

## Gender and 'Care Work' in Thai-Western Families Settled in Northeast Thailand

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### Abstract

This article applies the notions of gender and care to analyze the relationships between gender and care work allocation in Thai-Western families living in Northeast Thailand. It is based on in-depth interviews of 13 Thai-Western couples, as well as five Thai wives and one English man whose relationship with his Thai wife ended. All informants have resided in villages in Udon Thani and Khon Kaen provinces for between three and 35 years, the majority 10-20 years. The findings reveal that care work allocation and gender are related in various ways, and that Western/Thai cultures, class, and race also shape the way in which domestic tasks are allocated in these relationships. In addition to intimate relationships, all women have performed caretaker roles to serve their husbands. Yet, some women perceive care work as a space of 'negotiation and arrangement' in which husbands should also take part. Others view care work as 'women's authority,' empowering them to influence the husband's work, apart from getting the men to do certain domestic tasks. The findings allow us to argue that a family/household is an important unit for gender analysis. Drawing on different types of families, this study uncovers the diverse patterns of gender in relation to care allocation that elaborate the gender stereotype of male-breadwinner and female-caretaker pattern that have been considered to be pertinent to transnational unions.

**Keywords:** gender, care, transnational family, women's negotiation, northeast Thailand

### Introduction

In recent years, the increasing number of transnational families in Northeastern Thai villages where Western men resettle with their Thai wives has become obvious. This phenomenon is linked to a flourishing of partnerships between Thai women and Western men in Thailand over the last decades. In many cases such relationships resulted in serious commitment and transnational unions (Constable, 2005; Ishii, 2016; Lapanun, 2019; Lu and Yang; 2010). These liaisons often involve mobility and resettling which have produced specific migration patterns revealing "two-way" flows related to gender and family life cycles. Migration of women to reside with their partners in the West normally occurs in the early stage of partnerships, while the reversal flows in which men migrate to resettle in women's natal home appear later, in most cases after their retirement (Brown, 2022; Statham, 2020).

Studies on transnational marriages/partnerships have emphasized the flows of women to the more developed regions of the globe, their experiences of living in the receiving countries, and their ties to natal families. Women's practices and negotiations in the host and home societies and in the 'contact zones' where transnational relations were initiated and developed have been analyzed in relation to global and local circumstances and the dynamics of social fabrics in women's natal homes (Bélanger et al., 2014; Cheng, 2010; Fresnoza-Flot, 2017; Chumnanmak and Somkaun, 2023; Lapanun, 2019, 2022). Some works explore citizenship rights—especially marital/cultural citizenship—and status among marriage migrants in the receiving countries (de Hart, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau; 2017; Lapanun, 2018; Phukongchai, Lapanun and Suppatkul, 2022; Yeoh, Leng and Dung, 2013). Studies on the reverse migration flows of men to resettle in women's home countries are relatively limited. Yet, Brown's study (2022) reveals fresh insights. Focusing on Thai-Dutch couples moving from the Netherlands to Thailand, Brown suggests that migration trajectories are not linear, but fluid, complicated, and fragmented. This migration involves practices of waiting, preparing to move, traveling back and forth between Thailand and the Netherlands, and actual

moving. Such complexities are shaped and reshaped by mobility, capital, gender, and the age of both women and men.

Other works explore perceptions, positions, and social relations of *farang* (foreign, Caucasian) men and Thai wives living in Thailand. Such studies provide diverse insights. Maher and Lafferty (2014) point out the privileged position of Western men resettling with their wives in Isan (the Northeast region) and relate it to their provider roles, apart from their race, class, and gender. Such privilege is opposite that of their status as migrants, whose lives were bound with cultural displacement and legal disadvantages. These men relied on their wives for both language translation and social connections. This place-bound identity within Thailand is subject to contradiction in the long term. In their subsequent work, these authors state that over time, the men experienced new forms of vulnerability and precariousness as their control of intimate relationships as well as financial and international mobility declined (Lafferty and Maher, 2020). Scuzzarello's study (2020) provides different insights regarding experiences of retired Western men living with much younger Thai wives in Isan. These men enjoy better and more luxurious lives than most local people. Their abundant economic resources allow these men to act, sustain, and justify their self-perceived superiority to Thai people and enact privilege through practicing the form of new-found masculinity and sexuality with their self-gratification. Yet, the local imaginaries often cast these men in a positive light—as good husbands and responsible providers helping woman out of poverty. The Thai wives, on the other hand, have experienced pressure to adapt to their husbands' Western cultural needs. Despite living in their home villages, the women felt distant from their natal families and community. Women's lives are structured around catering to their husbands' intimate care and social needs, as defined by the men, on their demands and values (Statham, 2020). Statham (2020, 7-8) states that such "imported assimilationism" in personal relations is deeply inscribed by unequal gender relations and social conditions of global inequality. These relations can lead to isolation from family and detachment from a sense of belonging in Thai society.

