

Thai Women in Sweden: Victims or Participants?

Natasha A. Webster¹ and Karen Haandrikman²

Migration from Thailand to Sweden is a rapidly growing phenomenon with a threefold increase over the last ten years, with the majority of migrants being female marriage migrants. In Nordic media and popular culture, stereotyping of Thai-Swedish couples is commonplace, focusing on unequal power relations, sex tourism and other social problems which often position Thai women “as both materialist rural women and ignorant victims” (Sunanta, 2013, p. 193). Our paper positions and explores the status of this unique group of migrants through a power and agency lens and by adopting a multi-methods approach. Using register data, we give a detailed picture of the migration and sociodemographic features of Thais in Sweden, while in-depth interviews with Thai women provide nuanced understandings of Thai-Sweden migration. We find a complex narrative of migration, where Thai women are active agents in their migration process but still face many inequalities in Sweden. A diversified picture of these women is revealed suggesting that power and agency are situated spatially and temporally.

Keywords: gender, power, agency, migration, mixed methods

Introduction

Female migrants play an important role in global migrant movements and flows. Despite the fact that women represent more than 50% of international migrants (United Nations Population Fund & International Organization for Migration, 2006), their role and value as decision-makers in migration has been undermined and underrepresented. Reducing marginalization of women’s migration stories by acknowledging diverse motivations and drivers within women’s migration is especially important for migrant groups that are often associated with trafficking and sexual exploitation (Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). Furthermore, certain women migrant groups remain underrepresented in migration research possibly from heteropatriarchal assumptions about non-Western immigrant groups. Killian, Olmsted and Doyle (2012), for example, dissect the commonly-held notion that Arab women are not active in migration processes. They find many examples in their data of agency, including women

¹ Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: natasha.webster@humangeo.su.se

² Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden & Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University.

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being household decision-makers throughout the migration process. While there is much evidence that Thai women are an important migrant group in Sweden (Haandrikman, 2014), their agency, power and motivations, like the Arab women, remain under-explored in migration literature. We, therefore, explore how global power relations frame and sometimes define the way in which marriage migrants are problematized.

Despite a growing presence of gender in the migration literature (Green, 2012), women's power and agency continue to be underplayed. From media portrayals and other dominant discourses of Thai women migrants in Sweden, it could be easy to assume that a single or grand narrative of their experience exists which positions Thai women "as both materialist rural women and ignorant victims" (Sunanta, 2013, p. 193). This view often stems from Western interpretations of gender oppression and limits interpretations of power and agency (Wright, 2014). Due to Thailand's reputation as a center of global sex trafficking and prostitution, Thai migrant motivations are often subject to these generalizations (Kitiarsa, 2008). An increasing number of studies show migrants have a high degree of personal agency in migration (Cohen, 2003; Kitcharoen, 2007; Parreñas, 2011; Sandy, 2007). Lévy and Lieber (2008) argue in their study that even in precarious situations, migrant women are tenacious in their coping strategies, demonstrating agency and power.

This paper provides a description of the status of Thai women's migration to Sweden. We position and explore the socioeconomic characteristics common to Thai women in Sweden coupled with their own individual experiences drawn from in-depth interviews, thereby taking on a power and agency perspective shedding new light on migration experiences. We pose the following questions: What is the status of Thai women in Sweden as described by their demographic and socioeconomic positioning combined with their personal experiences? In what ways does this migration flow reveal the complexities of power and agency in women's migration process? We begin by providing a background on Thai-Swedish migration and then build a theoretical background focusing on the role of power and agency in female migration. We present our methods, which are both quantitative and qualitative, and then present our results, tying together big-picture data with interview insights. Our data suggests power within migration flows is a flexible concept contingent upon context, life course perspectives and geography. We conclude with a discussion of the results and suggest further research is needed on this unique migrant group.

Context of Thai-Swedish Migration

In the last ten years, Thai migration to Sweden has increased substantially, though historical ties between Thailand and Sweden began as early as the end of the 19th century (Webster & Haandrikman, 2014). Thailand is a very popular holiday destination for Swedes with, on average, nearly 500,000 trips of Swedes to Thailand annually (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2011). Generally, there is an increase of Europeans visiting Thailand, with Swedes occupying the fifth most common nationality (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2013), which is remarkable given Sweden's relatively small population of nine million.

