

# 'Temporary Workers', Temporary Fathers: Transnational Family Impacts of Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program

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**Under Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), precarious workers, most of whom are fathers, migrate each year without their families to work in Canadian agriculture. Using a 'whole worker' approach focusing on these workers' family relations, this article analyzes the impacts of the fathers' absences on both workers and their family members in Mexico. Although SAWP workers' main motivation for coming to Canada is to support their families financially, their absences also weaken their families. Common impacts include the estrangement of children who feel abandoned by their fathers, a higher incidence of children's health and behavioural problems, and poorer school performance, strained spousal relations, and mothers feeling overwhelmed by 'double days' of 'migration work.' In light of such findings, the authors propose practical policy changes to strengthen the cohesion of these families.**

**KEYWORDS:** *Temporary Foreign Worker Program*, labour standards, family cohesion, 'whole worker' industrial relations, transnational migrant workers and their families.

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## Introduction

Over half a million people work in Canada as temporary migrants under federal government programs (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015: 20-21). Of these, over 53,000 temporary worker positions in agriculture were approved in 2015, up from 35,000 in 2008. The *Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program* (SAWP) is the oldest and predominant temporary agricultural migration program in Canada, with nearly 42,000 positions approved in 2015 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Mexico, the leading participant country and focus of this article, doubled its SAWP participation over the past decade, sending nearly 24,000 workers in 2016 (STyPS, 2017).

The SAWP is structured to meet employers' needs for low-wage, flexible labour that is available for irregular work schedules "to accommodate the cyclical demands of the agricultural industry" during varying periods up to eight months (Government of Canada, 2017, Article 1). Exemplifying guest worker policies that "import labor but not people" (Castles, 2006: 760) and create transnational families divided between countries of origin and countries of employment, the SAWP requires workers from Mexico and the Caribbean to migrate *without their families*. For the half century of the SAWP's existence, workers have been leaving and returning to their families annually through "forced rotation" (Preibisch, 2010: 412). Family status has been a criterion in the selection process of SAWP participants. The majority of Mexican male SAWP workers are married fathers (with 98% being married or in common-law unions) and of the 3.5% who are women, most are single mothers (STyPS, 2017), with one aim being that they will return to their families each year (McLaughlin, 2010). Annually, participants leave their families behind for up to eight months, with the majority (73%) working six or more months each year. Among a snapshot of currently employed workers in 2016, the average number of seasons they had worked in Canada was 10.6, with this figure including workers who were in Canada for the first time. Over two thirds of these workers had worked for six seasons or more, while some had migrated for over 40 years (STyPS, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of time spent in Canada, they typically have no access to permanent residency.

Using a family-oriented perspective that has been "generally overlooked in migration research" (Ariza, 2014: 10, 27), the main goal of our study has been to understand how the SAWP affects the cohesion and well-being of transnational families. To answer this question we examined children's health, educational and behavioural issues, and emotional relations between workers and their children and spouses.

Our findings demonstrate linkages between these impacts and the SAWP as a tiered, managed migration labour regime that is a "system of exception,"<sup>3</sup>

(McLaughlin, 2010: 80) purposely defined by categorizing migrant workers as “permanently temporary,” unable to ever gain citizenship status or family reunification in Canada despite years and sometimes decades of employment here. Further, a lack of enforcement of labour rights and working conditions, which is generally lower than for citizen workers in Canada (Glenn, 1998), renders workers vulnerable to long-term health problems, for which their families must bear the burden (McLaughlin, 2009a). These family impacts are linked in important part to the SAWP “zone of exceptionality” that excludes these workers from “rules, rights and protections that otherwise apply” (Faraday, 2016: 30), such as the rights to labour mobility, family reunification and choice of residence (see Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2012; McLaughlin and Hennebry, 2015).

We draw on American labour organizer Jane McAlevey’s concept of “whole worker organizing,” which emphasizes that “real people do not live two separate lives, one beginning when they arrive at work and punch the clock and another when they punch out at the end of their shift” (2014: 14). As human beings belonging to families and communities—especially families—we argue that the SAWP regime is not only inadequate and discriminatory in relation to workers in the workplace, but it also contributes strongly to undermining the cohesion of workers’ families.

In what follows, we first describe the background and context of our research and outline our methods. We then present our main findings, summarizing the key impacts of the SAWP on workers, their children, and spouses. Finally, we offer a set of policy recommendations and conclusions informed by our analysis.

## Context

The impacts of the SAWP on transnational families must be understood within the broader structure in which the program operates, as well as the choices facing migrant families. The SAWP creates a “context of extreme vulnerability” in which workers’ fundamental rights are constrained, and where the limited choices of migrant families compel them to participate in the program, thereby creating “permanently temporary” transnational families.

### The SAWP as a “Zone of Exceptionality”

Agricultural workers and migrant workers have fewer rights than other workers in Canada, but even the rights to which SAWP workers have formal access are often practically unattainable, due to their extreme position of vulnerability, linked to tiered, temporary work permits, in which workers can be fired or removed from the program without any appeal process (Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2012; McLaughlin and Hennebry, 2015). The SAWP’s racialized, gendered, precarious,

second-tier workforce is strongly controlled by employers. According to a former Canadian Immigration Minister, employers prefer temporary migrant workers because they “know they’re going to show up every day for work.” They have “a kind of quasi-indentured status” (Tencer, 2014).

Employers’ exceptional power begins with SAWP contracts, which are negotiated by employer representatives from the Canadian Horticultural Council, the Canadian government and governments of sending countries. Worker representatives are not allowed to participate in these negotiations (Faraday, 2012: 15). Although the SAWP is a national program, managed by the Ministry of Employment and Social Development Canada, and federal government jurisdiction regulates the importation and repatriation of SAWP workers, their labour and employment rights are governed by provincial regulation. Yet neither level of government ensures comprehensive enforcement of these rights (McLaughlin and Hennebry, 2015). Instead, for the most part employer organizations, authorized by Employment and Social Development Canada, such as Foreign Agricultural Management Services (FARMS) in Ontario and FERME (Foreign Agricultural Workforce Recruitment Foundation or *Fondation des Entreprises en Recrutement de Main-d’oeuvre agricole Étrangère*) in Quebec, manage the SAWP.

