

# Forced-Voluntary Return

## An Intersectional Approach to Exploring “Voluntary” Return in Toronto, Canada

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■ **ABSTRACT:** During the near decade of Conservative rule in Canada from 2006 to 2015, anti-refugee and anti-migrant discourse was continuously circulated by government officials. Social, economic, and physical restrictions were implemented based on the dichotomy of “deserving” versus “undeserving” migrants, and borders were created within communities. This article takes an intersectional approach to explore the reasons that some migrants chose to leave Canada “voluntarily” during that time, and the factors that forced them to do so. I offer the concept of forced-voluntary return to capture some of the tensions and messiness within migrant experiences that are neither completely voluntary nor forced. These tensions affirm the emerging calls in research to conceptualize migration on a spectrum from forced to voluntary, and contribute to understandings of migration management, the production of deportability, and the “voluntary” mobility of migrants by highlighting some of the ways in which intersecting identities impact migrants’ decisions about return.

■ **KEYWORDS:** borders, Canadian immigration policy, deportation, intersectionality, migration management, migrants, refugees, return migration

Conceptualizations of return migration frequently position it as binary—either voluntary or forced (through deportation)—which offers a narrow picture of migrants’ motivations, agency, and actions. However, scholars have increasingly argued that migration is better understood on a spectrum from forced to voluntary (Erdal and Oeppen 2018). In this article, I take up this call to explore the factors that influence migrants’ decisions on the spectrum of voluntary to forced migration, focusing specifically on return migration. I offer the concept of forced-voluntary return to capture some of the tensions within migrants’ experiences of return that are neither completely voluntary nor forced. Within this concept, I aim to draw attention to the diversity of experiences that prompt decisions to leave, highlighting the hostile environments that are created through discourse and policy and that contribute to shaping migrants’ experiences. This research was initially conducted during the near-decade of Conservative rule in Canada from 2006 to 2015, when anti-refugee and anti-migrant policy and discourse were actively being circulated. My research centered the lived experiences of migrants and service providers who worked in the migrant-serving sector, so as to prioritize the perspectives of participants directly affected. For the migrants who are the focus of this article, feelings of exclusion resulted in a loss of hope for a future in Canada, underpinning their forced-voluntary return.



In this article, I employ an intersectional analysis to explore how gender, as it intersects with other identities and social relations, influences migrants' feelings of loss of hope and their experiences of forced-voluntary return. Intersectionality provides a nuanced approach to understand the ways that people's interconnected identities co-constitute their experiences, and allows for a disruption of the dominant power relations, oppressions, and inequalities created based on difference (Crenshaw 1989; McCall 2005). Specifically, this research highlights intersections of gender, race, class, and ability as factors contributing to forced-voluntary return. Moreover, I use the term "migrant" to refer to those with precarious immigration status, drawing on literature that argues against binary categorizations (undocumented/ documented, refugee/economic migrant) to highlight how statuses are often temporary or shifting and are dependent on third parties, including employers, family members, or civil servant decision-makers who grant or revoke status (Goldring et al. 2009). While migrants may be obliged to try to fit their experiences into narrow categories for legal purposes, to try to gain permanent immigration status, they frequently move between categories, including being without status, as categories are often ill-suited to match people's actual experiences (Boehm 2011; Goldring and Landolt 2013).

### **State Structures, Bordering, and Deportability**

Conceptualizations and operations of the modern state are particularly important to consider in relation to migration management broadly and forced-voluntary return in particular. They offer understandings of political actors' decisions and discourses, the ways that these are interpreted and understood by the population, and their material manifestations for migrants. State structures are (re)produced and enacted by policy-makers, civil servants, and other gatekeepers who are allocated the authority to construct and uphold borders and boundaries in different ways (Moffette 2014; Mountz 2010; Spire 2008; Walia 2013). Alison Mountz (2010) argues that "the state' does not exist outside the people who comprise it, their everyday work and embeddedness in social relations" (ibid.: xxiv). The state, as well as its governance and bordering powers, are therefore embodied, beginning with bureaucracy and extending to the "architecture of everyday life" (ibid.: xxxii). Therefore, the impacts of this construct can be analyzed through the context-specific ways in which it is operationalized on a daily basis.

