

# Managing Migration

- Risks and Remittances among Migrant Thai Women



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## **Abstract**

*Female migration has increasingly caught attention from states, NGOs and the media. In particular there has been an attention to on the one hand, the risks women face when venturing into new lands, in particular risks in forms of human trafficking, and on the other hand the remittances female migrants send to their countries of origin. Central to most of these studies and debates about female migrants is the idea that they are passive victims of criminal networks, poverty and their families' demands for conspicuous consumption. Such an approach tends to ignore the possibility of these women to make decisions and act in their own interests under various constraints. Taking the case of Thai women's migration to Europe this study attempts to show how Thai women exercise "agency", using two key areas of migration research: "risks" and "remittances".*

*Having agency as the point of departure is in line with much contemporary scholarly work on female migration that emphasizes agency. However, there seems to be unexplored challenges, limitations and pitfalls to this new celebration of agency. Hence my purpose with this thesis is twofold; To demonstrate the usefulness of approaching female migration from the perspective of agency and secondly to push and challenge the celebration of agency.*

*I argue that we have to be careful about using the concept of agency uncritically in the field of female migration, since it essentially celebrates individualism and furthermore is an elusive and empirically vague concept.*

*Rather, this study proposes ways to operationalize agency in the realm of female migration by using a control/victimhood model in which migratory experiences are understood as formed by successive steps which can be studied.*

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## **Introduction**

Since 2003, I have been spending time with and done field work among a group of Thai women living in the countryside in Denmark. These women taught me how to cook Thai style, or rather Isaan style, the region from where they all originate. They would eat their meals while watching a Thai soap opera transmitted to them via the huge satellite dish outside their houses. These women taught me how to play cards and I learned how the monthly gambling sessions in isolated houses in Jutland was going on for days. Sessions, that leave many of the women in huge debt, which they repaid by selling sex or by selling their plots of land in Thailand. I heard them talking on the phone with their families in Thailand for hours. I saw them laying on the floor in front of the fire place, freezing in the Danish month of May, nostalgic for the warm Thai climate. I saw their marriage photos, commonly taken in Pattaya - one of the main tourist and sex tourism destinations in Thailand - or at a small restaurant in a provincial town in Denmark. I celebrated Thai New Year with them and heard about their holidays which they always spend back in their home communities in Thailand.

Especially we talked about work; how to get it and how to earn most money possible, which commonly meant working night shifts in factories at a working schedule, few Danes would tolerate. We discussed the fact that some of them exchange these harsh working hours for very profitable sex work once in a while at brothels along the main highways in Jutland, where most of them live. We talked about how they tried to pay off the debt they had incurred when they had bought their ticket to Denmark. They paid off debt commonly via prostitution, at least for the first few months in Denmark until they married a customer, who would paid the remainder.

Observing how these Thai women took charge of their situation forced me to reexamine the conventional view of these women as innocent, helpless victims of the trafficking industry. They made me realize that there are a range of variations in how women migrants interact with the world around them and why they might think that working in a brothel 10.000 km from home in a cold, dark Danish provincial town might be a viable

strategy for achieving financial security for themselves and their families. Furthermore, I realized that if I should be able to fully understand this particular migration system, I had to complete the circuit and go to Thailand. In 2006, I did 3 months of field work in the village of Mo Baan in northeastern Thailand from where my Thai informants in Denmark originate.<sup>1</sup>

While staying in the village my network expanded. The women from the village represent a mixed group of female migrants. Most are married to - or divorced from - European men, some live illegally in Europe, some work in factories and some sell sex. This study is about the migrant women from Mo Baan.

### ***1.1 Agents or Victims?***

Thai women migrating to Europe are just one group out of today's 195 million migrants world-wide, where off approximately half are women (IOM 2005). Female migration is linked to new global economic transformations and restructuring of the labor force and has lately been conceptualized as the *feminization of migration*. In this process, new groups of migrants are emerging on the global stage, including both young single women and female family breadwinners who either move independently or are under the authority of older relatives (Sørensen 2005). Following this path during the last 30 years, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of Thai women immigrating to Europe. In Germany, the country in Europe with most Thai immigrants, the number has risen from 998 in 1975 to 25529 in 1997, whereof 84 per cent are women (Ruenkaw 1999). In Denmark the number of Thai immigrants has similarly risen from 338 in 1979 to 5627 in 2005 whereof 83 per cent are women (Danmarks Statistik). Although information on female emigration from Thailand to Europe is limited, an estimate suggest that around 150.000 Thai women currently resides in Europe (Huguet and Punpuing 2005; Network n.a.). Most of these women are or have been married to European men, they work in the service industry or they work as factory workers, domestic helpers and/or sex workers. A

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<sup>1</sup>The names of Thai informants and village communities cited in this text are all pseudonyms. All currencies mentioned in the text are in 2007 numbers.

part of these women are in Europe illegally, some in the context of “trafficking” for sexual exploitation (Mix and Piper 2003; Piper 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Central to most discourses on female migrants, and on Asian and Thai female migrants in particular, is the idea that they are “victims”. The notion of victim highlights the assumption that women’s migration is not of their own making. Rather, women who migrate are perceived as objects of (a) masculine power and male dominance in forms of criminal networks, (b) victims of global forces or (c) victims of their families’ needs for conspicuous consumption to be financed by remittances sent home by dutiful daughters working in slave-like conditions far from home. The idea of the Third World woman as “passive” victim who lacks the “modern” autonomy of her First World sisters has consequently led to representations and feminist movements, in particular anti-trafficking organizations to voice the need for aid and directions to women in the third world (Jeffrey 2002).

Indeed there are many examples of Asian female migrants in exploitative situations. But there is a side to their story which is still often overlooked. It is the story of Asian women who decide to migrate, who maneuver through various obstacles and who seek to achieve some kind of autonomy and security in their lives. Approached from that angle, Asian female migrants are not merely victims. They are decision makers. They have what in sociological terms is called “agency”. Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices on the world even under constrained situations. The concept of “agency” has increasingly captured the fancy of feminist researchers on migration who have reassessed their views on female migrants so as to incorporate not only their victimization, but also their agency (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999; Goddard 2000; Mills 2003; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005).

A focus on the agency of female migrants is crucial; *First* of all it is important, since everyone, though in different ways, expresses agency. Thus, ignoring agency in the context of female migration is also ignoring a central human characteristic. *Secondly*

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<sup>2</sup> I will discuss definitions of trafficking in the theoretical chapter.



agency, although perhaps not termed that way, is a key concept in most ethnographic enquires of, and narratives by migrants. Thus, not acknowledging including and analyzing the self-representation of the people we study is a scientific problem. *Thirdly* a focus on the resources and agency of marginalized or “vulnerable” people instead of merely their incapacities and victimhood might create barriers for sustainable development and aid programs and among those, anti-trafficking programs. Accordingly, in line with contemporary research and in recognizing the importance of agency, the approach of this thesis is likewise to see migrant women as exercising agency, albeit more or less constrained.

While the women in this study are approached from the perspective of agency, it cannot be denied that their active decision to migrate can and do subject them to different types of victimization including situations of “trafficking” and that they in some respect also are victims of global processes. Thus, although the overall perspective is that migrant women should not be viewed as mere victims and that they are agents in certain respects, this has to be qualified by contextualizing their specific experiences. The challenge then is to demonstrate the ways in which the agency of female Thai migrants manifests itself.

Approaching female migration from the perspective of agency has unquestionably broaden our knowledge and produced significant and original contributions, which also in some ways begin to influence the approaches of organizations working with female migrants and policy work (Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005).

However, this celebration of agency seems to overlook the limitations and pitfalls of a focus on agency. After a decade of celebrating agency in the context of female migration, the time seems ripe to explore and challenge the concept further. The problem is that most studies which emphasize agency is looking and searching for manifestations and actions which are interpreted as expressions of agency and forms of resistance.

But, is agency an adequate concept for analyzing and understanding female migration?

My intention with this study is twofold; *First*, I will include agency as a concept and demonstrate the ways in which Thai migrant women are neither victims pure and simple, nor free and unfettered actors. Rather they must be understood as conscious agents,

making decisions and pursuing goals within - and at times despite of - their often difficult circumstances.

*Secondly* I want to challenge this celebration of the rather elusive term agency in the realm of female migration and propose that we have operationalize agency in order to understand migratory experiences.

The underlying riddle of this thesis thus is: **In what way can the concept of agency help us understand female migration even though it may be empirically vague?**

This study ultimately revolves around classic questions of structure and agency, but at the same analyze agency as a separate concept. Since at the core of this classical debate, the term *agency* itself has seldom inspired systematic analysis in the realm of female migration. Moreover, in the struggle to demonstrate the interlinkages of agency and structure, many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right - with distinctive theoretical dimensions and temporally variable social manifestations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). By focusing on agency I hope to highlight key themes which are pertinent to gender and migration research generally and to Thai women's migration practices in particular.

### ***1.2 Risks and Remittances***

How do we analyze agency in the context of migration?

In the rising policy and academic field of female migration two themes continuously emerge; the *risks* that these women take to migrate and the benefits that they derive from these risks. Chief among these benefits are the financial *remittances*, since most women do not migrate for themselves but in order to assist their families. The concept of remittances means that individuals abroad send financial resources back home to their families. For instance UNFPA writes about risks and remittances in its State of the World Population 2006; "Their [female migrants] *remittances* constitute a significant contribution to poverty reduction and development. Despite this, women face disproportionate obstacles and *risks* simply because they are female" (UNFPA 2006) (my italics).

Thus, *risks* and *remittances* are intricately linked since the possibility of sending home remittances to help their families is a major driving force behind the risks the women are willing to take during their migration. So far, the risk-remittance nexus have primarily been analyzed within a framework of economic cost/benefit. That is, whether the financial costs of a specific migration journey would return in forms of remittances (Daveri and Faini 1995; Faini 1996; Fischer, Martin et al. 1997). The nexus of risk and remittances has also formed part of a picture drawn by states, NGOs and the media which stereotypically presents migrants as desperately poor third world citizens, victims of poverty or criminal networks, who take unreasonable risks in order to get to their destination and send home remittances. Yet, with the escalation of African immigrants drowning on their way to the shores of Spain and Italy, the death of numerous undocumented immigrants at the US/Mexican border and the assumed rise in migrants falling prey to traffickers, the risks migrants face are real and not simply economic (IOM 2005). These risks and dangers in the process of migration reveal a necessary move from the risk-remittance-nexus as being merely a point of economic analysis, to a focus on human security and the physical risks involved in obtaining remittances

Risks and remittances are both commonly described in objective terms (Mahler and Pessar 2006; UNFPA 2006; Curran, Garip et al. n.a.). Risks during the process of migration are objectively identified as a natural part of the migration process and are thereby disengaged from values, politics and ideologies. However, from an anthropological point of view, risks do not just exist. This approach to risk has fueled the critique of many anthropological studies on risk, which has been accused of ignoring the reality of risks by analyzing them in a cultural relativistic perspective (Douglas 1992). Yet, the reality of the risk is not at issue, an anthropological approach to risk does not (necessarily) cast doubt on the reality of the risks, since the potential risks inherent in migration of Thai women are all too real - instead it analyses the concept of risk.

Likewise, while remittances have captured the fancy of many international lending institutions from small remittance agencies to the World Bank, the majority of migration

literature treats remitting within a framework of objective materialist analysis as simply the money sent by overseas migrants to their homelands (Cliggett 2003; Mahler and Pessar 2006) and thereby ignoring remittances as a culturally conditioned phenomenon - a multifaceted action with multiple meanings (Cliggett 2003:543). This thesis do not just accept remittances as merely "money sent home" but view remittances as a cultural product: Money or things, sent by someone far away to someone back home for a specific reason and with an expectation of some kind of ongoing exchange or reciprocity.

It can be argued that risks ultimately are connected to ideas of migrants being victims and vulnerable and remittances the ultimate example of agency. Therefore studying female migration through the dual prism of risk assessment and remittances can be a fruitful technique for understanding broader issues of agency in the context of migration.

Risk and remittances thus represent two "windows" for understanding patterns of activities within the field of female migration from Thailand to Europe. The contradictions that remittances and risks pose for female Thai migrants are real and direct. In the everyday life, the nexus of remittances and risk play significant roles and work as sources of individual and household based conflicts. Thai women's migration is not simply a response to poverty at home or to the demands of European men who want caring wives or a demanding sex industry. It is also a dynamic field of social practice and cultural production through which people constitute, rework, and at least potentially, contest understandings about themselves, their relationships with others, and their places in the wider world. It is these activities of constituting, reworking and contesting which make Thai women not just victims but also creators - agents - of their own lives. They are not free agents of course; there are constraints (risks, dangers, demands for remittances) but these constraints are dealt with within a culturally constituted framework of action based on the Thai women's lived experience and not just as passive victims.

### ***1.3 The Laboratory***

In light of my focus on agency and the nexus of risks and remittances my research questions then is:

**How do migrants manage an uncertain future?**

**How do migrants control the “outputs” of their migration process?**

In order to answer these questions I focus on one particular source and circuit of female migration the village of Mo Baan, since it has characteristics which illustrate the complexity of the problem.

Mo Baan is a village in the province of Nakhon Rathasima in Thailand’s northeastern region of Isaan; the rough drought prone region is considered to be Thailand’s poorest and least developed. Mo Baan is a relatively poor and isolated village which has now benefited by the export of its women to Europe and the money they send home. Out of 550 inhabitants in Mo Baan, including children, 114 villagers were abroad during my stay. 17 women had migrated to various countries in Europe, of these 7 to Denmark followed by Germany, the U.K., Austria, Holland and Switzerland. This meant that no households in Mo Baan were uninfluenced, though in various ways, by female migration to Europe. The remaining 97 male and female migrants were in Bangkok, Malaysia, Taiwan and Japan.

Mo Baan represents an important laboratory for the study of agency and female migration through the lenses of risks and remittances for several reasons. *First* Mo Baan, along with rest of Isaan, is considered a target for anti-trafficking campaigns focusing on reducing risks and change in patterns of consumption fueled by migrant remittances. *Secondly* while absolute poverty in Thailand declined with rapid growth since the 1980s, and rural absolute poverty declined significantly (Siriprachai 2006), the number of out-migrating women has increased as have the amount of remittances to Isaan (Huguet and Punpuing 2005). *Thirdly* the province of Nakhon Ratchasima, in which Mo Baan is situated, is the

province from where most Thai women marrying a foreigner originate (NESDB 2006).<sup>3</sup> *Finally* Nakhon Ratchasima is similarly the province from where most Thai women, who are considered to be trafficked for sexual exploitation abroad, originate (Assavanonda 2003).<sup>4</sup>

We can now see from these factors that the dynamics of risks and remittances are present. The region is a place of potentially high risks of trafficking but also a place, where Thai women send money home. It is a true nexus of risks and remittances.

While the village of Mo Baan and the experiences of the migrated village women and their families represent one site and circuit of female migration, the general circumstances it portrays are similar to many of the nearby villages, I visited during my time in Mo Baan. Hence, as the four main reasons for studying Mo Baan indicates, dealing with risks and remittances are a part of the lives of most families in Mo Baan. At the same time, the out-migrated women from Mo Baan are only a few among the thousands of Thai women who have embarked upon a risk-adventure and traveled abroad to look for better and other opportunities and whose remittances has helped thousands of families and now are an important resource in the Thai economy (Huguet and Punpuing 2005; Curran, Garip et al. n.a.).

#### ***1.4 Chronology***

The thesis is organized following the theoretical and methodological approaches known as “migration systems theory”. The basic principle in migration systems theory is that any migratory movement can be seen as the result of interacting macro- and micro-structures and thereby this theory attempts to cover all dimensions of the migration experience and how macro- and microstructures are linked and intertwined. Furthermore migration

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<sup>3</sup>. According to a recent survey conducted by NESDB (2005), a total of 19,594 women in 19 provinces in Isaan have chosen to marry Western men and migrated to live with their husbands overseas. The province of Nakhon Ratchasima accounts for 21.25 percent of these women, thus representing the highest number of women who have migrated abroad. The number of women who reportedly have married a Western man in Nakhon Ratchasima province is 4,164.

<sup>4</sup> Bangkok Post, September 2, 2003. Here Mr. Wallop Ploytabtim from the Thai Social Development and Welfare Department said that research conducted by anti-trafficking networks had found most Thai women

systems theory emphasizes the importance of incorporating histories of migration in places of origin and destination and the history of these links (Castles & Miller 2003:27). Following these specific perspectives I will throughout the thesis move back and forth between the wider global context and the Thai context and the lives and practices of the female migrants and their families focusing in particular on risks and remittances. This alternating focus traces the themes in the complex intersections between global macro structures of power and historical processes of change on the one hand and local micro-structures experiences and agency on the other.

In Chapter 3 I will trace the history of female migration in, to and from the region of Isaan and to a lesser degree Thailand. Thus the chapter uses migration systems theory to do what very few academic studies on female migration from Thailand has done; including the history and culture of female migration in the communities from where these women originate. Chapter 3 in that sense presents various historical specificities and localities which have shaped and determined contemporary female migration on micro level and thereby give insights into why and how the migration of Isaan women has developed from women on oxcarts to women taking airplanes.

