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**‘Men are butterflies, women are hindlimbs of an elephant’:
Thai women’s gendered being in transnational spaces**

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Abstract

The numerical dominance of women within the Thai population in Belgium raises the question of how gender, as a category of difference and as a norm, influences Thai women’s decision to enter in a ‘mixed’ marriage, to migrate, and to ‘do family’ in their transnational social spaces. Drawing from a qualitative study of Thai women in ‘mixed’ couples in Belgium from 2012 to 2015, this article addresses this question using as conceptual points of departure the metaphor ‘men are butterflies, women are hindlimbs of an elephant’. It unveils how gendered ideologies in Thailand and in Belgium intersect and shape Thai women’s subjectivity and agency. On the one hand, the ‘men are butterflies’ metaphor reflects the gendered double standard of sexual morality in Thailand and suggests explanations for Thai women’s marriage with Belgian men, for their migration to Belgium, and for the break-up, in some cases, of their mixed marriage. On the other hand, the saying ‘women are hindlimbs of an elephant’ uncovers Thai women’s contributions to their families, societies, and nations, as well as the way they cope with the overlapping social expectations interacting on them as daughters, mothers, and citizens.

Keywords

gendered being; transnational social spaces; subjectivity; agency; ‘mixed’ marriage; Thai migrant women

Introduction

Prisana, who came from an upper-middle class family, was working as a freelance writer in Bangkok prior to her migration to Belgium. She had at that time a relationship with a Thai colleague, which ended after a few years. She alluded to her boyfriend’s infidelity without elaborating it, saying ‘I had a (Thai) boyfriend. [The relationship did] not, didn’t work, no. I had a boyfriend; my boyfriend was like a butterfly’.

Like Prisana, some Thai women I talked to during my fieldwork in Belgium described Thai men as ‘butterflies’ to stress their ‘playboy’ and easy-going attitudes. Contrastingly, Thai women are seen as ‘hindlimbs of an elephant’, which according to an informant named Kanya means that if they ‘do not go forward, you [can]not move anymore’. Unlike other migrants in Belgium, some Thai migrants particularly use the metaphors ‘men are butterflies’ and ‘women are hindlimbs of an elephant’ to make sense of their situations.

These metaphors raise the question of how gender, as a category of difference and as a norm, shapes Thai women’s lives, notably their migration and family trajectories. They represent the conceptual bases underpinning my analysis of the gendered subjectivity and agency of these women, as the metaphors reflect the structuring gender regime in Thailand. In this paper, gendered subjectivity refers to the way one relates to him/herself, to others, and to his/her social environment, or in other words, one’s ‘gendered being-in-the world’ (Nielsen and Rudberg 2005). This ‘gendered being’ is linked to one’s ‘subject positions’ within multiple power relations, practices, and discourses (Foucault 1972). Gender ideology – a set of beliefs and ideas about what are ‘appropriate roles, rights, and responsibilities of men and women in a given society’ (Lucas-Thompson and Goldberg 2015, 13) – shapes the construction and reconstitution of this gendered being. In the context of migration, the gender ideologies in the country of origin and in the receiving society intersect dynamically in the lives of migrants, who mostly inhabit ‘transnational social spaces’ consisting of ‘ties, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that reach across the borders of multiple states’ (Faist 2004, 337). The intersecting gendered ideologies within these spaces fashion migrants’ subjectivity and agency, that is, their capacity to take initiatives, to decide, and act by themselves. These gendered subjectivity and agency appear therefore transnational with a relational dimension. In this case, the metaphors ‘men are butterflies’ and ‘women are hindlimbs of an elephant’ can be used as conceptual points of departure to grasp Thai migrants’ gendered being and simultaneous relationships ‘here’ (in Belgium) and ‘there’ (in Thailand).

To illuminate the way Thai migrants’ gendered being is reproduced, modified, or negotiated in their transnational social spaces, I investigate in this paper the structuring role of gender. As a case study, I examine the situation of Thai women in Belgium for the following reasons. First, they are numerically dominant in the Thai immigrant population: for example, 85 per cent of the 3,769 Thais registered in Belgium in 2018 were women (Statbel 2019). Second, their migration is oriented towards the Belgian reproductive system, in which migrant women’s care labour plays a central role in the service sector of the economy as well as in the formation and social continuity of the family, the basic building block of the Belgian nation-state. Finally, Thai women’s migration is part of a larger gendered outflow of Thais to different regions of the world for varying purposes and motivations. It represents one of the strands of the Thai marriage migration phenomenon at the global scale (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Sunanta 2014). Therefore, Thai women’s experiences in Belgium may reflect the wider reality and the emerging tendencies of contemporary women-dominated marriage migrations. Examining their case will bring to the fore how the gender regimes in their transnational social spaces influence their decisions, constrain their actions, and also to some extent empower them.

In the following sections, I revisit the literature on marriage migrations, describe the background contexts of my study, present its methodology and informants, and examine Thai women’s lives in their transnational spaces while highlighting their gendered being.

