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Living Without Regular Status in Montreal: Women's Experiences, Hopes, and the Power of Collective Advocacy

Mujeres sin estatus regular en Montreal: experiencias, esperanzas y el poder de la incidencia colectiva

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ABSTRACT
This research provides a preliminary analysis into the lived experiences of women without regular immigration status in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Based on interviews, testimonies and secondary materials provided by community organizations, it highlights how systemic barriers, such as visa expiration, denied asylum claims, and employer abuse lead women into irregular status. Living without regular status comes with many hardships, and for women, these are often intensified by gender-based vulnerabilities that shape both how they fall out of status and how they navigate daily life. Once they become without regular status, there are few realistic pathways to regularize it. Their access to healthcare is nonexistent or extremely limited. They face unsafe and exploitative working conditions, unstable housing, and constant fear of deportation. Despite their hardships, they remain hopeful for their futures and for the possibility of regularizing their status. Many women find strength in collective spaces, where community participation provides emotional support, empowerment, knowledge, and helps them reclaim their voices and self-esteem. Those involved in advocacy with local organizations report improved mental health and reduced isolation as they support others facing similar challenges while fighting for their rights.

Keywords: Irregular migration; Experiences of women living without regular status in Canada; Causes for irregular migration in Canada; Hopes of women without regular status; advocacy for the implementation of regularization programs; Gender realities of irregular migration; Impacts of social participation and advocacy amongst women without regular status

RESUMEN
Esta investigación ofrece un análisis preliminar de las experiencias vividas por mujeres sin estatus migratorio regular en Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Basándose en entrevistas, testimonios y materiales secundarios proporcionados por organizaciones comunitarias, destaca cómo las barreras sistémicas, como la expiración de visas, el rechazo de solicitudes de asilo y el abuso de empleadores, conducen a las mujeres a un estatus irregular. Ser mujer añade una capa extra de vulnerabilidad y desafíos a sus experiencias de vida sin estatus regular, afectando tanto las razones por las que pierden su estatus como la manera en que enfrentan la vida diaria. Una vez que quedan sin estatus regular, existen pocas vías realistas para regularizarlo. Su acceso a la atención médica es inexistente o extremadamente limitado. Enfrentan condiciones laborales inseguras y explotadoras, vivienda inestable y un temor constante a la deportación. A pesar de las dificultades, mantienen la esperanza en su futuro y en la posibilidad de regularizar su estatus. Muchas mujeres encuentran fortaleza en espacios colectivos, donde la participación comunitaria ofrece apoyo emocional, empoderamiento, conocimiento y les ayuda a recuperar sus voces y autoestima. Quienes participan en actividades de defensa con organizaciones locales reportan una mejora en su salud mental y una reducción del aislamiento, ya que apoyan a otras personas en situaciones similares mientras luchan por sus derechos.

Palabras clave: Migración irregular; Experiencias de mujeres que viven sin estatus regular en Canadá; Causas de la migración irregular en Canadá; Esperanzas de las mujeres sin estatus regular; Incidencia para la implementación de programas de regularización; Realidades de género en la migración irregular; Impactos de la participación social y la incidencia entre mujeres sin estatus regular

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This end of master's project was written on unceded territories, specifically on the lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation, in Tio'tia:ke (Montreal), which means "where the currents meet."

Esta trabajo de fin de master fue redactada en territorios no cedidos, específicamente en las tierras de la Nación Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), en Tio'tia:ke (Montreal), que significa "donde se encuentran las corrientes."

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GLOSSARY

CBSA (Canada Border Services Agency)
The federal agency responsible for border enforcement, immigration enforcement, and customs services in Canada. CBSA plays a key role in detention and deportation procedures.

CSQ (Certificat de sélection du Québec)
A selection certificate issued by the Government of Quebec that allows a foreign national to apply for permanent residency in Canada under Quebec's immigration programs.

H&C (Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds)
A provision under Section 25(1) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) that allows people without regular status to apply for permanent residency based on compelling humanitarian reasons, including hardship, establishment in Canada, or best interests of a child.

IFHP (Interim Federal Health Program)
A federal program that provides limited, temporary health coverage to refugees, refugee claimants, and certain other vulnerable migrants who are not eligible for provincial or territorial health insurance.

ILP (Immigration Levels Plan)
Canada's multi-year immigration strategy, released annually, which outlines the number of immigrants the government plans to admit under various categories such as economic, family, and refugee or protected persons.

IRB (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada)
An independent tribunal that makes decisions on immigration and refugee matters, including asylum claims, detention reviews, and admissibility hearings.

IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada)
The federal department responsible for immigration, refugee protection, citizenship, and related services in Canada.

IRPA (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act)
The main legislation governing immigration and refugee matters in Canada, including admissibility, enforcement, refugee protection, and humanitarian provisions.

Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers
A temporary work permit for migrant workers in abusive job situations to leave their employer and find a new job. It is not renewable and has an expiry date, making it a short-term protective measure rather than a permanent solution.

PR (Permanent Residency)
A legal status granted to non-citizens in Canada that allows them to live, work, and access most social services on a long-term basis. Permanent residents have many of the same rights and responsibilities as citizens but do not have the right to vote. They may apply for Canadian citizenship after meeting certain requirements.

PRRA (Pre-Removal Risk Assessment)
A process that allows certain individuals facing removal from Canada to apply for protection by showing they would be at risk of persecution, torture, or cruel treatment if returned to their country of origin.

Refugee Claimant
An individual who has formally requested refugee protection in Canada but whose claim has not yet been accepted or rejected. During the process, claimants have limited rights and access to services.

Regularization
A legal or administrative process that allows people without regular immigration status to obtain lawful residency in a country.

TFWP (Temporary Foreign Worker Program)
A Canadian program that allows employers to hire foreign nationals for temporary labour needs when qualified Canadians or permanent residents are not available. Many workers under this program are issued closed work permits, which tie them to a single employer.

TRP (Temporary Resident Permit)
A discretionary permit granted to individuals who are otherwise inadmissible to Canada, allowing them to remain temporarily. There are two notable types relevant to women without regular status:

1. Temporary Resident Permit for Victims of Family Violence

2. Special Temporary Resident Permit for Victims of Human Trafficking

Without Regular Status
A term referring to individuals who do not have valid immigration authorization to stay and work in Canada. This includes people whose visas have expired, who overstayed their permits, who had asylum claims rejected, or who fell out of status due to complex immigration procedures.

INTRODUCTION

In Montreal, Quebec, the lives of women living without regular immigration status remain largely in the shadows. There is limited public awareness and accessible data especially from a gendered perspective about their lived realities and personal experiences. An estimated 500,000 people are living without regular status in Canada. Organizations working closely with migrants report a rising number of individuals falling into irregularity in recent years, driven by increasingly restrictive immigration policies, pushing more people into precarity and invisibility. This research aims to bring preliminary insight on the daily experiences of women without regular status, the systemic and gendered reasons behind how they fall into irregular status, the challenges they face in terms of healthcare access, working and housing conditions as well as how their situation impacts their psychosocial well-being. It also offers a preliminary look at these women's hopes, dreams, and recommendations, as well as how social participation and advocacy for their rights have impacted them. My motivation is to help amplify the voices of women directly affected, for us to learn directly from their experiences, and those who work alongside them, by sharing their stories and knowledge in their own words. This project recognizes the courage, strength, trust, time and vulnerability of the women without regular status who participated in the interviews. This entirety of this project was conducted through a feminist and intersectional lense which recognizes the power of collective advocacy. This paper hopes to affirm the presence, dignity, and contributions of these women and of the women who support and advocate alongside them — while also challenging, questioning, and calling for a more inclusive Canadian immigration system that upholds the human rights of all people to live with dignity, regardless of their immigration status.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims to provide preliminary approximations on the following four questions:

1) What factors contribute to women in Montreal becoming trapped to live without regular status?

2) How do the lived experiences of women without regular status impact their access to housing, employment, healthcare, and their overall personal and psychosocial well-being?

3) What are the hopes and recommendations of women living without regular status for the future?

4) How does rights-based advocacy and social participation influence the lived experiences and sense of agency among women with irregular immigration status?

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the systemic, legal, and gendered factors that lead women in Montreal to fall into irregular status or be denied regular immigration status, and to analyze how this affects their daily lives, including access to housing, healthcare, employment, and overall psychosocial well-being.

2. To highlight the hopes, recommendations, and forms of collective resistance shared by women without status, particularly through their involvement in social participation and advocacy efforts, in order to understand how this impacts them.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the systemic and gendered factors that lead women in Montreal to live without regular immigration status.

2. Analyze how irregular status affects women's access to housing, employment, healthcare, and psychosocial well-being.

3. Document women's hopes for their futures.

4. Examine the role of social participation and advocacy in empowering women without regular status.

5. Inform inclusive immigration policies by amplifying the voices, experiences and recommendations of these women.

HYPOTHESIS

1) Many women in Montreal fall into irregular status due to systemic and gendered issues, especially Canada's employer-specific work permit under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP). The closed work permit program ties their legal stay to one employer, so if they leave due to abuse or exploitation, they risk becoming undocumented. This policy structure creates a cycle that pushes women in and out of irregular status with limited and difficult pathways towards regularization.

2) Living without regular status severely limits access to essential needs such as healthcare, housing, and employment. These women often face workplace exploitation, precarious housing, and chronic stress, which deeply impacts their mental and physical well-being. Irregular status forces them into daily survival mode.

3) Despite these hardships, women without regular status continue to hope and plan for better futures. Their dreams are shaped by resilience and a desire for stability, justice, and dignity. Their recommendations reflect both personal and collective visions for a more humane immigration system.

4) Participation in community organizing gives women without regular status a sense of agency, belonging, and power. Advocacy not only allows them to speak out, it helps them heal, connect with others, and fight for change, even in the face of legal invisibility.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Defining Irregular Migration

The concept of living without legal immigration status, often referred to as being “undocumented” or in an “irregular situation,” has no universally accepted definition. Nevertheless, international organizations and scholars offer widely recognized frameworks. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a migrant in an irregular situation is defined as someone who, “owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry, expiry of a visa or stay permit, or failure to comply with an expulsion order, has no legal permission to stay in a host country” (UNHCR, 2025). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) similarly defines irregular migration as the "movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination" (IOM, 2025). IOM further clarifies that irregularity refers to a migrant’s legal status at a specific point in time rather than defining the migrant themselves (IOM, 2022). Franck Düvell (2011) emphasizes that terms like “irregular” or “unlawful” are context-dependent, with each country applying its own interpretations. What is considered “irregular” is often based on how “regular” is legally defined, making irregular migration a political and legal construct that can also be deconstructed (p. 295). Spencer and Triandafyllidou (2022) highlight the diversity of pathways into irregularity, such as visa overstays, denied asylum claims, or unmet permit conditions, and caution against binary labels like “legal” and “illegal,” arguing that status exists on a continuum (pp. 192–193, p. 199). Many migrants without status still contribute socially and economically, challenging exclusionary narratives (Triandafyllidou & Spencer, 2020, p. 2). The International Labour Organization (2022) stresses the growing global scale of irregular migration, a concern addressed in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), which calls for tackling root causes. Article 5 of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990) further defines regular and irregular status by the legality of entry, stay, and employment.

