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Rethinking the Political Economy of Non-Western Migration Governance

Assemblages of Migration

Edited by Sherzod Eraliev · Crystal A. Ennis



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CHAPTER 1

Assemblages of Migration: Rethinking the Political Economy of Non-Western Migration Governance

Sherzod Eraliev and Crystal A. Ennis

This volume proposes a new way to think about global migration governance and positions the political economy of non-Western migration regimes at the centre of our analysis. We argue that these contexts are constitutive of global migration regimes and essential to any robust theory of the political economy of migration. We propose a concept of *Assemblages of Migration* to provide a lens for understanding migration governance as historically sedimented, polycentric, infrastructural, stratified, embodied and co-produced. This framework departs from models that treat migration as a functional system or a state-driven regime, instead emphasising the provisional, contested, and heterogeneous character of global migration governance.

This edited volume brings together articles that explore migration in regions outside of the traditional Western migrant-receiving countries of North America, Western Europe, and Australia from a multidisciplinary

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and comparative perspective. The scale of international migration has witnessed a continuous increase in recent years, propelled by a confluence of economic transformations, shifts in political landscapes, and a myriad of other influencing factors. This surge in migration flows has notably expanded beyond the confines of traditional destinations in the West, or what is commonly referred to as the Global North. For instance, around half of the estimated 282 million international migrants worldwide live and work in non-Western countries (IOM, 2024). There are more people migrating from one country to another within the Global South than there are people moving from the Global South to the Global North (Crawley & Teye, 2024; World Bank, 2016). Moreover, recent data from the World Migration Report indicates a significant shift in migration patterns, with 12 of the top 20 destinations for international migrants in 2020 being non-Western countries (IOM, 2024). Despite this trend, non-Western contexts remain largely under-represented in global migration studies, with a disproportionate amount of research concentrated on North America, Western Europe, and Australia. Much of the existing literature on migration predominantly focuses on the experiences of migrants and immigration policies within Western liberal democracies (Düvell, 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Natter, 2018; Urinboyev, 2020). For instance, 80% of articles published in the *International Migration Review*, a leading journal in the field, since 2016 focus geographically on North America or Western Europe (IOM, 2019, p. 68).

This geographic bias not only limits our understanding of non-Western migration dynamics but also poses challenges for scholars attempting to contextualise their work within prevailing perspectives dominated by Western regions. Major non-Western migration destinations such as Argentina, China, the Gulf states, Indonesia, Russia, South Africa and Turkey are particularly overlooked in existing theories and comparative research within migration studies. As a result, migration scholarship predominantly revolves around the Global North, with a notable overemphasis on migration from South to North, as well as between Northern regions. Moreover, existing migration literature heavily draws upon theories and concepts originating from the Global North, resulting in a biased understanding. Not only does this approach fail to include much of the empirical experience from the global south in its theorising, it fails to challenge the intersecting inequalities that drive and shape migratory patterns.

True, an increasing number of studies have emerged in recent years that address the nuances and unique aspects of migratory processes and

governance frameworks in non-Western autocratic contexts.¹ Despite this, the current body of research remains fragmented and has yet to be fully incorporated into the broader research agenda within comparative migration studies (Crawley & Teye, 2024; Ennis & Blarel, 2022; Natter, 2019; Urinboyev, 2020; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). There is a growing consensus within postcolonial scholarship for the need to decolonise migration theory by centring the perspectives of the Global South (Bommes & Morawska, 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Nawyn, 2016b, 2016a; Piguet et al., 2018).

The volume represents an important contribution to this effort through generating new empirical, theoretical, and policy insights on migration governance practices and migrants' experiences in several non-Western locales. In particular, by focusing on Central Asia, China, Indonesia, India, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, and West Africa, it shows how distinctive histories, institutions, and political economies produce unique forms of migration governance. Our premise is that these contexts are not derivative of Western models; rather, they are constitutive of global migration orders and essential to any robust theory of the political economy of migration.

FROM SYSTEMS TO ASSEMBLAGES

Classic migration systems theory (Kritz et al., 1992; Mabogunje, 1970) highlighted reciprocal linkages between origins and destinations and the cumulative causation of flows. It drew attention to networks, remittances, and feedback mechanisms that sustain migration over time. Yet while valuable for mapping connections, this perspective often treated migration as a functional system rather than a contested field of power. It tended to overlook how states, markets, and social hierarchies actively shape who can move, under what conditions, and with what rights.

Subsequent frameworks attempted to address these gaps. World-systems theory (Portes & Walton, 1981; Sassen, 1988) tied migration to global capitalist restructuring, linking labour flows to core-periphery dynamics. The 'new economics of labour migration' (Stark & Bloom, 1985; Taylor, 1999) explained household strategies under conditions of risk and incomplete markets. The mobilities paradigm (Cresswell, 2010; Urry, 2007) recasts migration as one form within a wider constellation of

¹ We also welcome the shift in textbooks and handbooks that include more diverse regions (e.g., Geddes, 2021; Pécout & Thiollot, 2023; Triandafyllidou, 2024).

movements – of people, capital, and information – shaped by inequalities of access. More recently, the migration infrastructures approach (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), regimes of mobility (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), political analyses of routes and vehicles (Walters, 2015), and studies of externalisation (Andersson, 2014; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019) have pushed further, examining how recruitment chains, bordering practices, and transnational governance arrangements condition mobility.

Taken together, these literatures show that migration is never a neutral system of flows but always a terrain structured by political economy, legal categories, and historical legacies. However, most of these frameworks remain anchored in Western cases or treat non-Western settings as empirical illustrations rather than as generators of theory. They underplay the colonial legacies, regional architectures (e.g., ECOWAS and EAEU), the role of zones and municipalities, and the salience of diaspora, categorisation, and gendered labour regimes that dominate in many non-Western contexts.

To bring these dimensions into view, this volume advances the concept of *Assemblages of Migration*. Assemblages emphasise that governance emerges from heterogeneous alignments – empires, states, regions, zones, kinship, categories, brokers, donors, diaspora institutions, and infrastructures – rather than from state policy alone. Our conceptualisation of assemblages draws from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and Susan Strange (2005/2006),² while centring political economy. These assemblages organise extraction, redistribution, and control of labour, remittances, and legitimacy. Unlike linear models that assume migrants pass from origin to destination through identifiable ‘systems’, the assemblage perspective foregrounds the multiplicity of sites and practices through which mobility is governed. This also requires treating migrants’ microlegalities – their bottom-up repertoires for reading and working rules – not as epiphenomena but as essential components of the assemblage itself. *Assemblages of Migration* thus capture how governance beyond the West is polycentric, historically sedimented, and stratified.

Recent migration scholarship has also explicitly mobilised assemblage thinking to analyse bordering, subject formation and socio-technical infrastructures of mobility. Wiertz (2021), for example, conceptualises migration governance as a biopolitical assemblage constituted through heterogeneous alignments of bordering technologies, humanitarian actors

² Saskia Sassen introduces the term ‘assemblages’ in her work to describe the formations that extend within and beyond the nation-state, spanning domestic, regional, and global scales (Sassen, 2005, 2006).

and dispersed dispositifs of control. Likewise, Canzutti and Tazzioli (2023) show how data infrastructures, paper trails and embodied encounters co-produce fragmented regimes of mobility governance. Maury, Hakala, and Näre (2024) similarly extend assemblage thinking into platform labour and border regimes. These interventions demonstrate the analytical productivity of assemblage approaches, while this volume extends them by foregrounding political economy, historical layering, regional formations and non-Western migration regimes as sites of comparative theory-building.

Within migration governance, following Sassen, we can observe diverse assemblages cutting across the national and global even as they ‘continue to inhabit national institutional territorial settings but are no longer part of the national as historically constructed’ (Sassen, 2008: 61). They exist in public and private spaces and operate subnationally, transnationally, and sometimes globally. Assemblages also represent new forms of territoriality as regulatory and governance processes become increasingly de-nationalised or suddenly re-embedded in the state. Historical processes like decolonisation or transformations in the regimes governing enslaved peoples or unfree labour interact with forms of mobility governance, ranging from oppressive top-down to emancipatory bottom-up practices. At certain moments, the state (in postcolonial form) resurges in importance but then also finds itself subject to the demands of global capitalism shaping labour needs and its flows. This is visible, for instance, in Blarel’s chapter on India’s diaspora engagement or Baigabatova’s chapter on repatriation policies, where state-led projects are simultaneously driven by international market needs. Likewise, deterritorialised assemblages emerge in contexts such as Okyere’s chapter on ECOWAS free movement regime, where EU externalisation funds, local police, and women traders intersect to govern mobility in ways that are neither wholly ‘national’ nor ‘regional’.

DIMENSIONS OF ASSEMBLAGES OF MIGRATION

Assemblages of migration conceptualise mobility governance as the product of *heterogeneous alignments* that are historically contingent and constantly in flux. Unlike systems thinking, which assumes stability and functional feedback loops, assemblages emphasise the openness, partiality, and shifting character of social formations. The term ‘assemblage’, drawn from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and later developed in anthropology and geography (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Ong & Collier, 2010),

signals formations that are neither fixed structures nor random aggregates, but patterned configurations of actors, institutions, infrastructures, and discourses that hold together provisionally. Migration governance is therefore not a coherent system implemented by nation-states but a shifting field of power where multiple elements come together, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes contradicting one another.

The Assemblages of Migration perspective rests on several conceptual pillars. A first dimension is *historical layering*. Assemblages remind us that governance is never created from scratch. Migration regimes inherit and recombine elements from past orders – colonial bureaucracies, socialist labour allocation systems, or developmentalist projects. These legacies sediment into present practices, shaping categories, infrastructures, and institutions even when their original political contexts have faded. Historical layering explains why contemporary migration governance so often contains contradictory logics, with older practices persisting alongside newer reforms (Stoler, 2009).

Second, unlike frameworks that privilege the nation-state, Assemblages of Migration emphasises *polycentric governance* (Ostrom, 2010). Migration is regulated not only by central governments but also by regional compacts (e.g., ECOWAS, ASEAN), municipalities and special economic zones, diaspora bureaucracies, private recruitment agencies, and international donors. These overlapping sovereignties mean that no single authority monopolises migration governance; instead, mobility is produced through interactions across scales and institutions (Koinova, 2025; Lavenex, 2006; Ong, 2006; Ennis & Blarel, 2022).

The third dimension is *infrastructural mediation*. Migration never occurs in a vacuum; it depends on infrastructures that make it possible, desirable, or dangerous (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). These infrastructures can be material – transport routes, recruitment agencies, detention facilities, and digital platforms – or institutional and symbolic – legal categories, bureaucratic labels, and moral discourses (Knox & Harvey, 2015; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). The assemblage lens highlights how these infrastructures are not neutral supports but active mediators that structure access, channel flows, and distribute risk. Recent studies further show that migration infrastructures are increasingly socio-technical and digital. Digital–non-digital assemblages illuminate how data systems and embodied encounters jointly govern mobility (Canzutti & Tazzioli, 2023), while platform assemblages reveal how digital labour platforms intersect with

border regimes to structure migrant work (Maury et al., 2024). These studies reinforce our argument that infrastructures actively stratify access, risk and belonging.

The fourth pillar is *categorical stratification*. Assemblages govern mobility by differentiating between people: by skill, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, or legal status. Categories such as ‘refugee’, ‘temporary worker’, or ‘diaspora returnee’ are not descriptive but performative; they allocate rights, impose obligations, and legitimise hierarchies of belonging (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014; Sajjad, 2018; Zetter, 2007). Assemblages perspective highlights how such stratifications are central to migration governance: mobility is always graded rather than universal.

Fifth, assemblages are marked by their *embodied and affective dimensions*. Governance is not only about laws and institutions. It operates through policing, surveillance, and labour-market controls, but also through emotions and moral economies, such as notions of deservingness, stigma, or respectability, that shape how migrants are valued or excluded (Genova, 2002; Parreñas, 2001; Sheller, 2018). By foregrounding embodiment and affect, assemblages move beyond abstract accounts of flows, emphasising that migration is lived, experienced, negotiated, and contested in everyday life.

Finally, assemblages are sustained by *microlegalities*—small-scale, socially distributed rule-of-thumb practices through which migrants and their networks interpret, adapt, and enact law in practice. These repertoires arise because formal systems are opaque, fragmented, or discretionary; they travel across contexts and are mediated by diasporic infrastructures and digital platforms. Recent assemblage perspectives on irregularisation similarly underscore how irregular status is produced through dispersed legal, bureaucratic and social relations rather than residing in migrants alone (Sigona & van Liempt, 2025). Seeing governance through microlegalities centres migrants as co-producers of functioning legal orders, clarifies why similar strategies recur under democratic and hybrid regimes alike, and links political economy to lived navigation.

In sum, *Assemblages of Migration* provide a lens for understanding migration governance as historically sedimented, polycentric, infrastructural, stratified, and embodied. This framework departs from models that treat migration as a functional system or a state-driven regime, instead emphasising its provisional, contested, and heterogeneous character.

ASSEMBLAGES OF MIGRATION: DIFFERENCES FROM OTHER DOMINANT FRAMEWORKS

A clear view of what *Assemblages of Migration* offer is easiest to see in contrast to the frameworks that have shaped migration scholarship over the last several decades. Assemblages of Migration builds on their strongest insights but rejects the assumptions that limit their analytic reach beyond the Western context.

Migration systems theory (MST) was one of the most influential attempts to conceptualise international migration as a self-reinforcing process rather than as a series of isolated movements. Early work by Mabogunje (1970) on rural–urban migration in West Africa and later elaborations in global migration research (Fawcett, 1989; Kritz et al., 1992; Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 1993; Skeldon, 1997) argued that cross-border mobility becomes self-sustaining once initial flows establish networks, information channels, and remittance circuits. These connections lower the costs of migration for subsequent movers, generate cumulative causation, and gradually institutionalise the flow into a system linking specific origins and destinations. The systems framework provided a powerful relational mapping, demonstrating that migration is not reducible to isolated push–pull dynamics but must be understood as an ongoing set of interactions.

Yet the explanatory power of MST has significant limitations. First, it tends to depict linkages between sending and receiving contexts as functional systems that operate according to logics of equilibrium and reproduction, thereby downplaying the extent to which such linkages are actively constructed, managed, and policed. In this perspective, migration corridors stabilise almost naturally once networks are established. What remains underexplored are the ways in which sponsorship contracts, visa categories, quotas, recruiters, and policing practices selectively stabilise some corridors while constraining or extinguishing others. Second, MST has relatively little to say about how states deliberately manufacture precariousness through restrictive legal regimes, temporary labour programmes, and deportability (Anderson, 2010; Genova, 2002; Ruhs & Martin, 2008). Finally, MST privileges bilateral origin–destination units and national-level dynamics, thereby marginalising the influence of regional migration orders, subnational platforms such as cities and special economic zones, and the infrastructures and intermediaries that condition mobility.

Assemblages of Migration departs from these assumptions while retaining MST's valuable relational insights. Rather than conceiving migration flows as equilibria within closed systems, the assemblage perspective conceptualises corridors as provisional alignments among diverse authorities (state, municipal, and regional), infrastructures (recruitment agencies, transport networks, digital platforms), and classificatory devices (visa categories, labour contracts, refugee status). These alignments are historically layered, often contradictory, and subject to external reshaping by powerful states, international organisations, or market actors. They can stabilise for a time but are equally susceptible to disruption, reconfiguration, or collapse. In emphasising this contingency of composition, the assemblage framework brings into focus the role of power, instruments, and stratification as constitutive dimensions of migration governance and economic structures rather than as incidental features layered onto otherwise functional systems. This also requires taking seriously the microlegalities through which migrants actively translate and remake legal rules – mechanisms that become especially visible in contexts where formal governance is fragmented or discretionary.

The migration governance and migration regime literatures emerged to capture how authority over mobility is dispersed across multiple levels, actors, and policy fields. Early contributions emphasised the increasing involvement of international organisations and regional bodies in the regulation of cross-border migration, arguing that migration was becoming a matter of 'global governance' (Betts, 2011; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Pécoud, 2015). At the same time, critical scholars of migration control stressed the multilayered and fragmented nature of regimes, showing how implementation often depends on the everyday practices of street-level bureaucrats, courts, and municipal institutions (Eule et al., 2019; Walters, 2015). These approaches were particularly valuable for decentering the state as a unitary actor and illuminating how bordering practices diffuse into welfare systems, labour markets, and security infrastructures.

Nevertheless, governance and regime perspectives exhibit certain blind spots. They often assume the existence of relatively coherent institutional orders and treat formal policy-making and implementation structures as the central objects of analysis. As a result, they risk reproducing a state-centric ontology, where the role of non-state, commercial, and infrastructural actors is under-acknowledged. Recruitment agencies, testing centres, training institutions, logistics providers, and financial intermediaries appear in these accounts largely as background conditions rather than

as central components of migration governance (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013; Lindquist et al., 2012). Furthermore, when derived primarily from the European Union context, these frameworks tend to universalise Northern templates of governance, which do not adequately account for the prevalence of *zonal sovereignty* and ‘graduated citizenship’ in non-Western settings (Easterling, 2014; Ong, 2006).

Assemblages of migration align with governance and regime approaches in recognising that authority is dispersed and contested. Yet it insists that governance is not simply something to be ‘implemented’ across levels but something that must be *actively assembled* through the interplay of infrastructures, market devices, and externalisation practices (Andersson, 2014; FitzGerald, 2019; Lavenex, 2006; Zaiotti, 2016). Assemblages incorporate zones, municipalities, recruitment industries, and international donors as co-producers of mobility regimes rather than as peripheral actors. This analytical move reveals how migration governance is constituted not only by laws and policies but also by infrastructural and economic arrangements that are integral to the functioning of the regime.

The mobilities paradigm brought a broader cultural and phenomenological sensibility to the study of movement. By conceptualising societies as constituted through flows and ‘moorings’, it foregrounded rhythm, speed, embodiment, and inequality of access (Adey, 2017; Cresswell, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller, 2018; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). This enriched migration studies, pushing analysis beyond demographic measurement to consider how mobility is lived and felt. Yet mobility research often left under-specified the *political economy instruments* – visas, quotas, sponsorship contracts, and welfare rules – through which mobility is stratified. Assemblages of Migration builds upon mobilities’ attentiveness to embodiment and inequality and links it directly to the devices and categories that structure migration. Classifications such as ‘temporary worker,’ ‘highly skilled migrant,’ or ‘refugee’ are not neutral descriptors but active mechanisms of rule that allocate rights and structure belonging (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014; Sajjad, 2018; Zetter, 1991). Assemblages of Migration thus integrate the phenomenological and the political-economy dimensions of mobility into a single framework.

Finally, the **migration infrastructures approach** already moved beyond states and migrants to examine the organisational and technological bases of mobility. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) theorised infrastructures as assemblages of commercial, regulatory, humanitarian, and social sub-systems, drawing attention to brokers, recruiters, and transport operators.

This perspective shifted analysis towards the ‘black box’ of how migration is operationalised (Knox & Harvey, 2015; Lindquist et al., 2012). Assemblages of Migration embrace these insights but extend them in two crucial ways. First, it examines how infrastructures articulate with regional compacts, zonal sovereignties, and externalised border regimes to form broader political economic configurations (Easterling, 2014; Ong, 2006). Second, it foregrounds categorical stratification and historical layering, treating legal labels and imperial residues not as context but as active elements of the assemblage.

Relatedly, assemblage-inspired migration scholarship has often centred on biopolitical governance and border dispositifs (e.g., Wiertz, 2021; Canzutti & Tazzioli, 2023; Tazzioli, 2020). While these studies illuminate the dispersed and contingent operation of migration control, Assemblages of Migration broadens the scope of assemblage analysis by incorporating colonial-historical sedimentation, regional political economy, and migrants’ co-produced microlegalities as equally constitutive elements of governance.

Across these comparisons, the distinctiveness of Assemblages of Migration becomes clear. It preserves the strongest insights of earlier frameworks – MST’s relational mapping, governance perspectives’ attention to dispersed authority, mobilities’ sensitivity to embodiment and inequality, and infrastructures’ attention to mediation – while recentring composition, power, devices, and stratification as analytic cores.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

Beyond its conceptual payoffs, the Assemblages of Migration framework also advances migration studies more broadly by reorienting theory-building and offering a diagnostic tool for comparative and policy analysis.

First, Assemblages of Migration broadens the comparative horizon of migration studies. Much existing theory has been built inductively from Western liberal-democratic contexts, with non-Western settings often treated as anomalies or as sources of empirical illustration rather than of conceptual innovation. By treating authoritarian, hybrid, and postcolonial states as central rather than peripheral, Assemblages of Migration contributes to the ongoing effort to decolonise migration research (Bakewell, 2009; Crawley & Teye, 2024; Mayblin & Turner, 2020). It demonstrates that categories, infrastructures, and governance arrangements developed in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America are

not deviations from an imagined Western norm but are constitutive of global migration orders.

Second, the framework bridges fields that have often been siloed. It synthesises the relational focus of migration systems theory, the attention to dispersed authority of governance approaches, the phenomenological sensitivity of mobilities, and the infrastructural orientation of recent anthropology – while recentring composition, stratification, and historical layering. This synthesis makes *Assemblages of Migration* a platform for cross-disciplinary dialogue, allowing insights from history, sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, and law to be integrated into a single analytic vocabulary.

Assemblages of Migration also provides a language and methodology for comparative diagnosis. By mapping which actors, infrastructures, and categories constitute a given migration assemblage, researchers and practitioners can better explain why particular regimes produce distinctive patterns of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, *Assemblages of Migration* directs attention to the role of recruitment chains, municipal authorities, diaspora institutions, and external donors – actors often neglected in state-centric analyses. It also highlights how historical legacies and categorical stratifications constrain reform, explaining why some mobility regimes persist despite efforts at liberalisation or harmonisation.

This diagnostic value extends to policy debates. *Assemblages of Migration* make visible the unintended consequences of interventions – such as how anti-trafficking initiatives may undermine regional free movement agreements or how diaspora policies can stratify belonging while claiming to promote unity. By identifying the components of assemblages and their points of tension, the framework offers a way to anticipate contradictions and assess the distributive consequences of governance.

Finally, *Assemblages of Migration* contributes to the project of re-situating migration theory. By taking seriously the colonial legacies, regional architectures, and infrastructural experiments of non-Western contexts, it challenges the assumption that theory flows only from the Global North. In doing so, it answers recent calls to shift the geography of migration research, not only by diversifying cases but also by reconstituting the conceptual toolkit of the field (Abdelhady, 2025; Crawley & Teye, 2024).

In sum, the *Assemblages of Migration* framework contributes to migration studies at three levels: by advancing conceptual clarity, by providing a comparative diagnostic tool for research and policy, and by helping to reorient theory-building towards non-Western contexts. It thereby opens

new possibilities for both scholarly inquiry and practical engagement with one of the most pressing global issues of our time.

ROADMAP OF THE VOLUME

This edited volume is organised into three thematic parts, each of which reflects a central dimension of the Assemblages of Migration framework: (1) colonial and imperial legacies of mobility governance, (2) regional and subnational experiments, and (3) the stratifying force of diaspora, categorisation, gender, and everyday legal practices. Taken together, the nine empirical chapters demonstrate that non-Western contexts are not peripheral illustrations but key sites where migration governance is historically layered, assembled, contested and transformed.

Part I: Colonial and Imperial Legacies of Migration Governance

In Chapter 2, Pujo Semedi offers a socio-historical analysis of Dutch colonial intervention in rural Java, showing how the cultivation system altered landholding patterns, labour obligations, taxation, and subsistence strategies. Migration emerges not as a voluntary shift from agriculture to industry but as a coerced, incremental adaptation to the fiscal and ecological pressures engineered by colonial rule. By tracing how peasants navigated shifting obligations and exploitative infrastructures, the chapter reveals colonial governance as an assemblage of coercion, agrarian regulation, and commercial extraction – one that produced durable circuits of labour mobility persisting into the twentieth century. This illustrates the *historical layering* of today's Southeast Asian mobility regimes.

In Chapter 3, Arifah Arum Hayuningsih reconstructs the little-documented movement of Javanese indentured labourers across Dutch and French imperial domains, showing how recruitment, transport, surveillance, and repatriation were jointly organised by overlapping colonial authorities. Contracts, corporate intermediaries, plantation policing, and local chiefs formed part of a transimperial infrastructure that facilitated labour extraction while maintaining racialised hierarchies. Rather than a bilateral migration corridor, the system operated as a hybrid assemblage linking multiple sovereignties. This comparative colonial perspective highlights how racialised labour regimes, commercial brokerage, and administrative categorisation forged long-term diasporic communities and institutionalised inequality.

Together, [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) demonstrate that contemporary migration systems cannot be understood without recognising their imperial genealogies. Colonial authorities assembled infrastructures, categories, coercive mechanisms and labour markets that outlasted the empire and continue to shape mobility long after formal decolonisation. Part I thus sets the stage for the volume's theoretical argument: migration governance is never built from scratch but sedimented through historical layers of extraction, discipline, and categorisation.

Part II: Regional and Subnational Experiments in Governing Mobility

In [Chapter 4](#), Chan and Tan analyse Shenzhen's Special Economic Zone (SEZ) as a pioneering 'migration laboratory', where China's governing authorities experimented with new forms of regulating labour mobility. Rather than treating the SEZ as simply an economic reform initiative, the chapter shows how hukou controls, municipal policies, market actors, and targeted infrastructural projects were assembled into a finely stratified system of selective inclusion. Migrants were incorporated as flexible labour while being denied full access to welfare and urban citizenship, revealing how local authorities, central directives, and corporate interests jointly produced a mobility regime calibrated to the needs of rapid industrialisation. The chapter demonstrates that the governance of migration in China is deeply polycentric, with subnational units acting as laboratories where mobility is regulated through experimentation, differentiation, and infrastructural mediation.

In [Chapter 5](#), Okyere's chapter examines how the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol unfolds in practice by focusing on Nigerian sex workers migrating to Ghana. While ECOWAS formally guarantees entry, residence, and establishment, the chapter shows how these promises are undermined by policing practices, anti-trafficking discourses, municipal regulations, and EU-funded border externalisation initiatives. Migrants encounter inconsistent interpretations of the same regional framework, leading to a landscape in which rights exist on paper but are routinely constrained in practice. Okyere illustrates how regional free movement regimes are not coherent systems, but assemblages shaped by local moral economies, donor influence, and discretionary enforcement, producing a mobility order by contradiction and precariousness.

In [Chapter 6](#), Baigabatova analyses Kazakhstan's repatriation programme for ethnic Kazakhs (*qandas*) as a territorially uneven experiment

in nation-building, demographic engineering, and post-Soviet statecraft. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in the Zhetysu region and beyond, she demonstrates how quotas, shifting legal reforms, and bureaucratic procedures intersect with regional political economies to produce sharply differentiated experiences of incorporation and exclusion. While national rhetoric frames repatriation as an act of historical justice, its implementation is mediated by local officials, employment structures, housing markets, and kinship networks, resulting in variations that are not accidental but foundational to how the policy operates. In practice, municipal authorities exercise considerable discretion over settlement decisions, access to land, and recognition of documents; local labour markets shape whether *qandas* become marginalised workers or valued contributors; and social attitudes towards language, culture, and perceived ‘Kazakhness’ influence everyday encounters with neighbours, employers, and bureaucrats. By revealing these frictions, the chapter shows that repatriation functions as a multiscalar assemblage rather than a coherent national programme – an assemblage in which territorial governance, Soviet-era bureaucratic legacies, neoliberal reforms, and localised institutional practices jointly configure who belongs, under what conditions, and with what degrees of precarity or privilege.

Together, [Chapters 4, 5 and 6](#) illustrate that contemporary mobility regimes emerge through interactions across multiple scales – cities, zones, regions, international donors, and local bureaucracies. Whether through Shenzhen’s subnational experimentation, ECOWAS’s ambivalent free movement regime, or Kazakhstan’s regionally uneven repatriation programme, migration governance appears as polycentric, territorially mediated, and characterised by contradiction and improvisation rather than seamless institutional design.

Part III: Diaspora, Categorisation, and Gendered Stratification

In [Chapter 7](#), Blarel analyses how India has strategically built a differentiated diaspora governance apparatus over several decades, producing a stratified overseas citizenry through categories such as Non-Resident Indian (NRI), Person of Indian Origin (PIO), and Overseas Citizen of India (OCI). Drawing on detailed historical and policy analysis, the chapter demonstrates how these legal statuses function as instruments of statecraft that selectively extend economic and symbolic membership while withholding full political inclusion. Rather than merely tracking administrative

evolution, Blarel situates India's diaspora management within broader geopolitical and political economic shifts: the liberalisation-era drive for remittances and investment; the state's desire to cultivate a globally dispersed 'national community': and the need to balance domestic political sensitivities with external engagement. The chapter therefore conceptualises India's diaspora regime as an assemblage of juridical devices, fiscal incentives, overseas institutions and political narratives that together produce a differentiated, hierarchical form of transnational belonging – an exemplary case of categorical stratification in migration governance.

In Chapter 8, Mačkinė, Martinkėnė, Karalius, and Hiliuk examine Lithuania's rapid transition from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving state, analysing how new migration and family-related policies construct hierarchies of inclusion through labelling practices that sort migrants and their families into normative, ambiguous and problematic categories. Using policy analysis and expert interviews, the chapter shows how labels – 'labour migrant', 'asylum seeker', 'returning national', and 'temporary protection holder' – do not merely describe groups; they allocate differential rights, welfare access and moral legitimacy. By foregrounding families as integral to mobility governance, the authors illustrate how bordering is enacted through welfare bureaucracies, demographic anxieties and institutional routines that privilege certain family forms while marginalising others. Their analysis reveals migration governance in Lithuania as an assemblage of legal categories, welfare infrastructures, administrative discretion and public narratives, producing uneven terrains of belonging in a state undergoing rapid demographic and political transformation.

In Chapter 9, Kilichova synthesises a wide body of research on Central Asian women's migration to Russia, Turkey, and elsewhere, showing how gendered labour demand, patriarchal norms, bureaucratic precarity and corridor-specific recruitment practices intersect to shape women's mobility trajectories and vulnerabilities. The chapter foregrounds women's agency while tracing how social norms around respectability, kinship obligations, and transnational caregiving are embedded within the infrastructures of labour migration. By analysing sectors such as domestic work, hospitality, and low-wage service labour, the chapter demonstrates how the feminisation of migration is structured by legal restrictions, informal intermediaries, and moral economies that render certain forms of women's mobility stigmatised yet economically indispensable. Kilichova thus positions gender not as an 'add-on' variable but as a constitutive dimension of migration assemblages – shaping how states, employers and

families govern movement and how women themselves navigate stratified mobility regimes.

In Chapter 10, Aidarkhankyzy analyses how Kazakh migrants in the United Kingdom, United States, Turkey and South Korea navigate legal systems through what they term microlegalities: small-scale, socially embedded repertoires for interpreting, supplementing or circumventing formal legal rules. Drawing on interviews across diverse regime types, the chapter shows that migrants rely on informal networks, diasporic infrastructures, digital knowledge-sharing and culturally rooted legal dispositions to make opaque regulatory environments navigable. Crucially, these practices recur across democratic, hybrid and informally governed systems, demonstrating that migrant legal navigation is shaped as much by transnational social infrastructures as by destination state institutions. The chapter, therefore, highlights a neglected dimension of mobility governance: the bottom-up, migrant-side co-production of legal order across borders.

Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 collectively demonstrate that migration governance is constituted not only through state-led categorisation and institutional stratification, but also through the everyday legal and social practices through which migrants make sense of, negotiate and at times recalibrate the rules that govern their mobility. Across diverse contexts – from the legal statuses crafted by states to manage their diasporas, to the bureaucratic labels that structure welfare access, to the gendered moral economies shaping women's mobility, and to the micro-legal repertoires through which migrants navigate complex regulatory landscapes – Part III highlights how differentiated regimes of belonging are produced through the interplay of classification, embodiment and everyday legal reasoning. This section thus demonstrates that migration governance is simultaneously a project of institutional ordering and a field of practical, socially embedded action, revealing how power, legality and inequality are co-constructed across multiple scales.

The volume as a whole demonstrates the analytical power of *Assemblages of Migration*. Part I shows how colonial and imperial infrastructures created durable, hybrid regimes of labour mobility whose effects reverberate across contemporary migration orders. Part II illustrates how subnational zones, regional compacts and territorially uneven repatriation programmes act as laboratories where migration governance is actively assembled, contested and reshaped through experimentation, negotiation and externalisation. Part III demonstrates how welfare categories, diaspora policies, gendered moral economies and migrants' own micro-legal

practices stratify belonging and access to rights. Together, these parts show that migration governance is constituted not only through state-led coordination but also through historically layered infrastructures, regional experimentation, and everyday legal reasoning.

The cases in the volume span contexts as diverse as colonial Java, Shenzhen's SEZ, West Africa's free movement protocols, India's diaspora categories, Lithuania's family policies, Kazakhstan's repatriation strategies, Central Asian women's transnational labour, and Kazakh migrants' micro-legal navigation across democratic and hybrid migration regimes. This diversity underscores that non-Western contexts are not marginal illustrations but vital sites of theory-building, challenging the Northern dominance of migration studies.

Taken together, the three parts of this volume illustrate the six dimensions (pillars) of the Assemblages of Migration framework introduced earlier. Part I demonstrates *historical layering*, showing how colonial and imperial infrastructures continue to shape mobility long after the empire. Part II highlights *polycentricity* and *infrastructural and territorial mediation*, revealing how regional compacts, municipal authorities, subnational zones and regionally differentiated repatriation programmes assemble new forms of governance alongside – and sometimes against – national states. Part III foregrounds *categorical stratification* and *embodiment*, demonstrating how labels, policies, and moral economies produce differentiated forms of belonging and how migrants live these hierarchies in embodied, gendered, and affective ways. It also shows how migrants themselves navigate, reinterpret, and sometimes recalibrate legal and bureaucratic environments through embodied practices and micro-legal reasoning. Across these diverse cases, the volume demonstrates that migration governance is not a unified system but a constantly reassembled field in which power, history, infrastructure, and practical knowledge intertwine.

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PART I

Colonial and Imperial Legacies of Migration
Governance



CHAPTER 2

Out of Agriculture Migration in Java, the 1830s–2010s

Pujo Semedi

INTRODUCTION

Java is an important site for studying migration. As one of the islands with the highest population density in the world, covering an area of 138,793 km² and home to 151.59 million people, Java has become a significant source of migration. Historically, the Javanese were not known for their active migration (Maurer, 2010). Before the 1830s, migration within the island tended to occur in connection with local agrarian dynamics. To a degree, the Javanese were engaged in inter-island migration in the Malay Archipelago for trade purposes, but that was the extent of their involvement (Lockard, 1971). An intense wave of internal migration from the lowlands to the mountains took place in the nineteenth century in connection with the colonial policy of the Cultivation System (1830–1870), which compelled farmers to cultivate global market crops – sugarcane, indigo, and coffee (Bosma, 2007). This policy, which succeeded in increasing agricultural production in Java, had three immediate consequences: the clearing of new land on sparsely populated mountain slopes, population growth, and increased socioeconomic inequality and impoverishment of rural inhabitants (Boomgaard, 1987; Boomgaard & van

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Zanden, 1990; Elson, 1993). The exposure of Javanese agrarian society to the global market triggered peasant migration in Java, which intensified with the opening of labour-intensive plantations in the 1870s and 1880s. The ups and downs in the rural agrarian sector, including forestry and sea fishing (Peluso, 1989; Semedi, 2003), are the basis of the migration dynamics in Java to this day. In 1960, only 14% of the population lived in urban areas; by 2020, the percentage had increased to 66% – thanks to ongoing migration from rural areas. Up to now, however, the rural population remains high, at around 52 million people (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023), and serves as a labour reserve who, for the time being, are supported by agriculture and are ready to enter the service and industrial sectors whenever an opportunity arises.

As a social phenomenon, migration is often linked to social mobility and economic well-being. Classic studies on this theme discuss the push and pull factors that drive population movements in search of a better life and prosperity (Yea, 2005). Migration drives change, leading people to experience geographical and social mobility, whether upward or downward. Both mobilities tend to be superficial, and people may leave their home village to make a living, only to return home relatively wealthy. However, this labour mobility is not solely driven by individual calculations based on push and pull factors. Wallerstein's (2015, p. 56) analysis of the global economic system reveals how the division of the world economy between the core, semi-periphery, and periphery is shaped by labour division. This chapter examines whether migration among Javanese farmers leads to a change in their social position within the production relations and, if so, how and why. Reviewing migration from the perspective of production relations is necessary because most people migrate to work, meaning they will be assigned to a specific position within these relations. It is no coincidence that the production relations that have served as the arena for migration from Java over the past two centuries are capitalist. As Jan Breman (2024) revealed, the colonial regime that ruled Java in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was essentially a capitalist regime that turned Java into a commodity production arena to serve the world market and European capitalists. Independence did little to change this situation; the relations of production that operated in postcolonial Indonesia remained capitalistic. When Indonesia failed to create jobs at home, human labour was commodified and sent abroad to serve capitalism in other countries. Between 2020 and 2022, an average of 275,710 Indonesian workers migrated abroad each year (Statistics, 2010–2023).

The majority of these workers came from Java, and the official figures are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg. Overseas, the price of Indonesian labour is kept low by pitting it against labour from other countries, and the formation of class consciousness among fellow workers is hindered by entrenched ethnic nationalism (Brodin, 2000, p. 239).

However, cheap labour that migrates to other countries does not always remain cheap. The works of Rush (1991), Kwartanada (2002, 2017), and Booth (2012) show how, within two or three generations, some Chinese migrants in Indonesia experienced changes in their social status and position in the social relationship of production, enabling them to become part of the powerful middle class. This change occurred mainly because they established good relationships with the feudal, colonial, and postcolonial rulers of Indonesia, enabling Chinese traders and entrepreneurs to play indispensable economic roles. The second key factor, as Minghuan (2003) shows, was that these Chinese migrants settled permanently and came to regard Indonesia as their homeland. Considering these two points, the global capitalism thesis regarding migration as a source of cheap labour needs a correction.

The data for this work come from ethnographic observations I have made on various occasions in farming, plantation, and fishing communities in Indonesia since the 1990s (Semedi, 2002, 2003, 2009, 2012; Semedi & Nooteboom, 2018; Semedi & Schneider, 2021; Li & Semedi, 2021). The archival data were obtained from newspapers in the Netherlands National Library's collection (delpher.nl) and from the internet. I contextualise the data on migration through an extensive review of migration studies published by other researchers. I present the discussion chronologically to recognise the continuity of capitalistic relations embedded in Java.

FROM THE LOWLANDS TO THE MOUNTAIN RANGE

In the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial government transformed Java into a productive colony by introducing the infamous Cultivation System, which compelled farmers to allocate 20% of their farmland and 20% of their labour to the cultivation of global market crops – sugar, coffee, indigo, tea, and cinchona. The system was not born out of the blue as a political economic package. Efforts to make Java a source of income for the Dutch had already begun in the 1750s, limited to the Priangan region, which the VOC obtained as a reward for helping the King of Surakarta

win a war against his nephew. In the Priangan region, the VOC forced farmers to grow coffee in exchange for meagre prices (Bremas, 2015). Further integration of Javanese farmers into the market system was facilitated through the liberalisation policy of 1811–1814 during British rule. The farmers were freed from local feudalism and became subjects of the British king with the obligation to pay land rent in cash. In doing so, they were encouraged to cultivate market crops. The 1810s liberalisation had, in effect, forced farmers to gradually abandon the old subsistence mode of production and gear them towards a market economy, where money facilitated exchange and social relations were regulated by the supply and demand mechanism.

One main problem in the cultivation system was labour scarcity. To overcome this problem, sugar plantations were established in densely populated lowland areas, where labour could be recruited from villages surrounding the sugar factories. The same was done with indigo cultivation (Hemker, 1981). In the case of coffee, the labour issue was more complicated. Coffee trees are suitable for low-temperature areas, ranging from 400 to 1,000 metres above sea level. At that time, most of Java's uplands were sparsely populated. The opening of coffee plantations between 1830 and 1870 spurred migration to the uplands, where farmers cleared forests to plant coffee and corn fields (Topik & Clarence-Smith, 2003; Boomgaard, 1999, 2003a).

The migration to the uplands was also motivated by the farmers' economic interests. Coffee beans would be sold to the government warehouses at market prices; therefore, they would help farmers settle the land tax, with some money left to cover other needs (van Niel, 1992). Farmers' revenue from coffee cultivation was excessively low, but greed and racist views towards the native farmers discouraged colonial officials from increasing it. On average, across Java, farmers' revenue from coffee cultivation accounted for only 4% of their total household income, while this forced labour absorbed at least 15% of their household labour (Arminius, 1889, p. 2174). Upon advice to increase coffee farmers' revenue, Governor-General Jean Chrétien Baud answered: '[T]o pay more for what you can get for less is not a sound economic proposition' (Bremas, 2015, p. 233). Javanese farmers could survive and thrive on such low income by combining subsistence and market economies. They planted corn, roots, and hill rice for household use while cultivating coffee, and in a matter of years, the quiet uplands were filled with people and villages (Palte, 1989).

Increased food stock among farmers puts them in favourable socio-economic conditions that support population growth (Boserup, 1993). In the meantime, the colonial government also expanded the smallpox vaccination programme, effectively reducing the death rate among the Javanese population (Boomgaard, 2003b). Java's population increased rapidly within a century, from around 4.5 million in the 1810s to 28.5 million in the early 1900s. The government considered this population growth positive because it increased the labour supply desperately needed to cultivate market crops. To keep labour costs low, the government opened the gates for rice imports from other countries, ensuring the availability of cheap foodstuffs in the market (Bosma, 2007). Similarly, the farmers did not see rapid population growth as a problem. They said, 'Many children bring many fortunes', a social view that led them to severe economic difficulties. This viewpoint could be valid, as children might have been sent to work to increase household revenue if jobs or farmlands were available; however, that was not the case.

In 1870, the colonial government enacted the Agrarian Law, which expropriated 3.5 million hectares of land that communities had managed as village customary land and converted it into state land. Of this land, 2.1 million hectares were turned into protected and production forests, while 1.4 million hectares were leased to European private companies for plantations (Departement van Landbouw, 1925). The expropriation of such a large amount of land placed Javanese farmers in a disadvantaged socioeconomic position (Jacoby, 1949; Li, 2010). As the nineteenth century progressed, a significant portion of the Javanese population became landless, resulting in economic hardship. Unemployment and poverty were widespread, with people migrating across the island in search of work and income to survive (Maurer, 2010). By the 1880s, some mountain and lowland villages in the sugarcane-growing areas had become overpopulated.

The nineteenth century witnessed an incredible increase in productivity in Java. However, it left little for the farmers, as the colonial government grabbed most of it. Farmers used the little cash from coffee cultivation to increase access to the food the government kept available and cheap through rice imports from mainland Asia. The import deliberately kept the Javanese cost of living low, as did the price of their labour (Bosma, 2019, p. 71). The policy of keeping the cost of living low for Indonesian labourers continued into the 1930s, as revealed by the statement of the Director of the Home Government in the Volksraad (the Colonial People Assembly): 'That means an adult Indonesian is sufficiently fed with 2.5

cents per day' (Soekarno, 1932). Within a century, Java had become an island of poor labour reserves to be syphoned off to handle low-paid manual jobs on plantations.

From the very beginning, the provision of labour to run the capitalist plantation industry was structured within a colonial racist framework. The allocation of low wages and low living standards for Indonesian workers was shaped by Dutch racism, which perceived Indonesians as low-class colonial subjects. Therefore, they had to be paid cheaply. This racist view was legitimised by a colonial regulation that classified people in Indonesia into three groups: Europeans, or whites, as the first class; foreign Orientals as the second class; and *bumiputra*, or Indonesians, as the lowest class (Bremen, 1989, 2015, 2024). This stratification designates job positions and wages. Indonesians were assigned poorly paid manual jobs. Meanwhile, management positions in public and private companies were given to Dutch and Europeans with wages many times higher.

TOWARDS THE PLANTATION BELT

The difficult economic life in the rural lowlands and uplands of Java began to be felt in the second half of the nineteenth century. Food crises occurred in many regions due to the overallocation of labour to the market crop sector and poor interregional distribution of foodstuffs (Suryo, 1982). Indeed, the newly established plantations did open up job opportunities, but the work was mostly seasonal. Intensive work was carried out during the harvest season, which lasted 2–3 months. Outside the harvest season, plantation jobs were limited to routine field maintenance, which required fewer workers. Plantation jobs were poorly paid. The lower-tier workers were paid between 20 and 30 cents per working day or 6 to 9 guilders per month if they worked a full 30 days. A foreman was paid slightly higher, between 10 and 15 guilders. Higher positions, such as overseer and manager, were reserved for Europeans, with an initial fixed monthly salary ranging from 50 to 75 guilders. The low wages and social status of coolies made villagers around plantations less inclined to take plantation jobs. They joined the plantations during the low season in their farming calendar. Jobless youth from the lowlands were also not interested in plantation jobs. They did not see plantation work as a profession that people could be proud of. For them, plantations were mere fair game to extract easy money (Anonym, 1885).

It was a common story of workers fleeing to another plantation after receiving an advance, only to flee again after receiving another advance. These repeated incidents of runaway coolies were seen by the Dutch planters as a social characteristic of the Javanese: dishonest and lazy, rather than as a response to injustice in plantation labour relations (Alatas, 1977). Even in impoverished Java, obtaining a stable and dependable labour force had become a never-ending source of headaches for the Dutch planters. Decades were still to come before the unruly, jobless youth were finally subdued and confined to stay permanently in the plantation barracks, leading the life of a plantation coolie (Semedi, 2018). In the early twentieth century, to avoid bankruptcy, many coffee plantations were converted into tea and rubber plantations, which offered stable, year-round employment for field maintenance, daily harvesting, and factory product processing. To attract workers and make them feel at home in the plantations, planters developed plantation villages, known as emplacements. Until the late 1890s, the villages primarily consisted of Dutch overseers' houses and coolie barracks for bachelor workers, known as *kuli bujang*. The new emplacements built in the 1910s were much better than the old one. They consisted of independent, separate houses, public baths and lavatories, an entertainment hall, and a venue where ronggeng dances were staged on the eve of payday (Semedi, 2018; Semedi & Nooteboom, 2018). The new emplacements were expensive to build, but the plantation owners considered it worth the expense to secure a stable workforce that could be deployed throughout the season.

In the emplacement, the workers developed into a community and acquired a new identity as plantation people. They were characterised by a distinctive social structure, where the place of work and the place of life – the social structure of work and daily life – overlapped, much like a military barracks. Meanwhile, in sugar plantations, most of the work remained seasonal, with planting and harvest as the peak seasons. Outside of these two seasons, workers made a living elsewhere. Some returned to their villages to handle whatever agricultural and craft work was available, creating a social situation that Clifford Geertz (1963) described as agricultural involution, where more people work on the exact size of fields just to keep them having access to part of the harvest. Some sought odd jobs in the city.

In both seasonal and perennial plantations, workers live in a world of work rigidly structured by racist relations, determined by skin colour and not skills (Minasny, 2020; Raben, 2020).

As indicated earlier, Indonesians are hired to handle lower-level manual labour for low wages. Middle management, the overseers, were filled by Dutch or Europeans, and the highest position, plantation managers, was granted to the plantation owners or overseers who managed to work their way up – with lavish salaries that could reach \$600/month. Meanwhile, educated Indonesians could only become clerks or assistant overseers if they were exceptionally skilled and outstanding. This racially structured life was also reflected in the living arrangements in the plantation village. The plantation manager lived in the largest official house, with a large garden, located in the most prominent part of the emplacement, in the highest spot where the manager could command a controlling view of the surrounding area or in the front row before the factory. The overseers lived in neat rows of smaller, nicely built houses, a layer below or behind the manager's house. Finally, the Indonesians lived in worker housing in the rear rows of the emplacement.

The migration of Javanese people to plantation areas indicated a sinister connection between racism and capitalism in the colonial period. The Javanese rural population was systematically deprived of access to their main factor of production, land, and were turned into cheap labour to run the plantation industry. Once they took plantation jobs, they were poorly paid, not because of market mechanisms but because of racist relations. Considering that plantation managers and overseers complained about the shortage of labour, the wages of plantation workers should be high. It was racist relations that dictated that only white people were entitled to high salaries and prosperous lives. Indonesians, as the lowest colonial subjects, were entitled to a small wage, just enough to keep them alive and carry out their jobs. For villagers who were lucky enough to own land, they could remain in the village to live a free man's life. Over time, however, due to population pressure, their numbers dwindled as more and more people were dragged to make a living from paid jobs outside village agriculture (de Brauw, 2019).

SUMATRA PLANTATIONS

The opening of Indonesia to private investment in the 1870s was welcomed by Dutch and European entrepreneurs, who eagerly flocked to take advantage of the opportunity to open plantations in the colony – specifically in Java and East Sumatra (Szekely-Lulofs, 1989; Pelzer, 1982; Breman, 1989). European planters came primarily with capital – mostly

loans from the parastatal bank Netherlands Handel Maatschappij – and cheap land rents from local colonial and feudal lords. The colonial government subsidised the development of plantation capitalism. In addition to inexpensive land leases, these land leases could serve as collateral for obtaining business capital loans. Clearing forests and converting them into land for market crop cultivation required significant energy. However, the European planters were privileged; they did not need to purchase land or invest in business capital. Everything was provided cheaply by the government, exclusively for Europeans. At the same time, Indonesians were given cheap jobs.

The establishment of tobacco plantations in East Sumatra required an ample labour supply. Initially, labour was recruited from China and India, but high transportation costs pushed planters to look closer to Java. The socioeconomic situation in rural Java, particularly in the lowlands, deteriorated significantly during the 1870s and 1880s. Poverty spread, particularly in the lowlands where sugar factories were located. The abolition of forced cultivation in the 1870s, which required sugar factories to lease land through market mechanisms, did not significantly benefit farmers either, as the opportunity was largely captured by officials and large landed village elites (Fasseur, 1986). As soon as they heard that the government would order sugar plantation companies to lease farmlands at market price, many local elites invested their money to buy large tracts of land from impoverished farmers. Later, they rented the land to sugar plantations, living the lives of petty landlords.

By that time, labour had become a precious commodity in Java, but the premium was captured by recruiting companies and labour scouts. To recruit labour from Java, the East Sumatran plantation relied on recruitment firms in Jakarta and Semarang, paying a lavish commission of 40–50 guilders per worker. In turn, the companies hired Javanese scouts who roamed the countryside in search of targets (Hayashi, 2002). With persuasion, sweet promises, and often deceit, recruiters sought targets in town markets (Houben, 1999). Labour scouts, known as *werek* (from the Dutch word ‘werk’, work), were hated by villagers (Lockard, 1971), who perceived them as humans abducting ghosts. Villagers who took plantation contracts outside Java were called ‘lost to *werek*’.

Workers who agreed to join the recruiters were taken to the recruitment company to sign a five-year contract, and they became contract coolies, *kuli kontrak*. The contract would be automatically extended if these poor labourers had a debt with the plantation company at the end of the

first term. People were willing to sign the contract to work on the East Sumatran plantation in the hope of finding a better living. However, conditions in East Sumatran plantations were awful (Bremar, 1989, 2024). When they arrived at the plantation, the workers were provided with poor living facilities: coolie barracks without privacy and inadequate sanitary facilities. The wages were lower than promised. Gone were the workers' dreams of becoming prosperous on the Sumatran plantation and returning to their home village rich upon completing their contracts. Wages were often paid in plantation-made coins, which were acceptable for exchange only at the plantation store. On payday, every two weeks, every plantation village has a crowded market filled with gambling stalls and travelling groups of female dancers, *ronggeng*, who also offer sexual services. The fruits of two weeks' hard work are often used up in one evening at the payday market. After that, the labourers must slog again until the next payday and market day. This continued from month to month, and at the end of the contract period, many coolies were still in debt to the plantation store; therefore, they had to renew their contracts by default.

Often, the treatment of the white overseers towards the coolies was inhumane. They were subjected to corporal punishment for every mistake, to the point where female coolies were stretched between wooden poles, and their genitalia were smeared with pepper. The mistreatment of coolies incited widespread resentment. Several white overseers were targeted, beaten, and even killed along with their families. There was a high number of coolies running away from the plantations. Some entered local villages to take up jobs in rubber fields owned by farmers who treated and paid them well (Bosma, 2019, p. 70). The government subjected the runaway coolies to a penal code and treated them as criminals. Nevertheless, the number of Javanese who signed contracts to work in the East Sumatra plantations increased. From year to year, new coolies from Java continued to arrive at the plantation. By 1902, there were 34,596 Javanese workers in East Sumatra, and the numbers increased to around 200,000 in 1942. They formed the Deli Javanese community, and during the Independence Revolution, they were involved in the occupation of uncultivated plantation fields (Pelzer, 1982; Stoler, 1998).

