Families on the Move - Latin American Perspectives

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Abstract

Thisintroduction to the Special Issue *"Families on the Move – Latin American Perspectives"* explores the intersection of family life and migration within and toward Latin America. While existing scholarship has focused predominantly on migrant and transnational families in Europe and North America due to language barriers and epistemic exclusions, this Special Issue brings critical attention to the dynamics of intra-regional and South–South migration. Latin America presents a unique context for theorising family-related migration. This is due to factors such as porous borders, flexible and intergenerational care arrangements, heightened economic precarity in countries of origin and settlement, enduring colonial legacies, and migration policies that blend progressive legislation with restrictive implementation and practice. Drawing on theoretical contributions from scholars working on the region and literature written in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, this issue advances the international literature along three key dimensions: (1) rethinking binary notions of separation and reunification by highlighting fluid forms of family life that have movement and transit at their core; (2) examining how progressive policies alone cannot guarantee the right to family life, especially in the face of economic precarity and implementation gaps; and (3) interrogating how colonial, racial, and gendered legacies shape perceptions of family and care. By centering on Latin America, this Special Issue fills a critical gap in migration literature while also challenging essentialised notions of "the South", demonstrating that migrant families' experiences are diverse, intersectional, and profoundly shaped by the specific socio-historical conditions of each local context.

Keywords: Latin America, South-South migration, transnational families, family reunification

1. Introduction

Latin America has been a focal point in the field of family and migration studies for several decades, with significant attention given since the 1990s to the examination of global circuits of care that have emerged due to the migration of Latin American women to Europe and North America (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997; Mahler, 1999). Since then, various studies have analysed transnational parenthood practices (Dreby 2006), shared child-rearing systems (Yarris, 2017), and reunification strategies (Bonizzoni, 2011) employed by Latin American families residing in the Global North. Despite this robust scholarship, significantly less academic attention has been devoted to transnational families arising from intra-regional migration within Latin America itself or from migration towards Latin America (Bonjour & Cleton 2021). This is surprising given not only the historical prevalence of border mobility and intra-regional labour migration in Latin America but also the number of families who have moved intra-regionally over the last couple of decades.

Three main factors contribute to this exclusion. First, while Latin American scholars have produced rigorous and extensive research on intra-regional family migration, much of this work is written in Spanish and Portuguese. Given the dominance of English in global academic circles, this work often struggles to gain international recognition (Stefoni & Stang, 2017; Martuscelli, 2024; Bastia & Kofman, 2025). Second, even when Latin American research is published in English, it is often much less supported, resourced, and valued than research produced in universities in the Global North (Martuscelli, 2024; Izaguirre et al., 2025). Finally, although Latin America receives attention in countries such as the United States and Spain due to significant immigration flows *to* these countries, the theoretical contributions emerging from research conducted within the region remain much less visible worldwide.

Focusing on Latin America, this Special Issue advances theoretical debates on family migration and mobility along three key dimensions. First, it highlights how emerging patterns of regional mobility disrupt conventional frameworks of separation and reunification, foregrounding dynamic, fluid forms of family life rooted in movement and transit. Second, it examines the disjuncture between progressive legal frameworks and their implementation, revealing how ambiguous procedures, restrictive implementation, discretionary bureaucratic practices, limited enforcement, and economic vulnerability often undermine formal rights to family life. Third, it critically engages with the enduring influence of colonial, gendered, and racialised legacies in shaping dominant norms around family and care. As increasingly called for by research done on the region (McIlwaine, 2010; Gavazzo et al., 2020; Garcés et al., 2022; Izaguirre et al., 2025), scholars in this issue take close attention to intersectionality and how

various axes of exclusion—such as age, gender, race, and class—affect migrants and their families in radically different ways.

In her seminal work, Eleonore Kofman (2004) identified three key categories of family-related migration: family reunification, family formation, and the migration of entire family units. Kofman (2004) argued that while other types of migration have been the focus of most migration research for decades, family migration actually remained one of the most important regular migration routes, due to the international recognition of the rights to family life and family unity in global, regional, and national human rights legislation. Yet, the term "family-related migration" has historically been defined from the state's perspective, which determines what constitutes a family unit for the purposes of dependency, marriage migration, or reunification (Kofman, 2004). Any discussion of families, therefore, requires a theoretical engagement with how states define "family" and how familial ties are proven (Bonjour & Cleton 2021). The migration literature has long explored how family strategies intersect with state efforts to control mobility, leading to outcomes such as family separation or reunification (Schweitzer, 2015; Bonizzoni, 2011). To date, most of this scholarly work has focused on Europe and North America.

Importantly, families do not need to move to be considered in international migration processes. In parallel with studies on family migration, which generally focus on families in the process of coming together, the transnational framework has been used to understand families connected across borders despite physical distance (Sørensen & Vammen, 2014). As a conceptual approach used to understand how people's lives span across national borders, the transnational framework has been key in demonstrating that migration decisions are often taken within a familial frame of reference and that a sense of responsibility towards kin persists across distance (Bryceson & Vuorella, 2003; Sørensen & Vammen, 2014).

