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I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Precarity and informality in agricultural food production in Finland: the role of migrant workers

Sector report

Paula Merikoski and Lena Näre

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Executive Summary

Agricultural food production in Finland is largely dependent on the availability of foreign labour, especially seasonal labour, a development that began in the 1980s and 1990s and has intensified over the past three decades (Heikkilä 2020). While the tendency in Finnish migration policy is to restrict access to humanitarian, family and – to an extent – labour-based residence permits (Merikoski et al. 2024), certain types of work in the agricultural sector have been opened to non-EU labour forces through policy adjustments that have made the bureaucracy around obtaining work permits easier. In this report, we focus on two types of labour within the sector of agricultural food production, where the share of the migrant labour force is significant: seasonal work in open field berry production and greenhouse vegetable production, in which workers are employed both year-round and seasonally.

This report is based on an ethnographic study focused on the experiences of migrant workers in agricultural food production in Finland. The purpose of our study was to examine how an irregular, precarious and/or temporary migration status affects migrants' working conditions, livelihoods and living conditions and how the informality of their work arrangements impacts their everyday lives and residence status. By interviewing both migrant workers and sector stakeholders and conducting participant observation, we gathered data that allowed us to approach the intertwinement of migrants' work, everyday lives, living conditions and the associated irregularities from multiple perspectives. In addition to these data, we had access to labour inspection reports and other documents, which shed light on the issues typical to the sector. We also relied on informal conversations, observations and notes taken during field trips.

Undeclared work or work done without a contract is relatively rare in Finnish labour markets, and most migrant workers hold valid residence and work permits. However, certain irregularities in work arrangements are prevalent even if the employment is formal on paper. For example, we found that many workers earned money informally alongside their regular employment, or sometimes they worked for a different employer than that on their permit papers. Employers cutting corners or breaching the regulations of collective agreements, for instance, by not paying the required extra wages for weekend work, were typical. Moreover, regularisation through work ties workers to their employers, which can cause vulnerabilities. In our analysis, we discuss the impact of these irregularities on the financial situation and residence status of workers as well as the resistance strategies employed by workers. We further examine the impact working conditions have on migrant workers' families, personal lives, housing, health and access to welfare rights.

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1. Introduction

In Finland, labour migration is an ongoing topic of political debate. While the tendency in Finnish migration policies is to restrict migration, especially humanitarian migration, the need for foreign labour in many sectors is widely acknowledged in the political discourse. However, critical scholarship has problematised the separation between migrants and workers (e.g. Vickers 2019). Moreover, restrictions on labour-based residence permits make it difficult for non-EU citizens to move to work in Finland (e.g. Merikoski et al. 2024). Regardless, the migrant labour force is overrepresented in certain sectors, for example, cleaning and hospitality (Sutela 2024). Notwithstanding, the agricultural sector is not a predominantly migrant labour sector even though migrants are overrepresented, i.e. the share of migrant workers in the sector (14.3%) exceeds that in Finland in general (6.9%) (Table 1, Statistics Finland 2025). However, the importance of migrant labour becomes apparent when different types of work are scrutinised. Within the sector, clear divisions exist in specific branches based on the precariousness of the work, migration status (Näre et al. 2024) and the labour intensity.

According to the most recent statistics from 2023, labour-intensive production branches in agriculture are completely dependent on migrant workers, while high-tech branches employ only small numbers of foreigners. For example, high-tech grain cultivation is one of the biggest production branches, but only 0.35 % of the workers are migrants (National Resources Institute of Finland 2025). Most workers in agricultural sector in Finland work regularly, i.e., they hold migration and work permits, and their work contracts follow the minimum requirements of collective agreements. However, almost all residence permit types workers hold are temporary, conditional and, in different ways, precarious (see section 5.2.).

2. The Case Studies: Open-Field Cultivation and Greenhouse Production

The two branches within agricultural food production that we studied, namely, open-air cultivation and greenhouse production, are both marked by labour intensity. In 2023, the share of foreign workers in open-air cultivation was 61.5% and 43% in greenhouse production (see Table 1). The proportion of foreign nationals has increased significantly over the past 10 years, particularly in greenhouse production. Open-air cultivation has a longer history of dependency on migration, as over half the workforce (58%) comprised foreigners in 2013 compared to 18.8% in greenhouse production the same year (National Resources Institute of Finland 2025). All workers with a foreign nationality are included in these statistics—both those who arrive for the season and leave after it and those who live in Finland permanently or for the time being.

