

Research Note / Note de recherche

Patriarchy and Exploitation in the Context of Globalization

Andrea Gálvez Gonzalez & Osiris Ramos Rodríguez ¹

Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), a temporary work program which brings in agricultural workers from Mexico², Guatemala and the Caribbean, presents an interesting case for analysis of what happens when women enter sectors of the labour market that have historically been reserved for men. Indeed, these types of processes are an integral part of an idealized vision of a process that is supposed to lead towards equal economic and social opportunities for both genders. But unlike what might seem as plausible outcomes in academic discourse, the socioeconomic context in which this process operates only creates more vulnerabilities and exploitation for both sexes.

SAWP, designed to exploit global asymmetries inherent in the process of regional economic integration, allows the entry and temporary residence of agricultural workers into Canada. Access to foreign manual labour solves a structural supply problem of the Canadian agricultural labour market. At the same time, it constitutes an inexpensive temporary migration program that has wide social acceptance since it does not grant any residency rights or social protection to migrant workers or their families. In this sense, it (i.e., temporary migration) constitutes a 'revolving door system' that maximizes benefits for the host country.

The priority of the Canadian government is to develop and promote an agricultural economy that is competitive in the export market. The social and economic cost of this achievement, however, is borne, not by the population at large of the host country, but by a segment of a foreign labor force that is not only vulnerable, but specifically absent during the negotiation of the social contract.

We identify two major flaws that characterize this program. First, the lack of access to permanent residence is premised on the incorrect assumption that the shortage of manual agricultural labor is temporary and, in some way, unforeseeable. Any reasonable observer, however, would conclude that after thirty

years, this is no longer a temporary stop-gap need. In terms of permanent residence, Canadian immigration policy focuses on those with professional qualifications and/or skills. The skills of migrant agricultural workers, that are indispensable for the Canadian economy, are not considered worth integrating into national policy. The criterion for exclusion, therefore, is not economic, rational or defensible. It exists because of a social context that allows and justifies the exclusion of certain groups.

Second, the success of the program is a function of the wide legal and social flexibility that is available to the employer in defining working conditions - conditions which, if imposed on citizens or Canadian residents, would be socially and legally unacceptable. The extreme vulnerability that the linguistic isolation entails, the precarious migration status and the economic necessity of these workers are not accidental outcomes. It is a characteristic of the logic of the market that tries, when the social context allows, to make the condition of manual labor as precarious as possible. In this sense, the memorandum of understanding written up between the government of Canada and the government of the sending state legitimizes this system of exclusion. The program uses the dichotomy of an idealized labor market, where theoretically everyone has the same opportunity, whereas in practice, the hiring of employees privileges those who are, *de facto* and *de jure*, the more vulnerable.

Vulnerability is accentuated, and in order to create a flexible, disposable and unprotected manual labor force, gender constructs are exploited. For example, as part of the program, a farm not far from Montreal contracts women to gather strawberries. Specifically, the program requires unmarried³ women. The same program demands men be married and heads of households. For the woman, access to work as a means of subsistence does not signify a social achievement because she is a passive subject whose vulnerability allows entry into the market. Considered to be more docile, more controllable, but at the same time more productive, it is the condition of being a woman and being fragile – real or apparent, (which is assumed to be the same) - and not merely a worker, that gives these women access to the agricultural labor market. While all temporary workers have restrictions on their movement and mobility, which is exacerbated by the fact that they live in rural areas without transport, women workers find themselves monitored even more than the men. Often their

outings are limited to a trip to the local grocery store and back to the farm, under supervision.

If, on the one hand, the entry of women into the program institutionalizes socially accepted gender relations, it does not make a substantial improvement in the situation of the women since it reinforces the traditional role of the man as a provider for his family and an image of exaggerated femininity. Women who do not accept the precarious working conditions in Québec and return to their countries of origin, will return to the same household and the same patriarchal set-up that they had left behind. In the case of men, the patriarchal model bestows on them the status of foundational pillar of the household and the provider. As temporary migrant workers this identity is manipulated, subverted and re-articulated as a consequence of economic opportunism and exploitation. The problem is aggravated by the fact that extra-territoriality irrevocably breaks familial dynamics: the role of father, husband and provider suddenly is reduced to one of a long-distance provider but a stranger in the household.

This very brief and somewhat terse account of the situation of the temporary agricultural workers is an attempt to initiate the work of conceptualizing how globalization impacts the process of exploitation in a patriarchal system. We have tried to define relations between economic and social processes and show how, in the context of the logic of accelerated economic integration, they begin to be articulated in a dysfunctional manner. Different historical, social and economic realities could, under other conditions, give rise to more optimal experiences in changing gender relations. Nevertheless, as they appear at this moment with temporary migrant workers in Canada, they cannot but reflect the interests of the hegemonic discourse of exploitation.

Endnotes

¹ Andrea Galvez, UQAM (L'Université du Québec à Montréal), email: galvez_gonzalez.andrea@courrier.uqam.ca; Osiris Ramos Rodriguez, UAM (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana) Xochimilco, email: osirisra1@hotmail.com. The organization that has been working with Mexican migrant workers is Centre d'aide aux travailleurs et travailleuses agricoles (CATTAQ), in Québec, founded by Patricia Perez. Patricia dedicated herself to helping migrant workers with their cultural,

legal, medical and especially their workplace problems, first as a volunteer and then in 2004 as the coordinator of the UFCW Canada Migrant Agricultural Workers Support Centre in St-Rémi, Québec. She passed away at 52 in her adopted home of Montréal in October, 2007. Translated from Spanish by Mriti-unjoy Mohanty.

² According to the Mexican consulate in Montreal, 3,200 Mexican workers worked on 318 farms in Québec this year. Jasmin Legatos, “‘We’re not slaves’ – Mexican farmhands”, *The Gazette*, 16 July 2007.

³ Even though the program demands women to be unmarried, and thus without children, some of the testimonies we have heard lead us to believe that in reality there are women who are heads of single-parent households.