With the increasing complexity of migration dynamics, the distinction between migrant families and transnational families has become increasingly blurred. As Bertolani et al. (2014) argue, all migrant families are inherently transnational, since family "reunification" is rarely linear or permanent—it often involves repeated cycles of separation and reunion. Building on this insight, this Special Issue employs the term *families on the move* to describe a broader and more fluid range of family migration experiences. Rather than focusing solely on those migrating through legally defined family routes, we use this term to refer to diverse and often non-linear forms of mobility, including, families in transit, transborder families, transnational families that experience interment moments of physical proximity, refugees seeking reunification through expanded definitions of family, domestic workers negotiating their roles

within their employers' families, and people engaging in "birth mobilities" (Ruseishvilli, 2024). The idea of *families on the move* therefore also encompasses the different ways in which those who are immobile contribute to migration experiences. It acknowledges that stasis and movement are inherently transitory, and that transnational family networks are in a constant process of rearrangement. As the contributions to this Special Issue make clear, these diverse forms of family are particularly important in Latin America, and potentially other contexts in the Global South, where border porosity, economic precarity, colonial legacies, and unique policy frameworks shape family relations well beyond what is formally prescribed by states.

2. *Theoretical contributions of family migration research within Latin America*

Latin America has a long and complex history of intra-regional labour migration. This includes frequent cross-border movements, often driven by agricultural work, as well as longer-distance migration. In the 1980s, Colombians and Ecuadorians moved to Venezuela's oil sector, while the 1990s and 2000s saw increased migration from Andean and Paraguayan nationals to the Southern Cone countries—Chile, Argentina, and Brazil (Durand & Massey, 2010; Cerruti, 2022). Alongside labour migration, forced displacement has played a major role in shaping the region's migration patterns. Civil wars in Central America during the 1980s led to mass displacement from the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala). In the 1990s, Colombia also experienced escalating conflict and, by 2000, had become the country with the most significant number of forced migrants in Latin America (including the largest number of internally displaced persons before the start of the Syrian war in 2011) (Lopez 2019).

More recently, the Venezuelan crisis has driven the largest displacement in the region's history, with over seven million people leaving the country. Between 2015 and 2020, South America's migrant population surged by 75% mainly due to this exodus (Prieto Rosas & Zapata, 2024). By 2017, intra-regional migration in South America outpaced migration from outside the region (McIlwaine & Ryburn, 2018). Since 2010, the continent has also become a key destination for Haitian migrants and increasing numbers of refugees from African countries (Cintra & Martuscelli, 2025).

The profile of migration flows to the Southern Cone varies significantly. Historically, both men and women have migrated to this region, but they have tended to occupy different types of employment. Bolivian men have often been employed in construction and agricultural sectors in Argentina and Chile, while Bolivian women were more likely to engage in street vending and in the garment industry. In contrast, women from Peru and Paraguay have

typically found work in domestic service roles (Cerruti, 2022). Importantly, this migration experienced a gradual process of feminisation, with women becoming increasingly significant in the domestic sectors of these countries. This independent female migration, often based on live-in work arrangements, has spurred substantial research on transnational families in the region (Stefoni, 2011; Bastia, 2013; Ryburn, 2018).

The profile of displaced Colombians, Central Americans, Haitians, and Venezuelans varies significantly. Colombian and Venezuelan migration often involves entire families migrating together or reuniting after short periods of separation (Mejía, 2012; Jorgensen, forthcoming). Haitian migration, by contrast, has largely been male-dominated and marked by frequent family separation, although it has also included a gradual process of feminisation and family reunification (Cerruti, 2022). In the case of Central Americans, women and girls are estimated to make up about half of the migrant population (Kerf, 2023). Their experiences—particularly those fleeing gender-based violence and facing risks during transit through Latin American countries—have been the focus of increasing academic attention (Willers, 2020; Cerruti, 2022).

In recent years, Latin America has faced "one of the world's largest and most complex child migration crises" (UNICEF, 2025), with rising numbers of children crossing borders alone or with non-legal guardians. Between January and November 2024, 4,500 unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) crossed the Darien Gap—a dangerous route between Colombia and Panama—while 3,300 were registered across the region in 2023, marking a record high (UNICEF, 2024). While multiple factors contribute to this trend, key drivers include family dynamics, historical migration trends of caregivers, and restrictive reunification policies (Martuscelli, 2017; UNICEF, L.I.E.P., 2023).