Taking up plantation jobs in East Sumatra represented a significant shift in geographical mobility for Javanese workers. Still, it did not change their position in the capitalist relations of production. At most, this migration only slightly raised their status from destitute labour reserve to poorly treated coolies who lived close to slavery. People clustered in their ethnic

groups – Javanese, Chinese, and Tamil – and perceived other groups through stereotypes. Everyone was troubled and denigrated other ethnic groups to relieve their anger at the difficult life. Forced by circumstances, some Javanese female coolies sought additional income by offering sexual services. This has led to the stigmatisation and stereotyping of Javanese men as lazy and women as prostitutes. This stereotype has long since disappeared, but the power and capital relations that place Javanese migrant workers as lower-class people remain to this day (Udasmoro & Setiadi, 2021, p. 242) .

SURINAME AND NEW CALEDONIA

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, European plantation capitalism expanded throughout their colonies in various parts of the world, including the Americas and the South Pacific. The same spirit drove all. The Dutch, the British, and the French were all similar; they transformed the colonies into a platform to circulate Western capital and produce commodities for the prosperity of their respective nations in Europe. The same greed, the same cruelty, and the same social relations of production persisted. The emergence of plantations in various parts of the world illustrates how capitalism could easily overcome national borders. At the same time, as seen in the case of Sumatra, the coolies were susceptible and easily divided by ethnic identity. The division of coolies by ethnic identity became even more apparent when they were working on overseas plantations.

As in Indonesia, plantations in Suriname and New Caledonia required large amounts of labour. Java became one of the sources of cheap labour, and its shipment to plantations across the Atlantic and Pacific demonstrated the mechanisms of labour creation in plantation capitalism. First, the Javanese farmers were impoverished in their villages because they were alienated from their main factor of production, land, which was then handed over to plantation companies. Once established, plantations in Java reproduced poverty and enlarged the labour reserve through low wages. Subsequently, the impoverished labour reserve was sent to work on plantations in other places. In less than a century, Java was transformed from a land of subsistence farmers, who worked to meet domestic needs, to a cheap labour reserve to run global plantation capitalism (Elson, 1997).

For the Java farmers, the reproduction of cheap labour and the growing labour reserve led to increasingly harsh socioeconomic conditions. The

combination of high population growth and loss of access to agricultural land increases monetisation in the economy of the people in Java. An increasing portion of life's necessities had to be purchased from the market rather than produced on one's farm. By the early twentieth century, most Javanese had transitioned to a cash economy. They needed cash income not only to pay land taxes but also to buy the necessities of daily life.

On the other hand, jobs were challenging to come by unless they entered a plantation. The manufacturing industry was intentionally absent in Java. Machinery for plantation and industrial goods for everyday consumption was imported from Europe and the United States. Firstly, colonial officials did not want to see the growth of a militant and demanding industrial working class. Secondly, as a colony, Java and Indonesia were designed to supply crop commodities needed by the global market rather than to become competitors for European manufacturing industries.

In Suriname, a Dutch colony in South America acquired through an exchange for Manhattan Island with the British, Dutch planters opened sugar plantations. Initially, the plantation workforce was filled with slaves. In 1863, the Dutch government abolished slavery in all its colonies, and many former slaves preferred to work elsewhere rather than on the sugar plantations. To maintain a sufficient labour force, the planters submitted a request to bring in coolies from Java, to which the Dutch East Indies government responded unenthusiastically. They argued that they 'would be powerless to prevent the exploitation of the Javanese' at the hands of planters in a faraway place. The more plausible reason was that the Netherlands Indies' plantations desperately needed the labour. Only after repeated requests did the Dutch East Indies government open the door to send contract coolies to Suriname. In 1890, 94 Javanese (61 men and 31 women) left Java for Paramaribo (Lockard, 1971).

In Suriname, Javanese migrants were immediately employed on sugar cane plantations, where they met Creoles and Indian workers who looked down on them (Meel, 2018). The Creoles perceived the Javanese as fools 'to accept the kind of work that the Creoles had done as slaves' (Lockard, 1971, p. 56). The Indian migrant workers held a similar view, as they regarded themselves as superior British subjects who enjoyed the protection of the British Consulate (Suparlan, 1976). Life on the Suriname sugar cane plantations was harsh, characterised by long working hours and low wages. Unable to bear the conditions, 7,684 out of 32,956 workers between 1897 and 1938 returned to Java after their contracts ended (Hoefte, 1998). They returned home no richer than when they had left;

most of their wages had been spent on living expenses in Suriname. Others chose to stay on as plantation workers or smallholders on farmland provided by the government (Lockard, 1971). They worried about the humiliation they might face for returning to Java as poor. Some were afraid of the long sea journey, and some were tired of waiting for a ship that never came. Later, before the colony's independence in 1975, some Surinamese Javanese undertook double migration by moving to the Netherlands in search of better and more secure livelihoods, where they could work as skilled workers.

Supply of labour was also needed for mining and plantation work in New Caledonia, the French penal colony in the South Pacific. The labour needs were initially met by employing French prisoners, but in 1894, the penal labour system was abolished and replaced by an indentured labour system sourced from Asia (Allen, 2018). Following the steps of the Suriname government, the Government of New Caledonia submitted a request to Batavia, which was initially met with a cold response. Through lengthy negotiations, however, in 1902, the first batch of 170 Javanese indentured labourers was sent to New Caledonia, with more to come in the following years (Lockard, 1971). The interests of capitalism managed to break into the political calculations of the colonial state.

Working conditions in New Caledonia were harsh, as the colony had not yet discarded its penal tradition of treating workers like convicts. However, it seemed that the harsh life in the New Caledonia nickel mines and plantations, where workers lived in cramped barracks, was considered preferable to the depression-ridden economy of Java. Between 1933 and 1939, 7,800 Javanese migrants arrived as free labourers, mainly to fill vacancies in the booming nickel mines (Allen, 2018). Many of these workers raised their age at registration to comply with the law, which stipulated that only individuals 16 years of age and older could sign a contract. At the end of the Pacific War, in 1945, the French government abolished the indentured labour system and offered citizenship to those former coolies who wanted it. In 1950, the Indonesian government opened a repatriation program, and the returnees were settled in Lampung, Sumatra. Meanwhile, workers who chose New Caledonian citizenship stayed and became the French-speaking New Caledonian Javanese community (Hayuningsih, 2023).

The socioeconomic experiences of Javanese migrant workers in the plantations of Suriname and New Caledonia were not as severe as those of their contract coolies in East Sumatra, but in terms of social relations their experiences were far worse. They were divided into groups after their

country of origin, which were characterised by differences in language, traditions, and even physical features. Javanese migrants in Suriname spoke only their language and did not master either Dutch or Creole, Suriname's lingua franca. The Javanese migrants loathed the Creole as *blanda item*, Black Dutch, and contemptuously called the Indian workers *buto*, culturally unrefined giants because of their loud voice. The Javanese also called the Indian *tiyang kuli*, coolie men, as if the Javanese themselves were not coolies. On the other side, the Creole called the Javanese migrant 'lau-lau Japanesi,' lazy Javanese, or 'joe saka saka Japanesi,' inferior Javanese (van der Kroef 1951, p. 674). In New Caledonia, Javanese migrants occupied the lowest social tier of the colonised: white people descended from prisoners, indigenous Kanak people, and migrant workers from Indochina, India, and Java who spoke their languages. Despite coming from a miserable historical background, the white workers saw themselves as the masters of the colony and regarded the migrant workers from Java as inferior. Their social relations with the indigenous people of New Caledonia were also challenging to establish, as they lived in separate locations, and the local people viewed the Javanese contract labourers as an inferior social group. The reality of daily life in both Suriname and New Caledonia did not provide opportunities for migrant workers to build solidarity with migrant groups and local communities that were in an inferior position in the dynamics of colonial plantation capitalism. Instead of developing solidarity, migrants looked down on each other based on ethnic chauvinism.

COLONISATION AND TRANSMIGRATION

By the early twentieth century, Java was impoverished and heavily burdened by an ever-growing population. Rural villagers had to rely on agriculture on tiny plots of land, and food shortages were common. The colonial government addressed this problem by sending Javanese to the sparsely populated Lampung region in South Sumatra under a colonisation programme (Hayashi, 2002). The first group of migrants, consisting of 155 families, inarrived to Lampung in 1905. They were landless villagers from the Kedu region, where the average landholding was around 0.17 ha per farmer. In Lampung, each farming family was given 2 hectares of paddy fields and a houseyard to earn a much better living than in their village. The colonisation program continued until 1941, when 189,938 people from Kedu were successfully moved to Lampung (Dahlan, 2014).

In the 1950s, the Indonesian government continued the programme, rebranded as transmigration, which covered other densely populated areas in Java, Bali, and the Lesser Sunda Islands. The presence of a large Javanese population in Lampung eventually led to resistance from the local community. Considering that Lampung had become saturated with migrants, the government, under the pretext of regional development outside Java, sent the transmigrants to other parts of Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Papua (Levang & Sevin, 1990; Levang, 2003). In the 1980s, the Indonesian government sent transmigrants from Java to be employed in the state-owned oil palm plantations in Kalimantan. As in the colonial plantations of East Sumatra, they were placed in labour relations that were segregated according to ethnic identity. The Javanese transmigrants were allocated to workers' positions under the supervision of Batak overseers from North Sumatra.

Later on, in the early 1990s, batches of Javanese, Balinese, and Lesser Sunda Islander transmigrants were sent to Kalimantan to expand palm oil plantations through the nucleus estate scheme. Using the Agrarian Law, which remains in the same spirit as the 1870 Colonial Agrarian Law, the government took over land that Dayak farmers had cultivated for generations for rubber and swidden agriculture. The expropriated land was divided into three portions: one-third was returned to the local farmers, one-third was allocated to transmigrants, and one-third was leased at a low price to plantation companies for 35 years. Similar to colonial times, plantation companies were permitted to use leasing rights as collateral to secure working capital from banks. Both local farmers and transmigrants were tied to the plantation companies as outgrowers, obliged to sell their palm oil fruit to the company. This scheme put the Javanese transmigrants in a head-to-head confrontation with the local farmers. The local farmers rightfully stated that the scheme involved colonising their homeland by palm oil companies, in which the transmigrants played a crucial role (Li & Semedi, 2021).

As in Lampung, the arrival of Javanese under government sponsorship in Kalimantan led to resistance from local communities who saw the migration as Javanisation and transmigrants as the golden children of Suharto's regime (Li & Semedi, 2021). This accusation is not without basis. In addition to experiencing reduced access to agricultural land – because some of it was leased by the government to plantation companies and given to transmigrants – local people see migrants from Java as unwilling to integrate. They live and cultivate land in rural areas of Kalimantan,

Sumatra, and Sulawesi, but much of the wealth they generate is sent to the city or Java to pay for their children's school fees or to prepare a place to live when they grow old. Since the 2000s, the government has reduced the transmigration programme, and most labourers from Java migrated on their own arrangement.

FREE MIGRATIONS?

The first three decades after independence were marked by war, internal military conflicts, and corruption, which led the Indonesian economy to a poor state. The exchange rate of the Indonesian rupiah to the US dollar weakened from 3.8 in 1950 to 326 in 1969. Public investment in the agricultural sector decreased, leading to a significant decline in crop yields. Food shortages occurred annually in various regions (Glassburner, 1962; Woo & Nasution, 1989). These adverse conditions prompted a surge in migration to urban areas. Some people commuted daily, while others stayed for a few days, and some remained in the city longer before returning to the village when their labour was needed on the farm. In the city, they filled various manual jobs, paid on a piece-rate or daily basis without employment contracts, or worked in informal small trading. Many found jobs as household servants. This strategy largely helped villagers subsist, but that was all (Hugo, 1982, p. 70).

The introduction of the Green Revolution and the expansion of education services since the early 1970s led to a new pattern of rural migration. The Green Revolution drastically increased agricultural productivity but resulted in land accumulation among wealthy farmers, reducing the need for agricultural labour (Tjondronegoro, 2013). Both factors intensified the push for rural outmigration. The establishment of primary schools in every village and secondary schools in sub-district towns has raised the educational level of the younger generation, who were also encouraged to migrate to urban areas, entering the industrial and service sectors (Liu & Yamaguchi, 2014; Wajdi, van Wissen, & Mulder, 2015).

Initially, the migrants headed to the nearest city, which allowed them to maintain social and work relations with their home village. However, as their networks expanded, they moved further and further apart. The less educated moved to fill jobs in the expanding oil palm plantations in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and even Malaysia (Spaan, 1994; Spaan & van Naerssen, 2018). Economic growth in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and countries in the Middle East created opportunities for housekeeping

work, which Indonesian female workers quickly filled. Confidently, thousands of women left their villages with little education to improve their fortunes in other countries (Killias, 2018). Upon having a job as a house servant in the Middle East, an ex-female tea picker on a plantation proudly exclaimed, 'Now my tea fields (my source of livelihood) are overseas.' A similar view also emerges among fishermen workers who, since the 2000s, have joined foreign fishing fleets based in Taiwan, New Zealand, Southern Europe, Scandinavia, and Central America to fish in international waters: 'Now our fishing ground is in the Pacific or Atlantic.' They aptly perceive their migration as an expansion of their sphere of influence to make a living, in the hope of achieving better revenues and an improved socioeconomic status. They do not view their faraway migration as a means to alter their position in capitalistic relations of production. Just like in colonial times, in the places where they work, migrant workers occupy an inferior social position, referred to by the derogatory nickname 'Indon.' Migrant workers from other countries look down upon them.

Migration from rural Java after independence, especially outside the transmigration program, is referred to as 'free migration', as people move independently. Free migration, however, is a misleading term. People migrate and leave their families and hometowns to pursue a better life because they are forced by socioeconomic circumstances that offer little hope at home. The discussion above demonstrates that these circumstances stem from the positioning of rural Java within capitalist relations. Since the introduction of the Cultivation System, landlessness in rural Java has steadily increased, reaching 90% by the 1990s (Bosma, 2019, p. 85). Political efforts to maintain equal land access among farmers always end up in a dead-end (White, 2005). The poor economic conditions in rural Java are structurally created to form a reserve labour force that can be deployed across regional and national borders.

Mandor, Werek, and Agen

Javanese labour migrants are mostly seasonal and temporary; they do not have time to build established social networks and pave the way to achieve a better position in the social relations of production for the second or third generation. Poor economic conditions in their destination force a small number of migrants to give up their dreams of returning to their hometowns and instead settle down and become new citizens in their destination areas. This small group has the opportunity to experience upward

social mobility, become prosperous, and occupy a better social position. Many third-generation Javanese migrants today have become top politicians in Suriname. They even entertain the hope of a Javanese president in Suriname (Susilo, 2023). However, most migrant workers from Java return to their home villages.

Migration leads to visible marks in rural areas. Thanks to the steady flow of remittances, life in rural Java prospered. Nice brick houses were replacing wooden and bamboo houses. Indeed, in general, the goal of migrant workers is to ‘... build a house in one’s original village and return home with a substantial sum’ (Allerton, 2020) to open a small-scale business. In fact, not many migrants managed to fulfil their second wish. Work in another country was costly, and their wages were primarily used for family life in the village and children’s education (Soraya, 2020). Despite the optimism, they were forced to keep working contract after contract. For many people, the work originally envisioned as temporary became permanent jobs until retirement. Notable exceptions to this pattern were those who managed to position themselves as recruiters: plantation foremen (*mandor*), the colonial labour scouts (*werek*), and, currently, overseas labour agents. They all profit by serving as middlemen, facilitating the labour force flow from rural Java to the deployment area (Killias, 2010, 2018; Bosma, 2019), and raising their position in the capitalist relations of production a rung higher than that of the labour.

During the early development of plantations in Java, planters relied heavily on foremen to recruit labourers, also known as coolies. The foreman at that time received a work contract from the plantation overseer, and to carry out the contract, the foreman recruited labour from their villages. Various reports indicate that a stable patron-client relationship developed between the foreman and his work gang. Thanks to this position as chief of the gang and provider of labour, the foreman received an income from the plantation that was no less than twice the wage of coolies. In addition, the foreman also took a cut from the wages of the work gang members, which effectively reduced the coolies’ incentive to work correctly according to the value of wages paid by the plantation. To overcome this problem, the plantation introduced workers’ roll calls to hand out wages directly to them on pay day.

Werek, the labour scouts who roamed from village to village, were not the heads of the work gang. They did not engage in the real job of toiling in the plantation fields. They only looked for workers who could then be brought to recruiting companies, sending them to plantations outside

Java and Indonesia. Werek received a premium from the company for each person they got. Finding people through whatever means and handing them over to recruitment companies earned werek the infamous nickname of the human seller (Anonym, 1928). The abolition of contract work on plantations in Sumatra after independence removed the werek from rural Javanese life, only to be replaced by a new, more official, but often equally ruthless figure called the TKI (*Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*, Indonesian labourer) agent, who recruited workers for overseas jobs.

TKI recruitment agents emerged in Java as the flow of overseas labour migration increased since the 1970s. Utilising a wealth of information on overseas employment and expertise in navigating travel bureaucracy as social capital, TKI agents provide labour placement services to prospective migrants (Spaan, 1994; Spaan & van Naerssen, 2018). The agents charge a substantial fee, which can be paid in cash or through gradual deductions from the workers' wages. In the 2010s, the commission received by a local recruitment agency for delivering one worker to a large agency in Jakarta could be as high as US\$600 (Lindquist, 2010, p.124–127). The enormous amount of money generated from sending Indonesian labour overseas has led to the development of nefarious practices involving multiple parties – government agencies, health authorities, immigration offices, security personnel, and recruitment agencies – to obtain as many workers as possible. Falsification of documents, corruption of labour protection funds, confinement of prospective workers, and placement scams are ubiquitous and have become national scandals (Wibisono, 2011; Victoria, 2024).

Foremen, *werek*, and recruitment agents all managed to raise their social position in capitalist relations of production by participating in labour exploitation. Most of them come from a labour background and have been migrant workers. They utilise the experience and networks gained during their time as migrant workers to transition into – borrowing a pre-war term – people traders and compradors of capitalism.

CONCLUSION

Over the last two centuries, the Javanese population has engaged in migration driven by agricultural dynamics, including the scarcity of land in their home village, the hope of finding farmland elsewhere, the precarious life in their home village, and the desire for a better livelihood elsewhere. Migration has made them a globalised people, traveling near and far beyond the borders of their home villages. This migration has also improved their

socioeconomic status, leading to a more prosperous life. However, migration has not changed their position in the relations of production and relations of power. In the home village, they were farm labourers. In the new place, they remained labourers before eventually returning home as tired and drained ex-labourers. Constrained by low wages, high traveling costs, daily needs, children's education, and the social pressure to build nice houses in the village, these Javanese migrants could barely save.

The impoverished farmers from rural Java have been migrating to plantations, mining sites, and service sectors wherever their labour is needed. Yet, employment there has been racially segregated, with well-paid upper positions allocated to whites and the privileged, while poorly paid manual labour, often without legal protection, is assigned to the Javanese migrants. Socially, they have been placed in an inferior position and pitted against migrant workers from different places of origin, which closes the windows to developing solidarity. Officially, in the industrial sector, there has been little chance for migrant workers to be promoted to higher positions. Essentially, they are not recruited to be promoted but rather as foot soldiers in the global capitalist system's labour divisions. Promotion in the industry requires adequate education, which most migrants often lack. Most crucially, upper positions have been racially reserved for certain ethnic groups or nationalities. Under that setting, there has been little hope, if any, for migrants, Javanese or otherwise, for upward mobility in the relations of production. The closest chance to achieve this is by sleeping with the enemy (Brodskins, 2000, p. 237), that is, turning themselves into recruiters, which would give them a small niche to exercise the accumulation of surplus value generated by their co-villagers. There is also a possibility for a leap from labourer to employer when the employer's family takes a domestic worker as a spouse or in-law (Ignatia & Anwar, 2024). However, these Cinderella cases are statistically rare, and when they occur, they do not alter labour-employer relations but only change the actors involved.

The history of Chinese migrant workers in Indonesia and Javanese migrant workers in Suriname shows that migration provides not only exploitation but also chances to improve one's social status. Over generations, migrants who arrived as cheap labour were able to move up in the social relations of production. However, most migrant workers did not have this opportunity because they returned to their villages quickly, abandoning the chance to establish stable socioeconomic and political networks in their new locations. As a result, rather than changing their position within the social relations of production, they mostly reproduced the existing pattern of cheap migrant

labour. How Javanese migrant workers achieved better positions in the social relations of production in their destination areas is an important issue that this chapter does not cover and warrants further research.

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CHAPTER 3

Transimperial Migration of Javanese Indentured Labour in New Caledonia, 1896–1949

Arifah Arum Candra Hayuningsih

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-nineteenth century, the French colony of New Caledonia faced a profound labour crisis precipitated by the global abolition of slavery. As in many colonial contexts, slavery had underpinned the economic infrastructure of plantation economies and extractive industries, and its abolition disrupted established forms of coerced labour (Girard, 2015). In New Caledonia, known for its mineral wealth, particularly nickel, this rupture generated urgent questions about how to secure a sustainable and controllable workforce. The indigenous Kanak population, subjected to dispossession and colonial rule, was both unwilling and unsuitable to fulfil the colonial administration's escalating labour demands. Resistance to forced labour, combined with social marginalisation and the legal framework of the *indigénat*, made Kanak participation in colonial economic projects inconsistent and politically volatile (Angleviel, 2000; Merle & Muckle, 2019).

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To address this deficit, the French colonial state first transformed New Caledonia into a penal colony. From the 1860s onwards, thousands of convicts, including both criminal offenders and political prisoners, were transported to the island. Penal labour was imagined as a dual instrument of punishment and productivity: it was intended to regenerate deviant individuals through labour while also advancing the colony's infrastructure and economic development (Foster, 1991; Bullard, 2000; Dutton, 2013; Merle & Coquet, 2019). In line with French Republican ideals, penal colonisation aimed to rehabilitate through hardship, a logic echoed in Forsdick's reading of the penal colony as a moral project, displacing undesirable bodies from the metropole to the colonial periphery (Forsdick, 2020, p. 221).

However, this strategy proved inadequate. Penal labour was inherently temporary, and its productivity was compromised by poor conditions, high mortality, and the limited integration of former convicts into the broader colonial economy. Many prisoners, once released, were left destitute or physically incapacitated. Some were even recorded as having died from homesickness, highlighting the emotional and existential toll of colonial exile (Bullard, 2000, p. 182). Moreover, the broader system of 'penal colonialism' (Boast, 2023) generated a form of slow violence (Fuggle, 2024), where systemic malnutrition and infrastructural neglect exacerbated mortality and suffering among the incarcerated. From 1864 to 1931, New Caledonia received 30,000 convicts sentenced to hard labour, deportation, or relegation, mirroring the British system in Australia but with distinct ideological justifications (Sanchez, 2018, p. 308).

By the late nineteenth century, French authorities turned instead to indentured labour, seeking workers from other colonies and regions (Stanziani, 2013, 2018; Campbell, 2019). This strategy was not unique to France. The use of indenture emerged globally as a post-abolition solution to colonial labour shortages, functioning as a juridically distinct but materially analogous system to slavery (Quirk, 2008, p. 531; Mishra, 2020, p. 2). Labourers were nominally free, bound by contract rather than coercion, yet the working conditions and power asymmetries often reproduced core features of enslavement (Jones, 2019). In this global moment, indenture served to sustain colonial capitalist expansion without formally violating the moral claims of emancipation.

It was in this context that the French identified Java – then part of the Dutch East Indies – as a potential source of labour. Java was among the most densely populated territories in Southeast Asia and had been

subjected to intense colonial extraction, most notably through the *Cultuurstelsel* (Cultivation System), which required peasants to produce export crops such as sugar and coffee under coercive conditions (Elson, 1994). By the end of the nineteenth century, Java faced acute rural poverty, land scarcity, and demographic pressure (Maurer, 2010, p. 689). The Dutch colonial government, despite its reluctance to relinquish its labour force to foreign powers, found it expedient to tolerate labour outflows as a means of mitigating social unrest and unemployment.

The resulting transimperial migration of Javanese labourers to French-controlled New Caledonia was facilitated by state-level agreements and private recruitment firms. Between 1896 and 1949, over 19,000 Javanese men, women, and children migrated to New Caledonia under indenture contracts (Maurer, 2010, p. 873). Their journey from village recruitment, maritime transport, medical inspection, and labour deployment represents a carefully orchestrated apparatus of colonial control. These workers were subjected to surveillance, medicalisation, wage differentials, spatial segregation, and legal constraint – yet they also forged communities, cultural continuities, and strategies of adaptation.

This study explores the transimperial system that structured the recruitment, transportation, and regulation of Javanese indentured labourers. Drawing on colonial archival records, employment contracts, visual artefacts, statistical tables, and secondary historiography, the research investigates how French and Dutch colonial authorities collaborated to commodify and mobilise Javanese bodies. By foregrounding the workers' experiences and the bureaucratic mechanisms that mediated their movement, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on colonial labour regimes and non-Western migration under empire.

More specifically, this article argues that transimperial migration offers a critical lens for reinterpreting labour mobility beyond national or bilateral paradigms. Rather than viewing migration as a movement from one colony to another, the transimperial approach reveals how overlapping imperial logics shaped the lived realities of migrants. It shows the ways in which multiple empires co-produced systems of control and exploitation – negotiating sovereignty, sharing information, and regulating populations across borders. In doing so, the article intervenes in the historiography of indenture, urging for a more expansive, relational account of labour under colonial capitalism.

This article draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the transimperial migration of Javanese indentured labourers

to New Caledonia. Archival materials, including colonial employment contracts, medical inspection certificates, wage and ration tables, and administrative correspondence, are analysed to reveal the bureaucratic and biopolitical mechanisms through which labour was regulated and commodified. Visual artefacts such as postcards, diagrams, and identification documents are also examined to trace how colonial authorities represented and surveilled labouring bodies, engaging with recent scholarship on the visual culture of empire (Hofmeyr, 2022). The analysis is informed by a transimperial theoretical framework (sources) and engages critically with both contemporary press accounts and historiography in French, Dutch, and English. Following Stoler (2008) and Burton (2006), particular attention is given to the silences and asymmetries within colonial archives, recognising these documents not simply as records but as instruments of colonial common sense and affective governance. In dialogue with comparative studies of indenture and penal migration (Ballantyne, 2014; Anderson, 2022), the article situates the Javanese experience within broader circuits of imperial labour, while foregrounding the specific modalities of transimperial collaboration between Dutch and French colonial regimes.

TRANSIMPERIAL FRAMEWORK AND COLONIAL MANAGEMENT OF LABOUR

In recent decades, imperial history has undergone significant re-evaluation by critical interventions from postcolonial studies, global history, and the ‘new imperial history’. These approaches have sought to decentre Eurocentric narratives and to reconceptualise empire as a network of inter-linked practices, rather than discrete territorial projects (Hirschhausen, 2015; Grindel, 2017). While global history has made considerable strides in tracing transnational movements of people, goods, and ideas, the field of imperial history remains, in many respects, constrained by nationally bounded frameworks. As Hedinger and Heé argue, even studies of empire that emphasise mobility often reproduce the logic of the nation-state by focusing on individual imperial formations in isolation (Hedinger & Heé, 2018, p. 429).

To address this limitation, the turn towards a transimperial perspective has proven particularly productive. Transimperial history examines the circulation of people, capital, knowledge, and administrative practices

across imperial boundaries, revealing the degree to which empires were not autonomous but entangled (Kamissek & Kreienbaum, 2016). Rather than imagining imperial powers as competitors operating in isolation, the transimperial approach foregrounds instances of cooperation, borrowing, mutual surveillance, and shared governance – especially in zones of overlapping interest, such as labour management (Hedinger & Heé, 2018, p. 430). This perspective opens up new possibilities for rethinking how non-Western migrants moved through, were categorised by, and were governed within multi-imperial frameworks.

The migration of Javanese indentured labourers from the Dutch East Indies to French New Caledonia between 1896 and 1949 exemplifies such entanglement. Far from being a unilateral project orchestrated by a single empire, this migration depended on formal and informal cooperation between Dutch and French colonial authorities. These arrangements facilitated the movement of labourers across imperial boundaries, while simultaneously preserving each empire's sovereign interest in controlling subject populations and managing economic development. The result was a form of transimperial labour governance in which sovereignty was neither fully ceded nor fully retained, but negotiated and co-produced in bureaucratic and contractual terms.

For the French, recruiting labourers from Java offered a means of resolving the chronic labour shortages that plagued their Pacific colonies in the wake of abolition and the declining efficacy of penal labour (Maurer, 2010, p. 866). For the Dutch, permitting emigration provided partial relief from demographic pressures, rural poverty, and the political risks associated with landlessness and economic stagnation (Rossum, 2018, p. 158). Yet this cooperation was not without ambivalence. Dutch authorities remained wary of the mistreatment of Javanese labourers abroad, which could reflect poorly on their colonial management, and they sought to retain ultimate authority over the welfare of their subjects, even when employed under a foreign flag. Meanwhile, the French maintained administrative control in New Caledonia, regulating wages, rations, and worker discipline, while relying on Dutch agents to manage recruitment and embarkation. The transimperial framework thus reveals an uneven yet collaborative infrastructure of control, in which each colonial regime extended its reach by relying on the capacities of the other.

Transimperial labour migration also operated as a mechanism for empires to reconcile the moral contradictions of post-abolition capitalism. Following the formal end of slavery, European empires faced a common

problem: how to preserve the profitability of their colonies without reintroducing slavery in name (Rupprecht, 2015, p. 123). Indenture emerged as a flexible solution – offering a form of contract-bound mobility that could be framed as ‘voluntary’ while maintaining many of the coercive features of slavery (Saunders, 2018; Jones, 2019). The French, Dutch, and British all engaged in forms of labour recruitment that blurred the line between free and unfree labour, constructing legal, medical, and contractual infrastructures to justify and sustain exploitative conditions.

This shared logic is evident across multiple colonial sites. In the British Empire, Indian indentured labourers were transported to Fiji, Mauritius, and the Caribbean under similar contracts and conditions. In the French Empire, Vietnamese workers were recruited for labour in New Caledonia and Tahiti (Trang, 2022), while the Dutch used Javanese labour throughout their archipelago and allowed limited emigration to Suriname and Deli. The notion of an ‘indentured archipelago’ (Allen, 2023) underscores the geographical reach and ideological coherence of this system: labour was circulated through imperial networks that crossed seas and legal systems yet remained tightly controlled by colonial regimes.

Importantly, the concept of transimperialism not only captures the administrative and legal frameworks that enabled these migrations but also the affective, social, and existential dimensions of life lived across empires. Hennessey and Lahti (2023), for example, highlight how individuals who moved through multiple imperial contexts created hybrid subjectivities and challenged the coherence of national-imperial identity. Similarly, Caglar (2016, p. 64) has argued that migrants in transimperial contexts often developed complex positionalities: they remained tethered to their homelands through kinship, culture, or remittances, while being subjected to multiple and often contradictory legal and political regimes.

In the case of the Javanese, this dual positioning was especially pronounced. Recruited by Dutch agencies, transported under French contracts, and governed by overlapping systems of colonial law, they were rendered simultaneously visible and invisible, recognised as economic assets, yet denied full political or cultural inclusion. Their migration, though framed administratively as temporary, often resulted in permanent displacement and estrangement from both homeland and hostland. The labourers thus embodied what might be termed *transimperial precarity* – a condition shaped by the intersection of racialisation, economic extraction, and imperial collaboration.

Moreover, the transimperial lens compels historians to reconsider where and how empire operated. Empire was not only imposed from metropolises to colonies; it was enacted at borders, in contracts, on ships, in medical inspections, and through inter-imperial negotiation. As such, the Javanese migration to New Caledonia cannot be fully understood within the confines of Dutch or French national historiographies. It must be read as a shared imperial project that reveals the relational and comparative dimensions of colonial governance.

RECRUITMENT AND TRANSPORTATION

The recruitment process for Javanese indentured labourers was highly structured and strategically designed to meet both the logistical demands of the colonial economy and the ideological imperatives of imperial governance. Recruitment firms in Java operated extensive networks that reached deep into rural communities where poverty, landlessness, and limited employment opportunities made migration an appealing, if risky, prospect (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 33). Between 1870 and 1930, these systems underwent significant evolution, transitioning from early ad hoc practices to more centralised and contractual operations managed by agencies such as Soesman, Falkenberg & De Hass, Harland, D. Maccoll's Anglo-Dutch Labour Bureau, and A.F. Hillebrand (Muljono-Larue, 1996; Houben, 1999; Adi, 2014). These firms operated from Batavia and Semarang, coordinating a three-tiered labour hierarchy of European recruiters, local henchmen (*handlangers*), and village-level overseers (*mandur*), who collectively facilitated the mobilisation of bodies from remote Javanese communities to French colonial projects in the Pacific.

Recruitment patterns can be further shown by data on the volume and demographic composition of Javanese indentured labourers arriving in New Caledonia between 1896 and 1949, as shown in Table 3.1, compiled by Maurer (2010, p. 873):

The total number of arrivals reached approximately 19,400 individuals, spread over 87 convoys. Of these, the majority were men, reflecting colonial priorities that associated masculinity with physical endurance and labour efficiency. The period 1922–1929 saw the highest number of male arrivals, with 5,485 men and 2,103 women, suggesting a partial shift towards family migration during this time. Nonetheless, even in the 1933–1939 period, men continued to outnumber women nearly 3 to 1. This gender imbalance not only shaped the nature of the labour force but also

Table 3.1 Main phase of arrivals and departures of the Javanese indentured labourers in New Caledonia (1896–1955)

Migration Phase	Period	Arrivals in New Caledonia				Departures from New Caledonia			
		Men	Women	Total Adults	Children	Convoys	Men	Women	Total Adults
Phase 1	1896–1929	–	–	11,141	–	58	–	–	1,431
	Sub-phase 1a	–	(70)	1,271	(15)	5	–	–	76
	Sub-phase 1b	–	–	2,282	(1)	37	–	–	1,331
	Sub-phase 1c	5,485	2,103	7,588	(136)	16	–	–	24
Phase 2	1933–1939	5,821	1,988	7,809	(35)	28	–	–	5,299
	Sub-phase 2a	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	4,797
	Sub-phase 2b	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	502
Phase 3	1949	329	121	450	44	1	3,810	1,460	5,270
TOTAL (1896–1949)		–	–	19,400	–	87	–	–	12,000

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate children counted within the adult totals. Sub-phase periods – Phase 1: (a) 1896–1909, (b) 1911–1919, (c) 1922–1929; Phase 2: (a) 1924–1939, (b) 1941; Phase 3 departures: 1948–1955. A dash (–) denotes data not disaggregated in the source.
Source: (Maurer, 2010, p. 873). Data compiled and reformulated by the author.

had lasting effects on the social structure of Javanese diasporic communities, where limited female presence constrained traditional kinship transmission and often necessitated intermarriage or cultural adaptation.

A notable feature of this recruitment strategy was its overwhelming focus on male labourers. Colonial authorities, both Dutch and French, explicitly favoured young, landless Javanese men, whom they considered physically suited to arduous plantation and mining work, more mobile, and more easily regulated (Hayuningsih, 2025, p. 91). This preference reflected a broader gendered logic of colonial capitalism, in which male bodies were rendered the default unit of productive labour, while women were either excluded or relegated to domestic and reproductive roles (Ballantyne & Burton, 2005). Consequently, this male-dominated migration led to skewed gender ratios in New Caledonia and shaped diasporic social formations. Many labourers arrived without families, and those who stayed permanently often formed new ‘fictive’ kinship networks in situ, contributing to the emergence of hybrid, diasporic communities (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 53). The absence of women also limited opportunities for cultural transmission through maternal lines, affecting the intergenerational preservation of Javanese language, ritual, and culinary practice (Tsing, 2024). Thus, the gendered structure of recruitment had long-term implications not only for labour deployment but also for the cultural memory and social continuity of the Javanese diaspora.

Once recruited, labourers endured a lengthy and often perilous journey to New Caledonia. Ships used for transport were rarely equipped for human passage, having been designed for cargo rather than passengers. Conditions on board were cramped and unsanitary, with limited access to clean water, inadequate ventilation, and minimal medical care (Ivergård, 1984; Fisher, 2007). Food rations were poor in both quality and quantity, contributing to high levels of malnutrition. Diseases such as dysentery and respiratory infections spread quickly through overcrowded quarters, weakening the labourers before they even reached their destination. The psychological impact of this voyage – marked by confinement, language isolation, and anxiety about the unknown – compounded the physical hardships and further disorientated the migrants.

These maritime experiences were not unique to the French colonial context. British indentured labourers en route to Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean similarly endured long transoceanic voyages in substandard vessels. As Anderson (2022) and Carter (1995) have noted, the sea became a liminal space in which indentured labourers were transformed from

subjects of one empire into commodities of another, stripped of social identities and redefined in logistical and medical terms. Maritime crossings thus served not only as physical transfers but also as moments of bureaucratic and symbolic reclassification, where health inspections, shipboard discipline, and port quarantines reinforced colonial hierarchies of race, fitness, and labour value (Haycock et al., 2009; Morgan, 2010).

Upon arrival in New Caledonia, the labourers were immediately subjected to further bureaucratic processing. They were quarantined on the island of Freycinet, where medical officials inspected their bodies for signs of disease or disability, and immigration officers verified their administrative files (Fig. 3.1).

The medical examination certificate shown in this image provides a stark illustration of the bureaucratic and invasive scrutiny that Javanese indentured labourers underwent before being sent to destinations like New Caledonia. Issued by the Emigratie-Kantoor A.F. Hillebrand, the certificate includes a photograph of the labourer, alongside detailed diagrams of the human body, which were likely used to mark any physical characteristics or health conditions. These examinations aimed to assess physical fitness for labour, with doctors searching for signs of infectious diseases or disabilities that could hinder the individual's work capacity.

There are notable aspects of the boy's appearance that raise questions about potential age falsification. He appears quite young, which suggests that recruiters may have manipulated his reported age to meet the requirements for labour contracts. Age falsification was a common practice in the context of indentured labour, enabling authorities to meet quotas by expanding the pool of eligible workers (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 32). By disregarding the developmental needs of these young individuals, colonial authorities prioritised labour demands over the welfare of the labourers, revealing the exploitative foundations of the system.

The rigorous medical regime imposed on the indentured labourers exemplifies the colonial need to control their bodies, both as a workforce and as commodities (Trang, 2022). The labourers' bodies were subject to continuous monitoring to ensure their economic productivity, with health certificates marking them as 'fit' or 'unfit' for labour. This medical scrutiny and invasive record-keeping reflect the colonial authorities' desire to manage and control labourers' bodies, treating them as resources to be inspected, approved, and shipped as necessary.

In Foucauldian terms, this medical documentation process exemplifies the concept of biopower (Foucault, 1978), where modern states exert

control over individuals by regulating and monitoring bodies to achieve economic and social ends. Foucault's notion of biopolitics provides insight into how these labourers were viewed not as autonomous individuals but as assets whose physical capacity had to be documented and preserved for economic exploitation. This biopolitical governance not only dictated the labour conditions but also shaped the social dynamics within the colonies, reinforcing racial hierarchies and perpetuating the exploitation of indentured labourers (Dietrich, 2017).

The shift from sovereign power (the right to 'take life or let live') to biopolitical control (the power to 'make live and let die') is evident in how the colonial state meticulously scrutinised the bodies of indentured labourers to ensure their ongoing utility (Kothari, 2013). This form of power, which Foucault identifies as essential to modern governance, embedded itself within the bodies of these workers, controlling them as 'docile bodies' that were disciplined to function within the colonial economy (Foucault, 1995). By marking bodies with diagrams and recording health conditions, the colonial authorities reinforced their authority, stripping labourers of individuality and subjecting them to continuous observation to maximise their economic output.

Following quarantine, labourers were transferred to temporary accommodation at Orphanage Bay, where employers would claim them according to prior arrangements. The process resembled a dehumanising auction: employers, having 'ordered' workers in advance, reviewed contracts, paid fees, and collected labourers as one would collect tools or livestock (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 35). The disjuncture between the bureaucratic formalism of this system and the lived experience of the labourers underscores the abstraction of human lives into administrative categories, a hallmark of colonial modernity.

The contractual framework governing these migrations is exemplified in the surviving employment documents, such as the 1943 *Acte d'Engagement* for a labourer named Soekardi (Fig. 3.2).

The official contract, issued in Nouméa, bears the signatures and seals of multiple colonial authorities, including the employer, the interpreter, and a representative of the Immigration Office. The contract is written entirely in French, a language inaccessible to most Javanese labourers, and outlines a fixed term of two years, with a monthly wage of 200 francs. Despite the presence of an interpreter, the use of foreign legal language and the bureaucratic complexity of the document underscore the power asymmetries at play. Consent was operationalised through thumbprints

RENGAGEMENT
NOUVELLE-CALÉDONIE
ET
DÉPENDANCES
IMMIGRATION
N° (1) 988
d'enregistrement
Circonscription
de
Voh

ACTE D'ENGAGEMENT

Le 19 juil 1943, par devant nous Hubert Jean
Syndic de l'Immigration soussigné, assisté d'un interprète, se sont présentés :
Monsieur Société "Le Nickel" demeurant à Voh
et l'immigrant Soebardi N° Mle 25745
lesquels nous ont priés d'enregistrer la déclaration suivante :
l'immigrant Soebardi N° Mle 25745 loue ses
services à Monsieur Société "Le Nickel" à Voh qui accepte
en qualité de :
aux conditions du dernier contrat en vigueur pour une durée de deux ans
révisable en cas de besoin
sous réserve de l'approbation du Chef du Service de l'Immigration.
Monsieur Société "Le Nickel" s'engage à payer mensuellement
à l'ouvrier contractant la somme nette de 200 fcs et au Service de l'Immi-
gration, les redevances fixées par arrêté, pendant la durée du présent contrat
qui aura son effet à compter du 16 Août 1943 et supplémentaire-
ment le pécule de l'immigrant.
Il déclare, en outre avoir pris connaissance des dispositions du dernier contrat
en vigueur.
Et après lecture faite ont signé avec nous,
L'Interprète, L'Engagé, L'Employeur, La Syndic
Hubert Soebardi Le Nickel
Vu et Approuvé
Le Chef du Service de l'Immigration
Hubert

A faire en deux exemplaires qui doivent être adressés au Bureau de l'Immigration.
(1) Ne pas porter de N° sur le présent acte.
Les engagements partent du 1^{er} au du 15 de chaque mois.
Pécule de 40 francs pour les hommes et de 30 francs pour les femmes payé exclusivement par l'employeur.

Fig. 3.2 Employment contract of indentured labourer. Source: Muljono-Larue, 1996, p. 90

and formulaic declarations, yet the labourer's ability to negotiate or even fully understand the terms was profoundly limited. As Ballantyne (2014) and Stoler (2008) have argued, such documents must be read not only as legal records but as tools of colonial governance, disciplining subjects into docile bodies and abstracting them into categories of labour, risk, and productivity.

These contracts served both a symbolic and administrative function. They legitimised the extraction of labour by cloaking coercion in the language of legality, and they facilitated the transimperial handover of Javanese subjects from Dutch to French colonial oversight. The detailed endorsements, including wage deductions for immigration processing and fixed dates of employment commencement, reveal the transactional nature of indenture and the extent to which Javanese workers were commodified within a bureaucratic framework that crossed imperial lines. The contract's stipulation that the *pécule* – a deferred wage saving – be paid at the end of each month further bound labourers to the system, making exit or resistance materially costly. The demographic data and contractual evidence provide a clearer picture of how recruitment and regulation intersected in the transimperial migration of Javanese workers. They were not merely moved but classified, contracted, medically inspected, and administratively inscribed into the colonial economy, an economy that relied on the seamless transmission of bodies through overlapping imperial apparatuses.

WORKING CONDITIONS AND COLONIAL CONTROL

Life for Javanese indentured labourers in New Caledonia was marked not only by physical hardship but also by a pervasive system of surveillance and constraint that blurred the boundary between free labour and carceral regimes. Though legally bound by contract rather than judicial sentence, labourers remained subjected to tightly regulated schedules, curtailed freedoms, and institutionalised discipline. Until 1928, colonial regulations prohibited Javanese workers from leaving their barracks after 8 p.m. without written permission from their employer. These spatial restrictions, enforced through surveillance and pass systems, illustrate what scholars have termed the ‘carceral continuum’ of empire, wherein colonial governance extended techniques of confinement beyond formal prisons into the structures of everyday life (Foucault, 1995; Boast, 2023; Neilson, 2023).

Even modest changes to these restrictions, such as the 1933 revisions allowing workers to go outdoors until midnight on select evenings, Wednesdays, Saturdays, and film nights, were conditional upon the employer's written approval (Muljono-Larue, 1996, p. 62). The enduring need for employer-sanctioned mobility underscores the persistent infantilisation of labourers within the colonial system: they were considered incapable of autonomous decision-making and were instead subject to forms of disciplinary paternalism reminiscent of the penal colony that preceded

them. In this context, freedom of movement was not a right but a revocable privilege, reinforcing labourers' subjection to employer control not only in the workplace but also in their private and social lives.

Control was further exercised through tightly calibrated systems of food provisioning and wage regulation.

As shown in Table 3.2, rations for Javanese workers were standardised by colonial authorities and declined over time. For instance, the rice allowance, a staple of the Javanese diet and a culturally significant marker of sustenance, dropped from 800 grams daily in 1896 to just 500 grams by 1933. Bread, a European staple, experienced a parallel decline from 682 grams to 250 grams. These reductions, particularly during the interwar period and the global economic downturn of the 1930s, reflect not only cost-cutting measures but also a broader colonial logic of minimum subsistence: labourers were fed just enough to remain productive, but not enough to assert autonomy or secure surplus.

Other provisions such as meat, fish, and sugar were similarly rationed, with fish allowances fluctuating notably, rising to 450 grams in 1938 before declining again. Vegetables, absent from earlier records, only appear in the 1949 data at 300 grams, suggesting a late-stage nutritional recalibration. The introduction of margarine and increased tea rations in the 1930s may reflect attempts to incorporate familiar or low-cost supplements, but they do not alter the fundamentally extractive nature of colonial provisioning. Food thus functioned as both a biological necessity and a disciplinary device, what Mbembe (2003) calls the politics of 'necropower', wherein the state determines who may live and in what conditions.

Wages were similarly structured to reinforce dependency and discourage resistance:

As indicated in Table 3.3, Javanese male labourers in 1896 earned just 17 francs per month, with women receiving 12 francs, a wage gap that persisted throughout the indenture system. Though male wages increased steadily over time, they remained tightly calibrated to the worker's year of service, incentivising contract completion but penalising early departure. For instance, in 1933, male labourers earned 80 francs in their first two years, rising to 110 francs by the fifth year; female wages trailed behind at 65 francs and 80 francs, respectively. This system created a form of staggered economic bondage: the promise of higher earnings was contingent upon enduring exploitative conditions for longer durations.

The most dramatic wage increase occurred in 1949, with male labourers receiving 600 francs and female labourers 500 francs, a tenfold rise from

Table 3.2 Food allowance for Javanese indentured labourers (in grams; 1896–1949)

Food/Beverage item	Daily Ration per Labourer (grams): by Year						Trend Observation
	1896	1913	1924	1933	1938	1949	
Staples							
Rice	800	800	800	500	500	500	Stable until 1933; reduced by 37.5%
Bread	682	682	682	250	250	250	Stable until 1933; reduced by 63.3%
Protein sources							
Meat	250	226	225	225	225	225	Slight decline 1896–1913; stable thereafter
Fish	200	185	185	174	450	300	Fluctuating; peak in 1938, reduced by 1949
Vegetables							
Vegetables	–	–	–	–	–	300	Introduced only in 1949
Condiments & Beverages							
Salt	24	21	21	21	21	20	Marginal decline across the period
Sugar	50	50	42	40	40	50	Dip in 1924–1938; restored by 1949
Tea	3	2	3	5	5	5	Slight increase from 1933 onwards
Approximate Total	2,009	1,966	1,958	1,225	1,501	1,650	Overall decline of ~18% from 1896 to 1949

Note: All values are in grams per labourer per day, an em-dash (–) indicates the item was not part of the ration schedule for that year. Row totals are approximate and exclude absent items. Trend observations are the author’s synthesis.

Adapted from: (Adi, 2014, p. 68). Data compiled and reformulated by the author.

pre-war levels. While this may reflect inflation and labour pressures in the postwar period, it also signals the impending end of the indenture system. Increased wages functioned as both a concession to worker demands and a final effort to extract labour before systemic reform. Yet, even at their highest, wages remained insufficient to ensure economic security or repatriation. Many labourers were unable to accumulate enough savings for return passage and thus remained in New Caledonia, further entrenching the diasporic condition.

Table 3.3 Salaries of Javanese indentured labourers 1896–1949

<i>Regulatory period</i>	<i>Contract year</i>	<i>Monthly wage (francs)</i>		<i>Female-to-Male Wage Ratio</i>
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
1896	Uniform	17	12	70.6%
1899	Uniform	24	Unknown	n/a
1901	Uniform	30	20	66.7%
1903	Uniform	24	12	50.0%
1911	Years 1–3	24	12	50.0%
	Years 4–5	25.2	12.6	50.0%
1913–1918	Years 1–3	24	12	50.0%
	Year 4	28.8	14.4	50.0%
	Year 5	33.60	16.8	50.0%
1919–1923	Uniform	25	12.5	50.0%
1924	Uniform	98.4	73.8	75.0%
1925–1929	Uniform	81	54	66.7%
1933	Years 1–2	80	65	81.3%
	Year 3	95	72.5	76.3%
	Year 4–5	110	80	72.7%
1938	Years 1–2	95	77.5	81.6%
	Year 3	110	85	77.3%
	Years 4–5	125	92.5	74.0%
1949	Uniform	600	500	83.3%

Note: All wages are in French Pacific francs per month. ‘Contract Year’ refers to the labourer’s year of service within a five-year indenture term. ‘Uniform’ denotes a single rate regardless of contract year. The ‘Female-to-Male Wage Ratio’ column is the author’s calculation expressed as percentage.

Adapted from (Adi, 2014, pp. 61–62). Data compiled, expanded and reformulated by the author

These wage and ration systems must be understood not merely as economic arrangements but as tools of colonial governance. As Cooper (1996) notes, labour regimes in empire were not simply about productivity. They were about shaping compliant subjects, regulating time, space, and sustenance to maintain imperial authority. The deferred *pécule* (savings held by employers or the state until contract completion) further deepened this dependency, as labourers risked forfeiting accumulated wages if they resisted or absconded. In this sense, economic structures and bodily control worked hand in hand, reproducing the foundational asymmetries of indenture.

The broader effect of this system was to render Javanese labourers simultaneously visible and invisible: visible as a disciplined workforce central to New Caledonia's economic development, but invisible in legal, political, and historical terms. Their living quarters were segregated, their social mobility limited, and their cultural practices tolerated only insofar as they did not disrupt colonial order. Much like the penal colony that preceded it, the indenture system in New Caledonia produced a landscape of containment, where surveillance and extraction shaped every dimension of daily life.

DUTCH AND FRENCH PERSPECTIVES ON THE JAVANESE INDENTURE SCHEME

The transimperial nature of Javanese indentured migration inevitably produced divergent narratives about its legitimacy and effects. While the French colonial administration often presented the scheme as a successful solution to labour shortages, Dutch responses ranged from cautious approval to outright critique. These differences were shaped not only by diplomatic pragmatism but also by domestic political pressure, media scrutiny, and evolving attitudes towards colonial responsibility.

The French colonial government maintained that Javanese workers in New Caledonia were treated fairly, citing official reports that highlighted adequate wages, medical care, and food rations (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 39). However, these reports were often produced or vetted by colonial administrators with vested interests in maintaining the flow of indentured labour. In contrast, sections of the Dutch colonial press were more ambivalent (Feuer, 1946). Newspapers such as the *De Locomotief* published articles questioning the veracity of French reports and calling for independent inspections. A 1901 article, for instance, urged the Dutch government to appoint a neutral inspector to assess conditions in New Caledonia. This suggestion went unheeded for nearly two decades, reflecting the inertia of colonial diplomacy in the face of economic utility. When Labour Inspector Van Ardenne finally visited New Caledonia in 1920, his findings portrayed the labourers as content and well-treated – an assessment that stood in stark contrast to reports published in the Australian press, which described Javanese workers as malnourished and living in deplorable conditions ('*De Javaansche Contractanten in Nieuw-Caledonie*', 1925).

Dutch reticence to intervene more forcefully was not merely administrative indifference. It reflected the structural tension at the heart of

transimperial labour agreements: while the Dutch facilitated emigration, they had limited jurisdiction over working conditions in French colonies. This partial abdication of oversight created what Bickers describes as a condition where imperial subjects could be exported but not fully protected (Bickers, 2016, p. 389). The transimperial framework thus diffused responsibility, allowing both empires to benefit economically while evading moral or legal accountability for abuses (Banerjee, 2018; Coates, 2022; Walter, 2022).

