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‘Global Householding’ in Mixed Families: The Case of Thai Migrant Women in Belgium

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Introduction

Research on labour migration has shown how migrants form and maintain households in different societies. Studies focusing on this ‘global householding’ (Douglass 2010) usually adopt a transnational perspective paying close attention to migrants’ cross-border practices and their socio-economic, political, ethnic, and familial ties. However, although marriage migration is on the rise, the global householding of migrant spouses in ‘mixed couples’, that is, with partners of ‘different nationalities and/or ethnicities’ (De Hart et al. 2013), remains inexplicably understudied. In what way do these migrants simultaneously ‘do family’ ‘here’ (with their

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nuclear family) and 'there' (with their natal family)? How does their global householding affect their lives?

In this chapter, we address these questions through a case study of Thai women in Belgium, who mostly migrate to this country for the purpose of family formation or family reunification. These women's migration is part of the 'foreign husband (*phua farang*) phenomenon' (Sunanta 2009) in Thailand, which mainly concerns women from the north-eastern region of the country called *Isan*. Thai women migrants in Belgium are concentrated in Flanders (the Flemish-speaking region of the country) and in Brussels (the capital). They usually meet their Belgian partners through the Internet, when their partner goes to Thailand for travels, or through the matchmaking efforts of one of their family members already living in Belgium (Heyse et al. 2007). Many Thai women marry Belgian men for overlapping reasons such as falling in love or desiring to improve the economic condition of their natal family in Thailand (Fresnoza-Flot 2017). In 2013, there were 3505 Thai nationals in Belgium, and 84 per cent of them were women (DEMO and CGKR 2013).

To understand the gender and intergenerational dynamics in the mixed families of these migrants, we examine their global householding using Baldassar and Merla's (2014) 'care circulation' analytical framework. This framework refers to 'the reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies' (p. 25). Working on care relations between adult migrants and their 'left-behind' elderly relatives, these authors found that various forms of support (practical, emotional, material, and physical) flow across distances and national borders, both inter- and intra-generationally. This 'care circulation' plays a key role in the maintenance of 'familyhood' and cultural belonging in transnational families, binding together kin members in reciprocal, multidirectional, and asymmetrical care relations. Their form and intensity largely results from a dialectical relationship between the capacity of family members to contribute to these flows, their culturally defined sense of obligation to care for their relatives, and their family relations history over time (Baldassar et al. 2007). By using the care circulation framework, we highlight in this chapter the solidarity, tensions, power relations, and negotiations within mixed families that characterize their transnational lives.

In the following sections, we review previous studies on global householding in mixed families to illuminate this chapter's originality and empirical contributions. We also provide a short background about the culturally defined filial duties in Thailand to understand the dynamics of care circulation within the large family circle of Thai women. We then explain our methodology and present our sample. After this, we examine Thai migrant women's major strategies for global householding and its effects on their lives as spouses 'here' and daughters 'there'. We conclude by identifying the key contributions of our chapter in the field of transnational family and care studies.

Theoretical Background: Care Circulation in Mixed Families

The dynamics surrounding the maintenance of intergenerational solidarities and filial duties in a migratory context are central to the care circulation framework. This analytical lens largely contributed to embedding nuclear family relations and mother-child dyads (a key focus of the global care chains literature) into a vast array of care relations within transnational family networks (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2015), making more visible the active contribution of children, men, and elders in care dynamics. It also highlights how cultural differences between home and host societies influence the way family members care for (and about) each other in a transnational context (Tronto 2015). Although this literature specifically aims at covering a vast range of family situations and migratory statuses, the care circulation dynamics and negotiations within mixed couples with one migrant member remain incompletely studied.

