

## **“Patriotic Heroes” and “Foreign Laborers”: Politics of Media and Public Discourses on Essential Workers and Migrant Workers in Canada During the COVID-19**

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During COVID-19, politicians and the media in North America spotlighted the contributions of essential workers. As many low-income essential services are performed by migrant workers, this study explores how the pandemic served as a critical moment to raise societal awareness of the disadvantaged circumstances faced by migrant workers and to garner public support for their rights and equality. Engaging with scholarly critiques of media representation of underprivileged migrant groups and migration and labor scholars' work on migrant workers in Canada, the study examines mainstream media discourse and public discourse on essential workers and migrant workers in Canada during the pandemic. Adopting thematic and critical discourse analysis, the study reveals that nationalist ideology, intersected with capitalist and neoliberal ideologies, prevents the public from forming solidarity with migrant workers, although overt racist and xenophobic discourse diminishes, and advocacy voices begin to gain higher visibility in mainstream media. The study contends that mobilizing broader public support to tackle inequalities remains a crucial issue in the context of transnational labor migration.

*Keywords: migrant workers, essential workers, labor migration, Canada, COVID-19*

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in North America and Europe began to highlight the importance of essential services, and considerable media and public discourse emphasized essential workers' contributions. However, a noticeable discrepancy exists between the discursive acknowledgment of essential work and the precarious conditions of low-income essential workers, many of whom are migrants. Although migrant workers have long served as an indispensable labor force for economic development in industrial and newly industrializing countries, along with neoliberal globalization, they are subject to labor exploitation, social exclusion, and discrimination. Media and communication scholars have revealed that media representations of migrant people—including immigrants, migrant workers, and refugees—often reinforce

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xenophobic and racist ideologies in varied national contexts (Cheng, 2016; Gottlob & Boomgaarden, 2020; Parker, 2015; Sun, 2014). Migration and labor scholars have exposed and criticized the structural inequalities that migrant workers face across Western and non-Western countries (Bauder, 2006; Delgado-Wise & Covarrubias, 2007; Encalada Grez, 2022; Pun, 2005; Sharma, A. Sharma, & Kapilashrami, 2021). This study regards the pandemic crisis as a critical moment to explore the extent to which the high visibility and recognition of (low-income) essential work and workers could raise societal awareness about the disadvantaged circumstances migrant workers face and garner public support for advocating their rights and equality.

Among Western countries, Canada often stands as exemplary for its multiculturalist and hospitable environment for immigrants, while its low-income economic sectors rely heavily on temporary migrant workers. Responding to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government listed 10 service sectors essential to preserving basic societal functioning, including healthcare, agriculture, retail, and transportation. Mainstream media widely reported on essential workers. The public showed their appreciation for essential workers through posters and applause in their communities and neighborhoods. Engaging with scholarly critiques of media representation of underprivileged migrant groups, as well as critiques by migration and labor scholars about the structural inequalities faced by migrant workers in Canada, this study examines Canadian mainstream media discourse and public perceptions and attitudes toward essential workers and migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study explores the following research questions: How did mainstream news media report on essential workers and migrant workers in Canada during the pandemic? What was the public discourse about the two groups? What were the values and ideologies embedded in these discourses? To what extent did the high visibility of low-income essential work and workers raise societal awareness about migrant workers' inequalities and garner public support for advocating their rights?

### **Media Representation of Migrant People**

Dominant media discourses of migrant people often embrace deep-seated classism, racism, and nationalism across both Western and non-Western contexts. While mainstream news media in Western countries tend to distinguish among immigrants, migrant workers, refugees, and undocumented immigrants, the underlying tone is consistently racist and xenophobic. For instance, studies in Europe, Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the United States reveal that despite recognizing the economic contributions of immigrant and migrant workers, mainstream media still portray these groups as cultural aliens and racialized others who do not belong to the White national community (Bauder, 2005; Inouye, 2012; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017; Torres & Lindblom, 2020; Vickers & Rutter, 2016). In Canada, Harald Bauder (2008) criticizes the media's binary construction of temporary migrant workers as both an important workforce and community troublemakers. In Sweden, without addressing the skills immigrants and migrant workers possess and the racism they encounter, news media emphasize that immigrants and migrant workers are an ideal labor force for low-paid caring service as an undesirable but essential profession, portrayed in media discourse as jobs that migrant workers are grateful to do but Swedish people would never do (Torres & Lindblom, 2020). The discursive acknowledgment of immigrants and migrant workers' economic contributions alongside persistent xenophobia and racism in mainstream media justifies these workers as disposable, cheap labor that fulfills the profit-making needs of Western countries.