The most salient observation on Thai migration to Sweden is that it is highly gendered. The majority of Thai migrants are women. Many migrants marry Swedish men, a phenomenon that can be placed within a growing increase in marriage migration from Southeast Asia to Western countries (Mai Sims, 2012). Thais have been coming to Sweden to marry men as early as the 1970s (Alm Stenflo, 2001). The Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*) is

responsible for administering the residency and visa applications for Thai women wishing to come to Sweden. In order to apply, women should be married, have a common-law spouse or plan to have such a partner, and may need to demonstrate to the agency the seriousness of their relationship (e.g., sharing a common language) (ROKS, 2010). Children apply alongside their mothers as dependents. Residency permits require the couple to remain together for two years, except in the case of domestic abuse. However, the two-year rule is criticized by women's organizations for being unclear or unevenly applied (ROKS, 2010).

Niedomysl, Östh and Van Ham (2010) found that although the increase in international migration flows to Sweden had been relatively modest (17% between 1990 and 2004), the number of marriage migrants during that period increased by 37%. The pattern of geographical origins of marriage migrants was also found to be highly gendered, with an over-representation of female marriage migrants from Southeast Asia, as well as other parts of Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia and South America (Niedomysl et al., 2010). Since the early 2000s, Thai women have replaced Finnish women as the most numerous foreign-born women to marry Swedish men (Haandrikman, 2014). Divorce rates among migrants tend to be higher as a consequence of cultural differences, stress related to migration and migrants being a selective group, for instance in terms of rural/urban origin and religion (Andersson, Obucina & Scott, 2015), although there is almost no literature on this topic. One study found that divorce rates are especially high among Asian and South American migrants (Nekby, 2012). A recent study showed Southeast Asian women migrants are 16% more likely to divorce than Swedish-born women, which is actually much lower than the divorce rate among many other migrant women (Andersson, Obucina & Scott, 2015). Southeast Asian women migrants are more likely to remarry after divorce compared to Swedish-born women, but are less likely to remarry compared to many other migrant women (Andersson et al., 2015).

These global processes are also driven by migration contexts within Thailand. With growing tourism and international trade in Bangkok and southern regions, migrants leave poorer regions, such as Issan in the Northeast, to seek gainful employment in urban and tourist areas. Uneven urban-rural development reinforces and intensifies internal migration processes with rising standards and incomes (Mills, 2012). Similar to global migration trends, this process is highly gendered. The economic importance of Thai women to their families and extended families is an important driver of out-migration from rural areas (Wacharaporn, 2008). Migration through marriage is an increasingly acceptable household strategy (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009). Moreover, transnational marriage is a departure from traditional marriage strategies decided by families, as they are often, instead, determined by women themselves (Suksomboon, 2009). It is interesting to point out that parallel urban-rural migration trends exist in Sweden creating a rural environment open to transnational marriage and linking the two contexts together (Karlsson & Strömgren, 2010).

The positioning of Thai women as opposite and Swedish-Thai couples as deviant is a predominant theme in media and popular culture, as documented in Hedman, Nygren and Fahlgren (2009). Stereotyping is commonplace, emphasizing unequal power relations, sex tourism and other social problems. Typically, Western men are seen as powerful (Hedman et al., 2009), yet lacking physical desirability as well as modern masculinities (Nordin, 2008). These discourses reproduce notions of the South as backward and the North as modern, represented through competing discourses of femininities and geography (Constable, 2005). Academic migration studies on Thai or Southeast Asian women focus mainly on the commercialized marriage mediation industry, mail-order brides, sex/love tourism and trafficking (Glowsky, 2007; Mai Sims, 2012). In such studies, marriage is portrayed as an escape

from poor home countries (Niedomysl et al., 2010) with little agency attached to the woman as an actor in her migration story.

Theoretical Overview

Love and Marriage Migration as a Global Power Relation

A growing migration flow stems from love and marriage migration (Heikkilä & Yeoh, 2011). Most marriage migration from developing countries is construed as one-directional, both in terms of geography and also power and agency (Constable, 2005). This reinforces a set of global power geometries through spatial relations (Massey, 2005), affecting how marriage and love migrants are perceived and received in both sending and destination countries. Marriage migration, argues Robinson (2007), often mirrors global power relations and creates a false dichotomy of those with and without power. Power and geographical location become aligned with Western men being the “haves” and Southern women “the have-nots.” The underlying assumption in this line of thinking is the marriage migrant is marrying up, creating asymmetrical relationships (Constable, 2003). While love in transnational marriages is a taken-for-granted concept it remains under-theorized (Walsh, 2009; See Suksomboom [2009] for a deeper exploration of love in Thai transnational marriage).