1.2 Factors Contributing to Irregular Migration

Irregular migration isn’t just the result of individual choices, it’s shaped by a complex mix of legal, economic, and political forces. Many people become undocumented not because they set out to break the rules, but because of how the rules are designed or enforced. One common path into irregularity is when someone enters a country legally on a temporary visa but then struggles to renew it due to rigid or unclear requirements. These situations, where the person’s legal status expires through no direct fault of their own, are more common than one might think (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 193). The labour market plays a crucial role as well. In many countries, jobs in agriculture, construction, domestic work, and food services rely heavily on cheap, flexible labour, often provided by people without regular status. Employers sometimes prefer hiring undocumented workers because they’re easier to exploit, can be paid less, and are less likely to complain or unionize (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 193; Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020, p. 17). While migration laws are often strict, they can end up indirectly supporting these exploitative practices by not offering enough legal paths for people to migrate and work safely (Düvell, 2011, p. 288). A big part of the problem comes from bureaucracy and policy failures. Sometimes, people become irregular migrants because the system itself is slow, confusing, or constantly changing.

Delays in renewing permits, legal reforms that raise income thresholds or create new visa categories, or employers refusing to provide contracts all contribute to people losing their legal status (Düvell, 2011, pp. 289–291). In some cases, just one missed document or a technical error can push someone into irregularity. Governments have also increased enforcement, tightening borders, checking immigration status in hospitals or schools, and cracking down on those who assist migrants. Yet these measures often don't stop people from migrating. Instead, they make life harder for undocumented migrants and push them further into the shadows (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 198). The idea that migration status is either fully "regular" or "irregular" doesn't reflect reality. People often move in and out of status depending on their job, family situation, or changes in the law (Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020, p. 17). This fluidity shows how irregularity is often produced by policies, not personal decisions (Düvell, 2011, p. 276). In places where asylum systems are overly restrictive or have very low acceptance rates, or extremely long delays in processing, people who might otherwise qualify for protection sometimes don't even apply. They may choose to stay irregularly instead, especially if they believe their chances of success are low (Düvell, 2011, p. 283). At the global level, deeper structural inequalities play a part. Many people leave their home countries because of poverty, unemployment, or political instability. At the same time, receiving countries often need workers, especially in aging societies where care work and manual labour are in high demand. These push-pull dynamics continue to drive irregular migration despite tougher laws and stricter controls (Triandafyllidou & Spencer, 2020, p. 3; Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020, p. 14).

1.3 Consequences of Irregular Migration

Without secure legal status, migrants face barriers not only to basic rights but also to dignity and protection. In employment, they are often pushed into exploitative and unsafe jobs, especially when they lack language skills, awareness of their rights, or alternatives for income or support (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 194). These vulnerabilities make them less able to resist abuse. In some cases, restrictive enforcement drives people into informal work or criminalized survival strategies, such as using false documents or avoiding authorities altogether (Engbersen & Broeders, 2009; Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 195). Access to housing and public services is also limited. Many live in overcrowded or unstable conditions, face housing segregation, and depend on NGOs or intermediaries for shelter or healthcare (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 195). Without documentation, even visiting a doctor or enrolling a child in school can be daunting. While some municipalities and NGOs attempt to bridge these gaps, support is inconsistent (Delvino & Spencer, 2019).This intersection of legal insecurity and social exclusion has severe health implications. Social determinants like food, housing, healthcare, and safe environments significantly shape health outcomes. For migrants, prolonged exclusion from basic needs and services undermines mental well-being (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, p. 103; Ahnquist et al., 2012). Many fear reporting crimes or seeking help due to possible exposure to immigration enforcement, which erodes trust in institutions and creates invisible borders in their daily lives (De Genova, 2002; Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 195).This is especially harmful to young people, whose irregular status affects their identity, relationships, and future opportunities (Bloch et al., 2014). Legally, migrants without regular status often occupy the lowest tier in the hierarchy of rights. National laws typically exclude them from protections around work, housing, and healthcare (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 197). While international human rights law offers some safeguards, most provisions apply only to those "lawfully present," and few countries enforce a "firewall" between service access and immigration enforcement (O'Cinneide, 2020; Crépeau & Hastie, 2015). Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic made

these inequalities more visible. Despite working in essential sectors like agriculture, care, and food processing, many irregular migrants were excluded from basic protections, including healthcare and vaccines (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 200).

1.4 Defining the Concept of Regularization

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines regularization as "any process or programme by which the authorities of a State allow non-nationals in an irregular situation to stay lawfully in the country, by granting them a regular status" (IOM, 2019, p.175). The IOM also supports states in developing and implementing these measures to help migrants obtain legal status (Ibid). Regularization is endorsed in key global frameworks. The Global Compact for Migration (UN, 2018) calls for expanding legal identity (Objective 4), legal pathways (Objective 5), and protections for vulnerable migrants (Objective 7). Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes well-managed, orderly migration (UN, 2015). Historically, regularization programs have emerged as practical alternatives to strict enforcement, including temporary amnesties or status options based on specific criteria (Ambrosini, 2018; Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009). Some initiatives also include voluntary return and reintegration programs supported by the IOM (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 198). To reduce irregularity, experts suggest expanding legal channels, especially for families and asylum seekers, improving flexibility in immigration rules, and strengthening institutional capacity to apply them fairly (Düvell, 2011, p. 295). Others call for proactive regularization, warning that prolonged tolerance of irregularity leads to deeper marginalization (Düvell, 2011, p. 295).

1.5 Gender and Irregular Migration

Gender fundamentally shapes migration experiences—who migrates, why, how, and the risks encountered along the way (Ferdous, 2024, p. 15; UN Women, 2024). Women often migrate due to gender-based violence, discrimination, or limited opportunities, reflecting broader structural inequalities (Ferdous, 2024, p. 7). The "feminization of migration" has made women increasingly visible as independent migrants, asylum seekers, and workers (Ferdous, 2024, p. 12; IOM, 2024). However, migration systems rarely account for gendered labour markets, such as care and domestic work, pushing many women into irregular routes with heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, and sexual violence—risks that begin before departure and persist throughout migration (Ibáñez, 2024; UN Women, 2024). As UN Women (2024) notes, "Safe and regular migration options remain out of reach for many women," often forcing them to migrate through unsafe channels. Once in destination countries, undocumented women are overrepresented in unregulated, gendered, and precarious jobs where they face long hours, low pay, and harassment, with limited access to protection due to fear of deportation (Ferdous, 2024, p. 15). This fear discourages many from reporting abuse or seeking help (UN Women, 2024). Transgender, gender-diverse, and racialized women with irregular status face even greater challenges, often navigating a "triple vulnerability" due to their intersecting identities (Ibáñez, 2024; UN Women, 2024). Asylum systems often fail to recognize gender-based persecution, such as domestic violence or forced marriage, as valid grounds for protection (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022, p. 287). A major barrier to addressing these issues is the lack of gender-disaggregated data in migration research and policy. UN Women (2024) highlights a "striking scarcity of data" on exploitation and abuse faced by women migrant workers, especially those in low-skilled or irregular sectors. Without this data, irregular migrant women's contributions and needs remain invisible, undermining efforts like the 2030 Agenda to "leave no one behind" (Subiris Moriel,

2024, p. 7, p. 16). Labeling migrant women as inherently "vulnerable" can obscure their agency. As Butler (2016) cautions, this framing risks reducing them to passive victims rather than recognizing their leadership and resistance (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022, p. 288). Despite these challenges, many migrant women without regular status engage in grassroots organizing and informal entrepreneurship, demonstrating resilience and supporting others in similar situations (Ibáñez, 2024).

STATE OF THE ART

2. Defining Irregular Migration in Canada

There is no official record of the number of people living without regular immigration status in Canada. Due to its hidden and dynamic nature, irregular migration cannot be measured precisely, and as a result, no comprehensive government statistics exist to capture the scope of this phenomenon (Atak, 2018, pp. 21–22). The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), for instance, does not systematically collect or disclose data on foreign nationals in irregular situations who are removed from the country. Nevertheless, estimates suggest that up to 500,000 individuals may be living without regular status nationwide, with the majority concentrated in major urban centers such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver (Government of Canada, 2024; Atak, 2018). Although Canada has historically presented itself as welcoming to migrants for economic, family, or humanitarian reasons, a growing proportion of residents now live with either precarious or irregular status, placing them in increasingly unstable legal and social positions (Bhuyan & Smith-Carrier, 2011, p. 57; Bernhard et al., 2007). Despite the increasing visibility of this issue, research into the lived realities of undocumented migrants in Canada remains limited (Bhuyan & Smith-Carrier, 2011, p. 66). Canadian immigration law does not explicitly define the term "irregular migrant." Instead, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act outlines recognized legal categories such as citizens, permanent residents, temporary residents (including foreign workers, international students, and refugee claimants), and protected persons. Individuals who do not fall within any of these categories, due to visa expiration, failed asylum claims, loss of status, or unauthorized entry—are considered to be living in an irregular immigration situation (Atak, 2018, p. 20; Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, S.C. 2001, c. 27). The federal government defines undocumented migrants as individuals who have no legal authorization to reside or work in the country, often as a result of overstaying a visa or losing eligibility for an immigration program. Others may have entered the country without inspection, or have been trafficked or smuggled into Canada (IRCC, 2024). In the Canadian and Quebec policy and research context, many scholars and advocates prefer the broader term "precarious status" to capture the institutional mechanisms that produce and maintain migrant vulnerability. This term encompasses a spectrum of legal statuses that are temporary, conditional, or dependent on a third party, such as asylum seekers, temporary foreign workers, visitors, and international students, who often lack full access to rights and protections (Bernhard et al., 2007; Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 51). As Hidalgo (2025) explains, those with precarious status may technically have a legal permit to stay in Canada but are excluded from key services such as healthcare, social assistance, or labor protections. Importantly, precariousness is not static. People with precarious status often transition into irregularity, for example, when a work permit is not renewed, a sponsorship breaks down, or a refugee claim is denied. In these cases, individuals fall out of the legal framework entirely and lose all formal entitlements (Hidalgo, 2025, p. 21).

In this research project, the term "without regular status" refers to women who do not have legal authorization to live and work in Canada. This includes: 1) Women who entered Canada through either regular or irregular pathways as asylum seekers, but whose asylum claim was rejected and who received a removal order, yet have remained in Canada; 2) Women who entered Canada on regular visas, such as a student visa, tourist visa or through the Temporary Foreign Worker programs, but remained after their visa expired and 3) Women who entered Canada through irregular pathways and have remained undocumented throughout their entire stay in the country.

2.1 Factors Contributing to Irregular Migration in Canada

In Canada, irregular migration is rarely the result of unauthorized border crossings. Instead, it most often stems from people who initially enter the country legally; on tourist, student, or work visas, but lose their status after overstaying, being denied asylum, or facing complications in immigration processes (Vázquez Zúñiga, 2023; Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 51). Many migrants find themselves caught in a legal "grey zone," shifting between statuses, such as awaiting humanitarian decisions, failed sponsorships, or delayed permit renewals, which blurs the line between precarious and irregular status (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 51; Hidalgo, 2025, p. 21). A key contributor to this phenomenon is Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). Many migrant workers under this program hold closed work permits, which tie their legal status to a single employer. This structure severely limits their ability to leave exploitative workplaces or change jobs without risking status loss. Numerous reports and testimonies have highlighted how these conditions foster environments of abuse, overwork, surveillance, and isolation (The Temporary Agency Workers Association – Women's Committee, 2022; Amnesty International, 2025; Hidalgo, 2025, p. 22). For example, Bénédicte, a woman recruited to work on a Quebec farm in 2016, was subjected to extreme exploitation and sexual abuse. When she fell ill and could no longer meet the demands of her employer, he canceled her work permit, pushing her into irregular status (Amnesty International, 2025, pp. 43–44). Her story reflects a broader pattern in which Canada's labour-driven immigration model facilitates the "irregularization" of migrants (Magalhães, Carrasco & Gastaldo, 2010). This systemic vulnerability is not accidental. Researchers argue that Canada's immigration policies are designed to meet short-term labour demands rather than offer clear, long-term pathways to permanent residency (Goldring et al., 2009; Magalhães et al., 2010). As a result, migrants are often left in legal limbo, and those in precarious positions can easily slip into irregularity, particularly if they lose their job, fall ill, or are misinformed about their rights and obligations (Goldring & Landolt, 2013).

