
Insights from Community Justice Initiative (CJI): Identifying Legal Needs, Resources and Support for Vulnerable and Underserved Populations (Migrant Workers, International Students, Women and Gender-diverse Individuals) Through a Feminist Participatory Approach



Chair and Presenter

- Saleha Khan — Board Chair, EmpowerHer Diversity Hub

Presenters

- Saleha Khan — Board Chair, EmpowerHer Diversity Hub
- Maria “Esel” Panlaqui — Co-Researcher & Project Coordinator, EmpowerHer Diversity Hub / TNO Workers Support Services
- Jennifer Rajasekar — Manager, TNO Workers Support Services

Session Flow

Context & Acknowledgement

- Land Acknowledgement and Gratitude

Session Outline

- Saleha Khan — Board Chair & Co-Researcher, EmpowerHer Diversity Hub
 - Research objectives, process and methodology
- Maria “Esel” Panlaqui — Co-Researcher & Project Coordinator, EmpowerHer Diversity Hub / TNO Workers Support Services
 - How feminist and participatory approaches shaped the research
- Saleha Khan — Board Chair & Co-Presenter, EmpowerHer Diversity Hub
 - Presents the key findings and recommendations, highlighting community voices and insights from storytelling and developmental evaluation
- Jennifer Rajasekar — Manager, TNO Workers Support Services
 - Frontline case study connecting findings to outreach practice

Why This Research Matters

- Canada champions human rights, yet a significant justice gap remains.
- Most people—especially marginalized groups—struggle to identify rights or navigate legal processes.
- Migrant workers, women and gender-diverse people, and international students face layered barriers (cost, fear, language, complex systems).
- These barriers lead to unresolved housing, employment, family, and immigration issues, with social and health impacts.
- This research uses a feminist, trauma-informed, participatory approach to center lived experiences and identify real legal needs.

Research Objectives, Goals & Project Snapshot

Objectives & Goals

- Identify the legal needs and barriers faced by migrant workers, women and gender-diverse individuals, and international students in Ontario.
- Co-develop a Community Resource Map to improve access to legal information and services.

Project Snapshot

- 6-month initiative delivered with 35 community support staff across Ontario
- 300 surveys, 4 focus groups, 5 key informant interviews
- Materials translated into 7 languages (English, Spanish, Ukranian, Tagalog, Arabic, Thai and Urdu)
- Two evaluation phases: mid-term & final
- Videos and low-literacy materials created for participants
- Outreach prioritized underserved and rural regions
- Community Resource Map developed (Excel)

Slide 6 — Data Collection Overview

Surveys — 300 Participants

- Migrant Workers (100): Jamaica, Mexico, Philippines; based in Hanover/Walkerton, Haldimand, Grand Bend, Sarnia, Leamington
- Women & Gender-Diverse (100): India, Indonesia, Syria, Thailand, Nigeria, Philippines; based in Sault Ste. Marie, London, Ottawa (outskirts)
- International Students (100): Rwanda, Nigeria, India, Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, others; based in Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay, Grimsby, London, Windsor, Markham

Focus Groups — 14 Participants

- Migrant Workers — 3 in Sarnia; 3 in Windsor
- Women & Gender-Diverse — 3 in Toronto
- International Students — 5 in Sault Ste. Marie

Key Informant Interviews — 5 Participants

- Migrant worker — Leamington, Hanover
- Women & Gender-Diverse — Sault Ste. Marie, Toronto, Hanover/Walkerton
- International student — London

