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FROM THAILAND WITH LOVE: TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE MIGRATION IN THE GLOBAL CARE ECONOMY

Sine Plambech

Introduction

Transnational brides are just one segment of the 60 million female migrants of today. During the 1970s, Western Europe and Australia were common destinations for South-East Asian brides (De Stoop, 1994). In the 1980s and 1990s, migration movements diversified to include women from Latin America, Mexico, China and the Philippines who traveled to the USA, as well as women migrating from Eastern to Western Europe (Kojima, 2001). Historically, women have always migrated. The apparent tendency of feminization in global migration can be explained both by the number of female migrants as well as by gender-specific reasons for migration. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with a group of Thai women and Danish men, this article seeks to contribute new perspectives to the so called mail order bride discourse, as well as to perceptions of transnational marriages between women from Thailand and European men.

The existing discourse has categorized mail-order brides, in a non-critical but problematic manner, as victims. This non-contemporary perception has its roots in the universalist feminist discourse of the 1970s, in which marriage was essentially considered as being suppressive, regardless of the woman's own experience and opinions. The assumption that the woman was a victim, and unaware of her suppression, was particularly applied to women from third world countries (Constable, 2003, p.6).

This discussion is interesting in relation to Thai women, in view of their status as foreigners who come from a third world country in order to enter into marriage. Here, the same mechanisms that are considered suppressive in the universalist feminist discourse are incorporated into one and the same woman, making it hardly surprising that mail order brides are considered to be victims. However, these perceptions represent a distorted picture and are, to put it bluntly, rooted in non-contemporary perceptions of sexual inequality and the intrinsic subservience of the female sex. They can be seen as an expression of a patriarchal view of sexuality that keeps women in the role of the victim and does not differentiate between will and force (ibid.).

Five significant themes have characterized this discourse until now, in both a Danish and international context: First, the woman is considered a victim of illegal trafficking.¹ The link between transnational marriages and trafficking arises from perceptions of women from abroad who are specifically bought as marriage partners by western men. This commercial perspective is reminiscent of prostitution, and should be examined critically as it tends to have no relation to reality. Thai brides are not a commodity that men purchase and consume (Schaeffer-Grabel, 2004, p.33).

Second, Thai women are perceived as victims of violence. The National Association of Women's Crisis Centers in Denmark (LOKK, 2003) has documented that those Asian women who most frequently visit a Danish crisis center are Thais (p.13). Due to language barriers, lack of knowledge about Danish legislation and, in some cases, a weak social network, women are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the husband's violence (ibid. p.3). These conditions justify the perception of the women in question as victims. However, the violence aspect is also promoted by media portraying these marriages in a sensationalist manner that exclusively focuses on negative cases of Danish men who make a habit of marrying and divorcing Thai women, or by citing extreme examples of violence and abuse (Julag-Ay, as cited in Constable, 2003, p.86). There is little knowledge about Thai women in Denmark as many spend all their time in the home and are provided for by their husbands. As "self providers," these women are able to avoid almost all contact with public authorities (from an interview with the Nykøbing-Mors employment exchange). This phenomenon gives rise to two problems, the first being that exploitation and violence can remain unnoticed and concealed within the home, while the other is that common knowledge of Thai women and their marriages is primarily based on information from women who have been in contact with a crisis center precisely because they have been subjected to violence. Knowledge about the lives of Thai women in Denmark and transnational marriages that succeed without violence is limited. Nonetheless, it is essential in order to reveal the deeper reasons for such marriages and the conflicts that can arise.

Third, there is a perception that these women have "burnt all their bridges"² and therefore represent a vulnerable group without a social network in Denmark or ties to their country of origin. The Thai women in this study, however, have both a social network and connections with their families in Thailand—an aspect that this article seeks to illustrate. Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton (1995) have already demonstrated how migrants are often characterized as uprooted, or disconnected from their country of origin due to their migration (p. 48). In a watershed article (1995), they argue in favor of a more complex understanding of the migrant concept. Characterizing migrants who retain and sustain their ties to their country of origin more precisely as transmigrants.

