National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale des déterminants de la santé

Mind the Disruption

PODCAST EPISODE TRANSCRIPT & COMPANION DOCUMENT

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 4

Disrupting Migrant Work

Episode released on:
December 6, 2022

Mind the Disruption is a podcast about people who refuse to accept things as they are. It's about people pushing for better health for all. It's about people like us who have a deep desire to build a healthier, more just world.

The first season of Mind the Disruption focuses on Cultivating Creative Discontent: what it means to look around, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then take bold action despite the resistance we might face.

This episode companion document, available in English and French, provides a new way to engage with the podcast. It includes a written transcript of Episode 4 as well as highlighted powerful quotes and related resources to prompt further reflection and exploration.

EPISODE 4
DECEMBER 6, 2022

SEASON ONE

HOST

BERNICE YANFUL

Bernice is a Knowledge Translation Specialist with the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH). Bernice is also a PhD candidate studying the intersections between school food and food security, and she has worked as a public health nurse in Ontario.

PODCAST GUESTS

SAROM RHO

Sarom is an organizer with the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC), a workers' rights organization with a membership of migrants in farm work, care work and low-waged work, which includes current and former international students, refugees and undocumented people. MWAC serves as the Secretariat of the Migrant Rights Network.

DR. ERICA DI RUGGIERO

Erica is an Associate Professor of Global Health at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health whose research focuses on evaluating the health, gender and equity impacts of policies on marginalized groups such as precarious workers. She explores how different types of evidence shape global policy agendas and influence global governance in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Sarom Rho is a migrant and community organizer in Canada. Sarom unites with other migrants who are students, care workers and agriculture workers. Together they make up the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, which is a grassroots organization calling for full and permanent immigration status for all. In this episode, we learn why immigration status is a foundational determinant of health for people living in Canada without status that contributes to unsafe living and working conditions. We learn from Sarom about what collective action for change looks like, the ways in which it brings strength and well-being, and why a global approach matters to the local level. Later in the episode, we also talk to Dr. Erica Di Ruggiero, a public health researcher and professor, who is passionate about global health and work. In our conversation with Erica, we unpack how public health practitioners can support workers like Sarom by lending our voice, collaborating intersectorally and taking action.

BERNICE YANFUL (NCCDH)

Hi. Welcome to Mind the Disruption. I'm Bernice Yanful. I'm a PhD student and public health practitioner working to move knowledge into action for better health for everyone.

On this podcast, I chat with community organizers, public health professionals, academics and more who have a key thing in common: they're disruptors. They're people who refuse to accept things as they are. Passionate about health for all and are pursuing it with a tenacity, a courage and a deep conviction that a better world is possible.

In Season 1, we're talking about creative discontent. What it means to look around us, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then taking bold action despite the resistance we might face.

In each episode, we hear from a disruptor who has done just that in different areas: work, food, Whiteness, migration and much more. And we hear their personal journeys.

Then we dive into a reflective conversation about what all this means for public health. Wherever we find ourselves — in research, policy or practice — how do break from the status quo and move forward with boldness?

REBECCA CHEFF (NCCDH)

This podcast is made and brought to you by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. We support the public health field to move knowledge into action to reduce health inequities }in Canada.

We're hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We're funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and we are one of six National Collaborating Centres for Public Health working across the country. The views expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of our funder or host.

We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.

SAROM RHO

Two days later when they got out of the hospital and returned to work, they came back to the farm and their bags were packed. They were being deported.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

You just heard from our disruptor for today's show, Sarom Rho. Sarom uses she/her and they/them pronouns. Sarom is a migrant worker and organizer. She unites with other migrants to win immigration and migrant worker justice.

Migrants are people who live on lands that are different than the ones they were born or grew up in. There are many reasons why migrants may choose to come to a place like Canada. A few examples include those who come to:

- study, such as current or former international students;
- work, in sectors such as agriculture and care work; and
- seek asylum, such as refugees.

The vast majority of migrants in Canada arrive through legal predetermined pathways that are set by the federal government. Most of these immigration pathways are temporary and precarious, which means migrants can work or study in Canada but cannot stay here permanently and do not have access to many of the rights and protections that permanent residents and citizens in Canada often take for granted that are so important for our health. Like being safe at work and being able to access health care without paying large bills.

And while some of these temporary immigration pathways are increasing rapidly, such as temporary work permits, there are inadequate mechanisms for granting migrants full and permanent immigration status. As a result, many migrants lose their immigration status and become undocumented.

Immigration status as the foundational determinant of health for people without status in Canada: A scoping review

Gagnon N, Kansal N, Goel R, Gastaldo D. [2021].