The interpreter emerged as a key figure in this ambiguous system. Required on all outbound ships from Batavia, the interpreter was employed by the Dutch Immigration Office and tasked with translating contracts and administrative procedures for the labourers. As seen in colonial employment contracts (see Fig. 3.1), the interpreter's name and signature were included as part of the legal verification process (Muljono-Larue, 1996, p. 89). Their presence was intended to guarantee that workers understood the terms of their employment, a symbolic gesture towards consent. However, their role ended abruptly once the contract was signed and the workers disembarked in New Caledonia. Thereafter, the labourers were left to navigate their new environment without linguistic support, facing isolation, confusion, and the constant risk of disciplinary action for miscommunication.

This language barrier was not incidental; it was a direct consequence of the transimperial nature of the migration. Javanese labourers, recruited under Dutch authority, were inserted into a French colonial system without adequate cultural or linguistic preparation. Most were illiterate and spoke only Javanese; few had any knowledge of Dutch, and even fewer understood French (Hayuningsih, 2025, p. 83). The interpreter's withdrawal at the port marked a critical rupture in the labourer's capacity to assert agency. Misunderstandings on the job frequently led to punishment, often without recourse or explanation. As Egger (2022) argues, interpreters in colonial settings often served not only to facilitate understanding but also to mask structural inequalities by staging the performance of comprehension and mutual agreement.

This linguistic discontinuity exacerbated the invisibility of labourer grievances. As Feuer notes, the language barrier, coupled with a lack of independent advocacy, meant that workers were rarely able to articulate dissent in forms legible to colonial administrators (Feuer, 1946, p. 267). Even sympathetic Dutch politicians, such as Volksraad members Mohammad Husni Thamrin and Abdul Firman Gelar Maharadja Soangkoepoon, struggled to

make their concerns heard. They opposed the continuation of the migration scheme and urged more transparent reporting on labour conditions, but their influence was ultimately constrained by the geopolitical interests of the Dutch and French governments (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 41).

Despite official claims of benevolence, the structural inequalities of the indenture system were evident to many observers. The labourers' calm disposition and reluctance to strike were often cited as markers of 'good character' by colonial officials (Maurer, 2002, p. 73), yet such interpretations ignored the broader conditions of fear, surveillance, and linguistic disempowerment. The Javanese were praised as a 'model minority' in contrast to Vietnamese workers, who were more prone to resistance (Muljono-Larue, 1996, p. 30). This praise, however, functioned as a racialised management tool, positioning docility as a virtue while eliding the systemic silencing that produced it.

The historical marginalisation of Javanese indentured labour in New Caledonia is not merely the result of accidental forgetting but of systematic processes of erasure embedded in both French colonial memory and Indonesian national historiography. As Hayuningsih underlined, it remains a blind spot in French, Dutch, and Indonesian historiographies (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 198). These processes are also underpinned by what Trouillot (2015) terms the production of silences, whereby certain subjects, events, or perspectives are excluded at the stages of sourcing, archiving, and narrating (Nash, 2016, p. 31). In the case of Javanese indentured labourers, archival abundance in the form of contracts, salary tables, and demographic registers belies a profound absence of personal narratives, cultural representation, and memory transmission. Their presence in the colonial record is abundant but depersonalised, calculated in grams of rice, francs of wages, or numbers of convoys, yet their voices remain largely inaudible.

At the heart of transimperial labour governance lies a paradox: while empires relied on the circulation of migrant bodies for economic extraction, they simultaneously controlled how those bodies could be seen, known, and remembered. Both archival silence and image commodification functioned as complementary technologies within this system, producing the Javanese labourer as an object of administration and aesthetic fascination, while erasing the labourer as a historical subject. Furthermore, these two forms of representation, textual absence and visual excess, reveal how transimperial governance managed visibility itself as a form of power.

The French colonial archive, for instance, prioritised the administrative over the experiential. Contracts such as those in Fig. 3.1 formalised the

labourer's consent but omitted any account of their motivations, fears, or aspirations. Tables of food rations (Table 3.2) and wages (Table 3.3) provide quantitative insight into the economics of indenture but fail to capture its human cost. The Javanese worker was thus rendered governable and visible only within the narrow terms of colonial rationality. This invisibilisation extended to the realm of visual culture. A telling example is the postcard circulated in France, depicting two Javanese labourers posed in a coffee plantation, surrounded by abundant crops and tropical flora (Adi, 2014).

Such imagery was not neutral. As Edwards (2001) and Hofmeyr (2022) have argued, colonial visual culture operated as a form of soft propaganda, naturalising the presence of empire through aesthetic pleasure. In this postcard, the Javanese labourers are not depicted as coerced migrants or exploited workers but as benign figures in a tropical idyll, domesticated and exoticised for metropolitan consumption. Their anonymity reinforces this effect: they have no names, no voices, no subjectivity, only a racialised embodiment of the colonial division of labour. The postcard functions as both a document and a fantasy, masking coercion with beauty and discipline with harmony (Teulié, 2023, p. 846). The Javanese body, regulated through curfews and contracts, was also commodified as an image, a symbol of empire's reach and productivity. What is left unrecorded are the lived rhythms of indenture: the fatigue, the nostalgia, the interpersonal solidarities, and the resistances. Nor are such stories preserved in Indonesian national narratives, where post-independence historiography has prioritised heroic resistance over coerced migration.

This double erasure – French administrative occlusion and Indonesian nationalist indifference – has rendered the Javanese presence in New Caledonia historically opaque. Yet, as Glissant (1997) contends, opacity need not be a deficiency. It can also serve as an ethical posture against the imperial demand for transparency, categorisation, and assimilation. The opacity of the Javanese diaspora, their partial assimilation, fractured memories, and multigenerational silences resist the teleologies of both imperial and nationalist histories (Hayuningsih, 2023, p. 198). Their memory endures not in official archives but in ritual, family oral histories, fragmented Javanese phrases in New Caledonian Creole, and photographic traces whose meanings escape full capture.

Visual artefacts like colonial postcards can thus be read not only as instruments of domination but also as sites of critical engagement (Burns, 2004, p. 257). Their silences, aesthetic choices, and compositional tropes reveal the racial hierarchies and disciplinary logics of colonial capitalism.

As Andersen and Möller suggest, photographs have the power to produce not only visibility but also vulnerability, to expose the conditions under which people were seen and not seen (2013, p. 204). The Javanese in New Caledonia were doubly seen: first as units of labour and second as picturesque ‘others’, and in both cases, denied the complexity of voice.

Both the archive and the image thus embody the same logic of transimperial management through selective visibility. The Dutch and French empires shared not only migrants but also epistemic practices that disciplined how these migrants could appear in history. The Javanese body circulated across empires as both labour and image, its humanity fragmented between bureaucratic enumeration and pictorial commodification. What is effaced in both registers is the lived texture of indenture – fatigue, longing, and solidarity – that resists the rational order of colonial documentation.

In confronting these images and the absences in the archive, historians must develop strategies not to reconstruct a seamless narrative but to acknowledge the fragmentary and often disjointed nature of diasporic memory. This involves accepting the opacity of historical subjects, as Glissant urges, and tracing what Mbembe calls the colonial past that lingers unevenly in the present (2002, p. 21). The Javanese indentured labourers of New Caledonia, largely forgotten in official histories, survive instead through a residual presence: in surnames, in foods, in place names, and in spectral images whose very silence speaks of an empire’s selective remembrance.

CONCLUSION

The history of Javanese indentured labour in New Caledonia between 1896–1949 demonstrates how colonial migration operated not as a self-contained national enterprise but as a *transimperial assemblage* – a historically layered infrastructure of mobility jointly produced by multiple empires. This migration was enabled through overlapping sovereignties, logistical interdependence, and bureaucratic coordination between Dutch and French colonial administrations. In this assemblage, recruitment offices, medical inspections, interpreters, and contractual apparatuses functioned as infrastructural nodes that rendered labour mobile, extractable, and governable across imperial boundaries.

Rather than a bilateral movement between two colonies, the Javanese indenture system reveals the *polycentric* and *infrastructural* dimensions of migration governance long before the emergence of postwar global migration regimes. The circulation of Javanese labour was sustained through

heterogeneous alignments of actors – colonial offices, private recruitment firms, shipping companies, and plantation managers – that together formed a provisional order of governance. This assemblage transformed human mobility into an economic technology, where visibility, documentation, and medicalisation were central to the control of racialised bodies.

This case study also illustrates how transimperial labour regimes prefigured the stratified and racialised hierarchies that remain central to contemporary migration orders. The Javanese labourers' ambiguous status – legally Dutch subjects, economically French workers, and socially peripheral within both systems – exemplifies the layered positionalities that assemblage thinking foregrounds. Their experiences expose how colonial infrastructures of recruitment and surveillance became templates for modern migration governance: they created populations that were indispensable yet disposable, mobile yet unrepresented.

In line with the argument advanced in this volume, the case of Javanese indenture urges us to view migration governance as *historically sedimented, polycentric, infrastructural, stratified, and embodied*. The infrastructures of coercion, surveillance, and contract that bound Javanese labourers to colonial production foreshadowed later forms of labour brokerage, externalisation, and migrant stratification. Recognising these continuities allows us to trace how colonial and transimperial regimes of labour continue to shape migration assemblages today. In this sense, the Javanese in New Caledonia illuminate the longer genealogy of non-Western migration governance, an assemblage whose material and affective legacies remain embedded in the global order of mobility.

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PART II

Polycentric and Territorial Reconfigurations
in Governing Mobility



CHAPTER 4

Governmobility in the Shenzhen SEZ: Talent, Territory, and Transnational Flows

Lai Pik Chan and Yujing Tan

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Shenzhen originated in China's search for a model Chinese city to drive China's national development. As Olds and Yeung (2004) suggest, for a diverse country like China, the government tends to pay more attention to the development of particular city-regions, which are then used to connect the nation to the international arena. Since its industrialisation in the 1980s, Shenzhen has scaled its industry and upgraded from low-value goods to high-tech products. Following the turn of the millennium, the city transitioned from cheap labour to higher-value manufacturing, services, and a knowledge-based economy, spurred by the global financial crisis and rising labour costs (Altrock & Schoon, 2014).

While the Chinese state once viewed mobility as a threat to social stability, it now increasingly embraces it as part of city-making. This change is reflected in the evolving discourse on internal migrants in Shenzhen,

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where urban and economic restructuring have altered migrant demographics during the city's upgrading. From the 1980s to the 2000s, rural migrants working as manual labourers in Shenzhen were often referred to as the 'floating population' in government discourses and commonly adopted in everyday as well as scholarly narratives (Zhang, 2014; Scharping et al., 1997). Similar to the disparaging use of the term 'Gypsy' in the West, this term implied unpredictable and threatening mobility. However, as Shenzhen's migrant population has shifted towards educated professionals, the negatively connotated 'floating population' label has become less prevalent.

The chapter examines internal and international migration to Shenzhen over the past decade, exploring the following: How do Special Economic Zones (SEZs) like Shenzhen shape patterns of internal and international migration? What are the characteristics and experiences of new migrants in technology and education sectors, which are the two primary sectors for triggering new mobility in Shenzhen? How does Shenzhen's local government attract and retain desired migrants? And to what extent does the Shenzhen model challenge existing theories of migration and governance? This chapter explores how diverse migrant groups, from second-generation domestic migrant workers in Shenzhen (unable to obtain Shenzhen residency permits) to skilled new migrants with university degrees or higher, navigate opportunity and identity in Shenzhen. Besides, China's decades-long migration wave, coupled with administrative reforms governing population mobility, compels us to examine how this late-socialist government balances controlling and enabling population mobility. Specifically, we need to understand how urbanisation and urban redevelopment policies shape migration patterns and what kind of movement these policies encourage or restrict.

Adopting the theoretical framework of governmentality, our research exemplifies how assemblages of migration emerge at the intersection of state reforms, urban infrastructures, and migrant practices in Shenzhen. The chapter argues that SEZs such as Shenzhen have evolved into unique migration laboratories for a distinct form of migration governance we term 'government mobility'. It necessitates innovative governance approaches that challenge traditional migration theories. We find that SEZ reforms function as a state mechanism for reshaping mobility policies. The case of Shenzhen provides critical insights into migration in non-Western contexts and examines the role of local authorities in mobility governance within the Global South.

The chapter unfolds through the following sections: the next section addresses the theoretical framework of governmobility and reviews the latest literature on the governance of migration. Following this, in *Researching Governmobility in Shenzhen*, we explain the context of fieldwork and the method for data collection in Shenzhen, the field site of our research. In *Mobilising Mobilities through Economic Restructuring and City Branding*, we discuss two case analyses to illustrate how new migrants to Shenzhen navigate career, life strategy, and emotion to migrant governance within the city. In the final section we will engage in a theoretical discussion of the case study and explore the insights that the Shenzhen SEZ case offers for migration governance in other SEZs.

GOVERNMOBILITY AS STATECRAFT: UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE FROM MIGRATION

Drawing on Foucault's discussions of space and power, our analysis considers how power operates through spatial planning as a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality is a state of governance where power subtly manages individuals, leading them to internalise its rules. Bærenholdt (2012) extends this analysis with 'governmobility', arguing that mobility has become a key aspect of governmentality in contemporary hyper-mobile societies. Governmobility is how people manage themselves and their connections through new techniques (e.g., mobile phones) and spatial arrangements (e.g., moving home) via new techniques of governance. Spatial planning, such as urban renewal and development, can be a catalyst for governmobility (Bærenholdt, 2012, p. 32). The shift in governance moves from state control over territory to managing populations through mobility.

This theoretical framework complements the 'infrastructural turn' in social science (Larkin, 2013; Harvey et al., 2017) and migration studies in particular. Xiang and Lindquist (2018) propose that migration is 'profoundly shaped by changes in infrastructure, broadly defined as a socio-technical platform for mobility (Xiang & Lindquist, 2018, 157)'. In migration studies, governmobility emphasises mobility regimes as both the techniques of governance and the mobilisers of mobilities. Mobility regimes consist of a series of material infrastructures, administrative institutions, and social and cultural imaginaries that privilege and prohibit different movements (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Mancinelli & Molz,

2024). Among these, regions – particularly border areas and urban zones receiving new migrants – have become research subjects of scholarly inquiry into the governing scheme of mobility. Keller Easterling’s critics on industrial zones and special economic zones (2014) shows how zones are not just economic space but a demonstration of ‘extrastatecraft’ – semi-sovereign infrastructures where governance takes place beyond formal state structures. For instance, the Italian island of Lampedusa has emerged as a place of supra-local significance through the interplay of residents, tourists, migrants, and practitioners from social organisations engaged in various reception services (Cremaschi, 2019). Labour brokers, when integrated with the government’s labour governance, reshape a zonal network that provides a continuous supply of labour between Indonesia and Singapore (Goh, Wee, and Yeoh, 2017).

Critical migration studies centred on urban governance similarly call for cities to be regarded as arrival infrastructures and for arrival infrastructures to be understood as the material outcomes of social practices jointly constructed by diverse actors – including architects, urban planners, government employees, citizens, and civil society (Meeus et al., 2020). The urban fabric into which new migrants are embedded at arrival both produces and negotiates their future social mobility, whether local or transnational (Meeus, van Heur, & Arnaut, 2019). Our chapter then examines governmobility in urban China by analysing how new migrants negotiate practices and imaginaries of mobility amidst urban redevelopment and reforms as techniques of governance. New migrants’ imaginaries of mobility are primarily manifested in how individuals imagine their lifestyles and design approaches to acquire or compete for resources for self-actualisation and social mobility in a new city.

We ground this inquiry in sociological and political economy studies of China’s increasingly complex migration landscape. No longer simply an emigration country with limited domestic mobility, China’s rise as the world’s second-largest economy has spurred research on both internal migration and immigration. The late 1990s witnessed large-scale domestic migration following Deng Xiaoping’s reforms driven by rural land reforms and coastal economic opening policies (Davin, 1998; Fan, 2007; Siciliano, 2014). Studies on internal migrants included workers from rural areas migrating to export-orientated toy factories in the Pearl River Delta (Ngai, 2005), Wenzhou entrepreneurs in Beijing (Zhang, 2014; Xiang, 2004), Sichuan workers facing collective relocation in Shenzhen due to urban renewal (Liu et al. 2018, making the invisible visible), and

new middle-class migrants (Gong et al., 2023). Scholarly discussions on China as an immigration country (Pieke, 2012; Pieke et al., 2019) has also been rising in the past decade. International migration to China covers migrant groups from all over the world, including Westerners (Henry, 2013; Stanley, 2013; Lehmann, 2015; Farrer, 2014a, 2014b, 2018, 2019), female marriage migrants from Myanmar, Russia and Vietnam (Luo, 2018; Barabantseva & Grillot, 2019), Indian traders in Keqiao (Cheuk, 2016), Africans in Guangzhou (Castillo, 2015; Mathews, Lin, & Yang, 2017; Haugen, 2018), South Koreans in Beijing (Ma, 2024), foreign scholars working in China (Wang, 2022), overseas Chinese returnees (Zweig, Kang, & Wang, 2020), and many other groups from different geographical locations. *Destination China: Immigration to China in the Post-Reform Era* (2019) and the newly published *Handbook on Migration to China* (2025) collected different studies on migration to China over the past decade and explored the migration experiences of different migrant groups from a variety of perspectives in depth.

The diversity in China's domestic and international migrant makeup also challenges the existing 'migration from the global South to the global North' and 'South-South migration' narratives. The mapping of the global South and the global North indicates the hierarchical as well as developmentalist categorisation of places and economies in the so-called 'world system' since the 1970s (Massey et al., 1993). However, the global trend of megacity-making in newly industrialised economies since the 1990s complicated the scenarios of the 'world system' norm. Today, we cannot easily identify a megacity such as Shanghai as a place in the global South. In addition, the risk of emphasising terms such as 'global North' and 'global South' may ignore the inequalities and mobilities within nation-states' territories in the increasingly globalised and interdependent world. In that, we argue that 1) understanding internal migration and governance in cities provides a new perspective on transnational migration, and 2) internal migration should not be excluded from the academic concern on transnational migration, especially when we treat the mega(entrepot)-city as the research object.

RESEARCHING GOVERNMOBILITY IN SHENZHEN SEZ

The evolving global migration landscape requires moving beyond the traditional South-North framework, especially when examining emerging economies such as China. While research often focuses on traditional

migration patterns, the unique migration dynamics and governance within rapidly developing regions, such as China's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), warrant further attention. Designed to attract foreign investment through preferential treatment, SEZs have become crucial to the global economy by connecting mobile capital from developed regions with cheap immobile labour in developing countries (Bach, 2017). Analysing migration within these zones reveals how political, economic, and urban restructuring, coupled with migration policies, shape mobility and alter migrant demographics.

Since the signing of the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory (also known as the Second Convention of Peking), the national government of the UK and China drew a border between British Hong Kong and the mainland China in the late nineteenth century. This border line gradually developed into a management system comprising border checkpoints, agricultural access points, and coastal defence facilities after 1949, with formal border control measures implemented in 1951. In 1978, the People's Republic of China established the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone along this border area. Shenzhen is China's first SEZ. Like other SEZs around the world, Shenzhen began in the late 1970s as a pilot area for the national government to implement free trade, relaxed labour regulation, and export-orientated industrial policies. Today, Shenzhen has evolved into an international metropolis. The second border line, set up between mainland China and Shenzhen SEZ in 1980, was diminished in 2018, and China's household registration system, *Hukou*, which was previously used to control population mobility, has been further liberated. As Shenzhen's internal migrant demography transforms, recent studies on migrants in Shenzhen have shifted from rural-to-urban workers (Wang & Wu, 2010; Banerjee-Guha, 2011) to highly skilled migrants (Gong, Sun, & Xuan, 2023). As an innovation hub and an international city, the Shenzhen SEZ has stimulated both internal and international population movements.

Increasingly, mobility is seen not as a threat, but as a political technology for governing and a way of making societies (Bærenholdt, 2012). The Shenzhen government's recent policies to attract skilled migrants exemplify this approach, reflecting a state initiative to engineer society through mobility. For example, by offering preferential treatments to 'desirable' migrants, the government actively attracts and retains human resources that drive Shenzhen's transformation towards a cosmopolitan

city and a knowledge-based economy. Beyond preferential policies, the Shenzhen government successfully promotes a ‘Shenzhener’ identity that transcends place of origin. Official discourse blends migrants and non-migrants as equal actors in city-making. The government’s slogan ‘once you are here, you are a Shenzhener’ (*Laile, jiushi Shenzhenren*) aims to foster a sense of belonging by offering a non-hierarchical citizen identity that includes non-locals (*waidiren*). This slogan resonated with both internal and international migrants, who viewed Shenzhen as more welcoming than other Chinese cities (fieldnotes, 2018). Consequently, the distinction between locals (*bendiren*) and non-locals (*waidiren*) is less pronounced in Shenzhen than in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where localism and discrimination are more prevalent. As China’s largest migrant city, Shenzhen offers a more newcomer-friendly environment.

Method

This study, based on fieldwork conducted by the authors in the Shenzhen SEZ from 2015 to 2025, uses internal and international immigration to understand China’s immigration governance. This focus is empirically grounded in the influence of talent, migration, urban redevelopment, and industrial policies assembled by the local government since the 2010s, reshaping the urban as well as migration landscape. We analyse how this policy assemblage formed a new governance of mobility in Shenzhen. Over the 18 months’ research, we interviewed new migrants from other parts of China (particularly cities in the inland provinces) and various foreign countries. We defined ‘new migrants’ as residents who had lived in Shenzhen for less than five years. At the time of our first few years of fieldwork, they were aged between 22 and 35, and most had a college degree or above. We explored their motivations, expectations, strategies, and broader views on social mobility. To understand local states’ policy practices and their attitudes towards migrants, we also interviewed district-level officials about their interpretation and implementation of specific policies. Our analysis centres on two case studies chosen to exemplify new migrants in Shenzhen, both internal and international: highly educated individuals with entrepreneurial aspirations and foreign new migrants utilising their linguistic and cultural capital to establish themselves in a new environment.

MOBILISING MOBILITIES THROUGH ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND CITY BRANDING

'Incubating New Birds': Young Migrants and the Local State's Making of Urban Mobility

During our interviews, we asked the interviewees about their reasons for coming to Shenzhen to find work and settle down. In 2015, when we began our fieldwork, Shenzhen was perceived by new migrants as a highly inclusive city. In our definition and that of the interviewees themselves, new migrants refer to those who have lived in Shenzhen for no more than five years. The Shenzhen municipal government's recent slogan encouraging new migrants, 'Once you are here, you are a Shenzheners,' was cited by many interviewees to justify their decision to relocate or move to Shenzhen. Xicheng, a young graduate from Wuhan University, came to Shenzhen to look for work after graduating in 2017. He explained that compared to Beijing and Shanghai, he preferred Shenzhen because it was more convenient and had better living infrastructure than his hometown of Wuhan (the capital of Hubei Province). Additionally, he emphasised that after graduating from university, he wanted to move away from his nuclear family and live more independently. 'It only takes five hours to travel from Wuhan to Shenzhen by high-speed rail. I can return home to visit my parents during short holidays.' Compared to China's megacities like Beijing and Shanghai, Shenzhen not only has a more diverse industrial structure, making it more suitable for newcomers to the workforce, but also offers lower rent and daily living costs.

Many Chinese graduates share Xicheng's views. Born in the early 1990s, Xicheng, like other young people of the post-1990s generation who experienced China's rapid development and urbanisation following the second wave of 'Reform and Opening-up' (1992), sees working in a big city as a way to cultivate a more independent and enterprising self. This is in line with the (new) liberal values shaped by China's Reform and Opening-up policy. Reform and Opening-up attracted a large number of domestic and international companies to coastal cities, and in the 1990s, adopting a neoliberal narrative, Chinese media frequently reported on the success of new domestic migrants arriving in Shenzhen to work and start businesses. These wealth-creation myths from the 1990s became the growth benchmarks that the new generation of young people continued to pursue, when the domestic migration wave to Shenzhen began. Shi, a

university graduate from a rural area in Shandong Province, said, ‘During China’s economic boom in the 1990s, many people with little social capital (没背景 *mei bei jing*) made their first fortune. I think Shenzhen is very equal for people who start from scratch.’ Shi’s statement also reflects the mindset of highly skilled migrants from ordinary families in the younger generation, who see Shenzhen’s job market as encouraging social mobility for those who are capable.

However, it should be noted that this neoliberal ideology of achieving success on the basis of one’s merit and the pursuit of freedom and self-realisation among young new migrants is embedded in the spatial and industrial changes of the city as a whole. During the mid-2010s, the Shenzhen municipal government launched a series of urban redevelopment projects. Large and dilapidated factories and urban villages were redeveloped by local governments and real estate companies into middle-class residential neighbourhoods, causing Shenzhen’s housing prices to rise threefold over the past decade. On one hand, local governments needed to stimulate direct investment through real estate development, while on the other hand, they had to attract more highly skilled labour by introducing new talent policies to subsidise the high living costs of young migrants. When one of the authors interviewed experts from the Civil Affairs Bureau and Science and Technology Bureau of Nanshan District in Shenzhen about the formulation of industrial policies, many mentioned that welfare-orientated talent policies were an important strategy for attracting young university graduates. ‘Shenzhen does not need more labour, but rather higher-quality labour. Shenzhen is undergoing a period of “emptying the cage to change the birds”.’ The analogy of the cage and the birds has been mentioned repeatedly in the discourse on urban renewal and migrants in southern China over the past decade.

Shenzhen’s governmobility is vividly illustrated in its management of young, highly skilled domestic migrants. The local state’s strategy is encapsulated in its policy metaphor: ‘emptying the cage to change the birds’. This metaphor refers to local governments’ economic ‘hollowing out’ by encouraging the growth of more high-tech firms (Lim, 2016). The export-orientated and labour-intensive manufacturing enterprises encouraged during the Reform and Opening-up period lost their policy advantages in the new economy. Many coastal manufacturing enterprises have moved to inland regions of China since the 2010s. Technology firms became the new cage of the new economy after the state launched the national plan ‘Made in China 2025’ to trigger industrial as well as

urban redevelopment in 2015. Young professional migrants are also recognised as new birds filling the cage. It should be noted here that the actual connotation implied by this policy – one that interviewees either failed to elaborate upon or chose to overlook – is *substitution*: the policy metaphor aims to replace ‘low-skilled labour’ with ‘high-skilled technical migrants’. We consider this the most insidious aspect of governmobility. Those mobile individuals to be governed focus solely on the incentives and affirmation offered by new policies, overlooking the potential social inequalities they may engender.

The state’s spatialised imaginaries of the city’s future are intertwined with expectations and anxieties about new urban spaces associated with new migrants. Kesi, a 25-year-old Hunan native (his parents were working in Shenzhen, but they didn’t receive urban *hukou*, a permanent residency in urban China) who graduated from a university in Hong Kong, was working at a technology company in Futian District in 2016 when the author interviewed him. At the time, he and his girlfriend were renting an apartment in a neighbourhood specifically designed to provide housing for college graduates newly arrived in Shenzhen. They received a talent subsidy, which was subsidised by the district government and paid to the technology company that employed Kesi. Kesi used the subsidy for rent and saved the rest as a down payment for a future home. ‘Only after buying a house will I feel like a true Shenzhen resident. Though Shenzhen’s housing prices have long surpassed what we can afford’, Kesi said when discussing the stimulus for his pursuit of long-term residency in the summer of 2016. At that time, due to large-scale urban redevelopment, many real estate companies built up fancy middle-class communities in Shenzhen; Shenzhen’s housing prices had skyrocketed. The average price of a two-bedroom apartment exceeded 20 times the annual average wage of highly skilled middle-class workers like Kesi.

Urban redevelopment transforms old factories into ‘innovation incubators’. These spaces do not just host companies; they reshape migrant subjectivities, fostering a Silicon Valley-inspired ethos of entrepreneurship and self-realisation. Many real estate giants, in collaboration with local governments eager to attract more talent, further shaped the mobility of high-skilled migrants through spatial planning. To compete for high-skilled talent like Kesi, Shi, and Xicheng, who all have at least a university degree, the district government (sub-provincial) passed a series of resolutions on urban spatial renewal, encouraging real estate developers to transform abandoned factory areas into technology enterprise incubators,

aiming to attract more young people to start businesses. Traditional business operators are also forced to transition into investors and managers of these new incubators. Startup incubators have become representative infrastructure in Shenzhen for facilitating and governing youth entrepreneurship and employment. By emulating the Silicon Valley startup model of California's Bay Area (Lee, 2000), Shenzhen's youth entrepreneurship incubators have reshaped the identity, social relationships, meaning of work, and the life experiences of new migrant entrepreneurs.

At the time, as long as you had a creative idea that sounded decent, people would come looking for collaboration to develop products. Then investors would suggest we move into affordable incubators. At the time, I was working at a large tech company and felt a bit bored, so I started working part-time with colleagues and university classmates at an incubator in Futian District. At least back then, I believed that entrepreneurship was the way to create personal value and meaning.

Ryan, an engineer from Zhongshan (a medium-sized city in Guangdong Province) who graduated from a university in Guangzhou, described the opportunity he had in 2015 to develop an educational robot project with his business partners. The incubator then offered Ryan and other companies in the incubator entrepreneurship training courses and connected them with investors from Hong Kong and Singapore. Ryan sold his startup to an education company in 2020 and took an MBA degree at a university in Hong Kong. He became a venture investor in 2024, focusing on investment in private education sectors, because Ryan believed that 'only education can bring profits and social mobility in the future, no matter if there was the Double-Reduction policy'.¹

Slightly different from the Silicon Valley model, incubators, as part of the entrepreneurial infrastructure, are also organisations that regulate individual identity and social mobility. One of the authors of this chapter interviewed a technology business incubator in Bao'an District in 2017 and 2025 and found that the incubator's goals for attracting talent and startup projects had changed significantly. The incubator's operational objectives are no longer limited to attracting a sufficient number of startup

¹ Double-Reduction policy was officially launched in July 2021 by the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The policy aims to alleviate the burden of excessive homework and after-school tutoring on students during their compulsory education (grades 1-9).

teams and highly skilled labour (young graduates) from various regions but also aim to assist some local large technology companies in spinning off internal projects. Besides, since the unemployment rate of young graduates was increasing in big cities in China, subnational governments like Shenzhen launched new policies to encourage tech incubators to attract more graduates and entrepreneurs who are in the period of job and career-seeking.² According to Xia, the human resources manager of the incubator explained the following:

In 2017, local governments were still competing to retain capable young people in Shenzhen. By 2025, many companies faced workforce saturation, and the government needed to stabilise the regional unemployment rate. As a result, incubation centres like ours also became job creators. However, the cage is full now.

Shenzhen's SEZ status shapes migration through economic pull factors, state-engineered urban redevelopment, and inclusive rhetoric. Internal migrants experience both opportunity (social mobility) and precarity (housing costs), while governance adapts from attracting to managing talent. The Shenzhen model complicates theories by merging neoliberal individualism with strong state intervention, redefining how migration and urban redevelopment interact in China's post-reform era. Shenzhen exemplifies how SEZs leverage migration as a tool for economic transformation, but its sustainability hinges on balancing growth with inequality mitigation.

Working Towards Stability: Finding Social Mobility in a Foreign Land

Shenzhen's technology and innovation sector attracts internal migrants as well as international migrants; it also provides ample job opportunities for international migrants working in the education sector. Moreover, in the past decade, Shenzhen's urban and economic transformation has made it an attractive destination for international

² Please see the Notice of the Shenzhen Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau on Issuing the 'Management Measures for Municipal-level Business Incubation Bases in Shenzhen' launched in 2023: https://www.dpxq.gov.cn/ztlz/dpxqgxbysjyfw/jyxx/content/post_10617223.html (access 12th July 2025)

migrants seeking a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Despite Shenzhen's hospitable environment and job prospects for foreigners, the local government has demonstrated little proactive intent to retain or integrate them into Chinese society.

In the past decade, the Shenzhen government has not only engineered its urban and economic restructuring processes by transforming from a labour-intensive manufacturing centre to a knowledge-based economy, but has also been actively branding itself as an international city to elevate the city's national and global status. Building international communities and promoting international education are some of Shenzhen's international city branding initiatives. Also, to improve the social mobility or the chance of studying abroad, the city's affluent middle-class parents are eager to provide international and English language education to their children. This gives rise to a booming international education industry. Consequently, Shenzhen becomes a popular migration destination for foreign (mostly English-speaking) teachers.

Although foreign teachers are hired to build Shenzhen as an international city and fulfil the middle-class international and Chinese residents' education needs, the Chinese government is at the same time wary of Western influence. The aim of the Chinese government's effort to incorporate English language classes in the school curriculum is not to obtain 'the prestige of knowing a foreign language or appreciating the cultural heritage of Anglo-American societies', but to achieve 'national modernisation' (Johnson, 2009, p. 148). In actual practice, the Chinese government is cautious in restricting English language education to a technical level by teaching grammar and practical use of the language while minimising the ideological influence of Western cultures by excluding the teaching of Western history and literature. For example, foreign English language teachers are sent to teach in local government schools to 'internationalise' education, but the teaching is strictly on a grammar level.

Similar to the Chinese government's utilitarian positioning towards international education and English language education, so has its visa policy towards foreign migrants who work as teachers. Motivated by a pragmatic mentality, foreign teachers' residence permits are tied to their work visas that depend on their sponsors and need to be renewed annually (fieldnotes, 2017). This attitude of treating international migrants as

‘guest workers’ stems from a deep-rooted ideology of what is considered ‘Chineseness’, and adheres to the long-standing Chinese governmentality of ‘using the West to serve China’ (洋为中用 *yangweizhongyong*). This explains why the Shenzhen government promotes the ‘international communities’ and mobility of foreign migrants as long as it contributes to the city’s economic development and city branding, but initiatives to incorporate foreigners as permanent residents are yet to be seen on a policy and social level.

Compared to foreigners who worked in international schools, there were more who worked in various English teaching centres and schools. Geographically, foreign ELTs mainly concentrate in China’s economically more developed cities, where financial rewards are higher and lifestyle is more cosmopolitan. In Shenzhen, thousands of foreigners are working in the English language teaching industry. As one informant puts it, ‘every one in two foreigners in Shenzhen is working as an English teacher, or has worked as one at some point (fieldnotes, 2017)’. Because of the insatiable demand for English language education in Shenzhen, it was easy for foreigners to find teaching jobs, and students range from children to Chinese professionals who work in international corporates. While some taught English language as a lifelong career, some treated it as a way to accumulate capital and saved up money to start their own businesses. Before COVID-19, most of them worked in the English language centres and international schools. After the introduction of the double-reduction policy and the subsequent shutdown of many English language centres, the former English language teachers have been absorbed into various extracurricular programmes that use English as the medium of instruction (Chan et al., 2025).

Some foreigners find Shenzhen a more attractive migration destination than other Chinese cities in terms of employment in English language and international education. As Shenzhen offers a better salary and better remuneration than less developed Chinese cities. At the same time, it offers a cosmopolitan lifestyle like other first-tier Chinese cities but is not as saturated as Shanghai and Beijing. Compared to less cosmopolitan Chinese cities, English language education gets more attention in Shenzhen because Shenzhen strives to live up to the name of ‘world city’ and Shenzheners strive to cultivate qualities that make them ‘world citizens’. The Shenzhen Municipal government

treats the promotion of the English language as part of infrastructure building. As for Shenzhen's middle class, who are generally more affluent and cosmopolitan, they are also more able and willing to invest more resources in learning the English language. Moreover, bordering Hong Kong, living in Shenzhen means having access to world-class medical services, dining, and global sports and music events such as Rugby Seven and Clockenflap, if not for more pragmatic reasons such as doing visa runs.

Besides, some interviewees who experienced career stagnation in developed Northern economies seek greater mobility opportunities by relocating to emerging markets offering more professional prospects. Many interviewees' narratives illustrate how the dilemma of 'lateral mobility' in the Global North impacts individuals' global migration choices. In occupational sociology, lateral mobility refers to horizontal movement that does not entail class or occupational advancement (Sacchi et al., 2016). Ian was a 40-year-old Briton who had started teaching English in Shenzhen since 2012. At the time of our interview,³ Ian had recently climbed his way up from teaching English in a Chinese middle school to teaching in an international school. Sitting in a well-decorated café enjoying his Sunday brunch, Ian seemed content. He described himself as being in a 'much better place now' than when he was in his previous job teaching English in a local school through an agency and more so than when he was in the UK.

Upon graduating with a major in business studies from university, Ian got a job in the marketing field in a company in his hometown. A few years into his job, as a friend brought up an English teaching job opportunity in South Korea to him, so Ian quit his job and went to teach English in South Korea for a change. What Ian did not expect was that when he went back to the UK after two years in South Korea and asked to go back to his old job, his old company would not hire him again, because the company had been restructured, and his previous position was eliminated. Ian said he did try to start over in the UK after returning from South Korea, but it did not work out. He did not have any luck in finding another office job. According to Ian, 'it was hard to get an office job because all the foreigners were taking the jobs'. Consequentially, Ian had no other choice but to

³ The authors' interview with Ian was conducted in Emily's Café in Shekou on 3 October 2017.

take up warehouse jobs. He described what it was like trying to look for a job in the small town he came from.

It's not a lot there. It's not a lot of history there. It's not a lot of jobs there. So if I go back, I will probably go live there because that's where my family are, and I gotta try to find something that I really want to do, but there are not a lot of jobs available. Most people in the town do warehouse work for a living, and that's not the kind of job I want to do. When I was there, I was striving to find a job, getting zero-hour contracts. Do you know what a zero-hour contract is? It's like if they need you to work for one hour, then you work one hour and then you go home. You only get money when you work. Like Uber. So I was trying to do that, going to work, getting some money . . . terrible money! That's why I couldn't see myself going back. And I was living with my mum. London has more opportunities, but it is too expensive. So there are not many options for me but to stay abroad. I am essentially a migrant. I mean, a migrant is someone who is trapped to stay in a place in order to make money.

Ian could not see himself going back to England because it was difficult for him to find a stable, decent job. Ian felt he was forced to work overseas in order to earn a living, and in that sense, he considered himself a migrant. He further elaborated on how he distinguished between an expat and a migrant.

My understanding of an 'expat' is more of a rich foreigner living in a foreign country; I mean, I have had jobs, but a full-time taxi driver here is making more money than me. So in that sense I am a migrant. Also, it depends on what kind of job options you have. I will give you an example. I had a friend who had an excellent career as a cameraman, and then he moved into teaching. He could go back to his photography career and still make good money anytime. I think he will consider himself as an expat, but I will still think of myself as a migrant.

Ian drew a line between an expat and a migrant based on one's financial situation and job options. He identified himself as a migrant because he was economically marginalised before moving to teach English in China, and teaching English was almost the only trade he could work in. Ian got his first English teaching job in a Chinese middle school through a job agency when he first arrived in Shenzhen and said the salary the job offered was not ideal for him, but he stayed with the agency to avoid job scams. Ian's agency helped him with the application of a work visa and also

offered him a room in a hotel. He had to stay in the hotel room for an entire year. Although it was not the most ideal living situation, he took it because he would rather stay in the hotel than deal with the scams he had heard were associated with some local landlords.

There are a lot of job scams, and you have to be careful in China with jobs. So I was scared to leave the agency, even it was a bad deal for me. So I stayed with the agency and taught in a middle school for 10 hours a week. The middle school let you come and go, you just do your hours. But with a primary school, you will have to be there all day. So, I had this deal where I was just going in and teaching 10 hours and leaving. And sometimes I go all the way there to teach for one hour. That's my whole day of work with the school. So (laughing) ... it wasn't a bad deal really, yeah. But the school itself, the kids were really badly behaved. I had one kid spat on my head once. I had kids swear at me in Chinese and English. It was just quite a rough place like that.

After teaching in the Chinese middle school for four years, Ian got frustrated by the many constraints of teaching English in a public school. For example, the huge number and mixed levels of students made it difficult for him, or any teachers, to teach effectively. Also, because being a foreign English language teacher in a local school is a dead-end job, Ian felt like his life was not going anywhere. Fortunately, Ian was able to improve his employment situation after completing his master's degree. Upon getting his degree, Ian applied for a teaching position in an international school and was hired.

Ian now taught students from a very different background in a different school system than before. Since the international school put students in small classes and streamed students according to their level, he was able to teach much more effectively and was more passionate about his work. Also, his current students were from a more prestigious background and thus were, in general, more well-behaved. Ian enjoyed the remuneration package of a corporate-transferred employee, and he could have his job until he retired if he wanted. Compared to when he was struggling to find work in the UK or when he was teaching in a local Chinese school in Shenzhen, he could not be happier about his current employment conditions and the financial stability he enjoyed.

However, Ian did not think he would stay in China for a long time, as he was aware that he would not be able to retire in China. Just like his colleague who turned 60 years old and became ineligible to apply for a

Chinese work visa, he would have to leave China when he reached the retirement age, and he did not know any foreigners in his circle who were granted permanent residence permits in China. Ian's lack of vision of settling in China was shared by many non-elite foreigners. During our fieldwork, some international migrants expressed that they felt foreigners were living on borrowed time in China, and that they felt the Chinese government would replace them with Chinese people in their jobs one day. Feeling like outsiders to the Chinese society and feeling uncertain whether they would be allowed to continue to stay in China, some foreigners lived in China with the mentality of transients. As one foreigner said, 'I know I will never become Chinese no matter how long I stay, and I don't plan to stay in China for long. So, like most foreigners here, I try to grab as much as possible, whatever that is, while I am here' (Felix, White, US American, male, 36-year-old). The attitude of seeing China as a place for short-term benefits was not uncommon among international migrants.

The personal struggles and institutional marginalisation faced by these migrant workers are not isolated incidents but rather a vivid reflection of a pervasive global pattern. Within this framework, migration and migrant labour are deliberately instrumentalised and strategically mobilised through temporary visa programmes and bilateral agreements to fill critical gaps in the workforce, driving new economic growth and supporting key industries. However, this economic reliance is starkly contradicted by their social and political exclusion; they are systematically denied full membership in the city through policies that restrict their access to public services and pathways to citizenship. This precise condition of being economically included yet socially and politically excluded is a defining characteristic of a modern form of governmobility, which actively manages human movement to maximise economic utility while minimising the social and political claims of the migrant population.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

For internal migrants, Shenzhen's government uses talent subsidies, incubators, and redeveloped urban spaces to attract skilled workers. Policies like subsidised housing for graduates (e.g., Kesi's case) and startup support (e.g., Ryan's startup registered in a local incubator) demonstrate a state-capitalist approach to migration management. Yet, by 2025, labour-market saturation led incubators to shift from fostering startups to supporting corporate spin-offs and taking care of temporarily unemployed graduates, revealing the limits of perpetual growth. Shenzhen complicates

traditional models. Its ‘emptying the cage’ strategy blends neoliberal self-reliance with state intervention, contradicting pure market-driven migration theories from the neoliberal Western perspective. The city’s inclusive rhetoric masks growing inequality, as housing becomes unaffordable even for the middle class. Shenzhen exemplifies how special economic zones manipulate migration for economic upgrading. While it successfully attracts skilled labour, sustainability concerns – rising costs and labour saturation – hint at future tensions. The ‘Shenzhen model’ thus offers a unique lens on state-managed migration in post-reform China.

Shenzhen was not only an incubator for aspiring domestic migrant professionals working in the technology industry; the city also provided a space for international migrants to gain social mobility. It was a popular trajectory for newly arrived self-initiated international migrants to find teaching jobs through teaching agencies and slowly work their way up towards teaching in international schools or even start their own businesses. In effect, an education industry that heavily emphasised the English language and foreign faces created the market demand and thus room for social mobility for foreigners. For the Shenzhen government, foreign faces and international communities were symbolic of a global city, and the population’s quality (*suzhi*) was elevated through learning the global language of English. The case also demonstrates how China’s migration governance combines economic pragmatism (allowing foreign labour where needed) with exclusionary citizenship policies. Foreign English teachers are desired but disposable for the mobility regime. Their mobility is carefully regulated to serve urban redevelopment goals, but local governments refrain from granting rights of permanent residency. For migrants like Ian, upward mobility is possible but precarious, contingent on state policies and market fluctuations. Their experiences reflect broader global trends where migrant labour is instrumentalised and mobilised for economic growth while being denied full membership in the city – a core feature of governmobility.

Compared to the Shenzhen government’s regulation relaxation on granting non-local domestic migrants *hukou* (permanent residency) in an attempt to attract desired, highly skilled Chinese workers to stay and settle in Shenzhen, there are relatively few government incentives aimed at encouraging the long-term settlement of international migrants in Shenzhen. Unless married to Chinese nationals, non-elite foreigners face very few alternatives but to leave the country upon reaching retirement age, as they become ineligible for work-related residency. Although foreigners could continue to stay in China on tourist or business visas when they pass their retirement age, doing so would force them into illegal

employment if they need to continue working. Staying in China on one-year work visas, facing age limits on their work visa applications and grim prospects regarding obtaining permanent residency, it is no wonder some foreigners feel that they are ‘living in China on borrowed time’ (fieldnotes, 28 October 2018).

The case of Shenzhen’s internal and international migration governance disrupts conventional migration narratives – particularly the ‘Global South to Global North’ and ‘South-South migration’ frameworks – by revealing a more complex, state-engineered mobility regime. Shenzhen’s model demonstrates how Shenzhen SEZ policies reconfigure migration dynamics, blending neoliberal labour-market strategies with authoritarian state management. Traditional migration scholarship often assumes a unidirectional flow from poorer (Global South) to wealthier (Global North) nations, driven by economic disparities, conflict, or colonial legacies. However, Shenzhen’s case complicates this: Individuals like Ian (a British expat) from the Global North to China due to economic precarity at home. His story mirrors ‘lateral mobility’ – where migrants from developed countries seek opportunities in emerging economies due to stagnant wages, job insecurity (e.g., gig work contracts), and declining social mobility in their home countries. Unlike traditional North-South migration (e.g., Mexican workers in the U.S.), Shenzhen’s foreign labour is strategically recruited and regulated to serve urban development goals (e.g., English teachers for city branding and mobility of younger generations). This challenges the idea that migration is primarily ‘bottom-up’ (individual/family-driven); here, it is state-orchestrated. The Shenzhen model illustrates how twenty-first-century governmobility operates: not through open borders or postcolonial labour systems, but through flexible, state-directed flows that prioritise economic utility. This demands new theoretical frameworks that move beyond geographic binaries to analyse how rising powers engineer mobility as a growth strategy.

This chapter also contributes to comparative research on migrant governance within special economic zones across other emerging economies. Mirroring Dubai’s urbanisation surge in the early 2000s (Hamza, 2015), Shenzhen’s migrant governance exhibits profound institutional embeddedness: the state selectively employs policy instruments to encourage or restrict migration whilst pursuing regional economic development objectives. Mobility targets fostered substantial temporary migration flows. Indeed, the transitory nature of migration constitutes the defining characteristic of the governing model of economic zones. The Shenzhen

(Guangdong) model has also been extended by local enterprises from Guangdong province as their prominent approach for global infrastructure investment, exemplified by two major industrial projects in Nigeria's Lagos and Ogun states: the Lekki Free Trade Zone (LFTZ) and the Ogun–Guangdong Free Trade Zone (OGFTZ; Adunbi, 2019). However, compared to the economic zones of Dubai, Lagos, and Ogun, the Shenzhen SEZ typically encourages and mobilises new migrants under the guise of realising individual value and resolving personal mobility dilemmas, thereby facilitating the transformation of the economic zone's spatial and economic model. This state-directed neoliberal migration constitutes the defining characteristic of contemporary governmobility in Shenzhen.

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Understanding Free Movement in Africa: Nigerian Sex Workers in Ghana

Samuel Okyere

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Free Movement Protocol (hereafter the Protocol) was adopted in 1979 to promote regional unity, deepen integration, expand trade for shared prosperity, and dismantle the borders arbitrarily imposed across the region during colonial rule. It has been ratified by all ECOWAS member states who have also repeatedly affirmed their commitment to the Protocol. Yet, more than four decades after its adoption, the Protocol's implementation remains partial and stagnant. Contrary to its vision of frictionless mobility, West African citizens continue to face formidable barriers to movement and settlement across the region.

Scholars have attributed these shortcomings to ECOWAS's internal deficiencies, including divergent national migration policies and priorities, limited institutional capacity, and inconsistent political will (Adepoju, Boulton, & Levin 2010; Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2018). However, the literature also attributes these internal shortcomings and the Protocol's limited progress to external influences, notably, the enduring colonial power

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relations between Africa and Europe (Castillejo, 2019; Zanker et al., 2020; Donko et al., 2021; Niemann & Zaun, 2023). Since the 1990s the European Union (EU) and its member states have sought to deter African migration to Europe by using aid and development cooperation to extend European border controls into ECOWAS states. As Okyere and Olayiwola (2022) have discussed in more detail elsewhere anti-trafficking, anti-smuggling, and anti-terrorism measures are among the migration deterrence strategies the EU has deployed across West Africa. These measures, among others, have had deleterious consequences for free movement in the region.

The chapter demonstrates these dynamics through findings from qualitative research with Nigerian women living and working in Ghana. As ECOWAS citizens, the women are entitled to rights of free movement, residence, and employment across member states under the Protocol. However, their experiences at borders, workplaces, and in public spaces reveal that security and social practices shaped by the outsourcing of European border controls to West Africa have rendered their access to these rights precarious, heavily monitored, and morally contested rather than guaranteed. Far from realising ECOWAS's vision of unimpeded regional mobility and settlement, their experiences show that colonial infrastructures and regimes continue to constrain movement and labour rights, particularly for women. This situation thus underscore the fact that migration regimes are historically situated, polycentric, infrastructural, stratified, and shaped by multiple actors and interests in what Eraliev and Ennis (2026, this volume) conceptualise as 'assemblages of migration'.

From this perspective, the chapter observes that the Protocol's stalled progress arises from tension between actors with incongruent agendas. On the one hand there are those pursuing the Protocol's visions of free movement and decolonised mobility and on the one hand, there are those who prioritise transnational securitised border approaches informed by colonial migration control logics. The discussion further contends that given the unbroken links between Europe's colonial control of African mobility and its contemporary border externalisation practices, European migration deterrence measures should be understood as constituent components of ECOWAS migration governance. This understanding highlights the colonial continuities and the extent to which Europe's border security interests have become embedded within, and almost indistinguishable from, West African migration socio-political realities and rhetoric. Framing it this way also signals the need to confront this malign influence as a persistent

internal erosion of the free movement agenda rather than the temporary external challenge it is often assumed to be.

The discussion that follows first situates the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol within broader debates on regional free movement, migration regimes, and border externalisation. It then presents the study's methodology and findings, which illustrate how EU border policing agendas and rhetoric have reinforced colonial migration security logics and practices that have generated serious obstacles to the participants' mobility rights and subjected their labour and social lives to intensified moral and security scrutiny. The chapter concludes by addressing the central puzzle of how EU migration deterrence measures have reshaped a regional framework designed to decolonise mobility into one that perpetuates colonial control, before reflecting on the implications for regional integration, sovereignty, and migration governance in West Africa.

THE ECOWAS FREE MOVEMENT PROTOCOL: AMBITION, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND PERSISTENT BARRIERS

On May 28, 1975, leaders from fifteen West African States Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo met in Lagos, Nigeria, to sign the treaty establishing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The founding vision of ECOWAS was to promote political, social, and economic integration and unity as a pathway to prosperity and improved livelihoods across the region. Recognising the importance of unrestricted cross-border flows of people, goods, and services to these goals, ECOWAS leaders sought to rebuild the region's historical traditions of mobility and socioeconomic interconnectedness that had been disrupted by the borders and regulations that colonial rule had imposed (Arthur, 2017; Adepoju, et al., 2010, p. 1).

To these ends, in 1979, ECOWAS leaders adopted the Protocol Relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (Protocol A/P.1/5/79; hereafter 'the Protocol') to harmonise regional migration governance and provide ECOWAS nationals with largely unrestricted rights to move, stay, and establish socioeconomic activities throughout the bloc. These goals, further elaborated in supplementary Protocols in 1985, 1986, 1989 and 1990, were to be implemented over fifteen years in three stages of five years each, as set out in Article 2 of the 1979 Protocol.

The first phase, covering the initial five years after adoption, focused on eliminating entry barriers and enabling ECOWAS citizens to stay in any member state for up to ninety days without a visa or prior authorisation, provided they possessed valid travel and health documents. The second phase extended these rights to longer-term residence and equal treatment with nationals of host states in areas such as employment and sociocultural rights. The final phase sought to deepen regional integration by guaranteeing ECOWAS citizens the right to establish or operate businesses and pursue other economic ventures throughout the community.

