Thai Women in Sweden: Victims or Participants?

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Abstract: 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 the 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, 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 are able to give a detailed picture of the migration and socio-demographic 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, giving an inside view into their lives that goes beyond and break common stereotypes.
Introduction

Despite a growing presence of gender in the migration literature (Green 2012), women’s power and agency continue to be underplayed and stigmatized. 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 position Thai women ‘as both materialist rural women and ignorant victims’ (Sunanta 2013, 193). This view often stems from Western interpretations of gender oppression and thus limits interpretations of power and agency (Wright 2013). Due to Thailand’s reputation as a centre of global sex trafficking and prostitution, Thai migrant motivations are often subject to these generalizations. A few studies show that migrants have a high degree of personal agency in the choice to migrate, such as Cohen (2003) and Kitcharoen (2007). Such studies are rare; consequently, there is a need for broader problematisation of Thai migrant women’s roles and experiences in their destination societies in terms of power and agency.

Our aim is to position and explore the socio-economic 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 that sheds new lights on their migration experiences. We ask the following questions: What is the status of Thai women in Sweden as described by their demographic and socio-economic positioning combined with their personal experiences? How does this status contribute to understandings of power and agency within a global migration perspective?
A Context of Thai-Swedish Migration

In the last ten years, Thai migration to Sweden has increased substantially, though the current migrant population of Thais is the result of decades of migration between the two countries. Historical ties between Thailand and Sweden go back to at least the end of the nineteenth century, when the Ericsson Company signed their first contract in Thailand. Since, Thailand has become 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 has been an increase of Europeans visiting Thailand, with Swedes occupying the fifth most common nationality (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2013); quite remarkable given there are only 9 million people living in Sweden. Swedish visitors have one of the highest average lengths of stay and also frequently revisit Thailand. Since the 1990s, early Thai marriage migrants began inviting relatives to pick berries in the Swedish woods, which has resulted in a parallel migration flow where thousands of Thai berry pickers come to work as seasonal labour migrants during the summers (Hedberg 2013).

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 the growing increase in marriage migration from Southeast Asia to Western countries. Niedomysl, Öst and Van Ham (2010) found that although the increase in international migration flows to Sweden had been relatively modest, 17 per cent during the period of 1990-2004, the number of marriage migrants during that period had increased by 37 per cent. 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, other parts of Asia, Eastern Europe, 
Russia and South America (Niedomysl, Östh, and Van Ham 2010) indicating a South-
North migration flow on the whole. Thais have been coming to Sweden to marry men as 
éarly as the 1970s (Alm Stenflo 2001). Since the early 2000s, Thai women have replaced 
Finnish women as the most popular foreign-born women to marry for Swedish men 
(Haandrikman 2014).

In the media, stereotyping of Thai-Swedish couples is commonplace; emphasizing 
equal power relations, sex tourism, domestic violence and other social problems. The 
typical stereotypical view of these couples privileges the western man as moneyed and 
powerful (Hedman et al. 2009), yet lacking physical desirability as well as modern 
masculinities (Nordin 2008). Thai women may be represented as a victimized sex worker 
seeking a better life, willing to accept the western world’s so-called ‘rejects’. In a study 
on Thai marriage migrants, Mai Sims (2012) showed that dominant British perceptions 
were that Thai women married for economic reasons, being from a poor, less-status 
country, than out of romantic love or their own desires. Flemmen (2008), in her study of 
migration migrants in Norway, found different perceptions from the native population 
about migrant spouses who were from the UK or North America compared to those from 
developing countries. Thailand is a country famous for its sex industry which emerged 
internationally during the Vietnam War era (Truong 1990). Currently a well-informed 
activist group estimates that there are around 200,000 to 300,000 prostitutes in Thailand 
(RATS-W Team Empower foundation 2012) on a national population of around 64 
million (UN 2013). Prostitution is not an insignificant issue by any means; however, it is 
important to note that it is not as prevalent as suggested by the country’s reputation.
The positioning of Thai women as opposite and Swedish-Thai couples as deviant is a predominant theme in media and popular culture. Expressen, a Swedish newspaper, examined various websites where the advantages of Thai women were discussed, on 8 March 2010, and summarized these as ‘Thai women are conservative and traditional by nature. They take care of their families’ and ‘They have beautiful yellow skin, slim bodies and they prepare delicious food’. In the same article, Thai women are depicted as being respectful towards their husbands, hardworking and rarely unfaithful. A female Norwegian writer and social critic said in Aftonbladet, another Swedish newspaper, on 15 June 2009, that ‘I understand why Norwegian men want Russian and Thai women. They at least like sex and are good at cooking’. What is also interesting about these statements is the assumption that the Thai wife is the opposite of a Swedish woman: subservient, passive and a dedicated wife and mother. These discourses reproduce notions of the South as backward and the North as modern, represented through competing discourses on femininities and geography. At the same time, within Thailand, transnational marriages are also criticized as being overly traditional – as opposed to so-called love marriages which are representative of modernity (Sunanta 2013).