Governments of sending countries export the labour power of their citizens primarily to reduce unemployment and gain remittances, which often contribute substantially to their national incomes (Bridi, 2013: 1080; Binford, 2009: 510). By changing or threatening to change the countries where they recruit SAWP workers (so-called “country surfing”) and pitting workers and sending-countries’ governments against each other, employers further reinforce their power to pressure workers to work longer, harder and faster (Preibisch, 2010: 418).<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to provincial and federal human rights laws, the Canadian government empowers SAWP employers to select workers by gender and nationality (Preibisch, 2010: 416). These decisions are often based on employers’ notions of the “most suitable” nationality and gender for particular jobs (Preibisch and Binford, 2007). Recruitment policies focus on land-poor and landless rural workers, most of whom arrive in Canada in debt (Gabriel and Macdonald, 2011: 50), and desperate to support their families. This family dependency gives employers massive disciplinary power over workers who are required to work long hours, sometimes 18 hours a day, for minimum wages, often under harsh, dangerous working conditions (Basok, 2002; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2014a; Otero and Preibisch, 2009; Preibisch, 2010).

Another criterion for selecting “ideal migrant workers” (McLaughlin, 2010) from Mexico is that they have relatively low formal education levels<sup>5</sup>, which, together with lack of English or French language fluency, limits job opportunities. Furthermore, “tied” work permits restrict workers to one specific job for one

employer at one location, for a specified time period, effectively indenturing them. Transferring to another employer requires, among other conditions, approval of the worker, both the transferring and receiving employer, and the representative of the sending country (Government of Canada, 2017), and is usually not possible (McLaughlin and Hennebry, 2015). Moreover, employers have the power to “name” those they choose to return and to fire those they find undesirable, which generally leads to their immediate forced repatriation, with no right to independent appeal.<sup>6</sup>

SAWP workers are, in various ways and to varying degrees, segregated from much of the society around them. Typically, they work long hours each day, six or seven days a week. This workweek, combined with what is often exhausting physical labour, generally leaves little time and energy for socializing with community members beyond the boundaries of the workplace. Lack of transportation from isolated farms also contributes to this segregation. Employers often provide buses or other transportation so workers can do weekly grocery shopping, but this too normally leaves little time to participate in the community outside work. In addition, most workers from Mexico speak only Spanish and/or indigenous languages rather than English or French, making it difficult to communicate with Canadian residents in the surrounding communities. Some employers (and local community members and groups, including churches) help workers to try to overcome some of these barriers and encourage them to participate in local social events. Other employers are more restricting. By housing workers on or near their property, and sometimes using video surveillance cameras, employers can restrict workers’ lives and mobility. Tactics employers use include curfews, requiring workers to report their whereabouts when away from the farm, and denying or restricting visitors of the opposite sex (McLaughlin and Hennebry, 2015; Preibisch and Encalada Grez, 2010). Through such means, some employers effectively restrict workers’ interactions with local residents, thereby increasing their social isolation.

In sum, citing evidence from social science literature highlighting migrant agricultural workers’ extreme dependence on their employers, in his review for the Ontario Minister of Labour, Lynk noted the racialized restrictions on their immigration and work permit status, their worksite living accommodations, and their lack of effective access to collective bargaining. He concluded that the conditions of migrant agricultural work are consistent with “unfree labour” (Lynk, 2015: 37-38, cited in Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2017: 295-296).

This extraordinary state-employer power complex, similar to “total institutions” such as mental institutions (Binford, 2009: 513), fosters a climate of fear that prevents workers from accessing rights to which they are formally entitled. For example, agricultural work is among the most dangerous forms of labour,

exposing workers to toxins, unsafe machinery, extended periods of work in harsh weather, and ergonomic risks such as prolonged bending and lifting (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2014a). Legally, SAWP workers have occupational health and safety rights. However, exercising them can mean being repatriated or not “named” to return the next year (Gabriel and Macdonald, 2011; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2014a). From 2001-2011, in Ontario alone, nearly 800 SAWP workers were repatriated for medical reasons, many of them without receiving treatment (Orkin *et al.*, 2014). Repatriated workers have little or no access to dispute resolution procedures (Verma, 2003). Further, although agricultural workers enjoy the right to unionize and bargain collectively in most provinces, important exceptions exist. In Ontario, they are denied this right entirely.<sup>7</sup> Alberta passed legislation to extend labour relations coverage to agricultural workers, but regulatory changes have not yet been implemented. In Quebec, agricultural workers in enterprises with fewer than three workers who are ordinarily and continuously employed are denied unionization and collective bargaining rights; only in workplaces where three or more workers are ordinarily and continuously employed do seasonal agricultural workers have these rights (Gesualdi-Fecteau, 2016, 626-7; Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2017, 302)<sup>8</sup>. New Brunswick excludes agricultural workers from coverage under its *Employment Standards Act* who work for employers who hire fewer than four agricultural workers for at least six months annually (New Brunswick Ministry of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, 2016: 9). Moreover, even in provinces where unionization is legal, SAWP workers can be denied the opportunity to return to jobs in Canada for trying to exercise these rights (Paz Ramirez and Chun, 2016).<sup>9</sup>

According to Ontario and British Columbia surveys, over half of SAWP workers received no health and safety training or information. Many others experienced language and literacy barriers to understanding the information provided. One fifth lacked health cards. About half worked while they were injured or sick to avoid losing pay or due to fear of upsetting employers. Most did not know how to make health insurance claims or workers' compensation claims (Hennebry *et al.*, 2016; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2014a; Otero and Preibisch, 2009). In Ontario, where over half are employed, SAWP workers have been denied union rights despite repeated admonition from the International Labour Organization (ILO) that this violates fundamental international labour rights (ILO, 2012). Under agreements between Canadian and workers' governments, SAWP workers have rights to Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security payments, but these are often denied due to residency requirements and lack of information. Despite workers paying Employment Insurance premiums, the Canadian state denies them EI benefits, including parental, maternal and compassionate care benefits (UFCW and AWA, 2014).

