

# Migrant Agricultural Workers' Experiences of Support in Three Migrant-Intensive Communities in Canada

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## Abstract

Canada has intensified its reliance on temporary foreign workers, including migrant agricultural workers (MAWs) who have contributed to its agriculture sector, rural economies, and food security for decades. These workers live and work in rural communities across Canada for up to two years. Thousands of MAWs engage in recurring cyclical migration, often returning to the same rural communities in Canada for decades, while others are undocumented. Yet MAWs do not have access to the supports and services provided for immigrant newcomers and pathways for permanent residence. The exclusion of these workers from such entitlements, including labour mobility, reinforces their precarity, inhibits their sense of belonging, and reflects the stratification built into Canada's migration regime. This article draws on interviews with 98 MAWs in three migrant-intensive regions in southwestern Ontario to examine how workers construct and describe support in relation to co-workers, employers, residents, and community organizations. Drawing on conceptualizations of support as an important vehicle for social connection and inclusion that comprises social and citizenship belonging, we document how the strategies MAWs employ to forge connections are enabled or undermined by Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program, community dynamics, and the broader forces of racialization, gender, and exclusion. This article contributes to the limited scholarship on the support landscape for MAWs, whose experiences foreground the contested nature of belonging and inclusion among migrant populations across smaller cities and rural areas.

## Keywords

belonging; Canada; migrant agricultural workers; Ontario; rural communities; support

## 1. Introduction

Migrant agricultural workers (MAWs) have long supported Canada's agricultural industry, their temporary status as non-citizens cemented through cyclical migration (Basok, 2002; Tucker, 2012; Weiler et al., 2017). MAWs in Canada are most often hired under one of three streams of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): the longstanding Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), the low-wage stream, and the agricultural stream. Seasonal workers from the English-speaking Caribbean and Mexico are recruited through bilateral agreements under the SAWP to work for up to eight months per year. Under the agricultural and the low-wage streams of the TFWP, workers from Mexico, Jamaica, Honduras, Guatemala, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines can work up to two years in Canada.

Every year, thousands of MAWs, those in the SAWP program engaged in cyclical migration, return to the same rural communities in Canada for decades. While seasonal workers are entitled to certain benefits and labour protections, they are excluded from labour mobility, family reunification, and pathways for permanent residence (Faraday, 2012; Nakache, 2013, 2018). All MAWs experience exclusion from the social fabric of rural communities (Basok & George, 2021; Beckford, 2016; George & Borrelli, 2023; Hjalmarson, 2022) and are largely excluded from access to the services and supports enjoyed by rural residents, including immigrant newcomers (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021a; Caxaj et al., 2022; George & Borrelli, 2023). Efforts by local voluntary organizations and service providers to support workers are inhibited by poor coordination, minimal resources, piecemeal programming, and the employer-centred structure of the TFWP.

The result is a complex arrangement of inclusions and exclusions that renders MAWs both invisible and visible in the rural communities where they work and live (George & Borrelli, 2023). As a result, workers convey a sense of non-belonging, loneliness, and a limited sense of attachment to these rural communities (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Diaz, 2018; Mayell, 2024).

Belonging is anchored in the different ways individuals and groups forge social and emotional attachments (May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006), an intersectionally-situated process that may include and exclude them from social, cultural, economic, and political life (Esses et al., 2010; May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The transnational and increasingly stratified nature of migration (Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2022) generates hierarchies of belonging that lead us to ask not only who, but also how and to what degree specific migrants are included. The relationship between formal belonging and its everyday character articulates with everyday boundaries, gender, and racialized norms to inhibit belonging, including access to resources and services (Mattes & Lang, 2021; Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Ottonelli & Torresi, 2019; Speed et al., 2021).