Thai-Swedish relations, often represented through these couples, are not only frequent in Swedish newspaper articles but are also part of other prevalent discourses such as radio documentaries, television programmes (for instance a 2012 television drama series, ‘30 degrees in February’\(^1\)), films (such as ‘The Hunters’\(^2\)), music (such as a popular hip-hop song called ‘Svennebanan’, referring to a typical rural Swede, by the

\(^1\) Original title: ‘30 grader i februari’
\(^2\) Original title: ‘Jägarna’
band Promoe, describing the favourite pastimes of Swedes, including wild Thai beach vacations). In a recent expose on Swedish vacations in the newspaper Dagens Nyheter, a reporter wrote that ‘Out of control parties, massages with ‘happy endings’ and holiday flirtations that cost money. On Bangla road in Phuket morals disappear. Here Swedish tourists do things they never do at home’\(^3\) (22 April 2012).

In the academic discourse, Eisenstein, in her examination of women in nationalist constructions, argued that women become metaphors for what they represent, whereby ‘[f]irst world women of the west represent modernity; women of the third world south and east represent tradition’ (2000, 43). This insight is clearly expressed in academic publications by Scandinavian and Western European researchers, who describe the positioning of Thai women and their Swedish husbands using these stereotypes, though not substantiating them. Glowsky (2007, 2), discussing German men marry women from less developed countries, says ‘The man is middle-aged, has a heavyset appearance and a pronounced underclass habitus. One would expect the man not to have very much success with women, but in his arms he holds a much younger, beautiful, graceful woman with exotic traits’, while Östh, Van Ham and Niedomysl (2009, 4) state that ‘(…) men ‘importing’ wives are being portrayed as patriarchal sex-maniacs, living in remote rural areas, and being unable to find a local partner with modern values and preferences’.

While these views are predominant in media, the validity of these descriptions remains under researched.

\(^3\)Translated from Swedish: ‘Hejdlösa fester, massage med “happy endings” och semesterflirtar som kostar pengar. På Bangla road I Phuket är moralen flytande. Här gör svenska turister sådant de aldrig göra hemma.'
In general, academic migration studies on Thai or Southeast Asian women focus mainly on the commercialised marriage mediation industry, mail-order brides, sex/love tourism and trafficking. In such studies, marriage is portrayed as an escape from poor home countries, causing a loss of human capital in those countries (Niedomysl, Öst, and Van Ham, 2010). Most studies examine age and educational differences between natives and partners from less developed countries. For instance, Niedomysl, Öst, and Van Ham (2010) found that Swedish men who married a marriage migrant from a low income country were on average 11 years older than their wives. Öst, Van Ham and Niedomysl (2009) found that men who, in their words, ‘recruit’ a partner from a poor country are also higher educated. Marriage migrants were found to be higher educated than partners from higher income countries (Öst, Van Ham, and Niedomysl, 2009). Also in Germany, wives from poor countries were found to be higher educated than their husbands (Glowsky 2007). Paez Minervini and McAndrew (2006) argued that migrant women from poor countries might be relatively highly educated but unable to find a partner in their own country.