Fourth, a general case of gender blindness in migrant theory has ignored the fact that women can and will migrate for other reasons than those of men. In the case of the Thai women's migration and marriages, this can be illustrated by the wish of the family in Thailand for her to marry a foreign man at the same time as the woman herself wants to liberate herself from the traditional gender roles of Thai society.

Fifth, rather than embracing a global economic perspective, the discourse beyond the four themes outlined above has primarily explained these marriages as a result of extreme poverty, or the need of Danish men for control and sexual services. By placing these women's own perspectives at the focal point of the analysis and linking these to the wider influence of global processes, it is my intention to introduce new aspects to the mail order bride discourse in a Danish context.

Initially, I will present the ethnographic context, followed by a care-economic analysis of transnational marriages on a macro level, and then proceed to demonstrate how a transnational network supports these marriages. Subsequently, I will link the care-economic perspective with the motives of these women and their husbands for entering into marriage at the individual micro level.

Chutima, Kita, Siriporn, and Peter³

My focus for the discussion in this paper is Jens, a young Danish man married to a Thai, and three young Thai women from northeastern Thailand.⁴ The women, Chutima, Kita, and Siriporn, are all married, or have previously been married, to a Danish husband. They describe themselves as Thai girls. The interviews with the three women have been selected from a series of interviews supplemented by private visits, visits to companies, meetings with the employment exchange and the language school. As is the case with most anthropological studies in complex societies, this study is qualitative and local, enabling it to highlight new perspectives and contribute to a differentiated understanding of this type of transnational marriage. It cannot, however, be a basis for generalization.

The geographical locality of this study is northwest rural Denmark. There is a general tendency towards large groups of Asian women in rural areas, particularly in Australia and the USA (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Pettman, 1996; Constable, 2003). In Scandinavia, the number of transnational marriages in rural areas is growing. This growth is often accounted for by a lack of women, especially younger women, which, as often as not, is due to increasing demand for female labor in urban areas. Isolated workplaces in a local setting that primarily use male labor also contributes to making it difficult for men to meet local women (Cahill, 1990, p.67). One reason for the women in this study to live in rural Denmark was that they knew other Thai women already married to Danes in this area.

Jens lives on Mors, a small island in the region of northwest Denmark, and is married to Chutima, with whom he has a small daughter. They live in a new detached bungalow in a small village, and they both work in the fish processing industry—Jens more than full-time, while Chutima works eight hours a week. Chutima has lived in Denmark for five years. She has an aunt who helped her and five cousins to come to the Mors area in Denmark. In Thailand, Chutima grew up as the only girl in the family together with her two brothers. She later worked 16 hours a day in a factory making air-conditioning parts for export.

Siriporn is divorced, has two daughters, and rents an apartment in a small provincial town. She owns a house that she rents out. Siriporn grew up with her parents and eight siblings in a village to the north east of Bangkok. From the age of 16 she worked in a chicken slaughterhouse and in a supermarket. Siriporn has lived in Denmark for 11 years and has two marriages with Danish men behind her. She has an older sister in the city of Aarhus, in Denmark, who introduced her to each of her Danish husbands. Siriporn's younger sister came to Denmark in 2004. She lives on the other side of the street and is married to a mutual acquaintance of Siriporn and her older sister in Aarhus. Siriporn is on welfare after an accident at work, but has had her own restaurant for some years where she serves Thai food.

Kita has lived in Denmark for four years. She is a friend of Siriporn and both women come from the same area of Thailand. Kita worked in a factory in northern Thailand. She is now married to a friend of Siriporn's ex-husband and looks after the home. The couple lives in a rented apartment and has no children. Kita goes to Danish classes twice a week at a language school in a larger nearby town.

Many Thai women in the area are unemployed, look after the home, or work in the fish processing industry. The latter involves keeping up a fast pace on a production line, cleaning and packing fish and mussels. The employees call their workplaces "The Mussel" or "The Fish." Many of the Thai women have had similar jobs in Thailand and have no further education as exemplified by Chutima's, Siriporn's and Kita's backgrounds. The opposite applies in the case of Russian women married to Danes. These women generally have a higher education, while Thai women in Denmark generally have no education beyond basic schooling (LOKK, 2003, p. 12). The employment exchange officer in Nykøbing Mors pointed out that jobs in the fish processing plant matched the previous work experience of the Thai women, and met the labor requirement in fish processing factories that still operate conventional production lines and suffer from a lack of Danish female labor.