## Constrained “Choices”

On the labour supply side, migration of Mexican farm workers to Canada is, to a large degree, linked to international trade and investment agreements, economic restructuring and technological change promoting larger scale, trans-national agribusiness chains. On the labour demand side, cheap, flexible, highly disciplined and productive labour provided by the SAWP has become integral to many Canadian growers' competitive capacities<sup>10</sup> (Binford, 2013), as food retailing has become increasingly concentrated (Government of Canada, 2016).

Rural workers in Mexico have experienced pressures due to economic restructuring. There has been a massive decline in agricultural employment and wages in Mexico (UNCTAD, 2014: 87), due in part to the restructuring of the agricultural sector, and, in particular, the production of the staple grain, corn. There are many small, less competitive farms that rely on a small number of highly concentrated financing and marketing agents, and suppliers of seed and fertilizer. The end of tariff and quota restrictions under the *North American Free Trade Agreement* and other trade agreements, and dumping of subsidized US agricultural exports in Mexico, have “squeezed farmers out of production and into poverty,” creating a “leading ‘push factor’ driving asset-poor rural farmers to sell off their lands and migrate (...)” (UNCTAD, 2014: xvi). Mexican government cuts in food subsidies, reductions in real minimum wages, privatization of rural banks and collectively owned lands, and other economic changes have worsened this situation (Alba Vega, 2003; Reynoso Castillo, 2008). Half the rural population earns less than they need to feed themselves (McMichael, 2012: 138-139). The result has been the biggest rural population exodus in Mexican history (Pechlaner and Otero, 2010: 199).

With little or no hope of finding adequately paid work in Mexico, many migrate to the United States. Migrant workers regularly send a portion of their earnings to their families, and remittances formed the second largest source of foreign currency in Mexico's economy in 2015, at 25.7 billion USD (World Bank, 2017: 29).

Due to fears they will not be able safely to repeat the journey past militarized borders, many such migrants stay in the US, separated from their families (Hellman, 2008; Núñez and Heyman, 2007). Relative to this option, the SAWP, enabling legal, safe travel and separation from family of up to only eight months at a time, is appealing. Unsurprisingly, workers are willing to submit to employer demands, even when they may risk their wellbeing, health and safety, in order to keep their jobs and support their families (Basok, 2002; Binford, 2013; McLaughlin, 2009a).

## Permanently Temporary Transnational Families

Especially in Mexico's rural areas, polarized, patriarchal gender roles have traditionally structured family relations. Men are expected to provide for the economic wellbeing and physical protection of their families (Levine, 1993), and they have dominant roles in many aspects of household decision making and disciplining children. The traditional cultural norm for women is that they are subordinate to men, responsible for domestic duties, and crucial to maintaining family cohesion (Kanaiaupuni, 2000: 1317-1318). As mothers, they have primary responsibility for childcare, including feeding, clothing and education.

Absentee fathers disrupt the typical rural family expectations and norms (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). A study of Mexican village households found that migration is redefining husbands' roles: labour migration has become part of "being a good husband" and the "growing pressures of fatherhood" (Kanaiaupuni, 2000: 1337). In a context of rigid gender roles, including those that legitimize and reproduce gender inequalities, the separation of fathers from mothers and children due to migration can have severe impacts. These include increased marital stress, child discipline problems and emotional alienation between children and migrant fathers (Kandel and Kao, 2001: 1208).

## Research Methods

This research is based primarily on 74 one-to-two-hour semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish with male SAWP workers, their families (spouses and children over 18 years of age of workers we interviewed) and their children's school teachers.<sup>11</sup> The interviews with workers, all of whom had been migrating to Canada for at least five seasons and had children, documented their working conditions, their motivations for being in the program, how they interacted with their families while abroad, and perceived effects of their migration on their families and themselves. The interviews with spouses and children of workers focused on their family life while their spouses or fathers were in Canada, and the effects of repeated, prolonged absence on relationships, health and wellbeing, material changes, and personal development. Interviewees were invited to suggest policy changes to improve their experience of the program.

We conducted 20 interviews in 2011 with SAWP workers we met on weekends when they had finished work and were shopping for groceries or attending church services in Ontario towns near farms employing large numbers of SAWP workers. The remaining 54 interviews were conducted in 2012 in rural villages in Guanajuato State, which has been sending large numbers of SAWP workers to Canada for many years. These interviews with 24 workers, 16 spouses, 10 adult children of SAWP migrants, and four teachers and school principals who teach



children of SAWP migrants, were conducted in workers' homes and teachers' offices. Interviews with teachers and principals documented classroom and community experiences, comparing children of SAWP fathers with those whose fathers remained home year-round. Interviews were transcribed and translated, and then coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Data were analyzed using a thematic coding framework to assess patterns and relationships among workers and their families, and impacts of the SAWP on these relationships.

## Results

Our main findings are categorized by their primary effects on each of our participant groups: workers, children and mothers/spouses.

### Impacts on Workers

Throughout the interviews, workers consistently stressed that their absences from their families while working in Canada are a *contradictory dual sacrifice*: a sacrifice *for* their families and a sacrifice *by* their families. As family breadwinners, SAWP workers' overwhelming desire is to support their families financially (Wells *et al.*, 2014). A worker who has been leaving his family for many years to work in Canada explained this dual sacrifice:

My motivation is my kids. How can it be possible? So much misery. Such poverty. I had to leave everything behind to try to be better. I say: 'How is it possible that I have my children and I haven't seen them grow up?' (..) I tell (my children) about how the sacrifice (..) being away and far, is only in order to help them. (..) It feels really horrible specifically to have to leave and to leave my family (..) It affected me emotionally (..).

