

Guri Tyldum and Marianne Tveit

## Someone who cares

A study of vulnerability and risk  
in marriage migration from Russia  
and Thailand to Norway





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## Preface and acknowledgements

“Someone who cares” concludes a study commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion. The main objective of this study has been to identify mechanisms that make women more vulnerable for exploitation in the process of marriage migration. Further we wish to focus on empirical and ethical questions that can contribute to an understanding of the relationship between human trafficking and marriage migration.

There are many who have been involved in the production of this report. A number of persons have been helped us get in touch with respondents. We would in particular like to thank Hans and Jansila at the Norwegian Seaman’s church in Pattaya, and father Kliement at the Holy Olga Orthodox congregation in Oslo for their contributions to the project. Our gratitude goes out to the numerous marriage agencies and crisis centres that provided invaluable information and referred us to respondents throughout the project period. In order to protect the anonymity of our respondents we have chosen to let also the crisis centres and agencies remain anonymous, but we would not have been able to complete this report without their help.

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And last, but not least, we want to thank all the women and men who shared their stories and views with us. We have done our best to let their voices be heard in this report.

Oslo, December 2008

Guri Tyldum and Marianne Tveit



## Sammendrag

Denne rapporten presenterer resultatene fra en studie av ekteskapsmigrasjon fra Russland og Thailand til Norge. Målsetningen med studien har vært å avdekke eventuelle mekanismer som gjør ekteskapsmigranter sårbare for utnyttning. Søkelyset har vært på veiene inn i transnasjonale ekteskap, samt spørsmål knyttet til skismisse og retur til opprinnelseslandet. Rapporten ser i hovedsak på organisert ekteskapsmigrasjon, der minst én av partene har tatt bevisste steg for å oppsøke potensielle ektefeller i et annet land.

Kvinner som kommer til Norge gjennom ekteskap med en nordmann uten innvandrerbakgrunn, har blitt en stadig viktigere innvandrerguppe i Norge. I 2006 var det flere som fikk opphold i Norge gjennom ekteskap med en nordmann uten innvandrerbakgrunn, enn det var personer som fikk opphold som flyktninger, gjennom asyl-instituttet, eller gjennom ekteskap med en nordmann med innvandrerbakgrunn. Likevel har denne gruppen og deres spesielle behov til nå fått lite oppmerksomhet sammenlignet med andre innvandrergupper.

Det har vært en markant økning i antall kvinner som kommer til Norge gjennom ekteskap med en nordmann uten innvandringsbakgrunn de siste 15 årene. I 1990 var Sverige, Danmark og USA blant de viktigste landene for ekteskapsmigranter til Norge. I de siste 15 årene har det ikke vært noen økning i antall kvinner fra disse landene. Den økningen i transnasjonale ekteskap vi har sett de siste 15 årene knyttes til en sterk økning av ekteskapsmigranter fra ikke-vestlige land. I dag er Thailand, Filippinene og Russland de viktigste opprinnelseslandene for ekteskapsmigranter som kommer til Norge.

Ekteskapsmigrasjonen organiseres i all hovedsak gjennom tre kanaler, gjennom transnasjonale ekteskapsbyrå (ofte internettbaserte), gjennom nettverk og gjennom turisme, hovedsakelig i hennes opprinnelsesland.

Det er svært stor variasjon mellom kvinnene som kommer til Norge gjennom ekteskap. Denne variasjonen gir seg også utslag i store forskjeller i livssituasjon på det tidspunktet da de bestemte seg for å søke en vestlig ektemake, og stor variasjon i motivasjon for dette. Mange forteller at kvinner som har giftet seg med en utlending har høy status i de samfunnene de kommer fra. Noen, men langt fra alle, peker på at drømmen om et bedre liv var en viktig årsak for at de søkte etter en utenlandsk ektefelle. De færreste var imidlertid forberedt på å måtte gi opp kjærligheten av den grunn. På samme måte som mange vestlige kvinner gjerne oppfatter det som romantisk å bli oppvartet av

en velstående mann med høy sosial status, oppfatter ofte ekteskapsmigrantene og deres omgangskrets det som romantisk å ha mulighet til å gifte seg med en rik, vestlig mann. De færreste gir uttrykk for at denne formen for sosial mobilitet går på bekostning av drømmen om et ekteskap basert på kjærlighet.

Livet i Norge blir ofte vanskeligere enn parene har vært forberedt på. Mange par har forholdsvis begrenset tid sammen før de gifter seg, både fordi det kan være dyrt å reise frem og tilbake, og fordi det kan være komplisert og vanskelig å få visum slik at hun kan besøke han i Norge. I tillegg er paret ofte avhengig av tolk for å kommunisere med hverandre, eller må prøve å gjøre seg forstått på svært begrenset engelsk. Dette gjør at parene gjerne har hatt få muligheter til å gi uttrykk for forventninger og avklare misforståelser i forkant av ekteskapsinngåelsen. De internettbaserte ekteskapsbyråenes «rådgivning» og markedsføring mot menn som vurderer å gifte seg med en utenlandsk kvinne, forsterker denne tendensen til motstridende forventninger og misforståelser, gjennom svært stereotype etniske og kjønnede fremstillinger av kvinnene.

Den norske ektefellen står som regel i en langt sterkere stilling i ekteskapet enn sin utenlandske partner når ekteskapet inngås. I de fleste tilfeller er det han som har tilgang på og kontroll over de økonomiske ressursene, har nettverk i Norge, kan språket og vet hvordan ting fungerer her. I tillegg har han mulighet til å bestemme om hun skal få opphold i landet eller ikke, ved å kunne styre om de skal forbli gift i tre år. Noen ekteskapsmigranter forteller at de har blitt møtt med forventninger om å leve opp til «tradisjonelle» kjønnsrollemønstre som ikke bare er utdatert i Norge, men også i forhold til moderne russiske og thailandske kjønnsroller, og at de har følt at de må leve opp til disse forventningene for å kunne forbli gift.

I likhet med andre par, opplever mange transnasjonale par at økonomiske problemer ofte fører til konflikter. Selv om de insisterer på at de ikke valgte ektemannen på grunn av pengene, inrømmer flere at de hadde en forventning om at ektemannen var forholdsvis velstående i Norge. Dette var gjerne fordi han framstod som relativt velstående på besøk i hennes land, hvor han på grunn av forskjellene i kostnadsnivå kunne betale for fine restauranter og gaver selv om han kom fra en lavinntektsgruppe i Norge. Noen av kvinnene blir derfor overrasket når de oppdager at de må leve med en stram økonomi, hvor de må nøye vurdere hvordan de bruker penger. Mens mange transnasjonale par deler på de ressursene de har, opplever noen ekteskapsmigranter at de ikke får tilgang på penger i det hele tatt. I den første tiden når de ikke kan språket og ikke har mulighet til å få seg jobb, blir de derfor fullstendig avhengig av ektemannen, for å få råd til en bussbillett, en kaffekopp på kafé eller nødvendige vinterklær.

En annen økonomisk faktor som ofte skaper problemer for transnasjonale par, er hennes ønske om og behov for å sende penger hjem til familie og nære i hjemlandet. Igjen er det mange som fort finner en løsning begge parter kan leve med, og som ikke oppfatter dette som problematisk. For andre par kan behovet for å overføre penger føre til stor uenighet om hvor store begrensninger de bør legge på sin levestandard i

Norge for å kunne overføre mest mulig til hjemlandet. Dette ser i særlig grad ut til å bli et problem etter at hun får egen inntekt: Hun forventer gjerne at han skal fortsette som hovedforsørger samtidig som hennes inntekt i stor grad sendes ut av landet, mens han kanskje har en forventning om at hun i større grad skal bidra til å dekke felleskostnadene. På den annen side, dersom han aksepterer hennes behov for å sende forholdsvis store summer til hjemlandet, enten ved å sende egne penger, eller ved å dekke alle fellesutgifter, slik at hennes inntekt i sin helhet kan sendes til hjemlandet, kan hun komme i en sterk økonomisk avhengighet til ham. En eventuell skilsmisse vil kunne ha betydelige konsekvenser for hennes evne til å opprettholde de økonomiske overføringene til hjemlandet. Det er på bakgrunn av dette at vi kan forstå noen av de kvinnene som har gått inn i prostitusjon etter en skilsmisse i Norge.

Transnasjonale par har noe høyere skilsmisserater enn ektepar hvor begge partnerne er uten innvandrerbakgrunn. Det er imidlertid lite som tyder på at det er et klart hopp i skilsmisserater etter tre år, når kvinnene kan søke opphold på selvstendig grunnlag. Transnasjonale ektepar har også betydelig høyere skilsmisserater i løpet av de første tre årene.

Treårsregelen for å få rett til opphold i Norge etter skilsmisse gjør at mange kvinner lever i ekteskap med til dels stor grad av utnytting de første årene i Norge. Flere kvinner lever med stadige trusler om skilsmisse, og hevder de må tilpasse seg ektemannens ønsker i langt større grad enn de ellers hadde gjort, for å sikre at ekteskapet varer i de nødvendige tre årene. Flere rapporterer at de har blitt kastet ut av huset som konsekvens av en kranjel. Norske myndigheter har gjennom Utlendingsforskriftens §37 6. ledd, i den såkalte mishandlingsbestemmelsen, søkt å sikre at ekteskapsmigranter ikke skal trenge å leve i et ekteskap preget av mishandling for å sikre opphold i Norge. Gjennom studien kom vi imidlertid i kontakt med flere kvinner som vurderte å flytte tilbake til en voldelig ektemake, fordi advokater og andre rådgivere ikke kunne love at de ville bli gitt opphold etter dagens praksis med implementering av denne paragrafen.

Mens den ovenfor nevnte gruppen opplever at de ikke kan skille seg av juridiske årsaker, er det en annen gruppe ekteskapsmigranter som ikke er i stand til å starte et liv for seg selv av praktiske og økonomiske årsaker. Kvinner som har lite utdanning fra hjemlandet og svært begrensede språkkunnskaper, er spesielt sårbare i dette henseendet. Disse kvinnene er først og fremst avhengige av ektemannen for økonomisk støtte (og noen for å være i stand til å sende penger til hjemlandet). Mange har svært begrensede kunnskaper om de økonomiske og praktiske støtteordningene som finnes i Norge for kvinner som ønsker å leve for seg selv. Videre har de begrenset forståelse for hvordan ting fungerer i Norge. Tilsynelatende enkle oppgaver som å opprette en bankkonto og finne barnehageplass kan virke uoverkommelig for en person med begrensede kunnskaper om det norske samfunnet, kombinert med begrensede norsk- og engelsk-kunnskaper. Mange norske ektemaker er klar over denne avhengigheten, og gjør sitt beste for å hjelpe partneren sin til å lære mest mulig om det norske samfunnet og bli

selvstendig. Enkelte ser imidlertid ikke ut til å ta ansvar for å hjelpe ektefellen med disse integreringsutfordringene. Dette kan være fordi den norske partneren ikke er i stand til å hjelpe en utenlandsk partner, fordi han selv har psykiske problemer eller sliter med rusavhengighet. Andre ganger kan det se ut til at ektefellen bevisst utnytter, og legger strategier for å forsterke denne avhengigheten. Dette har vi kalt «tvungen avhengighet», som i sine mer ekstreme tilfeller bør vurderes å straffeforfølges etter straffelovens §224 om menneskehandel (for tvangsarbeid og utnyttning for andre seksuelle formål). Enten slik avhengighet er et resultat av manglende evne eller manglende vilje til å hjelpe ektefellen til å klare seg selv, kan det ha alvorlige konsekvenser for kvinnen. Mange blir i voldelige og nedbrytende ekteskap i mange år etter at de har fått rett til selvstendig opphold, fordi de ikke vet hvordan de skal gå fram for å bryte ut og leve for seg selv i Norge. Problemet blir da at en forutsetning for at ekteskapsmigranter skal kunne skille seg, er at de får en «god» ektemake, som tar deres integreringsutfordringer på alvor. De som får ektemaker som ikke tar på seg dette ansvaret, bruker betydelig lengre tid for de blir i stand til bryte ut og klare seg selv.

# 1 Introduction

Modern and classical fairytales, movies and literature often tell the story of the woman or girl who was able to move away from the poor neighbourhood, out of poverty and perhaps win the favour of a prince and his kingdom, through marriage. In these stories, marrying upward is not presented as a desperate choice made out of lack of opportunities or destitute poverty, but as a romantic dream-come-true. Nobody questions whether Cinderella and “the Sleeping Beauty” actually love their prince.

Transnational marriage migration is also often presented as a strategy for social mobility for women from developing and transitional countries. But marriage migrants’ success in winning the favours of a western man is rarely presented as a romantic dream come true in western media, academic writing or popular culture. In the west, marriage migrants are more likely to be presented as desperate and poor women who sacrifice themselves for the good of their family than as successful and romantic. However, in many developing and transitional countries marriage to a westerner is seen as exactly that – a romantic dream come true, that also secures a good life.

In this perspective transnational marriage between women from developing or transitional countries and western men does not represent anything new. Thai and Russian women that come to the west by marrying a foreigner do not constitute something fundamentally different compared with all the women before them who have improved their lives through marriage to a wealthier man.

Still – transnational marriage raises old and new questions that need to be addressed. With this report we attempt to shed light on some of the challenges marriage migrants to Norway face. The report take as a starting point the experiences that various women have when they come to Norway through marriage, telling the stories from the women’s perspective, and less so from the Norwegian men’s viewpoint<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, it has a specific focus on the problems associated with transnational marriages, giving far more emphasis to things that can go wrong, than to the potential gains of such migration. This orientation of the project design comes from two different observations

<sup>1</sup>For studies on male perspectives on marriage migration see the Swedish Nordin, L. (2007) *Man ska ju vara två*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur., the Danish Nielsen, S. B. & Gitz-Johansen, T. (2006) *Mænd i migrasjonsægteskaber. Fortællinger om hverdag og vold i danske mænds samliv med udenlandske kvinder*. Roskilde: Institut for Uddannelsesforskning, Roskilde Universitetscenter., and the Norwegian hovedfag thesis Egeland, Ø. (2001) *Kjærlighetens kjøtere. Om en giftemålsleir i Norge*. In Institut for Sosiologi og Samfunnsgeografi. Oslo: Universiteten i Oslo.

in recent years: First of all, in a mapping of the prostitution scene in Oslo in 2003 it was discovered that one third of the women in prostitution in Oslo were women of Thai origin. Most of them have citizenship or permanent residence in Norway, usually obtained through marriage to a Norwegian. Many entered prostitution several years after moving to Norway, often after a divorce (Brunovskis & Tyldum, 2004). The second observation that increased concern over the conditions of marriage migrants in Norway was a reported increase in foreign women contacting women's shelters for help. Here foreign women married to Norwegian men seem to be particularly frequent users, compared to their relative share in the population (Lien & Nørgaard, 2006). We cannot automatically conclude from this that women in transnational marriages are more exposed to violence. Whether or not somebody contacts a women's shelter in the process of divorce will be strongly influenced by their perception of alternative strategies, and their access to economic resources, networks or family that they may turn to for support. However, the two observations put together suggest that women who come to Norway through marriage to a Norwegian man may face different challenges, in marriage and in divorce, than other parts of the population.

There are quite a few studies, in Norway and internationally, that present the particular challenges in creating a life together for transnational couples. (see for instance Altnik, 1995; Constable, 2003; Eggebø, 2007; Jones & Ramdas, 2004; Lidén, 2005; Nielsen & Gitz-Johansen, 2006; Nordin, 2007; Visson, 1995). With this report we do not intend to duplicate these studies. Its focus is not on challenges in transnational marriages per se, but on issues of vulnerability and exploitation among marriage migrants. Instead of focusing on life in transnational marriage itself, we have extensive focus on the paths that lead into transnational marriage; motivating factors, facilitators, structural and legal frameworks that inhibit or stimulate movement, and not least, perceptions of risk and gain and the women's reflections concerning the various stages of the migration experience. Furthermore, we focus on the challenges marriage migrants face in the process of breaking out of a marriage, and how economic, structural and legal conditions influence the options the women have.

We do not claim that transnational marriages are better or worse than other marriages, but aim to describe the particular vulnerabilities that are inherent in such migration. We give special emphasis to the various decisions that are made along the way in the process: the decision to migrate, to marry, to divorce or to stay in a marriage, to go back to their country of origin or stay in Norway. Only by understanding how these decisions are made, and under what influences, can we be able to tend to the particular needs of these immigrant women.

## **Victims and agents**

Many Thai and Russian women living in Norway express frustration about the “victim stigma” associated with women of their nationality. They feel marriage migrants are presented as desperate and poor women who would accept anything to escape poverty and that there is a lack of ability to acknowledge their choices and preferences in the way they are presented in media and other arenas.

In this report we do not want to contribute to a further stigmatization of large groups of women in Norway. Still, we see a need to acknowledge the vulnerabilities that are inherent in the system, created by global inequalities, our current migration regime and the weak position of women worldwide. Although we see the problematic aspects of producing yet another account of “the problems of transnational marriages”, we do not believe that we help the women by ignoring the problems they are facing. However, we wish to present the situation as they see and explain it themselves. Describing vulnerabilities and dysfunctional migration or marriage patterns does not prevent us from acknowledging that marriage migrants are agents who make choices in order to find love, and to improve the lives for themselves and their families. We hope that this report, rather than constituting yet another account of poor women’s “lack of options”, can constitute a medium through which the women’s voices can be heard, and give them room to explain how and why their choices are made.

## **About the study**

In this study we have focussed on marriages between Norwegian men and foreign women that have been entered into after an explicit decision from at least one of the partners that they wish a foreign spouse. Couples who have met through work or studies are, as a rule, not in the target group for this study, although we acknowledge that some women who come to Norway, i.e. as au pairs, or through prostitution can also have as a goal of marrying a western man. This study focuses on women who have marriage as a more or less explicit migration strategy. This does not mean that these women did not also seek love and companionship through marriage. As we will come back to in later chapters, there are many different expectations for a marriage, and most women and men dream of being loved by their partner. Still, for various reasons our respondents have been seeking a partner abroad.

Women come to Norway through transnational marriages from a large number of countries. However, in this study we have limited ourselves to studying only two nationalities, to ease fieldwork and avoid too much variation in our data. We have chosen to focus on women from Russia and Thailand, the two major countries of origin

for marriage migrants who come to Norway through marriage with non-immigrant Norwegian men the last decade.<sup>2</sup> The two groups are quite different in many aspects; while marriage migrants from Thailand often have limited education, and may have several family members at home who are dependent on remittances, Russian marriage migrants more often have higher education, and except for own children (who often come with them), are less likely to have economic dependents in their country of origin. By focusing on two groups that are this different in terms of economic and human resources we hope to be able to raise a wide variety of issues. To the extent we find common patterns for women in these two respondent groups we believe the extensive structural, economic, geographical and cultural differences between Thailand and Russia make it possible to suggest more wide-ranging conclusions beyond these two nationalities.

The study is based on a substantial number of qualitative interviews, collected during fieldwork in Norway, Russia and Thailand. In Norway we have visited nine different cities or towns, in Northern, South-western, and Eastern Norway. In Russia we have visited St Petersburg, and a medium-sized city outside Moscow; in Thailand; Bangkok and Pattaya. We have conducted close to 70 interviews, including interviews with more than 40 women in various stages of marriage migration; some were merely thinking about marrying abroad, others were dating (or communicating with) a potential husband, married, divorced but still in Norway or had returned to Thailand or Russia after failed migration experiences. The aim of these interviews was to better understand the different choices women make in the process of marrying abroad. Based on how the women choose to present their life stories, and how they explain major changes in their life, we wanted to understand women's motivation, assessment of risk, and expectations in general, for marrying abroad, and for staying married or leaving a husband.

We have also interviewed some men who have married, or hope to marry, a woman from Thailand or Russia. The main purpose of these interviews was to study the contexts, so that we could better understand the situation for our female respondents. The interviews with men are not meant to shed light on the men's intentions or experiences; our material is too limited for this purpose.

Quite a few respondents were recruited through crisis centres in Norway, others were contacted through marriage agencies in Norway or abroad, while yet others through prostitution networks<sup>3</sup>. Some Russian women contacted us after we placed an ad in the Easter edition of the information leaflet of the Russian Orthodox Church. In

<sup>2</sup>In 2006 women from the Philippines surpassed Russian woman as the second largest national group of foreign women marrying non-immigrant Norwegian men.

<sup>3</sup>As we knew that some of the women in prostitution in Oslo had originally come to Norway for marriage, we wanted to hear the experiences of these women as well.



Pattaya the Norwegian Seamen's Church assisted us in contacting women with different marriage and migration experiences. Other women were recruited through a Catholic NGO that offers English classes and other courses to women in Pattaya. Many were recruited through networks. The Embassy in Bangkok has provided valuable information, as have interviews with representatives from a wide variety of marriage agencies located in Norway, Russia and Thailand, and representatives from a number of different cultural and religious organizations. We have also collected some information from the Internet, chat rooms for Russian women in Norway, chat rooms for men who have or are planning to enter into a transnational marriage, Internet sites of marriage agencies as well as some Internet-news sources' commentaries and debates. Our interviews are supplemented with some statistics run especially for this project and made available by Statistics Norway and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration. Last but not least, we have relied on available research, both in Norway and internationally.

This process has given us a wide variety of stories, experiences and perspectives on marriage migration. Although we cannot argue that all types of migration or marriage experiences or motivations are covered in our data, the data provide insight into some strategies and motivation, and suggest why particular problems occur for some, but not others.

### **The truth and the stories people tell**

Most of the interviews we conducted with marriage migrants were in the form of life stories, where the woman was asked to tell what had happened in her life, and more specifically, how she ended up in Norway (or in some cases, still in her country of origin, but looking for someone to take her abroad). We generally let them start from their childhood and tell their story, with more detailed follow-up questions when elements of their story were of particular interest.

In order to properly understand the data obtained, we need to ask what kind of information such life stories will give us. When we tell the story of our lives there might be some events where we have only one version to tell. However, usually there are different ways of telling a story – one story for parents, one for the boyfriend and one for friends. One story for the days when we feel strong, and another for the days when we feel down. This does not mean that we lie on some occasions, and tell the truth on others (at least we usually do not), but we merely use different versions of the story, where we choose to emphasize different elements, depending on how we feel, what we think the listener wants to hear and how we want to be perceived. The data we present in this report should be interpreted as exactly that – versions of stories that were presented to us in specific settings and contexts.

What parts of their stories did our respondents choose to tell us? We introduced ourselves as researchers, working on a policy project financed by the Norwegian gov-

ernment; that we had been asked by Norwegian authorities to find out how marriage migration comes about, and why it turns out to be less successful for some. Sometimes we emphasized that we wanted to develop recommendations for the authorities for how to better assist women who experience similar situations that they had gone through

This is generally the background against which they told us their stories (or the background for their “construction of narratives”), and also what motivated them to tell their stories. Of course, some simply told their story because they like having an opportunity to talk about themselves and their own experiences. Some of the respondents had limited networks in Norway, and appreciated having someone to talk to. Others used the opportunity of the interview to ask for advice or our opinion on matters they struggled to understand. We met with some of the respondents several times, giving a combined, total interview time of up to six hours. One respondent told her life story during three long interviews. She asked us to send the printed story back to her – so that it could be kept for her sons after her death; she thinks they are too young to hear her story now, but when they are older she wants them to know.

In spite of these additional elements, we believe the policy component of the project influenced the kind of stories we heard. It is our impression that many of the respondents took this responsibility seriously, and tried to account for things that had happened as thoroughly as possible, because they thought that if people could hear their stories it would make a difference.

The respondents satisfaction with own life situation at the time of the interview also influenced how they chose to tell us their stories. Some presented narratives marked by disillusionment and frustration; this was for instance the case for some women that earned money in prostitution at the time of the interview, and some of the women who were afraid to lose their right to residency as they were facing a divorce after less than three years of marriage. Other women told their life story as a story of success, emphasising own opportunities and agency. This was more often the case for women who were still in a successful marriage or in a process of divorce, but felt secure and protected. The different contexts and life situations our respondents were in at the time of the interview has consequently given different perspectives on processes of marriage, migration and divorce, and as such, helped us to get a fuller picture of both opportunities and pitfalls inherent in international marriage migration.

Most of the women we met presented themselves as being either 1) in a successful relationships with a foreigner, 2) in the process of divorce (sometimes already divorced or planning divorce) from a marriage they had initially believed would be successful, and 3) looking for a relationship. Through secondary accounts we heard of women in bad relationships, but not able to leave, and women who never intended to stay married, leaving as soon as residency is secured. To the extent this constitutes specific experiences, we have little information about these last two, as we prefer to rely on primary data, and want to be careful in putting too much weight on anecdotes or

gossip about other migrants. However, since we believe that our data are somewhat biased in that we did not obtain accounts of these two groups, in a few instances we will include such stories, nonetheless making it explicit that these are secondary accounts, since we believe that these stories can give insight into destinies of women that we were not able to meet.

### **Anonymity and names**

Ensuring our respondents anonymity has been given priority in writing up this report. Information about age, family background and age and sex of children is sometimes somewhat altered, although we have done our best not to alter its analytical contribution. In changing our respondents' names, we have decided to refer to them with names that are commonly used in Norway. For most respondents we simply picked the most common names in Norway for the relevant age groups according to data made available by Statistics Norway.