Table 1. Workers in agricultural production in Finland in all branches and in open-air cultivation and greenhouse production in 2020 and 2023 by number and percentage (source: National Resources Institute of Finland 2025, own elaborations).

	Year	Workers (total)	Farmers and joint owners (% of total)	Family members (% of total)	Permanent workers (% of total)	Seasonal workers (% of total)	Foreign workers (% of total)	Foreign permanent workers (% of permanent workers)	Foreign seasonal workers (% of seasonal workers)
All branches of agricultural food production	2020	136,141	61,404 (45.1%)	29,122 (21.4%)	12,635 (9.2%)	32,980 (24.2%)	19,427 (14.3%)	3,353 (26.5%)	16,074 (48.7%)
	2023	118,551	56,275 (47.5%)	27,790 (23.4%)	11,378 (9.6%)	23,108 (19.5%)	15,820 (13.3%)	2,622 (23.0%)	13,197 (57.1%)

	Year	Workers (total)	Farmers and joint owners (% of total)	Family members (% of total)	Permanent workers (% of total)	Seasonal workers (% of total)	Foreign workers (% of total)	Foreign permanent workers (% of permanent workers)	Foreign seasonal workers (% of seasonal workers)
Open-air cultivation	2022	16,668	1,633 (9.8%)	1,109 (6.6%)	1,422 (8.5%)	12,504 (75.0%)	9,319 (55.9%)	664 (46.7%)	8,655 (69.2%)
	2023	13,117	1,702 (13.0%)	1,088 (8.3%)	901 (6.7%)	9,427 (71.9%)	8,065 (61.5%)	335 (37.0%)	7,731 (82.0%)
Greenhouse production	2020	7,267	631 (8.7%)	583 (8.0%)	2,994 (41.2%)	3,059 (42.0%)	2,523 (34.7%)	1,486 (49.6%)	1,038 (33.9%)
	2023	6,166	488 (7.9%)	473 (7.7%)	2,395 (38.8%)	2,810 (45.6%)	2,651 (43.0%)	1,167 (48.7%)	1,484 (52.8%)

An important division within the sector concerns the temporariness of work. The demand for labour in agricultural food production in open farms is focused on the summer season and harvest months. In 2023, 71.9% of the workforce employed on open farms was seasonal, 21.3% of workers were farmers and their family members, and only 6.7% were permanent employees (see Table 1). Of the permanent workers, the majority (63%) were Finnish, and according to an estimate from 2023, approximately 70% of the full-time work in the sector was performed by farmers and their family members (National Resources Institute Finland 2025). The overwhelming majority – 82% – of seasonal workers were migrants, and this percentage has steadily increased.

Greenhouse production in Finland centres on tomatoes, cucumbers, salads and herbs as well as peppers and chili peppers albeit in smaller numbers. Almost all salads and herbs are cultivated in greenhouses that are open year-round, i.e., in which the cultivation period is over 10 months, and one third of tomatoes and cucumbers are cultivated in year-round greenhouses (Finnish Glasshouse Growers' Association 2025). The proportion of permanent workers is currently 38.8%, which is almost as high as that of seasonal workers (45.6%), and over half (52.8%) of seasonal workers are migrants (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the non-EU workforce is seasonal. In 2020–2023, Ukrainian nationals were the largest group, with an even higher number since the full-scale war in Ukraine started in 2022, which made Russian citizens' travel to Finland difficult. An estimated 95% of foreign seasonal workers are Ukrainian (National Resources Institute of Finland 2022).

According to the stakeholders interviewed, the internationalisation of the workforce started to accelerate in the 1990s. Following the EU enlargement in 2004, more seasonal migrant workers started to come from non-EU countries, mainly Russia, Ukraine and Thailand (Heikkilä 2020; Mattila et al. 2021). Significant economic, structural and cultural developments have taken place in society and with respect to labour relations across Europe over the past 50 years, such as increasing urbanisation, the depopulation of the countryside, higher living standards and technological developments in farming (Rye and Scott 2018). The so-called 'prosperity paradox' means that as income levels increase, the share of local workers decreases, that of precarious migrant workers increases, and production becomes more concentrated in larger farms (Palumbo et al. 2022). Our stakeholder interviews highlighted that the sector can also be precarious for farmer entrepreneurs, and it is difficult for farmers to make a profit or break even. The sector is becoming more concentrated as larger farms buy smaller ones. As the sector has developed in Finland, labour arrangements have become more formalised and the work itself more demanding.

