



## The Creation of a Mobile Workforce: Latin American Undocumented Workers in the Greater Toronto Area<sup>1</sup>

Denise Gastaldo, Christine Carrasco & Lilian Magalhães<sup>2</sup>

“Yes, I am illegal, but I also generate revenue to this country because I eat here, I buy clothes here, I pay rent here, and I pay taxes on all these things. Also, my work is not paid like other people (...) I understand, I am breaking the law, but I think that I – and many other people – are not stealing from Canada because we don’t receive any financial assistance from this country, and I am not a bad person either. In my case, and in the case of other good people I know, we don’t steal, we don’t go out committing any crimes.” (Elena)

It has been estimated that one out of every 33 people in the world is an international migrant, some 214 million have moved looking for a better life (UNDESA, 2008). This is equivalent to about three percent of the world population. According to several sources, these figures are expected to rise significantly as gaps widen between poor and rich countries and globalization processes as well as environmental challenges increase migration pressures. Already in the last decade, undocumented migration has become the fastest growing form of migration, with an estimated 30 to 40 million undocumented workers worldwide (Papademetriou, 2005) or an estimated 2.5 to 4 million people per year who migrate without proper authorization (UNFPA, n.d.). In the Canadian context, estimates suggest that half a million workers are currently undocumented (Papademetriou, 2005). Although there is consensus of the vulnerability of undocumented work, little is known about the experience of undocumented workers in Canada, including who they are, why they come, the particularities of their working conditions, and the strategies they employ for coping and resisting exploitative conditions in various realms of their transnational existence.

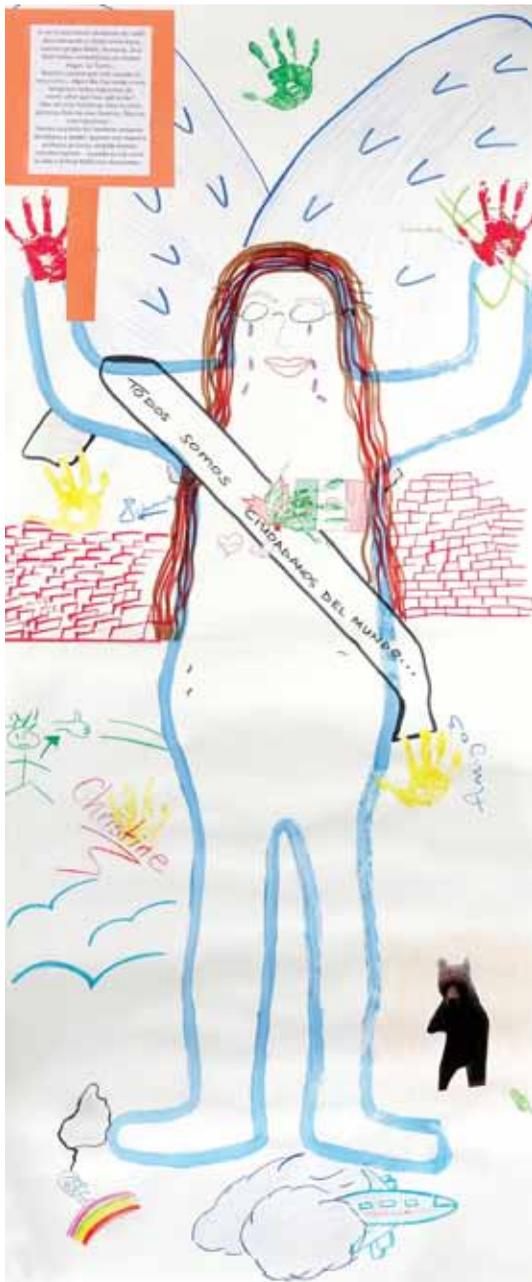
In national and international research, undocumented workers have either been a forgotten group or they have been a point of reference to illustrate globalizations’ effects. Very rarely has the focus been on undocumented workers’ diversity of occupations and circumstances or resistance and ingenuity in the face of hardship, like explored in this study.

This article presents findings on the migration journeys of 20 undocumented workers performing a range of occupations for a minimum of 18 months in Canada, but more typically for a few years. Focusing on the case of Latin Americans in the GTA, we contest popular understandings of who is undocumented and how undocumentedness is produced. While we recognize that some of the issues identified herein are not unique to undocumented workers, we

<sup>1</sup> This article presents sections of the e-book *Entangled in a web of exploitation and solidarity: Latin American undocumented workers in the Greater Toronto Area* (<http://www.migrationhealth.ca/undocumented-workers-ontario/summary-findings>) which was published in October 2012. There were some editorial changes in the creation of this article.