A few studies on mixed couples demonstrate how migrant spouses try to meet the various expectations of their newly founded family and of their natal family back home. Striking a balance in fulfilling these expectations can be challenging. For example, Malagasy women married to French men attempt it by securing their own source of income and by negotiating with their husbands (Cole 2014). Filipino women of working-class background in bi-national unions in France also take up paid

employment and try to convince their husbands of the importance of supporting their family back home (Fresnoza-Flot 2017). Finally, Vietnamese women in Taiwan send remittances back home and invite their relatives to visit them in Taiwan for short periods of time (Iwai 2013). In these studies, the capacity of migrant spouses to carry out global householding appears to depend on their family situation (whether they are mothers or not) and on their ability to negotiate with their husbands and to earn their own livelihood (Bélanger et al. 2011). Those who are not able to satisfy their obligations towards their natal family experience degraded social status in their country of origin (Yea 2008). Unresolved issues over the remittances sent by migrant spouses to their kin back home result in conjugal conflicts (Yea 2008). However, all these studies were conducted outside the care circulation framework and did not consider the role of other family members (husbands, parents, siblings) in the global householding of migrant spouses. In our chapter, we will attempt to fill this gap by taking into account the way in which care circulates within the large family circle of migrant women.

Methodology

The data presented in this chapter come from a larger research project (2012–2015) conducted by Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot (AFF) on children of Filipino-Belgian and Thai-Belgian couples in Belgium. This study adopted several complementary and mainly qualitative data-gathering methods such as semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, informal conversations, children drawings, photographs, small-scale surveys, and documentary research (including websites of Filipino and Thai migrants).

AFF's 2-year fieldwork in Belgium, Thailand, and the Philippines resulted in 143 semi-structured interviews. The present chapter specifically analyses the data concerning Thai migrant women, which comprised 19 interviews and observation notes gathered during fieldwork in Belgium and in Thailand. To supplement these data, we also draw from interviews with five Belgian men married to Thai women. All these respondents were met through snowball sampling with the assistance of key informants: a leader of a Thai association in Belgium and two Thai

Buddhist monks. Observations were conducted in two Thai Buddhist temples in Belgium. AFF also conducted observations during homestays in two mixed families of Thai migrant women to analyse the interactions and way of life of these families.

Of the Thai respondents, 17 had children, in six cases from their previous relationship with a Thai man. Most of the women interviewed were in their forties and had tertiary-level education. Sixteen lived with their Belgian partner and the rest were separated or divorced. At the time of their interviews, the respondents had resided in the country for an average of 19 years. All of them had a regular migration status and 17 had acquired Belgian nationality. Throughout this chapter, we use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity and privacy of these respondents and their Belgian spouses. Due to space constraints, we will build here more specifically on three case studies to illustrate our major findings.

Results and Discussion: Thai Women's Strategies, Couple Negotiations and Larger Family Dynamics in the Context of the *bun khun*

Thai women's culturally defined sense of obligation to care for their native family members can best be understood through the cultural concept of *bun khun*, a 'system of moral indebtedness on which Thai parents rely for support and care in their old age' (Redmond 2002, p. 234).

Bun khun emphasizes children's duty to repay their parents' kindness, care, and love. A son can repay his moral debts to his parents by entering the monastic order for a short period of time or by becoming a monk, whereas a daughter can do so only through 'physical and material' support to her parents (Mills 2008). This explains why the socialization of children in Thai families differs along gender lines: for example, daughters learn to perform household chores and care for younger siblings. By taking care of their parents' well-being and insuring their good health, children get *bun* (merit) in return (Rice 1991). However, if children neglect their parents, this 'results in sickness' for the latter and '*bab* (demerit)' for the former (Rice 1991).

In the context of migration, fulfilling one's filial duties to ones' parents by providing them direct material and physical support represents a challenge. Maintaining households 'here' and 'there' is a potential cause of conflicts in conjugal relations and is therefore the subject of intense negotiations between Thai women and their husbands. Hence, it is important for these women to obtain the agreement of their Belgian husbands in order to successfully fulfil their daughter role in Thailand. To satisfy their husband's expectations regarding their 'local' role as mothers and wives, the women interviewed developed three strategies: accomplishing a traditional reproductive role at home, earning their own livelihood, and tapping their family networks of solidarity.

