



# Stories of Newcomer Workers in Manitoba's Food Processing Industry



The Vidaview Life Story Board™

Karen Hamilton, Health Educator  
Anthony Huynh, Research Assistant

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## Introduction

This collection of stories of newcomer workers was part of a larger project ***“Building Support for Newcomer Workers in the Food Processing Industry”*** that involved the formation and delivery of two 10 week Occupational Health Support Groups for newcomer food processing workers in their own language in the Westman Region. Through this project, 25 workers from the Eritrean and Chinese communities participated in these support groups in their own language. These communities were selected to participate by the Project Advisory Committee based on perceived need and usefulness of the groups for these workers.

The objectives of collecting stories of newcomer workers in this industry were:

- 1) To help newcomer workers in the food processing industry describe their stories of immigration, work in Canada and present day living and working situations.
- 2) To document and share approximately 10 stories of newcomer workers in the food processing industry.
- 3) To assist newcomer workers in the food processing industry identify common areas of concern and develop strategies to address these concerns.

The Occupational Health Centre (OHC) is a non-profit, charitable community health centre focused on workers' health. The funding for this project was provided by the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba's Research and Workplace Innovation Program.

In Manitoba, large food processing plants in the Westman Region employ a large number of newcomer workers, including hundreds of Temporary Foreign Workers, usually with limited English language ability. While under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program these workers have limited rights and protections.

Workers in the meat and poultry industry suffer a high rate of many types of injuries and illnesses, most often musculoskeletal disorders due to the repetitive motions involved with processing meat.<sup>(1)</sup> In this industry workers are pressured

to work as fast as possible to process the largest volume possible.<sup>(2)</sup> Long hours with repetitive tasks lead to high rates of injury.

## Method

Workers' stories were gathered by the Occupational Health Centre in this project using the Vidaview Life Story Board as an interview tool. The Life Story Board was developed by OHC physician Dr. Rob Chase and is a versatile visual interview tool that helps the worker to share and depict their life and work story into a lifescape.

### Life Story Board Interview Questions - Food Processing Workers 2018

#### Migration & Settlement

1. How many years have you been in Canada?
2. Tell me about what life was like before you came to Canada.
  - What kind of work did you do?
  - Schooling/education?
3. What did you hope your life would be like in Canada?
4. What has life been like for you since you came to Canada?
5. What connections do you have with family here in Canada, and back home?
6. What do you like about your life in Canada?
7. What are some of the challenges you have faced in your life in Canada?

#### Work

8. Tell me about what it is like to work at your workplace.
9. What tasks does your job involve?
10. What do you like about your job?
11. What problems or concerns do you have with your job?
12. What effects has your job had on your health?
13. How are you treated by others at work?

#### Support

14. Who do you ask for help when you have any problems or difficulties?
  - coworkers                      -family                      -supervisor/management
  - community                      -union                      -settlement services
15. How have they helped you?

#### Future

16. What do you hope for yourself in the future?
17. What would help you to achieve this future?
  - language?                      -education?
18. What advice would you have for someone else who came to Canada to work in a similar job?

#### Storyboarding

19. How do you feel about storyboarding?
20. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Through verbal interviews and the use of symbols and words on the storyboard, many of the challenges and successes that are sometimes inaccessible due to communication barriers, culture, and fear are identified. A guiding set of questions was also developed to use during the interviews.

A total of 11 workers were interviewed using the Life Story Board in this project. All workers are currently employed at the same food processing plant. Six workers were from Eritrea and five workers were from the People's Republic of China (referred to as "China" for the rest of the report). The workers from Eritrea were all men, given that it is mainly men from this community who are employed in this industry. In contrast, we interviewed one man and four women from China. With the exception of one worker from China, all of the workers interviewed had permanent resident status on arrival to Canada. Four out of the five workers we interviewed from China came to Canada as a sponsored spouse of a former temporary foreign worker. All six of the workers we interviewed from Eritrea came to Canada as refugees with permanent resident status. In contrast, those workers with temporary status who come to work in the food processing industry as temporary foreign workers experience greater precariousness due to the inability to change jobs and a lack of access to settlement and other services. This project unfortunately does not capture this experience.

All of the workers interviewed had participated in the Occupational Health Support Groups prior to being interviewed and had volunteered to share their stories. A consent form, that assured confidentiality and the potential risks and benefits of participating in the research, was reviewed and completed with each participant prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted by Dr. Rob Chase with OHC's Project Coordinator, Venantie Nutmende. Interpretation was provided for all of the interviews by trained interpreters familiar with the work in the food processing industry. Each storyteller was provided a \$35 honorarium for their time and participation in the interview process. Each storyteller chose a pseudonym to be used in this report to conceal their identity.

The small number of workers interviewed makes it difficult to generalize the stories to the very large population that comprise newcomer workers in this industry. We can assume that some significant workers experiences will be missing. However, many themes reoccurred in this small number of workers

across both the Eritrean and Chinese groups of workers leading to some important understandings of the experience of newcomer workers in this industry.

