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“My body is in Canada, but my Heart Remains in Mexico:” Mexican Seasonal Farm Workers’ Perspectives on Well-Being

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“My body is in Canada, but my Heart Remains In Mexico:” Mexican Seasonal Farm Workers’ Perspectives on Well-Being

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Abstract

Reliance on foreign agricultural labourers is rapidly increasing in Canada. The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) is the major federal program coordinating these placements, and Mexico, which runs the matching *Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales* (PTAT), is the leading partner country, currently accounting for 43.8% of migrant farm workers in Canada. With the growing reliance on migrant workers, there are increasing concerns about their living and working conditions and calls for program and policy changes to better serve their needs and rights. According to Loo (2014), listening to and understanding workers' perspectives is critical to creating effective reforms. Our research aligns with this perspective. Through a focused ethnography approach, we engaged with nine Mexican seasonal farm workers who have the experience of participating in the PTAT in the Province of Alberta, where there have been few such participatory studies conducted. Using a food justice theoretical lens, qualitative data were gathered through PhotoVoice and semi-structured interviews to explore the factors influencing the health and well-being of nine Mexican farm labourers who are or have worked in Alberta through the PTAT. Participants also provided insights into what it meant to work and live as migrant labourers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Life as *divididos*, a word in Spanish that means divided, captures their sentiments about life as foreign temporary workers. This research gives voice to these individuals' experiences and needs and, as such, provides insights into ways to improve their living and working conditions.

Keywords: Mexican seasonal agriculture workers, health and well-being, food justice, Alberta, Canada

« Mon corps est au Canada, mais mon cœur reste au Mexique » : le point de vue des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers mexicains sur le bien-être

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Résumé

Le recours aux travailleurs agricoles étrangers augmente rapidement au Canada. Le Programme des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers (PTAS) est le principal programme fédéral qui coordonne ces placements et le Mexique, qui gère le *Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales* (PTAT) de jumelage, est le principal pays partenaire, représentant actuellement 43,8 % des travailleurs agricoles migrants au Canada. Avec le recours croissant aux travailleurs migrants, les inquiétudes concernant leurs conditions de vie et de travail augmentent et des appels à des changements de programmes et de politiques pour mieux répondre à leurs besoins et à leurs droits se font de plus en plus pressants. Selon Loo (2014), écouter et comprendre les points de vue des travailleurs sont essentiels pour créer des réformes efficaces. Notre recherche s'inscrit dans cette perspective. Grâce à une approche ethnographique ciblée, nous avons engagé un dialogue avec neuf travailleurs agricoles saisonniers mexicains qui ont l'expérience de participer au PTAT dans la province de l'Alberta, où peu d'études participatives de ce type ont été menées. En utilisant une perspective théorique sur la justice alimentaire, des données qualitatives ont été recueillies par PhotoVoice et par des entretiens semi-structurés pour explorer les facteurs influençant la santé et le bien-être de neuf ouvriers agricoles mexicains qui travaillent ou ont travaillé en Alberta par l'intermédiaire du PTAT. Les participants ont également donné un aperçu de ce que signifiait travailler et vivre en tant que travailleurs migrants pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. La vie en tant que *divididos*, un mot espagnol qui signifie divisé, capture leurs sentiments sur la vie en tant que travailleurs temporaires étrangers. Cette recherche donne une voix aux expériences et aux besoins de ces personnes et, ainsi, fournit des indications sur les moyens d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie et de travail.

Mots-clés : travailleurs agricoles saisonniers mexicains, santé et bien-être, justice alimentaire, Alberta, Canada

1.0 Introduction

Globalization has and continues to transform the food system in Canada and around the world, leading to the reconfiguration of traditional production and distribution systems (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009). A consequence has been the domination and integration of transnational companies in the food sector, as well as changes in the range of products available to consumers, technological advances, distribution patterns, and labour migration (Qualman et al., 2018). But the impacts of globalization on the food industry and farming communities have varied, particularly between the Global South and the Global North (McMichael, 1994; Patel, 2013).

In Canada, since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s, governments have developed and promoted policies to expand agri-food exports through increased productivity (Qualman et al., 2018). Increasing output and efficiency of production in an increasing competitive global marketplace has led farmers to become more reliant on external inputs such as agrochemicals and high-tech equipment. In order to offset the rising cost of inputs, farmers have adopted an economies of scale approach, particularly in the Canadian Prairies region where specialized grain and livestock operations are predominant. As farm size has increased and mechanization has advanced, the number of farms and farmers has steadily declined (Qualman et al., 2018).

Canada has had long-term labour shortages in the agriculture sector. In 1966 the federal government responded by creating the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP; Verma, 2003). SAWP, a stream of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), was initially established as a binational agreement with Jamaica, and later included Mexico (1974) and other Caribbean countries. Mexico, which runs the matching *Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales* (PTAT), accounted for 43.8% (25,669) of the seasonal foreign workers participating in Canada's agriculture sector in 2022 (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores [SERE], 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022). Participants in PTAT can work in Canada's agricultural sector for up to 8 months per year.

Over the past three decades, as Canada has become increasingly dependent on migrant labourers in the agriculture sector (Weiler & McLaughlin, 2019), there were growing concerns about their work and living conditions, and overall well-being. Previous research has shown that workers' conditions sometimes violate what is established in their contracts, resulting in negative impacts on their physical and mental health (Beaumont, 2021; Binford, 2013; Foster, 2013; Preibisch & Otero, 2014; Salami et al., 2015; Weiler & McLaughlin, 2019; Worswick, 2010). Understanding the experiences of these workers can inform policy reforms that better serve their needs (Loo, 2014; Weiler & McLaughlin, 2019).

