

# Abuse is systemic in Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker program, Amnesty International finds

## ‘Canada has destroyed me’: Labour exploitation of migrant workers in Canada

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The design of Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) exposes labourers from the Global South to shocking abuse and discrimination, Amnesty International charges in a new report.

Released on Thursday, [‘Canada has destroyed me’: Labour exploitation of migrant workers in Canada \[PDF\]](#) criticizes the structure of the TFWP, which allows employers to hire migrant workers, primarily for low-paid jobs, across various sectors, including agriculture, food processing, the care system, construction and hospitality. TFWP work permits tie workers to a single employer who controls both their migration status and labour conditions.

As Amnesty International’s report details in-depth, despite recent minor changes to the program, labourers in the TFWP will be vulnerable to abuse as long as the closed work permit requirement and other harmful provisions remain. In total, the report recommends 32 actions that federal, provincial and other authorities must take to eliminate abuse in the system and ensure victims can access justice.

“Exploitation, discrimination and abuse are integral features, not bugs, of the Temporary Foreign Worker program,” said Ketty Nivyabandi, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada’s English-speaking section. “Cosmetic changes are not enough. Our leaders must implement the reforms required to bring the program in line with Canada’s human rights obligations – and, ultimately, to respect the rights of workers.”

“Every year, thousands of people from around the world leave their homes and their families to carry out essential jobs in Canada,” said France-Isabelle Langlois, Executive Director of Amnistie internationale Canada francophone. “Rather than receiving a warm welcome, some are met with unsafe working conditions, racist intimidation and threats, sexual harassment and physical violence. We applaud the 44 workers who courageously shared their stories with us, and we thank them for their efforts to expose appalling human rights abuses taking place in our own backyard.”

## Essential but exploited

The report's findings are based on in-depth interviews and desk research conducted between February 2023 and June 2024, involving a total of 44 migrant workers from 14 countries. Amnesty International selected the interviewees based on referrals from partner organizations and in a few instances, from other workers interviewed by the organization.

"The abuse experienced by migrant workers in Canada is deeply troubling, especially for a country that claims to be a leader when it comes to protecting human rights," said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Senior Director for Research, Advocacy, Policy and Campaigns at Amnesty International. "Many migrant workers have told us they came to Canada hoping to secure a better future, yet instead, they felt they were treated like slaves. These workers are vital for putting food on the country's tables and caring for the elderly. They deserve much better."

## Exploited and abused

Bénédicte, a woman from Cameroon, suffered racist psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of her employer as soon as she arrived in Canada in 2016 with a two-year closed work permit to work on a farm. She was made to work 70–80-hour weeks performing tasks including domestic work, was substantially underpaid, and was constantly controlled. Her employer deceived her, promising to bring her children to Canada, to continue exploiting her. She eventually fell sick and was diagnosed with severe anaemia. When she finally left the farm in July 2018, her employer cancelled her work permit, leaving her with an irregular migration status. "I did not expect to be a slave here," she told Amnesty International.

Most of the 44 workers interviewed by Amnesty International reported unpaid wages and excessive working hours. Some contracts seen by Amnesty International stipulated zero rest days. Some workers reported being subjected to racist language by their employers and supervisors, including being called "donkey," "Indian," or "shitty Mexican."

A Jamaican woman said her supervisor told her to "go back to the tree you came from," and a few reported being physically assaulted by their employers. Many lived in inadequate housing, and a few said they did not have drinkable water in their accommodation. Some workers suffered severe injuries or developed medical conditions as a result of unsafe working conditions. Workers reported being threatened with repatriation by their employers and, in a few cases, were taken to the airport against their will.

Many workers reported suffering discrimination at work, including by being tasked with the hardest physical jobs, which they could not refuse. Women reported gender-based violence and discrimination.

For instance, Hélène and Sylvie (not their real names), two Ivorian nationals working in a nursing home, told Amnesty International they had to commit to paying the recruitment fees incurred by their agency

in Ivory Coast and the employer in Canada in case they failed to comply with their “commitments.” These included not being pregnant at the time of departure, not getting pregnant and not abandoning the employment before their two-year contract ended.

## **Threatened and surveilled**

Miguel, a Guatemalan migrant worker with a two-year visa under the TFWP, faced severe forms of control by his employer.