Migration in the region unfolds amid a rapidly evolving policy landscape marked by liberal migration policies but restrictive implementation practices (Acosta & Freier, 2015; Cintra and Martuscelli, 2025). The region is often recognised for having one of the world's most progressive migration and protection frameworks (Jubilut et al., 2021). A landmark moment was the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, signed by fifteen states, which broadened the definition of refugee to include those fleeing generalised violence, foreign aggression, internal conflict, and massive human rights violations. In the 21st century, this rights-based approach was reinforced by policy documents framing migration as a human right, emphasising non-criminalisation and equal treatment of migrants and citizens (Acosta, 2018; Zapata et al., 2023). Regional mobility has also been facilitated by free movement agreements, such as the 2006

Central American Free Mobility Agreement, the 2021 Andean Migration Status, and the 2002 MERCOSUR Agreement on Residence and Free Movement.

However, the large-scale displacement of Central Americans, Haitians and Venezuelans in recent years has put these liberal frameworks to the test. Despite the progressive legal environment, refugee status has rarely been extended to these groups. Instead, most are either undocumented or rely on temporary and often precarious protection permits (Gandini, 2022; Cintra, 2022; Zapata et al., 2023). We are also seeing restrictive migration policies reforms in Argentina, Brazil and Chile that are restricting migrant's rights and reinforcing border politics (Zapata et al., 2023; Zapata, 2025).

This complex socio-political landscape shapes the experiences of families on the move in various ways. Yet, to date, most studies focused on migrant families within the region have been published as individual contributions in migration journals. Unlike the European case (Bailey & Boyle, 2004), to the best of our knowledge, there is currently no special issue specifically dedicated to this topic in other regional contexts[1].

Previous research on families migrating within and towards Latin America, or studies focusing on migrants' contexts of origin, reveals the analytical importance of pluralising and decolonising this research agenda. Some key scholarly contributions from researchers working on the region have been especially influential and serve as a foundation for this Special Issue: a critique to care deficit and care chain theories (Herrera, 2020; Jorgensen et al., 2019); theorisations about the particularities of transnational families emerging from contexts of border porosity and geographical proximity (Bastia & Busse 2011; Arriagada & Todaro 2012; Ryburn, 2018; Meneses Gutierrez 2023); analyses of how progressive family reunification legislation are not enough to guarantee the right to family life (Bastia & Busse, 2011; Stefoni, 2011; Martuscelli 2019; 2023); and discussions of the role of slavery, and colonialism in shaping understandings of the migrant family (Herrera, 2014; Chan and Fernández-Ossandón's, 2023). In the following paragraphs, we focus on each of these contributions in detail.

Adding nuance to care chain theories

[1] The Special Issue "Class, Education and Parenting: Cross-Cultural Perspectives" edited by the Guest Editors: Deborah Golden, Lauren Erdreich, Kari Stefansen, and Ingrid Smette for the British Journal of Sociology of Education have many papers on Parenting in Global South, but it does not specifically focus on families on the move as the present Special Issue.

Care chain theories have been fundamental in demonstrating how global inequalities shape the transnational movement of care labour. They have highlighted how the paid care provided by migrant women in global cities in the Global North often takes place to the detriment of the care they can provide to their own families in their home locations (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997; Hochschild, 2000). Hochschild (2000) argues that once women in the Global North leave their households to work, they create a demand for care work – which is then usually fulfilled by immigrant women, who, in turn, leave empty care spaces upon departure.

While much of this theorisation is based on the cases of Asian and Latin American women working in the United States, works from scholars focusing more closely on migrants' countries of origin, or intra-regional migration, have been key in adding nuance to these theories. Herrera (2020) was among the first to recognise the contributions of Latin American scholarship in this regard. She argues that studies by Soto et al. (2012), Salazar et al. (2011), Arriagada and Todaro (2012), among others have challenged the idea of a clear-cut global divide between North and South, instead illustrating how asymmetries in care delivery systems coexist at regional, national, and local levels. This research shows that racialised women and internal female migrants from rural areas have historically carried out care work in Latin America. In wealthier countries within the region — such as Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica — this labour was also undertaken by female migrants from neighbouring areas, including Peru, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, particularly from the 1980s. The more visible flows of Latin American women migrating to Spain and the United States in the late twentieth century and the early 2000s were therefore preceded by a longer-standing pattern of internal and intra-regional female migration (Stefoni & Fernández-Ossandón 2011; Bastia 2013; Ryburn 2018).

As Herrera (2014) argues, Latin American scholarship has also been instrumental in challenging the notion of "empty care spaces" put forward by care chain theorists. Rather than voids left by migrating women, these spaces have been shown to encompass diverse care arrangements in migrants' countries of origin, each marked by varying degrees of vulnerability. Crucially, many of these arrangements are deeply rooted in the region's long-standing history of labour precarity and strong female economic participation, and significantly predate the surge in international migration to the Global North. As shown by Ariza & de Oliveira (2006) and Bastia (2019), caregiving responsibilities have long been distributed beyond the nuclear family (parents and children). Children have commonly been raised by grandmothers, older siblings, neighbours, or extended kin.