The stratification of (im)migration necessitates a complex and multi-layered approach to belonging that attends to inequalities, the dynamic of exclusions and inclusions, and the situatedness of migrant workers (Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2022; Speed et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Support may form an important aspect of social inclusion, which may in turn create belonging. A sense of belonging not only shapes identity-making and well-being (May, 2013; Soto Saavedra et al., 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006) but also how and whether MAWs access the benefits, relationships, and activities to which they are entitled (Caxaj & Diaz, 2018; Mattes & Lang, 2021; Menke & Rumpel, 2022; Soto Saavedra et al., 2023; Speed et al., 2021). MAWs require a range of supports to forge their inclusion and belonging; however,

the architecture of Canada's temporary migration schemes differentiates workers and their access to these entitlements.

This article examines how MAWs describe, understand, and construct support in rural communities to identify how rural communities can foster workers' sense of inclusion and belonging. In migration scholarship, support refers to different forms of help that arise from relationships with peers, family, friends, coworkers, staff at voluntary organizations and NGOs, and professionals, and that provides knowledge, self-worth, emotional and everyday assistance, and/or comfort to migrants (Baig & Chang, 2020; Hanley et al., 2018). By focusing on support, we explore how the differentiation of MAWs shapes their social inclusion in rural communities so that efforts to enhance their belonging are responsive to workers' needs. This person-centred focus (Basok & George, 2021) is important to provide direction for improving workers' inclusion given the paucity of systematic support for MAWs in rural locales where they work and live in Canada.

Drawing on interviews with 98 workers in three migrant-concentrated regions in southwestern Ontario, we examine how MAWs understand and construct "support" concerning co-workers, residents, and community organizations. We argue that support is an important component of belonging, of which certain needs are prerequisites, such as language translation, transportation, and healthcare services. We document how the strategies MAWs employ to create connections and navigate their social identities are enabled or undermined by specific community dynamics and the broader forces of racialization, gender, and exclusion. This article contributes to the limited scholarship on the support landscape for MAWs, whose experiences foreground the contested nature of belonging and inclusion among migrant populations in smaller cities and rural areas.

## 2. Migrant Belonging in Migrant-Intensive Rural Communities

Rural communities pose specific challenges to the facilitation of belonging for MAWs. The rural communities within which MAWs live and work are dominated by the "agri-food" sector. Within Canada, farming and agriculture have long been imagined (and regulated) as exceptional spaces that operate at or beyond the edges of legal systems (Weiler & Grez, 2022). As programs intended to provide agricultural employers with "reliable" labour (Reid-Musson, 2014), Canada's TFWPs exemplify exceptionalism through the provision of tied work permits for MAWs in the interests of *national* food security. The labour of these MAWs operates within *provincial* legislation that excludes agricultural workers from many employment standards in place in other sectors, such as minimum wage, overtime pay, and the capacity to unionize (Vosko & Spring, 2022; Weiler et al., 2017). MAWs in Canada live and work across the patchwork management of employer compliance by federal, provincial, and municipal administrations, an uncoordinated arrangement that exacerbates their exclusion.

In migrant-intensive regions, farms and greenhouses radiate from small towns that form "hubs" (Basok & George, 2021; Preibisch, 2004) where grocery stores, shops, banking, health care, municipal government, and social facilities are located. Canada's 70,365 MAWs (Statistics Canada, 2022, Table 32-10-0218-01) rely on advocacy organizations, grassroots organizations, churches, and community agencies to provide support for their social, language, legal, and health-related needs (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021a; George & Borrelli, 2023; Mayell, 2016). Yet, studies show that support in rural communities is ad hoc and limited; it is also uneven across the country (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021b; George & Borrelli, 2023).

Within rural communities, MAWs often work long hours and are geographically isolated from these hubs. Many are reliant upon their employers to provide transportation for basic needs. The physical geography of the regions facilitates or limits workers' ability to move autonomously to town centres or other spaces in which they can information and support themselves. The distance between MAWs and hubs shapes and circumscribes how, when, and under what conditions workers can access services, engage with residents, make friendships, and mingle with other workers.

