



## Thai women entrepreneurs in Sweden: Critical perspectives on migrant small businesses



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### ABSTRACT

Thai migrant women are an important and visible part of the small business community in Sweden, most notably through restaurants, massage spas and small shops. In this paper we explore the overlap between migration and entrepreneurship and position ourselves within the feminist entrepreneurial framework. We ask: which Thai women become entrepreneurs? How does being migrant women shape their entrepreneurial activities and practices? Our paper employs a mixed-method design to explore Thai migrant businesses, giving a detailed overview of which women become entrepreneurs based on register data, and providing space for the narratives of women. We find a gendered approach to understanding the business activities of Thai women business practitioners does challenge normative perspectives on entrepreneurship. We show that family structure, migration length, education and partner's labor market status all play important roles. Furthermore, we find that small businesses are sites of negotiation and contestation.

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### Introduction

The ubiquitous Thai restaurant is a typical example of a small migrant business. These businesses are known for hard work and tenaciousness, and are part of the migrant narrative. Similar to other small businesses, Thai entrepreneurs in Sweden maintain social and economic practices that lead to their success or failure. Entrepreneurialism is a dominant economic narrative where individuals accumulate capital through their innovation, creativity and risk-taking. This article defines entrepreneurialism as a business initiated by an individual who is taking risks (Morrison, Rimmington, & Williams, 1999). Other definitions have failed to account for the diversity of entrepreneurial practices, omitting women's businesses from many research frameworks that seek to define which activities are entrepreneurial (Berg, 1997).

Feminist economists critique mainstream entrepreneurial definitions which privilege male normative value and practice systems, conjuring images of a "heroic adventurer, individualistic, ruthless and aggressive" (Hamilton, 2013, p. 91). Innovation, for instance, has been contested as an implicit masculinist construct, modeled within and by male dominated industries (Pettersson & Lindberg, 2013). In other words, being an entrepreneur is a privileged designation that boosts conforming practitioners while non-normative practitioners remain a secondary group, as small businesses owners (Ahl, 2006; Essers, 2009). These narratives may exclude or hide different kinds of creativity, risk-taking and innovation that are entrepreneurial in character, due

to gender and ethnicity (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Hatcher & Terjesen, 2007; Essers, 2009). Such oversight has consequences for how we understand women's contributions, through their entrepreneurial activities, to the economy (Holmquist, 1997; Berglund, Birkelöf, Lundin, & Löfgren, 2013; McDowell, 2013). The predominance of the white, male hero discourse as a mechanism of exclusion "can make it seem as if a woman does not possess the required skills for being an entrepreneur" (Max & Ballereau, 2013, p. 100). A gendered examination of women's business practices unveils the diverse ways of engaging with entrepreneurialism (Kitcharoen, 2007).

The intersection of bodily work with gender and migration, coupled with experiences of discrimination and stereotyping (Mai Sims, 2012; Butratana & Trupp, 2014; Jungteerapanich, 2014) contributes to the exclusion of women's small businesses from normative entrepreneurial discourses (Essers, 2009). Thai entrepreneurs, as women and racialized 'others', are thus not granted belonging in the privileged narrative of entrepreneurialism, meaning that their business activities are not critically explored.

Entrepreneurship, like gender, being a migrant or other socially-constructed identities, is not a stable construction, and therefore, it is open to contestation through other interpretations of entrepreneurial activities (Lewis, 2006). This suggests the need to unpack small business activities from an entrepreneurial perspective that engages with non-normative masculinist constructions. In this paper, we explore who is an entrepreneur and which practices - the daily doing of work - are entrepreneurial by examining the nature and character of a segment traditionally understood as a migrant small business community (Bourne & Calás, 2013). We ask: Which Thai women become entrepreneurs?

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And, how does being migrant women shape their entrepreneurial activities and practices?

Using data with a level of detail that is not readily available outside the Swedish context, our study incorporates register data on all Thailand-born residents in Sweden in multivariate analyses, and in-depth interviews of Thai women entrepreneurs. We contribute to the literature by building on the feminist entrepreneurial perspective by examining a complex case study, that of Thai migrant women. This paper supports feminist findings which demonstrate that broader conceptualizations of entrepreneurship are needed to advance understandings of the work experiences of women migrants.

### Thai migration to Sweden and migrant entrepreneurship

The migration of Thai-born residents to Sweden has increased three-fold in the last decade. Approximately 80% of this migrant flow is women (Webster and Haandrikman, 2016). Thai migration to Sweden is primarily driven by marriage migration; Swedish men increasingly intermarry, and Thai women are the largest group since 2008 (Haandrikman, 2014). Thai migrants are now the 13th largest immigrant group in Sweden. The dramatic increase in numbers may be explained by growing connections between Thailand and Sweden as demonstrated by the growth of vacations to Thailand (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2011).

