

# Essential Yet Expendable: Advocacy, Care, and Migrant Agricultural Workers in Ontario During COVID-19

Presented at the

*Social and Behavioural Health Sciences (SBHS) Virtual Seminar*  
Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

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# Social Mobilization As Policymaking Lever (SMAPL): A Trans-Atlantic Platform Project



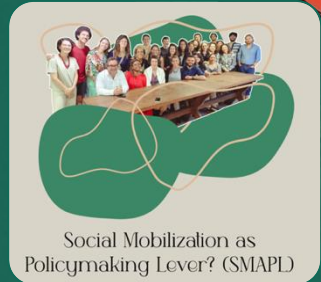
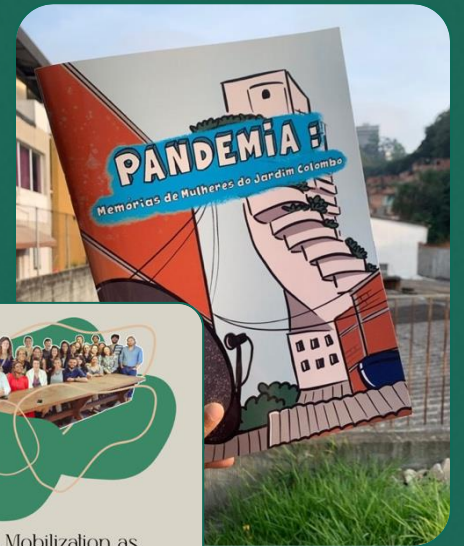
6 research sites across 4 countries: Canada (ON & QC), Brasil, Perú, and Germany



Employed **dialogical, non-extractive (DNA) methods** to reclaim global health as activist research through South-North collaboration and community-academic learning



Knowledge mobilized and shared with communities via local and international meetings, articles, reports, blogs, presentations, videos, webinars, comics, and town halls



Funders:



# SMAPL Research Focus & Rationale

1. COVID-19 policy responses largely characterized and analyzed in terms of cross-national comparisons and state-level responses
2. Advocacy/activist groups are typically excluded from policymaking
3. Many groups challenged subnational and national policymaking and mobilized to fill gaps in government responses during the pandemic



# SMAPL Research Goals & Objectives

Produce useable and contextual **understandings of activist mobilizations** and their impact on policy making

Foster **critical hope** shaping activism and research in the context of COVID-19

Increase **visibility of migrant justice struggles** and amplify their demands to Canadian public

Consciously **reflexive** about researchers' privilege and responsibility to push for transformative policy change

Produce **evidence-based data** to inform policy changes to increase migrant workers' rights

# SMAPL Theoretical Framework & Methodology



Consciously dialogic and non-extractive approaches (Freire 1970; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012)



Critical political economy theory (Chatterjee 2008; Gramsci 1992)



Discursive power & the politics of voice (Spivak 1988; Freire 1970)



Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2023; Robinson 1983)



Methods: Media & Historical Database, Policy Timeline, and Interviews

# Ontario SMAPL Team



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# Media & Historical Review



Identified **>1500 sources**



Historical exploration of **interactions between advocacy groups and policymaking** during other health crises