Most of the research on migrant agricultural workers to date has focused on the provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec, which have the highest provincial numbers of workers in SAWP; comparatively, there has been little research on this topic conducted in Alberta, particularly with Mexican migrant workers, despite rising numbers (Beaumont, 2021; Encalada, 2019). Engaging migrant workers in research is challenging because of a number of factors: (a) language barriers, (b) their demanding working schedules, (c) their lack of access to transportation, (d) their crowded living conditions and lack of privacy, and (e) the high degree of employers' control over workers' interactions. Nevertheless, listening to and documenting foreign

workers' perspectives is crucial because of their increasingly prevalent role in Canadian agriculture.

This qualitative research uses a focused ethnographic approach to explore the experiences of nine participants of the PTAT who have worked or are currently working in Alberta, and the impacts on their health and overall well-being during their stay in the province. This research was informed by a food justice theoretical framework. Food justice is a concept that challenges hegemonic structures and processes that create power imbalances in order to build a "more just, and sustainable way for food to be grown, produced, made accessible, and eaten" (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. 223). The quest for structural change in the food system through the lens of food justice has several angles; in this research, the situation of foreign farm workers within the Canadian context is examined because of their essential, yet precarious and vulnerable role in the food system (Hochedez, 2021).

To further our analysis, we contrasted the Canadian Index of Well-Being with the perceptions of well-being expressed by the Mexican seasonal agricultural workers who participated in this research. This comparison highlights the significant differences between the all-encompassing definitions of well-being presented by the federal government (e.g., high living standards, robust health, vibrant communities) and the substantial shortcomings identified by the interviewees in these and other areas. The financial gains that migrant labourers accrue while working in Alberta are insufficient to compensate for their emotional and physical challenges. Limited opportunities and barriers to social integration, access to healthcare, and leisure activities add to the discrepancies. Our research findings underscore the need for policies that address the broader needs of seasonal agricultural workers and better align with Canada's criteria for well-being, integrating a more holistic approach.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Well-being

The definition of well-being adopted by the Government of Canada originated as a citizen-driven initiative grounded in core Canadian values, and it is expressed as follows:

The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breath of expression focused on but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture.
(Canadian Index of Wellbeing, University of Waterloo, n. d., para. 1)

The framework offered by the Canadian Index of Well-being serves as a valuable tool for policy development, enabling its application across various levels of government and within diverse organizations to enhance well-being. It allows for detailed breakdowns of well-being data across different geographical areas, ranging from provincial to regional and community levels, and among various subgroups within the population. The use of this framework enables researchers, policymakers, and citizens to gain comprehensive insights into the disparities and variations in well-being among different groups and locations.

Elements of this definition of well-being align with what Encalada (2019) and Salami et al. (2015) identify as key factors influencing the well-being of seasonal farm workers: (a) work and living conditions, (b) access to health and other social services, and (c) cultural integration (Encalada, 2019; Salami et al., 2015). But research within the Canadian context shows that workers not only face barriers and challenges in accessing services and integrating into Canadian society, but some also work and live in adverse conditions. Preibisch and Otero (2014) underline the importance of safeguarding the integrity of workers' rights, as outlined in labour contracts, and to think broadly about their physical and emotional well-being. To build upon these studies and further examine migrant farm workers' well-being within the context of a globalized and industrialized agri-food system, we turn to the concept of food justice. Food justice acknowledges the social and political context shaping the agri-food system and the resulting inequities and disparities that can arise.

2.2 Food Justice

Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) describe the concept of food justice as “equity and fairness in relation to food system impacts and a different, more just, and sustainable way for food to be grown, produced, made accessible, and eaten” (p. 223). Moreover, we focus on the aspect of employment injustices in the agri-food system as a consequence of agricultural capitalism, as described by Hochedez (2021), which is directly relevant to our study of migrant Mexican farm labourers.

Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) conceptualize food justice as a term of multiple interpretations which encompass all aspects of “where, what, and how food is grown, produced, transported, accessed, and eaten” (p.5). According to Gottlieb and Joshi (2010) there are three main dimensions from which food justice can be approached:

- (i) seeking to challenge and restructure the dominant food system,
- (ii) providing a core focus on equity and disparities and the struggles by those who are most vulnerable, and,
- (iii) establishing linkages and common goals with other forms of social justice activism and advocacy—whether immigrant rights, worker justice, transportation and access, or land use (p. ix).

Food justice also presents a way to link and to interconnect all the elements involved within the food system. Fundamentally, it places migrant farmers, farmworkers, local and rural farmers and residents, as well as workers in food processing and distribution enterprises at the core of discussions about how food is currently produced and distributed, and it also analyzes how and which practices need to be transformed (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). Most notably, this transformation aims to include changes in the laws, regulations, institutions, and cultural beliefs that perpetuate injustices in a system that prioritizes economic gain over people's well-being (Holt Giménez, 2015).

Food justice also aligns with the United Nations' sustainable development goals in which the alleviation of hunger and economic and social welfare is guaranteed to *all* those involved in the food chain (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2021). More specifically, one of the social sustainability pillars in food systems calls for fair and equitable conditions for agricultural workers in order to attain a dignified and secure life (Kogut, 2020).

2.3 Food Justice and Migrant Agricultural Labour

Many Mexican agricultural workers migrate to Canada in search of a better life, trying to escape poverty and employment insecurity in rural Mexico (Binford, 2013; Salami & Joshi, 2015; Weiler et al., 2016). Framed by the equity and inclusion discourse on well-being that the Canadian Government promotes (Marsden, 2019; Perry, 2012), migrant farm workers not only have the right to fair conditions of work but also to have access to spaces where they can develop their life and build social bonds and experience cultural exchange (Weiler et al., 2016). The reality, however, tends to be the contrary. Research has exposed that migrant farm workers find themselves in vulnerable conditions, both in their home country and in Canada (Cohen, 2017; Hochedez, 2021; Obokata, 2023).