Circular migration further complicates the possibility of developing and offering support. In Canada, concern for belonging and support among newcomers is overwhelmingly directed toward those who are settling permanently (George & Borrelli, 2023; Roberts, 2020; Sethi, 2013). Studies that identify supports and services that foster migrants' social inclusion are anchored in settlement (Nolas et al., 2020; Ottonelli & Torresi, 2019). Yet in rural communities, MAWs are a permanently temporary workforce (Preibisch, 2004). As a result, MAWs' sense of belonging as both identity and access to entitlements is often considered relevant only within their home countries.

These compounding systems of exclusion in rural communities assign MAWs the burden of asserting their rights in everyday ways (Perry, 2020), claiming their own spaces in communities (Reid-Musson, 2018), supporting themselves and forging fledgling social ties with coworkers and community residents (Basok & George, 2021; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2016) or wider social networks (Perry, 2020), or marrying Canadian residents (Horgan & Liinamaa, 2016).

To alleviate this burden by identifying improvements in the support landscape for MAWs in rural communities, we share workers' experiences of support in the context of the TFWP and cyclical migration. This study focuses on the experiences of MAWs in three migrant-intensive regions in southwestern Ontario that have elements of support for this population. To provide meaningful feedback to communities and as a way of thinking critically about the limits and possibilities of inclusion in these rural communities, we asked workers how they seek support to address their social, economic, and interpersonal needs. In the absence of a systematic apparatus of formal support and services, MAWs seek support in ways that are shaped by the TFWP, the character of rural communities, and how such places advance their inclusion.

### 3. Context of Research and Methodology

We draw on interviews from a community-based research partnership (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) that seeks to identify the inclusion of MAWs, with particular attention to the support and service landscape for workers in three migrant-intensive regions in southwestern Ontario: Essex County, Niagara, and Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant. These regions are similar in their high density of MAWs, with approximately 9,000 workers in Essex County, 3,000 in Niagara, and 6,000 in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant. Each region operates under Ontario provincial laws, protections, and health services. Yet, they have distinct characteristics which reflect a range of crop production, farming practices, acreage, and ownership, from greenhouse vegetable and fruit production in Essex County to emerging greenhouse production alongside vineyards and tender fruit orchards in Niagara, to field vegetables and berries, orchards, nurseries, peanuts, sod, ginseng, and tobacco in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant.

While they are all depicted as idyllic rural spaces, exemplified through their tourist and popular narratives (Basok & George, 2021; Lozanski & Baumgartner, 2022), each has distinct settlement, migration, and colonization histories. Outside of the hyper-touristic Niagara Falls, the Niagara region highlights its significant role in colonial history as the first capital of Upper Canada (now Ontario) from 1792–1796 and as an important battleground during the War of 1812 against the United States. This historical prominence is woven into its broader contemporary identity as a bourgeois gastro-tourism destination, in which “local” foods and wines are featured at upscale restaurants for discerning clientele (Lozanski & Baumgartner, 2022). By contrast, Essex County struggles to project a gentrified sensibility given an industrial past fueled by corporate tomato production in Leamington (Basok, 2002). Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant was purchased from the Six Nations by treaty and opened for general settlement in 1832; the area has always been focused on agricultural production and has very few local services (Mayell, 2024; Preibisch, 2004). Leamington forms a central hub for greenhouses in Essex County; Niagara farms radiate from several small towns, creating a series of smaller hubs, which are nested between the larger hubs (small cities) of Niagara Falls and St Catharines. Farms in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant, the largest geographical region, have been historically serviced predominantly by one small town (Simcoe), although advances have been made to offer support in the town of Brantford. Workers’ access to rural hubs was also distinct across (and sometimes within) regions. While the proximity of Essex County’s greenhouses to Leamington and the relatively small farm sizes in Niagara might make it easier for MAWs to access rural hubs using bicycles, workers in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant were generally more isolated and reliant on taxis and cars.