Furthermore, Western media discourse on asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented immigrants display blatant racism and xenophobia. Andrea Lawlor and Erin Tolley analyze Canadian national and local newspapers' frames of refugees and asylum-seekers from 2004 to 2015, demonstrating that refugees are predominantly represented as social welfare abusers, criminals, and potential threats to the social order. Similar patterns of stereotypical representation in news media are found in Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Austria (Gottlob & Boomgaarden, 2020; Holmes & Castaneda, 2016; Parker, 2015; Pruitt, 2019). Western liberal democracies also fail to report political-economic conditions in the dichotomized media discourse about undocumented immigrants, who are represented as either victims or threats. Tanya Golash-Boza (2009) coins the concept of "immigration industry complex" to criticize how media, politicians, and corporations all benefit from the disenfranchisement of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

In non-Western contexts, media representation of migrant groups mostly focuses on transnational and internal migrant workers. In South and Southeast Asia, millions of workers have migrated from less developed countries, including the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia, to developed economies such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. In China and India, many rural migrants work in cities where they are denied access to social welfare and face immense discrimination (Pun, 2005; Sharma et al., 2021). These migrants work low-paid jobs in construction, production, and domestic service with little job security or legal protection. Mainstream news media mainly places them into two categories: degraded others and objects of sympathy. In Taiwan, migrant workers, primarily from Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, are referred to as "foreign labor" (*wai lao*) by the media and public with xenophobic, degrading connotations (Cheng, 2016). In Singapore and Thailand, dominant film representations of Filipino and Burmese domestic workers have switched from endorsing these women as heroic agents for their countries and families to recognizing them as neoliberal subjects with individual capacity to overcome difficulties, which fails to confront structural inequality through "depoliticized, tokenistic and affirmative scripts" (Cheng, 2021, p. 260).

The media is a key institutional power that influences migrant people's lives, especially underprivileged migrant groups. Existing scholarship reveals that mainstream media often reinforce stereotypes, exacerbate prejudices, and perpetuate discrimination against migrant workers, refugees, and undocumented immigrants across varied contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, essential workers became high-profile in the media and policy domains, attracting considerable public attention toward essential services in Western countries. As work in many low-income essential sectors is performed by migrant workers, immigrants, and refugees, this study regards the pandemic as a critical moment to further investigate the media discourse about migrant workers in juxtaposition with those on essential workers. Specifically, this study examines the discourse of Canadian mainstream news media on essential workers and migrant workers to explore whether there are new opportunities to reshape public perception and mobilize public support for disenfranchised migrants.

### **Nationalism and Labor Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Canada**

Shortly after WWII, many Western countries and Japan established temporary/guest worker programs to recruit migrants from developing and underdeveloped countries to address the labor shortage

(Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). In 1973, the Canadian federal government created the Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program (*NIEAP*) to employ migrant workers, primarily from third-world countries, to work in low-paid sectors. Nandita Sharma (2006) details a historical account of the *NIEAP* establishment process, arguing that nationalism naturalized the labor exploitation and racialized othering of foreign migrant workers in the country. Under the *NIEAP*, migrant workers are restricted from changing jobs, forbidden from engaging in collective bargaining and organizing, and must endure poor working and living conditions. Scholars have characterized the situation of migrant workers in Canada and elsewhere as a contemporary form of indentured, unfree labor (Choudry & Adrian, 2016; Fast, 2014; Pradella & Rossana, 2021). The discriminatory immigration policy is a primary extra-economic compulsory force that produces these unfree conditions. The unfreedom of migrant workers coexists alongside Canadian workers' freedom yet is unquestioned, as the Canadian nation-state is fashioned in a nationalist view as "a site of democracy and home" only for Canadian people (Sharma, 2006, p. 47).

Nationalism and settler colonialism intersect to shape working-class subjects in Canada. Interrogating Canadian labor history, Fred Burrill (2019) contends that the formation of the settler working class is complicit with the settler state and capital in the dispossession of indigenous people. The opposing classes, namely workers and capitalists, have paradoxically reached ideological alignment under settler colonialism and nationalism, which undermines the solidarity between settler workers and indigenous and non-White workers (Palmer, 1996). In the 19th century, in settler colonies like Canada, "a white working class formed in opposition to Indigenous peoples easily transitioned to anti-Chinese and anti-Black campaigns and other racist ideologies" (Burrill, 2019, p. 194). In the 20th century, racial division among workers continued to be maintained through nationalism and the legacy of settler colonialism. As Castles et al. (2014) critique, "The roots of racist stereotypes—today directed against new immigrant groups—often lie in historical treatment of colonized peoples" (p. 86).

Discursively, the nationalist ideology of homeland and national belonging justifies the political-economic inequality and social injustice toward migrant workers, who are regarded as nonmembers of the nation, whereas Canadian workers are entitled to rights and protection (Sharma, 2006, 2020). Materially, it is the Canadian state and employers that benefit from the low-paid migrant labor force, while Canadian workers either lose jobs or must accept declining wages. Although the unemployment rate was high in the 1980s and 1990s, most of the workforce in sectors like farming, service, and fabrication were still migrants (Sharma, 2006). Since the early 2000s, Canada's fast-food industry has preferred migrant workers over local workers to make more profit, which negatively influences underprivileged local workers (Polanco, 2016). Yet nationalist ideology conflates the interests of capitalism and the state with those of the Canadian people, which leads Canadians to blame migrant workers as the reason for lowered employment standards. Increasing anti-migration sentiment (Weiler & McLaughlin, 2019) and trade unions' stance of "Canadian first" (Foster, 2014) reflect this enduring nationalism.