Some readers will undoubtedly find the use of Norwegian names strange, and perhaps even frustrating, as one cannot automatically distinguish between Russian and Thai respondents based on names. Still, we have chosen to keep the typically Norwegian names for two reasons. First of all, we wanted to tune down the distinction between Russian and Thai women. National background is sometimes important in order to understand differences in alternatives and responses. However, surprisingly often we find that other factors, such as educational and economic backgrounds, can be just as important in understanding differences in behaviour; Thai women with higher education will often have more in common with educated Russian women, than with Thai women who never finished elementary school. And similarly, we find that Russian women with significant economic problems often behave the same way as Thai women who has grown up in poverty. Although we usually indicate nationality in the text when a respondent is referred to, we believe avoiding Russian and Thai names reduces this automatic emphasis on nationality, and forces us to reflect more on the processes and available resources that influence actions and outcomes. Secondly, and perhaps even more important, we believe that using Norwegian names reduces some of the "exotic bias" that is sometimes associated with marriage migrants in general and Thai and Russian women in particular. We believe that referring to the women as Astrid or Lise, rather than Natasha or Van, forces us to recognize them as Norwegian citizens or residents, with the same rights and opportunities, but also similar desires and dreams.

## **A note on language and translation**

The interviews were either conducted in Norwegian, Russian, English, or Thai, with a Thai-Norwegian or Thai-English translator. This means that most of the quotes that are presented here have been translated once and sometimes twice before they reach the form they have in this report. Most of the interviews were digitally recorded, while about ten percent are based on notes.

Some respondents were interviewed in a language they did not speak well (Norwegian or English). We have chosen to present the interviews translated into ordinary, everyday English. We do not believe that broken English or Norwegian has nuances that necessarily are lost. Rather, as most language students have experienced, with broken English the listener or reader may perceive nuances the speaker or writer did not wish to express. We believe that the interviewers who were present in the interview situation, and who know the context (based on follow-up questions or previous accounts) from which the quotes are taken, are better suited at interpreting potential ambiguities in what was said. Furthermore, we believe that presenting exact transcripts of broken Norwegian or English, leads to an 'exotification', close to a form of ridicule, of respondents who have agreed to tell their stories in spite of limited language skills. Still, if parts of interviews were so ambiguous that we were in doubt of what was actually said, this is of course not included in our analyses.

For all these reasons the quotes from interviews presented here must be understood as partly rewritten versions of stories. Detailed analysis of contents and nuanced value expressions should be done with care, as such nuances can have been added in the process of translation.

As one of the researchers on this project speaks Russian interpreters were not used in the interviews with Russian women. However, for a substantial part of the interviews with Thai women, interpreters were necessary. It should be noted that in interviews with an interpreter such a rewrite and interpretation of the respondents' words have been conducted without the researchers' participation. Due to the importance of the interpreter, we hired professional Thai interpreters from the major Norwegian agencies. Thus we had excellent translators; however, as the Thai community is relatively small in Norway, and translators are few, some of our respondents had already met our translators on several occasions, in meetings with public authorities or even in court cases on various issues. It should be noted that some of the women recruited through prostitution networks explicitly asked us not to bring specific translators, as they had been translators in meetings with various government authorities. Consequently, in interviews with an interpreter we believe this may to some extent influence the stories we were told. On the other hand, the translators that knew the respondents functioned as door openers, and cultural interpreters, and were able to explain and contextualize some of the interviews in a way that has been important to the analysis. Several of our interpreters were also important key respondents, based on their experiences and observations when translating in different settings.

## 2 Legislative framework and background statistics

### An increasingly important immigrant group

Marriage migrants are becoming an increasingly important immigrant group in Western European countries in recent years. In 2006, more immigrants (from non-western/non-EU countries) were given residency in Norway because of marriage to a non-immigrant Norwegian, than there were adults given residency for any other purpose<sup>4</sup>. In 2006 less than 1600 persons from non-EU and non-western countries were given permits to come to Norway for work (as experts). The same year 2200 persons were given asylum in Norway, and 1000 came as refugees<sup>5</sup> (Utlendingsdirektoratet, 2007). A total of 4383 persons from non-EU and non-western countries came to Norway through marriage. Of these, the majority (2295) came through marriage with a non-immigrant Norwegian<sup>6</sup>.

In 2006 there were 23 123 marriages in Norway. Of these 14 % were between a Norwegian man without immigrant background and a non-Norwegian woman. The number of marriages between Norwegian men and foreign women has increased strongly over the last decade, and we have seen more than a doubling between 1996 and 2006 (see Figure 1). Among Norwegian women there are significantly less who marry a foreigner, and there has been little change in the number of transnational marriages over the last decade<sup>7</sup>.

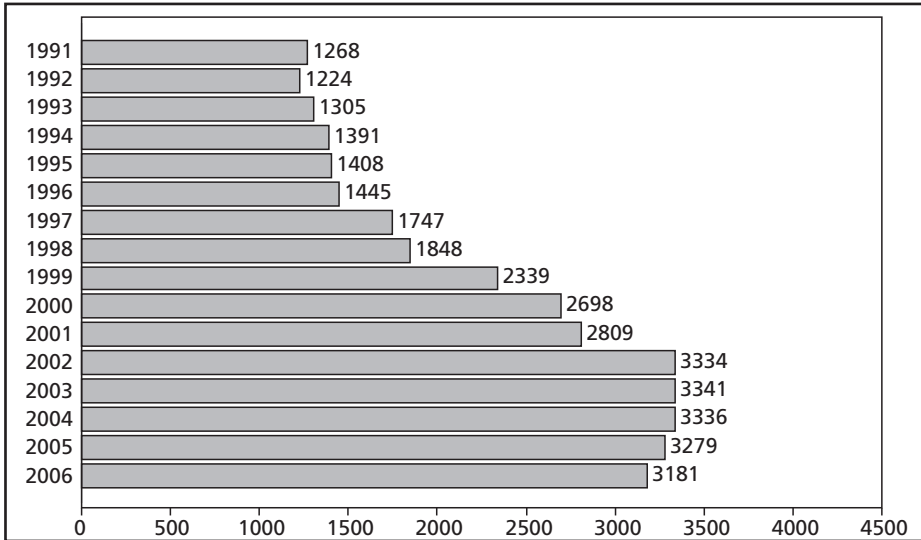
<sup>4</sup> EU and Western countries are here defined as old EU member states (EU-15), EES countries and Switzerland, New EU member states, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> In 2007 the number of persons that were granted asylum increased significantly, but as we have not been able to get access to statistics on marriages by nationality for 2007, proper comparisons could not be done.

<sup>6</sup> The numbers presented in this paragraph are calculated based on statistics made available by Statistics Norway, at [www.udi.no](http://www.udi.no), and in Utlendingsdirektoratet (2007) Tall og fakta 2006. Oslo: UDI.

<sup>7</sup> 1 369 Norwegian women without immigrant background married a foreign man (including Scandinavian and other western men) in 1990, going down to 1 121 in 1996 and back up to 1 471 (6%) in 2006. (Numbers made available by Statistics Norway).

Figure 2.1 Number of marriages entered into by Norwegian men without immigrant background and foreign women 1990 to 2006.



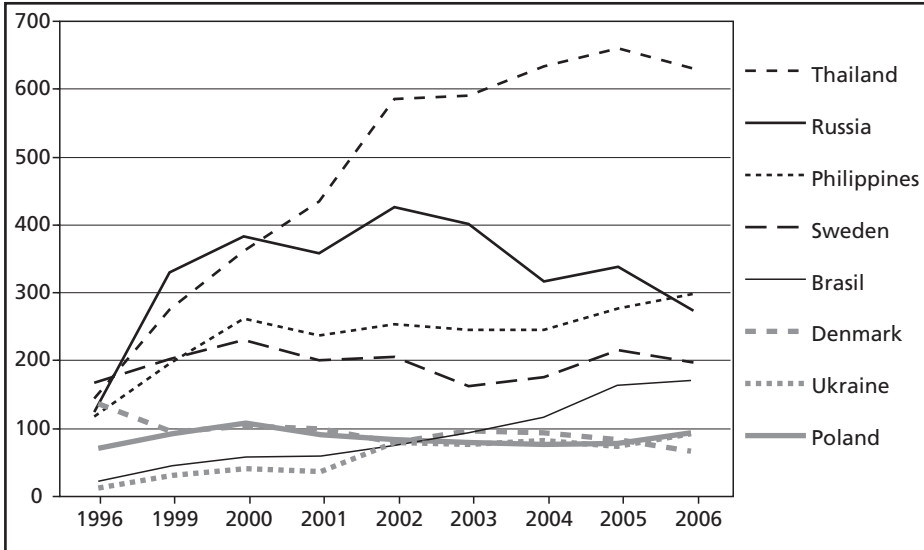
Source: Statistics Norway

In 1990 the absolute majority of the Norwegian men who married a foreign woman married a woman from a western country, mainly from Sweden, Denmark or the USA. About one in five married a woman from the Philippines, Thailand or Poland.<sup>8</sup> As Figure 2 below illustrates, the number of Norwegian men marrying Swedish women has been relatively stable (around 200) throughout last decade. The number of men marrying Danish women has even decreased somewhat. Similarly there has not been any significant increase in the number of women coming from USA and other western countries for marriage. Accordingly, the strong increase in transnational marriages in the last decade can hardly be explained solely with reference to increased globalization and international interaction, as there is no increase in marriages with women from western countries.

Most of the increase in transnational marriages with non-immigrant Norwegian men must be attributed to the strong increase in marriages with women from transitional and developing countries. In 2006 about three quarters of the transnational marriages with non-immigrant Norwegian men, were with a woman from non-EU

<sup>8</sup> At this time there are so few marriages with women from Russia that they are not registered in official statistical publications, and women from Poland was the third largest group coming from a non-western country, following the Philippines and Thailand (Lie, B. (2004) *Ekteskapsmønstre i det flerkulturelle Norge*. Oslo: SSB).

Figure 2.2 Number of marriages entered into by Norwegian men without immigrant background and foreign women by nationality of the women. 1996 and 1999 to 2006



Source: Statistics Norway

and non-western countries,<sup>9</sup> while only one in four married a woman from one of the EU member states or other western countries. Women from the Philippines, Thailand and Russia alone made up 40 percent of the transnational wives. By far the strongest increase is found for women from Thailand, going from 144 in 1996 to a peak of 661 in 2005. The number of women from the Philippines who come to Norway through marriage has also increased over the last decade, surpassing Russian women and becoming the second most common foreign nationals to marry Norwegian men in 2006, when 298 Philippine women came to Norway through marriage. It is interesting to note that the number of Russian women who came to Norway through marriage to a Norwegian increased steadily throughout the 1990s, and peaked in 2002 with 427 marriages. After this the number of marriages between Russian women and Norwegian men has decreased significantly. This reduction in marriages between Russian women and Norwegian men has run parallel with a significant improvement in living conditions in the general population in Russia. Also for Polish women we find an interesting trend; in the last decade there has been a strong increase in labour migration from Poland to Norway, first for seasonal labour in agriculture, and with Poland entering the EU, through other forms of labour migration as well. In 2006 more than 37 000

<sup>9</sup> As EU and Western countries we count the old EU member states (EU-15), EES countries and Switzerland, New EU member states (including 2007 expansion), and USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Only two percent of all marriages were between a non-immigrant women and a man from a non-western/non-EU country.

work permits were given to Polish residents<sup>10</sup> (Utlendingsdirektoratet, 2007). In spite of the great increase in migration opportunities, and strongly increased interaction between Norwegians and Poles, the number of marriages between Polish women and Norwegian men has remained relatively stable throughout the decade, and if anything seems to decline after the year 2000. In other words, the increased mobility between Poland and Norway has not increased the number of Polish-Norwegian marriages, if anything it has reduced it.<sup>11</sup>

## **Marriage migrants are important immigrant groups in rural areas**

As we entered 2008, there were almost 11 000 women from Thailand, Russia and the Philippines married to a Norwegian man and living in Norway (according to data provided by Statistics Norway). While other immigrant populations tend to cluster in urban areas,<sup>12</sup> marriage migrants from Thailand, the Philippines and Russia are important immigrant groups in rural areas (Byberg, 2002). Although the majority of the Thai, Russian and Philippine minorities still live in central counties, women from these three main nationalities for marriage migrants are much more likely to live in the countryside. While women from Russia, Thailand and the Philippines constitute only 8 percent of the immigrant women in the capital and surrounding areas (Oslo and Akershus), they make up 15 percent of the immigrant women in Western Norway and Trøndelag, and 26 percent of the immigrant women in Northern Norway (see Table 1). In less central areas of Norway women from Russia, Thailand and the Philippines make up 1 out of 5 immigrant women. If the current trend of marriage migrants from Thailand, Russia and Philippines as one of the main immigrant groups in Norway, this pattern will continue to strengthen.

<sup>10</sup> Of these 17 000 were renewals.

<sup>11</sup> There is a 30% decrease in Polish women marrying Norwegian men in the four years after the turn of the century. The steady trend from 2000 to 2005 is breached by a significant increase in 2006. Data from 2007 are necessary to see whether this trend has changed, or whether this is a random fluctuation.

<sup>12</sup> Close to three quarters of the immigrant population in Norway (74 percent of men and 72 percent of women) live in central, urban areas (what the bureau of Statistics defines as 'central counties'). Central counties are defined as counties with a regional centre (level 3), or which are within 75 minutes travel (for Oslo 90 minutes) from such a centre. Data made available by Statistics Norway.



Table 1 Distribution of immigrant groups according to region and centrality of their county of residence. Percent.

	All					Total	Women				
	Russia	Thailand	Philippines	Others	Total		Russia	Thailand	Philippines	Others	Total
Oslo and Akershus	2	1	3	95	100	2	2	4	92	100	
Hedmark and Oppland	4	3	2	91	100	5	5	3	87	100	
South-Eastern Norway	2	2	2	94	100	3	4	3	91	100	
Agder and Rogaland	4	3	2	92	100	5	5	3	87	100	
Western Norway	3	3	3	91	100	4	6	5	85	100	
Trøndelag	4	3	2	91	100	5	5	4	85	100	
Northern Norway	11	5	3	82	100	15	7	4	74	100	

Source: Statistics Norway

## Visas and residence permits

It is not easy to understand the rules and regulations that determine who can obtain legal documents for entering Norway, or get permission to live, work and marry in Norway. While on one side there are several different paths that can be followed, there also seem to be somewhat different practices between implementing actors, across time and space. Here we will briefly sketch the formal laws regulating marriage migration to Norway.

Women who want to obtain work and residence permits in Norway through marriage can follow one of the following two main paths: she can apply for a so-called “fiancée-permit” to come to Norway and get married here, or she can get married abroad (or while in Norway on a tourist visa) and then apply for family reunification from her home country.

The “fiancée permit” is a temporary work- and residence permit (regulated in the Foreigners Regulation §24 a), which allows an unmarried foreign citizen engaged to a Norwegian citizen to come to Norway to work and live for six months, for the purpose of marriage. After marriage, the person can apply for family reunification without going back to her home country. Before 1 October 2006 it was possible to enter Norway on an ordinary tourist visa (C-visa), get married and then apply for residence permit from Norway. Today, couples who have married while she is in Norway on a tourist visa will normally have to go back to her home country and reapply for family reunification (or a seven-day visitor’s visa) as described below.

In 2007 only 55 women from Thailand and 60 women from Russia applied for such a “fiancée permit” (see Table 2). This constitutes a relatively small proportion of the Thai and Russian women who came to Norway through marriage that year. The absolute majority chose to get married in her home country and then apply for family reunification. Under certain conditions a couple who has married in her home country can apply for a special visitor’s visa (D-visa), and then register with the local police authorities for family reunification within seven days of arrival in Norway<sup>13</sup>. If such a visitor’s visa cannot be obtained, the woman has to stay in her home country until the application for family reunification has been approved.

As Table 2 illustrates, case processing time for the different visa types varies greatly. Couples who applied for a fiancée permit had to wait from three to five months on average. In Russia, 20 percent of the applicants had to wait more than six months for an answer. In comparison, couples who had married abroad, and asked for seven-day visitor’s visa could get this in a much shorter time – applicants in the foreign stations in Russia had their applications treated on average within five days, while applicants to the foreign stations in Thailand, the Philippines and Ukraine had to wait on average one month. Eighty percent of the applicants for a seven-day visitor’s visa in Norwegian foreign stations in these four countries were answered within one month.

Consequently, although applications for family reunification on average have a case processing time of four to five months, a significant share of those who marry abroad choose to apply for a seven-day visitor’s visa, and can live together in Norway within

Table 2 Caseload, case processing time and approval rate for family reunion, “fiancée permit” and seven-day visitor’s visa (D-visa) for Russian, Thai, Philippines and Ukrainian women (2007 data).

		Philippines	Russia	Thailand	Ukraine
Family reunion UF § 23 a	Number of cases	348	274	725	88
	Percentage approved	97 %	97 %	99 %	99 %
	Average case-processing time (days)	142	136	117	149
Fiancée permit UF § 24 a	Number of cases	46	60	55	21
	Percentage approved	78 %	87 %	87 %	90 %
	Average case-processing time (days)	155	97	99	132
Seven-day visitor’s visa (D-visa) UF §106 - 3	Number of cases	158	108	481	22
	Percentage approved	94 %	93 %	75 %	77 %
	Average case-processing time (days)	28	5	29	37

Source: UDI

<sup>13</sup> According to “Rundskriv 2003-15”, ([www.udiregelverk.no](http://www.udiregelverk.no))

one month of the wedding. We believe the long case processing time is an important reason why so few chose to use the opportunity to live, work and get to know each other in Norway for six months before they got married. Anecdotal information also suggests that the demand for documentation is substantial for a fiancée visa. We also see that the approval rates are significantly lower for this kind of permit than for the ones who are already married. As we will show later, for many this leads to couples getting married in her home country without her having a chance to see her new home, or perhaps more important, to get to know her future husband in his home setting.

## **The three-year rule and its exceptions**

Having been given the right to family reunification with her Norwegian husband, the woman acquires the right to live and work in Norway. This work and residence permit should be renewed every year for three years. After this time she may apply for permanent residence on an individual basis. If the couple decides to divorce before three years have passed (or before the permit has been renewed three times), the marriage migrant will lose her work and residence permit, and will have to return to her home country. There are two exceptions to this rule. First if the woman has a child with her Norwegian partner, the child will usually be a Norwegian citizen. The marriage migrant can then apply for family reunification to stay with her child in Norway, and such applications are normally approved. The second alternative is regulated in the Foreigners Regulation §37 clause 6, in what is often referred to as the “abuse clause”. According to this, women who are exposed to violence from their partners will have right to residence on individual basis even if she leaves her husband. Also, women who face unreasonable difficulties in her home country after a divorce, due to social or cultural conditions, may be given the right to residence (Lidén, 2005). We will come back to this clause and its uses and consequences in the chapter “Divorce in the first three years of marriage”.

## **The ones who did not get a visa**

As we see from the statistics above, some applications for family reunion, fiancée permits and seven-day visitor’s visas are turned down. There can be several reasons for why visa applications are turned down, often tied to his economic situation in Norway. In a relatively recent (2005) addition to the foreigners regulation it is stated that:

Applications for work and residency permit for family reunification can be rejected if it is probable that the applicant or the children of the applicant will be mistreated or severely exploited.

(Foreigners Regulation §9)

Accordingly, embassies can now refuse to give a visa if they expect that she will be exposed to abuse, or he has a history of violence. While the intention of this regulation is commendable, as we will show below, it may not necessarily protect the women.

When Nina tells the story of how she came to Norway, the whole process of getting documents and a visa is told as if she was not involved in it at all; as she says: “It was my cousin and her husband who started the whole process with documents and stuff.” Her visa application was initially refused, although Nina did not understand why at this time. After she moved away from her husband in Norway, she has been informed that her initial problems of getting a visa, was due to his history of violence against Thai women. According to the legislation (Ot.prp. nr. 109 (2004–2005) chapter 2.7.3) the reason for declining visa on this ground should be clear in the papers documenting the decision. However, somehow the information about the reason for declining the visa had not reached Nina. We cannot say why she didn’t get this information – it could be that Nina didn’t understand information that was provided to her, or that she never saw the documents herself (as all was organized by others). Quite often, our respondents report that their future husband or other relatives managed all the documents sent back and forth to the embassy, and that they had little knowledge of how this was done. Furthermore, some of our respondents have no or very limited schooling, and would not be able to read official documents, including reasons for declining a visa. Consequently, if one wants to make sure that such information reaches the applicants, this should be done in face-to-face consultations in a language the woman is comfortable with, preferably without the presence of others.

However, in Nina’s case, even if they had been able to talk to her, it is doubtful that she would have acted differently. Nina had already been warned that he had been married before, and that “he had a bad record” and that “none of his former wives had been able to live with him”. When she still decided to marry him it was partly because her family expected it from her, and partly because she still believed that this could give her an opportunity for a better life. As she could not go to Norway to get married, she ended up marrying him in Thailand instead, and after some months and a few rounds of sending papers back and forth, she moved to Norway after all.

For Elisabeth, not getting her visa had quite severe consequences. She had met Mikkel in a bar in Pattaya, and she thought he was a kind man. He worked in a gas station in Norway and lived on the outskirts of a major city. They had decided to get married.

He started the process of getting me to Norway. Did it twice, but was declined both times. I don't really know why. I think he was missing some documentation. I had sent pictures home to my mother of how he lived and stuff. He hadn't been married before. Everything was supposed to be in order. While I was waiting, I was home with my parents.

After this long delay, Mikkel ends up falling in love with another Thai woman and marries her instead. When Elisabeth meets the man she ends up marrying, there seems to be no problem getting a visa, although he has been married to a Thai woman before, and has a history of violence. Elisabeth still has some contact with Mikkel and his wife. They have a nice house with a small garden, Mikkel does not drink, and he has a job. After some rough years in Norway, Elisabeth now lives alone, and as she shows us the pictures of Mikkel's house, she makes bitter jokes about the fact that it could have been her living there, if it had not been for the Norwegian embassy.

One discouraging interpretation of Elisabeth's story is that opposed to the original intentions in the immigration regime, the system seems to favour experienced "wife-getters". The more complicated the system for family reunification, fiancée permits and tourist visa becomes, the more difficult it is for inexperienced people to take their wives home, or invite their fiancées to come visit them. It is important not to develop a system that rewards the "professional" actors, the ones who have done this repeatedly and have networks that can assist and advice in how to proceed to avoid the problems.

Like Elisabeth and Nina, several of our respondents who were declined visas claim that they did not know why their visas were turned down; at least they were not able to explain to us why it happened. Often it is the Norwegian partner who is in charge of understanding the immigration rules, and figuring out what kind of documents she needs. If the visa is turned down, she will rely on him to find out why, and to explain it to her if necessary.

We do not know why our respondents were declined a visa, however, what we do know is that being declined a visa did not make them reconsider. They chose rather to get married in their home country, and apply for family reunification from there. But this way they did not have a chance to visit him in his home environment, and experience what life in Norway would entail. This was also the case for Silje:

In October he invited me and my son to come visit. But the visa was declined – because they believed I was at risk of getting married and staying. My husband insisted, and I wrote a complaint in November. In June I got another rejection. That winter my husband came back to Russia, and in January we got married. He went back home, and I started preparing documents. In July I had gotten all the documents, and in August we left for Norway.

Silje is in for a disappointment. When she comes to Norway, she finds that the house is far from what she expected. She had explicitly asked if there was anything she should bring, but he had told her that he had everything they needed.

If I had known I wouldn't have married. I would have waited... I probably wouldn't have found another, but still... There are many beautiful women in Russia. And I had a child... I was grateful that he wanted us. But still, had I known, at least I could have brought some of my things with me...

To Silje it was a shock to see how her new husband lived, and what kind of life he offered her in Norway. It is difficult, both for her and us to predict how she would have behaved if she had been able to visit him and see how he lived before she moved to Norway, but we believe her when she said she probably would have come anyway. However, if she had been allowed to visit him before marrying, it would have strengthened her bargaining position, making it possible for her to insist that some changes were made to the house. Not the least, it would have prepared her for what she was getting herself and her son into, enabling her to make sure she would keep options open if she wanted to return.

In Elisabeth's case it is even more obvious that a warning from the embassy would not have made her reconsider. Having been in the sex industry in Pattaya for years, and having had several failed attempts to get married behind her, she meets Kjell, who is in Pattaya to look for his wife who has left him. Kjell was able to arrange for her to come to Norway on a tourist visa to visit him.

I first visited Norway on a three-month tourist visa. In 2002.