Chutima, Kita, and Siriporn did not find their husbands via the Internet or in a catalog. The meeting with them indicates that the term mail order brides has troublesome implications: the main reason being that the women and married couples that I met had not been introduced by mail order. On the contrary, they had met via local personal networks, via women and men who

were already married to a Danish husband or Thai woman. They had exchanged a few letters after which the man sent an air ticket and the couple met in Denmark. Glodava and Onizuka (1994) defined mail order brides as women who find their partners via correspondence. This process can be initiated by a marriage agency, a catalog, a newspaper, or by friends or family. The juxtaposition of a formal marriage agency and personal family contacts is problematic. First, there are significantly different social factors involved when contacts are made via a personal network. Secondly, the women do not see themselves as, or have no knowledge of the concept of, a mail order bride. Sociologist Cecilia Julag-Ay points out that the term is of little use as it is not value-neutral, and, moreover, has “many negative connotations” (As cited in Constable, 2003, p. 70).

Care Economics in Denmark

Knowledge of this type of transnational marriage has been characterized by studies undertaken before the woman or man had decided to marry, or after some marriages had ended in violence. The most quoted book on the subject is *Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale* by Mila Glodava and Richard Onizuka (1994). In the book, they summarize the discourse up until then, which was characterized by generalizations and uncritical dichotomies between strong men who buy brides and suppressed women who sell themselves. Since then, Nicole Constable (2003) has performed virtual ethnography among American men and women in a study of how identities are constructed in the internet based on the wish to find a matching partner. Constable’s analysis contributes an anthropological perspective and a feminist criticism that refutes Glodava and Onizuka’s approach, overlooks central distinctions while also underestimating the ability of women to make informed and rational choices. Yu Kojima (2001) also employs virtual ethnography among Korean women migrating to Japan to argue that this group of female migrants should be seen as reproductive working migrants who perform domestic and reproductive work that Japanese women no longer wish to do (p. 205). This is a perspective to which I will return.

Research in recent years generally points to the fact that the women who migrate to the West for marriage purposes have a complex set of motives, and, more often than not, make their decision on the basis of a number of factors. For this reason, these women should not be uncritically categorized as victims of illegal trafficking. Research demonstrates first and foremost that marginalized women in a marginalized economy can and will create strategies for controlling their economic lives (Kojima, 2002; Constable, 2003; Bloch, 2003; Schaeffer-Grabel, 2004; Sassen, 2002; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). Few have focused on how marriages at the macro level can be analyzed in the light of wider global processes, in which care is an export commodity that is exchanged by means of a visa and monthly economic payments

to the family back at home (cf. Ehrenreich and Hochchild, 2002; Sassen, 2002). The economic exchange is thus more complex than a commercial perspective in which the woman enters into marriage as the result of an illegal transaction, or in which the husband-to-be pays an agency, the woman, or her family for the marriage. Nor do the women migrate because of extreme poverty. They could quite easily survive purely physically in Thailand; their existence is not under threat. They act on the basis of a relatively recently felt poverty as a result of the economic crisis in Thailand at the end of the 1990s (ESCAP, 1999, p.13). Glick Schiller et al. (1995) also points out that it is not the poor who migrate of their own volition, as migrating requires resources in all classes of society. Migration is often a strategy for making sure that a household unit is able to retain its assets in the form of resources and social standing (p. 48-54).

The Thai currency was devalued in July, 1997, triggering a widespread economic crisis in Asia. The lower middle class and the poor in Thailand were especially vulnerable, and in 1998, the unemployment rate accelerated as a result of factory closures and dismissals (ESCAP, 1999, p. 13). It is generally acknowledged that such a series of events and actions impacts women, as they are usually responsible for the health of the family and their children's education. This responsibility is the main explanation behind the global rise in the number of female migrants who travel in order to help their families in their country of origin by sending money to them. All of the Thai girls in this study send money every month to Thailand. Siriporn explains the situation like this:

We are not poor in my family, but we do not have a lot of money. This is why my sister and I send an amount of 500 Danish kroner [corresponding to about 75 US dollars] every month to our family... That was really why we came [to Denmark]. My brothers in Thailand do not have spare cash to send to our parents.