Sexuality and morality become packaged into this global hegemony, which in turn shape discourses on marriage migrant groups (Kulpa & Mizielinska, 2011). Global gender relations are expressed and maintained through a global system of heterosexual colonies. Thailand may be considered one of these colonies, for example, where spouses are “sourced” for Westerners (Lugones, 2007). Power in global relations needs to be teased out and complicated in the context of so-called dissident sexualities and intimate relations (Binnie, 2004). Sverdljuk (2009) finds Russian women in Norway exercised power and agency through their actions to overcome the “prostitution stigma.” These women migrants often worked outside the home in addition to being a mother, in order to gain “markers of decency” in both social and professional spheres in the host country.

Couples comprised of native men and foreign-born women are often characterized by substantial age differences in favor of the man (Haandrikman, 2014; Niedomysl et al., 2010). Large age gaps between partners are generally seen as markers of gendered power dynamics within couples and the wider society (Kolk, 2015). Associations have been found between women marrying older men and gender inequality, patriarchy, male dominance and limited opportunities for women (Bozon, 1991; Constable, 2003; Kolk, 2015), with the younger partner generally having less bargaining power and a weaker economic position. This suggests that Thai women with Swedish partners may experience situations of social and economic inequalities.

Power and Agency of Women Migrants

Power and agency thus shapes how outsiders, including the media, perceive marriage migrants, but actors themselves may also articulate power and agency. Power is not a static concept removed from the everyday (Massey, 2005). The amount of power an individual possesses changes throughout the life course and shifts in different times and geographies. Agency and power are brought together or pulled apart through choices and decisions, which

create change or, conversely, maintain the status quo. The position of a migrant is situational, meaning it changes according to context. A tension thus exists between the two concepts, which are constantly negotiated by the individual.

Agency and power can be expressed throughout different settings and methods, but as Bakewell (2010) notes, in some cases, agency “need be no more than the simple individualism of autonomous actors exercising their power over the world” (p. 1684). Following McNay (2000), who argues that agency must be contextualized within power relations, agency and power stem from multiple sites and thus are articulated by individuals across space and time in various ways, which may not be easily understood outside of context. Agency and power, in other words, are situational and so must be contextualized within multiple hierarchies of power (Pessar & Mahler, 2003). The power hierarchies, often based on gender, race, class and sexuality, situate women in particular contexts in Sweden and Thailand. Thus Thai women are positioned within a transnational structure of power relations constructed through the intersection between global patriarchies and nation-states (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013).

Migrant women exercise power through various decisions and strategic actions. Agency to make these decisions is shaped by and shapes their social and economic status (Yea, 2012). While global heteropatriarchal discourses may limit and confine women’s agency, there is room for multiplicities (Baydar, 2012). Similarly, Sandy (2007) argues that in contexts of limited options, the ability to make choices and enact decisions is an exercise in power and agency. Showden (2011) presents agency as “an ability to choose from an array of viable options to improve the quality of one’s life by allowing one to fulfill a range of needs and desires and to influence the contexts in which these desires take shape” (p. 2). Considering migration as a series of power exercises – ranging from the decision to migrate to actions taken in the home and the host-country – reflects a different analysis of marriage migrants while acknowledging the broader social and economic global structures. A few studies that have shown the gaps between agency and power highlight interesting arenas of negotiation opportunities. In Hoang’s (2011) study of internal migration in Vietnam, women’s agency and power were found to be neither that of full-fledged decision-maker nor victim of social structures. Instead, they are a complicated negotiation between the two. This indicates that agency and power need to be understood in a less hierarchal framework.

Data and Methods

In order to delineate the status of Thai women in Sweden, it is important to describe their demographic and socioeconomic positioning using quantitative data. It is also important to draw from qualitative methods to fully grasp the women’s own perceptions about their life and migrant experiences in their new country. Representations of migrant Thai women rarely come from in-depth analytic studies that utilize both quantitative and qualitative measures. By employing a multi-method approach, we respond to the theoretical call for using different conceptual and analytical approaches (Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Creswell, Shope, Plano Clark & Green, 2006; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The quantitative part of the study aims to portray the women by outlining descriptive statistics of women who were born in Thailand and registered to live in Sweden. We use data from the PLACE database, a full-population register database that is managed at Uppsala University in Sweden. For this study, we focus on all women born in Thailand and registered in Sweden during the year 2008, including information on these women during the years 1990-2007.

Using the women's social security numbers, their demographic, socioeconomic and geographic information can be matched. In addition, if the woman is married or has a child with the partner with which she lives, that partner together with his demographic and socioeconomic features is included. We thus capture both cohabiting and married couples.³ For both the migrant women and their partners, we have full information of socioeconomic attributes such as educational level, employment status, sector of employment and income, as well as demographic characteristics such as age, age at marriage, age at immigration, family position and the number of children.

