LUND UNIVERSITY
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# Women's Transnational Identities and Belonging

## The Case of Thai Female Immigrants in Sweden

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# ABSTRACT

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Title: Women's Transnational Identities and Belonging: The Case of Thai Female Immigrants in Sweden
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The aim of this thesis is to investigate 3 following questions: 1) how do Thai female immigrants in Sweden negotiate their identities in Swedish society? 2) How do they perceive their identities in Swedish context? 3) To what extent, do gendered and racialized processes shape their identities and experiences of belonging? To answer these questions, I propose that the issue of Thai female immigrants should be understood in terms of 'transmigration', since immigrants nowadays simultaneously engage in multiple transnational activities of both sending and receiving countries. Moreover, these engagements affect their identity narratives and complex sense of belonging because immigrants have to face different contesting values and norms when they move and settle in another country. I also argue that identities of Thai female immigrants should be analyzed as the result of intersectionality because intertwining social divisions such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class help shape their identities and sense of belonging. I rely on the data which I gained from conducting in-depth interviews with 5 Thai women who live as permanent residents in Sweden. I also conducted participant observations at Wat Sanghabaramee temple in Eslöv and the Thai Association in Sweden's annual meeting, to observe activities which occur in such transnational social fields.

**Keywords:** Thai women, Sweden, transmigration, intersectionality, identity negotiation, belonging

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## I.     <u>Introduction</u>

Despite an increasing trend of Thai women immigrating in Sweden, there is still a small number of literatures investigating this issue. Statistically, the number of Thai female immigrants has increased by 30 percent in the last ten years. Migration pattern of the Thai population moving to Sweden is highly feminized. According to statistics approximately 80 percent of Thai immigrants to Sweden are female[1]. Most of them migrated through marriage with Swedish nationals.

Recently, there are a number of studies regarding common stereotypes of Thai women in Swedish society as associated to sex trade, prostitution and mail-order brides. These images of Thai women are often represented in Swedish media such as newspaper, documentary (about Thai massage parlors which offer sex service), TV shows and so on. According to these representations and general perceptions of Thai women in Sweden, it is therefore crucial to examine how Thai female immigrants in Sweden perceive themselves in Swedish society despite all the challenges and stereotypes of Thai women. It is also worthwhile to find out what kind of strategies Thai women adopt to counter or deal with these challenges.

Another main point of this thesis is to observe Thai women's participation in transnational practices and networks and how they reconstruct or negotiate their identities through these premises. This thesis argues that Thai women's migration must be understood in terms of 'transnational migration'. Since immigrants nowadays engage in several social fields and maintain their connections in two or more societies namely their country of origin and host country. This thesis proposes that Thai women immigrants do not simply abandon their national and cultural values. On the contrary, they brought those ideological and cultural practices with them. Additionally, they have created a unique transnational social field within the Swedish context. The case in point is the existence of Thai

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[1] As of 2011, overall Thai immigrants in Sweden consist of 26,261 women and 7,352 men (SCB) (See Appendix A).

Buddhist Temple, Wat Sanghabaramee, in Eslöv. This is where Thai people would gather for religious ceremonies and national events such as Thai New Year. The significance of analyzing current migration as transnational is because transnationality also affects immigrants regarding their survival strategies, reconstruction and negotiation of their identities, and sense of belonging to multiple societies. Moreover, this thesis also investigates social positions of Thai women using 'intersectionality' as a point of departure to find out how their experiences are shaped by interrelation of various social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity and class.

## Objective of the Research

This research aims to bring about better understanding of Thai female immigrants in terms of their transnational practices, belonging and construction and negotiation of Thai identity in Swedish context. The thesis also aims to present Thai female immigrants' points of view and perceptions about their lived experiences in Sweden.

## Research Questions

This thesis is guided by following main questions.

1. How do Thai female immigrants negotiate their identities in Swedish society?
2. How do they perceive their identities in Swedish context?
3. To what extent, do gendered and racialized processes shape their identities and experiences of belonging?

## II.    Literature Review

This section provides a brief review of literature regarding women and migration in Europe and the situation of Thai women immigrants in Sweden in general. The reason of doing so is to provide readers the background and general trend of female's migration and their situation which will be related to the analysis of Thai women immigrants in Sweden in the following sections. This section also emphasizes the reason why research on women and migration, especially Thai

immigrant women in Sweden, is needed. Most literature on women and migration focus on family reunification and economic position of women. However, there are few studies on immigrant women's transnational activities and their experiences of belonging.

## Women and Migration in Europe

Generally speaking, women's motivations to migrate are largely diverse; for economic opportunity, family reunification, or as asylum seekers or refugees. Internationally, women constituted 49 percent of all migrant population (IOM, 2010). In 2009, it is estimated that there were 14.9 million female migrants in the 27 countries of the European Union (EU), which is 47.3 percent of non-European nationals (Kontos, 2011). Despite women's large share in international migration, they were only visible in studies of migration since 1970s onwards. These studies on women and migration aimed to 'give voice' to women and contest gender stereotypes of male migrants as breadwinner and female migrants as home keeper. The notion that household is the sphere that equally distributes power and resources, is also challenged by these studies (Kofman et al. 2000, p.27). Still, scholar on gender and migration such as Eleonore Kofman (1999) suggests that although there has been more attention in the field of women and migration, these studies still have little impact on the level of policy making and the media. Moreover, these studies have always been grounded on male bias.

Kofman (1999) further problematizes a traditional gender dichotomy in migration studies. Such dichotomy assumes men are producers as they migrate for employment reason, while at the same time views women as reproducers as they migrate subsequently to join their male counterparts for family reunification. The term 'family reunification' generally refers to "immediate members, mostly spouses and children, brought in by primary migrants", including "settled immigrants bringing in a marriage partner, usually from their country of origin and international marriages of citizens with non-citizens" (Kofman 1999, p. 275). She points out that such view of "male as active producer and female as passive followers" perpetuates stereotypes of women as dependents and not interested in employment (Kofman 1999, p. 272). The account of "active female labor migrants who deploy individual strategies and participate in household decision making" is

thus particularly absent from analysis of women's migration. Moreover, analyzing women's migration in terms of 'family reunification' and 'economic migration' as two exclusive terrains is problematic. In many cases, women who move because of family reason might also take up jobs after they have settled down in the host country.

There has been much debate on the issue of the household as being the main unit of analysis in discussions on migration (Kofman et al. 2000). Kofman et al. (2000, p.26) argue that migration is not only affected by collective interests (as assumed that household is collective rational decision-making unit which affects people's decision to migrate as a group), but also by individual and power relations, including gendered power relations, within the household. The critiques go on as it addresses that perceiving household as primary unit of analysis is problematic because; first, households can take various forms, apart from nuclear ones. Second, the concept of household is not stable and can be challenged as it lies within power structures (Kofman et al. 2000, p. 28).

The conceptual limitation of household in migration studies resulted in more attention on the issue of social networks and other institutions that connect people from different periods of time and places (Kofman et al. 2000, p. 28). The study of migrant's social network would bring better understanding of their patterns of settlement, employment and their connection to homeland (Kofman et al. 2000, p. 29). As demonstrated by scholars such as Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc (1992; 1995), migrants maintain links to their homeland, their decisions and experiences thus reflect their multi-sited relationships. Huang et al. (2000) also discuss the effect of globalization towards cultural and political spheres, especially on transnational identities of migrant population. They pay attention to women who are on the move; migrant women have to encounter negotiations and tensions of gender identities once they are exposed to new settlements (Huang et al. 2000, p. 392).

Although female migrants are mostly traditionally construed as dependant and passive agents in the field of migration studies, Kontos (2011) reports that, in the last 20 years, most of female migrants are economic migrants and there are 700,000 female refugees working for themselves and their families throughout

Europe. Kontos further asserts that new female migrants, who migrated to Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the expansion of the European Union, may have to confront more challenges in terms of economic and social integration than migrants of previous generations. Many of female migrants have experienced restricted labor markets with opening positions in informal economic sectors (Kontos, 2011). According to recent statistics, female migrants who are hardest hit by unemployment are those who came from outside Europe[2]. Research by Eurostat (2010 cited in Kontos, 2011) also suggests that migrant women from third-country mostly worked in 'elementary occupations' such as cleaners, domestic workers and in services and sales.

Ayres and Barber (2006) insist that the gender divisions within the EU's labor market have slightly changed. For instance, 31 percent of women held managerial positions in 2003, only 1 percent more than that of 2002. In case of migrant women, they experience greater poverty in later life and single parents, mainly women, face more cumulative disadvantage and are more vulnerable to social exclusion than national women. Foreign-born migrant women are concentrated in low paid sectors and occupations. The evidence on pay indicates that migrant women experience the greatest inequality, earning on average 10 percent less than EU national women in 2000 (Ayres and Barber 2006, p.9).

In addition, migrant women with high level of education are more likely to be employed in low-skill or elementary occupations than native-born women with a high level of education (Kontos, 2011). As for women who move into Europe as spouses, they might have to wait up to four years to legally participate in the European labor market (Kofman et al. 2000, p. 107). Another prominent issue when discussing female migrant labor is of commercial sex work. It is claimed that one of the important reasons why female migrants in Europe join commercial sex work is because they lack opportunity in normal employment. Nevertheless, some women consider sex trade as "fast-earning, temporary, and transitional economic choice" (Kontos, 2011). Kofman et al. (2000) also suggest that

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[2] See Appendix B.

nowadays the difficulty of migrant women in Europe to find jobs force them to sex work or domestic work (p.114).

## Thai Women Immigrants in Sweden

The number of Thai female immigrants has increased sharply over the last 10 years; from 737 in 2001 to 2,118 in 2011[3]. According to Statistiska Centralbyrån (2007), Thai women are the second most common immigrants (the first are Iraqi women) who came to Sweden due to family reunification, or as so-called 'dependents'. In 2006, it was reported that 90 percent of Thai women moved to Sweden because of family reason. Moreover, it is suggested that the number of Thai female dependants doubled between 2002 and 2006. As of 2011, Thai women constituted 78 percent of total Thai immigrant population in Sweden[4].

Since the majority of Thai women came to Sweden through marriage with Swedish nationals, studies on Thai women in Sweden, and also in other European countries, tend to target the issues related to marriage migration, mail-order brides (or importing wives) and sex trade (Hedman et al., 2009; Plambech, 2008; Spanger, 2010). Hedman et al. (2009) observe the discursive representation of Thai-Swedish couples in the Swedish daily press. They found that Thai-Swedish marriages are portrayed as a 'social problem' in general, and an intersection of various power structures such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and class which mutually constitute 'otherness' of Thai-Swedish couples. Furthermore, Hedman et al. point out that social problems that are usually portrayed by Swedish press as individual rather than structural problems, which is the press's market strategy to increase their sales. Stereotypes thus reinforced through universalized and essentialized image of Thai-Swedish couples (Hedman et al. 2009, p. 34). From their analysis of Swedish press, Hedman et al. found that the relationships between Swedish men and Thai women are at times presented as unequal and in different power positions. Swedish press also highlighted Thai women as poor, racialized, oppressed and sexually deviant from Swedish norm and Thai-Swedish

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[3] See Appendix C.

[4] See Appendix A.

couples were discursively constructed as 'the Other' (Hedman et al. 2009, p. 38-9). Thai women were also ascribed to sex industry and were subject to sexual objectification by Swedish tourists who went to Thailand for sex tourism (Hedman et al. 2009, p.40). Aside from printed press, recently there have been many presentations of Thai women in mass media such as television shows, news and documentary. Most of these portrayed Thais as in relation to sex trade (in massage parlors, for example). Television shows depicts Thailand as one of the most desirable holiday destinations for Swedes, however, Thai sex tourism is often brought up when mention about tourism in Thailand.

