bélanger, 2016, p. 146), others seek to advocate for themselves and others by challenging employers on key issues. Those who endure exploitative working conditions are sometimes driven by “self-exploitation” (Basok & Bélanger, 2016); that is, they “self-exploit” to lessen their economic anxieties, working longer and harder to make more money. “Self-exploitation” is also reflected in cases where there is competition between workers from different nations, as previously noted.

Many workers choose to remain silent as they are aware of the precarity inherent in their labour and immigration status and because they fear being fired or deported if they complain (Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Basok et al., 2014; Binford, 2019; Cohen, 2019). As Pedro mentioned, economic necessity forces them to be “prudent” when they speak to program authorities. Yet, despite being aware of the possible repercussions to their jobs, legal status, and well-being, some workers still choose to engage in acts of defiance and resistance. As Basok and Bélanger (2016) maintain, there are significant acts of defiance, but there are also everyday acts of subtle resistance, such as lying or mobilizing resources with other workers. This is evidenced in Pedro’s situation, as he recognized his employer’s strategy of pitting Mexican and Guatemalan workers against one another, and instead of playing into the situation, he chose to stop the rivalry and work together with his Guatemalan peers. These forms of resistance may be subtle and not highly visible, but they are important to highlight, given how common the fear of speaking up is among workers.

It is also important to note that not all participants had negative experiences; in fact, some had positive experiences. This is especially true in the cases of the three participants on Vancouver Island who described having comparatively better working and housing conditions. Given these experiences, an important question to ask is, “how might the governments of Canada and Mexico work collectively to ensure that all workers under the SAWP benefit from housing and work conditions that respect their basic labour and human rights?” There is already an understanding among workers of the economic benefits of working in Canada compared to Mexico. Contrary to that perspective, however, is the observation that the program creates an economic dependence on precarious employment, which subjects workers to exploitation and abuse.

In summary, the racialized and politicized dimensions of Mexican seasonal agricultural workers under the SAWP are interlocked. The findings from this study indicate that the SAWP and the policies that influence it are designed according to a racialized and classist hierarchization of migrant workers, which continues to benefit the Canadian government at the expense of the well-being of a precarious and exploited labour force. Immigration and labour policies in Canada are highly selective and segregating, and “lower-skilled” foreign workers are admitted into the country mainly to fill low-paying jobs, ones that have precarious legal and employment status (Cohen, 2019; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). According to Strauss and McGrath (2017), these forms of precarity and the unfree labour relations that result from institutionalized racialization<sup>7</sup> (interlocked with gender, class, and nationality) of “lower-skilled” foreign workers make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation (pp. 200-205). In addition, the SAWP grants an inordinate amount of power to

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<sup>7</sup>The state and employers target migrant workers on the basis of race/ethnicity (among other characteristics) through immigration policy and recruitment (see Strauss & McGrath, 2017, pp. 200-205).

employers and Mexican government officials, creating the conditions for the abuse of power. The analysis of participants' experiences and perspectives in the context of policies and existing research demonstrates that workers may suffer from discrimination, exploitation, and abuse because the program provides unequal access to and very little in the way of protection of workers' rights.

## Limitations

Based on the small sample size, it was not possible to make generalizations about SAWP workers' experiences in BC. Further, the absence of a female participant, due in large part to their low numbers in the SAWP, meant that a female perspective could not be explored.

## Conclusion

The study's findings contribute to a growing base of critical knowledge on the SAWP in BC, providing essential and timely insights into the situation of workers through an in-depth analysis of Mexican workers' lived experiences and perspectives. Evidence from this study and previous research supports the position that the SAWP is not the model program that it is promoted as. Structural exploitation and abuse towards seasonal migrant workers are evident in the program. In particular, employers exercise significant control over workers and regularly enforce self-serving rules that demand high levels of productivity from workers. This exercise of control is done through threats and punishments and under poor housing and work conditions. SWAP participants experience grossly unequal labour conditions and rights compared to citizen workers, including earning minimum wage with no overtime pay. Their employment and legal status in Canada are and will continue to be precarious because the policies that structure the SAWP discriminate against workers on the basis of race and class, rendering them vulnerable to an abuse of power from the people and institutions that have control over them.

Although positive experiences have been reported by program participants and certainly not all workers are subject to abuse, these experiences do not make up for the structural inequalities inherent in the program. According to participants in the study, the main issue that requires attention in order to improve the SAWP is the nature of the work permits. Open work permits would give workers a voice, an important say in how the program is run. In addition, an increase in wages, including overtime pay, and a fair and accessible path toward permanent residence would begin to address some of the structural inequities. Finally, program authorities should ensure adequate housing conditions (i.e., no overcrowding, proper ventilation, and well-maintained and safe spaces) for workers on all farms, as well as equity in the workplace and more humane working conditions.

Seasonal agricultural migrant workers are essential to Canada's food production and economy, as they provide cheap labour that is "permanently" available. Their essentiality has been especially notable during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is, therefore, a need for a targeted and thorough review of Canada's immigration policy as it pertains to programs like the SAWP. Such a review is necessary in order to respond appropriately to existing labour and migration injustices perpetrated by employers and government officials and to ensure that the program is fairly regulated. Participants in the study are hopeful that this study raises social and academic awareness of the situation of seasonal agricultural workers in Canada, leading to changes that benefit workers in the future.

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