

## Extended Abstract for the European Population Conference, 13-16 June, Stockholm

### Thai Women in Rural Sweden: Victims or Participants?

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*Please do not quote – Work in progress*

#### *Abstract*

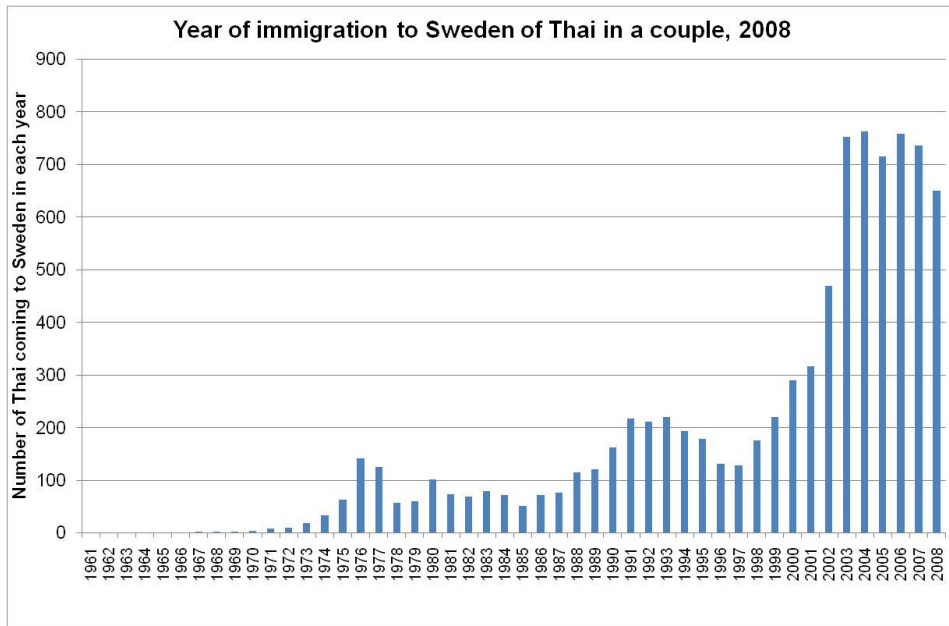
Migration from Thailand to Sweden is a rapidly growing phenomenon with a threefold increase over the last 10 years. Thai-Swedish migration is a unique migration flow as it is highly gendered and geographically pulled to rural areas. Eighty percent of Thai people in Sweden are women, and of those in a couple, almost 80 percent are married to Swedish men. Among women living in rural areas these figures are even higher. Consequently, many rural areas in Sweden have female dominated Thai communities. In the media, stereotyping of Thai-Swedish couples is commonplace; focusing on unequal power relations, sex tourism and other social problems. Our paper aims to explore the characteristics of this unique group of migrants, and to challenge popular media stereotypes. Through adopting a multi-methods approach we combine both quantitative and qualitative data. Using register data, we are able to give a uniquely detailed picture of the geography, migration history, and socio-demographic features of Thais in Sweden. To complement the understanding of these patterns, life story and in-depth interviews with Thai women, community leaders and other key stakeholders are conducted giving a more nuanced view of Thai-Sweden migration. We situate our findings within a gendered transnational perspective challenging frameworks that position Thai woman as passive victims of global power relations; rather we present Thai women as active participants in the Swedish countryside. We reveal a diversified picture of Thai women in Sweden, and give an inside view into the lives of these women that go beyond and break common stereotypes.

#### *Context*

The current population of 25,000 Thais in Sweden is the result of decades of migration between the two countries. The number of Thais increased threefold in the last 10 years. Thailand has for many years been a popular holiday destination for Swedes, but the migration history between the two countries is much longer, including not only marriage migrants but also for instance seasonal berry pickers. The figure on the next page shows the number of Thais that immigrated to Sweden and subsequently cohabited or married a partner in Sweden, by year of immigration. Although the most salient observation on the above graph would be the recent increase in numbers, it is also interesting to note that Thais came to Sweden to marry natives as early as the 1970s (Alm Stenflo 2001). This paper will explore the characteristics of this unique group of migrants.

