

# Research Brief

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## Thai Women Building Their Lives in Britain: “Invisible” Gendered and Ethnic Needs?

### Executive summary

For decades, Thai women have been migrating to the UK in search of the better life. With restrictions in British migration policies, they largely enter the UK via marriage to British citizen. Despite a substantial number of Thai women migrants in the UK, they remain invisible in the state's integration policies. Applying the concept of acculturation and social capital, this research attempts to discover how acculturation processes play out in Thai marriage migrants' lives and how social capital and social network support their wellbeing in the host society.

countries. Despite their long stay and their status as spouse or even naturalised citizen, Thai women still largely remain invisible to British state's integration policies. For the British state, Thai women's interests seem to be relegated to private matters within marital relations, thereby reinforcing the dominant patriarchal power of their British husbands. The state seldom intervenes or aids except in extreme (and relatively common) cases of domestic violence. Thai women are often left without realisable rights, because of knowledge deficits and dependence on husbands and their families. How they engage with, and fit in with, their settlement societies, has also largely escaped academic attention. Thai women commonly face stigmatisation. They often find their work opportunities channelled into 'sexualised work' in massage parlours, or low-end services, though many have professional qualifications.

This research's interests lie in grasping Thai marriage migrants postmigration lives by examining their social links, ties and networks with Thais in the UK, British people, and Thais back in Thailand. The hypothesis is that these social links, capitals and networks should support women's wellbeing while living in the host country. This research also focusses on migrants' acculturation and transnational processes over time.

### Introduction

Thai women's transnational marriage migration has long been in the academic lights. However, there is a small body of literature that focuses on the marriage migrants' lived experience postmigration. Thai immigration to UK is predominantly via 'marriage migration' and it is highly gendered, approximately 90% of marriage migrants are female (Home Office, 2019). This is a direct result of UK's strong barriers to immigration from Global South

### Methods

This research is based on an original detailed survey questionnaire with 300 Thai women who have lived in the UK for more than five years. The survey was funded by Ethnic Focus to collect data with Thai women in the UK in 2018. The survey data is also supported by ethnographic research (in-depth interviews with 31 Thai women and observations) and interpretations drawn from original research in South-eastern England (Chuenglertsiri, 2020).



## Acculturation to the UK

Classic acculturation theory emphasises immigrant minorities from linguistic and religious backgrounds that are historically distant and culturally disconnected from those of the majority population (Berry, 1980), or from countries whose values differ markedly from those of the country of settlement (Gordon, 1964), are likely to find it harder to adopt the values and norms of majority. Acculturation is two-way processes of cultural interaction between minorities and majorities, that can lead to a shrinking of the socio-cultural distance between them over values and norms. There are factors that can reduce socio-cultural distances between minorities and majorities leading to more cohesive relations across 'group' boundaries such as;

- Language – sharing language allows communication across boundaries
- Mutual identification and acceptance – people equally identifying as members of a country promotes common interests and solidarity
- Shared core norms and values – adherence to common “core” (e.g., liberal democratic) values
- “Bridging” social capital – network “ties” with “outgroup” or people outside ethnic enclave

## Social networks, capitals, and migrants

According to Robert Putnam (2007), social capital is defined as “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness”. Putnam also goes further to conceptualising of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital to examine how people exercise their social capital with different groups of people. ‘Bonding’ social capital means links with people who belong in the same group, e.g., Thai

women in the UK with other Thai women in the UK. While ‘bridging’ social capital means links with people who do not belong in the same group, e.g., Thai women in the UK, with British people in the UK.

## Results

### *Acculturation*

It is found that there is a low level of acculturation of Thai women to the British society. Whilst most respondents have lived in the country for more than 10 years, they still faced difficulties communicating in English, faced limited career choices due to their language efficacy, and generally did not feel belong in the British society;

- Half of respondents indicated that they sometimes have difficulty with English in conversation, while another half saw themselves as proficient.
- 35% thought that their English limited their work opportunities.
- When asked, to what degree do you see yourself as part of British society? (Scale of 1 to 10: 1 = not at all, 10 = definitely), the mean response 5.93 (n is 299)
- When asked, to what degree do British people see you as part of British society? (Scale of 1 to 10: 1 = not at all, 10 = definitely), the mean response is 7.21 (n is 299)

### *Social capital and networks*

- Thai women use social media to communicate most with family and friends in Thailand, then with Thais in the UK, and then comparatively very little with the British/non-Thai in UK.
- They are much more likely to meet with Thai friends than British/non-Thai friends, though meeting infrequently with British/non-Thai friends does occur.
- Overall points to engaging with Thai people in the UK (bonding) more than bridging, while for social media transnational contact back to Thailand is most prominent.
- These results also suggest limited acculturation of Thai women to the British society.
- Thai women are dependent on British Husbands and families when having financial difficulties – only 0.2% look for support from people in Thailand.
- Thai friends in the UK are more likely than British friends to be source of support, and both much more than people in Thailand.

- Thai women most likely deal with personal difficulties alone (specifically with their husbands), or otherwise address husband's family, Thai friends in the UK and abroad hardly register.

## Conclusions

- This group of women have a specific trajectory of acculturation to the UK that is playing out over the long term – and deserves studying in its own terms.
- Thai women tend to bond their social capital, rather than bridge their social capital with British counterparts (except family members).
- Their husbands are the main source of their social capital. In many cases, when relationship fails, women are left struggling on their own.
- Whether the low bridging directly results from being marginalized in the UK society begs for further investigation.
- Although the transnational component exists, it is in some cases symbolic and superficial, whereas the women have to address the problems (alone) within the context of the UK.
- Being on margins of the labour market, aids, and integration policies, Thai women abroad largely deal with domestic problems or financial difficulties on their own.

## Researchers

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