Baron et al. (2009) studied the physical demands of work in the agriculture sector. They found that in comparison to jobs in other sectors, agriculture poses a higher risk of health complications such as musculoskeletal injuries, respiratory system problems due to exposure to chemicals, dust, and other organic material commonly used in farming, and risk of developing cancer due to the exposure to carcinogenic substances such as pesticides. In addition, migrant workers also experience mental and emotional burnout (Caxaj & Cohen, 2019; Encalada, 2019; Salami et al., 2015). Because most workers have their rest area in the same place they work, it is difficult for them to disconnect, and both the public and private areas of workers' lives are regulated by their employers (Perry, 2012). Workers must rely on their employers' time, resources, and willingness for basic things, such as buying groceries, due to language barriers and lack of access to transportation (Binford, 2013). Encalada (2019) describes the situation of female migrant farm workers in Ontario, who are under constant monitoring, both in the work area and in their dorms. If a woman gets pregnant during the working season, she is immediately sent back home.

Arturo Almanza, a Mexican farm worker in Ontario, talks about solitude as one of the hardest aspects workers bear (La Grassa, 2021). Most of the workers come to Canada for work out of economic necessity, leaving their families for long periods of time. Emotionally, this creates deep emotional discomfort and pain. Limited access to the local community and opportunities for social integration due to long working days and language barriers increases feelings of loneliness (Encalada, 2019; Foster, 2013). Foster (2013) refers to foreign workers as a 'shadow population' living in Canada for a considerable time on a yearly basis, but are not included in the official number of residents, nor are they able to access the same services or develop their life as other residents. Encalada (2019) attributes this situation to a lack of real interest from government or employers in supporting workers' social integration. Salami et al. (2015) add that migrant workers are seen as disposable workforce whose main function and value are understood in terms of the work they perform. The temporality of their stay not only allows employers to have a source of 'just-in-time' (Encalada, 2019) workers, but also enables them to have a high degree of control over them.

Given the precariousness of their employment in Canada, migrant workers tend to remain compliant and are therefore easy to exploit. The repercussions of this exploitation on migrant workers are significant and diverse. Negative impacts on their health are frequently experienced and are aggravated by not having adequate access to the health system. Salami et al. (2015; 2016) describe the poor housing conditions, lack of sanitary facilities, language barriers, and mobility limitations, as the main reasons why they encounter constant health

issues. Add to this the fear of being deported and the experience becomes highly stressful. Workers are constantly anxious about committing errors or not pleasing their employers, so they push their bodies and mental health to their limits (Salami et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the situation (Haley et al., 2020). Amidst the Canadian restrictions, farm workers had to navigate different requirements to enter the country and commence the program during the pandemic; in many cases this meant an increase in costs. It also affected their health and safety due to crowded and inadequate working and living conditions, as exemplified by the death of farmworkers in one of Ontario's greenhouse operations (Gamble, 2021). When workers enroll in temporary work programs they are assured that their rights will be protected and that authorities from their countries of origin will be attentive to any needs they may have. But the labour conditions of PTAT workers pose significant barriers to their rights. Workers under this seasonal stream are typically tied to their employer for the duration of their contract. Technically, changing to another farm is possible but requires the involvement of Mexican and Canadian authorities to facilitate the process, which is complex. Migrant workers will choose to not report about poor working and living conditions to authorities for fear of employers' retaliation (Binford, 2013; Caxaj & Cohen, 2019; Perry, 2012). As a result, such changes rarely occur, which can lead to exploitative and abusive working conditions.

There is growing recognition of the need to develop a more socially just food system that improves the working and living conditions of migrant farm labourers (e.g., Caxaj & Cohen, 2019, 2020; Perry, 2018). Organizations such as The Migrant Worker Health Project and Justicia for Migrant Workers promote networking between institutions and NGOs to bridge services for temporary and seasonal labourers. These and other organizations facilitate migrant workers sharing their knowledge and experiences, as well as accessing information and counsel so they can negotiate better conditions with their employers. From a food justice lens, these actions are a form of resistance to the hegemonic view that shapes the food system in Canada. Through the food justice movement, grass-root organizations and academic research, there are people documenting these experiences and supporting workers who are seeking a better life (Perry, 2018).

3.0 Methodology and Methods

We utilized a focused ethnographic approach for this qualitative research. Knoblauch (2005) describes focused ethnography as a method for studying a distinct social phenomenon in a specific context and conducted with a sub-cultural group. This method uses short-term visits and audio-visual tools (e.g., PhotoVoice) for detailed data collection and analysis. We utilized the focused ethnographic approach to examine specific aspects of Mexican farm labourers' experiences while working on farms in Alberta, such as daily routines, living and working conditions, and interactions with employers and the broader community within which they were situated, all of which influence their experiences and perspectives on health and well-being. A focused ethnographic approach, with an emphasis on short-term, intensive data collection, was particularly useful for capturing detailed insights within the constrained time frames that the workers were available. We used PhotoVoice to enable workers to participate in documenting their experiences visually, which provided an entry point for discussion and follow up interview questions. This combination of data collection allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the workers' experiences while considering their time constraints and ensuring their voices were heard in a respectful and safe manner.