*Did you like it here, on your first visit?* The first time I thought it was strange [...] and I thought; is this how they live in this country? Dirty. He was very dirty. There was nothing there in the house – no furniture. In the apartment there was only a TV and a sofa. Nothing in the kitchen. Before this I hadn't seen any other houses [in Norway] so I didn't know how people usually live. He said his former wife [from Thailand as well] only wanted to save money to send home to Thailand, before she disappeared after 10 years of marriage. So I felt very sorry for him, and thought that he must have had it rough. I was very compassionate because of that. I talked a bit with the neighbour, a friend that lived in the apartment below. Kjell didn't talk much. He was probably worried that I would mention things he didn't want to talk about. After some time he started locking me in when he went to work. I had my own key – so I didn't understand anything – but it turned out he had locked the top lock too. [...] When he came back from work I was very angry with him – after all he had locked me in – he came in and he wanted to hug me – but I pushed him in the chest and said “Why did you lock me in?!” So he backed off, got angry and hit me in the face. Hit me hard – a beating from a man's hand is

very hard... Afterwards I was angry and sad and cried and was disappointed. I ran down to the neighbours – I still hadn't married him. At least he should try to keep me happy until we were married. And then I wasn't as fat as I am now – just a tiny woman [sic: she is still a rather petite, Asian woman, in our opinion]. I wanted to report him to the police, but how could I report him to the police if I didn't know the language – and I didn't know where the police were. And it was winter and I didn't have warm clothes. After some time he came to get me, but I told him I didn't want to come with him. He didn't know what to do – so he ordered a taxi that took me to the women's shelter. I remember all that happened – the faces of the lawyers and everything.

Then I went back to Thailand, and I was quite sad and things, and when I arrived in Pattaya I realized that my daughter [14 years old] had gotten pregnant while I was away. And I thought – oh my god – he is the reason I left her – if I hadn't visited him my daughter would probably not have lost her virginity, and then this wouldn't have happened. So I thought he could take some responsibility for my daughter once this had happened so I called Kjell and told him my daughter was pregnant. And when I called him he felt compassion for me and my daughter, so he sent me some money for another year, and then he came on holiday to visit again, and I thought why not marry him? The first time I applied for visa it was turned down, but then I got help from this Thai woman in Norway, and then everything went OK.

Elisabeth's marriage goes from bad to worse, with severe abuse of both herself and her children. However, it is difficult to argue that she did not know what she let herself into, as she ended up in a crisis centre after physical abuse even before she was married. We must assume that the lawyers and personnel at the crisis centre gave her solid advice. Still she decided to move to Norway, and stayed with Kjell until he found a new woman from Thailand he wanted to live with, and he left her at the women's shelter again. Elisabeth's background in Thailand is not only one of severe poverty and lack of schooling. There is also considerable violence, neglect, and substance abuse, in her childhood and in her early relationships with Thai boyfriends. When she met Kjell, she was entering her late 30s. Even if she knew that living with Kjell would not be easy, to her it represented the better option than the alternative: growing old in the sex industry in Pattaya.

Elisabeth, and several other respondents serve to illustrate how futile it is to warn some of the marriage migrants of possible abuse and violence. Even if the embassy personnel would take time to sit down with the woman to explain why the visa has been declined, if they did not think her fiancé was a good choice for her, it is doubtful that it will make many reconsider. This is partly because embassies and immigration authorities in general are not perceived as convincing carers, but are rather regarded with suspicion by most potential immigrants. But perhaps just as important, like

Elisabeth and Nina, some choose to marry even if they know the man has a history of violence. As we find in other studies of migrants from poverty countries, their situation in their country of origin will sometimes be so bad, and the potential gain from migration relative to this situation can be so substantial, that they will still openly submit themselves to situations of severe exploitation and abuse (Tyldum, Tveit & Brunovskis, 2005)



### **3 Three paths into transnational marriages**

The women who look for a husband abroad do not constitute a homogenous group; they have different economic and social backgrounds, different experiences from both marriage and travels, different educational backgrounds and language skills and different kind of networks and family bonds that tie them to their country of origin. Still we see that the strategies that are applied in looking for an international partner are relatively similar across economic and cultural differences. We find it useful to distinguish between the following three main paths to marriage between Thai and Russian women and Western men:

1. through marriage, or matchmaking agencies (Internet-based or traditional);
2. through personal networks and friends;
3. through travel and the tourism industry

In this chapter we will describe the main elements of these three different paths.

#### **International marriage agencies**

A large number of international dating and marriage agencies are engaged in match-making for transnational marriages. These agencies differ from other online dating agencies as they focus on matching relatively unequal couples of wealthy western men and women from developing and transitional countries such as the Philippines, Brazil, Ukraine, and not the least, Thailand and Russia (Sahib, Koning & van Witteloostuijn, 2006). Today most of these agencies are web-based, although some have other types of contact arenas or activities as well.

Several of our respondents have been in contact with one of these agencies as part of a strategy to find a foreign husband. Hilde was one of them. She says she had given up trying to find a husband in Russia, and was determined to find a husband abroad. She met several western men through the Internet; some of them visited her in Russia, and she visited some of them in their home countries. These attempts had been

relatively unsuccessful and even humiliating, until she found the web pages of one of the Norwegian agencies.

I noticed Jan's profile immediately. He was so handsome and young. He worked in a department store – told me he was a middle manager – although that turned out not to be really so. He invited me to Norway shortly after we started e-mailing. And I thought – why should I write a lot of letters and then end up being disappointed yet again? So I went to visit him, and stayed one week. We visited all these beautiful places in Norway – lakes, mountains and fiords. I met his mother. He showed me his job. I thought – he has a job – he is decent and responsible. He didn't have an apartment, but he was going to inherit some money he said – so when I came in the fall we would be able to buy a house. And I thought – he has a house and a job – I met his friends – all was well. He was relaxed and happy – told lots of stories – I thought he was smart. During this week I fell so much in love. He didn't even drink. We drank wine once – just a little bit one evening. And I thought: how fantastic! Then I went back to Russia to arrange all the practicalities. I had to sell the apartment, close my business and sell the car. What took the longest was that I had to go to court to have the father of my girl give me the right to take my daughter out of the country. Three months later I went back to Norway and we got married.

Hilde was actively looking for someone who could take her away from Russia. After several unsuccessful attempts she knew what she was looking for, and did not see any point in waiting. It was less than six months from the time when she first read Jan's profile on the Internet until she was married and living in Norway. The Internet marriage agency was central in making this possible.

The main principle of the Internet marriage agencies' services for matching western men with Thai or Russian women is that men pay for access to contact information based on information in women's "profiles". The profiles are small advertisements for women, with information on appearance, education, hobbies and expectations, as well as a few pictures. Most agencies can be used free of charge for women. Some also offer professional photographers and make-up specialists without any cost for women who want to set up a profile with pictures on their site. Most sites boast that they have hundreds if not thousands of profiles of women, while the male profiles are scarce, if they exist at all.

The male clients pay for participation, and are the main source of income for these agencies. They can often choose between paying for contact information for one woman at a time (or for sending one letter at a time), or for monthly (or yearly) memberships that give free communication with all the women, as well as advice on practical and legal matters. Many sites do not give out e-mail addresses or contact information, but charge per letter (usually electronically read and answered). Some also charge per photo downloaded. In addition these sites often assist in sending flowers or gifts to the

women, for a fee. In some instances translation services are included in the membership fee; others have additional fees for translation. Most agencies recommend that their customers start communicating with several women, and then narrow it down as time passes. As a consequence, it is possible to spend quite a lot of money on commercial marriage agencies, even before you have found someone that you wish to meet.

After having corresponded for some time, some couples will decide to meet. The agencies usually offer assistance in arranging trips to her country, on an individual basis or, for some agencies, in groups, as “romance” package tours. The so-called “social” can also be included in these tours; these are social events with a large number of women, and a significantly smaller number of men. Participants on these trips may or may not have corresponded with one or several local women they come to meet. Finally, agencies advise, and for the larger agencies, actively engage in, preparing documents for marriage and family reunification.

Finding a spouse through the Internet is generally reserved for the somewhat educated and resourceful, as Internet dating usually demands access to the Internet, both in terms of skills (language skills and computer skills) and infrastructure (having a computer and network access). However, some agencies in both Russia and Thailand compensate for such a lack of resources among the women by offering access to computers, and even assistance in typing and writing to women who wish to place their profiles on the net. This way even women who do not know how to read and write can end up with a profile on the Internet. Still, as such agencies are generally situated in major urban areas, women living in rural areas are usually excluded from this access. For the men who engage in this, Internet access is necessary, and as most sites are in English (with a few exceptions), some language skills can also be an advantage.

## **Networks and friends**

The most common way to meet a future husband and wife, is probably through networks and friends, also in transnational marriages. As Jørgen Carling (2008) shows in his analysis of transnational ties between the Netherlands and Cape Verde, migrants are often faced with strong expectations to assist non-migrants back home. This assistance can be purely economical, in the form of remittances, but it can also entail expectations to function as facilitators of migration. This way, migrants who have succeeded in building up a life abroad will be expected to assist friends and family to follow. One way of assisting relatives to move abroad is to identify potential partners for marriage, and function as a matchmaker. This becomes particularly important in areas where there are few other alternative ways for international migration (Carling, 2008).

Personal networks are essential for meeting a husband in many of the stories the women have told. Women who are already engaged or married to Norwegian men often mediate contact between her husband's friends and friends and relatives back home. Most of the women we have interviewed say that they are currently looking actively for a partner on behalf of a friend or relative; if they do not know about any suitable Norwegian man, they try different channels to find a man that may be appropriate.

Lene's older cousin came to Norway through marriage in the eighties. Ten years later, she offered to help finding Lene a husband in Norway too. The cousin, who then spoke and read Norwegian, helped Lene put an advertisement in the local newspaper, while she was in the country on a tourist visa. Lene wrote that she was a young Thai woman looking for a nice and kind Norwegian husband. She got several answers, and met a few of them, but none of them appealed to her. She did not really think any of the others seemed particularly interesting either, but her cousin talked her into a meeting with Lars.

I had seen a picture of Lars, and I didn't think he looked very nice. His face was red and he looked fat. But when I met him he was quite OK, and he talked calmly, and he wasn't old. He didn't talk only about himself, and asked me if there was anything I wanted to ask about. We met at a café and had a coffee, with my cousin as a translator. We were there for only 20 minutes. He got my cousin's phone number, but didn't say if he wanted to meet again. I thought that he might not be interested, and I was a bit disappointed. But then he called a few days later, and wanted to meet again. [...] We agreed that we could meet him in his apartment. It was good to see where he lived, to see that he didn't have a secret wife or anything (laughs). And then I thought – OK – he has an apartment, a car and he is 32 years old. It fits. Its not complicated. An apartment and a husband. I will try it. And if it doesn't work out, I can always divorce him. I told him that if we were to fight, I would not accept it if he beat me – not even once – then I would leave him. [...] And Lars agreed, and said of course – I will never beat you. And he never has.

Lene explains that if the marriage did not work out, she would just go back home or maybe try to find a new husband in Norway. When asked if she worried about meeting the wrong man and maybe ending up with an abusive husband for example, she says that she and her cousin discussed the different men carefully and that she was never afraid. Her cousin always came with her on the dates and looked after her. After she met Lars, all contact went through her cousin the first couple of weeks. They decided to get married after three weeks, and managed to do so before her visa expired.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>This was before legislation changed, and she could marry while in Norway on an ordinary tourist visa and apply for family reunification while still in the country.

Cathrine also came to Norway with the assistance of relatives, but her story is quite different. She is from North-Western Thailand, has six years of elementary school and has worked in the rice fields with her parents since she was a little girl. She got married to a local man when she was 18, but divorced four years later, having been subjected to severe physical abuse. After the divorce she decided that she wanted to travel abroad, and she presents this as an economic decision:

Where I come from it is common that one member of the family goes out and earns money.

*Is that person lucky or unlucky?* That is the lucky ones. The others have to stay home and work in the rice fields. You don't earn any money there – you barely get any food. I had a cousin who had married a Norwegian. When she came home to visit she had all these nice clothes and jewellery. I asked her if I could come with her, and she said she could arrange something for me. She knew about a Norwegian man who wanted a wife from Thailand, and showed me his picture and asked if I was interested. We wrote letters to each other for a couple of months before I travelled to Norway to get married.

*How old were you then?* Twenty-two.

*How did you feel coming to Norway?* ... (no answer)

*Were you more happy or more afraid?* I remember I was very afraid and insecure. I had no idea what he was like. I didn't speak the language. I travelled with my cousin to their city, and he met us there. I stayed together with my cousin the first couple of days. The third time he came to visit he brought marriage papers. I didn't bring my daughter [to Norway] then. My parents had paid for the airplane tickets and they couldn't afford to pay for both of us.

*What was your first impression of him?* I thought he had kind eyes... I still think he does. We got married after two weeks in Norway. There was some back and forth with papers. We had to book the court house – that's why it took so much time. There were 30 guests for the wedding.

*Was it all his friends and family?* I had 2–3 cousins who lived nearby who came – except for that, it was his family.

Catherine travelled to Norway with no language skills and a one-way ticket to meet this potential husband for the first time. The role of her family was central in both organizing and paying for her migration, but she was still in many ways an active part in asking her cousin to find a husband for her. Still, there did not seem to be much

room for reconsidering once she was in Norway, as she only had a one-way ticket, and one man to choose from.

While Cathrine's cousins assisted her in finding a potential husband directly, Lene's cousins offered a somewhat more flexible solution, giving her an opportunity to meet several potential husbands. Here it should be noted that Lene has a higher education and comes from a relatively wealthy family. A return ticket to Norway was affordable to her. Cathrine was a single mother who had worked in the rice fields from her childhood. Paying for a ticket to Norway was a big investment for her and her family. Coming back empty-handed was not really an option.

Getting to know each other through a network of friends or relatives in this way thus makes the situation safer, as the women have assistance in evaluating the men by someone knowledgeable in Norwegian and Norwegian culture. Simultaneously, it can be more unsafe because the women sometimes have limited life-experience, and are taken directly to Europe from their home community, perhaps the only setting they know. Nina was 22 when she met her husband for the first time, and just like Catherine she had recently left a marriage with an abusive husband. She still lived in her village in North-West Thailand. She was informed that the man they have found for her has a bad track record – he had been married three times before, but none of his previous wives had been able to live with him. However, her cousin's husband had talked to the man and he had promised to treat her better.

*The first time you met him, what was your first impression?* The first time he came to Thailand, my cousin and her husband had rented a hotel in Bangkok. And I picked him up at the airport. I was afraid, because I couldn't speak the language and I couldn't say anything. And I didn't like western men. I was afraid of western men. [...] I had heard of others who had western men. So I was very frightened and shivering and didn't really know what happened. *What was it you were afraid of?* I didn't really know how to behave. I hadn't seen him before, hadn't heard his voice, I didn't know how to behave. *Couldn't you just say no – and go back to your mother?* I couldn't say anything. It was actually just my cousin and her husband who had started the whole process with documentation and such. *You didn't really want this?* I wanted a good life and a family. *But did you want to move to the West?* First I didn't really want to come here, and I said that if we got married, I wanted to keep living in Thailand. But after we got married he said that he had a job, and a house in Norway and that I had to come with him. *When he asked you to marry him, what was your gut feeling. Mostly happy or mostly scared?* Both scared and happy. Mostly scared. I didn't know what would happen to me if I moved with him to Norway, and I came here all alone, and my mother and father would be in Thailand, and I didn't have any relatives here. [...] *What did you think when you came to Norway?*

I thought that I wouldn't have a chance to go back ever. It was so far. So I cried for a month or so.

Nina was evacuated by the police about six months after she came to Norway. By then Nina had called her mother in Thailand to ask for help, and through her cousin's husband they were able to inform the Norwegian police so they could come and get her out of her husband's house. She was injured from repeated rapes and other abuse.

Several studies have suggested that women who are recruited to marriage through networks are less likely to be exposed to exploitation than the ones who come through agencies, or tourism (see for instance Lidén, 2005; Lisborg, 1998). However, contrary to what we expected, our data indicate that meeting one's husband through networks does not seem to lead to less abusive relationships. Rather on the contrary, we see that among the women who have experienced the most severe abuse in our material, most of them met their husbands through networks. Having friends and family in Norway should in theory constitute some protection against severe exploitation. First of all one would expect that the networks should serve to ensure the quality of the husband (that he is a decent man). Secondly, one would expect that having access to networks would make it easier for women who are exposed to exploitation or abuse to find someone for advice and help. However, the problem with network recruitment for marriage is that the woman herself may no longer be in charge of the process of finding a husband. For Nina and Catherine this meant that they had to depend on their cousins' evaluations of the man, and the information they got from them. And they did not really have any alternatives if the Norwegian man had decided he wanted her. For the women who are expected to find husbands for their relatives at home, it must also be a dilemma to decide where to draw the line for what is acceptable or not. When we ask Sandra, who lives in a small Norwegian town where extensive marriage migration has taken place, if she has tried to find a husband for any of her friends back home, she replies: "No I haven't. There aren't many usable men left here". If the only available men left are assumed to be unsuitable for marriage, how do you then cope with the pressure you have from family at home to find a husband for relatives and friends?

A second element that can increase vulnerability of the women who come through networks is that they are likely to have fewer resources that allow them to cope with difficult marriages compared with the other groups. As we showed above, women who meet their husbands through the Internet are often better off economically, as they usually have access to a computer and an Internet connection. Many are also able to communicate in English without translation. Moreover, even if they do not have their own computers, they will more often live in urban areas in order to contact the agency, and communicate with potential men. If they deal with a decent agency, they may also get some good advice and assistance in the process. Women who meet their husbands in tourist areas (as we describe below) generally have more experience with

foreigners, they will often have acquired some basic language skills, they have heard the gossip from other women in the business of the dos and don'ts of matchmaking, and through all this, they have developed some sort of street smarts that leaves them better prepared to navigate around the most abusive situations. In contrast, some of the women who come through networks have limited experience with foreigners, and may know little of the world outside their country, or even their village. Consequently they may be more at risk of ending up with the wrong kind of man, and if they do end up with the wrong kind of man, they may have less ability to "negotiate" a way of life they can accept, or escape if necessary.

The lack of protective effect by networks can also be explained by the lack of quality of networks, in that their friends and relatives who live in Norway might be in difficult situations in Norway as well. Most marriage migrants have considerable contact with other women of the same nationality in their community. However, these communities of Thai or Russian women are often relatively isolated from other groups. In order for such a network to function in a protective manner, at least one person in the network needs to have knowledge of how the Norwegian system works. In some extreme cases, the most well-functioning networks (or information channels) the women have, are tied to prostitution networks. In these networks, economic alternatives to staying married are contrasted to the economic potential in prostitution (this is further discussed in the chapter on divorce).

Finally, for women who have come through family networks, and where parents or other relatives have helped cover expenses for travel and documents, the expectations for remittances from home will be substantial. This may also be one factor that makes it more difficult to break out of abusive relationships.

## Travel and tourism

Several women we have interviewed met their husbands while the men were on holiday or business in the women's home countries. Some of the men were probably looking for a partner for a shorter or longer period; others would initially have no such plans. Likewise, some women were systematically searching for a husband or lover among the tourists; others were not. Other women had themselves come to Norway as tourists, or visiting family members already living there, more or less actively looking for a husband while here. We should, however keep in mind that we in this study focus on couples where one of the partners had the *conscious intention of marrying a foreigner*. Couples who happened to meet while on holiday and connected, and eventually decided to marry, are consequently not the prime focus here.



## Tourism in Norway

In the section above, Lene was presented as someone who found her husband through a network. She could also be categorized as finding her husband through tourism, as she came to Norway as a tourist, but with a hope of finding a husband while she was here. Several of our respondents met their husbands while in Norway as a tourist, with a more or less explicit goal of finding a husband while here.

In particular in Northern Norway, in areas close to the Russian border, many couples have met, either when he visited Russia, or she visited Norway. Some of the women we met may not have had a conscious intention of meeting a foreigner, but met a man who had been looking for a foreign wife. Others have come to Norway for tourism or to visit relatives, hoping to find someone to marry while they are here. One very special sub-group are women who come to Norway on a tourist visa and earn money in prostitution, and end up marrying one of their clients. Many of our respondents (key respondents and others) told us of other women who came for prostitution and married a client while here. However, none of our respondents in this setting told us that they met their husbands through prostitution, and consequently we have chosen not to give much attention to this aspect in this report.

The women who say they met their husbands when they visited Norway as a tourist stand out in the aspect that they usually knew their future husband for a longer time, and had more time to get to know him before they decided to get married. This is in particular the case for many of the Russian women who live in Northern Norway. Their stories indicate much more interaction and contact prior to marriage – to the extent that some of them are borderline cases for our study as it is unclear to what extent marriage is a migration strategy or rather if migration becomes a marriage strategy<sup>15</sup>.

Astrid's story illustrates this. She is from Murmansk, a city only a three-hour drive from Kirkenes, the Norwegian town where she lives. She came to Norway for the first time as a tourist on a three-day tour in the middle of the 1990s. This is (a somewhat shortened version) of the story of how she met her husband:

*Had you considered moving to Norway when you visited the first time?* Then I didn't even think of moving here. Things were so different – after all Murmansk is a big city, and Kirkenes just a tiny village. But it was quite interesting. I suppose I thought it must be fun living here when I saw how people here managed. When I was in Kirkenes I met this guy that I talked with. And we exchanged telephone numbers. I went back to Russia, but came back to Kirkenes to visit. It was much easier to get

<sup>15</sup> This report focuses on marriages where either the man or the woman had an explicit strategy of marrying a foreigner. Among the women and men who met their spouse while travelling, this distinction is more blurred. When we have chosen to include some respondents where this strategy was less explicit, this is because they met in a setting where organized marriage migration was widespread, or because they themselves, or their partners have been contemplating transnational marriage, although not taken conscious steps to do this before.

a visa then. Anybody could get a three-day visa, and it was very cheap. It's not like that any longer.

*What was your first impression of him?* I thought that we could be friends. He asked me if I could arrange for an invitation for him to visit Russia – just for friendship – not marriage. He visited me a couple of times, and I visited him once a month for half a year. Visited his family, and met his friends and things like that. And then he started asking if I wanted to marry him.

*How long had you known each other then?* He asked when we had known each other three months. We met in July '96, and in February '97 we got married.

Like Astrid, several of our Russian respondents report that they were approached by Norwegian men interested in dating and marriage while they were visiting Norway. According to some respondents, their husbands had been in the process of finding a wife through other sources when they met, or had previously been dating Russian women. However, as in Astrid's case, the short distances and relative ease of travelling across the Russian-Norwegian border in the North gives women in this region a particular advantage, as they have time and money to get to know each other better before they enter into marriage. They are less likely to say they were taken by surprise once they are here. It does not necessarily mean they are less vulnerable to exploitation, but at least they make a more informed decision when they decide to marry.

### **Tourism in Thailand or Russia**

As the western man usually is in a better economic situation to allow for long-distance travel and tourism, it seems to be more common that transnational couples meet while he is a tourist in her country. It is not uncommon for women who work in the tourism industry in Thailand or Russia to find a western husband among the visitors she meets through work. To what extent do these actors have a conscious intention/strategy to find a foreign husband or wife? While the intentions are often less clearly stated than among the couples who find each other through matchmaking agencies or networks, many women we met who work in tourism in Thailand or Russia express a wish, or hope, to find a foreign man. Sofie grew up in a quite well-off family in central Thailand, has studied six years in universities in Thailand and abroad, and speaks three different languages fluently.

I met a lot of men when I lived in Bangkok, but I wasn't a party girl and wasn't looking for a husband. When I was in my twenties my mother always asked "Don't you want to get married? What is wrong?" I told my mother that I did not at all want to marry an Asian man; I thought Asian men only got drunk every day and fought with their families. "What about white men", my mother asked. "If God

wants”, I replied, “I will find a man”. But I didn’t have any rush to get married. I wouldn’t mind a life on my own. I did not look for a white man and had no strategy whatsoever to find one.

One day I met this Norwegian man at work. He was in Bangkok regularly, and as he was very shy I thought it was fun flirting with him. When he finally asked me out, he did so by e-mail. Then I went up to him and told him that he had to say what he wanted to say face to face; otherwise there would be no date. He turned red, stuttered but asked me directly – and then we went out on our first date. We knew each other for two years before we got married, and dated when he was in Thailand. We always stayed in separate bedrooms for I wanted to keep my virginity until marriage. Now I have been in Norway for one year, and I have no doubt that I made the right choice. My husband is nice and we are at the same level! He loves me, he is honest with me and I can tell him everything. If I did not love him, I would not have married him!

Ida’s Norwegian husband was backpacking in Thailand for three months when they met. They were both very young; Ida was 18 years old and Espen was 20. Ida was working in a hotel when Espen arrived and needed help because he had lost his luggage at the airport, and Ida spent several days trying to help him.

I felt that Espen and I met like equals and we connected instantly. He was totally lost in Bangkok without his passport and luggage, and I did not feel that he was superior to me in any way. He stayed in Bangkok a couple of weeks and then he was supposed to travel around in Thailand the next two and a half months. However, he returned after two weeks and the rest of his holiday we were together. I took a month and a half off from work, and got to see a lot of Thailand with him. We had a wonderful time. We even went to my hometown to visit my family. To me this was very special – Espen was so open-minded and positive. We stayed with my family for a week – five people sleeping together on the floor and he thought it was totally fine! My parents loved him, and people from all over the village came to see him. [...] In the end Espen had to go back to Norway, but after three months he came back for me.

### **Sex and dating – how many frogs do you need to kiss to find a prince?**

When marriage migration is linked with tourism, or when potential foreign grooms visit local communities to find a wife, there is a danger that practices develop that can be associated with prostitution and prostitution-like practices. Louisa Schein (2005) shows how Hmong men who live in the US and come back to their communities in Southern China are extremely sought after for marriage among local women. Hop-

ing to be able to win him for marriage, women enter into more or less formalized relationships with the visiting men, as short-time lovers, formal mistresses or even second wives. However, relatively few end up actually getting married and moving to the US. Many complain of having been misled, that he was already married, without letting them know.