Immigration status is an overlooked and foundational determinant of health for people who are undocumented or without permanent immigration status in Canada. This scoping review published in the *Journal of immigrant and minority health* provides public health practitioners with a foundation for understanding how lack of immigration status affects health. It sets out a framework for taking action to reduce the avoidable harms experienced by migrants.

Sarom along with other migrant organizers tackle this temporariness within the immigration system. To do so, they call for full and permanent immigration status for all migrants and undocumented peoples. By calling for status for all, they are also calling for health and well-being for all since, as we will explore in this episode, full and permanent immigration status is a foundational determinant of health. Sarom and I talked about her journey in this incredible work.

And later, I chat with Erica Di Ruggiero and reflect on what we heard from Sarom. Erica is a dedicated mentor, teacher and public health researcher with a focus on decent work in global health. In chatting with Erica, we talk about the global nature of labour, what it means to collect good data about employment, and about the collective responsibility we have as public health practitioners and community members to listen to and support migrant workers.

I was curious to hear from Sarom about what shaped her to become the organizer she is and how her early experiences inspired her work.

BERNICE

Can you take me back to when you first got involved with migrant justice organizing. Was there a particular moment for you that sparked that desire or interest to get engaged?

SAROM

Yes, I was 19 at that time, and I was inspired namely by the work of the Black Panther Party and was beginning to learn the language and the kind of analysis to assess the situation that people like me were facing. But this was largely in books.

Then I began thinking about how do I put this in into practice? And one of those ways is to join an organization. Join with others like you. Join with the people who are fighting for the same cause and advancing the same struggle to figure it out together because we cannot even come up with the best political analysis in a silo. The strongest is one that is iterative of the base, of the people directly.

And so I began thinking about that and joined an organization in Toronto called No One Is Illegal and began to get involved just in very early stages in campaigns around Access Without Fear policies in the city as well as supporting our brothers, sisters, siblings who were migrant detainees.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

No One Is Illegal is an international network of grassroots migrant justice organizers and allies who support undocumented peoples through direct action, collectivism and anti-oppression.

BERNICE

So what was it about the Black Panther Party in particular that inspired you?

SAROM

One of the things that really called to me was the fact that they situated the larger liberation struggle of Black people as an internationalist struggle. One that could not be won without the direct participation of oppressed peoples everywhere. That this wouldn't be something just relegated to what we would now consider so-called North America. That there are oppressed people globally. And that the way that we can together free ourselves is to join struggles together. And that really inspired me.

I grew up in a neighbourhood in Toronto that was considered, that is to this day considered, so-called high risk, which is just coded language generated by a lot of anti-Black racism. When my friends and I were trying to figure out our situations together, these kinds of texts were very useful for us to think about why it is that we are going to school hungry or that many of our friends and classmates were being streamed into different ...

BERNICE

Applied classes.

SAROM

Exactly. Or that there was a school resource officer in school and that kind of policing started to really have devastating impacts.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

As a student, Sarom began to understand that discrimination and racism were behind the streaming practices in her high school in Toronto. Streaming is an educational practice that divides high school students into taking either hands-on applied courses or entering an academic track set for post-secondary education. In 2021, the Ontario Ministry of Education announced plans to end academic and applied streaming in all Grade 9 courses. As of 2022, no formal plans to stop streaming in Grade 10 courses have been announced. Research shows that youth who are racialized, experiencing poverty and from some non-White immigrant groups are more likely to be in applied courses, limiting their opportunities for university education. You can learn more about the practices of streaming in schools and its effects on educational and

other types of inequities in the book *Restacking the deck: Streaming by class, race and gender in Ontario* schools by Clandfield and colleagues.

Now back to Sarom who is talking about their experiences living and going to school in a so-called high-risk neighbourhood in Toronto.

SAROM

So I think that seeing what we were facing and then being confused, asking these questions to get more political clarity, and one of the very impactful — to this day, culturally and politically — resources were the work of the Black Panther Party.

BERNICE

I know in my own life, reading books, resources have been kind of a lifeline. Helping me make sense of my situation, helping me think about what could be possible, what could be different. And it sounds like for you, immersing yourself in readings about these issues and the work of the Black Panther Party were really critical.

SAROM

They were, and that had its own limitations I realized, which was that sometimes if texts and the theory is detached from the everyday realities of our people, then they don't hold the kind of weight that it could. And also my personal experience may not be the singular and only universal one. And coming together with others, joining organization, debating ideas, coming up with plans together, *struggling together* is how we advance the work that we're doing.

Because when you come as a collective, your individual story becomes enmeshed with those of others. And together, a synthesis of that means that we are in collective, which means that some of my experiences are different from the experiences of others in the room. And that's okay. That's actually productive tension. And that is also how we can shape our plans for action as well. Building from the bottom up. Only we as oppressed people, as working-class racialized migrants, only we can together shape what we want the future to look like.

