Mothers and Moneymakers: A Case Study of How Citizen-Women Shape U.S. Marriage Migration Politics Online

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Abstract : Social media, internet technology, and affordable travel have created avenues like tourism and internet chatrooms for Western women to meet foreign partners without paid, third-party intermediaries in regions like the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where men from mid-level developing countries meet and marry Western women and try to relocate. Foreign nationals who marry U.S. citizens have an expedited track to naturalization. U.S. immigration officials require that "green card" petitioning couples demonstrate that their relationships are "valid and subsisting" (i.e., for love) and not fraudulent (i.e., for immigration papers). These requirements are ostensibly gender- and racially-neutral, but migration itself is not; black and white women petitioners who seek partners from these regions and solicit advice from similar others about the potential obstacles to their petitions' success online. Using an online ethnography and textual analysis of conversation threads on a large on-line immigration forum where U.S. petitioners exchange such information, this study examines how gendered and racialized standards of legitimacy are applied to family and sexuality and used discursively online among women petitioners differently to achieve "genuineness" and define "red flags" indicating potential marriage fraud. This paper argues that forum-women members police immigration requests even before cases reach an immigration officer, and use this social media platform to reconstruct gendered and racialized hierarchies of U.S. citizenship. Women petitioners use the formal criteria of U.S. immigration in ways that reveal gender and racial ideologies, expectations for conformity to a gendered hegemonic family ideal, and policing of women's sexual agency, fertility, and desirability. These intersectional norms shape their online discussions about the suitability of marriages and of the migration of non-citizen male partners of color to the United States.

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