Despite the elimination of overt racial discrimination in immigration policy in the 1960s, the later establishment of the temporary migrant worker program carries on racist and sexist practices. The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (*SAWP*) and the Live-in Caregiver Program (*LCP*) are the two main temporary migrant worker programs in Canada that attract a low-paid foreign labor force. *SAWP* is among the series of guest worker programs established in Western countries in the 1950s and 1960s. It was originally

introduced to bring workers from Jamaica to work on Canadian farms and later expanded to recruit workers from Mexico and Caribbean countries. The LCP was founded in 1992 to employ temporary foreign workers, primarily female migrants from the Philippines, in domestic service. Migrant agricultural and domestic workers are subject to severe labor exploitation, systemic discrimination, and social subordination under the two programs (Encalada Grez, 2022; Zaman, 2006, 2012). Temporary immigration status exacerbates power imbalances between migrant workers and their employers. With closed work permits that prohibit workers from changing employers, domestic workers face enormous difficulty changing jobs. Applying for a new work permit takes several months and often requires reference letters from current employers, which many employers refuse to provide (Banerjee et al., 2018; Lightman, Banerjee, Tungohan, de Leon, & Kelly, 2021). Exploitation of migrant workers is sustained and even legitimized through cultural representation of the group as subordinated others who do not belong to the local community (Bauder, 2005).

Amid the pandemic, there has been a notable surge in public recognition and appreciation for essential workers throughout Canada. For instance, numerous individuals and communities produce signs, banners, and posters expressing gratitude to essential workers, showcasing them in public spaces or at their residences. People donate money, food, and supplies to support essential workers and their families. Communities organize parades, light displays, and other public events. In the Canadian context, a significant number of low-income essential workers come from migrant backgrounds. This study examines the public discourse about both essential and migrant workers. It aims to investigate what ideologies are shaping public perceptions of migrant workers and whether there are instances of solidarity emerging specifically toward this group.

### **Federal and Provincial COVID-19 Policies on Essential Workers and Migrant Workers in Canada**

In April 2020, the Canadian federal government released "Guidance on Essential Services and Functions in Canada During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Government of Canada, 2020a) to support the maintenance and function of critical infrastructure. This advisory guidance provides a non-exhaustive list of essential services ranging from energy and utilities, finance, health care, and transportation to manufacturing, food, and water. Ontario and British Columbia, among other provinces, also released similar lists. A great number of workers in the essential services sector are low-income, including warehouse workers, grocery store workers, janitors, and caregivers in long-term care centers. In May 2020, the federal government announced an agreement with provinces and territories to provide up to \$3 billion to boost wages for low-income essential workers (Prime Minister of Canada, 2020).

However, the change was temporary. Workers received only a small top-up for a limited period, with eligibility determined provinces. For instance, in Ontario and B.C., only those who worked in care and support services, such as home and community care, long-term care, public hospitals, and social services, qualified for the temporary wage enhancement (Province of Ontario, 2021). The eligibility criteria excluded many underprivileged workers, including those who worked in grocery stores, retail sectors, private homes, and farms, many of whom were immigrants and migrant workers. The implicit value hierarchy embedded in the "essential" category prioritizes certain groups of workers while neglecting others. Also, the implemented short-term actions indicate no substantial changes or plans to improve working conditions, job security, or benefits for low-income essential workers.

In the home care and agriculture sectors of essential services, temporary foreign workers represent a key labor force. Migrant domestic workers provide essential care services to children and elders in private households. Migrant agricultural workers cultivate and harvest agricultural products on Canadian farms. When Canada closed its borders in March 2020, it made exemptions for migrant agricultural workers to enter Canada (Government of Canada, 2022b). The travel exemption further demonstrates the reliance of the Canadian agricultural industry on migrant labor. However, as Audrey Macklin (2022) criticizes, “upgrading the work to essential did not make the workers essential. Rather, it exposed the extent to which migrant agricultural labour is essential because the workers themselves are dispensable” (p. 35). The contradiction between the indispensability of essential work and the disposability of workers is particularly noticeable among migrant workers.

The Canadian federal government claims that the main goal of its immigration policy is to facilitate economic, population, and cultural growth.<sup>2</sup> This discourse is highlighted throughout the pandemic. In the official endorsement of immigration, classism is noticeable. For instance, the “Message of Immigration Levels Plan 2020–2022” (Government of Canada, 2020b) states, “We are committed to an immigration system that strengthens the Canadian middle class” (para. 1). Among economic immigrants, low-income temporary migrant workers’ access to immigration is severely limited. The annual average of foreign agricultural workers recruited through SAWP is 50,000 to 60,000, constituting 60% of temporary foreign workers in Canada—70% of workers from Mexico and 30% from Caribbean countries (Zhang, Ostrovsky, & Arseneault, 2021). However, all are excluded from gaining permanent residency. Migrant domestic workers face similar circumstances. Although LCP is often recognized as an exceptional model program that grants pathways to permanent residency for domestic workers, migrant domestic workers entering Canada through LCP still face rather precarious and exploitative conditions (Galerand, Gallié, & Gobeil, 2015; Hsiung & Nichol, 2010). Without landed immigration status, migrant domestic workers must tolerate various mistreatments from employers to maintain their jobs and legal status.