Gender and marriage migrations

In the literature on migrations, gender as a conceptual category has become a useful ana-

lytical lens to interpret migrants' experiences, notably by illuminating their subjectivity and agency. Thanks to this lens, scholars are able to unveil how gender oppression and discrimination can motivate women to migrate or stay in their country of residence (Ruyssen and Salomone 2018). The fact that this lens is more often employed to analyse women's situation rather than that of men's suggests its effectiveness in underlining the voices of minority groups. In marriage migration studies, a number of works also adopt the gender lens to analyse migrant spouses' experiences.

Studies in this field offer various explanations for why women enter in 'mixed' marriages. Aside from economic reasons, gender norm-linked inequalities within the family and in the larger society of the country of origin are often cited as powerful factors affecting women's decision to marry a man from another country (Constable 2003; Lapanun 2012). Given the administrative hurdles to emigrate from their natal countries, some women resort to binational relationships, which provide them a way to migrate abroad (Meszaros 2017). During the migration process, studies highlight how binational couples, notably migrant spouses, become subject to the gender norms in their country of residence. They are often expected to learn this country's language and proper ways of becoming 'good' wives and mothers (Kim 2008; Suzuki 2003). They are also subjected to states' restrictive policies related to migration and the family (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau 2018; De Hart 2015; Maskens 2015; Strasser et al. 2009), which makes them dependent on their citizen husbands and puts them in precarious situation (Piper and Lee 2016; Yeoh et al. 2013). These policies not only define their legal subjectivity but also shape their agency. For instance, in Japan, migrant women fear deportation if they divorce from their Japanese husbands, which drives them to adopt strategies to cope with unhappy marriages such as 'run[ning] away' (Faier 2009) or engaging in extramarital affairs (Liu-Farrer 2010). In terms of accomplishing family obligations, the gender ideologies in their countries of origin and of residence influences migrant spouses' strategies of care towards their natal family back home and towards their couple/family in their receiving society as they exert efforts to fulfil gender expectations in both societies (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018; Cole 2014).

Based on these works on marriage migrations, it is evident that women's subjectivity and agency are strongly connected, and that these two aspects are shaped by the interaction between the gender ideologies in migrant women's country of origin and country of immigration. Taking into account this cross-border dimension of gender ideologies, transnationalism, that is, migrants' simultaneous embeddedness 'here' and 'there', appears heuristic to understand Thai women's gendered being and agency.

An overview of Thai migration to Europe

Thai migrants in Europe have various, often overlapping motivations for their movement: work, family formation or reunification, studies, and temporary visits (Niyomsilpa et al. 2018). In 2012, 24 per cent of the 'roughly a million' Thai migrants in the world could be found in Europe (ibid.), and many of them were marriage migrants.

These migrants form communities usually structured around Thai Buddhist temples, which harbour 'both religious and social activities' (Butratana and Trupp 2011). In Sweden, for instance, temples serve as places of worship and as 'community centres, language school, legal and visa support, and even as shelters for women fleeing from domestic violence' (Webster and Caretta 2016, 1089). Aside from temples, Thai migrants also form associations and engage in businesses such as restaurants, shops, and massage salons (Webster 2017; Webster and Haandrikman 2017). These activities allow them to maintain links with Thailand, notably through remittances, visits, consumption of Thai cultural goods and symbols (Suksomboon 2007; Webster 2016). Thai migrants contribute in the social repro-

duction of their natal families in Thailand thanks to their ‘global householding’ (Douglass 2010) strategies (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018). Some women return to Thailand with their Western husbands at some point of their conjugal life cycle (Statham 2019), a phenomenon that forms part of the movement of Europeans to this country for the purpose of work, family formation, retirement, or tourism (Niyomsilpa et al. 2018; Scuzzarello 2020).

In Belgium, what Thai migrants experience cannot be isolated from the larger movements of Thais in Europe, as these migrants construct and maintain social networks among themselves within this region. They also retain connections with Thailand through dynamic transnational practices, making it possible to witness how the gender ideologies and norms there influence their lives as well as how these ideologies and norms interact with those in Belgium.

Gender ideologies ‘here’ and ‘there’

Within Thai women’s transnational social spaces linking Belgium and Thailand, gender ideologies manifest themselves in these countries’ parenting (notably mothering) norms and standards of sexual morality and marital choice. Social institutions, specifically religions and the State, shape these ideologies. As Thai women continuously inhabit transnational spaces, their gendered being may constantly be exposed and subject to different gender ideologies.

Competing gender norms in Belgium

The Belgian society exhibits a paradox when it comes to gender ideologies: at the macro-societal level, its gender equality principle defines the contours of many of its state policies, whereas at the family level, gender inequality appears to thrive.