In October 2024, the federal government implemented stricter criteria for issuing and renewing study and work permits, alongside the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan, which aims to reduce the number of temporary residents to 5% of the national population by 2026 (IRCC, 2024). These changes include caps on international student visas, tougher conditions for temporary foreign workers, and regional limits on study permits, particularly in Quebec (Hidalgo, 2025, p. 22). In parallel, the number of permanent residence applications to be accepted was reduced from 500,000 in 2024 to 395,000 in 2025, with further reductions planned by 2027. Quebec will also cut family reunification approvals by 50% (IRCC, 2024; Hidalgo, 2025, p. 22). These measures significantly limit migrants' ability to transition from temporary to permanent status.

2.2 Consequences of Irregular Migration in Canada

In Canada, immigration status determines access to essential services such as healthcare, housing, employment, and social support. Undocumented migrants are excluded from most public services, as eligibility is tied to legal residence (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024). In a Toronto-based study, one participant summarized: "As an undocumented, you don't have access to healthcare, no access to education, jobs, government support, housing. It makes you vulnerable to abuse and violence and employer exploitation" (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, p. 101). This exclusion is worsened by the criminalization of migration, which intensifies enforcement and deepens stigma (Ibid). Healthcare access is one of the most urgent concerns. Although emergency services are available, patients are billed afterward. Walk-in clinics require out-of-pocket payments, and private insurance is often unaffordable or inaccessible (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, pp. 101–102). Many avoid care altogether due to fear of detection (Hudson et al., 2017). Irregular status also leads to housing insecurity. Migrants often face food insecurity, poor living conditions, and rental discrimination (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 53). In Toronto, many racialized migrants without regular status stayed in overcrowded shelters or faced landlord refusal and financial instability (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, p. 104). Shelter workers often lacked the tools to support individuals with complex immigration issues, particularly people who were denied refugee protection (Bhuyan & Smith-Carrier, 2011, pp. 63–64). Employment is equally precarious. Migrants without regular status often work in low-wage, unregulated sectors, such as cleaning, construction, hospitality, and food services, without the ability to report abuse due to fear of deportation (Goldring et al., 2009; Magalhães et al., 2010; Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, p. 105). Access to food banks, legal aid, and housing support is also limited due to status requirements (Bhuyan & Smith-Carrier, 2011, p. 59). The psychological toll is severe. Constant fear of deportation, compounded by isolation and limited information about rights, causes chronic anxiety (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, p. 102). In Quebec, the situation is worsened by restrictive policies and limited legal aid, particularly for non-French speakers (Vázquez Zúñiga, 2023, p. 83). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed deep contradictions. Undocumented migrants worked essential frontline jobs without protections. The case of Mamadou Konaté, an asylum seeker who lost status due to poor legal advice but continued hospital work before being deported, illustrates this exploitation (Hidalgo, 2025, p. 21). The consequences of irregular status are far-reaching, material, psychological, and social. Racialized migrants, especially women, are most affected due to intersecting barriers to protection and services (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024, p. 104; Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 53).

2.3 Gender and Irregular Migration in Canada

There is currently limited research in Canada that directly examines the intersection of gender and irregular immigration status, despite growing evidence that this intersection profoundly shapes migrant women's experiences. Available studies highlight that women without regular immigration status face a unique and compounded set of challenges shaped by gender, legal exclusion, and social invisibility (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014; Magalhães et al., 2010). Women living without regular status often endure conditions of exploitation, isolation, and fear. Their irregular status can prevent them from leaving abusive relationships, accessing safe shelter, or seeking prenatal care, barriers rooted not only in the law, but in social stigmas and institutional blind spots. One example is Nell Toussaint, a Grenadian woman who was denied essential healthcare due to her undocumented status. By the time she gained permanent residency on humanitarian grounds, she had already suffered irreversible health consequences: she lost her leg, kidneys and her sight and eventually her life. Her case led to a UN Human Rights Committee

ruling affirming the right to life-saving care for all migrants regardless of status (Amnesty International, 2018). These risks are even more acute for pregnant women. In Quebec, research reveals that many give birth without medical assistance due to fears of deportation, inability to pay, or shame about their status. In a Montreal-based study, one woman, Lucia, chose to leave an abusive partner, which meant losing the possibility of regularizing her status. She ultimately gave birth alone at home, only reaching the hospital after a neighbour intervened (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 50). Others report avoiding prenatal care, encountering discrimination from healthcare providers, or being denied key services, leading to heightened risks for both mothers and infants (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, pp. 54–61). The lack of legal status also prevents mothers from securing rights for their Canadian-born children, such as access to subsidized housing, health insurance, or child benefits (Bhuyan & Smith-Carrier, 2011, p. 63). Some shelters resort to encouraging women to apply for asylum as a temporary means of accessing services, though a denied claim may lead to detention or deportation (Bhuyan & Smith-Carrier, 2011, pp. 63–65). Emotionally, undocumented women often describe living in constant fear, anxiety, and deep isolation. These feelings are amplified during pregnancy, when lack of access to medical follow-up, affordable pain management, or knowledge about childbirth can result in traumatic outcomes (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 54). Many avoid seeking help entirely, confiding only in a close friend or no one at all, afraid that any disclosure might lead to immigration enforcement (Ricard-Guay et al., 2014, p. 54).

2.4 Regularisation Programs in Canada

In Canada, regularization refers to administrative pathways that allow people with precarious status to apply for permanent residency (McDonald, 2011, p. 65). However, there is no permanent regularization program for undocumented migrants. The primary option is applying for permanent residence on Humanitarian and Compassionate (H&C) grounds under Section 25(1) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), which exempts otherwise inadmissible or ineligible individuals based on humanitarian circumstances. Applicants must already be in Canada and not qualify under other immigration classes, such as Spouse or Common-Law Partner, Economic Class, Protected Person, or Temporary Resident Permit Holder. Canada has previously launched targeted regularization efforts. From 1994 to 1998, permanent residence was granted to thousands of asylum seekers from countries like China, Iran, and Algeria who were denied refugee status but could not be deported due to unsafe conditions (Atak, 2018, p. 21). Since 2004, no broad program has been introduced. More recently, temporary initiatives addressed labour and humanitarian needs. The “Guardian Angels” policy (2020–2023) granted permanent residence to over 9,100 refugee claimants working in direct patient care during the pandemic. The Public Policy for Out-of-Status Construction Workers in the Greater Toronto Area (2020–2024) enabled about 1,000 workers and their families to regularize their status (IRCC, 2024). Both programs have now ended. In 2021, the federal government promised to explore new pathways for regularizing undocumented individuals contributing to Canadian society. As of 2025, this commitment remains unmet. Immigration Minister Marc Miller has expressed support but cited a lack of political consensus (Paas-Lang, 2024). Some warn that this delay, amid rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and stricter immigration policies, may push the issue off the political agenda (Hidalgo, 2025, p. 21). Limited protections exist, such as open work permits for vulnerable workers and Temporary Resident Permits for victims of family violence or trafficking (TRP). However, these measures do not provide a clear or permanent solution for people without regular status (IRCC, 2025).

3. Methodology

This research is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Montreal. It includes six semi-structured interviews and one recorded testimony provided by the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC). All interviews and analysis were carried out through an intersectional and feminist lens. The first part of the study draws on the narratives of three women currently living without regular immigration status in Montreal. This includes two anonymous semi-structured interviews that I conducted and one recorded testimony from the IWC. Their stories are shared in narrative form, using storytelling to center their lived experiences. The interviews explore how each woman fell into irregular status, how this affects their access to healthcare, housing, and employment, and what their hopes and recommendations are for the future. For participants involved in activism, the interviews also explored the impact of social participation. All names have been changed to protect participants' identities. The second part of the research is based on a semi-structured group interview with seven social workers from the Centre des Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs (CDFIA), the only organization in Montreal dedicated exclusively to women of all immigration statuses. The group shared their direct observations from working with women in precarious and irregular status, focusing on barriers to employment, housing, healthcare, and social services, as well as their hopes and recommendations for systemic change. Additionally, a semi-structured interview was conducted with an outreach worker from Doctors of the World – the only organization in Montreal providing healthcare to people without regular status. The interview focused on the challenges women without regular status face in accessing healthcare. The third part presents two semi-structured interviews with community organizers from the Women's Committee of the IWC, a militant advocacy group that includes women without regular status. They shared firsthand insights on how social and political participation has impacted women in the committee, what they observe as the most persistent challenges, and how women fall into and remain in irregular status. Lastly, the research also draws on secondary qualitative and quantitative data provided by the IWC, including a document written by the women of the committee and the previously mentioned testimony.

3.1 Gaps in Existing Literature

Although some studies look at the barriers people without regular status face, especially around access to healthcare services, very few focus specifically on the experiences of women living without regular status in Montreal. One study looks at women's experiences with the asylum system in Montreal (Zanga, 2021), and another explores the experiences of undocumented mothers during pregnancy (Ricard-Guay, Hanley, Montgomery, Meloni, and Rousseau, 2013). Research from cities like Toronto (Atak, Asalya, & Zyfi, 2024) touches on the vulnerabilities of migrants with precarious status but doesn't break the data down by gender. There is very little research in Canada that centers women with precarious or no regular status's personal hopes, dreams, or how being involved in advocacy for their rights has impacted them. Lastly, few studies take an intersectional approach to explore how gender, immigration status, and personal agency shape their lives. This project seeks to fill those gaps by placing women's voices, experiences, hopes, recommendations and acts of everyday resistance at the center.

4. FINDINGS

PART 1: Narratives of lived experiences of women living without regular status in Montreal

4.1 Nina has been living without regular status since 2015 due to a rejected asylum claim

**This interview was translated from Spanish to English*

> *"It's the feeling of not belonging anywhere. In my country, I never felt like I belonged. In my neighbourhood, in my own home, I never felt like I belonged. And when I arrived in Montreal, at first I felt like things were beautiful here, socially speaking, and I valued that. But now, it's like… I still don't belong anywhere, and that's a horrible feeling. I hold back in so many ways because I know they could arrest me at any moment, and then what? I don't have anywhere to go. I have nothing. That feeling, of not belonging, of not having any roots, of not being able to settle, it's horrible for me."*

Nina is 51 years old, born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia, she arrived in Montreal, Canada in 2008 with her 14 year-old daughter. They entered Canada as asylum seekers hoping to start a new life together in safety. Nina is a survivor of domestic and family abuse in Bogotá. She also faced extreme economic hardships, and had found herself living on the street, without a home to go to. Coming to Canada meant a new start at life, new opportunities to provide a dignified future for herself and her daughter.

> *"I came because it felt like an opportunity. I had never in my life imagined I would come to this country, never. I always lived with so much... so much economic hardship, a lot of family violence, psychological violence. I had my daughter when I was 21, so it was like… I was trying to escape all of that, you know? It was an opportunity. Someone lent me the money, and I said, 'Okay, I'll go,' It felt like a ticket to run away from a place where I just wasn't okay."*

As an asylum seeker, Nina was granted a work permit and access to healthcare services through the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP), which provides temporary healthcare coverage to asylum seekers. Her daughter was attending high school. She also received government financial assistance. All of these services were available to her while the asylum claim was being processed. At the time Nina studied and completed a course to become a 'patient care attendant' and she quickly started working in an elderly residence in the kitchen and also taking care of elderly people at the residential home.

> *"I was really happy, I liked my job because I realized it was by the hour and they paid me well."*

In 2014, Nina's life took a drastic turn when her asylum claim was rejected due to her lawyer's mishandling of the case and the advice to fabricate parts of her story. She had a deportation date, which ironically was set on the day of her birthday in January 2015. She then applied for an appeal to the Federal Court which was also denied.