On May 5, 2021, the Canadian federal government launched a new pathway to permanent residency open to 90,000 foreign nationals with three streams: 20,000 healthcare workers, 30,000 workers in other selected essential sectors, and 40,000 international graduates (Government of Canada, 2021a). Eligible workers must have a minimum of one year of full-time work experience in Canada, hold a job with a valid work permit, and pass a language test. The requirement excludes seasonal migrant farm workers, those who lost jobs during the pandemic, and those without legal status, such as undocumented immigrants (Government of Canada, 2022a) working in low-income essential sectors of construction, agriculture, caregiving, and housekeeping. These eligibility requirements made the new pathway inaccessible to the most vulnerable temporary workers.

The inconsistency and inadequacy of governance in protecting migrant workers’ rights were particularly exposed during the pandemic. On March 25, 2020, the federal government invoked the *Quarantine Act* requiring anyone entering Canada to self-isolate for 14 days (Government of Canada, 2020c). Under the Act, employers were required to provide quarantine accommodations for temporary foreign workers (Government of Canada, 2021b). However, enforcement of the Act varied by province. For instance, while the B.C. government’s preventive actions succeeded in curbing the spread of COVID-19 on

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<sup>2</sup> A recurring theme in the government’s annual reports on immigration.

B.C. farms (BC Government News [BGN], 2022), the Ontario government's actions were comparatively less effective in monitoring the quarantine subjects, resulting in a series of COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths of migrant agricultural workers on Ontario farms.

Throughout the pandemic, the Canadian government's policies on essential workers largely amount to nominal recognition and are inadequate to have concrete impacts on improving the situation of low-income essential workers. The government's immigration policies persist in maintaining a dual-immigration system, delineating middle-class immigrants from temporary migrant workers who are deemed essential but expendable labor force.

### Methods

Amid the growing acknowledgment of essential work and the ongoing presence of Canada's dual-immigration framework, this study analyzes media and public discourses about essential workers and migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. News reports are collected from three mainstream news media outlets: *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *CBC*. These three news media have nationwide influence in Canada and a large readership from diverse sociopolitical and socioeconomic perspectives. Website search of the news outlets crosses the period from the start of COVID-19 in March 2020 to September 2022 using the keywords "essential workers," "essential service," "migrant workers," "migrant agricultural workers," and "migrant caregiver workers." Sampling is stratified monthly, which has been argued to be the most efficient technique for sampling news media texts (Riffe, Lacy, Nagovan, & Burkum, 1996). The study analyzes user's comments as online public discourse (Wolfgang, 2015). Scholars regard online news comment sections as a virtual public sphere where users engage in public discussions and deliberations (e.g., Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). The three news media sites all require users to verify their real names for identity purposes. Data are retrieved from the comments section of each selected news article.

The selected sample includes a total of 160 news reports on essential workers, 247 reports on migrant workers, 3,851 comments on news of essential workers, and 5,374 comments on migrant workers. Table 1 shows the numbers of selected samples of news reports and comments.

**Table 1. Numbers of Reports and Comments From Three Mainstream News Outlets.**

News media	Essential workers		Migrant workers	
	News reports	Comments	News reports	Comments
<i>National Post</i>	20	78	28	330
<i>The Global and Mail</i>	25	989	59	2,759
<i>CBC</i>	115	2,784	160	2,285
Total	160	3,851	247	5,374

To examine meanings, values, and ideologies embedded in media and public discourses, the study adopts thematic and critical discourse analyses. Thematic analysis is a qualitative technique used to identify latent themes in textual materials (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method systematically analyzes recurring themes of issues about essential workers and migrant workers addressed in Canadian

media and public discourse. Thematic analysis “allows a sensitive, insightful and rich exploration of a text’s overt structures and underlying patterns” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 386). Critical discourse analysis follows thematic analysis to further discover the values and ideologies embedded in the discourse. Critical discourse analysis explores language use and text, which constitute social identities and relations and correspond to power structures (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 2008). Critical discourse analysis helps demonstrate the constitution of identities, values, and ideologies in media and public discourses about essential and migrant workers to reveal power dynamics in the Canadian political-economic and sociocultural context.

### Analysis

#### ***Exposing Problems and Advocating Rights: News on Essential Workers***

Mainstream news media representation of essential workers during the pandemic focused on the circumstances of low-income essential workers. News reports highlighted that a significant number of essential workers were in low-income sectors, including nurses, janitors, food delivery workers, and grocery clerks. Two main themes emerged from news reports on essential workers: the plights of low-income essential workers and rights advocacy. Table 2 demonstrates the themes, subthemes, values, and ideologies of the news discourse on essential workers.