Female Migrants

Female migrants play an important role in global migrant movements and flows. But despite representing more than 50% of international migrants (UNFPA and IOM 2006), historically women’s role and value as decision makers in migration has been undermined and underrepresented. Reducing marginalization of women’s migration stories through acknowledging diverse motivations and drivers within women’s migration is especially important for women’s migrant groups who are often associated
with trafficking and sexual exploitation (Hofmann and 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 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 underexplored in migration literature. We therefore explore how global power relations frame and sometimes define the way in which marriage migrants are problematized.

**Love and Marriage Migration as a Global Power Relation**

A growing migration flow stems from love and marriage migration (Heikkilä and 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 and effecting 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 that the marriage migrant is marrying up creating asymmetrical relationships (Constable 2003).

Sexuality and moralities become packaged into this global hegemony, which in turn shape discourses on marriage migrant groups (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011). Global gender relations are expressed and maintained through a global system of heterosexual colonies, for example Thailand 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). For example, Sverdljuk (2009) found that 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 the social and professional spheres in the host country.

Couples consisting of native men and foreign-born women are often characterized by substantial age differences in favour of the man (for Sweden see Haandrikman [2014] and Niedomysl, Östh, and Van Ham [2010]). Large age gaps between partners are generally seen as markers of gender power dynamics within couples and in the wider society (see Kolk 2012 for an overview). 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 2012), with the younger partner generally having less bargaining power and a weaker economic position. In addition, choosing a partner at later ages has also been associated with larger age gaps between partners (England and McClintock 1999). This suggests that Thai women with Swedish partners may experience situations of social and economic inequalities.
Power and Agency of Women Migrants

Thus far, we have shown that power and agency shapes how marriage migrants are conceived by outsiders, such as the media. Now we turn to how power and agency may be articulated by the actors themselves. Power should not be viewed as possessed or retained (Massey 2005, 46); rather it is a complicated negotiation between individual identities and situated geographies. Agency and power are brought together or pulled apart through choices and decisions which create change, or conversely maintain the status quo. A tension thus exists between the two concepts, which is constantly negotiated by the individual.

Agency and power can be expressed throughout different settings and methods but as Bakewell (2010, 1684) notes, in some cases agency ‘need be no more than the simple individualism of autonomous actors exercising their power over the world’. 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 (Pressar and Mahler 2003). A consequence of this process is that some groups may get caught into being a ‘have-not’ with little evidential support.

Migrant women exercise power through making various decisions and strategic actions. Agency to make these decisions shapes their social and economic status (Yea 2012). According to Baydar (2012) global heteropatriarchal discourses may limit and confine women’s agency but there is room for multiplicities. Similarly, Sandy (2007) argues that in contexts of limited options, the ability to make choices and enact decisions
is an exercise of power and agency. Showden 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 fulfil a range of needs and desires and to influence the contexts in which these desire take shape’ (2011, 2). Looking at 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 that frame their positions.

A few studies have shown that the gaps between agency and power highlight interesting arenas of negotiation opportunities. Gill (2010) in his examination of Polish migrants in the UK highlights the notion of choice, or not having a choice, as being an interplay between agency and power. In his example, the choice to integrate into mainstream society is situated with the context of opportunities and constraints. Thus, decision-making, even when confined by social mechanisms, is an indicator that power and agency in various forms have been activated. 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.

Identifying agency and power through indicators is both a theoretical and methodological challenge. Kabeer (1999) argues that indicators compress information and hide assumptions. Researchers need to triangulate data to find alternative explanations. She reports that agency and power are often measured by indicators of women’s empowerment, such as age and educational differences between partners, labour force participation, egalitarian gender roles, the control of earnings, freedom of
movement and, for instance, domestic violence. In the next section, we illuminate how we combine the measurement of Thai women’s positioning with their personal stories to present a more nuanced and complicated image of the Thai women in Sweden.