Similarly, in Danish context, Sine Plambech (2008) mentions themes which characterize the discourse of Thai mail-order brides in Danish and international settings: First, women are considered as victims of illegal trafficking. The situation of foreign women marrying Western men provokes such perception. Second, Thai women are perceived as victims of violence. Among Asian women, Thais are the most common visitors of Danish crisis center (LOKK 2003, p. 13 cited in Plambech 2008, p. 33). The similar situation occurs in Sweden where Riksorganisationen för kvinnojourer och tjejjourer (ROKS) reported in 2009 that most women who came to the center for help are from Thailand, Iraq and Russia[5]. Third, women immigrants are perceived as "burnt all their bridges", that they cut all the ties with their homeland when moving to other countries. However, she argues that women in her study maintain social network and connections with their families in Thailand (Plambech 2008, p. 33).


## III.   <u>Theoretical Framework</u>

To analyze Thai female immigrants in Sweden in terms of their identity construction and negotiation, firstly, I will discuss the notions of 'transmigrant'. The concept appropriately serves to explain recent form of migration which migrants maintain connection with their home countries and how their

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[5] LANDES, D. 2011. Rise in abuse of foreign wives in Sweden: report. *The Local*, 17 February 2011 [online] Available at: http://www.thelocal.se/32110/20110217/ [Accessed 24 January 2012].

engagement in multiple societies and cultures shapes or transforms their identities. Secondly, the concept of 'belonging' will be discussed. The issue of belonging is included to analyze the issue of immigrants' perception of their own community and others'. Belonging also provides analytical explanation of social inclusion and exclusion. Finally, 'intersectionality' will be proposed to be used in this thesis to understand the experiences of Thai female immigrants through the recognition of various mutually-constitutive social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity and class.

## Transnationalism and Transmigrant

Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc (1994, p.7) proposed the idea of 'transnationalism' to describe "…the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement". In their view, the analysis of migrants as those who move from one country to another without maintaining relationship to their origin; is no longer adequate to describe today's migration (Basch et al. 1994, p.4). Accordingly, they introduced the term 'transmigrant' as a concept to explain a new type of migrants who construct social fields that connect their home countries and host countries together (Glick Schiller et al. 1992, p.1). Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994), define social field as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, p.9) also conclude that;

> "Social fields are multi-dimensional, encompassing structured interactions of differing forms, depth, and breadth that are differentiated in social theory by the terms organization, institution, and social movement. National boundaries are not necessarily contiguous with the boundaries of social fields. National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries while transnational social fields connect actors, through direct and indirect relations across borders."

Glick Schiller et al. (1992, pp.1-2) describe transmigrants as those who "… take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously". This notion of transmigrant is significant for the fact that in today's globalized world; migration cannot only be analyzed in terms of permanent rupture or abandonment of 'roots' of migrants because migrants nowadays maintain their ties, create networks and take part in activities of their countries of origin and countries of settlement at the same time. The involvement of migrants on two societies or more affects the construction and negotiation of their identities (Glick Schiller et al. 1992, p.4). Therefore, it is important to understand transnational migrants as "people who are in transit, whose identities are unfixed, destabilized and in the process of changing" (McDowell, 2005 cited in Huang et al. 2000, p.391).

Glick Schiller et al. (1995, p.49) also pointed out that the use of the adjective 'transnational' in recent social sciences and cultural studies is to implicate the minimizing importance of national boundaries. And this is linked to rising global capitalism and globalization. Transnational activities of immigrants are facilitated, by advancement of transportation and communication technologies. People can travel across borders more rapidly and economically with airplanes, follow news in their homeland almost real-time with internet connections, and needless to say the cheaper cost of telephones and faxes. These are what facilitate close and immediate contact with immigrants' homeland (Glick Schiller et al. 1995, p.52). Despite the significance of technological advancement which diminishes the breadth and length of space and time, Glick Schiller et al. (1995) argued that,

> "…immigrant transnationalism is best understood as a response to the fact that in a global economy contemporary migrants have found full incorporation in the countries within which they resettle either not possible or not desirable".

Although it is suggested that national boundaries are weakened as a result of globalization and intensive flows of capital and people; national identities are reinforced and reconstructed within diasporic communities. This maybe the reason why some immigrants cannot fully assimilate to host countries, as Glick Schiller

et al. suggested above. The strengthening of diasporic national identities coincides with the conceptualization of nation as 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). Anderson elaborated that he conceived nation as 'imagined' because "… the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, p.6). 'Imagined community' help explains migrants' preservation of national identity despite dismissal from their homeland. Migrants' sense of national identity extends beyond geographical territory, that their sense of community is reproduced through imagination as a part of national community. However, as migrants move and settle in other country, they face different contesting nationalist values; that of their home country and of host country. Basch et al. (1994, p.34) claims that transmigrants are often caught in the middle of two or more nation-building projects. Thus hegemonic categories such as race and ethnicity, which are established in the processes of nation-building, influence their identities and practices. For that reason, it is particularly interesting to examine the challenges and also contributions that transmigrants have towards contesting hegemonic discourses.

The concept of transmigrant argues for the hegemonic construction of race and ethnicity, however, it sheds little light on 'gender' as one of hegemonic categories in its analytical framework. Gender should be analyzed as a social construction which shapes transmigrant experiences as well. Huang et al. (2000, p.395) assert that, "[w]omen's experiences are particularly relevant in revealing the (in)ability of (trans)migrant to contest and shape new identities for themselves in diaspora". Women's departure from their countries of origin challenges "the spatial association" between home and women (especially the notion of femininity or gender equality which is socially constructed in western societies) (McDowell, 1999 cited in Huang et al., 2000). According to such statement, it can also be assumed that Thai women in Sweden would struggle with different sets of gender norms. Therefore, their struggle with different contesting hegemonic discourses of gender should also be examined because this might contribute to the negotiation of their identities.

It is worth noting that the concept of 'transmigrant' is very close to the concept of 'diaspora'. The two concepts discuss people's displacement and their simultaneous connection to several communities. However, diaspora is conceptually broader in the sense that it discusses not only migrants or immigrants but also refugees and asylum seekers for instance. 'Diaspora' emphasizes more on involuntary dispersal of population as a result of civil war, genocide, starvation, such as Jewish, South Asian and Middle Eastern diaspora (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994). As Clifford (1994, p.304) puts, "[d]iasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future". In this way, we can also say that 'diaspora' focuses more on the historical aspect of displaced people. According to Clifford, diasporas share collective trauma of separation and they long to eventually return home. Although similar, diasporas and immigrants are different. Diasporas would face more difficulties when assimilate to the new country because they maintain sense of historical collectivity and memory of violent loss. Clifford suggests that these traumas cannot be 'cured' by merging into a new society (Clifford 1994, p.307). Unlike diasporas, immigrants may also confront the feelings of nostalgia and loss, but only when they are on the way to a new settlement (Clifford, 1994). The reason I choose to use 'transmigrant' over 'diaspora' is because according to my observations, most Thai people, especially women, immigrated to Sweden mostly on the basis of family reunification (SCB, 2007). Their reason for migration does not or rarely involve with collective violent history and loss. So, I think the concept of 'transmigrant' is more relevant to study Thai female immigrants in Sweden.

Another reason why I chose 'transmigrant' as my theoretical framework is that; in order to understand Thai female immigrants' identities in Sweden, it is important to realize that their identities are shaped by their multiplicity of engagement in two (or more) different social fields (namely Thailand and Sweden). Their situations cannot be described as fully engaging to either their country of settlement or their country of origin; they must be understood in terms of being 'in-between'. It is interesting to investigate the reconstitution and reinforcement of their identities as deterritorialization occurs. To what extent do

Thai women immigrants keep cultural practices, religious beliefs, customs and national aspiration of their home country? Also to what extent do they negotiate, transform or abandon these premises?

## Belonging

The concept of transnational migration should be discussed along with the notion of belonging because as Nira Yuval-Davis (2006a, p.197) states, "[b]elonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling at home". The idea of transmigrant observes people's multiple relationship with two or more nation-states, as well as how interconnection of different societies serve to shape and transform identities of transmigrants. However, it gives little focus on the narratives which transmigrants describe themselves or judge their own and others' belonging. One of interesting points in the discussion of belonging is that one does not necessary feel 'belonging' in the community in which they are identified. Alternatively speaking, one might feel accepted and 'belong' without fully identifying in or giving full allegiance to the community they live in (Anthias 2006, pp.19-20). Although Thai immigrants are subject to Swedish integration policy and welfare, they might not feel that they 'belong' in the sense that they may still have emotional attachment to where they originally came from. The notion of belonging, thus, will be used to answer the question of "how Thai female immigrants in Sweden perceive themselves".

Yuval-Davis (2006a) distinguishes three analytical levels of the concept of belonging namely; social locations, identifications and emotional attachments and ethical and political values. In terms of social locations, Yuval-Davis (2006a) writes that social divisions do not only serve to place people in certain gender, race, ethnicity, class, age-group or kinship-group, but they have implications with hierarchical positionality between groups. Moreover, these positionalities are not fixed and static, they "…related to specific kinds of differences in particular historical moments and contexts" (Yuval-Davis 2006a, p.200). Yuval-Davis further suggests that social locations are never constituted along a single power axis of difference; even though they are perceived as such in their most concrete format. People's identities are constructed along various social divisions such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, stage in life cycle, sexuality, ability and so on

(Yuval-Davis 2006a, p.200). Emphasizing the mutual constitution of social categories, several authors call for 'intersectional approach' to be applied in the examination of social locations (Anthias, 2006; Brah, 1996; Crenshaw, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2006a, b) (the issue of 'intersectionality' will be elaborated in the following section). For example, the experiences of Thai immigrants are not only shaped by their category of gender. Nevertheless, their experiences are the result of intersections of various social divisions. Using only concept of gender cannot explain why Thai women are mostly employed in low-skilled and low-paid work. The implications of race, ethnicity and other social divisions, which work as exclusion and discrimination against certain groups of people, must be included in the analysis of their social positions.

Yuval-Davis (2006a, p.202) asserts that "[i]dentities are narratives, stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)". She suggests that the creation of belonging is not only about how people perceive themselves and their collectivities but also their reflection of 'emotional investments' and their 'desire for attachment'. Furthermore, it is suggested that people's experiences of exclusion, rather than inclusion, partly shape the feelings people have about their social locations (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005, p.526). Discussing about emotions in the notion of belonging, Yuval-Davis et al. (2005, p.526) quoted from John Crowley (1999, p.22) that,

> "… (belonging) is a 'thicker' concept than that of citizenship. It is not just about membership, rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such membership evoke. Nor can belonging be reduced to identities and identifications, which are about individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labeling, myths of origin and myths of destiny."

Furthermore, regarding narratives of identity as a 'process', thus it is important to note that, narratives of identity can transform, be challenged and multiple; as Yuval-Davis puts, "[i]ndividuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than positing of identity as a stable state" (Yuval-Davis 2006a, p.202).

At the level of "ethical and political values", belonging is more than the issues of social locations and narratives of identity and emotional attachment but also the way people judge and value them. It is about the contested values around ethical and ideological issues. In other words, it concerns how belonging is politicized which further results in demarcation of boundaries of different political communities (or communities of belonging). The politics of belonging thus concerns with exclusive binary of 'us' and 'them' (Yuval-Davis, 2006a). Yuval-Davis et al. (2005, p.523) cited Parekh (2000) to illustrate the case of multiculturalism in Britain. It is argued that multiculturalism project which initiated by political conservatives as the strategy to save 'national culture', causes exclusion against minority communities rather than inclusion. The reason is that multiculturalist policies entail ongoing normalization of western hegemonic culture while the 'difference' of minority cultures are accentuated and perceived as deviant from western norms. In order to 'belong' in Britain, minorities are subject to suppression of their beliefs, values and culture and forced to accept western hegemonic values.

Arguing that belonging is a gendered process, Anthias (2006) explains that gender is an essential marker of boundaries. She also asserts that women are often burdened with the responsibility of reproducing national discourses, imaginary and practices. Women have a crucial role in the ideological and cultural reproduction of the nation. Moreover, women do not only give birth to national subjects in biological sense, they yield nationalized subject through the transmission of national and cultural values and practices; women are often referred to as symbol of the nation (for example, France's 'la patrie' and the notion of 'motherland') (Anthias 2006, p.22).