After completing all of the individual Life Story Board interviews, we facilitated a group process for both the Chinese and Eritrean Occupational Health Support Group members. We presented a summary of the results of the interviews to the participants and asked them to identify and prioritize any additional concerns that were missing. We also asked them to suggest recommendations to their employer, the union, and Westman Immigrant Services to better support them. Ten participants from the Chinese group attended the group process and four participants from the Eritrean group attended the group process.

### Migration Stories

"I remember when I arrived in Winnipeg, it was night. It was around 11:00 PM. On the way to Brandon, I noticed I look at the sky, the moon is so big and bright. I told my husband, "Look, the moon, it's bigger than the moon in China. It must be a nice place to live."

- Smile

### Workers from China

Before coming to Canada, the workers from China were employed in a variety of jobs. One owned a store, and the other four worked in positions in different types of factories, such as a clothing factory.

The workers from China that we interviewed have all been in Canada between

9-11 years. Generally the husband came to Canada as a temporary foreign worker first. Two or three years later, after receiving permanent resident status through the Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program, the husbands sponsored their spouses to come to Canada, sometimes with children. The workers endured a prolonged family separation during the time their husband was in Canada while they remained in China. One of the women we interviewed described the migration process for her family:

“When the employer came to China to hire people, my husband told me he wanted to try to work in Canada for one or two years. Then he came back. But another surprise came. He had us immigrate to Canada one year later. He went to China to bring us here.”

- Smile

One worker describes their hopes,

“I hoped that I could make more money to provide a better life for my family. We didn't expect to immigrate to Canada in the beginning, that was beyond our expectations.”

-Moon

Another worker said,

“I only had a very simple idea. As long as I was with my family, it will be a happy family. I did not think so much.”

-Smile

The workers describe being both curious and anxious about what life would be like in a new country. Some of their concerns, before coming to Canada, were about their ability to get used to a new life, learning a new language, about the parents they were leaving behind, and about their own ability to find a job even though their husband was employed.

### **Workers from Eritrea**

For the Eritrean workers, the primary reason for leaving their home in Eritrea was to avoid being forced into the military. According to the participants, the military

would go to great lengths to find the men and recruit them into the military. The men who refused to participate in the army faced the threat of having a family member be conscripted. In such cases, hiding from the government was the most logical and viable solution for the men.

“The Government of Eritrea they ask to make me a soldier and I am not at school and I don't want to be a soldier. The main thing I decide is to cross the border. The Government of Eritrea they send the two letters. One letter to my family, the second letter to me. My letter is immediately to come to the military service and for the family, the letter is saying if your son is not coming, they're saying to take the family to the military service.”

- June.

“I decide to leave the country. Because the soldiers they are coming at home, they are fighting with me ... with my family, “If they do not bring your son we'll take you.”

-Asterisk

As noted by all the participants, the journey across the border of Eritrea to find refuge in one of the UNHCR camps was often treacherous. Given their journey was lengthy and unfamiliar, the men would express the fear of potentially being lost as well as being shot or captured by an Eritrean soldier.

“Crossing the border from Eritrea to Sudan, we are three guys and no one knows the way to cross the border. Just we are going randomly. We are thinking maybe this way, maybe this way, maybe this way. Randomly we are going and we reach after nine days to Kassala. Kassala is a city at the border of ... between Sudan and Eritrea. Almost it is in Sudan, but when you cross the border you get the main city, that's the first one, Kassala. And I stay in Kassala, that's at the camp; the United Nation or UNHCR Camp. After three days they take us in Shagarab Camp, that's the biggest camp. There is small camps and the biggest camp. They collect all the people together in Shagarab, together at mission camp.”

- Asterisk



"And to cross the border to Sudan from that village to the border of Sudan takes us nine days because we are walking just night shift and in the day, we are sleeping under the trees. Because everywhere there is Eritrean soldiers so when they see us crossing the border or walking they would shoot us. So at daytime, we are sleeping or searching water places and we are walking the night. "

- Cross

"In 2011, I decide to....cross the border of Sudan it takes us three days. We're just walking on night, we can't walk in the day time because all the border are closed by the military of Eritrea so if they see us, they will shoot us. Just we are sleeping on day and then go night. After three days we get the city at the border what we call Kasala. And we stayed two weeks at that city because at the border there is an [organization] to collect all the refugees who cross the border. We stay with them for two weeks, after two weeks all the refugees most of them we're Eritreans they send us to the [main camp] what we call Shagarab ."

- Star

"After two months training for the military service, in that day, I see the life is going very hard. I decided to cross the border from the farms of Agordat, again me and my friend, and the way from that farms to the border of Sudan, it takes like three days just going in the night because all the borders of Eritrea and Sudan is full of the military who is waiting people will crossing the border, and they are ready to shoot all the people who is coming to cross the border."