One area of impact is in the day-to-day bordering experienced by migrants. Nicholas De Genova (2002) argues that the performance of border enforcement is not solely relegated to demarcated border spaces; instead, this policing of bodies by different actors takes place in multiple sites at varying moments. This bordering is experienced very differently based on people's identities, experiences, immigration status, and social locations, as even citizens who share racial, cultural, or linguistic characteristics with those expected of migrants may experience bordering (Romero 2006). The border therefore reconstitutes itself around certain bodies marked as excluded, thus forcing some to experience the border through barriers and exclusions in every aspect of their lives (Bhuyan 2012; Villegas 2014; Wright 2003). This everyday bordering heightens the perceived risk of deportability, or "the possibility of deportation," the power of which lies in the fact that some are deported while others are able to remain, exploitable and expendable (De Genova 2002: 439). Therefore, acts of bordering and experiences of deportability act as powerful technologies of exclusion, both within states and across their boundaries; these are concepts that will be explored further in this article as they contribute to forced-voluntary return.

## The Hostile Environment and Bordering Practices in the Canadian Context

Canada has a long-held international reputation as a welcoming and humanitarian state. Well-rehearsed settler-colonial narratives depict subjects who are constructed through national stories of immigration and settlement. Many anticolonial, feminist, and critical race theorists have critiqued these narratives, which, while inclusive of certain acts of “generosity” toward particular migrant populations, intentionally erase the experiences of many migrants and Indigenous populations, a process that normalizes a national “whiteness” and necessarily constructs bodies of color as outsiders (Arat-Koc 2005; Thobani 2007; Walia 2010). Through the retelling of these exclusionary narratives, combined with the increased public vilification of migrants and refugees, Conservative Canadian policy-makers established the context that enabled increased bordering and a drastic overhaul of immigration policies and procedures between 2008 and 2015 (Abji 2020; Alboim and Cohl 2012). These important changes to policies and procedures hierarchized refugee determination through a Designated Country of Origin or “safe country” list, restricted family sponsorship programs, and limited other humanitarian programs, all of which actively divided migrants into categories. The dichotomies dividing the “deserving or undeserving” migrant and the “genuine or bogus” refugee were increasingly ontologized and included in public discourse in Canada, and various measures were taken to create new borders to repressively manage these distinctions at different levels. A “hierarchy of rights” based on desirability (Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas 2014) was created, wherein social and economic rights, ranging from healthcare and education to work and social assistance, were restricted for those marked as “undesirable.” These significant new measures necessarily impacted migrants in gendered, racialized, ableist, and classed ways.

Civil servants, service providers, and other gatekeepers were relied upon to oversee these expanded forms of migration management and bordering, which were promoted through state discourse, policy directives, and funding restrictions. These agents then used their discretion to reinforce ideologies of migrants as either deserving of inclusion or as potential threats to the community (Bhuyan 2012; Park and Bhuyan 2012; Villegas 2013). At the same time, individuals and organizations that resisted in order to support migrants marked as “undeserving” were increasingly criminalized (Abji 2020). As a result, the border surrounded certain migrant bodies, augmenting the exclusions experienced in many different ways.

### Methods

This article draws on the perspectives of migrants and service providers to center the voices of those with lived experiences of forced-voluntary return. Interviews were conducted in Toronto between March 2015 and August 2016, with the exceptions of one interview done over Skype and another over email. In all, there were seven migrant participants who had strongly considered or engaged in forced-voluntary return, and 11 service providers, including settlement workers, lawyers, a doctor, and a representative of an international organization, all of whom had direct experience of working with migrants who experienced forced-voluntary return. Voluntary, informed consent was sought before every interview, which provided the opportunity to discuss the research in detail before decisions were made about whether or not to participate. Participants were also invited to choose their own pseudonyms; thus, the names used in this research were chosen by the participants themselves. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2017). The

seven migrant participants shared a great deal about both their aspirations and frustrations, revealing the ways that intersecting identities and social relations impacted people's experiences of belonging, exclusion, and return migration. The service providers shared a diversity of experiences based on the different populations they served, as well as their areas of expertise. They also contributed first-hand experiences and understandings of the discourse and policy changes being circulated and implemented. Their everyday struggles with migration management, and the frustration and desperation these struggles created, became undeniably clear during the interviews.

My own social location as a service provider and advocate within the migrant-serving community in Toronto, Canada also impacted the conceptualization and implementation of the research. Through this community work, I gained knowledge about the immigration system, as well as its overarching limitations, as I supported people through their processes and their many ups and downs. To draw a careful distinction between my research and community work, before each interview I provided an explanation to all migrant participants that any ongoing or future assistance or support would not be contingent in any way on their participation in my research, nor would participation impact their immigration status in any way.