Interviews were undertaken between July 2022 and October 2022 and, following the principles of participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) were accompanied by consultations with regional community partners and outreach activities with MAWs from June 2023 to October 2023. In addition to interviews, our research team members attended various MAW events, including health fairs, annual festivals, and recreational activities alongside visits to bunkhouses and migrant-centered voluntary organizations. To capture a person-centred understanding of support, we employed a constructivist approach by conducting open-ended semi-structured interviews with MAWs (Basok & George, 2021; May, 2013). MAWs were recruited through existing networks. MAWs were asked to identify their needs, to indicate the support and services they used, to describe their experience of support in the community, to identify barriers they faced, and to make recommendations that would provide greater support for them.

Studies show that MAWs are reliant on, and gain most support from, grassroots, community-based organizations, churches, and agencies that rely on short-term funding and volunteer labour to provide support by, for example, organizing events, soccer games, hosting dinners, and providing language classes or legal support (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj et al., 2020; George & Borrelli, 2023; Mayell, 2016). These organizations are often situated in small town hubs which also house shoe-string services for residents and MAWs (e.g., community healthcare and legal services). In rural communities, many local legal and healthcare service providers have limited knowledge of MAWs (Cohen & Caxaj, 2023; George & Borrelli, 2023).

We employed a narrative approach (Esin et al., 2014) to reflexive thematic analysis of interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to identify key actors, social relationships, omissions, tensions, and connections that workers described as they discussed support. Data was analyzed through a system of primary and secondary coding by two team members. We collated smaller codes and patterns into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which were mapped during in-person research meetings. The team-based approach was valuable in providing varied

expertise to our analysis, as team members include nursing and social science researchers, individuals with different national backgrounds (e.g., Guatemalan, St. Lucian, Canadian), and experience across not-for-profit, public health, advocacy, and community-based initiatives alongside former MAW experience. The study was approved by the University of Windsor and Western University Research Ethics Boards.

### 3.1. Profile of Participants

We interviewed 98 MAWs across the three regions in Ontario: 45 from Niagara, 43 from Essex, and 10 from Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant (see also Table 1). Our participants represented various countries of origin, representing Mexico (most dominantly), but also, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. We included both MAWs in the SAWP as well as those from the agricultural stream of the TFWP. While men made up 77% of our sample, we were able to recruit a sizable group of women participants in Niagara and Essex.

**Table 1.** Participant MAWs by region, gender, country of origin, and status in Canada.

	Total	Gender	Country of Origin		Status		
Niagara	45	Male	32	Mexico	26	SAWP	44
		Female	13	Jamaica	15	PR	1
				Trinidad & Tobago	4		
Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant	10	Male	10	Mexico	8	SAWP	7
		Female	0	Jamaica	2	TFW	2
						Unknown	1
Essex Country	43	Male	33	Mexico	37	SAWP	24
		Female	10	St. Lucia	4	TFW	5
				Other	2	Tourist	3
						Undoc.	9
						Unknown	1

## 4. Findings

When asked to identify their needs and the forms of support they had accessed, workers describe how they sought help for legal and health-related information, language support/translation, emotional and social connections, and assistance for securing food, basic needs, and health-related care. In terms of sources of support, workers identified the people and places they encountered, including friends, coworkers, employers, residents, formal service providers, and local businesses. We have organized their accounts as workers described them, arising in specific locales within rural spaces and encounters in “hubs.”

### 4.1. Coworkers and Employers

While some MAWs live independently from their worksites, most workers reside in congregate housing on or near farms and greenhouses (Basok et al., 2022). Given the difficulty of mobility in rural communities, MAWs often rely on co-workers and “friends” (often fellow workers, including those at different farms) who provide information, introduce workers to key service providers, and show co-workers how and where to access services such as grocery stores or health clinics. These relations of support, however, are mediated by social, racial, and nation-based hierarchies between workers, alongside conflicts created by congregate living and status hierarchies between co-workers.

Workers necessarily turn to employers to meet basic needs including access to grocery stores, banking, and health care. Employers are contractually responsible for providing this transportation for workers. This contractual obligation is double-edged: Although some workers identify employers as important—and supportive—mediators of access to health care, many workers are reluctant to draw on employers due to fear of repatriation should they be viewed as ill or troublesome (Orkin et al., 2014).