The majority of our research participants had experience in one of the two main branches discussed herein: strawberry farming and greenhouse vegetable production. Some had worked in fruit orchards, on dairy farms and open-field vegetable farms and for manufacturers of fruit and berry juices.

2.1. Case 1: Strawberries and the seasonality of labour needs

Strawberries are the most cultivated berry in Finland and are almost exclusively cultivated on open farms or in built tunnel constructions, which are also seasonal. The weather conditions in Finland are generally beneficial for the open-field cultivation of strawberries, as their flavour benefits from moderate temperatures and the long periods of light in early summer. In 2022, strawberries made up 16 million kilograms of the total 20 million kilograms of berries produced in Finland (National Resources Institute of Finland 2023). It is important to note the slightly different infrastructure and legislation vis à vis migrant labour for cultivated and forest berries in Finland. In this report, berry picking refers to work that is done on berry farms and not to the picking and sale of naturally growing forest berries.

We conducted our fieldwork for case 1 in the region of Suonenjoki in Northern Savonia, which comprises the municipality of Suonenjoki and its neighbouring municipalities. Strawberries are important for the region both in terms of both public image and production volumes. While berries are produced in all 19 regions of Finland, Northern Savonia is the single largest berry producer. In terms of land, Northern Savonia makes up more than 20% of the country's berry farming area (Natural Resources Institute Finland 2025). In 2023, the strawberries from the Suonenjoki region received the EU Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) certification which protects the names of agrifood products originating in specific regions – only the 14th Finnish food product to have received this recognition (Finnish Food Authority 2023). Pride in the strawberries in the region is evident, and they are depicted in the official logo of Suonenjoki and on lampposts and public statues around the town. For decades, the arrival of thousands of seasonal harvest workers – first Finnish youth, then migrant workers – livens up the small town during summer (Riepula 2016). After Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, many Ukrainians sought refuge in the region, as it was already familiar to them, and many decided to stay permanently.

2.2. Case 2: Greenhouse vegetable production

In Finland, approximately 100 million kilograms of greenhouse vegetables are produced annually, and tomatoes (40 million kilograms) and cucumbers (50 million kilograms) are the largest crops. In addition, around 100 million pots of potted vegetables, i.e. various types of lettuce and herbs, are grown each year. The region of Närpiö in Ostrobothnia, where we conducted our fieldwork, accounts for 70% of Finland's tomato and cucumber production (Finnish Glasshouse Growers' Association 2025).

Närpiö is a small municipality with 9,554 inhabitants. The percentage of migrants resembles that of the capital region of Helsinki. In 2024, 23% (over 2,100) of the inhabitants in Närpiö were foreigners, and 10.3% (985) were Vietnamese (Statistics Finland 2025). Migration to Närpiö, the heart of the greenhouse industry, began with the reception of refugees in 1988, when it was the first municipality outside a large urban area to take in refugees. The first arrivals were so-called Vietnamese boat refugees, who had arrived in Finland in the 1970s and moved to the region in the 1980s, and some families who arrived then stayed in Närpiö. These humanitarian migratory mobilities transformed into labour migration facilitated by existing family networks.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, migration to Närpiö has been fuelled by labour shortages in the metal industry and greenhouses that were switching from a production model based on seasonal labour to year-round cultivation (Raunio et al. 2023). In 2011, foreign-language speakers accounted for almost 8% of the municipality's population (approximately 750 people), almost twice the average for Finland (Mattila & Björklund 2013, pp. 39–44). Besides Närpiö, some of our participants lived in other small towns around the same region.

2.3. Legislative dimensions of work and entry regulations

The agricultural food production sector is exempt from labour market testing in Finland, which means that non-EU citizens can apply for work-based residence permits for jobs in the sector if the work is full-time. For temporary work, non-EU citizens who work in a 'seasonal work sector' for a maximum of 90 days may apply for a seasonal work visa or certificate depending on their nationality. The certificate is an instrument introduced in 2014 to facilitate certain non-EU workers' arrival for short-term work (Fiałkowska et al. 2022). Ukrainians may use the certificate, which is an easier procedure than that for a residence permit. Non-EU workers can apply for a seasonal work residence permit in case their employment lasts from three to six months. Most migrant workers in harvest jobs used to have seasonal work certificates before the introduction of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which gives Ukrainians an immediate and nonrestricted right to work. Before the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major source of uncertainty in the sector. The pandemic and related travel restrictions spurred a heated political discussion about the sector's need to secure labour even in times of crises and resulted in a solution that let migrant workers travel regardless of the pandemic (Kuns et al. 2025).