And the possibilities are incredible. I mean, Angela Davis has this quote where she says it is only in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism. And in a world where things can be so cruel, that kind of hope and optimism is what keeps us going. And where do we find that? We find that not only within ourselves but ourselves in relation to others like us.

BERNICE

Yeah, absolutely. And I love what you said about productive tension. I think that's so powerful.

And so can you tell me a little bit about how you went from learning, trying to gain as much information as you could, to organizing? What was that like? So that shift from "I'm interested in this, I want to make sense of my situation and what my friends are experiencing" to "I'm going to get involved." What was that like?

SAROM

I went to an event first, got connected to one of the members of No One Is Illegal, and then soon after joined the organization.

BERNICE

Can you take me back to that first event for a moment. When you were hearing people speak, was it a moment of realization for you? Like "Yes, yes, I agree, I want to be involved." What were you thinking or feeling at the moment at that first event?

SAROM

Exactly. There is a lot of power and also witnessing, like bearing witness, but also feeling seen. When you join with others like you, you're able to see that you are not alone. It seems very simple, but I think there is a real power in that, which is you begin to see that your pain, your isolation, your heartbreak are not just yours but that they are shared.

It feels really good — nerve-wracking, you know, butterflies in the stomach — but it feels really good to just join with others like you. Even if you don't have the language or even the familiarity of organizing, there is always a place to start organizing where you are and find others who want to do that with you.

BERNICE

So you felt seen at that first event you attended? Yeah.

I'm curious, Sarom, many people find themselves in a similar situation that you describe, as migrant workers experiencing precarious employment and all the challenges that come along with that, including health challenges. But they may not necessarily be fighting these injustices on a bigger scale for a number of reasons. They might be just so busy trying to survive, make enough money to send to their family back home. So I'm curious, for you, what was it about what you were experiencing and seeing that not only led you to say, "This is unfair," but then also, "This is unfair and I have to do something about it."

SAROM

It's the moment of refusal — which is to refuse to say that we will accept that this is just the way that things are, refuse to accept that this is the norm, and refuse to accept that we should live our lives like this. And when it is echoed by others like you, together we can refuse to accept that things are simply going to be the way they are. There is *everything* to change.

And it's also historically accurate, which is that our people, no matter who we define as our people, our people have liberated themselves before and can do so again. I'm from Korea, and we have fought off colonization very recently. All of us have stories of how it is that our people, our ancestors, our grandparents, our parents even, and even just today ongoing, are struggling for change and that it is possible. And that kind of refusal is rooted in a well-peopled and well-historied movement that then is our task to continue.

"It's the moment of refusal — which is to refuse to say that we will accept that this is just the way that things are, refuse to accept that this is the norm, and refuse to accept that we should live our lives like this."

SAROM RHO

Asking these questions of why is it that things are the way they are and then joining with others to figure out answers together and then come up with a solution or an action plan is just the waves of what it means to just come together and say we deserve more. And anything is possible as long as we have our heads and our fists up.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

It's this moment of refusal that continues to inspire Sarom to fight for migrant justice. But how does Sarom go from being a migrant *justice* organizer to a migrant *worker* organizer? This distinction is important, and there are two key turning points in Sarom's journey that inspired her to build migrant power through migrant work: (1) the union drive for Foodsters United and (2) Jobandeep Singh Sandhu's arrest.

Sarom was part of the incredible story we heard in Episode 1 where gig workers fought and won against misclassification. As reported by CBC News, Jobandeep Singh Sandhu was an international student who worked as a truck driver. He was arrested during a routine traffic stop because he exceeded the number of hours an international student in Canada is allowed to work each week. Sarom was involved in the fight against his deportation, but unfortunately he was

deported a few years after his arrest. Both experiences allowed Sarom to see work as an important avenue for change.

So in 2019, Sarom became a staff organizer at the migrant-led, Toronto-based organization Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. This is what Sarom does now. She builds collectives with other migrants to fight against injustice in the immigration system by mobilizing for status for all.

Next, you'll hear a story from Sarom about the kinds of current challenges that the organization supports migrant workers through.

BERNICE

You mentioned earlier on in our conversation that you have a particular focus on work when it comes to migrant justice. Can you tell me a little bit about that? Why that particular focus on work?

SAROM

So whether you are a migrant or not, we have a common enemy. We share a fight against a privatization and austerity agenda. Against increasing temporariness in our workplace, in our schools, and increasing precarity. And the only way to improve the situation then is to build directly the power of workers. We have to directly organize, build infrastructure so that we win. So that also our communities stay permanently organized. And there is a lot of power we have as workers in order to get the changes that we need.

"The only way to improve the situation then is to build directly the power of workers. We have to directly organize, build infrastructure so that we win."