<sup>2</sup> We thank our community advisors and partner organizations, Centre for Spanish Speaking People and the Centre for Support and Social Integration Brazil-Canada, for their guidance and active role in the development of several phases of this study.

Denise Gastaldo is an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto, Christine Carrasco is a Research Coordinator at the University of Toronto, and Lilian Magalhães is an Associate Professor at Western University.



Elena's Body Map<sup>3</sup>

argue that they are present in undocumented workers' experiences and unfold in ways that are different to that of other precarious status groups as a direct result of undocumented workers' minimal-to-no legal and social protections in Canada.

### Definition of undocumented worker

In this project, we defined "undocumented worker" as any woman or man working in Canada who had:

1. legally entered Canada but remained in the country after their visa/ permit expired ("overstayers");
2. experienced changes in their socioeconomic position (e.g. loss of visa-dependent job or early divorce in the case of sponsorships) and could not renew their residence permit but remained in the country;
3. received a negative decision on their refugee application but remained in the country;
4. used fraudulent documentation to enter Canada; or
5. unlawfully entered Canada, including those who were smuggled

### The production of undocumented migration from Latin America to Canada

*"... They (the bosses) used to say... that no Canadian would work in the same way a Mexican person or a Latino person works. Perhaps because they are in more need or because they don't have papers."* (Elena)

First and foremost, the reasons propelling workers to migrate thousands of miles away from their home and loved ones needs to be distinguished, yet understood, in the context of the

<sup>3</sup> Body-map storytelling is primarily a data generating research method used to tell a story that visually reflects social, political and economic processes, as well as individuals' embodied experiences and meanings attributed to their life circumstances that shape who they have become. Body-map storytelling has the potential to connect times and spaces in people's lives that are otherwise seen as separate and distal in more traditional, linear accounts. As a product, mapped stories offer a creative and potentially visually-compelling approach for knowledge translation and exchange." (Gastaldo, Magalhães, Carrasco & Davy, 2012, p.10)

factors that shape and make such journeys possible. Castles and Miller (2009) refer to such factors and interactions as the migratory process. Existing social networks and transnational linkages are at the foundation of the migratory process and play an important role in determining the course of migration and its outcomes for individuals. Yet, migration is complex and the causes for migration should not be reduced to simply push and pull factors, where individuals freely weigh the potential costs and benefits of migration. In most cases, our study participants did not have realistic information on their potential earnings in Canada, the cost of living, or an idea of the physical toll working in jobs distinct from what they were used to would have on their bodies. In many other cases, participants had distorted perceptions of life in Canada which was reinforced by other migrants' biased accounts of their experiences.

In this paper, we offer an alternative reading of why people migrate and illustrate how the process of falling out of status or becoming undocumented involves more than just the immigrant worker as an active player. We then explore the processes by which undocumented migration, as a global phenomenon, is simultaneously created and maintained by global and national level policies (health and immigration laws), macro-economic and labour market trends (e.g. recession, rise in casualization of work) and personal level interests that are deeply entrenched in dominant structures of power.

## Who comes and why?

Institutional factors as well as socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, class, and education invariably shape migratory trends. Most participants in our study had some form of technical training or higher education and rarely belonged to the lowest socioeconomic group in their respective countries of origin. In many cases, their intermediate social status granted them student and tourist visas that would have otherwise been denied to poor individuals that lacked secure jobs or assets needed to convince immigration officials that they were not here to stay. Belonging to a higher socioeconomic group also meant having the economic means to invest in migration, while those participants from lower social standings often relied on family loans or informal avenues of credit which they were required to pay back with high interest as soon as they arrived. For instance, one participant in our study who migrated with her family described having to sell their small home, furniture and all immediate assets just to pay for their airfare to Canada.

Kinship ties, friendship and shared community origins also contributed to participants' migration decisions and shaped the conditions of their arrival. For instance, out of the 20 participants in our study, only one had direct family members already living in Canada, but almost all others had friends, acquaintances or strong affiliations with an existing organization. Knowing someone in Canada was often the tipping point for migration, since these network connections constituted valuable social capital that some participants used to secure employment and other needed resources such as housing prior to or upon arrival to Canada. As Victoria, a recent university graduate, described:

*“Even though I had a job, I felt the need to find a job in my field... So I decided to come to Canada. I have a friend here. I contacted him. He introduced me to a friend who still lives here and she helped me do a lot of things, like get a ‘cash’ (paying) job... she*

has been here for 10 years.” (Victoria)

Although migration often depended on these conditions, it can be clearly seen through the example above that participants’ rationale for migrating was usually guided by a comparison of their current life circumstances, whether financial, affective or professional, to that of alternative opportunities for advancement or improved quality of life that Canada could offer them and their families.