The greenhouse sector is divided into big greenhouses, which are open all year round, and smaller greenhouses, which are only open during the growing and harvest seasons up to eight months. Previously, workers were entitled to unemployment benefits during the months they were not working. However, the current government has introduced new legislation effective June 2025 according to which non-EU migrants who have resided in Finland less than two years need to find new employment within three months if they lose their job. If they are unable to do so, they have to return to their country. This law has added a new layer of vulnerability for newly arrived agricultural workers.

Another notable issue in this sector is the ethical recruitment of labour. While it is illegal in Finland to charge workers fees for recruitment services, the problem is widespread, both in seasonal open field cultivation and greenhouse production. As these recruiters operate abroad and employers frequently turn a blind eye, arrangements in which the worker bears the recruitment costs are prevalent (see section 5.1.).

The collective agreement for agricultural trade defines the conditions of work, and all workers are part of the same agreement regardless of their status in the country or union membership (or lack thereof). The labour inspectorate oversees the fulfilment of work conditions via announced or unannounced check-ups, and severe misconduct, such as underpayment and discrimination, are reported to the police. However, the labour inspectorate resources are limited, and in some regions, they focus on farms where complaints have been made or previous misconduct has been noted by an inspector, so some farms hardly ever undergo inspections.

3. Methods and Data

The interview data from the workers (N = 27) and stakeholders (N = 11) were collected either in person or via video call depending on the location of the participant. Table 2 presents the participants' distribution by nationality, work experience type, region of work and gender. In addition to these 27 individuals, a group interview focused on their seasonal work experiences was conducted with six Ukrainian women on a strawberry farm in the Savonia region at the start of our fieldwork. These six individuals are not included in Table 2.

Table 2. In-depth interviews of agricultural workers. Overview of the research participants.

	N	Work experience (one or more per person)					Region (one or more per person)			Gender	
		Seasonal	Year-round	Green-house	Open field	Other	Savonia	Ostrobothnia	Other	Women	Men
Ukrainian	15	10	7	5	12	3	10	3	5	11	4
Vietnamese	11	5	11	11				11		4	7
Russian	1	1			1		1		1	1	
Total	27	16	18	16	13	3	11	14	6	16	11

The stakeholders included representatives of farmers' associations and other interest groups, farmers, employees of municipalities and NGOs whose work involved supporting migrants and a labour inspector. In addition to the interviews, we drew from participant observation, field notes from trips to agricultural sites, text material, such as labour inspection documents, and informal discussions during our fieldwork. Moreover, we gained knowledge from other interviews conducted within I-CLAIM in the domestic work and cleaning sector, as many participants had experience from both sectors. Several Ukrainian participants had previously worked in agriculture, mainly in seasonal work, but after settling down in Finland with temporary protection permits had found employment cleaning.

Most interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian or Vietnamese with the help of research assistants employed from the Faculty of Social Sciences. Others were in English, and in some cases, a combination of languages was used. Some of the student assistants had similar backgrounds to those of the participants beyond language competence, and their input and cultural knowledge impacted our fieldwork. Their main tasks were to reach out to participants in social media groups through and to interpret during interviews. They were also encouraged to influence decisions made during the research process and to actively participate in interactions with the participants. After each interview, we discussed the content of the interview with them, and their thoughts influenced our analysis.

The fieldwork started in May 2024 with Paula's initial trip to Suonenjoki and the first interviews with stakeholders and observations, followed by her second trip in late July that year with additional stakeholder interviews, the first worker interviews and participant observations. In September, field work started in full with the help of a research assistant, Mariia. Paula and Mariia visited Suonenjoki again in October and conducted several interviews. They also carried out observations and took photographs around the town and in a participant's home. During autumn 2024, Paula and Lena interviewed in person or online migrant workers with current or past experience of agricultural work. In winter 2025, we interviewed 11 Vietnamese participants with work experience in vegetable production. Lena and research assistant Thu visited

Ostrobothnia in April for a weekend, during which they conducted most of the interviews at workers' homes. They also conducted participant observation outside greenhouses and in workers' homes and neighbourhoods.