Recruitment of participants involved a combination of approaches. One approach was through direct contacts made with the workers during the first author's graduate program practicum with the Mexican Consulate¹. As a volunteer of the consulate, workers were greeted at Edmonton's airport upon their arrival and given information about how to contact the consulate if needed. These encounters were also opportunities for the first author to be introduced as an international graduate student from Puebla, Mexico researching the experiences of Mexican seasonal agricultural workers in Alberta. Although approximately a hundred Mexican farm workers were met in this way, only five agreed to participate; others indicated that they did not want to jeopardize their employment. Four more participants were recruited through referral, a Facebook post, and a casual encounter at a grocery store. In total, nine male seasonal Mexican workers agreed to take part in this research, which was conducted from April to August 2022. Attempts to include female migrant workers were unsuccessful. This is likely due to the fact that there is only a small percentage of women in the PTAT and they are usually under stricter surveillance by their employers (Spitzer, 2022; Encalada, 2019).

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to take photos of different aspects of their living and working conditions, which were discussed at the beginning of the interviews. The photographs served as a starting point for them to talk about their feelings of being in a context very different from their home communities but within which they must adapt and be productive workers. Initially, we considered the photographs to be simplistic, lacking provocative elements. Through their descriptions and subsequent discussion, however, the images came to life, vividly illustrating the participants' daily lives and how their stay in Canada is characterized by repetitive routine that revolves around work. The photographic images and participants' narratives revealed that their experiences are profoundly shaped by their work and their physical and social environment.

We received over fifteen photos from participants, and measures were taken to anonymize the images in the sharing of this research, in order to prevent identification of the location and identity of the participants. A pre-formed question guide was used to structure the remainder of the interview, but interviewees were encouraged to comment on any other topics they felt were relevant. Only two interviews were conducted in person, the remainder were conducted by cellphone. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and ranged from 40 to 80 minutes in length; all were digitally recorded.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English and analyzed through a combination of deductive and inductive analysis. Initial categories were created based on the available literature on migrant farm labourers, followed by the addition and refinement of categories or themes based on the PhotoVoice and interview data.

4.0 Findings

The findings and analysis presented in this section are derived from interviews conducted with nine Mexican migrant agricultural workers who are or have participated in the PTAT program in the Province of Alberta. Their stories about their life in Alberta, as well as back in Mexico, provide a glimpse of their lived realities, which remain largely unknown to the Canadian public despite their crucial role in our agri-food system.

¹ The practicum was a requirement for the Master's of Arts in Community Engagement at the University of Alberta. It was completed from August 2021 to April 2022.

4.1 Participant's Profile

All nine participants in this research had previous agriculture experience, knowledge and skills, which are a requirement of the PTAT. At the time of this research, six interviewees were working in Alberta, one participant was working in British Columbia but had previously worked in Alberta, and two were former participants of the program but are now working in other sectors. Besides working in Alberta, participants mentioned having worked in the agriculture sector in Manitoba, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia.

Participants' ages ranged between 30 and 55, with the majority being 40–45 years of age. Enrolment in the PTAT requires applicants to be between 25–45 years old, but older workers who have been in the program can continue to receive contracts. Participants had between five to seven years of participation in the program. Six of the interviewees worked in honey production (see Figure 1), one worked in silviculture, one worked specifically with tuber crops while another worked on a farm producing a range of vegetables. For further details on participants' profiles and work experiences, see Table 1 below.

Figure 1. Participant's co-workers at a honey farm preparing the hives for winter.



Table 1. *Participants Profile and Work Experiences*

Participant	Age (years)	Years in the program	Experiences in other provinces	Currently working in Alberta	Type of farm work in Alberta	Work experience in another agricultural sector
1	30–35	< 5	Yes	No	Diversity of vegetables	Yes
2	40–45	> 10	No	Yes	Bees/honey	Yes
3	40–45	> 5	No	Yes	Bees/honey	Yes
4	45–50	> 10	Yes	Yes	Bees/honey	No
5	50–55	< 10	Yes	Yes	Tubers	Yes
6	45–50	> 5	Yes	Yes	Bees/honey	Yes
7	45–50	> 10	No	Yes	Bees/honey	Yes
8	45–50	< 10	Yes	Yes	Bees/honey	Yes
9	35–40	< 5	Yes	Yes	Silviculture	Yes

Daily work and life at the farms. The nine research participants described arriving during the cold winter months (February–March) for the start of their contracts, which ended during the onset of fall and winter (October–December). A maximum of eight-month work contracts is permitted for seasonal workers but the length of their individual contracts depends on their employer and the work demands. All participants agreed that their work and life schedules, although somewhat variable depending on the nature of their work and their employer, formed a weekly routine. From Monday to Saturday, work typically started between 7 and 8am. Their contracts stipulate that the working day is eight hours, but according to participants, it can be as long as 10 to 14 hours as there may be jobs that need to be finished once started. It is expected that workers are paid for the extra hours they work, but two participants said that sometimes overtime is compensated in other ways, such as having time off on a day when there is not much work. After finishing the workday, participants commented that they prepare and eat dinner, do household chores, call their families in Mexico, and, ‘sleep as much as you can’ to prepare for the next day. Sundays are the only day off and this is when they usually shop for groceries, prepare meals for the week ahead and tend to other domestic chores. There may be recreational opportunities on Sundays as well, such as playing sports and visiting with other workers.

Language barriers were experienced by most of the participants as acceptance into the PTAT does not require English language proficiency. They commented that those who can understand and speak English will often act as the translator between the workers and the employer and assist when others want to access different services. This language limitation also extends to social interactions.

The physical experience. For participants, their body is their primary instrument; as such, much of their work experience is influenced by their physical capacity and the weather extremes of Alberta. Coming from Mexico, the hot weather they experience in Alberta’s summer months is not unusual or difficult, but dealing with the cold and snow during the winter months is novel

and can be challenging. One worker had a positive impression, however: “Well, me, I do like the cold, besides, here [where he is originally from] we don’t have snow” (Participant 1; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Participant’s morning view from his workplace.