The Thai girls make no secret of the fact that they send money back to Thailand. Money remittances from migrants to their countries of origin are not a new phenomenon, but merely a growing one. Studies of migrant cash remittances have, however, focused primarily on remittances from rich to poor countries. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo (2003) suggests that this approach is a simplification, as it does not take account of the macro-economic effects of a transnational migrant economy, thus underestimating the migrant influence on the global economy (p. 667).

Structural limitations arise from phenomena that impact the specific living conditions of the women and their families. By migrating and marrying, these women seek to challenge and push back these limitations. This is currently manifest by the growth in variation of what Saskia Sassen (2002) calls alternative global circuits for survival and profit making. These circuits em-

brace a rising number of women. The most central of these circuits include illegal trafficking, nannies, servant girls and transnational brides. Another perspective is the development strategy of the country of origin that can motivate its citizens to look for work, or find other ways of improving their economic situation by migrating (Sassen 2002, para. 4). This can take place officially, as is the case in the Philippines where the government ran an information campaign to get Philippine women to marry Japanese men, thus helping their families back home. It can also take place unofficially, as in Thailand where a remittance economy and bridal migration is a cornerstone strategy towards the underprivileged, as illustrated by Chutima:

Almost all the girls I know in Thailand want to leave. Many girls from my village have also left. Now they leave the country directly from the village as there are many Thai girls around the world who are willing to help them. They do not need to go to Pattaya⁵ first to find a husband. These girls travel to the USA, Germany, Norway, or the UK.

These women—and often migrants in general—are thus part of a macro-level development strategy. Marriage and a residence permit in Denmark open the door for countless money transfers from these women to their families in their country of origin. Many countries regard these remittances as a valuable international currency resource. In 1998, global remittances between migrants and their countries of origin amounted to 70 billion US dollars (Sassen 2002, ¶ 3). By migrating and regularly sending money, these brides are thus part of an alternative global circuit.

Sassen's economic analysis of the function of female migrants can be linked to the care drain concept of Ehrenreich and Hochschild's (2003).⁶ This concept highlights the global contexts that have contributed to the rise in the number of remittances by migrants, increasingly women, who leave their own families to take care of others. These new, global care circuits are an important, but frequently overlooked, consequence of "globalization." They arise from the importation of care, love, and service by rich countries, and the exportation of female migrants from poor countries to perform these care and service functions. Care drain manifests itself primarily as a private, and thus almost invisible, phenomenon. In Denmark, it is represented by the many "self-supporting" Thai girls who look after the home. Another type of care that is in demand is for sexual services, which are increasingly being offered by female migrants. Marriages with women from abroad is thus just one phenomenon of care import, and Ehrenreich points out that care import is just one more resource that is being extracted from poor countries to rich ones (p. 6).

Kita, Siriporn, and Chutima have no children in Thailand, but many of their cousins and girlfriends in Denmark do. This is not unusual as many Thai girls leave their children in Thailand when they marry in Denmark. Siriporn

explains that her mother looks after the grandchildren left behind by Siriporn's sisters when they migrated.

The concepts and phenomena of global care chains, care drain, and alternative global circuits for survival and profit making can be united in the concept of the global care economy. The global care economy can be seen in rural Denmark, where women have left their own children and elderly parents to marry and care for Danish men. When Chutima goes to the bank every month to send 150 US dollars to her parents in northern Thailand, she is literally living out her role as a player in a global care economy.

A Transnational Network

Transmigrants are defined as migrants whose daily life depends on constant and highly diverse connections across international borders. Transnational migration is a process in which migrants create and sustain simultaneous and many-faceted social relations that connect their country of origin with their country of residence (Glick Schiller, et.al, 1995, p. 48). Chutima, Kita, and Siriporn have a number of relations in Denmark who, as a whole, make up a central network for the Thai girls. This network also functions as a relation that connects the country of origin with their country of residence. This finding thus refutes general perceptions of migrants as being alienated from their countries of origin. The monthly remittances and the network in Denmark both demonstrate that the Thai girls cannot be considered as being uprooted or as having "burnt all their bridges."