Many workers said their children regarded them as strangers. One explained that when he left for Canada the first time, his son was a year and a half old. When he returned, his son "didn't remember me. It was really hard to see your own son didn't recognize you." Some children reject their fathers. When he returned home, a SAWP worker's young daughter "told him he was not her father." The wife of another worker reported that when he left to work in Canada his daughter rejected him, saying: "I have no dad!". "How can she love a stranger?", the wife asked the upset father. These findings are similar to those of Dreby (2007), who studied children's sense of abandonment and detachment in transnational Mexican families where fathers migrated to work in the USA. Some fathers we interviewed said they felt like Santa Claus because their children saw them mainly as bearers of presents. Similarly, Preibisch and Encalada Grez, (2013: 794) note that migrant mothers' sense a commodification of their relationships with their children and other family members who saw them as "dollar signs" and "money machines".

As noted, workers are typically isolated from the community around their farms, and employers may discourage them from socializing away from the farms. Even if social opportunities are available, long hours of exhausting labour mean they normally have little time and energy to socialize away from work. Furthermore, few live near a town; public transportation is usually unavailable and taxis are expensive (Russell, 2004). Since many do not speak English or French well, communication with locals is another barrier to socializing. It is therefore not surprising that many workers report mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety and addictions, and the culture-bound syndrome *nervios*, in the context of painful, repeated family separations coupled with social isolation in Canada (McLaughlin, 2009a; Mysyk *et al.*, 2008).

When injured workers are repatriated, their families must care for them. There is no transnational insurance program that supports them upon returning home (McLaughlin, 2009b). Injured workers often develop depression and feelings of worthlessness when they can no longer support their families (McLaughlin, 2009a). Sometimes women workers who become pregnant in Canada feel compelled to continue working despite the risks of exposure to chemicals, heavy lifting, etc., thus transferring risks to unborn children (McLaughlin, 2008).

### Impacts on Children

Another aspect of workers' laments is the damage done to their children. The adult daughter of one migrant worker said that she and her siblings "didn't get enough love" from their father when he was away: "We needed that. And we missed him." The absence of fathers is keenly felt during rites of passage and celebrations in the children's lives. Fathers are often in Canada when their children are celebrating milestones such as birthdays, first days of school and graduations. An adult daughter recollected that on her birthday, and those of her siblings, "everybody congratulated us except our father. If he couldn't call because he was busy, we thought he had forgotten us." A father said his daughter "always felt a great sadness" because he was never there when she finished school. A wife, regretting that her husband was in Canada when their daughter had her first communion, repeated the saying: "Money is not everything in life."

Many respondents commented that some children react to their father's absence by becoming sick, depressed, or both. One father explained that after he goes to Canada, "they start getting sick, because they are very fond of you. (..) They don't want to eat." "At first, my children even got sick when I left," reported another father. "Because they didn't see me, they became like very sad, depressed," he explained. "You feel so much pain in your heart when you leave,

[...] they stay crying, so you cry too." After learning that doctors are treating his five-year old son for depression, he phoned his son from Canada, saying: " 'I'm almost there, son!' How can I tell him that this is the price for a better life?!" An elementary school teacher likewise reported that SAWP children "become sad when the father leaves, but then he comes back and the children go back to a cheerful mood because their dad is here." The 19-year old daughter of another SAWP worker reported that her younger brother is depressed: "When my father leaves [for Canada], my brother only wants to be in bed. (..) He goes to school sad, and when he comes back, he goes to bed." These findings are consistent with those of Heymann *et al.*, (2009) who found, in a survey of over 1500 Mexican households, that when a caregiver migrated to the United States, children were more likely to have frequent and chronic illnesses, in addition to emotional and behavioural problems.

Physical protection that fathers traditionally provide their families is particularly important in communities with high rates of violence, which often targets children, the "vulnerable of the vulnerable" (Ariza, 2014: 20). Girls can be more vulnerable than boys to violence in their communities, and fathers often use this concern to justify forbidding their daughters from leaving the house. The adult daughter of one migrant worker who went annually to Canada for many years explained that when her father was away, the family didn't leave the home very often. "People can show disrespect for us, disrespect my mother. We live alone. Everybody knows my father is not here. Somebody can break in.", she said. "It's safer when my dad is here." The wife of another worker said that her daughter becomes very fearful when her father goes to Canada: "She says she's scared, as if nobody is protecting her. (..) She says when he's away the house is unprotected." Her mother says she needs to send her to a medical specialist to help her deal with her fear.

With their fathers absent, Binford notes, children often "rebel against their mothers' authority." Among other things, their "school attendance and grades commonly suffer," and some "become involved in drug use, petty crime and other problems" (2006: 11). Parents and teachers interviewed in our study also observed that children are often more difficult to control when their fathers are in Canada. Respondents commented that fathers' absences seem to have especially deleterious impacts on the boys, which become particularly apparent when they are in their middle and late teens. One mother believes that the fathers' absence led to many teenage boys becoming drug addicts: "We, as mothers, try to [protect] them, but they respect their fathers more". An adult daughter said that the boys become "like animals that need to be tamed." They start drinking alcohol and taking drugs. They feel "macho" and "fight anyone." They don't pay attention to their mothers: "They quit school, they just hang out on the

streets, they don't work." Many workers we interviewed believed their absence contributed to such problems. One father used a compelling metaphor to explain how repeated absences harm SAWP workers' children:

It's like a tree that is planted straight. If you don't pay attention to it (..) the tree starts to become [crooked] until it ends up sideways. Kids are like that too. If you don't straighten them out when they're little they start going like this, sideways, sideways. (..) they no longer obey you, Why? Because you didn't know how to straighten them out when they were little.

Older children made similar observations. One adult son explained:

When you start puberty, I think if I had had my father here to control me, I wouldn't have made so many mistakes. Many guys end up on the streets like vagrants because they don't have a father figure to control them.... But when my father was here (I was) 'like an angel' (because I respected my father) and that was enough for not doing bad things.

According to their teachers, relative to children whose fathers did not migrate, many SAWP children have more behavioural and mental health problems: "Not to have their father is like they're missing half of what they need, and the mother just can't play a double role," one commented. "[The children] overpower the mother's authority because of the father's absence." Another teacher observed a general pattern that he says is more common among SAWP sons: "Their father leaves, and their school performance goes down. Some quit school entirely."<sup>12</sup> An elementary school principal also highlighted this pattern, noting that boys often have more difficulty in school than their sisters. In part, the boys may be less motivated in school because the SAWP (and migration to low-wage jobs in the US) do not generally require high levels of education. Migration is an option more often exercised by males, and consistent with traditional male family-provider norms.