Therefore, I am neither an insider to the migrant experience highlighted in this study nor a "neutral" distanced outsider; rather, I am co-constituted by and through my relationships (Torre and Ayala 2009). Following feminist epistemologies that reject "objective" truths and "neutral research," and actively contradict the notion that observers can be completely separate from their research, I approached this research with continuous reflexivity and a critical understanding of the need for transparency regarding the researcher's choices, power relations, and potential biases in order to avoid speaking for or over the people who are experts in their own experiences (Das Gupta 2003; Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

## **Understandings of Return Migration**

Voluntary return is described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as stemming from a "freely described" wish to return, based on "full knowledge of the facts" and occurring in "conditions of safety and dignity" (UNHCR 1996). Therefore, individual agency to make an informed decision is prioritized, while at the same time, conditions in the country of return are considered crucial for a "voluntary return" to occur appropriately. Conversely, Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi (2013: 222) describe deportation, or nonvoluntary return, as "the physical removal of someone against their will from the territory of one state to that of another." While these precisely developed and widely understood definitions offer points of reference at the two ends of the spectrum, there are many experiences of return that lie between them. Scholars have increasingly challenged the inherent limitations of a voluntary/involuntary dichotomy (see Blitz et al. 2005; Cassarino 2004; Keith and Shawaf 2018; Turnbull 2019; Webber 2011), and the addition of the spectrum of return holds many possibilities for understanding migrants' experiences.

Within the Canadian context, deportation is a significant impediment to the rights of migrants to make decisions freely; however, few are physically forced onto a plane when deported. Most migrants are given appointments for deportation, asked to sign removal documents, and told to independently present themselves at the airport. Therefore, while all removals are considered "voluntary" by state officials, other tactics are used to push people to "agree" to leave. As Sathya, an immigration lawyer interviewed, explained:

I mean big quotes around voluntary, right? Because, like, it's all coerced and it's all forced. But there is no such thing as a "forced removal" [in Canada], because you have to sign for certain documents and you have to show up at the airport, you have to get on the plane, you have to do all those things.

The tactics used by immigration officials to push people out were described in different ways by several participants, and included coercion, manipulation, exclusion, threats, and detention. These tactics, while not usually physically forceful (with the exception of incarceration in immigration detention), are significant to understanding certain aspects of return on the spectrum between forced and voluntary.<sup>1</sup>

### Exclusion as an Intersectional Practice

In exploring the factors that influenced and shaped migrants' decisions on the spectrum of return, the impacts of the exclusions experienced were most apparent from the interviews. The anti-migrant and anti-refugee discourse and policies led to everyday acts of discrimination, which produced borders around the propagated distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" migrant, marking certain bodies as potentially dishonest and suspect. Overarching feelings of being mistrusted were described by migrants and service providers, as the distrust of migrants was increasingly woven into immigration processes and procedures by policy-makers and bureaucrats. As a result, migrants' experiences were frequently challenged, disbelieved, and negated by officials. Resources were allocated by government ministries to actively investigate accusations of fraudulent behavior and misrepresentation by migrants, which emboldened state officials and civil servants to proceed from a standpoint of doubt and suspicion (Atak et al. 2018: 27). As Alexis Spire (2008) argues, the tone and directives that come from politicians often become "common sense" to officials, who show "solidarity" with the messages.

The discourse and social constructs that circulated as a result of this pervasive distrust leached beyond the immigration ministry's purview into the broader forms of bordering within social services, workplaces, and the community. As Sathya described, "I think people are also very exhausted and can't believe how much more cruel Canada is than it seems to be, because of how criminalized migrants really are . . ."

While this violent and criminalizing distrust was described as an overarching systemic attitude, it manifested differently based on migrants' intersecting identities. Constructs related to gender, racialization, class, and ability often influenced procedural approaches.

### Gendered Experiences

Mistrust manifested in gendered ways, as the gendered expectations of an "appropriate" victim were more frequently imposed on female migrants, and they had to prove that they were worthy of that categorization. As Mariposa, a service provider, explained:

The woman has to prove everything. You need to prove that you were raped, you need to prove that you were in domestic violence . . . . And then, talking about gender, that's very unbalanced, no? And it's against, it really shows you how this is, how the patriarchal system is getting more and more on top of the women.