To explore the demographic and socioeconomic positioning of the women, three main themes were investigated using register data. First, marriage migration was studied by examining the number of Thai women migrants and their partnerships with Swedish men. Second, age gaps between Thai-Swedish partners were investigated. Third, several topics within education and employment were explored to outline Thai women's positioning in Swedish society and to assess their access to resources. Unless mentioned otherwise, all statistics pertain to the year 2008.

For the qualitative analysis, interviews with 16 Thai women were analyzed. Women were contacted through their businesses, temples or state-provided Swedish-language centers. From these initial interviews, snowballing methods were used to reach other women and to build connections within the Thai community. Interviews were conducted by the first author and took place in the period 2010-2013. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, English or a mix of the two. Author 1 has lived and worked in Thailand.

The women came from diverse backgrounds, and represented different ages and education levels. They lived very different lives in Sweden. While intentional search criteria were not employed, all respondents were heterosexual, have or had Swedish partners, were Thai Buddhist and all but one originated from rural areas in Thailand. Their ages at interview ranged from 26 to 44. Only women with the legal right to residency in Sweden participated in interviews. It is difficult to ascertain how illustrative these women are of all Thai migrants, but it is fair to say that they represent a broad spectrum of experiences and backgrounds.

The in-depth interviews used a life course perspective (Atkinson, 1998) in which women were asked to describe their life story, allowing us to understand their migration process as well as to self-identify contexts that have shaped their lives both in Thailand and in Sweden. The duration of the interviews ranged from a few hours to overnight stays. Some women were interviewed more than once. In addition, the interviews were complemented with researcher participation in community and daily activities (e.g., shopping for food, going on walks). These activities were essential in creating safe spaces for sharing intimacies and discussing personal information. In Sweden, Thai women were interviewed in three specific, primarily rural regions, which for ethical considerations cannot be revealed. Sweden, while relatively large geographically, has a small population and specifying locations may reveal participants' identities.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, in this article the term 'partner' covers men whom Thai women are married to as well as those cohabiting and having a child with a Thai woman. Unfortunately cohabiters without shared children cannot be traced in register data – they are either registered as singles or as single mothers – the latter when their partners are not the fathers of their children.

During the fieldwork process, dominant negative discourses surrounding Thai women in Sweden appeared to influence the willingness to participate in the study, as well as the attitude towards confidentiality. For instance, one woman refused to be interviewed because she was not confident we would not portray the Thai community as sex workers or economic opportunists. In other cases, the women's husbands contacted the researcher to check the intentions of the research. Personal connections of the first author in Thailand played a significant role in building trust with both the Thai women and their partners. Despite an openness and willingness to share their life story with us, a majority of women and partners did not consent to interviews being taped. To analyze the qualitative data, we had to rely mostly on research notes and interview summaries. With limited direct quotes from participants, we chose to represent the qualitative data as a series of stories to give a sense of character and complexity to the women interviewed.

Vignettes, stories or even plays are useful tools to represent qualitative data (Cannon, 2012; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). Vignettes bring forth data in a story-like format, which conveys information over a time period. They are also useful with vulnerable populations who do not wish to be recorded. Vignettes address ethical considerations by protecting identities and localities while giving a sense of experience.

We use vignettes to bridge our quantitative indicators and the qualitative understandings. Vignettes are meant to create flavorful snapshots rather than deep narratives. In this paper, each story is developed from interviews and participant observation by the researchers (Elliot, 2005). The stories presented are designed to bridge general experiences while honoring the individuals' experiences. Material was chosen that highlighted links between individual actions and reflectivity of the data (Elliot, 2005). This strategy connects stories more smoothly to our statistical analysis. Certainly, this raises difficult questions of which stories to include or exclude, a challenge common to narrative analysis.

The primary limitations of our methodology lie in the research methods and in the selection of respondents. The analysis of register data is limited to registered events such as registered migrations, marriages, employment and education. As a result, any unregistered event is not captured. Furthermore, datasets do not always match in terms of definitions. For example, marriage in interviews was left for the women to define or self-identify, whereas in register data only legal marriages are included. Nonetheless, we believe that the benefits of mixing methods outweigh these challenges, as we can see the big picture as well as the complications within these. The selection of interviewees included women who had a history of unhappy marriages, problems in finding employment and otherwise negative personal histories. However, paperless women and/or women exploited in prostitution or otherwise troublesome circumstances did not participate, though there are reports identifying such cases (County Board of Värmland, 2010). This bias is reflected in our vignettes, which focus strongly on successful examples.