A teacher explained that he referred several students, whose fathers are away working in Canada, to receive psychological support "because they cry sometimes, or they misbehave" and "some act aggressively", while others "develop strange behaviour, like hiding under a table." For many young males, gang culture provides a partial family substitute, and access to alcohol, drugs, guns, protection and status. In some cases, remittances may also be a factor contributing to children's access to drugs and, more commonly, alcohol. A school teacher also linked fathers' absences to their sons becoming "very aggressive" because fathers don't show them "love and care." When the fathers return home, it can be a "very strong emotional shock" to their sons who "have to share their life with a person they don't know." They often beat their sons for their disobedience while they have been away. This violence in the home, the teacher

argues, contributes to children's violence at school. Illustrating an extreme impact of a father's absence, a wife said that her husband's absence under the SAWP led to the breakup of their family. Their son moved to the US "because of his father's absence" and their daughter "got married (young) for the same reason." While violence, drug and alcohol abuse are more common among the boys, one principal noted that the "girls' problem, around the sixth grade, when girls are about twelve years old, is pregnancy." Other teachers confirmed that daughters of SAWP workers are more likely to look for boyfriends in their fathers' absence and to have early pregnancies.

While these problems are not unique to SAWP families, the principals and teachers we interviewed suggest they are more common among them. These findings are broadly consistent with other research on the impacts of migration when children are left behind in Mexico. A nationally representative sample of families in Mexico found that when spouses who are caregivers migrate to the United States, "children who remain behind in these migrant households are the ones doing worse in terms of academic, behavioral and emotional outcomes" (Lahaie *et al.*, 2009: 308).

### Creating Temporary Single Mothers

Their husbands' long absences increase responsibilities for many women. A mother explained: "sometimes [spouses] do farm work, so they have to bring the children to school, then they have to come back to bring them their lunch, they have to cook, perhaps take care of their cattle, and it is a very difficult task for a woman." Many wives reported they had no or very little help from other adults in their families and communities. While their husbands' absences expand autonomy for many women, they also make them more dependent on them for their families' livelihoods (Kanaiaupuni, 2000: 1320; Del Angel Perez and Rebolledo-Martinez, 2009).

Wives generally reported a profound sense of their sacrifices to support their husbands. This is acutely felt when fathers are away during pregnancy and childbirth: "I was pregnant when [my husband] left," one mother recalled. "I miscarried because I was lifting heavy things." Afterwards, her husband criticized her for carrying buckets when she was pregnant. "If I didn't do it, then who would?", she demanded. Anger and resentment can creep into long distance relationships: "Sometimes, I thought, he's only working there and sending money, and he worries about nothing else," she explained. "Me, I was worried because [the children] got sick, they needed clothes and they needed shoes. They didn't do their homework." When her son didn't come home at night, she worried because her husband had warned her: "If something happens to the girls, it's your fault; if something happens to the boys, you're responsible for that." While

her husband was in Canada, he became suspicious that she had another lover: "He was jealous. He told [his mother] that he thought [I] went with my lover to buy him boots, hats, belts, expensive ones." In some cases such distrust led to marital break-ups.

Despite their appreciation of financial support, and the fact that they sometimes gained new skills and empowerment as they adopt new roles independently of men, wives of SAWP workers often reported having a strong sense of lack of spousal support and of great emotional loss because of their added responsibilities. There is often a sense of abandonment. As other research attests, the division of parental roles is fundamentally changed while fathers are away, requiring negotiations "related to who and how care, supervision and discipline are meted out to children" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). Spouses try to "substitute for their absent husbands in role functions for which they have not been socially prepared", Binford explains (2006: 11). Their workload may increase substantially due to a new "double day" in which women add "migration work," such as working on and managing family farms, managing family finances, and other work, to facilitate their husbands' migration to Canada (Hennebry, 2014b).

These impacts may leave legacies of harm among successive generations. These consequences of the SAWP are serious and widespread in undermining family cohesion, but policy changes could ameliorate some of these effects.

## Policy Recommendations

Labour laws and regulations have not kept pace with the rise of these precarious, flexible, and permanently temporary workers in Canada's labour market who return under the SAWP year after year. Our findings suggest the need to broaden our conception of labour rights and standards by centring on *intersections* between work and family relations. That is, we need to think not only of rights and standards inside the workplace, but also in terms of relations among workers, work and workplaces, on the one hand, and families and communities on the other. This is consistent with a more comprehensive orientation to industrial relations, as seen through the lens of what McAlevey (2014), as noted earlier, calls "whole workers." Doing so entails a more holistic understanding of workers as humans with families and lives outside of work. When we are designing industrial relations policies, we must especially consider how best to regulate relations among work, families and communities when work requires that families be separated for long, repetitive periods, even more so when families are transnational. In this concluding section, we consider policy proposals our research participants suggested that could strengthen family cohesion and improve their experience of participation in the SAWP.

Participants emphasized that SAWP employment is extremely important to their families' economic futures, and they were hesitant to suggest any changes that could potentially jeopardize the future of the program and, thus, their job opportunities. Agricultural lobbyists have argued against extending further rights (including better wages) to migrant workers, invoking fears that employment and business viability could be compromised (Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2012; McLaughlin, 2017). Some analysts support these concerns. Ruhs and Martin, for example, argue there is an "inverse relationship between the number and rights of migrants employed in low-skilled jobs in high-income countries" (2008: 251).

Affordability is a key advantage of hiring migrant workers. Many employers, especially those with smaller family farms or low profit-margins, fear that increased costs due to higher labour standards or wages could make them less competitive or even threaten their viability (Burt and Meyer-Robinson, 2016). However, some larger and more profitable farms, the main beneficiaries of growing net farm receipts from 2005-2010, including over 9,600 farms with over \$1 million in gross receipts in 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2017), may find such changes more affordable (McLaughlin, 2017). Nonetheless, many non-wage related labour advances need not be costly to farmers, and certainly it is not in workers' or unions' interests to put farm employers out of business.