- Sun

"They have small camps, but there is lots of Eritreans over there. To cross the border of Eritrea is not one way, there is 20 ways. You have to hide day, and you have to walk on night. So if the capital city is 500,000, there will be 500,000 in the villages, so there is, I think, like one million Eritreans refugee."

- Sun

The men expressed waiting for months at the camps before receiving their

yellow card (a card that recognizes individuals as asylum seekers). As asylum seekers, men were eligible for permanent residency as well as employment opportunities in certain neighbouring areas. In retelling their experiences at the camps, some of the concerns men described were the poorly resourced, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions of the sites, corruption among officials, and the lack of job opportunities that were available to them.

“The life in Sudan start from Shagarab, from 2011 and in 2011 I stay in the Shagarab Camp for three months to get the yellow card for the admission. And the life in Shagarab is very-very hard as I mentioned before with another client. It is no education, no health safety, there is no allow to work. Just you have to wait for the United Nation how to help you, and there is lots of people they can't help you.”

-Asterisk

“In Shagarab I stayed for three months and that is to get the admission card of United Nation yellow card. And the life in Shagarab is very, very hard but it is similar with the life of the farm. There is no education, there is no easy life. There is no a lot of work, there is no enough food. We're not allowed to do anything just waiting for the Sudanese government they're working at the office of the United Nations, all they're Sudanese. So it is corrupt way in Shagarab. It is not allowed to follow the rules of Sudan. If somebody gives them money for the yellow card they give him immediately but if you don't have money you have to work for long time for three months to six months to get the admission card of the United Nation..... It's not a place to live for long time, even for the short time because there is no any facilities for any human beings. That's why everybody is trying to cross to leave that camp and to go to the cities to get a job and to improve his life. So after three months, when I get the yellow card, I go to the capital city, Khartoum.

- Star

Upon receiving their yellow card, men expressed crossing the border from the refugee sites to find work in the nearest city taking on odd jobs. Although the

yellow card did not guarantee men's employment security, their status as asylum seekers helped make them become eligible for employment prospects in the neighboring regions.

"I decide to get to work or to move from [the Shagarab] camp to another places. And I start to go to the capital city, to Sudan, Khartoum and it takes for me two days. After two days I reach Khartoum and I am working over there in lots of things like companies, they companies that are fixing windows and doors and working with them for couple of years."

- Asterisk

Despite the lengthy process, participants often noted sponsorships from a family member as a key entry point to migrating into Canada.

"I came here in Canada November, 2016 and I came with my wife... My wife she have her uncle in Canada. He sponsor my wife, and she enter me in her process then we come together."

-Asterisk

"When I am in Sudan, for all my brothers, for me, for two of my brothers, all we get a process by our brother-in-law who is living in Brandon now. In 2011, me and my brothers, we send the paperwork from Sudan to him, but when does he apply for us and from where he get those opportunity, we don't know, just we send all the paperwork to him. After couple of years, we get opportunity to come to Canada. Just in 2011, we sent the paperwork from Sudan to him."

- Sun

"We came to Canada as a refugee. My wife, she stayed in Sudan for six years, and there is a cousin who lives in Winnipeg, he sponsored her. Then they come to Sudan in 2014, and she applied for me to enter with her in her process. And we came together as a refugee."

- Kite

## Life in Canada

When the five workers we interviewed from China arrived in Canada a decade ago, they all rented apartments in Brandon. Within just a few years, they all were able to purchase their own house.

Most of the workers we interviewed from Eritrea currently live in rented apartments, usually with extended family or friends.

Two of the workers from China commented on how much they appreciate the natural environment in Canada. One of these workers attributed the climate in Canada to improving her daughter's health since she suffered with many respiratory issues in China which have improved since moving here.

When one of the workers from China came to Canada, their son was 14 years old. He has now graduated from college and found a good job.

The workers from Eritrea mentioned the important support provided by their own cultural community.

"Every Saturday we are going to play soccer as a community. Every Sunday in the morning, I am going to church and maybe after on Saturday, after playing soccer, I am going to my friend's house and sharing the coffee. We stay together. We are enjoying for a couple of hours."

– Cross

"There are lots of challenges at first when you are a newcomer. There is no English. I don't know the system, I don't know the life, the culture, everything. So just to know to do something I am calling my friends. They give information...like contact with the landlord, paying the bills, banking, English class, applying for job. I am asking my friend and all those things I get them from my friend."

– Star

Yet the same workers from Eritrea also lament the lack of training opportunities in Brandon, something in which most of them expressed a great deal of interest.

“There’s no training. I’m going to English class, I’m going to work, and I’m going to Superstore, nothing else. But when you get training...we can expand our mind.”

– Star

## Work Stories

### First Jobs

Some of the workers from China’s first job in Canada was cleaning or working in a restaurant before they were employed in the food processing industry.

