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OPINION

Migrant worker groups slam new Canadian border restrictions

By **Shree Paradkar** Race & Gender Columnist

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The federal government announced drastic border restrictions on Monday, with the prime minister saying only non-sick Canadians, permanent residents and — bizarrely — American citizens would be permitted to enter the country.

That means our doors are closed to residents with work permits and student permits, refugee claimants and anyone in need of humanitarian assistance.

Many migrant workers — farm workers and care workers, who are usually racialized — are on these permits. They cannot enter. Some are separated from their families, others are losing their livelihoods.

“There is no public health reason to shut out non-permanent residents,” the Migrant Rights Network said [in a statement](#) on the heels of the announcement. “This is simply racism.”

In these moments of determined calm amid chaos and confusion, it’s worth reflecting that when the comfortable feel vulnerable, the already vulnerable get pushed further into the margins.

Migrant workers are being penalized if they left the country. They’re being excluded from policies to protect Canadians if they did not. And if moral imperatives to do the right thing are insufficient, there’s this: not paying attention to their plight puts us all at risk.

About 37 migrant organizations from across Canada came together Monday [demanding that the government](#) support more than 1.5 million non-permanent residents in Canada, who they say “face a potential human rights disaster” when the loss of their livelihoods here leaves their families without food.

They’re asking the government to offer access to health care for all, including undocumented residents; to strengthen labour laws so migrants workers can also get paid sick leave and protection from reprisals for taking that leave; an end to all detentions and deportations; and funds to expand emergency shelters and food banks that are bursting at the seams.

Syed Hussan, executive director of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, said migrant organizations were flooded with hundreds of calls within an hour of Ottawa’s announcement, “from students abroad not being able to come back and from workers who’ve already bought plane tickets and paid tens of thousands of dollars” in recruitment fees. “There is no clarity if they will be protected.”

This is the start of the agricultural season and Hussan said farm workers who did manage to get in are finding employers refusing to take them to grocery stores.

“They live in rural communities and can’t get to the grocery stores,” Hussan said. “And when they do get to the grocery stores, there are no supplies there. So, we’re literally doing food drops across the country to farms.”

What about the workers who didn’t travel?

They can't afford to fall sick. There is no Employment Insurance available for those who are paid in cash, Hussan said.

Most migrant workers don't have access to paid sick leave and risk losing their jobs even if they take unpaid sick days.

Earlier Monday, Premier Doug Ford promised legislation that would remove the requirement for employees to obtain sick notes before taking time off work. But it's not clear if that protection extends to migrant workers.

Add to that, existing immigration laws allows for workers to be deported if they fall sick, even if their home countries are unsafe.

That threat is a huge barrier to farm workers and care workers from reporting to the health authorities if they do fall sick or are asked to do unsafe work.

"We wanted to hear about labour laws needing to work with federal immigration laws. But we heard nothing from federal government except the closure of borders," Hussan said. "And that's creating more shock waves than anything else. People feel excluded rather than protected."

Social distancing for the usually comfortable means figuring out workarounds: FaceTime! Skype meetings! Pick up the phone (as the prime minister said)! Take walks! Don't go to the gym! But the usually vulnerable are finding themselves in a deeper, more ominous mess.

"We're hearing from a lot of people that care workers are not being allowed to leave home because employers are too nervous (that) it's going to impact them."

In other words they're trapped in their workplace without a break. Imagine the uproar if Bay Street did that to its employees.

Also, how would migrant workers who live in bunk houses, sometimes "18 to a house" self-isolate? Or wash their hands? "We know there's no running water on the fields. People don't have the ability to wash their hands," Hussan said.

Labour laws, immigration laws and health and safety laws need to be adapted to ensure that migrant and undocumented workers are protected, Hussan said.

"Instead of dealing with this as a public health crisis, the government is responding to it by dealing with it as a securitization crisis by shutting down the border to racialized migrants and low-wage people."



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