Results

Marriage Migration

Vignette 1: Amporn knew she wanted to marry a Western man. Her cousin was working in a restaurant in the tourist area and suggested she should join her to make more money and meet Western men. Following the advice of her cousin, she migrated

to South Thailand and began to work in a tourist restaurant. It took only one and a half years to find a man she liked. After becoming pregnant, she moved to Sweden. Amporn describes herself as being very lucky and believes she has had a successful outcome. She has a kind, good husband and she can look after her child. She does not wish to return to Thailand as her life in rural Sweden is very happy.

Multiple power hierarchies position Amporn in a global migration flow. Amporn is not alone in describing her decision to marry a Westerner as a choice. This example raises interesting questions around the intersection of individual experiences of love and transnational migration. Amporn reflected on her options and weighed the pros and cons. The outcomes of her reflexivity created a complex web of power relations. On the one hand, she remained situated within global hierarchies, but on the other hand, she created dramatic and deeply-rooted change in her own life story. The stories from the interviewed women show that marriage migration, itself, is a power relation that transects both gender and geography. From a Swedish perspective, a woman moving to her husband's country may not seem like a powerful strategy, yet from some Thai perspectives, it represents a conscious, strategic choice. Power here is situational, based on individual needs and context. The experience of Amporn shows agency in that she exercised power in defining that she wanted a Western partner and positioned herself to achieve this goal, although her options were limited and defined by some of the broader global power relations.

If we examine the trends in marriage migration, we can better understand the power dynamics in marriage. The highly gendered nature of Thai migration to Sweden is evidenced by the fact that, according to the PLACE database, of the 25,781 Thailand-born persons registered in Sweden in 2008, 78% were women. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, Thai women were moving to Sweden, but only in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s did the annual number of migrants increase substantially, with a threefold increase in the last 10 years.

The proportion of migrants who marry shortly after migration has increased over time. More than half of those marrying Swedish men married the same year they migrated. It is relatively common for educated women to marry shortly after migration, perhaps suggesting an awareness of their vulnerability as migrants and initiating self-protective measures.

In the period that Thai-Swedish migration increased, the average age of the women at immigration increased. While those arriving before the 1990s were on average only 18 when they immigrated, those arriving in the second half of the 2000s are on average 33 years old. This figure corresponds with the participants' ages.

Half of all adult Thai women are married or cohabiting, with cohabiting defined as living with a partner and having common children. Cohabitation is quite common among Thai-Swedish couples, much more than among other foreign-born women. Many women who were interviewed had married in a temple, though they were legally unmarried⁴. Among those Thai women who cohabit or are married, no less than 85% have a Swedish partner. This share is only 35% for other foreign-born women. If Thai women are married to other men, they are

⁴ The qualitative interviews support the interchangeability between marriage and cohabitation. Many interviewees call their partners 'husbands' while legally they may have been unmarried. Marriages conducted in temples are common and socially recognized though such marriages are not legally recognized in Sweden.

mostly married to either Thai men or, to a smaller extent, Finnish or Danish men. About a quarter of Thai women who immigrated, as adults, have been divorced at some point during the 19 years studied.

