



Learning English For Building Resilient Migrant Workers

Occupational Health and Safety Training for BC's Agricultural Migrant Workers

Prepared by: Gurpreet Chopra & Raha Masoudi, Chapman and Innovation Grant Recipients, 2022
UBC Centre for Community Engaged Learning, October, 2023

The authors acknowledge that the work for this project took place on the unceded ancestral lands of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil- Waututh) Nations.

The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution, feedback, and support throughout this project:

Karina Villada, Watari Counselling & Support Services Society

Ingrid Mendez, Watari Counselling & Support Services Society

Jacquie Kwok, CCEL

Yusuf Alam, CCEL

Cover photo by Graeme Owsianski on Hello BC, Destination BC Corp.

This work was supported by the Chapman & Innovation Grant, through:



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Centre for Community Engaged Learning

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction and Background	3
Summary and Next Steps	4
References	7

Executive Summary

Gurpreet Chopra and Raha Masoudi partnered with Watari Counselling and Support Services Society to pilot a project that provided occupational health and safety training to migrant agricultural workers in British Columbia's (BC) Lower Mainland and Okanagan region. Watari has 15 years of experience supporting MAWs, and Gurpreet has been a Watari board member since 2018, with extensive knowledge of Watari's programs and policies. Migrant agricultural workers (MAWs) are vulnerable individuals who have historically not been provided any occupational health and safety training in their high-risk jobs on farms, where many are unable to identify and express unsafe work conditions due to barriers in language and lack of knowledge of safety procedures. Emergency preparedness training is also largely non-existent, leaving MAWs ill-prepared to deal with severe weather events, such as BC's summer heatwave. This collaborative project aimed to launch a culturally appropriate workshop series to provide 250 MAWs with occupational health and safety training, and also teach English language skills tailored to facing emergencies and other unexpected situations. The workshop series were held in-person within the community. The project provided opportunities for open communication for MAWs to receive the resources and services they needed and to address questions about their rights as temporary foreign workers. This experience allowed MAWs to work safer, become more knowledgeable when dealing with accidents or emergencies, and feel self-empowered when asserting their rights. The long-lasting impact of these workshops include the potential scalability and expansion of the project into other services, such as health and mental wellness workshops for MAWs.

Introduction and Background

Each year, Canada witnesses an influx of temporary migrant agricultural (MA) workers who play a crucial role in filling labor shortages within the agricultural sector (Caxaj & Cohen 2019). While the significant contributions of these workers are undeniable, they often find themselves in precarious situations due to their temporary status and the inherent vulnerabilities their work brings. Limited attention has been given to the subjective experiences of these MAWs concerning workplace health and safety, despite the challenges they face. Notably, MAWs make up a substantial portion of the agricultural workforce in Canada. In fact, approximately 75% of agricultural positions in the country are filled by MAWs, numbering around 69,705 individuals in

2018 (Burt & Meyer-Robinson. 2019). These workers are often returning to their workplaces for multiple seasons, and some remain in this category for extended periods, creating a unique labor dynamic (Henerby 2012). However, despite their contributions, MAWs do not have the same legal rights and protections as Canadian workers (Preibisch & Otero 2014). The Okanagan Valley in British Columbia serves as a vital destination for MAWs and hosts a considerable number of them, including a substantial percentage of Jamaican and Mexican workers (Caxaj & Cohen 2019). Despite this influx, the region is characterized as predominantly White and socially conservative, with limited capacity to accommodate the diverse diaspora of workers, which, in turn, complicates MAWs' ability to assert their rights in the workplace (Caxaj & Diaz 2018). A concerning aspect of this situation is the insufficient access to the protections that MAWs are entitled to, such as use of healthcare facilities (Caxaj & Cohen 2019). The nature of farm work presents distinct physical and psychological risks, making the lack of access to these protections even more troubling. Historically, regulators have relied on complaint-driven and pre-arranged inspections, placing the onus on MAWs to identify labor or health violations. Additionally, substandard living conditions, often characterized by overcrowding and inadequate facilities, are commonly accepted by these workers as a necessary but unpleasant part of their employment, posing substantial threats to their health and safety (Caxaj & Cohen 2019). The challenges and vulnerabilities faced by temporary migrant agricultural workers in Canada underscore the pressing need to address their working conditions and rights. Complex political and economic forces create a climate in which these workers feel compelled to make difficult choices between their health and safety and their economic stability. As such, it is imperative to continue to take immediate actions to ensure the protection and well-being of this vital workforce. This workshop works to provide them with tools towards empowerment, language skills, and knowledge of their rights and workplace safety measures.