## Intersectionality

As mentioned earlier, it is proposed that identities are constructed through various cross-cutting social categories and many authors call for 'intersectionality' to be used in the analysis of people's experiences. Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to analyze black women's experiences in the US. The term became popular in feminist writings as it addresses the intermeshing and mutually construction of social categories which shape people's experiences. This

concept argues that 'identity politics' is problematic because it tends to shed light on each social category such as gender, class and race separately. Rather, what shape individuals' lives are the cross-cutting and mutually-constitutive social divisions. Therefore, interconnection of race, ethnicity, class, gender and other social divisions must be observed. However, there is a question of "which social categories should we observe?" Yuval-Davis (2006b) points out that there are some social categories which are more important than others in certain contexts, which affects most of people's lives in society. Crenshaw indicates that identity politics is problematic because it fails to go beyond difference and this causes tension between groups (Crenshaw 1994, p.93). In the same way, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006b, p. 195) suggests that the narrative of essentialized identities "… often reflect hegemonic discourse of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct a homogenized 'right way' to be its member".

For Crenshaw, feminist movements which try to politicize experience of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experience of people of color have often proceeded as though their issues and experiences arise from mutually exclusive terrain (Crenshaw, p. 93). In other words, as Yuval-Davis (2006b, p.195) suggests, there is no such thing as 'triple oppression' which claim that Black women suffer from their identity of 'Black', 'women' and 'working-class'. She adds;

> "[a]ny attempt to essentialize 'Blackness' or 'womenhood' or 'working classness' as specific forms of concrete oppression in additive ways inevitably conflates narrative of identity politics with descriptions of positionality as well as constructing identity within the terms of specific political projects."

Practices of feminists (mainly dominated by White, middle-class women) and antiracists in politicizing women's experience and racialized people's experience ignores the fact that gender and race actually intersect and mutually shape a person's experience. Therefore, we have to keep in mind that various structures intersect in racialized women's lives as they simultaneously confront various forms of domination that often converged in their lives (Crenshaw, p.94).

In analyzing interrelation of different social divisions, it is also crucial to understand that race, class and gender are irreducible to each other. Each of them has its own ontological basis and interrelates in different locations and historical contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006b). For example; 'gender', although naturalized, should be understood as a mode of discourse that relates to groups of subjects whose social role are defined by their sexual/biological difference, especially as men and women (Yuval-Davis 2006b, p.201). 'Race and ethnicity' are social and political constructions around biological traits, physical characteristics or appearance such as skin color. They involve creation of boundary between those who can and those who cannot belong to a particular construction of a collectivity or population (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, p.2). 'Class' divisions are based on the economic processes of production and consumption that produce inequality in society (Yuval-Davis 2006b, p.201). However, class cannot be merely understood as related to economy. The formation of classes, class struggle or processes are prevalent within the sphere of production, are historically constructed in relation to the division of gender and ethnos (including race) (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, p.17).

Despite its usefulness, intersectionality is questioned in many ways. A prominent question of intersectionality is "who is intersectional"? Jennifer C. Nash (2008, p.9) states that "[i]n its emphasis on black women's experiences of subjectivity and oppression, intersectionality theory has obscured the question of whether all identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalized subjects have an intersectional identity". The problem is that intersectional analyses often ignore the fact that intersectional subjects might enjoy some privileges whilst being oppressed. This is an interesting point for me because even though I have an assumption that Thai female immigrants confront exclusion or discrimination in Swedish society, I am also open to the possibility that some of them might be in some privileged positions in this society: some might enjoy economic privileges while facing discrimination based on gender and race. Oppression may occur simultaneously with some kind of privilege (Nash, p.12).

Nash also criticizes prototypical intersectional subjects of black women in intersectional analysis as black women are mainly observed in terms of their

complex subjectivity whose marginalized experiences are imagined to provide a theoretical value-added (Nash, p.8). Nonetheless, the theory, in my view, can be applied to analyze women's experiences in different contexts as well. This is hence to emphasize the need to examine if intersectionality is able to provide a general theory of identity. Nash argues that intersectionality theory must grapple with whether it actually captures the way in which subjects experience subjectivity or strategically deploy identity (Nash, p.11).

## IV. <u>Methodology</u>

### Epistemological Basis

In examining Thai female immigrants' transnational experiences, identities and belonging, my epistemological basis for the methodology will be 'feminist standpoint theory'. Feminist standpoint emerged as opposed to androcentric and sexist characteristics of positivist natural sciences that manipulated by dominant social groups, as against masculine scientific objectivity or the 'view from nowhere' (Harding 2004, p.26). In my opinion, feminist research is about exposing power relations, injustice and oppression in the society. Aiming to bring about change and equality to the society, it is therefore political and politics is not neutral. It involves taking sides, resistance, struggle and interaction with people. Harding (2004, p.30) also suggests that:

> "Politics was necessary to create the possibility of diverse forms of women's collective group consciousnesses that would enable women in their different class, race, sexuality and cultural locations to identify, value, and engage in the kind of research that could enable them to see how to end their culturally-distinctive forms of sexist oppression.

As suggested by Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002, p.65), a feminist standpoint assumes that politics, theory and epistemology are interrelated to one another. Thus its focus is to investigate relations between knowledge and power which contrasts to modern, scientific fundamentalism which attempts to directly

connect knowledge and reality. Moreover, standpoint theory addresses that women 'speak their truth' which situated in relation to forms of power. Despite various notions of feminist standpoint, Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002, pp.60-61) conclude that:

> "… the notion of standpoint is a way of taking women's experience as fundamental to knowledge of political relations between women and men (of which people may or may not be aware). Taking a standpoint means being able to produce the best current understanding of how knowledge of gender is interrelated with women's experiences and realities of gender."

In similar stance, Harding (2004, p.26) puts, "standpoint theory claims that some kinds of social locations and political struggles *advance* the growth of knowledge, contrary to the dominant view that politics and local situatedness can only block scientific enquiry". According to these features of standpoint theory, I therefore think it is a methodology that is suitable for my study emphasizing experiences of Thai immigrant women in Sweden. Given specificity of my study having Thai women as focus group, I hope to make sense of their lives, complexity of their identity and I hope to find out something I never knew about their lives in Sweden. My presumption is that; even though there might be some similarities to other ethnic groups living as immigrants in Sweden, Thai women as a group must be different from other groups due to their background, culturally-distinct practices in daily life, community activities, subculture and so on. These distinctions would influence the way they handle or perceive things differently from other groups of immigrant. I agree that it is important to think about situatedness and locality of knowledge production. Thai women 'speak their truth' with relation to forms of power that is constituted in Swedish social, political and cultural context.

Opposing masculinist science, feminists call for feminist objectivity which is about limited location and 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988, p.583). For sociologist, objectivity is defined as the separation between the knower and the known, removal from the situatedness of knowledge. This method and these categories, as Dorothy Smith (1987 cited in Hekman 1997, p.346) puts it, exclude

the experience of women, an experience that is always situated, rational and engaged. From feminist perspective, knowledge is constituted within hierarchy of power. Science that feminists support, according to Haraway, is the one of "interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood (Haraway 1988, p.589)". According to this, we can see that situated knowledge tries to break fixed vision of the world that is described by positive and objective science. She further argues that, by situated knowledge, it means that "object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in this unique agency and his authorship of 'objective' knowledge' (Haraway 1988, p.592)". From this point, I think it is crucial to consider research subject as actor and agent because this subject deals with both groups and individuals. Individuals possess the ability to act and interpret social conditions, and that their perceptions of the world have dynamics and are based on personal experience. Researchers also have to interact with their research subjects in the way that human interact with each other not by remote observation or cold gaze. In my view, we cannot make sense of people's lives by observing them at a distance. To learn about lived experience, narratives of people's identities and belonging, there must be conversational engagement between researcher and the researched.

As mentioned above, standpoint theory stresses the partial position of the knower and production of knowledge as perspectival and situated. Feminist standpoint theorists assert the idea of 'the feminist' as a socially constructed knowing self because, "[t]he feminist researcher 'knows' from a specific and partial social location and so is constituted as a 'knowing self' in particular ways of thinking and authorizing knowledge" (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002, p. 65). Therefore it is crucial for feminist researchers to reflect their position in the field. Discussing queer/trans methodology, Jin Haritaworn (2008) states that, "[t]he call for positionality urges us to reflect on where we stand, to define our speaking positions and how they relate to others, especially those whom we claim to speak for". Also, he further argues:

> "…an empirical project which takes seriously the question of positionality can enable us to directly 'touch/interact/connect'

with our subject, in ways which are less exploitative, less objectifying and more politically relevant."

Although I think standpoint theory is epistemologically suitable for my study, it is criticized in many ways. Critiques point out that one of the problems of standpoint theory is the issue of difference. The notion of group-based analysis is criticized because women are not a unified category but are divided by, for example, real relations of racialized power, heterosexism, globalization or ablebodiedism. Diverse women's material conditions of existence are recognized by feminist theory, but the theory has been shaped in part by western ethnocentrism and the social divisions of particular society (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, p.75). This problem of generalization or essentialization of women has always been troubling feminist researchers. For that reason, I was uneasy to look at women as a group because I thought doing so might risk falling into essentialism that tends to homogenize experiences and power relations among women. In addition, taking into account multiple feminist standpoints and uniqueness of women might undermine politicization of women's movement as Susan Hekman (1997, p.359) puts:

> "If we take the multiplicity of feminist standpoints to its logical conclusion, coherent analysis becomes impossible because we have too many axes of analysis. Ultimately, every woman is unique; if we analyze each in her uniqueness, systemic analysis is obviated. So is feminist politics: we lose the ability even to speak for certain categories of women".

Interestingly, however, Patricia Hill Collins (1997) argues that in identifying the construction of standpoints with the idea of individual perspective or point of view, Hekman arrives at the dead end of the impossibility of systemic analysis that lead to systemic change. Collins emphasizes group as unit of analysis. She argues that "… the notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences". And, "It is common location within hierarchical power relations that creates groups, not the result of collective decision making of the individuals within the groups" (Collins 1997,

pp.375-6). In this way, Collins highlights the influence of social divisions such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, age and sexuality; as they construct inequality to certain groups in the society. Collins further clarifies group-based analysis that the experience of the group as the unit of analysis neither means that all individuals within group have the same experience nor that they interpret them in the same way (Collins, p. 377). Accordingly, I think it is necessary to examine women as in group as they share group-based experience and oppression. However, individual agency is not out of the analysis. In turn, group-based analysis invites us to discover how social structure influences lives of individual. The way individuals lead their lives is, I believe, influenced by social and power structures that discursively posed on them.

## Research Design

I choose 'critical ethnography' as method to collect data. John W. Creswell (2007) states that critical ethnography focus on marginalized population in the society and the nexus of power, prestige, privilege and authority which serves to subordinate social and cultural minorities (p.70). Critical ethnography, as well as standpoint theory, addresses the importance of 'positionality' Madison also argues that, "[p]ositionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures surrounds our subjects" (Madison 2005, p.7).

In conducting this type of ethnography, I intend to use combination of methods namely semi-structured interview and participant observation to collect data. Since I expect that my time for fieldwork would be limited, it would be better if I choose to have fieldwork near Lund. I did 5 in-depth interviews with Thai immigrant women. I think that these interviews would bring about in-depth and concrete data which will contribute to the understanding of Thai women's general issues and problems.

In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation at 'Wat Sanghabaramee', a Thai temple in Eslöv, as well. Wat Sanghabaramee is where Thai women would gather for religious service. They also go to the temple on Buddhist holidays and Thai national holidays such as Thai New Year. Apart from

participant observation at the temple, I also did a participant observation at the annual meeting of 'Thai Association in Sweden' in Malmö because it is where Thai people would attend to discuss the association's activities and also their experiences and problems while living in Sweden.

I also observed sources on the internet to help with the contextualization of my study. There are several websites and discussion forums or so-called webboards set up by Thai people who live Sweden. People use these websites to exchange their opinions, experiences and miscellaneous tips about settling down in the country. I had followed a Facebook page of the Thai Association in Sweden. The association uses this page to update activities such as language classes, sport activities, job opportunities and so on. However, I realize that materials I gain from these websites might not be reliable so I use them together with academic resources and interviews.