In this sense, while long-distance migration to the Global North certainly introduces new tensions and contradictions, families in the region have been historically operating outside traditional nuclear family models. Research by Herrera (2013), for example, highlights how teenage pregnancy and unstable partnerships in Ecuador have normalised caregiving by grandmothers. In contexts where fathers are often absent, "good mothers" are not necessarily those who provide hands-on care, but also those who can financially support their families. Similarly, research carried out by Jorgensen et al. (2019) in Brazil shows that teenage motherhood and the normalisation of extended family care arrangements actually facilitate young women's emigration to Portugal and Spain, rather than necessarily resulting from it. Soto et al. (2012), examining Paraguayan women in Argentina, likewise found that households in Paraguay were usually already based on extended families before migration occurred. Taken together, these studies situate international migration to the Global North within a broader set of socioeconomic and historical family dynamics, shaped by high rates of female labour market participation, longstanding patterns of internal and intra-regional migration based on class inequality and racially structured systems, and deeply rooted intergenerational care practices.

Are Latin American transnational families any different?

When thinking about families on the move, the dominant image is often one of a family member from the Global South separated from their loved ones in the Global North across vast distances and for extended periods, and with return visits made difficult by the high costs of travel and restrictive migration policies (especially given that the family member may have an irregular migration situation). However, considering that 75% of all refugees live in low and middle-income countries in the Global South (UNHCR, 2024) and that most migration in South America is intra-regional (IOM, 2025), this picture is likely far more complex. Overall, research on intra-regional migration in Latin America underscores the importance of examining how proximity, porous borders, cultural similarities, and lower economic returns shape transnational family life in unique ways (Bastia & Busse 2011; Arriagada & Todaro 2012; Ryburn, 2018; Meneses Gutierrez 2023).

Bastia and Busse (2011), Ryburn (2018), and Arriagada and Todaro's (2012) studies on Andean migrants in the Southern Cone illustrate how geographic proximity and circular migration can give rise to more flexible forms of transnational motherhood. These arrangements enable some women to combine paid work abroad with some level of hands-on

caregiving. While borders in the region are not open, their relative porosity facilitates more frequent visits home for migrants working in neighbouring countries.

While care arrangements are more fluid, extant literature from Latin American contexts shows that...n that intra-regional migration has generally been less conducive to the negotiation of traditional gender roles within families. This is due to several factors including lower economic gains for women in destination countries, more gender-balanced flows, and migration to countries with similar gender norms and ideals. For example, in the case of Bolivian migration to Argentina, Cerruti (2022) argues that the opportunity to engage in family-oriented economic activities (such as trade) and the relatively easier access to residency rights has resulted in more gender-balanced migration flows, as compared to Bolivian migration to Spain — which was predominantly female.

In a comparative study, Bastia and Busse (2011) show that the independent migration of women to Spain generated more intra-family tensions than those migrating within Latin America. In the former case, women's higher economic gains and their role as migration pioneers contributed to perceptions of greed and selfishness, which conflicted with traditional expectations of maternal sacrifice. Their reduced ability to make return visits home further reinforced these ruptures, which were not necessarily seen in previous migration to Argentina. In the case of men, Ryburn's (2018) more recent research on Bolivian and Peruvian men in Chile shows that stronger patriarchal norms operating in Latin America, combined with limited financial returns in the care sector, result in migrant men continuing to work predominantly in traditionally male-dominated occupations. s a result, men's gender identities are less challenged in intra-regional migration than in migration to the Global North (Ryburn, 2018), where they are being increasingly employed in care-related occupations.

The lower currency differences and the lower value of remittances in South-South migration also shape the dynamics of transnational family life, although research in this area remains limited. In a study on older adults left behind in Bolivia, Bastia et al. (2021) find that the parents of migrants in Argentina experience greater vulnerability compared to those whose children have migrated to Spain. This is because intra-regional migrants often face more economic insecurity and tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Studies focused on other contexts suggest that migrants in the Global South are more likely to stop remitting during times of crisis, further exacerbating the precarity of families who depend on their support (Ratha & Shaw, 2007).

Beyond the particularities of transnational family arrangements, Latin American scholarship across multiple disciplines has also been instrumental in highlighting the region's

rich and varied family structures, many of which challenge the traditional dominance of the nuclear family model in migration studies. Studies on indigenous communities have been critically examining the colonial origins of marriage, monogamy and gender binarisms. These studies also delve into the distinction between human caregiving and broader ecological responsibilities, considering the care of other beings and the environment (Cariño & Montelongo González, 2022; Núñez et al., 2022). More recent studies on queer identities and migration have challenged the rigid distinctions between kinship and friendship, emphasising the importance of other types of relationship for those who find little support within traditional family structures (Cortés, 2023; Cantú, 2023). Currently, more research is needed to explore how these diverse family structures shape and are shaped by migration processes.