Elena's Body Map<sup>3</sup>

## Economic migration

While migrating for better economic opportunities was often cited as the main reason for migrating, participants’ accounts of their pre-migration conditions elucidated how economic disadvantage is inextricably linked to social and political problems. Despite being highly educated or having years of work experience, participants commonly spoke of the impossibility for occupational advancement or job security in their countries of origin which often intersected with age and gender-based discrimination. Other participants reported leaving their home countries because of drug-related crime, political instability, and other types of violence and systemic discrimination. For instance, after years of working in his respective field and then being ‘let go’, Roberto noted:

*“Back in my home country it is very common that after 35, you’re considered not useful anymore. When you turn 36 you already know they’re going to give you the well-known “voluntary retirement” treatment. They tell you: ‘Roberto leave voluntarily, sign here’... and if you don’t sign you’re gone after a single mishap. That’s what happened. The first mistake I made... they let me go.” (Roberto)*

Fabio, who worked as a business administrator for several years, similarly experienced targeted dismissal and spoke about the difficulty of finding a job thereafter because of the credentialist

mentality of those hiring. Given that most of his education had been “on the job” and his previous position superseded his educational qualifications, he could not find a job: “the cost of

living was very high... And [to find] work was very difficult due to my [limited] studies.” For other participants, the global economic recession took a major toll on their independent businesses which forced them into bankruptcy, unemployment, and massive debt that had a crippling effect on their livelihood and personal safety. As Rafael described:

*“After living as low-middle class, we had an economic problem and we plunged to the bottom. We fell into poverty... My family has no money. We lost it all. Everything I earn goes to them, so they can eat and move forward.” (Rafael)*

As Rafael’s case study below further illustrates, coming to Canada was a choice made under limited alternatives in the face of growing drug-related violence in his country of origin. Yet this type of systemic violence and threat to personal safety faced by so many immigrants is rarely recognized by immigration officials in Canada as a reason for admissibility.

---

### **Case Study 1 Why did Rafael migrate?**

Rafael is a single young male who has lived in Canada for 2 years. After the market crash devastated his business he had no choice but to come to Canada to support his aging parents and pay off his family debt. Staying back home would have been his death sentence since drug trafficking, kidnapping for large ransoms, assault and political insecurity had become so pervasive. As Rafael described, “all I owed, everything, I am taking two years to pay off [here]. There [back home] I could pay it in a month, but I’d become an assassin and end up in prison, dead, or fleeing for my life. I’d end up psychologically tormented. And so, the best option is to do it well...search [for opportunities] in another country, where you can live in peace”. So Rafael came to Canada through a recruitment agency that claimed to provide workers with work permits and accommodation upon arrival in return for a flat pre-departure fee of \$3500. Upon arrival, Rafael was given a visitor’s visa rather than a work permit, and was dropped off at a guest house where he had to pay for a one-bedroom basement apartment that he was forced to share with several other male migrant workers who came through the same recruitment agency weeks before. Although no work arrangements had been made, Rafael quickly found construction work and better housing through advertisements in Latin American newspapers and by connecting with other immigrants. Since his arrival, Rafael has worked in demolition, roofing and framing and has been to other major cities in Canada in search for better work opportunities. Rafael is continuously exploited by his employers who underpay and undertrain him while providing unsafe working conditions. He has also been deceived by employers who promise work permits or opportunities for learning new skills in return for low pay. On the weekends, Rafael does factory work through a temporary work agency, which he says is a useful distraction from the loneliness he feels at times. He has very little friends in Canada and although he wants to start a family, he feels that he has nothing to offer a woman. Rafael consistently turns to his faith for strength and perseverance. He thanks God for giving him the opportunity to come to Canada and help his family.

---

Yet for nearly all participants who migrated for primarily economic reasons, migrating to Canada was rooted in a clear trade-off between hard work and financial rewards. As Emiliano noted:

*“... How many of my co-workers, like me, who sort tomatoes... how many of them do you think have studied to sort tomatoes? NONE OF THEM! Yet, their migration is economic, and when they go back, they want to work in their field but they can't do that here. Maybe if they could they would, but they can't.” (Emiliano)*

For Elena, migrating to Canada provided a once and a lifetime chance to help her parents pay off their debt and finally save for her own education:

*“Nowadays, one Canadian dollar is worth twelve times more than a peso from [country]... What I most wanted to do was to help my parents a bit with their debt... and be able to pay for my own university education.” (Elena)*

For other participants, like Valeria, migrating to work in Canada provided an opportunity to save enough money to purchase an apartment for her family in her home country – something that would have taken several years, if even possible, to accomplish had she stayed and continued to work for minimal pay.