Such borderline practices can be found in marriage migration from Thailand and Russia as well. The dream of finding a foreign husband is so strong in certain parts of the population that ordinary dating rules sometimes seem to be ignored out of fear of losing out on an opportunity. Anne describes this from her first meeting with her future husband. After some tough years as a single mother, she had asked some relatives to help her get in touch with a foreigner for marriage. It was arranged for them to meet in a city in Thailand:

After a few days my sister went back, and then I lived with him in his room.

*Was this a bit weird for you, since you didn't know him before this? To live in the same room without being married?* I found it a bit... I don't know... but at that time... And then I thought of how lucky I was. A kind, white foreigner. I was grateful, so I gave everything.

To Anne this was an opportunity she could not risk losing. Moreover, it did pay off, and he did marry her and take her with him to Norway. However, not all women in search of a foreign husband are equally lucky. This willingness to “give it all” for their dream of finding a foreign husband can be, and is, easily exploited by westerners on sex tours to Russia and Thailand. This is, of course, in one aspect no different from what happens in dating arenas anywhere in the western world where different expectations of relationships can lead to broken hearts, and feelings of being exploited. However, the power imbalance in this situation, where so much can be at stake, magnifies the potential for exploitation. Significant cultural differences also make it difficult for both parties to interpret and understand each others’ “signals” and to understand what kind of relationship they actually have.

In both Thailand and Russia extramarital sex (at least with a foreign, relative stranger) is still disapproved of in large parts of the population, and having sexual relations with foreigners that do not end in marriage can be strongly stigmatized, as it is associated with prostitution. This is also reflected in the feedback our respondents get from their parents when they tell them about their foreign boyfriends. Here is Heidi's account of the feedback she got when she came back to her home village to wait for her fiancé to arrange the documents for them to get married:

Everybody told me that I should be careful. But I told them: I trust him – he wouldn't desert me. [...] My mother was shocked when I told her I was engaged to a foreigner – what are you thinking, she said. I want a better life than we have had,

I said. And my mother said: You shouldn't tell anyone else – just talk to me about this for now. We have to see if he comes back before we tell anybody else. Everybody thought this foreigner was fooling me. [...] *But he came back for you after all?* Yes.

Another respondent tells us:

I didn't tell my parents about my first foreign boyfriend, because I didn't know if it would last. If the Norwegian boyfriend hadn't married me after I took him home to my village, I could never take another man back to my parents – that would be shameful for both me and them. My parents would never accept it. That's the way it is in the countryside in Thailand.

In spite of this stigma, many women who are looking for a foreign husband feel they have to keep kissing frogs, in order to find the prince that will take them to the West. Some women come to believe they have to break the rules of decency that they have grown up with, as the western man seems to expect sex after a short acquaintance. Moreover, the western man who seldom gets much resistance in this dating scene interprets this as part of the local culture; he believes that Thai, and Russian women are quite liberal when it comes to sex. In addition, as he believes that they are simply sexually free, he may not feel any obligations when she “gives it all” for her dream of a western husband.

Such dysfunctional interaction we can also find traces of in various institutions. Marit helps run a massage parlour in Thailand, and like many of her colleagues, she is actively seeking a foreign husband. She describes how the women working in the massage parlours, although engaged in serious non-prostitution massage, sometimes end up in high-risk dating when foreign men ask them out.

*Is it easy to meet foreigners in a massage shop?* Actually the massage shops here are a good place for the masseurs to meet foreigners. A lot of foreign men who are in Bangkok for business or pleasure come for a massage, and some of them are clearly interested in getting in contact with local girls. [...] There are two types of guys; there are the men who just want sex and they will go to bars and pick up girls there, but the men who come here, they like to make conversation, start a friendship first and then it may lead to something else, to a relationship. *Do some of the men who come here not know the difference between a bar and a massage place?* Yes, there are some; they come here for sex sometimes and when they come to the room they ask; they try to do it with the masseur. She has to say something like “please go, this is not the place for that.” [...] *What happens if there is a customer who likes a girl and she likes him, maybe they are a little bit in love, and they start to have sex in here, will you [as the manager] be angry?* If they just hold hands and things it is ok, but if it is for sex, they have to go another place.

According to Marit however, every massage parlour can have different rules, and customers might have a hard time deciding which is which. As she says, to tell if they can buy sex or not, they sometimes simply have to ask. However, if they are looking for a girlfriend, it is possible to try their luck everywhere. Marit explains:

The customers who want a girlfriend come and start a conversation, they say hello, how are you, have you had dinner yet, something like that, try to make conversation, try to talk. And if they like each other they will go out, and she doesn't know what will happen next. *Does it happen often? Do the girls go out often?* Yes, there are some of her girls that met their guys here. Three girls have met Japanese men and many girls have met others. But not all foreigners are good. Once this man wanted me to bring a girl he could have dinner with. Said he might want to marry her. He asked me to let her stay the night, said he would not do anything, only sleep. The next day when we came to the hotel to pick her up, he was gone and the girl was left with a note saying that he did not want to have her because her English was too bad.

Even though Marit emphasizes that dating a customer is an individual choice and that romantic and sexual contact must take place outside the massage parlour, above she still explains how she brought a girl to a customer and had a say in whether she stayed the night. As the manager of a massage parlour, she describes herself as being the guardian of her employees:

There is a feeling that foreigners try to trick Thai girls. Most of them are like this. They say, let her stay with me tonight, they do not say what will happen. In the massage parlour the men ask me first, before they take the girls on a date. I then ask the girls if they want to. Some are very innocent, and then it can be difficult, but the experienced girls usually say yes, if they have the time. Most of the girls are experienced and have been married, they don't care. It is easier to spend the night if they are experienced and not afraid. They look for men to marry, but they have to spend time looking and have to meet a lot of men. But this girl was innocent. The man said he would take her to the floating market the next day. I really thought he would marry her....

Marit describes an arena where Thai women who dream of marrying a foreigner regularly meet foreigners who ask them out on dates. Some are only interested in sex; others may be interested in a long-term relationship or marriage. As another woman who works in a massage parlour explains, it is quite common to receive gifts from a man you have dated, whether for only a few days or longer. Some will even give explicit offers of sex for money. As Marit explains above, you may have to meet a lot of men before you find the one to marry. In the meanwhile there is a thin line to be walked between dating and commercial sex. This thin line can be difficult to discern for the women, but it may also cause the male customers to be confused. The male tourists' inability

to understand the rules and signals given by the women, and some women's dream of finding a husband abroad and the fear of losing out on an opportunity, seem to fuel the impression that all Thai women are open to selling sex, as some of the western men we met in Thailand expressed. On the other hand, Thai women like Marit come to the conclusion that most foreigners cannot be trusted.

Transnational dating can also take on unusual shapes in the so-called "socials" organized by some marriage agencies.<sup>16</sup> Women who are looking for a foreign husband are invited to these "socials", as are a significantly lower number of men (according to advertisements, 10 women per man).

Rita works for one of the major international marriage agencies in Russia. She is worried that some of the men who come on "romance tours" to attend "socials" just want uncommitted dating, sex and partying, and do not seem to be looking for a wife at all. According to Rita the girls they ask out are generally not in a position to say no to a date; there are few foreigners looking for a wife abroad, compared with the number of women who dream of a western man. Few women are in a situation where they can pick and choose among western men. Consequently, if they are chosen to go on a date with a westerner, many say they do their best not to drive him away. In situations where they would normally be much more virtuous and careful, many decide to "give it all", hoping this investment will result in winning the "prince" in the end.

The power imbalances between the western man and the local women make the non-marriage-minded clients problematic for international marriage agencies. However, in response to our question of what agencies do to protect the women from such clients, few commercial agencies have any strategies at all. Rita realized that it was wrong, but still admitted that they would not do anything about it: "As long as they are paying customers, it is our job to make sure they are happy and get what they want". As we pointed out in the chapter on international marriage agencies above, these agencies are usually tailored towards the man as the paying customer, while the business is evaluated by the number (and quality) of women available. A representative from another agency told us about the success of one romance tour they had arranged to a Russian city; one of his clients had participated for the first time, and he was so satisfied with meeting so many interesting women that he had already signed up for a new trip, but to another city this time. This client was no longer looking for a wife, but had become a bit overwhelmed with his sudden success among the females. He is clearly not the first western man who initially sets out to find someone to marry, but realizes how attractive he is in the marriage market in some countries, loses sight of the initial goal and is not able to settle for one woman. The consequence is that the dating arena loses

<sup>16</sup>These socials and marriage tours are often organized to Russia and Ukraine, but on the Internet there are advertisements for such tours to a number of countries in Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

some of its innocence, and for some, “Romance tours” turn into low-risk, low-cost sex tourism. Although this was usually not what the women signed up for.

### **The prostitution link**

One particularly difficult aspect of marriage migration is that some women meet their western husband through prostitution or prostitution-like practices. The phenomenon is difficult to write about, as we are aware that one of the main difficulties for Thai and Russian women in Norway is coping with the heavy prostitution stigma associated with women of their nationality. Entering marriage via prostitution is the case for just a small group of women who come here, and this is not representative for most marriage migrants who come to Norway. However, as we see that this group faces special challenges, and seems to be overrepresented among women who end up in crisis centres in Norway, we have still decided to give this phenomenon some attention.

Tina is one of our respondents who does not try to hide the fact that she met her husband through prostitution. She has a turbulent past, with neglect and abuse in childhood, followed by drug and alcohol abuse from her late teens. She made a living in prostitution from the time she was 16 years old, until she met her Norwegian husband while she was working in a bar in Thailand. She was then in her 30s. She describes their meeting and marriage in the following way:

Fredric came into the bar, and we started talking. And it was very... like, you know, we were flirting... I was kidding with him, and he started to like me. So I went out with him – just for a week. Then he... I cannot remember properly. I think he asked me to stop working [in prostitution] and go home and live with my mum.

*So he knew what kind of job you had?* Yes. So then I went to live with my mum. I got money from him. And he said that if I married him he would help me with everything, and send money to my mum until she dies. He came and took me to Norway two or three times before we got married. We got married in Bangkok. Not a big party – I didn’t think that was necessary. We just went to the police station and signed a paper, and got married. Then we went to Norway. He knew that I smoke. He doesn’t smoke. And he knows that I drink. You see, he drinks as well.

The women who come to Norway through marriage via prostitution have surprisingly similar stories to tell from their lives – we recognized it in many different places in Norway, as well as among the women we met in Thailand. Basically it goes like this:

They grow up in the poorest regions of Thailand, and may often have a minority background. Some tell of extreme poverty while others are from families who own land, or even employed others. Often there is alcohol abuse or mothers that live alone. In their late teens the girls go into Bangkok to work. Some years later they marry a Thai



man (or find a boyfriend who does not want to marry them) and have one or more children. After several years the husband moves out, and they have to manage on their own. They then end up moving back to their home village (some come back to their village when they marry, others after the husbands/boyfriends have left them). They employ various coping strategies to make ends meet economically, but at some point they end up going to Pattaya to work in bars. In Pattaya they meet their husbands who take them to Norway.

This story was so dominant in our data that we decided to go to Pattaya during our fieldwork in Thailand to see if we could better understand how marriage migration takes place within this arena. We were in Pattaya for less than a week. This is not nearly enough for a proper understanding of all the transactions that take place and the roles of the involved actors. However, we will present some of the stories that we heard, to try to describe the “Pattaya phenomenon” as we saw it.

### **The “Pattaya phenomenon”**

The Internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia describes Pattaya as follows:

Pattaya was simply a small fishing village until it was discovered as a beach resort by Bangkok residents in the 1960s. Soon thereafter, servicemen from all over Southeast Asia, including the United States Air Force base at U-Tapao in neighbouring Rayong province, began using the area for “rest and recuperation” (R&R), causing a huge boom in prostitution. When the Americans left following the end of the Vietnam War, the city fell into a crisis. However, modern mass tourism, particularly single men looking for companionship, brought a new lease of life to Pattaya.

[www.wikipedia.no](http://www.wikipedia.no)

Foreign men and Thai women meet in several different arenas in Pattaya. Some women work in traditional tourist jobs in hotels or restaurants, while others are employed in the more explicit, traditional sex industry, such as go-go bars or brothels. Many of the women who end up getting married to foreigners work in so-called “lady-bars.”

The “lady-bars” are found in many Thai cities in areas frequented by foreigners, and come in different styles and price levels. Although there is much variation, the organizing principle is generally as follows: The bar employs a large number of women, who serve drinks and talk to the costumers. The bar may or may not give the women a small salary, but their main income is usually from what they get in tips from the men, and percentages of the drinks they sell. In Pattaya such “lady-bars” are often large circular bars, with a large number of women inside the circle, talking to clients on bar stools on the other side. Here Heidi describes her first day at work in the bar:

Then I went to work in the bar for the first time. Wearing jeans.

*Were you a bit afraid? Nervous?* Yes, very nervous, With jeans, and an ordinary t-shirt. Not even a nice one. And we had to work from five o'clock. And I had no idea what I should say if people came in...like "Hey, what do you want do drink?". I didn't dare to ask like that. [...] And I stood there and thought "Calm down, calm down". Then a foreigner came – and he looked at me, quite a long time. And then he came up to me and said "I love you". And I was quite shocked, so I said "Hæh? Me? Why?". You know, I knew nothing of this. And then he said: "Come here!". And he wanted to order beer. And I should sit and talk to him and stuff. He gave me 1000 bath to pay for the drink, and then he asked what I wanted to drink. I didn't know if I was allowed to drink when I was working, so I had to ask. "You can drink as you like," they said, "Coke, soda, whiskey or beer, but if you order this special drink, a bit nicer and more expensive, you get 20 %, and you can save up some money". And I chose one that was a bit more expensive. But he paid, of course. And when I gave him his money back, he gave me 500 bath back, and said, "This is for you; money so you can go and buy yourself a skirt and a top". He felt sorry for me because I was wearing jeans!

If a couple decides they would like to get to know each other better, the man needs to pay the bar a fee to take the woman with him. In addition he may also give the woman a tip or a gift. Sometimes a man will pay to take a woman out for a few hours, other times for a day, but quite often, he will pay to take her out for some weeks, to live with him in Pattaya, or travel around the country together for the remaining part of his holiday. During the time they have together, the woman will try to make herself indispensable, not only sexually, but also by cooking and cleaning and caring for him in any way she knows.

When he leaves he will leave her a gift, or some money. Often he will continue sending money – in particular if he wants her to stop working in the bar. Then he may send money to pay for her apartment and enough money for her to send to her children and parents back home. Sometimes he asks her to marry her.

According to some key respondents, a substantial part of the women who work in prostitution in Pattaya end up marrying western men, often after having been in prostitution for only a few months. Many also claim that the villages in some of the poorer regions in the North are increasingly being affected with this – women who have married foreigners are sending money home so that parents and other relatives can build new houses and buy cars. In the poorest villages three and four storey villas are popping up, with tiled floors, indoor plumbing and nice fences. This strengthens the dream of the foreign husband, both for the young women and their families. The sad side to this situation is that for those who do not have a chance to find a foreign husband through networks, their best chance of finding a foreigner to marry remains in entering the sex industry in Pattaya, and hope someone will choose them before the industry has marked them too harshly.

## 4 For love, opportunity and economic security

A recurring theme in public discussions on marriage migration concern how the people who come to Norway through marriage are believed to relate to money and love. Do they really marry for love, or are they just marrying to get a passport and money? Is it possible to say that marriage migration is sometimes economically motivated, and sometimes not? In this chapter we will discuss the women's motivation for looking for a husband abroad, based on how the different groups talk of the potential gains from marriage migration.

### Foreign men for the lucky and beautiful ones

Women from the countryside in Thailand describe how from early childhood they heard stories about women who had improved their lives significantly through marriages to western men. Sue is one of them. When we met her she worked in the sex industry in Pattaya, but she comes from a poor family in a traditional Thai village. She said that when she was little, one of her distant relatives had a boyfriend from America. This is how she remembers him:

He was a big, old man. The first time he tried to touch me I was frightened. But they had money. They had money... The family had a big home. And a car, I think... Oh, yes, they had big money... And I thought: I want to have a husband like that. I didn't know what it entailed. This was what I was thinking because my family was poor. But I didn't think it would be possible to find. She had been lucky, but I'm not lucky. So I realized that this would not be for me.

To Sue, and for many other women from rural and marginal areas of Thailand, finding a rich western husband was a dream as they grew up. However, as Sue points out, success in finding a western man to marry is not for all. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Sue has become particularly disappointed and sees the dream of marrying abroad as something for the lucky few, and not something that is possible for herself.

Even if the idea of marriage to a wealthy western man is not as apparent in the Russian women's stories of childhood perceptions of the good life, several of our Russian respondents recount local tales of women who found the good life through marriage to a foreigner. Silje, who comes from a medium-sized town in Russia, says she remembers very well the first woman who left her hometown for Europe in the beginning of the 1990s:

She had a relationship with a French man who was in the city for business. She took her son from a former marriage with her and moved to France. He was so much in love with her – it was very romantic. The next one who left went to France as well. Then there were some that went to Germany. And several to Israel. And one went to America.

*What characterized these women who married foreigners?* They were pretty and educated. They dressed nicely, and they were young. You have to get out while you are young and pretty. If you don't succeed then, you will end up getting old in Russia.

Although Silje does not remember having any dream of marrying a foreigner herself, she has a very good recollection of the people in her community who left. What is more, she clearly sees them as successful, which we take as an indication that to Silje and people in her community getting a foreign husband is associated with a relatively high status.

We interviewed a number of Russian and Thai women who were still in their home countries, but had taken active steps to find a husband abroad. These interviews all have one thing in common: While the women have very different ideas of what makes a foreign man better than their local men, they all have at least one success story to tell of someone who is married in the West, and who has found it all – economic security, a good life and a husband who cares for her and loves her. We heard the story of Maria, who came from the rice fields of rural Thailand, who found Peter, a young, good-looking and educated man with a decent job, who takes his share of the housework and has given her a job in the family business in Norway. There is also the story of Sara's aunt, who has lived in Germany for 10 years, and has a good job, and a stable life there. These stories often stand in stark contrast to the women's own experiences – as many have had a large number of failed attempts of finding a husband abroad. In their actual experiences men turned out to be impotent, overly aggressive, or only out for a maid. They describe their actual experiences more reluctantly, and we seldom heard of other friends who have had similar experiences. However, in spite of several humiliating and frustrating experiences, our respondents continued to try, as their friends success stories seem to have much more power than their own experiences.

## Getting away

It should be noted that for many it is not necessarily marrying a foreign man the women dreamt of, but they wanted to find someone who could take them away from the village or town where they live or grew up. Our respondents very often come from the countryside in Thailand, or a small or medium-sized town in Russia. Many felt that their life had stagnated, and they dreamt of getting away, of starting a new life. As Inger explains to us:

I didn't want to marry anyone from my home province but I thought when I go to Bangkok, I can marry someone, he could be from anywhere, but not my home province. *Why not from this province?* Because people from my province... If I married someone from there, I would have to work in the rice fields. I don't like that. I don't want a difficult life like that. When I left home I had worked in the rice fields since third grade. *It's a very heavy job...* Very hard. And I had to carry water from place to place, and it was very heavy, and since I was the oldest daughter too.

Like many other women from the poorer Northern regions of Thailand, Inger first moved to Bangkok to work, and found a Thai man there. It was only after this relationship did not work out and she was left to manage on her own as a single mother that she started contemplating finding a foreigner. She knew about some women back home who had married foreigners; they had built houses for their families, had cars, could travel overseas and in general had better lives. As the relationship with her Thai boyfriend at that time was bad and he constantly cheated on her, she said she thought "Okay, I think I better get a foreign boyfriend rather than stay with my Thai man".

Similarly, Sandra had a dream of getting away from Russia. She argued that she did not have any explicit hope or dream of marrying a foreigner, and when we asked if she remembered anybody from her community who married a foreigner, she first strongly refused. Then she reconsidered.

Well, maybe...: Yes – there was one neighbour who had married a Norwegian. *Can you remember what they said about her?* I cannot remember that they said anything... *Was she considered lucky or...?* Well, she was lucky, of course – people naturally thought she was lucky since she got out of Russia. And I am still happy that I live here in Norway. *Even in such a small place?* (we both laugh). Yes, I am. I always was. I was very sceptical towards Russian authorities. And Russia in general. I said I would never have children – because it is so difficult to raise children in Russia. We had several neighbours who had their children taken away. And they didn't have money to buy food. And education – it costs a lot of money. So I said I would never have children. But here in Norway you can easily have 10 children – and you know they will be safe – that they will never starve.

To Sandra there was little that held her back in Russia. Although she does not describe an explicit strategy to get away, she was clearly glad when marriage to a foreigner gave her the opportunity to move. Today Sandra lives alone with her two-year-old daughter, after her Norwegian husband has left her. She has a job in a kindergarten, and hopes to be able to study more. In spite of the emotional strain of the divorce, she enjoys the security the life in Norway offers her, and she does not even consider going back.

A special kind of dream of escaping is represented by the women who dream of getting away from prostitution. If they did not dream of a foreign husband before they entered prostitution, they will often start dreaming of it after some time in the sex industry. For many women in prostitution, marriage to a man who can support them represents one of few opportunities to get away from a rough life. In the parts of the sex industry that target foreigners, it is the foreign men who are the potential saviours. Moreover, as we mentioned in the chapter above, it isn't seldom that women in the sex industry find husbands among their clients. For the women who work in bars in Thailand, finding a western man to marry is perhaps one of the more realistic hopes they have of escaping prostitution. As such, the dream of the western man is it not only a dream of economic security, it is also a dream of the man who could come and save her, like the prince in the fairytales.

## Stigma

For many women, marrying a foreigner is seen as an opportunity to improve life, to get away from the harsh, or boring, life where they live. Others state that women who succeed in finding a foreign husband are generally envied. However, some respondents give a somewhat different picture of how marriage migration is perceived in their local communities.

Monica comes from a village in rural Thailand. Her mother was a widow, and her family was very poor when she grew up. When Monica was nineteen, she moved to Pattaya. She said she was hoping to find a white husband and to make a better life for herself.

I had heard of white people since I was just a little child. They came to my village during the war – the Americans came. I have always known that white people are rich and can offer you a better life. And I knew there were white men in Pattaya. I know it created a lot of talk in my village when I left. I gave my family a bad name. If you marry a white man, you will always be a whore.

Monica was not the only one to describe the ambivalence of marrying a foreigner; on one hand she knew that it could be the key to the good life. On the other hand it

was stigmatized and associated with immorality in her community. This is probably, at least in part, linked to the somewhat peculiar way in which women who wish to meet foreigners end up entering the sex industry in Pattaya in order to get married, as described in the chapter “The “Pattaya phenomenon” above.

But also women who had not met their husbands through the sex industry describe the stigma associated with marrying a foreigner. Elise has a higher education and comes from Southern Thailand. She tells us:

My mother got very upset when I told her I wanted to marry a Norwegian man. I was the only person in my family who had ever married a foreigner, and my mother felt that I made the whole family look bad, and that people would believe that I wasn't able to find a decent Thai man. Some Thai men shouted bad things at me on the street, because they thought that I was a bar girl bought by a foreigner. And when the director in the hotel where I worked learned that I was going to marry a foreigner, he got upset and said the foreigners should go to the bars and find their women there, but leave proper Thai girls alone.

The above quote illustrates the ambivalence that is associated with marrying a foreigner, particularly in Thailand, but also to some extent in Russia. For instance, Sandra tells us that her parents got very upset when she, as an 18-year-old student, said that she wanted to marry a Norwegian man who was twenty years older. According to our respondents, the possibility for a life in the West is associated with a way to get away and start a new life, and not the least, with economic security for both the women and her family back home. Simultaneously, a relatively strong prostitution stigma, insecurity of what it actually entails, and for some, the idea of the western lifestyle and expected dating norms as immoral, somewhat reduces the attractiveness of the idea.

## **Economic security does not exclude love**

Is it then only economic security the marriage migrants are looking for? Many of the women we talked to were relatively clear that it was the economic security that tempted them when they described the reasons for coming to Norway. Hanna was straightforward in telling us that there were practical and economic reasons for coming to Norway to marry a man her aunt had found for her:

There are three reasons why I went to Norway. First of all because of the money – you can earn much more money here. Secondly, the society is much better, and you get pension rights and welfare benefits and such. And thirdly, I didn't want to see my father and siblings in poverty. In particular my father, who was getting old. And my children, that I left with my ex-husband.

Clearly, someone who leaves their home country to marry a stranger, or someone they have barely met and do not share a common language with, will struggle to argue that they came here for love. However, does that mean that they have given up on love? In western societies romantic love is often presented as a prerequisite for marriage, and someone who marries a person explicitly for material or even 'practical' reasons will be chided by others (Frey & Eichenberger, 1996). Yet for most of our respondents there is no automatic distinction between marrying for love and marrying for money. Anne described this very well in relating her expectations when she decided to look for a husband abroad.