With the help of our research assistants we were able to reach prospective participants relatively easily. In the case of seasonal work, summertime is busy, so we conducted most of the interviews in autumn. Many of the participants talked about their past work experiences, which meant they had both the time to spare and temporal and emotional distance from their work and employers. In terms of permanent work, we were able to talk to workers after their working hours during the afternoons or over weekends. As the participants lived in several different regions, we interviewed many of them via Zoom, which was also their wish. All the interviewed participants were given verbal and written information about the study in their own language. They were further informed of the principles of data protection and pseudonymisation and of their right to withdraw from the study and to decide what they would share with us. All the participants gave their informed consent either via a recording or in writing.

The interviews were semi-structured. At times the focus steered more towards work; during others, it was on residence permit issues or family situations. In almost all the interviews, we managed to cover all the key questions, and many of them turned out to be in-depth and lengthy during the first meeting. Most of the interviews lasted one and a half or two hours. In the follow-up interviews (N = 5), we were able to return in-depth to some of the topics addressed during the first meeting, and we freely discussed the themes of migration, personal life/family, work and future dreams with the aid of photographs and objects of their choosing and by letting the participants lead the conversations.

The interviews were transcribed using secure AI transcription software and then checked. We then thematically analysed the data by focusing on the workers' experiences regarding residence rights, working conditions and social and welfare rights. We paid attention to gendered and bodily experiences as well as the household dimension. The stakeholder interviews shed light on how the sector operates, employers' perspectives and the different structural problems in workers' rights. In what follows, present our findings from the fieldwork beginning with the question of how irregularities and (in)formality are present in the sector.

4. Main Ethnographic Findings

4.1. Irregularities in Finnish agricultural food production

Most of the workers had a work contract and an official immigration status, albeit a temporary one. The most typical irregularities in the sector related to working conditions and regulations:

- Work performed for an employer other than the one stated in the residence permit or seasonal work certificate and not notifying the authorities of this. Sometimes this was initiated by workers who wanted to change employers and sometimes by employers who no longer had use for their workers.
- Having to work longer hours for lower wages or in different types of tasks than those stated in the employment contract. In some cases, this qualified as underpayment, which is not a criminal offence even though it is illegal and results in repercussions for the employer.
- Working informally for cash alongside formal employment, for example, by minding children, picking forest berries or cleaning the forest after timber felling.

- Employer breaching the regulations of the collective agreement, for example, when keeping track of overtime or calculating wages. Most notices are given by labour inspectors for these reasons.
- The use of intermediaries who charge employees large fees to carry out recruitment processes. An interviewed labour inspector named unethical recruitment 'the worst abscess' in the sector.
- Unreasonable deductions made from wages, for example, for accommodation.

As mentioned, the irregularities in Finnish agricultural food production lie in cutting corners with regard to employment conditions, wages and recruitment rather than the immigration status of workers. Finnish labour markets are highly formalised and regulated, and many employers do not wish to employ people who do not have the right to work. According to an experienced labour inspector, cases in which a worker has no status or right to work are rare. While most farmers who employ migrant workers follow employment and migration legislation adequately, problems are often revealed when details are scrutinised. These are frequently corrected after the first notification from the labour inspectorate. However, if conditions have not improved or mistakes corrected after one or two notifications, it is fair to assume some employers are knowingly acting this way. Outright exploitation had been experienced by some of the workers we interviewed. For example, they had not received payment that corresponded to their actual working time and effort.

4.1.1. *Migration brokers and recruiters*

Almost all our research participants had dealt with recruiters who help migrants find work and assist with travel and visa arrangements. In Ukraine, a law was passed that prohibits companies from charging fees from individuals who seek employment abroad (Pekkarinen & Jokinen 2023), but based on our research, the practice is still widely practised. In the case of Vietnamese workers, the use of brokers was common, and the amounts many participants had to pay to travel to Finland were sometimes staggering.