*“I left my job there because I wanted.... I really wanted to have my own apartment. I had a house [shared with relatives]; I would have needed a mortgage from the bank to buy an apartment (...) it would have taken 30 years to pay back (...) So I decided to emigrate to pay for the apartment much faster.” (Valeria)*

## **Gendered migration patterns**

Unlike trends in permanent migration to Canada, where women traditionally migrate for family reunification purposes, in our study, family considerations rarely motivated migration for women. In fact, a large number of men and women were single, and only one female in our study had children abroad and sent regular remittances to her family. Yet for 4 men in our study, the main purpose for their migration was to provide financial support to their spouse or children back home.

The migration histories of our study participants also highlight how migration is shaped by gendered kinship relations. For instance, household circumstances and organization played a critical role in the process of negotiating resources and making migration decisions, such as who migrates and for what reasons. Pepe for example, was the oldest unmarried sibling in his household after his father passed away, and his migration to Canada was motivated in large part by his new found obligation to provide for his widowed mother and young sibling. As Pepe noted:

*“Right now she is not working because I told her, ‘Why are you working if I am sending you money?’ ...They (my oldest brothers) do (help) but not in the way I am telling you, they already have children, they have things to do.” (Pepe)*

As a single young male, Rafael similarly came to Canada to help support his aging parents. These two cases, in addition to the four fathers in our study who provided regular remittances

to their families, reaffirm the common household expectation that males should, at all cost, fulfill the function of primary breadwinners. Conversely, the majority of women in our study provided only occasional remittances to support their family back home, and kept the majority of their earnings as savings, which further reinforces this gendered migration pattern.

Gender also intersected with other axes of identity such as age and marital status to influence migration. Unlike all the men in our study who came to Canada unaccompanied, 5 out of the 11 women in our study either came with their partners or with direct family members, which may indicate that migration becomes a more viable option for women as the perceived risks of migrating to an unknown place decrease if traveling with someone. The majority of women in our study were also younger than males and tended to be unmarried without children before migrating. This may also indicate that young single women have more personal freedom than females who are married or have children and are more confined to the domestic arena.

Overall, our study findings suggest that while participants had varying life circumstances, the undocumented migration of adult married females or single mothers unaccompanied by their children tends to be low in comparison to husbands, fathers, unmarried sons and single daughters. It is also important to mention that experiences of physical and sexual violence disproportionately affected women in our study, both as a precipitator to undocumented migration and as a result. For instance, Renata experienced repeated sexual violence in her country of origin, and combined with the financial stressors she and her partner faced, this was her main reason for leaving:

*“As a woman, I suffered a lot. A lot of assault, a lot of violence... There wasn’t a single job where I wasn’t sexually assaulted. You go out to the street and feel afraid that somebody will do something to you... not just get “jumped”, but something physical. I mean, THEY TOUCH YOU, it’s horrible! ... You know you cannot live free.” (Renata)*

Other participants’ experiences were characterized by sexual migration, a concept recently developed to capture international relocation that is motivated by the sexuality of those who migrate (Carrillo, 2004). Andrea, an openly homosexual female, recounted her experience of being the target for violent homophobic harassment in a large urban centre back home. Andrea also faced social rejection by her family as a result of her sexual orientation, and her reason for migrating to Canada was highly motivated by the search for greater social integration, sexual freedom and rights:

*“[There is] people’s rejection, your own family. And, by not being there, it isn’t an issue (...). I look a lot like my sister ... [and] one day my sister was beaten [on her way home] because people thought she was me. [They said] “That girl is a queer!” Moderator: And where you beaten in the streets in [country]? Andrea: I was beaten many times in schools, but also [in the street]... Moderator: And who would beat you up? Andrea: Boys, girls, skinheads...” (Andrea)*