At that time I wanted someone who could take care of me. I didn't care who it was. I was never in love, but I wanted someone I could live with. Someone I could learn to care for after some time. Being in love wasn't an issue for me at all. [...] I had heard of the game, about the foreigners – getting married – having a better life. Of course I was dreaming of that. I dreamt of a future. I was fighting for my life; life was hard. Economically it was tough to be a single mother. So I didn't really care much what he looked like, but he should be kind, should be able to take care of me. [...] *What did you think when you travelled to Norway? Were you mainly happy or excited, or were you afraid?* I was very excited, and I dreamt a lot. I dreamt way too much. *What did you dream about? Clothes? Or food? Or love?* Yes – lots of love and... and I thought it would be like on a holiday. When I was younger I liked nice clothes too. I had this image in my head of what everything would be like. *What was the most important thing for you with a man?* The most important thing was love – and that he should be kind.

As Anne's quote illustrates, she did not see that there was any contradiction between marrying for economic security and marrying for love. On one hand she said she was willing to accept anybody that would marry her, but she assumes that if someone agrees to marry her, it is because he loves her and wants to take care of her, and for that, she is willing to love him in return.

Similarly, Britt still has a dream that it will still be possible to get it all – a marriage with both economic security and love. She is approaching 50 and works in a massage parlour in Thailand. When we met her, she had just broken off the engagement with a Danish man, as he had decided to go back to his ex-wife. Although the engagement was broken off, she has still not given up the dream of going to Denmark, either for work or for marriage:

*And why would things be so much better there than in Thailand?* The money is better. I think that it is very cold, but I will be ok if I have somebody, my husband or boyfriend, with me. I just think that it is better than living here. *It is easier to make money in Denmark?* Yes, it is easier to make money. But at the same time the cost



of living is so high. *But what would you use the money for? Anything special?* I want to buy a house here in Thailand. I don't have a house. *But if you are going to live in Denmark, why would you need a house in Thailand?* My kids are here in Thailand. [...] *If you were called tomorrow and somebody told you, I've got two options for you, one is a job and it is well paid and it is nice job, and the other is a husband, which one would you choose? They would both be in Denmark.* I couldn't decide that now (laughs). 'Cause it depends on what kind of job it is and what kind of husband it is... *But if both are safe, both are regular and you can assume both will last. But for marriage you don't know if it is love or not.* [Pause –thinking]... Sometimes I just feel that you need somebody...It is good to be two people, to have someone who cares.

As Britt's reflections about going abroad illustrate, she does not see a conflict between marrying for money (or in her case, the opportunity to work in Denmark) and marrying for the sake of having somebody to share your life with. Although she believes she will need to make some compromises, she hopes she will be able to find both love and security.

Hilde's reflections are similar, in that she does not think she should give up on love even if her marriage had clear pragmatic elements. When she met her husband she was working in prostitution in Pattaya, and it could be easy to argue that her options were limited. Furthermore, as he proposed marriage the first time they met, and she had very limited English skills, she had little opportunity to assess whether this was before she agreed to marry him. Now she lives with her husband in the countryside in Norway. She tells of her loneliness, as her marriage is failing:

And I ask myself: What is happening to me? Why doesn't he ever have time for me? He never puts his wife and children first. I have to take care of the children all alone. I wait by the window, and look forward to him coming home to eat at 6 o'clock. Sometimes he doesn't come home, other times his friends sit and wait for him when he comes home. Why do I have to sit and wait for him... He pays the rent and food, but... that is not all that I want. I want him – his heart. Not money. This is important for everybody. That he loves me – just a little.

To Hilde being supported and taken care of economically is not enough. A marriage without love is not what she wanted out of life. Although she was willing to accept almost anyone to get her away from a life in the sex industry in Pattaya, it did not mean that she wanted a life without love. In return for dedicating her life to a man, she expects his respect and caring.

Not only do our respondents not see a distinction between economic security and love, for many there is an explicit link. Often if we asked questions like: "Is he a good man? Did he love you?" we would get answers reflecting how generous he is, if he pays for children's education or sends money to her family. Similarly, if he does not want

to spend money on her and her family, this is taken as proof of his lack of love and respect for her. In their idea of the male role, men show affection though caring for and providing economic security for their women. Consequently, love and economic security belong together.

## 5 Expectations and realities

When we marry we carry with us a set of expectations – expectations of how our partner will behave and expectations of what one's life will be like in marriage. Some of these expectations are tied to one's choice in partner, what it will be like to marry this particular person as opposed to somebody else, but many expectations are rooted in cultural traditions, in our understanding of what marriage is. These are often things we take for granted, as part of our understanding of, for example, gender roles, how children should be raised and how resources should be shared between spouses.

Cultural differences in marriage traditions lead to extra complications for transnational married couples; while most newlyweds realize that there is some breach of expectations and realities, this breach can be particularly severe for two people with very different cultural backgrounds. For many of our respondents these cultural differences were combined with limited knowledge of each other's cultures<sup>17</sup>. Last, but not least, many couples do not share a language, and have had relatively limited opportunity to meet and talk prior to the wedding. Such couples will have had limited opportunity to discuss and clarify what their expectations are. Cultural differences combined with limited language skills and short time frames may limit the possibilities to understand, assess and discuss the new partner's expectations compared with their own. Consequently, both men and women in transnational marriages may end up realizing that life in a transnational marriage was not as they expected, for good or bad.

In this chapter we will give a brief look at the particular challenges marriage migrants face in marriage in Norway. As we stated in the introduction, a number of studies look at life in transnational marriage from various angles, and we do not intend to duplicate these. With this chapter we wish to show how paths into marriage, and various framework factors external to the couple, influence the women's life in marriage through, for instance, negotiating power, and the potential for conflict. Further, we will show how conditions in marriage influence not only the women's desire to stay in or leave a marriage, but also her opportunities to leave if she wants to.

<sup>17</sup> Again we wish to emphasize that in this study we focus only on transnational marriages where at least one of the partners has had an explicit strategy of marrying a foreigner. Transnational couples who have met randomly and decided to marry (for instance, when the Norwegian man has lived and worked in Russia or Thailand) are not part of this study. We do however acknowledge that this is no simple distinction.

## The meaning of money

Transnational couples usually organize their economy just like other couples in Norway, and as for other couples, money-trouble is often a source of conflict. Here we will not describe disputes over how money is best spent, and if DVD players and cigarettes should be prioritized over fashion and holidays. Such discussions are probably no more interesting for transnational couples than for other couples. However, there are some issues relating to the economic situation that are particular to transnational couples. These come from differences in expectations tied to cultural interpretations of gender roles in marriage, questions around remittances and expectations from home, and questions of control and support in situations where one spouse controls all the economic resources.

### Marrying a wealthy man

Although almost all our respondents insist that they did not choose their husbands for the money, some have to admit that they were quite disappointed when they realized that in the Norwegian context he was far from a wealthy man.

Many of our respondents met their husbands in their home country and had never been to Norway before they got married. Both Thailand and Russia (with the exception of Moscow and St Petersburg) have a price level far below Norway, and consequently, even a relatively poor Norwegian can afford to pay for fancy restaurants and beautiful gifts while he is there. Moreover, being on holiday, and courting a potential wife, will often lead to a different lifestyle than the one at home, with a significantly higher expenditure on luxury. When the woman has to base her expectations on what she sees and hears when he is in her country, it is easy to understand that she often expects life with him to be one of affluence. For instance, a common misunderstanding comes with the fact that Norwegians say they own a house or car, even if there is a substantial mortgage on it. This does not mean that the man tries to trick or fool the woman and her family; even if he wanted to explain to her that he is relatively poor in Norway, it would be difficult to explain to a woman who grew up on the rice fields of North-West Thailand, or an ordinary small-town in Russia what poverty looks like in Norway.

Silje described this disappointment when she finally arrives in Norway after months of dating and waiting for a visa:

His house was so dirty and disgusting. Dirty furniture. Everything was old. I had asked him if I should bring anything from Russia, but he had insisted that he had everything we needed. And I had such a beautiful home! With a pianoforte. And he just sits there in all the dirt in his sweat suits and drinks. While we [sic: her son and her] are cultural people. We are used to beautiful surroundings. [...]

He spends all his money on alcohol and cigarettes – he drinks every day. He is particularly grumpy when the bills come. We do the groceries once a week. He buys the cheapest cheese, and the cheapest everything... He lets us buy a cucumber and some tomatoes, but not more than that – they're too expensive. And apples – but not oranges because they're too expensive. But for himself he buys nuts and crisps – even from the gas station... He has no shame. Smokes and drinks. [...]

To Silje the lifestyle that was offered her and her son in Norway came as a great surprise. As she remembers it, she was promised a house with all the things she could wish for, and that he would pay for swimming and other leisure activities for her son. She definitely did not expect to economize on groceries. Whether intentional or not, Silje felt that she had been misled and tricked into marrying her current husband and she was thoroughly disappointed at how her life here turned out.

### **Living in Norway with no money at all**

Up until they find an independent job outside the household, marriage migrants are usually totally dependent on their husbands economically. Few marriage migrants are able to find a job immediately after they come to the West, and many become housewives with no independent income. If they need new clothes (Thai women often tell they lack adequate winter clothes), cosmetics and personal hygiene items, or simply money for the bus or a cup of coffee in town, they need to get the money from their husbands. For most marriage migrants this is not a particular problem; they get what they need from their husbands, and many also have access to joint bank accounts, or get a fixed amount transferred to their own account every month. However, there are also quite a few examples where she does not get any, or very limited money, that she can spend on herself, and where she needs to ask for money every time she needs (or wants) to buy something.

In the section above Silje told us how her husband would take her grocery shopping once a week, deciding what was needed and not. Beyond this, she rarely received any goods, nor did she get any money to spend; after several months he started giving about 200 kroner a month in pocket money for herself and her son. Clothes and other necessities for her son and herself are covered over the official child allowance. The child allowance is an important (and relatively often the only) source of income for several of our respondents. The child allowance is a little less than 1000 kroner per month,<sup>18</sup> but still it was often mentioned, and given considerable emphasis in some of our respondent's accounts.

To some the lack of money also entailed isolation, as they could not afford public transportation. The first time we met Heidi we had made an appointment through

<sup>18</sup> Pr 1 January 2008 Child allowance (Barnetrygd) was NOK 970 ([www.NAV.no](http://www.NAV.no))

the local crisis centre. Heidi had stayed in the crisis centre for a short period earlier, but had returned to her husband again. She lived in the countryside, outside a small town, and when we arrived at the crisis centre, we were informed that she could not come to meet us as she did not have money for the bus. We offered to come and pick her up at her home, and when we arrived 10 minutes later, she had packed a small suitcase that she wanted to take with her. She insisted on leaving the suitcase in the car, as she had not decided if she was going to stay or not<sup>19</sup>.

Heidi stayed at home with her children. She did not have a bank account, nor did she get any fixed “pocket money” from her husband. She did not complain though, on the contrary she presented the husband as being kind to her, since if she asks, he buys her what she needs. Still, the lack of access to money isolated her. She was dependent on public transport to visit friends or do other errands, and she had to ask for money for bus tickets every time. This gave him the perfect opportunity to control where she went, and whether or not she should leave the house. This was the background against which she decided to take the opportunity and bring her suitcase to the crisis centre when we picked her up for an interview. The last we heard, more than a year later she had not moved back.

Some may claim that all housewives without an independent income experience this economic dependency, and that this is not something special for transnational wives. There is, however, a significant difference between the Norwegian housewife and the marriage migrant, in that the newly arrived marriage migrant has much more that impedes her from finding a job. When marriage migrants are granted the right to residency, it is on the precondition that their husbands will support them economically; he has to document that he has sufficient income to support her to have the right to family reunification. The first year of marriage, before she acquires some language skills and becomes accustomed to their new country, it can be difficult to show enough qualification even to get a cleaning job. If her husband is not interested in her getting a job (as some claim), she is dependent on friends and networks to give guidance as to how to proceed to find a job in Norway; the Norwegian-born housewife will on the other hand know about the employment offices, and the employment ads in the (Norwegian-language) newspapers, and may even have networks and contacts that can help her find a job. The marriage migrants cannot apply for disability pensions or other welfare benefits (unless her husband qualifies for it), and of course, have not obtained right to unemployment benefits. However, even if they did have such rights, very few would know where to go to learn about and demand such rights. For many who live in the countryside having a driving licence can be a prerequisite for getting to work,

<sup>19</sup> As we realize that Heidi is in a life crisis we decided that this was not a good time for an interview. Instead we had a short, informal conversation before we left her to talk with the crisis centre personnel. We revisited and interviewed Heidi several weeks later.

and again, getting a driving licence can be quite costly in Norway. For all these reasons, women who come to Norway through marriage often become particularly dependent on their husbands in the beginning. As we will come back to later, this further skews the imbalance of power between the spouses.

We should however keep in mind that for many men the additional expenses of supporting a wife with no income may come as a surprise. When our respondents complain that they have to economize on everything, it is difficult for us to determine to what extent their husbands are really cheap, or just struggling to make ends meet. Some stories may indicate a line has been crossed; others may suggest that the woman may have had too high expectations.

In the story above, Heidi was able to live in Norway without any independent income. This is also related to her not having much contact with her family in Thailand, so she is not dependent on sending home remittances. To her it was possible to accept living without access to her own money, but for many marriage migrants, life in Norway without access to money is not acceptable in the long run – as they need money to remit.

## **Remitting**

In rural areas of Thailand children are usually responsible for supporting their parents in their old age, as pension schemes and other welfare schemes are rare or nonexistent. Thai women who get married in the West, will be expected to send money home to parents and other family members in need. Failure to do so will be shameful for the woman who does not show gratitude to their parents, and lets them live in poverty. It would also bring shame to her family, who raised a daughter who is not grateful to them. However, it is important to emphasize that this expectation to support the family economically is not particular to marriage migrants who travel to the West, as Elisabeth tells from her childhood:

My older sister – she was a grown-up already when we lived in the forest, and she had a boyfriend in the army, and they got married. After they got married, my brother-in-law helped my mother build a house for us – and one for themselves next to it.

It was her older sister's husband who built the house she grew up in, and only after her sister died in a fire, did the responsibility to support her mother and siblings fall on Elisabeth. She continued to do so for decades, long before she moved to Norway through marriage.

For many, remitting is not simply an obligation, it is also a way of showing family members respect and love. To Sofie it is important that her husband understands her need to send money home:

My mother looked after me all my life, and now he [her husband] is taking me away. That makes him feel bad so he has to support them. The government does not support old people in Thailand, the children have to. I told him at the beginning that I would have to take care of my family. I said: "If I come to Norway, I have to work; I have to help my family". My grandmother told me that if I go to the university and finish, then I have to come back to help and work with my family. But my mother says I can decide for myself as long as I am happy".

Sophie goes on to emphasize that she never asked her husband to help her support her family, but that he has chosen to do this on his own. To her this is a proof of his love for her.

In the example above Sophie made it clear to her husband before they got married that she would have to send home money. Tina, on the other hand, did not make it explicit, but found it hard to understand how he could think that she would not:

*Did you and your husband discuss it [the need to build a new house for her mother] before you got married? He knows! He knew what the house looked like when he met me. It isn't a house, it's more like a... I don't know....doghouses here in Norway are much nicer.*

To Tina, it was hard to imagine that anyone could suggest that she should live comfortably in the Norwegian welfare state, and leave her family to live in sheds and poverty back home. Lack of acceptance from the Norwegian spouse for her need to remit is a common cause of conflict in many transnational marriages. Catherine claims she paid her share of their expenses – she contributed 9000 every month for rent, and other bills. However, when she sent her family 1000 kroner a month to Thailand it made her husband upset, and he claimed they could not afford it. Still, in this area Catherine refused to listen to him, and sent off the money.

It is a problem for many marriage migrants to know where to set the limits for how much you should remit; how many family members can one marriage migrant be expected to support back home? The women who have left their children back home will of course send money home to them. Most of the Thai marriage migrants, and some Russian, send money home to their parents. However, like Tina, many end up supporting siblings and their children as well:

*Do you still send money home to your mother? Is she still living? Yes – I do. To your siblings too? I have a brother who is an alcoholic, and he has two children that I have taken responsibility for. I send money to them and my mother. And a brother who isn't married. How much do you send? One thousand per month sometimes, if I have enough. If not, it is two thousand in three months for instance. [...] In addition, from September last year I paid down on a loan I had taken up to build a house for my mum. I have built two houses. My brother, the alcoholic, lives in the*



old house that I built 10 years ago. And my mum, my little brother and the two kids of the alcoholic live in the new house.

For Tina her economic responsibilities – or expectations from home – were the main sources of conflict with her husband. She claims that everything was fine until she started earning her own money. Then she spent everything she earned, including the child benefit on travels and remittances. When her husband suggested that they should spend some of her money to refurbish the house in Norway, she thought he was cheap and not generous. Tina wishes that she had more money, so that she could help even more:

In my village there are many old people who don't have anybody to take care of them. So I have been thinking that I could fix the old house, and then we could let the old people live there. But I can't afford that. And there are so many children who don't have a place to live. If I could, I would like to build a place where all the poor children could live. Help them so they can go to school.

To Tina her childhood in poverty became a problem in her marriage in Norway – she found it difficult to live well in Norway, without sharing what she earned with the ones who need it much more. While her husband perhaps was prepared to remit some small amount to her family, he clearly was not prepared to see that her full salary and child benefit was spent on travel and remittances. But to Tina the possibilities for helping are endless, and as so many family members come to depend on her, she cannot stop or cut back.

It is worth noting, that while still in Thailand, many have been able to send substantial amounts to their parents. In Pattaya some women would claim to send up to 10 000 Bath, or even more, home every month (NOK 1 500). It is understandable that they do not expect to reduce this amount when they marry a 'wealthy' man and move to the West. However, sometimes it may seem as if the family pressures and expectations for remittances can go overboard.

Anita was one of our respondents who experienced that cutting down on remittances was not an option. After years of heavy physical work, she had injured her back and could not work as a cleaner anymore. She says she did not see any other way out than to sell sex in order to continue sending money home:

Earlier I worked in a hotel and in a factory as a cleaning lady. It was very heavy work, and I had some problems with my back. I had to have an operation, and now I am on disability pension. I only get 3000 per month in pension, and the apartment alone costs more than that. In addition I need to send money home to my family in Thailand. My mother is ill, and then I have to pay for my nephews who are in school. My sister paid for my schooling when I was little [...] and now it is my turn to do the same, so I have to help my sister out economically so her kids can go to school.

Anita is not the only one who says she entered prostitution in Norway in order to be able to send money home. For some the demands and expectations from family members back home seem out of control; Stine's story is a good illustration of this. She met Andreas when he was on a study trip to Thailand, and when she took him home to the village the first time everybody back home was in awe that she had found such a young, handsome and kind man.

We have sent home money to my family the whole time – about 3000 every month. Andreas has always been positive about it, and doesn't question the need to help my family. But still – when my family calls and says they need money, he sometimes says that we don't have any more money, and asks if they can wait until next month. But this has been difficult because there has been a lot of illness in the family. My parents-in-law have also been kind and often ask if we need money – and help to send money to Thailand when necessary. But to me it has been difficult to ask Andreas for money all the time, since I haven't had a fixed income. Sometimes I have worked enough to be able to pay for clothes and food and stuff myself, in addition to sending 2000 of my own money. To that Andreas adds 1500.

It was going well for a long time like this. But then my family in Thailand started needing more and more money. There was a period when I didn't talk to them for three or four weeks to try to escape the pressure for more money. But it didn't work in the long run, and I talked to them again. My mother is ill and needs treatment in a hospital. And then they needed to borrow the neighbour's car to drive to the hospital, and this was cumbersome and tiring. So I bought a car for my parents.

Stine ends up taking up a major loan in order to cover the demand for money from her relatives in Thailand. She feels she cannot tell her husband, and as she has very limited income on her own, Stine sees no other resort than to start selling sex in Norway. She insists that she had never even contemplated selling sex before in Thailand, but now she cannot see any other way out. She claims that all families in her hometown have daughters that work in Bangkok or other places, and all of them build houses and buy cars for their families.

I don't understand how they do it – the other girls. But nobody would believe me if I said I wasn't able to do this for them – since I live in Norway and all. [...] *But do you think your family would have wanted you to prostitute yourself for their sake?* No, they would never ask me to, but still I have to do this.

When we met Stine she had just started selling sex one month earlier. She was depressed and in despair, but she could not see any other solution. We offered to take her to one of the social services for women in prostitution for assistance, and at first she agreed. However, she then postponed our next meetings, and in the end we did not hear from

her anymore. We believe it was her fear of being identified that also made her afraid of seeking assistance.

Stine's family in Thailand does not need help to escape poverty, but have started to expect money for cars and motorcycles which, although they are good to have, should also be considered status objects. When she brought Andreas to her village the first time everybody had agreed that she had made the best catch of all the girls in the village, and this has probably led to increased expectations. At least she wants to be able to provide for her family just as well as any other daughter in the village. To her it is a matter of honour and status, and to her this was important enough for her to enter prostitution.

### **When she needs to support him**

Not all the women are in a situation where he is the breadwinner. For some of the women, the problem is that the man spends the money he earns on himself, while she is stuck with covering the joint expenses. Hege told of a life in poverty for herself and her children in Norway:

We never got to buy new furniture, he said it was too expensive, so we had to buy everything used. I was allowed to buy curtains and stuff – but I had to use my own money. *Would he pay for the living expenses?* I would pay expenses for electricity, water and telephone. He paid NOK 3500 on the mortgage. I covered everything else. *This was after you started working?* Before this too. I used the child cash benefit ('kontantstøtte'). He spent his money on gambling machines, and cigarettes. He used 2000 per month in tobacco alone. And then alcohol. *Did he drink every day?* Mainly at the weekend, but sometimes he would drink during the week too, if he wasn't able to stop after the weekend.

Hege tells about their economic situation matter-of-factly. She does not find it particularly bad; other women in her community were in similar situations, she claims. She insists that when she decided to leave him it was because of his drinking, and the violence that followed as a result. The economic situation she could handle. After all he did have a job, and paid the mortgage. Hege lives in a small community, where marriage migration is quite widespread. She has a relatively large network in the community, but she knows no Norwegian women. When we asked if she thinks Norwegian women in her community were in the same situation, she said she did not know. She does not know what it means to be a Norwegian woman in this setting. However, she knows that there are Russian women who are worse off than she. She insists that some of the men in her community got Russian wives and expect the wives to support them, while they do nothing at all.

## Status and social mobility

Transnational marriages between partners from countries of very different levels of economic development can be complicated in terms of the status gain of the migrants. Although it might be clearer for women from third world countries, it can be claimed that most marriage migrants who come to Norway marry upwards several scales in socio-economic terms. Simultaneously, the Norwegian man will often gain in status through marriage as well, as in many communities, being a family man has significantly higher status than being an unmarried bachelor. This way many transnational marriages can be understood as giving reciprocal gains in status (Oxfeld, 2005).

On the other hand, a number of studies of transnational marriage migration all over the world point to the fact that many marriage migrants can experience a relative fall in status compared with their situations in their home countries (see for instance Constable, 2003; Oxfeld, 2005; Schein, 2005). Some of the women who come to the West through marriage have middle-class backgrounds in their own society. Compared with many women in Thailand or Russia they might have had been perceived as educated, having a successful career, good family background or for other reasons had a high social status. When they come to the West, some may struggle to keep up this image.

Labour migrants who come to Europe to work are often reported to experience such a fall in status, when persons with university degrees have to clean floors or work as shop assistants. The dilemma for this group is that manual labour in Europe can provide higher incomes and a better living than their high skill, high status jobs in their home country. Similarly, marriage migrants sometimes have to give up higher social status in their home countries for more comfortable lives in the West. This happens when they marry someone with significantly lower status in the local status hierarchy (for example, based on type of job, relative economic position or education), than their family at home. While labour migrants may to some extent be prepared for the fall in status (for instance, knowing that they will pick strawberries or clean bathrooms even if they work as medical doctors at home), marriage migrants may be less able to evaluate the social status of their future husbands, and the fall in status may in some cases come as a surprise. As we have shown above, the large differences in income levels make it possible for even relatively disadvantaged Norwegian men on holiday in Russia and Thailand to afford to go to fancy restaurants and buy nice gifts, in particular when they are courting a potential wife. However, back in Norway, they may have to economize to make ends meet. Furthermore, the women may find that the dwelling and available amenities may not meet the standard they expected, or even the standard they were used to. Some Russian women also complain that their husbands are not interested in cultural activities and have no interest in literature and arts.

Many marriage migrants come to the West confident that they have made quite a catch in marrying their husbands; as we showed above they are likely to be envied

by friends and family, and by having a residence in Europe, their status in their home communities may even increase when they marry a westerner (although this can be somewhat ambivalent as we showed in the section “Stigma” above). Of course, many remain certain that they made quite a catch throughout their marriage. However, some may come to realize that she, as a transnational wife, or for some reason, her husband, are perceived as relatively far down on the local social hierarchy. This can be because of his job or lack of education, or because of substance abuse or even, in some cases, psychological problems. This can come as an immediate surprise when she realizes what his life in Norway is like, while others come to realize this gradually, when she learns the Norwegian language and society, starts to understand the social codes, and adopts Norwegian values.