Miguel was promised a 40-hour work week, \$13.50 per hour, free accommodation, and the possibility of bringing his family to Canada in the future. However, when he arrived in Canada, he worked between 60 and 72 hours per week without adequate rest or compensation.

His boss confiscated his passport and placed cameras inside and outside the container where he lived and the garage where he worked. Threats and other forms of verbal abuse were also frequent, including threats to send him back to Guatemala. Sometimes, he would enter Miguel’s room uninvited, ordering him to “Come on, get to work.”

Miguel decided to gather evidence of his situation and report it to his recruitment agency. When his employer found out, he ended his contract early and drove him to the airport. Miguel never got on the plane. Instead, he reported the abuse he suffered to the police.

## **No adequate remedy for abuses**

Many workers fail to report the abuses they suffer out of fear of reprisals, including unfair dismissal, non-renewal of their contract, and repatriation. Those who do complain are faced with Canada’s complex enforcement system, which is not designed to protect individuals with precarious status. These individuals often don’t have time to engage in proceedings or may not be able to navigate bureaucratic systems in either of Canada’s official languages.

For example, Walter (not his real name) arrived in Canada to work in agriculture on a two-year closed work permit, but was subjected to long working hours and was not provided with the necessary protective equipment. He was also banned from eating, drinking or taking a break except during transportation.

Eventually, the owner of an unauthorized placement agency deceived Walter and several of his co-workers into believing he could help them change jobs lawfully. For a year, he lived in the basement of the owner of the placement agency and was not allowed to leave except to work on jobs that the agent arranged for him.

“My work permit and work almost killed me ... If we did not obey, we would be deported,” he told Amnesty International.

Walter has not yet received adequate redress for the severe abuses he suffered.

## **Systemic discrimination**

Unlike other temporary labour schemes in Canada, TFWP closed work permits don't allow migrants to change employers. TFWP work permits are mostly granted to “low-skilled” workers from low- and middle-income countries in the Global South, with a majority of Black, Latin American and other racialized populations. In 2023, the top countries of origin of TFWP workers were Mexico, India, Philippines, Guatemala and Jamaica, together representing almost 70% of the work permits granted.

Moreover, “low-skilled” racialized workers are subjected to a high risk of labour exploitation for long periods of time, as many continue travelling to Canada year after year, with little prospect of obtaining a more secure status, due to Canada's immigration system which privileges “high-skilled” workers for permanent residence.

“The reality is that labour exploitation is a foreseeable and systemic result of closed work permits,” said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Senior Director for Research, Advocacy, Policy and Campaigns at Amnesty International. “Any reform that fails to abolish closed work permits and replace them with open work permits fails to address the root causes of the abuses and will fall short of complying with Canada's international human rights obligations. Migrant workers should have the freedom to change jobs and employers, just as Canadians are.”

## **Background**

Canada's TFWP was launched in 1973 to allow employers to bring foreign workers to Canada on a temporary basis, although the first migrant workers began arriving from the Caribbean in the 1960s. The program has gone through several reforms but closed work permits have remained a fundamental component over the years. In 2024, the Canadian government adopted additional reforms to reduce the number of migrants in the country and the length of TFWP work permits.

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## **A door wide open to abuse and exploitation: Canada must stop abuses of migrant workers**

Please send a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mélanie Joly, calling on Canada to abolish closed work permits and instead grant open work permits to all TFWP participants.

[Take Action »](#)

### **Exploitation of migrant workers worldwide**

Amnesty International decided to research labour exploitation of migrant workers with tied visas in Canada to support local efforts by unions and migrant-led and civil society organizations to end abuses against workers in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

Amnesty also considered it essential to bring international attention to Canada's immigration policy, given the country's positive reputation as a multicultural country with welcoming asylum and migration policies. Canada also relies significantly on migrant labour for important sectors of its economy.

However, Canada is not the only country where Amnesty International has conducted research on tied visas. The abuses documented, which primarily stem from the nature of tied visas and the power imbalance they grant to employers over the labour conditions and status of migrant workers, are similar to those documented by the organization in other countries – such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Italy, Nepal, Hong Kong or Australia.