## Sampling

My research focuses on Thai female immigrants who live in Skåne region, especially those who live in Lund and Malmö. I put my focus on those who gained permanent residence permit and are first generation immigrants, because I assume that first generation immigrants experience more radical changes in their lives, moving from their country of origin and settling down in completely different settings, than the second generation. Therefore, it is interesting to see how they cope with changes and how these changes affect their lives.

Interviewees I recruited were diverse in terms of their background and occupations. Some had obtained university degrees, some only had secondary education. Thai women I interviewed were 30-50 years old and married; some had children, some do not.

## Reflexivity

In doing this research, it is therefore crucial for me as a researcher to reflect my positionality and standpoint in the field; who am I? How would my positionality affect my research? In doing critical ethnography, it is vital to consider our own role in the field and how our role as researcher affects the field;

unlike modernist scientific approach which assumes distant objective observation. As mentioned above, standpoint theorists maintain that the knowing self of researchers is socially constructed thus reflexivity is needed. Spencer (2001) as cited in O'Reilly (2008, p. 189), claims that reflexive turn is;

> "…an awareness that ethnographies are constructed by human beings who make choices about what to research, interpret what they see and hear, decide what to write and how, and they do all this in the context of their own personal biographies and ensconced in scientific and disciplinary environments."

Madison also asserts that reflexive ethnography is a 'turning back' on ourselves; "[w]hen we turn back, we are accountable for own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility relative to presentation and interpretation" (Madison 2005, p. 7). I have to be aware of the risk of authoritative representation and interpretation, that the voice of my research subjects might be silenced in the process of analyzing and writing. My purpose of presenting Thai immigrant women's experiences might be averted if I hold that my account is the one true account.

## Gaining Access to the Field

Before I conduct this research, I already have contact with some Thai immigrants. I sometimes go to the temple to attend religious ceremonies and holiday celebration and meet Thai people there. However, as I conduct this research I seek to build more relationship with people I already know. I first started with Ying, who created a website about Thai people's experiences in Sweden. I considered her as the gatekeeper of Thai community in Lund because, according to O'Reilly (2008, p.132), gatekeepers are those who facilitate access to the group, they give permission or grant access. Ying knows a lot of Thai women here because of her active participation in temple's activities and her role as webmaster of the Thai website. I know her through a Thai PhD student who is studying in Lund. I reached Ying through e-mails and phone calls. I explained to her my project and its objectives. Using a snowballing technique to gain more participants, I asked Ying if she could refer me to other Thai women she knew.

I also wrote e-mails to the Royal Thai Embassy in Stockholm asking for statistics and information about Thai women living in Sweden. I sent them short description of my research and permission to have some data. They agreed to provide me with data and asked if they can have a copy of my thesis when it is finished. As mentioned earlier, I had contact with 'Thai Association in Sweden' in Malmö as well. I learned through their Facebook page that they were having the association's annual meeting. So, I sent an e-mail to an association's committee, explain my project and asked if I can attend their annual meeting. A committee member agreed to have me in the meeting. I think it would be a good chance to meet Thai people in Malmö and continue to have in-depth interview with one of their members.

## Data Collection Method

To examine my research questions involving people's experiences of identity construction and belonging, series of qualitative method will be used. I will discuss below which methods were used and the reason why they are chosen.

### 1. Semi-structured interview

Researching on experiences of Thai immigrant women, it is therefore necessary to engage in the conversation with them, let them 'speak their truth' about their transnational experiences. Interviews are the best way to find out about immigrants' perceptions and narratives of their identities. I hoped that this method would bring about profound and detailed information about immigrants lives and their experiences.

I used semi-structured interview as one of my methods. Semi-structured interview is a combination of structured interview and unstructured interview. Structured interview contains sets of fixed and predetermined questions while unstructured interview is rather free-form and is more conversational (O'Reilly 2008, p.126). I was motivated to use semi-structured interview because I hope it will provoke subjects to 'tell story' and not to bind them with certain questions.

I created a list of interview guides containing vague topics which I categorized in themes. I usually met my interviewees in person or talked to them on the phone or write them e-mails before we meet face to face, so they feel accustomed to me and what I was doing. Before meeting for interviews, I sent

them the objectives of my research and draft topics so they have ideas on what we were going to talk about. In the beginning of each interview, I explained to my interviewees that the interview would be more like a conversation than formal interviews so they could relax. I also told them that they did not have to be afraid about right or wrong answers, it was all about their own experiences, opinions and feelings. Accordingly, I often let my interviewees wander off from the topic to get into in-depth conversation and let them express their feelings. Sometimes interviewees wandered off the theme which I prepared but it led me to new interesting things about their life experiences. All of the interviews were conducted in Thai.

## 2. Participant Observation

Participant observation was also included as my research method. Participant observation provides a method which let the researcher learn about first-hand experience in people's daily lives and practices. Moreover, it gives "…an insight to things people may otherwise forget to mention or would not normally want to discuss" (O'Reilly 2008, p.155). Therefore participant observation was included in this study to complement interview materials; it allows researchers to see people's practices and interactions in the field which sometimes are not conveyed in interviews. Karen O'Reilly asserts that participant observation is the main method of ethnography (O'Reilly 2008, p.150). O'Reilly cited Bronislaw Malinowsky that participant observation has two purposes: "to understand things from the natives' point of view and to blend into settings so as to disturb it as little as possible" (O'Reilly, p.150). I conducted my participant observation at Wat Sanghabaramee temple in Eslöv. I chose to do my fieldwork there because it is a place where Thai women would gather for religious ceremonies and other communal activities. In other words, it is a place where transnational social field is intensively at work. On important occasions such as Thai New Year, there would be hundreds of Thai people gathering there and join vibrant activities such as religious ceremonies, traditional shows and feast. I also went there during normal days, for example on the weekends. Some people go to the temple when they have free time to make merit. I joined activities and ceremonies there with other Thai people to gain insight about their practices.

During my participant observation, I also had informal 'interview' with some Thai women there.

As mentioned, I also did my participant observation annual meeting of 'Thai Association in Sweden' in Malmö. The association provides information on their website and Facebook page about language courses, sport activities or hobbies which Thai people can join. Their web page is also an open floor for Thai people to ask questions and discuss about living in Sweden.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethics was taken into account in studying Thai female immigrants. Madison asserts that researchers must be responsible of those we studied and should there be any conflict of interest, the people studied must come first. Researchers must protect their safety, dignity or privacy (Madison 2005, p. 111). Taking these responsibilities, I clarified my research and its objectives to my interviewees. I sent them e-mails describing about what I am doing and also give them topics which we were going to discuss. I had to make verbal agreement every time before the interview if interviewees want to keep their identities anonymous and if I was allowed to use a recorder. Some interviewees agreed that I can use their real name in the thesis. However, they sometimes exposed personal and sensitive information about their lives as the interview went on. So I decided to keep their names confidential.

In an interview, my gatekeeper, Ying, offered me to do an interview at her house because I was going to interview her friend and she was also interested at learning about her friend's experience too. Therefore, I had to ask my interviewee if I could conduct the interview with them while Ying was present. I had to make sure that my interviewee was comfortable with disclosure of their identities and information with others except me.

## Limitations

### 1.    Insider perspective

I think it is especially important to reflect upon my position as I am doing a research in a community that I share ethnicity, language and culture with. I study a community which I assume to know well about culture and social norms.

However, I might take something as ordinary or for granted, unlike researchers who come as an outsider who are provoked by cultural difference or culture shock. The problem which occurred was how to make the familiar strange. I agree with O'Reilly that, in doing insider ethnography, it is important to confront your own role, and your impact on the topic, the research, and the subjects. The problem for ethnographers is how to stand back and see ourselves as others see us (O'Reilly 2008, p.113). Another downside of being an insider is that people in the community assume that you are 'one of the community'. During my participant observation at Thai Association in Sweden's meeting, I introduced myself as master's student from Lund who would like to 'observe' the meeting. However, there were several times that I was asked to give opinions about association's activities. It was quite an awkward moment for me because I know that after this meeting, I would not be able to further contribute to their activities (they also need long-term commitment for their upcoming events that will be held in summer), so I avoided giving any opinion (or vote) which will commit myself to the association. I did however suggested some people who might be able to help them. And I also think that it was not fair for them if I said that I would help them because I will leave Sweden shortly. I had to reflect on my own position as a researcher. Although I am Thai, I have different interests and aspirations from the research subjects who also live in Sweden. During this fieldwork, I had to manage the way I get involve with research subjects. I had to keep some distance because my involvement will affect not only the research, but also people's feelings and expectations. So I presented my honesty, describing to people that I would like to observe them and I will soon leave the field.

Despite its negative side, the 'insider' position facilitated my access to the field and I did not have the problem of language barrier. I assume that an outsider researcher would not have the same ability to totally understand the Thai language especially some expressions or words that only exist in Thai.

## 2. Translation

Although being and speaking Thai made it easier for me to gain access and start conversations with Thai immigrants, the problem of translation emerged. Since the thesis must be in English, I had to translate my transcriptions in English

and I found that some Thai words or concepts do not exist in English. However, I tried to find English words which have the closest definition as much as possible.

## V.   Results and Discussions

This part will present discussion and analysis of the data which is acquired by the methods discussed above. The data will be analyzed based on the presented theoretical framework. This part is divided in three sections. Firstly, I will discuss Thai women's social position regarding their intersectional experiences in Swedish labor market. The reason I chose to analyze their social position in relation to work is because I think that the social processes operate prevalently in the public sphere of work and that they have profound impact on people's lives. Secondly, the issue of transnational identity and belonging will be examined. This part will draw on Thai women's transnational activities and the implication it has toward their sense of belonging and reconstruction and renegotiation of their identity. Finally, I will discuss Thai women's perception of their identity and their position in the Swedish context in relation to their confrontation with dominant stereotypes.

### 1.  Thai Women and Work: Intersectional Experience

Experience of Thai female immigrants should be understood as the result of interrelated social divisions and various overlapping power structures. In my view, experience of women in labor market is the most evident example to illustrate how intersectional social processes operate and influence Thai women's social position in Swedish society. I argue that it is important to make sense of the social and structural processes, which dominantly affect Thai women's inclusion and exclusion in the society, in order to understand immigrants' sense of belonging and perception of their identities.

Thai female immigrants, although migrate to Sweden principally due to marriage, desire to be recruited and work in the Swedish labor market as well. According to an interview with an official from the Royal Thai Embassy in Stockholm, Thai women are highly concentrated in certain occupations such as cleaning, factory workers, restaurant workers, child care, elderly care. The

Swedish Migration Board's statistics in 2010[6] and 2011[7] also suggest that immigrants who are granted work permit mostly work in elementary occupations. This data coincide with Ekburg's (1990 cited in Knocke 1991, p.476) suggestion that "a majority of women immigrants in Sweden have ended up in the most monotonous, the heaviest and intellectually most impoverished jobs." Migrant women do not have many choices in terms of occupations, given their high skills and education they earned from their home countries. They also tend to get stuck in jobs which do not match their qualifications, therefore they are less likely to gain upward mobility in the labor market (De los Reyes, 2000; Knocke, 2000; Lemaître, 2007).

Women's concentration in a certain sector of labor market should be understood in regards to 'feminization of employment' and 'gender division of labor' (Perrons, 2004). Although women participate more in paid labor, they still tend to be placed in 'women's work' which is predominant in the service sector. Women still perform tasks which resemble domestic work such as cleaning and caring. Moreover, for migrant women, they are usually positioned in occupations which are not attractive to the local workforce (Knocke 1991, p. 477). The gender division of labor is the result of a discursive social organization which operates throughout the society. According to Joan Acker, gender is "a basic principle of social organization, almost always involving unequal economic and social power in which men dominate. Gender is socially constructed and diverse, and varies historically and culturally (Acker 2006, p.6)." As discussed by Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992, p.18), gender relates to social organization of sexual difference and biological reproduction and involves social constructions and representation of these. Gender works with a notion of a natural relationship between social effects

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[6] Migrationsverket. 2010. *Beviljade Arbetstillstånd Helåret 2010*. [Online] Available at: http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.46b604a812cbcdd7dba80008286/Beviljade +arbetstillst%C3%A5nd+2010.pdf [Accessed: 19 January 2012].

