

Canada

Exploitation of migrant care workers has increased since COVID-19 struck, report says

Some survey respondents said their employers wouldn't let them leave the house during the pandemic

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People hold up signs during a demonstration outside an immigration office in Montreal in July calling on the government to give residency status to all migrant workers and asylum seekers. (Graham Hughes/The Canadian Press)

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An advocacy group is calling for full and permanent immigration status for all migrants as it releases a report detailing the alleged abuses suffered by hundreds of migrant domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Migrant Rights Network says the pandemic has worsened conditions for care workers, and that racism underpins much of the negative treatment, which includes increasing labour exploitation and unpaid wages.

The group released its report, [Behind Closed Doors: Exposing Migrant Care Worker Exploitation During COVID-19](#), on Wednesday. It was based on the survey responses of 201 workers across Canada who came from abroad to care for children, the elderly and those with disabilities.

The survey was conducted during the last two months via a link that was shared with care workers over email, Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media through member organizations of the Migrant Rights Network.

- ['I really miss my family': Protesters demand universal rights for migrant workers](#)

More than one in three survey respondents reported losing their jobs during COVID-19. Of those who lost work, a third reported ongoing problems in accessing the Canada Emergency Response Benefit or Employment Insurance.

For those who kept working during the pandemic, nearly one in two reported longer hours of work, says the Migrant Rights Network. More than 40 per cent of respondents also said they were not paid for any extra hours of work, averaging \$6,552 in unpaid wages per worker over the last six months, according to the report.

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Migrant care worker says friend was fired after leaving the house

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Migrant care worker Harpreet Kaur says employers don't let workers go outside and that her friend was fired from her job after leaving the house to go on a walk. 2:34

One in three survey respondents who kept working also reported their employers would not let them leave the house, take public transit, buy groceries or visit doctors during COVID-19, the report says.

"The racism underpinning this denial of freedom is clear: even as employers went in and out, workers — primarily South-East Asian, as well as Caribbean, African and South Asian women — were treated as vectors of disease," the report says.

The network says lack of permanent resident status makes it difficult for workers to assert their rights. Permanent residency would give workers "the ability to leave a bad job and make a complaint without fear of reprisals," it says.





Protesters attend a rally in support of migrant worker rights in front of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in Toronto in August. (Christopher Katsarov/The Canadian Press)

In an [online petition](#), the group calls for a "single-tier immigration system, where everyone in Canada has the same rights."

"All migrants, refugees, students, workers and undocumented people in the country must be regularized and given full immigration status now without exception. All migrants arriving in the future must do so with full and permanent immigration status."

The report makes a series of recommendations aimed at improving housing, health care and employment conditions, as well as immediately granting permanent residency to workers.

On Wednesday afternoon, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam acknowledged that some groups in Canada have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Dr. Theresa Tam says pandemic exposed existing inequities in Canada

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Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam says some groups in Canada have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. 1:11

"The impacts have been worse for some groups such as seniors, workers who provide essential services such as those in health care or agriculture, racialized populations, people living with disabilities and women," she said as the Public Health Agency of Canada [released its annual report](#).

"The virus didn't create new inequities in our society; it exposed them and underscored the impacts of the social policies on our health status."

In response to the report, the federal government acknowledged that "this pandemic has brought to light some unacceptable gaps in the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program, and we are committed to fixing them."

The joint statement from the offices of the ministers of Immigration and Employment also noted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's pledge to "reimagine" the TFW program, specifically how to "better protect workers — and that includes considering new pathways to permanent residence."

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