While the representation of migrant women has at times deliberately been shifted from “crisis-producing” threats to “innocent” victims in need of state-sanctioned saving (Sharma 2005), certain women have been perceived as more suitable victims, and thus more deserving of rescue and protection. This perspective of suitable victims necessarily relies on intersecting identities and positions women within specific tropes, viewing them as “victims” of their cultures and thereby erasing their agency and resistance (Musarrat Akram 2000; Schrover et al. 2008). Through these constructs the “disempowered female victim” can be saved from her reality, as “bad patriarchies” are cast as necessarily happening in distant places, disavowing violent patriarchy in the Global North (Mulinari 2007; Razack 1998). The heightened suspicion of migrant women during this time relied on these tropes, while at the same time increasing the expectations for women to prove their “victimhood” and thereby their position as “desirable” migrants. This distrust aimed at migrant women was elaborated on by Asha, an immigration lawyer: “there’s no compassion in [immigration officers’] voices . . . the amount of offensive questions I’ve seen being asked of women clients is really, like, it’s harsh.” She went on to speculate that “there is something going on that a lot more women are being investigated.” This gendered criminalization of migrant women has been tied to changes to immigration policy and practice. As distrust and accusations of misrepresentation grew over the near decade of Conservative rule, women frequently became the targets, particularly racialized women.

Asha went on to describe how the increased marginalization caused by the distrust of her clients further criminalized them; they were continuously assumed to be attempting to defraud the system in different ways and had to prove that they were not. Asha explained that many of her racialized female clients felt the increased risk both politically and socially, and tended to isolate themselves as a means of protection:

Another thing is, about the experience of racism, is that a lot of them try to isolate themselves from the mainstream society anyways, right? . . . their life will be really confined to one bus which goes from this one place where they live to this one other place they reach and that’s it. They contain their lives to very secluded and, which they also consider safe, safer zones.

This gendered isolation echoes the experience that women described in their communities, as they withdrew from public spaces out of different, yet interrelated, fears. Isolation then also impacted income and educational possibilities, as well as access to advocacy and support. For Suny, an undocumented migrant interviewed who was a young mother with little familial or community support, this isolation meant that she could not participate in many of the activities that her peers were taking part in. Moreover, her religious community in Canada became a place fraught with discomfort and risk. As she explained:

Here, like, I’m not comfortable going to church, not even making someone pray [for] my daughter, you know, pray for me. So, I’m not comfortable for that. So, that’s why there’s a lot of stuff I know, like, I, before I do it I always think, like, you know, is someone going to do me something?

Suny identified that church had been an important space for her before coming to Canada, but that since arriving in Toronto she had had unpleasant experiences in church related to her status and the ways people talked about it. Suny felt the borders within her church, where she otherwise would have sought support. She went on to further clarify that in her country, a small Caribbean island, she would have had the opportunity to get to know people quite quickly, as the geographical community was quite small; in Toronto, since the city is so large, it takes much longer to know and trust people.

Katherine, an undocumented migrant interviewed, explained that while she had made friends in Canada, she felt that people from her ethnic community were not helpful to her. While her male partner, Jonh, also felt uncertain about their ethnic community, he acknowledged that he had been able to make some friends and build more of a network than Katherine. The two of them offered a gendered analysis of their community connections, as he shared that he felt it was easier for men to bond since they could talk about sports (football) or cars and avoid discussing anything too risky. Katherine added that the way she experienced women talking about other people's immigration status made her even more nervous about interacting with them. They also agreed that Jonh had more friends because of his ongoing employment in construction, where he came into contact with other English-speaking people and had the chance to talk to them during breaks. Katherine's limited employment in sectors such as cleaning and childcare did not offer her the opportunity to socialize with many coworkers and left her more isolated. These particular gendered employment divisions are common among nonstatus populations in Toronto (Ellis and Stam 2018). The couple further shared how this limited their movements and interactions, and how they weighed their decisions carefully. At the same time, Jonh explained how they came to terms with the risk:

No, it's like, we are careful. She is more careful . . . You want me to go, I go with you to immigration. If immigration catch me in the street, or all these things, I don't be scared, because I [won't live] scared, I live normal.

Yet Katherine was less confident, as she explained: "I do the things too because I go with him, but in my thinking, it's going to happen [getting caught]. But I go, but I think." The concern Katherine expressed over their deportability was an indication of her isolation, as she may not have been willing to take risks without Jonh. For both Katherine and Suny, the circumstances produced by gendered expectations related to the formal and informal care work in which they engaged left them fairly isolated and unable to make the community connections they desired.