[7] Migrationsverket. 2011*. Beviljade Arbetstillstånd Helåret 2011*. [Online] Available at: http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.46b604a812cbcdd7dba800027742/Beviljad e+arbetstillst%C3%A5nd+2011+-+Work+permits+granted+2011.pdf [Accessed: 19 January 2012].

and a biologically constituted sexual difference. To sum up, segregation in Swedish labor market still persists with dominating gender discourse. Women are still assigned to 'domestic' tasks in the public workforce because of the assumption of their gender role.

Sex segregation and socially assigned gender role in the labor market link to the issue of 'deskilling' among immigrant women as well. As mentioned earlier, despite high education and skills, immigrant women find it hard to be employed in their field of competence. De los Reyes (2000 cited Knocke, 1994) argues that immigrant women are hit hard by the result of 'deskilling processes' because they are subordinated by intertwining gendered and racialized power structures. Hence, they are often barred in the lowest strata of work hierarchy, or in an extreme case, excluded from the labor market. For instance, Ying and Mali had gained university degrees prior to coming to Sweden. Despite their competencies and qualifications, they could not find jobs which match their knowledge or education background. Ying had worked in journalism in Thailand but were unemployed after having lived in Sweden for 5 years. She said that she tried to find jobs in journalism but often offered to work as cleaner or restaurant helper. While Mali, who received bachelor degree in hotel management, worked as an office cleaner.

Jai, before getting her current job as a purchaser of an international company, had to go through a period of language courses and several temporary jobs despite her high education and impressive work background in managing position in Thailand. She said she felt very discomfited and stressed in the early years when she came to Sweden as she had to live on her husband's money and was unable to find a job. She also said that she had not found any Thai women in Sweden who had the same position as her.

Apart from being discriminated based on their gender and ethnicity, another problem of employment for female immigrants is the language barrier. When asked about obstacles in getting employment, all interviewees indicated language barrier as the main problem. Swedish of Immigrants (SFI) class as a tool of Swedish integration policy can also be the obstacle of integration itself. Swedish language instruction class is an important component of the introduction program which is intended to prepare immigrants for, and facilitate the transition

to, the labor market (Lemaître, 2007). Language ability, according to interviewees, is the main requirement for employment in Sweden. Therefore, most of them had to go through years of language training prior to being integrated into the labor market. Most of interviewees considered the requirement of Swedish fluency as an obstacle in employment. Graduated from one of the highest ranked university in Bangkok with work background in journalism, Ying told me about the experience of finding job:

*"I thought 'why do I have to learn the language? I studied a lot already.' 'I studied a lot but why can't I find the job?' I used to work and earn money by myself. I was independent... So I wanted to work but I couldn't find a real job. Mostly I was offered to work in restaurants which earn little money and require hard work, or a cleaner. If you are not very proficient in Swedish, you are most likely to get these jobs."*

She added:

*"As time passed I felt awful because I had studied so much. I worked before I came here. I felt like, with my education, I should have more progress in life but I didn't. I looked back to my friends in Thailand, they obtained their master's, some had PhD, some had progress at work. I compared myself with them, they moved on but I was stuck. So I felt bad about the new beginning, like I wasted my time. The most important obstacle is the language."*

Not only facing disempowerment from extended period of language and additional training courses, some Thai women told me about discrimination in their participation in workforce and in daily work life. They also expressed worries about their unstable and unpredictable future in the labor market. Ying told a story of her friends who decided to add Swedish names into their names (for example, some people still keep Thai names while add Swedish names as their middle name). They use Swedish names when they applied for jobs because they think that it would increase the chance of employment:

*"My friend told me that when you apply for jobs, some places don't accept foreign names... Now I feel a little bit insecure because I studied a lot but my appearance and my name would hinder my progress in the future. I am worried*

*about my career too. There is no problem in Thailand. But I am worried about my work life and my progress here. I'm foreign and would I get promoted like everyone else?"*

Knocke (2000, p. 370) also asserts that one of the main hindrance for getting a job opportunity in Sweden is that employers prefer to hire people with Swedish names. Knocke also notes that there are around 2,000 people a year who change their names into Swedish names to increase the chance of being employed. Ethnic markers such as name, hair color, skin color, an accent, will be used to favor one's own and marginalized 'the other', especially when the country is experiencing economic downturn (Knocke 2000, p.370).

Some interviewees told about their experiences at workplace about cultural differences and different work ethics which contribute to their inability to assimilate with their co-workers. However, some also remarked about racial discrimination at work. For example, Mali told me about her promotion and what she had to deal with other colleagues:

*"The thing that really made me tired was that I was promoted as the head. The problem was that I have to distribute the tasks and the others didn't accept me, I guess."*

Interviewer: How did you know they don't accept you?

*"They took sick leaves and they always doubted my decision, 'Why does it have to be like this' I was tired arguing with them because they think I lack credibility. They were from here but who am I? Say, if Thai people hired a Burmese then the Burmese became our supervisor, there would be doubt and they don't speak the same language as us. When I assigned tasks sometimes we had argument. They asked me why this, why that."*

Mali perceived herself as 'the Other' in relation to her colleagues. She further implied that difficulties of working with others are the result of her otherness. Similar to gender, racial and ethnic divisions are based on supposedly 'natural' relation. Divisions of racialized and ethnic groups are assumed to relate to natural boundaries or collectivities, or the naturalness of culture (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, p.18). Not only working as mode of inclusion and exclusion,

but racial criteria may also be a mode for maintaining hegemony of dominant ethnic group within the nation-state (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, p.5). It is also important to note that racism is not necessarily exercised on the institutional level only, but practices may be racist in terms of their effects. For instance, qualification for employment based on certain skills or education (foreign degrees sometimes are not recognized or under-evaluated by Swedish employers (Dingu-Kyrklund, 2005)) might bring about outcomes that are racist (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, p.13).

The implication of women's work does not only lie in gendered and racialized processes but we have to understand it as intertwining with the issue of class. Discrimination along the lines of gender, race and ethnicity, contributes to people's location in certain economic class in the society. As discussed immigrant women are more likely to be placed in monotonous, arduous and relatively low-wage occupations, the so-called 'elementary occupations'. And in extreme cases, discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity excludes them from employment opportunities.

Some feminists argue that Marxist theory of class is problematic because it ignores gender and race aspects which contribute to class formation and propose that gendered and racialized processes lead to specific class practice (Acker, 2006). The traditional Marxist theory describing class as relation of employers and working class in terms of power, distribution of resources and domination and that class is maintained by exploitation and domination; is proved insufficient to describe why most women get lower pay than men or why majority of people from specific racial or ethnic groups always bounded in certain economic class. In other words, traditional class analysis overlooks the implication of race and gender that entail with it. In relation to social divisions and wages, Acker suggests that wages are attached to jobs and occupations, not to individuals, and job that are stereotyped as female, specific racial or ethnic groups. Wage relations are gendered and racialized, as it involves the sale of control, not over abstract gender-neutral bodies, but concrete gendered and racialized bodies (Acker 2006, p. 58). The implication of gender and race, as mentioned, locate most Thai female immigrants in lower working class. Immigrants also face class downward mobility

as they are subjected to deskilling processes when they move and settle in the new country.

Social position of Thai women in Sweden is shaped by intersecting categories such as gender, race/ethnicity and class. Although people's experiences are the result of various cross-cutting social divisions, I chose to principally analyze intersection of gender, race/ethnicity and class, as Yuval-Davis (2006b) claims that there are some social categories which are more important than others in certain contexts, which affects most of people's lives in society. Discriminatory processes based on these social categories can be observed in the situation of Thai immigrant women in Swedish labor market. The illustration of Thai women's intersectional experience in labor market, to a certain extent, contributes to the understanding of their daily-life strategies and perception of themselves in Swedish society. Thai women's experiences of exclusion and the obstacles they faced invoke their feelings and emotional attachment to their home country. As argued, belonging is exercised through the experience of exclusion rather than inclusion (Anthias, 2006; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). The issue of belonging, in relation to Thai women's transnational identity will be examined in following sections. This is not to say that all Thai female immigrants deal with the issues of belonging in the same way. There are numbers of immigrants who are not interested in joining their transnational ethnic community for whatever reasons. However, this paper wants to examine the dominating trend and practice within the Thai community in Sweden.

## 2. Transnationalism and Identity

Thai women's identity negotiation and belonging must be understood under the condition of transnational migration; that although they move and settle in host countries, they still preserve various types of connection to their homeland.

### 2.1 Buddhism and Transnational Nationalism

"How nice to see young people preserve Thai culture! We adults must instill them with Thai cultures and values because they don't care much but we know how important it is and it is our job to teach them", the announcer spoke with her cheerful voice introducing and band of young Thai folk musicians during

the event called 'Songkran festival' or Thai New Year which was celebrated at Wat Sanghabaramee, Eslöv. Wat Sanghabaramee was built in 2007. It is the only Thai temple in Skåne region. The establishment of this temple was initiated by a Thai woman who donated five hectares of land in northern Rörum. However, the land was too remote and had no necessary infrastructure. The temple was eventually established in Eslöv. The temple has an abbot, or as Thai people call him 'Luang Pho', who is in charge of general affairs of the temple. He was sent here as he participated in 'Dhammaduta Bhiksu going abroad program' which opened for monks who are interested in practicing Buddhism in temples abroad. According to Kitiarsa (2010, p.110), The main purpose of expanding Buddhism abroad is to serve Thai communities and other Buddhist followers outside Thailand.

Songkran is Thai New Year which is celebrated on 13-15 April of every year. Wat Sanghabaramee held the celebration of Songkran on 14th of April. The temple usually held their major events such as Songkran and other important religious holidays on weekends so people can come and join their activities without taking leaves from work. The temple's committees are flexible about dates of the holidays for the mentioned reason. It is considered one of the most important holidays in Thailand. Songkran is generally celebrated as Buddhist festival. People would go to temple to offer food to monks, make merit and pray for good things for the coming New Year. Songkran is also the time when people visit their family and pay respect to elders.

There were approximately 400-500 people who went to the temple on Songkran. Most of participants were Thai women. Many Thai women also brought their Swedish husbands and children with them. Some husbands also joined the religious ceremony in the morning and even prayed in Thai along with the monks. Some women deliberately wore dresses made of Thai silk to the festival.

Wat Sanghabaramee had several activities on that day. The day started with offering food to monks and praying. People also offer money to the temple by putting money in envelope and offering it to monks or putting money into temple's donation boxes. The temple also provided place for people to contribute

their food. Many people brought their cooked food from home to the temple, mostly in large amount, some set up stalls and cook food there. They did this in the name of charity, to make merit and get money for the temple. In this festival, all the food was free but there were donation boxes next to the food stalls, it is voluntary to give the money. Food is very important in Thai life. There were plenty of traditional and regional cooked foods. People seemed very pleased to have tasted the familiar flavors of home. Thai food in Sweden is quite a luxury as the ingredients are expensive, although they are not hard to find now as there are many Asian food shop in Southern Sweden especially in Malmö. Many people said to me that they wanted to eat everything (at the festival). People invited each other to taste their food.

The temple also set two stages for shows, inside and outside the building. The outside stage was for Thai folk dance which dancers invited people to join on stage and dance with them. Guests were encouraged to buy plastic garlands to put on dancers' neck. It was one way to get money to the temple. Inside there was a stage for traditional Thai music and dance shows by groups of young Thais. Musicians and dancers were in traditional Thai dresses and well-groomed. Some people said that joining in this festival was like going home. They had the chance to meet fellow Thai people, enjoy Thai food, watch and listen to Thai shows and music.

The importance of describing the existence of Wat Sanghabaramee and its activities is to examine the its implication as transnational social field regarding lives of Thai women. The temple is an evident sphere where transnational practices occur in concrete sense. In her studies of religious transnationalism of Salvadoran migrants in the United States, Cecilia Menjivar (1999, p. 589) states that, "[f]or migrants, religious participation offers not just a way to express and interpret their individual interests and to remain connected to their origin communities; it also provides a link to churches and religious organizations that maintain an active collective engagement by creating and shaping transnational spaces."