Nina then applied for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA), which is a process for individuals facing removal from Canada to assess potential risks they might face if returned to their home country. It's a chance for them to demonstrate that they would be at risk of persecution, torture, or other cruel treatment

if removed. Since Nina had been disappointed with her lawyers in the past, she decided to prepare and submit this application herself.

After submitting her PRRA application and waiting for the final decision, around one year later, Nina was on her way to work when everything shifted. Immigration authorities contacted her. She went to the immigration office and presented herself, thinking maybe this time, finally, she would be able to officially stay in Canada.

> *"That was the last light of hope I had. And then, they told me I had to leave the country."*

They asked her personal questions, where she lived, where she worked, if she had a partner, only to then hand her a deportation order. The date was set.

> *"I had to leave on my birthday, in January [2015]. She [immigration official] told me, 'That day, you're leaving my country.' On my birthday. That was an unforgettable gesture from immigration."*

Everything began to unravel.

> *"It was terrifying. We were scared, my daughter and I. It was incredibly hard."*

Nina explained how the first thing you do when you become without regular status is cut ties with everyone you know. She broke all connections with co-workers, friends, and she disappeared.

> *"When you lose your status, you isolate yourself. You don't have a choice. Who can you trust? You can't trust anyone."*

She explained how even small things: envy, misunderstandings, or simply human nature, can become threats.

> *"You run risks just by being seen, just by being known. You can't bring anyone to your home. So you learn to live without connection, without community."*

When they received their deportation notice, Nina's daughter, who was over 18 years old at the time, began to pack her bags, ready to leave Canada. But for Nina, there was never a doubt.

> *"I always knew: I was staying. No matter what."*

As January approached, everything was set. Her daughter had packed her suitcase and was preparing to leave the country, following through on the difficult decision they had made. Before parting ways, they spent Christmas together.

> *"That Christmas, we cuddled up in bed, as close as we could be. I said, 'Okay, she's going,' but when the moment came, we looked into each other's eyes and said, 'We can't do this.' We just couldn't separate. It felt impossible to be without one another. She would've been there suffering*

for me, and I would've been here suffering for her. That bond between us, everything we'd been through... it was too much. So we made the decision: she would stay. We were going to stay together and keep fighting here, side by side."

Since her daughter was an adult and no longer had a regular immigration status, she was not able to return to school to finish and obtain her high school degree. She joined her mother in the factory jobs they could find, working long hours just to get by.

"We were in a deep depression and we just said, well, now what we have to do is look for work. So I started looking for more work, cash work, more jobs. I looked with the Jewish community and in restaurants, and my daughter worked in manufacturing. Whatever came up, we had to take it. And if people agreed to pay cash, well, that's where we'd go. That's how I managed, that's how we survived."

For Nina, one of the hardest parts of living without regular immigration status for over ten years, with still no clear resolution in sight, has been the toll it has taken on her mental health.

"On a personal level, the hardest thing for me is...having the courage not to kill myself, because I always wanted to... I reached the point, when I received the news [of our deportation], that I wanted to kill myself. I already had everything planned. I was going to take my life, really, I couldn't take it anymore. And I already had everything organized and ready. And I reached that point, I hit rock bottom, because I said, 'My daughter is already grown. She can defend herself now.' And that's when I said...That's it, I couldn't take any more. Throughout this whole process, that's on a personal level, being able to have the courage not to do it, being able to talk about it, getting support for my mental health, being able to know that it is not an option…"

Nina explained that part of this pain comes from feeling guilt about the difficult life conditions her daughter had to live through due to not having a regular status.

"You come here hoping to give your child a better life, a better country, a better everything, but it's been so hard for her. Of course, life never goes the way we imagine, but it's been especially tough. Her mental health isn't well now either, and I carry a deep guilt. Guilt for not leaving her behind, even though at the time, I couldn't, I had no one to leave her with. Still, I feel like I dragged her into something painful. I took away her chance to study, to go to university, to have a different life. Sometimes that guilt overwhelms me."

Nina's experiences accessing healthcare

For Nina, the only real lifeline has been Doctors of the World — the only humanitarian organization offering medical support to people without regular status in Montreal. But even that support is limited.

"They try to help. But it's all very basic. Maybe a general check-up, maybe a pill from their small pharmacy. But if it's something serious, cancer, specialized treatment, blood work, they simply can't do it. They don't have the resources. I once got an eye exam through a university program

connected to Médecins du Monde [Doctors of the World]. You take whatever help you can get. But not everyone even knows these services exist."

Nina explained how if it's a health emergency, there's no choice but to go to the hospital.

"But you're treated as a private patient, a single consultation costs $1,500."

For people like Nina, without regular status, getting sick is more than a health crisis, it's a financial one. And most of the time, there's simply no care at all.

"Unless you have thousands of dollars, you're left with nothing. You just hope you don't get sick."

For mental health support, Nina says she calls a toll free anonymous helpline when she is going through difficult emotions and thoughts. She keeps the phone number in her purse at all times.

"I don't want to let myself be dragged down by those dark thoughts and strange feelings. So if I see that I can't handle something, that something has happened, I call, I call the helpline right away."

Nina's experiences accessing housing

For Nina, finding a place to live without regular status has always been about trust and knowing the right people. In the beginning, someone did her the favour of signing the lease for her. Later on, she took the risk of putting the lease in her own name, though the utility bills are under the landlord's name, a quiet understanding that helps her stay under the radar.

What really helped was her reliability. She's always paid rent on time, and the landlord doesn't ask questions. She got the apartment thanks to recommendations, someone knew someone who could vouch for her character. And that's how it works, she says.

"You need to come recommended. Otherwise, they ask for credit checks, and I can't provide that."

She's now been in the same apartment for over nine years.

Nina's experiences accessing employment

Nina explained she never came from privilege and that she was used to difficult jobs. Over the years, she's done nearly every job imaginable: cleaning offices, houses, and parking lots, caring for children and the elderly, helping in restaurant kitchens. Most of the jobs she's found came through word-of-mouth, recommendations from people who were happy with her work. She's built a reputation for being reliable and treating every job as if it were her first and last. Still, the work is precarious. Wages are often far below minimum, hours are long, and there are no protections. Because of her status, she feels she can't ask for more, she just adapts and endures. But there's a cost. She's left more than one job in tears. Not for lack of strength, but because of abuse and injustice. Employers, sensing her vulnerability, have underpaid her, accused her unfairly, or simply treated her as disposable. And in one job, she endured sexual harassment in silence. She would come home and cry in secret.

"I hold on and hold on… until I break. But you have to keep looking [for work], because in the meantime, whether you have papers or not, you have to pay your rent, you have to meet your basic obligations."

That breaking point has come more than once for Nina. But, she continues, not out of choice, but necessity as her family in Colombia also rely on her for financial help.

When asked what helped her cope during her most difficult times, she said:

"My daughter. She helps me. Because I always want to give her a good image. Even though she already knows my more fragile sides too, I still want her to see that I don't let myself be defeated."

Nina's dreams and hopes for her future:

"The dream? To have Canadian citizenship, obviously."

It's simple, but it means everything to her: safety, stability, and finally the chance to stop living in the shadows. She still holds hope that one day her status will be regularized. And if that day comes, she already knows exactly what she'd do: activate her work permit right away, start training for a job in community work, maybe even go back to school. She said she would like to study art, to be able to learn just for the joy of learning, without fear.

Helping others has always come naturally to Nina. It's not just a dream, it's who she is.
It brings her joy to see the people around her grow and feel stronger. She's imagined starting a small foundation, one that could bridge Canada and Colombia.

"I'd travel back and forth, helping children and elderly people."

And she wants to write a book, to tell her story to empower others. What matters most to her is making a real impact.

"You don't need a huge foundation or a powerful organization. Sometimes, all you need is to awaken a little humanity in yourself and in those around you."

How being involved with social participation, activism with local community organizations has impacted Nina:

Nina became involved with a community organization in 2018, which she says has played a vital role in supporting her mental health and breaking her isolation. Through this space, she participated in demonstrations, shared her story with others, and became a spokesperson advocating for the rights of women living without regular immigration status. It was also through this organization that she first learned about the possibility of applying for permanent residency under the humanitarian and

compassionate grounds status (H&C). She is now in the process of preparing her application and gathering all the necessary documents.

There was a moment when Nina explained she realized that without activism, without being part of community organizations, she might not have become who she is today. It was in the struggle and in militancy where she learned to put words to her pain. Through that collective struggle, she found the power to represent others, to speak up for those who can't. She learned that she's not alone in her struggle, that there are other women in similar situations.

> *"I do it to raise awareness and so that it's understood that my reality is the reality of many people, of many women. So all of that makes me, like, I find a reason and I find a way to pull myself up, to hold on to this because strangely, I believe that something very good has to happen, and I want it to happen."*

Through her involvement with local community organization initiatives, she found more than just a cause, she found a family.

> *"I found a sister, and I found friends and cousins and a chosen family that is really beautiful and that are unconditional and that love me and have learned to love me."*

Nina says her experience in social activism in her hardest moments allowed herself to be supported:

> *"I've been able to learn to let myself be supported, and I had support."*

Nina recommends two key actions to support people without regular status in Canada:
In the short term, she urges the government to grant work permits and access to healthcare for all individuals without regular status. In the long term, she advocates for a clear and accessible path to regularization. She emphasizes the need to review cases more fairly and efficiently, especially for those who have lived in Canada for many years without regular status.

4.2 Sena's search for freedom and hope to one day regularize her status, have a work permit and start a family

**This interview was translated from Arabic and French to English.*

Sena's story begins with a search for safety, freedom, and equal rights for women, a chance to live without fear or shame in her own choices. Sena is between 36 and 42 years old, she's from Morocco, she's lived there all her life, she speaks Arabic and understands French. She finished the equivalent of her high school studies, she's single and doesn't have kids and she used to live with her parents in their family home. She left her country in the hope of better economic opportunities, independence and a life where women's rights are respected. As a woman in Morocco, she never truly felt safe, speaking of the violence and lack of accountability women often face, especially in the workplace. She also dreamed of raising children independently, outside the framework of marriage, an idea rarely accepted for women in her cultural context. Over time, her situation became difficult: her family home was sold, her brothers married and moved on with their lives, and she struggled to care for herself.

She chose Montreal, where one of her brothers and a sister were already living. In 2019, she arrived in Canada on a tourist visa, carrying with her the hope of starting over in a place where she might finally feel safe and free.

> *"In Canada, I find freedom: whether in the evening, at night, or anytime, I can go out safely even if I don't have papers. I'm not Canadian, I'm not a resident, but there is security. Even living here without papers, I feel safer than in Morocco," she said.*

A few weeks after her arrival, her visa expired. At the time, she did not know she needed to apply for an extension within 60 days. Before it expired, she had already tried to find a job offer that might lead to a work permit. She searched, hoping to secure something, but couldn't find an employer willing or able to provide a contract in time. When she visited an immigration lawyer, it was too late. The lawyer told her there was nothing that could be done and that she would have to leave the country and reapply for a visa from Morocco. This was a painful moment for Sena. The door to a new beginning seemed to close just as she had started to believe in it.

It wasn't until later that she found support through a women's center, the Centre des Femmes d'Ici et D'Ailleurs (CDFIA), an association helping women with all immigration statuses. But by then, her options were already severely limited.

Even so, she made the decision to stay. She hoped that something might change, that perhaps there would be a way to regularize her status. She consulted with two different lawyers, but both gave her the same answer: that without valid immigration status, she had no legal path to remain in the country.