Using the women's decision-making processes and migration journeys I will analyze the concept of risk in chapter 4. With an emphasis on the micro-levels of everyday life in migrant families I demonstrate the strategies the women and their families adopt to cope with the various potential risks during the process of migration and in particularly the risk of human trafficking. I then move to macro level and discuss how risks are constructed and managed in terms of migration policies.

In Chapter 5 I analyze how the acts of sending transnational remittances materialize at micro level in Mo Baan in seeking to show the range of choices and practices exercised by Thai women in Europe, also under constrained conditions. Proceeding to a macro

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smuggled into Europe and victims of trafficking were originally from Nakhon Ratchasima. It has however not been possible to obtain the research report that Mr. Wallop Ploytabtim mentions in the article.

level I will analyze the role of the Thai state in facilitating or structuring the remittances sent by Thai women abroad.

Finally in Chapter 6 I will summarize conclude and draw perspectives and new horizons for the further study of female migratory processes. In particular I will discuss the usefulness and the limitations of the focus on agency and look at how we might move beyond the celebration of agency in the realm of female migration, including more profound discussions of how migration policies contributes to exploitation.

However, before we move on to the analysis of the lives of Thai migrants and their everyday life in Mo Baan, we need a set of theoretical tools with which to understand them.



## **2. The Theoretical Toolbox**

This chapter deals with theoretical approaches to the study of female migration. I will begin with introducing and discussing migration systems theory. Then I will include and discuss the gender aspect in migration. Thirdly, I will discuss and trouble the concept of agency and finally, I will introduce one model that might help us analyze and understand female migration.

Much scholarly work on female migratory flows tends to focus on migration as a response to poverty and to male demand in the countries of destination (Brown 2000; Monzini 2005). These perspectives on female migrations reflect conventional theories of migration based on neo-classical and the historical-structural approaches. The neo-classical approach neglected historical causes of movements and downplayed the role of the state in structuring migrant's decisions in both the sending and the receiving countries. The historical functional approach, based in underdevelopment theories, often saw the interests of capital as all-determining and paid inadequate attention to the motivations and actions of the individuals and groups involved (Castles & Miller 2003:26).

Migration systems theory was developed in response to the limitations of the neo-classical and the historical-structural approaches. Migration systems theory has two basic principles: The first principle is that any analysis of migratory circuits requires a detailed analysis of prior historical movements, since migratory movements generally arise from prior links between sending and receiving countries (ibid). Yet, to push migration systems theory further, I will argue that we should not only examine the historical linkages between sending and receiving countries but just as well look at the history of migration in regions of origin. We need to identify what migratory practices existed in a historical perspective and how these practices reside in contemporary migratory flows. One major pitfall when using migration systems theories then would be to ignore local historical contexts and thereby overlook, how “cultures of migration” (Cohen 2004) shape contemporary flows.

The second basic principle in migration systems theory is that any migratory movement can be seen as the result of interacting macro- and micro-structures. Macro-structures refer to large-scale institutional factors, while microstructures embrace the networks, practices and beliefs of the migrants themselves (Castles & Miller 2003:27). The macro-structures include the political economy of the world market, interstate relationships and the laws, structures and practices established by the states of sending and receiving countries to control settlement. The micro-structures are the informal social networks developed by the migrants themselves in order to cope with migration and settlement (ibid.). While several migration studies do not explicitly mention that they are informed by migration systems theory, many studies explicitly link micro and macro levels, as well as the history of the specific migratory systems (Gardner 1995; Mills 2003; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005). The two basic principles in migration systems theory provide the cornerstones and systematic framework of this thesis, since the history of Thai women's migration and the interplay between macro and micro level processes shape the theoretical and methodological approach.

### ***2.1 The Gender Aspect in Migration***

Despite the recent contributions of migration systems theory, there has over the past 25 years been little concerted effort to incorporate gender into scholarly work on migration in general, nor has it been integrated into migrations system theories. Women have until the last decade commonly been left out of migration research. In the 1960s and early 1970s the phrase “migrants and their families” was a code for “male migrants and their wives and children”. As a second stage the “add women, mix and stir” approach gradually appeared in more and more research (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). One problem with this approach was that it equaled gender with “woman”. However, gender is a relational concept – the one gender construed in relation to the other. The third stage of feminist scholarship in migration research is now emerging and here the emphasis is looking at gender as an integral part of the migration process.

The term gender, as used in this thesis, composes the ideals, expectations and behaviors of masculinity and femininity. Gender ideologies, and gender practices, thus vary among

societies. It is both socially constructed and reconstructed through time (Boyd and Grieco 2003). However, it is not my purpose here to carry out a “gendered analysis” of migration, because gender does not help us answer all migration related questions. As an example migration analyses, merely invoking gender as the units of analysis, are commonly faced with the central problem, that it is difficult to determine whether exploitation in the migration process solely is determined by the gender of the migrant, since both men and women are faced with exploitation. Furthermore, state regulations on entry and citizenship, for example, also apply equally to men and women. This demonstrates that there are other factors than gender that affect the migration process. Therefore, instead of solely focusing on gender, as is the case in much feminist migration research, I will argue that migration analysis could benefit from incorporating a more intersectional approach. That is an approach to understanding the relationship between gender race and other aspects of identity that are sources of systematic discrimination.

Thus, this study focus on women as it is a study of Thai *women's* migration and it purposely leaves the migration of men out for the following reasons; primarily because there is no significant migration of Thai men to Europe but also because the idea of the female migrant as victim is very much connected to the concept of agency which is the core of my studies. A final and crucial reason is that gender identities in Thailand, as in many Southeast Asian cultures, do not determine an individual's social identity along rigid easily predictable lines. Women are excluded from the most culturally celebrated positions of authority and value – e.g. the ordination into the community of Buddhist monks – and are generally absent from prestigious arenas of political leadership and formal office. However, practices such as equal inheritance of land by daughters and sons, marriage payments from the groom to the brides family and preference for post-marital residence in the wife's home give women access to economic and emotional resources. Scholars have debated the extent to which men and women enjoy complementary or unequal status in Thai society (Keyes 1967; Van Esterik 1982; Mills 2003). Most Thai village ethnographies, however, depict a variety of factors such as relative age, wealth, education and occupational position as markers of social identity and status that are at least as significant as differential gender roles and expectations (Mills

2003:18-19). These are all findings which illustrate the importance of an intersectional approach when analyzing gender.

Much contemporary scholarly work debates the ways in which female migrants contest, challenge or change existing gender roles. In Thai society women have through various means access to transform their status and this potential transformation lies at the heart of the process, female migrants are a part of, since migration experiences to Europe seems increasingly to be a “new” marker of social identity and status in Isaan.

The gender aspect is important in migration since, for example, critics have observed that economic factors do not have a gender-neutral impact (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999). At the macro level, national economic development may affect the economic roles of men and women in different ways and thereby stimulating or retarding the international migration of women versus men (ibid). Similarly, the demand for labor in receiving countries can also be gender-specific as seen in the migration of Thai women to work in the European sex industry or to marriage with European men.

However, by including a gender perspective we are not here only talking about the possibility for women to utilize certain opportunities not available to Thai men but also the normative system that encourages or even demands that Thai daughters, sisters and wives leave their own families and communities and migrate abroad. A gender approach to migration is therefore not just about “what women do” but also what is expected of them and how much decision-making power these women have on their own lives. This leads us to a main concept in this thesis – agency.

## ***2.2 Specifying Agency***

Central to dominant debates and discourses in public media, some parts of academia and social organizations is the idea that female migrants, and in particularly those who are subject to violence and exploitation, are merely “victims” (Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005). Likewise, Thai women have also been categorized as victims of dominant European men, the global sex industry and of voracious family consumption needs. The notion of

“woman-as-victim” was deployed by the US women’s movement during the 1970s and has underlined most approaches to the analysis of women since. However, since the idea of the female migrant as “victim” raises questions about the very conception of gender in social theory, leading social theorists have advanced that both social structures and human factors are critical in shaping gendered constructs and identities (ibid). With the help of such theorizing, it is now often assumed in contemporary feminist theory that the gender category “woman” is neither exclusively object nor subject and that under conditions or systems of domination such as patriarchy, racism and imperialism, women express forms of resistance, agency, subjectivity, and self-determination. “Woman” is in such social theory understood to equal “victim” and “agent” (ibid).

“Women” can thus be both victims and agents, sometimes at the same time and sometimes even victimizing other women.

Much contemporary research has consequently taken the objectifying dimensions of discourses on victimization and their ability to dismiss any conception of will and agency into consideration. “Agency” is now recognized as a crucial concept by central feminist researchers on female migration (Pettman 1996; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Sassen 2002; Anderson and Davidson 2003; Constable 2003; Mills 2003; Andrijasevic 2004; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005).

The analysis of Thai women’s migration experiences, or migrant women in general, is not simply a description of suffering. These women can simultaneously be “victims” and “agents”, since there are two axes of analysis involved: one is of women as “victims” of socio-legal, economic processes and exploitation and the other being the potential for women as “subjects” or “agents”, that is, as a social force capable of acting in their own interest (Piper & Roces 2003:9).

These two axes points to the classical debate surrounding the influence of structure and agency on human thought and behavior. In this context, “agency” has been defined as the capacity of the human individual to act independently and to make its own free choices. “Structure” has been defined in factors such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity,

customs etc. which seem to limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have (Wikipedia 2007). Agency then is human action and is closely tied to social structures in as far as they interact and mutually produce society together (Giddens 1984). Agency has also been defined as “the capacity and willingness of actors to take steps in relation to their social situation” (Goddard 2000:27) and so, by invoking migration systems theory and its emphasis on micro and macro structures, agency is placed as part of micro-structures which refer to the individual practices of the migrants themselves. The central questions in the debate on structure and agency are: What is cause and what is effect? Do social structures determine an individual's behavior or does human agency rule?

The focus on agency has in several ways broadened our knowledge not only on female migration but on migration in general. For instance, the agency approach has helped us to better understand the complexities inherent in voluntary versus involuntary migration, illustrating that questions of consent are far more complex. Research focusing on agency has in recent years demonstrated that women migrating from poor to rich countries have a complex set of motives and that it is ultimately they, who more often than not, take the decision on the basis of a number of factors. For this reason, most migrant women should not be uncritically categorized as victims of illegal trafficking. The same research demonstrates first and foremost that marginalized women and families in a marginalized economy can and will create strategies for controlling their economic lives (Kojima 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Constable 2003; Constable 2005; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005). Finally, the focus on agency has revealed how female migrants continuously seek to contest existing gender roles within their communities and households and that migration simultaneously can liberate and constrain women (Mills 2003).

There are, however, also unexplored problems with the celebration of agency. It is these problems we now turn to in the next paragraph.

### ***2.3 Troubling Agency***

The concept of agency has become a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought. So far in some scholarly work, agency does not seem to have confused studies on female migration. Variants of action theory, normative theory and political-

institutional analysis have defended, attacked, buried and resuscitated the concept in often contradictory and overlapping ways (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The result has been a flat and impoverished conception that tends to remain so tightly bound to structure that one loses sight of the different ways in which agency actually shapes social action.

The way, several feminist studies on female migration approach agency, is to search for “expressions of agency” as for instance Kempadoo writes: “This book focuses on [...] and center upon the needs, *agency*, and rights of migrant and working communities”(Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005):xxv). Piper asks: “How have women migrants expressed their *agency*?”(2003):11). And Constable declares: “That women [migrants] express *agency* and choice is not to idealize the resulting marriages”(2005):13).

These three examples points to a theme that most of these new works share, which is not only the focus on agency but also the lack of an methodological defined approach to agency. That is, if agency is an analytical concept, how does agency then look when it is “expressed”? Do we mean the same by agency? Agency seems to cover such broad themes as; “free will”, “resistance”, “problem solving”, “protest”, “choice” and “action”. One could argue that Thai women’s marriage to European men are not a response to crisis but a strategy to solve the problem of the needs of modernity and the duty to marry and by solving this dilemma, agency could be defined as “problem solving”. On the other hand agency is also commonly connected to political resistance and organizing around the rights of female migrant workers or sex workers (Jeffrey 2002; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005). Hence, in this context agency could be defined as “political resistance”. It could also be argued that a woman who are not willing to take the risk and migrate, also express agency, because submission to or acceptance of a situation may be a relevant and attractive response and just as much an aspect of human agency (Steffen, Jenkins et al. 2005).

In this study we will view agency empirically as examples of migrants’ ability to make independent decisions about their own lives and to carry out these decisions. In this

sense, the agency perspective is tied up with the modern Western notion of the autonomous individual actor. Migrants may be daughters wives and sisters, but from an agency perspective they are first and foremost individuals with a subjectivity and individual goals. This makes the agency perspective a very Western modern notion.

Here we begin to see the contours of yet one more problem with the concept of agency, since it requires an acceptance of a conception of “the person” or “the individual” and thereby “the self”. Such ideas can in various cultural contexts be more or less defined. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has argued that Western conceptions of “the person” as a bounded, unique and separate entity and “the self” as a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action are actually rather peculiar notions within the context of world cultures (Scheper-Hughes 1993). Hence, the contradiction is that we might interpret actions as agency in societies where there is no sense of personal “agency” so fundamental to western notions of liberty and democracy. This does not imply that all human beings do not have agency, since even in the most collectivist human societies, individuals still have choices and exercise certain liberties (ibid). But, human societies and cultures are essentially variable and highly resistant to a single definition of “the good” and this is a crucial implication in the context of celebrating agency. The very idea of freedom and agency is culturally shaped, historically situated and highly specific: In that context agency can never be reduced to a single, essential or universal meaning. This does not mean we should not use the agency perspective, but we should attend to its cultural specificities.

Hence, the problem is that while the agency approach definitely is crucial and useful, and there are good reasons to encourage this perspective instead of merely victimizing all migrant women, there are also serious challenges limitations and pitfalls to the concept.

It is striking that none of the several works on female migration really question the concept of agency. Rather it seems that there is a consensus about what it is, but as I have demonstrated, agency is apparently not just one “thing”. Some texts do trouble agency but solely in the realm of structure (Constable 2003; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005). The



critique I am after do not simply (once again) argue for looking more to structural problems. It is not a “new” debate on structure and agency I am after. Since one thing to beware of is not falling into some classical structure/agency dichotomy. Instead I wonder why none of all the new studies on human “trafficking” and female migration do not really question the usefulness of agency? It helps us understand of course that female migrants are not merely victims and that structures do not determine everything. But what else?

I will argue that there are four main critiques to be raised against this celebration of agency; *first of all* agency is too elusive. *Secondly* agency has to be understood in its cultural context and is therefore even more elusive. *Thirdly* agency is essentially a Western concept that celebrates individualism as normatively good. *And finally* agency celebrates characteristic which are commonly attached to masculinity such as control, authority, autonomy and power. This does not make it scientifically unusable but it is important to beware of which characteristics, we chose to celebrate.

Since the underlying riddle of the thesis asks in what way the concept of agency can help us understand female migration - even if it may be empirically vague - I will here focus on the ways in which this crucial concept might be operationalized.

#### ***2.4 Operationalizing Agency***

So far as definitions of agency are concerned, the problem is further complicated by the fact that migration experiences can vary in time and space. When we later in the thesis discuss risks and remittances, we will see that it is too simple to understand agency as static. As an example, various forms of exploitation in the case of migrant Thai women rarely comes in the form of either/or and before/after. It is rather a part of a successive process in which the women also themselves take part and make decisions. Therefore it is also problematic to understand agency in terms of an either/or dichotomy and this is exactly what makes it problematic to search for elusive “expressions of agency” in forms of “here we see agency” and “here we do not see agency”. Instead I would argue that agency generate a spiral of experience rather than a simple either/or dichotomy.

For that purpose we need a model to analyze Thai women's migration practices and experiences. The model would have to describe the conditions whereby Thai women could be more victimized or act more as agents, for instance when confronted by risks or demands for remittances. The model could look like this:



As illustrated it is an upward spiral staircase of more control or a downward spiral staircase of more victimhood. Along this spiral there are moments when migrants assess future conditions using the knowledge at their disposal, they make assessments, decisions and take steps. By seeing migratory experiences as successive rather than static, we begin to understand how the Thai women are enmeshed in various situations with changing levels of control and victimhood. Situations in which the women sometimes have control and power, and situations in which they sometimes become victimized and incapable of controlling. Hence, migratory experiences are continuums and we can identify specific moments when the situation is assessed (decisions) or agency exercised (practices). My point is, and here I agree with Emirbayer and Mische (1998) that in order to operationalize agency we have to begin to re-conceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual

aspect) but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). This means that agency can only be captured in its full complexity, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time, which the up and downward spiral helps us visualize. Moreover, as we will see in the case of Thai migrant women, judgments and choices must often be made in the face of considerable ambiguity, uncertainty and conflict; means and ends sometimes contradict each other, and unintended consequences require changes in strategy and direction. Therefore, in the realm of female migration, I argue that the spiral help us better understand this exercise of situations based judgment, which is what Emirbayer and Mische has termed the *practical-evaluative* dimension of agency. They similarly argue that understanding agency as empirical manifestations of *practical evaluation* gives a clearer sense of what is entailed by this analytical aspect of agency and shows how it can be investigated (ibid).