For participants like Valeria, sexual violence came as a direct consequence of the undocumented migration journey. Valeria was one of the few undocumented women in our study who had experience with clandestine border crossing, and in addition to having faced a very

long and treacherous journey to the United States from her home country, Valeria described being threatened with rape by the male coyotes she trusted in to get her across the border. The vulnerability of migrant females to sexual abuse was also a common thread in other participants' accounts of the dangers associated with undocumented work. Days after arriving to Canada with a group of undocumented workers, Fabio was asked by three of his female housemates, who knew he was married and had a daughter, if he could accompany them to a meeting related to a job offer. The people who owned the house where they rented rooms had told some acquaintances about these girls' arrival. Due to lack of concrete details about the job and fearing for their safety, they went to the meeting location with Fabio as a chaperone. There they learnt these men owned a bar where "dancers" were needed. As Fabio explained, the girls were reassured this was not prostitution, that no client would ever touch them, but the job description seemed suspiciously easy and well-paid so they left despite all promises made. These stories illustrate that women are particularly vulnerable to all types of violence and abuse during their journey and upon arriving to destination countries such as Canada. Anecdotal evidence provided by study participants about such vulnerabilities has also been corroborated by our experienced community partners. Recent literature on sex trafficking in Canada, further suggests that migrant women are repeatedly left in the hands of organized criminal groups or by individuals who take advantage of their vulnerable legal situation in Canada to sexually exploit or rape them (Langevin & Belleau, 2002; Timoshkina, 2011).

## **Undocumented migration is here to stay**

From our participants' experiences (see e-book pages 33-43), it is clear that the demand for undocumented workers is at an all-time high in Canada and growing. Yet, the rules governing migration to Canada get increasingly tighter and there is a new emphasis on temporary work arrangements that do not lead into permanent residency – this is occurring in an era when the politics and economics governing the flow of money and the global movement of goods continue to proceed unrestrictedly. Thus the complex network of players benefitting from undocumented migration seems to be part and parcel of its continuance. As governments manage migration through multi-level policies, their main purpose for doing so is to regulate the foundation and economic gains of a global migration business (Salt & Stein, 1997). Here, the main apparatuses for managing this industry's business efficiency are government programs aimed to control who is allowed to enter and what each of these categories of migrants are entitled. Maintaining this business enterprise are global labour market trends that promote the continued demand for cheap labour regardless of its source and its consequences on human life. At an individual level, migrants' limited income or difficult personal circumstances make them engage with globalization processes, producing undocumented migration flows to Canada, and maintaining workers in a precarious legal status once they are here.

## **The undocumented migration industry**

Embedded in participants' migration narratives was the recurring theme of what we call, an "undocumented migration industry". This booming industry included a broad spectrum of people and organizations that benefited in overt and covert ways by organizing undocumented

migration, advising workers on how to migrate, or by exploiting workers once they were here. These players were both in workers' countries of origin and in Canada, and included: travel agents, labour recruiters, brokers, smugglers (i.e. coyotes), immigration lawyers, unscrupulous landlords, employers, and at times, known acquaintances, family, and friends. Thereby we envision undocumented migration as a monopolistically competitive industry with no end in sight. Several participants in our study paid to obtain travel information from agents or legal experts or to obtain 'migration packages' in their country of origin. Rafael for instance, trusted in a recruitment agency he found through a newspaper and which eventually persuaded him into thinking that this was a more secure way to travel. Rafael recounted:

*"I already wanted to come to Canada. I had planned it. I was going to arrive with friends of friends of mine... but suddenly, I saw an agency ad in the paper, which said: 'Do you want to work? Do you want to migrate to Canada?' So I went there. You go to the agency and they tell you about the jobs. Everything comes out to \$3,500." (Rafael)*

As highlighted in Case Study 1, this was a ghost recruitment agency that did not offer Rafael any of the things it promised once he arrived. Similarly, Mariana and her family spoke to an immigration consultant in their country of origin who offered a free consultation session about the immigration process in Canada. Mariana noted:

*"There was this person on TV who said he could get you work permits, Canadian papers and so on... They [my family members] went to talk to him but... he charged a lot of money." (Mariana)*

Mariana later noted that immigration consultants usually provide free one-time consultations as a strategy to gain the trust of interested migrants, and it is common for consultants to work with a broader network of smugglers who charge lucrative fees for getting people to Canada once they agree to work with them. It is also important to point out that 'expert consultants' also frequently mislead migrants into believing that obtaining legal status in Canada would be an easy, straightforward process. When asked to provide a message to the general audience through her body map, Valeria included the following recommendation:

"Migrants should get information when they arrive to Canada. I did things wrong for lack of information".

When Valeria first arrived, she assumed that the best way to obtain Canadian residency was to get a job and later apply for landed immigrant status. In her mind, it made perfect sense that those who were already employed would be excellent candidates to become permanent residents and later citizens. Clearly, Valeria had a flawed understanding of how the immigration system really worked in Canada (e.g. applying from abroad, need for higher education to achieve points, etc).