Conceptually, the previous works are framed by two major perspectives—gender and migration/mobility. Gender is often conceptualized with assumptions about the universal stereotype of gender labor division—the male-breadwinner and female-caregiver. This pattern is considered to be particularly pertinent for transnational unions between Western men and Asian women, as care-taking is a key factor for men in seeking transnational partnerships (Constable, 2005; Lapanun, 2019). Yet, the assumption leaves gaps for investigation of labor division between husbands and wives in the lived realities of transnational unions. This paper aims to explore such gaps and challenge the stereotype by exploring how 'care work' is managed and negotiated between Western men and their Thai wives living in Isan communities. Another perspective is migration/mobility which involve different approaches/models e.g. push-pull theory and neoclassical approach, historical-structural and political economy models, the new economics of migration (King, 2013), the approaches focusing on subjective conditions as migration forces (Carling and Collins, 2018; Kaewwongyai, Lapanun and Suppatkul, 2021) and lifestyle migration focusing on mobility of the relatively affluent and privileged migrants searching for a better quality of life (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Western men resettling with their wives in Thailand is the case in point of lifestyle migration. Scuzzarello's (2020) and Statham's (2020) studies reveal that these men live a privileged life and receive care and domestic services that meet their Western patriarchal values. But Thai wives experienced alienation and loss of self although material expectations are met. Our findings elaborate such observations as the Western men in our study emphasized diverse motivations for resettling in Thailand. Their aspirations include not solely intimacy, care, and economic reasons, but also involve a passion for Thai culture, food, and ways of life. Such desires and needs have shaped the couples' lives and gender roles within their families. Furthermore, the findings also highlight how household contexts have shaped the allocation and negotiation of care work.

This paper begins by reviewing the concept of care (or care work) in relation to gender and agency. It then describes the research

methodology and background information of informants. The ethnographic section presents the aspirations for resettling in Thai villages, the conditions shaping daily life of the Thai-Western couples, the diverse ways in which gender and care are related and negotiated in specific family contexts and the consequences of such patterns on women's and men's lives. The last section highlights the major contributions where we argue that the dynamics of gender roles in transnational families have elaborated the stereotypes of gender division of labor.

### **Conceptualizing Care and Gender: An Intertwining Perspective**

Care or 'care work' has a twofold character, unpaid domestic or reproductive care within families and paid care work operating in household contexts and beyond. Unpaid/reproductive care refers to "the array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally" (Glenn, 1992:1). It includes such tasks as cleaning, cooking, shopping, household maintenance, and providing care for family members. These tasks are allocated to women without pay. When such jobs are performed for exchange value either in the household or public, they are considered productive work. In recent times, paid care has been contracted as wage labor in the market economy both in domestic and international contexts. There is a massive migration of women from poorer countries to carry out paid work in the more developed regions. These migrant women have engaged in diverse kinds of jobs, including childcare, eldercare, healthcare, massage and wellness, domestic service, and the food business. Married female migrants are also involved in care work either as paid care labor, unpaid domestic care providers, or both (Liu, 2018; Lapanun, 2019; Sunanta, 2014; Dalgas, 2016). This development has challenged the ideological separation between men's productive labor and women's non-market-based activity. It also emphasizes how transnational care is gendered and racialized (Glenn, 1992; Duffy, 2005). Conceptually, such development requires a broader framework to

capture diverse types and layers of care and how they shape gender relations and women's (and men's) life and agency.

Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2000) coined the term, 'Global Care Chain (GCC),' to refer to "a series of personal links between people across the globe based on paid or unpaid work of caring" (2000:131). This original notion of GCC focuses on motherly care, and thus it is criticized for its simplification and failure to capture different types of care work, the varying contexts, and the processes by which such work is being globalized (Kim, 2016). Yeates (2009) purposed the broader model with extensive meanings of care beyond reproductive work in family contexts to include other types of care work in varying institutional settings. Care work covers activities ranging from highly intimate care services of nursing, feeding, bathing, and sexual acts to less intimate ones such as cooking, cleaning, and general maintenance work. Likewise, work settings include families, hospitals, schools, churches, and brothels. Yeates's model also emphasizes the multiple positionalities that women occupy throughout their life-course to capture the transformation of care work in which women are involved over time. Yet, its limitations are insufficient analysis of women's agency and the social relations of caring and care work, thus devaluing the emotional component of care (Parreñas, 2005; Murphy, 2014). Duffy's work (2005) highlights the emotional dimension by proposing two different forms of care—'nurturance care,' which focuses on relationality, interdependence, and the emotional dimension of human connections; and 'reproductive care,' which refers to domestic labor and social reproduction. These two types of care are related to gender, race, and class inequality. In transnational contexts, nurturance care is claimed by privileged white women while reproductive care primarily involves low-wage workers or female migrants. This categorization provides an analytical tool for unpacking layers of care work and its intertwining with gender, race, and class.

This paper applies the broader notions of care, including both unpaid and paid care work in various family contexts, and analyzes how different types of care work are allocated and negotiated between

Thai women and their *farang* partners. We aim to examine how care responsibilities have intertwined with gender and social positions of women and men, such as economic status, culture, and expectations regarding gender roles and women's perspectives on care work. Also, we discuss how household conditions/contexts affect the allocation and negotiation of care work.

### Research Methodology

This paper draws on fieldwork in two Isan provinces—Udon Thani and Khon Kaen—where the number of *mia farang*<sup>1</sup> (women married to Western men) and their husbands is relatively high. Generally, Thai-Western couples settled in various villages, mostly in the natal homes of women under this relationship. To capture experiences of these couples this study applied “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus, 1995). This approach shifts from conventional anthropological studies of a single-sited location to multiple sites. Marcus points out various ‘tracking’ strategies for data collection, such as following the people, the stories, and the metaphors. Such methods allow us to gain insights into social phenomena that could not be fully understood within a single particular setting. In this research we followed *mia farang* and their husbands living in Pen district, Udon Thani province and Muang district, Khon Kaen province.

We conducted the fieldwork during October 2021-February 2022. It includes 32 informants—13 Thai-Western couples, five *mia farang* whose husbands were not present during the interview, and one English man who ended the relationship with his Thai wife but has lived in her natal village. The informants in Udon Thani—10 couples, five women and an English man—were introduced through the networks of one member of the research team, a local school teacher who has

<sup>1</sup> The Thai term *mia farang* refers to women married to Western men. This term inherits the stigmatized connotation associated with women engaging in sex-related jobs to serve American service men during the Vietnam War. This social stigma is reinforced by the fact that the route through which women in later generations initiated connections with Western men often involved the sex industry in transnational tourist destinations. Yet, there are many other channels to enter into these transnational partnerships. This paper applied *mia farang* as a rather neutral term.

promoted a cultural diversity curriculum in his school because of the substantial number of *luk krueng* (mixed children) who are pupils there. The other three couples in Khon Kaen were introduced through the networks of the first author, who has been conducting research on transnational marriage of Isan women since 2007.

The major data collection methods applied throughout the study were in-depth interviews and observation. We interviewed Thai women and their Western partners in several villages to gather their information on their experiences, opinions, life stories, and social relations; we also observed their daily life activities and interactions on such occasions as Christmas and other get-together events. Interviews with Thai wives were conducted in Thai, those with foreign men speaking English were in English, and those with the couples were both in Thai and English; in some cases, the wives helped in translating foreign languages other than English to Thai.