“Back home I did sewing in the clothing factory. I had that experience. I had hoped I could find a job similar to sewing. But when I came here, due to the language barrier, it turned out it was hard.”

– Cherry

“It is my first job and the only job I have. Because my husband went to work and the kid went to school, I stayed at home alone. It was so boring. Then I applied for a job with my employer. On my fifth week in Canada I was hired...It was a hard job compared to the job I had in China.”

– Smile

The workers from Eritrea heard about the job in the food processing industry from family or friends in their cultural community who were already working with their employer. A few lived in Winnipeg prior to moving to Brandon to work.

“My dreams and my hopes when I came to Canada, I’m thinking to get a job easily, not to wait for a long time looking for a job. And getting hard job...when I saw food processing work, it’s labour work. I am not expecting like that in Canada. I’m thinking to get easy job, or to find it easily, not waiting for a long time.”

-Kite

### **Type of Jobs in the Food Processing Plant**

Approximately 17,000 hogs are processed every day in the plant. Workers work two different shifts. The A.M. shift is 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and P.M. shift is 3:30 pm to 11:30 pm. Groups of workers also work overnight in areas such as sanitation and shipping. The plant is divided into the following areas:

- a) Front end kill – the area where hogs are alive. Workers receive the hogs from the farmers and place them in pens in the barn.
  - Kill – the area where live hogs are placed in an elevator to take them down to ground level where they are killed with gas. They are then returned to the main floor, placed on a conveyor belt and then stabbed in the neck to get rid of all the blood. If still alive after the gas they are shot. The hogs will then be shaved with boiling water before entering the dressing floor.
  - Clean kill (dressing floor) – a large room where the cleaning process starts. The workers work with the carcass of the hog that has no more blood and has been cut in half in order for workers to work with it. Different types of jobs in this department include stamping hogs, manually removing kidneys, notching front feet, clipping heads, manually removing the viscera from the carcass, removing salivary glands, removing heart fat, removing uterus, and tongues.

Workers in all these positions work with about 8,000 to 8,500 carcasses per shift. All jobs are manually done, with the help of knives or some other special machinery, and must be done **in seconds**.

b) Coolers – once the hogs are finished on the dressing floor, they are placed overnight in coolers.

c) Cut floor – this area is made up of five main lines:

- Block Table - turn hogs, trim fat, unload coolers, orient hams so they are in the proper position to be worked on other lines, jowl slasher/trimmer, drop table (where the hog is brought from hanging on a conveyor chain to the cutting).
- Picnic line - on this line, workers separate fat and skin on the picnics (hams), align butts, trim picnics and debone/trim shoulders.
- Butt line - in this area, workers operate riblet saw machines, trimming butts, removing blade bone, and deboning butts.
- Loin line - on this line, workers manually peel back ribs, operate a back rib saw, manually load loins onto the conveyor belt, pack back ribs or back bones, trim loins, separate back fat from bellies, and trim fat off the backs. Workers also work with scales, packing, and cleaning the floors.
- Belly line - on this line workers work with the bellies that come from the loin line; the ribs are separated from the belly with an electric gun and then manually removed with a special knife. Most of the work is done with knives, including electric knives.

c) Packaging - workers receive product from all the different lines mentioned above, and manually place product into boxes according to specifications. In the dumper area mentioned by a number of

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## Stories of Newcomer Workers in Manitoba's Food Processing Industry

workers we interviewed, conveyor belts bring product into the dumper machine which “dumps” the product on tables where workers sort the pieces and pack them in boxes.

- d) Shipping - the boxes from the packaging area are transported on rails to be sealed and stamped or palletized (placed on pallets for shipping). They are then sent to shipping where they are placed into trucks to be shipped to customers.
- e) Sanitation - in charge to clean all the different areas (floors, conveyor belts and machines) that are used during production. The workers in this area are trained to operate jitneys, they wash with high pressure guns, and are in charge of sanitizing before the next production day starts. They work with different chemicals in their daily work routine.

The workers we interviewed from China have worked in various departments in a variety of positions in the plant, including the kill floor, sanitation department, cut floor, packaging, picnic, stomach and chits, dumper, butt line, and the loin line.

Workers interviewed from Eritrea have worked in positions including dumper, rails, sanitation, loading backbone, cleaning, palletizing, bagging, and trimmer. Some of the workers have been able to change departments to earn more money, work a different shift, when they find the work too difficult, or when they began to have pain and discomfort.

“There is lots of positions. You can switch to other places. There is options like that.”

- Kite

The work at the food processing plant is physically demanding and fast paced.

“Just hard work, and to clean the whole day...and not have enough money, the lowest payment.”

- Spiral

### Relationships at Work

Both the Chinese and Eritrean workers we interviewed commented on positive working relationships, particularly with their coworkers.



"We have each other. For example, there are two meats. So another coworker would help me with that product. The same thing, when I see other workers busy, so I help. We help each other."