Agency can thus be operationalized by studying these specific moments and steps on an imaginary staircase. The idea is that the model can help us nuance several themes in which the dichotomy of victimization versus agency is at stake.

I will further on in the thesis demonstrate, how the model is useful when interpreting the themes of risks and remittances but also when defining “trafficking”.

#### **2.4.1 Defining “Trafficking”**

There are strong political pressures to divorce the debate on “trafficking” from the more general phenomenon of migration. Defining “trafficking”, however, is historically a difficult task. The legal definition of “trafficking” exists, but it seems there are always exceptions (OHCHR 2000). The popular stereotype tends to be a poor woman kidnapped by unscrupulous men. This is in part because the framing of “trafficking” or criminal smuggling assumes that the affected female migrants are moved against their will and that the trafficker or smuggler is the main culprit in their exploitation (Sharma n.a.:53). Instead I believe we have to walk a fine line and on the one hand distinguish, on an individual level among the women involved in transnational migration. *Firstly,*

transnational brides, domestic workers, factory workers, sex workers and victims of “trafficking” are not one single category. On the other hand we have to understand “trafficking” as part of much broader processes than simple male domination or criminal networks. Thus “trafficking” is part of migration systems in which migrants who are *not* victims of “trafficking” also take part. In order to understand “trafficking” we have to understand the migration system of which it is a part. The root causes that influence marriage migration, prostitution-related migration and “trafficking” from Thailand are the same and the women come from a place with almost identical history and culture of migration. Thus, invoking Foucault (1982), who emphasizes that we have to investigate oppositions in order to understand power relations and applying this rationality to migration means that in order to find out what a society means by victims, we have to investigate what happens in the field of agency. In other words, what do the migration successes tell us about the failures?

*Secondly*, I believe that a typology in combination with a juridical definition such as the Palermo Protocol is useful (OHCHR 2000). The problem with the protocol is, however, that it is very vague and it is further complicated by the fact that abuses can vary in severity, which means they generate a continuum of experience rather than a simple either/or dichotomy (Anderson 2007). For this reason I consequently make use of citation marks when I use the word “trafficking”. This does not mean I do not recognize its existence, rather I use it to indicate its elusiveness. Still, it has been estimated that 20 per cent (Lisborg 2001) of the total Thai immigrants have experiences with sex work. This number fits the migrant women in this study as well but it does *not* entail that these are all victims of “trafficking”. Furthermore, the fact that four of my informants stayed undocumented in Europe, two in England and two in Denmark, reflects that according to the organizations providing support to Thai women in distress, there are quite a large number of Thai women living undocumented in Europe, primarily women who have overstayed their visas (Ruenkaw 1999). Yet, “trafficking” does not have to take place across international borders and one does not need to be “illegal” in order to be “trafficked” or to be a “prostitute” (Anderson 2007). Much of these migratory flows do

however involve relatively high risks and sometimes results in insecure immigration statuses.

In trying to categorize the group of women which inform this study the control/victimhood model could look like this:<sup>5</sup>

## **CONTROL**

### **A**

Migrants know the category of work and the conditions and are free to choose other work places.

### **B**

Migrants know the category of work and the conditions but do not have a possibility to find alternatives.

### **C**

Migrants know about the category of work and the conditions but do not have information, knowledge or experience which give them the possibility of predicting difficult work situations.

### **D**

Migrants know the category of work but not the specific conditions.

### **E**

Migrants who have experienced false information and are "trafficked" to another work than promised.

### **F**

Migrants forced or kidnapped and "trafficked".

## **VICTIMHOOD**

Here we see how migratory experiences and agency can be operationalized. If we imagine the model as a spiral staircase, we are able to identify the specific moments when the situation changes and is assessed (decisions) or agency expressed (practices). Yet, while the up and downward spiral helps us start thinking about female migration and their

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<sup>5</sup> These categories are inspired by Lisborg (2001:74-86).

work, which is not only sex work, it is difficult to capture the complex situations of migrant women and in particular how work or migrant statuses rarely are static situations. Several of my informants worked at a factory in the weekdays, which could be categorized as the situation (A), yet in the weekends they would work at a brothel, to pay off migration debt - a migration debt, of which they did not always know the size of the interest. Neither did they know before coming to Europe that the only way to earn this much money would have to be in a brothel. In this case the very same migrant who are (A) in the weekdays could be termed (D) or (E) in the weekends. Likewise the typology does not capture what work is. A Thai woman in a marriage could experience her role and labor in the marriage as situation (D), while after divorcing her husband and working at a brothel she could explain her situation as (A). Finally, in time and geographical space, some women might experience all these situations, moving upwards and downwards from (A) to (E), while others remain in situation (B) or (C). The group of women in this study have primarily experiences ranging between (A) and (E). Thus, no women in this study was forced at gunpoint or kidnapped as situation (F).

Furthermore, as Anderson (2007) points out, ideas about the precise step on a spiral at which tolerable forms of migration end and trafficking begins will vary according to our political and moral values and these are aspects which are difficult to capture in legal definitions. Nonetheless, in order to operationalize agency and capture the complexities of migration, it is crucial to think about control and victimhood in the realm of migration along successive lines and not as dichotomies.

### ***2.5 Summarizing the Toolbox***

Conceptualizing and merging migration systems theories, gender and agency proves to provide a solid toolbox for examining Thai women's migration. The two basic principles in migration systems theory provides the cornerstones and systematic framework of this thesis, since the history of Thai women's migration and the interplay between macro and micro level processes shape the theoretical and methodological approach. In supplementing migration systems theory with a gender perspective, the thesis seeks to

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analyze how gender is understood from an intersectional perspective, permeates specific migration practices and phenomena, such as risks and remittances, and thus how gender as a fundamental social category take part in organizing migratory practices.

One way to approach female migration is to look at ideas of agency and victimization. By including an agency perspective I will emphasize that there are two axes of analysis involved in women's migration: One is of women as "victims" of socio-legal and economic processes, or even of family norms, and the other is the potential on a micro-level for women as a social capable force who acts in her own interest as "subject" or "agent". The problem with the agency perspective first and foremost is that it is a complicated elusive concept and cultural specific, which makes it empirically vague. Therefore, if the concept agency should continue to be center stage when analyzing female migration, we have to come up with alternative ways to operationalize it, for instance by using a control/victimhood model in which migratory experiences are understood as formed by successive steps or moments, which we can study. Hence, the toolbox is constructed and filled with theories which has equipped us to analyze the experiences of migrating Thai women as they operate in local and global domains and with these theories in the toolbox we now proceed to the methodological considerations.



**Fon finally established a connection – an invitation to Germany from a man she has never met. She shows the letter to a woman from the village and her son.**

### **3. Methodological Considerations**

In this chapter I will begin with an explanation of the theoretical methodology underlying the thesis and I continue with a discussion of the constitution of the field. Finally, I will describe my techniques of field work

#### ***3.1 Theoretical Methodology***

As migration systems theory proposes, any analysis of migratory circuits requires a detailed analysis of prior historical movements. The first basic principle is the major tool used in the historical chapter of my thesis, which traces the history of Thai women's migration to Europe. Furthermore my earlier field work in Denmark among Thai women, followed by my field work in Mo Baan, is a way of incorporating the first basic principle in migration systems theory which emphasizes analyzing the links between countries of origin and destination. The second basic principle in migration systems theory is that any migratory movement can be seen as the result of interacting macro- and micro-structures. This perspective is applied methodologically throughout the thesis, where I continuously draw connections between micro and macro level structures.

#### ***3.2 Constituting a Field***

The research upon which this thesis is based was in the beginning rather loose as I followed directions which were important to the migrant families in Mo Baan to pursue. After a while remittances and risks emerged among themes such as longing and future family gatherings, as recurrent and underlying key concepts in the lives of the migrants and their families. During the 3 months in Mo Baan my husband and I and two sons lived with a village family where the man in the family had a sister in Denmark and a niece in England. My/our adoptive household were of mid to low economic status, whom had two cassava fields and lived in a one floor concrete house financed partly by money from a sister in Denmark. The family had a central position in one of the largest and most powerful lineages in the village, which meant I could meet and interview both those who in the village were termed poor and the families with much land and huge incomes of remittances in other lineages.



I have undertaken a qualitative study based on participant observation and interviews. In order to understand migration in its context I needed to understand the female migrants as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, workers, women of Isaan and Thai citizens. Hence I had to constitute a field, an *arena*, within which I could gather my data (Ekholm Friedman 1998).

The data is primarily gathered among approximately 50 female migrants, whereof not all originates from Mo Baan but also from adjacent villages and provinces. Fifteen of these women are from Mo Baan and they are the key informants. Some of them I met and knew before hand in Denmark, others live in various European countries, and I met them during their visit to Mo Baan. Out of these 50 women, two main groups can be distinguished. One group consisted of young women between the age of 19 to 29, who had not been married previously. The second group of Thai migrant women were older, between 29-45 years. They had been married to a Thai husband and had children. After the death of their husband or divorce, typically due to alcoholism by the husband, they opted to go to Europe to support their children as well as their parents. These women typically left their children in Mo Baan with their relatives, some had their children family reunified, some planned not to bring their children to Europe. It would depend on their situation in Europe. Approximately half of the women had used close family networks to find a contact (a husband) in Europe, the other half used Pattaya or Bangkok as a steppingstone. The women who had used a close family network were all from the same lineage. There were not any significant differences between the groups in relation to occupation. Approximately 20 percent had experiences with sex work and this was both among the youngest and the elder group.

Besides the migrant women themselves key informants are among the 10 families who have female family members in Europe, that is, the receivers of transnational remittances. Furthermore the arena was constituted by the village headman (*phuuyaaybaan*), a few of the teachers in the village, teenagers, who are potential migrants, and finally three previous male migrants constituted the field. I also conducted interviews with NGOs who worked in the field of anti-trafficking to learn about discourses and programs within the field of female migration.

### ***3.3 Techniques of Field Work***

To carry out the study I used and played with multiple ethnographic techniques to collect data besides interviews and observations, primarily photography, map drawing and a minor rough survey of the village. For the survey I visited all households asking questions about family composition, work and migration. Furthermore I had three evenings where I, together with a group of villagers drew a “migration map” of Mo Baan.<sup>6</sup> That map includes all the houses in the village in order to discover who and where a member of a household had migrated transnationally. My experience with the survey and the map was twofold. *First* it helped me establish my own mental map of the migration situation in the village. *Secondly* it provided me with the possibility of listening to how the villagers talked about those who migrated and gave me an impression of how detailed their knowledge about the migration of fellow villagers was. Where did they go? For how long? Why did they leave? What do they do at their place of destination? Was some of the questions asked.

In both “surveys” I was quiet amazed to learn how much the participants in the focus group actually knew about other villagers migration experiences. Furthermore, when finalizing the map, several of the villagers expressed surprise over how many fellow villagers who actually had migrated or whom had previous migration experiences. Hence, with the help from other villagers, the migration map also became a part of their own mental map. On the other hand there were also several stories they did not know. Since I, in most cases knew what the women of Mo Baan had experienced in their everyday life in Europe, I sometimes had more information than their close family members. This meant they commonly did not know the migration status of their family member which could be illegal or if their occupation was sex work or not.

To begin with I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected life histories mostly in forms of in-depth interviews lasting between one and two hours. The questions I asked the informants were related to their daily practicalities, wages and daily life but also on broader themes such as family life, gender, future dreams etc. During my stay I tape-recorded a few interviews but primarily made notes. I also got much data through

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 1

informal meetings with a group of women, teenagers or a household - all situations very difficult to tape-record clearly. Before leaving for Thailand I had Thai lessons for eight months which made me capable of understanding some conversations although I continually made use of an interpreter.

Another technique was photography. After a month in the village I distributed ten instant cameras to selected key informants. I instructed them to take photos from all aspects of their everyday life, because I did not want to exclude possible interesting perspectives, I was unaware of. Out of this came two interesting results: Some of the photos were of girls with make up, looking coquettish into the camera dressed in school uniforms - the neatest dress they had. They had no money to go to a real photographer and wanted me to bring their photos to Denmark and find them a husband. This made me think about how important connections are in the context of migration, since effective connections reduce risks inherent in migration. The possibility of migration is a factor present whenever the girls meet foreigners - also the anthropologist. Victor Turner has said about field work that: "Every encounter is a social drama in which the participants act out the dynamics of a geopolitical relationship" (1974:76). The geopolitical relationship is the key to explain why not only the young girls, but also several mothers, in hope that their daughters could send home remittances, gave me photos of their daughters during my time in Mo Baan. The second thing the instant camera revealed to me was the importance of work in their everyday life. Most of the photos were from the fields or from construction sites. This led me to view the migrant women more as labour migrants (the labour in Europe being the labour of love and making a man feel happy) and investigate definitions of marriage migration and labour migration.

Within anthropological epistemology, knowledge is generated and validated through individual experience and my field work has indeed been guided more by the act of doing and of being there and letting Mo Baan, Isaan and Thailand permeate my experiences, rather than the appropriate interview or survey method. On the other hand the approach of multiple data collection strategies gave me the possibility of exploring the key issues important to the people and place I studied from various angles.

One of these angles was the histories of migration, and it is to those we now turn.

#### **4. From Oxcarts to Airplanes: The History of Migration in Thailand**

Despite the fact that historians, anthropologists, sociologists and geographers have shown that migrants behavior is strongly influenced by historical experiences as well as by family and community dynamics (Portes & Böröcz in Castles & Miller 2003:24), much research on contemporary female migration flows remains unlinked to its historical and specific context. It seems that the “newness” and the sensationalism of either the agency or the risks involved in female migration overshadow its historical embeddings. In light the of linking migration systems theory to female migration it does become important to understand the historical dynamics and specificities on micro and macro level which provides the context for a specific migration system, such as the one of Thai women to Europe.

Using Mo Baan as my point of departure I will in the following paragraph trace, how Thai female mobility has transformed from internal to transnational in a historical migration continuum in which women have moved from being transported on oxcarts as part of household moves and then via bus to the large cities of Thailand, to contemporary female migration were women move independently and transnationally by airplanes.

I also intend to demonstrate how migration in Isaan has developed a *culture of migration* followed by me demonstrating how a historical anthropological analysis not only provide the contextual framework but also simultaneously reveals how risk-taking and remittances are embedded in historical and gendered patterns of migration.

##### ***4.1 Women on Oxcarts***

For centuries, Isaan has been baking under a merciless sun, growing steadily dryer and poorer – with just enough rain and just enough good years of harvest to give its people an unshakable faith in the power of prayer (Boontawee 1987; Gustafson 1994). From Kampon Boontawee and Pira Sudham (1987), whom both writes about their childhood memories in Isaan in the 1930’ies, we learn that drought historically has served as a “generative metaphor” (Scheper-Hughes 1993). It still does in the context of migration,

for instance in the book *Child of the Northeast* by Boontawee (1987:27). After three years of drought the relatives of the young boy Koon pack their oxcarts and are ready to move, leaving the village almost deserted, since many has left before them. Koon asks his mother: “Where are the uncles going?” and his mother replies: “To the place where the earth is black with rain and fishes strike the water like crocodiles’ tails”. The imagination of the distant place where life would be better, described in recent migration literature and a central part of the narrative of the contemporary female migrants from Mo Baan, is thus not a new phenomenon in the region, despite that moves like the above described were internal and usually only 10 to 100 kilometers. Still, mentally it was far away. Mo Baan mirrors these relatively short internal moves. The typical Isaan village was started in 1952 by one family of 50 people who moved out from the nearby village to “the place where the earth is black with rain” - 20 kilometers away.

Tales and life histories passed on by participants in the moves reveals, how migration in the 1930’ies, 1940’ies and 1950’ies required a fundamental and courageous decision and the reasons for a move were usually serious. When people did decide to migrate, it was rarely undertaken independently but usually involved a small group of relatives or friends. (Seri & Hewison 2001:2; Boontawee 1987; Sudham 1987; life history interviews in Mo Baan). The role of the women in the migration was to pack belongings and prepare food for the journey and the women were usually transported on oxcarts, while the men would walk along side the oxcarts (Seri and Hewison 2001).

Furthermore, the hope that migrants leaving the village would contribute to their place of origin in forms of remittances, is mirrored in Boontawe’s writing: On the day the uncles leave the village a woman turn to one of the migrants and ask; “If there are plenty of fishes there, remember us. Maybe you can send us a big one, if anyone comes home to visit” (1987:27).

Even though it at that time was households migrating internally, what we learn from the life histories and novels from Isaan is the ways in which migrants and non-migrants narrate and perceive migration as a fundamental, a courageous and a collective decision sometimes facilitated by migrants who had already moved, and that remittances played a

part. These themes remain central throughout migration literature and research in and from Isaan, and are still central themes for the families of Mo Baan and the female migrants. The life histories reveal how migration as a collective practice, and the use of migration networks, are historically embedded in Isaan, as well as in Mo Baan. This finding points to a central theme since migration is rarely individual. However, studies of “the migrant” commonly neglect the collective practice of migration, of which the Thai case is but one example.