SAROM RHO

The stories show themselves that we face a lot of injustice but that, as workers, we can change this and fight for equal rights, fight for dignity and fight for full and permanent immigration status. Can I quickly tell a story?

BERNICE

Absolutely.

SAROM

A group of seven women from Jamaica were working on a strawberry farm in Nova Scotia, and in the agricultural sector, it's known that strawberry picking is some of the hardest and back-breaking work because you have to be on your knees the whole day. It's also piecemeal work, which means that you only get paid for how many strawberries you are able to pick.

"When they got out of the hospital and returned to work, they came back to the farm and their bags were packed. They were being deported."

SAROM RHO

They were working for 3 months, every day, without a single day off. And in this industry, workers are allowed 1 day off every 6 days unless there is an emergency situation. In this farm, the employer said that it was an emergency, and our members were forced to work 92 straight days in the heat, on their knees. And just from sheer exhaustion and dehydration, they collapsed, and one called an ambulance. They went to the hospital where they were treated with an IV drip, and 2 days later when they got out of the hospital and returned to work, they came back to the farm and their bags were packed. They were being deported.

This is very common practice in migrant farm work as well as this happens regularly to migrant farm workers, care workers, refugees, students, where the employer has so much power. They were asked to leave and given flight tickets to go back home in the cab that they took when they returned from the hospital. And when they went to the airport, the connecting flight was in Toronto, but they together were, again, angry at the sheer injustice of it all that they called us. And they've since lost status and have become undocumented.

But what's egregious about this situation is that all of this is legal because, in the eyes of the law, this is legal. And because they are migrants, workers like us have no recourse. In fact, the people who are considered to be breaking the law are the workers because we are criminalized.

And the way that these bad labour laws and unfair immigration rules work in tandem precisely allows for the exploitation of people, allows for employers to abuse workers and deny us basic rights and protections. We have members who are health care workers as well, members who are migrant student workers who are going to colleges and universities, and this is shared experience.

So then we have to understand where does our power come from? Our power comes from the fact that we can join together with others like us, be it on our farm or in our community or in our campus. And then come together to say, "This is a shared experience and let's fight for change together." And a huge source of where we can — a very fertile ground of where we can advance those changes together is in the workplace.

BERNICE

That story that you told about the women from Jamaica was almost unbelievable, but that's something that's happening regularly, right? And can you help me understand why were they being deported? Was it because they had to go to the hospital and they couldn't work any longer? What was the reason for that?

"Speaking up as a migrant means that you risk hunger, homelessness and deportation."

SAROM RHO

SAROM

Exactly. When migrant farm workers and care workers come to Canada on a closed work permit, which means that it's tied to the employer, they're only allowed to work for that one farm or that one employer. And what that means is that it gives the employer a lot of power. So speaking up as a migrant means that you risk hunger, homelessness and deportation.

When they went to the hospital, they were treated disposably, to say, "Okay, well, you have to go back." And many of our members have been forced to go back home, have been deported and are unable to come back because they've been blacklisted. And this is far too common, and it's also legal.

We have very little recourse in the existing rules to change this. So instead of accepting that this is the case, accepting that we have no recourse, what we say is, "Well, no. We have a lot of power even outside of these institutions. Our power is in our hands joined together. And that's how we will get changes."

BERNICE

So in that story that you told, essentially the law said that you're no longer able to work, therefore you're no longer useful to us and you have to leave?

SAROM

Exactly, it's that revolving door of labour that continues exploitation, and that revolving door is facilitated by the immigration system. Many of us out there, we're seeing how temporariness and precarity is affecting us in all parts of our lives.

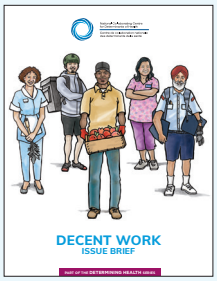
BERNICE (NARRATION)

The story that Sarom shared with us about the seven women working on a strawberry farm in Nova Scotia paints an incredibly clear and visceral picture of why immigration status, work and health are linked. The connections between precarious or temporary immigration status and public health are equally as significant.

Statistics Canada reported that temporary work permits for migrant workers rose 700% between 2000 and 2021, with most permit holders coming to Canada from the Global South. The National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health released an issue brief on decent work, which discusses the connections between health equity and migrant work. In it, authors describe how one way that employers exploit migrant and undocumented workers is by providing substandard wages and working conditions. Women, youth, and Black and other racialized migrants and undocumented workers are at a disproportionate risk of being exploited by their employers, especially through temporary work arrangements. Financial incentives, policy failures and lack of enforcement of minimum safety standards allow employers to avoid basic responsibilities. This includes avoiding the provision of mandatory employment standards such as minimum wages, adequate breaks and emergency days, and the provision of health-enhancing programs like workers' compensation for injury on the job.