One of the social arenas reflecting the deeply ingrained gender ideology in Belgium is parenting. The traditional ideology shaping this arena prescribes that mothers fulfil the reproductive role in the family and fathers accomplish productive labour. This ideology endures at present as we can observe in Belgium’s two competing gender norms. The first norm ‘assigns professional work’ to men and ‘instructs them to assume the role of main provider of income’ in the family, whereas women are ‘relegated to the domestic sphere and child care’ (Merla 2007, 153). The second norm ‘assigns professional work’ to both men and women but ‘when it comes to articulating professional life and family life, it is up to women to reduce (or give up for a longer or shorter time) their professional investment’ (ibid.). Consequently, women who substantially contribute to the household income in countries such as Belgium do not automatically ‘experience a balanced compensation in terms of gender equality in the division of household tasks’ (Aassve et al. 2014, 1017-1018).

In terms of standard of sexual morality and marital choice, Belgium is one of the countries in Europe with ‘more gender-equal attitudes’ than other societies (ibid., 1011). It allows same-sex marriages and provides its citizens with the legal possibility to dissolve a marriage through divorce. In Belgium, non-virginity, single motherhood, and divorce do not generally represent a stigma for women. However, despite this favourable macro-social environment for women, caregiving remains to a large extent women’s domain: for example, 94 per cent of single-parent households with the right to child alimony are headed by women (Blogie 2014), who act as primary caregivers to children without in many cases receiving regular child support from their ex-partner.

Catholicism influences the competing gender norms in Belgium. Although many people (65 per cent of the young adult population) in the country do not identify with any religion (Bullivant 2018), the impact of Catholicism’s emphasis on women’s reproductive/care role and men’s productive obligation in the family endures at the family level. The Belgian

State tries to address gender inequalities in the realm of home and in the public sphere. As a welfare state, it provides institutional support in the form of nurseries and allocations for families/individuals with children (Jonas et al. 2017), which in the long term could greatly diminish gender inequalities. These larger social conditions may affect the gendered subjectivity and agency of migrant women like Thais in Belgium.

Heterogeneous gender ideologies in Thailand

Thailand displays 'palimpsestic' gender cultures (Van Esterik 2000) in which diverse past and present gender ideologies co-exist synchronically and geographically. Still, the ideal of a 'good womanhood' appears strongly present in the gender norms throughout the country.

Like in Belgium, gender inequalities in the realm of home can be observed in Thailand: compared to Thai men, it is largely Thai women who take charge of reproductive labour (Esara 2004), the fulfilment of which makes them 'good' mothers (Thaweessit 2004). This caregiving role, notably with regard to children and aging parents, is one of the strong forces driving Thai women's migration abroad (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018). In fact, many Thai women regularly send remittances to their children and parents in Thailand to ensure their well-being (ibid.).

Moreover, being a 'good' woman in Thailand does not only imply fulfilling one's filial duties but also maintaining one's chastity till marriage, a characteristic of a patriarchal society. Thai men who get second wife (*mianoi*) boost their gendered self in the process, revealing the gendered double standard of sexual morality in Thailand. Such double standard also concerns marital choice: it is traditionally desirable for Thai men to marry younger women (virgins) with equal or lower socio-economic status than them. As Orathai (2012) observes, unlike their male counterparts, 'non-virgin' Thai women 'are relegated to the status of "used" object' and are 'often looked down upon by people around them' (157). Nonetheless, in the Northeastern (Isan) and Northern (Lanna) regions of Thailand characterised by matrilineal kinship systems, pre-marital sexuality of women carries little stigma (Thomson et al. 2018), especially in Isan where it is 'common and to some degree expected' (ibid., 107). This may be due to Isan's challenging economic condition, which fixates people's attention on subsistence rather than on women's chastity.

The aforementioned gender ideologies thrive in Thailand due to the influence of Hindu-Buddhism. This system of thought emphasises gender hierarchy: unlike their male counterparts who obtain spiritual merits by becoming monks, Thai women can only get merits by providing 'physical and material' comfort to their parents (Mills 2008). The cultural concept of *bun khun* encapsulates this by putting emphasis on children having to repay their 'debt of gratitude' towards their parents, notably towards their mother (Montgomery 2007, 416; Liamputtong et al. 2004). Unlike Belgium with a developed welfare system, the Thai state is still in the process of improving its gender-related policies and services. Divorce is allowed but same-sex marriage remains legally impossible. Although the Thai government recently 'approved a package worth around 42 billion baht to finance cash allowances for the poorest and other subsidies for almost 12 million low-income families' (O'Keefe and Zachau 2017), the Thai welfare system have not yet reach a stage at which care services for mothers become widely developed and accessible. This social situation, alongside Thailand's heterogeneous gender ideologies, may influence Thai migrant women's transnational gendered subjectivity.

Fieldworks, methods, and sample

The data presented in this paper originate from a larger study I conducted between 2012 and 2015 focusing on ethnically mixed families including Thai-Belgian ones. To meet Thai migrants and their mixed families, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium (Wal-

lonia, Flanders and the Brussels regions) and in Thailand (Bangkok and the Isan region).