My aunt was the first to leave, settling in Denmark when I was a small girl. She met her husband through her work in Pattaya. My aunt called me from Denmark and told me about a man from work who wanted to marry a Thai girl. She has since found a husband for my five cousins and they now all live in this area. Once one girl arrives, she can arrange for the rest of the women in her family to come. One of my friends has ten sisters and cousins here (Chutima).

The network shows that the role of the woman as a player in the global care economy has a number of implications. Not only must she send money home, but she can also help more girls to come who can then also send money home. The lower practical costs of migrating due to an active network in Denmark increase the number of women who can choose to leave, thus it can be argued that migration networks increase the number of migrants in a cumulative process (Massey, 1988); (Light and Bhachu, 1993, p.27). The women and their families in Thailand see these marriages as an opportunity to consolidate what Schaeffer-Grabel calls a transborder middle-class identity (2004, p.42). First, this identity is pinned on the Thai girls in Denmark by their families and social network in Thailand. The Thai girls are considered as part of the middle class in Denmark, even though they may not be so in reality. Second, the family in Thailand acquires access to sustain its position as

part of the middle class in their own locality. Thus the migration of their family member offers them social mobility. Chutima recounts that her big dream is to buy or build a house for her parents in Thailand. The result so far is the purchase of a television, refrigerator, and a washing machine for her parents when Chutima has visited them in Thailand. “Dollar houses” are houses paid for and built by the transnational remittances of migrants. They are becoming increasingly common in Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, and are influencing the price of land (Glick Schiller, et al., 1995, p. 54). Thus “dollar houses” demonstrate the necessity of studying and analyzing migration in both a transnational and a global economic perspective.

The network as a social institution in northwest Denmark is not an isolated geographical unit, as many Thai girls know other Thai girls who are married in Denmark and Europe. Neither is it specifically organized, structured, or even defined as a “network” by the Thai girls. “We just help each other,” as Kita says. The network is an active participant in the migration process itself, but also functions as a social institution that brings together the Thai girls in the area, demonstrating that not all Thai girls are part of a fragile group without a social network. Yet the network is a social forum in which conflicts between the Thai girls are a central element. Kita explains:

Even though we help each other, conflicts often arise because of jealousy. For example, if someone has more than someone else, like a good husband or a bigger house. We are nasty to each other and call each other whores... I often have problems with my cousins, but mostly with friends... we always help our own families most... I have helped a number of girls to come here [to Denmark], but I only do so if I know the man well. Otherwise the girls will be mad at me if they have problems when they come.

Good men who are recommended as husbands-to-be are those who, according to the Thai girls, let the girls stay at home, who don't hit them, and who make sure there is enough money for the family in Thailand. Simultaneously, the family in Thailand does not wait passively for the monthly remittances. They are also part of the transnational network. Glick Schiller calls this overlapping of functions flexible, extended family networks, which are not a new phenomenon. These networks are the basis for what Glick Schiller call collective transnational family strategies, indicating how the networks cross national boundaries, and how families thus acquire the opportunity to achieve economic security. Because the decision to migrate is closely linked to the opportunity to transfer money to the family in Thailand, the family joins the network in Denmark as part of the transnational network. For the Thai girls, free will is thus not necessarily a free choice between a number of economic alternatives, as they are in Denmark to fulfill important economic needs within a specific social and family context.

Marriage as an Individual Project

Personal choices and dreams of freedom, along with motherhood and love, are motives for migration at the micro-level. These are choices that must, however, be seen in the context of the structural frameworks and limited opportunities that are inherent in growing up in societies that have their own ways of prompting women to transnational marriages. An analysis that focuses on the women, and to a certain extent the men, illustrates how they, like most other people, are part of a social network; they seek to control their own conditions of life, that they exert power, and are also the object of power exerted by others. The motives demonstrate that women migrate for different reasons than men, a perspective that it is necessary to include in contemporary migration theory. I have demonstrated how women migrate in order to contribute to the family and thus fulfill an expected family duty. Simultaneously, migration can also be a process of liberation from the family. Migration as a freedom project is a complex field where apparently conflicting actions meet. Thai women migrate and enter into transnational marriages in order to express western ideas about freedom and individuality. These ideas, however, exist side by side with traditional perceptions of family values, gender roles, and femininity. Thus these intimate links and marriages incorporate perceptions of both the traditional and modern, and the global and local (Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2004, p. 45).