- Cherry

"Yeah, we treat each other good. We have good communication with the co-workers, supervisor, if something happens we help each other and support each other."

- Star

At the same time, most of the workers from China mentioned that either they, or a coworker, had been treated poorly by their supervisors.

"The worker wanted to communicate with the supervisor but the supervisor did not give the worker the chance to speak up. The supervisor would threaten the worker, "go home". Even the lead hand would say, "go home".

- Moon

"I went to see the supervisor because at that time, my English was not that good, so I needed interpreter. I told the supervisor that I need interpreter. Supervisor said you need to go find an interpreter by yourself. I don't like that attitude, that hatred, the attitude towards me."

- Cherry

## Health Stories

### Workplace Hazards & Injuries

The workers we interviewed mentioned many different hazards they face in the workplace, and have incurred injuries from these hazards. Hazards mentioned include the following:

**Repetitive work** – all five workers from China reported pain and injuries from the repetitive nature of their work, including moving the product repetitively as well as using both a small knife and a wizard knife

repetitively. Four of the workers reported injured shoulders and one worker reported pain in the wrist.

Five workers from Eritrea also reported pain or injuries in the shoulder, back, legs, arm and hand from driving, pushing and handling hogs, and making boxes.

“Some people can handle the pain, but for me, even if I sleep because of improper position, I could have the pain on my shoulders.”

- Cherry

**Cold & Dampness** – Temperatures in many parts of meat processing plants are normally set to ensure safety of the food. These temperatures are much lower than the optimum temperature range for humans. Many workers we interviewed repeatedly mentioned the cold, damp environment in many parts of the plant.

“Some people find it's okay in a cold environment, but for me, I cannot handle the cold work environment...There's only one thing that really bothers me, is...the workplace environment is too damp.”

– Bird

“Most of the time the place is cold. So if I am sick with flu, it will stay with me like one month, because the place is cold.”

- Kite

**Vibration** – whizard knives are shown to create a combination of vibration, repetitive tasks, force and cold and can lead to injuries such as Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome. Some workers we interviewed expressed concern about the use of these knives and vibration.

"The worker, when they whiz the knife, they have to do it for six hours, so for a long time. It will not be good for their health because the whizard knife is vibrating when it's working, so you have to hold that tight."

– Smile

**Stress and Pace of Work** – a number of workers mentioned the fast pace of work and the stress it causes them. One worker also connected this to being understaffed.

"The challenge most time is stress, because when you're working palletizing it comes very fast, so to lift the boxes very fast, that is very challenging and stressing."

- Asterisk

"The challenge in load line is most time they don't have enough people, so there is stress."

- Asterisk

One worker in the collective group process described how fast they work "as if there was a fire."

**Lack of training on health & safety** – in the collective group process the workers also identified a lack of training on health and safety as a main issue.

**Favouritism/discrimination** – in the collective group process both groups also identified favouritism/discrimination by lead hands and supervisors towards those workers from their own cultural community and against those from outside their cultural group as a serious concern. For example, many workers complained that supervisors and lead hands often preferentially give overtime and job rotations to workers from their own cultural group. Group members reported that there are no supervisors from either the Chinese or Eritrean communities, and no lead hands from the

Eritrean community, while some lead hands are from the Chinese community. In effect, the Chinese and Eritrean workers seem to occupy the lower rungs of the workplace hierarchy.

### **Reporting Health Issues & Injuries at the Workplace**

One of the workers from China said that they had reported a workplace injury to their supervisor and had also filed a workers compensation claim. However, most of the workers we interviewed, especially those from Eritrea, expressed reluctance to report an injury or health issue at work due to the employer's treatment of them when they do report and the fear of losing their job.

"You can go to the nurse station for help, but for the new workers they have stress because when you go to see the nurse, the supervisor may be not happy with that."

- Moon

"I did not tell the nurse because most time if someone or something happened, they ask lots of questions full of stress. So it's better to be quiet rather than tell them. When you tell them, they're not accepting our opinion, so I decide to be quiet."

- Star

"Most time they don't want to lose their job. They don't want to get themselves in trouble. So if somebody hurt his hand, it's better to be quiet, because you don't know who will talk about that, who are talking to the Union? ... You don't know the outcome, that's why it's better to keep quiet."

- Kite

The experience of one worker we interviewed who did report an injury and file a workers compensation claim confirms that these fears seem to be well founded.

“As for the supervisor/lead hand, as long as you are not injured, it's okay. If you get injured, they do not treat you nice. If you get injured, the lead hand supervisor will pick on you. If you are not injured, they do not treat you bad.”

- Apple

## Health Care

Workers we interviewed mentioned a variety of health care providers they have utilized to treat injuries and illnesses. These providers included the nurse at the workplace, as well as family doctors, walk-in clinics, physiotherapists, and massage therapists.