Determining Health: Decent work issue brief

NCCDH. [2022].



If precarious employment and hazardous working conditions are the problem, then decent work is the solution. This review of evidence from the NCCDH describes the impacts of employment as a determinant of health and health equity in Canada, and decent work as a critical solutions space for public health action.

Next, Sarom and I talk about what keeps her going in this work and advice she would offer to others.

BERNICE

If you could take me back to that early period of organizing for migrant justice, was there ever a time or a moment when you thought, "Oh, maybe I should stop this work. It's just too difficult." Was there a moment when you felt really defeated?

SAROM

Yes, but what keeps us going is the others who we are accountable to and others who hold us up. In organization, there are many times that I am walking along and I stumble, I fall. And sometimes I can pick myself back up and continue to walk even on shaky ankles, shaky knees. But sometimes I stumble and fall and find it difficult to get back up myself. But having people around me, they can pick me up and we can walk together. And when I see somebody else who's like me also stumble, I can also support them, and together we hold ourselves up, arm in arm, to rise up together.

BERNICE

Can you tell me about a moment when you stumbled and how did you get picked back up?

SAROM

About a year ago, as the Migrant Rights Network had a day of action where we marched on Ottawa. Nearly 800 migrant and undocumented people stepped out of the shadows and onto the streets and marched on Parliament demanding full and permanent immigration status for all. This was last July, end of July, and right before the march, I had gotten news that my grandmother was soon to pass, and we had been separated by this border for decades. And so that grief and that sense of anger — anger at the sheer injustice of border violence — was overwhelming.

But knowing that we were about to make history together and as migrant and undocumented people march onto Ottawa is what kept me going. I think I literally stumbled and literally got back up because there were people to pull me back up. And also I could do the same because many of us have shared a similar experience of losing family and not being able to go back home. Many of us during COVID, where the pandemic hit our home countries harder, lost people in our families but could not go back home and could not be with them and are carrying that grief. And one way that I have been able to work through that personal grief that is also a shared grief is by joining with other people like me.

BERNICE

My parents migrated from Ghana many, many years ago. And that story that you told about your grandmother, I remember my mom, she lost her mom while she was in Canada and she wasn't able to get back to Ghana. And just that grief, you know, it made her question her decision to come here and be separated from her family. It's only in having people around you to lift you back up, right, that you're able to keep going in the midst of that.

SAROM

Exactly, people to hold us down and also pick us up so that we can also do the same. And also share the anger and talk about the injustice that sharpens our will to continue to fight for justice. Today, rights and access to basic protections and services, basic things like family unity, are given or denied on the basis of citizenship status. And that largely exploits poor and working-class racialized migrants and refugees who are predominantly from the Global South.

And Canada has a multitiered immigration system that facilitates this, where some have permanent residency and therefore rights to health care, family unity, freedom from reprisals at work while others, the vast majority, are temporary or without status. And that just continues to engender exploitation, which was exacerbated and exposed during COVID-19.

BERNICE

I can imagine that the work you're doing, it takes so much energy. Is there ever a moment where you thought to yourself, deeply that you knew that this is the work that you should be doing? So despite the challenges that you faced, despite when you stumble or any pushback you might receive, is there a moment that stands out for you in terms of making you think, "I am where I should be, I'm doing what I should be doing"?

Unheeded warnings: COVID-19 & migrant workers in Canada

Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. [2020].

Migrant workers have often suffered many abuses in silence from fear of repercussions for speaking out. This report from the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change shares stories from hundreds of migrant farm workers during the first wave of COVID-19. It also includes recommendations for change — from migrant workers — that emphasize the need for permanent resident status, decent housing and safe working conditions for all migrant workers.

SAROM

That moment is every day, it's every hour. And we also don't need to have all the answers. There is this important quote by Paulo Freire.

BERNICE

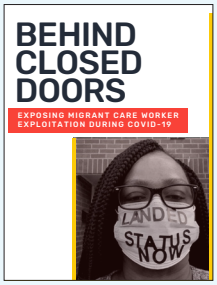
My favorite.

SAROM

Yes, there is this quote by Paulo Freire where he says, "Everything you recognize as something important. I think that even though we need to have some outline, I am sure that we make the road by walking.... You're saying that in order to start, it should be necessary to start." And this is in conversation with somebody else who answers him and says, "I've never figured out any other way to start."

In order to start, it should be necessary to start. And whether that means starting today or starting in this next hour, it means that we have to create the road by walking. And also the road is well peopled, right? Many have already walked this road with us, have given us guidelines. But, you know, when we're in what feels like uncharted territory or we don't know the answers yet, what we do is simply walk together. And that's what keeps me going.