The protocol has achieved important implementation milestones. All ECOWAS states had ratified the first phase by 1980 and the second by 1986, guaranteeing eligible ECOWAS citizens the associated rights to move and stay across the bloc. The introduction of the ECOWAS passport in 2000 further simplified cross-border travel and reaffirmed ECOWAS integrationist aspirations. Scholars have praised the protocol for its progress within the first 10-year phase and its wider design, scope and ambition (Garba & Yeboah, 2022; Zanker et al., 2020). It has been described not only as the most advanced free movement framework in Africa but also as the ‘best practice on the continent’ (Maunganidze 2017, p. 5). These accolades are lent credence by the African Union’s adoption of the protocol as a blueprint for the continent-wide African Union Free Movement Protocol in 2018.

Yet, for all its achievements and praise received, more than two decades after its implementation deadline, the Protocol’s promises remain only partially realised. The state of free movement under the ECOWAS Protocol contrasts sharply with that of the European Union’s Schengen framework. Whereas the latter has effectively eliminated internal borders to facilitate genuine frictionless movement across the EU, ECOWAS member states continue to maintain border posts and enforce restrictive and often discriminatory passport, health, and security checks that result in arbitrary delays, harassment, and extortion even for travellers with the requisite documents (Garba & Yeboah, 2022; Aduloju, 2017; Walther, 2015). According to Iwuoha and Mbaegbu (2021, p. 270, citing Dina, 2009, p. 3) ECOWAS borders represent sites of ‘chaos, denial of rights to move freely, humiliation, roadblocks, shameful extortions, and lack of political will’ towards the realisation of regional freedom of movement.

The Protocol’s goal of harmonising regional migration governance is also undermined by member states’ continued adherence to individual national migration policies. This has led to uneven implementation and, in some cases, direct conflict with the free movement agenda (Teye et al.,

2019). States frequently cite terrorism, smuggling, and public health concerns to justify unilateral border closures that suspend ECOWAS mobility rights and leave migrants stranded at crossing points. For instance, in August 2019, Nigeria unilaterally closed its land borders with Benin and Niger, ostensibly to curb smuggling and protect domestic industries. The closure lasted over a year, severely disrupting regional trade and mobility, and directly violated the Protocol's commitments. Similarly, in what has been described as pandemic nationalism, all ECOWAS member states closed their borders or applied divergent rules to foreigners, including ECOWAS nationals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aniche et al., 2022). This step undermined the possibility of a coordinated regional response to the health emergency and also reflected a broader pattern 'where, even pre-pandemic, states relied on various exceptions to capriciously curtail freedom of movement' (Hamadou, 2020, p. 341).

Even the 90-day visa-free travel provision that is celebrated as the protocol's most notable achievement is limited by its documentation requirements, as highlighted by Arhin-Sam et al. (2022). Obtaining passports, national identity cards, or health certificates remains costly and logistically difficult in many member states. Those without such documents are effectively excluded from the Protocol's protections and forced to rely on informal crossings that expose them to heightened insecurity, extortion, and the risk of being criminalised as immigration offenders. The literature shows that marginalised groups such as herders, itinerant traders, female traders and residents of border communities, who historically moved freely across West Africa before colonial partitions and boundaries, are disproportionately affected (Uchenna, 2019; Nwangu, 2025; Yeboah et al., 2021; Weinrich, 2024). Thus, ironically, the Protocol's documentation requirements reproduce the colonial mobility restrictions it was designed to dismantle.

These and other shortfalls in achieving frictionless free movement across ECOWAS have been attributed to member states' divergent migration policies, weak institutional and infrastructural capacity, and inconsistent political commitment to open borders and regional integration (Adepoju, 2015; Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2018). However, many scholars argue that these ostensibly internal weaknesses are also shaped by external pressures, particularly the EU's instrumental use of aid, security cooperation, and development assistance to advance European border control priorities in West Africa (Castillejo, 2019; Zanker et al., 2020; Donko et al., 2021; Niemann & Zaun, 2023). As explored in the next section, the dominant body of work on this subject converges

on the view that the Protocol's stagnation is rooted in, and continually sustained by, a colonial political economy of migration governance (Castillejo, 2019; Niemann & Zaun, 2023; Arhin-Sam et al., 2022; D'Humieres, 2018; Reslow & Vink, 2015).

Externalising Borders, Undermining Free Movement

Since the early 2000s, European states and the EU have extended their immigration and border controls beyond Europe's frontiers into West Africa through a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements with ECOWAS states (Bigo, 2006; Crisp, 2003; Boswell, 2003; D'Humieres, 2018). This process, commonly referred to as border externalisation entails the EU inducing West African governments to tighten their internal border controls, detain so-called 'irregular' migrants, obstruct their onward journeys to Europe, and adopt other restrictive migration practices and policies in exchange for aid, political support, or other incentives (Zanker et al., 2020; Deridder, Pelckmans, & Ward, 2020; Adam et al., 2020; Lopez, 2019; Niemann & Zaun, 2023; Olakpe, 2022, Cappiali & Pacciardi, 2024)

A decisive phase in this strategy was in 2015, when the EU devised new measures to intensify its reliance on externalisation to deter migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe (European Commission, 2015, pp. 2–9). Central to this intensification was the launch of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) at the 2015 Valletta Summit, which also marked a decisive shift in the EU's approach to development assistance for African countries. Although Europe had long used aid and cooperation to incentivise African governments to collaborate on migration deterrence, the EUTF made this conditionality more explicit. African countries' continued receipt of European financial assistance or development cooperation was going to become contingent on the extent of their cooperation with EU migration deterrence objectives rather than humanitarian or development needs (Hackenesch, Bergamn, & Orbie, 2021; Cassarino, 2025; Castillejo, 2019; Adam et al., 2020). This shift was further reinforced by the EU's Migration Partnership Framework (MPF) of June 2016 which explicitly stated the intention to 'to reward those countries willing to cooperate effectively with the EU on migration management and ensure there are consequences for those who refuse' (European Commission, 2016, p. 2).

The consequences of this reorientation became starkly visible in Niger, where EU and EUTF-backed initiatives saw the redefinition of national law and border governance in ways that directly contravened ECOWAS free movement rights. Under the banner of ‘capacity building’, the EU channelled over £1.2 million of EUTF funds into training Nigerien police and border guards, with the explicit aim of restricting the passage of non-Nigerien nationals transiting through the country to Algeria, Libya, and ultimately Europe (Bøås 2020, Bergmann et al., 2017, Idrissa, 2019; Kandilige & Yeboah, 2024). Bolstered by EU financial and political support, the Nigerien parliament also passed the controversial Law 2015–36 despite widespread domestic opposition to this. This legislation criminalised the movement of non-Nigerien migrants north of Agadez, a historic centre of mobility and trade in West Africa (Bøås, 2020; Deridder et al., 2020; Zanker et al., 2020; Lopez, 2019).

Thus, through EU influence, Niger effectively nullified ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol rights by criminalising regional migration beyond Agadez. This exposes a deep contradiction in the EU’s migration and human rights approach. While championing free movement and its benefits within Europe, it actively seeks mobility restrictions in West Africa. As the next section argues, this is paradigmatic of a colonial political economy of mobility or colonial governance at a distance. The section also draws on the assemblages of the migration framework to further elaborate on the intertwined actors, infrastructures, interests and discourses that reproduce these colonial hierarchies within West African mobility regimes.

THEORETICAL FRAMING: COLONIAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE ECOWAS FREE MOVEMENT PROTOCOL

As Strange and Martins (2019, p. 1) observe, ‘there is significant effort spent by actors on both sides of the Mediterranean on making African counterparts visible as an equal partner, an endeavour seen not just rhetorically within speeches but also in the set-up of key institutional fora and their membership’. The concept of partnership denotes the ‘highest stage of working relationship between different people brought together by commitment to common objectives, bonded by long experience of working together, and sustained by subscription to common visions’ (Mohiddin, 1998, p. 5). Genuine partnerships are characterised by equality, respect, mutuality, trust, voluntariness, reciprocity, transparency, shared ownership,

responsibility and decision-making, according to the literature (Crawford, 2003; Fowler, 2000; Laakso, 2007; Bailey & Dolan, 2011, p. 33).

Measured against these principles, the framing of EU-Africa migration agreements as ‘partnerships’ falls short, as they are driven by European priorities, sustained through asymmetrical power relations, and underwritten by the implicit threat of aid withdrawal or sanctions (D’Humieres, 2018; Adam et al., 2019; Olakpe, 2022; Natter, 2018). Contemporary migration governance in West Africa therefore remains rooted in colonial structures that are representative of the colonial political economy of mobility. The situation reflects what Adamson and Thiollot (2025, p. 1) describe as a ‘colonial migration state’ or ‘an order composed of both state and market actors that combined imperial policies of mobility and belonging with local institutions and practices in colonial peripheries’.

These configurations survived the end of colonial rule and continue to determine how Africans move within and beyond their region. Quijano and Ennis (2000) theorisation of the coloniality of power is also instructive here as it exemplifies how the enduring nature of European colonial domination subordinates ECOWAS free movement rights to European migration deterrence priorities. It must be noted that African governments are not totally passive recipients of European dictates. Adam et al. (2020) show that Ghana and Senegal, for example, actively react to, interpret, and adapt the EU policy agenda to their own domestic contexts. The extent of African cooperation with European border management initiatives is also only in so far as they can extract the aid and political benefits and find ways to make the European directives more palatable or even undermine their implementation (Strange & Martins, 2019; Gazzotti et al., 2022; Mouthaan, 2019).

Nonetheless, the fact remains that their manoeuvres occur within colonial and deeply asymmetrical structures of dependency in which the EU remains the initiator, agenda-setter, and principal beneficiary (Mouthaan, 2019; Uzelac, 2019). The choice is forced in that African governments comply with EU border policing initiatives to avoid the costs of non-cooperation. Their role as proxies for the enforcement of European priorities on their citizens resonates with the description of EU border externalisation as ‘governance at a distance’ (Astolfo & Allsopp 2023). Just as European colonisers enforced their imperial priorities in African colonies from afar through local proxies, EU states continue to reshape African laws, institutions, and border practices through African governments and other intermediaries such as the media and local and international actors

involved in its migration deterrence campaigns and other measures that reproduce colonial power asymmetries (van Dessel, 2021; Marino et al., 2022; Paynter & Riva, 2023).

Research highlights the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in particular, as key contributors to this continued challenge (Brachet, 2016; van Dessel, 2019; Cuttitta, 2020; Bisong, 2021). These agencies often lead or advise on the implementation of initiatives such as anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling programmes, migrant return schemes, outsourced asylum processing, and related interventions that are integral to the EU's broader strategy of restricting migration from the continent. Despite being framed in humanitarian terms as efforts to protect vulnerable migrants, these efforts have been shown to fuel anti-migration rhetoric, entrench xenophobia, legitimise restrictions on African free mobility and exacerbate inequalities in mobility rights for women especially (Lopez, 2019; Bøås, 2020; Deridder et al., 2020; Andersson, 2021; Olakpe, 2022; Weinrich, 2024; Bhanye & Shayamunda, 2025; Boampong & Mouthaan, 2025).

Taken together, these dynamics exemplify assemblages of migration, that is, the fact that migration governance is produced through overlapping actors, institutions, infrastructures, technologies, discourses, and embodied practices (Eraliev and Ennis, this volume). The EU and its externalisation strategies, African state responses, and the activities of international and local organisations form an interlinked assemblage that reshapes the ECOWAS free movement framework into a system of stratified rights and exclusions. These assemblages also operate materially through laws, checkpoints, surveillance infrastructures, and the everyday encounters that discipline and differentiate bodies on the move.

These processes are also evident in the lived experiences of Nigerian women in Ghana, which are examined in the next section. Their accounts demonstrate that the effects of externalisation are not abstract or confined to policy arenas. Instead, they are experienced directly through heightened border securitisation, xenophobia and intensified moral scrutiny of their right to move and work within the region. These everyday bordering practices reveal how externalisation is reproduced through gendered and racialised encounters that constrain mobility and undermine rights guaranteed under the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol.

Research Context of Nigeria and Ghana: Anti-trafficking as a Veil for EU Border Externalisation

In 2017, the IOM declared that trafficking from Nigeria to Europe had reached ‘crisis levels’, claiming that 80% of the 11,009 Nigerian women and girls who arrived in Italy by sea in 2016 were ‘potential trafficking victims’ (IOM, 2017). The qualifier ‘potential’ clearly indicated speculation rather than established fact. Yet this figure was widely circulated in European and African media as fact, with the qualifier omitted from headlines and reports. This narrative suited and reinforced long-standing stigmatising portrayals of Nigeria as a country mired in sex trafficking, people smuggling, and criminality; discourses that scholars have shown to be deeply entrenched in European representations of African migration in general (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012; Dunkerley, 2018; Castillejo, 2018). Such assumptions, coupled with the EU’s broader framing of Nigeria as both a major origin and transit point for ‘irregular’ migration, have positioned the country as a central focus of European migration deterrence efforts as highlighted in the EU’s 2015 European Agenda on Migration.

As ECOWAS’s most populous state, Nigeria is also pivotal to the bloc’s free mobility regime, meaning that migration deterrence interventions there carry consequences far beyond its borders and reverberate across the wider region. This calculation also factored into the EU’s choice of Nigeria as one of the five original priority countries for migration deterrence under the Migration Partnership Framework (MPF) and EUTF-sponsored interventions (EU Observer, 2018; Kingsley, 2018; Castillejo, 2017). Building on the ‘Nigerian trafficking crises’ narrative, these interventions have often been framed as efforts to protect vulnerable women from exploitation, obfuscating their true objective of seeking to curb African migration to Europe (Okyerere & Olayiwola, 2022). Through these ostensibly humanitarian measures, the EU has managed to secure deep influence over Nigeria’s migration governance. Pivotal frameworks such as the National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP) and the Migration Governance Framework (MGF) were developed through significant financial and technical support from the EU and European states (Arhin-Sam, 2019, p. 16).

The literature shows that Nigeria devotes relatively minimal domestic resources to implementing the anti-trafficking, anti-smuggling, and ‘irregular’ migration frameworks. Instead, these initiatives are largely financed

by the EU and European states. Furthermore, although the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) holds the legal mandate to lead such efforts, in practice the IOM, UNODC, and ICMPD dominate their planning and execution, largely because they receive the bulk of funding from European actors. Nigerian agencies have limited ownership of these activities and their wider national migration governance because ‘the central planning and operational activities of these projects remain in the hands of international organisations’, as Arhin-Sam (2019, p. 29) notes. Yet, the impacts are borne most directly by Nigerians and other ECOWAS nationals.

EU and European-funded training for Nigerian immigration officers, police, and other security services, presented as efforts to dismantle trafficking and smuggling networks, has instead intensified controls at airports, land borders and major transit hubs, leading to increased extortion, harassment, and other abuses against migrants (Okyere & Olayiwola, 2022; Andersson, 2021; Bisong, 2021). In northern Nigeria, EUTF-backed anti-smuggling programmes have disrupted vital informal mobility systems that support cross-border trade and livelihoods. Drivers and traders complain that the Action Against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (A-TIPSEM), funded by the EUTF and implemented by UNODC, has led to over-zealous policing and increased confiscation of vehicles and goods, arbitrary detentions, and serious impacts on their livelihoods and mobility rights (Idris, 2022).

Similar concerns surround the EU–IOM Joint Initiative on Migrant Protection and Reintegration (JMPA), launched in 2016 with over €700 million allocated across Africa, with Nigeria as a central focus. Although framed as a humanitarian project to assist stranded migrants, research shows that it has facilitated increased returns, normalised deportations, and deepened EU influence over Nigeria’s migration governance (Andersson, 2021). Returned Nigerians report stigmatisation and limited reintegration support, while others intercepted before departure and labelled as potential trafficking victims have been prevented from travelling altogether, against their wishes (Idris, 2022; Okyere & Olayiwola, 2022). These programmes therefore constrain Nigerians’ mobility rights and reinforce stigmatising narratives that conflate their legitimate movement with criminality, deviance, and risk (Zanker et al., 2020).

A similar pattern is evident in Ghana, which has also become a focal site for these interventions due to its role as a key destination for intra-regional migrants. As in Nigeria, EU and European funding has shaped Ghana’s

migration governance by influencing the development of its National Migration Policy (NMP) with anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling imperatives as key priorities. The EU has also financed major migration deterrence initiatives such as the Strengthening Border Security in Ghana programmes, led by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), to curb ‘irregular migration, human trafficking and other cross border crimes’ (ICMPD, 2020). These programmes, together with EU-funded training for police, immigration, the judiciary and other actors, have produced increased border securitisation and other restrictive practices that erode ECOWAS free movement rights (Arhin-Sam et al., 2021).

Ghana has also witnessed a proliferation of campaigns urging people to avoid ‘irregular’ migration and to ‘join the fight’ against traffickers and smugglers. These publicity campaigns, funded primarily by the EU and other external actors, have further entrenched European border control logics in Ghanaian public discourse. Disseminated through radio, television, social media, and border checkpoints, these campaigns have amplified nationalist narratives that portray certain local and regional migrants as potential criminals or security threats (Yemisi, 2024; Iwuoha, 2025; Boampong & Mouthaan, 2025). It is within this context that the study informing this chapter was undertaken. The next section outlines the research methodology and presents the findings, which illustrate how EU-driven interventions and influence over West African migration governance have reshaped mobility experiences and the Protocol’s emancipatory vision of free movement into a precarious, securitised, and exclusionary order for many.

Methodology

This chapter draws on data from an exploratory study conducted between May and June 2018 with a group of Nigerian sex workers in Kumasi, the capital of Ghana’s Ashanti Region. The original aim was to examine the lived experiences of ECOWAS citizens in Ghana under the Free Movement Protocol. The participants became the study’s central focus because public discourse at the time had intensified around the rising presence of Nigerian sex workers in Ghana, as widely reported by media and state authorities in both countries (Modern Ghana, 2017; Daily Guide 2017; Otoy, 2018). Although cross-border migration between Nigeria and Ghana has a long history, this specific trend was relatively new and

therefore attracted significant public interest, particularly regarding its drivers. An added value and originality of this study lie in the fact that it is the first known academic investigation of this phenomenon. Ethical approval was secured from the researcher's institutional ethics board.

Sixteen women took part in the study. The group included two smugglers or travel facilitators, two 'fixers' who managed lodgings and logistics, and twelve others who relied on them to organise their journeys. The study used unstructured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to collect data on the women's life stories, migration journeys, and lived experiences in Ghana. These methods were selected for their capacity to elicit vivid and in-depth personal accounts and to situate meaning making within participants' social and experiential contexts (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 99; Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102). They are also well suited to complex and emotionally charged issues such as those examined here (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Participants were recruited through a law firm providing services to Nigerian migrants in Kumasi, where the study was conducted. Notices were also posted at bars, food vendors, and other local businesses inviting interested individuals to contact the researcher. In line with established social research ethical standards, participants were duly informed of the research rationale, scope, nature of their involvement, collection, use and storage of their data. They were given ample time and opportunities to ask questions and ensure answers received were satisfactory before agreeing to participate. Participants were also informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw at any point during the study without giving a reason. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and analysed following the guidance of Smith and Osborn (2014) and Larkin and Thompson (2012). I began by reading all transcripts closely, returning to the recordings where tone or emphasis seemed under-represented. This was followed by rapid coding and line-by-line coding to identify recurring patterns and emergent categories. Finally, these patterns were synthesised into broader themes.

As already discussed elsewhere (Okyere & Olayiwola, 2022), a central finding that emerged early in the study concerned the drivers of the women's presence in Ghana. Participants described the adverse effects of EU border externalisation measures on their mobility rights in Nigeria. In the wake of EU-driven anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling controls in Nigeria, women were being subjected to heightened scrutiny at the international airports in Abuja and Lagos. Many were detained on suspicion of being victims or

perpetrators of trafficking or smuggling, which curtailed their travel plans. Several recounted experiences of lengthy detention, humiliation, financial loss and the emotional costs imposed on them and their families when they were identified as potential trafficking victims despite their insistence otherwise. The growing risk of detention and criminalisation in their own country compelled many to travel to Ghana under the ECOWAS free movement framework, hoping eventually to continue their journeys to Europe. However, the proliferation of anti-trafficking initiatives and the wider securitisation of migration shaped by EU externalisation policies similarly constrained their mobility and everyday lives in Ghana, as discussed next.

Findings

Three themes capture the adverse experiences of the Nigerian women and reveal how EU migration externalisation measures, channelled through anti-trafficking frameworks, reshape the practice of ECOWAS free movement into a process marked by suspicion, exploitation, and hostility: ‘Bribery and Border Economies: The Erosion of Free Movement’; ‘Restricted Mobility and Precarious Labour’; and ‘Over-policing, Xenophobia, and Hostility’. Pseudonyms are used in all cases.

Bribery and Border Economies: The Erosion of Free Movement

The first theme that emerged from participants’ accounts was the experience of heightened border policing and extortion while travelling across Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Although the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol guarantees nationals the right to move, reside, and work freely within the region, the women consistently reported that these rights were undermined by harassment and demands for bribes at border crossings. For them, free movement was not a protective reality but an aspirational principle contradicted by the borders and border officials. Participants repeatedly linked these negative experiences to the stigma attached to Nigerian travellers, particularly women, who were routinely viewed with suspicion. ‘Nancy’, one of the women explained:

At every checkpoint, they ask for money. If I say I don’t have it, they search my bags and try to use other means to get it. Free movement? It is not free at all. For a Nigerian woman, it is very expensive. They treat me like I am a 419 [fraudster] or ashawo [prostitute], and so I must share my money with them.

Participants with previous experiences of crossing the border, such as ‘Emeka’, emphasised that bribery was not new but that it had intensified

in recent years alongside the heightened anti-trafficking campaigns and enforcement. As she recalled:

These days, it is not just about your papers or the reason for travel. They [immigration] also say they've stopped us to check for trafficking. That also turns into a demand to 'pay something' else you'll be delayed for hours.

Such experiences underscore how EU-sponsored securitisation has created what Andersson (2021) and Gaibazzi (2024) describe as border economies, where officials profit from restrictions imposed in the name of combating trafficking and irregular migration. More to the point, anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling have heightened the problem of ECOWAS regional borders being transactional spaces. Free movement rights had been transformed into commodities extracted through bribery and sometimes demands for sexual favours, as starkly summed up by 'Suzy' when I asked about her experience of free movement.

That [free movement] is on the papers. At the borders the only law is money. If you pay, you move. If you don't, you wait, or you pay with your body if there's no money.

Restricted Mobility and Precarious Labour: The Protection Paradox

A second finding by the study concerns how the women's fears about travelling via Nigerian airports in the wake of heightened anti-trafficking measures had forced them to seek alternative routes, exposing them to further insecurity and precarious labour. At the time of the study, all sixteen women were engaged in sex work in Ghana. They attributed this not to personal choice, but to the absence of safer, alternative employment and the need to survive while seeking passage through Ghana. As 'Lucy' put it:

After two months here [Kumasi], my money finished. Even Ghanaians don't have work, so how could I? A friend introduced me to sex work. It wasn't what I wanted, but debts were growing, and I needed food, rent, and to save for the journey again.

This was also echoed by 'Mary':

I can't travel from my own country, but I want to travel. Now I am here, I must survive. There's no one to give me another job so I do the work available, even if it is not safe.

These experiences highlight what Andrijasevic and Mai (2016) describe as the protection paradox or the situation whereby interventions framed as protecting women from trafficking in reality deny them access to regular mobility and reproduce the very vulnerabilities they claim to address. Having been framed as inherently ‘at risk’ in anti-trafficking discourses had not provided the women with safer migration routes or options. Instead, it had heightened their exposure to exploitation, stigma, and violence. ‘Ruth’s’ point captures this situation: the fact that EU border externalisation not only erodes the rights guaranteed under the ECOWAS Protocol but actively creates the conditions for gendered precariousness:

They say they are protecting us from trafficking, but that only means staying put in Naija [Nigeria] or trying a more difficult way to travel and facing the consequences. If I were a man, I won’t face a lot of this wahala [problem].

As the third theme explores, beyond precarious labour, the institution-alisation of suspicion of Nigerian women as ‘risky bodies’ to be policed also exposed them to discrimination and outright xenophobic hostility in Ghana. This was yet another means through which the ECOWAS free movement protocol’s goals of regional integration and mobility are systematically undermined by concerns fuelled by the EU’s migration priorities.

Over-policing, Xenophobia, and Hostility

Having crossed the borders, the Nigerian women’s stay in Ghana was still marked by suspicion and oppressive paternalistic practices. Participants reported repeated police raids on their homes and workplaces. These actions were presented as interventions to ensure they were not victims of trafficking, hence protective. Yet, the outcome was often arbitrary detention, harassment, and extortion, as described by Judith:

The police say they come to protect us, but what they give is not protection. They raid our houses, carry us to the station. Even when we show papers, they treat us like thieves. If you don’t pay, you stay there the whole day. Is this protection?

Judith’s point highlights once again how the EU-inspired anti-trafficking frameworks, once implemented locally, had transformed into a situation where ‘protection’ was experienced as criminalisation. This heightened

policing and often finding themselves at the centre of the trafficking campaigns and public anti-trafficking discourses also fuelled stigmatisation and

because of the trafficking stories and the constant police attention on us, people do not treat us well. Landlords ask for higher rent because they say we are trouble. Neighbours insult us and tell us to go back to our country, saying we are bringing criminals and bad things into their community. You're viewed differently the moment people hear your accent and know you're Nigerian.

It is instructive to note that such experiences of paying higher rents, discrimination, and verbal abuse contrasted with those of other ECOWAS nationals encountered during the study. It seemed that the discursive framing of Nigerian women (and Nigerians more broadly) as 'risky migrants' in EU policies and popular migration debates had amplified existing local xenophobic sentiments against them. Their experiences thus suggest that border externalisation also influences social and community relations, and not just policies. Comparable patterns have been documented in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere, where intensified EU border policing has been associated with rising anti-Black racism, xenophobia, and violence against sub-Saharan Africans (Menin, 2024; Uzelac, 2020; Limam & Del Sarto, 2015). In the Ghanaian context, this discriminatory treatment fuelled by EU interests clearly undermines the ECOWAS agenda for freedom of movement and settlement.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has examined the reasons for the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol's implementation deficits, drawing on evidence from the lived realities of Nigerian women based in Ghana. The protocol was conceived to dismantle colonial-era barriers to mobility and promote regional integration. However, the evidence presented here shows that these barriers have been reinforced rather than removed because EU border externalisation renders African mobility a problem to be managed for European interests (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Sharma, 2020; Zanker et al., 2020). The Protocol's decolonial and emancipatory promises remain elusive as European states continue to use aid, political influence and security cooperation to shape ECOWAS migration governance. Cross-border mobility across the region is thus experienced through intensified securitisation, surveillance, and documentation demands that echo the practices of a colonial migration state or

colonial political economy of migration governance (Adamson & Thiollet, 2025; Lopez, 2019; Deridder et al., 2020; Sharma, 2020).

The continuities between the past and present are also deeply racialized, as argued by Okyere and Olayiwola (2022). The EU's drive to reduce African migration to Europe is partly rooted in a racial logic that Black bodies do not belong there. This produces practices of exclusion in which even intra-ECOWAS movement is treated as a risk to be contained. The findings of this study bring these structural dynamics into sharper relief, particularly the role of anti-trafficking interventions in EU migration deterrence. Contrary to their framing as humanitarian, these interventions construct Nigerian women as inherently 'at risk' to justify constraints on their mobility that deepen their precarity and subject their work and everyday lives to intense moral scrutiny. This pattern exemplifies the protection paradox in which interventions that claim to safeguard women instead reproduce the very vulnerabilities they purport to prevent (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Sharma, 2020).

Participants' encounters with border officials across Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana also revealed how the heightened securitisation has created what Andersson (2021) and Gaibazzi (2024) describe as 'border economies'. Taken at face value, their presence in Ghana might be cited as evidence of the Protocol's success. However, this would grossly downplay how journeys were marked by bribes, harassment and coercion that hollow out the goals of the ECOWAS protocol. It would also reflect a misunderstanding of the damage to community relations, the xenophobia, discrimination and community tensions that characterised the women's daily lives, along with other multiscalar forms of violence that EU border externalisation impacts are inflicting on ECOWAS citizens within spaces where they should be free to live and work.

Taken together, the findings affirm the argument that EU externalisation strategies reproduce colonial logics of mobility control in West Africa (Lopez, 2019; Deridder et al., 2020) and governance at a distance (Andersson, 2014; López, 2019). They also demonstrate that migration governance in West Africa reflects an assemblage of power in which states, international agencies, local security actors and public discourses converge to reshape free movement into a hierarchy of rights and exclusions. The chapter observes that European influence has become so deeply embedded within West African migration policies, institutions, practices and socio-political narratives that many consider it indistinguishable from local governance itself.

Against this backdrop, these influences should be recognised as persistent and constitutive forces within ECOWAS migration governance rather than temporary external pressures. Understanding them in this way underscores the need to confront their long-term erosion of the free movement agenda. The experiences of the Nigerian women show the urgency of this and the need to recentre African priorities in the region's migration governance. Resisting EU border externalisation involves resisting the securitisation of mobility and restoring the Protocol's original vision of unrestricted mobility and settlement with dignity, socioeconomic rights and equality. Without such recalibration, the promise of free movement in West Africa risks remaining subordinated to European interests that continue to entrench the inequalities the Protocol was created to overcome.

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Strangers at Home: Political Economy Paradoxes of Ethnic Repatriation in Kazakhstan

Nazgul Baigabatova

INTRODUCTION

The process of ethnic repatriation of Kazakhs from near and far to the territory of their historical homeland has become one of the key components of Kazakhstan's state policy since independence. As part of a strategy to 'restore historical justice' and strengthen state nation-building, repatriation policy is framed in a discourse of a hospitable homeland that opens its doors to its compatriots (Concept of repatriation, 1998). However, the patriotic rhetoric of repatriation often conceals deep contradictions related to access to resources, institutional inclusion, and symbolic belonging to the community of *local Kazakhs*, which become especially evident in the everyday practices of adaptation and integration of returnees. Despite the thirty-year history of the repatriation programme and the proclaimed goals of socioeconomic integration and cultural consolidation, in practice the process exposes a number of paradoxes lying at the intersection of politics,

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economics and identity. Ethnic similarity has not guaranteed repatriates full inclusion in the economic, legal and cultural space of Kazakhstan, who continues to face institutional and socioeconomic barriers, marginalisation and latent discrimination (Amitov & Amantayeva, 2016).

The problem field of this research includes analyses of the social production of 'ours' and 'strangers' within the post-Soviet nation-state, formal and informal mechanisms of resource redistribution, as well as symbolic and legal boundaries between repatriates and the 'autochthonous' population. There is a need to analyse not only normative frameworks but also local adaptation strategies, protest practices, and hidden mechanisms of resource distribution, in which repatriates often find themselves in a vulnerable position. It should be noted that repatriation, conceived as a restoration of justice, generates in practice new forms of inequality and hierarchy.

In this context, the Zhetysu region, historically connected with the migration of Kazakhs and the formation of the foreign Kazakh diaspora (Mendikulova, 2006), is of interest. This area, which is attractive for ethnic repatriates, especially from China and Mongolia, has become not only one of the main locations for repatriates, but also an arena of contradictions between official rhetoric and the real conditions of integration. In addition, it is a space where the historical logic of border and migration is intertwined with the contemporary challenges of the large-scale transformation of Kazakhstan's economy, which is still moving towards the development of the private sector and the formation of an institutional framework for market relations. Against this background, repatriates find themselves in a space of paradoxes: on the one hand, they are officially recognised as 'their own', while on the other hand, they almost universally face suspicion, inequality and exclusion. There is a contradiction between the declared right to return and the actual conditions of their inclusion in Kazakhstani society.

In this regard, against the background of growing processes of internal inequality and regional fragmentation in the post-Soviet transformation process, repatriation acquires not only an ethno-cultural but also a pronounced political and economic dimension. In addition, possible new repatriation waves, provoked by global climatic, political and economic changes, actualise the need to rethink the sustainability of the existing model of repatriation on the example of a single Kazakhstan region.

The issues of adaptation and integration of repatriates returning to Kazakhstan are well studied by contemporary scholars (Diener, 2005;

Diener, 2009; Finke, 2013; Werner et al., 2017; Rees et al., 2021; Finke, 2022; Kalysh & Kasymova, 2014; Amitov & Amantayeva, 2016; Shaken, 2023; Zharkynbekova et al., 2024). At the same time, the political economic dimension of repatriation and its manifestation in localised contexts, especially as applied to everyday practices on the ground, remains an underdeveloped research area.

The aims of this chapter are to analyse the political economy of ethnic repatriation in post-Soviet Kazakhstan drawing on the example of *qandas*¹ resettled in the Zhetysu region and to identify how institutional and local economic conditions shape everyday practices of settling, adapting and fitting into the local social environment. Particular attention is paid to how *qandas* construct notions of ‘home’, justice and belonging in the context of ambiguous state support and resource constraints.

Based on the objective, the research poses the following research questions: 1) How do official repatriation narratives interact with actual practices of reception and adaptation of *qandas* at the local level? 2) How do *qandas* form adaptive strategies in the face of uncertainty, bureaucratic obstacles and localised rejection? 3) To what extent does access to the labour market, economic resources and social infrastructure represent the inclusion or exclusion of *qandas*? 4) How are perceptions of ‘home’, ‘own’ and ‘stranger’ shaped and transformed in the everyday lives of returnees? The search for answers to these questions will also include the study of the degree of everyday inclusion of the repatriate in the local labour market; the analysis of barriers to their economic integration and ‘entry’ into the labour market; and the peculiarities of practices of embedding into the economic system of the host society.

This study starts from the premise that repatriation is not only a cultural and legal act of return but also a form of redistributive access to scarce resources such as land, housing, and social infrastructure, which is organised through institutional, bureaucratic, and power practices. This understanding invites a broader conceptual shift: rather than viewing

¹ In the context of Kazakhstan’s migration and nation-building policies, the term ‘qandas’ (literally meaning ‘of shared blood’) refers to ethnic Kazakhs who have returned to their historical homeland from abroad. Introduced in official discourse as a replacement for the earlier term *oralman* (used since the early 1990s), *qandas* reflects a shift towards a more inclusive and nationally symbolic framing of repatriation. In this paper, the term *qandas* will be used to denote members of the Kazakh diaspora who have resettled in Kazakhstan through state-supported repatriation programmes. In this paper, the term *qandas* is used to denote both the singular and plural forms.

repatriation solely through the lens of identity or legal status, it must be analysed as part of the wider system through which states govern mobility, allocate resources, and negotiate belonging. It is precisely at this intersection of migration, governance, and political economy that recent scholarly debates have called for a rethinking of how global migration governance is conceptualised (Ennis & Eraliev, 2026, this volume).

Recent debates in migration studies have argued that existing theories rooted in Western institutional contexts fail to account for the diversity of migration regimes emerging in post-socialist, postcolonial, and non-liberal settings. To address this epistemic imbalance, scholars propose shifting attention towards the political economy of non-Western migration regimes, treating them not as deviations but as constitutive elements of the global migration order. Within this theoretical move, the concept of *Assemblages of Migration* offers a productive framework for understanding migration governance as ‘historically sedimented, polycentric, infra-structural, stratified, embodied, and co-produced’ (see Eraliev & Ennis, 2026, this volume).

Applying this perspective to Kazakhstan’s repatriation policy makes it possible to situate it within a global debate on how states outside the liberal West manage mobility. The Kazakh case illustrates how post-socialist states develop distinct migration regimes (Urinboyev, 2021) that combine Soviet bureaucratic legacies, moral economies of kinship, and market rationalities. Repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs becomes a key arena where the political economy of belonging, nation-building, and migration management intersect, revealing how migration assemblages operate in practice as layered infrastructures that both enable and constrain movement, inclusion, and belonging.

The empirical basis of the study is based on field ethnographic materials collected by the author in the Zhetysu region in 2024–2025, using qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with repatriates (mostly biographical and narrative); informal conversations with officials and activists involved in the processes of repatriation, adaptation and integration; participant observation; and analysis of state programmes to support repatriates, official regulatory documents and media discourse. In addition to these primary materials, the study also draws on fieldwork conducted among Kazakhs in Mongolia in 2018, which provides further contextual depth and comparative perspective.

In this chapter, I seek not only to highlight understudied aspects of repatriation as a type of migration in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, but also to offer a critical perspective on the ways in which ethnicity becomes an

object of political economy practices in the context of nation-building. The novelty of the study lies in shifting the analytical focus from normative and identity-based aspects to everyday practices of institutional interaction and resource allocation. Repatriation is viewed not as a linear act of return, but as a complex process of political economic embedding in the transforming post-Soviet space.

REPATRIATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: FROM NATIONAL IDEAL TO MIGRATION REGIME

From the early 1990s, Kazakhstan's leadership positioned repatriation as an act of historical justice and demographic restoration (Diener, 2009; Kaiser & Beimenbetov, 2020). Yet, as in many post-Soviet contexts, the institutional mechanisms of migration management emerged not from a coherent policy design but through the layering of fragmented bureaucratic practices. Even before independence, an early legislative framework had already defined procedures and benefits for ethnic Kazakhs wishing to settle in rural areas. Early arrivals recall that newcomers received livestock, housing, and jobs:

'No one was unemployed at that time. Everyone had a job. We raised cattle, had our own tractors, and cultivated the land. It was comfortable. But after the crisis of the nineties, the transition to a market economy, everything fell apart. In 1995–1997 the districts were united, and at that time the village was empty, many people went to big cities to trade'. (M., 75-year-old man, Syrymbet village).

The first post-independence policies established quotas, initially set at 10,000 families a year, and by 1993 arrivals even exceeded expectations (Sarbasov, 2021). *'In those years, the Kazakh government sent KAMAZs² to Mongolia almost weekly. I was 11 years old at the time, but I remember very well when the next bright orange KAMAZ arrived and neighbours started loading their things for shipment, we - children were crying because we also very much wanted to leave for Kazakhstan quickly. In August 1993 such happiness happened to our family. We loaded all our belongings on the cars, up to the yurt. And ourselves, we were almost 40 people of relatives, our family and families of 4 brothers of my father, came by plane. First from*

² Large truck.

Bayan-Olgiy to Ust-Kamenogorsk, and then to the airport of Taldykorgan. Yellow PAZ-buses were already waiting for us, which took us to the village of Kokzhazyk in Alakol district'. (D., 43-year-old man, Taldykorgan city)

By the late 1990s, the economic crisis prompted a reduction in migration quotas, while new policy frameworks formalised the status of repatriates under the label *oralman*.³ The term soon moved beyond bureaucratic use and became a powerful social marker, differentiating newcomers from local Kazakhs. Official narratives legitimised return through references to colonial dispossession, collectivisation, and famine, yet these same narratives provoked local counter-discourses that questioned the moral legitimacy of return. Repatriation thus operated as both a migration policy and a politics of categorisation, defining who counts as a 'true' Kazakh and on what historical or moral grounds.⁴ The category *oralman*, created as an administrative device to organise inflows, illustrates a process of institutional assemblage in which moral ideas of belonging were translated into bureaucratic techniques of control. It transformed the ethical notion of return into a technical instrument of governance, producing both inclusionary and exclusionary effects within the titular nation (Diener, 2005). During this formative decade, the state also consolidated legal definitions and benefits for *oralmans*, including transport, housing subsidies, and cash allowances, while official discourse remained optimistic about uniting all Kazakhs around their historical homeland.

Between 2001 and 2011, repatriation peaked. The government expanded quotas, clarified selection rules, and promoted return migration as a demographic and economic resource. During this decade, nearly 700,000 ethnic Kazakhs arrived in the country, accounting for more than 65% of all repatriates since independence (Ministry of Labour, 2012). However, as spontaneous migration outside the quotas increased, the state's ability to coordinate resettlement weakened. Therefore, in the mid-2000s, policy gradually shifted from open encouragement to selective

³ The word 'oralman' comes from the Kazakh verb '*oralu*' (to return) and is translated as 'the one who returned'. The official term 'Oralmans' refers to foreigners or stateless persons of Kazakh nationality who permanently resided outside its borders at the time of the acquisition of sovereignty by the Republic of Kazakhstan and arrived in Kazakhstan for the purpose of permanent residence // Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 204-I of 13 December 1997 'On migration of population'. https://adilet.zan.kz/kaz/docs/Z970000204_

⁴ See Diener 2005; Bonnenfant 2012; Cameron 2018; Mendikulova 2006; Kinayatuly 2007; Alff 2013; Kuşçu 2014; Kurganskaya et al. 2024. These works discuss the evolution of *oralman* as an administrative and moral category, the use of historical trauma in legitimising repatriation, and the emergence of moral distinctions between 'locals' and returnees.

management. Migration programmes emphasised ‘rational resettlement’ and security, prioritising the sparsely populated northern regions of Kazakhstan. One such programme was the state-run *Nurly Kosh* programme, launched in 2008 to support the resettlement and integration of ethnic Kazakh repatriates. The initiative aimed to resettle oralmans in northern regions but proved ineffective due to underfunding, bureaucratic delays and uneven local execution (Kalysh & Kasymova, 2014). Field interviews reveal how these administrative failures translated into personal frustration:

‘We were sent to Pavlodar region and given temporary housing, but for a year we couldn’t obtain compensation or residence permits. I went to akimats at every level – rural, district, regional – and everywhere they told me to wait, without explaining what for. The biggest problem for my family was language: local people and officials spoke only Russian, which caused many misunderstandings. After a year, having achieved nothing, I decided to return to my Mongolia’. (From a conversation with K., 71-year-old man, recorded in 2018 in Hovd aimag, Mongolia).

From that point on, the process began to slow down, as state support became conditional on settlement in designated regions, primarily in the north, officially justified as a measure to maintain demographic balance. Although this restriction was later eased, it marked a broader tightening of administrative control. The suspension of quotas and persistent delays in financial payments further eroded trust among repatriates. Frequent legal amendments deepened the uncertainty: new rules extended the residence period required for citizenship, only to shorten it again soon after. Such oscillations between inclusion and restriction reflected unstable institutional commitments and produced a climate of institutional uncertainty that discouraged potential returnees. In the late 2010s, the government reaffirmed its symbolic commitment to ethnic repatriation as part of national consolidation by introducing targeted subsidies and relocation allowances. However, these privileges caused discontent among local residents, who considered the oralmans to be overly privileged (Werner et al., 2017; Baigabatova & Sancak, 2018).

In an effort to restore the image of repatriates, in 2020 the state replaced the term ‘*oralman*’ with ‘*qandas*’ (‘blood relative’). This lexical change was intended to evoke a sense of unity and common origin (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020; Sharimova, 2024). However, as many studies and interviews show, this rebranding has failed to change deeper

Table 6.1 Evolution of Kazakhstan's Repatriation Policy (1991–2023)

<i>Period</i>	<i>Dominant logic of governance</i>	<i>Institutional mechanisms</i>	<i>Political economic effects</i>
1991–1995	Nation-building; moral restitution	State-sponsored return, generous subsidies	Symbolic nationhood; initial legitimacy of the regime
1996–2000	Administrative formalization	Creation of <i>oralman</i> status, quota system	Bureaucratisation and social categorisation of returnees
2001–2011	Expansion and optimism	Growth of migration infrastructure, housing and employment schemes	Institutionalisation of migration as an economic instrument
2012–2016	Retrenchment and selectivity	Quota suspension, regional restrictions	Declining returns, moral fatigue, informalisation
2017–2020	Symbolic recalibration	Reintroduction of benefits, renaming to <i>qandas</i>	Symbolic inclusion without structural reform
2021–present	Labour market and demographic engineering	Regional quotas, complicated procedures, new order and digitalisation of accounting	Persistence of stratified migration governance

social attitudes or material realities. Despite renewed rhetorical attention, the actual influx of repatriates continued to decline. In the latest political cycle (Concept of Migration Policy, 2023), the emphasis was again placed on the *qandas*, with promises of simplified procedures and targeted regional resettlement. However, the settlement areas were reduced to eight labour-deficient, predominantly northern regions, which was yet another sign of demographic engineering rather than liberalisation. In recent years, the requirements for obtaining *qandas* status and, subsequently, Kazakh citizenship have become more stringent. The authorities now require mandatory confirmation of ethnic origin, apostilled documents, and passing exams on knowledge of the Constitution, the Kazakh language, and history. They are also introducing digital registration of *qandas* (Zakon.kz, 2025).

Analysis shows that repatriation policy in Kazakhstan has fluctuated, alternating between cycles of expansion and contraction (see Table 6.1). Each reform, whether through expanding quotas, renaming *oralman* as *qandas*, or introducing regional settlement zones, reflected shifts in the state's capacity to distribute value, legitimacy, and belonging. This configuration demonstrates a central insight from recent scholarship on migration governance: non-Western regimes are not peripheral but constitutive elements of the global migration order (Eraliev & Ennis, 2026, this volume). The Kazakh experience shows how migration management evolves through overlapping institutional and moral logics that combine post-Soviet bureaucratic legacies, market rationalities, and narratives of kinship and nationhood. The 2020 renaming of *oralman* as *qandas* symbolised an effort to reframe return migration within the discourse of unity and equality, yet it did not eliminate the stratifications embedded in administrative practice.

So, across three decades, the emotive narrative of return has gradually transformed into a technocratic apparatus for managing population mobility, labour distribution, and political legitimacy. The Kazakh case illustrates how post-socialist states actively participate in shaping global migration governance as hybrid, stratified, and historically grounded formations that contribute distinct non-Western perspectives to the political economy of migration.

PARADOXES OF INTEGRATION: BETWEEN SYMBOLIC INCLUSION AND MATERIAL EXCLUSION

The integration of repatriates, particularly their economic incorporation, represents one of the most contested and structurally fragile dimensions of Kazakhstan's repatriation regime. While official programmes promise support through subsidies, land allocation, and employment opportunities, the practical outcomes reveal persistent institutional, legal, linguistic, and cultural barriers that undermine equal inclusion (Kryakvina, 2022). These challenges are most evident in the sphere of labour and access to economic resources, where nationalist rhetoric of unity encounters the uneven realities of post-Soviet redistribution.

As the interview materials show, one of the main problems is limited access to the formal labour market. The lack of recognised qualifications, including higher education diplomas, language barriers (especially among

those arriving from China and Mongolia), bureaucratic difficulties in document processing and weak institutional support on the ground become significant obstacles. However, even with education and qualifications, according to the majority of our respondents, *qandas* often face mistrust from employers, discrimination and administrative barriers related to lack of citizenship and registration, which are accompanied by corruption risks.

Respondent N., a 51-year-old woman, a resident of Taldykorgan who moved from China in 2013, noted: *'In China, I was a doctor of the highest category. But here my diploma is not recognised, and neither is my qualification. So here, after taking additional courses and receiving a certificate, I was able to get a job as a nurse in a private medical centre. Official polyclinics and hospitals did not hire me at all. I can diagnose diseases, though'*.

A., a 45-year-old man from Mongolia with a maths teacher's diploma, said in an interview that he has been working as a labourer at a construction site in Taldykorgan for 10 years. His repeated attempts to find employment in his speciality have failed. The same fate befell engineers, technologists, and economists from China and Mongolia.

In this respect, the situation is more favourable for repatriates who came to Zhetysu from Uzbekistan. Their educational documents are usually recognised without significant obstacles, which facilitates the process of employment, especially in the education and health care sectors. Due to the historically similar education system (especially from the Soviet period) and the proximity of the language environment, Uzbek graduates are more likely to be able to confirm their qualifications and obtain official employment, unlike migrants from Mongolia or China, whose diplomas require complicated nostrification procedures or are not recognised at all. For example, R., a 59-year-old woman, who migrated in 2012 from the Navoi region of Uzbekistan, graduated from the Samarkand Medical Institute during the Soviet era and had experience as a doctor. After moving to Kazakhstan, she found a job in her speciality without significant problems. After several more advanced training courses, she is currently working as the head of the therapeutic department in hospital of the Tekeli city.

At the same time, under conditions of formal exclusion, a significant proportion of returnees living in the city and settlements find themselves involved in the informal sector of the economy, where temporary and low-paid forms of work predominate. Although Zhetysu has a predominantly agricultural profile, which largely coincides with the labour experience of many *qandas*, in fact real jobs are limited and access to them is

often mediated through personal connections. Field research showed that people take seasonal jobs, work without official registration, and combine several occupations. They work part-time on construction sites, in bazaars, in domestic services and petty trade, and are hired as shepherds, usually without formal labour contracts, which deprive them of legal and social protection. Such 'shadow' employment not only provides minimal income, but is accompanied by a lack of social protection, pension contributions and elementary guarantees, and does not create sustainable grounds for economic integration, making them socially vulnerable and invisible to the official economy.

In this regard, we would like to focus on the occupational specialisation of repatriates, which is largely determined by their country of origin and shaped by differences in socioeconomic structure, level of education and professional experience accumulated prior to migration. These differences lead to the formation of specific professional niches, particularities of adaptation to local labour markets, and unequal access to formal employment. Below, we will examine these dynamics in more detail by comparing the employment trajectories of repatriates from Mongolia, China, and Uzbekistan in various sectors of the economy.

Repatriates from China and Uzbekistan show a more pronounced inclination towards entrepreneurship and trade. This is especially true for those from border and urbanised areas, where historically there is a culture of family business, small retail trade and informal entrepreneurship. According to observations of local employees of regional and district *akimats*,⁵ this category of *qandas* more often opens its own small business and registers as individual entrepreneurs, trades at markets, imports goods, and provides household and service services. Their active participation in this sector is due not only to their accumulated entrepreneurial experience before moving, but also to a well-developed system of mutual assistance and networking within the diaspora.

Qandas from China are widely present in small businesses and services: in bazaars, canteens, hairdressing salons, sewing workshops and small retail outlets. The visual landscape of such places is often labelled

⁵ In Kazakhstan, *akimats* are local executive authorities representing the state at the regional, district, and city levels. They are headed by *akims*, who are appointed by the president or higher-level officials. *Akimats* are responsible for implementing national policies at the local level, managing social services, land and migration issues, and coordinating interactions between citizens and state institutions. In practice, they play a key role in administrative processes such as repatriation, registration, and naturalisation.

with cultural and linguistic signs indicating their origin. In Taldykorgan, numerous establishments bear names such as *Urumqi*, *Kulja*, or *Ili*, visually linking owners to their former homelands. Signboards written in Chinese or *töte zhazu* (Arabic-script Kazakh) illustrate how linguistic and visual codes operate as tools of self-identification and economic positioning. These practices, as Billig (1995) argues in the concept of *banal nationalism*, transform everyday spaces into arenas of symbolic belonging. Yet, in the Kazakhstani context, such signs simultaneously affirm and differentiate, reproducing the perception of *qandas* as culturally distinct within their ‘own’ nation.

Studying the Kazakh diaspora in Mongolia and China, we have already encountered similar practices of spatial and visual representation of identity through names, signage and iconic symbols (Baigabatova et al., 2020). Within these communities, toponyms, graphics and visual elements played the role of not only cultural labelling, but also a tool of self-preservation in the context of an alien majority. However, in the case of Kazakhstan, this strategy of self-recognition acquires a different meaning: being in their formally ‘own’ country, *qandas* have to reproduce signs of belonging, thus, paradoxically, they reproduce their ‘other’ presence in the eyes of the locals. Thus, the observed visual and linguistic code becomes ambiguous: it simultaneously includes the diaspora and excludes it from the national majority, emphasising the ambivalent position of repatriates in the post-Soviet structure of Kazakhstani identity.

Returnees from Mongolia are less represented in the urban or service sector. *Qandas* coming from Mongolia are overwhelmingly of rural origin and have a strong connection to livestock and agriculture. Their labour employment is more often concentrated in the agrarian sphere, predominantly in villages and small settlements in Zhetysu, where their skills in traditional herding and farming find practical application. However, in contrast to entrepreneurial practices based on an economy of reciprocity and recognition, the agrarian labour of Mongolian *qandas*, usually working as indentured labourers, is individualised, physically demanding and rarely formalised. After arriving in Zhetysu, most of the ethnic Kazakhs from Zhetysu settled in rural areas, whose inhabitants, since the late 1990s, due to the collapse of the former economy, have gradually started to move to Almaty, Taldykorgan, and suburban settlements. Therefore, the agrarian economic niche turned out to be free.

Zh., a 48-year-old man born in Ulankhuus, a district of Bayan-Olgii Aimag (province), moved to Sarkan District in 2006. In an interview

telling about his life, he described the problems he and his family faced in finding work until they took up traditional livestock farming.

In the beginning there was no work at all, and then we decided to take up petty trading. But somehow it didn't work out. Then we decided to do what we do best – herding cattle. After all, we have been trained in this business since childhood, we know how to look after them properly, and we know the peculiarities of caring for horses, cows, sheep. Besides, local Kazakhs did not want to breed cattle. We did not have our own cattle, so at first we were hired as shepherds by the locals who owned herds of sheep and horses. Cash was still hard to come by then, so the owner paid for our labour with sheep. Over time, I managed to raise my own herd. Now I have my own horses, sheep and goats. We also produce dairy products, which we sell at the local market and sometimes cook to order.