## Racism and Bordering

Like Asha, Suny went on to describe the racist experiences she faced, which contributed to her isolation and impacted her struggle with the idea of return. As Suny shared, the oppression that she faced in Canada was continuously accented with racism:

Honestly, I feel being in Canada, a lot of people they, they judge you by your color. Like even at the work that I have, they, I experience it . . . they expect that you know nothing so they don't, they don't um, show you [how to do] anything [new]. They expect you to be the one that's ignorant and [that] . . . made me feel like . . . I would still be treated that way, in any job.

For Suny, this ongoing anti-Black racist discrimination (as it intersected with class, education, and likely gender) became unbearable. She went on to explain that the exclusion she endured was quietly pushing her out: "It actually made me feel like I didn't even want to stay here. . . . They made me feel like it's not even about your status, there's so much more to it." Suny importantly pointed out that she did not believe the "othering" was related to her immigration status, as her coworkers were not necessarily aware of her particular situation. While a permanent status may have allowed her increased mobility in the job market to leave that particular situation, it would not have remedied the anti-Black racist violence that she encountered in different ways.

Maria, who had recently received permanent residence, described the racism that she experienced in Canada. She shared stories of racist encounters with other students in her English school, from the moms at her job as a babysitter, and in her other attempts to “blend in.” She described the racism as fairly subtle, but undeniable, as she explained that “I feel like some of them . . . they tell you in a very explicit way that you belong there and they belong here.” She shared that the people she had interactions with made her feel like she would never be completely accepted in Canada as a result, as the border constantly surrounded her. She described this as a high price to pay for being in Canada, a price that she felt she was still partially paying emotionally, despite gaining a more secure immigration status. While scholars have shown how racism in Canada can be perceived as subtle, and even “polite and democratic,” it relies on the systemic normalization of whiteness (Das Gupta 1999), which necessarily “others” people of color. Citizenship therefore becomes “embodied in skin colour” (Romero 2006: 449), as racism casts doubt on immigration status and bounds belonging more generally, even when secure status is obtained.

### **Health and Ableist Exclusions**

Another area of concern for many of the participants in my study, both service providers and migrants themselves, was access to suitable healthcare for migrants, creating ableist hierarchies. The lack of clarity over government cuts to healthcare access for certain refugees and other migrants led to widespread confusion and the denial of services, even to those migrants who had valid government-provided coverage (Barnes 2013). As Kate, a service provider, explained, “[it] has been really, really difficult to know exactly who’s covered for what and when. And not even us, it’s hard for the [medical] service providers to stay on top of.” This confusion made it difficult for migrants to access medical services and support, creating borders where healthcare providers acted as gatekeepers to services, thereby promoting ableist constructions of “desirable” migrants as people who did not require medical care. The exclusion of “undesirable migrants” not only affected the targeted population, but also impacted others who, for other reasons, were categorized as “desirable” refugees or migrants.

Dr. Agarwal, a physician interviewed, highlighted the fear that these changes caused for migrants: “There were a few patients that have asked me whether it was a problem that they were seeking healthcare and whether the government would know, and whether it would impact their claim.” This fear demonstrates the ways in which discourse was understood and internalized by migrants to mean that if they sought services, they would be deemed “undesirable.”

Two of the migrants I spoke to tied their “voluntary” return directly to the cut in health services. Kelly, a refugee claimant who had a chronic condition, had had both positive and negative experiences with the healthcare system in Canada. She described advocates having to fight for her to get the medication that she needed, and people being rude and creating borders in clinics and hospitals; but she also talked about kind and generous doctors. Her experiences highlight the complicated and messy realities of the informal bordering and the ways in which it was resisted. Kelly then explained that after her initial refugee claim was denied, her health insurance was terminated, as access to healthcare was not extended to the appeal process. Around the same time, she learned that she required a new treatment that would not be covered. Kelly explained: “I wasn’t receiving any medication for the fungus and this was something that was indicated that was a big deal, a big problem. A serious problem. . . . And then that was the deciding factor to go.” Kelly felt the negative impacts of the health cuts directly and this exclusion impacted her well-being, as it marked her as unworthy of lifesaving services.