### Thai Women and *Farang* Men Informants: Background Information

The Thai women and *farang* men under the study have diverse backgrounds. At the time of the fieldwork, the ages of all 18 women ranged from 32 to 62, about half were in the 41-50 age bracket. Seventeen women had been in relationships with Thai men before being with *farang* partners. Six women had children with Thai partners; five women also had children born to *farang* fathers. More than half of these transnational relationships lasted 10-20 years. There is also a French man who met his wife in 1987 and has resettled in the village ever since. Twelve women had overseas experiences. Some had lived abroad for more than 20 years; others visited their partners' home countries every now and then and stayed for a few months on each trip. In terms of education, the number of women who completed a bachelor's degree, a secondary or vocational school, and primary education is almost the same. Women's occupations before marrying *farang* partners were quite diverse, including teaching, staff of private companies, petty traders,

maids, caretakers, overseas migrant workers, and jobs related to tourism—bar girls, waitresses, and masseuses.

In all cases Western partners are older than their Thai wives. Ages of 14 men ranged from 45 to 81; more than half of these men were in their 60s and 70s. Half of them were Europeans, the others were from the United States, England, Australia, and New Zealand. Eleven men had completed high school; others acquired vocational education, a bachelor's degree and a Ph.D. All men had been in relationships before marrying Thai wives and resettling in Isan; 11 of them had children from a previous relationship. Their occupations before resettling in Isan included blue-collar jobs (car/train drivers and mechanics) and professional work (chefs, hospital managers, journalists, teachers, engineers, technicians, and staff of a company working with the American military). Some also ran businesses such as house rental, real estate, and water amusement parks. Most of these men are pensioners who lived mainly in the villages. Some spent several months in the villages each year while maintaining their businesses or lives in their home countries.

### **Settling and Living in Thai Villages: Western vs. Local Cultures and Norms**

The recent studies presented the privileged lives and dominant power of Western men settling with Thai wives while the women experienced stress and loss of self in having to adapt to and serve their husbands' needs (Statham, 2020; Scuzzarello, 2020). In such contexts, Statham (2020:7) points out that men “can assert the ‘superiority’ of selective patriarchal, neo-colonial, and sometimes racist versions of ‘Western values’ that are dismissive of Thai-ness and women”. Such descriptions are valid, yet our findings reveal diverse experiences of women and men in these partnerships, which highlight not solely the dominant power of Western cultures/values on their relationships, but the contestations and negotiations between local and Western cultures over their lives and the arrangement of care at home.

Some couples like Kevin<sup>2</sup> (76) (Kevin [Pseudonyms], 2021), an American engineer who has resettled in Udon Thani with Poo (47)<sup>3</sup> (Poo [Pseudonyms], 2021), a divorced mother with two grown-up children from a local father, have encountered and adapted to cultural differences in their daily life. They run a shop selling second-hand goods. Poo also opened a small bakery shop, but it was closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Kevin does not like Thai cuisine, and prefers steak, pasta, and sandwiches. Poo usually cooked for him, sometimes they ate out. Living together for 13 years, Poo came to enjoy Western food and often joined Kevin's meals. Sometimes Poo had Isan food at her mother's house next door. Before the Covid-19 pandemic the couple had traveled to different tourist destinations in Thailand; in most of the trips they were joined by Kevin's friends and their families. For Poo such trips allowed her to have new experiences and engage in Western ways of life. In contrast, Kevin rarely joined Poo's family gatherings and communal activities. Yet on such occasions like Christmas, he always invited Poo's parents, siblings, and their families to celebrate at his home and gave everyone a gift. Poo related Kevin's limited associations with her natal family to his appreciation of privacy and his language limitations.

Kevin was not happy when Poo helped in taking care of her grandchildren for a day or two; let alone his support of her natal family. In talking with Poo about cultural obligations of ‘dutiful daughters’ which Thai women have to support their parents, she said that she is lucky as her parents and siblings can help themselves; they do not rely on her support. Interestingly, Kevin told us that he valued his partnership with Poo, but he married her not her family. Husband-wife relationships in this family reflect Kevin's dominant power while Poo adapted to Western cultures and values. In Statham's term (2020), Poo has lived an “imported assimilationism” life on a daily basis.

Poo's experiences in adapting to Western culture/values and her practice of catering to Kevin's needs are shared by some other *mia*

<sup>2</sup> All persons' names quoted are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> The figure after a person's name indicates her/his age at the time of the interviews.

