

[The Good Daughters of Isaan \(2\) - Challenging the “victim” narrative of mia farang](#)

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The number of Isaan women migrating to live with their husbands in the West and more recently the remarkably rising number of Western men settling down in Isaan has not been lost on the government. Is the concern of the government warranted? Recent research suggests that Isaan women have overcome the limited choices facing them when they marry a Western man. Far from being victims, these women have shown agency over their own lives and improved the situation of themselves and that of their families.

By David Streckfuss

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Western men settling down in the Northeast with their Isaan wives increased from less than a thousand to almost 25,000. Many thousands more of Isaan women moved to Europe, Australia, or the United States and sent money back home.

In purely economic terms, the association between Western men and Isaan women had a palpable effect on the region as a whole. In 2004, [government research asserted](#) that some 15,000 Isaan women were involved in a relationship with a Western man and sent some 1,464,000,000 baht back to their families (\$44,360,000 USD) each year, or an average of about 97,600 baht (\$3,148 USD) per family.

This is no piddling amount. In 2004, the country's [average household income](#) was 40,000 baht. The economic contribution by these women was equal to the average income for 36,552 families. One news report pointed out that contributions of Isaan women married to Westerners [provided more than six percent](#) of Isaan's total economic output for the year at a time when [international remittances for the country](#) as a whole was only about one percent.

Ten years later in 2014, the [contribution of these transnational couples](#) in Isaan had almost increased seven-fold, to 8,670,000,000 baht (\$279,677,419 USD). With an [average yearly household income](#) for Thailand at 100,500 baht, these contributions could have provided the average yearly

income to more than 86,000 families in the Northeast.

Certain villages or subdistricts began to become known for their connection to Western men and [attracted media interest](#). In one village in Roi Et, dubbed “Swiss Village,” more than 18 percent of the households had a Western son-in-law. Although most of the women lived with their husbands in Switzerland, their remittances had benefitted these rural communities.

In another area with a high number of Western men married to Isaan women in Nong Khai, a kindergartener was quoted as saying, “I want to be a *mia farang* when I grow up” in a 2008 *Khom Chat Luek* article.

Readers were scandalized and government officials and university lecturers expressed outrage, worrying that “the emphasis on economic security signals the decline of the family institution in Isaan.”

The *mia farang* who read the article were similarly scandalized. They wondered why the article never mentioned the good they had been able to do for their families. They argued that they had sought transnational marriages because of “family crises, the irresponsibility of local men and a desire to take care of their parents.”

Pacharin Lapanun, author of one of the most detailed studies on the phenomenon of *mia farang* in Isaan and lecturer at Khon Kaen University, relates in her book about how the central government, now alerted to the “problem” of the *mia farang* phenomenon, worried that these areas were losing their Thai soul and damaging local traditions and family values. One academic researcher worried that hamburgers would replace Isaan food in these villages at risk.

The government researched the issue and concluded that the problem was human trafficking, suggesting that from the government’s point of view, “there was a connections between the trafficking of women and current transnational marriages.”

One local woman who attended an information session arranged by the government reported that she was confused. The session emphasized how Western men were used “to lure women into transnational prostitution”—an issue unrelated to her experience or that of other *mia farang* in the area. She understood that the heart of being a *mia farang* was that these women had provided their parents with a better life.

For those with a Bangkok-centric, nationalist bent, the spread and influence of the *mia farang* phenomenon causes unease. Every so often, this discomfort results in a Bangkok person publishing something that questions the character of these Isaan women. Such was the case of the patronizing, sexist, and racist editorial published last December by the *Matichon Weekly* that caused an uproar among Isaan women.

Highlighting the agency of *mia farang*

In the 1980s and 90s, much of the social and academic discourse about *mia farang* was based on “the widespread assumption in Western countries, as well as urban dwellers in Bangkok, that Thai brides of farangs are young naive women who fall prey to the international bride trade or sex traffickers.” The most common stereotype was the woman was a “prostitute” and the man a “sexpat.”

In their [2013 article](#), Sirijit and Angeles emphasize that Isaan women were fleeing a poverty-stricken, agricultural life in the Northeast and were more often than not single mothers left by unreliable local men. “These women are marginalized at multiple levels because of their gender,

ethnicity, class, and/or nationality," the authors write.

With few options, these women migrate to central Thailand and find a place in a global working class. For those who become involved in tourist entertainment spots, many of them become part of the economy of the "global intimate," performing "intimate labors"—skillfully "using emotions, care work, [and] social/emotional intelligence"—and making use of Thai women's exoticized image on the world stage.