Due to the structure of TFWPs, workers often rely upon peers for assistance but do so within a programmatic context in which MAWs often feel they compete with one another. The precarious nature of their employment is exacerbated by workers' reliance upon employers to facilitate access (transportation) to health care, an entitled benefit but one that could put them at risk of repatriation or non-return if they are perceived as unhealthy or injured by their employer.

#### 4.2. Community Connections

Participants describe varied experiences in the way they engage with community life in the three regions. In Leamington, Jennifer describes how days off can be spent with friends “from her country,” “fishing, swimming, celebrating birthdays with the Mexicans and Jamaicans along with visits to Point Pelee.” Yet in Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a longstanding impact on the possibility of such social gatherings. Andre explained: “We used to go to Caribbean night, but since the pandemic none of that happened again....So we stay on the farm and play pool, or you go and cook, and that's just about it.”

Access to potential social spaces is unequal across the three regions due to the relative geographical isolation. While workers in Essex County are concentrated in and around greenhouses with relatively straightforward access to Leamington and other spaces, Haldimand-Norfolk-Brant's larger farms and distances limit the capacity for workers to seek interactions with other workers and residents. This participant describes how he has no capacity for social engagement because the only opportunity to move outside of the farm space happens every two weeks and there are too many tasks to be done to spend time socially:

We have no social life. We come here and it's like we are in jail, they have you there and the only day you are happy is on the 15th day because they pay you and you send that to your family, you cover your expenses in Mexico and because you are out, you may come to town to eat a burger, and that's all we have access to and only every 15 days. (Mateas and Jose, HNB)

Even though the MAWs in Essex County have access to community spaces, they do not necessarily feel welcome in these spaces. According to Paolo (Essex), “they did tell us that Canadians feel that they can't enjoy their restaurants quietly because they are very quiet. And in the streets, they can no longer walk so calmly.” Yet several restaurants and grocers provide a sense of inclusion to Spanish speakers, as store clerks try to speak Spanish, help direct workers, and carry Latinx specialty items.

While connections with local community members are important, workers' interactions with residents can be fraught and uncertain. Some workers identify racist interactions and feel a sense of exclusion that they attribute to racism. Andre describes his community: “Out of 100 (in Simcoe), 80% are racist....Being there so long, you just know how to live around them. But, it's racist.” Andre elaborated that locals are “unfriendly,” they

“walk fast past you, people, you know you are coming, and they try to like move out of the way...they try to distance themselves from you.” Other workers describe similar experiences, including people avoiding them or not responding to them or, more seriously, driving dangerously when workers travel by bicycle: “I don’t know if it is out of disrespect, racism, or whatever” (Joe, Essex County).

Despite this sense of isolation, MAWs who have connections to individual community members feel strongly supported by these individuals who know how to effectively navigate systems in Canada and have the necessary resources, such as transportation, to help workers do so. Beyond facilitating access to organized support, “good neighbours” help build a sense of belonging for workers who are grateful that residents recognize the work they are doing:

Just good neighbours. Sometimes we are in the field, and they would stop by and say, “hey, guys, you should take a break. Here are some bottles of water. Take them, have a drink. It’s boiling hot out here.” You have to give thanks for those people because they are looking out for us while we are working. (Willy, Niagara)

The geographical isolation of rural communities makes it difficult for MAWs to access community spaces, within which they can build connections with other workers and with residents. These relationships are an important means of sharing knowledge about supports and services available to workers. Connections with residents are especially important because residents often know of supports or how to identify and access them. In this way, access to community spaces—as both physical and interpersonal spaces—are critical to establishing MAWs’ sense of belonging as both an identity and as a mechanism to access support.

### **4.3. Community Organizations**

Our interviews show that most MAWs are unaware of the limited support and services that are available. In instances in which MAWs are aware of services, many have difficulty accessing services and are reluctant to do so given concerns that employers could be alerted. MAWs are hired on employer-specific work permits; they can be repatriated with no appeal process, and they must be named by their employer to return in subsequent seasons. Consequently, many MAWs see interactions with health and legal supports as risky. One worker, concerned about being sent to work in fields recently sprayed with chemicals, states that contacting the local legal clinic for support is not an option: “It’s not that some of us can’t contact someone else, but 95% of us don’t want to contact someone else, because we are worrying about coming back next year” (Winston, Niagara).

