

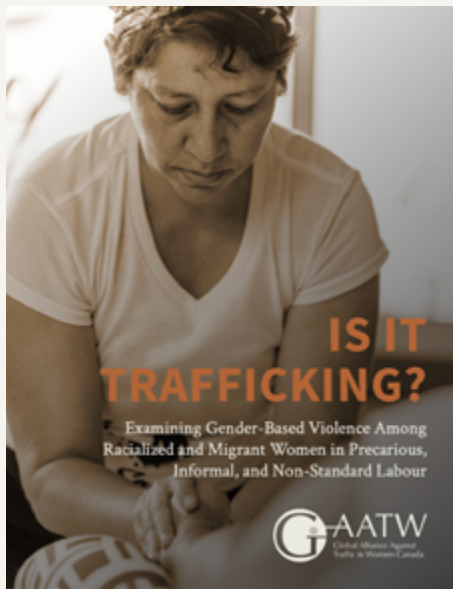
ROOT CAUSES

Trafficking and the Legacy of Settler Colonialism: *Migration Policies*



About the Root Causes Series

In February 2026, [GAATW Canada published findings](#) from its three-year project documenting experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) among racialized and migrant women working across precarious, informal, and/or non-standard labour sectors.



The [report](#) examines how experiences of GBV are understood and responded to by the women themselves, alongside service providers delivering essential support across four provinces and one territory.

Particular attention is given to how these experiences are positioned within broader anti-trafficking discourse and whether they are recognized as “human trafficking” or not.

Drawing on the stories of 16 migrant and racialized women, and 19 representatives from 21 organizations, the findings reveal that labeling migrant women’s experiences as “trafficking” is not straightforward.

Once filtered through anti-trafficking frameworks, experiences of violence and exploitation can become tied to systems of surveillance, criminalization, immigration enforcement, border securitization, and other forms of institutional control, rather than addressing the social, economic, and structural conditions that shape vulnerability and exploitation.

In this way, anti-trafficking discourse reinforces broader settler-colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal systems of control over mobility, labour, and belonging.

In this series, we highlight some of the root causes of human trafficking and gender-based violence as they emerged from our research.

What are the Links Between Human Trafficking, Immigration Control, and Border Securitization?

Research demonstrates that anti-trafficking policies are closely tied to immigration enforcement and border securitization.

Anti-trafficking discourse reinforces settler-colonial ideas of national security, citizenship, and belonging by determining who is considered worthy of protection and who is treated as a threat to Canada's borders.

Restrictive immigration laws result in dividing migrants into reductive categories such as “innocent victims of human trafficking” deemed worthy of temporary protection (e.g., VTIP-TRP) and “irregular migrants” who lose their legal status in Canada and become subject to immigration enforcement.

To this end, migrant workers are caught within a binary system that reinforces colonial ideas about who belongs (and who doesn't) within the nation state.

Experiences of GBV and exploitation are also rooted in systems concerned with border control, surveillance, and the regulation of migration, which intensifies insecurity for migrant and racialized women.

[GAATW Canada's research](#) revealed the material consequences of this in the everyday lives of the women we spoke to.

For example, many women described fearing that reporting violence, exploitation, or unsafe working conditions could result in losing both their employment and legal status in Canada.

Canada's immigration policies make migrant workers dependent on employers while simultaneously producing fear of the immigration system itself. In this way, anti-trafficking frameworks create conditions where migrant workers do not seek help for exploitative workplace conditions because they fear immigration-



related consequences such as the loss of their work permit and legal status in Canada, as well as detention and deportation.

Fear of the immigration system is especially common among migrant workers and temporary visa holders employed in workplaces where sexual services are provided.

Migrant workers' fears cannot be understood solely as a consequence of a lack of knowledge about their labour rights in Canada.

Even when migrant workers are aware of their rights and legal protections, many face profound insecurity because Canada governs migration through a criminal justice framework that treats precarious or unauthorized status as grounds for detention and removal.



Therefore, the threat of immigration enforcement is inseparable from migrants' decisions about whether it is safe to exercise their labour rights.

As one organizational representative said:

“They fear that if they spoke out about violence, bad working conditions, or low pay, their employer would fire them and, because of their closed work permit, they would lose their status in Canada and be forced to return home.”

When women did seek help, service providers described helping them navigate highly complex immigration systems that many could not manage alone. They recounted cases of migrants whose experiences showed clear indications of trafficking, but who were deported or denied a visa for trafficking victims.

One research participant said:

“it doesn't feel like actually the government rhetoric around wanting to help victims of trafficking is put into practice.”

In recent years, Canada's federal and provincial governments have increasingly acknowledged the exploitation of migrant workers.

However, simply labeling more migrants as “victims of trafficking” is insufficient.

To effectively reduce the risks of trafficking and exploitation, Canada must provide all migrant workers with permanent resident (PR) status upon arrival and end all closed work permits.

Immigration reform must also extend to migrant women engaged in sex work, as current prohibitions reinforce stigma, limit access to justice, and exclude migrants from recognition as contributing members of Canadian society.

Ensuring permanent residency and open work rights for all migrant workers, including those in sex work, is essential to fostering equity, safety, and inclusion.

What Can You Do?

- Educate yourself on how Canada's immigration policies, including the regulation of temporary foreign labour, uphold colonial systems of control over land, labour, and mobility.
- Support grassroots and community-led organizations that tackle the root causes of vulnerability in temporary labour.
- Demand open work permits and rights for all migrant workers, regardless of nationality or labour sector.
- Oppose all forms of racism and anti-migrant rhetoric and actions by the media and national or local policymakers.

About GAATW Canada

GAATW Canada is a federal non-profit organization and charity based in British Columbia.

GAATW Canada bridges community and scholarly expertise to address human trafficking through research, policy change, advocacy, education, and collaborative partnerships.

Since 1996, GAATW Canada's work has been grounded in several guiding principles. Our goal for a fairer Canadian society is to prevent, reduce, and address human trafficking while prioritizing the rights of those at risk or trafficked, as well as those harmed by anti-trafficking efforts.

We aim to build a fairer, more compassionate society where exploitation has no place.

We listen to diverse voices—including Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, sex workers, and other affected groups—to honour the varied experiences of exploitation at individual, community, and regional levels.

We move beyond rescue and criminal-legal approaches, fostering lasting change and creating a society where everyone can flourish, free from exploitation.