> *"I found here the freedom. On the other hand, there, I do not find that. When I go out, there is violence. I did not find my life there, that is why I decided to stay here."*

Sena has been living without regular immigration status in Montreal for over six years now, facing daily struggles that touch every aspect of her life, from finding work, a place to live, to accessing healthcare.

> *"Finding work when you don't have papers, it's very hard. Without status, it's not that we don't want to work. We just can't. And even when we do, it's not legal, and we don't have protections."*

For the past two years, Sena hasn't been able to find work, not for lack of trying, but because living without regular status makes stable employment nearly impossible. At one point, she was able to find a part-time job in a kitchen. She worked around 20 hours a week. The salary was below minimum wage, but she accepted it because she had no other choice.

> *"I couldn't work every day. It wasn't allowed. But even so, the people at work treated me well. They respected me. They saw how hard I worked and that was very different from what I experienced back home in Morocco."*

The language barrier has also been a challenge. Her mother tongue is Arabic, and while she understands some French and can speak a few words, becoming fluent has been difficult. Without regular immigration

status, she doesn't qualify for government-funded French courses, known as Francisation, nor for most community-based French classes, which also require official documentation.

In the meantime, she survives thanks to the help of her brothers, her friends, and people in the community who know her situation and choose to support her.

Without official documents, renting legally is nearly impossible. Sena relies on the kindness of others. Today, she lives with a friend, helping out with childcare, cooking, and cleaning in exchange for shelter.

> *"She let's me stay because I help her. It's an exchange. That's how I can have a place to live."*

She's experienced trouble accessing healthcare. She only has access to services through Doctors of the World. She shared that when she sought medical care, hospital emergency rooms demanded proof of immigration status and turned her away, leaving her without treatment.

Living without regular status has also taken a toll on her mental health and well-being.

> *"It's not easy to live without status. Right now the difficulty is work. I only think about finding a job because I can't spend my whole life without work and without status. That's what I'm looking for, but I don't know how I can do that. I'm looking for the solution."*

She says she lives with the constant fear of deportation and avoids certain places in the city, worried that someone might ask for her identification.

> *"There are places where I don't go out of fear, so I live in isolation."*

Despite constant fear, Sena continued to look for work, to care for others, to learn, and to hold on to her dreams.

> *"I have hope that the laws will change and that they will do something for immigrants who don't have status here. Maybe this year they will do something for us. I have hope."*

Sena holds a firm belief that she will be able to regularize her immigration status one day. If this dream comes true, she says she will finally be able to start living her life.

> *"I would look for a job, do a job training course to improve myself and so that I can have children but without getting married, that's what I'm looking for. That's not a problem here, but in Morocco, no. You respect the religion, meaning that you get married before having children, but I can do that here. Resolving my status means everything to me. Living like a resident, and having all those rights."*

For Sena, her hope is not just for herself, but for all those who remain unseen:

“Canada says it needs immigrants, but why not start with the people already here? There are so many of us living without papers, people who just need the chance to regularize their status so we can work, pay taxes, contribute like anyone else. I know it’s not ‘in the rules’ to stay without status. But we didn’t stay to break rules, we stayed to build a life.”

4.3 Miriam: How a recruitment scam and closed permit left her without regular status

This anonymous interview was conducted by the Women’s Committee within the Immigrant Workers Center (IWC) organization in Montreal. Miriam worked numerous years as a nurse and immigrated to Canada from Africa – she does not specify the country. She came to Canada with the hopes of working in the healthcare sector. This interview was translated from French to English. (IWC-CTI, 2024).

"I decided to immigrate to Canada because, for me, Canada was like a dream country, a country of rights, of fairness, where values are respected, and also where there is a dire need for healthcare personnel."

A few years ago, she moved to Canada as a temporary foreign worker via Canada’s Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) through a closed work permit, arranged by a recruitment agency that charged her a significant amount of money. But when she arrived, she was informed by the agency that the employer she had been hired to work for no longer needed her. Suddenly, she found herself in Montreal, without a job, without money, without a home, without an immigration status, completely at the mercy of others.

About a month later, the agency offered her work with another employer at a different residence. She had no choice but to accept as she needed to eat, pay off her debts, and support her family. That’s how she ended up working in another residence, this time without a contract and without a valid work permit for that specific job. She was fully dependent on her employer. Her salary was below minimum wage, paid monthly by the agency, and she was never given a payslip, something that should not happen in Canada. When she approached the agency and the employer, they assured her they would “take care of everything”, implying they would regularize her immigration status, and told her to simply keep working. So she did. But as time passed, she realized that nothing was being done.

Eventually, she began asking questions to people around her and online. That’s when she learned about support organizations like the Immigration Workers Center (IWC). When she shared her story, they confirmed that what she was going through was illegal and offered her guidance. After about a month of support from the IWC, she was able to regularize her status and obtain an open work permit for vulnerable workers. For the first time, she felt a sense of relief, like she had escaped the grip of her exploiters.

But the joy was short-lived. The open permit for vulnerable workers is only valid for one year and cannot be renewed. After that, she would be expected to return to a closed work permit system or risk ending up without regular status once again. And so, all the fear and frustration came rushing back.

"Thinking about going back to a closed work permit was like thinking about returning to the claws of the executioner. It was like thinking about going back to another prison. So I was frustrated."

After that, she found another employer who offered her a job as a live-in caregiver, but it wasn't really the kind of work she was looking for or wanted to do.

> *"But I didn't have a choice because I had to preserve my status. In order not to lose my status, I had to accept this job."*

She submitted her application for a CSQ (Quebec Selection Certificate) (which is the first step in the process of permanent immigration in Quebec) to the Ministry of Immigration, Francisation, and Integration over one year ago, but she still hasn't received a positive response.

> *"Since I arrived in Canada, I have experienced a lot of abuse, a lot of stress, like many other temporary workers. I have a lot of ambition, but without status, you can't do anything. Without status, you live in fear, in fear of tomorrow, you don't know what will happen the next day. I believe in a better Canada. I believe in a Canada that regularizes everyone's status. I believe in a Canada where workers' rights are respected. We are good enough to work, we are good enough to stay."*

4.5. Interviews Part 2: Community organizations supporting women without regular immigration Status

Centre des Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs (CDFIA)
**Translated from French to English*

The CDFIA in Montreal's Villeray neighborhood, is the city's only center offering social services exclusively to women regardless of immigration status. For many, it's a place where they finally feel safe and seen.

Now celebrating 40 years, the Centre is grounded in feminist and intersectional values. Women come not only for services: French classes, legal aid support, workshops, referrals, but also for connection, solidarity, creative activities and a sense of belonging. Services are free, multilingual, and adapted to each woman's needs. Whether it's housing, legal support, or emotional care, the team walks alongside every woman. Most importantly, the Centre helps break isolation.

During a group interview, the social work team: **Kavitha Culasingam, Sonia Haddad, Christina Merino Raimundo, Stéphanie McConnell-Enright, Jasmine Renteria Huerta, Émilie Trépy, and Camille Zanga**, shared their insights and concerns about the increasing challenges faced by women with precarious status and without regular status.

Camille Zanga shared that it has become much easier to fall from precarious status into complete irregularity.

"The interrelation between precarious status and being without status is even more deeply connected now. Women often spend not just months, but years, fighting to move from an asylum claim to refugee status and eventually to permanent residency. But today, that path is being cut short for many. In the current context, they are now increasingly, almost always having their asylum claims refused."

She said she noticed a drastic shift in asylum acceptances.

"I haven't seen a single asylum claim accepted in the past two years [...] I really think there's been a huge shift in approvals."

Camille explained how even after refusals, women try to navigate the appeal process and other legal options and financial barriers make things even harder.

"More and more of them end up falling into irregular status. Right now it's absurdly expensive. Sometimes they don't have the money for legal fees. And even if they can scrape together enough to continue, their chances are getting slimmer."

Émilie Trépy echoed the need for systemic change:

> "*Real access to justice just isn't there."*
>
> As legal aid is increasingly inaccessible, it's community organizations like theirs that are stepping in, doing their best to support women with life-altering decisions. But Émilie was clear:
>
> "*We're not lawyers. It's people's lives we're dealing with, and that weighs heavily*."
>
> Even when they try to connect women with immigration lawyers, resources are beyond capacity. Émilie also emphasized the internal pressures their centre faces:
>
> "*We're not just about providing services. We have other pillars like collective action, popular education that are just as important*."
>
> But because of the urgency of women's situations and the lack of systemic support, Émilie says,
>
> "*We end up doing more and more direct service, because there's no one else. But that means we're doing less and less of the other critical work*."

Christina Merino Raimundo spoke about the toll that precarious immigration status takes, especially on women's mental health.

> *"I see their mental health take a huge hit. It's always stress after stress."*

For many of the women she supports, Christina says the uncertainty of their status stretches on for years. And that's on top of all the daily pressures of life: raising children, searching for housing, moving from shelter to shelter.

> "*Some of them have kids who are constantly changing schools, it affects them deeply*."

Over time, she said, this emotional strain also becomes physical.

"*It affects their physical health too, because it's not just waiting, it's waiting without answers*."

She also addressed how rare it is for women without regular status to access mental health support.

> "*It's very rare for women with precarious or no status to walk into a therapist's office. But here, they find someone who listens with compassion. We don't offer formal therapy, but sometimes helping them write their story, just being there while they cry or pause to breathe, makes a difference*."

Sonia Haddad spoke about the layered violence women face:

> "*They carry trauma from home and the migration journey… and even here, the exploitation continues*."

She highlighted how poor housing worsens risk:

> "*You live with whoever offers a roof—your cousin's cousin—and it can lead to exploitation, even of children*."
> Women in abusive relationships face intensified risks:
> "*Especially those sponsored—if they leave, they fear losing everything*."
> Even shelters are not always accessible:
> "*Not just due to language, but racism and exclusion*."

She also emphasized how gendered inequalities shape experiences in deeply systemic ways:

> "*There is something about being a woman that men do not experience, something that is truly systemic sexism, systemic discrimination. Something extra that women go through when it comes to their health*."

Sonia pointed to barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare.

Many women ask, *"What am I going to do to give birth?"*

Some hospitals demand $15,000 upfront.

> "*It's so horrible. Some women even give birth alone... and anything can go wrong*."

She spoke with frustration about children born in Canada to mothers without regular status:

> "*The child is recognized as Canadian, but doesn't have access to services to be born in dignified conditions. If there's a complication during birth, the child is at risk too. Just because their mother has no papers, they don't start with the same chances in life*."

The Centre's refusal to tie services to legal status is intentional:

> "*We don't take government funding for our French classes—we don't want access to depend on [immigration] status*."

Sonia emphasized the importance of moving from individual to collective action:

> "*When many are living the same thing, it's worth going public. We've supported women in gaining humanitarian status through political pressure*."

Still, she expressed concern over growing intolerance:

> "*We once hoped for universal access to services regardless of status... But now, with rising intolerance, it's no longer the discourse politicians put forward*."

Yet her final message was one of resistance:

> "*If we could secure access to services for everyone... that would be incredible. The barriers are increasing for everyone, but even more for those already marginalized. [...] That's why it's so important to resist when one part of the population starts being excluded. If they don't have rights, then we all risk losing ours*."

Kavitha Culasingam addressed difficulties in accessing housing:

> "*Landlords often require a credit check. But these families just arrived, weeks ago, sometimes days, so they have no credit history. It makes it almost impossible to find housing*."

She also described how the impacts are worsening.

> "*We used to see women sharing apartments, each taking a room in a [two bedroom or three bedroom apartment]. But now we're seeing multiple entire families sharing the same space*."

Kavitha also highlighted the vulnerability of women with closed work permits tied to a single employer.

> "*We had cases where women were being harassed sexually, even assaulted and couldn't leave their jobs. If they left, they'd lose their status*."