A few of the workers we interviewed mentioned that the health care treatment they received for workplace injuries might provide some short term relief, but they continue to experience pain and discomfort due to their work.

“The foot doctor prescribed insole for me, but they were not helping. The foot doctor also showed me some exercise, some moves I did at home, but it's still not helping. But for me, if I tried not to walk less, that's not possible at the workplace. At the workplace, I have to move around.”

-Smile

## Language

Most workers identified language as being one of the biggest challenges they face. A lack of English makes it easier to get injured, more difficult to communicate about one's needs in the workplace, unlikely to find another job outside of the food processing industry, and more difficult to integrate into the wider community.

"If you hurt your hand today, and you meet with the nurse, and if you say something wrong, a misunderstanding or a miscommunication, that will be registered. And forever, it will go with you."

-Kite

"When I'm going in the street somewhere, I see the people are speaking English, they are chatting well, and I'm stressing: 'Did I speak like those people? How can I learn English and how can I communicate with those people?' I feel like a loner. I'm not speaking English, but the people all speak, so I'm wondering about that."

- Sun

Workers mentioned a number of ways they have tried to improve their language skills. Many have taken English classes at their union or at Westman Immigrant Services. A number of the parents mentioned that their children help them learn English as well. One worker had made use of online English. However, in the workplace itself they discussed the difficulty improving English amidst so many different language groups.

"Most of the time we're speaking another language so there is no improvement of English in the workplace."

-Star

"I can speak simple English, but as my coworkers most of them are Spanish-speaking...so there's not much communication between us."

-Bird

Language learning is a huge challenge in the context of workers' other responsibilities.

"The main thing is because I am working night shift, I can't wake up in the morning to go to school. That's why I quit school....it's very hard to wake up in the morning."

-Spiral

"I have two kids, so I was busy to take care of them. So in the beginning, I didn't have time to study English till three months later. I sent my kids back to China so I had time to study English. So I went to Westman Immigrant Services to study English for several months."

-Cherry

Some workers also mentioned that the availability of language training in Brandon is more limited compared to larger cities like Winnipeg. Because of these difficulties learning the language, a number of the workers mentioned the need for interpreters available in the workplace.

## Job Insecurity

Many of the workers we interviewed mentioned the negative impact of a lack of job security and little prospects for other employment.

"Even if you are sick, you have to work, because you don't want to lose your job. If you lose your job, you can't get another job. For example, in Brandon, without this employer, there is nothing. That's why even people hurt or they're sick, they have to work."

- Kite

"They are working ... but they are not comfortable. They are feeling stressed because if they fire them ... where will they go? Every family, they have four children, three children, some of them big families... If they did something, they will fire them."

- Sun

### Financial Difficulties

A number of Eritrean workers we interviewed mentioned their lack of knowledge regarding financial practices and institutions in Canada. The workers did not have experience with banking and the use of debit cards and credit cards. This lack of knowledge presents an additional barrier to managing money.

While a couple of the workers we interviewed from China mentioned sending money to their parents back home, most of the Eritrean workers regularly provide remittances to their families in Eritrea or other parts of the world.

"I'm sending them money. In Eritrea my family are farmers. My sisters, even they are married, but they need help. So I help send them money, even my cousins. All the family. And in Eritrea we have the culture, we help each other. Grandmother, grandfather, cousins, aunts, uncles. Even if you can't help them every month, you send them money at Christmas, Easter, holidays."

- Kite

"The Eritreans who live in Canada, they can't make plans...they can save money, but if they get a call from Eritrea or from Sudan they will send the money they have in their banks or in their pockets."

- Star

### Dreams for New Stories

All of the workers we interviewed have dreams for better lives in Canada. Most of them want to find another job outside of the food processing industry and for this they understand that they need to improve their English language ability.



"I hope for a better job, but right now, due to the language barrier, it's really hard to find a job."

–Bird

"After I took the course offered by OHC...I took action. I applied for a job at Shoppers Drug Mart. I do not expect to achieve more in the future, but I want to try different things. This industry is maybe not the right place for me."

–Smile

"Human beings, they can live for a long time eating food, but they can't live for a long time working labour work. So life in Canada, to improve your future, first of all you have to have the language... Now I'm working in the food processing industry, but this is not for a long time. .. for my future it is not a good place or good idea to work for this employer."

– Star

Many of the Eritrean workers we interviewed also spoke about their hopes to enroll in training or schools for different fields of work, including construction work, driving trucks, and opening a small business.

Many of the workers from Eritrea also shared with us their hopes to sponsor family members to Canada.

"We are working and we are sending all our money back home in the camps in Eritrea, in Sudan... and we are waiting and looking if there are any ways how we can sponsor our friends, families, relatives who are living in the camps. It is better to sponsor them here, rather than wasting time or sending all your money back home."

– Star

## Workers' Recommendations

The workers who participated in the collective group process developed recommendations to the employer, union, and Westman Immigrant Services to better support them with their challenges and to achieve their dreams.