Summary and Next Steps

The workshops took place over the last year, in-person in the Okanagan valley, with 2 cohorts completed. The workshop material was created by Gurpreet and Raha, and the sessions were facilitated in English and Spanish by instructors hired by Watari. In the face of climate change-related challenges, such as increased flooding and heatwaves in British Columbia, the workshops exposed the urgent requirement for comprehensive emergency preparedness

training. Workers expressed that they experienced adverse effects during extreme weather events, and they lacked the resources and knowledge needed to ensure their safety. In fact, there was an unprecedented delay in commencing the first cohort due to the emergency wildfires in the Okanogan and surrounding areas this past summer. Milestones include interest and continued attendance by participants. In the first cohort, 32 participants were divided into four groups, with each worker using their own devices for classes. The second cohort included 24 participants, with an outreach effort inviting more workers to use their cellphones for the program. Notably, 28 and 21 workers used the items provided in the first and second cohorts, respectively. Moreover, two workers utilized projectors to conduct peer education workshops, attended by 26 workers. The program extended its impact during a summer Health Fair, using projectors to educate nearly 200 agricultural migrant workers on health and safety, with more than 265 attendees. This project has a target of having 250 workers in the program by year-end and a commitment to continue the project. This is underpinned by positive feedback on the quality and ease of use of the Health & Safety materials received from the workers. The grant funds were instrumental in the project's success. They facilitated the development and implementation of the workshops, allowing us to reach and benefit a substantial number of MAWs. Funds covered various expenses related to program design, lesson delivery, materials, and outreach. These resources played a crucial role in delivering the project effectively.

The impact of the project was assessed through various methods, including surveys and interviews from participants. These evaluative approaches revealed the success of the workshops in enhancing the safety and knowledge of MAWs, as well as their increased sense of empowerment and confidence in the workplace. Post-workshop surveys completed by the participants reflected high levels of satisfaction, with 75% of responses indicating a 10/10 level of satisfaction, and 25% indicating a 9/10 level of satisfaction with the workshops. 100% of participants ranked the teaching style as “excellent”. Additional feedback points include the following:

“The instructor who taught the class was very flexible and her teaching method was good”

“The projector was very useful for taking the English class”

“Taking the class in a group helped a lot to motivate each other inside the farm”

“The pictures in the material helped us a lot to understand the topics in English besides the distance (on Zoom)”

When asked about potential future improvements for the program, participants indicated the following:

“Do a reading aloud in class and everyone can repeat and follow the instructor”

“Include videos for the class”

“As workers, we should commit more to attend English classes”

“Everything was good for me”

Participants were also asked what the most important lesson that they learned was, to which they responded:

“Body parts”

“Learning the name of tools that I use at work”

“Relating situations”

“Improve my pronunciation”

As we conclude, it becomes apparent that the workshops not only bridge the gap in workplace safety training for MAWs but also enhance their overall well-being and security. The findings from the workshops set the stage for the development of recommendations to further improve the conditions and treatment of MAWss, creating a safer and more equitable environment for them. Looking to the future, we are enthusiastic about the sustainability of these workshops. We are actively planning to introduce a mental health-focused workshop to address the holistic well-being of MAWs. Furthermore, our commitment to the cause remains unwavering, and we

intend to continue these workshops under Watari's control and migrant worker support programs. By doing so, we aim to establish a lasting impact, fostering a safer and more empowering environment for MAWs in the long run. Through effective partnerships, resource utilization, and impact assessment, this initiative has laid the foundation for lasting improvement in the lives of our community members.

References

- Burt, M., & Meyer-Robinson, R. (2016). Sowing the Seeds of Growth: Temporary Foreign Workers in Agriculture. The Conference Board of Canada, 26 pages, December 1, 2016.
- Caxaj, C. S., & Cohen, A. (2019). "I will not leave my body here": Migrant farmworkers' health and safety amidst a climate of coercion. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(15), 2643.
- Caxaj, S., & Diaz, L. (2018). Migrant workers'(non) belonging in rural British Columbia, Canada: storied experiences of Marginal Living. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 14(2), 208-220.
- Hennebry, J. (2012). *Permanently temporary?: agricultural migrant workers and their integration in Canada*. desLibris.
- Preibisch, K., & Otero, G. (2014). Does Citizenship Status Matter in Canadian Agriculture? Workplace Health and Safety for Migrant and Immigrant Laborers. *Rural Sociology*, 79(2), 174-199.