Data and Methods

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

The quantitative part of the study aims to portray the women by outlining descriptive statistics of women who are born in Thailand and registered to live in Sweden. We use data from the PLACE database, a full-population register data base that is managed at Uppsala University. For this study, we focus on all women born in Thailand and registered in Sweden the year 2008, including their demographic, socio-economic and geographic attributes during the years 1990-2007. In addition, if the woman is married or has a child with the partner she lives with, that partner together with his demographic and socio-economic features is also included. We thus capture both cohabiting and married
couples. We have full information of socio-economic status such as educational level, employment status, sector of employment and income; demographic characteristics such as age, age at marriage, age at immigration, family position and having children, of both the migrant women and their partners.

To explore the demographic and socio-economic positioning of the women, three main themes were investigated using these 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 analysed. Women were contacted through their businesses, temples or state-provided Swedish language centres. From these initial interviews, snowballing methods were used to get in touch with other women and to build connections within the Thai community. Interviews were conducted by the first author and took place in the period 2012-2013. The women came from diverse backgrounds, had different ages, education levels, and 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 age at interview ranged from 26 to 44.

4 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.
Only women with the legal right to residency in Sweden, so who are present in the register data, 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. Generalizations cannot be made from this sample, but rather their stories illuminate our theoretical understanding of agency and power in their migration story.

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 and some women were interviewed more than once. In addition, the interviews were complemented with researcher participation in community and daily activities such as cooking, walks, parties and sporting events.

For the PhD project where this work is part of, various experts were interviewed such as policy makers and Thai academics. These have been used to give a contextual background to the present paper. In Sweden, Thai women were interviewed in three specific mostly rural regions, which for ethical considerations cannot be revealed. Sweden, while relatively large geographically, has a small population and revealing locations may also reveal participants’ identities.

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.

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5 Only children registered to live in the same household are captured.
because she was not confident that we would not portray the Thai community as sex workers or economic opportunists, and in other cases, the women’s husbands contacted the researcher to check the intentions of the research, all on a friendly and informational basis. 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. For the analysis of the qualitative data we thus had to rely mostly on research notes and interview summaries. With limited direct quotes from interviewees, 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 growing and useful tools to represent qualitative data (Cannon 2012) and we use vignettes to create connections between our quantitative indicators and the qualitative understandings. Vignettes may be defined as short sketches or descriptions of decisions, episodes or events in a person's life. Each story is taken directly from interviewees’ words but has been condensed as well as edited for ethical considerations, for example geographies and names are changed. Presenting ethnographic material in different forms is an important reminder that interviews and ethnographies are ‘an interpretative, subjective and value-laden project’ (Goldstein 2001, 294). The stories were chosen for how they topically related to the themes and for how the women’s stories shed nuance on the statistics and could be interpreted in different ways.

The main drawbacks 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, and as a result, any
unregistered event is not captured. 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 making notice of such cases (County Board of Värmland 2010).

Results

Marriage Migration

Vignette 1: Amporn knew she wanted to marry a western man. Her cousin was working in a restaurant in the tourist areas and suggested that she would join her to make more money and meet Western men. It took only one and a half years to find a man she liked. After becoming pregnant she moved to Sweden. Amporn feels very lucky. 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.

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, the woman moving to her husband’s country may not seem like a powerful strategy. But from a Thai perspective it might be a good marriage choice given the alternatives. The story of Amporn also 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 reveal more about he power dynamics in marriage. The highly gendered nature of Thai migration to Sweden is
evidenced by the fact that of the 25,781 Thailand-born persons registered in Sweden in 2008, 78 percent 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 (figure 1).

**Figure 1**: Thai women migrants by latest year of immigration, 2008

![Bar chart showing the number of Thai women migrants by latest year of immigration from 1960 to 2010.](chart)

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*

The share of migrants who marry shortly after migration has increased over time (figure 2). More than half of those marrying Swedish men married in the same year as
they migrated. In the most recent time period, as much as 98 percent of all Thai women migrants married within two years after migration. It is also relatively common for higher educated women to marry shortly after migration.