Despite these considerations, there are community supports that workers identify as helpful including grassroots organizations such as The Hub, a free store and community space for workers in Niagara. In Leamington, the Migrant Worker Community Program provides translation, language training, and transportation, as well as leisure activities including cultural celebrations, dinners, and outings.

Churches were also noted as valuable sites of support for Spanish-speaking workers in Leamington and Caribbean workers in Niagara. Henrique described how Saint Michael’s Church in Leamington offered translation services, English classes, and social gatherings:



Yes, they make an effort to [make you] feel comfortable and it's like a family. Because you go and listen to mass and after that, they invite you to take their English classes. Not every eight days, but maybe every three weeks or every 15 days, there's a gathering on the first floor to have, I don't know, coffee, cookies or something, and there's a lot of information about abuse and all. So, they support [us] in that way.

In Niagara, Caribbean workers identified church outreach programming in one hub as creating spaces in which they interacted with locals. This church matches families to farms, which creates interpersonal yet structured connections for Caribbean workers. Delroy (Jamaica) describes how the pastor organizes Caribbean nights where they “keep service, sing, and them [share a] meal. They cook, we cook, we Jamaicans, we cook, cook rice and peas and jerk chicken and dessert. We have service there.” In addition, this church organizes trips to Niagara Falls, bowling nights, dinners, and cricket games and has taken workers to health clinics. Churches however were not vested as sources of support for everyone as some workers found them to be unwelcoming, proselytizing, or offering services that were inconvenient.

For organized community support to effectively meet the needs of MAWs, the availability of these supports must first be communicated to workers. Key barriers for these services to overcome include limited transportation and the perceived and real concerns of workers that accessing health or legal services will put their employment status at risk, either immediately or in subsequent seasons. Those organizations that were able to effectively provide MAWs with support were those—often churches—that successfully overcame transportation barriers and provided services that fostered relationships but did not call into question workers' specific living and working conditions. That is, organizations that provided social spaces or basic supplies for MAWs did not encounter the same worker reluctance and were typically perceived as less risky (in terms of job status) versus those that provided health and legal supports.

#### **4.4. Interpersonal Connections and Resilience: “They say ‘take care,’ but no one will take care of you, you have to take care of yourself”**

Given the difficulties MAWs experience in accessing both informal and formal support, many describe how they address their own needs or find support in Canada by relying on family members in their home countries:

It depends on what kind of loneliness you are experiencing, for instance, certain things, you don't want to discuss with your friends right here, I just call my wife or my kids, you know, and discuss certain things like that. (Marlin, Niagara)

Despite this support, many also emphasize the importance of self-reliance. Workers emphasize how their resilience provides an anchor that derives from their work, their life plans and expectations, and their role as supporters of family members at home. Taking care of yourself and family and friends at home is described as an ethic, a disposition often attributed to their national identity, their role as fathers or caregivers, and as an expectation inscribed in the TFWP. When asked who he supports, Eddy (Niagara) explains: “Just family members and friends. You take back rice, you take back oil. Whatever you take back, you can just share. Always giving to people.” This sharing took place as further as possible throughout the community.

This emphasis on self-support and caretaking for one's family is mediated by the countervailing sense of dependence and captivity workers described. Workers describe the precarious and fraught character of their engagement and interactions with different community actors, including employers, that made them feel like "children, prisoners," or outsiders. This precarity was reinforced by many participants in all regions who felt devalued, essentialized as workers, and yet unrecognized for their contribution to local economies and food security (Perry, 2018; Weiler et al., 2017).

