

[The Good Daughters of Isaan \(9\) - Taking the Risk: Isaan women's migration to Europe has become more risky](#)

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In 2003, I started working as an anthropologist among Thai migrant women in Denmark in the rural area of Thy and in a small Thai village close to Nakhon Ratchasima. Thy is home to more than 900 Thai women, most of them from Isaan. Twenty-five years ago, there were only a few Isaan women in Thy—one of them was Sommai, who met Niels when she was a sex worker in Pattaya, married him, and moved with him to Thy.

In the many years I have known Sommai, she has built a large concrete house in her village, paid for with the money she has earned by working in a metal factory in Denmark. She has taken her extended family out of poverty and secured them a better life.

Victims or gold diggers?

Isaan women began migrating to Europe and Denmark primarily via marriage and short-term sex work migration in the late 1990s. Through remittances (the money migrants send home), they financed houses, education, and healthcare at home. While there is no precise data on Thai women's remittances specifically, [data from the World Bank](#) shows that remittance payments to Thailand have increased significantly in the past ten years, and in most countries in Europe, 85 percent of Thai immigrants are women.

Often, the migrants' families in Isaan can afford to build houses, pay for better healthcare and education through the money sent by the daughters, mothers, or sisters in Europe. These situations emphasize that the women who migrate abroad from Isaan often contribute to economic prosperity for their families and their home villages. These are all things that one could argue should be provided for by the Thai state, not by poor women.

Yet, Isaan migrant women are often described judgmentally as "gold diggers," looked down upon by Thais and others as only doing it for the money, sex slaves, victims of trafficking, and as women who are passively "bought" and exploited by Western men. Rarely are they understood or celebrated as powerful women who, despite very difficult circumstances, migrate to Europe in a deliberate decision to support their families and find work.

Some marry out of love, in the hope of a caring marriage, and others in a search for work and a

better life. Some are looking for love and money at the same time. These choices are not without consequences.

Migration is most often depicted as frozen moments in time: migrants scaling border fences, clinging to capsized boats, or waiting in line at immigration authorities in Europe. These moments are pivotal in documenting the perils of migration—but to fully understand the circumstances and choices that lead to migration—and the consequences of migrating—we need to follow the lives of migrants over the course of time.

Sommaï, after 27 years abroad, feels torn between Denmark and her Isaan home. She doesn't want to die in Denmark and Niels does not want to live in Thailand.

Another example is the particular pain and heartbreak that migrant mothers face. Some women end up mothering via Facetime and Messenger. Their efforts to create a better life for their children eventually leads them to being separated across borders.

Yet, the problem with viewing Isaan women, and women migrants in general, as merely victims or “gold diggers” is that it overlooks their obvious capacity to make meaningful decisions in matters that concern their own lives, and those of their families. It also overlooks the huge economic contributions that migrant women make to their families, as well as the structural conditions, such as unemployment in Isaan, that they seek to circumvent.

The dominant victim discourse fails to see how Isaan women's migration to Europe is part of a larger global tendency of women as migrants—and as agents of change in their own lives. Worldwide, women constitute slightly less than half of migrants, and migration of women from the Global South to Europe is commonly understood as part of a broader global feminization of migration (domestic workers, marriage migrants, and sex workers) where a particular burden is put on women to ensure development and the well-being of families in the Global South through migration.

However, the significance of gender plays out in a multitude of ways. The need for female migrant breadwinners increases when male breadwinners lose their job as day laborers, become sick and can't afford medication, or struggle with alcohol or drug addiction. In Thailand alone, it is estimated that the coronavirus pandemic could leave up to eight million people unemployed, which, in turn, might encourage more women to migrate abroad.

Risky routes to Europe

Emphasizing the agency of the women does not deny that some of the women end up in difficult or exploitative situations, like some of the many women I have met in my work. In areas that have depended on migration for survival, such as Isaan, the women now migrate in more risk-filled ways. They borrow more money for the journey, which then has to be paid off in Europe, before they can start sending money back. This means that some female migrants turn to the sex industry. As a consequence, some Thai women end up working in brothels in Europe in order to make money fast. The deeper underground a woman lives, for example working alone in a brothel, the more money she is promised to earn.

Isaan women take ever greater risks to release themselves or their families from the clutches of debt. They acquire more and more debt in order to migrate to Europe to make money to send back to their families. Entire debt industries in Isaan profit from this, and the women often take new loans to pay off old ones.

Stricter migration laws don't discourage Isaan women from travelling. Rather over the years, migration to Europe has entailed more, specifically gendered, and indebted forms of high-risk types

of migration. Thus their migration is not hindered but rerouted and prolonged through riskier routes—for instance through the sex industry in Pattaya, short term visas to Eastern Europe, contacts to sketchy agents in Bangkok—before they eventually reach Europe.

The stricter the EU border laws become, the more money the women have to borrow to make the journey and the longer and harder they have to work to pay it off. I've met very few Isaan women who would not have preferred to stay in Isaan if they had decent jobs, access to good health care, housing, and education for their children.

Neither would they make risky journeys if they could more easily apply for work visas abroad. So before they are judged for their actions, we need to acknowledge the limited possibilities, the difference migration can make for a better life, and the strength of Isaan women on the move.

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