There are three central factors for the Thai girls in an analysis of individual motives for migration and marriage: freedom from harsh working conditions, freedom from Thai gender roles, and their ideas about Danish men. In the first case, Chutima, Kita, and Siriporn all worked up to 16 hours a day, six days a week, in a factory in Thailand. In Denmark, Kita looks after the house and her husband goes out to work. Siriporn has stayed at home looking after the children for long periods of her marriage, and Chutima works only eight hours a week, spending the rest of her time in the home where she does the cleaning and cooking. Her husband, Jens, works late every day. All of the women see a man as good if he lets his wife stay at home. This contrasts with a specific perception of suppression and exploitation that is often linked to these marriages, where the women who stay at home are perceived as suppressed regardless of their own experience and opinions. This perception has its roots in a western, feministic, middle-class vision of equality that criticizes families with a specific private/public work division where the husband works outside the home, while the woman stays at home. This criticism of gender roles in marriage often lacks an acknowledgement of the fact that women in different socio-cultural contexts define equality in different ways. Constable (2003) makes the point precisely:

To work for a wage might be liberating to a middle-class woman, but not to a woman who has worked in fields or a factory for subsistence since childhood (p. 65).

Hence, even though Kita, Siriporn, and Chutima stay home and look after the house, this is not necessarily an expression of passivity or suppression.

Second, all of the Thai girls talked about nighttime trips to discotheques in the nearby town because they could go out in the evening and dance in Denmark. It is generally accepted in Denmark that married women can do these things, but the Danish husbands of the Thai girls often do not accept it. This is not what they were looking for, and the phenomenon explains why jealousy is a major cause of marital problems. Siriporn explains:

Many Thai girls are married to older men. The Thai girls are young, they go to discotheques and cheat on their husbands, even though their husbands are good to them... It's because Denmark is free... Many Thai girls have several men in Denmark. They can't do that in Thailand, but here in Denmark she is free to do what she wants.

New studies of women seeking marriage in the West demonstrate that the women are also influenced by imaginary fantasies about western ideals of freedom and a liberating life style (Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2004, p. 34). Linked to this idea of seeking freedom is the third important motive for marriage, especially for women who do not already have children in Thailand. This springs from a dream of fulfilling a role as mother and wife, a dream that the women do not believe they can actualize in Thailand for fear of violence and alcohol abuse in the marriage. They preferred Danish husbands because they have a reputation among Thai girls for not drinking and beating their wives, as well as for letting their wives play a bigger role in marital decisions. Danish men were preferred to Thai men, whom the girls described as poor, out of work, dominating, drunk, violent and unfaithful. Strikingly, many female migrants have left violent husbands with alcohol abuse (Ehrenreich et al., 2002) including a number of those I met. It is not my purpose to ignore the fact that many have been subjected to violence and abuse, but by describing Thai men as dominating and morally depraved, the women divert a moralizing discourse away from perceptions and accusations that the Thai girls who marry Danish husbands are the ones who are prostitutes and morally depraved. Transnational brides from Asia, Colombia, Russia, and Mexico have also justified their search and marriage with men from other countries by denigrating men from their own countries (Del Rosario, 1994). This illustrates how these marriages can be understood as a personal and national sexual revolution on a transnational level (Schaeffer-Grabiel 2004, p. 40). Even though the women apply this discourse, they do not entertain discussion of the possibility that the same structural conditions and lack of economic opportunity that in-

fluenced their own migration may also influence the opportunities for Thai men to be economically stable caretakers.

