

# Population & Societies

## Immigrants in France: a female majority

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In France today, the majority of immigrants are women. Using data from the Trajectories and Origins Survey (TeO), Cris Beauchemin, Catherine Borrel and Corinne Régnard show that, contrary to what one might expect, family reunification is not the only explanation for this gender imbalance. Growing numbers of women migrate on their own initiative, either to find work or to pursue their education.

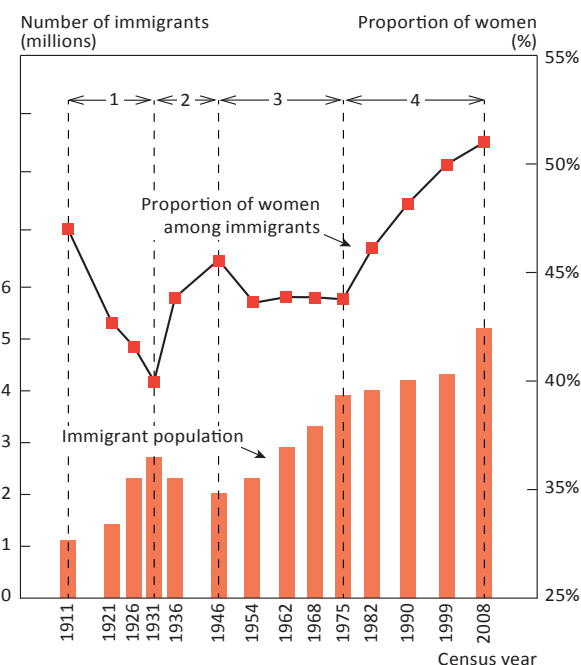
Up to the end of the twentieth century, most immigrants to France were men, but they are now outnumbered by women. What is the reason for this change? Can it be explained solely by the end of labour migration in 1974 and by the development of family reunification?

### Today, more than half of immigrants are women

In recent years, the population of immigrants, i.e. persons born as foreigners outside France, has become increasingly feminized.[1] The proportion of women among immigrants has always been high (Figure 1): in 1911, while still a minority, they already accounted for 47% of the total. Their numbers almost equalled those of men in the early twentieth century (47% in 1911), but it was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that they became a majority (51% in 2008). Their proportion has varied over time, however, fluctuating over the last century in response to the prevailing economic climate and the migration policies in place. Four main periods can be distinguished (Figure 1):

1 – Between 1911 and 1931, the share of women fell from 47% to 40% at a time when the immigrant population was increasing rapidly. After the First World War, employers brought in foreign labour, mainly men, to rebuild the country, but the economic crisis of the 1930s put an end to these migrant flows.

Figure 1. Immigrant population in metropolitan France and proportion of women since 1911



(C. Beauchemin, *Population and Societies*, no. 502, INED, July-August 2013)

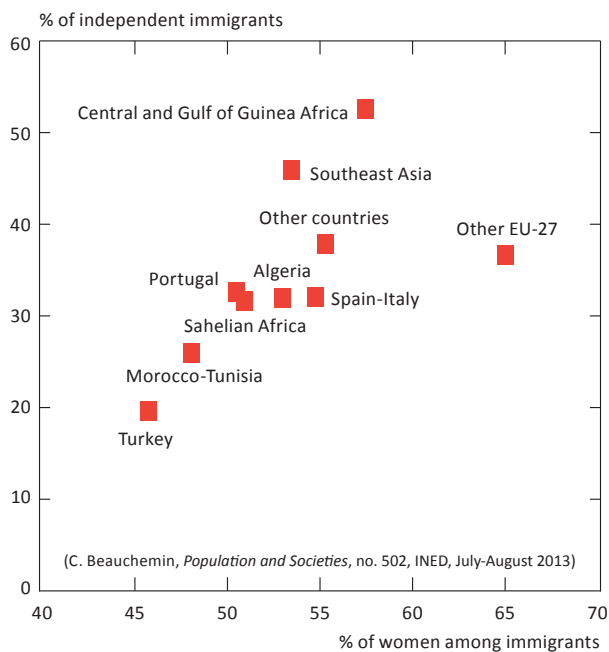
Source: INSEE, population censuses from 1911 to 2008.

