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## Temporary Foreign Workers: Issues in Integration and Inclusion

Between 2003 and 2012, the number of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in Alberta skyrocketed from 11,376 to 68,339 – a jump of over 600%. If one were to place all the TFWs residing in Alberta in one location, they would make up Alberta’s 5<sup>th</sup> largest city, larger than Grande Prairie, St. Albert or Medicine Hat. Alberta now has the highest proportion of TFWs in its labour force than any other province.

The types of workers coming to the province through the TFW program have shifted. Where the program was once dominated by high skill occupations from the global north (i.e., U.S., Britain, Australia), TFWs are now more likely to be come from the global south (Philippines, India, China) to work in lower-skilled occupations. While men still make up a majority of TFWs, the proportion of women has increased significantly.

There can be no question the TFW program has undergone a rapid transformation of its purpose, goals and outcomes. What was once a program intended to assist in recruitment of a select group of high-skilled occupations with international labour markets has become a mass migrant labour program. Canada is actually something of a latecomer to migrant worker programs. Research in Europe suggests when migrant worker programs appear they tend to last longer and grow larger than initially intended and create pockets of migrant worker-dominated sectors disconnected from the larger labour market (Ruhs 2002) – so-called ‘migrant worker ghettos’.

The transformation of the TFW program has serious consequences for Canada’s labour market. Much has been written on the topic and the debate about the program’s desirability continues<sup>1</sup>. Much less attention has been paid to the experiences of TFWs themselves. Have they succeeded in their jobs? Are they integrating into the workplace and have they been included in the life of the broader community?

These questions are important not just for the TFWs themselves, but are pertinent to the cohesiveness of the community as a whole. It also poses a challenge to HR professionals whose job is partly to ensure smooth integration of new workers.

I have spent a number of years researching the issue, speaking with TFWs, employers, unions, community organizations and TFW advocates to learn about the experiences of TFWs once they arrive in Alberta. This research includes a large project with my colleague, Dr. Alison Taylor

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<sup>1</sup> For those interested in reading more about the labour market effects of the TFW program, they can read my article, “Making Temporary Permanent: The Silent Transformation of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program” published in *Just Labour* last fall. It can be found here: [www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume19/pdfs/02\\_foster\\_press.pdf](http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume19/pdfs/02_foster_press.pdf)

from the University of Alberta, examining workers in construction and health care, as well as smaller projects focused on workers at various skill levels.

What has emerged is a picture of determined men and women facing multiple barriers to their integration and inclusion in Alberta workplaces and communities. One of the most significant obstacles is their precarious residency status. Legal scholar Leah Vosko has called their precarious situation “partial citizenship” (2010), a status that affords TFWs only some of the rights of citizens and cuts them off from much of the benefits of citizenship.

Their precarious status arises from the TFW program rules. TFWs’ work permits are tied to their employer and the maximum stay is four years. Permanent immigration is beyond the reach of most TFWs, although most come hoping to remain permanently. Also, work permits severely restrict TFWs’ labour market mobility – to change employers they must first obtain a new work permit. The uncertainty weighs heavily on their minds. As one TFW says: “If you don’t have permanent residence you’re always afraid [of] everybody, afraid [of] your boss that you’ll be sent back home. You don’t have peace of mind.”

TFWs are more vulnerable to violations of their employment rights. Sometimes, employers use the threat of deportation to extract more work. One TFW reports resisting working on a Sunday because they attend church and being told by the employer “you know what, I will [get] a boat and I will send you home.” Even when employers assure TFWs they are secure, TFWs continue to feel that their presence was contingent on “being a good worker”, which meant acquiescing to employer demands and sacrificing personal time.

Second, discrimination and racial tension, often serve as a barrier to workplace and community integration. While experience of discrimination was uneven, most TFWs report experiencing some act of discrimination. Sometimes it is overt, such as shouted insults on a city street. Other times it is more subtle, such as TFWs receiving less desirable shifts or job assignments.

Discrimination is highly problematic as it leads to social isolation and exclusion and creates an unwelcoming atmosphere. In our research, we found that active steps to prepare existing staff and extensive training and cultural inclusiveness work are more important for reducing discrimination than formal employer policies.

The third obstacle is the lack of community support for TFWs. Unlike permanent immigrants, TFWs are not eligible for settlement services. Many TFWs speak of landing at the airport, being picked up by the employer, driven to a house and then left to their own devices. Language and cultural differences serve as significant barriers, but so do little things like knowing where to buy groceries and how to charge up a cell phone. Without proper support, it becomes much harder for TFWs to integrate into the life of the community, leaving them socially isolated.

Employers often report doing initial orientation for TFWs, but few extend that orientation to community integration. Instead informal support networks develop among TFWs and with permanent residents from their ethnic community. Community groups and other advocates also attempt to fill in the gap. In one workplace, the union took the initiative to partner arriving TFWs with existing members and to run English-as-a-Second-Language training out of the union hall.

The fourth barrier can often be overlooked. TFWs struggle to integrate, in part, because of their own conflicted motivations. Most TFWs come to Canada so they can better support their families back home. Their goal requires they keep one eye on their life in Canada and one eye on their life back home. As one TFW says “I was hoping that I will bring here my family and also my kids will settle here. That is the only thing that I want to pursue now. I want also to help my brother and sister and my wife’s brother and sister. That is the main thing [why] I want to stay here.”

The presence of a conflicted and contradictory identity is common among migrant workers (Castles 2002). Desire to provide for family back home can lead to a single-minded focus on work, at the expense of leisure activity and social interaction. They also feel the pain of being far away from their home community. Foreign workers are neither “of here” nor are they wholly “of there”, which means they struggle to maintain community links in both locations.

A large portion of the challenges faced by TFWs are a consequence of structural aspects of the TFW program itself. The program creates a vulnerable class of workers leading to a series of concerns. Continued debate over the appropriate role of a migrant worker program in Canada’s labour market is needed. However, our research results also have direct impact on the work of HR professionals. The challenges of integrating TFWs are unlike those of most new hires, and they go beyond language and cultural awareness.

Employers need to take extraordinary steps to facilitate the inclusion of TFWs in their workplaces by actively addressing the four obstacles highlighted above. They also need to look outside the factory/office walls and find ways of working with community groups to ensure TFWs become an active part of community life.

Finally, employers need to stop viewing TFWs instrumentally, as solutions to narrowly defined labour problems. Employers we interviewed report TFWs are highly productive and motivated workers. This is true. Some of the reason for their heavy focus on work is their relative isolation and exclusion from other aspects of community. HR professionals cannot ignore the negative effects that arise from that isolation.

If, indeed, the TFW program has become a permanent feature of Canada’s labour market, then HR professionals need to learn more about the experiences of TFWs so they can design better methods of ensuring inclusion in both workplace and community.

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