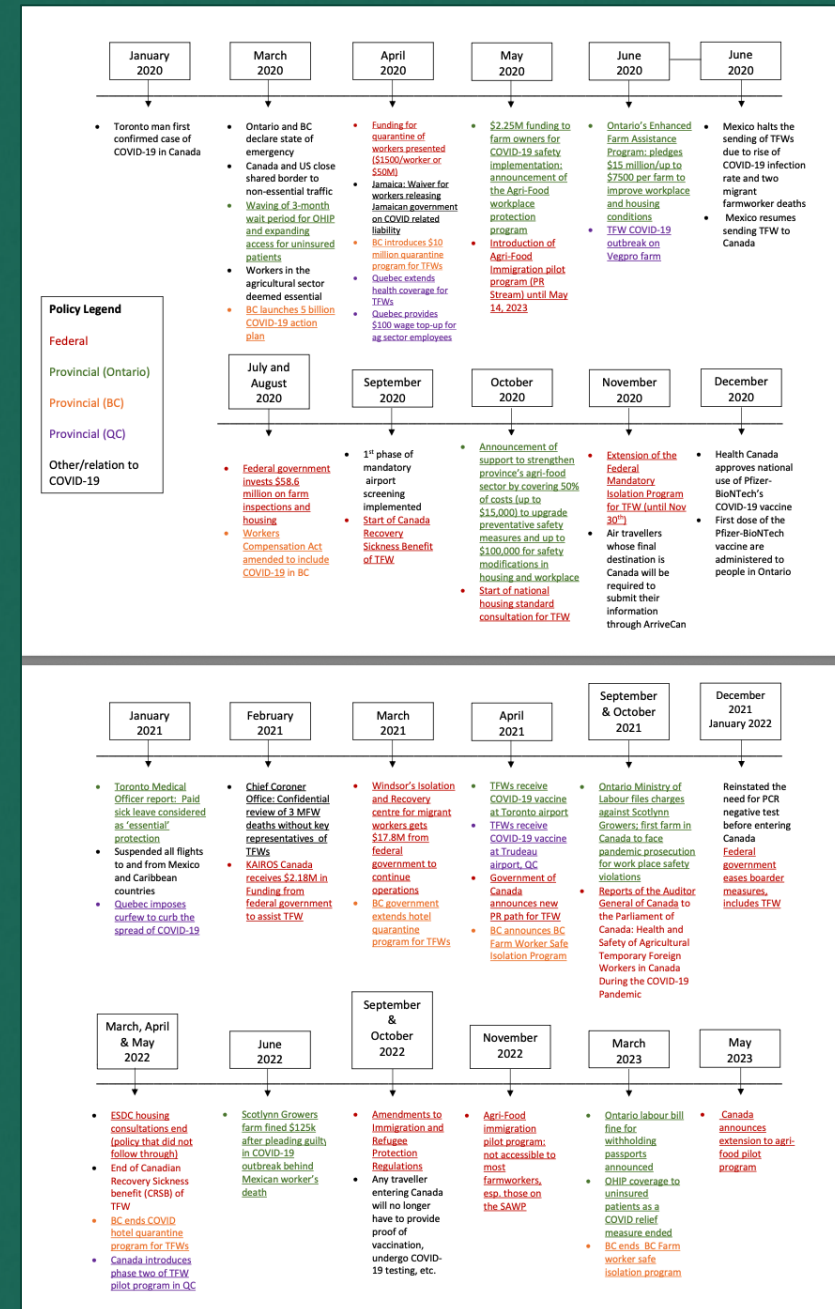
Sought to determine whether, how, and why such efforts **informed policy changes**, and what alternatives emerged

Reviewed media sources covering key policies and related advocacy/activism by several community groups:

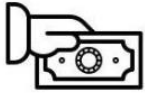
- Justice for Migrant Workers (J4MW)
- Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC)
- United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW)
- Industrial Accident Victims Group of Ontario (IAVGO)
- Injured Workers Action for Justice (IWA4J)

# Policy Timeline

- Compiled a **chronological timeline** of activism and policies related to MAWs during the pandemic to the present
- Shared with interviewees **before interview**
- Preliminary analysis showed pandemic-era advocacy/activism **built on decades-long struggles** over MAWs' health, safety, and legal status in Canada



# Visual Timeline

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                       |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>May 14</b>  | Canadian and Ontario government's announcement of the Agri-Food Workplace Protection Program - \$2.25M funding to farm owners for COVID-19 safety implementation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |     |
| <b>May 15</b>  | Start of Agri-Food Immigration Pilot Program (citizenship stream) until May 14, 2023                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                       |
| <b>May 18</b>  | HF: circulates a video taken by a migrant farm worker (MFW) that illustrates poor/unsafe living conditions and releases a petition directed at the Government of Ontario and Canada demanding better working conditions for migrant farmworkers                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                       |
| <b>May 20</b>  | Haldimand-Norfolk: reversal of proof of quarantine ID cards for MFWs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |     |
| <b>May 21</b>  | Bonifacio Eugenio-Romero tests positive for COVID-19                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |  |
| <b>May 28</b>  | Positive (1st) in Scotlynn Growers, Haldimand-Norfolk                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                       |
| <b>June 15</b> | extend immigration status to migrant workers<br><br>Mexico halts the sending of TFWs due to rise of COVID-19 infection rate and 2 MFW deaths<br><br>MWAC report release                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |    |
| <b>June 16</b> | Mexico reverses suspension of TFWs to Canada (CNN and The Guardian)<br><br>Leamington Assessment Centre closes down due to lack of provincial and federal directives (funding)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                       |
| <b>June 17</b> | MWAC: Announcement of new Pathway to Citizenship for MFWs and discussion of the importance of citizenship upon entry<br><br>Announcement: Positive in Grey-Bruce (happened early June)<br><br>Farm owners discuss a bubble system that limits the movement of MFWs between farms<br><br>Ford pleads with migrant workers to get tested and offers to send mobile units and buses to increase testing; Windsor-Essex will not enter Stage |    |