Central for this study is that migration required courage and risk-taking. Historically, the migrant households were the risk-takers of their communities and asked to remit some of their prosperity.

#### ***4.2 From Ox carts to Busses***

Although most migration in mid-twentieth century was household based, simultaneously new more gender specific migration practices emerged, linking Isaan and Mo Baan to broader national and global processes. Labor migration from the village was, as in the rest of Isaan, initially male dominated. From 1950s Bangkok employers turned to the nation’s rural hinterland to fill their labor needs. More than any other region, these first migrants - the majority of whom were men – came to Bangkok from Isaan and migration began to offer the people of Isaan economic opportunities that were not available locally, and a *culture of migration* in which all household were influenced by migration emerged. Invoking Jeffrey Cohen’s definition, a *culture of migration* is pervasive – it occurs throughout the region and has historical presence. The decision to migrate is one that people integrate as part of their everyday experiences and last because of a specific history and culture of migration, the decision to migrate is accepted by most people as the most effective strategy toward economic well-being (Cohen 2004).

Most of the contemporary female migrants from Mo Baan are daughters of male migrants who during the 1960s, 70s and 80s borrowed money for the ticket and went to Bangkok and some to Singapore, Taiwan and Saudi Arabia. As daughters they have been receivers of remittances and their fathers’ migration has influenced the young women’s decision

making processes. Most of the migrant women from Mo Baan (as well as many potential female migrants) voiced how they felt obligated to migrate and remit money, because their father once took the risk and migrated to sustain the family, when she was a child. Furthermore their fathers experiences as migrants were a part of most family narratives in Mo Baan, in which the father were ascribed an identity as an experienced traveler of whom they talked proudly. This meant, as Cohen (2004) points to that migration was an accepted way to accumulate money and gain life experience and thus not an unfamiliar practice for the children born into a male migrant family in Mo Baan. This finding points to the importance of understanding migration in the context of everyday experiences.

Presently only two men in Mo Baan had recent transnational migration experiences. Apart from these two examples, the men stopped their Asian regional journeys in the mid-nineties. The two men both went to New Zealand. Although most Thai male workers went to the Gulf in the 1980s, the two men mirror the gendered migration transition in the 1990s. Since the rapid economic growth in the 1990s, the number of transnational male Thai migrants have decreased, while female migration have increased, though some male Thai workers still seek work abroad (Castles & Miller 2003:165-166).

In the 1990s many observers, both inside and outside the country, hailed Thailand as one of Asia's "newly industrialized countries", soon to join the ranks of Asia's more established economic "tigers" such as Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong. Despite years of high growth, the benefits of Thailand's economic success were however never evenly distributed. The cheap labor that sustained this urban-based accumulation came largely from the agricultural periphery like Isaan. In particular, rural women – unmarried and between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five – constituted the preferred work force for many urban employers (Mills 2003). Thus, from being receivers of remittances, the young women now jumped on the bus to Bangkok or Pattaya and became internal migrants. Most of the women from Mo Baan went to Pattaya, and still do, some went to Bangkok and a few traveled around as seasonal workers in the construction-sector.

Pattaya is, as several informants explained, “*the necessary evil for people of Isaan*” and has now become the most important steppingstone to Europe besides migration networks. From Mo Baan to the main street in Pattaya (“The International Meeting Street”) is about an eight hours drive and the bus ticket \$9. Beside Bangkok it is the closest destination for the women of Mo Baan to engage in tourism, earn money and meet *farangs* (*white foreigner*).

With the growth of Pattaya and the new employments opportunities in the factories surrounding Bangkok, the village economies in Isaan,

including Mo Baan have been boosted by transnational/urban-rural remittances sent by the village youth, especially the young women. Thus the remittances have changed gender, moving from transnational remittances by male migrants to a situation where, since the 1990s, the remittances of daughters are a major source of income for families in Isaan (Mills 2003; Curran, Garip et al. n.a.). Today 51 percent of the families in Mo Baan have a family member who used to live in their house and now live in either Bangkok or abroad. No one, however, in Mo Baan are uninfluenced by the migration of a close or more distant relative. Leh was the first women who migrated from Mo Baan. She recalls the changes since remittances began to flow in from abroad:

*“Eight years ago, there was only one car in the entire village, a red, old Toyota pick up van, now there are at least ten, and some of them are brand new, big pick up vans[...]Also I remember a two storey wooden house with blue tiled floors, it was neat and tidy and pretty well kept, eight years ago people in the village considered that house the most beautiful and modern house in the village, and now there are at least 15 brand new concrete houses with windows and tiles, some of them look like palaces[...] I cant believe how fast it has happened”.*



### ***4.3 From Busses to Airplanes***

Mary Beth Mills has provided one of the most cited ethnographies on Thailand's increasingly feminized workforce and related migratory flows (2003). She pays in particular attention to the hundreds of thousands of young rural women who migrate to Bangkok to fill the factories and sweatshops of the metropolis. A conflict which Mills experienced the young girls struggled with was, that the girls through remittances stayed dutiful daughters and dutiful daughters are expected to marry. Yet, most of Mills informants experienced internal dilemmas stemming from on the one hand participating in the modernity which Bangkok offers and the possibility of sending home remittances and on the other hand they are expected to marry and reside matrilocal. In her work, Mills leave this potential conflict open as a site of future frictions. I found however that in some ways the women and girls in Mo Baan solved this conflict by migrating to Europe because most of them use marriage (pro-forma or not) as a means to migration. By remitting, marrying and in Europe experiencing what the term modernity (*thansamay*) is, they solve this dilemma as they stay dutiful daughters. Thus, foreign marriage is not solely a response to financial crisis but a strategy to solve the problem of the needs of modernity and the duty to marry.

Still, migration and marriage migration are also a response to the fact that Thailand in recent years have experienced high growth compared to other developing countries in Asia. Thailand is still faced with two significant problems: The country has failed to achieve human development that can be expected given its level of economic progress. As well, the Thai development strategy displays an urban bias. Thus, although absolute poverty declined with rapid growth, the Thai society has become more unequal (Siriprachai 2006). By migrating the women of Mo Baan seek to challenge and push back these structural defined limitations.

Under the limitations of most European immigration laws, the only legal way for Thais to enter Europe is to marry a European. Hence, "Migration to Europe" might seem like a broad geographical framework but in the eyes of the female migrants, there might be

many countries but with the same problem of how to get visa. With the status of spouse of a European citizen the women are entitled to obtain residence and work permits that make up the prerequisites for income earning which are their intended aims of migration. Hence, Thai women now increasingly utilize marriage as a mean for immigration to Europe (Plambech 2005). Marriage migration can thus be defined as: a migration by means of marriage (Ruenkaw 1999; Mix and Piper 2003). The use of marriage as a means to migration applies to romantic unions, pro-forma marriage to obtain a visa or the pro-forma marriages seen in sexual exploitation – “trafficking” arrangements.

The strategy of Thai women to enter Europe is then to arrange a marriage. Arranging this marriage means finding an eligible European man. Hence, finding possible husbands are the most central issue in the lives of the potential migrants. In this effort, social networks between Thai wives living abroad and local Thai women aspiring to emigrate are of crucial importance. For instance, I sat one day in the car on the way to the market with the man in the house where I stayed in Mo Baan and Gip, a young girl from the village. Gip kept on mentioning names on Thai women whom both she and I knew lived in Europe, which had promised to help her go abroad. In the car in a very remote part of Isaan I realized the true value of migration networks. Europe seemed extremely far away, if it was not for the names she enthusiastically clanged on to. There are never any single foreign men in and around Mo Baan, and in Isaan there are only 2-3 significant tourists spots, which are not like party tourist places as the bars in Pattaya, but historical Khmer ruins. For a woman who has no contacts in Europe, the next-best solution is to go to Pattaya in the hope of meeting an eligible European tourist.

Marriage migration is typically considered secondary compared to labor migration and is associated with women whose migratory role is limited to that of dependant or a trailing spouse (Piper 2003). However, three problems emerge from this perspective in relation to Thai women’s migration. *First* it ignores that their migration most commonly is initiated by the women themselves. Thai marriage migrants are not simply objects, but agents. *Secondly* it ignores that most Thai women marry in order to obtain a more secure status, to escape from poor employment prospects and to acquire a long-term residence permit and work permits in Europe. Marriage is a well-considered strategy. *Thirdly* it ignores the

history of labor migration in Isaan, in which migration abroad to achieve economic security has a cultural continuity. In this perspective it is pointless to ask whether Thai women, who marry Europeans, are marriage migrants or labor migrants. The Thai women are simply operating with different cultural practices in which marriage to a European is a form of “work”, in which there is a “contract” involving sentiment and the possibility of economic security for the wife, plus additional funds which can be sent home. Whether there are also love and romantic bonds between the Thai wife and the European husband is an interesting empirical question, but it does not deny the fact that all the Thai migrants in this study talked about the marriage primarily in terms of family economic security (For a discussion on love and motivations see Plambech 2005). We have to go beyond existing scholarly work on marriage and migration in which the “woman” often is locked into either the category of “bride” or “worker” since the distinctions between these two analytical categories (wife or worker) are very much blurred (Mix & Piper 2002:4). In this sense, it is possible to argue that for Thai women, marriage is a form of work that is more secure and possibly more remunerative than working in a local Thai factory or as a housemaid in Kuwait or selling sex in Berlin (although several are married and sell sex at the same time). In some ways, Thai women might be redefining some basic anthropological distinctions between “work life” and “domestic life”, because in some ways and for some Thai women, domesticity is their work: They are care workers who can also use sentiments and expressions of love on their European husbands.

By removing the focus solely on marriage migration to an acceptance of the blurring of work and marriage, female migration from Mo Baan inscribes itself into the growth in variation of what Saskia Sassen calls *alternative global circuits for survival and profit making* (Sassen 2002). These circuits embrace a rising number of women. The most central of these circuits include illegal trafficking, nannies, servant girls and transnational brides. Paying attention to the blurring of the analytical units of “wife” and “worker”, Sassen's economic analysis of the function of female migrants in the global domain can be linked to the *care drain* concept of Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002). This concept

highlights the global contexts that have given rise to the increase in remittances by migrants, increasingly women, who leave their own families to take care of others.

Since caredrain manifests itself primarily as a private and thus almost invisible phenomenon, these new global care circuits are an important but frequently overlooked consequence of “globalization”. They arise from the import of care, affection and sexual services by rich families or lonely men in rich countries and the export of female migrants from poor countries to perform these care and service functions. Female migration from Mo Baan can at the macro level thus be analyzed in the light of wider global processes in which care is an export commodity that is exchanged through a visa and monthly economic payments to the family back home (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Sassen 2002). Unquestionably, when a Thai woman boards an airplane en route to Europe, it may be understood as a part of global care drain: For Thai migrants, such abstractions become meaningful only from the vantage point of their own experiences and beliefs, shaped by their particular historical and cultural contexts (Mills 2003).

#### ***4.4 Summarizing Histories of Migration***

The historical perspective allows us to get insights into the ways in which migration has become “deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people’s behavior, and values associated with migration become part of the community’s values” (Massey 1988). Thus, the migrant life histories of Mo Baan illustrate three main points in Cohen’s definition of a “culture of migration”. *First* the decision to migrate is one the women make as part of their everyday experiences, as well as other women migrating, and the migratory experiences of their families. *Secondly* the migration narratives of Mo Baan reveal how the “culture of migration” in Isaan is pervasive – it occurs throughout the region and has historical presence that dates to the first half of the twentieth century. And *thirdly* because of their father’s migration experiences and the many other women who migrate, the decision to migrate is accepted by most women in Mo Baan as one central path toward economic well-being (Cohen 2004:5).

Attending to the tradition and history of migration involves certain epistemological problems. That is, a model that argues that geography and tradition are critical forces in determining outcomes is ultimately essentialist and not satisfying. As Cohen points out, suggesting that traditions, culture and place drive people in their decision making, the fiction that migrants “are at the mercy of super organic forces beyond [their] control” is maintained (ibid). Likewise, migrating Thai women do not just respond to cultural or historical influences and other forms that cannot be defined in economic or political terms. In other words, the out-migrating Thai women do not just follow certain patterns as they move, because they are rural traditional people and that is what rural traditional people do (ibid:4). Traditions, or a “culture of migration”, do not drive the migrating women to make certain decisions. Migrants are individuals, although enmeshed in complex networks of power within their community and household and thus the history of migration adds knowledge to the puzzle of Isaan women’s migration but it does not determine it. An historical anthropological continuum does however reveal how risk-taking and remittances are embedded in historical and gendered patterns of migration. It is to this issue of risk-taking that we now turn in the next chapter.



## 5. Managing Risks

*“Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the dangers, considers the event”* (Ewald 1991):199)

As the history chapter on Thai women’s migration revealed, risks have continuously been a part of migration processes. In anthropology there is similarly a long-standing tradition of dealing with the concept of risk and how humans deal with the uncertainties of life, stretching from classical studies of misfortune (Evans-Pritchard 1937) to recent studies of risk and uncertainty (Douglas 1992; Whyte 2004). Anthropological approaches all stand in clear contrast to technical-scientific approaches to risk, and they all take into account the broader social, cultural and historical contexts in which risk as a concept derives its meaning and resonance.

As Douglas (1992) points out, risk is unacceptable danger but what is unacceptable to some people might be acceptable to others and how people deal with these risks, is where the anthropologist enters the scene.

In much of the studies on anthropology of risk, there is a gap that separates analyses concerned with conceptualizations of risks, structural conditions or political economy, that is macro structures, on the one hand, and work that is concerned with individual agency and the human capacity to deal with situations of risk on the other (Steffen, Jenkins et al. 2005). Hence, when connecting theories on risk to the study of migration one challenge is to reconcile the tension between philosophical macro structural approaches to risk versus the experiences and capacities at micro level to deal with those risks in the context of migration.

There are various ways in which migrants and their families deal with and are confronted by risks. I shall discuss two of such implications, namely (1) risk in decision making processes and then, including a macro level perspective, I investigate (2) constructions of

risks. In both cases I am particularly interested in the risk of “trafficking”. The focus on these aspects of risk and migration will help us answer the research question connected to risk and thereby analyze how migrants manage an uncertain future.

### ***5.1 Taking Risky Decisions?***

In most of the migration narratives in Mo Baan, uncertainty and the risks derived from uncertainty, played significant roles. There was “something” the female migrants or potential migrants could not predict, a certainty they could not establish beforehand. Hence, as Douglas puts it, risk looks forward: It is used to assess the dangers *ahead* (Douglas 1992:26). In a decision-making process potential migrants weigh the different advantages and disadvantages of their present unit of residence and potential alternatives and decide whether they want to remain within their present area of residence or whether they want to move *ahead* to a different place and then when, where and how.

In the following I will present four examples of such decision making processes.

**Leh** was 33 years old at the time of her migration. She now lives in Denmark and works at a factory in a small town. She is married to a man she met in Pattaya. When she arrived in Denmark, she paid \$700 each month to her family in Mo Baan, having three jobs at the same time. Now, after her mother and father have passed a way, she pays \$150 a month to her son who lives in Mo Baan.

*“Before I left I was first married to a man with whom I had two children, but he died and I married another man with whom I had two more children. After a while he went to Saudi Arabia to work and send home money, but he only send little. I worked in the field, provided for my four children, my parents in law, my own parents, my sister who was sick, and her children. At that time I began to notice and hear about women who left for Pattaya to find Europeans to marry, not from my own village, but from adjacent villages. They sometimes came back from Pattaya and told me that if I worked in the bars and went with customers [sold sex] I could earn a lot of money. I knew some people who had a bar in Pattaya, and they told me I could come and work there. I decided to go*

*there; my plan was to earn money by going with customers and one of them I would marry.*

*The reason why I left at that time was that it was very, very hard for me to pay for all of my family; you know working in the field you don't earn anything. The day I left, I lived in the village of my husband, even though he was away in Saudi Arabia. My mother lived in Mo Baan. It was difficult for me to live by myself in my husbands' village, only with my parents in law. My husband did not want me to go home to my mother, even though he was not there. But that is normal, in Thailand the husband decides what to do and where to live. Then I decided that I did not want him to decide anymore. I thought my life was too though. I wanted to follow my own ideas, since he only gave me little money. I was so tired of him and my life. One day my niece was getting married in Mo Baan, so I told my parents in law that I had to go home to Mo Baan. I filled some clothes in plastic bags and a radio my husband had bought in Saudi Arabia. Then I, and my four children took the bus to Khorat and I sat them on the bus to Mo Baan. I told them I had to go and fix the radio, but that was a lie. I took it to the pawnshop and got money for the ticket to Pattaya. After two weeks in Pattaya I one evening met an older man, he was Danish, but he was not interested in me. But I was beginning to be annoyed with going with customers, so I actually offered him money if he would go with me. We knew each other for a week and then he went home to Denmark. After a few weeks I got a letter from him inviting me to Denmark. It was a new feeling for me. I had traveled to many places in Thailand to find work, but now I had to go all by myself. Nobody knew about it when I went to Europe the first time. I told my mother, but the people in Mo Baan thought I was still in Pattaya. I wouldn't tell them, since in Thailand it is like this; if you travel abroad and it does not work out, and you have to come back then everyone laughs at you. I thought that would be very embarrassing. Then people would gossip and say; "oh so you thought you could make it". I was not sure at all how it would be like, and I did not know anything about that man or the country. But I had to tell my mother and father, somebody had to know where I was, in case something happened. They did not dispute me, they could not say much. It was a chance I got. They were very scared that something should happen to me. So I had to reassure them that I was a grown up now, and that I had borrowed*



*money from a guy in Pattaya to buy a return ticket, since I only got a one way ticket paid for by the Danish man.”*

**Nui** is 17 years old. She has worked in Pattaya for a couple of years as a maid and also sold sex to European tourists. She is now pregnant and lives with her sister in Mo Baan. After giving birth, she will migrate to Germany, hoping to find a husband.