Taken from: "fiche immigrée". France portrait social, INSEE, 2011.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

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**Figure 2. Share of women in the immigrant population and frequency of independent female migration in 2008**



**Source:** Trajectories and Origins survey, INED-INSEE, 2008.  
**Coverage:** All immigrants aged 18-60 in 2008 who arrived as adults in metropolitan France.  
**Interpretation:** Each point represents a group of origin. 46% of Turkish immigrants are women, of whom 19% entered France “independently”, i.e. while single or as “pioneers” ahead of their partner.  
**Note:** The correlation coefficient between the two series is 0.61. It rises to 0.89 after excluding the other EU-27 countries and the rest of the world, which are very heterogeneous groups.

2 – The situation was reversed between 1931 and 1946. While the immigrant population fell from 2.7 to 2.0 million, the share of women rose from 40% to 45% (Figure 1, period 2). Under the pressure of crisis, measures were taken to reduce the immigrant population and even encourage outmigration: quotas of foreigners, restrictions on granting of residence permits, limited legal capacity for naturalized citizens, refoulement at national borders. More single men probably left the country than men who had already been joined by their families, at a time when France tolerated family migration but had not yet established the right to family reunification.

3 – In the years following the Second World War, the share of women fell again, though the number of immigrants increased, and the manpower shortage led to renewed campaigns for the recruitment of foreign workers. But unlike the previous post-war reconstruction effort, these new recruitment drives focused less exclusively on men, and the share of women stabilized at around 44% between 1954 and 1975.

4 – The oil shock of 1973 was another turning point. For the first time since the start of the twentieth century, the percentage of women increased in line

with the immigrant population as a whole. With the economic crisis and the “suspension of labour immigration” decided in July 1974, many foreign workers left France (although they were never counted so their proportion is unknown). At the same time, the recognition of the right to family reunification made it easier for wives to join their husbands in France.

In sum, the same pattern appears to repeat itself: in times of crisis labour immigration is restricted, a share of immigrant workers leave the country while others are joined by their families, resulting mechanically in a growing proportion of immigrant women. A similar phenomenon is observed in the United States, where women formed the majority of incoming migrants from the 1930s due to the highly restrictive policy of quotas by nationality. [2]

These periods of “feminization” changed the profile of the immigrant population, which now included more families and more long-term migrants. Until the mid-1970s, an (unquantified) proportion of labour migration functioned on the “noria” model of multiple return migration: young people from the same village took turns to emigrate before returning home to form a family or rejoin an existing one. By blocking this circulation, border controls have given rise not only to long-term settlement in France, but also to the development of family migration and the emergence of a “second generation”.

### A proportion of women that varies by origin

In 2008, the share of women in the immigrant population varied considerably by origin (Figure 2). In only two groups do men represent a majority: 54% of Turkish immigrants are men, and 52% of Moroccan and Tunisian immigrants. In groups with the largest gender imbalance, it is women who outnumber men. For example, 65% of immigrants from the European Union (excluding Spain, Italy and Portugal) are women. What accounts for these differences?

Historically, when labour migration dominated, the share of women in the immigrant population was closely correlated to the time since migration. For example, in the early 1970s, the gender distribution of Spanish and Italian immigrants who had migrated many years earlier was already balanced, with women representing 51% according to the Trajectories and Origins survey (TeO, see box). At that time, the majority of more recent immigrants from North Africa (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) were men (77% of entrants in the period 1966-1974). When labour immigration was halted, the proportion of female entrants (of certain origin groups) increased rapidly, with women representing 61% between 1975 and 1983, before gradually returning to equilibrium (48% of women after 1998).

### Box. Trajectories and Origins (TeO), a survey on the diversity of populations in France

The Trajectories and Origins survey (TeO) was conducted in 2008 by INED and INSEE on a sample of 21,000 people representative of the population aged 18–60 living in ordinary households in mainland France. It provides an exceptional data source to study the detailed trajectories of immigrants and their children. Only immigrants who arrived in France as adults were included in the analyses presented here, i.e. a total of 5,418 persons of all origins, including 2,960 women.

Like the censuses, the TeO survey provides a snapshot of the population at a given date (2008), but as the questionnaire includes questions on the data of arrival in France, it is possible to construct migrant cohorts by classifying immigrants by year of first entry. These cohorts are incomplete as they do not include migrants who are deceased or those who had already left the country at the time of the survey. While these cohorts cannot provide an exact picture of immigration flows or of former immigrant stocks in France, they show how the place of women in immigration has evolved over the years.

