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Editorial

Closing Editorial: Migration, Civil Society, and the Reimagination of Citizenship

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Over the past few decades, the study of migration has increasingly moved beyond a state-centered framework to examine the diverse actors and institutions that shape migrants' lives across borders (Sager 2016; Scheel and Tazzioli 2022), even if scholars continue to debate the salience of states' roles in these processes (Waldinger 2015). Scholars in migration and citizenship studies have highlighted how migrants' trajectories—from departure and transit to settlement and integration—are structured not only by states and markets but also by a wide array of civil society organizations, advocacy groups, and community networks (Ambrosini and Van der Leun 2015; Cuttitta et al. 2023). The six contributions gathered in this Special Issue advance this growing body of scholarship by examining how civil society actors participate in the governance of migration and the everyday negotiation of migrant belonging. Taken together, they demonstrate that migrants and refugees shape complex configurations of state and non-state actors that structure opportunities for mobility, participation, and social recognition. By examining these relationships across different stages of migration and in diverse geographic contexts, this collection of articles underscores how civil society simultaneously mediates, contests, and reproduces the institutional and social boundaries of citizenship.

Rather than treating citizenship as a fixed legal status, recent scholars on migration and citizenship have emphasized how access to rights, services, and social membership is stratified along multiple axes, including legal status, gender, race, and class (Ellermann 2020; Morrice 2017). This shift has also generated growing scholarly interest in the role of civil society in shaping migrants' experiences within these highly stratified systems. Non-governmental organizations, faith-based institutions, humanitarian volunteer groups, immigrant associations, and grassroots networks frequently serve as intermediaries between migrants and states, providing services, advocating for rights, and creating spaces for civic participation. At the same time, these organizations often operate within states' regulatory frameworks, which constrain their activities and may inadvertently reinforce the very hierarchies they seek to challenge.

Despite the expansion of this body of literature, several gaps remain. Much scholarship continues to focus primarily on migrants' experiences within receiving states, overlooking the ways in which migration processes are shaped by actors and institutions in countries of origin and transit. Similarly, while civil society organizations are often discussed as service providers or advocacy groups, less attention has been paid to migrants themselves as active participants within these organizations, shaping their agendas, leadership structures, and forms of collective action. Finally, existing research has only begun to explore how civil society mediates the stratification produced by contemporary migration regimes, in which legal categories and policy frameworks generate differentiated access to rights and resources. The contributions to this Special Issue address these gaps by examining the dynamic relationships among migrants, states, and civil society actors across multiple stages

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of migration. Additionally, rather than treating civil society as a uniformly benevolent actor, the articles in this Special Issue reveal its diverse and sometimes ambivalent roles. Civil society organizations appear in these studies as advocates, mediators, community builders, and providers of humanitarian support, but also as actors operating within, and sometimes being constrained by, broader systems of governance and inequality. In doing so, this collection illuminates how civil society participates in shaping migrants' mobilities, trajectories, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion, while also offering spaces in which migrants develop new forms of social belonging and civic engagement.

One of the most important contributions of this Special Issue lies in the attention it pays to migrants as agents within civil society rather than merely as recipients of assistance. The articles examining immigrant and refugee women's organizations highlight how migrants themselves play central roles in constructing civic spaces that support integration and community building. For instance, Topa and Cerqueira's (2023) article on immigrant women's leadership in Portugal reveals how participation in immigrant organizations can foster autonomy, visibility, and political voice, even as leaders confront structural constraints such as limited resources and organizational sustainability. Similarly, the study by McEvoy et al. (2025) on refugee women's networks in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland demonstrates how community-based organizations can become sites of mutual support and collective empowerment. Through shared experiences of motherhood, leadership, and problem-solving, these networks generate social cohesion and facilitate the rebuilding of lives in new social contexts. Together, these contributions emphasize that civil society is not simply an institutional intermediary between migrants and the state; it is also a space in which migrants themselves shape forms of participation, solidarity, and self-representation.

Another central theme emerging from the articles in this Special Issue is the stratified nature of contemporary citizenship regimes. Migration scholars have long recognized that legal status structures migrants' access to rights and resources (Kmak 2020; Taran 2001), but the articles in this Special Issue deepen our understanding of how these hierarchies are produced and experienced in everyday life. The introduction of the "documentation status continuum" framework by Joseph (2025), for example, provides a useful conceptual tool for analyzing the graded nature of migrants' legal belonging. By mapping the range of legal statuses between undocumented migrants and full citizens, this framework highlights how policy regimes allocate benefits and restrictions, including access to such essential services as healthcare, along a continuum of legal recognition. At the same time, Joseph's research underscores the role of civil society organizations and community networks in helping migrants navigate these complex bureaucratic landscapes, illustrating once again how civil society mediates the boundaries of citizenship in practice.