*farang* we interviewed. Yet, there are *farang* men who were motivated to resettle in Isan villages because of their passion for Thai ways of life, food, and traditions, apart from their intimate relationships with Thai wives. Macro (61) (Macro [Pseudonyms], 2021), a train driver from London who has been with Nok (48) (Nok [Pseudonyms], 2021) for four years is a case in point. They met in England while Nok worked as a caretaker in an elderly center. Macro wanted to resettle in Thailand, so they built a house in Nok's natal village. Macro will sell his house in England after he retires. In talking about his motivations to live in the village, Macro said, "I love Thailand. Thai people are nice and friendly. Thai foods are delicious, I love sticky rice and grilled chicken." Based on his experiences of living in the village for several periods, Macro appreciated how villagers help each other and gladly engage in communal activities. Such engagements and social interactions are quite different from associations and ties in the neighborhood in London where he lives. These experiences evoked his nostalgia for his childhood in rural England and his warm family ties, which were missing after his ex-wife passed away and his two children left for overseas. Drawing on his experiences, Macro imagines his retirement life in the village with Nok.

Earl (75) (Earl [Pseudonyms], 2021), an American who served the military mission in Udon Thani during the Vietnam War (1965-1975) shared Macro's passion for Thai culture and people. Earl has been with Jum (45) (Jum [Pseudonyms], 2021), a mother of two children, for 17 years. He had a Thai partner while serving in the military, but the relationship ended when he returned to the United States after the war. Earl had worked in a petrochemical industry until he was 55 and resigned when many of his colleagues had health problems. Motivated by his experiences living in Thailand and his passion for Thai culture and the personality of Thai people, Earl came to Udon Thani and met Jum, a petty trader selling fried chicken and snacks in the village. Earl supported Jum's trade and also took care of her parents. He built a house for the parents and renovated the house where he lived with Jum and her children. With Earl's support, Jum was able to take care of her children

and conform with the Thai filial cultural obligations of 'dutiful daughters.' Yet, Earl felt uncomfortable with the local perception of him as a 'rich *farang*' which has raised expectations towards *farang* partners and brought tensions to bear on his part.

Narratives of these three couples reflect diverse patterns of contestation between local and Western cultures/values in motivating transnational partnerships and shaping men's and women's lives. For some couples, like Poo-Kevin and those in Statham's study (2020), Western cultures play a dominant part in their lives and women have to acculturate Western values and norms to serve their husband needs. Yet, other families, like Macro-Nok and Earl-Jum, Western partners accepted and adapted to Thai culture and traditions. Such recognition and adaptation have shaped their relationships and everyday lives. These findings reveal the diverse and complex relations of intercultural and transnational families.

### **Transnational Families and Care Work Practices: The Complexity of Gender Stereotypes**

Social relations in the contexts of interethnic and intercultural union are deeply inscribed by global inequalities produced by the intersections of gender, class, ethnic and national disparities (Constable, 2005a; Fresnoza-Flot, 2017). Studies on gender and transnational relationships repeatedly highlight the universal stereotype of gender roles—male-breadwinner and female-caregiver (Cheng, Yeoh and Zhang, 2014; Constable, 2005; Lapanun, 2019; Maher and Lafferty, 2014). Care provider roles often place women into a subordinate position and limit their agency. Facing pressure to acculturate their husband's needs can lead to psychological costs. Some women experienced alienation and loss of self (Statham, 2020). By contrast, breadwinner roles allow *farang* men to earn privileged lives (Scuzzarello, 2020). Our findings elaborate the women's experiences and gender stereotypes. Focusing on how care work is carried out within transnational families, we discovered diverse and flexible gender roles and women's negotiation. Specifically,

our study reveals the involvement of Western partners in certain care tasks at home which complicates the universal gender stereotype. The malleable gender roles are associated with women's negotiation and arrangement, on the one hand, and the household context on the other.

Poo and Kevin's relations represent the universal gender pattern—women perform care work to serve their husband and men provide financial support. Although this couple ran businesses—a bakery shop and a second-hand store—they did not earn much money, and thus, the major household income is from Kevin. According to the pattern, woman's care obligation secures her 'good' life in this case. In other cases, this responsibility may also ensure the lives of the woman's children and parents. This gender pattern is shared by other couples in our study. Yet, there are families in which a husband performed certain care work, such as cooking (Western food), cleaning, taking care of children or elderly living together in the household. These cases reveal not solely flexible gender roles, but also women's negotiations and strategies in managing care work within household.