The stories told by the Thai girls were often contradictory. They described Danish men as dominating, while underlining the desirability of Thai family values, such as loyalty and the well-defined role of the Thai man as a care-er. The contrasting constructions from the Thai girls of men from Denmark and Thailand illustrate how it is not only the women who are seen as objects and categorized as traditional, erotic, and passive. Danish men are also seen as objects, as symbols of attractive, alternative ways of living on the basis of their nationality. Thus the migration and marriages of the Thai girls are linked to individual dreams about the good life, wealth, independence, love, motherhood, and of liberation from Thai gender roles, which the Danish husband paradoxically hopes to import. The quest of men for women from abroad is a quest for a “sweet” and faithful girl with traditional family values. These are family values that men nostalgically believe existed in the 1950s before other family constellations than the nuclear family emerged (Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2004, p. 40). The men want to import sex, care, and love, but also have the idea that they are importing women with firmly anchored traditions. Jens explains:

I think many Thai girls come because men without wives look at men who have a Thai wife and think “I’d like one of those, too.” They may also find it difficult to score real Danish women and end up with the one they want. Danish women can be difficult and complicated... they make some big demands.

The men also nurture considerably greater romantic aspirations when it comes to marriage than the women. Jens continues:

I met a nice Thai girl in the packing room at work. She was married to a Dane and I asked her whether she might know another nice Thai girl, or maybe she had a sister. She got in touch with her niece, now my wife, in Thailand and I sent two letters to her. Understanding each other was difficult by letter. There’s not a lot to write about and my English isn’t too good. So I enclosed an air ticket in my third letter. I thought that if it didn’t work out she could just enjoy it as a holiday and then return home. I went to Copenhagen airport to pick her up. I was terribly nervous before she arrived. I can’t really explain how I felt, but it was like having butterflies in my stomach.

Contrasting expectations produce conflicting results (Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2004, p. 45), especially because Danish men hope to establish traditional family and gender values, while some of the Thai girls want to transcend them. This explains why there are instructions on the Internet about how to tackle a

woman from Thailand, Russia, or the Philippines. Not least, it also offers a possible explanation of conflicts that can lead to marital violence. The marriage and the women are often far from what the men imagine. The woman is not just a “sweet” girl, but an independent individual. Conflicts arise when two worlds of imagination meet in a collision between two conflicting projects: care versus visa.

Conclusion

This article criticizes the existing “mail-order bride” discourse, while seeking to extend and deepen it. Initially, five significant themes in the existing discourse were outlined that were rooted in an explicit victim perspective. I have demonstrated that the marriage and migration of women have causes rooted in far more complex motives than controlling men who buy poverty-stricken women. This simple commercial perspective is anchored in a problematic, essentialist, and universalist feministic approach that ignores the women’s own perspective and power of action.

Part of the theoretical and analytical approach of the article is thus linked to more recent feminist studies of prostitution and sexual services. Like mail order brides, prostitutes are also frequently described as slaves, as trafficked, and as victims (Constable, 2003, p. 89), despite the fact that many women working in the Asian sex industry point out that prostitution should be seen in another perspective: as a job in a well-defined industry, as a survival strategy, or as a way of getting by in the absence of other options (Kempadoo, as cited in Constable, 2003, p. 89). Despite the marginalization and vulnerability inherent in Asian prostitution, the role of the victim is rejected both by prostitutes themselves and in studies based on the perspective of the prostitutes themselves. Neither did the Thai girls see themselves as victims, either of male control or of poverty. How should we interpret the way marginalized women see their own situation? As an expression of “false awareness” with Danish-married Thai girls being seen as victims despite their own perception? Or is it possible to accept and include the women’s own perception in a future discourse? Kamala Kempadoo asks for increased attention to the agency of marginalized women through acknowledgement of their role as players in the global arena and by seeing their individual decisions as conscious and rational reactions to structurally determined conditions. By placing the women in the center of analyses that include the women’s own perceptions, Kempadoo argues in favor of an innovative reinterpretation of prostitution in the Third World (Ibid., p. 89). In the same way, a reinterpretation and extension of the existing “mail order bride” discourse is possible by focusing on the women themselves and listening to their own perceptions.