She explained that for women without regular status who do find work, the picture is even bleaker.

> "*The working conditions are terrible. They're paid well below minimum wage. It's exploitation, it's labour trafficking, really. And there are no workplace safety protections.*"

Stéphanie McConnell-Enright mentioned how systemic exclusion persists, even within the very places meant to offer help. Community organizations, she says, often inadvertently reinforce these barriers, whether through lack of funding, ignorance, or institutional policies.

> "*It's true, there are a lot of community groups that, whether because of their funding or just plain ignorance, don't accept or create systemic barriers for people with precarious status*."

Jasmine Renteria Huerta also holds onto hope through collective action and voice. She highlights how women involved at the center want things to change and that change begins with awareness.

> "*I believe the more we talk about it, the more we do popular education, the more we break down prejudices, the more united we'll be*."

4.6 Doctors of the World

This interview was translated from Spanish to English

Doctors of the World is an international organization working in Canada and over 70 countries to ensure healthcare access for people in vulnerable or excluded situations (Doctors of the World, 2025). Since 2011, it has been the only provider in the province of Quebec offering free healthcare to migrants with precarious status, without regular status and all those without insurance or the means to pay. In Montreal, volunteer doctors, nurses, and social workers provide general checkups, pregnancy follow-ups, and emergency referrals.

Javier Lopez Fraile, an outreach worker, explained that the team also helps connect people to food banks, schools, shelters, and childcare. The clinic focuses on women's health, supporting around 20 women through pregnancy each year and offering lab tests, doctor referrals, and emotional support.

Their holistic model recognizes that housing, food, safety, and social connection are integral to health. They also raise awareness of migrant rights through partnerships with shelters and community groups. Informal links with clinics and labs allow occasional referrals for free or low-cost care, even when services are officially unavailable to people without regular status.

In a semi-structured interview, Javier Lopez Fraile shared his observations highlighting the barriers and difficulties that women without regular status face in Montreal when trying to access healthcare services.

Javier explained that for many women without regular status, basic medical care during pregnancy is often inaccessible, leaving them to navigate high-risk situations alone: *"They continue working through high-risk pregnancies, even when they've been told to stop because they have no insurance, no income, and no choice."*

He said that hospitals and public health institutions frequently turn people away or demand payment upfront due to their immigration status.

"We've seen maternity wards refuse to release a baby's birth certificate unless the mother pays first. Some women skip most of their prenatal care, saving their money for one day: the birth."

The barriers extend beyond pregnancy. Women without regular status face chronic stress, struggling with housing, work, and basic survival.

"The people we see are at the lowest rung of vulnerability. Without legal contracts, without protection, life gets more complicated every day. Lately, more women ask us not only for healthcare, but for help finding work. That's when we feel most powerless."

Javier also notes a growing and worrying trend among international female students. Many come with a study permit that requires private insurance, insurance that often covers only a short term or excludes prenatal care and contraception.

“Ninety percent of the pregnant students we see have insurance that doesn’t cover their pregnancy. If they miss classes due to pregnancy, they risk losing their permit and, with it, their status.”

This leaves them in a precarious position where pregnancy itself threatens their legal right to stay in Canada.

When it comes to serious illnesses like cancer, the situation is even more dire.

“For cancer patients without status, there is no clinic partnership, no workaround. The only option is to regularize their status, which is often impossible. Without coverage, the cost of treatment is out of reach.”

He explained that sometimes, patients must decide between returning to their home country for treatment or going without care entirely. Even for conditions like diabetes or hypertension, which are normally manageable illnesses, the lack of access leads to rapid deterioration.

"And then the things we see more in the clinic, a lot of people with so-called “simple” problems, like chronic illnesses that are easy to treat, but because they don’t have access to treatment, they deteriorate, like diabetes, hypertension, heart failure."

Javier also explained that: *“We have to explain to them [the patients] from the start that this problem would be very easy to treat with this medication. But this medication costs $300 a month for a person without coverage. So, that option has to be ruled out. We have to find an alternative."*

4.7 Interviews part 3: The impacts of women without regular status being active in social, political participation on their lives and agency

The Immigration Workers Centre

For over 25 years, the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) has been a space of community, resistance, and care. Founded by Filipino domestic workers, it supports some of the city’s most vulnerable workers, often women with precarious or no regular immigration status, to organize, seek support, and defend their rights.

In 2018, the IWC created the Women’s Committee after a meeting of ATTAP (Association of Employment Agency Workers) revealed a disturbing pattern: nearly all the women present had experienced sexual harassment at work. It became clear that they needed a space of their own, to speak, organize, and support each other in safety.

The committee now includes 25 active members: migrant women working in agriculture, construction, domestic work, and healthcare. Their immigration statuses vary, some live without regular status, others are temporary foreign workers, international students, asylum seekers, or sponsored migrants. Together, they lead conferences, share testimony, run workshops, join rallies, and hand out resources near

workplaces known to hire recent migrants. Their goal is clear: justice and visibility for women with precarious or no regular status. Today, the Women's Committee is one of the IWC's most active and vital groups.

Viviana Medina and Susana Ponte Rivera, community organizers of the women's committee at the Immigration Worker's Centre
**Both interviews were translated from Spanish to English*

Viviana Medina and Susana Ponte Rivera are both community organizers of the Women's Committee at IWC since it was created in 2018. Viviana has worked at the IWC since 2014, focusing on the rights of temporary foreign workers, and supporting women living without regular immigration status. She also documents cases of labour trafficking, combining advocacy, accompaniment, and political action. Susana has been involved with the Centre for over a decade, beginning her work with temporary and agency-hired migrant workers. She now coordinates outreach and research for the Women's Committee.

Viviana and Susana, along with the 25 women of the committee, are currently leading a participatory research project titled "*Women without status in action: working conditions and health*." Women living without regular status are interviewing others in similar situations, so far, they've interviewed over 75 women. The committee chose to focus the study on healthcare access after tragically losing two members in 2020 who, due to their irregular status, were unable to receive treatment for cancer.

By documenting these lived experiences, they hope to advocate for universal healthcare access in Canada, regardless of immigration status. In two individual semi-structured interviews, Viviana and Susana offered insight into the leading causes of loss of status, the challenges and vulnerabilities and how participation in the committee and this research has impacted women without regular status.

Factors contributing to loss of Status
Viviana shared that many women in the committee became undocumented after fleeing workplace abuse while tied to employer-specific work permits:

> "*Many of them lost their status after escaping abusive situations while they were tied through a work permit. It happens to so many.*"

Another frequent cause is rejected asylum claims. Even after going through all possible appeals, many are left without regular status.

Viviana also expressed concern about Canada's 2024 policy changes, which reduced permanent and temporary admissions, now affecting even international students:

> "*What's new now is the number of international students who are suddenly at risk... They come here to study... and for many reasons, they decide to stay. But they lose their status*."

At the Immigrant Workers Centre, she's already seeing the impact:

> "*People are coming in who've been affected... Since October, we've seen many people walk through our doors who have already been impacted*."

Vulnerabilities without regular status

Susana emphasized how the fear of deportation and lack of healthcare most deeply affect women:

> "*Not having status means it's impossible to make plans for the future... There are women who have been here for 20 years without access to healthcare... There is no retirement day... They have to work until death. And that's not an exaggeration.*"

She also spoke of domestic violence: "*Almost all of them have faced gender-based violence... or other forms of abuse, such as human trafficking*."

Susana pointed to the Temporary residence permit for victims of domestic violence (TRP), a temporary residence permit available in cases of conjugal violence. But even this so-called solution is faced with long delays. Even when granted, it only provides a year of stability:

> "*At least it gives you a year to apply calmly for permanent status on humanitarian grounds. Because the humanitarian process takes much longer. But still, it's case after case, and the procedures are endless. We have two women in that situation right now.*"

Viviana added the fear of seeking protection from police:

> "*Going to file a report with the police without status… is basically signing your own deportation*."

Healthcare Access

Two women in the committee died in 2020 from cancer due to lack of access to treatment. Susana explained:

> *"She was in her 30s, very young, and died of breast cancer. So there was no access to prevention. The other one… breast cancer as well. She died… she was around 60, almost. And she had two work accidents and then got sick. Both of them were from Mexico and they both went to die in Mexico. They might have died anyway, but years later, they just didn't have access to public and free healthcare."*

Viviana fears more women could face this fate:

> "*It's a necessity, it's a terrible barrier... women don't want to go to the hospital because they know the hospital can report you just like that...*"

There is also a growing need for mental health support. Susana and Viviana are working to connect women to free, feminist-aligned services and are developing a group intervention model.

Work Conditions

Susana explained that most women work in precarious, gendered jobs like domestic work, cleaning, and restaurants.

"*These are places where there is a lot of exploitation... It's heavy work, and there isn't always respect or recognition [...] They go to work, and no one pays them… and they face workplace harassment*."

Even in care work, respect is lacking:

"There isn't real recognition, neither social recognition nor recognition from the employers. That is also the problem of the sexual division of labour. And well, because they are women, immigrants, racialized, they are even more assigned to those kinds of jobs."

Viviana said finding work is getting harder:

"*Just finding a job is already difficult... And now, it's getting harder and harder to find work.*"

Most women live in poverty:

"*They are very dignified... but they live in poverty, especially those who live alone*."

Housing

Susana addressed how stable housing is one of the most persistent struggles.

"*When they're in a place and feel okay, they don't leave*."

For women fleeing domestic violence, shelters are often inaccessible beyond the emergency stage:

"*It's much more difficult for them to access a [second-stage shelter]... you don't have a work permit and you don't have access to financial support.*"

The result is instability:

"*Normally what you see... They go to the private market. Or someone offers them their home, the couch... but that's not… it's not your home. That's also stressful*."

Challenges to regularize via Humanitarian and Compassionate Grounds (H&C)

Susana explained that women without status can apply for permanent residency through the H&C program, but it's a long, uncertain, and costly process:

"*That is very costly, and nothing is certain, and the wait is very long*."

Viviana echoed this, calling it a last-resort option:

"*There's the last resort through immigration, which is the humanitarian application, but it's a very difficult option to obtain. The acceptance rate is very low, and when you're in that process, it doesn't stop deportation*."

Viviana explained that because nothing protects applicants from removal while their case is being processed, many are afraid to apply:

> "*So many women don't apply precisely because when you submit that application, you're telling immigration: I'm here. You put yourself back on their radar*."

For those who've lived without status for years, the risk is enormous:

> "*You're saying: I want to regularize my status, I'm here, but they're going to come looking for you... if they're not convinced by your file, they'll detain you*."

Even for the women who do apply, it's rarely resolved quickly:

> "*Imagine, there are women who have gone through three humanitarian processes. Two denied, the third accepted, but that process took seven years*."

Viviana described the emotional toll:

> "*When you choose to regularize your status through that route, it's incredibly stressful*."

She remembered one woman from the committee who went through this long ordeal:

> "*Seven years. Three processes. Two denials. And on the third one… it broke her. It breaks you. It breaks you. It breaks you, because what immigration asks of you is too much. To be able to take a breath and say, 'I'm going to try again,' you need so much energy*."

Impacts of participating in the women's committee

Susana shared how being part of the women's committee has a profound impact on the women involved. For many who have lived in silence, carrying the weight of trauma, fear, and invisibility, the space offers connection and a chance to be heard.

> "*It's good, breaking the isolation of women, finding a group where they can speak with confidence... friendships are also created... I believe it helps a lot with self-esteem*."

Women are encouraged to reflect, decide how they see the world, and speak publicly.

> "*We say, 'The IWC has an opinion, and it's up to you, how do you see things?' They speak up... it's also very good for mental health. These women have gone through a lot... many with their partners, others at work... At first, they didn't talk. Now they've opened up*."