S: *What did you do in Pattaya?*

N: *I was at bar with foreigners. It wasn't for Thais. Foreigners would come and eat. I would sit and chat and drink with them. There were models there. People said it was a quite nice place, with nice girls.*

S: *Why did you go to Pattaya?*

N: *At first my sister was there. My sister had a foreign boyfriend. Besides him, she had another foreign boyfriend also. But she was primarily with the first one. My sister left Pattaya and had me take her position in the place she was working. So then I started going with customers.*

S: *Did you and your sister send money home?*

N: *My sister sends money to our mother and father for 15 years. I also send money. When our mother died we stopped sending money. [...] My mother died of diabetes, my father had heart disease. They died at 57 and 64. My mother died first.*

S: *Where are your sisters now?*

N: *We are five sisters and one brother. Four of my sisters are overseas in Germany and England.*

S: *What are your future plans?*

N: *I stay here in the village until I have my baby. Then I go to Germany, I hope. My sister cannot help me I think, it is difficult to have papers [visa]. Maybe three months, then I have to find husband. I leave the baby here in the village, with my sister, she will take of it. The baby will live in Thailand and finish school [...] The baby will be “half and half”, I like that. Maybe Finnish or Israeli. I don't know who the father is [...].*

S: *How long time do you plan to stay in Germany?*

N: *Probably a long time. Perhaps if I get much money I come back for the baby.*

**Muan** is 29 years old. She is married and lives in Mo Baan. She is internal labor migrant/seasonal worker. Her husband works in the rice paddies.

*“Muan is married and have one son who is eight years old. Her son has been hospitalized for one year, and recently the doctors diagnosed him with leukemia. The boys’ grandmother, the mother of Muan, explained that the treatment involves a change of blood once a month; otherwise the boy will die in a few months or if lucky in a few years. The public health program only pays for his bed and to clean the blood with salt water. The expenses for his treatment with real blood are 20.000 baht, a three month pay for a well paid factory worker. The family cannot afford the treatment. They have received some financial assistance from a female relative in Europe, but not enough. Thus, the whole family decided, mother, father and the husband of Muan, that Muan should go to Pattaya and find a farang (white foreigner), eventually one who lived permanently in Thailand, otherwise she would have to go with him to Europe, USA or Australia. The money she would get from this relationship should cure her son. Muan went to Pattaya while I was in Mo Baan, and she came back again, while I was in Mo Baan. After four days in the go-go bars, with fierce competition among the women and girls in the bars, Muan had enough. She was already mentally fragile, because of the sickness of her son, and she just could not take the pressure being in Pattaya and the uncertainty of the future ahead of her possibly in another country. When I was just about to leave Mo Baan, the boy came back from the hospital, the family could no longer afford his treatment, and Muan was thinking about leaving for Pattaya again.”*

**Gaw** is 21 years old. She lives undocumented in England and occasionally works at a brothel. She each month remit \$600 to her parents. They have retired after Gaw migrated and now lives solely by the remittances of their daughters. Gaw has financed a house and expensive medication for her father.

*“Gaw went to Bangkok two years ago to look for a connection to Europe. Her father was ill and her mother too old to keep on working in the fields. Gaw started to work in the Patpong district<sup>7</sup>, where she met a younger British man, who promised to help her go to*

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<sup>7</sup> Red-light district in Bangkok

Europe. He said he would marry her. When she told her parents about her plans to leave, they became very worried something should happen to her. They realized they knew about another girl from a neighboring village who had migrated to England, they got her phone number and provided it to Gaw in case she needed contact on arrival, or if she got into trouble. When Gaw arrived in England the young man was not interested in marrying her pro-forma anyway. But she decided to stay and now lives in England undocumented, working at a brothel. She goes to Thailand once a year and visits her parents. On return she gets a three months tourist visa, which she continuously overstays, until she leaves for Thailand again.<sup>8</sup> Because of her status as either tourist or “illegal” she does not think she can find any other job in England, in which she can earn so much money that her parents need, and she still owe the young man some money she borrowed for the first ticket.

When I visited the parents of Gaw in Mo Baan, a couple in their mid fifties, I noticed the wrinkled piece of paper lying underneath their telephone, which was centrally placed on a small table in the middle of the living room. On the paper was several phone numbers to England accompanied with small drawings and food stains, I understood how this piece of paper was central to the family and never hidden away.

A few months ago their second daughter also went to England. She now lives with a young man in suburban London. Everyday the parents called their daughters in England, using an average of a half months pay for a farm worker, to stay in touch with their daughters whom paid the phone bill. The parents’ strategy of protection was staying in touch, calling their daughters everyday and ask them how they were doing. If they could not get in touch with one of them, they would ask the girl from the other village who also lived in England to take contact.”

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<sup>8</sup> I found the particular legal matters difficult to unpack and understand, how Gaw continuously could travel in and out of England although she had overstayed her visa and then have a new tourist visa. But this was how she and her parents explained it to me.

## **5.2 Unpacking the Narratives**

What do these narratives elucidate? Although there are several paths to follow, I will here focus on four of them; *Successive risks*, *present risks*, *practical and symbolic risk avoidance strategies* and *the struggle for visa*. I will in particular focus on the ways in which the women and their families attempt to obtain some control over the migratory situation by assessing risks and acting accordingly.

### **5.2.1 Successive Risks**

First of all the narratives illustrate the usefulness of understanding migrant women's experiences along a upward and downward spiral, rather than focusing on simple dichotomies of sex worker/non sex worker, migrant/"trafficked", voluntarily/forced, labor migrant/marriage migrant and in particular risk/non-risk. The spiral, as the stories of Leh, Nui, Muan and Gaw illustrate, help us use more complex models of thinking about female migrant experiences than simple dichotomies, since dichotomies do not capture the complex lived experience of the women. For instance, the four stories demonstrate the importance of walking the fine line and on the one hand distinguish, on an individual basis in time and space, among the women involved in transnational migration. Here we see that marriage migrants, domestic workers, factory workers, sex workers and victims of trafficking are not one single category, not necessarily the same. On the other hand their narratives reveal how their migration journeys all are part of the same migration system and that their situations are not static. They can have all categories of experiences in shifting time and space. The successiveness exposed in the narratives are important, since it tells us that risk is not an aspect, the women experience once and then it fades away. They so to speak walk in an out of risky situations, work situations and migration statuses. When Nui as a 16 year old girl traveled to Pattaya to work in the bars that was risky business. Going to Pattaya is a journey most of the women talked about as risky, since commonly women travel in groups, when they visit relatives etcetera but when they go to Pattaya, or to Europe, they travel alone. Furthermore, Pattaya has comparatively high levels of crime and criminal recruiting agencies are believed to operate (Brown 2000; Cummings 2005).

When I met Nui she was back in Mo Baan and felt safe but because she a few months later would have to provide for a baby, she had chosen to travel to Europe. This is another risky situation, because Nui only have a three months tourist visa to find a husband. Similarly, Gaw has moments of relative “risk-freedom”, when she has her three months tourist visa and when she is in Mo Baan for visits. But when she overstays her visa, her situation becomes more vulnerable. Thus, for these women, risk is not static, risk is successive: It is a continuum rather than a break. Dean has similarly pointed to risk as a concept, that never completely evaporates or disappears. It can be minimized, localized and avoided but never dissipated (In Lupton 1999:146).

What is furthermore revealed when understanding risk as a spiral between control and victimhood is how the women’s narratives reveal one central finding when linked to discourses on female migrants, victimization and agency. Most biographies of the Thai migrants, including Leh, Gaw and Nui, reveal that the majority of them have an internal migration history (Also documented in Ruenkaw 1999). At the time of the interviews the women were aged between 17 and 52 years. Upon their transnational migration most of them were older than 29. But at their first step in the rural-urban migratory process in Thailand they were much younger, between 15 and 19 years old. Leh, Gaw, Nui and Muan’s migration attempts, mirrors how most of the transnational female Thai migrants have gained various migration experiences, and life experiences in general, in their lives prior to their decision to migrate abroad. The stereotypical image of inexperienced Thai girls so deeply entrenched in European media and society, is thus past reality. With this knowledge new perspectives on risk and transnational migration emerge, since on the path to transnational migration the women crossed and navigated through several risks before that. This further confirms that risk-taking during the process of migration is successive and may be better understood in forms of a spiral. These women have taken several risks in their lives in order to send back remittances and migrating to Europe was not the first migratory risk. In this process they move up and down the spiral between more or less risky situations, between more or less control of the situation. Finally, the fact that Gaw and Leh borrowed money to pay for their tickets are examples of the ways in which many Thai women end up in exploitative situations, such as human

“trafficking”, since obtaining migration debt is a well-known step towards exploitation. They do so by successively taking risks and by this they become more and more enmeshed in complicated deals, where they put some of their control into the hands of others. Hence, exploitation in the case of migrant Thai women rarely comes in the form of either/or, before/after, it is a part of a successive process in which the women also themselves take part and make decisions. Again we can here in particular use the spiral staircase to understand how risk and agency is to be understood as an upward spiral of more control or as a downward spiral of more victimhood. This perspective makes agency in the realm of risk more operationalizable, since along this spiral there are moments when the Thai women assess future conditions using the knowledge at their disposal, they make risk assessments and decisions and they are not just passive victims. By seeing risks as successive rather than static we begin to understand how the women are enmeshed in various situations with changing levels of risk. Situations, in which they sometimes express agency, have control and power and sometimes become victimized and incapable of controlling. Risk and agency are therefore successive and we can identify specific moments when risk is assessed (decisions) or agency expressed (practices).

### **5.2.2 Present Risks**

Although risk according to Douglas looks forward and is placed in an unknown future, this perspective ignores the risks people are enmeshed in, in their present. In an analysis of risk and migration, merely connecting risk with processes of migration and thereby place risks in the unknown future of the migrant, conceptualizes risks “away from home” as a separate problem from risks “at home” - home being in Thailand in the everyday lives of the women in Mo Baan. This structures knowledge of “home” in particular ways. If risks are only connected to migration, risks comes to be identified with women’s movement abroad, their mobility, and loose its moorings from the risks experienced on a daily basis in Isaan. Thus a pitfall would be to solely focus on risk in the processes of migration and leave “home” naturalized and therefore depoliticized as a site where harm and risk are similarly part of women’s everyday life (Sharma n.a.). Hence, it is not simply migration which is risky. Staying at home is risky too.

The risk of Muan's son dying, the risk of a continued life in absolute poverty experienced by Leh and the risk of being a poor single mother which were the future prospects for Nui are precisely those risks "at home", the women seek to minimize by migration. In the last resort, uncertainty and risky migration are preferred to the certainty of disaster or status quo by staying in Mo Baan.

In this context the story of Leh becomes important as she explains; *"My husband did not want me to go home to my mother, even though he was not there [in their shared house]. But that is normal, in Thailand the husband decides what to do and where to live. Then I decided that I did not want him to decide anymore. I thought my life was too though. I wanted to follow my own ideas, since he only gave me little money. I was so tired of him and my life."* Leh in saying this and acting upon it expresses how risks are preferred to status quo or the certainty of future difficulties. Here we see that risk-taking in the process of migration is not simply unreasonable desperation. Instead it is a process of weighing the pros and cons and making a decision in order to manage the future. At the same time, it is at this decision making moment that Leh exercise agency as she resists the objectifying ideologies, expectations and hierarchies of power in which she is enmeshed as woman and wife. Hence Leh's account helps us to bring elusive ideas of agency into the nitty-gritty of social relations and the micro structures in everyday life.

Furthermore, when placing risk-taking on a spiral - in the realm of migration where risk is placed in the present as well as in the future - the present here versus the future "there", we begin to understand the complexities of risk in the process of migration. Migration might then from the migrants perspective be understood as a step upwards and away from risk and not a step downwards into more risky situations. This concludes that risk is not just a static absolute inherent only in the movement.

### 5.2.3 Practical and Symbolic Risk Avoidance Strategies

So far the focus has primarily been upon risk in the decision making process, which necessarily lies before the actual migration. The narrative of Leh and Gaw points out, how the women and their families seek to establish some kind of control on a transnational scale, after the women have left. The parents of Gaw, by their food stained telephone list, revealed how they attempted to gain control over their daughters mobility and reducing her risks by keeping in daily



contact. They were well aware that female migrants might be faced with risks, not only in physical terms, but also emotionally in terms of loneliness and isolation. Hence, as Long earlier pointed to, the parents of Gaw were, within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints that exist, “knowledgeable” and “capable” social actors (Qtd. in Moser & Clark 2001).

Leh also reveals how she strived to protect herself and reduced risks by borrowing money to buy a return ticket to Thailand. This act captures precisely the usefulness of understanding control and victimization in the process of migration in forms of a spiral. As Leh seeks to control her journey by buying the return ticket, she simultaneously loses control as she becomes enmeshed in a classical constraining and potential exploitative relationship and lacking sufficient contacts, she must incur migration debt. This is a classical moment of risk assessment, which could move her either up or down the spiral. My point is that migrants and their families in the village constructed individual strategies to distance themselves from potential risks in the migration process which is a finding that complicates the stereotypical portrayal of female migrants as third world citizens, who take unreasonable risks in order to get to their destination and send home remittances.

Some of these strategies are practical, others are of ritual nature. Rituals are means to exerting control over forces that may adversely affect one’s life. In coping with the uncertainties of migration, the women and their families used artifacts, techniques and rituals. For instance, they practiced a soul-tying ceremony (*baay sii suu khwan*), a



traditional Lao/Isaan rite of blessing, whenever a woman was leaving for Europe. Therefore Thai women, who recently left Thailand, will usually wear lots of white cotton strings tied around her hand wrists for protection and good luck.

Furthermore, several women and families emphasized how they in their migration process were protected by their karma. Ford and Suporn have suggested that in Thailand risk behavior is often associated with the concept of accepting ones fate into ones own hands (*siang duang*), taking ones chance with destiny (1991:407) and several of the informants mentioned fate and destiny as determinants of migratory success and avoidance of risks as in the following phrase; “*the success of traveling [i.e. migration] depends on your fate, fortune and “the stars”*” (Expressed in the survey by anonymous 21 year old women, living in Mo Baan).

However, Chris Lyttleton, medical anthropologist specializing in HIV/AIDS in Isaan, finds it too simplistic to explain risk taking with a putative national character trait (1996). But the idea that fate or karma plays a role in attitudes towards health and sickness and I will add migration cannot be dismissed.

Together these transnational risk avoidance strategies demonstrate that people seek to control their situations, which entails that in the face of indeterminacy, people struggle to influence even if they cannot completely control their present and future situations.

#### **5.2.4 Struggling for Visa**

The continuum of present and future risks points to one more central theme in the anthropology of risks which is that, as Mary Douglas points out, risk is a culturally conditioned idea shaped by pressures of social life and accepted notions of accountability (1992). This means that what Leh, Nui, Muan and Gaw, as well as their families, perceives as risks are not necessarily the same as other Thais or “Western” people would find risky. Confronted with this more cultural relativistic approach we can focus more realistically on risk than when perceptions of risk is referred to an imaginary culture-free individual (Douglas 1992:42).

Connecting this perspective to the potential risk most studies on female migration emphasizes human “trafficking”, new aspects will emerge. Not only do most of the

women and their families perceive their present risks in their daily lives as more important to react to, than future and potential risks in migrations journeys. They were also more concerned with their positions as migrants in relation to the states in countries of destination than they were with the risks of gender specific exploitative situations. In other words they are more concerned with maximizing their success as migrants than by the potential hazards of trafficking. Seen from the migrants' point of view, migration is successful when it is economically rewarding and physically secure. The migrant must obtain sufficient economic resources to live abroad and to transfer remittances to her family and those resources must be obtained in a way which is not too risky. Here, risk entails both physical hazards but also a lack of continuity in procuring and sending resources. Remittances must be regular and continuous, and for most Thai women, transnational migration is a long term strategy. The long-term preparation, which commonly requires at least 3 years of establishing the right connections in Europe and then it requires at least 7-10 years abroad to be able to establish profound financial savings. The migrant's strategy is to achieve some kind of long-term stability, typically by becoming a legal permanent resident or citizen of the country they are in or by obtaining legal, low-risk employment. In opting for long-term residential statuses we see how migrants carry out their own "risk assessments", here both economically and physically, and act accordingly.