Amnesty International has an extensive body of work focusing on labour exploitation of migrant workers in different countries. Research into labour exploitation is ongoing in Australia and France.

Over more than a decade, the organization has documented the abuses migrant workers are exposed to in Qatar as a result of the kafala system, including wage theft, restrictions on changing jobs and inadequate grievance and redress mechanisms. While authorities have implemented reforms to the kafala system, migrant workers continue to face bureaucratic hurdles when seeking to change jobs without their employers' permission, even though such permission is no longer a legal requirement.

### **Saudi Arabia**

In Saudi Arabia, migrant workers, who make up around 77% of Saudi Arabia's private sector workforce, are, as in Qatar, governed by the abusive kafala sponsorship system. Despite some limited reforms introduced in 2021, the kafala system still imposes strict limitations on the freedom of migrant workers once they are in the country, and they continue to face significant challenges in exiting the country or moving jobs without their employer's permission. By creating a deeply imbalanced relationship between workers and employers and enabling employers to exercise significant control over the life of the worker, the system directly enables forced labour and other serious abuses. The abuses documented by Amnesty International include instances of forced labour practices, deception in the recruitment process, passport confiscation, inadequate pay, late or non-payment of salaries, inadequate living conditions, and restrictions on changing jobs or leaving the country. ([Saudi Arabia: 'Don't worry, it's a branch of Amazon': Exploitation of migrant workers contracted to Amazon in Saudi Arabia – Amnesty International](#))

### **Lebanon**

In Lebanon, migrant domestic workers are excluded from the Lebanese Labour Law and are governed instead by the kafala system, which ties the legal residency of the worker to the contractual relationship with the employer. If this employment relationship ends, even in cases of abuse, the worker loses regular migration status. Moreover, the worker cannot change their employer without the latter's permission. This allows the employer to coerce the worker to accept exploitative working conditions. If a migrant domestic worker refuses such conditions and decides to leave the home of the employer without the latter's consent, the worker risks losing their residency status and consequently detention and deportation. ([Lebanon: 'Their house is my prison': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon – Amnesty International](#)).

### **Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, research conducted by Amnesty International in 2012-2013 revealed that the Two-Week Rule- which allows migrant workers only an impossibly short time to find a new employer after the end of an employment relationship- exacerbates migrant workers' vulnerability to exploitation. Under the New Condition of Stay (NCS) 1987, migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), also known as foreign domestic helpers (FDH), must find new employment and obtain an

approved work visa within two weeks of the expiration or premature termination of their employment contract. Failing that, they must leave Hong Kong.

Amnesty International research found that Indonesian women who had worked in Hong Kong as domestic workers from 2008-2012 had their identity documents confiscated by their employer or placement agency, were not free to leave their employer's home, received a salary below the minimum wage, were physically or verbally abused by their employer, and many claimed they did not receive a weekly day off. The research also found that obtaining new employment and a new work visa within two weeks was an impossibility due to the bureaucratic processes for obtaining the new visa. The inability to legally change employment in the two-week window left migrant domestic workers with little choice but to remain in abusive and/or exploitative conditions or accept jobs with unfavourable work conditions in order to maintain their regular migration status.

## Nepal

Research conducted by Amnesty International in Nepal in 2017 revealed how migrant workers were trapped in a vicious cycle of deception, extortion, debt, and exploitation abroad, due to the Nepali government's failure to crack down on recruitment agencies which charged illegal fees for jobs abroad. ([Nepal: Turning people into profits: Abusive recruitment, trafficking and forced labour of Nepali migrant workers – Amnesty International](#)).

## Italy

In 2012 Amnesty International conducted research in Italy on the human rights situation of migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Asia, employed in low paid, often seasonal or temporary jobs, mostly in the agricultural sector. Amnesty International's research found evidence of widespread labour exploitation of migrant workers in the agricultural sector, and documented, in particular, wages below the minimum wage agreed between unions and employers' organizations, arbitrary wage/salary reductions, delays or non-payment of wages and long working hours.

Further, Amnesty International expressed concern that Italian migration policy increased the risk faced by migrant workers, especially those in an irregular situation, of being subjected to labour exploitation. ([Italy: Exploited labour two years on: The 'Rosarno Law' fails to protect migrants exploited in the agricultural sector in Italy](#))