Another worker humorously compared himself and his work outdoors in the winter to that of a sled dog: “That is when you pull those carts...over the snow you go pulling...as if you were a dog” (Participant 3; see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Marks of a vehicle in snow leading to work.



The physical nature of much of the work is demanding and participants’ perception is that younger applicants are typically selected first because of this. Aging and not being able to carry out tasks is something that participants worried about. One participant reflected on his experience with the aging process:

When I arrived, I was young. Then, I used to make fun of the elders. They used to tell me “really are you going for a run?”, because I have always liked running. Right now, I gained some weight, but before I used to play basketball a lot, I was fit, I ran. Then I used to tell the elders, “really? Are you tired already?” And now, I am in their place, and I think, yes, my mom was right, it is really exhausting to live the life like this. (Participant 8)

There are exceptions, however, as one participant commented: “Well at that time [of being selected], I wasn’t young, so I was lucky to enter the program” (Participant 6).

At the end of each season, workers receive an evaluation from their employer. A poor evaluation is negatively regarded by the Mexican authorities and could jeopardize their work at the farm next season, and their continuation in the program. Because workers want to secure a position for the following season, they tend to push their bodies to the limits in order to achieve a high level of performance and have their work noticed by the employer.

4.2 Access to Health Care

Maintaining good health is a main concern for the workers. They worry that if they get sick or injured, the employer won’t hire them again. Consequently, workers try to stay healthy and avoid injuries. If they do become ill with digestive issues, a cold or flu, or have a low-grade fever, they will self-administer medicine they have brought from Mexico. A participant explains:

I try to bring things from Mexico. For example, here I have some medicines like Naproxeno for the headaches, or Terramicina. I go to the medical center of my town and I tell the doctor, “if I have stomach problems, can you give me something?” And he gives me medicine. (Participant 4)

On the other hand, one participant recalled with gratitude his previous employer's caring attitude, pointing out that not all employers are as compassionate:

Well here, in any situation we have or any illness, I tell the patrón [employer], and he takes us to the doctor. If we don’t have pills he gives us a pill, or if it is something serious the patrón takes us [to the doctor]. But every farm is different. (Participant 5)

Accessing health services, such as calling 911 for an ambulance, is also complicated because of language barriers, as Participant 9 explains:

Unfortunately, the language sometimes limits that. You have to go to the patrón, so he takes you to the hospital, and he acts as an intermediary. I think [there should be] a translator at the hospital. Why? Because the demand is high, we are already thousands of foreign workers in Canada

without the language. If the government is accepting you as a worker, I think that it is the Canadian government's responsibility to provide a translator in the hospital, at least for an emergency.

4.3 Food Access

When participants were asked how they access food, they spoke about going once a week to shop for groceries in the nearest city or town, usually on Sundays, but this depends on the employer availability and the work demands. Food purchased includes meat, vegetables, fruits, and different Mexican products when they find them. According to the participants, even in some small towns it's possible to find familiar and culturally appropriate foods, such as tortillas, which they will make from scratch if they cannot buy them prepared. A few participants commented on bringing cooking ingredients, such as spices, from home. All the interviewees said they are responsible for cooking their own meals, which typically takes place on Sundays for the week ahead, but they may also cook one or two other days, including preparing snacks for mid-day breaks.

Participants' opportunities to take part in host family or community gatherings were rare; the exception tends to be at the end of each working season when employers offer a meal to thank them for their work. On occasion, some employers' family members participate. Of the nine participants, only one talked about his previous employer organizing several meals where his family was present.

An important aspect that affects workers' access to food is the employer's attitude towards the use of vehicles. Some workers said that their employer will lend them a vehicle to use for shopping, while others said that only the employer or someone they hire will drive the workers to grocery stores. One worker complained about the dependency on his employer:

The employer has the obligation to facilitate transportation to do our shopping. But the employer does what is convenient for him. He takes you to the nearest town. We have struggled a lot in that aspect, because we have told him that it is more convenient for us to go to Edmonton, even if it is only once every 15 days. Why? Because there are many more Mexican products and because the products are cheaper. But our employer says that it represents more expenses for him. He has to buy more gas, he needs to pay a driver, and it is not easy for him. So, he takes us to the nearest town, even if that means we have to buy the products at a higher price. (Participant 9)

The primary objective of participating in PTAT is to save as much money as possible; hence, the workers look for low-cost food items and mostly prepare their own food.

4.4 Perceptions of Well-Being

All the participants referred to well-being as the feeling of being at ease or having a sense of peace, which encompasses different aspects of their life including, the personal sphere represented by the family, their financial situation, and a positive situation in the workplace.

Families were identified as top of mind by participants, and they expressed the importance of putting their loved ones' well-being first. Concern for their families' welfare is the main motivation behind participants' enrolling in PTAT and working outside their country. In order to support their families financially, all participants are willing to live, in their words, "*divididos*" [divided] between the two countries:

For me, well-being depends on several factors that we as migrants can't have together. Because, well-being, as I understand it, is having the family and work aspects [come] together. If you cannot have those two fundamental aspects in your life [together], then you don't have well-being. [If] I have my family, a good job, [good] income, [if] my children are studying, then I have well-being. But as migrants we can't have well-being entirely. We are divided. (Participant 9)

Participant 3 spoke about the negative consequences of working abroad on his marriage and his well-being:

The program provides work, better income, but well-being from my point of view? Not necessarily, right? For example, in my case, it didn't give me well-being because I got divorced. So, there are perks and negative things. (Participant 3)

With the income earned, workers can improve their situation and increase their family members' possibilities to have what they believe is a better life: "Coming here to Canada has changed my life completely. Because when I started, I didn't have anything, so coming here changed my life, economically, for my kids and my wife" (Participant 5).