The use and cost of smuggling networks to come to Canada have also been highly impacted by increased border security measures which make it difficult for individuals to come without any assistance. Extra smuggling fees were often imposed against the will of participants which blurs the line between smuggling and coercive forms of human trafficking. For instance, Fabio agreed to pay an organized network of smugglers a set fee to obtain a Canadian work permit,

but then found out that the smugglers were assisting other migrants by providing fraudulent documentation. Although Fabio was able to enter Canada with a valid tourist visa, he was forced to pay his smugglers more money due to unexpected costs trying to smuggle the other migrants. Fabio explained:

*“He got me a visa for 10 days... By the time I met him to start the trip, I realized there were 19 other people (...). Five out of 20 people had a real passport [with a visa], like me. (...) The other 15, all forged... But the amount he charged wasn't the same [for everyone] (...) those with the fake passports paid around ten thousand American dollars. In the end, he charged me a bit more, five thousand dollars. It was supposed to be two thousand but he tricked me, as the trip progressed [they passed by more than one country] he kept changing [the amount].” (Fabio)*

While these examples highlight the potential profits made as a single undocumented worker comes to Canada, it should also be noted that several participants in our study experienced “back and forth” migration to Canada and within Canada, highlighting the multiplier effect on profits made by circuitous migration and secondary migration patterns.

Particularly evident upon undocumented workers’ arrival to Canada is that the undocumented migration industry can be further expanded to include legitimate businesses in Canada that thrive off the provision of services or goods related to migrants’ everyday needs. For instance, several participants described purchasing private travel insurance, opening up bank accounts, enrolling in private English classes costing over \$3000 per term, paying hefty service charges to cash-transfer businesses to send bi-weekly or monthly remittances back home.

With respect to everyday living costs, all participants used Toronto’s public transportation system (some often purchasing monthly metropasses), paid rent to local residents, and maintained cell phone accounts with major Canadian service providers. The Canadian government also profits from this underground economy because undocumented workers pay taxes on purchased goods, a few pay income taxes using other people’s social insurance number, but do not use services, paying out-of-pocket fees for essential health and social services. Interestingly, these forms of economic contribution often go unnoticed and are typically overshadowed by conservative practices, policies and national debates which devolve into a discourse of loss; that undocumented workers are a burden to social safety nets, that they take away jobs, and that they abuse health systems.

## **The “American Dream” is stronger than the border**

Globalization has generated an increase in worker migration worldwide which has been sustained by widening socio-economic gaps between nations and a concomitant rise in contingent work which now characterizes the global state of the economy. In Canada, the conscious decision to curtail irregular work migration has been largely devoid of discussions about workers’ individual agency, thereby gravely underestimating their capacity and resourcefulness to affect their own social and economic livelihoods in the face of highly conservative politics.

For the majority of participants we interviewed, migrating to Canada was seen as a gateway to opportunity, a chance to realize the “American dream”. Canada in this regard, has been skilfully constructed by returning migrants and others alike as a place where freedom and

economic prosperity are possible. As Emiliano noted:

*“We had these friends who used to tell us over there [country] about life here and no immigrant wants to tell a life of failure. So they always tell you this fairy tale of wonders and you swallow it, even though you have been to other countries... you swallow it because you want it to be true, right?” (Emiliano)*

It is within these deeply entrenched beliefs and hopes for a better life in the ‘First World’, that workers overlook the potential hardships of migration and find the means to keep coming. For women in particular, coming to Canada offers a sense of opportunity, usually not afforded to women in their home country. As Elizabeth noted:

*“because I am a woman, here the doors are more open. Here, there isn’t as much discrimination as there is in [country]; even to get a job, I noticed that. If someone was black or [different], they wouldn’t read their resume. They would simply throw it in the trash” (Elizabeth)*

Migrating to Canada and staying at whatever cost, is also sustained by the promise of fulfilling material goals and aspirations that would be impossible to attain back home. For some participants, this included the purchase of a home in their country of origin. For others, it included paying off debt, paying their children’s primary or higher education, saving enough money to open a business or pay for their own tuition when they returned. One worker spoke about having saved over thirty thousand dollars in 3 years while making less than \$13 an hour. In almost all cases, participants realized the multiplier effect of earning Canadian wages after converting it to their local currency back home, and this often prolonged workers’ intended stay in Canada. As Roberto noted:

*“I am able to recover \$300 dollars in three days here, maybe in a week if you want, but this is because I am here. There is a big difference. [If I spent] \$300 dollars [in my home country] I’d lose it and never get it back. That is my point of reference, and that’s the reason why I am still here.” (Roberto)*

Similarly, when asked to compare the work she did back home to her current work in Canada, Valeria noted:

*“They are different only in financial terms, right?... Because in [country] you work and you get paid in [local currency] (...) I used to work a lot there too, but here I work a lot and I get paid in dollars. So, since the dollar is worth much more than [local currency], you can get ahead [and] buy the things you need. It’s like... I’m working so I will buy things now, because if tomorrow I stop working I already have these things I wanted.” (Valeria)*

Workers also described how, overtime, their families began to depend on regular remittances to sustain their improved lifestyles back home. For instance, the children of undocumented workers were able to attend better quality schools, enroll in paid extracurricular activities, attend private universities, and families were finally able to afford gravely needed health care. Therefore, the decision to go back home, particularly for undocumented men supporting their

families, had to be carefully balanced against the potential loss of their family's improved quality of life. As Roberto explained:

*"The quality of life my son has, the education... I mean, it is very difficult. I know that the price I am paying is very high... being apart. I know I am missing out on the best years of my child's life... but I know that one day I am going to sit with my child and we are going to talk, and I am going to tell him the cause, the motivation, the reason I couldn't be with him all this time." (Roberto)*

Imposing visa restrictions on migrant-sending countries, and thereby making migration more difficult, dangerous, and expensive to travel back and forth, has also 'locked' workers in Canada for longer periods than anticipated or wanted. For Julio, this has meant living in Canada for over 9 years without being able to travel to his home country. For others, like Fabio, it has meant forfeiting milestone celebrations with his children in order to meet 'all or nothing' remittance obligations given that migration to Canada often presents itself as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that is either too costly, too dangerous, or too logistically impossible to repeat.

Yet most participants agreed that harsher immigration controls and visa restrictions would only push migrants to find new, and most likely, more dangerous, ways to travel or meet visa requirements. Some alluded to higher smuggling fees being imposed in some countries and others spoke about the rise of trafficking networks. Emiliano also pointed to the power of established social networks in making continued migration possible, even after a recent visa requirement was imposed on his home country:

*"I am not afraid of the visa. I think I can get it. I am sure of this because I have many contacts in my home country who could give me a hand to get a Canadian visa... I have a friend here who could invite me to come, right? Whatever the rules they want to set for us, it doesn't matter. I'll come. I'll comply. It doesn't matter." (Emiliano)*

In addition to the goals, aspirations, and new found responsibilities that motivated people to come and stay, and the visa restrictions that make it impossible to leave once they are here, participants also described a sense of pride in not going back home until they had accomplished what they came to do. For instance, Elena constantly extended her return date, and when we asked her why she still remained in Canada, she described:

*"I could already picture myself there... But then I started thinking and saying to myself: 'When you left [your home country] you said, 'I am going to Canada to learn English and I will come back having learned how to speak English'. You left and now you are going back with no money and with no English". So, it's because of personal pride that I am still here, not because I am stubborn...but rather, because this process has already been too painful and has cost me a lot. This is the last push. I only need to feel satisfied... if it was already so painful and I was able to handle it, I know I can hold on for a few more months..." (Elena)*

Similarly, when we asked Julio why he was still in Canada after so many years, he responded:

*"One time in my home country I was assaulted and almost killed. But that wasn't my day to die. This is why I believe in destiny. When you've accomplished your goals, then*

*you are ready to go” (Julio)*

As shown by these cases, several participants were propelled to stay in Canada to satisfy their own dignity and self-worth. They wanted to feel like “they had made it” before they left, and that the sacrifices they endured were indeed worth it. Conversely, there were also sentiments of shame and loss among workers who were planning to go back to their home countries because they “had not made it”. For instance, when asked how she felt about her migration experience to Canada, Mariana described:

*“It has been very hard. Maybe it was worth it –speaking for my parents – since they now have a chance to buy a house [back home]... In my case, maybe it has been the less productive of cases. Maybe we wasted a lot of time.” (Mariana)*

### **When Canada becomes home and home becomes nothing to go back to**

Particularly for those who had lived in Canada longer or who had escaped personal violence, there was a strong personal attachment to Canada which strongly impacted their reason for staying, even if this meant having limited social protections and entitlements. For instance, when participants were asked where they felt their body, their heart and their mind was relative to their countries of origin, several called Canada “home”, and one participant said, “I’m 100% in Canada today”. Therefore, for many participants, the opportunity to come to Canada was much more than a chance to gain material things, or improve the livelihoods of the ones they loved back home, it was about a search for belonging and creating anew what had been lost.