Swedes increasingly marry partners from Southeast Asia. Nedomysl et al. (2009) found that although the increase in international migration flows to Sweden has been relatively modest with 17 percent during the period of 1990-2004, the number of marriage migrants has increased with 37 percent. The pattern of geographical origins of marriage migrants is highly gendered, with an over-representation of female marriage migrants from Southeast Asia, other parts of Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia and South America (Nedomysl et al. 2009). The same study found that the fastest growing group of marriage migrants in the last 20 years are those from Southeast and other parts of Asia. Our study has found that eighty

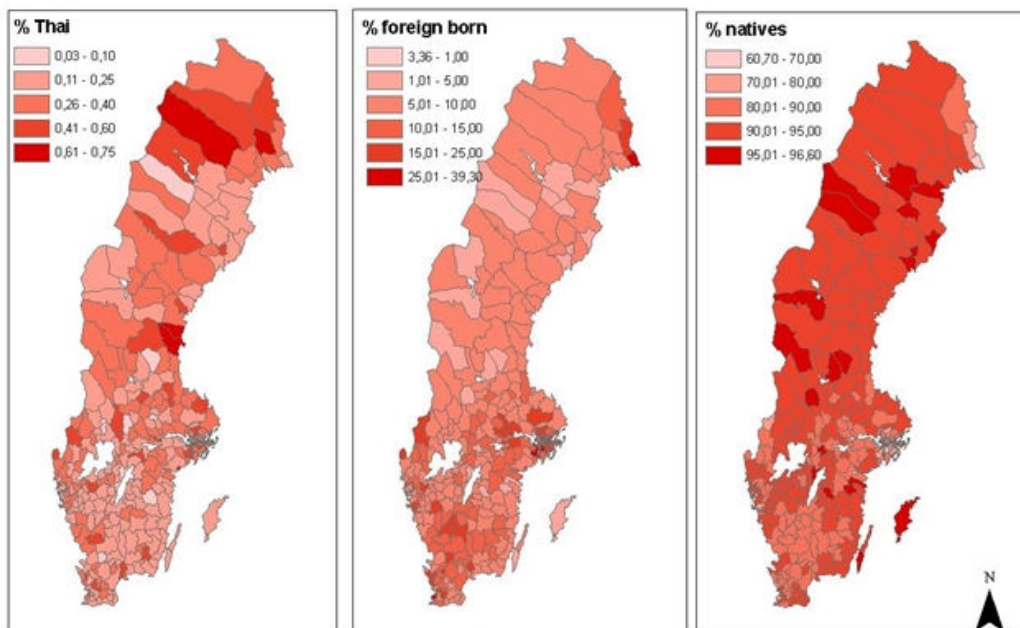
percent of Thais in Sweden are women, and that of those that are in a couple, either by cohabitation or marriage, almost 85 percent have a Swedish partner.



Source data: PLACE register data, 2011.

Thai migration to Sweden is a gendered but also a spatial issue. The maps below show that compared to other foreign born residents, Thai migrants are less concentrated in cities, and also live in remote areas in the north. Among couples existing of a native and a partner from outside Europe who live on the countryside, Thais form by far the largest group. The share of Thais in a couple who have a Swedish partner is higher in rural than in urban areas. Consequently, many rural areas in Sweden have female dominated Thai communities. Moreover, from our interviews it appears that even many Thai women originate from rural areas themselves.

Thai, foreign born and natives living in Swedish municipalities, 2008



Source data: PLACE register data, 2011.