Susana noted that speaking about painful experiences, especially publicly, can lead to re-victimization. It takes courage and collective support.

Viviana emphasized that the work is healing and political.

> "*If they don't mobilize, they're going to face the same risk anyway, only they'll live it alone. But when they are organized, they can do a lot. And they've achieved it*."

The committee has long fought for regularization, including testifying directly to government officials.

> "*We've had many meetings where they themselves have gone to testify*."

But for Viviana, empowerment is deeper than policy, it comes from lived experience.

> "*When you have information, you're in a privileged position... Knowledge comes from what's lived... So no one is going to tell you, 'That's not the word to use.' They have to learn from you*."

She sees this shift as central to the committee's impact:

> "*Here, you put yourself in the position of: 'I know more than you, because I lived it.' That is the empowerment we give them*."

Participatory research and collective strength

Since 2019, women from the committee have led a collaborative research project, *Women Without Status in Action*, documenting healthcare access and working conditions. Despite pandemic delays and personal losses, including the death of two members, the project moved forward.

> Susana recalled: "*The women said, no, we have to go back to this study because next time it will be us*."

Participants received interview and labour law training, reaching 75 other women and aiming for 100. Susana's hope is clear:

> "*My hope is access to healthcare... We demand healthcare for all people. If we achieve that, it will be a success*."

Susana believes the project itself has built strength:

> "*It's already a success to carry out the study... But we have to achieve the goal. We've been fighting for three and a half years... We have to keep fighting.*"

Viviana added that organizing transforms how women understand and use knowledge:

> "*You're going to be able to explain to another woman what the law says... From that knowledge, we empower ourselves and we fight*."

She stressed that many women remain without regular status, but are no longer alone:

> "*They are still in a better position than women who are not organized... Those people still have fear. The women here are in the process of losing it*."

Health remains urgent. Viviana explained that two members are seriously ill.

> "*These women live in a state of emergency... This project is to prove that they're getting sick. That they're dying. And these are not isolated cases.*"

The committee plans to use the findings for direct advocacy.

> "*We want to say to the Ministry of Health: here are 100 women facing these consequences. This will be our weapon.*"

Viviana says the research has also helped reach women living in isolation:

> "*We've recruited four new women who are now really engaged and excited to have found the group. That also remains one of our goals*."

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 What factors contribute to women in Montreal becoming trapped to live without regular status?
Women become trapped in irregular immigration status in Canada due to an interplay of systemic, legal, economic, gendered, and racialized factors. Many arrive as asylum seekers, students, temporary workers, or tourists. A rejected asylum claim, expired visa, or fleeing an abusive employer under closed work permits can quickly lead to the loss of status. Testimonies and secondary qualitative data reveal that workplace violence is a direct cause of falling out of status. Once lost, status is extremely difficult to recover due to limited regularization options. These challenges are intensified for racialized and ethnically marginalized women, who face discrimination in employment, housing, and access to public services. The intersection of race, gender, and irregular status is central to understanding their experiences.

Temporary permits, like the open work permit for vulnerable workers or the temporary resident permit for victims of family violence only postpone status loss. If the worker can't secure a new employer or obtain another temporary or permanent status within 12 months, they lose their legal stay. Recently, international students have also struggled to renew visas due to Canada's 2024 policy changes aimed at reducing temporary migration. Some pregnant international students risk losing their permits after missing too many classes. Many women with precarious status fall out of status due to high legal fees, long processing delays, and falling approval rates. While applying for permanent residency on H&C grounds remains an option, the process is long, expensive, and uncertain. In 2024, the approval rate was only 56%. Crucially, because applicants are not protected from deportation while their H&C case is under review, many women are too afraid to apply.

5.2 How do the lived experiences of women without regular status impact their access to housing, employment, healthcare, and their overall personal and psychosocial well-being?
Living without regular status affects everything from whether you can see a doctor, your housing conditions to how safe you feel at work. These women live with constant fear of deportation, isolation, and poverty. Access to healthcare is extremely limited. In most cases, only one organization in Montreal, Doctors of the World, can offer some help and even they don't have the resources to meet the growing demand. Pregnant women often go without prenatal care and work late into their pregnancies because they have no other choice. In an emergency, they go to the hospital knowing they might be refused care,

reported, or billed for services they can't afford. If they develop serious illnesses like cancer, treatment is often completely out of reach. Many go without medicine, checkups, or mental health care. Work is no safer. Without regular status, women are pushed into underpaid, exploitative jobs, mostly in domestic work, cleaning, manufacturing, caregiving, or restaurants. Many face sexual harassment, unpaid hours, and dangerous conditions. Though the law technically protects all workers, it offers little real protection to those without regular status. Some women become entirely dependent on an employer who promises to help regularize their status — but often never does. Most women rely on personal networks to find housing. If someone agrees to put their name on a lease, they might secure a room. But landlords often ask for credit checks, which undocumented women cannot provide. Some exchange childcare or cleaning for shelter — but these arrangements can become exploitative, even toward their children. Rising rents push families to crowd into small apartments, sharing rooms just to have a roof over their heads. For women in abusive relationships, the risks are even higher. Shelters may turn them away due to immigration status, language barriers, or racism. Many stay in dangerous homes simply because there's nowhere else to go. Testimonies describe deep sadness, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. The emotional toll is heavy. Many live in survival mode focused on the next job, the next rent payment, the next crisis. Mothers carry an even deeper burden: watching their children suffer or inherit the same status issues.Women speak of small things that help them cope such as friendship, someone who listens, a moment of connection. These small lights bring relief in the darkest moments.

5.3 What are the hopes and recommendations of women living without regular status for the future?

Despite everything, these women remain hopeful and resilient. For most women, gaining permanent status would be life changing. For them, it means freedom, the ability to work, live without fear, and plan for the future. Many say the first thing they would do is apply for a work permit, study and get work training to find stable employment. Some want to give back by starting organizations or community projects to support other migrant women. They dream of a Canada that treats people with fairness and compassion.

They want:

- A universal regularization program that includes all undocumented people
- Immediate access to healthcare for everyone, regardless of immigration status
- Work permits for those living without regular status
- Faster, clearer, and fairer processes for asylum and humanitarian claims

5.4 How does rights-based advocacy and social participation influence the lived experiences and sense of agency among women with irregular immigration status?

Testimonies show that participating in social and political activities through community organizations plays a vital role in the mental and emotional well-being of women without regular status. It breaks their isolation and creates space to connect with others living through similar realities. Many shared that being part of a collective struggle reminded them they were not alone. That sense of solidarity brings strength. Activism offers a renewed sense of agency and purpose. It empowers women to speak up, advocate for

their rights, and support others in similar conditions. Through this work, they begin to take back control of their own stories and reclaim their voice. Many are driven to raise awareness about the realities they face, hoping their testimonies will help shift public understanding and policy. Participation also builds community. Some women form lasting friendships and “chosen families” in these spaces, bringing emotional relief and self-confidence. It gives them the courage to share their experiences and begin to heal. At the same time, speaking publicly about painful pasts can be re-traumatizing and painful for them. Through workshops, legal training, and mutual learning, women become more informed about their rights and many go on to help others by sharing this knowledge. This becomes a source of pride and strength: they are not only surviving, but actively supporting others through the same struggle. In the IWC Women’s Committee’s participatory project, many women without status took on leadership roles: interviewing peers, sharing resources, and supporting others in similar situations, empowering one another through solidarity and knowledge. Through this, they have further reclaimed their agency. Testimonies reveal that activism has helped them lose, or begin to lose, the fear of speaking up and demanding their rights. Their involvement has helped reach and mobilize more women, encouraging them to join the collective fight for justice and regularization.

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ANNEXE 1

Photos from the Centre des Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs (CDFIA) 40th anniversary celebration - the only organization in Montreal dedicated to offering social services to all women regardless of their immigration status.

Group photo with members of the CDFIA including social workers, committee members and volunteers during their 40th year anniversary celebration.

ANNEXE 2 - INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

PART 1: WOMEN WITHOUT REGULAR STATUS INTERVIEWS

Pseudonym	Profile	Main points of discussion during interview
Nina	Gender: Woman Nationality: Colombian Immigration status: Without Regular status. Age: 51 years old	-She has been living without regular status in Canada for over 10 years. -She first arrived legally as an asylum seeker due to domestic

	Marital status: Single **Kids: one daughter who is with her in Canada** **Languages spoken: Spanish and French** **She left Colombia in 2008 with her daughter to seek asylum in Canada due to domestic violence in her home country.**	**violence and family violence.** **-Feeling of not belonging across all stages of life.** **-Initial hope and dignity as an asylum seeker in Canada.** **-Asylum claim rejection due to legal mishandling.** **-Loss of legal status and issuing of deportation order.** **-Fear and isolation after becoming undocumented.** **-Unwillingness to separate from daughter, choosing to stay together.** **-Working under the table in exploitative, precarious jobs.** **-Mental health crisis, including suicidal thoughts and guilt.** **-Barriers to healthcare, reliance on humanitarian clinics.** **-Housing through informal networks, based on trust.** **-Ongoing fear of detection, avoidance of visibility.** **-Guilt over daughter's disrupted education and limited opportunities.** **-Survival through resilience and mutual support with daughter.** **-Dreams of regularization, citizenship, and formal work.** **-Aspiration to help others, create a foundation, and write a book.** **-Community activism as healing and empowering.** **-Social participation fostered a chosen family and sense of belonging.** **-Policy recommendations: work permits, healthcare access, path to status.**

Pseudonym	Profile	Main points of discussion during interview
Sena	**Gender: Woman** **Nationality: Moroccan** **Immigration status: Without Regular status.** **Age: Between 36 and 42 years old** **Marital status: Single** **Kids: none** **Languages spoken: Arabic and French** **She left Morocco in 2019 due to safety and violence issues towards women and lack of freedom and economic opportunities.**	**-She has been living without regular status in Canada for 6 years.** **-Fled Morocco seeking safety, women's rights, and independence.** **-Selected Canada for freedom and family connections.** **-Visa expired shortly after arrival; unaware of the 60-day limit.** **-Lawyers offered no legal options to stay.** **-Decided to remain in Canada despite risks.** **-Feels safer in Canada without regular status than in Morocco.** **-Faces major barriers to work; experiences labour exploitation.** **-Worked informally in a kitchen; underpaid but treated respectfully.** **-Language barrier limits opportunities; can't access French courses.** **-Depends on community and family for survival.** **-Exchanges domestic help for shelter with a friend.** **-Hospital denied care due to lack of immigration papers.** **-Accesses only basic healthcare through Doctors of the World.** **-Suffers from isolation, fear of deportation, and mental health stress.** **-Avoids public places to reduce risk of being identified.** **-Continues to search for work and hold on to hope.** **-Dreams of status regularization, job training, and having children without marriage.** **-Wants to live freely, work**

		legally, and contribute to Canadian society. **-Calls on Canada to regularize those already living and working here.**

PART 2: NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS WORKING DIRECTLY WITH WOMEN wITHOUT REGULAR STATUS AND WITH WOMEN WITH PRECARIOUS STATUS

1. **Semi-structured group interview with the Centre des Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs (CDFIA)**