For the authors, these women try to overcome their marginalized status and their limited opportunities to climb up the social ladder by marrying Western men.

This has all been possible under the current global economy. But while the profits of tourism have generally fallen in the hands of "transnational corporations, airlines, and hotel chains," Isaan women have been able to siphon off a fair share of the wealth back into Isaan.

By fulfilling their role as "good daughter" and "generous community member," these "brave" women are seen in a more positive light by Isaan society. Marrying a Westerner in Isaan has become more accepted and carries less stigma than in previous decades, as reflected in the words of a male local leader in Isaan:

"The women (mia farang) cannot choose the place and social location they were born into but they can choose where they want to be (physically and socially), and as long as their choice makes them and their families happy and secure, I have nothing against it."

These women, the authors say, should not be looked on with suspicion. Instead, they show how people "at the lowest social strata continue to struggle, evolve, adjust, and invent ways to improve their lot, despite limited resources."

The good daughters of Isaan

Thompson, Pattana, and Suriya also point out that previous research has tended "to stigmatize women in particular but also men as forever marked as 'former sex workers' (or 'sexpats') as if that were the only part of their long life experiences that matter."

They instead want to "open up a wider discussion" on how the status of mia farang and "the tens of thousands of farang men settling down in Isan" have been transformative for not just the women, but for their families and the social and economic relations of the local community as well.

Isaan has traditionally been matrilineal in the sense that land and wealth are largely controlled by women. When married, the families of the husband not only have to pay a "bride price," but they lose their sons as well. Typically, new son-in-laws joined the woman's family and were valued for "the productive labor and material resources they can bring to the family and village into which they marry." As such, daughters, as compared to sons, have been highly valued but they are also subject to higher expectations for taking care of the family. Indeed, write the authors, "the primary cultural expression of matrilineality is the filial duty of daughters toward parents."

Keyes notes that in the early 1980s, there were as many as 500,000 to 700,000—3.3 to 4.7 percent of Thai women of working age—when Thailand was known as the "brothel of the world." He argues that these women came from "rural families in deep financial trouble" and entered "into sexually exploitative relations with men." Such a woman, although carrying out their role as dutiful daughter, often found "the benefits...hardly offset the degradation that is associated with playing her role."

Research by Pasuk shows that commercial sex workers in that period recognized their role as dutiful

daughters. She remarks that of those she surveyed, the majority recognized their role “as family bread-winner,” “retained good links with their families,” and sent money back to their families.

As agricultural income declined, Isaan families became increasingly dependent on remittances from family members who had migrated to urban areas within Thailand or abroad, part of a pattern that “has expanded from the rural-local, to the urban-national, to the transnational.” In a more monetized economy, the emphasis on the potential labor of son-in-laws changed to “money and other material resources they can contribute.”

Marrying a Western man became an “important strategy for women in fulfilling this filial duty” and a way of strengthening the status of these women. The Western men were part of “reproducing Isaan matrilineal family and kinship relationships, as in-marrying sons-in-law who provide material and financial contributions as well as non-material care work,” such as support for the children the wife brings into the marriage.

Isaan-Western couples in decades past relocated to the husband’s home country and sent remittances back to their families in Isaan. But now there is a “proliferation” of these couples settling in Thailand and more often than not in Isaan, which, in a way, is keeping alive the tradition of in-marrying sons-in-law.

Because a Western son-in-law often can provide a stable source of Isaan family income, families compare to to “winning a lottery prize”-or even better, as instead of a one-time payout, the Western son-in-law has the potential to continue giving.

Although still subject to some stigmatization, marrying a Westerner “has become a wide-spread, cultural aspiration among Isaan women” that “is widely-i.e. ‘culturally’-recognized as something that many women desire.”

The central government has identified this widespread desire of Isaan women as an issue of concern and instituted perhaps well meaning but certainly misconceived efforts to address “the problem.” Rather than a problem, the advent of the Western son-in-law often can advance the status of Isaan women, albeit within cultural and gendered limits. In most cases, Isaan women are able to meet their filial duties, making them “the good daughters of Isaan.”

In tomorrow’s segment of our series, we look into the status of mia farang, the role of local men, and provide a reconsideration of “love” in “Marriage to a Western man as an act of empowerment for Isaan women?”

[The Good Daughters of Isaan \(1\) - Introduction to the series](#)

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