During this fieldwork, I adopted qualitative data-gathering methods such as participant observations, informal conversations, and semi-directive interviews. For the present paper, I draw from my observations and interviews with Thai women in Belgium. Accessing the Thai migrant population was not easy at the beginning of my study, as I neither spoke Thai nor Flemish (the language in Flanders, where most of Thai migrants in Belgium reside). I started my ethnographic observations by ‘sleeping over’ in the homes of one Belgian-Thai family (one night) and of a British-Thai couple (one night). This approach allowed me to gain insights about family/couple interactions, interpersonal relations, and parenting styles. After this, I frequented two of the four Thai Buddhist temples in Belgium: one in Waterloo in Wallonia and one in Mechelen in Flanders. To facilitate my meetings with possible informants, I took up a basic Thai language course in a Thai migrant association prior to and during the ethnographic observation phase of my study. I also collaborated with a Thai migrants’ regional organisation and participated in some of its activities in Europe and in Thailand. Aside from this, I took part in events organised by Thai migrants’ associations, such as cultural festivals, flea markets, and Thai New Year’s celebrations (*songkran*). For my interviews, I utilised the approach ‘children-in-families’ (Bushin 2009), which consists in interviewing all family members whenever possible.

Table 1. Profile of Thai informants

Informants (pseudonyms)	Age	Nationality	Education level	Duration of immigration
Phailin	60	Thai/Belgian	did not go to school	25
Prisana	43	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	20
Malisa	43	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	18
Daw	43	Thai/Belgian	elementary	24
Ruang	43	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	14
Malee	49	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	17
Farung	46	Thai/Belgian	postgraduate	10
Nin	44	Thai/Belgian	vocational	10
Piti	50	Thai/Belgian	vocational	20
Nom	37	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	12
Pim	45	Thai/Belgian	secondary	30
Solada	57	Thai/Belgian	elementary	34
Siriporn	47	Thai/Belgian	elementary	25
Mai	43	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	13
Kanya	43	Thai	elementary	25
Phailin	62	Thai	elementary	25

Informants (pseudonyms)	Age	Nationality	Education level	Duration of immigration
Siri	49	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	26
Dao	50	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	22
Som	53	Thai/Belgian	bachelor	15

During my fieldwork, I was able to interview 19 Thai migrants who mostly came from the Isan and Lanna regions of Thailand. They had been residing in Belgium for an average of 20.3 years. Except two of them, all the informants had children (two in average) and six had offspring from previous relationships in Thailand. Many of the informants had university education and possessed Belgian nationality (see Table 1). A majority of them had arrived in Belgium as marriage migrants. To protect their privacy, I modified their names and those of their partners as well as their professions in this paper.

Since I conducted observations mainly in Thai Buddhist temples and met possible informants using a snowball approach, most of my informants were part of the same social networks and originated from Isan and Lanna regions. Accessing Thai migrants through other means such as via associations and informal friendship groups might have provided me the possibility to meet women from other regions of the country. The use of English and French during interviews and informal conversations was another limitation, as I might have obtained more nuanced data if my level of proficiency in Thai had allowed me to conduct my interviews in this language. However, despite these limitations, the findings in this paper unveil research tracks worth exploring in the future.

‘Men are butterflies’: understanding the formation and break-up of relationships

Having experienced a failed romance may prompt Thai women to embark in a relationship with a *farang*, that is, a foreigner (Lapanun 2012). This is notably the case of divorced/separated women and single mothers. In the present study, eight informants had had previous relationships with male co-nationals and six of them were already mothers prior to meeting their Belgian husband. They shared unpleasant experiences with former partners who did ‘not love’ them, who left them alone to care for their children, or who fooled them. These women expressed negative views about Thai men.

One example is the case of Prisana: after finding out about her Thai boyfriend’s infidelity, she turned her attention to the Internet where she met Thomas, a Belgian man seven years older than her. She found him ‘very polite’ and she met him in Thailand after chatting with him during one year. She decided to marry him because she ‘want[ed] to have a family’. At the time of their wedding, she was 32 years old. In recent years, Thai women like Prisana with university degree and professional success have increasingly turned their gaze towards foreign countries to find potential husbands (Ruenkaew 2009). Forming a family becomes more complicated for these women, notably when they are already in their thirties or forties. Their decisions regarding marriage and the family reflect their subjectivity, which emerges at the intersection of age and gender as a product of their society where a gendered double standard of marital choice exists. Such standard can also be observed in the prevailing view of ‘non-virgin’ women as ‘used object’ in the Thai society (Orathai 2012), which makes it particularly difficult for them to find a lifetime partner in the local marriage market. This contributes to the social construction of the Thai men as ‘butterflies’

with a supposedly 'natural', 'inherent' playful attitude towards women and relationship. One informant below confided how such a 'butterfly' man prompted her to migrate abroad:

He (her former Belgian husband) was on holiday in Thailand. One customer (in the shop where she was working) said, 'you want to marry with a *farang*?' No, at that time a policeman liked me, but he had a wife. I wanted to run away [...]. One policeman wanted to take me to be his second wife, *mianoi*, but I didn't accept it, but he had power, you understand? He was a policeman, and I didn't want to hurt his wife; she was my friend. (Solada).