Most of the families and women were aware that migration could entail being what they called "cheated" since several of the previous male migrants had been cheated by agents and employers when abroad. Furthermore there were almost every evening warnings on national Thai television against "trafficking". So, although it has often been claimed that migrants do not know about the dangers of migration, this was not the case here (Brown 2000; Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005; Udenrigsministeriet, Ligestilling et al. 2007). They knew about the risks. What the migrants and their families instead feared most about migration was not individuals or criminal networks but the immigration authorities in their countries of destination. This was both mirrored in the survey where 65 percent out of 95 survey respondents answered that they had heard about the dangers of going abroad and that one could be cheated. In most of the interviews they feared imprisonment if they did not know about laws and they feared deportation. Consequently, the women felt they

were at risk because they were *migrants* not because they were women. This finding is crucial, since it (a) illustrate why gender in some cases are an insufficient unit of analysis in migration research and (b) indicates that we have to investigate further how immigration controls and migrant statuses create vulnerability.

What the women most of all hoped to control, were their visa status. This is exemplified in the narratives of Muan, Gaw, Leh and Nui. The migrants' struggle is for the legal entry visa and the long-term residence permit. Being illegal, as in the case of Gaw, is both risky and undesirable, since it restricts the possibility of work to the black market or to illegal, brothel-based prostitution (although in some European countries, prostitution is legal).

Since what the informants feared most were the authorities in the countries of destination, they carefully seek for legal ways to stay in Europe and because their migration is a long term strategy they are not interested in illegality and/or too insecure work positions. Hence, they might be vulnerable when they arrive, but their primary goal is a legal migrant status. Although reports indicate, that there are quiet a few undocumented Thai women in Europe (Huguet and Punpuing 2005), Thai migrants seems to differ from for instance Nigerian female migrants in Europe, who primarily arrive and stay illegally (Carling 2004; Gamborg Holm 2006). Nigerian women might opt or hope for legal status, but are mostly not in contact with migration networks with the primary goal of finding husbands neither are there as migration systems theory indicate any significant prior links between Nigeria and Europe that would fuel marriage migration.

Migration as a long term strategy explains why Muan, Leh and Gaw goes to Pattaya and Bangkok as a stepping stone to Europe rather than being smuggled into Europe directly.

Likewise, Nui's major concern is whether her sister can help her have a tourist visa and then how to have that visa prolonged, which is done by finding a husband. Similarly, Gaw seeks to minimize her time at risk by traveling back and forth between Thailand and England to have a new tourist visa instead of just staying illegally in England. The fact that the gender aspect were downplayed and the status as migrant seemed more import reveals how perceptions of risks have to be understood in its local and historical context, since as Ewald earlier pointed to "Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But

on the other hand, anything *can* be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the dangers, considers the event” (1991:199).

### ***5.3 Constructing Risks***

The struggles for visa points to the importance of including broader macro level processes and include the political economy of migratory risks. In much literature on migration, and in particular on trafficking in women for sexual exploitation, discourses on risk is largely treated as a taken-for-granted objective phenomenon simply as an inherent part of female mobility (Sharma n.a.). The problem is that by making migration the problem, it is assumed that migration is something that is inherently damaging. Risk does however not just exist; risk is created and constructed through various practices and discourses. Ultimately there are no real risks involved in taking the plane from one country to another, unless the plane crashes! Neither is it in particularly risky to work and live in most European countries. The problem is that emphasizing movement as the real risk ignores the complex ways in which migratory risks are constructed and eclipses the fact that Thai women’s risky migration is caused by the complex interactions of immigration control, nation states and geopolitical inequalities.

The increasingly restrictive European immigration management regime plays an enormous role in creating risky migration. This in turn can reinforce some of the factors responsible for the social vulnerability of migrant women. This is especially true in labor-importing countries that separate the right to work from the right to reside. We saw this mirrored at micro-level in the case of Gaw, who because of the rejection of marriage by the young British man she had met in Bangkok, chose to remain undocumented in England and therefore had to work mostly illegally in sex work or other illegal jobs.

How risks are constructed we see evidently in the case of Nong. Nong is a 15 year old girl in Mo Baan, the youngest daughter in a family of five children. Nong goes to secondary school in the nearby village. In one year she will finish school and she has to start earning money, since her family has no money for any further education. Nong has an aunt in Denmark and a cousin in Germany, whom both mentioned to me that it was

difficult for them to help Nong find a husband. In Denmark immigration laws made it impossible because the law prohibits marriage with persons under the age of 24 from foreign countries and this prevents Nong from marrying in Denmark in the next 8 years. This is too many years for her parents to wait for financial assistance from her, since they are old in village terms, 52 and 54, and have been working in the rice paddies and as a house maid throughout their lives. Nong's cousin has not been able to obtain a tourist visa for Nong, a possibility many Thai women use to find a husband during these months. Furthermore, Nong's relatives in Europe considers it difficult to find a husband for Nong because they do not consider her beautiful enough, a theme Nong also mentions herself. The family and she consider her fat, far too dark-skinned and too Lao ethnic-looking. Consequently, because of these immigration restrictions and because of family aesthetic standards that downgrade her probability of finding a husband, Nong can not make use of the migration network to which she is connected. Hence, Nong had decided to go to Pattaya and work in the bars and hopefully find a farang this way. This strategy as implied earlier is far more risky, and as earlier implied in the case of Muan, there are furious competition in Pattaya among the girls. This might leave some girls without choice - they have to take the men who wants them or they would instead have to rely on (sometimes unreliable) agencies. Furthermore, if the girls have the possibility of using a close family network of women already in Europe, they will usually select the most suitable husband and meet him in familiar surroundings.

The case of Gaw and Nong illustrate how the contemporary European migration management regime is outplayed in the everyday life in the context of a poor family in Mo Baan in Thailand. The theme resolves into the broader issue of the role of immigration controls in constructing categories of people who are vulnerable to abuse. When certain immigration statuses create marginalized groups without access to the formal labour market and when immigration restrictions creates risky migration journeys, we are confronted with the problem that immigration restrictions commonly are a major part of the problem (Anderson 2007), when analyzing risky female migration.

Furthermore, in Mo Baan a few people are involved in the so-called “migration industry”, which is people who earn their livelihood by organizing migratory movements (Castles & Miller 2003:114). The cousin of Leh have two sons living in Mo Baan whom at several occasions have earned their daily living by smuggling undocumented migrants across the Cambodian border into Thailand. Their work was not secretive but an accepted way in the village to earn money, although illegal. Thus, not only has migration become an accepted way by most families in Mo Baan as a central path toward economic well-being, some villagers still living in Mo Baan also embark on the entrepreneurial opportunities inherent in migration. First the presence, although small in scale of a migration industry in Mo Baan, mirrors contemporary trends on the global migration scene and is an inevitable aspect of many migratory processes, since once a migration gets under way, a variety of needs for special services arise (Castles & Miller 2003:114) especially as in the case of undocumented immigrants. Thus the migration industry in Mo Baan reveals how the village is linked to much wider national and even international political and economic arenas. Second, as Cohen states, the decision making processes during migration is formed by everyday experiences (2004). Hence, when considering various migration opportunities the women’s decisions and way to arrange their migration is formed by everyday experiences of migration as a process where some make money out of migrants, and the migrants involves themselves in various deals to get to their destination. For instance, most of the migrant women borrowed money from relatives or on the black market to go to Europe, in both cases the interest is often 20 percent. For these money they have to pay for the ticket, for securing funds in Europe to prove they will not use the social security system and they have to pay a contact who found a them a husband several thousand dollars or pay a “husband” to stay pro-forma married. The local bank explained that people cannot borrow money for the ticket, they have to go to the black market in Khorat or borrow from friends. From a banks perspective there is no guarantee that migration results in money, migration is simply not a secure investment. In several anti-trafficking education and pre-departure training people are advised not to obtain loans from private, but instead get a loan in the bank. One issue here is that debt and loans are more the norm than the exception in many parts of Thailand. In Mo Baan most people obtained private loans frequently for various reasons. Furthermore, poor people without

land cannot borrow money in the local bank close to Mo Baan, which puts landless potential migrant women even more at risk since the black markets entails peripheral contacts and high interests. Thus, various deals and the migration industry becomes a norm to enter the migration scene.

Therefore, when analyzing and debating risk and female migration, we have to emphasize the role of immigration controls and the ways in which immigration controls heightens vulnerability to exploitation. A focus on the constructions of risk disclose the interaction of structure and agency, since these are structures that limit agency.

#### ***5.4 Summarizing Risks***

I have used the women's decision-making processes to analyze how migrants manage an uncertain future and seek to gain power over migration processes and practices. With an emphasis on the micro-levels of everyday life in migrant families I demonstrated the strategies the women and their families adopt to cope with the various potential risks during the process of migration.

Four central findings emerged and can be categorized as; *Successive risks, present risks, practical and symbolic risk avoidance strategies and struggles for visas*. *First* by seeing risks as successive rather than static we begin to understand how the women are enmeshed in various situations with changing levels of risk. Situations in which they sometimes have control and power and in some become victimized and incapable of controlling. I therefore argued that we can operationalize the interactions of risk and agency by using the model of the spiral. *Secondly* taking that into consideration risk is both a part of the future and the present. Hence, the risk of Muan's son dying, the risk of a continued life in absolute poverty experienced by Leh and the risk of being a poor single mother which were the future prospects for Nui are risks in the present which the women seek to minimize by migrating and this is where agency begins and passivity ends. *Thirdly*, the practical and ritual risk avoidance strategies established by the women and their families confirmed that migrants do not just take unreasonable risks. Instead people seek to control their situation, even if they cannot completely control their present and

future situation. *Fourthly* in order to minimize their risks, the women struggle for and most of all hope to control is their visa status. Thus, when analyzing and debating risk and female migration we have to include a broader macrolevel perspective and emphasize the role of immigration controls and the ways in which immigration controls have the potential of heightening the women's vulnerability to exploitation. These four risk themes all point to risk as successive in the migration process. In other words, risk logics and experiences are successive and driven by simultaneous feelings of uncertainty and control.

As noted in the section on gender in Thailand, women have access to social mobility through their actions and they can because of this be ascribed powerful positions. Thus, in Thai society women have through various means access to transform their status and this lies at the heart of the process, female migrants are a part of. As the risk-takers in their community I will argue that risk-taking serve as a marker which have the potential of transforming the women's status. In general spatial mobility is perceived as a natural and appropriate characteristic for men, as demonstrated in the historical chapter, while women's bodies and their movements are subject to greater restrictions, gossip and conflicts (recall Leh and her fear of gossip if telling about her migration intentions). Approached from this perspective, the risks taken and the migration of women to Europe in general might challenge customary gender ideals in Mo Baan.

The story of Leh actually poignantly captures how new identities are ascribed to migrant women, because they have the courage to migrate. The story of Leh has inspired many young girls in Mo Baan and adjacent villages to go to Pattaya. Leh has ventured around the world, achieving a degree of independence her mother could not have imagined, and amply supporting her four children with no help from her ex-husband and the father of her children. Furthermore Leh succeeded in bringing all her children to Denmark and she has personally helped 25 other women from Mo Baan and surrounding villages to migrate to Europe. She has single handedly established her own transnational migration network which has changed the lives of individuals, families and of Mo Baan as a community. Leh's success sends a message to potential migrants that it is worth taking



the risk. As Nong, the 16 year old girl whom we met earlier, said; *“I don’t care where I go, or how I get there, I just want to travel, have fun and be like Leh [the, in various ways, most successful migrant from Mo Baan] ”*.

Nong’s phrase play into a larger narrative of migration and agency in Mo Baan, where there is an admiration towards those who, as Leh, dares taking hand of their own life. There is gossip, fear and fascination and it is through risk-taking, risk decisions taken by the women themselves and not by others for them, that makes them individuals and turn them into subjects. Thus, in the process of risk-taking, migrant women turn themselves into acting subjects as they pursue strategies for achieving economic security. This identity also derives its meanings from national, historically founded ontologies of Thai women as having “the spirit of a fighter”(Sukanya 1983).

Decisions made at the pre-migration stage and risk assessments are influenced by a variety of gender-related factors. In certain instances, men are more likely to migrate, while in others women may be the ones to leave. In the four cases we saw how gendered and reproductive obligations formed the decision making process. Yet, their stories also illustrated the importance of intersectionality, including gender as the unit of analysis and only explaining the risky situation of Gaw, Nui, Leh and Muan by their female gender is not sufficient. We have to include their Thai citizenship, geographical origin in the economically underdeveloped Isaan and race similarly forms demand, root causes and their difficulties in getting through the European immigration regime.

Here were a faced with broader political economical aspects of the risks involved in migration, since a decision to leave ones country does not entail permission to enter another. Thus, the political economy at macro level demonstrates that there are limits to the ability of many female migrants to control their journey and its risks, if only because access to resources which make it easier to do so is uneven and often inadequate (Whyte 2005: 245).

Hence, the chapter on risk reveals how the migrating women are not just “victims of risks” on unreasonable risky journeys. This is what an agency perspective help us discover. On the other hand we have to consider the specific situations in which risk is a

part. This is best done by detailed analyses on migrant practices and by avoiding an understanding of risk as dichotomy but rather as step taking on a spiral.

The driving force behind risk-taking in the process of migration is nowhere more evident than when the women finally arrive in Europe and start sending money home despite their sometimes difficult situations. Hence, we now turn to the other axe of the nexus; remittances. As we shall see in the next chapter, contemplating who, when and how to remit is a complex social field in which agency plays a central part.

## **6. No Free Gifts**

At the nexus of risk and remittances, the transnational economical transfers sent by female migrants are commonly portrayed as yet one more aspect of the migration journey of which the women are victims (UNFPA 2006; Curran, Garip et al. n.a.). Discourses on female migration and remittances are commonly guided by assumptions about female migrants as being merely “cash cows” for their homebound families.<sup>9</sup> Hence, not only are most female migrants commonly presented as victims of globalization and victims of “trafficking” or “victims of risks”, they are also commonly portrayed as victims of their homebound families’ conspicuous consumption needs. Furthermore, it has been argued that the demand for conspicuous consumption is the root cause for “trafficking” in Thai women, while at the same time describing migrant women, who are victims of “trafficking”, as not having the possibility of remitting (Kempadoo, Jyoti et al. 2005).

Simultaneously, as female migrants are described as “victims of remittances”, these same transnational transfers are commonly described solely in financial terms, simply the money migrants send home. However, research is emerging which demonstrates that economic assistance to home communities is highly variable in its form and constitutes a social field in which power relations are communicated and contested. The intention of this chapter is to analyze and describe remittances as a field of decision making and agency for the Thai migrant women.

The question is then: How do migrants control the “outputs” of their migration process? I will answer this, first by describing the role of merit and duty, which underlies family obligations in Isaan. I will then discuss two ways in which remittances materialize in Mo Baan; *Transnational Payments*, and in the realm of social remittances, the interactions that takes place during the migrants *Visits* to Mo Baan. Finally I will discuss the act of remitting despite being in constrained situations and then concluded this chapter with an analysis of remittances in a broader Thai national context.

### **6.1 *Bun Khun: Gendered Family Obligations***

Chai sits among a group of teenagers, all from Mo Baan. Chai is the only kàthoey (ladyboy) in Mo Baan. He sits white powdered with lipstick, necklace and styled hair. The teenagers talk about what to do when they have finished school, as most of them will finish secondary school in a few weeks. I ask Chai what he dreams of. He explains that “[...] *he wants to go to Bangkok, to become a doctor*”. I ask him if he wants to go to Europe to work as a doctor and he says no. Surprised, I ask him why, since I know most of the other teenagers wants to go to Europe. He explains that he wants to go back to live and work in the village as soon as his education is finished. Again I ask why, and he looks serious and replies, “*because of bun khun*”. I got the feeling that all the teenagers sitting around us knew exactly what he was talking about, they nodded and looked appreciating at him. Especially the young girls, who explained that *bun khun* similarly was the reason why they wanted to go to Europe.

*Bun khun* is a powerful set of social and cultural ideals and ties that bind the parents in Mo Baan with their children. It is an asymmetrical reciprocity and deep-rooted morality, based on the Buddhist concept of obligations and “debts of merit”. Parents bestow their *bun khun* upon children by giving them life and for loving and caring for them as they grow. In return, children owe their parents not only life-long gratitude and respect but also – and increasingly as they mature – their active assistance, including labor and income, in the material and spiritual support of the parental household. Ideals of *bun*

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<sup>9</sup> UN officials’ expression of female migrants.

*khun*-reciprocity place all children in a position of lifelong obligation to their parents (Mills 2003:76).

The ideals of *bun khun* are strongly pervasive in most social relations, not only in Mo Baan, but in most of Isaan.<sup>10</sup> These ideals transform into everyday life and means that you have to give something back to someone who has helped you, since many everyday activities produce an obligation or debt towards people who has done something good for you. *Bun khun* that one owes to others can be reciprocated (*katanyuu*) to them endlessly with unlimited time and space. No matter where one lives, one can reciprocate *bun khun* in one way or another to others depending on circumstances (Ratana 2005).