Beyond progressive family migration legislations

Latin American studies have also been key in examining the effects of progressive family migration policies on family dynamics within the region, shedding light on the limitations of formal legislation alone in guaranteeing the right to family life (Senfet, 2018; Martuscelli, 2021; Mazza, 2024). Many studies have recognised implementation gaps (Acosta & Freier, 2015; Cintra and Martuscelli, 2025) between liberal migration legislation and policies and restrictive practices and decisions that limited families' mobility (Martuscelli, 2019). Since the early 2000s, Latin American countries have adopted a more liberal and rights-based approach to migration and refugee protection. This shift has been driven by several intersecting factors, including the rise of centre-left governments in many South American nations, growing regional integration, longstanding civil society advocacy, and an attempt to antagonise restrictive policies in the Global North, where many Latin American nationals live (Acosta & Freier, 2015; Prieto Rosas & Zapata, 2024). Latin America is often noted for its comparatively advanced regional approach to refugee protection (Jubilut et al., 2021).

A key milestone was the 1984 Cartagena Declaration—drafted amid large-scale displacement from Central America—which was endorsed by fifteen countries and broadened the criteria under which people may claim asylum. Nonetheless, South American countries have adopted many restrictive migration practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zapata et al. 2023) and more recently to respond to the Venezuelan migration crisis (Freier and Luzes, 2021; Zapata, 2025), which may have limited people's right to apply for asylum in the region.

Latin America also stands out for its family migration policie including family definition and citizenship rights. For migration-related matters, many states adopt an expansive understanding of family, allowing reunification not only with spouses and children but also

with extended relatives (Acosta 2018; Martuscelli 2021, 2023). In addition, the combination of birthright citizenship with the principle that children should not be denied the right to family life opens up paths to the regularisation of entire families when children are involved, a pattern which is rare in other parts of the world (Acosta, 2018).

Latin America has also been recognised as a protective region for refugee rights. Freier and Gauci (2020) compared the protection of refugee rights in Europe and Latin America. They explain that the protection and guarantee of refugees' right to family is more comprehensive in the region than in Europe due to expanded definitions of family for family reunification purposes and facilitated family reunification procedures. In the twenty-first century, this has been followed by several policy documents that proclaimed migration as a human right and that were expressed in terms of principles of non-criminalisation and of equal treatment of migrants in relation to the native-born (Acosta 2018; Zapata et al., 2023).

However, this trend is changing, and in many countries, progressive immigration policies are being replaced by openly deterrence-focused approaches. In Argentina, for example, a 2025 reform aims to not only increase enforced returns but also restrict access to healthcare for irregular migrants. In addition, research shows that the progressive nature of migration and asylum legislation often amounts to little more than a "humanitarian façade," frequently coexisting with poor or restrictive policy implementation in practice (Domenech, 2013; Zapata 2025). Acosta and Freier (2015) famously described this as an "upside-down paradox," where officially welcoming frameworks mask covert efforts to deter irregular migration. This contradiction has been further documented by scholars examining recent responses to Venezuelan displacement, where ostensibly humanitarian visa schemes have, in practice, functioned as restrictive mechanisms—exacerbating uncertainty and vulnerability for migrants (Freier & Luzes, 2021; Jorgensen, 2022; Vera Espinoza et al., 2022).

With relation to family migration policies, Martuscelli's (2021, 2023) research has demonstrated how despite the broad definition of "family" adopted by the Brazilian legislation, ineffective implementation practices and diplomats' moral codes and subjectivities have hindered Congolese refugees in Brazil from exercising their right to family reunification. Mazza (2024) has analysed how the Latin American asylum regime has progressively approached the issue of family reunification for refugees, concluding that while there have been collective advancements in the right to family life in the region, this is not uniform nor a clear practice in Latin American countries.

The Latin American literature also reveals that policies alone - even when correctly implemented - are not enough to guarantee migrant families' possibilities of being together.

Stefoni's (2002) work on domestic workers from Peru and Bolivia revealed that material barriers and live-in work arrangements lead to mother-child separation, despite Chilean liberal family reunification policies. Economic barriers and the distance between the countries of origin and the destination (in the case of African migrants in Brazil, for example) were other issues that kept families apart. The cost of flight tickets and visas was an impediment for refugees to reunite with their families in Brazil, even when the facilitated family reunification procedure was working perfectly (Martuscelli 2019; 2023). This happened because refugee families were expected to send remittances to family members abroad, live in Brazil (usually with low salaries), and save money to cover the costs of family reunification. This body of literature underscores that, although Latin America has gained international recognition for its progressive approach to family migration—such as broad definitions of family for reunification, the application of birthright citizenship, and accessible regularisation pathways—persistent implementation challenges and material barriers often subject families to separation.

