



Rural-to-rural translocal practices: Thai women entrepreneurs in the Swedish countryside



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ABSTRACT

Thai women are an increasingly present migrant group in rural Sweden. Often arriving through transnational marriage, women build lives and businesses in their respective Swedish communities while retaining ties to their rural regions of origin. This paper asks: How is translocalism produced and embedded in and from rural contexts through the workplace activities of Thai migrant women in Sweden? Using life course narratives of 11 Thai migrant women and interviews with rural actors in Thailand, this article examines the role of Thai women's businesses in creating translocal connections between distant rural spaces. It finds that women actively engage in multiple rural areas as part of their daily work and business strategies. As shown by the research, Thai women migrants make rural-to-rural connections through familial and friend networks, material goods, and engagement with local rural communities. Moreover, practices are embedded and produced, through social connections and practices, within the rural areas women are closely tied to prior to migration. This paper shows the importance of women's connections to rural localities in shaping their translocal practices. The paper argues daily connections between rural areas are closely tied to local and global gendered practices, norms, and expectations. It highlights the significance of rural networks in shaping translocal practices within migrant rural businesses.

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1. Introduction

Of the nearly 39 000 Thai-born people in Sweden in 2016 (SCB, 2016), nearly 80% are women and are more likely to live in rural areas than other foreign-born people (Webster and Haandrikman, 2016). Thai women arrive in rural Sweden primarily for transnational marriage or family reunification; these processes are similar to other rural migration flows (Nordin, 2008; Nakamatsu, 2005). Thailand has supplanted Finland as the leading sender of transnational wives to Sweden (Brandén and Haandrikman, 2013). Thai women usually join this transnational marriage flow from previous internal migration pathways within Thailand that start in poorer, rural areas in Northern regions and draw women to the prime tourist areas in the South (Mills, 2012).

Thai migrant women are a visible entrepreneurial group in rural Sweden, often opening businesses like small eateries, massage shops, or Asian grocery stores. Earlier studies show Thai women are

more likely to open their own businesses compared to other women migrants; moreover, their Swedish partners are more likely to be small business owners (self-identifying, 2016b). Thai women's entrepreneurial activities are thus closely tied to their position as racialized and sexualized migrant workers (Jongwilaivan and Thompson, 2013; McDowell, 2013; Kang, 2010; Kitcharoen, 2007). Other migrant groups, such as Dutch migrants, also are an important growing migrant entrepreneur group in the Swedish countryside (Eimermann, 2016), albeit positioned differently in society.

Translocalism, a concept used to understand social–spatial interactions with an emphasis on actor-oriented mobilities (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013), seeks to understand the social forms of relational globalisations (Massey, 2005). Like studies on entrepreneurship, translocalism perspectives have been slow to take up a gendered perspective, with the notable exceptions of Lachenmann (2010) and Anthias (2012; Anthias et al., 2013). Translocalism focuses on social forms of globalisation; Thai migrant businesses in rural settings offer a means to explore how translocalism is produced in rural areas by women migrants.

Similarly, rural research is shifting away from rigid constructions of place to explore how mobilities and fixities play out in

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social norms and day-to-day interactions (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Tacoli and Mabala, 2010; Milbourne, 2007). Rural areas are increasingly understood sites of globalization (Woods and McDonagh, 2012; Woods, 2007). Rural perspectives in translocalism require specific attention due to the interaction of stabilities with ongoing globalized mobilities (Hedberg et al., 2012; Bell and Osti, 2010). Rural migrants sit between a particularity of rural spaces and places alongside rapid globalization, a kind of 'dwelling in motion' (Smith, 2011, p. 189). By continuously engaging within multiple locales, migrants assert their agency within several localities, linking disparate geographies across time and space through their actions (Main and Sandoval, 2015; Christou, 2011).

Migrant business activities can offer insights into how spatial connections are produced and navigated daily with multiple meanings in different spaces and places. Women's roles as entrepreneurs are formed by broader social and economic norms; these norms are often replicated in the day-to-day activities of their businesses (Clark Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016). This supports the need to understand the role of the rural in migrant entrepreneurship (Oliva, 2010). Thai migrant women's activities can illuminate ways rural regions are built and embedded within translocal processes.

2. Aim and research question

The paper examines how Thai migrant women make rural-to-rural translocalism through their workplace activities and how translocal practices are shaped by rural contexts. The paper addresses the following research question: How is translocalism produced and embedded in and from rural contexts through the workplace activities of Thai migrant women in Sweden?