In this article, Chutima’s, Siriporn’s, and Kita’s personal perceptions and experiences have contributed to a deeper understanding of Thai-Danish marriages, and illustrated migration as a specific action performed by indi-

viduals in a specific socio-cultural context. The parallel inclusion of a global perspective demonstrates that the migration and marriages of the Thai girls is a complex mixture of free will, necessity and force. It is also important to underline the fact that focus of the agency of the women does not mean that their lives as migrant women are without problems or that their migration is not rooted in fundamental gender inequalities. As already pointed out, migration theory has, in general, not implemented a gender perspective despite the fact that women want to, can, and must migrate for other reasons than men.

Anti-trafficking organizations often cite mail order brides as a target group.⁷ The critical point is the extent to which the women voluntarily entered into the marriage, and to what extent she had been paid for. As I have already demonstrated, both free will and economy are complex concepts in relation to the migration of the Thai girls. Secondly, significant distinctions between groups of migrating women are often overlooked, as prostitutes, sex slaves, housekeepers, and mail order brides are all characterized as victims of trafficking (Constable, 2003, p. 214). While the differences between the various groups of migrant women can be indistinct and perhaps form a continuum rather than a series of discrete categories, finer distinctions are important. Saskia Sassen pinpoints the problem of the uncritically linking of mail order brides to trafficking, as this blurs their participation in transnational migration, as well as the fact that they make a significant contribution to a global remittance and care economy. The complex realities, structural limitations, and global processes that influence the choice of these women is overlooked when mail order brides are linked to trafficking. At the same time, the women's ability to take personal decisions and perform economic strategies is underestimated (Guarnizo, 2003, p. 667).

Some women are victims of trafficking, and are ignorant of the potential dangers of migration in terms of violence and exploitation. The women I met were both knowledgeable about structural conditions in a wider context that made them choose migration, and about the potential danger of violence and complications when migrating to a new country. The structural limitations and mechanisms that influence the woman and the life of her family are considered more dangerous than potential violence. By migrating, these women react primarily to their feeling of social exclusion and the fear of economic discrimination, both of themselves and of their family. Thus, the Thai girls are not victims. On the contrary, they are independent and dependent, resourceful, exploiting and exploited at the same time. With this more pragmatic player perspective as the point of departure, the second part of the theoretical and analytical approach of this article is founded in recent feminist analyses of the role of female migrants in the global economy. The new global care circuits are a frequently overlooked consequence of globalization. The dominant globalization discourse concentrates on major capital transactions, seldom on smaller, private remittances. This, however, means underestimating the function of migrant women in the global economy. On the other

hand, if we expand the narrative of globalization, we can include care and service as commercial commodities that are exported from poor to rich countries—care and service that support global dynamics and the global economy. Marriage migration is just an example of a concrete manifestation of care exporting. By analyzing the marriages in a care perspective, I have argued for considering the Thai girls in rural Denmark as players in a global care economy.

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Notes Chapter Three

- ¹ For definition see UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Definition of Trafficking in Persons, 2000.
- ² LOKK (2003). (Landsorganisation af Kvindekrisecentre—National Association of Women's Crisis Centers) in the report "*Når drømme og håb forvandles til mareridt: Danske mænds vold mod udenlandske kvinder og børn*" ("When dreams and hopes turn into a nightmare: The violence of Danish men against women and children from other countries"). The report describes the shortcomings of knowledge about why women chose to "burn all their bridges."(p. 20).
- ³ All informants have been assigned fictive names.
- ⁴ There are 218 Thai citizens in Viborg county (Viborg Amt p. 10).

⁵ Pattaya is the center of the Thai tourist industry and, to a large extent, the country's sex industry.

⁶ Parallel to the "brain drain" from the poor countries of the world, but instead a "care drain."

⁷ Visit for example <http://www.trafficked-women.org/trafficked.html> (2004). CATW (Coalition against Trafficking in Women International) <http://www.catwinternational.org/philos.htm> or see Moustgaard & Brun (2001). Some groups are aware of the problem with a precise definition of trafficking. See, for example, "UN Trafficking Protocol: Lost Opportunity to Protect the rights of Trafficked Persons" (2004) <http://www.stop-traffic.org.news.html> (As cited in Constable p. 23)