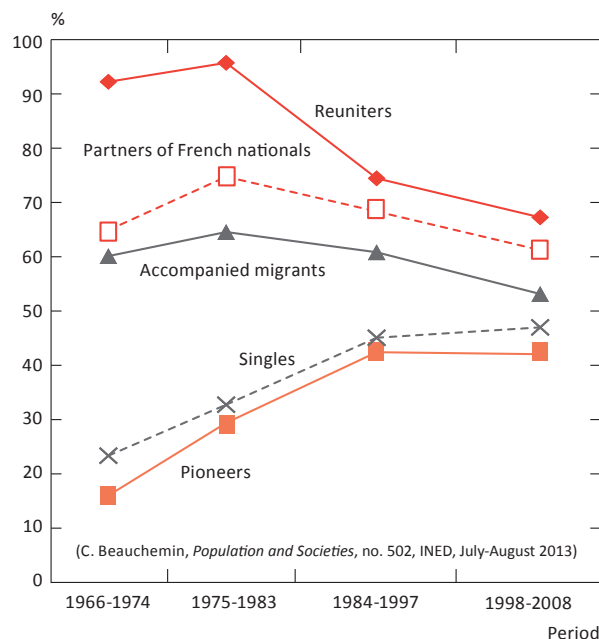
To find out more: [http://teo\\_english.site.ined.fr/](http://teo_english.site.ined.fr/)

The proportion of women also depends on the circumstances of migration. Men and women are represented equally among political refugees, as was the case for refugees from Southeast Asia in the early 1980s (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia). The social structures of the countries of origin also play an important role. For instance, in the Sahel, nuclear families are often divided between different households, with husbands, wives and children living in different dwellings. [3] This ability to “do family” at a distance also applies at the international level, so family reunification tends to be delayed among Sahelian migrants. Another important factor is women’s status, which affects their capacity to migrate on their own initiative, independently of family reunification procedures.

### Family reunification is not the only reason for the rise in female migration

The growing proportion of women in the immigrant population since the 1970s cannot be explained solely by the legal recognition of the right to family reunification introduced in 1974. The TeO survey shows that the migrant origin groups with the highest proportions of women are those characterized by a larger number of “independent” departures of single women or – to a lesser extent – women migrating ahead of their partner (Figure 2). For example, immigrants from Central Africa or the

Figure 3. Trends in the share of women involved in different types of migration



Source: Trajectories and Origins survey, INED-INSEE, 2008.

Coverage: All immigrants aged 18–60 in 2008 who arrived as adults in metropolitan France.

Interpretation: 42% of the pioneer immigrants arriving after 1998 are women.

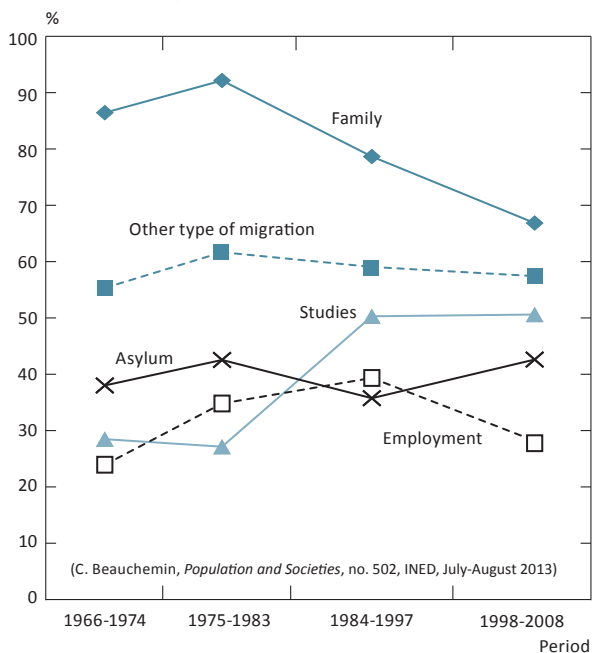
#### Definitions:

- “Singles”: Persons not in a union at the time of migration (they may have had previous unions, or enter a union after arrival). Single persons who migrate are considered as “independent” migrants;
- “Pioneers”: persons in a union at the time of migration; their partner remains behind in the country of origin. They may or may not be joined by their partner at a later date. Pioneers who migrate are considered as “independent” migrants;
- “Reunited”: persons in a union at the time of migration and who are reunited with their partner already resident in France. This category is independent of the administrative reason for admission, which may be for family or other reasons (asylum seeking, education, employment, etc.).
- “Partners of French nationals” persons in a union at the time of migration and who come to France to join their partner who has French nationality.
- “Accompanied” migrants: persons in a union at the time of migration and who migrate in the same year as their partner.