***Table 2. Mainstream News Reports on Essential Workers.***

Themes	Subthemes	Values and ideologies
Low-income essential workers	Low wage; lack of access to job benefits and interests; vulnerabilities to the COVID-19	Critiquing stratified labor market; Implicit nationalist ideologies
Advocating rights	Increasing wages; Prioritizing access to vaccines	

Many news reports highlight the critique that workers do not receive a fair wage for the essential work they perform. For instance, in a report from *CBC* about an essential workers’ demonstration in Montreal (*CBC News*, 2021), a protesting teacher says, “We get congratulations at the weekly or daily press conferences but there’s never any measures to protect us. Our salaries are not better, our work conditions are not better” (para. 3). Canada’s Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, made a series of public speeches (*Prime Minister of Canada*, 2020, 2021) to call for reflection on how the economy can compensate essential workers during the pandemic and across the long run. In an opinion article from *The Globe and Mail*, the author questions the dominant societal value system:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of low-skilled labour in the economy was assumed to be in decline. The pandemic has partly debunked this narrative, by revealing which workers truly are essential. It turns out that there are still no good technological substitutes for the street cleaners, shopkeepers, utility workers, food deliverers, truckers, or bus drivers who have kept the economy running through the darkest days of the crisis. (Campanella, 2020, para. 2).

Such critique in the news media exposes and aims to raise public awareness about the deep-seated issues of stratification in the Canadian labor market.



News also exposes the peculiar challenges that low-income essential workers face, including lack of daycare, insufficient paid sick leave, and limited access to vaccines. Daycare issues are widely covered in the three news outlets. A nurse couple told *CBC* that they were left with no choices to care for their two kids when daycare was closed, and they found no babysitters willing to go to their house because the couple worked in the hospital and sitters feared getting the virus (Moore, 2020). Many reports included similar stories of frontline workers struggling to find childcare support. A report from *The Globe and Mail* included a survey showing that 40% of Canadians went to work when they were sick amid the pandemic, most of whom were frontline essential workers (Subramaniam, 2022). As many low-income essential workers lived paycheck to paycheck, they could not afford unpaid sick leave. Without prioritized access to vaccines, frontline workers expressed concerns and anxiety about their safety and health. A retail store worker said in an interview with the *National Post*, "Even with the extremely strict precautions I myself take, just based on the number of people we have to interact with in an enclosed space—some not wearing masks properly or even at all—I do not feel safe" (Paglinawan & Thompson, 2021, para. 8).

Strong advocacy discourse is presented in the news to address low-income essential workers' difficulties. Advocacy voices include essential workers themselves, doctors, researchers, and politicians. A grocery store employee told *The Globe and Mail*, "I think all the grocery clerks should get one (vaccine) because I lost count of how many cases I've had in my store" (Deschamps & Dundale, 2021, para. 4). Doctors and scientists also urge prioritizing essential workers' access to vaccines. For instance, a report from the *National Post* cited several scientific studies indicating that the virus spread much faster in neighborhoods with high proportions of essential workers (Blackwell, 2021). Experts' views suggest that vaccinating essential workers is not only for workers' safety but also to serve public health.

The news media expose the disadvantages of low-income essential workers and advocate for their rights, which demonstrates a critical stance against capitalist, neoliberal, and meritocratic systems and ideologies. Yet, news reports largely neglect a crucial fact: Many low-income essential workers are migrant workers, undocumented immigrants, and refugees with precarious immigration status. This neglect indicates the opinion that essential workers deserve to be treated better because they are Canadians, which embraces an implicit nationalist message. This nationalist sentiment is more apparent in news discourse on migrant workers and different public attitudes toward essential workers and migrant workers.

### ***Continuity and Discontinuity With the Old Patterns: News Discourse on Migrant Workers***

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada, mainstream news media reports on temporary migrant workers have predominantly focused on migrant agricultural workers, with only a few reports on migrant domestic workers. This disproportionate representation manifests the long-standing public invisibility of migrant domestic workers as the main labor force. The underrepresentation also sharply contrasts with the public recognition and high visibility of care workers in LCP during the pandemic. Media focus on migrant agricultural workers is mainly due to the agricultural industry's labor crisis and COVID-19 outbreak on Canadian farms, which had a significant impact on the Canadian economy.

News reports on migrant workers can be categorized into four themes. Table 3 displays the main themes of the news discourse on migrant workers, voices from different actors, and embedded values and ideologies.