While many MAWs describe their own resilience, several workers discuss how their personal strategies emerged in response to limitations in the TFWP. To feel supported, workers seek straightforward, intelligible ways to access their pensions, complete taxes, ensure fair remuneration, understand their contracts, and minimize pressures and fears of repatriation. Efforts to coordinate these issues reveal the extent to which MAWs find little support from governmental representatives. Those workers participating in the SAWP specifically have designated representatives in Canada (Mexican consular officials and Caribbean liaison officers) to ensure the smooth functioning of the program. When workers were asked to identify sources of support, many Mexican workers in Essex identified the consulate in Leamington. However, when they tried to access support from the consulate, they were frustrated and found consular officers unhelpful. Jamaican workers in all regions argue that their liaison officers convey that their job is to placate employers, including the repatriation of "trouble-making" workers. Despite the programmatic supports built into the SAWP which help to distinguish it from the other streams of the TFWP, interactions with the designated support—consular representatives or liaison officers—reinforce workers' detachment within rural communities. For all MAWs, the inability to access the social provisions afforded to Canadians (such as employment insurance when in their home countries) and long-term uncertainty about whether they will be able to continue their employment in subsequent seasons undermines workers' sense of control. Andrew (Essex County) describes this experience of insecurity:

You come to Canada, you don't know if you will return. You are in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Salvador, and you don't know if you are going to return to Canada. So, we are like [hanging by] a thread because we don't know what to do or what can happen. I think and feel it would be fair for the Canadian government to reimburse us, not totally, but possibly it could help us when we go back to Mexico unemployed, for the period that we are going to Mexico.

In Essex County, Guillermo articulates MAWs' frustrations regarding payroll deductions, pointing out that they contribute in terms of taxes and employment insurance but do not have access to all benefits:

When we were coming to work here, they said: "You have the same rights as a Canadian." But that's not true because we are limited. There are so many limits, and we pay taxes as a Canadians, but we don't have the same benefits.

The exclusion of MAWs from state support such as employment insurance reflects their lack of belonging in Canada. This material social exclusion is exacerbated by the withholding of symbolic support. For Andre (Haldimond-Norfolk-Brant), belonging and social inclusion is about "recognition":

I don't think there is anybody that you can talk to about employment insurance. We have been paying employment insurance for over 20 years. Which is not benefitting us, we have to pay it, but it is not a

benefit to us....Employment insurance is work insurance and that's if you are not working, am I clear? If you are not working, then you can file and get some money, but that doesn't benefit us, see, if you're on the farm and don't work for three weeks, you don't get any pay and we don't know who to turn to and say we'd like some money. We don't know who to turn to, but every week, every week employment insurance is taken out of our pay.

Many MAWs rely primarily upon themselves and their family members abroad to navigate the difficult separation from home and the challenging living and working conditions that they face in Canada. In this context, however, these workers are aware of how this “self-support” reflects broader failures within the TFWP. Workers' lack of confidence in support from their designated government officials, the uncertainty of continuing participation in the program, the lack of access to Canadian social benefits, and the withholding of recognition result in their sense that they are the only reliable source of support.

## 5. Discussion

MAWs' accounts spoke to both the routine and everyday forms of exclusion, but also their hopes and yearnings for a more inclusionary experience in Canadian society. Key to this sense of belonging was a deep desire for recognition and valuing of their presence and contributions. Indicators of such a valuing could include both interpersonal acts of kindness and accommodation in a storefront or parish community, but equally (if not more so) were evident in their absence in various practical and programmatic ways. For instance, paying taxes without a meaningful and reliable way to access benefits, a lack of security in accessing health care services due to its potential to raise alarms with employers, or a lack of transportation to move freely, or inaccessible services sent a message to MAWs about their position in Canadian society. MAWs thus focused on their value as both workers and breadwinners to their families, while being aware of the deep vulnerability entrenched in their status as temporary workers that largely mitigated their sense of support and belonging.