The legacies of slavery and colonialism

Latin America is a region profoundly shaped by exploitative colonial legacies, primarily from Spain and Portugal, and by the transatlantic slave trade—both of which have left a lasting imprint on migration policies. From 1526 to 1867, Mintz (2022) estimated that around 10.7 million enslaved Africans were forcefully brought to the Americas, 90% to Latin America and the Caribbean, especially to work in plantations. Slavery separated families across the Atlantic and in the places where enslaved populations were forced to work. Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in 1888. In the post-abolition period, many South American countries implemented migration policies explicitly designed to attract white migrants—particularly European families—as part of state-led nation-building projects rooted in racial hierarchies and whitening ideologies (Cintra, 2022).

At the end of colonial rule, newly independent Latin American states faced the critical task of defining who would be recognised as citizens. Although kinship is often regarded as belonging to the private sphere, it has historically been closely entwined with broader notions of belonging and the formation of modern nation-states (Humphris, 2019). In much of Latin America, the principle of birthright citizenship became the dominant legal framework, meaning that the right of the land took precedence over the right of blood. However, historical analyses reveal a more complex and exclusionary reality. In a comprehensive study of 19th-century citizenship laws across South America, Acosta (2018) shows that while any free person born

within the territories of the new republics—including Brazil—was formally recognised as a national, not all were granted full citizenship. Citizenship was often transmitted through bloodlines, and for people of African or Indigenous descent, it frequently had to be earned by fulfilling additional conditions. In effect, national belonging was constructed through deeply racialised distinctions.

Contemporary studies of nationhood in Argentina (Bastia & Vom Hau, 2014) and Chile (Cano & Soffia, 2009; Stefoni, 2011; Ugarte, 2022) demonstrate that long-standing ideals of whiteness and racial purity continued to influence immigration laws well into the twentieth century. In the Brazilian context, research by Cintra (2022) and Ruseishvili (2020) underscores how anti-Blackness and racialised notions of "desirable" migrants—rooted in state-led whitening projects—have historically shaped both migration and reception policies. These legacies remain evident in these countries current asylum system, with direct implications for how racialised migrants are received and incorporated into the nation.

These legacies extend into the region's systems of care. Herrera (2014) emphasises the importance of examining the enduring impact of racialised and gendered notions of servitude in Latin America, which challenges the traditional South-North dichotomy within care-chain frameworks. In a study comparing migrant domestic workers in Chile and Spain, Acosta (2015) highlights how, despite key contextual differences, histories of servitude continue to shape employers' perceptions of care work in similar ways across both countries. More recently, Chan and Fernández-Ossandón's (2023) work examined how Chile's colonial legacy, coupled with more recent politically progressive developments, engenders highly contradictory labour relations between Philippine domestic workers and their Chilean employers. Their research also underscores the need for further investigation into the impact of South-South extra-regional migration on family and care dynamics.

Cintra and Martuscelli (2025) argue that Brazil's humanitarian and family reunification visa policies have racially differentiated impacts, effectively constructing a "wall of visas" that obstructs racialised persons from entering or remaining in the country—even under humanitarian frameworks. In the UK, Turner (2020) suggests that the legacy of the British Empire continues to influence and regulate family life. The literature reviewed in this section similarly illustrates how Latin America's histories of slavery, servitude, and colonialism persist in structuring hierarchies around whose families are recognised as legitimate, who qualifies for reunification, and which forms of caregiving are deemed acceptable by the state.

3. Advancing the study of families on the move in Latin America

Bringing together scholars from a range of disciplines—including international relations, anthropology, sociology, law, and geography—working with diverse methodological approaches such as ethnography, interviews, and legal analysis, the papers in this issue make three main theoretical contributions that significantly expand on the discussions carried out by scholars working on Latin America. First, they examine how emerging regional mobilities challenge rigid frameworks of separation and reunification, revealing instead fluid forms of family life that have movement and transit at their core. Second, the issue explores the gap between progressive legal frameworks and their on-the-ground implementation, showing how unclear procedures, bureaucratic discretion, weak enforcement, and material barriers undermine formal rights to family unity. Third, the contributions interrogate how colonial and racial legacies continue to shape dominant ideals of family and care—particularly as enacted by employers, educators, and policymakers. These everyday institutional encounters reinforce racialised hierarchies and influence migrant families' experiences in settlement and transit countries.

Gioconda Herrera and Tania Bonilla discuss how movement has become a central feature of transnational Venezuelan families. Through multi-sited research conducted in Ecuador, they show that being constantly on the move serves as a key strategy through which these families navigate and resist economic precarity, xenophobia, and increasingly restrictive migration policies across South America. Their analysis challenges traditional understandings of family migration and reunification, revealing that such trajectories are not marked by a single moment of separation or reunion, but by multiple, staggered, and ongoing processes of coming together and parting ways. Rather than a linear model in which one family member sponsors or facilitates the reunification of others, Herrera and Bonilla's rich qualitative research illustrates how different nodes within transnational family networks support one another in relocating to third countries, while others stay momentarily put, often in a second country, looking after dependents. In this context, being "in transit" is not a temporary phase en route to permanent settlement, but a sustained and dynamic strategy for the reproduction of the family.

