

In the European Union, as in much of the industrialized world, family life is quietly becoming the major battleground of immigration struggles. It is doing so through the logics generated by family reunification, increasingly the key mode of legal entry into Europe for people from poor countries. Among the last half century's production of an enormous body of international human rights law, family reunification has been one of the most important, advocating the universal right of individuals to a shared family life. Closely related is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which advocates for all children the right to the care and company of a family, preferably that of both parents.

Family reunification doctrine builds on the concept of a person as a collection of single characteristics, some of which can be converted to transactable value when defined with respect to another person across a national boundary. We believe that as the press toward exclusion in Europe defaults to family reunification as one of the few remaining windows of transnational mobility for people from poor regions, this places a premium on each position that a family manages to establish in Spain. Because of its value, such a position, once created, is likely to remain filled independently of the original occupant. The rules governing each position differ, however, each orients to a separate pathway of legal mobility. While positions such as that of "child" can be held by more than one person at a time, other positions such as "spouse" effectively comprise a "slot": a singular position through which multiple people can circulate over time.

For most Africans bringing family members to Europe has become a daunting proposition. The costs for transportation, middlemen, translators, and lawyers are enormous, and the legal risks are spiraling. As well, states may ignore or adhere selectively to family reunification principles, or they may attach conditions to them that are difficult to meet and shrink qualifications for family reunification to a core of highly circumscribed ties with tight age windows and few allowable variations in sexual preference and marital status. Most countries exclude children who a legal migrant, a few are beginning to demand DNA evidence of parental relationship, and most divide childhood from adulthood at exactly age 18. Almost all ban polygamous unions, and some demand evidence of emotional spousal attachment to rule out marriages of convenience that few Europeans themselves could meet.

Increased state effort to exclude marginal immigrants that entail systematic regulatory scrutiny over immigrants' family reunification efforts appear to result in demands for tighter compliance with the separate logics of relationship, age, and quantity that underlie the family reunification positions of "spouse" and "child." For marginal immigrants, social relationships and even age itself can become objects of commerce as people try to shape their lives to accommodate a narrowing set of family reunification demands, a fact that may distort families as much as it unites them, whether by comparison to the home country or the country of immigration. In the case of Germany, for example, Cameroonian immigrants must orient their reproductive and marital and reproductive lives more toward Germans than toward their compatriots, obliging them to marry or reproduce a German citizen in order to stay (A. Fleischer). And Moroccan parents of "unaccompanied minors" in Spain must sometimes cede legal custody of their sons to the Spanish state to ensure they can stay in Spain (Empez).

The case of Gambians in Spain brings to light a very particular set of potentials that family reunification policies can spawn. Spain, an "interface" country between Europe and Africa, with its economy heavily reliant on agriculture and construction labor, is caught between pressure from its EU neighbors to tighten its borders, on the one hand, and, on the other, the risk of excluding the labor it needs to maintain its economy. Among Gambians, a group of modest size (just 17,425 in 2006),

families maintain close ties to rural areas of a high fertility polygynous homeland. The “own child” method of fertility calculation, though hardly perfect, suggested that in 2005, Gambians had the highest fertility rate by far for any group in Spain: 3.57, compared to the fertility rate for all of Spain: around 1.4. Exploring a case of what we call the “demography of family reunification,” we contend that immigrant efforts to meet family reunification requirements, and state efforts to enforce them, have begun to form the fault lines along which family splits may occur. We argue that as Spain, itself facing EU pressures to tighten its borders, exerts pressure on immigrants through its family reunification categories, social formations begin to assemble around the inner perimeters of allowable immigration categories, whether through anticipatory selection or through the use of language.

As Gambian families back home appear to delegate members for migration who will be successful in entering, this appears to have produced a rise in the number of young men who, because of increasing difficulty and expense in travel, appear to be delegated to come because of their high mobility. Because many of them are likely undocumented, they may be more likely to try to stay in Spain, once they get in. Increasing difficulties in travel appear to lead families to select members who will qualify for family reunification entry. Deep changes in Gambian immigrant life in Spain appear to result.

Given the health and educational advantages to children of being in Spain, together with the mounting risks in coming and going across the international frontier, a legally resident man tends to keep his children with him. For women, however, a slot dynamic seems to emerge: a tendency to rotate multiple holders through the singular “wife” position. This appears to increase the pace with which women circulate through households headed by older men. It may also result in an accumulation of the children of a circulating pool of fertile young women from Africa who experience high rates of reproduction for short slices of time as they rotate through the wife “slot.” Several peculiar demographic effects seem to result. It may lead families back in The Gambia, for example, to send very young women for migration because they can pass as the daughters of an older man. It may also separate children from their mothers and put older women at risk of exclusion and isolation. Finally, it may be contributing to the high synthetic fertility rate of Gambians in Spain.

To be sure, these paradoxical outcomes -- intensifying early marriage, high fertility, the formation of households with multiple spouses, and high rates of separation among mothers and children -- could be interpreted as evidence of African “traditionalisms.” However, we believe that EU legal and economic pressures may be as influential in shaping Gambian family practices in Spain as practices back home. After sketching the changing immigration terrain in Spain, we present some of our ethnographic work and our examination of the national Spanish data sources, at www.ine.es. The year 2006, in which immigrants who had not re-registered for two years were dropped from the Municipal Register, provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of immigrant family dynamics under pressure. We examine particularly the impact of the changing profile of Gambian men coming to Spain on patterns of marriage and reproduction.