To some of the men their new wife’s high expectations may come as a surprise. As the wife comes from a significantly poorer country than Norway, he may not expect her to have any expectations at all – but be grateful for what she gets. But for some of the marriage migrants, life in Norway turns out to be very different from what they expected. Some of our higher educated respondents found it difficult to accept that they had to take up manual labour to get money for their own consumption. To Kristina, taking a cleaning job was only a last resort:

In Russia, if you clean floors, then you are nobody. Nobody wants anything to do with you – nobody cares about you. It means that you don’t have any education – that you don’t have any abilities or talents. It isn’t like this here – luckily. I have worked cleaning floors for more than a year now. It was because of the situation at home. I didn’t get any money for food. Or the bus. He said it was too expensive.

As Kristina was not able to get a job where she could use her education, and she was still struggling to learn the language, she had to take a cleaning job when she needed money. It is not something she is proud of when she talks to friends and family in Russia.

Many migrants maintain a form of double-status identity. Although they may be perceived as having a low status in their new country of residence, they may still be perceived as winners at home, when they come back to their home communities in their nice clothes, bringing gifts to friends and family members. Many secure their high status through supporting parents and siblings, building them nice houses and supporting children through education. This way it may be easier to increase their status in their countries of origin than it is in their new country of residence. The lower their status is in their new country of residence, the more important it can become to maintain their status in their home countries, through remittances and assistance to family.

## Domestic work and other work

As Nicole Constable (2005; p. 11) points out, marriage migrants may come from countries with low aggregate income levels, but where the middle class can afford to eat out relatively easily, have maids, and enjoy entertainment and other services which are far more expensive in the West. This is reflected in several of our respondent's stories, in the surprise they feel when they realize they are expected to cook and clean. Camilla is not really middle class in Thailand, but still she felt that the transition to Norway was rough:

It was difficult for me to adapt. I didn't want to be a housewife. I wasn't used to cooking and cleaning. I was used to living a city life. In Thailand I went to discos and had dinner with friends – I had a free life. In Norway I had to change – I had to learn how to clean. I cleaned the stairs for the first time in my life after I moved to Norway.

Just as a woman may be disappointed when she realized that the man she got to know turned out to be different from what she expected, some men might be disappointed when they learn that the women they assumed should be the perfect wife are uncomfortable with the role of housewife. Many have to learn to clean, to cook and even to take care of their own children.

In Thailand I never washed the house or my clothes myself. We paid someone to do it – it was so cheap. Even when I lived in the women's collective we would pay someone to clean. And before that I lived at home with my mother and my sister, and then they would take the responsibility. I had never been responsible for a home before I came here. It was a lot of work – and so much hassle with the clothes for the children. And to take the kids with me when I go shopping. In Thailand the kids stayed with my sister, and I would send money to her and she would fix everything.

In contrast to the widespread representation of marriage migrants as traditional housewives, many of our respondents complain that their husbands did not do any work at home. As many were not used to domestic work at all, it is sometimes difficult to assess how much housework our respondents actually do; however, many claim that they are the only one doing any work at home. As Tone complained:

All the domestic work is so tiring. First you work until six, and then all the housework when you come home. Sometimes I am in bed late in order to get everything done – and then up early the next day. If not I wouldn't get everything done. I wish we could have a maid, but this is too expensive here. Sometimes I call home to my sister and cry – because I am so tired and discouraged.

Complaints over too much domestic work is not something unique for marriage migrants; although there has been some tendencies towards more equal distribution of domestic work, surveys indicate that women still do the major part in Norwegian households. Several of our respondents proudly told us that she and her husband share the duties at home equally, and have done so from the start. Other respondents have tried to make demands on him, but have been unsuccessful. Tina said that when she, during couples counselling, suggested that he should help out at home, he bought her a washing machine, and thought everything was solved with that. Linda's husband rebuffed her with a "what are you going to do then" when she suggested that he did some housework. However, as Linda points out, all the Norwegian men she knew in the small village where they lived were like that. Many of our respondents did not seem to mind being a housewife, nor did they question their role as the one in charge of housework in the family. However, as Tina pointed out, there is still a difference between being treated as the housewife and being treated as a domestic worker:

Tina likes to go fishing and to pick berries in the forest. She is used to this kind of gathering of food from childhood, and when she came to Norway, she continued. But after a while she started feeling that her husband had begun to expect it of her, as he had realized how much money it saved them. And as she had a full-time job on the side, she started to feel exploited when she went fishing.

It isn't only me who lives like this. Lots of Thai women live this way. Get up, go to work, come home to make dinner for the husband and do the dishes – and he just lies on the sofa and does nothing. [...] I often think back on how my mother and I lived when I grew up. We were poor, and we would walk for kilometres to find food, but still we had a good life. For I had her, and she had me. But my life now isn't like that. I don't feel like that when I live with him. He doesn't have me. He has a domestic worker. He has a whore that sleeps next to him who he wants sometimes. But we don't have each other – there is no love. [...] *Do you feel that he doesn't care about you?* He cares about the work that I do, he doesn't care about me. He is happy that I am a really good worker.

Tina did not mind working hard and collecting berries in the forest for their household as long as her work was not taken for granted. If she could work side by side with her husband for their common good, she thinks she would enjoy such a life. However, when she feels she is no longer seen a person and respected as his wife, she does not feel any joy in doing these tasks.

## Caring and respect

One recurring theme in our interviews with some marriage migrants who were struggling in their marriage was that they felt their husbands did not treat them as wives, that they did not respect their opinions, or even that they did not care for them as persons. They complained that they are not treated as partners in life; some complained that the husbands do not discuss important economic and practical issues with them, and make important decisions about their life without consulting the wives. Others claimed that the husbands show no interest in the wives' family and their country, or even that the husbands show contempt for the women's national background and culture. Finally there are those who felt that they are not seen as a person or an individual by their husbands, but as someone who performs certain functions (for instance, domestic work, caring for children or sex).

### Influencing small and big decisions

Karin grew up in Moscow, and has worked all her adult life, but when she came to Norway her husband lived in the countryside where there were no job opportunities for her. She said her husband did not want her to work, but preferred her to manage the house and take care of his kids when they were visiting. During the whole year Karin lived with her husband, they worked on refurbishing the house:

*When you refurbished the house, was it he or you who decided on the colours? In the beginning he would come to me and ask – which colour do you want – this or this? And I would pick one. But still he would use the colour he wanted himself... and after some time he stopped asking. Just told me – I will do this and this and this. I would ask: Aren't you going to ask me too? After all, I live here too – I am your wife. And he would say – yes, but I want it like this and this....*

Karin was not the only one who were not given a chance to influence interior decoration in her own home. Silje was told that if she did not like his house, she could leave, and Tina said that in her 10 years of marriage, she never once was allowed to change anything, or buy something new for their house.

Other marriage migrants are run over and not asked for advice on issues of more severe consequences; several respondents were just told that they were going to move. Linda thought that the small town where Jonny lived was quite small compared to the big city she came from in Russia, but when she moved to Norway, Jonny had decided that they should move to the countryside, to his childhood's house:

*It was a small place – everybody knew everybody, even smaller than the town where he lived when we met. I thought we would live in the town, and I wasn't told any-*



thing else before after we were married. And he would study – and travel around a lot. So I ended up sitting in the countryside alone.

Similarly, Nina thought she would stay in Thailand and be close to her family even if she married a Norwegian, but after the wedding she was told she had to come with him to Norway after all. Nina was so lonely she cried for a month, she said.

A major problem for couples in transnational marriages is that due to large cultural differences, there is most likely going to be relatively large differences of opinion, for instance in what constitutes nice interior decoration, how children should be raised, how money should be spent and how life should be organized in general. Several of our respondents claim that their Norwegian spouse would solve such conflicts by simply not asking. It should be recognized that it cannot always be easy for the western man to let someone with limited knowledge of the Norwegian society, and who, in some instances can barely read and write, make major decisions on the family economy; however, on questions of interior decorations or place of residence some dialogue and attempts to reach compromises should be expected, even when there are major cultural and educational differences. As one of the more extreme examples, one male respondent told us, in front of his Thai wife, that being married to a woman from Thailand is like having an extra child. He believes it his responsibility to be in charge and make all the important decisions.

### **Respecting her culture and background**

All immigrants need to find a balance of what they want to bring from their own culture, and to what extent they want to adapt to their new country of residence. For those who come through marriage to a local, the pressure to adapt may be more significant than for immigrants married to someone from the same culture. However, to what extent could it be expected that marriage migrants should adapt?

The issue of food was a recurring problem in many of our interviews, both for women from Russia and Thailand. For both cultures, the endless Norwegian sandwiches for breakfast and lunch was extensively ridiculed in the interviews. However, for most of them this was mainly a problem in the first few days, until they figured out ways of organizing it so that both could get food they considered appropriate. Some of our respondents were however told that once in Norway you are expected to do as the Norwegians, and were offered nothing but whole-grain bread with goat cheese or tomato fish for breakfast and lunch. Many were also expected to learn to cook “Norwegian” for dinner. As he is the one who controls the money in the beginning, he is also in a position where he can decide what is brought into the household, and what is not.

Not only do many experience a lack of interest in their food and culture, others complain that he has no interest in her family back home. To Silje, her husband's lack of interest in her parents is taken to indicate indifference towards her as well:

Before I left home I thought I would be able to send 1000 kroner to my parents once a month... (she frets scornfully). But I cannot even afford to let my son go swimming. [...] Now my dad is ill in Russia, but I have no opportunity to send money. My husband doesn't even know what my parents names are...

Many of the Thai women travel to Thailand with their husbands regularly. However, quite a few separate once they are in the country; he will go south to the beaches and other conveniences of the tourist industry, while she goes home to visit her relatives. Here it should be mentioned that many women probably prefer going home alone, having the opportunity to spend her time freely with family and friends without having to take the responsibility for her western husband who does not speak the language, and generally struggles to adapt to the heat, insects, food and customs. However, most women still would appreciate him dropping by the parents-in-law to show his respect sometimes, and otherwise show interest in the individual destinies of family members.

Perhaps even more important, many marriage migrants complain that their husbands do not like them to spend time with their co-nationals. As Louise Schein points out in her study on transnational marriages in China, for women who have grown up with strong family ties, in the absence of blood relatives – co-nationals (or co-ethnics) become increasingly important (Schein, 2005). For almost all our respondents, the society of other Thai or Russian women in their community was of outmost importance. This is the group they turn to for advice and support, but also for recreation and companionship. Some of the respondents complained that their husbands did not like or respect her compatriots. Tina's husband refused to spend time with her Thai friends, as he claimed they were all peculiar, and that the men who married Thai women were particularly strange. That his contempt for her co-ethnics could be seen to apply to Tina (and himself for that sake) did not stop him from making this point. However, he would still let Tina visit her friends when she wanted. Other respondents described husbands who tried to prevent them from spending time with their friends. Some described how husbands interfere or even hang up the phone while they are talking to their friends on the telephone. Others told of husbands who meddle when their friends are visiting, insisting that they speak Norwegian, or that they include him in their conversation.

Sometimes such behaviour can be interpreted as a manifestation of jealousy. According to these respondents, their husbands have very limited networks of their own, and are likely to have wanted a wife for the companionship. Often with substantial age differences, in addition to cultural differences and language barriers, it is quite natural

that many marriage migrants would want to spend time with co-nationals, and women closer to her age. However, with her gaining independence and developing networks that he cannot be part of (because of the language), he might end up feeling even more lonely than he did before she came. However, even if his motivation can be understood, sometimes his attempts to limit her interaction with co-ethnics can border on control and abuse of power. As most marriage migrants have little contact with Norwegians, cutting them off from contact with their co-ethnics often means isolating them from contact with others.



## 6 Divorce

Marriage can be difficult for anybody. Transnational couples face the same challenges as others when they try to make their marriages work. However, as we have described above, they often face a number of other problems in addition, in particular in the beginning of the relationship. Many have limited possibilities for communication in a shared language. With large cultural differences there are also often different expectations of how marriage should be organized, and finally, due to economic and legal constraints, most couples have limited opportunities to live together and get to know each other prior to marriage. Studies indicate that the more different the married couple are (for example, in terms of culture, economic background and age), the greater the likelihood of divorce (Tsay & Wu, 2006). This is also reflected in divorce statistics for couples in transnational marriages. Of all the couples who got married in Norway in 2001 and 2002, about 82 percent were still married six years later. Thai women who married a Norwegian were somewhat less likely to stay married – 68 percent were still married after six years, while 66 percent of the Russian women who married a Norwegian made it through the first six years (see Table 3 below). The divorce rates for these transnational couples are somewhat higher than for the Norwegian population at large, but it is worth noting that the divorce rates for Norwegian women who marry a foreign man are significantly higher (Daugstad, 2006).

Is the somewhat higher divorce rate for this group a problem? Although many would want to defend the importance of marriage as an institution, in particular when there are children involved, it is difficult to argue that divorce is necessarily a negative outcome, from a scientific or moral standpoint. There are situations when divorce may be the right response, or a natural outcome (Trost, 1986).

Based on what we know of the challenges transnational couples face – as described in the chapter above – it should not come as a surprise to anybody that some couples come to realize that their marriage does not work. Consequently, in this report we do not intend to give much attention to transnational marriages that end in divorce in general. However, there are two special aspects of transnational marriages that need to be treated here. First, we need to look at the specific challenges marriage migrants experience when their marriage ends before three years, when she still does not have independent residency. In relation to this we will discuss the marriages that end as soon as she has independent residency, partly because they may indicate so-called pro forma marriages and exploitation of the system, but also because we need to consider

the conditions under which some women live while they wait for their residency. We need to ask if the laws provide adequate protection, or if women stay in exploitative marriages in fear of being sent out of the country.

In the second part of this chapter we will ask what holds some women back from divorcing in marriages marked by heavy exploitation and abuse, both before and after the three years have passed. We show that not all women who come to Norway through marriage are in a situation where they are able to divorce, even if they want to after three years. This is mainly because of lack of basic integration in the Norwegian society, where they do not have sufficient language skills, economic independence or knowledge of the welfare system in order to manage on their own (or to risk moving out). However, first we will look briefly at the statistics to find out who gets a divorce and when.

## Numbers and trends

Table 3 gives an overview of the prevalence of divorce for couples that got married in Norway in 2001 and 2002. The foreign women in the first group – the ones who got divorced before three years – were mainly not able to apply for independent residency in Norway at the time of divorce. The second group – the ones who divorced during their fourth year in Norway – have largely just received independent residency at the time of divorce, while the last group, who got divorced after five to six years in Norway, had had the right to independent residency for some time when they decided to file for divorce.

Of all couples (among Norwegians and other nationalities) that got married in Norway in 2001 and 2002, 18 per cent had separated or divorced five to six years later<sup>20</sup>. Of these, about half divorced before 3 years had passed, and another 17 per cent divorced during the fourth year. In marriages between a Russian or Thai woman and a Norwegian man 33 and 32 per cent respectively, had divorced after 5 years of marriage. For the Thai women the distribution of divorces follow more or less the same pattern as for Norwegians at large – about half divorced before 3 years, another 15 per cent during the fourth year, and the last third during the fifth and sixth year. For the Russian women only one third divorced before three years of marriage, and another 15 percent during the fourth year, while about half divorced during the fifth or sixth year.

How should we understand this? First of all, these numbers show that there is no significant increase in divorce rates for marriage migrants during the fourth year of marriage. In other words, there is nothing in these numbers that indicates that there are

<sup>20</sup>In January 2007 for those married in 2001, and January 2008 for those married in 2002

Table 3 Divorces after 2, 3 and 5 years of marriage. Percent of couples married in 2001 and 2002 still married 01.01 2004/5, 2005/6 and 2007/8, in marriages between Norwegian men without immigrant background and women from Thailand and Russia. Percent

Year of marriage		Number of marriages	Still married after:		
			2–3 years 2004/2005	3–4 years 2005/2006	5–6 years 2007/2008
2001	All couples	20492	91 %	88 %	82 %
	Russian woman and Norwegian man	358	88 %	82 %	66 %
	Thai woman and Norwegian man	437	85 %	79 %	68 %
2002	All couples	21465	91 %	88 %	82 %
	Russian woman and Norwegian man	436	88 %	83 %	67 %
	Thai woman and Norwegian man	599	81 %	78 %	69 %
2001 and 2002	All couples	41957	91 %	88 %	82 %
	Russian woman and Norwegian man	794	88 %	82 %	67 %
	Thai woman and Norwegian man	1036	83 %	78 %	68 %

Source: Statistics Norway

large groups of women who are waiting to get divorced as soon as residency is secured. We are rather surprised to find that the divorce rates during the first three years are this high, given that the women will normally not have a chance to claim independent residency at this time. We do not have access to data that indicate how many of these women stay in Norway, or gain residency subsequently. However we do know that only a very small group of the women who divorce before 3,5 years have a child under 3 years of age at the time of divorce (5 and 6 percent of the Thai and Russian women respectively)<sup>21</sup>. Family reunion with a child born in Norway is more or less the only options available to gain residency for women who divorce before 3 years.

It is difficult to say how the divorce rate between Russian and Thai women and Norwegian men will develop in the long run, as most of the marriages have not yet lasted very long. In 2005, 69 per cent of the Russian migrants in Norway and 55 per cent of the Thai have lived in Norway less than five years, and 91 per cent of the Russian population and 73 per cent of the Thai have lived in Norway less than ten years (Daugstad, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> In the 2000–2006 period 202 Russian and 195 Thai women got divorced before they had been married 3,5 years. Of these 12 Russian and 9 Thai women had children under 3 at the time of divorce (Statistics made available by Statistics Norway).

## Divorce in the first three years of marriage

### Waiting until residency is secured

As the transnational marriages studied here are between two persons who did not know each other particularly well to start with, many of our respondents were aware that there is a risk that their marriage would not last. However, most of our respondents seem to really want to make it work. This is also Linda's impression. She knows a lot of other Russian women who came to Norway through marriage. And although she thinks that for some of them the wish to live abroad was more important than any attraction to their husband, she insists that they did not calculate on or plan for a divorce:

Most of the ones who get married believe they will be able to live with their husband. If he is sufficiently kind so that he is possible to live with, they will try to cope. But sometimes it is just totally impossible.

*What do you mean by that – what is it that makes it “totally impossible”?* Well – many drink – or they don't have enough money. There are some women who do not like that they have to work. There are many men that marry a Russian lady so that she can provide for him. I know several like that. If you don't pay – please go back.

There may have been a certain level of pragmatism in the choice of life partner for some of the women we met, as the possibility of moving abroad was important for their decision to marry. However, the women we interviewed before entering into a marriage were convinced that they would be able to make their marriage work, to create a home filled with love and take good care of their husbands.

Women we talked to who were in the process of looking for a husband abroad did not see that there was much risk associated with transnational dating. They insisted that going to Europe through marriage could only be seen as an opportunity, claiming that if things did not turn out well they could just go back, and things would simply be the same as when they left. There is nothing to lose, they state. However, after they come to Norway, many come to realize that turning back is more difficult than they expected.

Kristina claims that she already realized on the morning of her wedding day that the relationship would never work. They had met when she was on holiday in Norway. He had been looking for a Russian wife for some time, and after they met he worked hard at convincing her to marry him and come to Norway. In the end she agreed – convinced that he cared for her and loved her – even though she knew that he was a bit suspicious towards Russians in general, and somewhat influenced by the public discourses that presented Russian women as prostitutes who only aim at getting money from men. Then, on the morning on their wedding day, after the car had come to pick them up to take them to church, he handed her some papers in Norwegian that he wanted her



to sign. When she asked what it is, he explained that it delineates their property in marriage. Kristine emphasizes that she would not mind signing a prenuptial agreement; however she would want to have time to sit down with a lawyer and look over the documents in a language she understands. However, he gave her an ultimatum there and then – if she did not sign, he did not want to marry her.

What you are doing now is treason, I told him. He laughed. This is how the rules are here, he said. [...] On the way to the church I told her [the maid of honour, her best friend from Russia] that I cannot do this now. “I don’t want to try to convince you,” she said. “It is only you who can decide. We can turn the car around and go home and pack your things and go to the airport. And we’ll leave.” But I didn’t have anything left there. I had sold my car, and closed up my business. Everybody knew that I had left to get married. What would they say if I came back. The shame of it. I was frightened. I thought I couldn’t take it. That I would be scared of meeting people. So that is how I ended up living the life I do now. It isn’t anybody else’s fault. It is my own fault for getting myself into this mess, sitting here as his slave all these years. I understood at that moment that he didn’t want a wife – he wanted someone to clean his floors and that he wanted for other things too. He didn’t want a woman with education – he doesn’t understand anything about this.

Kristina is now counting the days until she has independent residency and can move away from her husband, and she has done so from the day she got married. She realized too late that it was not that easy to just go back. She had burned a lot of bridges – selling the car and quitting her job. However, the biggest problem for her was the humiliation she would have to face, going back and telling everybody that he did not love her after all. One of the priests we talked to in the Russian-Orthodox church in Oslo does not think Kristina’s story is special. He has often been surprised by how easily some women throw themselves into deep water, and make it very difficult for themselves to go back if things do not turn out well. They quit their jobs, and sell their apartments. But one of the most difficult factors, he claims, is the fear of the humiliation of returning to a place they left with their heads held high – as one of those who were able to get out. Then it is not easy to go back. The priest emphasized that he has also met many women who are much more careful, protecting themselves legally and economically, and keeping their options open. However, you can never protect yourself from the humiliation and gossip that is likely to accompany a failed migration experience and a failed marriage.

This was also the case for Kristina, and this is why she chose to enter into a marriage she wanted out of from day one. Does this mean that she is exploiting the system through a pro forma marriage? Perhaps. But she, and many women like her, are living very difficult lives, balancing a fine line, making sure their husbands do not get tired of them and throw them out before all documents are in order.

Kristina emphasized the fear of gossip and loss of face as the main reason she wanted to stay. Others have family who have become dependent on remittances back home, and find it difficult to go back without securing the living standard of their family in some way. For the ones who have children from earlier relationships, some believe that the possibilities a child can have in Norway compared with Thailand or Russia are so great that they are willing to sacrifice much in order to guarantee that they will not have to move back. Many also see much better opportunities for themselves here – with the possibility to go back to school, and find a secure job and have a decent life. What they all have in common is that they may be willing to endure quite a lot in order to stay in Norway. This gives enormous power to their Norwegian spouses since ultimately he is the one who decides if they can stay in the country, as three years of marriage is necessary to secure independent residency.

### **When he decides to leave her**

In most of the cases in our material where she is divorced before three years of marriage (and when she does not have a child that secures her residence), it was the husband who decided to leave. Only in a few instances of extreme violence have we met women who have left on their own initiative (or because child protection officers threatened to take away her child if she did not leave him). The others have been divorced because he did not want to try any longer. This was the case for Karin. Her husband asked her to go back to Russia after a little more than one year of marriage:

[...] In the end he [the husband] decided to end the reign... to change wives. *So he decided that?* Yes, of course. *So he was the one who decided that he didn't want to live together with you any longer?* Yes... he went to Brazil and found himself a Brazilian... Half a year ago... (she becomes quiet. I laugh a bit, shocked – and she joins me in a sarcastic and resigned laugh). He wanted to send me back... *What did he say to you – literally?* That he no longer felt anything for me – he had lost the feelings he once had – and that I should go back to Russia for some time and live there. “So, how do you figure things will go for my daughter [from the first marriage],” I said. He replied: “You can go back and take up your old job”. But they wouldn't take me back there... And my daughter had been in school in Norway for a year and a half.

I thought it would pass – that he was just having a fling. To him it was perfectly normal – he did the same with his last wife. We had an OK relationship in spite of this. Slept in the same bed – everything was OK. I could easily live with him – I am made like that by nature – I can endure a lot. *So you thought he would come back to you?* He went there [Brazil], and then the time approached when she should come to Norway. So we had bigger and bigger scenes – where he wanted me to move out.

But I had to find an apartment – and that wasn't easy. He found one for me – but I didn't like it – it was very small.

We are certain that if we ask Karin's husband we would most likely get a very different story. But Karin was convinced that the problem was that as an urban and educated Russian, she did not fulfil his expectations of what a transnational wife should be. It is interesting then that he left her for another marriage migrant from another country. Karin is not the only one who sees her husband marry another foreigner soon after they have broken up. In our material being left for another marriage migrant is far from uncommon, and as we mentioned in the introduction, several women's shelters have tried to bring attention to the problem of men who bring women to the country, and leave them after a period of time, to live with another.

As Hilde Lidén (2005) points out in her study of transnational remarriages in Norway, there is a large variety of reasons why some men end up marrying several foreign women. Some are what she terms "try and fail" marriages, where a failed relationship makes the man want to try to find a wife again relatively quickly. Some are also what she sees as strategic misuse of the marriage institution, where marriage migrant uses the marriage to obtain residency. Lidén also finds some serial marriages characterised by controlling behaviour and mistreatment, or even notorious abusers. But not all serial marriages fit easily into one of these categories; as Lidén describes, some seem to not be satisfied with the women they get, and are tempted by the possibilities inherent in the system of transnational marriage migration to replace their wives. She describes this type as follows:

He is in a milieu where several of his friends have foreign wives. In spite of his superior position, he gets a feeling of being exploited by the women he marries, and he is not satisfied with the women he has met. New relationships confirms his self-image and makes sure he does not loose face vis a vis his friends.