By focusing on MAWs' experiences of support, we foreground how the temporariness associated with workers' cyclical migration shapes their understanding of, and ability to gain, support as well as how access (or lack thereof) to such support shapes their experiences and sense of belonging within rural communities. Support is an important aspect of belonging which illuminates workers' vulnerabilities because it foregrounds their reliance on help and assistance from others. In the absence of systematic formal supports, our participants create and find support through everyday interactions, despite limited social ties, the social and geographic segregation of migrant workers and residents, and the precarity structured by Canada's TFWP. MAWs make do in this liminal space where community-based supports and services are poorly resourced, ambivalent, and struggling to meet workers' daily health care and social and legal needs.

Despite regional distinctions, MAWs across all three regions share similar experiences of support and barriers to accessing support. Barriers are related to working and living conditions and resulting health and social challenges encountered in these environments. While some of these barriers are well documented, the navigational strategies and standpoints that migrant workers utilize to address these service gaps are less documented. Our findings indicate that MAWs rely on their identities as resilient providers (often within the narrative of a specific national identity) to tolerate a lack of support while also experiencing various dependencies (e.g., as temporary workers and on closed work permits) that keep them captive and marginal. Likewise, participants must assess services available both in terms of accessibility and in terms of the real

and perceived risk it poses should their access to such support be known to their employer. Such common reports speak to the need to explore safe and confidential pathways for legal and healthcare support for his population (Hennebry et al., 2016; Mayell & McLaughlin, 2016). The need for unmediated access to services and support for this population has been well documented (Caxaj & Cohen, 2023; Caxaj et al., 2020; George & Borrelli, 2023).

Previous studies show that MAWs have a very limited sense of belonging due to their status as non-citizens, their permanent temporariness, and the absence of connections and social ties with family, friends, and community who largely reside in their home countries (Basok & George, 2021; Caxaj & Diaz, 2018; Mayell, 2016). Our study suggests that non-belonging is further reinforced by geographical barriers, patchwork programming, and difficulties in sharing information with workers in the context of employer-centric programs. Despite the value of migrant farmworkers for rural communities, MAWs experience a distinct sense of not belonging. Within such spaces, workers make do with whatever supports they find, navigating connections that are thin and truncated, even though many workers have been returning to the same community for years.

## 6. Conclusion

It is difficult to provide support through sustainable services to enhance MAWs' belonging to these places without attending to the governance of the TFWP and the government's role in the resourcing and distribution of services. While MAWs were disproportionately and negatively impacted by Covid-19, the pandemic did increase public knowledge nationally and in these rural communities regarding workers' experiences and their essential role in our food security and agriculture industry. In response to pressure, the federal government launched a Temporary Worker Support Program in 2021 to increase services for MAWs across Canada (Government of Canada, 2022). Through this federal funding, these three regions have expanded their support and services for farmworkers in multiple ways, including providing additional legal support, language translation, English language training, community health clinics, and transportation services. Service providers have also been able to increase their outreach initiatives and enhance spaces in hubs where workers can meet each other and service providers.

Such investments have the potential to enable service providers to establish more widely accessible supports for MAWs, towards the goal of enhancing workers' belonging within Canada. Yet the provision of funding to expand programming by service providers does not address many of the key barriers to support identified by MAWs. These barriers include employer-centric governmental representatives, the risk of being repatriated or not called back in subsequent seasons, and the sense of racism within the communities in which they live and work. These limitations reveal the multi-pronged character of meaningful support. Support cannot be downloaded onto service providers through funding to enhance, for instance, outreach. Support must also come through greater oversight of employers' role as mitigators or gatekeepers in service provision and from investment in initiatives that strengthen the capacity of rural communities to meet the needs of this group, which contributes substantively to the region. Support must be embedded into the very structure of Canada's TFWP such that language learning, health care, legal aid, and tax and pension information and processing are integrated meaningfully into these programs, and migrant workers must have sufficient belonging that they can actualize these elements of social inclusion. Rural communities seeking to create belonging for MAWs must address issues that affect all residents, namely geographical isolation, and

those specific to MAWs, such as circular migration. However, until the architecture of the TFWP is changed, it is unlikely that migrant-intensive rural communities will be able to overcome the structural precarity of the TFWPs to enhance the social inclusion of MAWs.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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