Kai (52) (Kai [Pseudonyms], 2021), a local school teacher, has been with Spencer (72) (Spencer [Pseudonyms], 2021), her German husband, for almost 20 years. The couple live in Germany and run water amusement parks. Every year during the winter, they have spent a few months in Udon Thani where they built a house for themselves and another one for Kai's father next to theirs. They also brought a plot of paddy that the father takes care of. Spencer recounted that the water park started out of Kai's interest and she found all the information about this business. He gave her credit for this. The couple has worked hand-in-hand to develop their business. It went well, and thus they established the second park just before the Covid-19 pandemic. Spencer recalled that running business in two locations is hard and stressful work. So, he became concerned about health, food and exercise. He likes cooking and always cooks; Kai only cooks Thai dishes. Going to a gym is his routine and Kai joins him sometimes. Kai talked about cleaning house as a way of exercise and Spencer has shared this task. Gender division of labor in this family does not follow the stereotype of man

as breadwinner and woman as caretaker; rather both husband and wife have taken part in both the family business and domestic tasks.

In the contexts where there are woman's/man's relatives living with the mixed couple in the same household, domestic tasks may not always be allocated to women, but such tasks become an area of 'negotiation and arrangement' between Thai wives and *farang* partners. Laddawan and Will's experiences reveal the reconfigurations of gender and care allocation. Laddawan (57) (Laddawan [Pseudonyms], 2021), a divorced mother with a daughter and son, has been with Will (64) (Will [Pseudonyms], 2021), a German journalist who also runs a local publishing house with his friends, for 11 years. They met and lived together in Phuket for three years, then moved to settle in Khon Kaen in 2013. They bought 9 rai<sup>4</sup> of land and built a big house where Laddawan's son, his family with two children (4 years and 9 months), and Will's ailing brother have lived together. They grew a variety of fruit trees and vegetables and dug a pond to water the plants and raise fish. They had a small house and planned to build another one to rent out to foreigners who like to live close to nature. Will said that he wants to do agriculture, but has no experience. His major tasks are taking care of farm tools and water and electric systems and cutting weeds. Planting and taking care of the garden are left to his wife and her helper while Will has learned bit by bit. Will mentioned that he was very happy with his life in the village, it is not possible for him to own farm land in Germany.

Besides farm work, Will is also involved in certain care tasks. His daily routines include cleaning the house where he and Laddawan live, and where his brother lived while Laddawan's son's family took care of where they stay. Will always looked after the granddaughter when their parents were at work, making toys and playing with her. Helping his sick brother who needs assistance for daily routines is Will's responsibility while his wife and her son provided help when needed. Laddawan mentioned that women are socialized to take care of their family and husband; she does not mind taking care of Will and the whole

<sup>4</sup> 1 acre = 2.5 rai

family who live together. She cooked for everyone and managed household resources; yet she wanted all of them to take part in the housework. She had discussed this and the idea of give-and-take with Will. Whenever he was sick; she took good care of him, and she wanted the same. Lately, he took care of her when she was sick. Though caregiver is perceived as a female role, women also wanted to be cared for. Laddawan emphasized that talking and sharing with partners is an important means of arranging tasks in the household in the ways that do not give overburden either partner.

A flexible gender division of labor is also found in Pha and Mario's family. Pha (45) (Pha [Pseudonyms], 2021), a divorced mother whose daughter is under her ex-husband's care, met Mario (65) (Mario [Pseudonyms], 2021), a man from Switzerland who owned a souvenir shop, in Phuket in 2011 while Pha worked as a manager of a hotel massage shop. They got together every time Mario came to Phuket. Then Pha's mother (80) became sick Pha left her job and returned home to take care of her. Mario decided to follow Pha; he stopped his business in Switzerland and resettled in the village in 2019. His decision to live in the village involves multiple motivations: his relationship with Pha, his passion for the rural way of life and his interest in farming. Living in the village, Mario went to the garden every day; he took care of trees, vegetables, chickens, and fish. The couple did not sell their farm products, but gave them to relatives and neighbors. In talking about household tasks, Pha said that she always cooks, while Mario helps with cleaning the house and taking care of her mother, upon her request. Pha was interested in and took active roles in village development; she often joined community meetings and activities. Thus, Mario looked after her mother—serving her meals and helping with what she wanted—when Pha was not home and she could not get assistance from her siblings. Like Laddawan, Pha always discussed her desire to work for the village with Mario, as his support would facilitate her involvement. Although he did not totally agree, Mario helped in taking care of her mother when she joined the meetings/activities.