*Bun khun* is gendered in its consequences. Sons can uphold their *bun khun* obligations by becoming a monk for a short period of time, while daughters do not have that possibility. Daughters, especially the youngest, can uphold their *bun khun* obligations to parents only through her respectful obedience to their authority and by her contributions toward the physical and material well-being of the households (Mills 2003:78). The women in Mo Baan did so best - in their own opinion - by migrating to Europe and did share a similar gender ideology of being dutiful daughters and mothers to support their poor parents, siblings and children. As Leh, whom we met earlier, explained;

S:     *“Why is it you who have to provide for your family?”*

L:     *“I got the chance [to go to Europe], that’s how it works. I have 3 sisters and 3 brothers, I am the youngest. The others did not have enough to share. In Thailand that is a tradition. Daughters have to take care of their mother. Nobody told me I had to. Nobody pushed me. I just had to.”*

As the fragment of the interview with Leh, and the vignette with Chai and the teenagers illustrate, ideas of *bun khun* are enculturated and guides life decisions. Chai, who identified himself as female, confirmed the gendered aspects of *Bun Khun*, since especially girls and women in Mo Baan felt obliged to make life decisions determined by

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<sup>10</sup> Also important in central Thailand but *bun khun* is increasingly questioned, contested and transformed in more urban settings.

values of *bun khun*. The informants already in Europe confirmed this point as they all remitted and expressed a strong sense of connecting to their homes of origin. During my time in Mo Baan and among migrant women in Denmark, I only twice heard of women who stopped remitting and these cases caused much gossip and disapproval.

Mary Beth Mills in her ethnography of young Thai women migrating to Bangkok similarly demonstrates, how gender ideals anchored in *bun khun* shapes rural Thai family obligations and how female migrants to Bangkok must eke remittances out of their low wages and send them home to win the women the family honor that their brothers can earn locally (Mills 2003; Mahler & Pessar 2006:45).

The title of this chapter, “*No free gifts*” captures the fine line this thesis is balancing on, since on the one hand being capable of sending home remittances, contributes to a powerful identity and narrative in the village of the migrant women and on the other, the remittances are an example of how the woman is obliged to uphold her *bun khun* as to uphold the reciprocal relationship between her and her family. Thus, there are no free gifts. Marcel Mauss (1954) has in his work on the potlatch system argued that the whole idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding. What is wrong with the idea of the so-called free gift is the donors intention to be exempt from returning gifts coming from the recipients. Like the potlatch system among indigenous peoples in North America the value of *bun khun* similarly establish mutual ties, obligations and power relations. This is not a new phenomenon. Right across the globe and as far back as we can go in the history of human civilization, the major transfer of goods has been by cycles of obligatory return of gifts (Douglas in Mauss 1990). The potlatch is an example of a *total system of giving*, which means that each gift is a part of a system of reciprocity in which the honor of giver and recipient are engaged. Both potlatch and *bun khun* are based on the same principle: Every gift has to be returned in some more or less specified ways and a failure to return means losing the competition for honor (Mauss 1954). Then we might ask where the system of potlatch or the system of *bun khun* gets its energy from? As Mauss points to, systems of gift-giving gets its energy from individuals who are faced with losing respect if they fail to pay back what has been given and from beliefs that the spirits then will

punish them. The system would thus not be total or work if it did not include personal emotions or religion.

Applied to the migration of Thai women, fears of losing familiar honor and respect by not upholding *Bun khun* appropriately, in many ways underlies the migration of Thai women to Europe and their remittances. These gendered ideals are not though an uncontested practice. It might be so that the women are dutiful daughters that uphold *bun khun* but they simultaneously seek to decide the ways in which to do so and this is where the perspective of agency becomes crucial.

## **6.2 Controlling Remittances**

Several studies have elucidated how transnational female migrants bear the burden of gendered family expectations. As the practice of *bun khun* points to, this is similarly the case for female Thai migrants which means they are expected to remit more money than their male counterparts and also in some cases *do* remit more money than male migrants (Sørensen 2005; UNFPA 2006).

As Leh recalled in the chapter on the historical developments of migration in Mo Baan, the village has during the last ten years changed face. Remittances from female migrants have played part of the building of 15 “modern” houses, compared to the 2 houses build by male migrant remittances. Houses are in Mo Baan, as in many other places, a prominent sign of family status and migrant houses in particular commonly play a part in discourses on female remittances and conspicuous consumption.

Most new migrant houses in Mo Baan are build close to the main road or/and close to the center of the village where two roads cross and the only telephone box is placed, adjacent to a noodle bar and the village school (see appendix 1). The lots close to the paved road and the village cross are more expensive costing 30.000 Baht (\$910) compared to the lots scattered behind on gravel road which comes at a price of 10.000 Baht (\$303). On the paved road is also the house of the village headman, the two families with most land, two

government officials and the school. This illustrates how migrant houses has inscribed themselves into a powerful placement in the village.

As the photos below illustrate new houses in Mo Baan mark a departure from older patterns of building, mostly in hand-hewn wood with the ground level open, to embracing a range of more “modern” styles. The new houses have a closed ground floor and are built of concrete, glass windows and tiles.



1. “Old” Isaan house



2. “Modern” house paid by daughter in the U.K.



3. Migrant house paid by daughter in Denmark



4. Bamboo shack of a poor family in Mo Baan

When looking at some of the new migrant houses in Mo Baan it is understandable why migrant houses have come to be symbols of the conspicuous consumption migrant women are presumed to be victims of. However, the houses are significant sites of conflicts which reflect the choices and agency of the Thai migrant women. *Firstly* most of the women themselves voiced how a “modern” (*thansamay*) house would fulfill their

migration dreams. *Secondly* even those women who had in various ways been in situations of severe exploitation while working in the sex industry, among them a HIV-infected Thai woman in Europe, managed to pay for the building of a house. *Thirdly*, the women did not just comply with their families' demands for elaborate houses. In the process of a potential house building they attempted to control the process in various ways. For instance, Leh, whom we met earlier, was for several years a cause for much gossip, because she did not want to pay for a new house to her family. Her reasons was that she did not want to give money just so her family could "show off". This made people in Mo Baan gossiped for several years about why Leh did not build a house and it was thought of undutiful when she had the money. Leh believed however that the wooden house her family lived in was adequate and she declined to pay for a new house. Eventually the old house was flooded and impossible to live in and at that point Leh decided to pay for a new house.

Another example is the house of the family I stayed with, whereof only 50 percent were paid for by the husbands' sister in Denmark. This way of financing was arranged by the migrant woman in Denmark, who insisted that she would not pay anything to the house unless her brother managed to finance 50 percent of the house himself.

Furthermore, the elaborate house on photo 2 was an exemption because no other migrant houses in Mo Baan had electrical fence, two floors of which both were in concrete, a balcony and air-condition. They were as photo 3 instead rather moderate, although still very elaborate compared to the bamboo shacks like photo 4 of the poor families in Mo Baan.

The enormous house on photo 2 and its residents, a middle-aged woman and her alcoholic husband with a daughter married to a rich Chinese husband and one daughter in the U.K., were cause of much gossip, in particularly focusing on the electrical fence, which the people in Mo Baan found "crazy" and "too much".

My point is that most of the migrant women did not just fulfill their families' demands for conspicuous consumption. This was not only evident in connection with houses. The women would make similar decisions in relation to requests for cars, TVs, cell phones



and son forth. Among themselves they commonly wanted to build houses as a manifestation of their migratory success (no matter their situation in Europe).

Rarely did they simply decline to pay, but rather defined various complex conditions and ways of financing as they determined when and who should have access to her financial resources. Even close family members were postponed and sometimes declined the possibility of either having or borrowing money for a house or other goods on grounds that they were “lazy”, “strange”, “untrustworthy” etc. As Muk, a young woman living in Germany with only her alcoholic father still alive, explained; “*My father drinks too much, and he is lazy, he just walks around all day doing nothing [...] when I visit the village he only talks about my money, but I have told him, he can only have money or a house if he stops drinking. I work everyday and then he just buys whiskey for my money*”. These findings disclose how a gendered analysis of migration and remittance (control) patterns must take its point of departure in an understanding of the family/household as an arena of contradictory, hierarchical and conflicting social relations organized along generational, kinder and kinship lines (Nyberg Sørensen 2005).

Yet some of families were very insisting to get their daughters to remit more money. Several also explained that they knew it took time to save so much money (a moderate house is approximately \$15.000) and that they did not expect a new house before 7-10 years after the migration journey started. For instance when a migrant woman who usually lived in Germany came to Mo Baan after some unspecified problems with a man in Germany, her mother explained to me that it was not a problem if her daughter did not want to go back to Germany again to get more money; “*She has already helped us with so much, and we also got the house [...] she [her daughter] was very lonely in Germany and weeping and weeping, so I told her just to come home and she can stay here if she wants to*”. An insight which mirrors how some families adjusted their expectations to their daughters’ remittances, as they were confronted with the difficulties of migrant life in Europe. Therefore, remittances are a site of both control and renegotiation of “obligations”.

On the other hand, the smaller amount of money remitted each month ranging between 5000 Baht (\$150) to 20.000 Baht (\$600) were not in the same way sites of contestations. Most households in Mo Baan having a female member in Europe were totally dependant on the monthly payments which covered food, medicine, school uniforms and secondary school tuition (primary school is free), rent and other daily expenses. In particular for the parents who in village terms were old (52-55 years old) and could not work as hard anymore or work at all. These monthly payments the migrant women in Europe usually had to pay and did without any complaints or rearrangements neither with the family, nor did they complain about it when I met them in Denmark. They might complain about their work conditions or the fact that they sometimes had to sell sex to pay expenses in Denmark and pay for the family in Thailand. But they almost never complained that they had to pay.

The houses and the large sums of money they entailed give insights into the complex power relations entailed in households and how the women attempted to resist or navigate in the field of remittances. The larger consumption items were sites of conflict, whereas daily expenses were not. In this way remitting simultaneously reproduces and contests existing gender roles, as the migrants fulfil the role of dutiful daughters, they also seek to control and navigate in this social field. Migration reflects certain gender inequalities but the resources gained from migration enable the young women to exert control over their own lives and that of their families. The dutiful daughters are now a force to be reckoned with: They can scold their drunken fathers or threaten not to send money. The scolding and threats are indeed a far cry from *bun khun* and the parents seem to be aware of their vulnerability when they renegotiate these obligations.

Migrant remittances is usually conceptualized and categorized as monetary flows. Other kinds of catalysts are however also at work, among them the so-called *social remittances* (Levitt and Sørensen 2004). Social remittances are usually defined as the ideas, practices, identities and social capital that flow from receiving to sending country communities and are usually exchanged by letter or other forms of communication, including by phone, fax, the internet or video that is through transnational communications (Nyberg Sørensen

2005:5). Indeed social remittances are part of transnational living I will argue that migrants visits to their home villages are also an exchange of social remittances. In the following I will analyze this type of remittances paying attention to the ways in which visits are a social field for solidifying migrant identities.

### **6.3 *Paying a Visit***

If ever a time where the women can not only escape their sometimes difficult life situations in Europe, as well as the stereotypical portrayals of Thai women they commonly are confronted with in their daily lives in Europe, it is during their visits to their home villages. In the village they can instead temporarily combine the identities of being dutiful village daughters upholding *bun khun* and maintain the ascribed identity as powerful global migrants.

During my fieldwork in Mo Baan during the summer of 2006, several women who lived in Europe came back to their village for a visit. Dreaming of and longing for and planning visits to home villages are a central aspect of most Thai migrants, no matter how difficult their life situation in Europe is. Most families in Mo Baan would, first thing, find a calendar and explain when their daughters were coming home for visits. These visits are a time for arranging elaborate religious village events, paying for charity, going to restaurants, sightseeing and weekend trips. These were all places and events the women's family primarily experienced when paid for by their daughters.

Two of the much discussed examples were a contribution from a migrant woman in the U.K. to help build two new *salas* to the monks. Since the village did not have a temple of its own, the *salas* were built for the monks to sleep in when they stayed in the village during religious events.

Another forthcoming event was a *bun caek khaaw*, a ritual feast lasting one or two days. The feast is hosted by the immediate family in honor of a deceased relative and should be held between one and three years after the death (Mills 2003:178). For such a feast to be held in December 2007, the relatives of a deceased grandfather were already planning. They had invited a famous Thai pop star from Bangkok with a huge set up and planned to invite the entire village of Mo Baan as well as adjacent villages. They believed the price

would be 200.000 Baht (\$6000). The initiative to the feast was taken by a migrant woman in Denmark, whom now worked all the time to pay for the event and a young migrant woman living in the U.K.

Paying for new temples, *salas* or religious events are among the most meritorious acts to which any Buddhist can contribute. Hence, the migrant women are ascribed powerful identities as they act in the most prestigious arena of Thai social and moral order: Buddhist merit-making (Mills 2003:144). Thus, religious events during visits in Mo Baan mirrored how religion is also about economics. It empowers the women to participate in religion. Another aspect about religious merit-making is that it turns away moral discourses in the village about too elaborate consumption, or the immorality of the women who sell sex, into more moral appropriate ways of spending remittances. That is, to support temples, monks and charity is also a way to say that one is not only immoral or focused on money, simultaneously it reaffirms the powerful position of the women in the village.

**When Lek visits her village from Germany she always gives a party for a school for blind children. On the photo she distributes 100 Baht (\$3) to each of the children after their meal, while most of the villagers looked at the distribution act. The children later sang a song of thanking addressing Lek for her generosity.**



Visits in the village were also an important opportunity to tell about ones migration experiences. Although several of them did not tell their “true” stories about occupation migration status and everyday life in Europe, most would tell the “true” story to their mother or sisters. That is, the women who did sex work, had lots of debt, were divorced or illegally in Europe would usually just tell the other villagers that they worked as

cleaning ladies or at a factory to protect their own and their families reputation and powerful positions, they so to speak “fly out and lie home”.

Simultaneously, the visits were an important platform for potential female migrants. Young girls, and divorced mothers of young children, would come by the house of the female migrants and tell stories of misfortunes and hardships. Thus, since the migrant women only told little about their hardships in Europe, the potential migrants expressed what Stefansson (2007) has termed “the non-migrants monopoly of suffering.” Usually they brought a photo of themselves for the women migrants to bring to Europe and thereby help them find a possible husband. This geographically defined position as a connection to Europe worked as a significant source of power since the migrant women could determine the future of a household if she agreed to help finding a husband. Sometimes the migrant women would tell hopeful potential migrants that, if she should help them, they would have to learn more English, loose weight or help the family of the migrant in Mo Baan, when the migrant herself would be away in Europe. Furthermore, the fact that some girls agreed to pay the migrant woman money to establish a contact further confirmed the unequal power relation.

The frequent visits by migrant women in the village meant that throughout the year there were almost always a women home from Europe, hence these visits constantly reinforced and reminded about the possibilities inherent in migration, and the migrant women actively contributed to these imaginations.

As Aom, who has worked in Pattaya, now lives in Germany and occasionally works at a brothel explained;

**A:** *“When I go back [to Mo Baan] I have my golden jewelry in my purse. When I land in Bangkok, before I pick up my belongings, I go to the bathroom and take on my gold. Then I am ready to go to the village.”*

**S:** *“Why do you do that?”*

**A:** *“They [in the village] always gossip about what I do in Germany, how much money I have and so on. Before I left [for Germany] they thought I could do nothing [...] but they all like gold, and I know they think I am lucky”.*

What these data disclose are that remittances are a social field and that migration not necessarily is a departure from family or home but instead a way to stay within the family by upholding *bun khun*, participate in gossip and conflicts of everyday life. However, their visits simultaneously revealed how their migration distanced them from their families and the village. The migrants were, as Stefansson (2007) has earlier pointed to, distanced geographically, socio economically and in some ways culturally. To this I will add *bodily distanced*, since most of the women after some years in Europe could no longer drink the tapped water because of bacteria and had to drink bottled water. They had to take anti-malaria pills, which no villagers could afford or felt they needed. Some of the women found the weather too hot and bought an air-conditioner. Most of the women also gained weight while being in Europe, they had their teeth fixed, a minor nose plastic surgery which made the nose more pointed and “Western” and several of them also appeared more light skin, in the words of the villagers, since they did not have to stay in the sun all-day long.

Thus, the women migrants’ visits to their home village present important opportunities to exercise agency and identity. Traveling home, bringing money and wearing new clothes allowed the women to reconfigure their life situations in Europe and at the same time project a solid identity of the successful migrant.

#### ***6.4 Constrained Remitting***

Yet, the remittances and the visits home came with a price. The project of “going home” influenced the everyday lives of the women while in Europe, since it is very expensive to pay for plane tickets, air-conditioned van to the village, food for the whole family during the time of stay, sightseeing trips, presents in forms of refrigerators, bicycles, cash to selected people, events, visits to medical specialists by family members and generally just holding all costs during their stay.

Those who found themselves in difficult situations in Europe often struggled with going home, since they felt they could not do it before they had sufficient funds. Several of the migrant women, who have arranged pro-forma marriages, have to pay their “husband” money for several years until they could get their permanent residency.