Given these issues, we propose finding a better balance that advances migrant rights while still maintaining jobs. Many changes could be implemented *without* compromising the viability of agricultural operations or endangering workers' livelihoods. In 1992, after assessing the experiences of other provinces where agricultural workers had collective bargaining rights, the Ontario government Task Force on Agricultural Labour Relations found that the availability of collective bargaining rights in these provinces had "not had a significant negative impact on farm economics" (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2017: 290). Moreover, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union has organized SAWP workers alongside Canadian farm workers in British Columbia, Manitoba and Quebec without job losses and bankruptcies, according to UFCW Canada national representative, Stan Raper.<sup>13</sup> As McLaughlin (2017) argues, "not only is advancing workers' rights a moral imperative, but it can also support farms' productivity and public image, and in turn enhance their business models and success." Further, workers who are treated with dignity are more likely to be content, healthy, dedicated, consistent, and ultimately, more productive (see Akerlof and Yellen, 1990; Luce, 2014).

A number of policy proposals to advance worker rights have been suggested by scholars, community groups, and labour and human rights groups (Faraday, 2012; CMWRC, 2017; Hennebry and McLaughlin, 2016; UFCW and AWA, 2015). Rather than repeat these recommendations, or provide more extended

comparative analysis, based on our interviews we focus attention specifically on changes that are most vital to strengthening migrant families. These proposals fall into three categories: 1- maximizing remittances; 2- improved employment, labour and human rights that strengthen families; and 3- family unification.

### Maximizing Remittances

Often a “lifeline to transnational family survival,” remittances are the main reason behind migrant families’ decision to participate in the SAWP, even though they are not enough for most of these families to escape poverty in Mexico (Wells *et al.*, 2014: 1). Maximizing remittances would help support families by reducing the duration of the separation needed in order to remit the same amount of money. Raising take-home wages would be an obvious way to increase remittances. Workers asked for fewer wage deductions and greater access to benefits from their existent pay, and for greater control and consistency over their hours of work.

For example, workers note that they must contribute towards their own travel and lodging costs, and that the former are particularly expensive. Furthermore, migrant paycheques are substantially reduced by mandatory contributions, at the same rates other Canadians pay, for income taxes (about \$20 million annually), Employment Insurance (EI) (about \$9 million annually) and the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) (about \$49 million annually) (UFCW and AWA, 2104: 11-14). Although SAWP workers have legal access to programs such as the CPP, workers’ compensation and provincial health coverage (while in Canada), they often cannot access health care benefits when they require them, after they have been repatriated. Consequently, their families bear these costs. Such access could be improved by providing dedicated bilingual support staff to assist workers in making claims and receiving maximum benefits through these programs.<sup>14</sup> In addition, migrant workers’ benefits could be expanded, including access to bilateral portable health insurance, so that when they become sick or injured in Canada, they receive access to health protections even after they return home (McLaughlin, 2009b). They could also receive full benefits under the Employment Insurance (EI) program, including restoration of parental EI benefits, which had previously been available to them (UFCW and AWA, 2014). The lack of a quality pension is a concern for many. As Omar, who has been working in Ontario for 16 years, on average eight months each year, tells us:

I think a good improvement would be a good retirement pension. The one we currently have is not very good. You spend your life working [in Canada]. When you can't work anymore and you have to come back, what will you get? Nothing, only what you earned when you were working.(...) it is like they're using us. We work, we get paid, then we retire, and what we get then is hardly enough for tortillas. I'm not asking to



have exactly the same benefits as Canadians do, but something better than what we currently have. (...) I've seen retired people here, they get 90, 100 dollars monthly. What is that good for?

Small changes outside of the SAWP could also help maximize remittances. For example, supporting workers in sending inexpensive email transfers, rather than through more costly money transfer companies, could save each family hundreds of dollars annually. Preferential interest rates on savings in approved home country accounts would be another helpful innovation (Agunias, 2007), and would protect their savings from loss due to theft or fire.

### Improved Rights

Strengthening workers' rights is good for families: workers who are protected are more likely to return safely, healthy, and in a state of mental well-being to their loved ones. Several key changes could reduce workers' vulnerabilities to rights violations and health risks. Open or sector-specific work permits, an appeals process prior to repatriations or program removals, increased access to existing employment rights, and the full right to unionization in all provinces would be major improvements. Multilingual support services, mandatory health and safety training and seniority/recall rights for workers would also promote worker empowerment and job security. More information on workers' rights could be provided prior to workers' departure (in sending countries) and upon arrival. Canada could sign and enforce the *UN Migrant Workers Convention*, which recognizes that "migration is often the cause of serious problems for members of the families of migrant workers as well as for the workers themselves, in particular because of the scattering of the family". It stipulates that states "take appropriate measures to ensure the protection of the unity of the families of migrant workers" (United Nations, 1990).<sup>15</sup>

In addition, workers could have more say over their contract durations and destinations. Choice of contract duration would empower workers to balance their families' income needs against the harm to their families caused by sustained absences. As a worker explained: "I'd choose a contract of no longer than six months. Why? Eight months is a long time away from home, from my family." Those who prefer particular contract durations should be prioritized for those contracts. Workers could also suggest family or community members with whom they would like to be placed, in order to allow family members to maintain relationships throughout their sojourns in Canada, rather than being placed at random locations, often far away from each other.

Additional measures could also be taken to strengthen migrant families. Often workers have difficulty making telephone calls to their families because phones are too few (one for every hundred workers in one instance) or too far away. The

importance of family communication while workers are in Canada is grounds for enhanced use of communications technology, for example, through mandatory phones placed in worker housing, in private locations, and through increased access to internet for Skype and email communication. Allowing family members to visit Canada and workers to visit their families partway through their contracts would also help maintain family connections.<sup>16</sup> A worker's spouse told us: "I have even dreamt many times (...) that he visits, he sees me ...and he says that he has dreamt that too." A worker told us he speaks "on behalf of thousands of immigrant workers in Canada" in asking to "bring our families to where we work."