The recruitment of workers was also mentioned as an issue by employers in strawberry production. They were aware of predatory recruitment systems and expressed concern about the lack of institutional support for finding workers ethically. Merja, a stakeholder in the sector, said that it was an uncomfortable subject for many farmers – 'an area that many do not like to talk about'. Furthermore, as many farms and greenhouses employ tens or even hundreds of people who most often do not speak the language of the employer, employers typically appoint a 'trusted worker' to oversee the work as a middle manager and interpreter. The power 'trusted workers' hold in the organisation of large farms was raised by a labour inspector and some of the participants. This person may work with recruiters who are taking money from workers, or they may ensure that workers do not talk to authorities. Jaana from the labour inspectorate said that they regularly warn employers not to give too much power to these trusted workers, as they may take advantage of their positions. As Jaana bluntly put it: 'The farmers should know that if someone just offers to find you 30 workers, they must be charging the workers. If you don't pay for the service, the worker most likely does.'

4.1.2. *Resisting unfair treatment or bad working conditions*

In cases of wrongdoing by employers, for example, if an employer had attempted to deny workers the minimum wage, our participants had used various strategies of resistance. Some had attempted to protest on site or even to contact the authorities, although this sometimes led to them being laid off. Workers have the right to contact the agricultural workers' union for assistance and guidance even if they are not members. The labour inspectorate accepts both open and anonymous tip-offs of bad employer conduct, and they may forward cases to the police, such as those involving discrimination or salary theft. However, our participants rarely contested failings in their

working and living conditions through official channels. This is most likely due to their mistrust of the Finnish authorities and the lack of a common language and knowledge of the system. Instead, most of our participants had tackled unfairness by taking it up directly with their employers or middle managers. A typical strategy was to leave their employment and seek better work. Workers often shared experiences of good places to work and knowledge of their rights among their language communities.

Based on our interviews, seasonal workers' positions typically improve with experience. In harvest work, their earnings improve after the first season, as they become accustomed to picking, and many can obtain work directly without the use of middlemen after they get to know the farmers personally. Completing the application form for seasonal entry is difficult for those with a weak command of English or Finnish, which is the reason many choose to pay for assistance. Moreover, many workers told us that for several years they had not known about the minimum wage, that they should not pay for their jobs and that the employer can be sanctioned for such contraventions.

Some of the participants highlighted their agency in the recruitment arrangements seemingly as a refusal to play the role of a victim. For example, Bohdana from Ukraine told us that she had paid between 300 and 800 euros each year plus a percentage of her earnings. When the harvest was good, she was able to make thousands of euros regardless. She noted that she had made these decisions knowingly and that she was not ignorant about the recruiter benefiting from her labour. To her, it seemed like a decent enough deal for the service. After a few seasons, however, she no longer needed the service, as she was able to be hired directly, and she had learned how to apply for a visa without external assistance.

Similarly, many of those who were living in Finland permanently seemed to strategically view their work in the agricultural sector as a temporary means to an end. Their accounts conveyed a work ethic that gave their work meaning, even when the conditions and wages were undesirable, because their work ethic was intertwined with their aspirations for a better life (Munger 2002). We noticed some differences in economic vulnerability between the nationality groups. Among the Vietnamese participants were individuals who had risked practically everything to be able to move to Finland. They had taken on large debts, which had resulted in their long-term dependency on the work and no real options to escape even if conditions were not good. Although Ukrainians had also typically had to pay for their work and migration, they were less likely to be in a severe debt.

Interestingly, a significant aspect that affected the migrant workers' chances of improving their working conditions was the strict formality of the sector and the entry regulations. On the one hand, the permit system protects workers by obliging employers to follow collective agreements, but on the other, it ties workers to these employers. Employment-based residence permits, visas and certificates are always issued for a given employer, and if a worker chooses to leave and seek better employment or generate extra income on the side, they risk breaching the regulations unless they start an administrative process to change employers. This is especially noticeable currently, as the TPD gives Ukrainians more freedom to choose their employer. Some have even suggested this has already improved conditions in the sector.

4.2. Agricultural workers' living conditions

4.2.1. *Seasonal workers' housing in Northern Savonia*

Farms in Northern Savonia are typically located in rural areas; many are far from even small towns. Seasonal harvest work starts early, before 6 a.m. depending on the weather. Since no public transport operates, the best – or only – option is to live on site in accommodation arranged by the employers. Going shopping is difficult from these locations, and workers hitchhike, ride bicycles or share rides or minivans borrowed from their employers to reach municipal centres. On the berry and vegetable farms, the housing was typically in outbuildings or lighter barrack-type constructions. Some of these were of quite a high standard with hot running water, heating and cooling, fully equipped kitchens, facilities for washing clothes and even recreational spaces, such as TV rooms. Others were rundown, with too few toilets and showers for the workers and too many people sleeping in one room. Sometimes, the farmers only provided a sauna to wash in and no showers or washing machines. Various wage deductions are widely used by employers in the sector to underpay workers (Ruiz-Ramírez et al. 2024). All employers deduct a sum from workers' wages for housing; in fact, they must, otherwise free housing will be interpreted as a taxable benefit. However, frictions arise when some employers deduct more than the tax authorities suggest (approximately 4–5 euros/day) or if the housing they offer is so poor that the workers feel cheated.