Having all these financial responsibilities were a reason why several felt they had to sell sex, because working as a cleaning lady simply could not pay all these expenses. The migrants thus felt compelled to supplement their regular employment with prostitution, a practice we could interpret between agency and victimization, depending on one's attitude toward women who sell sex.

I have earlier pointed out that the difference between a "successful" migration and a "unsuccessful" migration lies in the amount of remittances sent home (Huguet and Punpuing 2005; IOM 2005). Hence, a "true" victim of "trafficking" is one who gets very little money to themselves if any at all. This was not the situation of the women in this study. Some had been "trafficked" and made to work in jobs different from those promised. Nevertheless, all managed to send remittances home. They found their ways to cheat the "mamasans", whom they are supposed to pay a huge percentage of their daily earnings by not telling what type of sex they had offered, when in the private room with the customer and how much they got for it. Those who were in relationships to a man who did not want them to remit, a common occurrence, nevertheless always managed to send money home. Hence, by our standards, these women might be perceived as "victims". By their own standards these women saw themselves as successful migrants and continuously tried to reconfirm this although their lives sometimes were very difficult.

Thus, I found that despite some of the women had been in or were in exploitative situations, also situations of "trafficking" in the sense forced prostitution, they managed in various ways to remit money, although not always as much as they hoped for. This has similar been documented in studies on Nigerian women (Gamborg Holm 2006) and women from Eastern Europe (Andrijasevic 2004). Some of those who worked at brothels in the weekends and factory work in weekdays, and did not have debt, were the ones who remitted the most. The woman who, as earlier described, remitted 20.000 Baht (\$600) each month, worked at brothel in the weekends.

Investigating exploitation and remittances we are truly faced with the agency definition of Goddard who describes agency as "...the capacity and willingness of actors to take

steps in relation to their social situation” (2000:27). Thus, exploitation and remittances are points on an axis, in which one pole is that of being “victims” and “objects” of exploitation and the other pole by the potential for them to resist exploitation and thereby become “subjects” or “agents”. We can then use the spiral staircase model to understand that moments of control and victimhood can exist simultaneously and see how the Thai women are enmeshed in various situations with changing levels of control and victimhood. Remitting despite constraints is then a moment of assessment and agency.

After getting insights into the life of remittances at micro level in Mo Baan we now move to a broader perspective looking at the interlinkages between women’s remittances and the Thai Nation.

### ***6.5 Staining the Nation***

In the existing discourse on female migration, the states – the sending countries – get little attention and are ascribed little responsibility for the out-migration of the nation’s women. In the case of Thailand, the state ultimately has only little interest besides a humanitarian and ethical interest in protecting its out-migrating female citizens against the risks of migration. These women’s remittances do what the Thai state ultimately should do: They take care of people, pay hospital bills and schools and this gives Thai migrants a functional place in the Thai welfare state.

I never experienced the villagers or the migrant women blame the Thai state for their difficulties in finding decent work or pay the hospital bills. Instead they would emphasize the benefits of new initiatives, e.g. some neo-populist policies, the so-called Thaksinomics invented by and named after the former Prime minister in Thailand Thaksin (Siriprachai 2006). For instance Thaksin introduced the 30 Baht (1\$) medical scheme for all Thai people to get access to medical treatment. In everyday life it meant that all Thai citizens had a social security card issued by their district, enabling them to get basic medical care for 30 Baht. Still, sudden death, serious diseases, unemployment, secondary school and so on all had to be provided for by the families themselves, which often meant from female relatives abroad. The story of Muan, whom we met earlier and her deadly sick son, exemplifies how one of these neo-populist policies not sufficiently



covered medical expenses and thereby forcing especially women to bear that financial burden. Along these lines it is possible to argue that female Thai migrants and in particular Isaan-women bear the burden and responsibilities of the Thai state and its underprioritization of Isaan.

This is however not the way the state itself describe the situation. The Thai Ministry of Culture have during conferences and through the media voiced a concern over the moral impact female migration from Thailand have on the reputation of Thailand as a nation.<sup>11</sup> That is, Thai women who migrate for “true” love are respectable, whereas Thai women who migrate for money (e.g. as sex workers or pro-forma marriages) stain the moral reputation of the Thai nation.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the boundaries between sex work and love are much more fluid as life histories my informants show. Sex work can be an interlude between love affairs and true love can emerge in the most pecuniary situations. Furthermore, the women themselves rarely mentioned love as a reason for marriage migration but rather the need for decent employment opportunities and money.

Paradoxically, the village headman in Mo Baan, who is also a government official, would praise the migration of women while the Thai nation and public debates among middle class Thais, primarily in Bangkok, would deem the women who migrate for money immoral. Hence, the migration for money has to be prevented as to protect the reputation of the Thai nation, while at the same time Thailand, Isaan and the villages undeniably needs the remittances. Discourses on female migrants as bearers of the moral of the nation clash with the high percentage of remittances transferred to Isaan by the very same “immoral women”.

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<sup>11</sup> From conversation with Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya, who is professor in cultural anthropology at Mahidol University at Salaya and one of the few Thai scholars who study the migration of Thai women to Europe.

<sup>12</sup> I have wondered whether this is why the women consequently are termed “trafficked” in the report from the Thai Social Development Office because if the women migrate involuntarily, they do not put moral stains on the Thai nation. Then the women are “innocent” and not “immoral” women staining the reputation of the nation.

In this vein Georges Fouron and Nina Glick Schiller has similarly shown the hypocrisy typically inherent in discourses on the female migrant by illustrating that poor Haitian immigrant women's remittances and gifts elevate their social status back home to an extent previously unimaginable. And yet paradoxically, their material contributions signify such a high percentage of hard currency flowing into Haiti that they really buttress the very Haitian State that systemically discriminates against women (2001).

This hypocrisy takes center stage when including broader macro level perspective into an analysis of female migration. The focus on rural women's migration into prostitution or marriage overseas reinforce the role of the Thai elite and government in protecting peasant women by disciplining them into proper behavior, in particular it contributes to a discourse where poor people's patterns of consumption are explained as a root cause to "trafficking" and female migration.

For instance, the government makes special arrangements with foreign governments to prevent "trafficking". Such measures effectively curtailed women's self-determination and freedom of movement, making them - "for their own good" - objects of state control (Jeffrey 2002). A case to point out is that Thailand in 2005 decided upon a national program to fight "trafficking" and risky migration.<sup>13</sup> Since most Thai women in the sex industry in Europe are from Isaan, Mo Baan are likewise a target in this upcoming anti-trafficking campaign.

A local program official in Isaan explained it like this: "*[...] after many anti-trafficking projects we have realized that ultimately it is the attitude in the villages that need to change. We have to make them [the villagers and potential female migrants] understand that "trafficking" is a real risk and that they have to learn how to protect themselves [...] another problem is that they are so focused on houses, cars, TVs and cell phones [...] As I usually say, they simply do not know how to handle globalization. They lack the skills to do so. This project will try to change this, as well as get people to protect their daughters.*"

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<sup>13</sup> Behind the program and its implementation is the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and the program is also funded by UN, IOM and NGOs in Europe and US.

The local program official continues: *“The new project will create dance and plays in classical Thai style which tell about risks and important things in life other than consumption [...] We believe this awareness raising program will be the most difficult program we have tried, since we have experienced, that they do not listen [...] When we go and talk to the women and recommend them a factory job, they try to go to Europe anyway [...] Our new project has 2 phases; first, they have to accept that it is risky to migrate and change attitude towards consumption. Second, phase is a development program in forms of income generation, which will be different projects in each village, it depends upon the villagers.”*

These new anti-trafficking campaigns capture the nexus of risks and remittances and the dilemmas this nexus produce. For instance, soon an anti-trafficking CD will be distributed to all village headmen in Thailand starting with distribution in the region of Isaan and therefore also Mo Baan. In the early morning, after the national anthem has been played at 6 a.m., the centrally placed loudspeakers begin their loud information distribution to the villagers who listens on and off all through the morning. The loud speakers are partly administrated by the village headman and he will also be the one who plays the new anti-trafficking CD. Furthermore, in order to help prevent Thai nationals from becoming victims of “trafficking”, intensive and continued measures have been undertaken through wide ranging campaigns on the national TV channels. However, when I asked the village headman in Mo Baan about the CD, he told me that he was not sure he would play it. It might stop the women from Mo Baan going to Europe, and he knew that their families as well as the village needed the money they could send home.

What happens in this process is that migrants women’s self-interpretation as workers, wives and family wage earners are rendered mute, while protective measures that will restore village culture to its idealized form mainly as envisioned by the urban middle and upper classes are established. This sense of national anxiety on behalf of the rural women also lead to the requirement of any foreign man proposing to marry a Thai woman to

obtain an affidavit from his embassy stating his occupation and income, along with two letters of reference from referees living in his home country. The change was prompted by the growing concern over the practice of European men taking Thai women abroad as their wives and then presumably forcing them to work in prostitution (Jeffrey 2002).

The problem here is twofold; *First* as symbols migrant women are denied agency. Women are typically construed as the symbolic bearer of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency. Seen as an agent, she is an accomplice in the destruction of national identity; seen as a victim, she is sympathetic but also powerless. Those portrayals encourage patronizing and stifling reactions (Jeffrey 2002). *Second* the focus on consumption patterns, the morality of the migrant women and the (though not unreasonable) demand for foreign men to document their intentions, remove the focus from the contradiction that Thailand, and in particularly the underdeveloped Isaan needs the remittances, while at the same time the women are deemed immoral and not given any credit for the burden they bear.

### ***6.6 Summarizing Remittances***

While it is important to distinguish between various types of remittances it is striking what they have in common. Remittances are a field where migrant women assert control over their lives and their families and at the same time fulfill traditional obligations of duty. In that sense, transnational payments and visits illustrate how remittances are a site where migrants seek to control the “outputs” of their migration and remitting despite being trapped in difficult situations in Europe, mirror a clash between agency and victimization. Hence, these findings all revolve around the axis of structure and agency. Finally I demonstrated that understanding remittances along the lines of control and victimhood help us comprehend that female migrants are not simply “cash cows” or “victims of remittances”. Instead, they seek to obtain control as they balance upwards and downwards on the spiral staircase between being victims of familiar demands and controlling these demands. In the case of Muk and her decline to assist her alcoholic father, although she is supposed to as dutiful daughter, it is a specific moment of agency

and control. Agency is empirical manifestations on continuous lines, not as either/or, which should give a clearer sense of what is entailed by this analytical aspect of agency and shows how it can be investigated.

Thus, on one level, the migration of rural women and their remittances may be seen as appropriate gender behavior – the acts of dutiful daughters upholding their obligations to help support parents, siblings and their own children. However, migration to Europe and the possibility of remitting not only provides the women with access to cash income but also to control how the money is spent, illuminating how remittances like wealth in general, reflect and transmit power (Mahler and Pessar 2006).

Finally, the national discourse on migrating Thai women as immoral reveals how female migration commonly is linked to broader debates of remittances and development, but how this nexus commonly and hypocritically instead focuses on the moral economy of remittances and not the burden migrant women bear in lack of adequate governance.

## **7. Summary & Conclusion**

Since the risks women face in the process of migration and the remittances they return from the countries of destination are two central themes inherent in the feminization of migration, conceptualizing risk and remittances as keys to analyze the field of agency and female migration, unpacked several central themes inherent in contemporary female migratory flows. In this chapter I will briefly summarize the findings of the study, draw conclusions and new horizons.

### ***7.1 Summarizing the Findings***

Taking Mo Baan as my point of departure, I traced how Thai female mobility has transformed from oxcarts to airplanes. This approach elucidated certain significant features inherent in contemporary migratory flows, such as showing that courage by taking risks were historically embedded in migration discourses. In other words, migrants were the risk-takers of their communities. The life histories also revealed that remittances likewise were historically embedded in Isaan, as well as in Mo Baan. Finally, the

historical perspective revealed how migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of possible life choices and how values associated with migration become part of the community's values and play part in a *culture of migration*, which also fuel (risky) migration in a causal continuum.

In the chapter on risk I used the women's decision-making processes to analyze the ways in which migrants seek to manage an uncertain future.

Four significant themes emerged; *successive risks*, *present risks*, *practical and symbolic risk avoidance strategies* and *struggles for visas*. They all pointed to an understanding of risk as successive and to agency as a continuum in the migration process. Hence, the chapter on risk reveals how the migrating women are not just "victims of risks" on unreasonable risky journeys. This is what an agency perspective helps us discover. On the other hand we have to consider the specific situations in which risk is a part. This is best done by detailed analyses on migrant practices and by avoiding an understanding of risk as dichotomy but rather as step taking on a spiral. Risks, the chapter argued, does however not just exist. Looking at the existing migration management regime in Europe shaping Thai women's migration I analyzed how risks are constructed by broader structures of power and how there are limits to agency and control, since in the process of navigating throughout the European visa jungle, these women take steps up and down the spiral staircase between victimhood and control.

In analyzing how the acts of sending transnational remittances materialize at micro level in Mo Baan, I focused on two types of remittances; *payments* and *visits*. My intention was to analyze how migrant women seek to control the "outputs" of their migration. I demonstrated that understanding remittances along the lines of control and victimhood help us comprehend that female migrants are not simply "cash cows" or "victims of remittances". Instead they seek to obtain control as they balance upwards and downwards on the spiral staircase between being victims of familiar demands and controlling these demands. They similarly step upwards and downwards while being trapped in exploitative situations and victimhood while simultaneously seek to navigate through the situation and send home remittances.

## ***7.2 Conclusion and New Horizons***

The underlying riddle of the thesis was: In what way can the concept of agency help us understand female migration even though it may be empirically vague?

In this study we viewed agency as examples of migrants' ability to make independent decisions about their own lives and to carry out these decisions. In this case the concept of agency can help us understand that female migrants are not merely victims, neither of "risks" nor of "remittances". An agency perspective rather helps us challenge the dichotomy of "agent" versus "victim". This is much needed since although much research on female migration emphasize perspectives on agency, much policy work and various organizations still perceive and portray female migrants merely as victims lacking the agency of "Western" women. To contrast this we have to keep on emphasizing the various experiences of female migrants and that they do seek to control their situation and act despite constraints.

In this connection it is crucial to emphasize the need for historical anthropological analyses of female migratory systems as a whole and not only specific groups within that systems and we must understand both migratory successes and failures in order to get the full picture. On top of that female migration and "trafficking" occur in different ways in different cultural and political circumstances and therefore we have to investigate the specific histories and cultures of migration in a particular migration system. We have to be much more aware that there are great difference between migration and "trafficking" in women from Thailand, eastern Europe and Nigeria. Each group utilize the specific migration possibilities inherent in the links between a specific country of origin and place of destination, consequently their agency might also be visible in very different situations. It is, however, a common trait that most of these women are motivated by the opportunity to support their families in their country of origin and studies of "the migrant" tend to neglect this collectiveness of migration, of which the Thai case is but one example.

It is crucial to strengthen the usefulness of this empirically vague concept of agency - we have to operationalize and visualize it. This thesis suggests that a spiral staircase on

which migrant Thai women take steps upwards towards more control and downwards towards victimhood could help us. Although it might not capture all dimensions of the intersections between control and victimhood, it does help us start thinking about how we might use the concept of agency more convincingly and structured.

However, maybe operationalizing the concept of agency is not the only way. Perhaps we should redefine the concept. The existing discourse on agency within the field of female migration leaves so many crucial questions unasked. Questions like: When is it agency and when is it simply action? What are the consequences of celebrating agency? What happens when the academic feminist celebrates the agency and individuality of migrant women who commonly are born into much more collectively and household oriented systems and communities?

This thesis answered some of these questions and simultaneously raised a lot of others, but it is not my intention to answer all these questions. It is, however, in my view such questions feminist migrant researchers should begin to grapple more about in order to push and redefine the concept of agency and look at the concept in its own right and not only through the prism of structure.

Furthermore discussions of migrants' agency are highly politicized because those who are "victimized" and whose agency is felt to be highly constrained - refugees and "trafficking" victims for instance - may have certain rights recognized which those who are considered to have a degree of "choice" such as economic migrants, do not. (COMPAS 2007). Moreover, as we saw earlier, organizations step into the realm of female migration and voice moralizing and problematic issues. The problem with the moral economy of remittances and the warnings of risks inherent in migration do indeed ignore that migrant families already seek to exercise "safe migration" and that moral values already shape the use of remittances.

Yet, these practices and this "kind of agency" does not really challenge existing and underlying structures of gender, class and geographical inequalities inherent in Isaan



women's migration. On the contrary, migration in fact reproduces and sustains these same hierarchies of power and hierarchies of risk. Ultimately the choices the women make in attempting to resolve global and local inequalities reproduce rather than challenge the structures and symbols that underlie their marginalization and exploitation within the wider society. Hence, before celebrating the agency of female migrants, we have to be much more aware of how and at what levels agency operates in the area of female migration. If we do not analyze agency as an operational concept in its own right, we might overlook the inter-linkages of unequal development and restrictive immigration policies.

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**Appendix 1: Map of Transnational Migrations in Mo Baan**