Validation & Storytelling Sessions

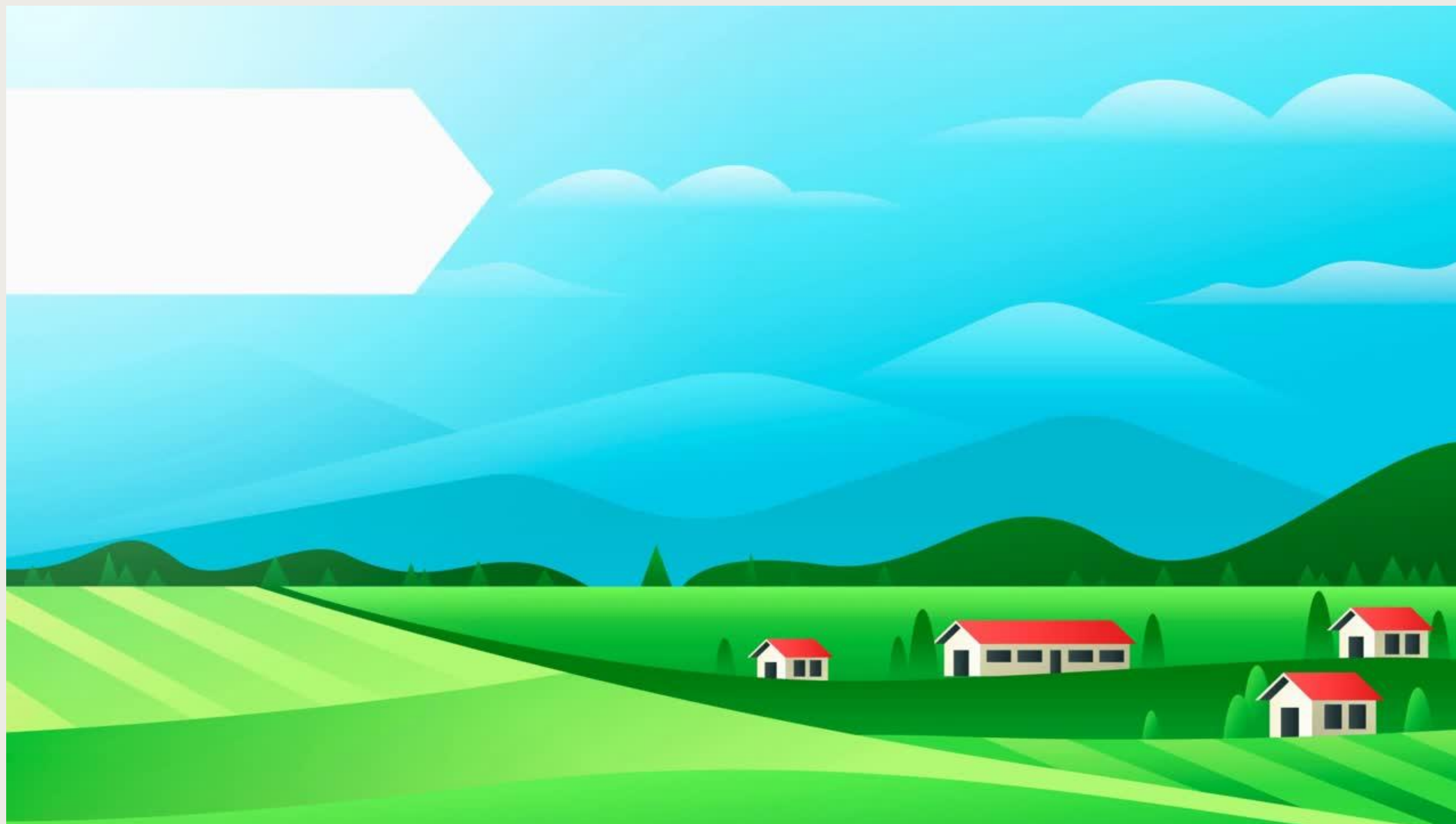
- Validation Workshop (Nov 30): Participants and community support staff reviewed findings, corrected details, and refined the Community Resource Map
- Storytelling Sessions: Used reflection activities and guided prompts to capture lived experiences, emotional impacts, and cultural context behind the data

Our Approach: Community-Led, Participatory & Inclusive

- Rooted in trust, collaboration, and shared leadership, centring the voices of those most impacted
- Guided by a monthly Community Advisory Committee representing diverse regions, identities, and lived experiences across Ontario
- Members recruited through trusted community networks, ensuring meaningful participation of migrant workers, international students, women, and gender-diverse individuals
- Included storytelling circles, developmental evaluation sessions, and a final Validation Workshop co-designed with participants
- Worked closely with grassroots, women-led, and ethnocultural organizations to reach rural, remote, and newcomer communities
- 35 multilingual community staff supported outreach, recruitment, translation, and engagement across multiple regions
- A feminist participatory approach ensured flex-time for meetings, culturally safe spaces, and the reduction of barriers to participation