Behind closed doors: Exposing migrant care worker exploitation during COVID-19



Caregivers' Action Centre; Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregiver Rights; Caregiver Connections, Education and Support Organization; Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. [2020].

"Without full immigration status, migrants like me don't have the power to protect ourselves even in COVID-19. It's not fair" [press release]. This report presents the results of a survey of migrant care workers in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Manitoba and New Brunswick about their experiences living and working during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report highlights the need to address the exploitation and mistreatment of migrant care workers, which were amplified during COVID-19, and ensure equitable working conditions and permanent resident status that promote health.

And that organizing can look different for everybody. So what may that mean for you? So if you're in a workplace, you can regularly start meeting with your coworkers. If you're not unionized, you could start a unionization drive. If you're already in a union, maybe go to union meetings. If you're a student, meet with fellow students at your school. If you are a member of a religious organization, sports team or any group, start taking action on the things that matter to you and then join with others like you. And if you are a migrant, the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change is a place for you to do that, to gather with others like you to take collective action.

BERNICE

And for you, I wonder, has your journey in organizing for migrant workers' rights or migrant justice more broadly been different than what you imagined when you first got involved? So thinking back to that first meeting you went to with No One Is Illegal and your journey over the last while, has that journey been different than what you imagined?

SAROM

That's a great question. I guess I didn't have a set vision of what that journey would look like. But I think what has been unexpected is just being part of and also witness to the sheer power of our people. And that kind of takes me by surprise, all the time.

Which is seeing our members face deportation — right now we have so many of our members who are fighting removal orders, fighting deportation, but are being organized, talking to each other to say, "Let's all go to the boss and say we won't work in these conditions or that we need better housing" and so forth. Like that takes me by surprise every time.

I think I have learned that there isn't a one set path, but that it's like a rolling cascade of twists and turns. But at the end, we find our power with each other, and that keeps us going. And so, again, this goes back to: we make the road by walking.

BERNICE

Yeah, I love that, that's so powerful.

For our listeners who may want to get involved and want to be a part of fighting for migrant workers' rights, how could they do so?

SAROM

Yes, join us! Join our struggle, and let's build up the power of migrants and as workers together. You can sign the petition at www.statusforall.ca. And we also have regular days of action, and so stay up to date by joining our mailing list and then come through to the next action near you.

It also looks like, in your union meetings or in your workplace meetings or even conversations with your friends and family, to talk about the realities of migrant and undocumented people in Canada and our winning strategy and calls for change, and to join in and to recognize that this is a shared struggle.

"We all want to live in a fair society, and a fair society is one where everybody has the same rights. And the only way for everyone to have equal rights is to have equal status, which is full and permanent immigration status."

SAROM RHO

BERNICE

And can you tell me a little bit about that call in terms of status for all?

SAROM

What we are saying is that all migrants should get permanent resident status.

We all want to live in a fair society, and a fair society is one where everybody has the same rights. And the only way for everyone to have equal rights is to have equal status, which is full and permanent immigration status. So everybody must have health care, that means everybody must have equal status. Everybody must have the ability to be with their families, that means everybody must have equal status. And everybody must have the ability to assert our rights at work, and that means everybody must have equal status. We deserve full and permanent immigration status for all without exclusion, without exception.

REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Joining me today for a reflective conversation is Dr. Erica Di Ruggiero, who is an associate professor and director of the Centre for Global Health at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health in Toronto.

Erica brings many hats to this conversation including her research on decent work and expertise in cross-sectoral action to advance health equity. Erica is also a dedicated mentor, and she's actually on my PhD committee, where she has been a great support.

In Episode 1, we introduced the concept of decent work. Today, we talk about a global approach to decent work and learn key actions that public health professionals, researchers and policy-makers can take in their practice.

BERNICE

Erica, how did you first become involved in exploring decent work? What has that journey been like for you?

ERICA DI RUGGIERO

I would say, and there are many examples of this, but just in terms of a key influential event: Back in 2012, so that's over 10 years ago now, there was a very, very tragic fire in Dhaka in Bangladesh in the fashion factory in one of the outskirt regions. I'm sure you've heard about it. It led to, I think, over a hundred deaths and over 200 people being injured. It was a really deadly fire — one of the most deadliest fires in that country's history — and it did catalyze some reforms to workers' rights and safety laws. However, there were a number of things about that event that I became incredibly interested in.

First of all, workers in that situation were working under very unsafe and inhumane conditions for a very long time. Their work schedules were controlled. They couldn't even leave their stations. And that's why they became trapped, in part, and management was telling them to ignore the fire alarm, and many people couldn't escape.

And of course they were working for very, very little money to produce very cheap products for the likes of big global retailers like Walmart, who of course, when the fire occurred, took no responsibility and claimed no awareness that garments were being made in that factory for their distribution. And then there were a number of other factories of course that then had fires as well, but it was sort of a recurring pattern of controlled work environments, no agency, no dignified work. Financial security was non-existent.