This collection also expands the spatial and temporal scope of migration scholarship by examining migration processes beyond the countries of settlement. Several contributions emphasize that the conditions shaping migrants' opportunities and vulnerabilities often originate long before arrival in a host society. Alowais and Suliman's (2025) study on migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates highlights how exploitative recruitment practices and informal lending arrangements in countries of origin can trap workers in cycles of debt and dependency even before they begin their journeys. These findings encourage us not to focus solely on labor conditions or policy frameworks within destination countries, but instead to look at the transnational systems of recruitment and finance that structure migrant labor markets. Similarly, the study of transit migration in Central America by Romero et al. (2026) underscores the importance of examining migration as a dynamic process shaped by both long-term structural pressures and immediate causal factors. By applying a "push-pull plus (PPP)" framework, the research demonstrates how

migrants' decisions are influenced not only by economic or political conditions in their countries of origin but also by shifting policy signals, opportunities for travel, and, most crucially for this Special Issue, support networks encountered along the route. Civil society organizations such as migrant shelters in transit countries play a crucial role in this context, providing humanitarian assistance and critical information that can shape migrants' journeys. These findings highlight the need to consider the role of civil society not only in settlement contexts but also in the often-overlooked spaces of transit where migrants make critical decisions about their movements.

The Special Issue also situates these micro- and meso-level dynamics of mobilities within broader global structures that shape migration flows. The analysis of skilled migration across nearly two hundred countries by Vega-Muñoz et al. (2025) illustrates how governance quality, economic inequality, and political stability influence patterns of the so-called "brain drain" phenomenon. Yet this study also challenges simplistic narratives that portray migration solely as a loss for countries of origin. By highlighting the potential for "brain circulation," it suggests that migrants can contribute to transnational networks of knowledge, investment, and social exchange through their movements. It argues that civil society organizations, diasporic networks, and professional associations can facilitate these connections, helping migrants maintain ties with their home communities while integrating into new social contexts. In this sense, migration becomes not merely a movement of individuals but a process that reshapes relationships among societies through engagements with various actors, including civil society organizations.

Taken together, the contributions in this Special Issue highlight the multifaceted roles of civil society across the migration trajectory, from pre-departure contexts and transit routes to settlement and community formation in receiving societies. They demonstrate that civil society operates at the intersection of multiple systems of governance, navigating the tensions between humanitarian support, policy compliance, and advocacy for migrants' rights. At the same time, these studies reveal the creative ways in which migrants themselves engage with and transform these civic organizations and groups, turning them into spaces of leadership, solidarity, and, in some situations, collective action. By foregrounding these dynamics, this Special Issue contributes to ongoing efforts to reconceptualize citizenship in an era of intensified global mobility. Citizenship, as these articles collectively suggest, cannot be understood solely as a formal legal status granted by the state. Instead, it emerges through a complex interplay of legal categories, institutional practices, and social relationships that could extend across nation-state borders (c.f., Isin 2012). Civil society organizations play a crucial role in this process, helping migrants navigate the stratified landscapes of rights and belonging while also creating new spaces for participation and recognition before, during, and after their transnational movements.

Looking ahead, the research presented here points toward several promising directions for future scholarly work. First, there is a need for more systematic attention to be paid to the transnational dimensions of civil society's engagement in migration processes. Many of the vulnerabilities and opportunities that migrants encounter originate outside their destination countries, whether in recruitment systems, diaspora networks, or humanitarian infrastructures along migratory routes. Comparative and multi-sited research could deepen our understanding of how civil society actors coordinate across borders to address these challenges. Second, further research is needed on the internal dynamics of migrant-led organizations and networks. The articles in this Special Issue, such as those provided by Topa and Cerqueira (2023) and McEvoy et al. (2025), demonstrate the transformative potential of such organizations, particularly in fostering leadership and empowerment among migrant women. Yet questions remain about how these organizations sustain themselves, negotiate relationships with state institutions, and navigate internal inequalities

related to gender, race, class, or legal status in the long run. Third, scholars should continue to investigate how evolving policy regimes of sending, transit, and receiving states reshape the stratification of citizenship. As governments in these different migratory contexts introduce new legal categories and regulatory frameworks, migrants' access to rights and services changes in complex and differentiated ways. Understanding how civil society actors respond to these changes, and how migrants themselves mobilize within these spaces, will be essential for analyzing the future of migration and citizenship studies. Finally, there is a growing need to integrate insights from migration research with broader discussions of global inequality, governance, and development. Migration flows are deeply embedded in these larger structures, and civil society actors often operate at the intersection of local, national, and international policy environments. Interdisciplinary approaches that connect migration studies with political economy, sociology, and international relations may therefore offer valuable new perspectives.

Collectively, the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate that migration processes cannot be fully understood without examining the complex networks of civil society actors that shape migrants' trajectories and experiences of belonging, whether they lead to state-sanctioned legal citizenship or not. By illuminating these relationships across diverse contexts and stages of migration, the contributions offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of how citizenship is negotiated in an increasingly mobile world. In doing so, they also highlight the critical role of civil society not only as an intermediary between individual migrants and states but also as a critical space in which new forms of participation, solidarity, and recognition can emerge.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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