**Table 3. Mainstream News Reports on Migrant Workers.**

Themes	Voices	Values and ideologies
Labor shortage in Canadian agricultural economy	Government official and farmers: foreign workers are indispensable	Concealing labor exploitation; for-profit
Policies about migrant workers	Government offices: protecting migrant workers is to protect food security	Prioritizing national interest
Plights of migrant workers	Migrant workers: questioning the mistreatment and hardship	Critiquing labor exploitation
Advocating rights	Migrant workers, activists, and academics: criticizing systemic inequality and calling for systemic change	Contesting classist and racist policies and ideologies

The first theme highlights the labor shortage in Canada's agricultural industry exacerbated by COVID-19. Migrant agricultural workers represent one-quarter of the workforce in the Canadian agriculture sector (Statistics Canada, 2022). During the pandemic, many migrant workers were stuck in their home countries because of travel restrictions and were unable to come to Canada, creating challenges for farms during harvest seasons. Labor shortage news reports took a national-economic perspective, stressing the Canadian agricultural economy and food production's reliance on the migrant labor force. This perspective aligned with the mainstream media's recognition of migrant workers' economic contributions, which was demonstrated in prior studies in Canada and other contexts (Bauder, 2008; Cheng, 2021; Torres & Lindblom, 2020). Reports primarily incorporated the stance of farmers and government officials on behalf of employers' and the state's interests. For instance, on March 18, 2020, shortly after the federal government closed the border and before travel exemptions, *CBC* published a news report about Conservative MP Dave Epp calling on the government to allow migrant workers to enter Canada (Maru, 2020). Epp, a farmer himself, warned that "This puts into jeopardy an entire season of our food production" (Maru, 2020, para. 5). In another news article from *CBC*, a farmer was quoted: "Experienced foreign workers are essential for the future, for me, and for the majority of growers of vegetables. They are professionals. We are not. Local workers haven't been much help" (McKenzie, 2020, para. 16). This discourse was prevalent across the three mainstream media. Although the discourse emphasized the significance of migrant workers in the Canadian economy, it concealed their exploitation as cheap labor. In other words, the low cost of migrant labor, not the workers, conditioned their indispensability to the agricultural industry's profit-making.

The second theme concerns governments' policies about migrant workers amid the pandemic. The three news outlets widely reported actions and policies implemented by three levels of government—federal, provincial, and municipal—including the federal government lifting travel restrictions for migrant agricultural workers, 90,000 new pathways for immigration, Ontario warning to punish farms that violate health rules, B.C. monitoring the quarantine of migrant workers, and Windsor expanding isolation centers for migrant workers who tested positive. Most of these short-term actions were to avoid disruptions to the migrant worker labor supply. In a *National Post* article, Ontario Premier Doug Ford was quoted: "I'll go to the

extreme, whatever tool I have, to protect the people of Windsor, and the food supply chain, and the farmers, and the workers" (Jeffords, 2020b, para. 4). Similar to the discourse on labor shortage, in politicians' discourse, the justification for protecting migrant workers was to benefit Canadian food security, which embraced a nationalist ideology.

The third theme in news discourse exposes the plight of migrant workers during the pandemic. The three news outlets covered various issues of migrant workers' grief and hardship, including the tragic deaths of migrant agricultural workers who contracted COVID-19, lack of PPE on farms, overcrowded housing, no sick leave, racist slurs, threats of deportation, overtime work, and limited access to vaccines. Migrant workers encountered many of these issues daily before COVID-19, and the pandemic only heightened the group's vulnerability. For instance, overcrowded housing has been a long-lasting issue for migrant agricultural workers. Dozens of news reports addressed the COVID-19 outbreak on Ontario farms, attributing it to workers' substandard housing conditions. When discussing hardship, a clear condemnation of labor exploitation is evident. A news article from *The Globe and Mail* states that "Migrant workers have always been exploited. The pandemic anxieties of their employers have aggravated that problem, increasing their workload, barring them from riding public transit or going to the bank to send remittances to relatives overseas" (Ha, 2020, para. 3). The report quotes from a migrant farm worker, "we are humans too. We are not robots" (Ha, 2020, para. 5).

The fourth theme is advocacy, a progressive change in mainstream news media. Advocacy discourse was consistently and explicitly integrated into news reports on migrant workers' suffering and governmental policies. Voices from activists, migrant workers, and academics were frequently incorporated into news articles. They questioned migrant workers' labor exploitation, rights violation, and systemic inequality. Advocacy voices called on provincial and federal governments to take immediate action toward structural change. Suggested changes included improving housing conditions, enforcing federal guidelines, providing PPE and vaccines, and granting landed PR status. With the advocacy for migrant workers' labor and human rights, media representation of migrant workers' plight departed from old patterns by going beyond mere victimization of the group.

Dozens of reports from the three news outlets included "advocates call/say" directly in their titles, such as "Advocates Call for Accessible COVID-19 Vaccine Plan for Ontario Migrant Farm Workers" (The Canadian Press, 2021) and "Advocates Call for Migrant Care Worker Protections, Document Alleged Pandemic Abuses" (Jeffords, 2020a). For instance, in a report from *The Globe and Mail*, a migrant group coalition criticized the federal government's new 90,000 pathway, pointing out that it still excluded many migrant workers, refugees, and undocumented immigrants (Bailey & Raman-Wilms, 2021). Syed Hussan, Executive Director of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, appeared in many news reports on migrant workers. In one report from CBC, Hussan said,

We believe that a fair society is one with equal rights. And equal rights are only possible if all of us have full and permanent immigration status. We don't want a society in which some people are treated like second class citizens. (Joaquin, 2021, para. 11)

The three news media also widely reported migrant workers' protests and rallies in major Canadian cities, increasing the visibility of workers' collective resistance. The supportive tones demonstrated in the media are reassuring.