In Thailand, Thai Buddhists' relation to temple prevails in every step of their lives. As reported by Thailand's National Office of Buddhism in 2012, there

are 6 Thai Buddhist temples situated in Sweden.[8] However, as of 2004, there are 33,902 active temples in Thailand.[9] Approximately 95 percent of Thai population identify themselves to be Buddhist.[10] Temple, or 'wat' in Thai, has been center of Thai life since ancient times (it is said that Thais adopt Buddhism as their religion since 1100s A.D.) (Virasai 1981, p.53). Most of Thai people follow the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Except for being venue for religious practices, temple also plays crucially diverse roles in Thai community. In Thailand, temple also has educational function as schools are set up in the temple's domain. In rural areas, government officials sometimes use temple's space as meeting hall for district functionaries, village headmen and villagers. Furthermore, temple is considered as the socio-cultural center as it provides space for recreational activities, parents may bring their children to play in temple's yard. Its space is also used during major events such as New Year celebration where shows, dance, and other recreational activities take place (Virasai, 1981).

In Thai case, Buddhism is inextricably linked to Thai nation building project. Buddhism is one of the core symbols of Thai nation. King Rama VI (reigned since 1910-1925) adopted nation-building mission from his ancestors, which was described as an attempt to resist Western colonial powers at that time (Thananitichot, 2011). The king introduced Thai national flag which was based on his idea of Thai nation, or 'chat Thai'. King Rama VI's concept of Thai nation was established on the basic triad of chat-satsana-phramahakasat (nation-religion-monarchy). He then introduced the tri-colored flag, called the 'trirong,' which has

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[8] Office of National Buddhism. *List of Thai Temples Abroad*. [Online] Available at: http://www.onab.go.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1294:2010-10-07-11-31-36&catid=77:2009-07-14-14-27-10&Itemid=381 [Accessed: 27 April 2012]. (in Thai)

[9] Office of National Buddhism. [Online] Available at: http://www.onab.go.th [Accessed:27 April 2012].

[10] CIA World Factbook. *Thailand* [Online] Available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html. [Accessed 27 April 2004].

red, white and blue to symbolize his Thai-nation motto, 'nation-religion-monarchy' (Peleggi, 2007, p. 119 cited in Thananitichot 2011, p.258).

The legacy of 'nation-religion-monarchy' trinity still prevails in Thai society today as it is reinforced both in institutional and individual level. It is required constitutionally that Thai king has to be Buddhist. In addition, the discourse of 'being Thai' equating 'being Buddhist' is still prevalent in Thai society (Bao 2005, p.117-8). Therefore, participation in religious practices or temple's activities of Thais who settled abroad should not be merely seen as a matter of faith but also about sentiment of nationalism which attached to them. Benedict Anderson (1983) asserts that, even though members of a nation do not have face-to-face interactions, they are bounded together by imaginary mutual connection. This imagination is forged by the creation of language and symbols such as censuses, maps and museums. In Thai case, the creation of national flag and the meanings of the national symbols which are attached to it is the best example. Given the discourse of the 'trinity', Thai Buddhism must be understood as closely related to Thai nation-building project.

## 2.2 Transnational Space and Belonging

During interviews, Wat Sanghabaramee was often brought up as a connection to 'home' (Thai people usually refer to their country as 'baan' which means 'home'). Apparently, the temple, as reterritorialized national and cultural space, provoked migrants' sense of belonging and emotional attachment to their homeland. For instance, Ying told me when I asked about her participation at the temple:

*"… It was fun to help* (with temple's activities) *and to meet a lot of Thai people. It's like you go back to Thailand. It is Thailand zone there. The people, the conversation, the language, it's Thailand there. It's a small Thai community that we get everything, the food, the culture and the fun. It's warm and it makes me feel like I miss Thailand less. Maybe because it fulfills that feelings. I don't miss Thailand much. When people cook Thai food, it's really Thai food. So it feels like the yearning for food decreases."*

Mali expressed similar feelings:

*"…because the more I am away from home the more I yearned for it. The longer you left home the more you yearned for home. When I acknowledged about the temple, it's like I got back home. I feel useful when playing a role in temple's activities. At least I use my free time in a useful way, for myself, for my friends and for the children and youth here."*

From their statements, we can see that Thai temple is where cultural and national boundaries are reinforced. At the temple, Thai immigrants were exposed to familiar things which they had missed; the language, the people, the food, the activities. Not only interviewees felt that their nostalgia was fulfilled, that they went 'home', but they also felt a sense of empowerment when they acknowledge that they were a part of a larger whole. Ying and Mali also told me that sometimes they felt that they could not get along with other colleagues at work because of different cultures and ways of thinking. But when they went to the temple, they felt the sense of community and felt useful by getting involved and helping with the temple's affairs. Ying, as she had knowledge in using media equipments such as camera and video recorder, therefore helped with temple's media. While Mali reported that she tried to go to the temple to help with little things such as cleaning, if she had free time. She also gathered a small group of young Thais. They meet at the temple on weekends to make merit and discuss about problems in life. Mali said that these young people needed help with adjusting to Swedish society since many of them came with their mothers and were exposed to completely new settings. Moreover, Ying and Mali are now the members of the temple's committees who are the main decision makers of the temple.

Another interesting thing which emerged during interviews was that some of the interviewees reported that they were interested more in religion after they move to Sweden. When I asked about the importance of the temple, Prim replied:

*"I think it's important. I think I am more interested in religion since I move here. I think it's good to have temples here because in Thai culture we usually go to temple. It's the place where you meet others, friends or have conversation with monks. It makes you feel content."*

Ying also explained her greater interest in Buddhism after she moved to Sweden.

*"I think it's because I get the chance to go to the temple a lot. When I encounter it every day, I began to be interested and wanted to try. They said meditation is good so I tried. The monk taught about five precepts so I tried. I saw the results so I became more religious. It turned out that I go to temple more often than when I was in Thailand."*

Because of its socio-cultural functions, the temple invokes the feelings of yearning for one's culture and sense of collectivity. Yuval-Davis (1997, p.42) asserts that oftentimes, "religion becomes incorporated into hegemonic traditions of the different collectivities and acquired specific cultural signifiers which would associate it with those collectivities." In the same way, Durkheim (1965, cited in Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 42) suggests that the most basic socially cohesive act can be seen in religion, that society cohesively and symbolically worships its own 'collective conscience'. Therefore, immigrants' narrative of becoming 'more religious' can be related to ideological constructions of individuals' identity, as well as the matter of faith and spirituality which might help immigrants handle obstacles in life.

In addition, the temple can be seen as 'emotional shelter' for immigrants. Many of interviewees described their feelings when they went to temple as happy, content or calm. They acknowledged the spiritual and psychological benefits from participating in religious activities. Furthermore, for Thai immigrants, going to the temple is also a way to cope with difficulties while they were living in Sweden. Mali asserted that:

*"We don't always find happiness when we are here. Sometimes we can find the way out but sometimes not. Who would you talk to? My husband speaks the language here and our beliefs, cultures, religions, traditions and others are different. I can't make him understand everything. He can acknowledge and listen but the he can't give you the answer. See, the temple give you this. So I like going to the temple, participating in activities and meeting friends who talk about and*

*are interested in the same thing, and Luang Pho who is really generous. He gives me advice and points me to the way out."*

Jai also mentioned about the temple as shelter for women who have problems.

*"I think it's good. It's a mental sanctuary. For people who just came here, where would they go if they have problems? Shelter or the temple? They rather go to the temple because you don't need an interpreter."*

Floya Anthias (2006, p. 20) claims that the sense of belonging should not be analyzed in terms of cultural initiation or cultural identity only, but it should be analyzed in relation to preconditions for quality of life as well. In other words, the experience of obstacles of Thai women shapes or enhances the sense of belonging to their homeland. Some interviewees said that they cannot assimilate with their Swedish colleagues or sometimes face discrimination and problems at work or in daily life. As demonstrated above, Thai women found temple as a shelter or a place where answers are provided for them when they experienced problems. As Anthias puts,

> "… it is precisely when we feel destabilized, when we seek for answers to the quandaries of uncertainty, disconnection, alienation and invisibility that we become more obsessed with finding, even fixing, a social place that we feel at home in, or at least more at home with; where we seek for our imagined roots, for the secure haven of our group, our family, our nation writ large" (Anthias 2006, p. 21).

## 2.3 Relationship and Contribution to Home Country

As discussed in theoretical section, although it is suggested that national boundaries are losing their significance due to globalization and intensive flows of capital and people; national identities are reinforced and reconstructed within diasporic communities, the 'cultural exhibition' and the emphasis of 'cultural preservation' at the Thai temple is an example. Thai identity was reinforced in communal and public sense at the temple. However, Thai women sustain various forms of connection to their home country in their everyday lives. Interviewees said that they kept themselves updated about news and situations in Thailand and

they regularly contacted their relatives back home using telephones and internet. Transnational activities were also exercised through financial remittances and financial aid when their country experienced problems. Most of interviewees reported to regularly send money back to their families in Thailand.

Kaew explained the need to save money while working in Sweden, since she had to support her nephew back in Thailand and she was investing on a piece of land in her hometown as she planned to go back and spend last years of her life there. She also described that she had gathered money from other Thais and send back to contribute to a constructing temple in Thailand. She also coincidentally went back to Thailand during the major flood event in 2011. She told me that she had to go to Thailand at that time due to her mother's funeral. Nevertheless, she had a chance to volunteer in flood relief by cooking and distributing food to flood victims. Although she said that she was very exhausted during her volunteer work, she expressed her feelings:

*"I was proud to help because I do it for Phra Thep* (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindorn, King Bhumibol's third daughter). *The charity project was under her name. I'm having goose bump now. I almost cried."*

When a major flood occurred, Ying told me that she and her friends had gathered around 30,000 SEK from Thai people who live in Sweden and sent money to Thailand to help with flood relief efforts.

Being attached to multiple societies, transmigrants feel anxious and uncomfortable when they acknowledge that there are some serious situations in their country. When asked about previous situations in Thailand such as the political demonstration or the flood, most of interviewees expressed deep concerns. For example, Prim explained her feelings when she acknowledged about political protests and tsunami warning:

*"I follow the news because I'm Thai and even though I'm not there, I am worried. When a friend told me that there might be a tsunami, I felt anxious. I couldn't sleep. I thought "what's going to happen again?" Luckily, they have warnings and the tsunami didn't occur. I have an aunt living in Phuket. When they say tsunami, I thought about her. I was worried. It's strange because it is the feeling*

*that… I am not there, I wasn't going to be affected, but I feel that I was worried. I was worried that people might be harmed. I couldn't sleep. I was worried about the country. And when there was the demonstrations (red shirt and yellow shirt), I felt depressed. It was depressing to know that there was such a conflict happened in our hometown.*

Speaking about her visit to Thailand, Mali said that she saw problems of young people in modern Thailand and wanted to go back and open a day care center and educate children in her village. Mali felt that her success story (going abroad and earning money) should not be seen as merely positive. She wanted young people in her hometown to know that she had to go through, including the struggles and impediments that she endured prior to reaching that point. She said that she felt the need to 'develop' her hometown, by helping young people. Mali expressed worries for the country's future since she saw that there are a lot of problems regarding young Thai people nowadays.

Thai women's participation in religious activities, financial remittances, frequent contacts and contribution to home country reflect such performativity of constructions of belonging. They result in deep-seated emotional attachment and self-identification of 'Thai'. Citing Bell (1999), Fortier (2000) and Butler (1999), Yuval-Davis (2006a, p.203) suggests that "constructions of belonging have a performative dimension. Specific repetitive practices, relating specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behavior, are crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment."