Manuel, a refugee claimant, also experienced the impacts of the cuts, as he also suffered from a persistent health condition. He explained that after his health insurance expired because of the refusal of his refugee claim, he had to get medical exams done, but as he said: “I couldn’t pay for them because they couldn’t charge them to the [health insurance] document and I didn’t have any money either.” Despite a legal review of the asylum decision, Manuel emphasized that he had to go. He said he had to leave because

[I] can’t get medicine, which is very important for me. In that moment they told me “you can stay,” but because I have no benefits, I can’t, because I am on medicine for the rest of my life and I don’t have money to buy it.

Even though he was still very afraid for his safety in returning to his country, he felt that he had to go back for the medicine. Manuel felt that his only option was to go back to Central America and live in hiding because it was the only way he could guarantee consistent access to healthcare. As a result of the healthcare cuts, migrants felt criminalized and stigmatized based on their physical abilities and needs, and the associated exclusion led to a forced-voluntary return for some.

## Migrant Descriptions of Forced-Voluntary Return

When asked specifically about their return, the migrants I spoke to highlighted the tensions inherent within the spectrum of forced to voluntary departure. While some participants spoke of the fear that they felt in their forced-voluntary return, people also talked about their sadness and upheaval, while at the same time describing their excitement to see family, friends, and familiar places, and taste the food of their home countries again. The range of feelings and perspectives clearly showed that return migration meant different things to different people at different times. Some described leaving before they lost status, as a kind of systemic ultimatum, while others talked about turning themselves in, or making their lack of status visible in different ways.

I would avoid to be deported right? . . . I don’t want to go back, but I have no choice . . . I could stay, you know “illegally,” but I don’t, I know that it will be so hard, right? To get job or you know, I also can’t get outside of the country, so I don’t want to do that. For me the option is to go home. (Esse, international student)

Esse described criminalizing processes in her discussion of forced-voluntary return through the loss of status, as she was afraid of the hardship involved. She went on to highlight the tensions between voluntary and forced migration in her own plans to return: “It’s hoping to come back, so try not to have a bad record or something, you know?” Esse was clear that she was not willing to do anything in Canada that might hinder her future plans, so even though she had no desire to leave, she would do so strategically to ensure that she would be able to return.

Asha, an immigration lawyer, described similar scenarios, highlighting the agency that she saw in some of her clients in light of their imminent departure:

Everyone . . . in their family [is in Canada] and they know that they will advocate for them to come back under some other scheme. So it’s always those people who are ready to go . . . Or they are getting deported to a third country and not getting deported to the country where they have a lot of issues.

In these situations, migrants are able to mitigate the involuntariness of deportation through the legal support and advocacy of others to address their own needs and desires. While systemic

barriers were still clearly pushing them out, the idea of circular or secondary migration allowed migrants to use their agency in departure plans.

Kelly, the refugee claimant leaving for health reasons, also spoke of secondary migration, and was doing whatever she could to make arrangements to move on after she had left Canada. While she felt that she could not stay in Canada any longer, she was not prepared to remain in her country of origin. For Kelly, the desire for secondary migration was clear: “I want to see if I can get my [European] citizenship. If not, then I don’t know. Perhaps living in another country in South America and if I do, I won’t need anything.” She had made a refugee claim in Canada, which had been denied, yet in the interview, she spoke of the fear that she still felt about returning. Kelly was pushed to leave Canada, as her immediate need for medical attention outweighed her fear of returning to her country.

While sometimes there were strategic reasons behind the decision to return, for many it was also the result of an overpowering loss of hope. Maria, a migrant from Latin America, spoke directly to the feeling of exclusion that she experienced in Canada in different ways, and the many times it made her lose hope. She shared the challenges she faced, including a lack of employment, poverty, racism, and discrimination. Her interactions with law enforcement and immigration officials had left her feeling isolated and criminalized, despite having been the victim of a serious crime. As a result, she described different moments of “waiting to be deported.” Despite these experiences, Maria also explained the difficulties that she saw in going back because of the expectations of others. She discussed the judgmental disappointment others would express to her, since, as the first woman in her family to have migrated, she believed that she would be letting family and friends down because she had not met certain expectations. She also felt that they would judge her for not having earned enough money or collected enough material goods. She described the hardship that she would face in finding employment and establishing herself in her country of origin. The tension between the imagined hardship of going back and the lived hardship of staying led her to describe the idea of “voluntary return as a way to stay safe and to feel safe.” Maria explained that for her, keeping the idea in mind that she could reject a life in Canada gave her the strength to keep going.