Several of the participants had at least 10 years' experience of seasonal work on berry farms, and they shared the view that the housing conditions were improving. Just a decade ago, it was common for workers to be allocated substandard barracks or even spaces not meant for habitation. Liza from Ukraine shared that when she had first undertaken seasonal work on a strawberry farm, she had been housed in a shed used to store wood and had not had a proper bed to sleep in. The professionalisation of the sector from small businesses, where strawberries were a side business, to larger berry farming operations has ameliorated some aspects, from electronic wage calculation systems to more modern housing. Furthermore, the constant need for workers has compelled employers to consider their reputations. One second-generation farmer, Salla, explained that she believes that investing in living conditions offers good returns, as her workers are well fed and rested, and thus more efficient. 'We have never had problems finding good workers who return', she noted. Mattila and others (2021) similarly found growing consensus among the sector's employers about the benefits of being an attractive destination for seasonal workers. Besides the legal responsibility to take care of workers' conditions, it is cost-efficient in the long run and reduces worker turnover, particularly since the Finnish sector competes for workers with other EU countries and individual farms with one another (Mattila et al. 2021).

4.2.2. *Long-term workers' housing in Ostrobothnia*

Work in greenhouses is more regular and less dependent on weather than that in open fields, so work usually starts the same time every day, or employees work shifts. Workers often live in their own apartments nearby and drive to work. Sometimes the greenhouses are close enough to travel by bicycle or via public transport. However, our fieldwork in Ostrobothnia revealed numerous Vietnamese workers with dire housing situations. Many workers lived in relatively cramped conditions in flats that they rented privately but that needed repairs. When we asked about this, the tenants said they had to do everything themselves, even though it is normally the owner's responsibility to take care of repairs in flats. A few had had the opportunity to buy their own flats but not with a mortgage – they had used their savings.

The interviewed Ukrainian workers with permanent work in greenhouses lived in either municipal or private rental apartments. Most had no major complaints about the quality of the housing, although some mentioned that the rent was high in relation to the size of the apartment and they wished to move to larger homes in the future. Many of the participants received housing support from social services for rent, as most often their income was low enough to qualify for support, especially if they had dependants. After the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022, many local households opened their homes to refugees fleeing the war – a hospitality practice called home accommodation that was popularised in the so-called asylum crisis after 2015 (Merikoski 2023). Following their arrival, some of the interviewed Ukrainian workers had lived in homes offered for free or at a low rent by Finnish families, either with them or in separate buildings or apartments owned by the Finnish hosts. A couple of the participants were still living like this at the time of the interviews.

4.3. Immigration status, work and family

Immigration status determines a person's likelihood of settling down in Finland with their family. They need an A-type residence status and sufficient income to bring their family members through family reunification. Non-EU workers with permanent contracts in the agrifood sector are eligible for type A employment-based residence permits, which allows for family reunification and counts fully towards permanent residence or citizenship. However, the permit is given to a specific employer and a specific sector. If a person wants to change to a different type of work, they must have a job offer from a qualifying sector, start the process all over again and risk losing their status. Through the residence permit based on employment, workers are tied to their employers, which enhances their vulnerability, as the threshold for leaving even exploitative employment can be high (Pekkarinen & Jokinen 2023). Short-term permits, for example, seasonal work visas or certificates for three to six months, do not allow workers to bring their family members.

Migrant families wishing to become permanent residents or citizens in the future are concerned with how time spent in the country is calculated. One needs eight years of residence before applying for citizenship, but seasonal work does not count towards time spent in the country. Student permits or temporary protection for Ukrainians only counts towards 50% of the time. Thus, many Ukrainians who wish to stay in Finland have had to take jobs in other sectors, such as cleaning, where they can apply for type A work permits. This leaves them stuck with a certain kind of a job that is often poorly paid. However, many of the Ukrainian study participants said they would remain in any job that guaranteed an A-type permit because they wanted to be able to apply for permanent residence later, and many were worried about the future of the TPD.