Names	**Titles/Roles**	**Main points of discussion during interview**
Kavitha Culasingam, Sonia Haddad, Christina Merino Raimundo, Stéphanie McConnell-Enright, Jasmine Renteria Huerta, Émilie Trépy, and Camille Zanga	**Social workers**	**-Women are increasingly falling from precarious to irregular status.** **-Asylum claims are being rejected at much higher rates.** **-Legal processes are expensive and inaccessible for many.** **-Legal aid is harder to access; community groups fill the gap.** **-Community workers face pressure balancing direct aid and collective action.** **-Precarious status severely harms women's mental and physical health.** **-Constant uncertainty affects both mothers and children.** **-Few women access formal mental health care.** **-Support often comes through listening, storytelling, and compassion.** **-Women face layered violence before, during, and after migration.** **-Housing conditions expose women and children to exploitation.** **-Sponsored women in abusive relationships fear leaving due to status loss.** **-Shelters may be inaccessible**

		due to racism and language barriers. **-Sexual and reproductive health services are financially out of reach.** **-Women sometimes give birth alone due to fear or cost.** **-Canadian-born children of non-status mothers face inequality from birth.** **-Services are intentionally offered regardless of immigration status.** **-Collective action can lead to humanitarian status for some.** **-Rising political intolerance threatens universal service access.** **-Exclusion of one group threatens rights for all.** **-Lack of credit history makes housing access nearly impossible.** **-Overcrowding is increasing; multiple families share apartments.** **-Closed work permits leave women vulnerable to abuse.** **-Undocumented workers face exploitation and no protections.** **-Even some community groups create barriers due to ignorance or policies.** **-Collective voice and popular education are key to change.**

2. Semi-structured interview with outreach worker from Doctors of the World

Names	**Titles/Roles**	**Main points of discussion during interview**
Javier Lopez Fraile	**Outreach worker**	**-The clinic supports women with no regular status through pregnancy, lab tests, and emotional care.**

		-Health is approached holistically: housing, food, safety, and connection are seen as essential. **-Informal partnerships allow some access to low-cost or free care.** **-Pregnant women without status often lack prenatal care due to cost.** **-Some work through high-risk pregnancies because they have no income or insurance.** **-Hospitals sometimes refuse to release birth certificates unless payment is made.** **-Many women save only for the cost of giving birth, skipping earlier care.** **-Chronic stress from survival, housing, and lack of work affects health deeply.** **-Women without contracts or protections are especially vulnerable.** **-The clinic increasingly receives requests for help finding work.** **-International students face gaps in private insurance, especially during pregnancy.** **-Pregnant students risk losing their permit and status if they miss school.** **-Serious illnesses like cancer are often untreated due to cost and lack of options.** **-Chronic conditions worsen rapidly without consistent access to care.** **-Simple illnesses become serious due to unaffordable medications.** **-Some needed medicines cost $300/month and must be ruled out.** **-The clinic must find limited, alternative solutions for care.**

PART 3: INTERVIEW WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS OF ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATIVE COMMITTEE

1. **Semi-Structured interviews with community organizers at the Immigrant Workers Centre (CTI)**

Names	Titles/Roles	Main points of discussion during interview
Viviana Medina and Susana Ponte Rivera	Viviana Medina and Susana Ponte Rivera have been community organizers with the Women's Committee at the Immigration Workers Centre (IWC) since its creation in 2018.	-Many women lost status after fleeing abuse tied to employer-specific work permits. -Rejected asylum claims, even after appeals, lead to irregularity. -Recent immigration policy changes put international students at risk of losing status. -The IWC has seen a rise in people losing status since late 2023. -Constant fear of deportation and no access to healthcare create severe insecurity. -Women live decades without healthcare or retirement possibilities. -Gender-based violence and trafficking are common experiences. -Temporary permits for domestic violence survivors exist but are slow and limited -Some women have died from untreated cancer due to lack of access. -Fear of being reported prevents women from going to hospitals. -Mental health support is urgently needed; free, feminist-aligned options are scarce. -The group is building a

		collective mental health intervention model. **-Most work in underpaid, exploitative sectors like cleaning, caregiving, and restaurants.** **-Sexual division of labor reinforces gendered, racialized job precarity.** **-Finding work is increasingly difficult.** **-Most live in poverty, especially women living alone.** **-Housing instability is constant; women often rely on couches or unsafe arrangements.** **-Second-stage shelters are rarely accessible without a work permit or income support.** **-H&C applications are expensive, long, uncertain, and don't protect from deportation.** **-Fear of exposure prevents many from applying.** **-Some women endure years of emotional toll through multiple failed applications.** **-The committee breaks isolation, builds community, and boosts self-esteem.** **-Women are encouraged to voice their experiences and engage in public advocacy.** **-Sharing publicly can be re-traumatizing, but is often healing with collective support.** **-Empowerment comes from lived experience and shared knowledge.** **-Members have testified**

		directly to government officials. **-Since 2019, the committee leads a study on healthcare and labor conditions.** **-The project continued despite COVID delays and member deaths.** **-Women were trained in interviews and labor law, reaching 75+ participants.** **-Goal: Demand healthcare for all, using findings as advocacy tools.** **-Organizing has helped women shed fear and gain strength.** **-The project brings isolated women into the movement.**

ANNEXE 3: INTERVIEW GUIDES
***Each interview guide was translated to Spanish and French**

3.1 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WOMEN WITHOUT REGULAR STATUS

INTRODUCTION / PROFILE

1. What is your preferred name for today?
2. Do you mind me asking your age/or range of age if you prefer?
3. What is your country of birth and nationality?
    a. What languages do you speak?
4. Before arriving in Canada, where did you live?
    a. (Did you move directly from that country to Canada or was there also a transit country?)
    b. With whom did you live with in your country of origin?
5. What have you studied/level of studies?
6. Were you working? If yes, in what kind of field of work/jobs?
7. Are you married/were you married?
8. Do you have children? If yes, how many and their age?
    a. Are your children here with you in Canada?
    b. (*If not, for how long have you been apart? Where and with whom are they living?)
9. In what year did you arrive in Canada?
10. With whom did you arrive with?
    a. Did you have any support system (friends/family) already in Montreal/Canada when you arrived?

PART 1: MIGRATION JOURNEY

1. What were the experiences or circumstances that led you to leave your country and come to Canada?
2. Why did you choose Canada as a destination? And why specifically the city of Montreal?
3. What were your hopes or expectations for your life in Canada when you first arrived?
4. How did you travel from your country to Canada?
5. When you arrived in Canada, did you enter with a visa or some other kind of legal status?
    a. If not, how did you enter the country?
6. Can you describe what happened after your arrival, and how your immigration status eventually changed?
    a. Did any rules, delays, or decisions cause your status to change?
    b. Has your status changed more than once?
    c. Looking back, is there anything you wish had been different about how the system responded to your situation?
    d. Were you given any support, legal guidance, or information during this time?
7. What is your current immigration situation or status?
8. How long have you been living without legal status in Canada?
9. Did you try to regularize your status at any point? What happened?
10. What challenges or obstacles did you face in trying to regularize your status?
11. What happened after your efforts to regularize your status didn't succeed?

PART 2: DAILY CHALLENGES LIVING WITHOUT STATUS

12. In your day-to-day life, what situations or experiences feel most difficult because of living without status?
13. Have you experienced difficulties finding or keeping housing because of your immigration status?
    a. With whom do you currently live?
    b. Do you feel secure in your current living situation?
14. Have you been able to find work in Montreal? If so, what kinds of jobs have you done?
    a. How did you find these jobs?
15. What has your experience been like working without legal status?
16. Can you walk me through a typical day at work? What kind of tasks do you do, when do you usually start, and how many hours do you work each day or week?
17. Have you ever experienced exploitation or unsafe conditions in your work?
    a. If so, have you received any help or support from local community organizations?
18. Have you been able to access healthcare or medical services when you needed them?
19. What happened when you tried to seek help from hospitals or clinics?
    a. Were you ever turned away or asked about your immigration status?
20. Have you or any of your family members tried to access education or other public services?
21. Do you have people or organizations you can rely on for support?
22. Have you connected with any community groups, religious centers, or advocacy organizations?
23. How has living without status affected your emotional well-being or mental health?
24. What helps you cope during more difficult moments?

PART 3: HOPES, ASPIRATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE & IMPACTS IF INVOLVED IN ADVOCACY

25. If everything went the way you wished, what would your future in Canada look like?
26. What are your dreams or goals for your life here?
27. Do you believe you'll one day be able to regularize your status? What would that mean for you?
28. What steps are you thinking of taking now, or in the near future?
29. If you could share one thing with people who don't know what it's like to live without status in Montreal, what would you want them to understand?
30. If you could change something about the immigration system in Canada, what would you change?
31. Based on your experience, what kinds of programs or policies do you think could prevent people from losing their status in Canada?
    a. Are there specific changes you think could have made a difference in your own case?
32. Have you ever been involved in, or thought about getting involved in, efforts to advocate for permanent residency for people without status in Canada?
33. If so, how has being involved in local advocacy, social participation in fighting for your rights impacted you?
    a. Can you share your experiences/involvement in local advocacy?
    b. How has it impacted your mental health?
34. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your journey or your hopes for the future that we haven't talked about?

3.2 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SOCIAL/OUTREACH WORKERS FROM NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

1. Based on your observations and experience, what are the most urgent difficulties currently faced by women without status or with precarious immigration status?
    a. In particular regarding access to healthcare, housing, and employment.

2. According to your observations, what are the factors that contribute to women in Montreal becoming trapped in a situation without status?

3. With the tightening of immigration policies — the reduction in temporary permits, study permits, and long waits to obtain permanent residency — do you fear that a greater number of women may risk losing their status or falling into irregular situations?

4. Have you noticed that women with precarious status often face administrative or bureaucratic difficulties when trying to renew or maintain their legal status?

5. What are the obstacles you encounter, as a community organization, in supporting women with precarious or no immigration status?

6. What are your hopes and recommendations for changes to be made at the governmental level, in the short and long term?

3.3 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ADVOCACY GROUP

1. An introduction: What is your role within the organization, how many years have you been working here, and what is your involvement?

2. From your perspective and observations, what do you consider to be the most urgent difficulties currently faced by women living without regular status in Montreal?
    a. In particular, regarding access to work, healthcare, and housing.
    b. What concerns you the most at the moment, based on what you are seeing/hearing?

3. Based on your observations, how has participating in the women's committee and fighting for their rights impacted the women?
    a. How do you perceive that their participation in the committee has influenced their emotional health, well-being, or personal confidence?

4. Regarding the participatory research you are working on together: Based on your observations, how has it impacted the women involved to participate directly in this research, especially considering that they are women without regular status or who have experienced this situation in the past and are now interviewing others currently living through it?

5. What are your hopes regarding what this participatory research can achieve?
    a. How many women without regular status has the committee managed to interview so far?

6. What have you personally learned by being part of this participatory project?
    a. Is there anything that has particularly touched or impacted you in this process?

ANNEXE 4: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Hello, my name is Sandra Hercegova Michelashvili, and I am a master's student at the University Institute of Migration Studies at Universidad Pontificia Comillas in Madrid, Spain, studying remotely.
I grew up in Montreal, raised by my strong single immigrant mother, and my final research project is about sharing the stories of women living without regular status in this city. I'd like to meet with you, listen to your experiences, learn about how this situation shapes your daily life, and hear about your hopes for the future. My goal is to help contribute to the ongoing advocacy efforts towards implementing a permanent regularization program in Canada and to raise awareness, both here and internationally about your experiences.
The research project will be turned into a written document called "Living Without Status in Montreal: Women's Experiences, Challenges, and Hopes for the Future." This will be shared with the University Institute of Migration Studies in Madrid and made available online for anyone to access.
I'm looking to interview women living without status individually and anonymously during April and May. The interviews will be about 30 to 40 minutes and can be done in French, English, or Spanish. Only

audio recordings will be made, just for my reference, and all information will be kept confidential and secure throughout the process.
For the interviews, we can meet in person at the day, time and location most convenient for you.
I will offer a meal, drink and transportation costs.
It is also possible for us to do the interview by Zoom if preferred.
Your time and trust is truly appreciated.
Thank you for taking the time to read this proposal.