Nuni Jorgensen similarly examines Venezuelan displacement within South America to challenge rigid binaries of separation and reunification. Drawing on life-story interviews with family dyads living across Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela, she employs the metaphor of "life as a telenovela" to capture the complex spatial and temporal trajectories of kin dispersed throughout the continent. Departing from the emphasis on policies found in much of the

existing literature on family reunification, Jorgensen highlights the need to consider legal and labour precarity in tandem, which sometimes keep families forcibly apart, and at other times, push them into physical proximity. Drawing on the transnational framework, her work introduces the concept of "forced unification," showing how in the context of South–South displacement and minimal or even reverse income differentials, some families are compelled to live together due to the impossibility of remitting and sustaining each other from afar. Her analysis also highlights how seemingly progressive legislation can mask restrictive policies that profoundly contribute to migrant families' feelings of uncertainty.

Neal, Garbett, Riggirozzi, Cintra, Rueda, and Channon draw on an innovative quantitative survey conducted with Central American migrants held in deportation centres in Honduras and El Salvador. Their study investigates the full trajectory—from motivations to migrate, through transit and detention, to return—and compares the experiences of women migrating with children to those migrating alone or with other companions. The analysis reveals that mothers with children are more likely to be fleeing violence and hardship, and face heightened risks during transit. They also suffer worse health and emotional well-being outcomes, and make different choices during transit, with greater proportions relying on smugglers and other costly strategies. Their findings underscore the specific realities of mothers migrating with children and, together with other contributions in this issue, emphasise the significance of the transit journey as a crucial dimension of family migration, and as they show, a critical site of exposure, care, and risk.

Mixty Mabel Meneses Gutierrez draws on ethnographic research conducted at the Mexico–US border to show that people do not experience transborderism as individuals, but collectively as family units. Her study reveals that commuting across the border has spillover effects on family members who are not themselves transborder commuters. For instance, parents of children enrolled in U.S. schools must contend with limited time, language barriers, and the logistical demands of daily border-crossing. These dynamics intersect with the family's varying immigration statuses, further complicating their experiences. At the same time, Gutierrez shows that transborderism functions as a deliberate family strategy, often adopted by parents as a means of securing better opportunities for their children. Her work makes a key contribution to the literature on transborderism by positioning families, not individuals, as the central unit of analysis, while also adding a new dimension to studies on mixed-status families.

Patricia Nabuco Martuscelli compares family reunification legislation for refugees Latin America. Through an extensive documentary analysis of the legislation from 20 Latin American countries, she demonstrates that most Latin American states explicitly recognise

family reunification in their national laws. Unlike many countries in the Global North, these nations adopt an expanded definition of family that goes beyond the nuclear household. While this represents significant progress, Martuscelli's paper underscores that the majority of these definitions still prioritise economic dependence over emotional ties, contrary to what is advocated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Moreover, in many cases, dependence is not clearly defined, which may in practice limit refugees' rights based on states' migration control interests. Finally, her study highlights that most countries lack clear family reunification procedures or established avenues for appeal in the event of a denial. This aligns with findings from other studies conducted in the region, pointing to broader concerns about bureaucratic discretion and the gap between legislation and its implementation.

Rosario Fernández-Ossandón and Carol Chan bring greater nuance and complexity to previous discussions in Latin America about how cultures of servitude shape notions of "being part of the family", a concept often deployed by middle-class, white employers. Through a series of in-depth interviews with internal and international migrants in Chile, they examine how domestic workers navigate the delicate balance of fostering affective relationships with their employers while simultaneously acknowledging and resisting exploitation. Focusing on the role of disillusionment, their rich qualitative analysis reveals that by holding employers accountable for their promises of kinship, workers seek to build affective connections that neither erase differences nor overlook power imbalances. While pseudo-kinship has often been viewed in the literature as a tool of exploitation, their work offers critical insights into contemporary domestic labour relations, highlighting the tensions between rights-based discourses and the affective nature of domestic work.

Svetlana Ruseishvili explores a largely under-researched context—Russian families travelling to Brazil to give birth—to examine how Brazil's colonial past grants these families moral leverage in comparison to other migrant groups also engaged in so-called "birth tourism". Through an ethnographic study of Russian families in Florianopolis, in the South of Brazil, her analysis reveals that the compound effect of economic self-sufficiency, whiteness, and heteronormative family structures plays a significant role in framing Russians as "good migrants". Simultaneously, the privileged position of Russian women within gender and racial hierarchies shapes their birth experiences in Brazil. By accessing superior maternal healthcare, they are able to avoid the obstetric violence often faced by Brazilian women and even receive better care than they would in their home countries, which also acts as a determinant of migration. While Brazil's family migration regime is fairly liberal when compared to countries in the Global North, granting citizenship to parents of children born in the country,

Ruseishvili's work reveals that migrants accessing these family-based routes are, in practice, treated in profoundly different ways by immigration officials, depending on where they stand at intersections between race, gender and class hierarchies.