# Interviews & Data Analysis



Semi-structured interviews with  
**current activists/advocates** (n=13)



Interviews with **policymakers** (n=7)  
& other **key informants** (n=10)

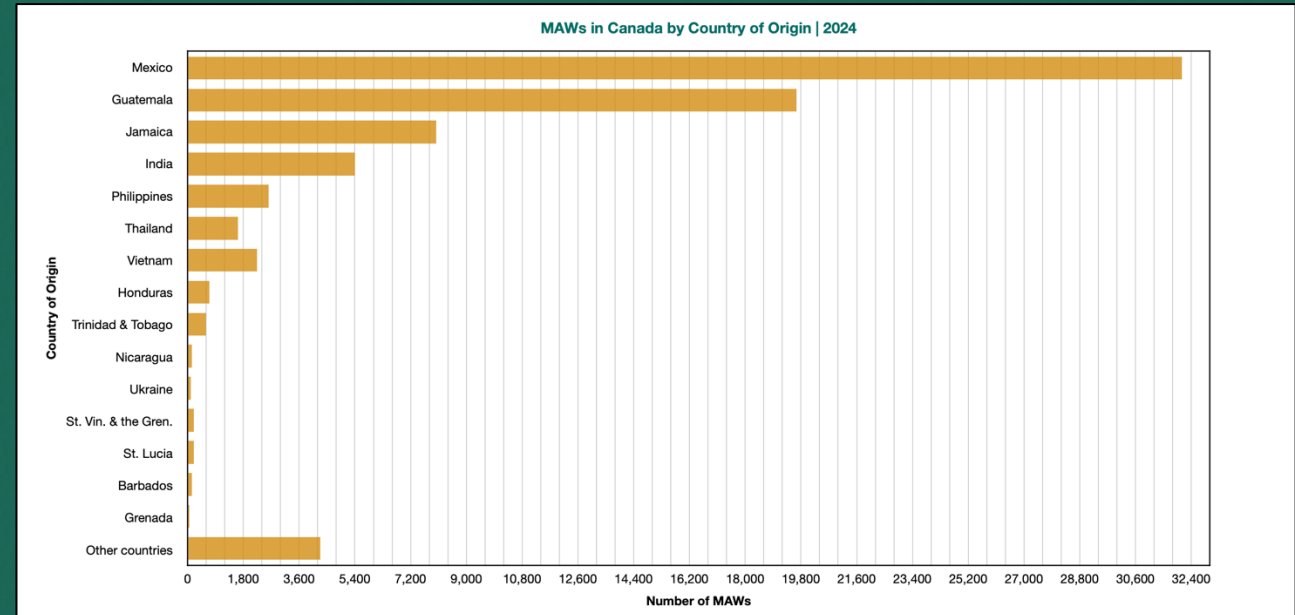
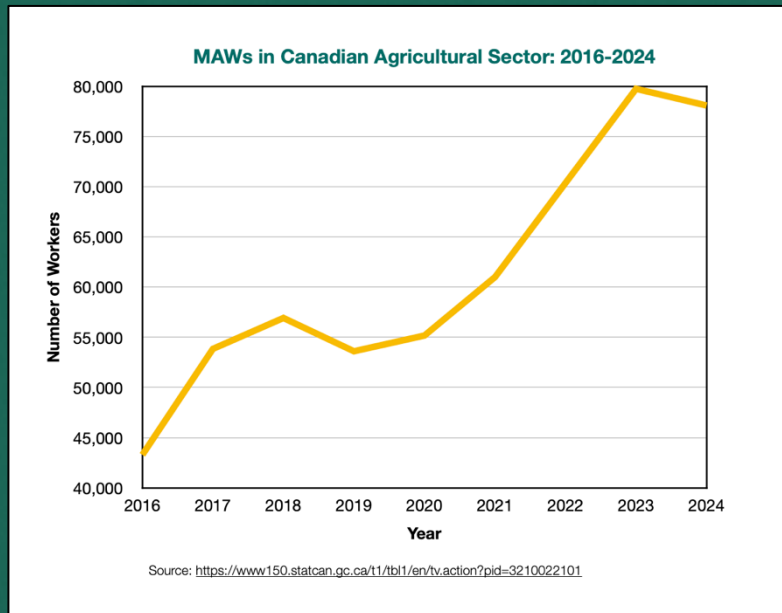