Engaging in a Traditional Division of Productive/ Reproductive Labour

Mai (43 years old) arrived in Belgium in 2001 and got married to Marc (44 years old), whom she had met through her sister and her Belgian brother-in-law. Both Mai and Marc were divorced and each had children from a previous relationship. In 2002, Marc helped Mai reunite with her son in Belgium. Mai came from a family of four, two sisters and two brothers. Her sister and she were the only ones in their family to migrate and live abroad. Mai's two brothers worked in the Thai army and had a comfortable life in Thailand. At the time of the interview, Mai's parents were already in their 80s. On the other hand, Marc had a brother and a sister in Belgium, and his parents lived independently from them. Learning from his past experience with his former wife, Marc wished that Mai would stay at home and be a full-time housewife. This was a source of tensions in their relationship, as Mai wanted to fulfil her filial obligations by engaging in paid work to provide financial support to her aging mother. Mai told Marc that she would accept to stay at home only if he committed to take care of her mother. So, the couple came up with an agreement: Mai would not work, but it would be Marc who would be sending financial support to Mai's parent. Although Marc does not see his natal family very often and does not provide financially for them, he understands his wife's viewpoint: 'I immediately did [fulfil my part] because the positive feeling 'she's staying home for me' was stronger than my reluctance to help'. Mai seems happy

with her life: 'some people want more. That's not me. I'm happy with what I have'. Marc too appears satisfied with his life with Mai: 'I like [that] she stays home and I work'.

The case of Mai and Marc illustrates a largely tension-free participation in the circulation of care, secured by the common decision to engage in a traditional male-breadwinner/female-caretaker model (Lewis 2001), considered by both as a win-win situation since it allows them to combine their respective expectations (and obligations) in terms of local and transnational care-giving. During the interview, the couple expressed their contentment with their blended, mixed, and transnational family life. However, their story appears exceptional in this study: the other Thai respondents generally rely on themselves to fulfil their daughter role transnationally, either because their husband refuses to support their transnational duties or because they want to be economically independent from him. In fact, sending remittances to Thailand was a major cause of conjugal conflicts in the mixed families that participated in this study because of each partner's normative beliefs and practices concerning marriage and the family. The Belgian husbands in this study usually expected their Thai wives to entirely focus their attention on their own local nuclear family (either on a full-time basis or in combination with paid work) and struggled to accept the fact that their nuclear family's economic situation could be negatively affected by the sending of remittances to Thailand. Their Thai wives, on the other hand, felt the need to support their parents, who expect them to possess the material capabilities to fulfil their *bun khun* obligations thanks to their migration to an economically developed country.

The financial expectations linked with filial piety weighs heavy when Thai women depend completely or partially on their Belgian husband's economic support. Like Mai, these women must negotiate their participation in transnational care circulation with their husband. Those who cannot reach a consensus compensate for not sending remittances by maintaining regular communication with their parents through the Internet or telephone. Some of them also borrow money from other Thai migrants before a visit back home, using this money to portray themselves

as 'successful migrants' to their friends and family in Thailand. Suksomboon (2007) also observes such behaviour among Thai migrant women in the Netherlands who 'generally do not tell their parents and relatives in Thailand about the reality and the hardship of their life' in their receiving country to 'save face' (p. 7). Visits back home also offer Thai women opportunities to buy a piece of land and/or start building a new house. Interestingly, these projects are mostly financed by their Belgian husbands who, even if refusing to send remittances to Thailand, enjoy holidays in this country and consider moving there permanently after retirement.

Thai migrants who engage in transnational care practices with the moral and financial support of their husbands strive to give something back in return to their partners, by providing various forms of care to their husbands' relatives. For example, Farung (43 years old) took care of her husband's aged parents by cooking for them and by regularly visiting them at their place. Nin (44 years old) drives her aged parents-in-law to the hospital or the shopping mall when necessary. Other women strongly encourage their husbands to participate in important family gatherings (birthdays, wedding of a relative, etc.) with their Belgian relatives. These women's efforts to return the favour to their husbands seem indispensable to reach a certain 'balance' within their large family circle, between their transnational and local care practices. Women who had difficulties getting their husbands' agreement over sending remittance to Thailand, who did not want to rely on them, resort to other strategies as we will see in the following sections.

Securing Care Circulation Through Paid Work: Earning and Using One's Own Money

Within our sample, several women tried to meet gendered expectations and familial obligations 'here' and 'there' via paid work, a situation that was an important source of tensions with their husbands.

Jean: 'I always understand it [sending remittance], but I found it a bit…'

Kanya: 'I never asked you to pay. I was always the one who took charge.'
Jean: 'but in the end, the demand [for money] comes from them [Kanya's mother and son]. No matter, no matter if it is you or [me], you let the household money go'
Kanya: 'no, it's my money that I earned and that I send them. I never … we can't mix it, because there is the money of the husband who works, [and there is] that of the wife'.