However, the main challenge for repatriates settled in rural areas is access to promised land plots for farming, subsidiary production, gardening, or housing. According to Article 46 of Kazakhstan's Land Code (2003), *qandas* receive such plots under temporary free use, which convert to private ownership upon obtaining citizenship. Land allocation is managed by local executive bodies on a priority basis through applications to the *akimat* or via the e-government portal. But this is not easy in practice.⁶ Although my data are based on qualitative interviews and are not statistically representative, the problem extends beyond individual cases. There are no official statistics, yet national media have repeatedly reported systemic delays and inconsistencies in the distribution of land and housing among *qandas*.⁷

Prolonged waiting times, opaque procedures, and unresponsive local administrations are common across the country, suggesting that these ethnographic findings reveal broader structural issues in the implementation of state repatriation programmes. Another respondent, a 57-year-old man from China, remarked: '*We have not been given a single metre of land, although we have been on the waiting list for over eight years. But the locals get it quickly. They are mostly rich people with money. Besides, connections and acquaintances decide a lot, or you need to find the "right" people and give them money*'. Another respondent noted that they had to pay bribes

⁶ Although my data are based on qualitative interviews and are not statistically representative, the problem extends beyond individual cases.

⁷ *Qandas* must request land by letter, 2017: <https://dalanews.kz/kz/article/qan-dastar-jerdi-xat-arqili-surau-kerek.html> (In Kazakh); The land issue is a national issue, 2023: <https://egemen.kz/article/342666-zher-maselesi-%E2%80%93-eldiktinh-maselesi> (In Kazakh)

for access to social programmes or to speed up the processing of documents: *'If you don't pay, your documents will lie with them for months or disappear altogether'*.

The provision of land plots for the construction of individual dwellings also often remains at the level of promises: plots are either undeveloped or remote from infrastructure or require additional costs that *qandas* are unable to cover. Renting in urban areas requires a stable income, which most people do not have. Access to government housing programmes, while in theory open to returnees, in practice requires informal connections or bribes. Bureaucratic procedures coupled with language barriers become not only a technical but also a political economic filter: access to subsidies, microcredits, and participation in state support require multiple references, registrations, and personal contacts with government officials.

The political economic paradox here is that repatriation, codified as an act of returning 'home', in fact turns out to be included in the market and requires social, bureaucratic and monetary investments. A contradiction arises between the declared right to return and the market reality, in which repatriates must 'earn' their place in society anew. Such stories illustrate how formalised state support is devalued in specific local administrative practices. Land promised as a symbol of historical justice and an instrument of economic self-sufficiency ends up becoming a source of frustration and social frustration. Instead of integration, *qandas* face a situation where access to resources is mediated not by law but by connections, local bureaucracy and shadow distribution mechanisms. This not only undermines trust in institutions but also embeds returnees in an already existing asymmetry of access to land in which they are marginalised despite their official status.

This makes them economically vulnerable and dependent on informal support networks. In conditions of limited access to formal mechanisms, repatriates develop their own survival strategies. These include, first of all, reliance on fellow countrymen and informal diaspora networks, micro-entrepreneurship (small trade, renting premises, services), labour migration within the country and even temporary departure abroad. Some join informal co-operatives to develop land or rent housing together. These strategies temporarily reduce economic pressure but do not address systemic problems.

At the same time, it should be noted that *qandas* who have economic resources and social capital at the start (finances, connections, diaspora support) demonstrate more successful adaptation strategies and

integration practices than those who lack such resources. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that not all returnees are in a vulnerable situation. A significant number of *qandas*, who arrived in Kazakhstan before the socioeconomic crises of the early 2000s, have been able to adapt relatively successfully to the new conditions. Having mastered economic niches, established social ties and strengthened their position in local communities, they are now perceived as a fairly prosperous and stable group. Their earlier arrival has given them an advantage in allocating resources, obtaining housing, participating in support programmes and integrating into local economic practices. In this sense, the repatriate community is internally heterogeneous: there are both disadvantaged, struggling *Qandas* and those who have managed to integrate into the socioeconomic fabric of the region.

Although employment is seen as a key indicator of successful integration, for many *qandas* it remains informal, precarious and insecure. However, limited access to the formal labour market is only part of a broader problem. Labour marginalisation is often accompanied by institutional invisibility, when repatriates, having already lived in Kazakhstan for decades, continue to feel themselves out of sight of state structures. In this context, the following episode from our field materials is particularly revealing. The case of 70-year-old man T., who migrated from Mongolia more than two decades ago, was a vivid example of how repatriates remain outside the attention of local authorities. When I went to his home to interview him, he initially took me for a representative of the *akimat*. It was only after I introduced myself and explained the reason for my visit that he realised that I was a researcher and with bitter irony began the conversation by saying: *'Since I moved here, which is more than twenty years, no one from the local authorities has ever crossed the threshold of my house. No one is interested in how we have settled here, how we live, what we live on'*.

This case illustrates not just domestic exclusion, but also points to a broader institutional problem – the lack of accompaniment and monitoring of integration by the state at the local level. Despite the formal recognition of *qandas* as full citizens and symbols of ethnic return, many of them continue to exist in social isolation and administrative invisibility. The lack of regular visits, surveys, support or at least symbolic engagement from the authorities becomes a symptom of the underlying gap between policies 'from above' and practices 'on the ground'. Such personal testimonies not only expose the failures in the system of post-settlement

support, but also question the sustainability of the very idea of integration as a coherent institutional process.

In practice, adaptation and integration mechanisms often rely on relatives, acquaintances, and mutual assistance, operating beyond the scope of institutionally promised support. Migration studies describe such patterns as chain migration and informal support networks that compensate for limited state involvement (Massey et al., 1993; Faist, 2000). Observations show that ethnic repatriates in their historical homeland, largely left to themselves, create horizontal initiatives to access available economic niches. *Qandas* build social ties based on kinship and shared land origins, forming communities united by common histories, memories, and values. Among Kazakhs from Mongolia, China, or Uzbekistan, these networks become spaces of internal solidarity, enabling information exchange and mutual aid in employment and housing. In Zhetysu villages, repatriates from the same regions or families often settle nearby, creating compact communities where kinship and collective support serve as key resources for survival amid uncertainty and limited state assistance.

However, this closed form of adaptation has a downside. Emerging semi-closed *qandas* communities tend to be orientated towards internal communication and reciprocity, which limits their participation in wider social ties. This is particularly noticeable in mixed rural settlements, where local residents, including Kazakhs, often perceive *qandas* as a ‘separate group’. In the course of field research in Karabulak settlement of Eskeldybi district we recorded several catering establishments built by repatriates from China themselves – cafes, restaurants, canteens, which fulfil not only an economic function, but also serve as social spaces for meetings and socialising of *qandas* from the same country of origin. There they organise big celebrations like weddings, big memorial dinners where 150–200 people gather, but where local Kazakhs are rarely invited. In interviews with locals about relations with repatriates, the phrases *‘they are different; they keep themselves apart; they speak to each other in Chinese; they communicate only with their own people; they marry only their own people; they dress differently; everything is different: language, food, and even smell’* were often heard.

This ambivalent condition recalls Simmel’s figure of the stranger – one who is simultaneously inside and outside the group (Simmel, 2008) and Barth’s (1969) insight that ethnicity is a process of boundary-making rather than an essential identity. Despite formal belonging to the titular nation, *qandas* remain socially peripheral, their integration mediated

by informal economies rather than institutional inclusion. In addition, the state, having granted benefits and preferences to repatriates, including financial ones, has singled them out as a 'privileged' group (Werner et al., 2017), which causes discontent of the local population and alienation from them. Initial admiration for *qandas* as true bearers of authentic Kazakh culture and language was gradually 'replaced by irritation and dissatisfaction with their behaviour and consumer attitude towards the state and society' (Kalysh & Kasymova, 2014, p. 9). On the one hand, the official media broadcast the successes of repatriation, on the other hand, stories about difficulties, complaints, failures, problems of adaptation and integration prevail at the local level. This creates the image of an 'ungrateful recipient of assistance' and 'dependent', legitimising the unequal distribution of resources.

Thus, at the level of everyday realisation, repatriates, symbolically included in the state project of the nation, face multiple barriers that question the promise of equal inclusion and social support. Having become a stigmatised and marginalised group in the structure of Kazakhstani society for 30 years, repatriates in the homeland of their ancestors remain one of the economically and socially vulnerable groups. The paradox is that instead of the promised integration, most of them are forced to build the infrastructure of survival on their own, relying on informal networks. At the same time, state rhetoric maintains the image of 'successful repatriation' without taking into account the real mechanisms of adaptation.

REPATRIATION AS ASSEMBLAGE: POLITICS OF BELONGING AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAGMENTATION

The integration of ethnic Kazakh repatriates, or *qandas*, in Kazakhstan constitutes not only a social or economic process but a complex political and institutional configuration that exposes the inherent contradictions of the country's repatriation regime. The state promotes repatriation as a patriotic project of historical justice, aimed at restoring demographic balance and strengthening national identity. Yet everyday experiences of returnees reveal a fragmented constellation of actors, institutions, and practices that rarely convert symbolic recognition into material inclusion (Massey et al., 1993; Faist, 2000).

From the perspective of migration regime theory and the assemblage approach (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Ong, 2006; Ong et al, 1996;

Natter, 2018), Kazakhstan's repatriation regime operates less as a unified policy and more as a dynamic field of interaction among state institutions, local bureaucracies, markets, and kinship networks. The *Assemblage of Migration* concept highlights how migration governance in non-Western contexts emerges through dispersed sovereignties and overlapping rationalities rather than centralised control (Eraliev and Ennis, 2026, this volume). Within this configuration, symbolic inclusion, articulated through narratives of ethnic unity and national belonging, coexists with structural exclusion rooted in bureaucratic fragmentation, resource scarcity, and regional inequality.

At the level of formal policy, Kazakhstan presents repatriation as a comprehensive and inclusive process. State programs, housing subsidies, and employment assistance are officially designed to facilitate social integration (Shaken, 2023). However, their implementation is often inconsistent. Local authorities enjoy considerable discretion in distributing resources, and program funding fluctuates across regions. This decentralisation produces institutional fragmentation, turning official guarantees into arenas of negotiation where personal connections, informal exchanges, and administrative discretion determine access to benefits (Faist, 2000). The resulting system functions less as a mechanism of support and more as a political economy of belonging that ties social mobility to the logic of state-building.

Empirical evidence from the Zhetysu region demonstrates how these institutional gaps shape everyday realities. Many repatriates report prolonged delays in receiving housing or land plots, while others encounter inaccessible or informally reassigned territories. Employment offices, constrained by limited budgets and authority, fail to provide effective job placements. Such experiences illustrate how the repatriation assemblage operates through contingent and uneven practices rather than consistent administrative procedures. Symbolic recognition thus collides with bureaucratic inertia, compelling repatriates to navigate uncertainty through informal strategies and personal networks.

A comparison of repatriation waves further reveals an evolution in the logic of integration. In the early 1990s, return migration was celebrated as a moral and national act, underpinned by public enthusiasm and material incentives. As economic rationalisation deepened in the 2000s, the process became increasingly selective and technocratic. Repatriation shifted from being an emotive project of return to a bureaucratic mechanism for managing population mobility and regional development. The promise of

homecoming transformed into a continuous negotiation with state structures that mediate access to rights, recognition, and resources.

Economic integration provides a clear example of this transformation. Official narratives portray *qandas* as contributors to national development, yet structural barriers restrict their participation in the formal economy. Returnees from China and Mongolia often face difficulties related to the non-recognition of qualifications, language barriers, and administrative hurdles. By contrast, repatriates from Uzbekistan, whose Soviet-era diplomas are more easily validated, find smoother pathways into employment, particularly in education and healthcare. These differences demonstrate that access to rights and resources depends on the intersection of institutional recognition, geography, and historical proximity (Massey et al., 1993; Natter, 2018).

Such differentiation reflects Ong's concept of graduated sovereignty, in which the state selectively allocates rights and resources according to shifting political and economic priorities (Ong, 2006). In Kazakhstan, symbolic inclusion of *qandas* coexists with uneven material access determined by regional administrations and informal economies. This results in a mosaic of partial sovereignties and overlapping jurisdictions rather than a coherent system of governance. The assemblage of repatriation thus embodies the coexistence of multiple logics – nationalist, bureaucratic, and market-driven – each shaping belonging in distinct and sometimes contradictory ways (Eraliev & Ennis, 2026, this volume).

At the everyday level, this fragmented structure produces what Fraser (2007) conceptualises as a tension between recognition and redistribution. The state provides cultural and symbolic recognition to *qandas* as rightful members of the nation but fails to guarantee redistributive justice through equitable access to housing, employment, and welfare. National belonging does not necessarily translate into material security. In response, repatriates develop adaptive strategies based on kinship ties, informal exchanges, and small-scale entrepreneurship. These networks facilitate survival in conditions of limited institutional support and uncertain legal protection, functioning as what Faist (2000) calls 'meso-level structures' that mediate between individuals and the state.

While such informal mechanisms provide flexibility and resilience, they also reinforce exclusion. Operating outside formal legal frameworks, they leave repatriates without consistent access to rights or accountability mechanisms. The absence of systematic monitoring and transparent evaluation deepens institutional opacity, allowing inequalities to persist across

regions and generations. What emerges is a form of governance that relies on informality as a structural feature rather than a temporary solution.

Overall, the experience of *qandas* in Zhetysu reveals how Kazakhstan's repatriation regime operates as an assemblage shaped by the interaction of nationalism, bureaucracy, and market rationality. Integration unfolds not as a linear process of inclusion but as a continuous negotiation between symbolic recognition and material exclusion. The state's commitment to ethnic unity is undermined by the very administrative and economic structures through which it seeks to achieve that unity. Repatriation, rather than fulfilling the moral promise of homecoming, redefines belonging within a fragmented institutional landscape characterised by selective inclusion, informal adaptation, and enduring inequality. The case of *qandas* demonstrates that repatriation, like Russia's compatriot programme or Germany's Aussiedler policies (Lukov & Bezgacheva, 2020; Dietz, 1999), can generate new forms of social and economic vulnerability even when returnees are formally recognised as having a right to return and national belonging. Unlike Kazakhstan, where bureaucratic fragmentation and uneven regional development create highly conditional inclusion, Russia's programme provides more centralised support but still faces challenges with local implementation, while Germany's Aussiedler policies historically offered structured pathways for social and economic integration, though cultural and linguistic barriers persisted, highlighting that even formal recognition does not automatically ensure equitable access to resources or full societal incorporation.

CONCLUSION

This research approaches ethnic repatriation in Kazakhstan as a political and institutional process that cannot be understood solely through normative narratives of return, citizenship, and national belonging. Instead, it adopts the lens of assemblages of migration to analyse how repatriation is shaped by the contingent interactions of state institutions, local bureaucracies, market dynamics, and kinship networks. Such a perspective moves beyond linear understandings of migration and situates Kazakhstan's repatriation regime within the broader debate on the political economy of non-Western migration governance. Rather than a unified policy, repatriation emerges as an assemblage in which symbolic inclusion and cultural recognition coexist with fragmented institutions, uneven access to resources, and differentiated forms of citizenship. This framework makes

it possible to examine the paradox of *qandas* as 'strangers at home', formally embraced as part of the titular nation yet materially excluded within hierarchies of regional development, administrative authority, and economic opportunity. By linking theories of migration regimes, politics of belonging, and graduated sovereignty, the study reveals how repatriation functions as both a nation-building project and a mechanism of selective incorporation that produces new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within the nation.

The official narrative of Kazakhstan's repatriation policy presents ethnic Kazakhs returning 'home' as part of a nation-building project. However, analysing repatriation through the lenses of political economy, everyday practices, and institutional structures reveals a persistent tension between this rhetoric and the actual conditions of inclusion for *qandas* in the social, legal, and economic life of the state. While repatriation is framed as a moral and national obligation to accept ethnic kin, the realities of institutional and economic mechanisms often hinder meaningful integration. Frequent changes in legislation, regulations, and administrative procedures create a climate of legal and bureaucratic instability that makes long-term inclusion strategies difficult and risky.

Interaction with the administrative system shows that bureaucracy functions not as a neutral mechanism but as a selective filter. Access to housing, employment, and social benefits depends on factors such as country of origin, education, and informal networks. Multi-stage approvals, opaque rules, and changing requirements turn the process of returning into a test of endurance. Even officially recognised *qandas* must repeatedly prove their right to inclusion. In practice, bureaucracy regulates not only access to resources but also the conditions under which repatriates are accepted into society and the economy, marking them as 'conditional others' despite their ethnic kinship.

Empirical research from Zhetysu illustrates how these institutional dynamics shape everyday life. Repatriates often experience legal and economic vulnerability and rely heavily on informal networks, mediation, and adaptive strategies to navigate systemic gaps. Economic integration is fragmented and precarious. Many *qandas* find themselves on the margins of the formal labour market, without secure employment, full access to social protections, or inclusion in local budgets. Consequently, informal and casual work becomes the primary livelihood strategy, often in low-paid sectors such as construction, petty trade, and basic services. This combination of marginalisation and economic precarity reproduces inequality,

effectively creating an ethnically Kazakh underclass despite their formal recognition as citizens.

The Zhetysu case demonstrates that repatriation, rather than resolving historical displacement, can reproduce new forms of exclusion and vulnerability. Returning 'home' does not automatically remove social and economic boundaries but instead reconfigures them in selective and conditional ways. Addressing these challenges requires more than simplified administrative procedures. It demands a fundamental rethinking of repatriation policy that moves beyond ethnocentric and demographically driven frameworks to prioritise rights, equality, and social justice.

Future research should focus on the long-term trajectories of *qandas'* integration, their political agency, and the potential for institutional transformation of repatriation practices. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating policies that transform symbolic inclusion into substantive participation and prevent the reproduction of structural inequalities within the communities the state claims to integrate.

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PART III

Diaspora, Categorisation, Gender,
and Everyday Legal Practices



India's Tryst with Its Diaspora: From Estrangement to Re-engagement

Nicolas Blarel

INTRODUCTION

India has historically been the leading country of origin of international migrants with an estimated 35 million 'overseas Indians' in 2025, including 19 million Persons of Indian Origin (PIO)¹ and close to 16 million Non-Resident Indians (NRI).² Of these two categories,

¹ A Person of Indian Origin (PIO) is a citizen of any country (other than Bangladesh or Pakistan) who had (a) at any time held an Indian passport or (b) he or either of his parents or any of his grandparents were citizens of India by virtue of the Constitution of India or the Citizenship Act, 1955, or (c) the person is a spouse of an Indian citizen or a person referred to in (a) or (b). See definition offered by the Reserve Bank of India here: <https://www.rbi.org.in/commonperson/english/scripts/Notification.aspx?Id=717#2>.

² For the figures, see MEA (n.d.). The MEA uses the term Persons of Indian Origin interchangeably with Overseas Citizens of India. All Persons of Indian origin cardholders became Overseas Citizens of India from 9 January 2015 onwards. See No. 25024/9/2014-F.I., and

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only NRIs are citizens of India.³ The Citizenship Act of 1955 originally recognised only one category of Indians, namely citizens. However, the categories of individuals recognised as PIOs and OCIs (Overseas Citizens of India) were introduced many decades later as an example of the legal categories, bureaucratic labels, and moral discourses associated with the infrastructural mediation theorised in this volume. The term of OCIs has been misleading since India does not have and expressly prohibits a dual citizenship regime. Thus, there has been a deliberate political decision of the government of India to consider an expansive definition of ‘overseas Indians’ as a larger community than just NRIs who have fundamental, constitutional and statutory rights, which PIOs do not have, showing how this categorical stratification shaping migration governance shapes how migrants are valued or excluded.⁴ This significant Indian diaspora covers all continents and over one hundred countries. This overseas population also contributes more to India financially every year than Foreign Direct Investment and foreign aid combined, with an estimated \$135,46 billion in remittances in 2024–2025 (Times of India, 2025).

The history of India’s international migration flows and of its migration policies has long been misunderstood due to the nation-state obsession of much of the field of International Relations, as emphasised in the introduction chapter of this volume, which has deliberately neglected the proto-state, evolutionary and dialectical processes of state-formation which inform the definition of the state and of its population itself. As for many of India’s foreign policy institutions, bureaucracies, and thereby legacies, India’s migration policies or governance can be traced back to an assemblage of policy decisions and instances of institutional design under the British Empire and in its immediate postcolonial period. In fact, it was partly during the colonial period, when the government-sponsored migrations started that large numbers of labourers moved and permanently

F. No. 26011/01/2014-IC.I., GK Dwivedi, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs – The Gazette of India Extraordinary Part 1 – Section 1, 9th January 2015, <https://archive.org/details/in.gazette.central.e.2015-01-09.162411/mode/2up>

³ Section 115(C)(e) of the Indian Income Tax Act 1961 describes an NRI as ‘an individual, being a citizen of India or a person of Indian origin who is not a “resident”’. See here: <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2435/1/a1961-43.pdf>

⁴ This chapter will take into account the varying political and legal definitions of overseas Indians as important to explain the motivations and actions of the Government of India and its migration governance over time.

settled across continents. This is a long-term colonial legacy which was also documented for instance in chapters 1 and 2 of this volume.

To trace these processes, this chapter builds on historical-institutionalist perspective and the conceptual pillars of the Assemblages of Migration framework to analyze Indian migration governance, and more specifically the policies and capacities the Indian government has mobilised overtime to govern migration and diaspora engagement. A focus on the long-term process of designing migration policy in both pre- and post-colonial times is therefore important as the regulation of migration is one of the primary mechanisms for the creation of the state and of sovereignty as enclosing a fixed territory and a fixed population, for defining membership in political communities, and for consolidating the notion of state borders. As a result, this chapter argues that the Indian state's contemporary migration policies have been the product of an incremental process before, during and after independence, in line with recent historical studies and the historical layering focus of this volume (Amrith, 2011; Mongia, 2018; Natarajan, 2025; Roy, 2010).

Indian nationalists fighting for independence and then building a new Indian state were concerned about governing Indian citizens in a newly defined territory but also abroad. The consideration was therefore to identify Indians spread across the world and to approach them in a global scheme. However, this discovery or re-discovery of Indians abroad (and for Indians abroad of a 'homeland') did not happen in a political, institutional, and international vacuum for India's first generation of political leaders and bureaucrats. While India's nationalists-turned-state-leaders held strong beliefs in the principles of ending empires, promoting racial justice, and self-determination and ensuring cooperation and friendship between newly decolonised states (Louro, 2018), they also had to consider the inflexible exigencies of state-building and consolidation, both at home and for their new diplomatic partners, when developing a relationship and policies towards Indians abroad.

British India first developed migration policies and progressively imposed a state control over population movement, motivated partly by the needs of the broader British Empire system, following abolition of slavery, which generated an important demand for labour in the labour-intensive plantation economies, which was met by the migration of labourers from India (Kumar, 2017). Rather than delimiting clear and contradictory pre- and post-independence Indian migration policies, this chapter aims to focus on the institutional overlaps and legacies to better account for the context

in which Independent India leaders had to operate. This assemblage was partly a legacy of British India and was adopted and only gradually adapted by Indian leaders dealing with the post-imperial practical sovereignty consideration of state-building. An historical analysis of the colonial origins of India's migration policy then aims to help us better understand, nuance, and perhaps also evaluate the state's contemporary and contested claims about its exclusive authority in managing and regulating migration.

The remainder of the chapter is organised as follows. First, I offer a brief historical overview of Indian international migration from its colonial rule roots to contemporary migration to wealthy Western countries and the Gulf states. In the second section, I discuss the regulatory and bureaucratic legacies of the British Empire leading to the multifaceted nature of India's migration governance after independence. Third, I look at initiatives since the early 2000s to (re-)engage India's global diaspora at the economic and political levels. Finally, I discuss the main challenges ahead shaping debates to reform its migration governance.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

India has one of the densest and most complex migration histories, as it has served as a land for migrants setting off for international destinations, but also as a transit for others, and the Indian state today still attracts migrant workers from abroad. As a result, there is a long history of Indian migration which predates the colonial period, and the composition of flows has evolved over time. However, the absence of a sizable distinctive Indian population of the pre-modern period in these regions seems to indicate that these migrations were rotational and not permanent settlements (Narayan, 2008, pp. 1–6; Tinker, 1977).

It is only in the nineteenth century, with the British colonial presence in India, that important changes in migration flow patterns have led to the global dispersion of Indian communities that we know today. Three major periods of emigration can be identified starting with the British colonial era, and mainly as a response to global capitalism's shifting labour needs: (1) emigration as direct colonial design in the nineteenth century, including coerced movement of indentured labourers to other parts of the British Empire; (2) movements as results of the political movement leading to the end of British colonialism and the creation of the modern Indian state; and (3) post-1970s employment- and business-driven migration to OECD and Gulf countries.

The main driver of the first important wave of emigration from India was the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1833 and the resulting emancipation of all the slaves in the British Empire, except in the territories controlled by the East India Company and Ceylon until 1843.⁵ This decision led the British Indian government to sponsor the migration of labourers to other colonies in the British Empire, notably to replace slave labour on colonial plantations, under various bonded contract schemes with labourers in plantation colonies, such as *indentured labour*. The indentured labour system was designed in 1837 to help the British imperial economic system⁶ and the planters who created a legal instrument to structure labour markets, ensure large-scale, systematic, state-sponsored migration from the Indian Subcontinent, and to fulfil the plantations' production needs (Ramsarran 2008, and for a similar account of how colonial labour regimes laid the ground for long-term policies and shaped diasporic communities, see Chapter 3 in this volume).⁷ The colonial labour policy was driven by the need to provide an abundant, diversified and cheap supply of labour, as well as an assurance of labour freedom of movement and a limited amount of protection to labourers (Lal, 2007, p. 15). Through the façade of an orderly, safer, and open system for the supply of labour than slavery, labourers were recruited under an initial and extendable agreement for five years, after which labourers were free to either return or settle down in other colonies. Many of the Indian labourers would also stay in the destination country beyond their five-year contracts (Sen, 2016).

Beyond government-sponsored migration, there were self-sponsored migrants exploiting the limited 'free' or passage migration within the British imperial system, meaning that this category of emigrants paid their own passage and were thereby free in all respects. Most were traders, entrepreneurs, semi-skilled and skilled professionals (mainly

⁵ One has to note, however, that other colonial powers present in the Indian subcontinent also abolished slavery in the following decades, such as France (1848), the Danish West Indies (1848), the Netherlands (1863), and Portugal (1869). See Tinker 1974.

⁶ Although Indian labourers also emigrated to French and Dutch colonies, a vast majority migrated to British colonies, further demonstrating that this wave of migration was mainly the result of British colonial decisions.

⁷ More recent research suggests the abolition of slavery was a way through which the British Empire could end other competing labour trade systems to favour its own indentured system (Mathew 2016; Sharma 2020).

goldsmiths, teachers, and lawyers) ‘pulled’ to migration due to the perspective of better living conditions in other colonies such as Canada, South Africa, and the East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. These migrations were initially rotational, but permanent settlements then took place (Pande, 2013). While indentured labour migration lasted from 1837 to 1920 (when it officially ended), other forms of sponsored and facilitated types of migration from India lasted until independence.

The breakup of the British Empire had dramatic consequences for India and other former colonies. At midnight on 15 August 1947, the territory that had previously been known as British India dissolved into the two self-governing dominions of India and Pakistan, prompting one of the world’s largest ever forced migrations. As many as 17 million people were displaced along new religious, nationalist and sovereign state lines as a result of the partition, resulting in massive refugee movements as individuals, families, and communities trekked between the new countries (Tumbe, 2018, pp. 267–286). This process of redrawing political boundaries was marked by horrific violence in large sections of northern India, particularly the Punjab region.

One less considered driver has been that migration was a product of the modern state-formation process of British India and then of modern independent India. For decades after independence, Indian elites struggled to sharpen and reify the national/international distinctions, creating and thereby consolidating categories of migrants, diasporas, and national citizens (Varadarajan, 2010). These practical considerations espoused by some Indian leaders and bureaucrats were obviously at odds with the globalist ideologies of some of New Delhi’s elites, like India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and created alternative modes of transnational ties between Indians abroad and India, often below and beyond the state.

For instance, migration was mainly facilitated by kinship ties and networks rather than state-driven policies. In the following decades after independence, many Indians moved to the United Kingdom, especially from Punjab, based on subnational, family and friendship contacts. War-scarred Britain at the time was experiencing labour shortages, and as Commonwealth citizens, Indian nationals were able to move to the country without restriction. Migration to the United Kingdom became more difficult in subsequent years, as laws passed between 1962 and 1971 imposed new controls on movement from elsewhere in the Commonwealth

(Thandi, 2015). Still, as of 2020 India remained the largest country of birth for immigrants in the United Kingdom.⁸

The third wave of emigration was again as in the nineteenth century driven by economic factors and opportunities. There were first important migration flows to the Gulf countries in the 1970s responding to the labour needs in the growing oil extraction business and related growth in the construction sector (Weiner, 1978). Retail and construction trades such as carpentry, electrical wiring, and masonry have been popular for many migrants lacking postsecondary education, while those with higher levels of training have gone to sectors such as health care. Kerala, India's southernmost state, has historically accounted for most of the migration to the Middle East, but large numbers of migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Rajasthan have travelled to the Gulf in the last decade. Similarly, along with migrants from Kerala, recent flows from Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have also accounted for an increase in semi-skilled workers being employed in the healthcare sectors (nurses) and retail in the Gulf states (Ennis & Blarel, 2022a).

This third wave also been comprised of healthcare workers, engineers, finance professionals, service sector workers and international students heading to economically developed nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia and other OECD countries. Unlike nineteenth century migrants, these contemporary Indian nationals build on new opportunities of the globalised workforce market and held different economic characteristics and skills. Many came from India's growing middle class, the states of Gujarat, Punjab, Maharashtra and Karnataka, and shared strong educational and skills backgrounds, and aimed to relocate to urban centers in Europe and the U.S. As a result, India has the highest number of emigrants with a postsecondary degree, with 3 million residing in the 38 OECD states as of 2016 (McCarthy, 2020).

Due to this long-term and complex history, the Indian overseas population today is diverse in terms of class, caste, language, religion, and socio-economic profiles. The professions overseas Indians have taken range from unskilled to highly skilled ones depending on their education and social background. On the one hand, unemployment in some Indian regions compelled labourers to move to the Middle East for work despite risks of

⁸ See here the Population of the UK by country of birth and nationality in 2020 from the UK census: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/ukpopulationbycountryofbirthandnationality/2020>

oppressive working conditions; on the other hand, several high-skilled and highly educated Indians deliberately moved to take up some of the highest executive and administrative positions in OECD countries.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN INDIAN MIGRATION STATE

As mentioned above, as the Republic of India gained independence from British rule in 1947, it inherited a complex colonial legacy of multiple policies, rules and categories, as well as an Indian emigrant population spread all over the globe, embedded within varying socioeconomic and political situations locally and with different links to the subcontinent. Independent India also had to immediately deal with continued labour emigration in reaction to similar socioeconomic pulls and pressures as under colonial rule. The new government of India had therefore to build on existing regulations and experiences to determine whether it would and could determine how, where, why, and who emigrates.

The role of migration policies needs to also be seen as crucial to legitimise state control over Indian indentured migration following the abolition of slavery in 1833. In response to the major exodus of Indian indentured labourers travelling across the British empire to work in plantations, which led to considerable political debate throughout the period of recruitment over whether these migrants were ‘freely’ emigrating, the East India Company, which was in charge at the time of the British administration of India, began developing new rules to monitor this mass movement of population. A series of legal decisions in the mid-1830s in this regard by the Court of Directors of the East India Company came to supervise private contractual arrangements and to discriminate between categories of ‘free’ and ‘non-free’ migrants which needed to be regulated or not, to define categories of high-skilled and low-skilled migrants or guest workers in order to facilitate and enable the movement of *some* Indian subjects to other colonies (Mongia, 2018, pp. 24–26). This would be the first intrusion of the state in managing the movement of people which was until then unregulated and free.

In the following years, official reports on the appalling conditions for migrants also resulted in additional regulation of labour emigration, notably recruitment practices and the terms of indentured contractual arrangements. At the height of emigration, from the 1860s to 1880s the British Indian government appointed Emigration Agents to regulate the ports of departure and Protectors of Immigrants for the ports of arrival (Kumar,

2017, pp. 59–60). From 1834 to the early twentieth century, indentured Indian migration would be authorised for some twenty countries on four continents. This state monitoring and ‘logic of facilitation’ began a novel practice which we still observe today in Indian migration policies with the discrimination between Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) and Emigration Clearance Not Required (ECNR) categories determined by the office of Protector of Emigrants (POE), another British Indian institutional legacy which prevails to this day, and which discriminates categories of emigrants according to levels of education, work skills, and gender to determine emigration clearance (Walton-Roberts & Rajan, 2013; Mongia, 2018, p. 2; Agarwala, 2022; Burmeister-Rudolph, 2025).

By the late nineteenth century, the state-monitored migration which was initially limited to the movement of indentured Indian labour and state-controlled indentured system gradually to cover broader flows of migration out of India as there was an increase of ‘free’ migrants moving to countries like Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the United States. The state then stepped in to extend its control to cover all types of migration and to prohibit and restrict movement. This increase in size and scope of the British Indian migration state was in phase with a global movement towards migration control, with the spread of a system of nation-states with clearly defined boundaries and citizenships (Mongia, 2018, p. 2). Other institutional legacies of the British Indian state in formation in the technologies and institutions for managing migration included the creation of the state-authorised juridical labour contract each emigrant in the indentured labour system was required to sign before emigrating (Kumar, 2017; Mongia, 2018).

In parallel to the creation of the supervisory role of the state over these contractual arrangements, there was the formation of a significant bureaucracy, including the POE, which gradually developed standard procedures to efficiently manage and monitor migration, such as the modern Indian passport (and of marriage licenses for non-indentured women to be allowed to migrate). The POE was illustrative of the nascent and then enduring paternalist function of the Indian migration state as this particular bureaucratic position was created in 1842 to set the terms of the juridical contracts and to require migrants to consent to these terms, thereby certifying the validity of the agreement (Mongia, 2018, p. 54–55). Another Act in 1864 also stipulated that recruiters of migrant labourers would need to be licensed by the POE, in response to complaints of deception, manipulation and fraud in the recruitment process (Laurence,

1994; Tinker, 1974). This new reform did not lead to a reduction of these complaints, notably targeted at untrustworthy recruiters, and in 1883, it then became mandatory to further formalise a set of rules to control of the recruitment process, including a set of forms required to license a recruiter (Mongia, 2018, pp. 63–64).

This is just one of the examples of the multiple bureaucratic positions – which also included medical workers, recruitment agents, emigration officers, district magistrates among others – which were created and whose tasks and prerogatives were increasingly formalised as the expansion of the migration state apparatus, and thereby the borders of British Indian state authority and sovereignty, was debated and contested in practice. The Indian passport is another example of the growing involvement of the British Indian state in controlling migration. The modern passport was initially created by the British Indian authorities to restrict the mobility of Indians to white settler colonies, and especially following concerns from Canadian, American and South African authorities about the increasing size and mounting political activism of Indian immigrants (Ramnath, 2005). However, the protracted bureaucratic debates over the creation of the passport as a travel document in Colonial India led the British Indian state to further its exclusive sovereign control over movement of all types of migrations out of the Subcontinent, including the regulation of the movement of ‘free’ subjects, that is, not included in the indentured labour system (Zamindar, 2007).

In addition, this process also concurrently led the creation of a category of British Indian ‘nationality’, distinct from the British subject with a defined territorial attachment to the British Indian Empire and the British protected states in the Indian subcontinent (Mongia, 2018). By instituting the British Indian passport, British Indian bureaucrats suggested a conception of ‘nationality’ linking citizens to a spatially delimited territory, thereby different from British imperial affiliation. This history of the British Indian passport also further demonstrates that the Indian migration state apparatus was not an automatic and persistent feature of state sovereignty but rose out of contingent bureaucratic and practical considerations and debates over how to regulate the movement of people out of the Indian Subcontinent and within the Colonial Empire.

After independence, these earlier bureaucratic debates also influenced the new Indian nation-state and its relationship with the Indian diaspora. The Republic of India inherited regulatory mechanisms but did not have any department dealing with relations with Overseas Indians. The

department of Overseas Indians, which had been set up in 1941, was transformed into that of Commonwealth relations in 1944 (Mahajani, 1976). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the postcolonial state very consciously adopted a policy of distancing itself from emigrant communities spread across the globe during the colonial era waves of migration. However, this was a puzzling reversal as Indian nationalists had long built on the diasporic networks of Indian revolutionaries, including one of its foremost leaders, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and on a transnational nationalist project when fighting for independence from British rule (Fischer-Tiné, 2007). Leaders of the Indian nationalist movement had initially articulated their demands for freedom from British rule by linking the discrimination faced by people of Indian origin in various British colonies with India's lack of sovereignty (Varadarajan, 2010, p. 52).

In 1952, an Indian government report instructed all diplomatic missions abroad that the 'first objective in regard to Indian overseas communities should be to help them to assimilate themselves to local conditions and to identify themselves as closely as possible with the interests of the indigenous population'.⁹ Then, in an important statement to the Indian parliament in 1957, Nehru acknowledged that people of Indian origin were facing discrimination in different parts of the world,¹⁰ but he spelled out Indian government's post-independence policy towards migrants in terms of a choice that had to be made by the Indians abroad themselves. By this, Nehru meant Indians abroad had to explicitly choose to claim Indian citizenship, thus officially becoming part of the Indian nation-state, for them to be provided with support from India's diplomatic and legal means. He added that those who chose to accept 'the nationality of the country they live in' should comport themselves in their new countries as local citizens.¹¹

Prime Minister Nehru's decision to encourage overseas Indians to integrate within their host countries, and thereby the adoption of a traditional postcolonial territorial migration state project, was linked to

⁹ Commonwealth Secretary Badruddin Tyabji, Burma—Hindu Muslim Relations on Burma (Ministry of External Affairs document at the National Archives of India, B/52/1335/4), 35.

¹⁰ In a sporadic fashion, the Indian government attempted to mediate when Indians were targeted by discriminatory policies in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), or Eastern African countries. See, for instance, the India's intervention in the case of stateless Indians suffering discrimination in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). For more, see Phadnis 1967.

¹¹ Lok Sabha Debates, Vol. 6, 2 September 1957.

the acknowledgment that independent India did not have the material resources to support or absorb the millions of overseas Indians, but also a realisation that diplomatic partners in East Africa, but with Malaysia, Burma (Myanmar), and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), had concerns that their Indian minority populations were a channel for Indian influence (Egreteau, 2014; Phadnis, 1967). This is why Nehru suggested that the loyalties of Indians choosing to stay abroad should be with their host countries.

Independent India was also built mainly on the British Indian state migration institutional and legal apparatus. With the end of the indentured system in 1920, the British Indian government had also developed an official emigration legislation through the Emigration Act of 1922, which formalised state control over the emigration of unskilled workers and limited the emigration of skilled workers. The act also allowed the government to make exceptions for specific countries and gave the power to control or prohibit the emigration of skilled workers as well (Tinker, 1974, pp. 367–369). The Indian Emigration Act stayed in force in independent India until 1983. As a result, for almost 40 years after independence, Indian authorities and bureaucrats regulated the emigration of low-skilled and semi-skilled labourers to the Gulf and Southeast Asia and skilled workers to North America, Europe and Australia under colonial-era rules.

It is only in 1966, following a decision by the Indian Supreme court, that the issuance of passports was no longer considered a discretionary instrument of the Indian government to conduct its foreign relations. The Supreme Court then established the ‘right to travel’ as a fundamental right under the Indian constitution, following which the Indian parliament enacted the Passports Act of 1967, which still contained several provisions to refuse the issuance of a passport if the government thinks this would not be in ‘public interest’ (Natarajan, 2022). A new Emigration Act was only enacted by the Ministry of Labour in 1983 to deal with the massive emigration of Indian workers for overseas employment on contractual basis, notably to the Gulf states since the 1970s, and to better safeguard the emigrants’ interests and welfare (Jain, 2005). With this new legislation, India sought to reform the Indian migration state to reinforce its control over recruiting agencies and to allow for the setting of minimum standards for foreign work contracts. Seven field Protectors of Emigrants in six states and Union Territories were set up to implement new regulatory procedures of the Act. Further, under the Emigration Act of 1983, only registered recruiting agents became able to conduct the business of recruitment

for overseas employment after obtaining a Registration Certificate from the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE) and taking into account the recruiting agent's financial guarantees, trustworthiness, and experience in the field of handling manpower export (Jain, 2005, pp. 63–66).

For four decades after independence, India was therefore caught in a dilemma over how to engage with overseas Indians. The government of India mainly prompted its expatriates to integrate within the host societies, notably out of a concern of an independent India's developing constructive diplomatic relations towards states which hosted important overseas Indian communities. Just as British India, India also adopted a territorialised definition of nationality in order to preserve and develop productive diplomatic ties with partners in the nation-state system it operated in by 1947 (Varadarajan, 2010). The preservation of the colonial British Indian state regulatory mechanisms was also meant to prevent post-independence emigration described as a large-scale 'brain drain' of doctors, engineers and other professionals crucial to the development of a postcolonial state.

As a consequence of these political and policy choices, the government of India did not promote emigration nor create any special department or centralised agency to maintain ties with its diaspora until the mid-1980s. Expatriate Indians also became aliens like any foreigners, and the government of India restricted their rights in buying property and investing in their country of origin. As the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora (2001, xi) concluded in its report: 'Barring some high-profile names in the Information Technology and entertainment sectors abroad, the diaspora has been largely out of public sight and awareness.' As a result, due to limited material and institutional capacities, as well as limited political willingness, India did not directly intervene to support the interests of Indian communities under threat in other states, as in Uganda in 1972 or in Fiji in the 1980s (Lall, 2003).

RE-ENGAGING THE INDIAN DIASPORA

It is gradually with the emergence of an Indian elite in the OECD countries that India began to take a keen interest in NRIs and its larger diaspora, in order to attract its investments in India. By the late 1990s, a critical mass of Indian engineers arrived in key positions in multinational corporations in OECD economies. This stands in contrast to the earlier migration communities in the Caribbean, South and East Africa, Fiji, Malaysia which traced their roots to emigration under colonial rule, were also less affluent

and into agriculture and petty trading rather than investment-prone businesses. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora, including NRIs and people of Indian origins, despite being diverse and heterogeneous, had retained strong ties with the homeland.

In parallel, there was a gradual recognition by the government of India of the vast resources, global skills, and talent of the Indian diaspora, which introduced initiatives to leverage them for its own domestic development. Indian politicians and bureaucrats gradually moved away from old paradigms such as an exclusively territorialised definition of Indians, but also with the 'brain drain' belief as the Indian diaspora increasingly got involved in India's rising IT industry (Hunger, 2004). The first time any special agency specialised to manage relations with Indians abroad was mentioned was in 1986 when a special approval committee was constituted within the Department of Industrial Development for the expeditious clearance of industrial proposals of NRIs. Also in 1987, an Indo-NRI Chamber of Commerce and Culture was set up to promote ties with overseas Indians (Lall, 2001). During the 1990s, following the policy of liberalisation, some other attempts were made to secure the involvement of affluent NRIs in setting up industries and to tide over the foreign exchange crises through attractive financial schemes. India's policy of foreign non-involvement slowly changed over the years to allow the overseas Indians to take part in the economic development of the country. However, the barriers remained high while the process remained slow.

Since the early 2000s, India engaged in systematic attempts to institutionalise its relationship with its diaspora, marking a distinct shift from its earlier policies of active dissociation with overseas Indians (Kapur, 2010; Varadarajan, 2010; Xavier, 2011; Naujoks, 2013). The initiative to make special bonds with the diaspora started with the High Level Committee (HLC) on Indian diaspora under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The HLC was assigned to prepare a comprehensive report on the strengths and weaknesses of the global Indian diaspora. The HLC report was submitted to the Government of India 2002, and it highlighted several important policy initiatives, including the dedication of one annual celebration of the achievements of the Indian diaspora. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was decided to be held on 9 January (the day Mahatma Gandhi, the first Pravasi, returned to India from South Africa). During this event, the Government of India also honors successful diasporic individuals with a prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award to encourage eminent overseas Indians to support India's growth.

Responding to a long-standing request from the Indian diaspora of a dual citizenship, the HLC also recommended introducing a new categorical innovation with the creation of the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) card. The OCI was implemented in 2005 and did not offer official dual citizenship, given existing constitutional statutes prohibiting Indians from holding more than one nationality. However, the OCI card offered several other benefits for overseas Indians such as multiple entries; multi-purpose lifelong visas to visit India; exemption from reporting to Police authorities for any length of stay in India; and parity with NRIs in financial, economic, and educational fields except in the acquisition of agricultural or plantation properties. In addition, following another recommendation of the HLC, the government of India established a new and separate cabinet ministry in 2004, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), to provide information, partnerships, and facilitations for all matters related to overseas Indians (Naujoks, 2013).¹²

As India also aimed to play a major role in world politics, it also began to see PIOs with U.S. citizenship as playing an important role in improving India's ties with the U.S. (Chakravorty et al., 2017). Wealthy Indians were increasingly contributing to election campaigns and in some cases running themselves for public office. This active political involvement led to the establishment of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans in 1993. The political influence of this caucus and, more generally, of Indian Americans was first visible when India conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, as overseas Indians in the U.S. were vocal in explaining India's position and lobbying for the removal of sanctions against India. However, the most significant success of the Indian-American lobbying efforts was its support for the Indo-US nuclear deal signed in 2008 (Kirk, 2008; Mistry, 2013). Recognising the key support of its overseas Indians, at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas annual convention, India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, thanked 'the Indian community in the United States of America for the efforts made by them in mobilising support of the political leadership in that country for Indo-US cooperation in civilian nuclear energy.'¹³

¹²The MOIA was eventually merged with the MEA in 2016 in an apparent effort to improve migration governance.

¹³Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's address at the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas on 7 January 2007. Available at: <https://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodcid=436>

After 2014, the new Narendra Modi government tried to further leverage the diaspora support to facilitate India's economic and political interests abroad, notably through an aggressive public diplomacy reconnecting ethnonational links with the diaspora, broadly defined as both citizens and persons of Indian origins, as well as publicising as series of measures the Indian state put in place to safeguard the interests of overseas Indians in destination countries (Sahoo & Shome, 2020). While implemented under the Modi government, these were measures or actions which evolved out of a longer pattern of actions over the last two decades from the government to try to improve its reputation in the management of emigration and protection of emigrant welfare abroad. The government of India for instance set up the 'Madad' (*Help*) online portal to address grievances related to existing consular services offered by Indian Missions abroad on priority basis by tracking online their redressal process until the final resolution. In 2009, the government of India had established an Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWD) that could be tapped into by embassies as necessary for the protection and welfare of Indians in the Gulf states. Building on this successful initiative, the Modi government set up the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) in Indian Missions in destination countries with significant overseas Indian population to provide on-site welfare services in times of distress and emergency, especially to of Indian citizens in ECR countries (Bhaskar, 2016).

One other key initiative to streamline the recruitment of certain categories of labour migrants abroad was the centralisation since May 2015 of the migrant recruitment process through an online e-Migrate system. The e-Migrate online system was integrated intended to replace the in-house System Automation Initiative platform and to reduce administrative and financial costs of the migration process. The digitisation was directly framed as a response to criticisms of the existing long, costly, and burdensome administrative process of emigration clearance as regulated by the 1983 Act. The e-Migrate system was initially due to be launched in June 2013, but it was delayed until May 2015, soon after the election of Modi. The e-Migrate platform was launched with the promise that it would ensure a certain respect for basic labour standards, such as minimum referral wages in various sectors, and foster a transparent process for recruitment and employment in the destination. By for instance requiring all prospective workers to the Gulf states holding ECR passports to be employed directly by a foreign employer, with both employees and employers submitting all necessary documents for emigration clearance, the e-Migrate platform is

intended to regularise and protect labour migrants deemed most vulnerable (Ennis & Blarel, 2022).

In 2017, the MEA initiated another outreach program, 'Videsh Sampark' in collaboration with various states governments in India to collect more information about the connections between diaspora and India's regions (*The Hindu*, 2017a). Given India's limited direct engagement with its diaspora for decades, some Indian states like Andhra Pradesh and especially Kerala initiated subnational initiatives to manage emigration and set up state-level institutions to ensure the welfare of emigrants from their states, notably diaspora organisations and returnee associations. Kerala has the largest emigrant population and its economy has greatly benefited from emigration, especially to Gulf countries. It was the first Indian state to set up specialised agencies to deal with the governance of their emigrants such as Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA) in 1996 as a department of the government (Kumar & Rajan, 2014). NORKA was created to formulate schemes for the welfare of emigrants and address their problems. The MEA conference is one of a series of efforts to strengthen dialogue between national and subnational stakeholders in India's migration governance apparatus. These examples of coordination of subnational initiatives with central state authorities demonstrate both the polycentric nature of migration governance, but also how sub-nationalised migration governance has gradually been re-embedded in the state.

Finally, given this increasing economic and political engagement with its diaspora, and a growing recognition of its diaspora as a key national interest, the government of India has also developed more incentives to track and protect its citizens overseas, but also, if necessary, to evacuate Indians caught in difficult situations. In public statements to the diaspora communities, Prime Minister Modi has often publicised evacuation operations as evidence of India's support to the security and welfare of overseas Indians. Traditionally, India has faced significant challenges in deploying its diplomatic and military assets abroad to protect its diaspora, notably due to its nonaligned posture and reluctance to get involved in conflict zones, but also in the internal affairs of other states. Nevertheless, India has engaged in more than thirty missions across Asia and Africa since 1947. However, given the lack of any formal doctrine or emergency plan, the success of some of India's past operations such as the evacuation of Indians during the first Gulf war, in Syria, Libya, Lebanon, or Yemen stemmed mostly from the personal efforts and risks taken by government officials, especially diplomats serving in conflict zones (Xavier, 2016).

Furthermore, as visible during the Ukraine-Russia or Israel-Iran conflicts, the success of India's evacuation operations relied heavily on New Delhi's ability to collaborate with the governments of neighbouring states, and thereby mainly on its diplomatic apparatus, and not just the deployment of military capacities. Furthermore, repatriation efforts have not been limited to conflict zones but also covered Indians impacted by economic slowdown and rising unemployment, notably in Gulf states, but also in the context of the covid crisis. In all these situations, an overstretched MEA consular apparatus has relied on informal channels with diaspora networks to better grasp the approximate size, profile and distribution of the Indian community in precarious situations.

CONCLUSIONS

If we go by an expansive definition of overseas Indians – consisting of both Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian Origins (PIOs) – The Indian diaspora, estimated to be more than 30 million spread over 206 countries across the world (MEA, 2025) has had a strong impact in both the home and host states. By way of remittances, this overseas population contributes more every year than foreign direct remittances to India's economic growth and development policies. Since 2003, India has been the world's largest recipient, at least in absolute terms, of remittances, moving from a modest \$2,1 billion in 1991 to an estimated \$135 billion in remittances in 2025.

The Indian diaspora is also diverse in terms of class, caste, language, religion, and professions (from unskilled to highly skilled), due mainly to a long history of international mobility, with various waves of Indian emigration, motivated mainly by socioeconomic pressures and opportunities, as well as facilitated or not by successive Indian politics and migration systems. To manage these various waves of migration, there has been a great deal of continuity in India's migration policies, institutions and laws. In successive historical periods, reforms were meant to regulate private recruitment through licensing and monitoring systems (Agarwala, 2022).

Through this analysis of the emergence of the Indian migration state, this chapter also aimed to demonstrate that the control of migration across alleged state borders is the result of a contested and protracted assemblage of legislative actions, institutional design and bureaucratic expansion. It is important to note, India still maintains institutional and infrastructural legacies like bureaucratic migrant categories, state-monitored

labour contracts and the Protector of Emigrants and waited for close to 40 years after independence to amend the 1922 Emigration Act. In 1983, India equally sought to reform the Indian migration state to reinforce its control over denationalised and deterritorialised actors such as the recruiting agencies.

Similarly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government's approach to reforming the 1983 Act since 2014 has been presented as modernising, digitalising, and empowering Indian workers abroad, but it has simultaneously expanded state control and surveillance over labour mobility. Policies such as the e-Migrate platform cited above, meant to digitise the recruitment process, license recruitment agendas and link overseas employment clearances to centralised databases, were direct reactions to public concerns about the recruitment and working conditions of Indian labourers in the receiving states and framed as efforts to empower workers, make recruitment more transparent, and align with global efforts to facilitate 'safe and regular migration' (MEA, 2019, 2021). However, the new system has also given the Indian state unprecedented oversight over who migrates, where, and how. The e-Migrate system, for instance, centralises clearance for all low-skilled workers going to 'ECR countries', mostly Gulf states (Ennis & Blarel, 2022b). This is one more example of the Indian state trying to address governance gaps and to claim (albeit inefficiently) its sovereign right to control and regulate the mobility of Indian labourers. It is also one further example of how reinforced colonial and imperial-era categorical stratification creates structural hierarchies of belonging. Furthermore, building on these infrastructures, the Indian state's efforts to police labour-market mobility shape the mobility of migrants depending on their education levels, skills, and gender, long after decolonisation.