The ways in which care work are allocated to husbands and wives in the three families reflect the flexible gender roles and reveal the complexity of gender stereotypes in transnational partnerships. Such dynamics are associated with women's negotiations and arrangements. Drawing on Laddawan's and Pha's families, it is possible to hypothesize that malleable gender roles related to the context of domestic unit—extended families with members needing care—have encouraged men, *farang* partners in this case, to take part in certain domestic tasks.

### Care Work and Women's Perspectives

Women's unpaid domestic care is viewed in relation to their subordination and gender inequalities. In transnational contexts, gender, class, and race often intersect and influence the positions, choices, and practices of women and men, especially those in marital relationships (Duffy, 2005; Lafferty and Maher, 2020; Lapanun, 2019; Suppatkul, 2020). While this analysis is valid, it is also important to take women's perspectives into account so that we do not lose sight of how women make sense of their lives on their own terms (Lapanun, 2022). Women in our study did not refuse to accept the roles of caretaker, yet they perceived and managed care tasks differently. Several women talked about their involvement in domestic work to serve their *farang* partners from a transactional perspective in which their physical and emotional labor are exchanged for a secure life and material improvement. This perception is also found in other studies (Somnuek and Taotawin, 2021; Statham, 2020). For women like Laddawan and Pha, care work is a space of 'negotiation and arrangement' where they discussed and arranged with their partners the ways to get male involvement. Some women like Rommanee went further, as she related her engagement in both unpaid domestic tasks and paid care work to 'women's authority'—the ability to get her husband to do certain domestic tasks and to influence his work.

Rommanee (56) (Rommanee [Pseudonyms], 2021), a divorced mother with a son, has been married to Mark (71) (Mark [Pseudonyms], 2021), an employee of a company working with the American military, for 23 years. They met in Bangkok in 1997; then moved to the United States, where they lived for 20 years. In 2020, they returned to Thailand to resettle in Khon Kaen. Before they met, Rommanee worked as a maid and nanny for Singaporean and later Danish families. She met Mark through an introduction of her friends; they had been in contact for three years. Finally, she quit her job and resettled with Mark on a small island in the Pacific Ocean called Kwajalein, which is part of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, where its population consists of only those working for the American military. In the United States, Rommanee took care of domestic tasks and ran a childcare service at home. Her work experience in Bangkok allowed her to get permission to provide this service. The business went well. Mark knew how much she earned and he let her manage the household income. In terms of domestic work, Rommanee said that Mark always prepared his meals as he did not like Thai food. He also did the laundry and vacuumed the house while she took care of the rest of the household tasks. This pattern of work allocation is drawn on the fact that both husband and wife worked. Rommanee mentioned that if she did not work, she would not ask Mark to share housework, or would speak to him only in a way like: "Honey, can you bring me a glass of water, please." In this sense, Rommanee perceived her engaging in paid work as a way to negotiate domestic tasks and certain services with her husband.

In 2015, Rommanee returned to Thailand to take care of her mother. After her mother's death, she took a Thai massage course for three months. When she returned to the island, she transformed her house into a Thai massage shop. This business flourished; her customers included Mark's colleagues, some of whom whose children she looked after. Both massage and babysitter jobs allowed Rommanee to become close to Mark's colleagues and his boss. On a few occasions when Mark struggled with his work, Rommanee helped by getting suggestions from his colleagues/boss. She recalled a critical situation in which Mark

almost lost his job, but support and advice from his colleagues by way of Rommanee saved him. His boss, who had been her customer for several years, mentioned to Rommanee that because Mark was her husband, he would give him another chance. Mark agreed that his wife had good relationships with his boss and colleagues and that she was also a good mediator. In 2020, when Mark retired, they relocated to resettle in Khon Kaen, where Rommanee's sister and son's family also lived with them. The sister took major responsibility in the domestic work while others helped when needed. With their savings and Mark's pension, they can live a comfortable life, yet Rommanee continues working—making dresses to order.