Immigrants in Sweden are more likely to be self-employed than natives (Andersson & Wadensjö, 2004; SCB, 2015), but the rate of self-employment differs widely among migrant groups. Studies investigating the reasons for these differences show mixed results (see Hammarstedt (2001) for an overview). Some studies find support for higher self-employment among migrants living in segregated areas with high shares of migrants from the same origin, while others do not. There is some support for higher self-employment among disadvantaged groups (for instance, in terms of discrimination or poverty), while others find higher rates among advantaged groups. Two Swedish studies using 1990 data found higher self-employment rates with increasing age, for migrants with a partner, for those with lower education and for those who had lived in Sweden for a longer period (Hammarstedt, 2001, 2004). Generally, educational attainment, family status, the availability of capital and job-related characteristics are important in explaining differences in self-employment among migrant groups, and therefore, they will be included in the multivariate analysis of this study.

Although self-employment is, in general, more common among men than women in Sweden, the share of women who are self-employed is larger among foreign-born residents than among natives. Recent statistics (SCB, 2015) showed that self-employed foreign-born residents are, on average, more highly educated than Swedish-born self-employed residents, and self-employed women have more advanced education than self-employed men. Self-employed migrants often perform low-skilled work, however, although they are better skilled than Swedish-born counterparts. In Sweden, migrant entrepreneurs are over-represented in small businesses in retail, and in the hotel and restaurant sector, and health care and services is an upcoming sector for migrant women (Andersson & Wadensjö, 2004; SCB, 2015).

There is a rich body of literature examining the practices of ethnic entrepreneurs who usually enter entrepreneurship to bypass barriers in the local labor market (Chaganti & Greene, 2002). In Sweden there is general consensus that structural and institutional challenges (Framtidskommission, 2013) along with racial and gender barriers makes starting and maintaining small business an ongoing challenge (de los Reyes, 2006; Pettersson & Hedberg, 2013). In this paper, we take a feminist approach to understanding entrepreneurship, as the majority of Thai women in Sweden are employed, with employment rates almost equal to those of native women after five years of stay - much higher rates than those for other foreign-born women - with even higher rates for Thai women who have a Swedish partner (Webster

and Haandrikman, 2016). These trends make Thai entrepreneurs a particularly interesting group for study, as the research indicates that they are not overtly blocked from the local Swedish labor market yet they do engage in entrepreneurship at higher than average rates. The same study found that Thai women are more often *self-employed* than other foreign-born and native women (6.3% for Thai women versus 5.5% for other migrant women and 4.9% for native women); and that this share is even higher for those with Swedish partners. Thai women dominate in service sectors such as food, tourism and health. These trends are part of the globalized service economy, which is gendered, sexualized and related to new labor mobilities between rich and poor countries (Veijola & Jokinen, 2008). In turn, this creates a social division of labor, and in workplaces where self-employment or small businesses can capitalize on their businesses, or locally on these broader global trends (McDowell, 2009).

### Methods

Our study uses mixed methods, as advocated in feminist research, to understand entrepreneurialism among Thai women living in Sweden (Spierings, 2012). Using mixed methods means that we gain an overview of which Thai women become entrepreneurs, and complement this with a detailed understanding of how daily practices shape their experiences as business professionals.

#### Quantitative methods

We use register data on the whole Swedish population, gathered in the PLACE database, managed by Uppsala University, Sweden. We focused on all women born in Thailand and registered in Sweden in 2008, and included their demographic, social-economic and geographic attributes. We make use of this excellent data source by means of descriptive statistics to portray patterns of entrepreneurship, and we employ multivariate analysis in order to identify which characteristics make women more inclined to become entrepreneurs, such as education, age at migration, and their possible partner's characteristics, such as whether the partner is Swedish or self-employed. Multivariate analysis also enables the prediction of how likely entrepreneurship is, given a woman's attributes, based on a set of hypotheses related to the research questions. In the first stage, we analyzed which Thai women were most likely to become entrepreneurs, while in the second step, we only included women with a partner, in order to analyze which characteristics of the woman and her partner influence the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur. We limit the women's age range to 21–65 years, the most appropriate for self-employment analysis. As our dependent variable is binary (is a woman an entrepreneur or not), we use logistic regression analysis to examine the different relationships.

The measurement of self-employment is derived from tax registers, based on the obligatory registration of income from owned businesses and other employment, measured in the month of November. If the core income comes from self-employment, then the person is registered as self-employed.<sup>1</sup>

Choosing variables to represent power and agency is difficult, as many variables mask or exaggerate structural or social barriers (Kabeer, 1999). The variables, educational level, household position, and degree of urbanization, were chosen based on previous empirical studies examining women's empowerment; they indicate different configurations of the existence, use and achievement of choices to stand as a proxy for power and agency (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

Educational level, which indicates social class as well as the use and existence of choices, is measured as the highest level of completed education, whether in Thailand or Sweden, in June, and categorized as low (nine years, normally from age 7 to age 16), middle (upper secondary

<sup>1</sup> Including both entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of companies with shareholders (AB in Swedish).

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