Their work environment is also considered important to their well-being. Three workers specified that relations in the workspace, such as solidarity, cooperation and teamwork, are essential for their well-being. Another related theme that came to light is workers' feeling of well-being when their work is recognized and appreciated by the employer. A participant recalled:

The day I was preparing divisions [dividing a beehive into a new colony] with the boss [foreman]. I was doing one side [without the foreman's supervision] and he was doing the other side. The patrón [employer] asked the boss, "why is this lad working alone?" and the foreman answered him, "because he knows what he is doing". "But you should supervise him"...and he responded to the patrón, "he knows what he is doing". Then the patrón said "well, if you say that it is fine". I felt they recognized my work. (Participant 2)

Positive recognition provides a sense of security, although it is not a guarantee that they are going to be rehired. The employer's evaluation of workers' performance at the end of each season is more of a direct influence on whether they will be hired or not.

Housing is another sphere that has gained a lot of attention from researchers and the media due to the impacts on workers' mental and physical health (Salami et al., 2015; Haley et al., 2020). Three of the nine participants commented that they felt their living conditions were adequate and comfortable, and specifically referred to not feeling crowded. This was not the case for another participant who shared: "We don't have the possibility to cook every day because we don't have space or time. We are living more than 10 in a house and we only have a few stoves to cook, so unfortunately you don't cook every day" (Participant 9).

Figure 4. Participant's housing during his stay in Alberta.



Emotional and mental aspects: Loneliness and anxiety. Participants talked about feeling lonely in their life divided between Mexico and Canada. One participant explains: "You can talk to your family over the phone, with a video call, but you are alone" (Participant 2). In addition to loneliness, participants said that they can experience a high level of stress, depending on their work and living situations. But they tend to keep negative emotions such as loneliness and anxiety hidden from their families instead of worrying them, which increases emotional strain. To deal with this, some workers focus even more on their jobs, while others will make a point of visiting other co-workers during the weekends if possible.

The attitude of employers towards the workers significantly influences their emotional and mental state. Workers who reported feelings of anxiety said it was because they felt they needed to be constantly on the alert to protect their position on the farm. The situation can be further aggravated, either because of a tense environment with co-workers or the boss, inappropriate housing conditions, or lack of services such as the internet to communicate with the family. All these factors can influence and result in stress. On the other hand, when an employer

is supportive, even when the workers still miss their family, it increases their sense of well-being and overall satisfaction with their job. One of the nine workers, for example, spoke about how much he enjoys the environment at the farm he is working on, and how he would like to share this experience with his family.

When asked how they think the general public or government representatives view migrant workers, participants said that they feel their reality of working on farms in Canada is invisible to the general public and of no interest to authorities. One participant expressed his appreciation for being able to tell his story by being included in this research: “Well, thank you. Because never before, while I have been here, was there something like this. Never have we talked to another [external] person [about our situations]” (Participant 8).

4.5 Workers’ Cultural Integration

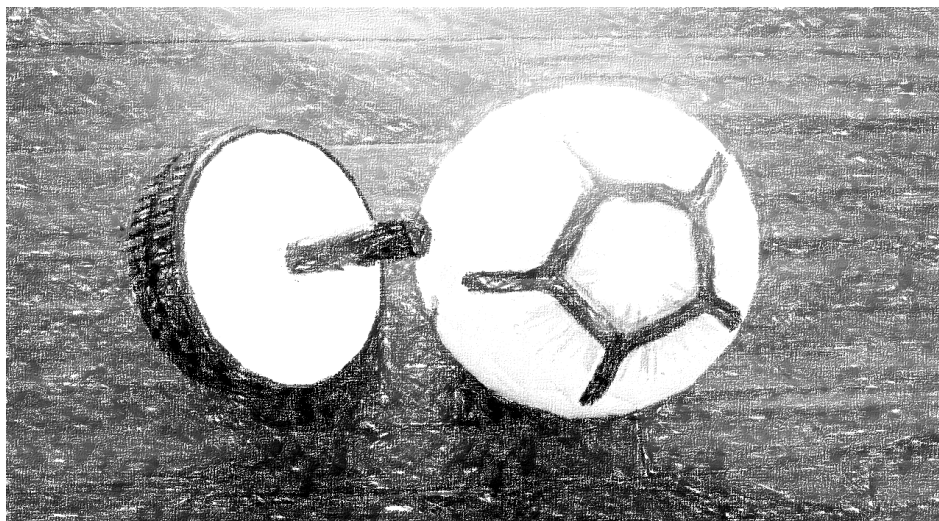
“Here you don’t have a life because you are just dedicated to work—a modern slave.” (Participant 2)

When participants in this research were asked if they have opportunities for connecting and integrating into the local community, all commented that due to a lack of free time and access to transportation the opportunities were limited. Participant 4 said:

Well, we don’t have time. We work from Monday to Saturday, and, sometimes during the harvest you can be heading back at 9 or 8 pm. Then Sunday, your day to rest, is the only day we have to do the laundry, clean the house and those things. Then, the only thing you [could] do, is going to another “trailer” [trailer] to chat with another co-worker.

When asked if there were any recreational activities they took part in, some mentioned physical activities, such as playing football, doing some exercises (see Figure 7) or going for a bike ride, while others said they would organize a meal and get together with other workers. But mostly participants said Sundays were spent doing domestic chores, resting and catching up on sleep.

Figure 5. Participant’s recreation and exercise items.