Gulf of Guinea (Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.) have record proportions of women (57%) and of women migrating independently (53% of single or pioneer women). Conversely, Turkish migration is not only the least feminized, but also has the lowest proportion of women entering France on their own initiative.

In fact, a spectacular convergence of male and female migration profiles has occurred in France over recent decades (Figure 3). This appears in the matrimonial situation of migrants. While before 1974 only 16% of the pioneer migrants (i.e. immigrants who entered France, leaving their partner behind at origin) were women, the proportion has risen to 42% since 1998. Over the same period, the share of women in the population of single immigrants rose from 23%

**Figure 4. Trends in the proportion of women among migrants admitted for residence, by reason for admission**



**Source:** Trajectories and Origins survey, INED-INSEE, 2008.

**Coverage:** All immigrants aged 18-60 in 2008 who arrived as adults in metropolitan France.

**Interpretation:** Among migrants arriving before 1974, 24% of those admitted for employment reasons were women.

**Note on categories:** the information presented corresponds to the respondents' answers to the question "On which grounds did you obtain your first residence permit? Was it for... [list of reasons for admission]". For the sake of simplicity, certain reasons were grouped together:

- the "family" category includes family reunification and migration to join a French spouse;
- the "asylum" category includes refugees themselves and their family members;
- the "other" category includes the following reasons: "other type of permit"; "not required by law to apply for a residence permit"; "procedure ongoing"; "don't know"; "don't wish to reply".

to 47%. Likewise, "secondary" migration to join a partner in France, either foreign or French, is no longer a purely female phenomenon: since 1998, one-third of secondary migrants have been men, and their numbers are also increasing among migrants entering to join a French citizen partner.

This convergence is also observed in the administrative reasons for admission (Figure 4). More men now enter France for family reasons, and this is no longer a purely female motive for migration. Today, women account for more than half of all admissions for residence for non-family reasons (education, employment). Furthermore, women

now receive more education in their home country so that a growing number migrate to France to pursue their studies: over the period 1975-1983, one in four immigrants entering France to study were women, but by 1998 the proportion was one in two. In short, despite remaining gender specificities, men and women increasingly behave in very similar ways.

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In short, more and more of the women who arrive in France are single or "pioneers" migrating ahead of their partner. The fact that growing numbers of women receive an education in their country of origin and now have access to higher education probably plays a key role. Migrant women today are remarkably similar to migrant men, in terms of both their administrative status and their marital situation at arrival. The feminization of the migrant population speaks to a fundamental shift in French migration patterns, characterized less by the rise in family migration than by the broadening diversity of female migrant profiles.

**References**

[1] Borrel C., 2006, "Près de 5 millions d'immigrés à la mi-2004", *Insee Première*, 1098, pp. 1-4.

[2] Houston M. F., Kramer R. G. et al., 1984, "Female predominance in immigration to the United States since 1930: A first look", *International Migration Review*, 18(4), pp. 908-963.

[3] Mazzucato V., Schans D. et al., 2013, *Migrant Families Between Africa and Europe: Comparing Ghanaian, Congolese and Senegalese Migration Flows*, MAFE Working Paper 30, Paris, INED.

**Abstract**

In 2008, women represented 51% of the immigrant population in mainland France. As shown by the Trajectories and Origins survey (TeO), the feminization of the immigrant population is not simply the consequence of family reunification. In fact, the most predominantly female migrant flows are those in which single or "pioneer" women (migrating ahead of their partner) are most numerous. It is no longer only women who migrate to France to join their partner: since 1998, one-third of secondary migrants for family reunification have been men, and their numbers are also increasing among migrants coming to France to marry a French national. In short, despite remaining gender specificities, men and women now behave in very similar ways.