### **Workers' Recommendations for Employer:**

- Give workers opportunity to raise concerns & listen to them
- Ensure supervisors and lead hands respect workers - address favouritism & discrimination
- Train workers on health and safety
- Stop reducing the number of workers for each line
- Provide interpreters
- Give breaks on time and stop practice of early dismissals – pay for full shift

### **Workers' Recommendations for Union:**

- Provide more information to workers about the union
- Respond faster to workers' questions and concerns
- Be stronger advocates for workers with the employer
- Help workers deal with problem supervisors and lead hands (i.e. favouritism/discrimination) and make this a priority
- Provide training opportunities for members, beyond language training

### **Workers' Recommendations for Westman Immigrant Services:**

- Assist workers progress in English classes. Placement with Benchmark level testing does not allow workers to advance & improve.
- Provide more opportunities to learn about Canadian laws, beyond what is provided in the initial orientation program.
- Provide help with sponsorship and other application processes.

## Discussion

This project should be seen in the context of the employment trends in Manitoba's food processing sector which employs large numbers of newcomer workers, including Temporary Foreign workers. The food processing industry is an important driver of immigration and settlement in the Westman region of Manitoba. Key informants in this research estimate that of the approximately 2,100 workers in the largest food processing plant in Brandon, roughly 1,800 are newcomers to Canada. Their countries of origin include various Latin American countries (El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia), China, India, Ukraine, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

In the two groups of workers involved in this project, it is estimated there are 150 Eritrean workers in the plant out of a population of approximately 400 in Brandon. Approximately 400 workers from China are employed in the plant out of a population of approximately 900 in the larger community.

The workers we interviewed all had permanent resident status upon arrival in Canada which allowed them to access a wide range of health, social, and settlement services. Despite access to these services, the workers we interviewed face significant barriers to their settlement in Canada.

The food processing industry also relies on temporary foreign workers who do not have access to settlement and other services and are at risk of losing their status and being deported if they lose their job. Workers with temporary status are less likely to report injuries and voice concerns due to this precariousness. The workers we interviewed from China are the spouses of former temporary foreign workers who had achieved permanent resident status through Manitoba's Provincial Nominee Program. These former temporary foreign workers from China achieved permanent resident status prior to the introduction of a minimum language requirement to be eligible to apply. However, stringent language requirements (Canadian Language Benchmark Level 4) from the federal government since 2012 to access permanent resident status through this program make it a stressful and difficult process for many temporary foreign workers who

struggle with language learning. Our interviews in this project demonstrate that the former temporary foreign workers from China, their spouses and children have gone on to successfully settle and contribute to their workplace as well as the Canadian economy and our communities.

The workplace issues, policy implications, service gaps and resettlement needs of newcomer workers in this industry extend beyond the two groups of workers from China and Eritrea engaged in this project. The Advisory Committee for this project developed the following recommendations to address some of these issues.

### **Harassment, Discrimination & Favouritism**

Workers are reluctant to report harassment and discrimination in the workplace yet it is one of their top concerns. The union, employer, and government all have an important role to play to strengthen harassment prevention efforts and accountability in this industry:

**Recommendation 1:** The Employer should ensure the harassment policy is up to date and that training on identifying and addressing harassment is regularly provided to all workers, lead hands, and supervisors. Interpretation by a certified interpreter should be provided for training. The issue of favouritism to particular cultural groups as well as discrimination against injured workers should be included in the policy and the training. The harassment policy must ensure a clear reporting mechanism for workers when the person engaged in harassment is their supervisor.

**Recommendation 2:** The Union should offer harassment training on a regular basis to all lead hands and workers. The issue of favouritism to particular cultural groups should be included in this training. Interpretation by a certified interpreter should be provided for training. The Union could offer special training sessions for lead hands given their important role in ensuring fairness and respect in the workplace, and payment provided for those who attend to encourage maximum participation.

**Recommendation 3:** Workplace Safety & Health Branch of the Government of Manitoba should proactively ensure harassment prevention policies are in place and being followed in the food processing industry.

### **Workplace Health & Safety Concerns**

The workers in the food processing industry face a host of significant health and safety concerns outlined in this report. Efforts to address these health and safety concerns should be strengthened. This includes strengthening the internal bodies responsible for health and safety in the workplace, including the workplace safety and health committee and representatives. Our project has demonstrated that offering training can be an effective way of engaging workers in health and safety.

**Recommendation 4:** The Employer should provide more training on health and safety hazards to workers. Interpretation by a certified interpreter should be provided for health and safety sessions.

**Recommendation 5:** The Union should ensure it has effective worker health and safety representatives in the workplace who attend meetings regularly. A process for reviewing and electing or appointing new representatives should be undertaken.

**Recommendation 6:** The Union should offer training to worker health and safety representatives to improve engagement and effectiveness in their role. Providing an honorarium for attendance at training sessions can encourage participation.