Prior to meeting this policeman, Solada was living with her Thai husband and two children. Because of the 'butterfly' attitude of her husband, she separated from him and worked to support her children's needs. It was at her workplace that she met the policeman client. She did not like to enter in a relationship with him because of her friendship with his wife and because she had no feelings for him. Given that the policeman was an influential person, Solada felt pressured by his insistence that she becomes his *mianoi*. Getting married with a *farang* and migrating abroad became the sole option for her. Marriage and migration allowed her to escape in a subtle way the constraining masculine practice of *mianoi*. It also offered her a way to provide economically for her natal family, notably to sustain the needs of her widowed mother and her two children. In this case, Solada's gender subjectivity came out at the intersection of friendship, family obligation, and mothering. However, although her natal family regarded her as a 'good' daughter and sister, her children left under the care of her ex-partner's family considered her a 'bad mother': 'they (were) angry at me. When they (were) little one(s), and they sa(id) 'mama I think you're bad; you leave me like that'. Consequently, Solada made sure that she satisfied her children's basic necessities; she regularly sent remittance to her former mother-in-law who was acting as a caregiver to her children. This behaviour coincides with the gender ideology in Thailand about 'good mothers' who take care well of their offspring, an ideology that is partly influenced by Hindu-Buddhism. As a 'Thai popular Buddhist belief' states, it is 'through mothering' that women become 'entitled to a certain level of spirituality fitting them for heaven [...] after death' (Thaweessit 2004, 207).

In Belgium, four informants experienced the metaphor 'men are butterflies' in a different way. It is their Belgian husband who resembled 'butterflies': having an affair with a woman or sexual encounters with many partners. Because of this, the marriage of the four informants broke up. Another informant confided to me that her romantic relationship ended because of her Belgian boyfriend's infidelity: 'he was a good man, but a butterfly. One partner was not enough, he always like to have more and more women'. Hence, the metaphor that some Thai migrant women used to describe Thai men found its echo in some Belgian men. These women employ the same metaphor to make sense of their relationship's break-up in another socio-cultural context. Marital break-up puts Thai women in a challenging situation regardless of whether it is their husbands or them who become 'butterflies'. For example, Nom was not able to acquire the Belgian nationality as her marriage ended before she reached the required number of years of communal life. She pointed out that she needed to find another employment on top of her part-time job in a nursing home:

After divorce, I worked as a cleaning lady [...]. Why shouldn't I work? Because it's easy. After divorce, I have to find other job that I can take care of my daughter. Because in the nursing home, I have to work also in the weekend, it's difficult. For me, I don't mind to have another job, and then this one is fast and after good. I just like doing it. It's easy to take care of my daughter.

By engaging in the labour market, Thai women such as Nom can support their children following divorce. Their paid work reassures them that in case of a break-up they will survive economically (Fresnoza-Flot 2018).

The informants' migration to Belgium reshaped their subjectivity as they experienced a society pursuing gender equality and legally allowing expressions of sexual identities/belongings. For three informants, this provided them spaces of liberty to express their intimate needs. These women engaged in extramarital affairs with other Belgian men due to the lack of 'love' in their marriage since its beginning (in one case), to their feeling of alienation related to their husband's dominating attitude at home (in another case), or to his unwelcoming attitude towards 'Thai people' and culture (in a last case). Their extramarital sexuality consequently led to the break up of their marriage with their Belgian husband, suggesting that Thai women too can become 'butterflies' like their men counterparts. On the one hand, this shows that 'extramarital sexuality in migration' is not men's reserved domain; women too can enjoy sexual freedom and act on their 'sexual subjectivity' (Liu-Farrer 2010). On the other hand, it demonstrates that not all Thai women subscribe to the gender regime of their country of origin and that they can reassemble Thai gender norms regarding extramarital sexuality (essentially favouring men) so as to realise their own wish for intimacy. Indeed, as the next section shows, Thai migrant women often combine gender ideas across transnational spaces to fulfil gendered expectations.

'Women are hindlimbs of an elephant': Thai women's multi-faceted social roles

Feminist scholars have pointed out that women are socio-cultural producers and a symbol of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). In the context of migration, women were initially seen as following their husband in the destination country, a stereotypical view that has progressively changed. Nowadays, many migrant-sending and receiving states recognise women migrants as economic actors and vital cog of their respective societies. In the present study, Thai women play important roles in Belgium and in Thailand, which is linked to their gendered subjectivity and agency. Their key roles 'here' and 'there' make them the 'hindlimbs' of the nation, the 'elephant' in women's lives.