Further studies looking and comparing how British India's institutional legacies shaped the migration policies of other South Asian states borne out of the British Indian Empire. For instance, Pakistan was the first state to replace the Emigration Act of 1922 in 1979, followed by Sri Lanka in 1981, Bangladesh in 1982 and India only reformed its colonial era emigration policy in 1983 (Addleton, 1992). Most of these reforms were linked to the uncontrolled movement of South Asian workers to the Gulf states. There is therefore more we can learn of how postcolonial states like India came to gradually behave like bureaucratic and regulatory states, especially in reaction to challenges towards its sovereign authority, rather than to assume that a state holds both a clear idea of its identity and objectives when managing and regulating migration.

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Governed by Labels? Migrants and their Families in Lithuania's Evolving Migration Regime

Irma Mačkinė, Gintė Martinkėnė, Mažvydas Karalius, and Iryna Huliuk

INTRODUCTION

Central and Eastern European¹ (CEE) member states of the European Union (EU) have traditionally been characterised as migrant-sending countries. Around the time of their EU accession, they were often viewed as major sources of large-scale emigration to Western Europe (Black et al., 2010; Favell, 2008). Economic transformations and geopolitical developments, however, have significantly reshaped migration dynamics across the region. In several CEE countries, immigration has risen considerably,

¹ The term *Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)* is used here as a widely recognised regional shorthand, while acknowledging that it is contested and shaped by historical and geopolitical perspectives. Following scholars like Narkowicz, Gawlewicz and Pędziwiatr (2025) and Kalmar (2023), we recognise its hierarchical connotations but employ it here to facilitate discussion of shared migration dynamics among EU member states commonly grouped under this label.

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prompting governments to revise existing policy frameworks and introduce new measures to address emerging trends (e.g., Kusek, 2024; Linnamäki, 2024; Muntele, & Bănică, 2025; Rudincová & Vomlela, 2024). These societies now confront the complexities of growing diversity and the need for more inclusive and responsive approaches to migration governance.

Within this regional context, Lithuania stands out as a compelling case. In a relatively short period, immigration has not only surpassed emigration but has also diversified significantly in terms of countries of origin, legal statuses, and social needs. This is particularly notable for a country with a comparatively small population compared to larger CEE countries now attracting more international migrants.² Much like Western European countries that transitioned from emigration to immigration societies at various points of the twentieth century and gradually tightened migration controls (Abdou & Zardo, 2024; Geddes et al., 2020; de Haas et al., 2020), Lithuania now appears to be following a similar path at a notably fast pace.

This chapter asks how migrants and their families are categorised and governed within Lithuania's evolving migration regime, and what these processes of labelling reveal about the infrastructural and stratified nature of migration governance in a rapidly diversifying state. As Lithuania adapts to its emerging role as a migrant-receiving state, policy frameworks have begun to respond to the growing diversity of its migrant population.

² For the purposes of this chapter, the terms 'migration' and 'migrant' refer specifically to international migration. 'International migration' is understood broadly as the movement of people from their usual residence across international borders, temporarily or permanently, regardless of their main reason for moving (de Haas, 2023, ix). Accordingly, an 'international migrant' is defined here as someone living in a country other than their country of birth (ibid.). The term 'migrant' in this chapter encompasses both legally defined categories (e.g., 'migrant workers') and those not clearly defined under international law (e.g., international students). An *inclusivist* perspective is applied when defining 'migrant', including those fleeing war or persecution, in contrast to the so-called *residualist* approach (cf. Carling, 2019; Sironi, 2019). Various ways to categorise migrants exist – often in binary terms – though these terms are rarely defined consistently. Such classifications typically draw distinctions within so-called 'economic migration' (e.g., 'regular' versus 'irregular', 'high-skilled' versus 'low-skilled') or within debates on asylum (e.g., 'forced' versus 'voluntary' and 'vulnerable' versus 'non-vulnerable'; for more details, see Abdou & Zardo, 2024). It is important to emphasise that these categorisations and labelling are not neutral: they carry legal, political, and symbolic connotations that differ across institutional and national contexts. In this chapter, the term 'migrant' is used with critical awareness of how various categorisations can shape access to rights, services, and forms of social recognition. These dimensions are discussed in more detail in the theoretical and empirical sections that follow.

However, the treatment of different migrant groups varies significantly. The chapter explores how these patterns of categorisation reflect broader dynamics of inclusion, exclusion and bordering in the Lithuanian context. Drawing on the work on migration categories (Sciortino, 2024) and the politics of labelling (Abdou & Zardo, 2024), it analyses how both migrants and migrants' families³ are positioned within these policy frameworks and stakeholders' narratives. In doing so, it highlights the political and social implications of these labels and the ways in which they shape access, visibility, and forms of belonging within Lithuania's evolving migration regime.

Conceptually, the analysis is informed by the 'mobility turn' in migration studies (Urry, 2007; Cresswell, 2010). This approach (re)conceptualises international migration not simply as a cross-border movement, but as part of a wider constellation of material, social, and symbolic mobilities structured by unequal access and control. Building on this volume's framework of assemblages of migration, the chapter considers families not only as subjects of policy but also as integral to the infrastructures and stratifications through which migration is governed. It examines how legal categories, welfare provisions, and normative assumptions come together in shaping how migrants and their families are positioned in the migration regime, highlighting their role in the production of differentiated forms of inclusion and exclusion.

The chapter also engages with recent scholarship on borders, boundaries, and the politics of labelling (Abdou & Zardo, 2024; Dahinden, 2016; DeMaria Harney, 2024; Portes, 2010; Sciortino, 2024; Zetter, 1991; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) to situate the Lithuanian case within broader theoretical debates that challenge static, nation-centred understanding of migration and call for more relational, inclusive and justice-orientated approaches to mobility governance. In doing so, it contributes to migration and mobility studies in CEE, a context that remains less explored in this regard.

³ In this chapter, 'family' is not treated as a fixed, static structure but as a socially constructed, negotiated network of relationships, continuously made and remade through everyday practices, responsibilities, and emotional ties (Juozeliūnienė et al., 2014). While we adopt an open, relational understanding of family – not limited to legal or biological criteria – we also acknowledge how normative constructions of family intersect with bordering practices on other grounds (Vuckovic Juros et al., 2024) and are embedded in legal and policy frameworks.

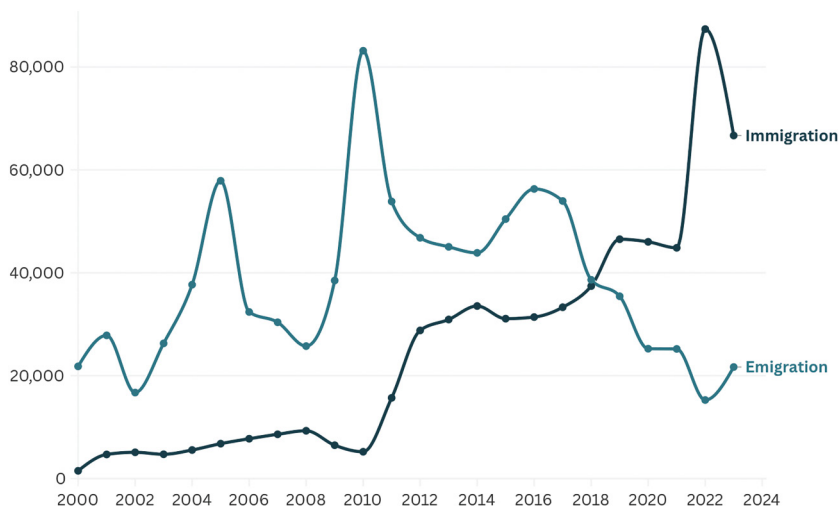


Fig. 8.1 General emigration and immigration trends (2000–2023). Source: created by the authors using the *Flourish* application, based on Eurostat (2025)

FROM EMIGRATION TO IMMIGRATION: DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND MIGRATION TRENDS IN LITHUANIA

Recent data show a notable shift in Lithuania's migration landscape, challenging its long-standing image as a primarily migrant-sending country (Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., 2025). Since 2018–2019, immigration flows have not only caught up with but significantly surpassed emigration (see Fig. 8.1). After EU accession, far more people left Lithuania than arrived;⁴ by 2019, however, this pattern had reversed. Over 40 thousand people moved to Lithuania that year – many of them returning nationals – while around 28 thousand Lithuanian citizens left. This trend continued in subsequent years. Between 2019 and 2021, the share of non-EU citizens grew substantially and now makes up the majority of foreign nationals

⁴ In 2004, following the EU accession, 37 thousand residents left the country, compared to just over 5 thousand arrivals, 93.4% of individuals emigrating and 61.2% of individuals immigrating were Lithuanian nationals. In 2010, during economic crisis, over 83 thousand emigrated and only 5 thousand immigrated, 79.7% of whom were returning Lithuanian nationals.

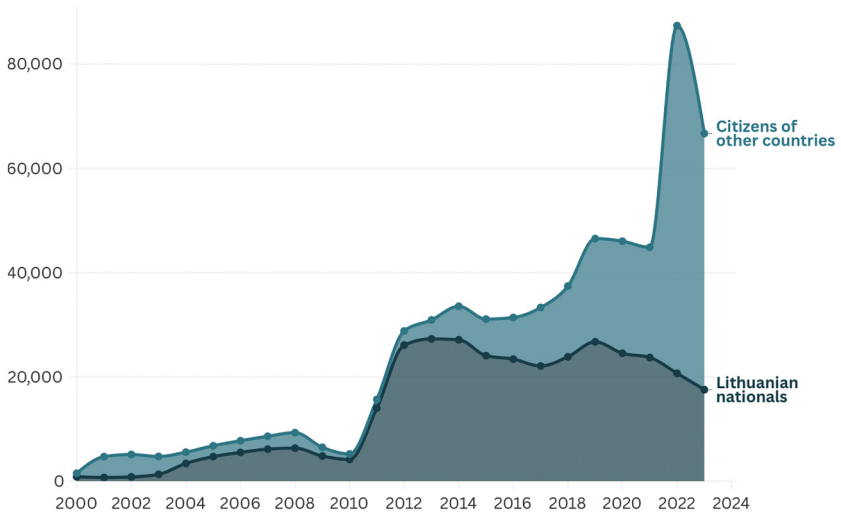


Fig. 8.2 Immigration trends by citizenship (2000–2023). Source: created by the authors using the *Flourish* application, based on Eurostat (2025). Note: Citizens of other countries are grouped together, as a breakdown by EU and non-EU citizenship is only available for the period from 2013 to 2019. During this time, the share of non-EU nationals ranged from 79% to 95%: 82.3% in 2013, 87.8% in 2014, 79.3% in 2015, 89.2% in 2016, 93.1% in 2017, 94.2% in 2018, and 95.4% in 2019

(Fig. 8.2).⁵ This shift is partly due to increased movement of people from Middle Eastern and North African countries through Lithuania's border with Belarus starting from 2021, and the arrival of Ukrainian nationals following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. By 2023, approximately 50 thousand foreign nationals and over 17 thousand returning Lithuanian citizens moved to Lithuania, while around 22 thousand people left the country. Together, these figures highlight Lithuania's emergence as a country of immigration.

The composition of newcomers has also become increasingly diverse. In the 2010s, most foreign arrivals were from Belarus, Ukraine and

⁵ Although EU nationals also migrate to Lithuania, their overall share remains modest (EMN, 2025d). Between 2013 and 2019, non-EU nationals made up 79% to 95% of all immigrants, rising from 82.3% in 2013 to 95.4% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2025).

Russia. More recently migration from Central Asian countries – notably Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – has increased, alongside smaller but visible flows from India, Syria and other countries (EMN, 2025d). Migrants from non-EU countries are predominantly adult men aged 18–64, with children under 18 forming the second-largest group. Most adult non-EU nationals arrive on temporary work permits, especially in low-skilled sectors such as long-distance trucking, welding, and construction (EMN, 2025b). However, growing numbers now also arrive for family reunification and study⁶ (EMN, 2025c).

Although asylum seekers and irregular migrants represent a smaller share of total arrivals, their legal and social status remains highly politicised. Since 2021, Lithuania has resorted to systematic pushbacks at its border with Belarus, turning back thousands of irregular border-crossers without providing them with full opportunities to submit asylum applications, failing to ensure their proper examination and creating extremely poor conditions in temporary accommodation facilities (Amnesty International, 2022). This development highlights growing tensions between migration control measures and international human rights obligations within Lithuania's evolving migration regime. In 2023, 3,651 individuals were recorded as residing irregularly in Lithuania, and 4,992 were denied entry⁷ (EMN, 2025a). Reception of Ukrainian nationals displaced after 2022 serve as a stark contrast to the pushbacks implemented at the Belarus-EU borders (Artiukh, 2023). This group, mainly composed of women and children, is usually granted temporary protection and thus excluded from asylum statistics (Official Statistics Portal, 2025).

Taken together, these trends signal the significant structural and demographic changes confronting Lithuanian society and its migration governance system. The rapid growth and diversification of the immigrant population place increasing demands on institutional capacity, particularly in relation to access to services and long-term integration.

⁶ Between 2011 and 2020, an average of 4.5 thousand people per year received a temporary residence permit on the grounds of family reunification, ranging from just under 3 to around 5.5 thousand. This number rose to nearly 6 thousand in 2021 and increased further to about 7.5 thousand per year in 2022 and 2023. In parallel, temporary residence permits issued for education averaged around 2 thousand per year between 2011 and 2020, rose to over 3.5 thousand in 2021 and 2022, and almost doubled in 2023, reaching more than 6 thousand.

⁷ Notably, the asylum acceptance rate increased recently – from 11% in 2021 to 70% in 2023 (EMN, 2025a).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNEQUAL MOBILITIES AND THE POLITICS OF LABELLING

This chapter draws on the ‘mobility turn’ in migration studies to unpack unequal access to movement produced, regulated, and contested through categorisation and labelling. Rather than treating mobility as a neutral or universally accessible phenomenon, the new mobilities paradigm foregrounds the ways in which it is shaped by intersecting structures of power – including legal status, economic capital, ethnicity and geopolitical positioning (Cresswell, 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). At the same time, immobility is not simply the absence of movement but a condition often produced and maintained through restrictive policies, bordering practices, and unequal access to resources (DeMaria Harney, 2024). The new mobilities paradigm foregrounds the varied and often ambiguous nature of migrant trajectories that defy fixed categorisations (DeMaria Harney, 2024, p. 18). An aspirations-capabilities perspective, building on this paradigm, further shows how people’s ability to move – or remain in place with dignity – depends on the resources, rights, and social networks available to them (de Haas, 2021). From this perspective, mobility is relational and differentiated: the same person may be labelled in different ways depending on institutional logics and shifting policy priorities.

Recent scholarship has shown how exclusionary dynamics are enacted through categorisation. Public unease with mobility – whether in the form of immigration or emigration – continues to shape exclusionary narratives and inform restrictive policy responses (Kustov, 2022). As Sciortino (2024) argues, borders are not merely territorial demarcations but also as institutional and symbolic constructs that regulate access to rights, recognition, and inclusion. Building on the idea of ‘bordering’ as an active practice rather than on borders as a fixed boundary, Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy’s (2018) concept of ‘everyday bordering’ expands this framework. They show how immigration controls are embedded in routine institutional practices – such as those conditioning access to education, health-care, or housing – thereby dispersing and normalising border enforcement across society (see also Ataç, 2019; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021).

In line with the reflexive turn in migration studies, scholars now emphasise that migration categories – like all social categories – are inherently ambiguous, fluid, and best understood as ‘a spectrum instead of fixed, binary categories’ (Abdou & Zardo, 2024, p. 35). The categorisation of migrants serves not only as a mechanism for managing population flows

but also as a means of reproducing social hierarchies, often along racialised or class-based lines (Anderson, 2013; Bakewell, 2008). The politics of labelling play a central role here (Abdou & Zardo, 2024). As Sciortino (2024, p. 26) notes, informal and often unconscious categorisation systems shape daily life by reinforcing insider-outsider boundaries, both with and without legal codification. Through processes of standardisation and stereotyping, categories become institutional labels that circulate across policy, administrative, and academic discourses, often reinforcing each other (ibid, 40). As Zetter (1991) has demonstrated, labels such as ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’, or ‘economic migrant’ are not neutral descriptors but institutional constructs with tangible consequences (see also Dahinden, 2016; Portes, 2010). These labels embed hierarchical distinctions that shape access to legal protection, public services, and social legitimacy, reflecting institutional logics that tend to prioritise control over care.

Furthermore, scholars highlight a core asymmetry in the global migration regime: while emigration is widely upheld as a human right, states retain broad discretion over immigration (Sciortino, 2024, p. 24), treating access as a political concession rather than a right. In EU policy, ‘mobility’ is often framed positively – linked with middle-class aspirations and consumer freedom – whereas ‘migration’ usually remains politically charged and heavily scrutinised, mirroring broader divergences in the ways mobility and migration have traditionally been conceptualised in academic research (DeMaria Harney, 2024, pp. 17–18). This distinction is also relevant in the Lithuanian context. As the results section demonstrates, returning citizens and highly skilled workers are more often associated with mobility and opportunity, while asylum seekers, individuals entering the country through irregular channels, and low-skilled migrants are more likely to be framed as security or policy challenges. As Lithuania becomes a country of immigration, such distinctive framings appear increasingly central to how inclusion and exclusion are organised, shaping not only access to movement but also its social and political meaning.

Although migration has historically been conceptualised as an individualised and economically driven phenomenon, recent research increasingly demonstrates that migrant trajectories are deeply embedded in family and personal relations (Brettel & Hollifield, 2000, 2023). Migrants do not always move or settle alone: family ties shape decisions to migrate, stay, or return, and profoundly influence experiences of inclusion and exclusion. This shift calls for an approach that situates migrants within broader

familial and relational contexts rather than viewing them as isolated actors. This perspective is particularly relevant in Lithuanian context as well, where recent inflows – especially among non-EU nationals – include arrivals for family reunification. However, as the following sections show, family-related issues in migration context remain more marginal in policy frameworks and stakeholders' narratives, contributing to fragmented and uneven governance responses.

As the literature shows, policy, public and academic discourses often frame migrants' families through a heteronormative, nuclear family lens, privileging the 'right kind' of family – typically a white, middle- or upper middle-class married heterosexual couple with children – while marginalising extended kin networks, same-sex partnerships, or other configurations deemed 'non-traditional' (Budginaitė-Mačkinė et al., 2025; Safuta, 2024). The labels applied to migrants' families – frequently articulated through dichotomies such as 'deserving' versus 'undeserving' (Jørgensen, 2012), 'right kind' versus 'wrong kind' of families (Safuta, 2024) – intersect with broader classificatory logics based on nationality, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Taken together, these intersecting hierarchies can produce institutional classifications that do more than differentiate between families – they can actively produce the conditions under which certain groups come to be framed as at risk or in need of special oversight. This highlights how the notion of 'vulnerability' is not an inherent trait but is socially and institutionally constructed, marginalising certain family forms while portraying others as passive or dependent (Abdou & Zardo, 2024, pp. 41–42; see also Sciortino, 2024).

Building on these theoretical insights, this chapter examines how bordering practices in Lithuania are shaped by policy frameworks, as well as by the discursive practices of actors involved in migration governance. Here, bordering is understood as enacted through legal classifications, bureaucratic routines, and narrative constructions that position migrants – and their families – within hierarchies of value. More specifically, we analyse how these classifications are articulated in strategic policy documents, focusing on the labels commonly applied to migrants and their families. These labels often reflect intersecting markers of difference such as legal status, nationality, and socioeconomic position. Drawing on qualitative interviews elicited through visual mapping methods, we investigate how key stakeholders apply, negotiate and/ or contest these labels, particularly in relation to migrant family life, often transcending national borders. Rather than limiting our analysis solely to the labelling of individual

migrants, we also foreground our study into how migrants' families are situated within policy frameworks, stakeholder narratives, and academic discourses. In doing so, the chapter answers a recent call to 'make migration categories an object of study' (Abdou & Zardo, 2024, p. 43) and contributes to a growing body of research that emphasises the social and relational dimensions of mobility. It also seeks to develop a more critical understanding of migration governance in Lithuania – one that accounts for both institutional policy and everyday discursive practice.

METHODOLOGY

The study draws on multiple sources and combines diverse methodological strategies to explore how migrants' families are positioned within Lithuania's evolving migration governance. It begins with a **secondary analysis of statistical data** to contextualise Lithuania's transition from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving country. Statistical data were sourced from national and international databases, including Lithuania's official statistics portal, Eurostat, and materials from the European Migration Network (EMN) Lithuanian branch.

The empirical foundation of the study is structured around two main components: (1) analysis of key policy documents and (2) qualitative expert interviews. The analysis of key policy documents was carried out to trace developments in migration governance and examine how migrants and their families are categorised within national frameworks. To this end, a content analysis was conducted on eight strategic and legal policy documents adopted primarily from 2018 to 2024. These documents were selected based on their relevance to migration and family-related policy, using targeted keyword searches (e.g., *šeima**, *partner**, *migrac**, *migrant**⁸). The analysis focused on identifying normative assumptions and discursive framings of migrants and their families, with particular attention to how hierarchies of value are constructed along lines of nationality, legal status, and perceived economic utility. The analysis was undertaken between November 2024 and February 2025.

To uncover gaps in current policy and better understand how migrants' families are situated within these frameworks, we carried out in-depth

⁸ English equivalents: *famil**, *partner**, *migrat**, *migrant**.

qualitative interviews with policymakers and key stakeholders from six institutions and organisations working in different areas of migration governance, including representatives of several public sector institutions from national level, international organisations working in Lithuania and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Given the small sample and ethical considerations, interviewees' affiliations are not disclosed when presenting quotations, both to preserve anonymity and because the study focuses on how migrants and their families are conceptualised, rather than on comparing differences between stakeholder types. The interviews used a visual mapping method developed in line with visual sociological research methodology (Juozeliūnienė, 2014). This approach allowed participants to spatially map the challenges migrants' families face and reflect on how different institutions respond. The interviewing unfolded in three stages. First, the interviewees were asked to identify the major issues faced by migrants' families in Lithuania. Second, the visual mapping of these issues was made in relation to specific institutional actors' efforts to address them. Third, an in-depth interview followed by encouraging reflection on barriers, inter-institutional dynamics, and potential policy solutions. This approach provided nuanced insights into institutional logics and practices while supporting a participatory, bottom-up conceptualisation of migration policy by key stakeholders. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Vilnius University's Research Ethics Committee, responsible for sociological research at Faculty of Philosophy, and all interviews were conducted with informed consent, adhering strictly to confidentiality and data protection protocols. The interviews were carried out between November 2024 and January 2025.

Finally, to situate our policy and interview findings within a wider scholarly context, we also draw on the review of the recent academic work on migration in Lithuania. Using the eLABa⁹ database and filtering out unrelated results, we identified studies published in both English and Lithuanian focusing on migration to Lithuania. Rather than providing a detailed analysis of this literature in this chapter, we use it to contextualise some of the insights emerging from the policy review and interviews, positioning our findings within the academic debates on migration in Lithuanian context.

⁹ The eLABa database is Lithuania's national academic repository, which aggregates scholarly publications produced by researchers and institutions across the country.

RESULTS

Categorising Migrants and Their Families in Lithuanian Policy Documents

Lithuanian policy documents categorise migrants and their families in multiple – and sometimes contradictory – ways. In the following sections, we reveal distinct approaches to different migrant groups, structured around perceived economic utility, national belonging, and legal status (see the next section) and demonstrate how migrants' families seen as embodying national or economic value are primarily positioned as facilitators of return and (re)integration, but also potential drivers of onward migration (see section *Framing Families of Returnees, 'Talents' and 'Foreign Workers'*). By contrast, families of other migrant groups tend to remain secondary, invisible, or framed as a risk or a factor of vulnerability in the policy discourse (see section *Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Families as Vulnerability Markers*).

Migrant Group Hierarchies: Belonging, Economic Value, and Legal Status

Lithuanian policy documents classify migrants based on their national belonging, perceived economic value, and legal status. This logic underpins Lithuania's *Strategy for the Demographic, Migration, and Integration Policy for 2018–2030* – a key document adopted in 2018 outlining national priorities for migration governance. The strategy addresses low birth rates, population aging, and continued emigration by promoting what it calls 'positive population growth and a balanced age structure' (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2018). Emigration is depicted as a serious demographic threat not only in this strategy but also in other policy documents addressing population decline. For instance, the *Resolution on the Future of Lithuania's Demographic Policy* identifies both economic (e.g., low wages or unemployment) and non-economic factors (such as a 'negative psychological climate, lack of justice, feelings of social insecurity, better opportunities for self-realisation abroad, and family-related reasons') as key drivers of emigration (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023a).

Migration is presented both as a demographic challenge – particularly the emigration of Lithuanian citizens – and as a potential solution, primarily through return migration and the attraction of migrant groups deemed 'desirable' in Lithuania. 'Desirable' groups are understood quite narrowly, prioritising the Lithuanian diaspora – broadly considered to include not

only citizens and their children living abroad, but also individuals with historical or cultural ties, such as former deportees, former political prisoners, and their descendants. These groups are framed as central to national renewal, valued both symbolically and demographically. This is a new development, as previous attempts to encourage return mainly focused on Lithuanian nationals who moved abroad in the late twentieth or early twenty first century (for overview, see Budginaitė, 2012).

The second major category prioritised in Lithuanian policy documents comprises the foreign nationals classified as ‘highly skilled’ migrants, often referred to as ‘talents’ or ‘specialists’. Unlike the Lithuanian ‘diaspora’ – whose value is tied to national belonging – these migrants are assessed primarily through the lens of their anticipated economic and professional contributions. *Lithuania 2050*, a long-term strategic planning document, envisions the country as an attractive destination for ‘talents from other countries who willingly settle’, framing their successful integration as essential for addressing labour shortages, advancing high-tech industries, and promoting economic diversification (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023b). The *Programme of the 19th Government of the Republic of Lithuania* reinforces this logic by prioritising the recruitment of ‘highly skilled workers’ and ‘specialists’ (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024), tying this with broader strategic efforts involving employers, diplomatic services, and higher education institutions.

In contrast, other foreign nationals – particularly those referred to as ‘low(er)-skilled’ labour migrants from non-EU countries – are portrayed quite differently. While their arrival is recognised as necessary to address labour shortages caused by high emigration in strategic policy documents, this broad group is also framed as requiring control and monitoring to prevent risks such as wage suppression or social tensions. For example, the *Programme of the 19th Government of the Republic of Lithuania* calls for a consistent, long-term policy for issuing work and residence permits that meets employers’ needs while avoiding an oversupply of cheap labour (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024). In this framing, the label ‘foreign worker’ represents a mobile labour unit, valued mainly for economic contribution, whose presence must be carefully managed to protect domestic labour conditions.

Asylum seekers and refugees are largely framed through an administrative logic that emphasises their ‘vulnerability’, positioning them as subjects to be assessed, monitored, and categorised within an individualised integration system. The portrayal of this group generally reinforces an image of passivity and dependence – an interpretation that obscures

their agency and the structural conditions shaping their experiences, as the section *Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Families as Vulnerability Markers* later demonstrates.

Framing Families of Returnees, 'Talents' and 'Foreign Workers': From Integration Assets to Marginal Concerns

The Lithuanian diaspora – broadly defined to include citizens and their descendants abroad, as well as those with historical or cultural ties to Lithuania – is portrayed as central to demographic renewal and nation-building. Beyond invoking current or historical family ties, policy discourse also sees family members as anchors and facilitators of return and reintegration. This is one of the few instances where migrants start to be depicted not merely as individual economic actors but as embedded within personal and familial relationships.¹⁰

'Highly skilled migrants' are also occasionally seen as embedded in social ties. Their successful integration is explicitly linked to the presence and well-being of their families. For example, the *Strategy for the Demographic, Migration, and Integration Policy for 2018–2030* emphasises that foreign nationals should have access to clear information on social insurance, housing, education, healthcare, and other services through a one-stop shop system in municipalities. Recognising that many newcomers leave within their first year, the strategy also recognises that their decisions to stay (or emigrate) can be shaped by family ties and close relationships.

This logic is particularly reflected in measures referenced to when talking about 'highly-skilled' migration such as expanding Lithuanian language courses, providing targeted services in schools, recognising foreign qualifications, supporting community activities, and offering information in other languages. By facilitating conditions that allow highly skilled migrants to bring their families – and by engaging municipalities in their settlement support – families are framed as a resource essential for successful integration. Retaining the economic value of these 'talents' and ensuring they do not leave prematurely thus becomes inseparable from ensuring their family well-being.

By contrast, in the economic framing of 'labour migrants' and 'foreign workers', the family dimension remains largely invisible. Policy documents

¹⁰ Earlier analyses showed that policymakers initially problematised Lithuanian migrant families (Juozeliūnienė & Bielevičiūtė, 2020). As migration of Lithuanian nationals became normalised over time, this scrutiny shifted towards the families of foreign nationals, as this chapter demonstrates.

seldom address the rights, needs, or integration of the families of these groups of migrants. Instead, they are treated primarily as individual labour units, with little recognition of how family ties may shape their settlement or long-term integration. Unlike the approach taken for highly skilled specialists ('talents'), there is almost no explicit mention of support for family reunification, children's education, or broader community engagement for this group.

During the preparation of this chapter, an amendment to the law was registered in the Lithuanian Parliament, aiming to explicitly restrict the opportunity of work-based temporary permit holders from non-EU countries to bring their family members to Lithuania (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025a). As it is noted in the explanatory note accompanying the draft law, allowing a foreign worker to reunite with their family members would automatically impose the obligation on taxpayers to support dependent persons (children, parents etc.) and to finance their education, healthcare and social services (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025b). The document further expresses that in some countries of origin, population registers do not exist at all, and documents proving familial ties may be forged, thereby presenting family networks as indeterminate, fluid and, therefore, dangerous. The presumed arrival of family members is associated with various perceived threats, both to the demographic situation and to the imagined 'cultural homogeneity'.¹¹

This selective visibility illustrates how policy acknowledges the relational dimension of mobility when it helps to retain 'desirable' migrants, while downplaying it for those labelled as 'low-skilled', 'short-term', and easily replaceable. Such discursive constructions reinforce a hierarchy of deservingness, where family support is seen as an advantage granted to those deemed aligned with the state's economic interests.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Families as Vulnerability Markers

Passages on asylum seekers and refugees – and their families – in Lithuanian policy documents reveal yet another distinctive dimension of how migration is governed. In this context, family is not approached as a stabilising resource or means of supporting integration. It is treated primarily as a

¹¹ These hierarchical distinctions echo earlier findings that non-EU family migrants often encounter negative public attitudes and racialised boundary-making, despite limited direct contact between residents and migrants (Blažytė, 2017).

potential risk factor or marker of ‘vulnerability’ within an individualised integration framework.

Since 2020, Lithuania has operated a state-supported system centred on preparing and monitoring *Individual Integration Plans* for each asylum recipient. According to the procedure for developing such plans for asylum seekers and their families (Minister of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020), after three months in a Refugee Reception Centre, responsibility for integration transfers to the municipality where the person is relocated.

During initial intake, it is foreseen for municipal staff to assess factors that might limit participation in integration measures, classifying each case according to high, medium, or low levels of vulnerability. For instance, single parents, pregnant women, or those caring for a family member with a disability are classified as highly vulnerable. Families with more than two children fall into the medium category; those with one or two children are considered low vulnerability; and childless families or single individuals are seen as having no vulnerability. This system of classification reflects a bureaucratic logic that quantifies family composition as a potential liability, rather than as a source of stability or support.

At the same time, some policy documents reviewed hint at more supportive approaches to integration. Reports from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour on the implemented measures describe how, depending on the individual or family circumstances, such plans may aim to strengthen social ties with the local community, support access to employment and education, promote ‘self-reliance’, and facilitate Lithuanian language acquisition. With the involvement of assigned mentors to support this process, these provisions also suggest a presence of a parallel vision of integration as a relational and context-sensitive process, rather than purely an administrative task.

This approach reflects what DeMaria Harney (2024) calls the double-edged nature of ‘vulnerability’: while the label can identify specific needs, it also risks categorising migrants into two groups (‘vulnerable’ versus ‘non-vulnerable’), portraying some as passive or helpless and obscuring both their agency and the structural conditions that render them vulnerable. This ambivalent framing – where family is seen simultaneously as a source of risk and a target of support – mirrors broader patterns within Lithuanian migration governance. The value attributed to family ties depends less on their social or emotional significance and more on how well they fit institutional aims and narrow

conceptions of integration. While tailored support is possible and can be meaningful (see also the next section), it remains shaped by a bureaucratic framework that privileges classification and oversight over relational understanding.

Categorising Migrants and Their Families in Stakeholders' Discourses

This section examines how key actors in migration governance in Lithuania frame migrants and their families. While elements of the legal and economic hierarchies found in formal policy documents (see section *Categorising Migrants and Their Families in Lithuanian Policy Documents*) reappear in stakeholders' narratives, these accounts also reflect more fluid situational distinctions, shaped by institutional mandates, professional roles, and everyday encounters.

From Temporariness to Pragmatic Acceptance

Across the interviews, migration was broadly recognised as a structural shift: from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving country. Yet this recognition often carried tones of resignation combined with inevitability:

Over the past five years, our number of foreigners grew dramatically – from 58,000 in 2019 to 225,000 now. At first, people thought they would just pass through. But migration is here to stay – wars, climate change, economic instability. It's time to come to terms with that (Interviewee no. 4).

The whole community, all of Lithuania, needs to understand – whether you like it or not, if an Asian person lives next door, what can you do? Nothing. So, we need to find ways to talk, find what we share, and help each other, rather than fight (Interviewee no. 1).

These reflections mark a shift from denial or wishful temporariness ('they'll pass through') to pragmatic acceptance – a reluctant acknowledgement that Lithuania is now a more diverse society. The first interviewee frames this in terms of inevitability, while the second, though calling for dialogue and coexistence, presents diversity as an unavoidable reality. This tone mirrors policy discourses that justify migration through (economic) necessity but diverges in tone by foregrounding social unease and ambivalence. Integration is portrayed less as a shared societal goal than a reactive and pragmatic – sometimes defensive – response to demographic change. This gap between growing institutional recognition and societal readiness recurs across stakeholders' accounts.

Despite recent efforts to address growing migration flows, migration governance in Lithuania is seen as emergent, fragmented, reactive, lacking coherence and requiring more coordination across ministries, municipalities and NGOs:

We have some elements in place, but they don't really connect with each other [...]. In our labour market there are certain gaps [...] but these needs aren't properly aligned with the kinds of people we're allowing to enter the country. [...] We have quotas, but they're open-ended, so usually it's the employers with the best systems for bringing in workers who use them up [...]. So yeah, we have these elements, and we have some directions, but sometimes they contradict each other. Sometimes they even go against our actual demographic reality. That's why, in my view, our migration policy is unclear – there's no clear direction, and it's not obvious what exactly we're aiming for. We don't even seem to have a sense of how many foreigners there should be in the country, how many we need for the economy to grow. We are really lacking a clear-headed assessment of the situation and a set of coherent criteria (Interviewee no. 6).

This account encapsulates the tensions of an evolving migration regime that functions less as a coherent system and more as a patchwork of policy responses driven more by short-term needs and employer initiative rather than by strategic planning.

The pattern of reactivity and lack of coherence is also visible in the language policy. While interviewees consistently identified Lithuanian language learning as essential for integration, they emphasised the lack of a unified system or clear institutional responsibility for its delivery:

We don't really have a proper integration system in place. It's not even clearly defined in the law what integration actually means, how we understand that someone is integrating, or what indicators we're supposed to look at. We don't have a proper language learning system either – something that would include both teaching and testing, and make it clear who can study for free and who has to pay. Only recently did we even decide that people providing services have to speak Lithuanian. But even after making that decision, we still don't have any system to offer them language courses. [...] I think the main challenge for the government is to figure out who's actually responsible for teaching the language in Lithuania, because language is kind of a lost topic – and that's causing a lot of problems. (Interviewee no. 6)

Institutional fragmentation in language provision can be also understood as a subtle form of bordering – not through explicit legal exclusion, but through gaps and inconsistencies that restrict access to integration opportunities. While not aimed at specific groups explicitly, these inconsistencies produce differentiated outcomes in practice. Some interviewees connected such issues to broader systemic weaknesses in public service provision:

One time we were joking with a colleague – if you really want to test how the Lithuanian systems work, try being a migrant. Then you'll see that nothing works. Honestly, what it all comes down to – well, one of the main issues, I think one of the most important ones – is healthcare. Because if a person is healthy, everything's fine. But once something happens, healthcare really falls short, even though the legal framework is supposedly already in place (Interviewee no. 1).

Though delivered humorously, this comment offers a pointed critique: migrant experiences expose not only gaps in migration governance but also broader weaknesses in the welfare infrastructure. As interviewee points out, entitlements often exist on paper but fail in practice – a form of 'bordering through dysfunction' (Adbou & Zardo, 2024) that produces exclusion through institutional inertia rather than explicit restriction.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that migration governance in Lithuania operates through aspirational discourse, administrative patchwork, and limited institutional capacity. While there is widespread recognition that Lithuania has become a migrant-receiving country, according to the interviewed stakeholders, policy, infrastructure, and public attitudes are not yet aligned. As the next section demonstrates, these structural and discursive inconsistencies are reinforced by informal hierarchies of legitimacy, where belonging and worth are shaped as much by cultural assumptions and perceived deservingness as by formal status.

Fluid Labels and Hierarchies of Deservingness

Extending the discussion of institutional ambiguity, this section explores how interviewed stakeholders draw informal – and sometimes inconsistent – distinctions between different groups of migrants. While formal categories such as legal status, employment type, and ancestry structure much of the reviewed policy documents (see Section Categorising Migrants and Their Families in Lithuanian Policy Documents), stakeholder accounts

suggest that everyday labelling practices generate more subtle and uneven forms of recognition and support.

When asked about the challenges facing migrant families, interviewees consistently focused on third-country nationals – with only passing references to returning Lithuanian citizens or persons of Lithuanian descent and virtually no mention of other EU nationals. While this emphasis partly reflects the institutional mandates (most interviewees primarily work with non-EU nationals), it also signals a broader tendency to equate ‘migration’ with racialised groups, typically from outside of the EU.

Stakeholders came from diverse institutional contexts and did not speak with a unified voice. Even within a single interview, individuals often shifted between different and occasionally inconsistent labels. Terms such as ‘foreigners’, ‘migrants’, ‘asylum seekers’, and ‘refugees’ were sometimes used interchangeably and, at other times, each carried distinct moral and institutional connotations. For instance, ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ typically evoked vulnerability, legitimacy and humanitarian concern, whereas ‘foreigner’ functioned more as a neutral – or at times distancing – administrative category, denoting national non-belonging without specifying rights or status. The label ‘migrant’, in turn, shifted depending on context: in some cases it was used broadly, in others to describe ‘labour migrants’ or ‘economic migrants’ seen as less deserving that ‘talents’.

This general fluidity is evident in the following reflection, where ‘immigrants’, ‘foreigners’ and ‘newcomers’ are used almost interchangeably:

I would add discrimination and attitudes [...] because when it comes to immigrant integration, a lot of people like to shift the responsibility entirely onto the foreigners. Like, ‘they don’t work’, ‘they don’t learn Lithuanian’, or ‘they’re not interested in Lithuanian culture’. But integration is always made up of two parts: the receiving society and the newcomers. Both sides need to be open – to share their culture and to be open to accepting a different one. As I often say, it’s about creating this kind of ‘third identity’, because a person already has their original identity shaped by their own culture, and when they arrive here, they can’t fully take on a Lithuanian identity – and they never will – and we shouldn’t expect them to (Interviewee no. 5).

This quote reframes integration as a reciprocal and cultural generative process – one that moves beyond assimilationist expectations. Yet such inclusive framings coexist with implicit hierarchies of moral worth

and cultural (in)compatibility, often reflected in how different migrant groups are described.

These moral distinctions were most visible in the selective use of the term ‘refugee’. Ukrainian nationals displaced after 2022 were frequently described as ‘genuine’ or ‘real’ refugees, while third-country nationals arriving via Belarus were framed more ambivalently or even with suspicion. This differentiation is illustrated by the following quotations:

There were three crises in a row: Covid, then the illegal migration from Belarus, and then the Ukrainian war refugees. Covid wasn’t over before the Belarus crisis started, and that was still ongoing when Ukrainians arrived. And in all of this, the government really relied on NGOs (Interviewee no. 4).

During the Belarus border crisis, the media and politicians framed those people as terrorists. It really affected public perception. You had MPs saying things like: ‘You let our staff work with them?’ But when it came to Ukrainians, society reacted much more sensitively – donating, helping. I think the war brought people closer to understanding who refugees really are (Interviewee no. 1).

By sequencing events as ‘three crises in a row’, the first interviewee applies distinct framings for different groups and implicitly normalises distinction between them. Referring to arrivals via Belarus as ‘illegal migration’ introduces a securitisation frame that casts them as potential security threats rather than humanitarian subjects. This logic reflects a broader pattern of racialised bordering: positioning people arriving from the Middle East, South Asia or Africa as culturally distant (and more suspect), while Ukrainians – perceived as white, Christian, and culturally proximate – were discursively embraced as ‘genuine’ refugees in experts’ narratives, despite entering under a different legal status under the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive, which technically differs from refugee status under the Geneva Convention. These divergencies between legal classification and moral perception underscore how social legitimacy can be constructed narratively, not (just) administratively.

The language used by interviewed stakeholders also reflected the layered nature of social and institutional bordering. While many acknowledged that Lithuanian society is not yet fully prepared to accommodate growing diversity, their own narratives reinforced implicit distinctions between migrant groups – framing some as easier to integrate:

It really depends on what kind of foreigners we're talking about. If we're talking about Ukrainians – it's usually easier for them. They can find work more easily, support themselves, and they have access to various types of social support in Lithuania. If they meet the same conditions as Lithuanians, they can get child benefits, allowances – all of that. So in that sense, things are pretty straightforward. But for labour migrants, it can be much harder. If they haven't worked for six months, they can get into serious trouble. We know that some Lithuanian employers exploit them – they don't officially hire them, don't register them with Sodra,¹² and then the migrants lose their residence permits. They think they have a job, but then suddenly they're out on the street, or even packed off somewhere in a truck (Interviewee no. 6).

Such narrative constructs distinctions not only through legal definitions, but also through assumptions about compatibility, self-sufficiency, and integration potential. Labour migrants, though described by some as vulnerable to exploitation, are rarely explicitly positioned as requiring stronger protections.

Further distinctions emerged where stakeholders blended legal, cultural, and geographic categories. Labels such as 'undocumented', 'asylum seeker', or broad regional descriptors were often used as shorthand for presumed difference or administrative complexity. One stakeholder expressed this logic explicitly:

Now when we talk about migration, migrant families – well, it's a mix. We work either with undocumented migrants or asylum seekers. I could talk about them. Or there are people of Lithuanian origin from Venezuela or Ukraine – we support them too. Health-wise, it's simpler with those from Venezuela and Ukraine; somehow the systems align faster. But when it comes to Asians or Africans, it's much more complicated (Interviewee no. 1).

This account combines legal categories ('undocumented', 'asylum seekers'), ethnic origin ('people of Lithuanian origin'), and broad regional identifiers ('Asians or Africans') to implicitly sort migrants by institutional compatibility. Migrants with Lithuanian ancestry are implicitly positioned as easier to 'align' with local systems, while others are grouped into vague, racialised categories that evoke unfamiliarity and distance and are associated with complexity (and potential burden).

¹²Sodra is the institution responsible for administering Lithuania's social insurance system.

These symbolic distinctions extend beyond individuals, shaping whether – and how – their families are recognised by key stakeholders. As the next section shows, these perceptions become particularly apparent in how stakeholders discuss, or more often overlook, the lived realities of migrants' family lives when conceptualising migration.

Families as an Afterthought? Individualised Discourses and Selective Recognition

Despite the interview guidelines explicitly seeking reflections on the challenges faced by migrants' families, most discussions reverted to individual-level concerns. Interviewed stakeholders frequently defaulted to viewing migrants as individuals – primarily as workers or service users – rather than members of familial and relational networks. As one interviewee candidly put it:

We never think of migrants in terms of families, to be honest. It's more about the language barrier, the cultural barrier. The education system is difficult, especially for kids. For families, housing would be the number one issue. And if there are language or cultural barriers, that makes access even harder (Interviewee no. 6).

In this framing, the family appears not as a social unit with distinct needs and capacities but as an extension of the individual migrant or as a complicating factor in service provision. This aligns with the individualised, economic framing of migration prevalent in the strategic policy documents (see Section Categorising Migrants and Their Families in Lithuanian Policy Documents).

When families were mentioned, it was typically in relation to underage children – especially in school or child protection contexts. Stakeholders' narratives are at least partially in line with what is described in the policy documents regarding the education of children (see Section Categorising Migrants and Their Families in Lithuanian Policy Documents). Divergent understandings of childrearing were highlighted as points of friction, particularly when practices deemed acceptable by migrant families conflicted with professional expectations. Interestingly, similar tensions are reported in the academic literature on Lithuanian migrant childrearing practices abroad (see Budginaitė-Mačkinė, 2023).

When migrants are assessed not as individuals, there is also a consideration about the extent to which their family practices align with institutional

expectations, making legitimacy contingent on normative conformity. Other kinship relationships – such as extended family, multigenerational households, or non-heteronormative partnerships – were largely absent from stakeholder narratives,¹³ with a couple of notable exceptions:

Family issues really depend on their country of origin. For instance, asylum seekers from neighbouring countries – like Belarusians – have a cultural understanding that is, let's say, more aligned with Lithuania's. But when it comes to asylum seekers or migrants from Asia or African countries, their cultural understanding is different. And then, well, we find it harder to adapt to them than they do to us. For example, for us, family usually means husband and wife. But for them, it's broader – it includes parents, grandparents, and others. So that basic understanding of family, culturally, is just really different (Interviewee no. 2).

While the interviewee briefly acknowledges institutional limitations – ‘we find it harder to adapt to them’ – the framing ultimately reaffirms a binary of ‘cultural similarity’ versus ‘difference’. Here, family is not treated as a flexible or relational concept but as a culturally fixed unit, with recognition contingent on normative fit and country or region of origin.

A second example where interviewees acknowledged broader familial networks highlights how family logics shape the experiences of groups not typically viewed as migrant families – international students. Although it is common to frame them as autonomous actors (van Mol, 2014), this account recognises their embeddedness in extended family networks and expectations:

For many students from third countries, it's like a whole village or family project – they're sent to the EU with everyone's savings riding on them. They're expected to study, start working, and eventually bring others over. The pressure is immense. But the state sees them as consumers – you paid, now manage on your own (Interviewee no. 6).

This quote exposes a disconnect between institutional framing and lived experience. On one level, it critiques the treatment of students as tuition-paying consumers, which erases their economic, emotional, and

¹³ A similar pattern appears in analysed Lithuanian academic publications, which largely adhere to narrow family definitions centred on parents and underage children, with particular attention given to the challenges migrant children face in the Lithuanian education system and parents' involvement in children's education (e.g., Stasiūnaitienė et al., 2020).

aspirational ties that shape their migration trajectories. At the same time, it also reflects how international degree mobility can be imagined as a strategic pathway to entry into more desirable destinations – especially if other migration routes are increasingly restricted.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examined how migrants and their families are positioned within Lithuania's evolving migration regime. It highlighted a tension within Lithuania's migration governance: while migration is increasingly framed as inevitable, institutional responses largely remain fragmented and reactive. As a result, bordering is reproduced not only at the point of entry but also through institutional inertia, leading to unequal access and uneven recognition. Therefore, governance operates not as a coherent system, but assemblage of legal classifications and discursive framings shaped by demographic concerns, economic priorities, and (implicit) cultural hierarchies, with little attention to the relational and affective dimensions of migration.

Drawing on the theoretical lens of labelling and bordering, the chapter has shown that categorisation serves not only administrative but also symbolic functions. Families, in particular, reveal how inclusion is selectively assembled: they are instrumentalised in diaspora and talent policies, largely invisible in labour migration, and problematised or vulnerabilised in case of asylum seekers and refugees.

Stakeholders' narratives were similarly shaped by structural logics and normative assumptions about cultural proximity, administrative ease, and perceived deservingness. Importantly, families were often not recognised as relational units with social agency, treated as secondary to the individualised framing of migration. Instead, they are seen primarily as dependents or factor of vulnerability. Extended kin networks, multigenerational households, or non-normative partnerships are largely absent from both policy texts and practitioner accounts.

Ultimately, these findings highlight that Lithuania's migration regime remains in formation – balancing tensions between control and care, demographic need and societal anxiety, long-term strategy and reactive governance. They also speak to broader debates in migration governance scholarship. First, they show how institutional ambiguity and fragmented governance produce uneven access to rights and support. Second, they underscore the importance of recognising the relational dimensions of

mobility – viewing families not as appendages to migration, but as active social actors shaping its trajectories and outcomes.

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CHAPTER 9

Gendered Migration from Central Asia: Intersectionality, Embodiment, and Mobility Beyond the Region

Chekhros Kilichova

INTRODUCTION

Rationale and Research Questions

International migration is a global phenomenon, and women make up nearly half of the world's migrant numbers (UN DESA, 2024), yet scholarship on Central Asian mobility continues to centre male labour migrants, treating women either as secondary movers or as exceptional cases. This chapter argues that Central Asian women's migration is not a marginal or derivative phenomenon but a crucial site for understanding how gendered, racialised, and legally stratified assemblages take shape across post-Soviet, Middle Eastern, European and North American destinations. Women's movements from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan reveal how labour markets, state bureaucracies, kinship obligations, and moral economies intersect and become embodied through everyday mobility practices.

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The Soviet Union's dissolution, accompanied by deep structural and economic changes, industrial restructuring, the retreat of social welfare, and the emergence of gendered wage disparities, created not only the economic conditions for outward migration but also the social and institutional architectures that shaped how women could move, work and belong (Hofmann, 2017; Khusenova, 2013; Rocheva & Varshaver, 2018). While post-Soviet flows were dominated by men, subsequent transformations in labour demand, household strategies and gender norms have increasingly drawn women into transnational labour, care, marriage and educational corridors (Childress, 2018; Childress et al., 2024; Kamp & Nurdinova, 2022; Liebert, 2020; Poletaev, 2022a, 2025; Poletaev, 2021). As a result, policies in both Central Asian countries and destination countries continue to reflect an incomplete, often male-centred view of migration. These policies don't adequately address women's lived realities or provide appropriate responses to their needs.

To make sense of these dynamics, the chapter mobilises *intersectionality* and *embodiment* as lenses for analysing women's migration within broader assemblages of migration. The concept of intersectionality originates in Black feminist scholarship, which examined how Black women experience discrimination simultaneously on the basis of both race and gender (Weldon, 2008). Crenshaw (1989, 1991) further developed this framework, which has since become widely applied not only in feminist theory but across the social sciences. She argued that the cross-cutting dimensions of race, gender, and class create structural and systemic barriers that hinder Black women in the United States from effectively addressing issues such as sexual violence. Crenshaw (1991) later theorised that broader social structures – including race, gender, class, disability, nationality, sexual orientation, and age – intersect to produce what she terms a 'matrix of domination' or oppression.

Migration entails the movement of bodies across space, either within or across borders, 'negotiating access to jobs and services, experiences of violence or of pleasure and joy', thus turning the migration into an 'embodied' experience. The theoretical significance of embodiment in migrant assemblages lies in its attention to the affective, phenomenological, and material dimensions of migration that economic models typically overlook. Scholars have documented how migrants' embodied practices – from maintaining familiar foodways and cultural organisations to forging spatial belonging – constitute forms of agency that exceed prescribed labour roles (Mitchell, 2023). Migrant women use their bodies as a form

of resistance to hegemonic violence (Bastia et al., 2025). They use their bodies to help them continue on their migration journeys through their bodies' emotional and spiritual strength.

These theories allow us to interpret the dispersed legal, institutional and social components of migration governance not as abstract systems but as lived arrangements that women negotiate, resist and recalibrate. This analytical orientation guides three key questions:

1. What empirical evidence exists on the experiences and outcomes of Central Asian women who migrate beyond their region?
2. How do intersectional hierarchies – gendered, legal, ethnic and classed – shape women's opportunities, constraints and vulnerabilities across different destinations?
3. What forms of embodiment characterise Central Asian women's migration experiences, and how are these embodied practices reflected in their everyday mobility strategies?

To address these questions, the chapter synthesises peer-reviewed scholarship across English, Russian and regional-language sources published between 1990 and 2025. Rather than merely cataloguing existing studies, it develops a theoretically informed reading of the literature to illuminate the gendered, stratified and embodied character of Central Asian women's migration journeys.