(Lidén, 2005; 63; own translation from Norwegian).

The mental strain associated with being replaced by another woman, is perhaps neither more nor less in transnational marriages than in others. However, the economic and legal consequences this can have for foreign women without automatic right to residency can make the situation extremely stressful. Ellen Kristivik (2005) also describes how one of her Thai respondents had a psychological breakdown when she realized that she was to be replaced by a woman from the Philippines, because, as she puts it, her husband got tired of her. As we have stated earlier, this study does not aim to describe men's motivation for marriage or divorce, and we do not wish to speculate in what their intentions are if they get a new transnational wife. However, we do wonder if they can have fully understood the consequences it can have for their wives, when they divorce before independent residency is secured. Whatever reason Karin's husband had, he did

not want to stay married until she had secured residency, but insisted that she should go back to Russia. Karin's application for residency in Norway has now been declined, and she is preparing to return to Russia with her daughter.

Karin's husband is not the only one who wanted his wife to go back after the marriage failed. When Anne decided to leave her husband, he did all he could to make her go back to Thailand – he even contacted the police and tried to convince them to force her go back. However, as Anne had a Norwegian child, her residency was secured.

In Pattaya we met several women who had been married in the West and had returned. Helena had lived in Texas for many years with her American husband (who according to Helena was not mean, but had a mental disorder and severe alcohol problem). Some months before we met her she had come to Thailand with her husband for her father's funeral. At some point her husband had told her he did not want her to come back with him to the US, and he had simply taken her documents and left her. Helena is 42 years old and has a substance abuse problem. She is not able to support herself economically, not even in prostitution, and does not have family to rely on.

Dina was also back in Thailand after several years of marriage. She had lived happily with her Norwegian husband in Thailand for some years when he decided that they would be better off economically if she moved to Norway; then they would not have to pay for private school for her children (from an earlier marriage), and she could have a Norwegian salary. After living together for some time in Norway, her husband moved back to Thailand. She continued to support him economically, and took care of his childhood home in a small village in Western Norway. Her children went to school in Norway and learned to speak the language fluently. But after some time local authorities realized that they were no longer living together as man and wife. They refused to renew her residency permit, and she had to go back to Thailand. There she found that her husband was living with a new woman, and that he wanted a divorce. Now, neither Dina nor her children are able to go back to Norway.

Women with failed migration experiences are not difficult to come by in Pattaya. Usually we have only her version of the story, but according to her she was often willing to do and endure almost anything to be allowed to stay. For many this was still not good enough.

### **Living on the edge**

It is the fear of ending up like Helena and Dina that makes many marriage migrants tip-toe around their husbands for the first years of marriage, without daring to make too many demands on how their life should be. Several of our respondents report that they have been threatened with divorce in disputes and fights with their husband.

When Silje comes to Norway after she has married Knut, she is taken by surprise by how small and old his house is. When she asks if she can refurbish or change anything he refuses to let her do anything – he likes it as it is. Silje is not happy about it. One month after she has arrived they arrange a party to celebrate their wedding. The issue of refurbishing comes up during the evening. When the guests have left, he is drunk and upset; he takes off his wedding ring and throws it at her, and tells her to leave the house.

He threw me out and said: “If you don’t like the house you can leave. I am the boss here.” It was two o’clock in the morning. He called my parents and told them we were splitting up. I packed my suitcases and called my friend, and she came with her husband to pick me and my boy up and took me to their house. The next day my husband came and apologized, and we went back to him. The next time it happened he had washed some of my and my son’s clothes together with his blacks. I commented on it. He started yelling that tomorrow he would contact his lawyer for divorce papers, and that night I had to sleep on the sofa in the living room. *How many times has it happened that he threw you out of the house and you had to sleep at your friend’s house?* I suppose it’s been 5–6 times – wasn’t it?

Silje turns to her seven-year-old son. The child answers: I think it is 4.

Knut and Silje are probably not the first couple to fight over interior decoration and miscoloured laundry. What makes them different is that Knut has the power to decide if Silje can stay in the country or not. When Knut throws Silje out of the house it has much more severe consequences than it would for any woman with independent right to residency in Norway. This also reduces Silje’s ability in getting things her way. When Knut feels pressured, he retreats to this option of waiving her residency; he knows that it will ensure that he gets what he wants.

How powerful this threat is depends of course on whether she believes it or not. Sandra also experienced being thrown out of the house.

...He threatened to throw me out almost every time we fought. *Did he ever do that before you had been here for three years?* The first time he threw me out was when I was pregnant [after one year]. He said something that I didn’t like, and one of the neighbours was visiting, and told him: “You cannot talk to your wife like that”, and then he got really upset and angry with me. So he threw me out of the house. I went down to sit underneath the veranda. It was autumn and horrible weather. So in the end I had to go back. When I came in he just sat there. *Were you afraid that he would mean it?* Well – he couldn’t just throw me out... He understood that. At that time I didn’t have any friends here.[...] The last time we fought I said – don’t go out and drink. Don’t drink so much. And then he answered, “That’s none of your business”. And then he took my keys and threw me out again. Slammed the

door in my face. Then I thought – it's enough. If I had gone back he probably would have let me back in, but I was tired of listening to it. So I went to my friend's house. And she told me about the shelter, and I went there to stay.

Sandra did not really believe he would throw her out of the country; still, being thrown out was not a pleasant experience. Simply the knowledge that he has this possibility forces her to relate to him differently, to acknowledge that he has the power in the relationship. This becomes clear when she explains to us how Russian women are undeserving of their reputation of running away as soon as residency is secured.

In an almost perfect northern Norwegian dialect she insists:

People say – you Russians just stay for three years, and as soon as you get your residence permit you push your husband away. That is so far from the truth. It is the Norwegian man – it is in his head. That after three years its – “pling”. Its not us – it's he who has this attitude. He thinks ”Now she can do what she wants”, and then he gets angry. He gets worse after three years, because he is losing control.

When Sandra claims that he loses control after three years, she also admits that he had the control during the first three years. For some marriage migrants it is necessary to wait three years to say and do what they want.

Transnational marriages are different from marriages between two Norwegians in one important aspect: in transnational marriages the Norwegian partner has a residence permit and access to the Norwegian welfare system, while the foreign partner depends on her Norwegian spouse for access to a residence permit and welfare system for the first three years, or until they have a child together. The power imbalance is further distorted since the Norwegian partner is the one who speaks the language and understands the “system”. It is the Norwegian partner who knows for instance how the school system works, or how to get a mortgage. Even minor issues related to understanding social codes and social interaction can be confusing and strange for the foreign partner, while the Norwegian partner barely reflects on them.

Transnational marriages in other words are characterized by a strong asymmetrical power balance, where the Norwegian partner usually controls the cultural, social and economic resources, as well as the wife's access to independent citizenship. As Ann Therese Lotherington and Anne Britt Flemmen argue (translated from Norwegian):

“The husband is given the responsibility for securing her adaptation to the Norwegian society and also for her well-being in every way. [...] he is offered a subject position that is dominant and superior. [...] The situation makes her vulnerable in that all is well only as long as he does not exploit the dominant subject position he is offered as a Norwegian citizen. It is up to him to use, or decline this possibility. She can oppose him, but it is not in her power to turn around the power relation in

this situation, because he can decide to divorce her. In that case she would lose her residence rights in Norway, and will be expelled if she doesn't go voluntarily."

(Lotherington & Flemmen, 2007; 66)

This is not to say that all men exploit the position of power they are in; men in transnational marriages can be the first to acknowledge this asymmetrical power balance as a problem. Some of the men in transnational marriages that we have talked to have had relatively explicit strategies for *increasing* the wife's relative position of power in their relationship, for instance in assisting her in learning the language, getting a job and becoming as independent as possible. But we have also come across cases where he rather seems to try to exploit, and not only maintain, but also deepen this imbalance.

### **Putting up with abuse and violence**

In the sections above we have described couples who stay in dysfunctional marriages where they have limited opportunity to influence their daily lives during the first three years in Norway. However, there are those who have worse experiences. As stated in the introduction, the women's shelters have been reporting an increasing number of foreign women seeking refuge with them, and where the share of foreign women married to a non-immigrant Norwegian is disproportionately high compared with their share in the population at large. As we explained in the chapter "The three-year rule and its exceptions", the "Abuse clause" (the Foreigners Regulation §37 point 6) ensures that women who are exposed to violence from their partner have the right to residence on an individual basis even if she leaves her husband before three years. The intention of the clause has been to protect the women, and it is explicitly stated that there should be a low threshold for documentation of abuse. However, when we look closer at how abused women relate to this law, and how applications are treated in practice, we find that the granting of residency is far from automatic, even when abuse can be documented.

Hilde Lidén (2005) has examined applications for residency according to this clause, and concludes that in spite of the intentions of the law, in *practice* the clause does not provide the women the protection they need. The women are generally not granted residency on the basis of psychological abuse (such as living under constant verbal abuse, or controlling what they can eat and do), unless it clearly has reduced the women's quality of life, leading to depression or other signs of strong mental stress. In one example given by Lidén, a woman is refused residency after having moved away from a man who has beaten her physically, refused to give her money for clothes for herself and her son, and told her to prostitute herself for money. The committee argued that the refusal was obvious, as the woman is claimed to be resourceful and strong, and she was only exposed to violence once or twice. This way, behaving responsibly

and breaking out of a violent relationship early, to protect herself and her son from abuse, disqualified claiming the right to independent residency. In accordance with this logic, a woman has to put up with the abuse until it becomes unbearable, before she can claim her right to independent residency. As Lidén shows, there seems to be a clear difference between the standards that are used for what Norwegian women should accept of dominance and limitations of freedom, and what is implicitly expected of foreign women (Lidén, 2005; 111–117).

The above described practices for interpretation of the abuse clause, and the claim that it must be repeated violence that reduces the women's quality of life, makes it difficult for many lawyers to advise women to move away from their husbands in spite of severe abuse. Unless they can document repeated, severe physical abuse, they cannot give any guarantees that the marriage migrant can stay in the country if she decides to leave her husband before three years. Hanna was one of our respondents who had been exposed to extreme psychological abuse. He would not let her visit friends and family, and he would be upset if she spoke Thai on the telephone:

He was angry no matter what I did. I had to do what he told me – he would say – sit here – go there – do this. For instance, if I ate a piece of cake, he would tell me that then I couldn't eat the next meal. I could only cook when he gave me permission. If I was hungry I was told to drink water – for he thought I needed to diet. (She pinches herself above her waist and changes her voice) “big and fat – not pretty – not pretty”. [...] He said he didn't have any money, but still he wouldn't let me work – or go to school. The worst was that he wouldn't let me go to school...”

In spite of this severe psychological abuse, Hanna's lawyer did not dare promise her that she would be granted residency according to the Foreigners Regulation §37 clause 6. And this terrified Hanna. In our interview, she did not want us to tape what she said, and repeatedly we had to convince her of our secrecy – that nobody will know that she has talked to us. She was afraid that her husband would find out, and not take her back if she needed to. She might be scared of going back to him again, but what scares her even more is going back to Thailand. She would do anything to avoid that.

Of the 89 women who applied for independent residency based on the abuse clause in 2004, only one third were turned down (Lidén, 2005)<sup>22</sup>. This may seem like a high acceptance percentage. However, many women, like Hanna, need to know they are certain that they will get residency before they start the process of claiming independent residency. If they are in doubt that they will be sent back, they will not take the risk. If they do not file for independent residency, they can go back to their abusive husbands. Somehow this seems to be more predictable, than relating to the abuse clause. This way

<sup>22</sup> Similar numbers are reported for 2005, when 65 percent were given residency based on this (Ot.prp. no 75 (2006–2007)). In addition some may have been granted residency after filing complaints.



the abuse paragraph does not always work for those who see going back to Thailand or Russia as an option they cannot consider.

## When you cannot leave when you want to

Earlier we told the story of Nina who was so isolated in Norway that she had to call her family in Thailand for them to help her get away from her abusive husband (see the chapter on Networks and friends). In the end she was evacuated by police. Still after having received medical treatment, and being taken to a women's shelter, she ended up going back to him.

*But [the first time] when you were at the shelter, what did they tell you? Did you get information about what you were entitled to?* They didn't say much. They told me that I should press charges against him. And then I said that I wanted to go back to Thailand, and they said they would help me with that. But then my husband came to get me. And so I went back to him.

When Nina was pregnant with her first child, health care personnel react to her bruising and his treatment of her, and offered to help her get away from him. She decided not to accept their help:

I thought that I wouldn't know what to do if I left him. Then I hadn't been in the country even one year, and I didn't know what to do, where I could stay, I didn't know the language, I didn't have a job, I didn't know how to eat or how to live in this country. Not with a little child.

It was only when child protection officers threatened to take away her child (and convinced her that it was in the interest of the child) that she agreed to accept their help and move away from him. This was the case for several of the women we have been in contact with – only when child protection officers got involved, did they decide to leave. This is not unique for marriage migrants; research on women exposed to violence in marriage has shown how difficult women sometimes find it to leave their husbands in spite of severe abuse (Skjørten, 1988). Several reasons have been suggested for this, both economic and emotional, and these reasons are also present for many marriage migrants who come to Norway. However, we will still argue that women who come to Norway through marriage can be in an even more vulnerable situation; Nina is in many ways right in her assessment. How can someone manage on their own in Norway, if they have never lived alone their whole life, and only have four years of elementary school from Thailand? If they in addition do not speak the language (and barely any English), and do not have a place to live, a job or an income the situation becomes

even more complicated. In order to make it possible for women in Nina's situation to choose life away from an abusive husband, there are a number of issues that need to be settled to give the most vulnerable marriage migrants the resources they need in order to enable them to live on their own in Norway.

### **The shame of divorce**

First of all, we should not ignore that for some women there can be a strong stigma attached to being divorced. Anne moved away from her husband some time after her son was born, but she did not want her family in Thailand to know. Anne had lived in an exploitative marriage, with rapes, physical and psychological abuse and isolation, but the family were never told about this abuse:

I went back to Thailand with my son when he was two years old, but I didn't let them know that I had divorced. *Why not?* I was a bit afraid. My mother was very worried. She had heard from someone that my husband had thrown me out. And my mother was really afraid and anxious, and she asked why I didn't just come home with the boy. We are poor, but we grow rice, so we will be able to take care of the child, she said. [...] But I told her that we had a good life in Norway, that there was nothing to worry about. Told her we were doing OK. I was very angry with the friend who had told my sister about the divorce. She lived in the same place as us, and I had sent some money for my mother with her once when she went back to Thailand. But then she became mean, and told this to my family. Afterwards I got a letter from my sister where she asked if it was true that my husband had thrown me out, and that I wasn't able to cook and that I couldn't take care of my husband... My mother didn't believe it, that I wasn't able to cook. She knew that I could cook at home. But mum told me to take the boy with me and move back. Then I was really sad. *Because you didn't want to?* No, because I didn't want her and the family to know about this. They would have worried about me. I had moved abroad, far away. They didn't know how I lived. Without a husband and no money. But I had help, and did well. I wrote back saying I was doing well, and that I was divorced. I told the truth.

Anne mentioned two aspects that make her want to protect her family from the information about her divorce. First of all, she did not want her family to worry. In Thailand, a single mother would have great difficulties in managing without the help of her family, and as Anne's mother expressed, if Anne was alone with the child in Norway, there was nobody there to help her. In some ways she is right, for Anne did have a difficult time in the beginning. Anne also found it difficult to explain to her that she gets support from the government. Moreover, and perhaps equally important, Anne seemed to be ashamed that she was not able to keep her man. According to the "rumours" she refers

to, it was she who was to blame for the divorce, in not being a good enough cook, and not being able to take care of her husband. Such sentiments of guilt when a relationship breaks down are in no way unique for marriage migrants. But the idea that if he treats her badly, and leaves her, it is the woman's fault, reoccurred in many interviews. It is in many ways the same optimism that we find in interviews with women in the process of looking for a husband abroad; he may have treated other women badly, but this does not mean he will treat them badly as well, because she will make him love her. In line with this logic it is a woman's shame to be divorced.

### **Skills for life in Norway**

For most couples, breaking up a marriage can have severe economic consequences (Trost, 1986). Not only will the couple need to redistribute the wealth and property obtained through the years of marriage, they will also need economic resources to start a life on their own. Not only marriage migrants find it difficult to start a life on their own; newly divorced persons are one of the main groups among the poor in Norway, both in objective terms, but even more, in subjective turns, since by living alone many feel they cannot maintain the same standard of living as they are used to.

As we showed in the chapter on "The meaning of money" above, marriage migrants are usually dependent on their husbands for economic support until she is somewhat integrated in the Norwegian society. Here language is of outmost importance; once the woman is able to speak and read Norwegian, she is in a much stronger position to manage on her own. But for various reasons many women may still struggle to speak Norwegian, even after several years in the country. Some have married men who did not encourage them to take language classes, or even actively sabotaged their attempts to attend them. Others may lack the necessary confidence necessary to attend classes, or to be able to learn much from them; this is sometimes the case for women with no or limited education in childhood. It is not difficult to understand that for women who do not read and write in their own language, attending classes to learn a second language can be somewhat intimidating. One employee at a women's shelter also argued that some of the women who have come to them have been clearly marked by having been exposed to a relatively particular Norwegian language. She related the story of one woman who had lived a very isolated existence with her Norwegian husband and his network, who had developed some Norwegian skills, but with a vocabulary that, although extremely limited, had a strong dominance of very vulgar words relating to alcohol and sex. In this way her language skills were more of a handicap than an asset.

With limited education in childhood it is not only the lack of language skills that can be problematic. Many also seem to struggle with basic mathematics and household economics. This can also be a challenge for women who need to run their own house-

hold for a period of time. Furthermore, it can make it difficult to assist their children with homework, even at an early age.

Even some of our highly educated respondents, who had attended language classes and done their best to learn the language, struggled to understand official documents in Norwegian, and felt helpless and dependent on help from others when relating to the “official” Norway. Being able to relate to official documents is particularly important in a process of divorce; if you do not know what you are entitled to, it is difficult to demand your rights. There are several accounts of both Thai and Russian women who have been tricked into signing documents where they, for instance, agree to take out a loan, transfer rights, or decline inheritance, without really knowing what they have signed. These stories are mainly recounted by proxy respondents such as translators, lawyers and crisis-centre personnel. When we talked to women who had been tricked in some way, we found that many were still not certain of what had happened, or at least they were not able to explain it to us. This was the case for Dina. She explained to us that her husband had taken out a substantial loan in her name, but that she never saw that money. When we met her, she was back in Thailand with her teenage sons and had lost her residence permit and could not return Norway. When we asked whether they had a prenuptial agreement, and if she has any claims to the property the loan is tied to, she just got more confused. Even on questions of her residence permit and registration, she struggled to give good answers. She had trusted her husband to take care of all practicalities, and when it turned out that he had not had her best interest in mind, she found it very difficult to assess herself what kind of situation she was in, and why.

While the highly educated with relatively good Norwegian language skills struggle to find their way through rules, legislation and official documents, the ones with little or no language skills are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, and totally dependent on the advice they get in their network, or in the contact points they have with the official Norway (see more on this below). This makes them very vulnerable if they are in a situation where they can no longer depend on their husbands.

### **Economic independence**

Many marriage migrants also feel they need to have an independent job in order to live alone in Norway, or at least to have the resources necessary to get an independent job if they needed one. As we showed in the chapter “Living in Norway with no money at all” above, the ability to get a job depends not only on language skills, but also on having networks (or a husband) who can guide them to the right places to look, and that they have general competence on how society works in general. In some parts of the country a driving licence may be necessary in order to move around and get to work; in other places they need to understand the public transportation system.

Getting a job however may not be enough in itself. Newly arrived marriage migrants usually get low paid jobs in cleaning, if they get a job at all. As we showed above, many marriage migrants have family members in their country of origin who have come to depend on remittances from them. Consequently, if they were to divorce and manage on their own, they would not only have to have a job that enables them to support themselves, but they would have to earn enough to keep up the money to send home. Some of the women had a full-time job while married, but as their husbands was responsible for most of the living costs, significant parts of the her incomes could be sent to relatives in the country of origin. If they wish to leave their husbands, these women will either need to cut down on (or even stop) sending money home or they will have to find alternative sources of income. It is against this background that we have to understand at least part of the recruitment to prostitution of marriage migrants after divorce (see chapter on remittances above). This need to remit can also keep women in heavily exploitative marriages, as she can be willing to stay, as long as she is able to send money to Thailand regularly.

It should be noted that many marriage migrants receive little or nothing in divorce settlements. Most Norwegians prepare relatively strict prenuptial agreements before entering into marriage with a foreign woman, as is strongly recommended on all web pages warning against the cunning marriage migrants who marry only for money. Furthermore, even if no prenuptial agreements are signed, Norwegian legislation states that both parties are entitled to whatever they brought into the marriage, if they divorce. The more wealthy partners' wish to protect themselves against exploitation is understandable, in particular in relationships where they have had very limited time to get to know each other prior to the wedding. However, this does put marriage migrants who wish to divorce in a particularly difficult situation. Many come to Norway with little or no economic resources, and have little or no income during marriage, either because they have been housewives, or because they have not been able to find a job yet, due to language problems or other issues discussed above.

For those who cannot work, because of the responsibility for small children, illness or other reasons it may be even more difficult to divorce, in particular if they are not aware of the security provided by the Norwegian welfare system. In order to be confident that they will be able to manage on their own, they will need access to information about how the welfare system actually works, and confidence that the system will provide for them in an adequate manner. In theory the Norwegian welfare system should be adequately developed so that single mothers should be able to live and raise their children relatively well in Norway. However, in order to give women in exploitative relationships sufficient confidence to dare to move away from their husbands, they need to know about these rights. Generally, the information the women receive about this depends on the composition and quality of their networks. For many their networks mainly consist of co-nationals in situations similar to their own, who may not necessarily be better informed.

### **Forced dependency**

As we have shown, some marriage migrants may lack the skills necessary to manage on their own in Norway. While asylum seekers and refugees are given compulsory introductory courses to learn about the Norwegian society (in addition to language courses), it is assumed that the marriage migrant's husband will take the responsibility upon himself to teach her about the society, and enable her to manage on her own. As Ellen Kristvik also points out in her study of Thai women in prostitution in Norway, for successful integration into the Norwegian society marriage migrants are totally dependent on their husbands' willingness to teach them how to be independent (Kristvik, 2005). Quite a few of our respondents had been in marriages where her husband had not taken it upon himself to help her manage on her own. In some cases this could be argued to be merely a lack of awareness from the husband's part, or that due to problems of substance abuse or psychological problems, he was not in a position to help anybody. In other cases the husband had taken active steps to prevent her from becoming independent. This could entail refusing her to attend Norwegian classes (or refusing to pay for bus tickets to get to Norwegian classes), limiting her opportunities to obtain, or maintain, an independent network and friends or refusing to assist her in finding employment when such a wish is explicitly made by her. In the more distant areas it could be argued that being able to drive is a prerequisite for an independent life, and refusing to spend available resources on driving lessons can in some instances also be argued to be a conscious step in increasing her dependency. These are all examples of what we will call *forced dependency*. The marriage migrant is not only dependent on her husband when she first arrives in the country, but she remains dependent for years, through more or less conscious strategies to limit her opportunities to get the resources she needs to manage on her own, in terms of language skills, economic resources, networks and necessary knowledge about the Norwegian society.

If the husband has not taken his responsibility to help her integrate into society, given her the information she needs and made her able to live alone, then, in order for her to be able to leave an exploitative relationship, somebody else has to take this role upon themselves. This is why Norwegian teachers and in-laws often play an extremely important role, for those who are able to leave.

### **Dependence on helpers**

We have met several women who have been able to file for divorce even though they have been in marriages where little had done to lay the ground for their independence. For some it has taken them 10 years to come to this point where they are able to stand on their own feet. The ones who have been able to leave before have depended on helpers – individuals or institutions who were able to take the responsibility their husbands did not, and to give advice and assistance to enable them to live alone.

By far the most important institution here is the committed teacher in her Norwegian class. For some women the teachers constituted the only point of contact with the outside world; for others they were the only well-informed Norwegian contacts besides their husbands. This was the case for Hanna. She had finally convinced her husband to let her go to Norwegian classes, and after some time she realized that the teacher cared about her:

The teacher once came up to me and asked: Why are you so pale? And I realized that she was a friend, someone who cares. So one day I was able to go up to her and talk during the break. And I told her. And then she took me to the principal in the school, and afterwards they brought me to the women's shelter.

Of the marriage migrants we met at the women's shelters, the teachers were the most common person to have referred the women there. They are in an important position as they not only teach the language, but also often teach about Norwegian traditions and society. Some courses also have classes on gender equality and domestic violence, and they provide information about women's shelters and the economic assistance that is available, for instance, to single mothers. However, teachers are also important as they meet the women repeatedly, and are in a position where they can build trust. The ones who make a difference are generally the ones who dare to care – who take upon themselves to explain to the women that they do not have to put up with just any kind of behaviour, and that there are alternatives.

It is not unusual for women who are in a relationship of “forced dependency” that it is a female relative of the husband who intervenes, or at least plays an important role in enabling her to leave. Sometimes it is his sister or mother, a sister-in-law, or even a daughter, who somehow participates in making it possible for her to leave, partly by pressuring him to give her more freedom, and partly by assisting her themselves.