Although our research focused on fathers, migrant mothers' needs should also be considered. In particular, women migrants could be granted greater protections during pregnancy, including the right to safe work, prenatal care, and to protection from premature employment terminations based on reproductive status.

### Family Unification

Finally, we join many others in calling for SAWP workers to be provided the right to permanent residency and family reunification in Canada for those who wish to do so.<sup>17</sup> Repeated long absences from their families as temporary "visitors" could be replaced by a system of permanent immigration and family reunification, which recognizes and welcomes migrant workers and their families as valued and respected contributors to Canadian society.

### Conclusion

In a field normally dominated by a truncated workplace perspective, our research offers a powerful insight into the experiences of "whole workers"—particularly linking the state and employer regulation of work to workers' relations with their families. We emphasize that the impacts of the SAWP reach far beyond individual migrants, and have profound effects on workers' families, including spousal and parental relations, and not least on their children. These impacts may leave legacies of harm among successive generations. Some of today's repeatedly absent SAWP fathers are themselves the sons of repeatedly absent SAWP fathers who came to Canada over the past fifty years. These second-and-third-generation absent fathers imply that an intergenerational change in parenting roles and capacities is becoming *normal* as a result of the SAWP. Although the remittances they send home are a major benefit to their families, enabling them to survive economically and provide education to their children (Wells *et al.*, 2014), their repeated absence also harms their families.

Among the limitations of this research is the exclusive focus on male SAWP participants, when about three percent of SAWP workers are women, who are primarily single mothers. They face issues that are particular to their gender and parental status. Although we only came across male-female parent households, other types of families, including same-sex parent and single father households, would also be important to study. In addition, interviews with other family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, may reveal wider family impacts. Finally, the nature of qualitative methods and number of interviews limit the generalizability of our findings. Future research could employ quantitative methods, larger sample sizes, expand the analysis to include more varied kinds of family units, and include women migrants as central participants.

## Notes

- 1 These figures represent the number of approved *Labour Market Impact Assessment* (LMIA) in agriculture. However, not all positive LMIA result in a work permit. Therefore, the “positions approved” do not equate to the actual number of workers who entered Canada.
- 2 These data, derived from Mexican Ministry of Labour statistics, reflect the over 10,500 Mexican SAWP workers in Ontario in 2016.
- 3 Agamben’s (2005) conceptualization of the state of exception in liberal democratic societies emphasizes how extraordinary measures, including suspending normal socio-political order, can become rationalized and normalized. This concept is useful to analyze how Canada has constructed areas in which “partial or differential rights for certain (non-citizen) groups become normalized” (McLaughlin, 2010: 80). McLaughlin’s use of the term “system of exception” to describe the SAWP recognizes that the program “operates as a system, involving multiple zones and actors, across time and space” (McLaughlin, 2010: 91-92).
- 4 Indeed Satzewich (2007: 273) suggests that one reason Mexico was asked to join the SAWP in 1974 was to provide a competitive alternative to Caribbean workers.
- 5 With rare exceptions, SAWP workers’ highest education is primary or high school. Whereas Mexican government statistics for 2006 indicated that about 3 percent of Mexican SAWP workers had high school or higher education (McLaughlin, 2010: 85), as of 2017 about half had completed secondary school (STyPS, 2017).
- 6 This lack of due process is contrary to the UN’s *International Convention for the Protection of All Migrant Workers and their Families* (1990). Article 22 states that migrant workers may be expelled “only in pursuance of a decision taken by the competent authority in accordance with law.” It also stipulates that, except where a decision is made by judicial authority, the migrant worker “shall have the right to submit the reason he or she should not be expelled and to have his or her case reviewed by the competent authority, unless compelling reasons of national security require otherwise.”
- 7 The Ontario Ministry of Labour’s *Changing Workplaces Review* recommends that agricultural and horticultural employees be included in the province’s Labour Relations Act 1995 and have the “same rights and protections as other employees” (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2017: 304).
- 8 This is contrary to Article 26 of the UN *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and of their Families* (1990), which recognizes migrant workers’ right to “join freely any trade union” (“subject only to the rules of the organization

concerned.") It is also contrary to Article 40, which states that migrant workers have the right to form "trade unions in the State of employment for the promotion and protection of their economic, social, cultural and other interests." The Ontario Ministry of Labour's *Changing Workplaces Review* also argues that inclusion of agricultural workers under the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* is strongly supported by the values of Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* for collective bargaining: it "enhances the human dignity, liberty and autonomy of workers by giving them the opportunity to influence the establishment of workplace rules and thereby gain some control over a major aspect of their lives, namely their work" (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2017: 303).

- 9 In the few cases in Canada where the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union has organized unions and bargained collective agreements for agricultural workers, SAWP workers have made gains such as grievance procedures to address firing and repatriation without cause, and seniority and recall rights to replace favouritism in the 'naming' process (Stan Raper, personal communication, May 15, 2017).
- 10 According to a SAWP employer survey, labour costs were a mean average of 38.4% of Ontario employers' production costs (Mussell, 2015: 15)
- 11 Although we were open to including any type of family configuration with a father and children, it turned out that all families who participated were male-female two-parent-headed households.
- 12 Zoller-Booth's (1996) study of temporary migration in Swaziland found fathers' absence had a different impact on primary school sons than daughters. This difference was explained in part by fathers' absence as role models for sons, and by daughters' observations of their mothers' economic burdens increasing their determination to do well in school.
- 13 Personal communication, 4 May 2017.
- 14 See Hennebray and McLaughlin (2016) on recommendations to improve health care access and McLaughlin et al. (2014b) on recommendations to improve access to workers' compensation.
- 15 Mexico is among the 49 states that have ratified this convention thus far.
- 16 The Correctional Service of Canada's rationale for its *Private Family Visit Program* for inmates is similar to that proposed here: "to develop and maintain family and community ties" (<http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/family/003004-1000-eng.shtml>).
- 17 According to a recent study, over half of SAWP workers would like to immigrate to Canada permanently (Hennebray, 2012).