The Context of Central Asian Women's Migration

Research consistently shows that migration from Central Asia to Russia initially involved mostly men but has increasingly included women over recent years. Scholars attribute this shift towards 'feminisation' primarily to growing job opportunities in Russia's service sector which generates gendered labour demand distinct from the male-orientated construction sector (King & Dudina, 2019; Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). Yet this trend is far from uniform across Central Asian countries. While women make up a much larger share of migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia (up to 38–40%), their representation from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remains considerably lower (15–20%) (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; King & Dudina, 2019; Poletaev, 2021; Zotova et al., 2021). Rocheva and Varshaver (2017) indicate that recent data from the former Federal Migration Service did not confirm a continuous feminisation for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with

high female shares remaining specific to Kyrgyzstan. Based on the latest available gender-disaggregated data from Russia from 2019, UNESCAP (2025) reports that the percentage of women migrants in Russia were 26% for Kazakhstan, 35% for Kyrgyzstan, 11.6% for Tajikistan and 13% for Uzbekistan.

To truly understand Central Asian women's migration, we need to consider the deep structural changes that created the conditions for it. The collapse of industrial and agricultural jobs, persistent gender wage gaps, and the retreat of Soviet-era social safety nets didn't just create economic necessity; they fundamentally changed how families, communities, and entire societies think about gender roles and generational responsibilities both at home and in diaspora communities (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2018). These shifts altered gendered expectations regarding breadwinning, care work, and transnational family obligations. At the same time, the evolution of migration policies among destination countries – including Russia's evolving documentation requirements, Turkey's demand for feminised labour, and emerging pathways to the United States and Western Europe – created new opportunities while reinforcing stratified access to mobility.

The differences in migration patterns between men and women are closely tied to varying cultural norms about women's mobility in their home countries. Kyrgyzstan's comparatively permissive attitudes towards women's migration aligns with its higher Gender Development Index compared to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and helps explain its larger female migrant share (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017; Zotova et al., 2021). In contrast, traditional gender roles in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan typically position women primarily as caregivers, which can limit their educational and employment opportunities and influence their decisions about migration. However, economic decline and poverty throughout Central Asia have partially transformed gender roles, sometimes pushing increasing number of women into labour migration to assume income-earning roles abroad (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021). Divorce and widowhood, which often carry social stigma in traditional Central Asian families, can also compel women to seek employment abroad to support their children independently or escape harassment (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017).

Women's migration from Central Asia is thus marked by various drivers – economic need, family reunification, marriage, educational opportunity, or escape from patriarchal constraints and gender-based violence (Coşkun, 2023; Hofmann & Chi, 2021; Kamp & Nurdinova, 2022;

Liebert, 2020). The central analytical point is that gender moderates the interplay between structural ‘push’ factors (such as post-Soviet economic decline, welfare retrenchment) and ‘pull’ factors (such as sector-specific labour demand, and more recently, social networks, marriage markets abroad; Poletaev, 2021).

Russia continues to function as a prominent destination country for international migrants, consistently ranking among the top four globally (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; Gorina et al., 2018; Pellet & de Talancé, 2023; Zotova et al., 2021). The overwhelming majority of labour migrants in Russia originate from post-Soviet Central Asian countries, predominantly Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, reflecting long-standing post-Soviet economic and linguistic linkages. Yet beyond Russia, gendered patterns diverge strikingly. As Kamp and Nurdinova (2022) note, the colloquial saying, ‘Türkiye is for women; Russia is for men’ captures the structural division in destination choice: Turkey attracts a predominantly female flow, especially from Uzbekistan, whereas Russia remains male-dominated (Kamp & Nurdinova, 2022). This suggests that destination-specific labour-market demands, regulatory regimes and cultural contexts also shape gendered migration patterns (Hofmann, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This review was conducted in alignment with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for transparent and comprehensive reporting of systematic analyses. The review protocol specified all decision rules, search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and analytic approaches in advance. For exploratory reviews examining women migrants, an adjusted PEO framework (Population–Exposure–Outcomes) was used. The PEO framework helped set the formulation of the research questions, consistent with best practice in health and social science systematic reviews. This lens allowed for a rigorous definition of the framework items (Table 9.1).

The search strategy included two steps in order to double-check the completeness of the search results. The first step comprised of a search by the author in popular scholarly databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCOHost and Google Scholar during June–August 2025. Various combinations and adaptations of the following search string was used on all of the above-mentioned platforms:

Table 9.1 The PEO framework

<i>Element</i>	<i>Description</i>
Population	Women migrants
Region	Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan)
Concept	Migration experiences, processes, challenges, drivers, integration, policy, gender issues
Context	Any receiving country or migration pathway outside of Central Asia
Outcome	Current knowledge about migration patterns, experiences, challenges, outcomes

*(‘Central Asia’ OR Uzbekistan OR Kazakhstan OR Kyrgyzstan OR Tajiki-
stan OR Turkmenistan)
AND (women OR female OR gender OR sex)
AND (migration OR migrant* OR emigrant* OR immigrant* OR
diaspora OR displacement OR mobility)*

The Web of Science platform search returned 304 results, of which 104 papers were added to the review collection based on the title and abstract screening. Scopus, EBSCOHost and Google Scholar platforms were screened in the same way, which resulted in 334 papers. It is important to note that at this point articles which did not specify gender disaggregation in their title and abstracts were included in the collection for a detailed review.

The second step consisted of a systematic and comprehensive search executed in July 2025 using Undermind’s proprietary multilingual AI engine to interrogate the Semantic Scholar corpus – an aggregate of over 200 million scholarly records, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ArXiv, eLIBRARY, and major regional indices. The second step allowed a comprehensive search using the currently available AI search engines to make sure no relevant publication remains unnoticed. The Undermind’s search engine helped to add 52 more papers, including in other local languages, for example, a few in Russian and Turkish.

Following the initial search, the reference list was then exported and uploaded to the Covidence systematic literature review tool, which makes the screening process streamlined. In total, 386 literature items were reviewed by title and abstract by the researcher. The Covidence tool also helped to remove 79 duplicates from the searches on different

platforms automatically. Where it was not clear if there is gender disaggregation, a quick screening of the paper was executed in order to add or remove from the collection based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined below.

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Empirical in nature (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods, plus conceptual or methodological contributions anchored in empirical data);
2. Focused on women migrants or explicitly provided sex-disaggregated findings;
3. Concerned with migration originating in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, or Turkmenistan;
4. Addressed migration to destinations outside of Central Asia (thus excluding intra-regional flows);
5. Published between 1990 and 2025, that is, since the Independence of Central Asian countries;
6. Available in English, Russian, or a Central Asian language (plus one study in Turkish).

Studies were excluded if they centred only on intra-regional migration, exclusively analysed male samples, or included only ethnic Central Asians born outside the five republics. From an initial pool of 307 records returned from the systematic search, titles and abstracts were double-screened for eligibility by the researcher. Of these, 74 full-text articles were retrieved and reviewed in detail. In total, 47 studies were retained for final synthesis and in-depth analysis. The 47 studies identified by this systematic review display a diverse array of origins, destinations, research designs, and languages (Table 9.2).

For each study included, the following core attributes were extracted: country of origin, country of destination, sample characteristics, design and methods, main outcomes, and key findings. Given the heterogeneity of methods and outcomes, meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate. Instead, a narrative, theme-based synthesis approach was adopted, rooted in best practices for systematic reviews of social science and public health research.

The literature is anchored in studies of Russia, as its institutional and linguistic links with Central Asia make it the primary extra-regional destination. These studies are comparatively methodologically robust, featuring multi-wave surveys, advanced sampling of undocumented migrants,

Table 9.2 Distribution of the 47 studies included in this systematic review by origin, destination, research design, and language

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Studies (n)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Origins		
Uzbekistan	33	70
Kyrgyzstan	31	66
Tajikistan	28	60
Kazakhstan	10	21
Turkmenistan	1	2
Destinations		
Russia	38	81
Turkey	7	15
United States	4	9
European Union	2	4
Multi-site	3	6
Methodological Designs		
Cross-sectional surveys	17	36
Respondent-driven/time-venue samples	6	13
Repeated cross-sectional trend studies	4	9
In-depth/life-history interviews	18	38
Administrative-data analyses	2	4
Languages of Publication		
English	28	
Russian	17	
Turkish	1	
Kazakh	1	

and mixed-method triangulation. Turkey has emerged as a significant ‘second cluster,’ with work focusing on both labour and marriage migration, legal dependencies, and gender-based violence. Scholarship on migration to the United States and the European Union is emerging but remains largely qualitative and small sample, focusing on acculturation, occupational downgrading, and gendered aspirations (Childress et al., 2024; Liebert, 2020). No included study focused primarily on the Gulf states, Korea, or Japan, despite the sufficient evidence of significant flows to these regions. There is a probability however that the migration to these regions

could not be gender disaggregated or they are published in local languages which was not easily accessible.

RESULTS

Intersectional Dimensions of Migration

Existing scholarship on Central Asian women's migration has generated substantial empirical documentation of labour-market segregation, legal precarity, family strategies and return intentions. A key limitation, however, is that many studies treat gender, ethnicity, legal status, and ethnicity as separate variables rather than tracing how *intersecting* hierarchies combine to produce distinctive vulnerabilities and capacities. Read together, the literature suggests that women's outcomes are shaped less by any single factor than by the interaction between gendered labour demand, legal regimes, ethnoracialisation, class position, and destination-specific institutional arrangements.

Labour-Market Segregation

Economic necessity remains the primary driver of women's migration from Central Asia to Russia, with poor labour-market conditions, limited opportunities, and persistent low wage gaps motivating women to migrate (Gorina et al., 2018; Zotova et al., 2021). Many migrant women aim to earn money for long-term goals such as buying property, funding their children's education, or paying for family weddings (Zotova et al., 2021). Unlike women migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, contemporary Kyrgyz women use migration as a way of freeing themselves from some of the societal and patriarchal pressures at home (Rubinov, 2014), indicating that 'economic migration; is frequently co-produced by gendered norms and constraints in sending contexts'.

Gendered labour-market segregation varies dramatically by destination, revealing that gender alone does not determine occupational placement; rather, gender intersects with destination-specific labour demand, ethnic stereotypes, and educational credentials to structure opportunities and constraints. In Russia, women predominantly work in retail (supermarkets, shops), food service (restaurants, food factories), and domestic/cleaning services, jobs that are generally characterised as 'low-skill, low-pay' (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; Kozlova et al., 2024; Poletaev, 2021;

Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). Men, by contrast, typically work in construction, manufacturing, and transport.

Despite often having higher educational qualifications than their male counterparts, women face persistent wage gaps compared to both male co-migrants and native-born workers (Gorina et al., 2017; Kozlova et al., 2024; Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). This pattern cannot be explained through human capital theory, which posits that education should improve labour-market outcomes. An intersectional reading suggests instead that ethnicity and gender override education in determining occupational placement and pay, revealing how racialised and gendered hierarchies structure labour markets independently of skill. Gorina et al. (2018) found that while temporary legal status leads to an earnings penalty, both temporary and permanent migrants reported higher job satisfaction than natives even while perceiving pay inequality – an ambivalence that points to how relative comparisons, aspiration horizons and household strategies shape migrants' evaluations of 'good work'.

For women migrating to Turkey, Kamp and Nurdinova (2022) introduce a diverging perspective: Uzbek women in Turkey actively choose care work, perceiving it as more valued by employers due to their prior experience, unlike the often-unappealing nature of domestic work in other contexts. This destination-specific variation demonstrates that labour-market segregation is not universal but emerges from how gender intersects with culturally specific valuations of women's work, with legal and labour-market arrangements in particular contexts.

'Shuttle trade' (or 'suitcase trade') represents another important economic activity primarily engaged in by women, involving small-scale entrepreneurs who personally transport merchandise in large bags between countries. While this activity has a negative reputation and is sometimes associated with prostitution, female shuttle traders play a unique role as intermediaries, providing advice, contacts, and transferring remittances for a commission (Piart, 2013). Their conspicuous presence and frequent travel create a paradoxical situation where they are highly visible in public spaces and rumour mills but invisible in official statistics (Piart, 2013).

Women's remittance behaviour is particularly distinctive. Several studies note that women send money home more frequently, direct funds towards household health and education, and take primary responsibility for the welfare of extended families left behind (Kornienko et al., 2017; Poletaev, 2025).

Overall, occupational segregation cannot be explained by gender alone or even by gender plus education. Rather, it emerges from how gender intersects with migration destination, ethnic stereotypes about Central Asian workers, legal status, class background, and cultural perceptions of women's appropriate work – producing vastly different outcomes across seemingly similar migrant populations.

Legal Precarity

A strong, recurring theme across the literature is the pivotal role of legal status. Legal precarity produces qualitatively distinct embodied experiences when it intersects with gender, because women's occupational concentration in domestic and service work increases employer dependence and reduces public oversight. Women's bodies become sites of particular vulnerability – confined to domestic work, isolated from public institutional oversight, and vulnerable to employer violence – in ways that exceed the legal precarity experienced by male migrants in construction or transportation.

Irregular or dependent status consistently increases risks of exploitation, harassment, and psychosocial distress, particularly for those in Russia. However, regularisation does not erase ethnoracial discrimination, especially for those visibly marked as 'Asian' (Agadjanian et al., 2017, 2022; Gorina et al., 2017). A consistent finding across the literature is that many Central Asian migrants in Russia, irrespective of gender, are undocumented or hold precarious temporary legal statuses (Agadjanian et al., 2014, 2022; Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; Gorina et al., 2018). This is due to complex and costly bureaucratic processes for obtaining and maintaining regular legal status. This legal precarity has far-reaching negative consequences, impacting migrants' access to social security and healthcare services. This finding is reinforced by multiple independent survey-based studies which show that while regularised status improves self-efficacy and reduces exposure to overt harassment, racialised exclusion persists even for those with strong legal standing (Pellet & de Talancé, 2023).

Gorina et al. (2018) converge on the point that temporary legal status is associated with an earnings penalty. However, regularised legal status shows a strong positive association with migrants' perception of their rights and freedoms, self-efficacy, and a negative association with depression. It may also offer a degree of protection from anti-immigrant hostility. Eraliev and Heusala (2021) add important nuance, arguing that the dominant 'migrant agency' narrative in transnationalism research may not

fully capture the experiences of vulnerable groups like women. Women's agency is often constrained by strict family traditions, lack of social capital, and limited financial resources, sometimes leading them to resort to obtaining fake documents, particularly for children born in Russia, to navigate the legal system. This suggests that the legal environment, combined with sociocultural factors from home countries, can limit women's choices and perpetuate inequalities.

Legal precarity operates qualitatively differently for women than men, and its effects vary markedly by ethnic visibility and class position. Among irregularised Central Asian migrants in Russia, women face compounded vulnerabilities unavailable to either irregularised men or regularised women: undocumented status restricts access to formal healthcare (structural barrier), while gendered occupational segregation into domestic work creates employer dependence and isolation (economic vulnerability), and racialisation as visibly 'Asian' subjects women to heightened state surveillance, police harassment, and public stigmatisation (ethnoracial vulnerability). These three dimensions interact multiplicatively rather than additively.

Family Strategies and Transnational Marriage

Recent ethnographic and statistical studies reveal complex relationships between family obligations and migration strategies. Migrants from Central Asia consistently maintain strong, diverse, and regular connections with their countries of origin, even after prolonged stays abroad (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021). In Russia, 'satellite child' arrangements – where children remain in the home country while parents (usually the mother) migrate for work – persist not only because of cost or income limits, but substantially because of legal and institutional barriers to childcare and schooling (Demintseva, 2023).

Kindergarten enrolment rates reveal significant disparities between migrant and Russian citizen families. While Russian citizen children typically enrol in kindergarten at rates between 50–80% depending on regional context, migrant children show substantially lower participation, with approximately 15–25% attending kindergarten (UNESCAP, 2025). Central Asian migrant families face particularly acute barriers to early childhood education access – one-third of interviewed Central Asian migrants reported encountering such obstacles, reflecting the dramatically low enrolment figure of roughly 10% for Central Asian children in Russian kindergarten systems (UNESCAP, 2025).

Transnational marriage creates a unique intersectional configuration where gender, legal status, and cultural norms converge to produce a specific form of vulnerability distinct from labour migration. Administrative and interview-based studies have documented the rise of transnational marriages, including polygyny, particularly in Russia, which reproduce gendered status hierarchies and create new forms of vulnerability (Cieślowska, 2021; Ryazantsev & Sivopljasova, 2021).

Marriage-migration laws in Turkey have created conditions where women are simultaneously empowered by transnational unions yet vulnerable to increased legal and intimate-partner dependence (Coşkun, 2023; Coşkun & Budaichieva, 2023; Ryazantsev & Sivopljasova, 2021). In Turkey, recent tightening of marriage and work-migration requirements has produced new forms of dependency and risk for migrant women, even as ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ appears as a recurring strategic response (Coşkun, 2023; Coşkun & Budaichieva, 2023; Nakipbayeva, 2025). This legal dependency is compounded by gendered patriarchal expectations imported from their countries of origin.

Agency and constraint coexist asymmetrically. Women exercise strategic navigation within patriarchal marriage structures, but their capacity to do so varies systematically based on educational background, legal status, economic resources, and origin-country patriarchal intensity – revealing how class, legality, and gender intersect to differentiate women’s negotiating power within intimate relationships.

Return Intentions

The rhetoric of ‘returning home’ remains predominant for the majority. Social connections in the host country (with relatives, friends, or children) can influence and sometimes discourage return plans (Agadjanian et al., 2014). Financial and emotional support networks exist both within the host country and across transnational ties. However, research differs on the factors influencing return. Agadjanian et al. (2014) found that connections in home countries didn’t directly influence return plans, but financial and social obligations to family in the homeland did. Reasons for return vary, including reuniting with family, lower living costs, or avoiding discrimination, but ‘better (warmer) climate’ was surprisingly the most popular reason for the Moscow sample. Kamp and Nurdinova (2022) introduce the concept of the ‘guest-worker’ script, where migrants, including women, have specific target-earning goals and don’t aim for deep integration into host society.

Although many migrants express plans to return, longitudinal data often suggests that actual stays are longer than anticipated, and migration often becomes circular or even permanent over time, indicating a gap between initial intentions and evolving realities (Agadjanian et al., 2014; Poletaev, 2022b).

Embodied Dimensions: How Intersectional Hierarchies Are Lived Through Bodies

While intersectionality identifies which hierarchies intersect and how they produce differentiated vulnerabilities, embodiment reveals where and through what processes these dynamics materialise – namely, in and through migrant bodies. This section demonstrates that migration governance operates not only through laws and labour markets but directly through and on bodies, while simultaneously revealing how migrants generate embodied practices of agency and resistance.

Health and Reproductive Health

The concentration of Central Asian women in domestic work, food service, and retail is not merely occupational segregation – it also entails embodied labour where women's physical presence, affective capacities, emotional management, and reproductive labour are directly commodified. Both quantitative and qualitative studies consistently show a gender gap in self-rated health, with women reporting poorer health than their male co-migrants and native-born women in similar sectors. The literature provides substantial evidence about the specific health needs of Central Asian female labour migrants in Russia, while most prior research focused on male migrants and HIV risk. Women are identified as a particularly vulnerable group, facing severe living conditions and significant problems accessing medical services (King et al., 2019; King & Dudina, 2019).

Key barriers to healthcare access that converge across the sources include:

- Structural issues: Lack of health insurance, high costs of medical care, and legal status concerns. Migrants often fear seeking support due to document and legal status worries (King & Dudina, 2019; Poletaev, 2022b).
- Information gaps: Lack of access to health-related information (King & Dudina, 2019).

- Cultural and linguistic differences: Lack of trust in health providers, and communication barriers. Cultural and gender norms influence how women discuss health issues and interact with the healthcare system (King et al., 2019; King & Dudina, 2019).

Embodiment theory reveals what labour-market statistics obscure: the phenomenological and affective dimensions of this work. King et al. (2019) and King & Dudina (2019) document how women experience their bodies as sites of vulnerability – chronic fatigue, untreated health conditions, persistent pain, and psychosomatic illness resulting from the cumulative stress of precarious legal status, separation from children, and workplace exploitation. Women describe feeling unable to show illness or weakness, yet simultaneously experiencing bodily breakdown from overwork: ‘You feel sick, you get sick, you still keep going’ (King et al., 2019).

Reproductive health outcomes are also significantly affected by legal status and moral economies. Migrants overall have lower abortion rates than natives, but among migrants, those with regular status are more likely to report abortion and show a marked preference for long-acting contraceptive methods (Agadjanian & Yoo, 2018; Poletaev, 2021). Yet reproductive decisions are simultaneously shaped by affective economies of shame and respectability operating across transnational networks. Several studies focus specifically on HIV and STI risk, tracing trajectories from structural barriers: documentation, exclusion, and stigma – to increased risk, especially among women in the sex trade or recent migrants (Agadjanian & Zotova, 2014, 2019; Weine et al., 2013; Zabrocki et al., 2013).

Stress and Mental Health

The elevated rates of psychological distress documented among Central Asian women migrants in Russia exemplify embodied consequences of intersecting marginalisation. The evidence is particularly strong for migrants in Russia, both male and female (Zotova et al., 2021). The literature also converges on the point that immigrant women generally report a significantly higher level of psychological distress compared to men (Zotova et al., 2021). While many stressors (limited social support, hard work, poor housing, discrimination) are shared with male migrants, unique challenges for women stem from gendered vulnerabilities, such as limited power in relationships and discrimination in public settings, including healthcare.

Traditional gender norms from home countries continue to exert significant influence, often exacerbating vulnerabilities even in new settings. This can manifest as increased susceptibility to domestic violence, limitations on sexual health autonomy, and societal pressure to conform to traditional roles, sometimes reinforced by compatriots in the host country. While social networks provide vital support (Kornienko et al., 2017), they can also exert negative pressure or control (King et al., 2019). The complex interplay of tradition and modern realities is thus explored. Eraliev and Heusala (2021) demonstrate how national traditions and family structures significantly influence female migrants' legal choices and agency in the host country, often limiting their autonomy and perpetuating inequalities from the sending countries within the transnational space.

A concerning divergence is the social consequence of male migration: many male migrants abandon their wives in their home countries and form new families in Russia (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). This highlights a gendered vulnerability where women left behind may lose economic support and social status, and support mechanisms for such families are lacking. Reintegration into home communities can also be challenging for women, especially in patriarchal societies where their mobility might be stigmatised (Agadjanian et al., 2014).

Several studies note how the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a stress test, increasing incidence of food insecurity, mobility restrictions, and workplace violence, especially for Kyrgyz women in Russia (Abdukadyrova & Studenko, 2023; Poletaev, 2022b). Poletaev (2022b) found that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly worsened the situation for migrant families, with psychological stress being a major difficulty, particularly for women.

A notable gap in the literature, highlighted by King and Dudina (2019), is the lack of explicit research and measurement of mental health outcomes among Central Asian female labour migrants in Russia. Despite anecdotal evidence from informants about stress, poverty, and fear of state institutions, their impact on mental health remains under-researched.

Yet even in crisis conditions, women's embodied agency persisted – maintaining virtual ties to families, organising collective support, and asserting dignity through community care practices. Mental health outcomes represent embodied manifestations of structural violence – the chronic stress of navigating intersecting hierarchies materially inscribed in bodies as anxiety, depression, psychosomatic illness, and emotional exhaustion. Understanding these outcomes requires recognising that they emerge from specific intersectional configurations, not generic 'migrant stress'.

Areas of Divergence, Persistent Gaps, and Nuance

Notwithstanding overall empirical convergence, the literature contains patterned divergences that are analytically informative because they point to *context effects*, sampling differences and shifting polity regimes rather than simple displacement.

First, while there's a general agreement that the proportion of Central Asian women migrating to Russia is increasing, driven by economic necessity and expanding service sector jobs (Agadjanian et al., 2014; Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; Poletaev, 2022a; Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017) the trajectory of feminisation is debated. Some sources indicate it's more pronounced for Kyrgyz women than Tajiks or Uzbeks, and some data points suggest a plateau rather than a continuous increase for the latter two groups (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). This indicates that 'feminisation' is not a uniform regional process but mediated by origin-country gender regimes, corridor-specific demand and legal-institutional conditions.

Second, destination variation remains central. While Russia is predominantly male-dominated, Turkey is described as female-dominated, indicating that destination-specific labour-market niches and cultural contexts decisively shape the gender composition and sectoral placement of migration flows (Kamp & Nurdinova, 2022).

Third, reproductive health findings show important ambivalences. There is an evidence of both lower abortion rates among migrant women compared to natives and paradoxically higher abortion likelihood among fully regularised migrants. These patterns likely reflect changing cohorts, policy effects (e.g., insurance portability), and evolving household strategies (Agadjanian & Yoo, 2018; Poletaev, 2021). While some women give birth in Russia with the belief it aids citizenship acquisition for their children, others prefer to return home for delivery, indicating varied strategies influenced by individual circumstances and perceived benefits (King & Dudina, 2019).

Fourth, health and mental health evidence is uneven. Some studies, especially those controlling extensively for housing and occupational context, find the gender health gap attenuated or explained away (Poletaev, 2022b), while others report strong, persistent disparities (Pellet & de Talancé, 2023). There's a notable gap in explicit research on mental health outcomes despite clear evidence of factors causing psychological distress, pointing to an area needing more focused attention (King & Dudina, 2019).

Finally, agency is variably conceptualised. A range of studies report divergent levels of women's agency, some emphasising 'bargaining with patriarchy' and creative navigation of restrictive legal orders (Coşkun, 2023), while others documenting near-total dependence and heightened gender-based violence risk (Coşkun & Budaichieva, 2023). Rather than contradiction, this divergence likely reflects differences in periodisation, destination regime, and sample selection (e.g., marital status, sector, documentation), reinforcing the need to treat women's agency as structured and differentiated by intersecting legal, class and gender hierarchies.

DISCUSSION

Strength and Weaknesses of Theoretical Approaches

More recent literature, particularly from the mid-2010s onwards, has broadened its scope to encompass a more nuanced understanding of migrant women's experiences. Qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, have yielded rich narratives and deep contextual insights into the lived experiences of migrant women (Childress et al., 2024; King et al., 2019; Zotova et al., 2021). At the same time, the persistent reliance on non-probability samples (snowball, purposive, RDS), while often methodologically necessary for hard-to-reach populations, remains a significant limitation, hindering the statistical generalisability of findings to the broader migrant population (Agadjanian et al., 2017; Agadjanian & Zotova, 2012; Liebert, 2020). The predominantly cross-sectional nature of the data also limits causal inference or makes it difficult to observe how legal status, health, or family arrangements change over time. In addition, many studies are concentrated in specific major cities, corridors or sectors (often within Russia), which may not reflect the diverse experiences of migrants across regions or destination regimes. Finally, the dependence on self-reported data introduces potential for recall bias or social desirability bias, especially on sensitive topics such as abortion, intimate-partner relations, or irregular status (Agadjanian & Yoo, 2018).

Some of the theoretical frameworks adopted in the literature include the acculturation theory, intersectionality framework, the concepts of 'bargaining with patriarchy', transnationalism as well as legal precarity and 'illegality'. Acculturation theory defines the process of adaptation that occurs when cultural groups interact or the extent to which an individual

adopts the norms and values of a host culture (Berry et al., 2006). This theory helps analyse the challenges immigrants face in adopting new values and behaviours in host environments. When applied to Central Asian immigrants in the United States, this framework revealed significant challenges, including shifts in gender roles, professional status, and family values, while also identifying opportunities for positive adaptation (Childress et al., 2024).

The transnationalism concept broadly helps conceptualise the social fields connecting countries of origin and destination. Transnationalism describes how migrants maintain simultaneous connections to multiple places, both their sending and receiving societies, through the exchange of ideas, values, and practices (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021). Transnational families illustrate this, with ties connecting members across different spaces, potentially leading to a reformulation of gender and generational roles (Cieślowska, 2021). The cluster of concepts around the legal status examines the profound impact of (il)legality on all aspects of international migrants' lives, noting its intersection with other characteristics like racial/ethnic background. The concept of legal precarity or 'illegality' is central to understanding vulnerabilities, with studies employing nuanced terms like 'liminal legality' or 'legal violence' to capture its complex manifestations (Agadjanian et al., 2022; Eraliev & Heusala, 2021).

Yet an overarching limitation is that these theoretical vocabularies often operate in parallel rather than being brought into an integrated explanatory framework. As a result, empirical findings can become catalogues of disadvantages (or 'risk factors') without clarifying the mechanisms through which gendered hierarchies are reproduced, contested, or transformed across borders. This is why there is a strong rationale for connecting migration scholarship more explicitly to feminist theory and theories of social change, especially those that treat patriarchy not as a background 'cultural context' but as an institutionalised and portable structure that can be reconfigured – yet persist – across migration corridors.

Intersectionality

The intersectionality framework is highly relevant to understanding the experiences of Central Asian migrant women, who, like many migrant women globally, face the challenges of relocation, integration, and return through multiple, overlapping dimensions of inequality. Ethnicity, gender, legal status, and class together constitute a multiplicity of burdens that

shape and sometimes obscure their lived realities. For instance, a migrant woman from a rural village in Uzbekistan with limited education will have markedly different experiences from an educated, urban counterpart. Likewise, women migrants from Central Asia navigate migration processes differently from male migrants, whose social positions often afford them distinct opportunities and constraints. Intersectionality thus provides a lens through which to interpret these nuances, revealing how marginalised groups experience varying degrees of discrimination and exclusion and how gender and legal status in destination countries influence agency, confidence, health, and mental well-being.

Legal precarity alone increases exploitation, but legal precarity and gender produces specific vulnerabilities (employer dependence, domestic work confinement, marriage-based legal status) distinct from those faced by irregularised male migrants in construction. A woman with irregular status working in domestic service faces a different constellation of risks than an irregularised man in transportation: she cannot easily flee abusive employers due to childcare constraints; she is more susceptible to sexual harassment; her reproductive status complicates legal navigation (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021).

Ethnic hierarchies intersect with gender to structure racialisation and vulnerability. Racialised exclusion of Central Asians as ‘Asian’ workers persists even with legal regularisation (Agadjanian et al., 2017, 2022), yet affects women differently than men because racialisation compounds with gendered sexualisation – women experience not only ethnic stigma but sexualised racism in public space and workplaces (Zotova, 2018).

Intersectionality also illuminates the coexistence of agency and constraint within women’s migration experiences. The same woman who negotiates restrictive gender expectations through ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti, 1988) may simultaneously experience empowerment in one sphere, such as controlling remittances, and disempowerment in another, for example, legal dependence on a spouse in a cross-border marriage. Integrating intersectionality into migration research enables scholars to trace how these positionalities shift across time and space, from village to border, workplace to diaspora community, highlighting the fluid and context-dependent nature of women’s agency.

Future research should also engage with the notion of transnational intersectionality (Childress et al., 2024), which examines how hierarchies originating in the home country are reproduced, displaced or transformed in host societies through social networks, remittance expectations, and

moral economies of respectability. Such an approach captures how gendered and classed inequalities travel across borders, shaping migrant women's experiences and opportunities within transnational social fields.

Embodiment

Embodiment illuminates how bodies carry cultural knowledge, emotional attachments, and memories that persist through displacement, revealing the term 'multi-dimensional body' encompassing physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions (Bastia et al., 2025). This framework enables migration scholars to move beyond viewing migrants as rational economic actors towards recognising complex social beings whose lived experiences and bodies stand at the intersection of and absorbing the hierarchical forms of migration governance.

For women migrants from Central Asia, embodiment takes on heightened significance given the intersecting structures of gendered exploitation in both sending and receiving contexts (Nikiforova & Brednikova, 2018). Their bodies encounter racialisation and gendering in Russian labour markets, with occupational segregation into domestic work and service sectors rendering them particularly vulnerable to wage theft, passport confiscation, and violence (Coşkun & Budaichieva, 2023; Eraliev & Heusala, 2021; UNESCAP, 2025). Research documents violence and psychological pressure affecting approximately 18% of Central Asian women migrants abroad, with newly restrictive Russian migration legislation further intensifying economic vulnerability (UNESCAP, 2025). Yet the embodiment lens simultaneously reveals Central Asian women migrants' strategic embodied practices: collective encounters with fellow migrants, maintenance of transnational familial ties, and assertions of dignity within severe constraints (Nikiforova & Brednikova, 2018). Understanding these gendered embodied experiences thus reveals how Central Asian women migrants navigate what scholars identify as 'post-Soviet precarity', simultaneously experiencing structural victimisation and generative agency within transnational migration assemblages (Bastia et al., 2025).

Migration involves powerful affective states, fear of deportation, shame around migration choices or sexuality, longing for separated children, joy in community gathering, dignity reclaimed through cultural practice. These emotions are not peripheral psychological states but constitute affective governance: respectability norms discipline women's sexuality; fear of deportation limits healthcare-seeking and reporting of violence;

shame prevents disclosure of exploitation (Zotova et al., 2021). The embodiment lens reveals how governance operates not only through laws and economic structures but through emotional regulation and affective control (Demintseva, 2023).

Integrating Intersectionality and Embodiment

Understanding Central Asian women's migration requires moving beyond isolated structural or cultural analyses by combining intersectionality and embodiment frameworks. Intersectionality illuminates how gender, class, ethnicity, and migration status intersect to differentiate migrant experiences, while embodiment demonstrates the material manifestation of these inequalities within bodies and emotional states, simultaneously generating vulnerability and forms of agency. These two approaches are complementary: the hierarchies identified through intersectional analysis become physically and affectively realised in embodied experience, while embodied conditions themselves vary systematically across intersecting social positions.

The documented mental health challenges among Kyrgyz and Uzbek women in Russia (Zotova et al., 2021) exemplify this dynamic their psychosocial distress emerges as the embodied consequence of compounded marginalisation, including racialisation in everyday interactions, occupational segregation into gendered labour roles, and precarious legal status. Reproductive health inequities similarly cannot be analysed separately from affective dimensions of shame and respectability norms that regulate women's sexuality across transnational family and community networks. Adopting an integrated embodied intersectional framework thus enables migration scholars to advance beyond simply cataloguing disparities towards analysing the mechanisms through which inequality operates via bodily and emotional processes, revealing how disadvantage is actively constituted.

CONCLUSION

This review has shown that Central Asian women's migration cannot be adequately understood through single-factor explanations, such as poverty, culture or corridor-specific descriptions alone. Across the literature, women emerge as a numerically significant and analytically revealing group precisely because their trajectories illuminate how migration governance

and labour markets are organised through intersecting hierarchies. The evidence consistently indicates that women's outcomes are patterned by the interaction of legal status, gender, ethnoracial positioning, class resources, and destination-specific institutional arrangements, producing differentiated mixes of risk, constraint, and opportunity across Russia, Turkey, and other emerging destinations.

Bringing intersectionality and embodiment into dialogue sharpens what the empirical record implies but does not always state explicitly: inequality is not merely 'experienced' by migrants as an external condition; it is actively produced through everyday mechanisms that operate across workplaces, bureaucracies, households, and public space. Legal precarity shapes employability, bargaining power, and access to healthcare, but it does so unevenly when combined with gendered occupational sorting (for example, into domestic and service work) and racialised visibility. Similarly, reproductive and mental health outcomes are not reducible to individual behaviour or 'migrant culture'; they reflect the embodied consequences of structural positioning, where legal insecurity, work intensity, family separation, moral regulation, and fear of authorities become materially inscribed as exhaustion, distress, stigma, and constrained healthcare-seeking. At the same time, the literature also documents that women's agency is real but structured: it takes place within and is limited by these intersecting constraints and is often expressed through pragmatic strategies of navigation, care, and dignity rather than through straightforward 'empowerment'.

Read together, the findings reviewed here point to migration governance as a multilayered and processual field in which heterogeneous elements – law, labour demand, gender norms, moral economies, and transnational family obligations – interact across scales and over time. Central Asian women's migration is therefore best understood not as a marginal or exceptional case but as a particularly instructive site for analysing how governance arrangements are lived and negotiated in practice.

These conclusions point to a future research agenda that is less about expanding descriptive coverage and more about clarifying mechanisms and comparison. First, more work is needed that explicitly theorises how particular configurations (for example, gendered labour demand + temporary legality + ethnoracial marking) generate predictable forms of vulnerability and protection and how these configurations differ across destinations. Second, longitudinal and multi-sited designs would help track how legal status trajectories, family arrangements, and health outcomes evolve over time, reducing the current reliance on cross-sectional snapshots. Third, comparative work

should move beyond treating ‘Russia’ or ‘Turkey’ as unitary contexts and instead examine within-country variation (cities, sectors, recruitment channels) as well as policy shifts (regularisation rules, marriage-migration requirements, welfare access) that reorganise risk. Finally, policy-orientated research would benefit from linking interventions to these mechanisms: context-aware measures that address legal accessibility, workplace regulation, healthcare entry points, and protections against gendered violence are likely to be more effective than generic ‘migrant women’ programmes because they target how precarity is produced rather than simply naming it.

Read in this way, the chapter complements the volume’s broader framework by showing how migration governance is constituted through the interaction of legal regimes, labour markets, and social norms as they are lived and negotiated in practice. Overall, the literature reviewed here supports a clear analytical conclusion: Central Asian women’s migration is a strategic and socially embedded form of mobility, but one that is systematically stratified by the intersection of law, labour regimes, and moral economies. Treating these dynamics as both structural and embodied provides the strongest basis for explaining not only where vulnerabilities cluster but also how they are lived, negotiated, and potentially contested in different migration contexts.

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Microlegalities in Motion: Kazakh Emigrants Between Formal Rules and Informal Orders

Albina Aidarkhankyzy

INTRODUCTION

Cross-border labour mobility has become one of the most consequential socioeconomic dynamics shaping Kazakhstan's post-Soviet development trajectory (Abuova et al., 2024; Delovarova, 2024). Since independence, Kazakhstan has transitioned from a predominantly internal-migration society – driven by Soviet-era urbanisation, industrial distribution and ethnodemographic restructuring – to a country deeply embedded in global labour markets (Kelinbaeva et al., 2025). Today, external labour migration constitutes both a livelihood strategy for households seeking income diversification and a structural response to uneven development, shifting regional economies, and Kazakhstan's evolving position within a stratified global mobility system (Syzykbekov et al., 2021).

Recent demographic indicators underscore the growing importance of cross-border migration. Kazakhstan's official statistics reveal that 2023 marked the first year of positive net migration in over a decade, with

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25,387 arrivals versus 16,094 departures (Astana Times, 2025). Early 2025 data sustain this trend (+3,801), signalling a partial reversal of long-standing outmigration patterns.¹ Yet, these figures obscure the scale of irregular and unregistered labour mobility: tens of thousands of Kazakh citizens travel abroad without formal contracts or registration, working primarily in Russia, South Korea, Turkey, and increasingly in Europe and the UK (The Times of Central Asia, 2025). South Korea alone is estimated to host nearly 14,000 undocumented Kazakhstani residents, a tenfold increase since 2015 (Chu, 2024). Meanwhile, the UK's Seasonal Worker Visa scheme admitted more than 5,000 Kazakh nationals in 2023, double the number recorded in 2022 (GOV.UK, 2025). This diversification of migration corridors reflects shifting opportunity structures in global labour markets and the rising importance of high-wage destinations beyond Kazakhstan's immediate region.

These mobility patterns are shaped by persistent wage disparities, labour-market constraints, and aspirations for improved socioeconomic mobility. With Kazakhstan's average wage hovering around USD 780 per month – compared to USD 1,099 in Russia or USD 2,800–3,200 in South Korea – migration functions as both an individual strategy for income generation and a collective household investment. Yet mobility does not begin at the moment of border crossing. It emerges within Kazakhstan's own fragmented migration governance landscape, characterised by rapidly fluctuating regulations, uneven state capacity, and the proliferation of fraudulent recruitment schemes (KTK.kz, 2025; Tengrinews.kz, 2025). The rise of digitally mediated recruitment scams, many demanding substantial upfront payments from aspiring migrants, demonstrates the institutional vulnerabilities migrants confront long before they interact with foreign state authorities.

In response to the growth and complexity of external migration, the Kazakh government has launched multiple reforms to regulate outbound labour mobility (NUR.KZ, 2025; Zakon.kz, 2025). These include tightening licensing requirements for recruitment agencies, enhancing oversight mechanisms, negotiating participation in South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), strengthening bilateral labour agreements with destination states, and enforcing legal obligations for publicly

¹ For a more detailed overview of Kazakhstan's internal and external migration trends, see Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025). *The Migration of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan (January–March 2025)* [online]. Available at: <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/demography/publications/372705/>

funded university graduates to work in Kazakhstan for a specified period. These measures reflect the state's increasing recognition that external migration is deeply entangled with national human capital strategies, domestic labour-market development, and broader geopolitical concerns. Nevertheless, as research on migration governance has repeatedly shown, formal policy changes rarely align neatly with migrants' practical experiences (Malm Lindberg, 2023; Maru et al., 2022; Natter, 2018; Schenk, 2018; Schierenbeck et al., 2023; Urinboyev, 2020; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). Formal legality is often only one dimension of the regulatory environment migrants must navigate (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2012; Simpson, 2020; Urinboyev, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines how Kazakh labour migrants interpret, negotiate and navigate legal and bureaucratic systems in four distinct migration destinations: the United Kingdom, the United States, Turkey and South Korea. These sites represent markedly different governance architectures – from high-capacity, rights-based regimes to hybrid and informally governed systems – making them instructive cases for analysing the interaction between formal rules and migrants' lived experiences. The empirical data presented in this chapter reveal an important insight: variation in political regime type does not produce corresponding variation in migrants' strategies for navigating legality. Despite facing different kinds of legal institutions and migration governance regimes, migrants across all contexts rely extensively on informal knowledge systems, social infrastructures, and community-mediated interpretations of legality. More specifically, in our chapter, we will show that Kazakh migrants consistently depend on (1) co-ethnic and diasporic networks to interpret rules and mediate interactions with authorities; (2) informal brokers or intermediaries who facilitate access to jobs, documentation or housing; (3) digital communication channels that circulate real-time information, warnings and tacit norms; (4) culturally embedded expectations regarding hierarchy, conflict avoidance and reciprocity; and (5) shared repertoires of practical knowledge about employment, visa procedures, border mobility and everyday survival.

These practices are not peripheral or exceptional. They represent the central mechanisms through which migrants make foreign legal systems navigable. To conceptualise these mechanisms, I introduce the *concept of microlegalities*: emergent, everyday normative repertoires through which migrants translate formal law into lived practice. Microlegalities are assembled through experience, imitation, social learning and digital

communication. They include practical legal knowledge, social capital, moral economies of trust and solidarity, and embodied understandings of authority and institutional behaviour. Hence, microlegalities are neither fully formal nor purely informal. They are hybrid, situated between legal text and social practice. They emerge precisely because migrants frequently encounter legal systems that are opaque, incomplete, difficult to access, contradictory across different bureaucratic actors, or unevenly enforced. These conditions occur not only in hybrid regimes like Turkey or South Korea but also in the United Kingdom and the United States, where migrants must still navigate fragmented bureaucracies, varying interpretations of rules by employers or officials, and the practical complexity of long-distance migration.

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter builds on research in legal pluralism, legal culture, and mobility regime theory. Scholars of legal pluralism have long shown that individuals navigate layered normative systems that include state law, organisational rules, community norms, market practices and informal enforcement mechanisms (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Moore, 1973; Tamanaha, 2000). Migration amplifies these dynamics by placing individuals within transnational legal fields where different legal orders intersect (Ballard, 2006; Kubal, 2013; Menski, 1993; Urinboyev, 2020; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). Studies have shown that migrants must constantly assess which rules matter, which can be ignored, who enforces norms, and how to anticipate discretionary authority (Coutin, 2003b; Dadabaev, 2022; Kubal, 2019; Turaeva & Urinboyev, 2021; Urinboyev, 2021). Their navigation strategies reveal sophisticated forms of legal reasoning that are often invisible in state-centric analyses of migration governance (e.g., Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Fassin, 2011; Hallett, 2014; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Schenk, 2018).

This chapter also connects to research on diaspora infrastructures, which emphasises the critical role diasporic communities play in mediating migrants' encounters with formal institutions (Carruthers, 2017; Godin & Heritier, 2025; Norman, 2022; Olsson, 2017). Alongside formal state institutions, migrants rely heavily on diasporic networks for knowledge, social protection and conflict resolution (De Haas, 2009; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Lund, 2017). As I demonstrate empirically in this chapter, in Turkey, long-standing Kazakh communities act as key intermediaries translating law into practice; in the United States, Russian-speaking networks guide newly arrived migrants through complex bureaucratic systems; in the UK and South Korea, workers depend on peer groups – primarily Ukrainian,

Russian or Kazakh – to learn workplace rules and anticipate immigration enforcement practices.

From the perspective of international political economy (IPE), microlegalities illuminate how global labour markets operate at the ground level (Lindquist, 2010; Standing, 2011, 2014; Xiang, 2007). Migration flows are shaped not only by policies, bilateral agreements and labour demand but also by migrants' own adaptive capacities. Migrants generate informal infrastructures that make labour mobility possible despite governance gaps and institutional opacity (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2023; Urinboyev & Polese, 2016). Their strategies reveal how the political economy of mobility depends fundamentally on a co-production of governance: states regulate borders and labour markets, employers manage workplaces, intermediaries shape access to opportunities, and migrants create the practical normative schemas that allow these systems to function (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). By analysing Kazakh migrants' experiences across four contrasting legal and political environments, this chapter intends to make three core contributions.

First, it demonstrates that microlegalities are universal across regime types. Regardless of whether migrants enter deeply institutionalised Western democracies or hybrid and informally governed regimes, they rely on similar forms of social learning, informal practices and community infrastructures to navigate legality.

Second, it shows that migrants' navigation strategies are transnationally embedded. Their approaches reflect Kazakhstan's domestic governance realities, long-standing regional mobility patterns, diasporic histories and digitally mediated networks that share information across borders.

Third, it positions microlegalities as central to the political economy of global labour mobility. They reveal how migrants co-produce the normative orders that structure their working and living conditions, operating alongside and at times in tension with formal regulatory systems.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. The next section outlines our theoretical framework, integrating insights from legal pluralism, legal culture, mobility regimes and diaspora infrastructures to conceptualise how migrants interpret and enact legality across borders. This is followed by a background section that situates contemporary Kazakh labour migration within its historical, socioeconomic and policy context. The methodology section then details our qualitative research design and interview dataset. An ethnographic vignette provides a thick, grounded entry point into migrants' everyday encounters with law, after which the

empirical findings trace how microlegalities take shape across the United Kingdom, the United States, Turkey and South Korea. The discussion section synthesises these insights to examine the broader implications of microlegalities for migration governance and the political economy of labour mobility. Finally, the conclusion summarises the chapter's key contributions and identifies directions for future research.

CONCEPTUALISING MICROLEGALITIES

Understanding how Kazakh migrants navigate diverse and often opaque legal environments requires a theoretical lens that brings together socio-legal scholarship and IPE. This chapter conceptualises migrants' everyday encounters with legality through the notion of microlegalities – the small-scale, adaptive, relational normative practices that migrants use to interpret, negotiate and sometimes circumvent formal legal regimes. These practices cannot be understood through state-centric approaches alone. Instead, they emerge from the interplay of legal pluralism, legal culture, mobility regimes, and diaspora infrastructures, which together shape the informal governance systems migrants construct and inhabit across borders.

Legal pluralism provides the foundational insight that legal authority is never singular (Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2000). Migrants encounter a dense constellation of normative orders: state immigration laws, labour codes, employer rules, consular procedures, reputational expectations within diasporic communities, unwritten workplace hierarchies, and the tacit digital norms that circulate through WhatsApp, Telegram and other platforms (Alencar et al., 2019; Aricat, 2015; Urinboyev, 2021, 2022). These normative systems intersect, overlap and sometimes contradict one another. Migrants must therefore negotiate not only the content of formal rules but also the gaps, inconsistencies and discretionary interpretations that animate real-world governance. The experiences described by Kazakh migrants across the UK, Turkey, South Korea and the United States illustrate how legal pluralism is lived. A worker in South Korea, for example, may hold a valid visa yet rely entirely on the informal *pitak* system of daily labour allocation – a practice governed not by state law but by seniority norms and verbal agreements. Seasonal workers in the UK operate within a clearly codified visa scheme, yet their earnings, disciplinary experiences and sense of security hinge far more on the unwritten norms enforced by supervisors and interpreted collaboratively by their co-workers. In all

cases, migrants engage in continuous translation between formal legality and the informal worlds through which legality is enacted.

These dynamics are deeply shaped by legal culture (Friedman, 1975; Nelken, 2004) – the values, expectations and learned dispositions migrants carry with them from Kazakhstan. Decades of navigating hybrid governance at home have cultivated a pragmatic legal orientation in which individuals expect formal rules to coexist with inconsistent enforcement, bureaucratic discretion and the need to negotiate informally through personal networks. This produces a transnational legal habitus that migrants draw upon when entering new environments. Many assume, for instance, that officials in Turkey or Korea will behave similarly to those in Kazakhstan, prompting strategies that privilege caution, indirect communication and reliance on trusted intermediaries. Even in rights-based legal orders such as the United States, migrants often rely more heavily on Russian-speaking community networks than on state agencies when seeking guidance. These learned dispositions influence how migrants assess risk, interpret authority, and form judgements about institutional trustworthiness. They also shape understandings of what constitutes ‘practical’ or ‘realistic’ law, reinforcing the importance of microlegalities as socially mediated tools for interpreting unfamiliar systems.

Mobility regime theory helps illuminate the political economy conditions under which these practices emerge (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Squire, 2010; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002; Walters, 2006). Contemporary migration governance – across both democratic and authoritarian contexts – is increasingly characterised by informalisation, in which states outsource regulatory functions (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022), shift administrative burdens onto migrants (Axelsson et al., 2022), or rely on employer discretion and private intermediaries to manage labour mobility (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Fragmented bureaucracies, ambiguous rules and selective enforcement are common in non-Western contexts (Natter, 2018, 2021; Urinboyev, 2020; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022), but they also appear in the labour migration regimes of the European Union and the United States (Coutin, 2003b; Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). As a result, migrants operate within hybrid regulatory fields where the boundary between formal and informal authority is blurred. The empirical data we gathered show how this dynamic manifests across destinations: UK agriculture relies on informal peer training and unwritten productivity standards; South Korean factories and construction sites operate through daily

hiring queues and verbal contracts; Turkey's formal labour law coexists with diasporic mediation of employment and documentation; and the U.S. home-care sector depends on migrants' ability to navigate licensing systems through community support rather than institutional guidance. Microlegalities emerge as migrants learn to navigate these hybrid assemblages, developing context-specific repertoires that allow them to manage legal ambiguity, anticipate discretionary enforcement and remain employable within volatile labour markets.

Diaspora infrastructures constitute another critical layer of governance (Norman, 2022; Walton-Roberts & Judge, 2025; Zapata-Barrero & Rezaei, 2020). Long-standing Kazakh communities in Turkey, and increasingly in other destinations, provide not only emotional support but also practical legal translation, job referrals, housing networks, informal dispute resolution and bureaucratic guidance. These infrastructures often function more effectively than state institutions for newly arrived migrants who lack language skills or knowledge of local administrative systems. Similar dynamics appear in the United States, where Russian-speaking networks interpret bureaucratic procedures and mediate employment, and in the UK and South Korea, where Kazakh, Ukrainian and Russian migrant groups share essential information through digital platforms. Diaspora infrastructures thus serve as parallel legal systems – not competing with state institutions but filling gaps, buffering migrants from risk, and generating shared understandings of how legality 'really works' in daily life. They facilitate knowledge translation, risk mitigation, informal enforcement through reputational logics, and the cultivation of transnational connectivity that sustains mobility across borders.

Taken together, legal pluralism, legal culture, mobility regimes and diaspora infrastructures create the conditions under which microlegalities take shape. Microlegalities are the emergent rule systems migrants construct to navigate, reinterpret or circumvent formal regulation. They are informally institutionalised practices transmitted through brokers, peer groups, diasporic leaders and digital communities; culturally embedded repertoires shaped by Kazakhstan's legal dispositions and host-state expectations; and transnationally sustained through the movement of people, information and moral obligations across borders. These practices are not merely adaptive strategies but politically consequential forms of governance. They illuminate the gaps between policy and lived experience, expose the limitations of formal legal frameworks, and reveal how migration systems actually function at the ground level.

In this sense, microlegalities are central to understanding the political economy of labour mobility. They show how migrants themselves co-produce governance structures by generating the practical knowledge, informal institutions and social infrastructures that allow global labour markets to operate. Migrants interpret opaque regulations, compensate for weak or fragmented state capacity, and translate legal ambiguity into actionable norms that enable mobility, settlement and survival. Through this perspective, migration is not merely regulated by states; it is governed through a multilayered, socially embedded field in which migrants are active producers of legal meaning. Their micro-legal practices constitute an essential but often invisible foundation of contemporary mobility regimes.