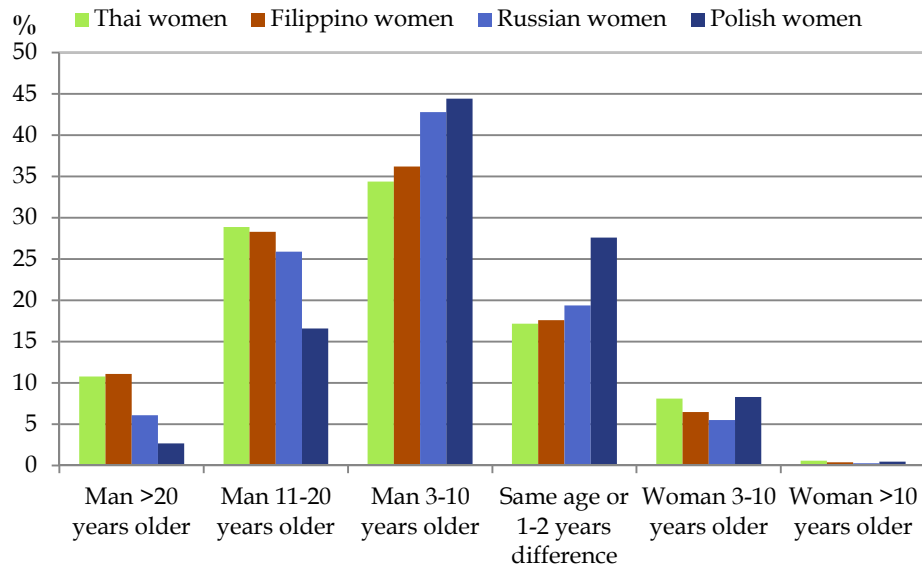
Age Gaps

Vignette 2: Lek is 42 years old while her Swedish husband is 58. They recently married through a Buddhist ceremony in their home. Lek's husband is seven years from retirement or even less if he takes early retirement. Lek is the manager of a successful massage business but suffers from arthritis, backaches, knee pain and wrist pain from years of massage. She knows she will be unable to continue massage for the 20 plus years until her retirement, and is looking forward to her husband's retirement. Together, they can live well on his pension in Northern Thailand. Lek and her husband will build a house on her parents' farmland. Not only will life be more affordable and will she be able to quit her work in massage, but she will also be able to help care for her older parents who are increasingly in need of care. As Lek explains, the age difference provides her with social and economic support and protection.

Throughout the interviews, age was raised by Thai migrants as a strategic and important factor in choosing to marry overseas. With few exceptions, the women aim to return to Thailand and the ability to do so was dependent upon their husband's age. Certainly the birth of children complicated how these plans would play out in the future. Several women reflected on this during discussions. However, it was clear that age differences were seen as an opportunity as well as a problem. This example illustrates how power is a flexible concept, shifting over the life course of a marriage and changing with different positions.

This positive view towards a substantial age difference is something we encountered many times in interviewing the Thai women. But how common are large age differences among these couples? Our data show that in 85% of Thai-Swedish couples, the man is older than the woman. Figure 1 shows that if the man is older, he is substantially older. In 40% of all Thai-Swedish couples, the man is more than 10 years older. In comparison, Swedish men are on average 3.6 years older than their foreign-born partners. Kolk (2015) found that in the Swedish population, men are on average two years older than their female partners. Figure 1 shows that the age differences in couples are much larger when the man is Swedish and the woman is from a typical marriage migration origin country. Yet Thai-Swedish couples, together with Filipino-Swedish couples, stand out because they have the highest share of couples whereby the man is much older. This also becomes clear when comparing the average age differences between partners, which is 8.8 years for Thai-Swedish couples, 9.2 years for Filipino-Swedish couples, 7.8 years for Russian-Swedish couples and 5.3 years for Polish-Swedish couples.

Figure 1: Age gaps between foreign-born women and their Swedish partners



Source: Swedish register data, authors' calculations

Education and Employment

Vignette 3: Jaidee is a 44-year old Thai woman who has lived in rural Sweden for four years. She met her husband, who is more highly educated, while he was on holiday in Thailand. Now they have a daughter together. Jaidee finds life in Sweden both enjoyable and difficult. She loves to go ice fishing and collect mushrooms. Although she was a successful business woman in Thailand and has a college-level education, she struggles with finding suitable employment in Sweden. During most winters, she returns to Thailand to manage her tourist service business directed towards Swedish tourists. Jaidee is very happy to give her daughter better opportunities, but she misses the excitement of running her own business and the opportunities that she had in Thailand.

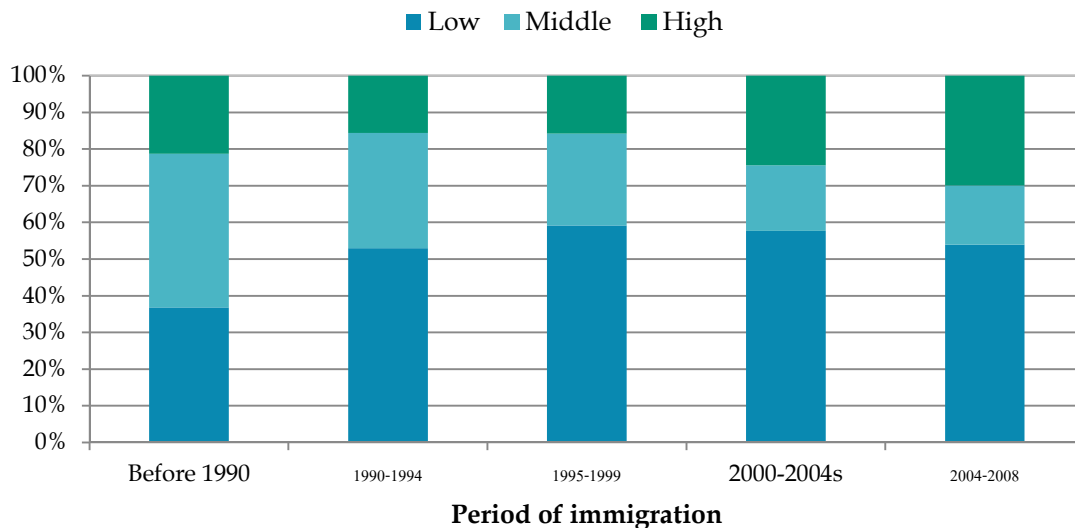
Jaidee's example illustrates how choices are made by balancing their own needs while optimizing opportunities for their children. Despite a successful career in Thailand, she felt that her daughter would have a better life in Sweden as an adult. She spoke about the long-term benefits that migration would afford the next generation. This illustrates how migrant women push and pull with power over the long term. Jaidee prioritizes her daughter's opportunities over her own, suggesting power must be contextualized both by the individual and over a generational life course. It implies a gendered perspective to strategic power brokering.