The dialogue above illustrates the tension around remittances that often arises in Thai-Belgian couples. Kanya (43 years old) used to sell Thai dishes, and her earnings went to Thailand to support the needs of her mother and of her son from a previous relationship. Her husband did not agree with this because her mother had a history of misusing the remittances she received from her daughter. Kanya explained: 'My son was very small at that time, and so she [her mother] had always money and everything. Instead of doing something [good] with the money, she spent without thinking, incurred debts and everything, and it was me who paid'. Kanya explained her behaviour by emphasizing that she used the 'money that [she] earned' and not that of her husband to fulfil her family obligations. By differentiating her 'husband's money' from hers, she tried to reduce the tension in her couple. This strategy allows many Thai women like Kanya to maintain their conjugal relations while being 'good daughters' to their parents back home.

Among the 19 Thai respondents, 12 were employed part-time or full-time. The amount of money remitted depends on their kin's needs and their level of income in Belgium. One woman sent 200 euros per month to cover her sick father's medical expenses. Divorced respondents who worked part-time and/or did not receive financial support from their ex-partner tended to send only a few times per year like Nom (37 years old): 'I try twice a year, 1000 euros something, at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year'. The sending of remittances usually stops when Thai women's 'left-behind' children reunite with them in Belgium or when their parents pass away.

Paid work also allows some Thai respondents to invest in Thailand, most often with the husband's financial contribution as explained in the previous section. For example, Kanya's husband bought a house in

Thailand to house her mother and son. Farung and her husband bought land in Bangkok to build a family house. Seven other respondents bought either a piece of land or a house in Thailand. These properties are taken care of by the migrants' siblings and often become the residence of the parents or a sibling caretaker. These family members also receive financial support from the Thai migrant, notably in times of sickness and during special events like Mother's Day or New Year. Remittances and investments bring positive reactions from relatives in Thailand, who highly regard both the Thai migrant and her husband.

Relying on One's Family Networks of Solidarity to Become a 'Good Wife' and a 'Pious Daughter'

Thai respondents who have limited income rely on their natal family network to save their face and fulfil their *bun khun* duties back home. This network of solidarity partly alleviates these women's care obligations.

> Piti (50 years old) arrived in Belgium when she was 23 years old after marrying her first Belgian husband whom she met in Thailand. She was a full-time housewife at that time and could not send any financial help to her parents: 'Before, I wasn't working. It was very difficult. I didn't send [money] because they [her parents] understood my situation.' During this period, Piti mainly looked after the child she had with her Belgian husband. When she found a job in a nursing home, her income was insufficient to send remittances. When her marriage broke down, Piti shared child custody with her ex-husband, but did not receive any food allowances from him and struggled financially. Piti did not conceal her situation to her parents, which facilitated her life: 'my father always says, "did you have enough money to eat? Do you have something?" [This is] because he thinks so much about me'. Piti compensated by maintaining regular communication with them. She was partly relieved from the obligation to provide for her ageing parents thanks to her sister who lived in Thailand and was married to a Norwegian man, and who provided their parents a comfortable life in Thailand. According to Piti's husband, Robert (51 years old): 'now it's easy. The Norwegian guy, he's very rich and he takes care of the

family in Thailand, and I take care of the family here'. Another sister of Piti who was working in Sweden also provided financial assistance to their parents. Piti regularly communicated with her sisters about the matters affecting their parents.

Networks of family members living in different places and having stable financial resources offer women like Piti a possibility to become 'good daughters', even indirectly. As Kilkey and Merla (2014) note, the transnational circulation of care does not only take the form of direct provision of various forms of support (either physically or from afar), but also consists in coordinating the provision of support from a distance, or delegating this provision to other members of the network. In many ways, Piti fulfilled her filial duties 'by proxy', via the active participation of other family members who may, in some instances, act in her name and represent her.

Some aging parents also participate in the circulation of care by bequeathing land to their children: as Piti confided '[we bought a house] in December, then we bought a land in June, and I inherited [a piece of] land from my parents. […] We don't have money in Thailand, but we have a lot of land'. If the eldest brother or sister has insufficient resources, other siblings volunteer to take care of aging parents. Sometimes, birth order determines family obligations. For example, Pim (45 years old) who was the youngest of six children explained that her eldest siblings 'have more responsibilities. They have to answer to the [needs of] the family, but I don't have that'. When all siblings have good economic resources, they tend to all take a share of family obligations, as the following case illustrates.