Oral history interviews (n=2) with  
**former activists/advocates**



# Background: Migrant Agricultural Workers (MAWs) in Ontario, Canada

- In 2024, **>78,000** MAWs employed in Canada
- More than **32,500** employed in Ontario
- Most from Mexico, Guatemala, and Jamaica



# Structural Vulnerabilities



Workers' immigration status & work permit tied to a single employer



Employers can fire & deport workers without a grievance process



“Naming system” of re-employment only benefits employers



Workers unable to refuse unsafe work & reluctant to report abuse



In Canada, workers must live in employer-provided housing



Workers face barriers to accessing social supports & health care



Injured workers deported before receiving health care or compensation

# Common Health Issues & the Social Determinants of Health for MAWs in Canada

Employment &  
Working  
Conditions

Low Income/  
Social Status

Lack of Support &  
Inclusion

Housing & Living  
Environments

Limited Access to  
Health Care

Language &  
Literacy  
Challenges

Gender Issues

Racism &  
Discrimination

# COVID-19 & MAWs in Ontario



HOME | SOCIETY

## Jamaican migrant workers in Ontario pen open letter likening conditions to 'systematic slavery'

Letter written to Jamaican labour minister before his visit to Canadian farms



Jamaican migrant farm workers in Niagara Region penned an open letter to the Jamaican Ministry of Labour requesting more support in the face of what they call « systematic slavery, » a days before a migrant worker died in Norfolk County.

Garvin Yapp, 57, of St. James, Jamaica, was killed last Sunday in an accident with a tobacco harvester at Berlo's Best Farm in Norfolk County, two hours southwest of Toronto.

The province has confirmed his death. The Van Berlo family, who runs Berlo's Best, said they were devastated by Yapp's death, adding "they did not lose an employee, but they lost a person they considered a member of their family," the family's lawyer Bernard Cummins told CBC Toronto.

RCI  
Posted: August 22, 2022 11:26 AM

CANADA

## Canada reviewing allegations Ontario farm wrongfully dismissed migrant workers

By Fakiha Baig • The Canadian Press  
Posted August 25, 2023 10:49 am • Updated August 25, 2023 12:35 pm



Mexican and Guatemalan workers pick strawberries at a farm in this file photo. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jacques Boissinot

The federal government is investigating allegations that a farm in southwestern Ontario sent six Jamaican seasonal workers home earlier than planned after they protested their living and working conditions.

A spokesperson for **Employment and Social Development Canada** said it is currently reaching out to its counterparts with the Jamaican government to better understand the allegations involving the farm in Norfolk County.

Politics

## UN envoy links temporary foreign worker program to 'contemporary forms of slavery'

Migrant workers make up about 15 per cent of Canada's agricultural workforce, Statistics Canada says

By Darren Major • CBC News • Posted: Sep 06, 2023 4:46 PM EDT | Last Updated: September 7, 2023



Thousands of workers come to Canada each year to work in the agriculture sector through the temporary foreign worker program. (Ivanoh Demers/Radio-Canada)

A United Nations official on Wednesday denounced Canada's temporary foreign worker program as a "breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery."

Tomoya Obokata, UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, made the comment in Ottawa after spending 14 days in Canada.



# Policy Context: The Migrant Worker Support Program (MWSP)

- Federal **funding for “migrant worker support groups”**; rolled out nationally during the pandemic as a support model for MAWs (piloted in B.C. *before COVID-19*).
  - Expanded capacity for some groups, enabled new organizations to emerge, while other groups refused federal funding for political reasons.
- **This shaped pandemic care:** groups with funding could offer more support, but their work was also structured by government-approved activities and reporting requirements.