4.3.1. *Health and safety of agricultural workers*

Because farm work is physically demanding, the musculoskeletal workload on workers is a central aspect of working conditions that employers should consider (Mattila et al. 2021). Temporary workers must by law have access to healthcare. Those who have a seasonal work certificate should be covered by their employers, so the employer must provide access to healthcare when necessary as well as information about how this will be arranged. If workers are beneficiaries of the TPD, their healthcare is organised by the municipality or reception services. If the worker holds a type A work-based permit, they are allowed to use municipal services, and their employer must provide at least a minimum level of employment-based health services.

As the work is physical, monotonous and demanding, and bodily harm often takes time to appear, providing the legally required access to healthcare in the case of sickness is not enough. Workers in greenhouses are also exposed to harmful chemicals and require special protective gear. Some employers provide information

about ergonomic working positions and encourage workers to take breaks. For example, in the Suonenjoki region, some farmers provide basic food staples for free to their seasonal workers to ensure everyone eats enough. Unfortunately, not all employers take the issues of bodily care, protection and recuperation seriously. Moreover, some fail to see how piecework payment or competition among workers encourages workers to push beyond their limits (also Ruiz-Ramírez et al. 2024).

4.4. Gender, 'race' and ethnicity

Seasonal harvest work is highly gendered, and most seasonal workers are women, especially in berry picking. It is common in the agricultural sector in Europe for employers to apply gender and/or national origin 'criteria' based on cultural, ethnic and racialised preconceptions when seeking migrant farmworkers (Ruiz-Ramírez et al. 2024). Women are, in many contexts, more sought after than men. Women are considered pliable, willing to work for lower wages and, especially in the case of those with dependants at home, less at risk of refusing to return (Ruiz-Ramírez et al. 2024). During our fieldwork, many stakeholders mentioned that Ukrainian women were the ideal seasonal workers in the sector. Men are, however, overrepresented in the few 'skilled' jobs in strawberry farms, such as planting and postharvest jobs that require a specific command of machinery. For example, Tuuli, the owner of a fairly large strawberry farm, told us they employ one local person year-round to help with maintenance, but each year, a couple of Ukrainian men arrive early in spring to help with planting and other more specific jobs. In contrast, they hire approximately 70 workers for harvest season annually, most of them women. In general, Ukrainian workers seemed to be preferred over other nationalities by farmers and other stakeholders. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic travels restrictions, a suggestion to introduce asylum seekers with negative decisions who were already in the country to seasonal farmwork was blocked (Merikoski 2024).

As in Finnish labour markets in general, racialisation in the sector is most clearly present on a structural level. Certain types of work are migrantised, and in these types of work, the upward mobility prospects and salary levels are generally low. Non-EU migrants are systematically and structurally pushed to low-paid and low-skilled sectors of work, such as agriculture, cleaning, restaurant work and 'low-skilled' construction work. This segregation can be perceived as a form of structural othering and racialisation and is partially caused by the control of residence permits, which is differentiated based on the nationalities of migrant workers.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this report, we have discussed the labour arrangements and reliance on both seasonal and permanent migrant labour in the Finnish agricultural sector, specifically in open-field cultivation and greenhouse production. Despite the general formality of employment in the sector, our research revealed certain irregularities in working conditions, wages and recruitment practices. Importantly, migrant workers' experiences were conditioned by temporary residence permits on one hand and the intertwining of their living and labour conditions on the other. Our findings underscore that migration policies often enhance vulnerabilities among migrant workers. The bureaucratic obstacles associated with obtaining and maintaining residence status complicate their situation by tying workers to specific employers and limiting their ability to seek better opportunities in other sectors. Notwithstanding, the interviewed workers demonstrated agency and resistance by employing strategies to cope with low wages, poor working conditions and outright exploitation. Recruitment practices in the sector, particularly the use of intermediaries and migration brokers who charge workers fees, have a significant impact on workers' situations. This raises questions regarding the responsibility of employers and the sector at large. The roles

of nationality, gender and ethnicity in the labour dynamics are also evident, as certain groups are disproportionately represented in low-wage, labour-intensive work. Addressing the problems in working conditions, ensuring ethical recruitment and facilitating pathways for permanent residency and family reunification are ways to enhance the welfare of migrant workers and to secure the sector's labour needs into the future.

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