## 2.4 Multi-sited Belonging

According to interviews, Thai women's identity has been proved to be a very complex issue. Even though all interviewees identified themselves as Thai women and sustained strong ties to Thailand, some of them assertively suggested that, at the same time, they felt 'belonging' in Swedish society. When asked why they feel belonging in Swedish society, Jai and Prim gave the same reason that it was because they worked and contributed (pay tax) to Swedish state and they held dual citizenship, which also granted them equal legal and political rights as

Swedish citizens. Jai also explained that Sweden has good foundation of welfare system and that she was covered by the Swedish tax system and provided with pension after her retirement while Thailand does not have welfare system of the same quality. However, identifying themselves as being integrated into the Swedish welfare system and contribute to Swedish society, some immigrants desired to eventually go back to the country of their origin. Jai said that if she got really old, she would prefer to go back and live in care center in Thailand. Such view is similar to Mali's who mentioned about life in Sweden:

*"I found what I yearned for and I feel happy to be here* (Sweden)*. When I go back to Thailand; the weather is hot and there's traffic jam everywhere. When you want to go somewhere or you want to run errand, things are unscheduled. I used to the life here, I used to having a log book. I can track what I have to do, put my tasks in the table and I can plan my life ahead for years. It's easy here. It's easier to manage life here. But eventually, I'll go back and die at home. I want to spend last years of my life in Thailand. As long as I have strength, I keep travel back and forth."*

Kaew, told interviewer about her life in Sweden:

*"*(In Sweden) *People in higher position than me talk to me and have lunch with me. But in Thailand, I'd be considered as in another class, I can't talk to them. But here, people are sociable to you. It's different from our home, it's better. But the real happiness is in Thailand. What I'm doing here is just for survival. If I don't do it, I can't survive. Everything is expensive here. The cost of living is high, the expenses are high, everything. I'm happy but the real happiness is at home, in Thailand, Buddhist land, where we have the King. Our King is ultimate."*

Since transnational migrants are in between two terrains, their decisions and aspirations involve concurrent connections between home and host countries. The 'in-betweeness' of transmigrants reflects their inability to completely engage in country of settlement or country of origin, that they described themselves as simultaneously 'belonging' to one society but also yearned to finally go back to where they originally came from.

Discussing about transmigrants, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, p. 12) visualize transmigrants' movement and attachment as a sort of gauge. That is, their movements are described as settled while simultaneously swinging back and forth. Such movement and attachment can also transform over time. Transmigrant's connection and belonging thus are not grounded in single terrain, but involve fluidity of movement and simultaneity of various connections (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Although some Thai women described that they felt happy living in Sweden and preferred some aspects of life in Sweden than in Thailand, they still wanted to spend the final days of their lives in their homeland. As discussed in theoretical section, people might feel belong in a society without fully identifying or having complete affiliation to the community they live in (Anthias 2006, pp.19-20) as in the case of Thai female immigrants. Thus, their identities and belonging should be understood as always contested, unstable and fluid. Anne-Marie Fortier (2000, cited in Yuval-Davis 2006a, p.202) refers to identity construction as transition, which concerns processes of "being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong."

## 2.5 Contesting Selves: Thai Women's Negotiation of Contesting Gender Norms

The dynamic of identity constitution can also be seen in relation to negotiation between different sets of values that Thai women face in their daily lives. Keeping their feet in two countries, Thai women are exposed to various sets of values which are contesting with each other. They got caught between different sets of gender norms. Huang et al. (2000, p.395) claim that migrants use a variety of strategies to reaffirm elements of their cultural identities so that the connections with their origin are maintained, while negotiating the values and norms of their host society in reshaping their identities. Thai women have to face contestation of Swedish gender equality discourse vis-à-vis the discourse of Thai femininity. Prim talked about different gender ideologies between Thai and Swedish:

*"Women here are afraid of Thai women because Thai women are sweet and delicate. Thai women are talented. Women here are afraid that Thai women will steal their husbands. Thai women can do housework and anything. Thai women are also gentle unlike women here they think that they are equal to men. 'If you*

*can do it, I can do it', something like that. So divorce rate here is quite high. I have changed. When I first lived here with my husband, I didn't talk much. I always agreed with him. But when I spent some time here, I speak more. I have the rights. I didn't express opinion much before. I was mostly quiet and accorded with my husband. As I have stayed here, I realized that I couldn't agree with him on everything because I would not get what I am supposed to get. It's self-devaluation if you don't express your voice or your rights. If you don't express your opinion you don't get what you want."*

Interviewer: It's like you have absorbed Swedish value.

*"Yes. Thai women are quiet, they don't talk much. They expect their partner to know what they are thinking, to read their minds. I was like that. I expected him to read my mind or understand me. So lately I expressed my feelings to him. I have to tell him if I feel angry or dissatisfied. I have to speak it out. Thai women here have problem with communication or I don't know if is because they are women or Thai women, I don't know. We expect men to understand us. Even in the workplace, you have to speak out. You can't be quiet and expect other people to read your mind… I noticed that people here always speak out, then why I have to be quiet? So I tell others what I want, what I think. I just speak out."*

As we can see from statement above, Prim valued and judged the attributes of Thai women as more "sweet, delicate and gentle" than Swedish female counterparts. She also signaled transformation of her gendered role as she admitted that she had adopted Swedish notions of gender equality as women are allowed to speak out and demand for their rights, unlike Thai women who are supposed to be quiet and compliant to their husbands. Women in a transnational domain renegotiate and rework their identities by evaluating different sets of social norms, rationalize and strategically validate them (Huang et al., 2000). Prim also discussed about the different values of working women in Thailand and Sweden. She said that Sweden is a working society, men and women are equal and everybody has to work. She said that it is embarrassing not to have a job in Sweden. However, in Thailand, women can stay home and let their husbands be sole breadwinner of the family. She asserted that Thai people praise husbands who work and take care of their wives and women who do not have to work outside are

considered as 'lucky'. Being clashed with two sets of gender norms, she expressed her uncertainty:

*"Thai society and Swedish society perceive unemployed woman differently. It's very different. So I wonder that if I have a female friend who are married and moved here, how should I feel about them? Should I feel happy for them or pity them? Should I be glad if they don't have to work?"*

Interviewer: You thought which set of value you should use…

*"Yes. Which set of value should I use to judge them? Because there are different attitudes here and there."*

Ying also mentioned about different gender norms:

*"There's a phrase "ladies first". It is very obvious for my friends at school because they let women decide first. I think this is good but sometimes it seems irrational. It contradicts with my feeling from Thailand because in Thailand, men decide first. We want men to decide for us but here they let you decide. My husband also let me decide. I don't know why."*

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

*"It's ok. It's like they respect our decision. But there is something I can't decide on. Sometimes I just don't want to make a decision."*

Gender is socially and culturally constructed category which can be challenged and transformed. Thai women face conflicting gender norms as they are simultaneously exposed to multiple social fields, their gender performativity is thus disrupted. Thai version of femininity (such as being delicate, sweet, gentle and giving men the role of leader) is contested by the notion of gender equality which prevails in the Swedish context. Accordingly, Butler (1999, p.4) argues, "…gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained." The case of Thai female immigrants is interesting since their gender identities are intersected, and most importantly, contested by various political and cultural domains. Transmigrants retain values and norms

from their origin but have to reevaluate them as they confront values and norms of the host country. Thai women do not completely abandon their original culture, at the same time, they do not completely adopt the new ones.

As discussed, gender identities are fluid as they are shaped by dynamic and overlapping power structures. Emphasizing the problematic assumption of 'woman' as a stable universal identity, Butler further puts, "[a]s a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relation" (Butler 1999, p.14). Furthermore, the examples above show us why we should not understand category of 'woman' as essentialized, universal and unchanging.

## 3. Who are Thai Women in Swedish Society?: Self-Perception of Thai Women in Sweden

Although identities revolve around the issues of emotional attachment and the connection to specific collectivities, it is essentially about the narratives that people tell themselves who they are (and who they are not) (Yuval-Davis 2006a, p.202). People's perception of their identities should be examined as related to their experiences and belonging. The perception of identity is inextricably tied to belonging and thus should be understood as it reflects the experience of exclusion as well as inclusion. Hegemonic discourses, stereotypes and discrimination therefore shape migrants' perception of identity. Not only who they are and where they are from, people tell stories about their experiences of challenge, confrontation and struggle. Yuval-Davis et al. (2005, p.522) argue that construction of collectivity boundaries is the reflection of people's differential positioning and their differential intersectional identities. They also assert that "it is important to relate the notion of belonging to the differential positioning from which belongings are imagined and narrated, in terms of gender, class, stage in the life cycle, etc…" (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005, p. 521).

As illustrated in earlier sections, Thai female immigrants identify themselves through their connections to homeland, cultural activities they engaged, their aspiration, desire and emotional attachment. This section will focus

on their perception of identities as contested by hegemonic discourses and stereotypes in Swedish society. It is interesting to see how these challenges invoke people's narratives of identities and how such identity narratives are used as defense against such discourses and stereotypes.

Thai women, as suggested, are frequently portrayed by Swedish media and press in regard to sex industry. They are at times referred to as 'social problems' and are subject to prejudices and stereotypes. From interviews and participant observation at the annual meeting of the 'Thai Association in Sweden', most of research subjects addressed the issue of stereotypes of Thai women as involving in prostitution. These stereotypes reinforce immigrants' feelings of belonging to their home country and shape the perception of their identities as Mali told her story:

*"Some said that they had travelled to Thailand and said to me that, 'There're lots of prostitute in your country'. So I asked them "Do you know where in the world that doesn't have prostitutes?' "Do you really think that your country doesn't have prostitutes?" I think they exist in every country but whether they are obvious or presented in the news. I joked that maybe Thai women are beautiful so they attracted the news coverage. When we are abroad, it's like we are here to 'reclaim independence'. I feel like we have to be good representatives of our country. I have to make myself good so people can refer to me as the Thai woman that they know. So they can tell others that the things they heard or saw in the news about Thailand are not always like that. So I try to be representative of Thailand. This is big. It's like reclaiming the independence."*

When faced with a remark about Thai prostitution Mali logically argued back to counter such a stereotype. Furthermore, she expressed the feelings that she needed to defend the image of Thai women by using the word 'reclaim independence'. In the Thai context, the word is actually often used to talk about honor of ancient kings who fought and regain national territories from colonizers. In this case, Mali used this word to talk about regaining honor and image of Thai women as their good images was lost to prostitution and sex tourism. She declared herself to be 'representative' of the country and tried to reclaim independence from western colonial views of Thai women as gendered and racialized 'others'. Jai also expressed similar opinion when talking about Thai women in general:

*"Thai people work a lot. About 10 cleaners at my office are Thai. They are really hard-working. I think they are representatives; they have dignity, honesty and diligence. They don't take advantage of the society. They are honorable. So people perceive Thai people as diligent, responsible and are not the burden for society. It's strange that people don't talk about this, they tend to focus on prostitution."*

Both interviewees refer to good women as 'representatives' of the country, in this case, they are representative against stereotypical image of Thai women in regard to sex trade. Yuval-Davis (1997, p.45) claims that women are usually required to bear 'the burden of representation' because "they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor, both personally and collectively." Thus, Thai women's proper behavior, values and ethics must be represented for the honor of their collectivity. Anthias (2006, p,22) also asserts that women not only have the duty to biologically reproduce cultural and national subjects, but they carry the responsibility of reproducing national discourses, imaginary and practices as well. They often play crucial role in ideological and cultural reproduction of the nation. When the ideal of Thai women is contested, interviewees especially felt the need to protect their national and cultural prestige.

At the Thai Association in Sweden's annual meeting, the association's chairperson also addressed that stereotypical image of Thai women in Swedish society was one of the reason why it was important to have an association for Thai people. She said:

*"We want to present ourselves for who we are; that we are honest and generous because we were brought up that way. How can we do to let people know who we are? How can we make Swedish people know who we are and become our network? We don't want them to say to others that Thai people can do only one thing… that thing (prostitution)."*

After the chairperson finished with this sentence, a participant said that she had just experienced a remark about prostitution and was laughed at by her classmates. The chairperson responded:

*"A lot of people experienced that. What can we do instead of arguing with them or getting angry with them? We'd rather sympathize with them that they have narrow social life, they are narrow-minded. We have to help each other so they know other aspects of Thai people."*

Struggling against image of Thai women and prostitution, Thai immigrants emphasize the positive characteristics of Thai people as 'hard-working, dignified, honest and generous'. Interviewees felt that goodness of Thai people needed to be represented and they had to protect the honor of Thai women. As we can see, Thai women negotiate their identities through identification of the positive image of Thai people. Participants at the associations meeting also remarked about the public image of Thai women produced by Swedish media. The chairperson expressed her opinion that Thai female immigrants in Europe have more 'negative image' than those in America because they immigrated mainly due to their marriage with Europeans.