Integrated Feminist Participatory Practices

- Centered lived experience through co-designed tools, participant-led agendas, and consensus-based decisions
- Ensured accessibility with flex-time meetings, multiple participation formats, and one-on-one options
- Reduced practical barriers by providing transportation, childcare, meals, and community-based meeting locations
- Created trauma-informed, culturally safe spaces with grounding practices, confidentiality agreements, counsellor access, and LGBTQ+-inclusive facilitation
- Shared leadership by engaging participants as co-facilitators, analysts, and validators of findings
- Valued labour through fair honoraria, rapid stipend processing, and treating community members as research partners
- Fostered community-care with peer support, wellness kits/meals, and space for emotions and cultural expression
- Ensured inclusive representation across gender, identity, culture, and region
- Maintained transparency by showing how feedback shaped decisions and returning findings through validation workshops



Ethics & Capacity Building in Practice

- Advisory Committee members were **hired, trained, and entrusted with real decision-making power**, contributing directly to project design, analysis, and validation
- Community staff received **practical training in ethical research methods**, confidentiality, informed consent, safe data collection, and trauma-informed engagement
- Honoraria and stipends were delivered through **streamlined, responsive processes**, recognizing community members' time, expertise, and lived experience
- Regular **team debriefs and reflective learning sessions** strengthened ethical consistency, researcher wellbeing, and alignment with community priorities
- Trauma-informed counsellors supported staff and participants during sensitive discussions, reinforcing an ethical commitment to do no harm
- Emotional and physical safety protocols were embedded into all activities, ensuring participants could engage confidently and without risk
- The entire process upheld **core feminist research principles**—care, reciprocity, shared power, transparency, and accountability

Field Engagement & Impact

- Local, multilingual staff conducted region-specific outreach, building trust through existing community relationships and cultural familiarity
- Fieldwork blended data collection with direct community support, ensuring that engagement activities were immediately useful and not extractive
- Legal information was shared in multiple accessible formats, expanding reach to low-literacy and linguistically diverse participants
- Staff delivered real-time referrals and navigation support, helping individuals access legal, health, and social services without delay
- Ongoing peer learning and team-based reflection helped refine methods, strengthen consistency, and adapt to emerging community needs
- Community mapping guided outreach routes and schedules, allowing staff to identify underserved farms, campuses, and rural clusters
- Field activities were grounded in relational trust-building, reinforcing long-term community connections beyond the research period

Lead Support, Debriefing & Evaluation

- IDEA principles — Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility —
- All training materials, forms, and flyers reviewed to ensure inclusivity and representation
- Demographic data collected to reflect diverse identities and experiences
- Mid-term and final evaluations conducted to assess progress, impact, and learning
- Regular team debriefings for reflection, knowledge-sharing, and emotional well-being
- Continuous refinement of tools and methods based on participant and staff feedback

Storytelling & Amplifying Voices

- Storytelling circles co-facilitated with trauma-informed counsellors
- Participants shared in their own languages – spoken, written, audio, or video
- Safe, inclusive spaces for reflection, connection, and healing
- Stories shared (with consent) on digital platforms and community events to celebrate resilience and belonging
- Project team also met with the MP and MPP in London to share research updates and insights
- Plans underway to submit written evidence from the study to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM)



A PREGNANT WOMAN WITHOUT PAPERS

Throughout my work with the Community Justice Initiative, one case forever changed my understanding of justice.

It involved a pregnant woman living in Canada without legal documents. She was unable to access proper prenatal care and lived under constant fear of deportation. But what struck me most was the level of exploitation she endured because of her undocumented status. This woman lived a life invisible to the systems many of us take for granted. Every trip outside was a risk. Seeking help came with potential punishment. It was a harsh reminder that legal status determines who is protected and who is left behind. What made this situation transformative for me was not only the depth of her suffering, but the strength of the community response. Together, we were able to mobilize legal aid, medical support, and safe networks. It didn't solve everything—but it gave her hope. This case challenged me deeply. It forced me to see how our justice system, while built on rights, often fails those who fall outside traditional definitions of "belonging." I learned that empathy, community, and tailored legal support are not optional—they are essential. This story has strengthened my resolve to continue advocating for a justice system that sees everyone and protects everyone.