**Figure 2:** Duration between migration and marriage

![Graph showing duration between migration and marriage](image)

Note: Marriage was measured as a change from unmarried in the previous to married in the next year. Those who migrated before 1990, N=1,068, were excluded from this graph.

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*

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 corresponds to the interviewees’ ages.
Half of all adult Thai women are married or cohabiting - with cohabiting defined as living with a partner and common children\textsuperscript{6}. Among those Thai women who cohabit or are married, no less than 85 percent have a Swedish partner, while this share is only 35 percent for other foreign born women. If Thai women are married to other men than Swedes, they are mostly married to either Thai men. Cohabitation is quite common among Thai-Swedish couples, much more than among other foreign born women. Many women who were interviewed married in a temple, though being legally unmarried.

A quarter of Thai women in Sweden are or have at one point been a single mother; a fairly high share, which might be explained by many having children from previous relationships. Mook (vignette 2) succeeded in Sweden as a single parent and is not atypical in wanting to build a life in Sweden for her children.

\textit{Vignette 2: Mook was a single mother of two children in Thailand when she met her Swedish partner while he was on holiday. She did not want to move to Sweden or leave her children but her mother encouraged her to do so as it would provide her with a marriage and a means of support for her children. Mook was very unhappy with her Swedish partner. She was isolated from other Thai women and he discouraged her from learning Swedish. After some years, she left her husband and she was finally able to bring her children to Sweden, something he had forbidden. As a single mother in Sweden with her children from her first Thai marriage, Mook built a good life for her and them.}

\textsuperscript{6} 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.
She opened her own massage business and learned Swedish. Her children are now adults and living in Sweden, while she is currently engaged to another Swedish man.

**Age Gaps**

Vignette 3: 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 retired or even less if he takes early retirement. Lek is the manager of a successful massage business but suffers from arthritis, back aches, knee pain and wrist pain from years of massage. She knows that 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 parent’s farmland. Not only will life be more affordable and she can stop massage but she will also be able to help care for her elderly parents who are increasingly in need of care. As Lek explains, the age difference provides her with social and economic support and protection.

This positive view towards a substantial age difference is something we encountered many times in interviewing the Thai women. Most of them associate it with early retirement, after which they plan to move to Thailand. But how common are large age differences among these couples? Our data show that in 85% of the Thai-Swedish couples, the man is older than the woman. And figure 3 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 partner; Kolk (2012) found that in the Swedish population, men are on average 2 years
older than their female partners. Figure 3 also 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 in that they have the highest share of couples in which 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 3:** Age gaps between foreign-born women and their Swedish partners

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*
**Education and Employment**

Vignette 4: Jaidee is a 44-year old Thai woman, living in rural Sweden since 4 years. She met her husband, who is higher 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 collecting mushrooms and loves the fresh air on the countryside, which she finds very refreshing after returning from Bangkok. As she was a successful and educated business woman in Thailand, she struggles with finding suitable employment in Sweden although she has a college level education. 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.

**Table 1:** Educational level of adult Thai women and other foreign-born women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of education*</th>
<th>Thai women</th>
<th>Other foreign-born women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% missing education</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Low=förgymnasial, Medium=gymnasium, High=eftergymnasial utbildning.

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*
Jaidee and her husband are both quite high educated. If we look at the statistics, we see that Thai women are significantly lower educated than other foreign-born women (see table 1). More than half are lower educated (basically have only primary school), and almost a quarter are higher educated. Part of this result might be explained by the fact that compulsory education in Thailand is only until the age of 12. Thai women being lower educated is also reflected in a large share being lower educated than their partners: more than 40 percent of the women is lower educated than their partners. Lower education is more common for older Thai women, and over time, the share of higher educated women who migrated to Sweden increased, as evidenced in figure 4, and illustrated by high educated Ploy in vignette 5.

**Figure 4: Educational level of Thai women by period of immigration**

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*
Vignette 5: Ploy and her husband are self-employed. She comes from Bangkok and has been living in Sweden for almost 10 years now. After not settling into urban life in Sweden, her Swedish husband suggested that they return to the family farm and start a new life there. At first, the silence was difficult for Ploy and she felt alone. But after some time she began to love the fresh air. In the small village, she knows her neighbours 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.