In Belgium, the informants did not only fulfil reproductive/care responsibilities at home but also a productive role. Most of them maintained a paid work, which allowed them to contribute to their household expenses. A few women even assumed the role of primary breadwinner in the family. Malisa told me that she was 'the only one' supporting the basic needs of her family, as her husband could not work anymore after a work accident. She said that this was not new to her because she was already engaged full-time in the labour market since her child was small: '(my baby was) three months (old). I brought her to a (Belgian) baby sitter'. When her daughter grew up, she taught her how to do some domestic tasks: 'ironing, she can do. Last year, last year, I bought a new small one (ironing board) for her, for beginner. I have a big one. It's not easy for her. I buy a new one, small. She can try'. The ideology of gender equality in Belgium, accompanied with available care possibilities for children of working mothers, allowed Malisa's full-time engagement in the labour market. The Belgian ideology of parenting that emphasises children's autonomy from an early age also facilitated her life. This partly complemented the mothering ideology in Thailand where mothers, according to Malisa, are expected to teach their daughters domestic work. As she explained, daughter 'must (learn) cleaning the home'. Indeed, her daughter learned to perform household chores on her own and she considered her a 'good' daughter from the points of view of both Thai and Belgian gender standards. Hence, the intersecting gendered ideologies and norms in Belgium and in Thailand reshaped Malisa's subjectivity as a women citizen and mother. Malisa's mothering appears akin to the 'homosocial practices' reinforcing 'gender contracts' that Webster and Caretta (2016) ob-

served among Thai women in Sweden and women in East Africa. What differentiates Malisa's social practices is that she fused 'gender contracts' from two specific locations and gave them a transnational dimension.

Paid work allows Thai women to send remittances to their natal family back home without necessarily consulting their husband. It also permits them to own properties in Thailand, such as houses and pieces of land, for which in many cases they secure their husband's agreement and assistance (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018). Within the Thai migrant population in Belgium, one's type of job matters: unlike Thai women in massage salons, those working as cashiers or saleslady in supermarkets, as waitress or cooks in restaurants, and as cleaners or babysitters in households or retirement institutions do not suffer social stigma and even gain the admiration of their family. Pim explains below how her husband reacted when she was promoted to manager in her workplace:

He said 'that's not possible'... I didn't know it also. It came unexpected. My chef then, suddenly he went above me, and he said 'we need someone to replace you' and I said 'yeah'. There it goes. He just picked me up and put me in the department, yeah but they also knew that I know a lot of products. I have knowledge of my products. Other colleagues, they show no interest.

At the societal level, the informants play the role of 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu 1984) between Belgium and Thailand. Most of them actively participate in many Thai cultural activities organised by Buddhist temples, the Thai embassy, and/or Thai migrant associations. These events include showcasing Thai traditional dances, foods, and music as well as celebrating important dates (e.g. *songkran*). Some Thai migrant associations, more often led by Thai women, also offer a variety of activities and programs including Thai language course for Belgians. One of the Thai Buddhist temples in the country offers meditation classes for Belgians and Thais as well as Thai language and Thai traditional dance classes for children of Thai migrants. In another temple, children of Thai migrants who are growing up in Belgium can learn a Thai traditional music instrument. This shows that Thai Buddhist temples act as a 'hub' for Thai migrants (Webster 2016, 37) and that they play a multifaceted role 'beyond spiritual guidance' (Webster and Caretta 2016, 1089). Most instructors of the aforementioned classes in a Thai Buddhist temple in Belgium are Thai migrant women. Farung, for example, taught Thai language in a Belgian university and also took part in the 'integration course' for newly arrived foreigners organised by the Flemish government. Aside from this, Farung prepared Thai dishes that were popular in her neighbourhood: 'I cook also. Every Thursday, I cook for the neighbours. I cook Thai. So they order. I make a menu'. Like her, three study informants presented Thai foods in Belgium by cooking and selling them formally (in a restaurant) or informally (among their acquaintances). Other informants with full- or part-time jobs worked in the service sector as home cleaners, Thai restaurant cooks or waitresses, and Thai language teachers. Such jobs allowed the women interviewed to transmit cultural and symbolic values, materials, and meanings regarded as 'Thai' or linked to Thailand in their receiving society. In and outside of the family, the informants fulfilled reproductive/care labour and were obviously cultural reproducers.

As these women engage in the Belgian labour market, they contribute to the Belgian tax system that supports their receiving nation's economy and society, which illustrates how they act as the 'hindlimbs' of the Belgian nation. As I emphasised elsewhere (Fresnoza-Flot 2018), Thai women participate in the reproduction of the Belgian nation by raising their children as citizens and favouring the Belgian nationality over the Thai one for their offspring.

In addition, the informants dynamically participated in the social reproduction of the Thai nation in many ways, which is another illustration of the metaphor picturing them as ‘hindlimbs of an elephant’. In the family realm, their financial remittances and their socially valued possessions (such as parcels of land and newly built or renovated houses) allowed the upward social class mobility of their natal family in Thailand. They contributed to the spatial mobility of their natal family members: for instance, some informants made their parent(s) visit them in Belgium. There were also stories of chain migration, mainly concerning women: for example, the mother of Ruang facilitated her migration to Belgium as well as that of her sister to Germany, and later on that of her father in the same country. Four women made their Thai children immigrate to Belgium, whereas two women immigrated in the country thanks to their sister’s help as what the informant below experienced.