Ruang (43 years old) has a youngest sister in Germany who got married to a German; their only brother died long ago. As their parents are divorced and their mother remarried a Belgian man, they agree that when their mother will become frail, Ruang will look after her given their residential proximity. On the other hand, her sister helped their father reunite with her in Germany and takes care of him there. The absence of natal family members in Thailand prompted Ruang and her Belgian husband to reinforce their ties with Ruang's kin. When the couple bought a house in Thailand, they asked Ruang's aunt to look after it.

The closely-knit kin networks in Thailand facilitate care circulation within migrants' large family circle. Belgian spouses appreciate this aspect, notably when their communal properties in Thailand are well looked after by their Thai wives' kin. This motivates them to continuously support their wives' efforts to care for their family and also to invest in Thailand. Farung and Andrei (49 years old), for instance, bought another piece of land in Thailand for their Belgian aging parents. They also maintain communication with Farung's family, as Andrei explained: 'I speak English with her [sister], we try to keep contact [via Skype]'.

Many Thai respondents reported that their husbands had almost no contact with their kin and were not emotionally close with their siblings. Among the Belgian husbands interviewed, three had regular contact with their natal family members and cared for them together with their Thai wives. For instance, Andrei and Farung lived near his parents, which facilitated their everyday interactions. When Andrei's father fell sick, the couple easily managed to divide their time between their son and his parents. Later when Andrei's father was hospitalized, the couple regularly visited him in the hospital. Likewise, Julien and his wife Ratree (both 42 years old) resided near his parents, who looked after the couple's children when necessary. Julien helped his father manage their family business, and this later became his full-time employment. Jean and Kanya also actively participated in the care circulation dynamics within their 'Belgian' kin circle. They regularly attended family gatherings and Jean's mother and sister kept constant phone communication with them. These cases show that some Belgian husbands are also involved in care flows, both locally (with their own relatives) and transnationally (by taking part in their wives' global householding).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to contribute to one of the major topics of this book, that is, the gender and intergenerational dynamics organizing social relations within multi-ethnic/transnational families, and their influence on migration experiences. We have done this by focusing on the situation of female migrants who face the difficult challenge of trying to be 'good daughters' for their ageing parents back home without com-

promising their couple relationships with their non-migrant spouse. In this conclusion, we would like to raise four important points.

First, our results partly echo a long tradition of feminist thought that identifies marriage as a site of exploitation for women, particularly when these either struggle to access the labour market and/or are strongly expected to fulfil a traditional gender role within their household (Delphy 1998). Many Thai women in our sample are located in a system that makes them financially dependent on their husbands, and that weights heavy on their capacity to accomplish their filial duties by reducing both their financial capacity to support their parents from a distance and their bargaining power for negotiating the allocation of the households' budget with their husbands.

Second, this study brings to the fore the important role that migrants' partners play in the maintenance of transnational family relations. They do not only influence the migrant's capacity to support her distant relatives but also play a key role in shaping and supporting the migrant's long-term investments in her home country (benefitting both the couple and its relatives there), as well as future possibilities of re-settlement in Thailand.

Third, the various strategies of Thai women to combine their local and transnational family lives show that these women, even when in an extremely disadvantaged position within their mixed household in Belgium, still play an active role and try to overcome the obstacles they face by negotiating their local and transnational engagements and duties with their husbands. When these negotiations fail, these women resort to various strategies (seeking financial autonomy, drawing a clear distinction between their income and the household budget, tapping their transnational networks of solidarities) to 'save face' and partly fulfil their *bun khun*.

Finally, this study underscores the need to further develop our theoretical and empirical knowledge on the inter-connections between the various circuits of care in which migrants are simultaneously involved. In this particular case, women (and their husbands, to various extents) are involved both in a circuit of care with their 'native' extended transnational family network and in another circuit of care with their husbands' relatives. The fact that some Thai women feel the need to thank their husbands for supporting their transnational care practices suggests that

these two forms of engagements (local and transnational) do not function autonomously and separately, but are instead inter-connected.

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