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## Presentation to Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Honourable Members of Parliament,

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today on behalf of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC) - a coalition of 27 migrant-led organizations and allies. I am also on the Coordinating Committee of the Migrant Rights Network (MRN) - Canada's national migrant justice alliance. Jointly we include almost all self-organized groups of migrant agricultural workers, care workers, migrant or international students, migrant sex workers, and undocumented people.

The truth is that a person's ability to access healthcare, assert their rights at work, be with their families, or protect themselves in a pandemic is directly linked to their citizenship. This is true because the law makes it so. Just as one example, migrant agricultural workers know that a single COVID-19 infection on a farm puts them all in immediate danger, but they cannot risk speaking out because doing so means termination, homelessness, loss of income and deportation. On Saturday night, Juan Lopez Chaparro passed away. He is the third Mexican migrant farmworker to die in Ontario from COVID-19 following Bonifacio Eugenio Romero and Rogelio Santos Muñoz.

There are at least 1.6 million temporary or undocumented migrants in Canada, or one in every twenty-three people. Canada has failed to provide equal rights and support during COVID-19 to at least one in every twenty-three people.

This includes over 500,000 people in the country with no immigration status, most of whom do not have access to Canada Emergency Response Benefits or healthcare during a pandemic. Undocumented migrants have been left to starve, or forced into incredibly dangerous conditions to avoid hunger, homelessness and death. Undocumented migrant women were forced to move in with abusive men; families chose homebirth over starvation; and thousands have become homeless. Those that did not lose work, faced dangerous conditions but without any essential worker wage top up.

- Please see [a letter from over 200 organizations](#), including most major medical organizations, calling on the federal government to ensure access to healthcare for migrants (EN & FR).
- Read our [simple, pragmatic proposal to the federal government on ensuring CERB access to migrants without a valid Social Insurance Number](#).

Hundreds if not thousands of migrant domestic workers are [trapped by their employers who refuse to let them leave even to buy groceries or send remittances home](#). These are live-in migrant careworkers who are forced to stay to complete unfair immigration requirements including impossible language and educational assessments to have a chance to reunite with their families.



Over 850,000 people on study or postgraduate work permits are unable to find work, have lost wages, and are struggling to have their basic needs met, tens of thousands are only eating because of food banks. But post-secondary institutions have raised tuition fees. And existing immigration requirements mean that most will not qualify for permanent resident status.

- Read our [letter on migrant students' needs](#) and priorities here.

Tens of thousands of migrant farmworkers in Canada came here because they were not able to access income supports abroad. We released [a report with complaints on behalf of over a thousand workers about racism, surveillance, wage theft, exploitation, labour intensification and inhumane housing](#).

So to repeat something that you already know: a multi-tier system of immigration where some have permanent residency, and therefore rights to healthcare, family unity and freedom from reprisals, while others are temporary or without status, engenders exploitation. That inequality and exploitation has been exacerbated during COVID-19.

This isn't just migrants saying it.

Consider this from an op-ed published on May 5, 2014 in the Toronto Star: "This is a basic issue of fairness. Fairness for [...] for vulnerable people who travel to Canada from abroad in search of a real opportunity to succeed. Canada needs to re-commit itself to bringing permanent immigrants here who have a path to citizenship." Authored by then MP, now Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau.

Or take Recommendation 16 from this very committee's report in September 2016 that called on Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to "review the current pathways to permanent residency for all temporary foreign workers, with a view to facilitating access to permanent residency for migrant workers."

Or Recommendation 19 from again this Committee's study in December 2012 under the previous Conservative government which recommended that Canada "offer better opportunities for temporary foreign workers to eventually become permanent immigrants."

The reason that permanent immigration has always been a central component of any review on vulnerability and exploitation of non permanent residents is simple. To quote Minister Carla Qualtrough from just three days ago: "There's a power imbalance that exists in this system."

The power imbalance exists wherever there is temporary migration or people are undocumented. Migrants are not asking for special treatment. But by denying them the rights that come with citizenship, laws and lawmakers are tipping the scale in favor of abuse, exploitation, exclusion and death. The facts are clear, it is action that is needed.



We will provide this committee with more detailed recommendations but our call is simple: ensure full immigration status for all without exclusions and exemptions immediately to save lives. Ensure everyone arrives with full immigration rights in the future.

- See our [proposal for regularization to ensure full immigration status for all here](#).

A few final words:

First, a “path” to citizenship or permanent residency is not our ask or a solution. We need permanent resident status now for workers to leave dangerous conditions and protect themselves and their families, not a promised path in some distant future with impossible requirements while remaining temporary now.

Second, increased inspections by Employment and Social Development Canada does not respond to the crisis at hand. Inspections ensure that employers are not breaking the law. The problem is most of what employers are doing is legal. The law does not mandate social distancing, does not create national housing standards and there is no system through which workers can complain.

Third, we are not just talking about “good enough to work, good enough to stay” or “guardian angels”. Yes, we have all seen that migrants are in jobs that continued even during a public health pandemic - we do essential work. But whether migrants are disabled, or homeless, or unable to work because of trauma or any other reason - they must have the ability to take care of themselves and their families. Whether it is migrant sex workers, or migrants working in warehouses, in construction or delivering food, they and every person is essential. No one deserves to be exploited. Everyone deserves to live.

We need a single tier system of immigration, and that means full immigration status for all in the country and full immigration status for everyone that arrives in the future.

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