Jaidee and her husband are both quite highly educated. If we look at the statistics, we see Thai women are significantly less educated than other foreign-born women. More than half have only primary school educations, and almost a quarter are higher educated⁵. Part of this result may be explained by the fact that compulsory education in Thailand is only until the age of 15. Measuring educational level by Swedish standards thus introduces a large bias. Thai women

⁵ Higher education is measured as completion of tertiary degree, measured by the Swedish system.

being less educated is reflected in a large portion being less educated than their partners; More than 40% of the women are less educated than their partners. Low education is more common for older Thai women, and over time, the share of highly educated women who migrated to Sweden increased, as evidenced in Figure 2, and illustrated by highly educated Ploy in Vignette 4.

Figure 2: Educational level of Thai women by period of immigration



Source: Swedish register data, authors' calculations

Vignette 4: Ploy and her husband are self-employed. She comes from Bangkok and has been living in Sweden for almost 10 years. After not settling into urban life in Sweden, her Swedish husband suggested they return to his family farm and start a new life there. At first, the silence was difficult for Ploy and she felt alone. After some time she began to love the fresh air. In the small village, she knows her neighbors and she has made friends with her husband's family. She is a person in this small community. However, life is very different from Bangkok, where Ploy, who has a master's degree from a top-level university in Thailand, worked in an international organization and had a lot of responsibility. She now works for the family business, but is content to do so for a better life, though she misses the challenge and prestige of her former job.

Like Jaidee, Ploy had a successful career in Thailand prior to migration. Working in the family business gives her a work-life balance, but it does come at a personal cost. Ploy was not alone in remarking on how her social status changed through migration. Women often described losing status in Sweden but gaining status in Thailand. Women, with access to resources in Sweden, were able to better support their families in rural Thailand, which gave them higher status within the family. Examining power across geographies, as seen through status, hints at migration as a means to create flexibility with one's power position.

Turning to employment, we find that the majority of Thai women in Sweden are employed. After staying in Sweden for at least five years, almost three quarters are gainfully employed.⁶ This employment rate is almost similar to that of Swedish women, and is much higher than other foreign-born women, as Table 1 shows. Thai women with Swedish partners even have slightly higher employment rates. The interviews also demonstrate that Thai women do find employment, but that access to stable employment and security remains difficult, especially for those without the resources, networks or capital.

Table 1: Labor market status of Thai women and other foreign-born women*

| Status | Thai women | Thai women at least five years in Sweden | Other foreign-born women, at least five years in Sweden |
|-------------------------|------------|--|---|
| Employed | 52.6 | 74.1 | 62.7 |
| Officially unemployed | 17.7 | 10.2 | 10.4 |
| Not on the labor market | 29.8 | 15.7 | 26.9 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

* Including only those who are at least 18 years old.

Source: Swedish register data, authors' calculations

Another measure of power dynamics within couples is the income share of one partner as part of the coupled income of the two partners, as proposed by Sørensen and McLanahan (1987).⁷ We used the disposable income to calculate this income indicator, which includes wages, study grants, social benefits, parental leave, unemployment benefits and other income.⁸ The measure varies between -1 (the couple's income is based solely on the man's income) and +1 (the couple's income is solely based on the woman's income). The average income share for Thai women is -0.27, indicating that on average, Thai women contribute less to the household income than their husbands. In comparison, the average income share was found to be -0.11 for newly-formed couples in Sweden (Brandén & Haandrikman, 2013).

The average income shares vary by age gap for Thai-Swedish couples, as Table 2 shows. Those with the largest age gaps to their partner contribute the least to the household income.⁹ Among couples where partners are the same age or where the woman is older, women contribute significantly more to the couple's income.

⁶ Gainful employment was defined as earning at least 41,000 SEK (approximately \$4,805), excluding those who were unemployed or who worked few hours. This amount is based on what the Swedish Tax Office uses for the amount geared to the price index (the so-called *prisbasbelopp*).

⁷ The measure is calculated as $(\text{income woman} / (\text{income woman} + \text{income man})) - (\text{income woman} / (\text{income woman} + \text{income man}))$.