The significance of this case lies in its exploration of the role of international rural-to-rural interrelations. Given the privileging of urbanity, this paper addresses the role of the rural in translocal processes, an overlooked transnationalism research focus (Andrzejewska and Rye, 2012; Oliva, 2010). Most research on migration deals with rural-to-urban (often developing country domestic) and urban-to-urban (developed countries and a significant component of international migration); little research has explored rural-to-rural dynamics in migration flows, despite the growing internationalization of rural areas (McAraevey, 2012).

This paper begins with an examination of migrant rural business in Sweden and a brief background on the rural context in Thailand propelling this migration flow. Building from these contexts, translocalism is examined as a theoretical concept useful for understanding the spatial practices utilized by migrant women in rural areas. A description of methods is followed by a presentation of findings of translocal practices in Thai migrant business, focusing on the day-to-day execution of their businesses. A final discussion emphasises the importance of gender in constructing rural-to-rural translocal practices.

3. The rural contexts in this translocal flow

3.1. Migrant rural businesses and gender in Sweden

The number of migrants *to* (as opposed to *from*) rural areas is small compared to cities; however, as a percentage of the overall population, foreign-born individuals are increasingly present in Swedish rural areas (Stenbacka, 2012; Bjerke, 2011). Migrants arrive in Swedish rural areas due to refugee placement, lifestyle and amenity migration, temporary labour migration, and through transnational marriage (Hedberg, 2016; Hedberg and Haandrikman, 2014). As in other parts of Europe, some migrants to rural regions become part of a broader non-agricultural labour

force (Kasimis et al., 2010).

Summer houses are popular in Sweden, abetted by the availability and relative affordability of real estate in the Swedish countryside. The border with Norway and other tourist areas exemplifies this phenomenon, offering seasonal opportunities for small businesses (Flognfeldt and Tjørve, 2013; Lagerqvist, 2011; Marjavaara, 2007). While some rural development is driven by newcomers to rural areas, more research on international migrant entrepreneurship in rural contexts is needed (Pato and Teixeira, 2016; Petterson, 2012). European migrants (e.g., from the Netherlands) are actively building tourist businesses in rural Sweden (Eimermann, 2015). Rural small businesses, coupled with rural lifestyles, remain an important part of the social and economic fabric of rural communities (Eimermann, 2016). How rural small businesses connect to their ruralities and global systems requires further study for better understanding (Dubois, 2016; Bosworth, 2012).

Women play a central role building rural businesses (Heldt Cassel and Pettersson, 2015; European Commission/Directorate-General for Agriculture, 2000) and women's activities play an important role in rural regional development, yet limited attention has been paid to the ways gender shapes and impacts rural entrepreneurship (Forsberg and Lindgren, 2015; Pettersson and Heldt Cassel, 2014; Forsberg et al., 2012) [A vast body of literature on women's rural entrepreneurship in developing countries exists. For an example concerning Thailand, see Tongboonrawd and Sukpradit, 2007].

Given the intersection between rural lifestyle and economics, gender underpins many practices within rural business. Rural women often connect rural social and economic practices (e.g. the obvious example of 'the farmer's wife') (Sposito, 2016; Midgley, 2006; Little, 2002). Women's economic contributions in rural areas are often hidden within social roles and norms, and are more likely to be taken for granted through gendered constructions of the rural (Forsberg and Stenbacka, 2013; Little, 2002; Forsberg, 2001; Brandth, 2002). Like other rural areas in the developed world, Sweden has had a gendered ordering of rural day-to-day life (Granvik, 2009). Existing studies point to the need to understand the unique challenges facing women working in rural areas (Forsberg and Lindgren, 2015).

3.2. Rural and migration development in Thailand

Rural areas in Thailand have undergone significant structural change, from predominantly agricultural to industrial and residential economies, resulting in rapid shifts to urban values in rural areas and shifting household strategies towards migration (Rigg et al., 2012; Hirsch, 2009). Market forces have strongly favoured Bangkok and its extended region, resulting in strong inequalities between urban and rural areas (Krainara, 2012; Rigg and Salamanca, 2011). At the same time, decentralization policies placed greater responsibilities on rural local governments and institutions to address planning and development policies (Khongsatjaviwat and Routray, 2015). Concentrating economic policies on the Bangkok region resulted in wage disparities and a dependency on migrant workers from the outer regions, often at the cost of development in rural areas (Gullette, 2014; Pholphirul, 2012). Rural residents, especially those from the North and Northeast regions, have responded to these changes by taking up migration – internationally and domestically – as a household strategy and response to lack of opportunity in rural areas.

Thai rural women migrating to Greater Bangkok have developed mitigating strategies to compensate for the lack of opportunity in their home regions (Sunanta, 2013). Migration offers opportunities for Thai rural women, both in terms of social mobility and through

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