Participants also tended to migrate from Latin American countries with limited democratic, social and economic participation and some with fragile political systems, with little enforcement capacity to protect citizens from violence and crime. As Rafael’s Case Study revealed, his economic migration to Canada was closely linked to systemic violence in his country of origin, and when asked if he would go back, his response indicated a sense of emotional detachment and disappointment with what “back home” had become:

*“There is no future in my country. I mean, it is very dangerous. There are no jobs. There is NOTHING. Going back means ending up involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping. The country has really been ruined- there is a very bad economic crisis and there is lots of drug trafficking, murder, and death. Given that I have an opportunity to be here, I am trying to make the most of it. I ask God alot, I ask Him to let me be here, to let me stay here. My future involves me trying to stay here until I get my papers.” (Rafael)*

Similarly, for Renata Canada became a place of refuge from sexual violence, economic and political uncertainty. But more than just a safe haven from a place where she “couldn’t live freely”, Canada became her home. When pressured with the decision to leave once they were given a deportation order or to stay and live underground, Renata described:

*“I used to say [to my partner]: “Let’s go back!” But at the same time, we already had strong connections with the community. We felt ‘at home’. We had our church... So it wasn’t easy to leave that behind. We did leave a big part of what we had*

*accomplished, but we said we didn't want to give up the other piece that was also so special to us". (Renata)*

When combined, factors such as the availability of jobs in the cash economy, currency exchange rate that allows for supporting family members or acquiring a house, living in a place without systemic violence, and experiencing the solidarity of fellow church members, employers or coworkers, can create an entanglement of structural conditions, social and personal circumstances, and subjective desires (e.g. explore the world, learn languages, fulfil the 'American dream') that produce and maintain undocumented work migration.

## **Final Remarks**

This study was conducted primarily to document the working and living circumstances (i.e. the social determinants of health) of undocumented workers in the GTA to provide evidence for academic and social dialogue. While we know several structural, policy, and practice changes are required internationally and in Canada to warrant both decent work and supportive social conditions for this group of workers, we recognize that this is a complex and sensitive issue, making it difficult to propose a single course of action to address current exploitative circumstances. In the following table we list key ideas people should keep in mind when discussing the issue of undocumentedness. We do so subscribing to international agendas put forward by the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, and PICUM – Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants.

---

### **Table 5 Key messages for discussing undocumentedness**

- The fast movement of capital around the globe requires a mobile, flexible workforce. If goods and capital may migrate freely across boundaries, why are obstacles placed on the movement of people? Presently, workers' migration is an unstoppable trend
- We need to rethink the relationship between human rights and citizenship. Migrant workers should be considered occupational citizens
- Current economic globalization patterns have created profound inequities for migrant workers mainly due to the restrictions faced by the international labour movement and the lack of social protection which is offered exclusively to citizens of receiving countries
- Most economists see positive economic effects for the countries receiving undocumented workers
- National governments have not been able to offer legal solutions to this new social phenomenon and mainly opt to criminalize these foreign workers
- Migrants come to work in Canada because jobs are available and/or because they have been targeted and recruited by Canadian employers abroad
- While some fall out of status as a consequence of rigid immigration rules, most

find work due to the availability of cash economy jobs

- The cash or informal economy plays a central role in the maintenance of undocumentedness and promotes undocumented work even for those groups with regular immigration status
  - Undocumented workers do mainly 3-D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and degrading)
  - Canadians and foreigners who have committed crimes in Canada are not denied access to health care, but people who are criminalized as “illegal” migrants do not have access to preventive and curative health care in Canada, despite their contribution to the economy
  - Living in social isolation, fear, and without social protections has severe health consequences
- 

## References

- Carrillo, H. (2004). Sexual migration, cross-cultural sexual encounters, and sexual health. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 1(3), 58-70.
- Gastaldo, D., Magalhães, L., Carrasco, C., and Davy, C. (2012). Body-Map Storytelling as Research: Methodological considerations for telling the stories of undocumented workers through body mapping. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationhealth.ca/undocumented-workers-ontario/body-mapping>
- Langevin, L., & Belleau, M. (2002). *Trafficking in Women in Canada: A Critical Analysis of The Legal Framework Governing Immigrant Live-in Caregivers and Mail-Order Brides*. Ottawa: Status of Women Canada.
- Papademetriou, D. G. (2005). The Global Struggle with Illegal Migration: No End in Sight. *Migration Policy Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=336>
- Salt, J., & Stein, J. (1997). Migration as a Business: The Case of Trafficking. *International Migration*, 35(4), 467-494.
- Timoshkina, N. (2011). *Sex Trafficking of Women to Canada: Results from a Qualitative Metasynthesis of Empirical Research*. Paper presented at the Centre for Criminology Lecture Series on April 8, 2011.
- UNDESA. (2008). Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision. *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)*. Retrieved from <http://esa.un.org/migration/index.asp?panel=1>