And this really interesting connection between what is happening to people over there, quote-unquote, is inextricably linked to what happens here because many of the products that they were making were for distribution in countries like ours. And of course this has been enabled by globalization. So that event, but a number of them that followed, really was quite pivotal in me trying to understand, well, we're really failing through policy here. And so I would say those are a few of the things that really motivated me to go back and do a PhD and really focused on decent work.

BERNICE

In what ways would you argue that decent work is in fact a public health issue that we need to pay attention to in Canada?

ERICA

So of course work intersects with determinants like income, with gender and, as Sarom indicated, also rights that many people take for granted but are not easily accessed by workers such as right to citizenship. And many of these things — and this links back to my interest in policy — by failing to act on these determinants and how they intersect for the public's health, it signals a real failure to deliver on these social goods.

BERNICE

You apply a global lens to the work that you do with respect to decent work. Can you talk a little bit about the intersections between those global policy frameworks and what we're seeing at more local levels in the Canadian context? Why is it important to apply a global lens in understanding the issues of decent work?

ERICA

I think it's really, really important because we've come to finally accept that infectious diseases know no boundaries. They transcend boundaries, and what I mean by that, country boundaries or borders. But labour is the same, right? There is a flow of labour within regions of the world — look at what's happening in South America right now with crises in different countries, and you have this migration to neighbouring countries and the kind of pressure that's putting on. The crisis in the Ukraine and some of the neighbouring countries taking in refugees from that country because of the ongoing war there. Many examples in sub-Saharan Africa around war-ridden areas or floods or drought that are causing outward migration. There are so many examples, and many people also make their way to Canada eventually, in some cases, or other parts of the U.S. or Europe or wherever.

And so you can't think of labour as, "Oh, it only happens within my jurisdiction." I think it's a very naive thing. To me, that's partly because globalization has influenced the flow of labour markets globally. And back to my example about the fire in Bangladesh, that was a really good example of corporations that are benefiting on the backs of poor workers whose human rights are being violated because of the working conditions under which they were labouring to produce cheap clothing that in some cases was provided at a cheap cost to the consumer because that's what drives the bottom line. Yet the markup value for corporations that reside elsewhere from those countries and yet benefit off the backs of poor workers in countries where legislation is not sufficiently well developed and not protective of those workers.

And we're not perfect here either. We've got lots of problems as well, but in other countries, it's not necessarily any better, yet we're still responsible or should be accountable. So those are examples of how we have to think about these issues through a global lens.

BERNICE

Something that Sarom discussed was the sense of powerlessness that migrant workers in particular experience as it relates to their work. So I'm curious, how can public health support workers, including migrant workers, to gain power and influence as it relates to their employment and working conditions?

ERICA

I know we're probably a bit tired about talking about COVID, but let's just reflect on that context just as an example. I think we have seen really good examples of public health working with other sectors to advocate for sick leave. One of the best examples was when public health authorities on the one hand were asking people to self-isolate, but many workers who were in very precarious jobs did not have the power to self-isolate because they didn't actually have the luxury of not going into work. So it was pretty rich for us as public health officials on the one hand to ask for that when workplaces or the many places they were working that were positions that had no social and health benefits.

So I think this is an example where public health did lend its voice very deliberately to strongly advocate for changes to sick leave. We did move the needle a little bit on that.

One of the things to watch is whether we're going to see some positive social innovations that occurred at least in the policy space, will they be sustained? The pandemic brought to light again, it's not a new issue, this idea of basic income or guaranteed income. We saw some experimentation with mechanisms to offset lost income and loss of jobs because of the pandemic. But again, what are we doing in the policy space?

So this is something else public health really needs to be at the table for, to argue for the public health benefits of having stable and financially and decent work. Because we know there's a strong literature on this, that the relationship between work and health — many different health outcomes, physical health and mental health are strongly linked to strong working conditions as I've described before.

"Public health really needs to be at the table… to argue for the public health benefits of having stable and financially [secure] and decent work."

ERICA DI RUGGIERO

BERNICE

You wear many different hats: policy, teaching, research, etc. And so I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit about the specific roles public health can play as it relates to decent work?

ERICA

Maybe I'll start with teaching. Obviously given my strong interest in this topic, I take many opportunities to talk about it in my classes, and not just reflecting on my own research but the work of others. Because I do think, given my interests in agenda setting, which is one of the areas of policy that I've spent a fair bit of time thinking about, we need to think about why certain things come on the agenda and fall off the agenda and then come back on. One of the ways in which to raise attention to these issues is by bringing them up in our classrooms as teachers, educators, so that we can inspire our students to also take up some of these things.