One participant, who had an overall more positive experience on the farm he worked on compared to the rest of the workers, told about a social activity (see Figure 6) organized by his employer:

That day the patrón invited us to his place, to a barbecue with his family—his parents, his wife, his children—and us workers. He invited us and opened the door of his house. Such a thing hardly ever happens for us in Canada. He [the employer] used to tell us, “You are part of my family, you work for me, you are my friends, you are my family”. (Participant 1)

Figure 6. Participant at a barbecue organized by the employer.



Participants were asked what impacts they made or would like to make to Canadian society. Some said that beyond their labour they would like to share more of Mexican culture, but time constraints and language barriers made this difficult. Participant 3 explained why Mexican workers and he, in particular, have had a positive impact in Canada:

We create a positive impact in general, in the economy, in culture too, because we are friendlier people, warmer, more loving. For example, I know a lady from church. She feels completely lonely here. In this culture children live very independently, away from their parents and elders. Not like us Mexicans; we embrace our parents, our grandparents. This lady was very depressed. She really wanted to visit Mexico and she went to visit my relatives. I told them “please welcome this person, she is a good person”. She was there for a whole month and everyone was really happy. Then, in that sense, I did impact a person in a positive way.

5.0 Discussion

Concerns about the living and working conditions of migrant farm workers in Canada have been brought to light by previous research, mostly conducted in other provinces (e.g., Caxaj & Cohen, 2019; Champagne, 2022; Encalada, 2019). Our research expands upon the existing literature by using a focused ethnographic approach to explore the experiences of Mexican seasonal farm workers' experiences while working on farms in Alberta. Through this approach, we were able to listen to workers' perspectives and gain insights about the advantages and challenges of participating in the PTAT within this provincial context, and the effects on their overall health and well-being. Although many of the findings align with those of previous research, our study also reveals issues unique to Alberta and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, we draw comparisons between our findings and those discussed in the literature.

5.1 Perceptions of Well-being

From interviews conducted with the PTAT workers, well-being is perceived as a sense of peace and work-life balance, encompassing individual, family, financial, and workplace aspects. For many workers, family well-being is paramount, but economic necessity drives them to endure separation from loved ones for extended periods of time. Participants describe their lives as “*divididos*” [divided], highlighting the emotional and geographical separation they experience. The Canada's Index of Well-being includes aspects such as good living standards, robust health, vital communities, and access to leisure and culture. However, interviews with PTAT workers reveal several challenges to achieving these criteria. While the program provides better income, separation from their family often leads to adverse outcomes such as emotional stress, loneliness, and marital strain. Furthermore, farm work is physically demanding and is associated with high risk of injury, yet workers face significant barriers to accessing healthcare. Hence, the emotional and physical conditions experienced by the workers stand in sharp contrast to the notion of ‘robust health’. Lastly, the barriers to social integration and lack of access to leisure and cultural activities further highlight the discrepancy between workers' lived experiences and the government's well-being criteria. This points to the need for seasonal migrant labour policies and programs that better align with a food justice framework. Additionally, it may be beneficial to broaden the discussion of well-being by reflecting on alternative approaches, such as “*Buen Vivir*” proposed in South America, which advocates for a holistic view of well-being incorporating spiritual elements that highlight the connection between individuals and the land (Torres-Solis & Ramírez-Valverde, 2019). Considering such perspectives, among other options, can contribute to a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of the well-being of seasonal migrant workers.

5.2 Physical and Mental Health

Physical health is a fundamental dimension of well-being and is a key requirement for participating in the PTAT; without optimum health participants cannot perform the physically demanding work that is expected of them. Previous investigations have exposed conditions that put migrant workers' health at risk and the barriers to accessing timely and appropriate medical services (Caxaj & Cohen, 2019; Salami et al., 2015; Spitzer, 2022). Participants of this research spoke about their dependence on the employer for accessing the Canadian health care system and their reluctance to do so, instead self-diagnosing and relying on medications brought from Mexico. They identified ways to improve upon the current situation (i.e., language translation,

transportation) in order to improve access to health services and safeguard workers' health, which was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Crowded housing facilitated the spread of illness among the workers and increased anxiety levels. Restrictions imposed during the pandemic increased their isolation as their opportunities to leave the farms for shopping or visiting other workers were limited. Besides the physical aspects of health, Salami et al. (2015) report on the mental and emotional health of temporary migrant workers:

Maintaining mental health was a common challenge experienced by participants. Factors and conditions contributing to poor mental health were poor working conditions, poor working relations, communication barriers, loneliness, competition among colleagues, injustices and powerlessness, poor nutrition, insufficient sleep, stressful and unsafe working conditions, and abuse. (p. 548)

Many of these mental health stressors were also brought up by research participants who said they felt lonely due to the lack of social interactions. Caxaj and Cohen (2019) also write about the end of the year employers' assessments workers receive, stating it acts as a strategy to increase their productivity. Comments from the workers interviewed in this research also align with these findings; they felt the need to constantly prove they are good at their job and worthy of rehiring. This can take a cause high levels of stress and anxiety and take a physical toll.

5.3 Access to Adequate and Culturally Appropriate Food

Food is essential to ensure the health of farm workers; inadequate nutrition can lead to deficiencies and negatively impact workers' health and well-being (Weiler et al., 2017). None of the research participants mentioned problems related to insufficient food or lack of knowledge of where to find it, but similar to Spitzer's study (2022) we found that food access depended on the employer's willingness to provide transportation to grocery stores. Access to cooking facilities was also a limiting factor for some participants that lived in a house with several other workers (see also Weiler et al., 2017). Fundamentally, this relates to what Hochedez (2021) and Encalada (2019) characterize as a vulnerable situation because of migrant workers' high level of dependency on their employer's willingness to provide adequate living and working conditions.