WHAT DOES A MANAGER LOOK LIKE?

I had worked in management for some time, moved to Canada as an international student and continued with my advanced degree. During this time, I got my work permit and I started applying to various jobs. I applied for a manager position in a food establishment.

The lady doing the interview said that I did not look like a manager, and that I should think about working on the front line service or as a cashier. I walked out of that place, very much confused and disheartened. Why didn't I look like a manager? I looked around the place and so people who looked like me working in the service areas, serving and cleaning up. Did that mean that I was only good enough to do that work? I could never be in a manager position in Canada...why?

Was I ugly?

What was wrong with me?

Key Findings: Barriers to Legal Access

Knowledge & Information Gaps

- Low awareness of legal rights and where to seek help
- Reliance on informal networks due to lack of clear, translated information

Cost, Language & Literacy Barriers

- Cost is the top barrier across all groups
- Language gaps in rural and urban areas
- Literacy challenges limit access to written resources

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) & Sexual Harassment

- Women and gender-diverse participants reported:
- Sexual harassment at work and school
- Intimate partner violence
- Gender-specific legal gaps (safety, housing, reproductive rights)
- Stigma and safety fears discourage reporting

Key Findings: Barriers to Legal Access (cont'd)

Rural Isolation & Limited Services

- Few legal clinics outside major cities
- No transportation and long distances to services
- Employers control mobility and communication in some cases

Systemic Barriers in Legal Aid & Institutional Supports

- Long delays and difficulty finding representation
- Inconsistent interpreter services
- Institutions lack trauma-informed and gender-responsive supports

“What We Heard”: Community Voices

On Language Barriers

“It’s really hard when you can’t communicate, and people don’t understand that.”

“I don’t know if I can ask for help because I don’t know the words.”

On Exploitation & Harassment

“She paid cash... no contract, no protection.”

“If I report him for touching me, I lose my job.”

On Fear & Retaliation

“Speaking up means losing everything.”

“If I go to a lawyer, later employers will see me as trouble.”

On Discrimination

“She said I smelled bad — because my English wasn’t good.”

“When my partner came with me, suddenly the apartment was taken

“What We Heard”: Community Voices (cont’d)

On Housing & Safety

“My room didn’t have a door. No one cared.”

“They told me foreign students are too risky.”

On Isolation & Mental Health

“We are alone here. People drink because they miss their families.”

On Systemic Gaps

“Legal aid told me to wait months... no one called back.”

“We need someone who comes to us and explains things simply.”

Recommendations for Action

Multilingual, plain-language legal resources

Videos, audio guides, and visual tools for low-literacy users

Mobile-friendly Community Resource Map App with instructional videos

Strengthen Gender-Responsive Supports

Trauma-informed, culturally safe services

Clear pathways to report sexual harassment and gender-based violence

Supports for reproductive rights, housing safety, and workplace protections

Expand Rural, Mobile & Community-Based Legal Services

Fund rural and virtual legal clinics

Rotating pop-up legal clinics with interpreters across farms and rural towns

Transportation supports for remote workers and students

Increase Legal Aid Capacity & Cultural Competency

Faster response times and better interpreter services

IDEA, anti-racism, trauma-informed, and cultural-competency training

Legal Navigator training for community support staff

Strengthen Community Networks & Trust

Peer navigators from migrant, newcomer, LGBTQ+, and student communities

Partnerships with community groups, faith networks, employers & campuses

Recommendations for Action (con't)

Establish a Dedicated Migrant Worker Legal Clinic in Ontario

- Ontario currently has no specialized legal clinic dedicated to migrant workers
- Similar model exists in British Columbia (Migrant Workers Centre)
- A provincial clinic would provide: Specialized legal casework (employment standards, immigration, housing, OHS)
- Multilingual staff and culturally-responsive services
- Outreach across farms, rural communities, and campuses
- Targeted support for workers facing abuse, reprisals, or status insecurity