I would say that through work in community — now I don't work as much at the local level — but certainly colleagues in public health have very strong connections to community-based organizations. And this is a really good example of where we have to be very mindful that we're a bit later to the party compared to many other groups, and I think Sarom's amazing account of her journey suggests that the extensive community organizing that has gone on for many, many years before public health has come to the table, we need to lend our voice. We need to also get out of the way and amplify the voices of others.

BERNICE

How does public health get out of the way, so to speak, but also does not deflect responsibility in terms of the role it should play in supporting decent work?

ERICA

I was trying to be a bit provocative because I think sometimes sectors swoop in and decide, "Okay, I'm the point person on this," yet inadvertently, not necessarily deliberately, eclipse the very voices that really need to be amplified — the voices of marginalized workers, for example.

One of the ways public health can do that is by working very closely in intersectoral coalitions with community, for community. Identify and cocreate priority areas. One of the things we can bring to the table also are our skills in monitoring and evaluation, and to really bring to light what is not being measured.

"One of the ways public health can do that is by working very closely in intersectoral coalitions with community, for community. Identify and cocreate priority areas."

ERICA DI RUGGIERO

An example that is of global relevance, and certainly there are efforts to change this, but if you look at how we tend to measure whether a society is actually doing well overall in terms of providing access to jobs, we look at the unemployment rate. And while no measure is perfect, I think it's a really good example of something that is hiding a lot of things that are not measured. Because many of the configurations of work, be it informal gig, precarious, undocumented work, actually does not fall into the category of this employer-employee traditional arrangement. And so we're not picking up a lot of hidden work through statistics like that. And while it tells a story, it really decontextualizes many other stories.

So I think meaningful, context-sensitive monitoring and evaluation, which also starts with better indicators that don't just quantify a problem but also measure inequitable access to working conditions through policies and programs. And there are many, many ways to do that, but that's another way that public health working of course in interdisciplinary teams, because this really cuts across many sectors outside of health, is another way to do that.

BERNICE

And so you're saying it's important that public health first acknowledges that there's been a long history of this work and community organizing around this work, and then secondly, it needs to make sure that it's partnering in authentic, real ways to move the agenda.

ERICA

Yes, absolutely.

BERNICE

In speaking to public health folks, some of the challenges they face in addressing various social determinants of health, including decent work, is that (a) they don't see how it's connected to the immediate work that they're doing in terms of their current role, and (b) they're also worried about potential consequences that may come from them speaking up or speaking out.

And so I'm curious for you, what advice do you have for both of those things, but primarily for the second one in terms of the risks that public health professionals might perceive for their role if they were to be more vocal about some of these issues that are happening?

ERICA

The advice I would give is that, if there's a feeling, there's a threat to your own security — and that level of threat is a personal one in terms of people's ability to tolerate it because some will still do it in spite of that, so I don't want to suggest that all people won't jump at the opportunity — but to work in coalition. Because sometimes if a public health staff person feels like they can't on their own do this, then work in coalitions with community groups who have a mandate to be advocates for improving workers' rights, for example. And we've got lots of examples of that, that Sarom spoke about, many, many examples of community organizing.

> *"If a public health staff person feels like they can't on their own do this, then work in coalitions with community groups who have a mandate to be advocates for improving workers' rights."*
>
> **ERICA DI RUGGIERO**

And so that's another way to work in collaboration with other groups, and also through other non-governmental organizations and through public health associations as well. I think there are really, really important opportunities.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Thanks to Sarom and Erica for sharing their experiences and insights about migrant work, status for all and decent work.

Sarom spoke to us about how migrant workers are uniting against an immigration system that negatively impacts migrants' health and well-being. And while we explored the worrying increase of temporariness within the immigration system, we also learned that there is hope in collectives and through the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change.

We learned from Sarom that a fair society must mean that all peoples living on these lands must have full and permanent immigration status, and that public health has an important role to play by lending our data, our voice, and working together with migrant workers. You can learn more about and support Sarom's work by visiting migrantworkersalliance.org.

With Erica, we discussed the importance of intersectoral action and having a global approach in our public health practice, especially as it comes to labour and health equity. Erica also gave us some great advice about our role as public health professionals: good data is critical to advancing decent work, and advocating through collectives such as public health associations.

What's our takeaway? Migrant workers are owed and deserve better. Full and permanent immigration status is an important determinant of health and an important part of decent work.

REBECCA

Thanks for listening to Mind the Disruption, a podcast by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Visit our website nccdh.ca to learn more about the podcast and our work.

This episode has been produced by Carolina Jimenez, Bernice Yanful and me, Rebecca Cheff, with technical production and original music by Chris Perry. If you enjoyed this episode, tell a friend and subscribe. We have more stories on the way of people challenging the status quo to build a healthier, more just world.

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