5.4 Cultural Integration

Opportunities to participate in social activities with co-workers, the farm family or in nearby communities can also have an impact on the mental and emotional health of participants. As Foster (2013) points out, there are limited opportunities for seasonal foreign farm workers to integrate into society. In part, this is due to daily and weekly work demands, but it is also due to the considerable distances between farms and from farm to urban centers in Alberta, which increases the difficulties of participating in social and community activities. In comparison to other provinces outside of Canada's prairie region, the increasing size and mechanization of farms in Alberta has resulted in a steady decline in the number of farms and increasing distance between them, which has also negatively impacted rural populations in general. Our research also identified language barriers as being one of the biggest challenges to achieving social integration. Salami et al. (2016) also

found that services, such as medical care and public transportation, are generally not equipped to deal with language differences of farm workers, which our research participants confirmed. Participants in our research also identified difficulties accessing services to assist them with tax filing, legal advice, and prompt and efficient banking services.

6.0 Conclusions

Research on migrant farm labourers in Canada has identified numerous aspects of concern regarding their living and working conditions, and the impacts on their health and well-being. In this research, we focus on the under-researched context of the province of Alberta, and the lived experiences of Mexican seasonal agricultural workers participating in the PTAT. By employing a focused ethnographic approach and utilizing qualitative participatory research methods of PhotoVoice and semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish, we were able to engage with nine male Mexican seasonal agricultural workers and hear their perspectives on being part of the PTAT and the implications for their health and well-being. Informed by a food justice lens, we agree with the position taken by Hochedez (2021), Loo (2014) and others that migrant farm workers should be central to discussions about equity and sustainability of the Canadian food system. But despite acknowledging the importance of this approach, we found there were several obstacles to achieving this, such as workers' fear of reprisal for speaking up, their busy work schedules, language barriers, and the significant distances between workers' locations in Alberta.

Research conversations with participants began by discussing the photos that they took to visually represent their working and living situations. These images aided in learning about their perceptions of well-being and the factors shaping their physical and mental health, which were further explored through the semi-structured interviews. In addition to the physical demands of the work, participants spoke about their lives as being fragmented, living in two realities, which takes a toll on their mental and emotional health. Even though they are able to attain a level of income in Canada that they could not achieve in Mexico, it comes at the cost of being separated from their families. While working in Alberta, feeling isolated can be quite prominent because of the distances between the farms and towns or cities which limits opportunities for social integration. Access to affordable and culturally appropriate food is also impacted by these distances, and their high dependency on their employer for transportation. What becomes clear through these findings is that migrant workers are not able to achieve several dimensions of well-being, as presented by the Canada's Index of Well-being. Our analysis emphasizes the critical need for a more inclusive and supportive framework that aligns with the well-being of individuals in the communities where they live and work to ensure social justice and equity for migrant farm labourers in Canada. It highlights a significant disconnect between Canada's well-being index and the actual enforcement of labour laws for migrant workers. Moreover, our research demonstrates the stark differences in the impacts of globalization on well-being between the global North and South, as evidenced by our findings.

This research thus provides useful information for policymakers interested in improving agriculture seasonal labour programs so as to better meet the needs of migrant workers by guaranteeing improvements in their overall working and living conditions. With continuing labour shortages in Canada's agriculture sector and the growing reliance upon foreign farm workers, it is imperative to create programs and conditions that uphold the rights of these individuals.

In future research, including more participants from different types of farming operations in different regions of the province would be informative. We were unable to recruit female migrant workers into this research but it is important to do so as their challenges and experiences likely differ from male workers. Future research could also explore workers' strategies for coping with adversity, including establishing or connecting with supportive social networks.

This field research was conducted in 2022 and there have been recent reforms to the SAWP that aim to improve conditions for Mexican workers in Canada (Government of Canada, 2024). This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of PTAT and the Mexican Government has expressed the need to enhance the benefits of orderly, regular, and safe migration (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2024). Additionally, Mexican officials have emphasized the importance of aligning the program's structure with Canada's new labour regulations which would improve labour and health conditions for Mexican workers as well. The Mexican administration has highlighted its commitment to enhancing labour rights, aiming to prioritize worker well-being in the program's revisions (Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, 2023).

We would like to think that these reforms are partly a response to ongoing advocacy by researchers and organizations who have long highlighted the need for improved conditions for SAWP and PTAT workers. Studies and reports have consistently pointed out issues such as inadequate living conditions, insufficient wage protections, and lack of comprehensive health and safety measures. By addressing these concerns, the reforms aim to enhance worker welfare by improving accommodation, wage fairness, and health and safety standards. They also seek to ensure compliance with modern standards by aligning the program with updated labour regulations to ensure fair treatment and protection for workers, which has been a key concern among advocates. These modifications are expected to have a significant impact on workers' experiences in Alberta, potentially including discussions on pathways to permanent residency for those wishing to take part in this opportunity.

Another recent change brought into effect in the Canadian migration system which will negatively impact Mexican seasonal workers ' is the need for Mexican citizens to now have a temporary resident visa to enter Canada by air. This new requirement adds an extra layer of complexity and bureaucracy, posing additional challenges for both employers and workers in PTAT which could hinder the timely and efficient arrival of workers, thus affecting the agricultural sector's labour supply.

While the 2024 reforms to the SAWP represent a significant step towards improving the conditions and rights of Mexican workers in Canada, we believe that the additional entry requirement underscores the need for a holistic approach to policymaking. Balancing enhanced protections and streamlined processes is essential for the continued success and sustainability of the SAWP. The outcomes of these reforms will be crucial in shaping the future landscape of temporary agricultural work in Canada, ensuring that it remains fair, efficient, and beneficial for all parties involved.

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