Turning to employment, we find that the majority of the Thai women in Sweden are employed. After staying in Sweden for at least 5 years, almost three quarters are gainfully employed\(^7\). This employment rate is almost similar to that of Swedish women, and is much higher than other foreign-born women, as table 2 shows. Thai women with Swedish partners even have slightly higher employment rates. The interviews also demonstrated 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, for instance to start one’s own business.

\(^7\) Gainful employment was defined as earning at least 41,000 SEK, 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’).
Table 2: Labour market status of Thai women and other foreign-born women*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thai women</th>
<th>Thai women at least 5 years in Sweden</th>
<th>Other foreign-born women, at least 5 years in Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officially unemployed</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not on the labour market</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Including only those aged at least 18 years.

Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations

Typically, average annual income tends to increase annually for Thai migrant women, and especially so for the higher educated, as shown in figure 5. The story of Raijin (vignette 6) is typical of how many Thai women earn their income and handle their finances.

Vignette 6: Raijin explained to her husband that it was important that she send money home and so they reached a deal whereby any money she earned would be hers to support her family and he would finance their Swedish household. This motivated Raijin and she rapidly learned Swedish and took on an apprenticeship in a local restaurant where she learned skills and became a permanent member of the staff. Her income has made a significant change to her family’s life in Thailand. She has bought them a house with air-conditioning in the nearby city and pays for her nephews’ schooling. As she supports much of her family, she has emerged as a village leader and relatives often call
her advice. Raijin is proud of the impacts of her income in Thailand and is very happy with the income arrangements she has made with her husband.

**Figure 5:** Average annual income development since year of latest immigration, by educational level in 2008

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). We used the disposable income to calculate this income indicator, which includes wages, study grants, social benefits, parental leave, unemployment

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*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*

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8 The measure is calculated as (income woman / (income woman + income man)) - (income woman / (income woman + income man)).
benefits and other income. The measure varies between -1 (the couple income is based solely of the man’s income) and +1 (the couple 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 and Haandrikman 2013).

Table 3: Income share of Thai women in Thai-Swedish couples, by age gap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age gap in couple</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>man 1-5 years older</td>
<td>-0.3084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man 6-15 years older</td>
<td>-0.3144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man more than 15 years older</td>
<td>-0.3201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same age or woman older</td>
<td>-0.2295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations

The average income shares vary by age gap for Thai-Swedish couples, as table 3 shows. Those with the largest age gaps to their partner contribute the least to the household income⁹. Among couples where partners have the same age or where the woman is older, women contribute significantly more to the couple income.

⁹ Existing negative values were set to 0.
### Table 4: Employment status among the employed, Thai women, other foreign born women and Swedish women aged 18-64

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thai women</th>
<th>Other foreign born women</th>
<th>Swedish women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>93.7</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*

Table 4 shows that Thai women are more often self-employed than other foreign-born and Swedish-born women; this share is even higher for those with Swedish partners. It is also quite common that both the Thai woman and her Swedish partner are entrepreneurs. However, the share of self-employed women is not as large as expected. One of the most recognizable signs of Thai migration in the Swedish landscape are small women-led businesses, especially Thai take-aways. 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. 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 business. Such is the case for Simla and her husband, as shown in the next vignette, where the partner responsible for these challenges changed depending on geography.
Vignette 7: Simla and her Swedish husband have been together for many years. After living together in Thailand for seven years, they decided to move to Sweden to have children. Both Simla and her husband have experience in running their own businesses. First in Thailand her husband started a tourist-related business with Simla providing the insider knowledge and networks to get it started. When they moved to Sweden, the roles reversed and her husband provided the external supports to get her business off the ground. Simla’s massage business has been very successful and she has since opened a second shop. Her husband’s new Swedish business is also taking off. Working together they pool their ideas, skills and resources.