She (her elder sister) was married to a Belgian at that time, and now still [...] and then, she asked me if I liked to come here. I was young. I was only 14, 15 years old, and then together with her daughter [...] from the first marriage, [...] we came here [...] both of us, (in) 1984. (Pim).

Aside from this, most of the informants sent financial help to their aged parents, as inscribed in the Thai cultural values of *bun khun*. They strived to be simultaneously ‘good daughters’ and ‘good mothers’ (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018), a manifestation of their Buddhism-fashioned gendered subjectivity. In doing so, they gained power in the decision-making in their natal family circle, notably concerning the care arrangements for their parents and/or for their stay-behind children.

In the Thai society, the informants also acted as cultural intermediaries between Belgium and Thailand through their ‘social remittances’ (Levitt 1998) in their natal villages. Every time they returned to Thailand, they brought some ideas about their receiving society and the Belgian way of life, from clothing styles to food habits. In an interview, a leader of a Thai migrant association told me that borrowing money from a friend before going back to Thailand for vacation was a popular practice among Thai women in Belgium. The money was then used to present themselves as successful migrants and ‘good’ family members (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018; Suksomboon 2007; Yeoh et al. 2013). Through their financial and social remittances as well as investments, many informants reinforced their role in the Thai nation. They were truly socio-economic actors and potential investors. It is not surprising that Thai state officials actively participate in regional meetings of a Thai migrant organisation in Europe. In one meeting I attended, Thai state officials informed Thai migrants about their rights as Thai citizens and provided them with legal information concerning buying properties in Thailand, inheritance issues, divorce, and so on. This reflects the paternalistic attitude of the Thai state vis-à-vis its women citizens who in this case appear vulnerable and lacking sufficient knowledge to deal with the world beyond their villages of origin, and therefore in need of state’s guidance. In this sense, the metaphor ‘women are hindlimbs of the elephant’ conveys the significant roles Thai women play in their transnational social spaces inhabited by families, societies, and nations. It also implies Thai women’s fragile position in this ‘elephant’ life world where gendered ideologies and norms continue to shape their subjectivity. Nonetheless, Thai women demonstrate their agency through assembling gender ideas ‘here’ and ‘there’ to achieve their own agenda and to satisfy various roles making them ‘good’ citizens and family members.

Future prospects: stay ‘here’ and/or ‘there’?

The way Thai women in the present study plan their future, notably where to spend their old age, reflects their gendered subjectivity. In many cases, women’s family roles and conjugal power dynamics influence their future projects.

Among the 19 study informants, eight expressed their desire to stay in Belgium during their old age, a desire linked to their mother role. They wished to be with their children who were growing up in Belgium and who would most probably build their lives in this country. Likewise, three other informants would like to spend some months living in Belgium but also some months in Thailand, as their children were used to the Belgian way of life and it would be difficult for them to live in Thailand. These cases echo the ideology of Thai mothering that I observed in the narratives of the Thai women I talked to during my fieldwork, which emphasised protection and physical proximity (Fresnoza-Flot 2018). Such ideology intersects with the cultural concept of *bun khun*: some informants stressed that at the time they became old, their parents would not be alive anymore. This means that once their parents passed away, they would have no reason anymore to live in Thailand. The existence of their parents in Thailand is determinant in deciding where to live during their retirement years: ‘Thailand, all I have [is] family there, I still like Thailand. I take six months here and six months there’ (Som). Another informant said that ‘as long as my parents are still alive, I will always go back to Thailand’. Daughters’ physical support or direct care provision to their aging parents (notably to their mother) forms part of fulfilling their moral debt to them, allowing them to gain spiritual merits (Mills 2008).

There were also women who emphasised that they were already used to their life in Belgium and appreciated the country’s cold weather as well as its welfare system. These women’s preference for cold weather can be attributed to their perception of beauty, which was tied to their skin colour: the favoured white complexion over darker one, and believed that cold weather can ‘prevent the darkening and ageing of the skin’ linked to the strong heat from the sun. The meaning of beauty for the informants appears therefore connected to that in their natal country where ‘(b)eauty has become effectively detached from its moral base’ and ‘is seen less as a natural attribute existing within the body’ (van Esterik 1997, 216). The informants protected their skin from strong sun as a way to preserve as much as possible their bodies from ageing and possible sickness. Thinking about their health and well-being in the future, these migrants found an assurance from the Belgian welfare system that they would be taken care of during their old age.

Nonetheless, despite their desire to stay permanently in Belgium, three informants appeared constrained by their husband’s decision: ‘He [husband] want to go back to Thailand, but me not so much’ (Ruang). The husbands of two other women wished to spend their retirement years in Thailand: ‘It depends on him [her husband], if I may decide, I will go there for only in the summer, and in the winter we come back, I will stay here’ (Pim). Consequently, having no choice, the three women foresaw themselves accompanying their husbands to Thailand rather than staying in Belgium. Their case reflects the asymmetrical power relations in their couples, as their husband seems to hold power over them concerning the issue of where to spend their old age. This probably stems from the fact that in many cases their husbands possess more economic resources than them (retirement allowance, properties, and so on).