# Research Questions



What **specific practices** did advocates undertake to sustain MAWs' lives and livelihoods?



How did these **practices render visible structural failures** in the TFWP?



How were they positioned to assume these roles over time, and what **emotional and physical impacts** did advocates bear?



# Theoretical Approach

- “Racial Capitalism” (Robinson)
- “Political Ethics of Care” (Tronto)
- “Systemic Carelessness” (The Care Collective)

## Our approach:

- Robinson helps us theorize the **structural production of precarity**; Tronto and the Care Collective help us **interpret advocates’ care practices** in response to that structure.



# Advocates' Pandemic Care Practices

We identified **three interrelated forms of care** in advocates' accounts:

1. Practical/Material
2. Informational/Educational
3. Social/Emotional



# Practical/Material Care

“There’s no food. There’s no water. There is nothing... So that’s when we stepped in, the organizations, the advocates.” (A3)

“We gave out masks, hand sanitizers, different cleaning products. There was a group here that made handmade masks when we couldn’t even get a mask anywhere.” (A2)

# Informational/Educational Care

“We would make videos out of government policies and notices... *‘This is the law... Your boss has this information... Now you know the law.’*” (A6)

“We would walk around with packages with information and our numbers and slip it under the door. Because workers weren’t getting information from anyone, from anywhere.” (A7)

# Social/Emotional Care

“My role had to change to provide... mental and emotional support, because not knowing when and what will happen... that mental state was really difficult.” (A1)

“I was also out on the street, going for bike rides with workers and connecting in safe ways.” (A6)



# Impacts on Advocates

“So, I was also just paying out of pocket, sometimes \$800... I just spray painted a big pink heart on it so that [MAWs’] employers wouldn’t chuck it out.” (A7)

“I was hit by depression during Covid... I actually accessed help... and so I slowed down a bit during those times.” (A3)

# Social Mobilization as a Policy Lever: IAVGO, J4MW & IWA4J

## The decision marks a legal victory and recognition of how systemic racism impacts migrant workers.

The practice of deeming has forced migrant workers into poverty for years. IWAJ has called for the abolishment of the practice through advocacy, drawing attention to the practices' basis in racism and injustice. This legal victory means that the WSIB will review its practice of deeming, and recognize the actual context and circumstances of migrant workers.



**40th Anniversary**  
**Injured Workers' Day**

June 1, 2023 at 11:00 AM  
@ Queen's Park

- 11:45AM - March to Ministry of Labour for a Rally @ 400 University Ave.
- 1:00 PM - Free Lunch and Celebration @ Steelworkers Union Hall @ 25 Cecil St.

WhatsApp/WeChat: 647-832-1514  
Email: [iwaction4justice@gmail.com](mailto:iwaction4justice@gmail.com)  
[facebook.com/justiceforinjuredworkers/](https://facebook.com/justiceforinjuredworkers/)  
Instagram: @iwa4j  
Twitter: @iwa4j

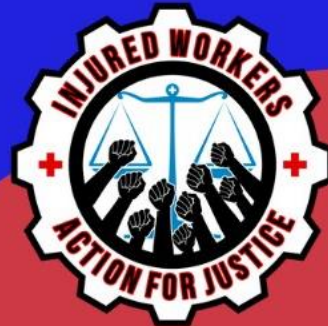






**Community Rally at WSIB**  
200 Front St. W., Toronto  
Friday, September 27 @ 2 pm





**IAVGO**  
Community Legal Clinic

#legaladvocacy  
#justiceprevails  
#milestonevictory

# Conclusions & Recommendations



Advocates built alternative **infrastructures of care**.



Their care practices **sustained workers' lives** and well-being.



These practices **exposed failures in the TFWP** and related protections.



Care alone **could not transform** structurally produced precarity.



**Structural change is required:** status on arrival, access to PR, end closed work permits, and regularization.

# MAWs' & Advocates' Long-Standing Demand: Status for All on Arrival

“The fact that migrant workers are seen as second-class citizens and they’re not given status is really **the root of the problem.**” (A7)



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# Thank you!

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# Questions?