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## SUMMARY

### 'Temporary Workers', Temporary Fathers: Transnational Family Impacts of Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program

Under Canada's *Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)*, migrant workers come to Canada for up to eight months each year, without their families, to work as temporary foreign workers in agriculture. Using a 'whole worker' industrial relations approach, which emphasizes intersections among work, family and community relations, this article assesses the impacts of these repeated separations on the wellbeing and cohesion of Mexican workers' transnational families. The analysis is based primarily on 74 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted in Spanish with male workers, their spouses and children, and with the children's teachers. Assessment criteria include effects on children's health and educational success, children's behaviour, mothers' abilities to cope with added roles and work, and emotional relations among workers, children and spouses.

The study findings suggest that families are often negatively impacted by these repeated separations, with particular consequences for the mental and physical health of children. Children's behavioural challenges often include poor school performance, involvement in crime, drug and alcohol abuse (especially among sons), and early pregnancies among daughters. As temporary 'single moms,' wives often have difficulty coping with extra functions and burdens, and lack of support when their husbands are working in Canada. Typically, there are profound emotional consequences for workers and, frequently, strained family relations. The article concludes by offering practical policy recommendations to lessen negative impacts on SAWP workers and their families, including higher remittances; improved access to labour rights and standards; and new options for family reunification.

**KEYWORDS:** *Temporary Foreign Worker Program*, labour standards, family cohesion, 'whole worker' industrial relations, transnational migrant workers and their families.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Travailleurs temporaires, pères temporaires : les effets familiaux transnationaux du Programme des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers

Dans le cadre du *Programme des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers (PTAS)*, des travailleurs migrants séjournent au Canada (jusqu'à huit semaines chaque année sans leur famille) afin de travailler comme travailleur étranger temporaire en agriculture. En faisant appel à une approche de relations industrielles de type « travailleur intégré » qui met l'accent sur les interrelations entre travail, famille et communauté, cet article évalue les effets de ces séparations répétées sur le bien-être et la cohésion des familles transnationales des travailleurs mexicains. L'analyse s'appuie

sur 74 entrevues semi-dirigées en profondeur qui ont été réalisées en espagnol auprès de travailleurs, leurs conjointes et enfants, ainsi qu'auprès d'enseignants de ces enfants. Les critères d'évaluation incluent les effets sur la santé et la réussite scolaire des enfants, leurs comportements, les aptitudes des mères à composer avec leurs rôles additionnels et le travail, de même que sur les relations émotionnelles entre les travailleurs, leurs conjointes et leurs enfants.

Les résultats de notre étude suggèrent que les familles subissent souvent des effets négatifs de ces séparations répétées, avec des conséquences particulières sur la santé mentale et physique des enfants. Les défis auxquels les enfants doivent faire face dans leurs comportements incluent souvent une faible performance scolaire, des délits de nature criminelle, l'abus de drogues et d'alcool (particulièrement chez les garçons), ainsi que des grossesses précoces chez les filles. En tant que mamans « monoparentales temporairement », les conjointes ont souvent de la difficulté à composer avec les fonctions et les tâches additionnelles, car elles manquent de support lorsque leurs conjoints travaillent au Canada. Typiquement, on observe des conséquences émotionnelles profondes chez ces travailleurs et, fréquemment, des relations familiales tendues. L'article conclut par des recommandations pratiques pour amoindrir les effets négatifs du PTAS sur les travailleurs et leurs familles, incluant des versements plus élevés, un accès accru aux droits et aux normes du travail, ainsi que de nouvelles options pour la réunification des familles.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** *Programme des travailleurs étrangers temporaires*, normes du travail, cohésion familiale, relations industrielles du « travailleur intégré », travailleurs migrants transnationaux et leurs familles.

## RESUMEN

### Trabajadores temporales, padres temporales: los efectos familiares transnacionales del *Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales*

Bajo el Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales (PTAT), los jornaleros mexicanos llegan a Canadá sin sus familias para laborar en la agricultura hasta por ocho meses cada año. Utilizando el enfoque de las relaciones industriales “el trabajador como un todo”, que enfatiza las intersecciones entre las relaciones laborales, familiares y comunitarias, este artículo evalúa los impactos de estas repetidas separaciones en el bienestar y la cohesión de las familias transnacionales de los trabajadores mexicanos. El análisis se basa principalmente en 74 entrevistas a profundidad, semiestructuradas, que se realizaron en español con los trabajadores migrantes, sus cónyuges e hijos, y con los maestros de estos últimos. Los criterios de evaluación incluyen los efectos sobre la salud y el éxito educativo de los hijos y su comportamiento, las capacidades de las madres para hacer frente a nuevos roles y trabajos adicionales y las relaciones emocionales entre los trabajadores, los hijos y los cónyuges.

Los resultados del estudio sugieren que las familias suelen verse afectadas negativamente por estas separaciones repetidas, con consecuencias particulares en la salud mental y física de los hijos. Los desafíos de conducta de los hijos a menudo incluyen el mal desempeño escolar, la participación en el crimen, el abuso de drogas y alcohol (especialmente entre los varones) y los embarazos tempranos entre las mujeres. Como "madres solteras temporales", las esposas a menudo tienen dificultades para hacer frente a las funciones y cargas adicionales debido a la falta de apoyo de sus maridos quienes se encuentran trabajando en Canadá. Típicamente hay profundas consecuencias emocionales para los trabajadores y, con frecuencia, se tensan las relaciones familiares. El artículo concluye ofreciendo recomendaciones políticas prácticas para disminuir los impactos negativos sobre los trabajadores del PTAT y sus familias, incluyendo: incremento de remesas, mejor acceso a los derechos y normas laborales y nuevas opciones para la reunificación familiar.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Programa de trabajadores temporales extranjeros, estándares laborales, cohesión familiar, relaciones laborales de tipo « trabajador integral », trabajadores migrantes transnacionales y sus familias.

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