Not only to represent Thai people, according to the chairperson, another main objective of the Thai Association in Sweden was to forge network among Thai people and also network of Thai people and Swedish people. She said network is very important in Sweden as it *"facilitates your adjustment into society, into labor market, expands our connections or referrals"*. The chairperson said that it was harder to find jobs in Sweden if one did not know any Swedish person as referrals. She insisted that *"if you do not belong to any network you are nobody, you don't exist"*. The need of network reflected employment problems among Thai female immigrants since they thought that they had less opportunity of employment than others.

The association was also planning for an upcoming event called 'Experience Beautiful Thailand' (Upplev vackra Thailand) in June 2012. The event would feature cultural shows, Thai boxing demonstration and workshops on Thai food, arts and massage. The chairperson said that this activity was very important as Thai people will be represented and it would lead to mutual understanding and network creation among Swedish and Thai people. During the meeting, the chairperson addressed that the cultural exhibition was used as a 'tool' to invite Swedish people to know Thai people. In this case, the chairperson saw

that identity of Thai people was about their characteristics rather than cultural practices. In addition, cultural exhibition was seen as the way to integrate themselves into Swedish society by letting Swedish people know 'who they really are'. In the case of the association's activities, we can see transmigrants' preservation of their original culture. Moreover, they used these cultural practices as a facilitator to be integrated into host country. This case is interesting because the promotion of culture or ethnic project is often analyzed by scholars as relating to the demarcation of collective boundaries, the way to separate 'us' from the 'other' (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Yuval-Davis (1997, p. 44) claims that, to promote ethnic projects, resources; be it political, economic or cultural (such as customs, language, religion and other cultural artifacts and memories) are mobilized. But the aim of promoting ethnic projects are usually seen as related to legitimize competing ethnic groups. Interestingly, on the contrary, Thai community in Sweden used their cultural resources to promote their ethnic identity as they hoped to present their good image and to be eventually welcomed and integrated into Swedish society.

Not only described themselves as 'hard-working, dignified, honest and generous' to counter negative views of Thai women, when describing themselves some interviewees also reinforced the stereotypes of Thai women as traditional and feminine as well. When asked what she thought about the status of Thai women in Sweden, Mali answered:

*"Women in Sweden are very superior. Women are very powerful here. That's why Swedish men like to have Thai wives. It's because they can demonstrate their leadership and masculinity. Thai women are very feminine. We have the quality of being 'Kullasatri' (women with decent behavior). We are delicate. From my perception, from talking to my husband's friends and mine, they see Thai women as housewives who manage, take care and prepare food. This is the primary attractiveness of Thai women. Women in other countries can't compare with us in being delicate and sweet."*

Being challenged with the assumptions about prostitution, Thai women worked out these stereotypes by reconstituting the desirable image of 'Thai women'. Similar to Mali's view on Thai women, other interviewees also

described Thai women as sweet, delicate, gentle, hard-working and as being good housewives. Immigrant women not only negotiate or challenge the stereotypes, but they also reinforce and reconstitute those stereotypes themselves (traditional wives, the notion of femininity etc.). Huang et al. (2000, p.395) claim that stereotypical notions of femininity is hardly overturned by the transmigration process. Instead, women's role as 'ethnomarkers' and their gender identities are still being emphasized through transnational practices. For Moghadam (1994 cited in Huang et al., 2000) the term 'ethnomakers' refers to the role of women as cultural carriers who maintain the symbolic, material and practice of their respective cultural and ethnic values through their role as mothers. At the same time, she asserts that women's gender identities are often defined in relation to the family such as sacrificial and dutiful sisters, daughters, mothers, wives and guardians of family honor. Some Thai immigrant women, although acknowledged the western notion of gender equality, still reinvigorate the notion of dutiful housewife and their positions within the patriarchal structure (let men decide and take the lead in the households). Interestingly, some even felt uncomfortable to comply with the notion of gender equality (such as Ying, when she explained that she felt strange when men let her decide first). Identity narratives of Thai women as opposed to stereotypes reflect the intersection of social categories of gender and race. Their sensitivities do not only shaped by the fact that they are women, but it is also shaped by the product of national and cultural ideologies which instilled in them.

## VI. <u>Summary</u>

Women have always been key actors in the field of migration. Especially in globalized world, women move, settle and actively make their living in new countries. Despite their resettlements, women still retain ties with their countries of origin. They bring with them national and cultural aspirations, imaginary and practices from their homeland. At the same time, women rework and renegotiate their identities as they confront new sets of norms and values of the receiving countries. Such process of sustaining multiple connections to migrants' homeland is referred to as 'transmigration'. This thesis specifically focuses on lived experiences of Thai female immigrants in Sweden and investigates these following questions: 1) how do Thai female immigrants in Sweden negotiate their identities in Swedish society? 2) How do they perceive their identities in Swedish context? 3) To what extent, do gendered and racialized processes shape their identities and experiences of belonging?

This thesis, argues that the experiences of Thai immigrant women in Sweden should be examined in relation to the process of transmigration. In order to study Thai women's transnational activities and identities, my data collection drew heavily on in-depth interviews with 5 Thai female immigrants who live in Skåne region, Sweden. Moreover, I conducted participant observation at 'Wat Sanghabaramee' temple in Eslöv, as well as the annual meeting of the 'Thai Association in Sweden' in Malmö in order to understand the implications of transnational social fields of Thai community in Sweden.

The issue of Thai female transmigrants, I argue, cannot be fully understood without the analysis of their social positions as a result of various axes of power which intersect with each other. Intertwining social divisions such as gender, race/ethnicity and class lead to women's identities (re)construction and the perception of their identities in the society. I illustrate Thai women's intersectional experiences in relation to Swedish labor market because the arena of work is where various power structures come into play and have great impact on women's lives. Thai women's participation and exclusion in labor market shaped their

feelings of belonging as well as the perception of their positions in the Swedish context.

Women's transnational and intersectional experiences also relate to the issue of belonging as mentioned. The experiences of exclusion and the problems in life, to some extent, affected their emotional attachment and feelings of belonging to their home country. Many Thai women remained strong ties to their homeland through various means such as participating in cultural and religious ceremonies, sending money back home and contacting their families and friends in Thailand. They also expressed emotional attachment to the country of origin especially when the country faced stressful situations.

Although relocated and felt integrated into Swedish society, many of Thai women still yearned to go home. Another interesting point which emerged during the study is that, some Thai women explained themselves as belonging in two societies at the same time. This simultaneous belonging should remind us that people's identities, especially transnational identities, are not static and always in process of changing and becoming.

Women in transnational communities are opened to interactions of different norms and values. These interactions lead to their complex identity narratives and identity constitution as women have to negotiate various discourses and prioritize their ideologies along the lines of intermeshing and multi-faceted social domains. Therefore, this thesis also explores Thai women's renegotiation and perception of identities. It was interesting to see how Thai women negotiated and handled contesting hegemonic norms and values and how such identity negotiation played out in the narratives of Thai women's identities. Thai women evaluate and validate different norms and values such as the issue of western notion of gender equality vis-à-vis the notion of Thai femininity. Thai women also strategically confronted stereotypes and prejudices in their everyday lives. They used the discourse of ideal Thai women (as sweet, delicate, gentle, hard-working and as being good housewives) to bargain negative views regarding prostitution.

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# Appendix

**Appendix A**: Thai population in Sweden, 2011

**Foreign-born persons by sex.**
**Country of birth=Thailand, Age=total, 2011. (number)**



| | men 21,87 % | women 78,13 % |
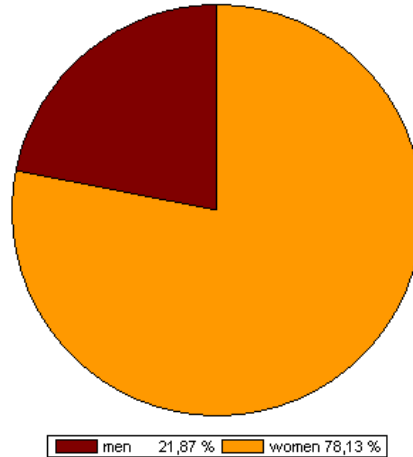
© Statistics Sweden

**Appendix B**: Employment and unemployment rates in 27 countries in the European Union by age and nationality group, third quarter 2009 (Eurostat, 2010 cited in Kontos, 2011)

| | Employment Rates | | Unemployment Rates | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Age 15-24 | Age 25-54 | Age 15-24 | Age 25-54 |
| **Women** | | | | |
| Native born | 33.7 | 73.0 | 19.0 | 7.5 |
| Migrants from other EU27 countries | 40.4 | 68.4 | 23.1 | 10.9 |
| Third-country migrants | 25.7 | 52.8 | 30.8 | 16.3 |
| **Men** | | | | |
| Native born | 38.2 | 85.4 | 20.6 | 7.0 |
| Migrants from other EU27 countries | 48.5 | 83.1 | 20.1 | 11.2 |
| Third-country migrants | 35.8 | 73.2 | 31.1 | 18.3 |

**Appendix C**: Population of Thai female immigrants in Sweden

**Immigrants by period.**
**Country of birth=Thailand, Sex=women. (number)**



© Statistics Sweden
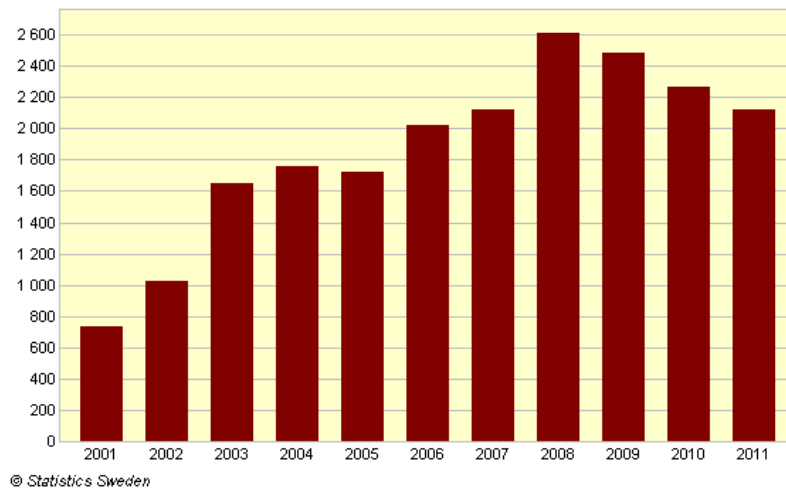
**Appendix D**: Interview Guide

**General questions**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you been in Sweden?

**Work-related questions**

1. What is the education level you gained before moving to Sweden?
2. What did you do before moving to Sweden?
3. What are you doing for a living now?
4. Can you tell me your experience of entering Swedish labor market?
5. Are you satisfied with the job you are having?
6. Can you tell me about difficulties you experience at work? (Any discrimination?)

**Questions regarding transnationalism, identity and belonging**

1. Can you tell me your experience of moving from Thailand to Sweden? Do you find it hard to adapt to Swedish society and culture? How?

2. Do you think that you have the same social and political rights as Swedish citizens? Why?

3. Do you feel that you are a part of Swedish society?

4. Do you feel satisfied living here in Sweden?

5. Do you miss your homeland? What reminds you of homeland? What do you do when you miss home?

6. Do you keep contact with people in Thailand?

7. Do you follow news or political movements in Thailand?

8. Have you visited Thailand since you came to Sweden? How often do you go back and why?

9. Do you go to the Thai temple? How often?

10. What do you get from going to the temple?

11. Do you participate in cultural activities held by Thai temple or other organization here in Sweden? How is it important for you?

12. Before you came to Sweden do you regularly go to temple? When do you engage in Buddhist practice more, before or after coming to Sweden? Why do you think so?

13. What do you think about position of Thai women in Sweden in general?