EXTERNAL LABOUR MIGRATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan's contemporary labour migration system cannot be understood without attention to the deeper historical, cultural and structural forces that have long shaped how mobility is practised, interpreted and regulated in Central Asia. While the forms and destinations of migration have changed dramatically over the past century, many of the logics that underpin today's labour mobility – including adaptability, risk-sharing, reliance on social networks, and negotiation between formal and informal orders – are traceable to earlier periods of Kazakh society and statehood (Cameron, 2018; Khazanov, 1994; Martin, 2012). Situating current labour migration within this broader trajectory illuminates why Kazakh migrants so readily construct the *microlegalities* analysed in this chapter and why these microlegalities persist across divergent political and legal environments.

Mobility has historically been central to Kazakh ways of life (Finke, 2024; Khazanov, 1994; Olcott, 1995). For centuries, nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism required regular seasonal movements across vast ecological zones of the steppe (Finke, 2024; Hauck et al., 2016). The annual rhythm of shifting between *zhailau* (summer pastures) and *qystau* (wintering grounds) was not a disruptive or exceptional event but a foundational element of social organisation, land use, labour division and kinship structure (Khazanov, 1994). These modes of life cultivated enduring skills: the ability to coordinate movement across distances, maintain kin-based support networks dispersed over territory, adapt swiftly to environmental uncertainty and negotiate access to resources in contexts of fluid authority (Olcott, 1995). While contemporary international migration is

qualitatively different from pre-modern nomadic mobility, the dispositions and practices associated with movement – flexibility, collective decision-making, reliance on relational trust – constitute a cultural repertoire that many Kazakh migrants continue to draw upon when navigating unfamiliar environments abroad.

The historical orientation towards movement was reinforced over centuries of engagement along the Silk Road (Khazanov, 2019; Olcott, 1981). Urban centres such as Taraz, Sairam and Otyrar were nodes of long-distance trade, craft production and cultural exchange, linking steppe populations to multiethnic urban societies and transregional economic systems. These interactions exposed local communities to commercial circuits, linguistic plurality and diverse governance systems, laying early foundations for openness to translocal and transnational mobility. Although the Silk Road era ended long before modern migration regimes emerged, the historical sensibility that mobility could be an economic opportunity rather than a rupture continues to shape attitudes towards work abroad.

The Soviet era introduced dramatic transformations. During the 1930–33 famine, caused by forced collectivisation and sedentarisation, hundreds of thousands were displaced or fled to neighbouring territories such as China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Cameron, 2018). This episode represented one of the earliest large-scale external migrations in modern Kazakh history and left lasting demographic and psychological imprints. Later, Soviet industrialisation policies stimulated massive internal migration as labour was funnelled towards mining, metallurgy, oil extraction and urban industrial centres (Pianciola, 2001). This period normalised state-directed mobility and cultivated familiarity with bureaucratic systems, structured recruitment, and workplace hierarchies – elements that would reappear in post-Soviet international migration, although now mediated by market forces rather than central planning.

With independence in 1991, Kazakhstan entered a new phase marked by economic restructuring, enterprise closures, unemployment and the emergence of private labour markets (Olcott, 2010). Outmigration increased sharply, with both ethnic and economic motivations. Many ethnic Russians, Germans and Ukrainians left for their national homelands, while young Kazakhs increasingly sought opportunities abroad to support household incomes (Finke et al., 2013; Laruelle, 2013). External labour migration soon became an established livelihood strategy, especially after the 1998 financial crisis and during subsequent

economic downturns (Delovarova, 2024; Kelinbaeva et al., 2025). Temporary, circular and seasonal migration gained prominence, embedding Kazakhstan within new regional and global labour circuits and reinforcing a collective sensibility that mobility is a rational, even expected, response to structural uncertainty.

Contemporary migration patterns reflect these longer histories while responding to new global economic conditions. Kazakhstan's official statistics suggest a recent shift from years of net emigration to positive migration balances in 2023 and early 2025 (Astana Times, 2025). Yet, these numbers obscure the scale of unregistered or irregular labour migration, which remains significant. Large numbers of Kazakh citizens work abroad without formalised contracts or residency permits, especially in Russia, South Korea and Turkey (The Times of Central Asia, 2025). These flows do not diminish simply because the state's migration balance appears positive; rather, they highlight the coexistence of formal, semi-formal and informal mobility channels.

Russia remains the most important destination, absorbing around 70 per cent of Kazakh migrants (Ryazantsev, 2016; The Times of Central Asia, 2025), though its dominance is gradually decreasing as labour mobility becomes more geographically diverse. The United Kingdom has become an important site of seasonal agricultural labour migration, enabled by the expansion of the UK's Seasonal Worker Visa scheme (GOV.UK, 2025). South Korea represents a high-wage labour market that attracts both documented and undocumented workers, with estimates suggesting that nearly 14,000 Kazakhstani migrants reside there without legal status (Chu, 2024). Turkey and Germany also receive steady flows, driven by cultural, educational or ethnic ties and facilitated through a mix of formal recruitment programmes and informal networks. These evolving geographies reflect broader processes – wage differentials, visa policies, public discourses of opportunity, and digital information flows – that lower the barriers to long-distance migration.

Economic and aspirational drivers remain paramount. Kazakh migrants prioritise higher incomes, children's future prospects, professional development and educational opportunities. Persistent wage gaps between Kazakhstan and key destination countries make migration a rational household strategy for risk diversification and upward mobility. Many families treat external migration as a long-term investment in housing, education or entrepreneurship, reinforcing the strategic role of remittances in household economies and regional development.

However, the expansion of migration has also intensified risks. The digitalisation of recruitment has enabled widespread fraud, with unlicensed intermediaries advertising lucrative jobs in the UK, South Korea or Europe, collecting large upfront payments and disappearing. These recruitment scams thrive in contexts of uneven legal literacy, economic inequality, and weak regulatory oversight. They also demonstrate how informal norms – trust, recommendation, reputation – structure decision-making in the absence of reliable institutional information. In this pre-departure stage, migrants already begin to construct *microlegalities*: practical rules about whom to trust, how to evaluate authenticity, and what kinds of documentation or payments are considered legitimate.

The Kazakh government has attempted to address these challenges through a series of reforms aimed at formalising and regulating external labour mobility. These measures include stricter licensing and oversight for recruitment agencies, public information campaigns warning about fraudulent schemes, bilateral labour agreements with destination countries, and negotiations to join South Korea's Employment Permit System. Additionally, state-funded university graduates are legally required to work in Kazakhstan for a fixed period – an effort to retain human capital and curb brain drain. Yet, implementation gaps persist, and migrants continue to rely primarily on informal networks and personal assessments of risk when making mobility decisions. State regulation thus exists alongside an extensive informal apparatus that shapes migrants' actual pathways abroad.

Taken together, these historical, structural and policy dynamics create a migration environment in which formal and informal governance are deeply intertwined. Kazakhstan's long-standing cultural orientation towards mobility, combined with contemporary economic incentives and fragmented regulatory systems, equips migrants with a repertoire of adaptive strategies and informal norms before they ever cross a border. These practices then travel with migrants into foreign legal systems, shaping how they interpret and navigate the rules they encounter in the UK, the United States, Turkey and South Korea.

This background is essential for understanding the *microlegalities* that constitute the core analytical focus of this chapter. Migrants' informal repertoires do not emerge only upon arrival in host countries; they are deeply rooted in Kazakhstan's socio-historical experience of mobility and its contemporary migration governance landscape. By the time migrants reach foreign legal environments, they are already skilled at managing ambiguity, negotiating through intermediaries, mobilising networks and interpreting

institutional behaviour. These dispositions shape how migrants encounter foreign bureaucracies, how they assess legal versus practical considerations, and how they construct the informal infrastructures that allow them to survive and succeed abroad. Understanding this broader background therefore provides critical context for interpreting the empirical findings and situates migrants' microlegalities within the larger political economy of global labour mobility.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This chapter draws on qualitative interview data collected between 2024 and 2025 with Kazakh migrants living and working in the United Kingdom, South Korea, Turkey and the United States. The methodological approach reflects the chapter's broader socio-legal and IPE orientation. Rather than treating migration governance as a fixed institutional framework, the study seeks to understand how migrants themselves interpret, negotiate and reshape legal orders through their everyday practices. The aim is not only to document experiences but also to analyse the production of legality from the perspective of actors situated within overlapping formal and informal regulatory systems.

The interviews form part of a broader research project examining migrants' experiences and the governance of labour migration in non-Western migration regimes. This project emphasises that legal regulation is not merely implemented by states or employers but is co-produced by migrants, intermediaries, diasporic networks and digital infrastructures. Within this framework, qualitative interviewing offers a privileged lens for exploring microlegalities: the small-scale, adaptive and relational practices through which migrants navigate – and often compensate for – gaps in formal regulation. Capturing such practices requires data that reveal not only what migrants do but also how they think, interpret institutional behaviour and mobilise their own cultural and legal repertoires in response.

Semi-structured interviews were therefore used to elicit detailed migration narratives. Respondents were encouraged to describe the full arc of their migration experiences: initial motivations and expectations; decision-making and recruitment processes; early encounters with employers, brokers and state authorities; workplace routines and disciplinary regimes; and the informal strategies they developed to manage documentation, mobility and employment precarity. Interview prompts explored migrants' understandings of formal visa rules, their methods for

learning or interpreting legal requirements, and their use of diasporic or digital networks to supplement or circumvent formal information channels. Interviews also included reflections on how migrants compared the legal cultures of Kazakhstan and their destination countries, providing insight into how prior experiences shaped their interpretations of foreign institutional environments.

The final corpus consists of twenty-three in-depth interviews, of which twelve interviewees were female and eleven were male. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 63, allowing the study to capture perspectives across different life stages and migration trajectories. All interviewees had university-level education, and several held postgraduate qualifications, including PhD degrees. Interviews were conducted in Kazakh or Russian, depending on participant preference, and participants were recruited through a combination of personal networks, snowball sampling, and contacts within migrant community organisations and online migrant groups. Given this transnational sampling strategy and the geographical dispersion of participants across multiple destination countries, nearly all interviews were conducted online via Zoom or WhatsApp. Only five interviews were conducted in person, when migrants happened to be temporarily back in Kazakhstan. Online interviewing proved particularly well suited for this project, enabling sustained engagement with participants across different time zones and legal contexts and allowing interviewees to speak from within their everyday environments of work and residence. At the same time, conducting most interviews digitally required heightened attention to issues of confidentiality, trust and data security, especially given the sensitivity of topics such as irregular employment, encounters with fraudulent brokers and informal legal strategies.

The participant sample, though not designed to be statistically representative, reflects the diversity of Kazakhstan's contemporary migration landscape. University-educated seasonal workers in the United Kingdom provided insight into how educated youth navigate temporary labour schemes in formalised environments. Documented and undocumented workers in South Korea, many employed in construction, manufacturing or small-scale industrial enterprises, offered perspectives on navigating a highly bureaucratised yet informally mediated regime. Migrants working in Turkey's textile and service industries described a hybrid legal field structured by both state institutions and long-standing Kazakh-Turkic diasporic networks. Finally, migrants in the United States – working in care, hospitality and other service sectors – provided perspectives from

a rights-based but administratively fragmented system where community networks often mediate access to information.

This diversity enabled a comparative methodological approach that is central to the political economy orientation of the chapter. Rather than treating each destination as a discrete case study, the analysis juxtaposes migrants' experiences across contexts to reveal structural patterns that transcend political regime classifications. Semi-structured interviews proved particularly well suited for such comparison because the interview guide addressed similar themes – recruitment, learning processes, workplace dynamics, legal knowledge and network reliance – across all four contexts. This made it possible to identify how similar challenges manifest differently under varying regulatory architectures. For instance, while migrants in the UK and USA operate within comparatively transparent legal systems, they nonetheless rely heavily on peer networks for interpreting bureaucratic instructions, anticipating employer behaviour or securing housing. Migrants in Turkey and South Korea, positioned within more discretionary or informalised regimes, draw even more extensively on social intermediaries, but the underlying logic of micro-legal problem-solving remains recognisably similar across all contexts.

The analytical strategy was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) and socio-legal interpretive approaches (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Open coding was used to identify recurring motifs such as fear or avoidance of state authorities; differentiated trust in employers, brokers or diasporic leaders; learning processes related to visa regimes or workplace expectations; and forms of peer-enforced accountability within migrant communities. These initial codes were then clustered into broader analytical categories aligned with the chapter's theoretical framework: legal pluralism (multiple coexisting normative orders), legal culture (values and dispositions shaping responses to law), mobility regimes (institutional and infrastructural configurations structuring migration pathways) and diaspora infrastructures (community-based systems of governance). Throughout the coding process, attention was given to how migrants described what they 'should' do, what they 'actually' do, and what they believed 'really works' – distinctions that reveal how microlegalities form in the space between formal prescriptions and pragmatic realities.

The analysis also adopted a relational approach that considered the interactions between migrants and the various actors who shape their experiences: employers, supervisors, brokers, inspectors, fellow migrants, powerful co-ethnics and online communities. These relationships illuminate

how authority is experienced, negotiated and contested in everyday practices, offering insight into the micro-politics of workplace governance and bureaucratic navigation. Because microlegalities often operate through trust, reciprocity, reputation and subtle forms of social sanction, the analysis sought to capture not only explicit statements but also implicit normative assumptions within migrant narratives.

A reflexive approach was taken throughout the research process. The authors' long-standing engagement with migration in Central Asia, familiarity with socio-legal ethnography and deep understanding of post-Soviet legal culture shaped both data interpretation and interviewer-participant interactions. Shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds facilitated rapport, enabling participants to speak openly about sensitive topics such as irregular employment, encounters with fraudulent brokers, or informal strategies used to navigate legal constraints. At the same time, the researcher's academic role and institutional affiliation sometimes positioned her as a perceived expert, influencing how participants framed their experiences. Some respondents appeared to emphasise their knowledgeability or strategic competence; others voiced concerns about confidentiality or the potential consequences of disclosing irregular practices. Recognising these dynamics is crucial, as the production of data in qualitative research is itself a social process shaped by trust, relationality and power.

The reflexive stance also extended to the interpretation of microlegalities. While the chapter analyses migrants' informal practices analytically, it avoids romanticising them as purely empowering or condemning them as simply deviations from law. Instead, they are viewed as pragmatic responses – often necessary for survival – within governance systems that are fragmented, discretionary or opaque. This interpretive approach is informed by the researchers' prior work documenting how post-Soviet legal cultures cultivate flexible orientations towards rules, trust-based forms of legality and pragmatic responses to institutional uncertainty. These insights helped identify when migrants were describing formal legal knowledge, when they were articulating informal norms, and when they were delineating the boundaries between them.

Taken together, the methodology and data enable a rich, comparative and politically grounded analysis of migrant experiences across distinct legal and political environments. By centring migrants' narratives and interpretive practices, the approach reveals how legal systems are understood and enacted from below and how microlegalities emerge as essential tools for navigating overlapping regulatory orders. The interviews thus

provide a robust empirical foundation for the chapter's broader argument: that migrants' informal practices are not peripheral to migration governance but fundamental to how global labour markets and mobility regimes operate in practice.

ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE

Before turning to the interview data, I offer an ethnographic vignette drawn from twenty-three in-depth interviews with Kazakh migrants across the United Kingdom, South Korea, Turkey and the United States. The aim is to provide a thick, grounded description of migrants' everyday navigational practices and to immerse the reader in the textures of migrants' working and domestic worlds, revealing the informal norms, social infrastructures and adaptive strategies that underpin the microlegalities.

Before sunrise on an English fruit farm, rows of prefabricated caravans glow faintly as workers begin preparing for the day. Inside one of them, a 30-year-old migrant from Astana, trained as a radio engineer, ties his shoelaces and scrolls through WhatsApp messages exchanged overnight. His seasonal worker visa provides a clear legal outline of his presence in the country, but as he soon learns, the visa tells him almost nothing about how to survive the season, maintain productivity or avoid disciplinary trouble. Those rules come from fellow migrants. During his first week, Ukrainian and Russian workers explain the farm's unwritten codes: which supervisors tolerate slower pickers, which expect strict obedience, how to anticipate inspection visits, and how to position oneself in the field to maximise piece-rate earnings. 'You won't find this online,' one worker tells him. 'Only the people here know how it really works.' These informal lessons become his primary legal navigational toolkit. Formal legality sets the parameters of his stay, but it is the socially produced micro-legal system circulating in lunch-break conversations and group chats that makes the workplace legible.

Across the continent in Busan, South Korea, a young Kazakh man arrives at a construction site before dawn. He works without valid documentation – a condition that, in legal terms, places him outside the boundaries of state recognition. Yet his daily life is governed not by immigration and labour laws but by a dense hierarchy embedded in workplace culture. Seniority, nationality and age shape expectations and obligations. He knows he must avoid errors, follow instructions without hesitation and never challenge older workers. In return, he receives free meals, accommodation

and transport – unwritten entitlements that circulate within the informal labour networks connecting Kazakh, Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrants with Korean subcontractors. Although state law defines him as irregular, the practical norms that organise his safety, wages and working hours emerge from a hybrid governance system where the employer's authority, co-ethnic intermediaries and tacit social contracts matter more than official regulations. His everyday strategies – avoiding public places, responding instantly to colleagues' warnings about immigration raids, relying on multilayered chains of trust – illustrate how microlegalities become survival mechanisms under precarious conditions.

In Turkey's Denizli province, a Kazakh woman walks her toddler to daycare before beginning her shift in a textile factory. Unlike the worker in Busan, she holds a legal work permit, and Turkish labour law formally protects her rights. Indeed, her employer pays her twice the rate of local workers, in compliance with regulations governing foreign labour. Yet she quickly discovers that legal protections alone are not sufficient for building a stable life. It is the local Kazakh diaspora – long-established and culturally intertwined with the broader Turkic world – that guides her through bureaucratic procedures, helps her secure housing and supports newly arrived students seeking temporary shelter. Diaspora elders advise on how to access municipal services; community WhatsApp groups alert members to unscrupulous landlords or job scams; experienced migrants translate ambiguous legal terms into culturally meaningful guidance. In this context, formal law provides structure, but diaspora infrastructures shape the everyday enactment of legality. She follows the law not simply because it is written but because her community interprets and anchors it within shared moral and practical frameworks.

On the other side of the globe, in New York City, a Kazakh couple who migrated through the Diversity Visa programme build their routines around licensed home-care work. They operate within one of the most institutionalised labour regimes in the world, complete with training requirements, workplace standards and mechanisms for wage protection. The rights they enjoy on paper are extensive and enforceable. Yet when they face difficulties – an ambiguous tax form, a dispute over overtime pay, a shortage of childcare options – they turn not to state agencies but to the Central Asian and Russian-speaking networks that have proliferated across the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. Through these networks, they learn which training centres process certifications fastest, which home-care agencies treat workers fairly, how to avoid predatory landlords and how

to build credit without falling into debt. Their legal consciousness develops not from direct engagement with American institutions but through the interpretive labour performed by peers who translate the formal system into culturally comprehensible advice. Even in rule-of-law contexts, legality is filtered, refracted and reshaped through community-based infrastructures.

Across these contrasting settings – highly regulated Western democracies and hybrid or informally governed non-Western regimes – a common thread emerges: migrants do not navigate legal systems alone; they co-produce the normative orders that guide their lives. What appears from the outside as compliance or non-compliance with formal law is, from the migrant's perspective, a much more intricate process of interpreting rules, managing risk and aligning action with the expectations of employers, peers, brokers and community networks. Formal law provides a structural frame, but it rarely offers the practical knowledge necessary to operate effectively within everyday life. Migrants fill these gaps through microlegalities: emergent, adaptive and socially embedded practices that allow them to reconcile abstract legal frameworks with the demands of daily survival.

By grounding the analysis in lived experience, this vignette illustrates how migrants blend formal and informal orders across different migration regimes. It offers a textured entry point into the interview material that follows, demonstrating how microlegalities arise, circulate and evolve in response to the constraints and opportunities embedded in diverse migration destinations.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS: NAVIGATING LEGAL WORLDS THROUGH MICROLEGALITIES

The interviews conducted with Kazakh migrants across the United Kingdom, United States, Turkey and South Korea reveal a strikingly consistent pattern in how migrants learn, interpret and enact legality in everyday life. Despite wide differences in political regime type, labour market regulation and bureaucratic design, migrants construct their own normative repertoires – microlegalities – that help them manage uncertainty, decipher ambiguous institutions and sustain mobility under shifting conditions. What emerges is not a dichotomy between 'legal' and 'illegal' behaviour but a landscape where migrants blend formal norms,

informal expectations and socially embedded strategies to navigate complex legal environments.

Across all four destinations, migrants described a pragmatic orientation to law: they learned rules not simply from official sources but from the lived experience of others; they evaluated risks through community knowledge rather than institutional channels; and they calibrated their visibility and compliance in ways that balanced survival, obligation and aspiration. These practices reflect a broader transnational legal consciousness shaped by Kazakhstan's own hybrid governance environment, where formal rules coexist with discretionary enforcement and informal negotiation.

Formal Law Meets Everyday Reality: The UK Experience

Migrants who travelled to the United Kingdom on seasonal worker visas consistently described the visa application process as orderly and transparent. As Aidos (30, male) put it, *'Back home everything depends on who you know, but in the UK system, I felt the process was the same for everyone.'* Yet this sense of predictability ended abruptly upon arrival.

On the farms, workers discovered that productivity norms, work allocation and disciplinary practices were governed not by official contracts but by tacit knowledge shared among peers. Dana (23, female) explained, *'You arrive thinking the rules are written somewhere. But then you learn the unwritten ones – the ones that decide your pay.'* Workers relied on experienced Ukrainians and Russians to decode workplace expectations, identify lenient supervisors and interpret the subtle cues that signalled warnings or favour.

Formal rights – such as the possibility of filing complaints – were known but seldom invoked. *'You avoid trouble,'* said Aliya (28, female). *'You follow what others do. It's safer.'* In this context, microlegalities took shape as collective strategies for maintaining invisibility, ensuring productivity and avoiding jeopardising future migration opportunities.

The United States: Rights on Paper, Community in Practice

Migrants in the United States encountered a highly institutionalised labour system. Diversity Visa recipients described feeling empowered by the clarity of their legal status. Yet legal empowerment did not translate into institutional engagement. Instead, migrants filtered American rights through community infrastructures.

Madina (36, female) noted, *'When I get a letter from the government, I don't call the hotline. I ask someone from our community who already went through it.'* Russian-speaking networks acted as informal legal translators, explaining tax obligations, licensing pathways and workplace protocols in culturally comprehensible terms. Migrants often preferred these networks because they offered contextualised guidance rooted in shared language, experience and risk perception.

Even when disputes arose – over wages, schedules or workplace expectations – migrants rarely activated formal complaint mechanisms. As Shyngys (29, male) explained, *'The rights are strong here, but you still don't want trouble. Our people solve things quietly.'* Thus, even in a rights-rich democracy, migrants relied heavily on microlegalities: informal mentoring chains, selective institutional engagement and culturally encoded interpretations of bureaucratic behaviour.

Turkey: Diaspora as An Informal Legal Infrastructure

In Turkey, where labour law offers protections to foreign workers, migrants reported receiving legal wages and contracts. Yet it was the Kazakh diaspora – long-established and deeply rooted – that shaped their everyday experience of law. Newcomers were quickly absorbed into community networks that acted as intermediaries between migrants and Turkish institutions. Aigul (32, female) emphasised, *'I have rights here, but I don't understand the system. Our diaspora explains everything – how to register, where to go, who to trust.'* In disputes, migrants seldom approached formal institutions. Instead, elders and community leaders negotiated with employers, screened potential workplaces and resolved conflicts informally.

These community systems acted as informal regulators, imposing moral obligations, enforcing reciprocity and establishing behavioural expectations. They reduced the risks associated with legal ambiguity while producing shared microlegalities around trust, obligation and authority. As Zhanar (42, female) summarised, *'You follow the diaspora rules because they keep you safe.'*

South Korea: Illegality, Hierarchy, and Informal Orders

South Korea's migration landscape – marked by high levels of irregularity and strong workplace hierarchy – generated one of the most elaborate micro-legal systems described by interviewees. Many migrants overstayed

intentionally, viewing irregularity as an economically rational strategy. Erzhan (28, male) remarked, *'Everyone overstays. That's the normal path to real money.'*

Irregularity shaped all aspects of daily life: where migrants lived, how they commuted, and how they communicated with employers. They relied on WhatsApp warning systems for immigration raids, used cash-only arrangements and avoided public interaction with authorities. But workplace hierarchy played an equally powerful role. Senior workers functioned as quasi-legal authorities whose instructions carried more weight than written labour codes.

Asel (38, female) explained, *'There are rules, but no one tells you. You watch and follow the older and more experienced migrants from your home country or region. That's how you learn the law here.'* The *pitak* system – informal morning gatherings where foremen selected daily labourers – embodied a form of labour governance entirely outside the state. Reputation, punctuality and network affiliation determined access to work, shaping microlegalities based on loyalty, discipline and deference.

A Unified Pattern Across Divergent Regimes

Though the political and legal landscapes of these four countries (i.e. migration regimes) differ markedly, migrants' experiences reveal a shared underlying structure. Formal rules – no matter how elaborate – rarely provide sufficient guidance for navigating the realities of work, documentation or institutional engagement. Migrants depend on networks and acquired informal knowledge to interpret ambiguous norms, assess risks and ensure continuity of mobility.

Across all settings:

- Informal networks serve as primary legal translators.
- Formal and informal orders coexist and often conflict.
- Migrants selectively comply, strategically remain invisible or engage institutions cautiously.
- Diaspora structures function as alternative legal infrastructures.
- Culturally inherited legal dispositions shape how migrants understand and respond to authority.

Microlegalities emerge as adaptive, relational and deeply social forms of legal reasoning – pragmatic repertoires learned through observation,

conversation, imitation and collective experience. They allow migrants to survive and thrive within legal regimes that are often opaque, inconsistent or fragmented.

The interview narratives provide compelling evidence that microlegalities are not peripheral improvisations but central mechanisms of migration governance across political regime types. Whether working legally in the UK or USA, semi-legally in Turkey or irregularly in South Korea, migrants mobilise shared strategies grounded in informal networks, cultural expectations and pragmatic reasoning. These strategies are shaped by – but not reducible to – formal legal frameworks. They emerge from the frictions between law in books and law in action, from bureaucratic opacity, and from the need to maintain mobility under precarious conditions.

Across destinations, migrants enact legality as a hybrid practice: part legal compliance, part social navigation, part cultural performance and part tactical survival. Microlegalities thus illuminate how migrants do not merely comply with or resist the state; they actively participate in the production of legal order, shaping the contours of migration governance from below.

DISCUSSION: MICROLEGALITIES AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MOBILITY

The findings presented in this chapter reveal a consistent pattern across all four migration destinations: migrants do not encounter law as a fixed or coherent system but as a shifting landscape of overlapping norms, expectations and authorities. Although the United Kingdom, United States, Turkey and South Korea differ dramatically in political regime type, bureaucratic design and labour-market governance, migrants describe their experiences of legality in remarkably similar terms. They speak of rules that are unclear or unspoken, of procedures that require interpretation, and of institutions that cannot be navigated without social guidance. The central insight that emerges is that migrants must actively construct the terms of their own legal navigation. They do this through microlegalities – practical repertoires of knowledge, interpretation and strategy that allow them to operate within environments where formal systems alone are insufficient.

This perspective allows us to return to the chapter's core research questions. How do migrants interpret law in diverse institutional settings?

Through which social infrastructures do they learn and enforce rules? And how do culturally rooted legal dispositions shape their encounters with foreign regimes? The vignette and interviews show that migrants' responses to law are shaped not simply by the rules of the host state but by their own histories, dispositions and collective practices. Law in practice is always plural: migrants reckon with immigration rules, workplace norms, unspoken hierarchies, diaspora expectations and digital knowledge systems simultaneously. Their everyday legal strategies therefore reflect a continuous process of evaluation – determining which rules matter, how strictly to follow them and whom to trust in moments of uncertainty.

From the perspective of legal pluralism, this multiplicity of normative orders is unsurprising. Migrants in all four destinations navigate formal immigration regulations alongside employer-specific demands, culturally encoded labour expectations and diasporic norms governing trust and reciprocity. What the empirical material underscores is that these different normative fields are not abstract categories – they take shape in the granular realities of daily life. A Kazakh migrant in the UK quickly learns that the pace set by Ukrainians and Russians carries more practical force than the formal terms of the visa. A home-care worker in New York realises that community WhatsApp groups, not state agencies, provide the most reliable interpretations of bureaucratic instructions. A textile worker in Turkey depends on diaspora elders to translate legal protections into actionable steps. And undocumented workers in South Korea understand that the authority of senior co-workers outweighs any formal labour rights they theoretically hold. In each case, migrants assemble their own map of legality from multiple, sometimes contradictory, sources.

Migrants' ways of navigating these plural legal landscapes are shaped by a deeper set of dispositions – what I might call a transnational legal habitus (Bastia, 2015; Coutin, 2003a; De Genova, 2005; Verhellen & Güdük, 2025). Formed within Kazakhstan's own hybrid governance context, this habitus is marked by caution towards state authorities, expectations of inconsistent enforcement and reliance on personal networks for bureaucratic navigation. Such dispositions travel with migrants and influence how they approach new institutional settings. This explains why migrants in highly regulated environments like the UK and USA often avoid direct engagement with authorities, even when they have legal status, and why diaspora networks in Turkey or South Korea play such authoritative roles in mediating access to jobs, housing or documentation. Microlegalities thus extend Kazakhstan's legal culture across borders, providing cognitive

and social tools through which migrants interpret and act upon foreign legal regimes.

The interviews also speak directly to broader debates on mobility regimes and the informalisation of migration governance. In each destination, migrants confront regulatory systems that are neither fully coherent nor fully enforced. States increasingly govern migration indirectly through intermediaries – employers, brokers, certification bodies, digital platforms and diaspora organisations. These intermediaries translate, distort or selectively implement legal rules, producing a fragmented field of authority that migrants must learn to navigate. The UK's tightly regulated seasonal worker programme still relies on unwritten productivity norms enforced through workplace cultures. Turkey's strong labour protections coexist with reliance on diaspora mediation. The US offers robust rights and complaint mechanisms, yet migrants turn to ethnic networks for practical guidance. South Korea's strict immigration policies intersect with informal labour queues and tacit agreements between employers and undocumented workers. In all cases, migrants operate within hybrid governance assemblages where formal and informal systems are deeply entangled.

Diaspora networks emerge as especially significant actors within this hybrid landscape. They provide not only social support but also interpretive labour – translating state rules into familiar cultural idioms, screening risks, resolving conflicts and enforcing moral expectations. Their authority derives from trust, shared identity and proximity to migrants' everyday needs. As such, diasporas function as parallel legal infrastructures, often more influential in shaping migrants' behaviour than formal institutions. Their centrality reflects a broader structural reality: migrants' access to legality depends less on the design of state systems and more on the quality, density and reliability of the social networks that mediate those systems.

Microlegalities, then, can be understood as systems of situated knowledge and practical judgement. They encompass the tacit understandings, heuristics and interpretive frameworks through which migrants decide how to act – when to comply, when to seek help, when to avoid attention and when to invoke rights. These practices are not haphazard or merely reactive. They are collectively produced, continuously refined and transmitted transnationally through digital communication, circulating narratives and shared experiences. They represent a form of agency that is adaptive rather than oppositional, grounded in pragmatism and orientated towards survival, opportunity and long-term mobility.

This has important implications for the political economy of migration. Microlegalities reveal the hidden labour that migrants perform to make global mobility systems function. They compensate for gaps in state governance, enable employers to operate within flexible labour markets and sustain migration flows even when formal channels are opaque or inaccessible. At the same time, they reveal how inequalities are reproduced: migrants carry the burden of legal interpretation, risk management and institutional navigation. They must become self-made ‘experts’ in hybrid legal regimes (Urinboyev, 2020), even though their agency is deeply constrained by global economic structures and uneven power relations.

In sum, the discussion shows that microlegalities are not peripheral adaptations but central components of contemporary mobility regimes. They illuminate how migrants understand and enact legality, how states govern indirectly through intermediaries, and how global labour markets depend on the interpretive and relational labour of migrants themselves. Viewed through this lens, the experiences of Kazakh migrants across diverse political contexts underscore a fundamental insight: legality is lived, not given. It is constructed day by day through negotiation, memory, culture, and collective practice. And it is within these small, routine acts of navigation that the broader political economy of labour mobility takes shape.

CONCLUSION

This chapter set out to understand how Kazakh migrants navigate the legal, political and institutional environments of diverse migration destinations, with a particular focus on how informal practices, social networks and culturally rooted dispositions shape their everyday encounters with law. By analysing in-depth interviews with Kazakh migrants in the United Kingdom, United States, Turkey and South Korea, the chapter explored how legality is interpreted, enacted and negotiated across vastly different governance contexts. The guiding questions – *How do migrants learn and interpret legal norms? What infrastructures enable them to function within complex or opaque regulatory environments? How do these practices vary or converge across regime types?* – all pointed towards the central finding that migrants’ relationships with law are fundamentally shaped by microlegalities: the informal, tacit and socially embedded repertoires that structure legal navigation from below.

The empirical evidence demonstrates unequivocally that political regime type, while shaping macro-level governance designs, does not determine migrants' lived experiences of legality. Whether in the highly regulated agricultural sector of the UK, the rights-rich institutional environment of the US, the diaspora-mediated legal ecosystem of Turkey, or the culturally hierarchical workplaces of South Korea, migrants repeatedly emphasised that formal law provides only a partial understanding of how things work in practice. What enables them to navigate bureaucracies, secure employment, mitigate risk or resolve disputes is not familiarity with statutory rules but access to informal infrastructures – peer networks, diaspora organisations, digital communication channels and culturally familiar norms that translate law into actionable knowledge.

The chapter's findings therefore challenge assumptions that Western legal systems offer inherently clearer or more accessible pathways for migrant workers. Even in democratic contexts with transparent procedures and robust rights protections, migrants rely on informal knowledge-sharing and selective institutional engagement. Similarly, in hybrid or non-democratic contexts, migrants do not experience complete legal precarity; instead, they often find stability, predictability and protection through community-based intermediaries. These observations underscore that informality is not the absence of regulation but a mode of regulation woven into migration governance across political systems.

By bringing legal pluralism, legal culture and mobility regime theory into dialogue, the chapter advances a more nuanced understanding of how migrants inhabit multiple normative orders simultaneously. Migrants must interpret the interplay of immigration rules, workplace expectations, diaspora norms, employer discretion and culturally encoded hierarchies. Their strategies – ranging from strategic invisibility and compliance to informal dispute resolution and calibrated engagement with authorities – constitute a form of *distributed legal agency*. Microlegalities allow migrants to bridge the discrepancy between law in books and law in action, constructing pragmatic pathways through systems that are opaque, fragmented or inconsistently enforced.

The chapter contributes conceptually by positioning microlegalities not as marginal or exceptional practices but as central mechanisms within the global political economy of labour mobility. They reveal the hidden interpretive labour migrants perform to make migration systems function; the

reliance of states and employers on migrants' adaptive capacities; and the ways in which global labour markets depend on informal infrastructures to compensate for governance gaps. By foregrounding migrants' expertise and agency, the analysis challenges top-down understandings of migration governance and emphasises the co-production of legal order by state and non-state actors alike.

These findings also open several promising avenues for future research. First, there is a need to examine microlegalities across a broader range of migration pathways, including student mobility, family reunification, short-term contracts and high-skilled migration. Each pathway likely generates distinct repertoires of informal knowledge and interpretation. Second, comparative research across sending countries could illuminate how different legal cultures shape transnational legal consciousness and migrants' adaptive capacities. Third, more attention should be paid to digital infrastructures – Telegram channels, WhatsApp groups, and TikTok migration influencers – as rapidly evolving spaces where new microlegalities circulate, are contested and become institutionalised. Fourth, future work could explore how microlegalities evolve in moments of crisis or abrupt policy change, such as border closures, labour inspections or geopolitical shocks. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing responsive policy interventions.

Finally, the chapter points to a broader theoretical implication: migration governance cannot be understood solely through formal policy analysis. Legal orders are lived and enacted through everyday practices, social networks and culturally situated negotiations. Microlegalities illuminate this lived dimension of law, offering a lens for analysing the subtle forms of agency, knowledge-making and relational labour that sustain mobility under global capitalism. Recognising the centrality of microlegalities is therefore not only analytically fruitful but essential for designing more equitable migration policies that acknowledge the realities of how migrants actually navigate the world.

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Towards a Global Political Economy Scholarship on Global Migration Governance

Crystal A. Ennis and Sherzod Eraliev

Assemblages of Migration offers a new way to think about global migration governance, and one which positions the global political economy of non-Western migration regimes at the centre of analysis. This volume is empirically grounded in ‘non-Western’ case studies and theoretically viewed and analysed through the concept of migration assemblages, which we build throughout the book. The assemblages of migration framework is an approach that understands the contested, multiscale, and heterogeneous character of global migration governance and decrypts it as historically shaped, polycentric, infrastructural, stratified, embodied, and co-produced. We argue that the *Assemblages of Migration* approach provides scholars a truly global way to analyse the governance of global migration, escaping two traps that have plagued the field.

These traps are, first, global migration governance scholarship suffers from methodological Western-centrism. Empirical research is drawn from

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Western experiences and theories grounded in Western contexts. These contexts are taken as representative of global migration, whereas studies based on other world regions are considered idiosyncratic cases of that region. That is, cases from South Asia, for example, can only speak about South Asian migration governance, whereas case studies from Europe are viewed as contributions to building global migration governance theory. The second trap therefore extends from the first – the field of global migration governance ghettoises migration governance that occurs across non-Western geographies. The global south is viewed as a space for empirical extraction and descriptive depth but not for theory-building. As Natter (2021) argues, essentialising logics are embedded within a particular ‘political economy of knowledge production’ which inhibits theory-building across political regimes and geographies by denying them similar value (pp. 115–116). Only in the last decade do we observe a nascent and growing critique of the methodological Western-centrism plaguing the field. We agree with Triandafyllidou (2022), who argues that this demands a ‘radical de-centring’ of our understanding of migration governance.

In the past decade, global political economy (GPE) literature has taken a turn to do better at being global and escaping the methodological Western-centrism that binds it within borders or specific regions. Helleiner’s fantastic books, the *Contested World Economy* (2023) and *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods* (2014), are cases in point.¹ GPE scholarship on migration too is gradually undergoing a similar transformation (see, for example, Lavenex & Piper, 2022; Mieres, 2020; Talani & McMahon, 2015). Notably, recent work by Adamson and Thiollot (2025) on the colonial migration state repositions migration management as an intrinsic component of the colonial political economy – one that fused population control with labour extraction and legal differentiation. In parallel, Tsourapas (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021) conceptualises migration as a tool of international bargaining and regime survival, showing how states in the Global South leverage labour export, diaspora remittances, and migrant containment to accumulate political and economic capital.²

¹That for three of the last six years, the annual BISA International Political Economy Group book award has gone to books focused on the non-West also gives us an indication that the shift is gradually occurring in the wider field (Johnston 2023; Pati 2022; Hanieh 2019).

²We observe in fact increasing attention being paid to sites beyond the Western world, including in recent migration textbooks (Carmel et al., 2021; Geddes, 2021; Pécout & Thiollot, 2023; Triandafyllidou, 2024). We celebrate this movement.

Together, this emerging body of scholarship pushes GPE to recognise migration not as a residual outcome of economic globalisation but as a structuring principle of it.

Our volume builds on and extends these insights: *Assemblages of Migration* locates migration governance within historically sedimented circuits of extraction, brokerage, and externalisation, while maintaining analytical sensitivity to the infrastructures, categories, and embodied practices through which these circuits are made and remade. Building from Bhambra's call for a reorientation of how GPE studies capitalism, we are concerned not with a particular theory of global migration governance, 'but rather with the histories' and empirics that 'underpin the possibilities of those theories' (Bhambra, 2021, p. 308). Our book demonstrates how we can take case studies from around the world, beyond the West, and usefully engage them in a theory-building exercise. Not only does this decentre our usual analysis and offer new possible starting points but it also demonstrates the possibilities of an *Assemblages of Migration* approach to analysing global migration governance more broadly. The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, we ask whether we can decentre the West in global migration governance theory. Next, we delineate how an assemblage lens reframes the global political economy of migration. Finally, we outline the broader implications of this approach for a more global, politically grounded scholarship on migration governance.

DECENTRING THE WEST IN MIGRATION GOVERNANCE THEORY

The first step towards a global political economy scholarship on global migration governance is to ask whether we can decentre the West and how? Global migration governance scholarship has largely grown out of the field of international relations (IR), a field, as Tickner noted, which has changed little since it emerged as an American social science (Tickner, 2013, p. 633). IR's very foundation was grounded in the history of imperialism, as David et al. demonstrate, where the global south was indeed essential to its development but irredeemably entangled with imperial racial thought that it cannot seem to shake (2020). As Vitalis emphasises, IR in the United States was originally known as 'race relations' (Vitalis, 2017). The racial and colonial underpinnings of scholarship trying to understand the international system and governance have shaped its theories and methods – our ways of knowing. As Edward Said showed decades ago, imperialism and colonialism are not only about accumulation and

extraction. Rather, these are reinforced by ‘forms of knowledge affiliated with domination’ (Said, 1993, p. 9). These logics that have embedded our approaches to global migration governance within ‘a political economy of knowledge production’ (Natter, 2021, pp. 115–116) by denying certain geographies equal theoretical value need to be radically decentred (Triandafyllidou, 2022).

This volume aims to chip away at the process of radically decentring the West in the GPE of migration governance. Our assemblages approach hearkens to Edward Said’s call to ‘reread’ our histories not from one voice but ‘contrapuntally’ from multiple voices and experiences in order to disassemble the universalising codes of research and knowledge that have dominated the field (Said, 1993, pp. 51–52). Applying the *Assemblages of Migration* framework across diverse non-Western contexts demonstrates its analytical reach and flexibility. Rather than a fixed model, it offers a method for tracing how migration governance is assembled through alignments of history, authority, infrastructure, and lived practice. As Said entreats:

we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others (Said, 1993, p. 32).

Assemblages of migration engages contrapuntal reading to think through global migration governance. It centres those geographic spaces that have been marginalised in scholarship and thereby challenges the approaches that present themselves ‘as universal truth, experience, and theory ... backed up and reinforced by the power of expansion’ within imperialism and (neo)colonialism (Hwang, 2021, p. 312). This allows us to study global migration governance as a space co-constituted and co-produced by ‘others’ outside the West (Bilgin, 2016; Chowdhry, 2007).

Across the chapters, this lens exposes governance as a *layered and relational* process, showing how colonial, socialist, and developmentalist legacies, with all their racial and gendered lineages, persist within new architectures of mobility. In Java and New Caledonia, we observe how colonial and postcolonial labour systems produced durable architectures of extraction; in Shenzhen and West Africa, we see how regional compacts and subnational zones assemble governance through experimentation and contradiction; and in India, Kazakhstan, and Lithuania, we

trace how diaspora, categorisation, and gendered and racial hierarchies of labour and belonging operate as mechanisms of stratification. Collectively, these chapters reposition the non-Western world as an analytical core for understanding the dynamics of migration governance and its global interdependencies.

The framework also bridges structural and experiential scales, linking infrastructures of recruitment, remittance, and documentation to the embodied experiences of migrants. This resonates with Geddes' approach to migration governance in a global context that shows how the operation, effect, and actors of migration governance can shape migration and the lived experience of migrants themselves (Geddes, 2021). Our volume extends this helpful non-state ontology by emphasising the GPE of migration and centring non-Western migration regimes. It further reveals how the same bureaucratic and logistical devices that channel labour and capital also produce differentiated subjectivities and precarities. In this sense, *Assemblages of Migration* clarifies both how mobility is governed and how it is lived.

Equally important, the framework's comparative value lies in its ability to accommodate contradiction. It enables dialogue among cases that are geographically and politically distinct – colonial Indonesia, post-Soviet Eurasia, contemporary India, or West Africa – without forcing them into a single model. In this way, returning to Said, it is multivocal (Said, 1993, p. 51). The notion of assemblage accommodates contradiction: zones of liberalisation may coexist with regimes of coercion; diaspora mobilisation may intersect with exclusionary nationalism. This flexibility makes it particularly suited to analysing hybrid, authoritarian, and postcolonial regimes, capturing fluid and multiscale governance. Thus, *Assemblages of Migration* re-centres migration governance on processes of assembly, negotiation, and reconfiguration, revealing how global mobility is shaped through intersecting regimes of power and inequality.

So, can we decentre the West in our theorising of global migration governance? It is difficult to reframe established approaches to scholarship and reground our intellectual histories, but not impossible, as David et al. and Vitalis show with the field of IR (David et al., 2020; Vitalis, 2017). By revealing its racialised, gendered, and colonial origins, by decentring the Western ways of knowing and doing, by re-reading together the discrepant experiences, agendas, and relationships, we can begin to do so. We believe the assemblages of the migration approach advanced through this volume takes us some steps forward through its careful consideration of

not only origin stories and overlapping histories but also through holding human experience in conversation with governance patterns and mobility infrastructures. Certainly, however, more remains to be done.

REFRAMING THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MIGRATION

The chapters in this volume collectively demonstrate that the study of migration governance gains new analytical clarity when approached through an *assemblage* lens. Theoretically, *Assemblages of Migration* advances three interrelated contributions to the study of migration governance, and in so doing, reframes the GPE of migration to emphasise a global perspective that is not centred in the West.

First, and as noted earlier, it decentres the geography of theory. Instead of treating non-Western settings as deviations or imitations, the volume foregrounds them as sites of conceptual innovation. The cases reveal that hybrid, authoritarian, or postcolonial regimes generate logics of governance – formal and informal, experimental, national and multi-scalar, with intersecting legal regimes and microlegalities. Blarel shows, for example, how the Indian state has used digital technologies like its e-Migrate platform to innovatively help manage labour emigration. While this is framed as an effort to protect and empower Indian workers abroad, the system also offered the state enhanced surveillance and control possibilities over labour mobility. This is just one example of the Indian state's endeavours to police labour mobility and extend its sovereignty over diasporic bodies, and one which polices differently depending on education level, skill, and gender.³ Chan and Tan also show how new technologies are wielded from both the top down and bottom up to govern the mobility of middle-class migrants within China and into China in a way that allows the Chinese state to instrumentalise educated workers for the goals of economic growth. Drawing from examples across the world such as these aligns our volume with scholarly efforts to decolonise migration research and to democratise knowledge production (Bakewell et al., 2009; Crawley & Teye, 2024; Fiddian-Qasmieh, 2020; Mayblin & Turner, 2021).

³ How the Indian state polices differently depending on education level, skill, and gender has served to reinforce colonial legacies that governed mobility in and out of South Asia.

Second, the volume pushes GPE scholarship to centre migration and human mobility. Doing this allows us to unpack the colonial legacies and racial, gendered, and classed logics underpinning the infrastructures weaving together the global economy. This position argues alongside Adamson and Thiollet's concept of colonial migration state, showing how migration regimes are always embedded in 'broader systems defined by hierarchical logics of *extraction* and *differentiation*' (2025: 8). Correspondingly, Hayuningsih sketches the interaction of multiple empires and how they 'co-produced systems of control and exploitation' – foundational patterns for negotiating and governing sovereignty and the transnational flows of people and information. In a similar vein, Semedi demonstrates how over two hundred years of Javanese migration have been continuously structured by colonial and contemporary labour recruitment systems to reproduce a racialised, cheap, and flexible labour reserve. This has not facilitated upward class mobility as claimed by push–pull explanations of migration but rather has trapped workers in a form of production relations in the global political economy whereby their labour is extracted, disciplined, and circulated.

In West Africa too, Okyere shows how plans to liberalise regional mobility and settlement have been constrained by colonial infrastructures and regimes. The outcomes of this constraint have been especially harmful for women, demonstrating clearly the racial, gendered, and colonial logics underpinning the GPE of migration that subjugates the free movement rights of West Africans to European exigencies. Similarly, Mačkinè *et al.* reveal the racial hierarchies underpinning logics of governance and migration management. As Kilichova, Hayunsingih, and Okyere also show in this volume, differentiation has always been central to gendered and racialised logics and structures of governance (Bair, 2010; Roediger & Esch, 2012; Tilley & Shilliam, 2018; Virdee, 2019). Understanding how migration patterns have been shaped by these infrastructures, logics, and patterns enables us to hold human experience in conversation with the governance of human mobility and interaction of power hierarchies. These contributions then build on earlier work that centred labour, migration, and mobility in the core of global capitalism (e.g., Ashiagbor, 2021; Babar & Vora, 2022; Castles, 2011; Chang, 2015; Ennis, 2024; Kunz, 2020). Together the volume demonstrates how mobility has always been central to the organisation of global capitalism. It further extends this by showing

how infrastructures, categories, and brokers reproduce hierarchies of labour and belonging across time.

Third, the framework bridges GPE with lived experience, connecting with scholarship on the international political economy (IPE) of the everyday (Elias & Louth, 2016; Elias & Roberts, 2016; Hobson & Seabrooke, 2009). As Elias and Rai show us, more than simply a 'site of mundane acts', the everyday is an ambiguous and contradictory space that can manifest inequalities and gendered violent structures underpinning global spaces of work (2015, p. 425). We agree with their characterisation that lived experiences 'generate the most useful insights' (p. 426), which we see as enabling scholars to connect the everyday IPE with material structures and infrastructures that assemble unequal migration pathways and governance together. Baigabatova, for example, exposes the everyday practices of adaptation by Kazakh repatriates, which interacts with an assemblage of state structures and bureaucracies, familial networks and informal practices. Together, these produce contradictions where symbolic inclusion is reified while returnees face material exclusion. Echoing this finding, Mačkinė et al. show how migrant inclusion in Lithuania is 'selectively assembled' and shaped by racialised logics of deservingness. This understanding of the everyday is foregrounded in Kilichova's chapter. Emphasising the embodied experience of Central Asian women's migration, the chapter demonstrates how inequalities are produced through institutional and material realities in combination with lived, bodily experiences and women's situated forms of agency. Chan and Tan use the concept of governmobility to think through how migrants manage themselves and their connections through new assemblages and techniques of governance. Taking this further, Aidarkhankyzy fleshes out the centrality of microlegalities to understanding the GPE of labour mobility by demonstrating how migrants co-produce governance structures through their everyday generation of practical knowledge and social infrastructures that facilitate the operation of the global labour market. This perspective understands migration governance through the everyday as 'a multilayered, socially embedded field in which migrants are active producers of legal meaning' (this volume). By linking macro-structures of extraction to everyday navigation and affect, connecting GPE with lived migration experience shows how legality, trust, and moral classification sustain global orders of mobility. Migration governance thus appears simultaneously as an apparatus of rule and a terrain of social creativity.

Final Remarks

The departure point of assemblages of migration has been to radically decentre the GPE of migration governance away from the West. Using the terminology of Triandafyllidou, this idea is developed out of Bhambra's concern with reorienting how GPE studies capitalism (Bhambra, 2021). Alongside Said's call to reread our histories and scholarship, our approach to the GPE of global migration governance is thus concerned with the histories and empirics that 'underpin' migration governance theorising (Bhambra, 2021, p. 308). That is, we are especially concerned with how the geographies and experiences that are centred in migration governance literatures need to be disassembled and recentred so we can highlight multiple voices and experiences. Through this foregrounding, we therefore offer theoretical worth to those spaces that have been denied analogous value in comparative scholarship (see Natter, 2021). We have argued that applying an assemblages of migration approach allows us to escape the trap of methodological Western-centrism and the tendency of global migration governance to ghettoise regimes and experiences across the Global South as exceptional, deviant cases of migration governance.

Assemblages of migration has also made three interconnected theoretical contributions to the study of global migration governance. Assemblages (a) decentres the geography of theory, (b) centres migration in GPE and in so doing uncovers the colonial, racial, gendered, and classed logics defining the infrastructures of human mobility underpinning the global economy, and (3) engages a GPE of the everyday by emphasising the lived experience of migration. Together, these interrelated contributions reframe the GPE of migration to underscore a global that is not centred in the West.

Looking ahead, the challenge for global migration governance scholarship is not merely to add more cases from the Global South (or non-Western contexts) but to build theories that travel across contexts and speak from them. The *Assemblages of Migration* framework invites precisely this: an approach that sees migration governance as historically layered, relational, and open-ended. By tracing how mobility is assembled through power, infrastructure, and lived practice, this volume calls for a genuinely global conversation – one that situates theory not from one geography but in multiple peripheries where global mobility is governed, contested, and re-imagined. Only in a multivocal story that centres the so-called margins, reconceiving our core and peripheries, can we radically decentre and reframe our understanding of global migration governance.

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