News discourse on migrant workers amid the pandemic displayed a mix of continuity and discontinuity with prior patterns. The discourse on the economic contribution of migrant workers persistently objectified the group as a profitable labor force for the Canadian economy. At the same time, the rising visibility of advocacy voices on migrant workers' labor and political rights in the news manifested a promising change in mainstream media discourse.

### ***Contrasting Views and Attitudes: Public Discourse on Essential and Migrant Workers***

Responding to news articles on the precarity of low-income essential workers in Canada and federal top-up on their salaries, most views championed essential workers' contributions and supported increasing their pay. For instance, one comment said, "Many essential workers are paid minimum wage and their wage should be increased" (personal communication, September 1, 2020). Similar views were widely seen in the comment section across the three news outlets. Other comments displayed strong nationalist sentiment to express appreciation. For instance, one post said, "You are the real patriotic. People for the nation" (personal communication, December 15, 2020). "Patriotic" indicates essential workers as members of the Canadian nation. These views reveal the public's ignorance of the fact that many low-income essential workers are migrants, undocumented immigrants, and refugees, not Canadian citizens. Nationalism embodied in these public views aligns with the nationalist ideology embedded in media discourse on essential workers. Table 4 shows the main views expressed in the comment section and the values and ideologies embedded in the discourse.

***Table 4. Public Discourse on Essential Workers and Migrant Workers.***

	Views	Values and ideologies
Essential workers	Debates on increasing wages, unions, and basic income	Nationalism, pro-market, and neoliberalism; anti-neoliberalism.
Migrant workers	Debates on TFW and migrant workers' rights; opposing granted landed PR status	Anti-capitalism, critiquing labor exploitation; nationalism, racism, xenophobia, neoliberalism.

Divergent views stem from a pro-market ideology. For instance, in a news article on the circumstances of low-income essential workers, one comment argued, "These workers are low paid, because they have low education and skills" (personal communication, February 15, 2022). The comment displays a typical neoliberal belief about individual capability and entrepreneurship that justifies income inequality and the status quo. Pro-market logic also manifests in debates on unions and basic income in comment sections. In discussions about possible solutions to improve the well-being of low-income essential workers in Canada, debates center on whether to rely on unions and basic income. Supportive views suggest that unions are important for workers and should extend their membership and protect labor rights. Opponents contend that unions are counterproductive and not economically beneficial, a conventional anti-union view prevalent in the neoliberal age. Some readers propose a basic income provided by the government as social welfare to guarantee stability for low-income workers. Opponents argue that with a basic income, people will get

lazy and stop working. This lasting suspicious view of the welfare state could be seen as the legacy of neoliberal reforms over the past four decades.

Public views were divided on issues of migrant workers' labor rights, safety, and health. Whereas some comments strongly criticized capitalism, nationalist and racist sentiments were observed. Three debates emerge. The first centers on labor exploitation in the TFW (Temporary Foreign Workers) program. Critical views describe the program as modern slavery and the sin of capitalism. In the comments, people urged Canada to treat migrant workers well. One post commented on the TFW program, "It's disgraceful and immoral" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Defenders claimed that migrant workers choose to work in Canada voluntarily through TFW and are grateful for the job opportunities. One post even said, "If they (migrant workers) are not happy, they can go back" (personal communication, June 10, 2021), displacing structural inequality onto individual choices and responsibility. Xenophobia toward migrant workers contrasts with enthusiastic expressions of appreciation for essential workers. The message is that we (Canadian citizens) are grateful for our fellow (also citizens) essential workers' service, while migrant workers (foreigners not belonging to Canada) should be grateful to come to the country. Although migrant workers also perform essential services, nationalist sentiment prevents the public from equating migrant workers with essential workers.

The second debate revolves around solutions to address the problem of TFW. Under news articles exposing the plight of migrant agricultural workers, only a very small number of comments support workers receiving higher wages, being treated well, and having better housing conditions. Most comments suggest that TFW should be abolished and that farms should hire Canadians instead of migrant workers. Many comments refer to the high unemployment rate in Canada and suggest that farmers should raise wages and hire Canadians. For instance, one post said, "There are millions of Canadian people unemployed. Why keep bringing temporary foreign workers?" (personal communication, March 10, 2022). These comments show that the public is aware of TFW's exploitation and supports improving agricultural workers' salaries but not for protecting migrant workers. Differentiating Canadians from migrant workers manifests the persistent nationalist ideology and sentiment. Another noticeable opinion is the technological determinist view that some readers believe automation will solve the labor shortage problem. One post suggests that Canada should improve robot technologies and AI "instead of bringing more people" (personal communication, April 20, 2020). This view indicates that the public regards migrant workers only as cheap, disposable labor fulfilling a Canadian economic need.