Many of the interviewed women work in the food sector or with massage services. Figure 6 confirms that the most important employment branch Thai women work in is the food and hotel sector. Within this branch, most women work in the restaurants and mobile food service sector, while many others work in cleaning and administrative services. Only two percent of Thai women are registered to work in ‘physical well-being activities’, which includes massage activities. Given the visibility of Thai massage businesses but the low rate of women employed in it, we believe that the informal economy is prevalent here.
**Figure 6: Employment branch of Thai women 18 years and older***

* Note: These statistics are based on the Swedish Standard Industrial Classification 2007, with branches being regrouped.

*Source: Swedish register data, authors’ calculations*

**Discussion**

The main conclusion drawn from the quantitative and qualitative analyses together is that there are contradictions in the status of Thai women in Sweden, and thus also in the understanding of power and agency in their migration process. Some of the evidence supports a view of inequalities in these women’s status and their relationships while there is also support for alternative ways of understanding these in their daily lives.

Nevertheless, strong tensions exist between their expressions of power and agency and conceptualizations of these in differing contexts.
Both methodologies have shown that these women are unmistakably marriage migrants, and so are deeply linked to ideas of asymmetrical relationships as shown through discourses of gender, class, and nationality (Constable 2003). 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 (e.g. Kolk 2012). These power dynamics of gender and age come to the fore 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 in the couple might reverse. These dynamics reveal that power and agency is not a case of oppressed and dominator but an ever-shifting process.

Likewise, there are considerable couple differences in education and employment which are diversified and contradictory. Many Thai women successfully create opportunities for themselves through self-employment. Labour participation rates are exceptionally high among this group, testifying to their successful integration. Thai women do relatively well in learning Swedish, acquire access to Sweden-specific resources such as local networks, and in building transnational communities, and their income increases steadily after migration. This is not to suggest that it is easy for these women to gain financial independence in Sweden, and many women remain reliant upon their husbands for networks and support. Though these women manage to make a living, their jobs do not indicate job prestige. The increasing age at immigration as well as their level of education does mark a change over time, and we could foresee stronger examples of women’s agency to make decisions and influence their context.
In the Swedish context, the findings from both the demographic analysis and the vignettes are indicative of unstable positions from both a legal and a financial perspective. Unmarried cohabitation, relationship breakups and patchwork families are common among Thai women in Sweden. Without written cohabitation agreement, the division of resources after dissolution of an unmarried partnership might be unclear (Agell and Brattström 2011). This raises questions about why Thai women are often in these fragile positions. Do they not feel a need to legally marry or is it a means to deny them legal rights on the part of their partners? It is hard to draw substantive conclusions from either method.

From these findings we can 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 context, following McNay (2000) and Pressar and Mahler (2003). For example, a Thai woman in Sweden may not hold a position of power, but may emerge as a family leader stemming from the skills and material resources accumulated in Sweden contesting static conceptions of power. Simla and her husband (vignette 5) have both experienced being the ‘power-holders’ when opening their businesses in their non-native country and relying upon their spouse to facilitate the process. Many women have long-term strategies to get the power back later in their life course. Since power is a negotiation, it is always pushed and pulled between actors and their context; for some Thai-Swedish couples, power changes hands often.

Discourses on Thai women position them as powerless or at least in weaker power positions, yet, the interviews showed that as situated subjects they are exercising agency
and power in different situations, contexts and time. Amporn’s case (vignette 1) is an example; she exercised power in acting upon her desire for a Western partner in a context of limited options defined by broader global power relations. Agency varies over one’s life course or over one’s migration story and waxes or wanes over time. Thai migrant women are shown in this study as flowing between different power flows and degrees of agency.

Arguing that agency and power are process concepts also stems from our mixed methodology. We found disconnects between the status indicators provided by the quantitative methods and the multifaceted narratives from qualitative methods. Mixed methods revealed the difficulties of measuring and highlighting the functionality of power and agency. Despite challenges of blending together differing logics, ‘methodological pluralism or eclecticism […] frequently results in superior research’ (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). We need to take on a variety of perspectives to see the continuous change that occurs with power and agency status.

Acknowledgements

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