**Recommendation 7:** Workplace Safety and Health Branch of the Government of Manitoba should prioritize regular workplace inspections in the food processing industry with a focus on ergonomic issues related to repetitive work, vibration from whizard knives, and pace of work.

## Workplace Injuries

Claims suppression is when an employer tells or encourages a worker not to report an injury. In our project, workers told us they are reluctant to report injuries and that injured workers are regularly both misunderstood and mistreated. This contributes to a climate of ongoing claims suppression in the workplace. After the closing of the Brandon & District Worker Advocacy Centre, injured workers no longer have access to the advocacy support they may need for a workplace injury. Given that claims suppression is a continuing concern in the food processing industry, injured workers require more support and protection than they currently receive

**Recommendation 8:** The Employer should ensure that all workplace injuries are properly documented and reported to the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba.

**Recommendation 9:** The Employer should ensure interpreters are always available when workers need them at the First Aid stations. Interpreters should not be members of management.

**Recommendation 10:** The Union should provide training for workers on what to do when injured and returning to work after injury. Interpretation by a certified interpreter should be provided for the training.

**Recommendation 11:** The Government of Manitoba should reinstate funding to the Brandon & District Worker Advocacy Centre to provide support to injured workers.

**Recommendation 12:** The Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba should conduct regular investigations into the claims reporting practices in the food processing industry to ensure employers are meeting their legal obligations to report workplace injuries and to identify and remedy practices of claims suppression.

**Recommendation 13:** The Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba should expand their current awareness campaigns to inform workers of their right to report injuries by ensuring that information includes what to do if workers are penalized for reporting an injury, the role of the Compliance Unit and how to contact it. The WCB has already published a number of informational pieces for workers in multiple languages. This important effort should be expanded to include information on claims suppression and the Compliance Unit in multiple languages.

### Language Needs

Language challenges faced by newcomer workers in this industry are significant. Workers need to improve their language ability to better function in the workplace and in the wider community, and to secure employment outside the industry. Workers have limited time and energy to attend language classes. A lack of flexibility and strict attendance policies in local language classes means that workers cannot sustain their participation in programs and have difficulty progressing. In the meantime, workers need continued language supports in the workplace.

The language barrier workers experience is primarily a burden not on the Canadian system, but on the workers themselves. Language requirements to access permanent resident status only further marginalize this group of workers and prevent them from accessing a wider range of language learning opportunities. Instead of language eligibility requirements for permanent resident status, a more effective and supportive policy response is to tailor and improve language learning opportunities for workers in the workplace, union, and community.

**Recommendation 14:** The Employer should continue to provide and increase the availability of interpreters in the workplace. Interpreters should not be members of management. These interpreters should be available as needed, and automatically in the event of a workplace injury or illness.

**Recommendation 15:** The Union should continue to advocate for expanded availability of interpreters in the workplace and advocate to ensure interpreters are not members of management. The Union should also continue to offer certified interpreters for its own programs and services.

**Recommendation 16:** The Employer should provide language classes in partnership with the English at Work program that typically offers two-hour classes held twice a week near the end of the employee workday, with one hour on paid work time and one hour on employee personal time.

**Recommendation 17:** Westman Immigrant Services should conduct a needs assessment with workers in the food processing industry to determine the best way to provide language learning to this group. This will likely necessitate more flexibility and less stringent attendance policies for language classes.

## Immigration Status

**Recommendation 18:** The Employer, as stipulated in the workplace Collective Agreement must provide assistance to workers on immigration matters. This should be provided by someone knowledgeable about work permits, the Provincial Nominee Program, and other immigration matters.

**Recommendation 19:** The Government of Manitoba should continue to provide access to permanent resident status for temporary foreign workers through the Provincial Nominee Program.

**Recommendation 20:** The Government of Canada should eliminate or reduce the language requirement for temporary foreign workers to attain permanent resident status through the provincial nominee program to make it more accessible for workers in the food processing industry.

**Recommendation 21:** The Government of Canada should provide permanent status on arrival to temporary foreign workers who are filling permanent labour needs in Canada, such as those in the food processing industry. This would reduce the vulnerability of the workers and ensure they have access to the services in the community critical for their successful settlement.



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Most of all, thank you to the workers who shared their stories with us. We are inspired by your strength and determination to build a better life. We hope to do our small part to help make the path easier by sharing your stories with others who have the ability to make changes that would help address some of the challenges you experience. May your dreams for new stories come true through your own hard work and with the support of your new community.

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<sup>(1)</sup> United States Government Accountability Office. (2005). Workplace Safety and Health: Safety in the Meat and Poultry Industry, While Improving Could be Further Strengthened. Washington, D.C.: GAO.

<sup>(2)</sup> Lian, Jean. "Silence on the Floor: The recent meat recall at XL Foods Inc. in Brooks, Alberta is not wanting in superlatives" OHS Canada, January 10, 2013