Suny, the young undocumented mother from the Caribbean, described departure in similar terms but with differing consequences. To her, voluntary return was also tied to intense frustration and concerns over mental health, but it did not give her strength. Instead, it signified an ending:

I feel like [it’s] almost like suicide . . . they’re just doing it because they’ve had enough. So, I feel like it’s like suicidal, like you’re just ending all your dreams, all your hopes, like suicide. In suicide you’re just taking yourself, taking your life. Self-deportation, I feel like you’re just ending everything you had hoped for, like for no reasons. . . . I just feel like it’s similar to it, because either you lose your mind or you go back home and start all over, or you could stay here and you’d go crazy.

The tension that she described between losing your dreams and “losing your mind” speaks powerfully to the impact of life with precarious immigration status. For Suny, the need to make the difficulty and pain end coincided with an extremely difficult life choice, one in which the person would let go of dearly held ideas about a future, abandoning all those hopes and dreams. The comparison to suicide is both painful and enlightening. For others, the pain, frustration, or fear became too much, and the only remedy was to leave. This defeated position was also described by frontline workers when reflecting on some of their clients. As Mariposa, a settlement worker with 25 years of experience, explained:

I saw it [for the first time] last year, clients that . . . are coming to say, “you know what, I’m leaving.” . . . And they feel defeated by Canada, by the system. That was the first time that I was seeing that, it was not happening before.

Mariposa linked the exacerbation her clients felt to the recent changes in immigration law and policy that increasingly excluded them. The continual hardships and losses, as described by the migrant participants, caused migrants to feel that they were being worn down to the point that they could not take it anymore. Voluntary return can be a moment of agency in those situations, whether it feels “safe” or “suicidal.” Mariposa went on to describe the conversations that she had with her clients when they came to tell her that they were leaving: “It’s just, ‘I need to go.’ And you try to convince them not to do it, good luck. . . . sometimes they come just to reaffirm or to get information, but the decision already is done.”

Several service providers saw the connection between mental health and forced-voluntary return as something that they needed to remedy. From this perspective, people did not actually want to leave, but rather were going through a difficult time for differing reasons. As Asha, the immigration lawyer, explained, “You’ll get them counseling because they’re under so much mental health stress that they start saying, ‘I want to go.’” Asha struggled to find the few examples that she could think of where people actually wanted to leave, because from her perspective they could be talked out of it “most of the time.” While this approach removes agency from migrants by possibly negating their desires to leave, it also reinforces the idea of a forced “voluntariness” according to which migrants would not leave voluntarily as long as they could gain access to the services and community support they needed.

By extension, many of the discussions with research participants focused on voluntary departure as a reaction to not being able to endure the current situation anymore. Service providers talked about their clients being “exhausted,” “frustrated,” “fed up,” “disappointed,” or experiencing “despair” and “hopelessness.” Mariposa described the recurring disappointment of refused applications as “diminishing” her clients. The extended time in immigration limbo, whether as a result of multiple rejected applications or the delays of a single application, left people with a diminished sense of hope for their future. For migrants waiting to regularize their status, the feeling of lost time and stagnation often became intolerable (see Khosravi 2018; Villegas 2014). As Suny, the young undocumented mother, shared:

Sometimes I feel like I’m just wasting time. . . . I would say it, like, maybe God should just take me out of here. And I, like, I’m not afraid to be out of here. Like, I’m only scared of doing the decisions and it’s, you know, it ends up being a life decision, like, it could have been better. But if it was to happen by chance or by fate, I would just let it be.

Suny struggled with the idea of return for some time. She shared the ways in which the frustration over wasted time and opportunities pushed her to try something, anything, to change her situation. At that point, she explained that she would leave it up to God to determine what should happen to her, as she was too afraid to make a decision with such a life-changing impact, but at the same time, too frustrated to do nothing.

This overarching sense of defeat, which took different forms and had varying impacts, was also frequently linked to separation from family. The interviews suggested that the prospect or reality of long-term separation from family was one of the deciding factors in migrants’ forced-voluntary return. With the many changes to immigration policy, this separation could be caused by long immigration processes—including refugee family reunification, sponsorship applications, and appeals—or simply by the lack of mobility that comes with having precari-

ous immigration status. Kate, a settlement worker, emphasized the impact of family separation, sharing a couple of cases in which it had become the deciding factor. She explained that:

you wait a year for your refugee hearing and then six months for your decision. And then . . . years until your wife and three kids come here. And a lot of people's family members are in situations of profound insecurity.