In the media, stereotyping of Thai-Swedish couples is commonplace; focusing on unequal power relations, sex tourism and other social problems. The typical stereotypical view of these couples privileges the western man as moneyed and powerful (Hedman et al. 2009), with a focus on the extent of manliness, an unworthy physical inferior and rural residence (Nordin 2008). The stereotype extends to the victimized Thai sex worker seeking a better life, accepting the western world's so-called 'rejects'. Although Thailand is a country famous for its sex industry and exploitation of women, only 0.1 to 0.5 percent of the population in Thailand is working as sex workers, this popular imagination remains part of discourses (Pirazzi and Vasant 2004: 110). Studies on Thai or Southeast Asian women focus mainly on the commercialised marriage mediation industry, mail-order brides, or on sex tourism and trafficking. In such studies, marriage is seen as an escape to poor home countries, causing some degree of brain drain (Niedomysl et al. 2009). *Expressen* (2010), a Swedish newspaper, examined various websites where the advantages of Thai women were discussed, and summarized these as "Thai women are conservative and traditional by nature. They take care of their families" and "They have a 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. Academic studies that challenge these stereotypes are lacking, and this is one of the motivations for our study.

Existing studies mainly examine age and educational differences between natives and partners from less developed countries. Swedish men who married a marriage migrant from a low income country are on average 11 years older than their wives (Niedomysl et al. 2009). Contrasting to their hypotheses, Östh et al. (2010) found that although men who "recruit" a partner from a poor country are indeed older, they are also higher educated. Marriage migrants were even found to be higher educated than partners from higher income countries (Östh et al. 2010). Similarly, for Germany, women from poor countries were found to be higher educated than their husbands (Niesner et al. 1997, cf Glowsky 2007). These findings are in line with the study of Paez Minervini and McAndrew (2006) who argue that migrant women from poor countries might be relatively highly educated, but unable to find a partner in their own country.

### *This study*

Our paper aims to explore the characteristics of Thais in Sweden, and to challenge popular media stereotypes on Thai-Swedish couples. Through adopting a multi-methods approach we combine both quantitative and qualitative data. Using register data from the PLACE database, we are able to give a uniquely detailed picture of the geography, migration history, and socio-demographic features of Thais in Sweden. Our study population consists of the total population registered in Sweden for the years 1990-2008. We are therefore able to study all persons in Sweden who are born in Thailand, including their migration history and their demographic, socio-economic and other characteristics. We intend to examine patterns and trends regarding Thai-Swedish marriages, and the life courses of Thai women since arrival in Sweden.

To further understand the phenomenon shown by the quantitative study, we also conducted qualitative interviews. To date, 12 in-depth interviews with rural Thai women have been conducted. Interviews ranged from one to six hours length. While all the women lived in a rural area of Sweden, they came from diverse backgrounds, ages, education levels, and lived very different lives in Sweden. Women were contacted through snowballing methods as well as through key agencies such as "Swedish for Immigrants" (the government language training system). The interviews draw on life course theory whereby women are asked to describe

their life story. Life story interviews allow us to understand their migration process as active agents and the particular contexts that shape their lives both in Thailand and in Sweden. They allow for the interviewee to identify the themes and issues that are relevant to her individual migration and integration. Themes that arose in most interviews included language, family care, food and a shifting sense of belonging.

We situate our findings within a gendered transnational perspective challenging frameworks that position Thai woman as passive victims of global power relations; rather we present Thai women as active participants in the Swedish countryside. We reveal a diversified picture of Thai women in Sweden, and give an inside view into the lives of these women that go beyond and break common stereotypes.

The in-depth interviews reveal significant challenges to the popular discourses and the lives of Thai women. For example, several of the women interviewed regarded the significant age differences, a fact often criticized in media, to be an advantage to them as it should mean more living time in Thailand as seen through spending the winters in Thailand when their husbands retire. Initial findings further show a strong translocal process occurring in the daily lives of the Thai women in their families both in Sweden and Thailand. We also find strong community connections between the countries. The qualitative methods confirm that Thai women lead complicated lives that are deeply ingrained in both societies.

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