⁸ Existing negative values were set to 0.

⁹ The differences between the four categories are statistically significant.

Table 2: Income share of Thai women in Thai-Swedish couples, by age gap

| Age gap in couple | Mean |
|------------------------------|---------|
| man 1-5 years older | -0.3084 |
| man 6-15 years older | -0.3144 |
| man more than 15 years older | -0.3201 |
| same age or woman older | -0.2295 |

Source: Swedish register data, authors' calculations

One of the most recognizable signs of Thai migration in the Swedish landscape is small women-led businesses, especially Thai takeaway restaurants. Self-employment emerged as an important theme for economic independence from the qualitative data. A majority of the women interviewed were self-employed or worked in a family business, which is confirmed by the statistics. Table 3 shows that Thai women are more often self-employed than other foreign-born and Swedish women, and the share is even higher for those with Swedish partners. It is quite common that both the Thai woman and her Swedish partner are entrepreneurs. We suspect from the interviews that there is more hidden ownership of businesses. Due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the Swedish bureaucratic system and difficulty getting bank loans, the Swedish husbands are often active partners in establishing and registering the businesses.

Table 3: Employment status, Thai women, other foreign-born women and Swedish women ages 18-64

| Status | Thai women | Other foreign-born women | Swedish women |
|---------------|------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Employed | 93.7 | 94.5 | 95.1 |
| Self-employed | 6.3 | 5.5 | 4.9 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Swedish register data, authors' calculations

Discussion

Our findings are in line with other studies (Sandy, 2007; Yea, 2012) that show migration is a complicated negotiation between the individual and social structures. Thai women in Sweden are not an exception, and our study reveals the delicate balance between individual agency and imposition of global social structures (Parreñas, 2011). Some of the evidence supports a view of inequalities in personal status and their relationships while there is also support for alternative ways of understanding their daily lives. Nevertheless, strong tensions exist between their expressions of power and agency, and conceptualizations of these in differing contexts.

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies illustrated that these women are unmistakably marriage migrants, and are deeply linked to ideas of asymmetrical relationships as shown through discourses of gender, class and nationality (Constable, 2003). This reveals great diversity of the role of emotions, such as love, in how relationships are presented and practiced. The strong gender bias present in this group reflects global patterns. Substantial age gaps are the norm for Thai-Swedish couples, which have been associated with lower bargaining power, gender inequality and limited opportunities for women (Kolk, 2015). These

power dynamics of gender and age come to the forefront when a woman makes the decision to migrate. However, later in the marriage, many couples plan to move back to Thailand, where the power dynamics might reverse. These dynamics reveal that power and agency do not necessarily involve a victim and a dominator, but rather that they can relate to an ever-shifting process over time. Likewise, there are considerable differences in education and employment among the couples, which reveal a diversified and sometimes contradictory narrative. Thai women often create opportunities for themselves through self-employment. Labor participation rates are exceptionally high among this group, testifying to what might be considered successful integration. Many Thai women do relatively well in learning Swedish – acquiring access to Sweden-specific resources such as local networks – and in building transnational communities. This is not to suggest that it is easy for these women to gain financial independence in Sweden. Many women remain reliant upon their husbands for networks and support. A study focusing on migrants who struggle could shed interesting perspectives on power and agency. Though these women manage to earn a living, their jobs do not indicate job prestige. The increasing ages at immigration, as well as their level of education, does mark a change over time, and we can foresee stronger examples of women's agency in making decisions and influencing their contexts.

From these findings, we assert the importance of geography and time in understanding women's agency and their life course. We argue that agency and power are partial and continuous processes that change in geographic and temporal contexts, following McNay (2000) and Pessar and Mahler (2003). The vignettes reveal that Thai migrant women engage in power and agency in a complicated manner, underscoring the fluidity and flexibility of these concepts. Each woman featured in this article clearly reflected on her situation and used the migration experience as a launch pad to renegotiate their life courses. Their stories reveal that they continuously engage with and renegotiate their positions throughout their lives – and this continues post-migration. It emphasizes their subjectivity and autonomy in the process. Power and agency are embedded in structures, but migration shows the contexts of these structures are in flux. Migration is a key tool for women to challenge positions and navigate global power systems. It is important, then, when examining migrant women's experiences to consider power and agency as situated, flexible concepts bridging and relating across different spaces, places and temporalities.

This study indicates a need for much more research on Thai migration in the Nordic context. The status of Thai women in Sweden extends beyond this empirical example as a means to explore the intersection between gender and migration. This case suggests that frictions within migration stories have the potential to further deepen conceptual developments of agency in migration.

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