Kate went on to describe cases in which the knowledge of long-term familial separation was enough to push people to return to the countries they had come from. She explained that in some of these circumstances, the decisions were taken so quickly that people did not even inform her that they were leaving; they simply left a note or message to tell her they had gone.

Katherine and Jonh, both undocumented migrants, also linked their return to their need to be reunited with family. This desire was tied to a health issue and was also a reflection of their inability to find the support and services they needed in Canada. When Katherine and Jonh realized that they would not be able to collect the money needed to buy their plane tickets home, they decided to turn themselves in to the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) to be deported. They explained that although they were working, their money was used up every month for rent and bills, and they could not bear to wait until they could collect the money little by little. Their need to leave as quickly as possible pushed them to risk detention and other forms of immigration enforcement. I asked them if they were afraid of what would happen when they turned themselves in, and their answers again took a gendered perspective:

I'm not nervous for me, I'm not nervous, I'm just nervous for her. For me, I'm good, they can do whatever they want, cause, but she's a . . . (Jonh)

I'm not afraid, he's afraid for me, but I'm not. (Katherine)

Jonh's fear for Katherine's safety and well-being but not his own speaks to gendered constructs around physical and emotional strength, as well as the ability to express and perform fear and distress in specific ways. Jonh was afraid that the experience would be too unpleasant for Katherine, and that she would be physically or mentally affected by it, while he projected his own strength in being able to handle difficult situations. He went on to explain that he did not need to be afraid, because

if we respond honestly and correctly [to] everything the person ask, is OK . . . They persons [CBSA officials], not monsters, the people act like they monsters. They persons like you, they go coffee, McDonald's . . .

Jonh's understanding of the power relations inherent in his return speaks to different conceptualizations of state authorities, either as frightening and violent state-sanctioned enforcers, or as ordinary individuals who hold a particular authority. While these understandings contribute to migrants' considerations of return in different ways, differing identities intersect with the fear, coercion, and marginalization experienced to push certain people to leave "voluntarily."

## Conclusion

The experiences discussed in this article offer a limited snapshot of factors influencing people's forced-voluntary return, but they also capture the messiness underlying individual realities. While some people described agency in their decisions, by ensuring that they would eventually

be able to return to Canada, choosing secondary migration, or prioritizing familial reunification, some also presented defeat and broken dreams. It is questionable whether any would have left if they could have accessed the services and support that they felt they needed. This bordering of access is an approach to migration management that is based on the false dichotomy between the “deserving or genuine” and “undeserving or bogus” migrant—constructs that are gendered, racialized, classed, and ableist.

The policy changes implemented by the Conservative government had broad impacts, as refugee determination was hierarchized, leaving claimants from certain countries with little chance of success; family sponsorship programs were increasingly restricted; and other humanitarian programs were intentionally limited. The anti-migrant discourse and policy was imposed upon or voluntarily taken up by civil servants, service providers, and citizens who bordered communities and access to services, leaving many migrants feeling excluded. As a result, participants identified loss of hope as one of the primary factors that pushed them to leave “voluntarily,” so as to relieve the pain associated with staying. The loss of hope was tied to the perceived impossibility of a meaningful future in Canada; such a future would be characterized by increased inclusion, access to healthcare and other services, and the possibility of timely family reunification.

While the factors that pushed migrants to make decisions about return may be context-specific, the concept of forced-voluntary return offers nuance to the spectrum between voluntary and involuntary departure to better reflect the intersectional aspects of people’s lived experiences. Exploring inequalities and exclusions experienced by migrants based on their intersecting identities and the material impacts of dominant power relations and oppressions will deepen our understandings of “voluntary” return. This analysis also contributes to broader discussions of migration management, the production of deportability, and the “voluntary” mobility of migrants, as migrants have been discursively and materially targeted in various ways that push them to leave. Increased understandings of how different political landscapes, policy directives, and citizen engagements may impact forced-voluntary return and the ways that it is experienced, based on different intersectional identities and power relations, can add to understandings of the return spectrum and draw out commonalities that enable us to better understand and support migrant experiences.

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**NOTE**

1. While a limited Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program was piloted in Toronto for a short time, its impacts are not included in this article's analysis of forced-voluntary return, as none of the research participants had direct experience of it.

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