The third debate centers on migrant workers' health and safety. Responding to news reports on the COVID-19 outbreak on farms, one group urges the government to monitor quarantines, conduct on-site inspections, and ensure that farms comply with health requirements. Meanwhile, racist comments accuse migrant workers of bringing the virus and suggest closing borders. Some posts doubt whether migrant workers properly obey the quarantine rule. Under one article about federal financial support to improve migrant workers' housing, opposing comments display blatant xenophobia: "The government should not spend our taxpayers' money on these issues" (personal communication, July 31, 2020). The view indicates that we (Canadians) are not responsible for protecting migrant workers (foreigners). The xenophobic view also ignores the fact that migrant workers pay taxes in Canada.

Xenophobic and nationalist views are particularly evident in readers' comments on news reports of federal immigration policy and advocacy for migrant workers' political rights. Although there are debates on other issues related to migrant workers, almost all comments are against the idea of granting migrant workers PR status on landing or providing pathways to PR. Under articles on advocates from three news outlets, comments display astonishing xenophobia and nationalism: "Canada doesn't owe them" (personal communication, June 4, 2020), "We should prioritize Canadians' need" (personal communication, June 13, 2021), "Once they (migrant workers) get PR, they will not work (on farms) anymore" (personal communication, September 21, 2021), "Working on farms do not qualify citizenship or PR" (personal communication, March 17, 2022). These readers apparently are aware that the exploitation of migrant workers' is due to their precarious immigration status, but do not think migrant workers deserve rights as they are not Canadians. Even the few comments that support granting migrant workers access to open visas to allow workers to freely choose employers are explicitly against granting workers PR.

Unlike the media's empathetic attitude toward advocates, public views are overwhelmingly negative. One comment says sarcastically, "Social justice and political correct(ness) are useless" (personal communication, November 23, 2020). Under news reports on the federal government providing 90,000 pathways, classism and stereotypical scapegoating discourse are prevalent in the comments: "We want the best immigrants, business and innovative people" (personal communication, April 21, 2021), and "Bringing more people (immigrants) will not improve the economy but will have more burden on housing and environment" (personal communication, April 14, 2021). While Canada relies on migrant workers' essential labor and the pandemic makes that fact more visible, scapegoating immigrants is weaponized to deny migrant workers' rights.

### **Conclusion**

Despite implementing short-term policies and acknowledging their contributions, the Canadian government lacks a long-term commitment to improving the welfare of low-income, underprivileged essential workers and migrant workers. The stratified labor market, discriminatory immigration policy, and inadequate protection of workers' rights all remain unchanged. While mainstream news media persist in emphasizing migrant workers as an ideal labor force for Canadian economic development during the pandemic, the advocacy agenda and discourse embraced by the three national news outlets signal a positive change, with overt racism and xenophobia diminishing. This shift represents a departure from previous patterns characterized by stereotypical media discourse, as critiqued by prior scholarship. However, implicit nationalist ideology is still embedded in news reports, which fail to highlight the fact that migrant workers are also essential workers to raise public awareness. As scholars have demonstrated, nationalism has historically hindered Canadian workers from seeking solidarity with migrant workers, impacting various aspects of working-class formation, union practices, and the establishment of temporary foreign worker programs (Burrill, 2019; Foster, 2014; Sharma, 2006, 2020). My study further reveals that nationalism continues to perpetuate division between local people and migrant workers in contemporary Canadian society. Nationalist sentiment is quite noticeable in the different public opinions and attitudes toward the two groups. Nationalist views admire essential workers as "patriotic heroes" while discarding migrant workers as "foreign laborers." The overwhelming opposition to granting migrant workers access to immigration directly contrasts with the high regard for low-income essential workers. As persistent

nationalism obscures the reality that many low-income essential workers are migrants, the recognition and respect of essential workers paradoxically coexist with the lack of public support for migrant workers' rights. The study also reveals that nationalism intertwines with capitalist and neoliberal ideologies, forming a complex web that influences public perceptions and attitudes toward migrant workers.

In the past decades, migrant workers, scholars, activists, and NGOs have advocated strongly for granting migrant workers landed immigration status and making structural changes to industries, including food, agriculture, retail, and care service. Yet Canada has achieved neither macro-level reforms nor radical transformations of immigration and labor relations. This study illuminates the challenges of advocating for migrant workers' rights within Western liberal democracies. From a political-economic perspective, both the state and the market benefit from the exploitation of migrant labor. Immigration policies persist as effective tools for securing a cheap and unfree foreign workforce to meet market demands. Through a sociocultural lens, nationalist, capitalist, and neoliberal ideologies prevent the public from feeling solidarity with migrant workers, despite the increasing visibility of advocacy discourses in mainstream media. Mobilizing broader public support to address inequalities remains a crucial issue in the context of transnational labor migration.

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