Although the gender roles in Rommanee and Mark's family may not be a common pattern, this case speaks to the fact that gender and care are related in various ways, and that women's perceptions and involvement in care work are also diverse. Such involvement does not always result in pressure on women, but can sometimes lead to the negotiating of power as in Rommanee's experience.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explores how gender and care work are related in the context of transnational families. It illustrates the diverse patterns of care-task allocation in relation to gender, which elaborates the universal gender stereotype. Apart from gender, such patterns are also shaped by race, class, economic status, and the intersections of these factors as presented in previous studies (Ishii, 2016; Lapanun, 2019; Maher and Lafferty, 2014; Scuzzarello, 2020; Statham, 2020). This study highlights how women's responsibility on care work at home is shaped not solely by their involvement in paid work and financial dependency, but their perspective on care work and their practice of negotiation also plays a significant part in shaping care arrangements in the household.

Taking a closer look into transnational families settling in Isan, this study discloses women's perceptions and negotiations that have shaped the allocation of care work between wives and husbands. These

women perceive care work as a space of 'negotiation and arrangement' rather than repression. This perception facilitates women to discuss and share with their husbands their expectations, desires, and circumstances with the aim of getting the husband's support and involvement in domestic tasks. Conceptualizing care in the broader framework, including both unpaid domestic task and paid care work (Kim, 2016; Yeates, 2009), this study highlights two vital contributions to the literature: 1) care work can also facilitate women's ability to influence men's work in the public sphere—as the case of Rommanee and Mark—apart from getting them involved in domestic tasks; and 2) women are not free from the expected gender roles regardless of their economic security, yet financial dependency facilitates women's negotiation and authority. These findings add to the dynamics of gender roles in transnational families, which elaborates the stereotype of gender division of labor.

In addition, this study further illustrates that care allocation is also related to household contexts, specifically the extended families with children and elderly that encourage Western partners to take part in certain care tasks. Thus, we propose that in exploring gender roles and the experiences of women and men under transnational partnerships, it is necessary to focus on different layers of the phenomena, including macro (social, cultural, and political contexts), meso (family/household), and micro (individual). Focusing only on each one of them or on macro-micro interrelations would confine our understanding of the diverse and complex experiences of women and men in these relationships. Addressing the diverse experiences of women (and men) and various patterns of gender division of labor in the household (and society) is an important way to bring gender toward the core of international and transnational migration studies (Mahler and Pessar, 2006).

Furthermore, the everyday life of Thai-Western married couples is shaped and reshaped by both Western and local cultures, though in different ways and degrees. Husbands and wives under this partnership have different experiences in managing and adapting to Western/local

norms, values, and ways of life. The consequences of such cultural differences on relationships, task allocation, and the lives of women and men are also varied. As a constructionist concept, gender is associated with and influenced by social and cultural contexts. As this study focusses on experiences of Thai women and Western men settled in Isan, further research can look at women's and men's experiences in Western societies where many of them had lived before resettling in Isan. An important aspect of the examination should be on gender roles and relations in the family—the meso level—in relation to the macro and micro analysis. This information would broaden and deepen our understanding and knowledge of gender in relation transnational families/partnerships.

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### Interviews

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- Jum. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 21). **Interview**. Thai woman, Udon Thani province.
- Kai. (Pseudonym). (2021, December 16). **Interview**. Thai woman, settling in Germany, but returning to stay in Udon Thani province 2-3 months every year.
- Kevin. (Pseudonym). (2021, December 16). **Interview**. An American man, living in Udon Thani province.
- Laddawan. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 17). **Interview**. Thai woman, Khon Kaen province.
- Macro. (Pseudonym). England, (2022, January 30). **Interview**. An English man living in Udon Thani province.
- Mark. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 6). **Interview**. An American man living in Khon Kaen province.

- Mario. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 21). **Interview**. A Swiss man living in Udon Thani province.
- Nok. (Pseudonym). (2022, January 30). **Interview**. Thai woman, Udon Thani province.
- Pha. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 21). **Interview**. Thai woman, Udon Thani province.
- Poo. (Pseudonym). (2021, December 16). **Interview**. Thai woman, Udon Thani province. Rommanee. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 6). **Interview**. Thai woman, Khon Kaen province.
- Spencer. (Pseudonym). (2021, December 16). **Interview**. A German man settling in Germany, but returning to stay in Udon Thani province 2-3 months every year.
- Will. (Pseudonym). (2021, November 17). **Interview**. A German man living in Khon Kaen province.