Moreover, the cultural concept of ‘losing face’ influenced a few informants’ decision to stay or not in Belgium. Those without investments (house, land...) in Thailand, which indicates one’s economic status, preferred to stay in their receiving country (Fresnoza-Flot 2018). These women seemed to fear to ‘lose their face’ in Thailand as people there expected them to have moved up in the social ladder following their overseas migration and marriage with a man from an economically developed country. However, there is one case in which the woman interviewed did not have any properties in Thailand but still preferred

to spend her old age there. Unlike most of my informants with working- or middle-class standard of life, this woman possessed highly valued properties in Belgium thanks to her marriage to a wealthy Belgian man.

Among the informants, only four wished to return and live in Thailand for their old age. Aside from their husband's desire to live there, they were nostalgic of their place of origin: 'For me, I would like to stay in the North of Thailand, yes [in her province], because I like the culture and the people [are] so, so kind' (Phloi). Four other informants including Som expressed their plan to live alternately in Belgium and in Thailand. Finally, three informants were in different situations: one was a single mother who intended to live with a Thai friend in Sweden and spend her old days there together; whereas the other two were ambivalent and could not yet decide what they would do in the future. Prisana shared to me her reasons:

I do not decide anything yet, because I don't know what [will] happen at that time, if I can come back [to Thailand] or sometime. I want to come back to take care of my sister, my, my sister, my, [...] my brother also, because they will be old at that time [...] not plan any, because my son is still young, because I like to see him until he graduates.

It is interesting to note here the way Thai women considered their children and husband in planning their future, to the point that they set aside their personal desire, demonstrating hereby their gendered subjectivity and its intricate relations with agency.

Conclusion

The present study illustrates the powerful way in which gender ideologies in different social settings influence Thai women's migration trajectories and future projects. The 'gendered being' (Nielsen and Rudberg 2005) of these migrants is a by-product of those intersecting ideologies in their transnational social spaces.

The exploration in this paper of the metaphor 'men are butterflies' unveils its hidden reality: like Thai men, Belgian men exercise their sexuality beyond the legal or emotional bonds of a relationship. The Thai women interviewed used the metaphor 'men are butterflies' to come to terms with their Thai or Belgian partner's infidelity and 'easy-going attitudes'; the metaphor is part of their repertoire of emotional support. Residing in Belgium, a country with 'more gender-equal attitudes' (Aassve et al. 2014) than Thailand, a few Thai women informants allowed themselves to become 'butterflies' too as a way to cope with their unhappy marriage, thereby challenging the sole applicability of the aforementioned metaphor to men in their society of origin. The 'men are butterflies' metaphor reflects the gendered double standard of sexual morality in Thailand: whereas the pre- and extra-conjugal sexuality of men are considered a 'normal' part of their masculine self, that of women remains generally frowned upon (Orathai 2012). Migration enables Thai women to reverse and/or challenge some gender ideas of their country of origin. The social setting in which these women are enmeshed determines if it is socially acceptable or not for a man or a woman to become a 'butterfly'. In this case, inhabiting transnational social spaces empowers Thai women as these spaces provide them avenues and ways of being that often go beyond certain gendered expectations.

Concerning the metaphor Thai 'women are hindlimbs of an elephant', the present study shows the multifaceted contributions of Thai women to their respective families, societies, and nations of belongings. Without these contributions, moving forward appears difficult for these units, notably for the nation whose social reproduction lies heavily on women's shoulders (Yuval-Davis 1997). As these women fulfil various roles in different settings,

they try to portray an image of themselves as ‘successful’ as observed in other studies (e.g. Suksomboon 2007). This demonstrates their agency, which can be observed before, during, and after their migration. Migration provides Thai women spaces of expression but it also brings many challenges, notably on how to manage overlapping, interacting social expectations. It is not surprising that these women’s decisions regarding marriage, migration, and old age remain in general aligned to certain gendered roles, expectations, systems of values, and meanings in the families and countries where they are enmeshed – a strategy of coping up with gender-fashioned challenges in their lives.

The present study confirms previous works’ observation that many migrant women strive to simultaneously satisfy gender expectations in their country of origin and in that of destination (Fresnoza-Flot and Merla 2018; Cole 2014). What it unveils is that such a process is not straightforward but rather nuanced: some Thai women adopt certain gender ideas of their country of origin to make sense of their situation; a few act on their sexual subjectivity using the gender frame of their receiving country to move on with their lives; and others combine gender contracts ‘here’ and ‘there’ to navigate gender ideologies. These practices indicate that Thai women do not take up transnationally all gender ideas in their social spaces, which can be attributed to the centrality of the family in their lives. This intimate realm shapes their migration process, and this situation is likely to continue as they take into account their immediate family members in planning their future. Thai migrant women also relate to their own body – one of the bases of their ‘gendered being’. Their attitude towards their bodies deserves further examination, notably the way it develops through time in the context of aging. Future studies should also include the experiences of these women’s partners to shed further light on the intersubjective dimension of their gendered being.

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