Andrea Cortés Saavedra's work similarly examines the complexities of Latin America's colonial history in shaping perceptions of migrant families. Through an ethnographic study conducted in a school in northern Chile, her analysis reveals how national and local notions of belonging intersect to influence teachers' narratives about migrants' parenting cultures. Cortés Saavedra's study challenges simplistic South–North migration frameworks by including both Caribbean and Andean families in her analysis. She demonstrates how racial stereotypes and colonial legacies are mobilised differently for these groups: Andean families are often viewed as embodying northern Chile's own traditional parenting cultures, while Caribbean families are portrayed as needing to be "civilised". Her article shows the complex and contradictory ways in which teachers produce racialised hierarchies about migrant families. The local northern identity that has permanently received border migrants leads her participants to frame their discourses around a local nostalgia that seeks similarities with Peruvian and Bolivian families.

4. Conclusion

All papers in this issue contribute to seeing the complex realities of families on the move in Latin America. First, in different ways, the articles challenge normative definitions of family in contexts of mobility. Affective ties and forms of emotional or practical dependency emerge as central in narratives of how people do family. Fernández-Ossandón and Chan, as well as Cortés Saavedra, reflect on how families enact their familial roles and how these roles are perceived by others — such as state bureaucrats, teachers, and employers. In parallel, Martuscelli explains that even if the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has recognised affective/emotional dependency as a basis for defining family in migration contexts, most Latin American countries accept only economic dependency to qualify family for family reunification purposes.

Second, this special issue demonstrates that family separation and family reunification are not binary categories. Jorgensen, Herrera, and Bonilla highlight the need to consider the experiences of families who are constantly on the move as a means of resisting legal and economic precarity, while Neal et al. discuss the importance of transit in migrant mothers' experiences. Similarly, Meneses Gutierrez showcases the experiences of families who live on the border daily, albeit not as "migrants". In this sense, the concept of "families on the move"

proves analytically helpful in capturing the complexity of the Latin American migration and mobility landscape. By exploring diverse family forms—such as transnational families, transborder families, families in transit, forcibly separated families, reunited families, and transnational families—this Special Issue also demonstrates how fluid and context-specific these categories can be.

Latin America has some of the most progressive regional legal frameworks on migration, protection, and family reunification. However, as this Special Issue demonstrates, states retain significant discretion in determining what constitutes a family —shaping who is allowed to migrate together, who is excluded, and under what conditions reunification can occur. Martuscelli critically examines whether refugees in Latin America truly benefit from a right to family reunification, revealing the legal and bureaucratic barriers that limit its practical realisation. Meanwhile, Jorgensen, Herrera, and Bonilla show that in contexts of social and acute economic precarity, family mobility is often shaped as much by structural constraints and survival strategies as by migration policy itself.

The contributions also illustrate how families actively navigate migration policies as part of broader family strategies. For example, Meneses Gutierrez discusses transborder families along the Mexico–United States border who adapt to restrictive regimes through flexible, cross-border arrangements, while Ruseishvili analyses how Russian families giving birth in Brazil use mobility to secure legal and social advantages. These cases demonstrate how people resist restrictive policies or oppressive conditions by crafting and performing family through decisions related to migration, reunification, and separation, which reflect care, pragmatism, and resilience. These strategies are not fixed; they evolve over time in response to changing legal, economic, and personal circumstances.

Finally, not all families have the same opportunities to move, nor are their movements perceived in the same way. Racism, anti-Blackness, and colonial legacies shape not only families' ability to move and resettle but also how they are viewed by employers, authorities, educators, and policymakers. Cortés Saavedra's article highlights how international migrant families are perceived differently within Chile, revealing underlying hierarchies of belonging. Similarly, Ruseishvili observes that Russian families giving birth in Brazil tend to receive more favourable treatment than other migrant families—particularly Angolan mothers. Colonial legacies of servitude, race, and gender also continue to influence care relations. Fernández-Ossandón and Chan show how colonial logics of servitude persist in the sphere of migrant domestic work, affecting both the roles domestic workers occupy and how they negotiate their positions within their employers' families.

In conclusion, this Special Issue contributes to the literature on family migration and mobility in Latin America in three theoretical ways: a) it shows how emerging regional mobilities challenge rigid frameworks of separation and reunification, revealing instead fluid forms of family life that have movement and transit at their core; b) it explores the gap between progressive legal frameworks and their on-the-ground implementation, showing how unclear procedures, bureaucratic discretion, weak enforcement and economic precarity undermine formal rights to family unity and c) it interrogates how colonial, gender and racial legacies continue to shape dominant ideals of family and care. Beyond these theoretical insights, the Special Issue contributes to re-centring South–South migration contexts in family migration studies (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020). While it identifies points of convergence across different settings, the contributions also challenge essentialised notions of "the South," demonstrating that migrant families' experiences are diverse, intersectional, and profoundly shaped by the specific socio-historical conditions of each local context.

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