Acknowledgements

- Participants who shared their stories and experiences — the foundation of this research
- Advisory Committee members across Ontario for their insight and guidance
- Community support staff from Toronto, Haldimand, Owen Sound, London, Niagara, and Hanover
- Translators, interpreters, and trauma-informed counsellors who ensured accessibility and care
- Grassroots and women's organizations — including Compassionate Mommies International, Hanover Women's Collective, the St. Thomas Filipino-Canadian Community, and the Filipino-Canadian Association of London and District
- TNO – Worker Support Services for their collaboration
- The Law Foundation of Ontario for funding and believing in community-led research

Case Study: TNO – Workers Support Services



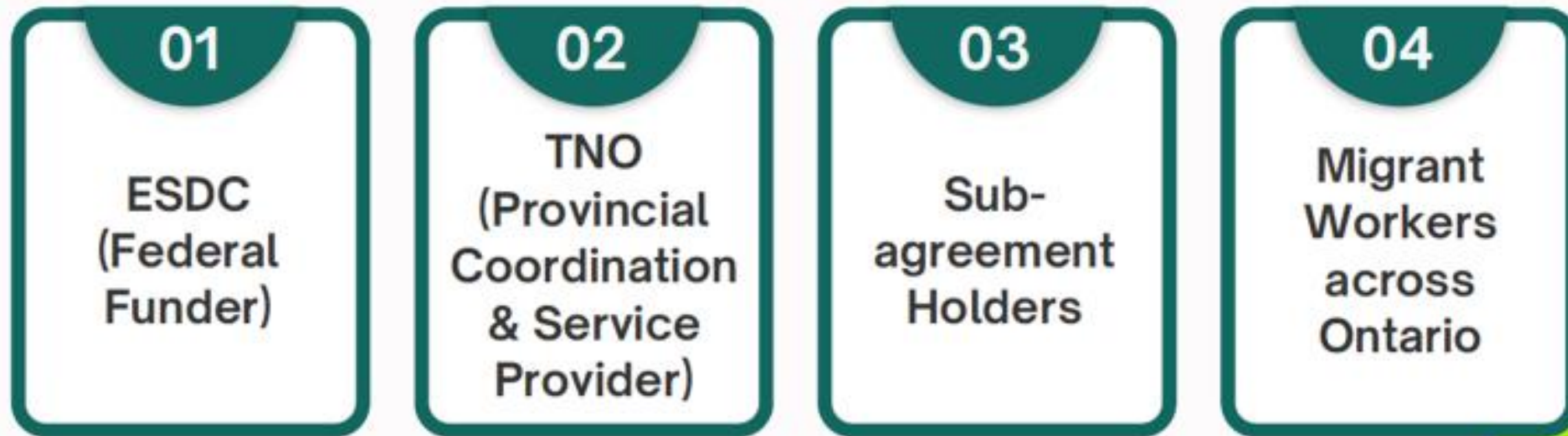
What is Worker Support Services?

- A federally funded initiative support temporary foreign workers (TFWs) across Ontario
- Funded by ESDC, under the Migrant Worker Support Program (MWSP).
- Provides information, referrals, emergency and non-emergency services to workers.
- Aims to increase awareness of rights, promote community connection, and reduce worker isolate.



Case Study: TNO – Workers Support Services

Service Model Overview



- Coordination, funding, training, and strategic planning flow through TNO to partners.

Case Study: TNO – Workers Support Services

- Many workers live in rural and isolated areas with limited access to services
- Literacy and language barriers limit outreach effectiveness
- Legal clinics in rural regions often lack immigration & employment law capacity
- Growing cases of women workers facing sexual harassment or intimate partner violence
- Call for a dedicated migrant worker legal clinic in Ontario

Discussion Prompts:

- What stood out to you about using a feminist and participatory action research approach?
- How can we make participation more inclusive — especially for people who are often left out or unheard?
- What helps build trust and safety when working with diverse communities?
- How can we continue applying these lessons — inclusion, care, and shared leadership — in our own work and organizations?

Thank you!

Contacts:

EmpowerHer Diversity Hub (EHDH)

✉ info@empowerherdiversityhub.com

☎ 519-697-2378

Jennifer Rajasekar

**Manager, TNO – Workers Support
Services**

✉ jrajasekar@tno-toronto.org

☎ 647-296-0161