### **Individual solutions for a collectively oriented individual**

The representatives for women's shelters that we talked to recognized that marriage migrants dependency on others was a major problem, in particular for those with limited education from their home country. Several employees at the shelters explicitly stated that they wanted the women to learn to be independent. However, to them this often meant that the women were told to for instance call around for a job and a place to live on their own, and that the shelter personnel should not assist them in this. Breaking out of a marriage can in itself be an emotionally draining process. When we visited women in shelters many showed clear signs of exhaustion, from meetings with lawyers explaining what resources they can get from their husband, with the social services on possible economic benefits, child protection officers on whether they can have custody of their children and sometimes also the police on whether or not to press charges, in

cases of abuse. Although the need to be independent must be recognized, this might not be the best time to learn independence. For someone who knows very little of how the system works, and who has been totally dependent on others for economic and legal decisions, at least since she came to the country, suddenly having to relate to all this at once can be extremely difficult.

One of our respondents had been at the women's shelter several times. She said she would come there when she needed to get away from her husband; however, she would always go back to him. When she finally decided to leave him for good, it was not something in the relationship with her husband that changed. What changed was that she met a Thai woman who had been able to build a life on her own in Norway, and this woman had promised to help her. This was the offer she had been waiting for. The years of assistance the women's shelter had given in helping her become independent was not what she needed in order to break out.

Thailand, and to some extent also Russia, are relatively collectively oriented societies. Many stay with their families until they get married, and even after marriage, and many continue to live with, or at least close by, their families. Women who get divorced will often, if the family wants her back, move back in with her parents, or other family members. Some of the women we met had never lived alone during their entire lives, and for many living on their own was not something they looked forward to. For some living alone is seen as a punishment, and not a newly won freedom. This was the case for Eva. We visited her in her new apartment where she lived alone after her husband had left her: It was a large apartment with several rooms, and she had done a good job at making it cosy and nice. She had a job cleaning offices in the evenings, and as she worked alone she seldom met anybody at work. She had lived a very isolated life with her husband, and she did not have much of a network or friends, and she rarely had any visitors. Her daughter had been put in foster care, and was psychologically damaged after years of abuse from her Norwegian stepfather. When we visited Eva the TV was on quite loud, showing a youth programme in Norwegian, that she does not understand. She was thrilled to get visitors, and talked for hours, elaborating on every little detail of her life. Before we left we had to help her go through the mail that she had received; it was only advertisements, but she was not sure, and she wanted us to check that she did not throw away anything important. She told us she had some contact with some of the local men. They were married, but they would sometimes stop by and help her with things, and then they had sex. To her these were important social contacts, and she dreamt that one of them maybe one day would leave his wife for her. Or even better, that her heavily abusive ex-husband would reconsider, dump his new Thai wife and come back to her.

Eva's life can be said to be a parody of independence. She does not have a fraction of the resources necessary to manage on her own. Her independence means solitude, and she has no idea what she should do with the situation. Consequently she is extremely



vulnerable to any form of exploitation and abuse. Moreover, Eva would never have ended up in such a situation if she had not been thrown out by her husband. Like many other women who live in heavily abusive relationships, she knew that she was not able to live on her own, and if she could, she would have chosen to go back to him, rather than live with the insecurity and solitude that she now experiences.

Rather than trying to make the marriage migrants totally independent immediately after they leave their husband, it may be worth considering more collective solutions for those who are still not ready to live on their own. It is interesting to note that many women's shelters report that women of some nationalities come in waves. For instance, there might be no Thai women at one shelter for years, and suddenly there are three or four at once; making Thai food and speaking Thai in the corridors. Often they are friends or acquaintances who have been inspired by each other, or who have decided to break out collectively. Tone tells us that when she got divorced in Thailand she did not go back to her mother, but moved into a collective with other women in similar life situations. This made for an affordable solution, and also provided the company of other women who had experienced similar situations that she could rely on for support and assistance. In Norway there are few collectives of this kind; however, one institution that has some resemblance to the women's collective is some of the Thai brothels. Several studies describe some brothels as strong women's collectives, where women with failed marriages behind them live together with other women in similar situations; in a sphere that clients do not take part in, they watch Thai movies and eat Thai food, and have the company of each other (Kristvik, 2005; Lisborg, 1998). In our interviews with Thai women in prostitution, they often claim that selling sex was suggested for them by a Thai woman, when they were in a phase in their lives where they saw few alternative solutions. Somehow the alternatives provided by social services or women's shelters are not recognized as good alternatives, while the alternatives offered by the Thai community seem to work better as alternatives to staying married.

### **Being taken seriously**

Marriage migrants often end up in a relatively weak position in Norway. Many have limited knowledge of how the system works, and in their encounter with representatives from the Norwegian public sector, be it health care services, immigration authorities, or childcare and school, they are likely to ask strange and unusual questions, and to misunderstand information that for Norwegians may seem obvious. This can be partly a question of lacking language skills, and partly a need for additional information in order to be able to understand the situation fully. This project cannot describe what happens in meetings with marriage migrants and official representatives, as we mainly have the women's versions of the stories. But in Linda's case, the social security offic-

ers failure to inform her of the rights and opportunities she has in Norway, has severe consequences:

When I got pregnant with my second child I considered leaving him – to go back to Russia. But my friend said I wouldn't need to leave the country, since my children were Norwegian. I went to the local social services office to get information, to hear what kind of support I would get if divorced. He told me I would only get some extra child benefit.

*Why did he say that? After all you were entitled to much more?* I don't know...

*If you had known what economic support you are entitled to – would you have left your husband then?* I think so. But then I thought that I would have to get a job first – and save up some money before I go. And with two little children to take care of that takes some time. [...] When the youngest was one year, I considered leaving again, I even got the divorce papers. But he panicked, and promised he would stop drinking. And he did – didn't drink for four months. After that he started travelling, and could be gone for two or three months at a time, and was home only for a few weeks in-between. Then it was easier for me to cope.

I left when the boys were four. Bought a car and left. Decided I had had enough. It was just before Christmas, and he had spent all the money we had in our joint account in the bank. I drove to the nearest city. I had searched for an apartment for some time. When I found one I packed my things and left. Slept on the floor with my boys the first night. I hadn't heard about the women's shelter then.

The next day I went to the social services office to register for the extra "child benefit". I got a case handler, and he told me that I was entitled to this and this and this. But then I had a job and earned my own money, owned my car and had 100 000 kroner in the bank. I thought I would need something to live on when I left him – I was able to save 10 000 from my salary every month – plus the child benefit.

It is impossible for us to say why the first case handler did not inform Linda of the economic security that is provided for single mothers in Norway. No matter what his motivation was, it resulted in Linda and her children living in an exploitative marriage for three more years, with violence and a high level of insecurity

As it sometimes can be difficult to explain "how things work" in Norway to someone from another culture, it is understandable that representatives from the "official" Norway may prefer to relate to the marriage migrants husband, and leave the responsibility of explaining everything to him. Although they are entitled to have translators in meetings this is often not provided. Most of our respondents, and in particular Thai women with limited education, reported taking their husbands with them for such official meetings where he would function as a "translator", in spite of him not

knowing any Thai. Liv even experienced the women's shelter contacting her husband to ask him what she was complaining about.

When her husband threatened to force her to have an abortion, Liv contacted the local women's shelter in Northern Norway in the late 1980s. When she tried to explain her problems, they did not understand her. Instead of contacting a translator, they called her husband for an explanation:

They called him [the husband] and he said there wasn't a problem. That there wasn't a problem at home. That I was the one who had a problem. And then he had to pay for the night at the shelter. *Did he have to pay?* It was only one room, it wasn't much money. He said yes. They told me that I should contact them if something happened; if there was something serious. But they didn't believe me. *Didn't they provide you with an interpreter?* [she had been in the country for less than a year at this time] No. But after the baby was born I went there again. But then I wasn't alone, it was the nurse that took me there. [The nurse came to visit]... to look after how things went at home, how I did with looking after the children and such. It didn't last very long, I think the baby was like six weeks old or so. When she came that morning, I was sitting there crying with the baby. And she called the women's shelter. She said I would get help, and that I wouldn't have to give her up for adoption. He had told me that if I wanted to keep the baby I would have to move out of his house. But he had written a prenuptial agreement when we got married, so that if I moved out I wouldn't get any money to live on.

Liv did everything right. When she felt threatened by her husband, she decided to go to a women's shelter to ask for help. It is impossible for us to know what actually was said and done during her visit, but somehow she did not get the assistance she was seeking. Neither did she get the information she desperately needed. When her husband threatened to throw her out with the child, she had no idea that she could get support from the government as a single mother. Somehow, her desperation was not taken seriously. Her husband was somehow treated not only as her interpreter, but also as her "knowledgeable adult", while she felt that she was reduced to a child.

That he was trusted as "translator" is also problematic as he did not speak Thai, and consequently would not be able to provide much assistance in translating as such. But, perhaps more importantly, with the husband as "interpreter" she was not given a chance to ask about her rights, and get access to the necessary information. Had the crisis centre contacted a translator, taken the time to listen to her, and explained her rights to her, she could have been saved a considerable amount of trouble. Luckily the nurse, who visited after the child was born, was able to intervene. If not, she could have ended up giving the child up for adoption – or taken her with her back to Thailand.

Access to translators is key for migrants, both in order to manage everyday life, but in particular in situations of a life crisis. Translators enable the migrant to tell

their stories properly – in their own way, and when they need to, add and subtract the nuances they want, depending on the setting and the person they are talking to. In one interview arranged by a women’s shelter in a smaller community in Norway, the staff insisted we did not need a translator, even though we offered to pay for one. They knew her story they said, so they could help her if she got stuck. It turned out that the respondent barely knew any English, and her possibility to express nuances, and more complicated reflections, were non-existent in her broken English. This reduced her story to a set of naïve statements, reflecting simple actions. Much of the story was told by the employees of the shelter who asked leading questions such as: “Did you go to Pattaya then?” and “Did he force you to have sex then?”, to which she replied yes and no<sup>23</sup>. Letting the shelter’s personnel function as “translators” with the task of repeating the story as they remember it (in the form of questions) is in itself problematic as it breaches any promise of confidentiality that the shelter is likely to have given the woman. Furthermore, it is quite disrespecting towards the woman, as it takes away her opportunity to herself decide what she wants to tell to us as strangers and researchers, and perhaps even more important, how she wishes to present her story to us. However, perhaps even more worrying, we were informed afterwards that the women in the shelter knew both her husband and many other Thai women in their small community. We would like to emphasise that we do believe that everything the shelter personnel did was done with the best intentions. However, by insisting to sit in on an interview, while they simultaneously knew her ex-husband and her friends, they also made it more difficult for her to give different versions of her story, than the one familiar to people in her community. Sadly enough, we did not have the impression that we were the first ones to be offered such “translation” assistance.

For marriage migrants who often live in rural areas in Norway, access to translators is often a problem. However, as immigration from Thailand and Russia is starting to be substantial in most regions in Norway, with some planning, it should usually be possible to get translators for these languages, if not in other ways, then by telephone. There are, however, countless examples of women who do not get the translation they need. We have ourselves come to women’s shelters for an interview only to hear that some official representative from the child protection office has booked a meeting with our respondent afterwards, but forgot to bring a translator. They then “borrow” the translator we had brought. We are quite sure that if we had not happened to be there, the meeting would have taken place in Norwegian, in spite of our respondents’ very limited Norwegian skills, perhaps with someone from the shelter to “help” her understand. For these women access to information is key, as they struggle to understand what their options are and if they are going to be able to manage on their own. Moreover, as any student of language has experienced, trying to express oneself in a

<sup>23</sup>The data from this interview is not used in this report, for ethical and methodological reasons.

language one barely knows usually makes even the most brilliant thought sound simple-minded and plain. Having important meetings in a language she barely understands, and has almost no opportunity to express herself properly in, shows strong disrespect for the difficult life situation she is in.

The interpreters we met were frustrated over the lack of commitment many representatives from social services and other institutions seemed to feel towards many of these women. The interpreters told us they would do their best to convey the confusion and desperation some women would express when they were informed about the ins and outs of welfare benefits, child custody and residency permits. However, quite often, the official representative would ignore obvious indications of total confusion, or misunderstandings. As one translator stated, "Sometimes you know for sure they have no idea what to do next when they leave the office." Moreover, although the translators clearly do their share in providing information and assistance in their spare time, there are limits to how much responsibility they can take upon themselves as they run between translation tasks of women in various degrees of confusion. The women who come out of the official offices, still not knowing how to proceed to manage on their own, will often choose to return to their husbands, unless they have friends they can rely on to provide assistance and advice. As we have shown above, these networks may be of varying quality, and do not always give the best advice.

## **Forced to stay married**

Until now we have discussed structural factors that make it difficult to leave. Although we can talk of forced dependency, where the husband more or less consciously sabotages her ability to manage on her own, in most cases we cannot speak of women being forced to stay. There are however cases that border on force – and those who clearly cross over the limit.

As we discussed above in the chapter on remittances, some women experience relatively heavy pressure for remittances from home. If the pressure to keep up remittances to her home is strong, some women could feel that it is impossible to break out of a marriage, if this would make the remittance flow stop. Others not only depend on sending home remittances, but also have to stay in Norway in order to earn enough money to pay back loans taken up to cover the expenses for the journey here. This was the case for Hanna. She had to take up a loan to pay for the ticket to Norway (about 6000 Norwegian kroner). Her husband did not want her to work, but she helped him in his store sometimes, and then he paid her 100–200 kroner per day. This was money she sent home. However, as she also had to support her children and parents; only a small part went to pay off the loan. Even if her husband was extremely controlling and

exposed her to emotional terror on a daily basis, she was afraid to file for a divorce. If she came home without paying down the debt, she had no chance of ever getting rid of it, as she could barely support her parents and children before she left. This way Hanna ended up in a situation similar to debt bondage. It should not be classified as debt bondage since the husband did not put her in a situation of debt on purpose in order to control her. However, once she was in this situation, she felt that she had no choice but to stay with her exploitative husband, until she had paid back her debt.

In several cases we saw that the husbands used threats of keeping the children in case of divorce to control their wives. While such a threat in many cases will not be real, we should also keep in mind that a Norwegian man can have a strong case against, for example, a Thai woman with only four years of schooling if a custody case makes it to court. The women's lack of knowledge about the Norwegian system makes them particularly vulnerable in these instances. Based on such threats it is also possible to argue that some women are forced to stay.

In a few cases there were also examples of isolation so strong that they border on captivity. After six months of heavy abuse and isolation Nina decided she wanted to go back to Thailand. However, as she had no money, and no idea how to proceed to get an airplane ticket, she needed him to buy her the ticket.

I thought it would be very simple, if I wanted to go back, I could do so, and it would be piece of cake. But it wasn't like that – because I didn't have a job, and he worked alone, so I couldn't just follow my heart and do as I wanted[...] He said I had to work to earn money first so I could buy a ticket myself.

Nina was not locked in, and as her husband went to work and even sometimes stayed away for days with his friends, Nina was in theory free to leave. However, she was kept in total isolation; she knew nobody in Norway and she did not have any money to go anywhere. She did not get any language training, nor any assistance in finding a job. For her going back to Thailand became impossible. Furthermore, she had no idea where to go in Norway if she wanted to break out. For all practical purposes she was forced to stay.

## 7 Representations and identities

### Three stereotypes of marriage migrants in Norway

In order to understand the life women in transnational marriages have in Norway, it is useful to take a closer look at some of the stereotypical images we find of these groups in our society. This is not because we believe that such stereotypical images necessarily give a good description of who the marriage migrants are; sometimes rather far from it. However, we do believe that these *social representations* (Duveen, 2001) influence what kind of lives individuals can make for themselves. We all have some sort of “social maps” that we use to navigate in our everyday social life and to understand the world around us. We categorize the world and the people around us and attach meaning to those categories. We will often have different expectations towards women than men, towards native Norwegians compared to immigrants, towards people with high and low education and so on. These are not necessarily prejudices – they are necessary categorizations without which it becomes difficult to relate to the social world, and give meaning to social reality.

What is particularly important here is that as we interact with other people in society, these social representations or understandings of who we are will not only influence how we are treated, they may sometimes gradually be internalized and influence how we see ourselves. These social representations become part of our identity formation, or at least, they make up the identities we can choose from (Duveen, 2001). Consequently, such representations not only influence how other people treat us, they also influence how we can and will behave ourselves.

In this study we have mapped how marriage migrants are represented and talked about in various new-sources and internet sites that more or less explicitly deal with marriage migration, as well as in our interviews with men and women in transnational marriages, and various key respondents. When we have decided to take some time to describe some of the stereotypes marriage migrants must relate to in their life in Norway, this is not an attempt to describe the marriage migrants as such. Rather, it has been our goal to show how narrow and inhibiting the available representations are.

Sahib, Koning and Witteloostuijn (2006) argue that such stereotypical representations have particular consequences for marriage migrants. Transnational couples face a number of challenges when they try to learn to know each other; they often find that they have limited time together (due to economic and legislative constraints on

visiting each other's countries) and little or no common language. 'In such a setting, role-playing may serve as the only guide to behaviour and result in both parties reinforcing and acting out roles based on their respective stereotyped information sets' (Sahib, Koning & van Witteloostuijn, 2006; p 64). Instead of learning to know each other and figuring out if they fit, couples in this situation may choose to play out stereotypes, both because they believe (and are told) that this will increase the likelihood of success, but also because the framework does not give them room for other than role-playing.

When they come to Norway, marriage migrants generally have three options of how to see and present themselves in the Norwegian society; the first one is highly stigmatized, being presented as a cunning materialist, or even a prostitute; the other two are very passive representations, as traditional housewives or victims. These representations form an important part of the framework the women have to relate to in Norway, because the "cunning materialist" is the only representation that recognizes the marriage migrant as a competent actor. We believe this leads to a tendency to perceive marriage migrants who show too much agency and independence as someone out to exploit the immigration system or her husband. As we will come back to later this is likely to disqualify her from residency both by the individual male actors (the men looking for wife in the international arena) and by official Norwegian authorities.

### **The materialist**

The first of these representation is the idea of the marriage migrant as a materialist: a relatively cunning and calculating woman who seizes the opportunity to manipulate a kind, but perhaps somewhat inexperienced or simple-minded western man, in order to get money, and perhaps a passport or residence permit. The materialist is not looking for love, but exploits the western man's want of love in order to enrich herself.

The Internet marriage agencies' web pages are full of warnings about women who are not in this for love. As this Norwegian agency warns:

This is a dangerous kind of Russian woman. Her goal is dating in order to earn money. A long-term relationship with a western man is not on her agenda. The most important thing for these Russian women is to get residence permits from their future western husbands. Usually these women come from poor families, and are not able to do much on their own. Some of these women are even players with the sole purpose of scamming you for money, and then disappearing. Many naïve western men have sent thousands of dollars to women they think they will marry in the future.

[www.russiamore.nu](http://www.russiamore.nu)



All marriage agency web pages are full of warnings never to send money to the people they meet online. Other advice includes recommendations of meeting for the first time in a public place, to tell a friend where you are going and when you will be coming back, and to request multiple photos from different situations and at different times in the woman's life. There are also stories of women who marry a westerner while they have a husband or boyfriend in their home country, who they send money to and that they visit when they visit their home country alone allegedly to visit their parents. On a Norwegian web page for an informal organization called the Norwegian Info-center about Thailand we find the following warning:

Lately there have been way too many divorces as a result of so-called "haste marriages", or from the lady's hidden intentions: a "business marriage", where love has definitely been mutual in that *the man has really cared about the lady, and the lady has really cared about the man's wallet and visa card*. Regrettably, there was a time when they got visas more easily because they were married, but that has ended now. It is very important to take care of the wedding certificates which are issued in two copies. In addition it is very important to note down the address of the place you got married. In some cases the Thai has run off from the husband, changed her name in Thailand and nobody can find her. In most cases she has moved back in with a former Thai boyfriend or husband. The Norwegian is stuck in that he is still married on paper and the Thai spouse can return and demand her inheritance if he dies. If the Norwegian spouse moves in with a new girlfriend, this one will not be entitled to an inheritance due to former "paper marriages"<sup>24</sup>.

These warnings combine to draw a picture of a manipulating and dangerous woman, exposing the western man to a number of emotional, economic and other dangers if he is so unlucky to end up with the wrong kind.

As a subgroup of the materialist we find the marriage migrant as the "Prostitute"; the Prostitute is a Materialist who uses her sexuality to gain economic benefits. This representation should also be seen in part as a reflection of a general prostitution stigma associated with Thai and Russian women in Norway.

Jana Sverdljuk (Forthcoming) shows how Russian women in Northern Norway feel they are perceived as sexual entertainers and prostitutes irrespective of how they behave, and what kind of job they have. The respondents quoted in her study consistently complain that once their nationality is recognized by others, they are likely to receive unwanted sexual attention. Some are so uncomfortable with this sexual attention that they avoid going to nightclubs, and even turn down jobs out of fear of sexual harassment. Several other studies describe the problem of the prostitution stigma among Russian

<sup>24</sup> Own translation from Norwegian; emphasis from original text: <http://www.thai-norway.com/index.php?pageid=12&language=1>

women in Norway (see among others Kramvig & Stien, 2002; Stenvoll, 2002; Størset, 2003). Also Thai women complain that they are perceived and treated as prostitutes by strangers. In December 2006 one of the local newspapers in Bergen told the story of three women of Thai origin who were thrown out of a bar in Bergen.

The three friends were just out to have a beer, when they were harassed, called prostitutes and ended up being thrown out of the bar. According to the newspaper, one of the women explains:

- First we were called whores by an intoxicated woman who was outside the bar smoking. After we entered it didn't take long before the doorman came up to us and asked for ID. We are all above 30, so I asked why.

The doorman then asked them to leave, in English.

- We speak Norwegian, not English. It was very humiliating. It seemed like they thought we were prostitutes.”

(BA 04.12 2006, translated from Norwegian).

The experience of being treated as a prostitute is reflected in several of the interviews with Thai and Russian women living in Norway. Some have experienced general derogative comments from strangers; others get concrete offers of money for sex in various situations. The idea of marriage migrants (or rather women from the same countries as the marriage migrants) as being somewhat pragmatic in the exchange of money and sex is also supported on some of the marriage agency websites. The Norwegian site [www.russiamore.no](http://www.russiamore.no) is perhaps one of the most explicit on this issue:

Russian women may have different motivations for looking for a western man. Some will have serious intentions and wish to find a western man to establish a family with him. Other Russian women just wish to have fun, a non-committal relationship. Some Russian women even want dating simply for economic profit.

This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the description of the faithful and family-oriented traditional wife that we will come back to below. However, this representation of marriage migrants as “loose women” willing to do anything for money, is not only present in recommendations for non-committing relationships, it is also very much present in warnings against marrying the “wrong” kind of women. As one participant in the chat room at [www.asiaforum.no](http://www.asiaforum.no) expressed:

By seeking out or marrying the wrong lady (the NEVER ENOUGH kind) the result will regrettably be that the lady will turn to what she knows the most about, and that is getting money with her body as the object on sale. It is much easier to get the lady out of the bar, then to get the bar out of the lady. (Phitoo 29.11 2005)

Talking about the problem of getting “the bar out of the lady”, “Phitoo” refers to the praxis of matchmaking that takes place in the sex industry in Thailand, as we described above.

There is a slight difference between the pure “materialist” and the “prostitute”, as the “materialist” is a calculating agent, and she is stronger than the man. Partly because of this strength she is rarely presented as sexual. “The prostitute”, on the other hand, is purely sexual, and beyond this we get little information about her. The prostitute is in many ways an empty category that nobody identifies with; she is somehow a “non-person”. She is not stronger than the man, but she does not evoke empathy either. We can also find discursive representations of women in prostitution described as “victims” as we will come back to below, but she is then described and referred to in a different way.

The cunning and manipulating materialist stands in stark contrast to the kind and family-oriented traditional wife that we come back to below. This materialist marriage migrant is characterized by having a lot of agency, being stronger than the man, and being more interested in money than love. This representation is found in most Internet-based matchmaking agencies, and in discourses among various agents in contact with marriage migrants. Also some representatives of official authorities seem to have this perception of marriage migrants. The idea of the materialist marriage migrant can be said to be the motivating factor behind much of the policies aiming at identifying pro forma marriages. It is also present in some of the interviews with men who have, or are in the process of finding, a wife abroad; they often express a fear of not being able to distinguish those who are in it for money, from those who are in it for love. We also recognize this representation in some women’s reflections on relationships with their in-laws and friends of the Norwegian partner. During the fieldwork of this project we were several times contacted by women who were about to lose residency in Norway, claiming that the family of her husband had convinced him to throw her out, because they did not believe her intentions were good.

For each of the representations of marriage migrants, we can argue that there is a parallel representation of the man who enters into transnational marriages; the idea of the man that marries Thai and Russian women. As the man marrying the materialist, we find a kind, but perhaps somewhat simple-minded man, who is not able to find someone to marry in Norway. The western men at large are presented as a scarce and valuable resource, used and abused by these women for migration purposes (Constable, 2005). We find it difficult to find a discursive representations of the man who marries the prostitute. This is because “the prostitute” is generally not presented as someone you marry. The ones who do marry women they meet in the sex industry, or from prostitution-like practices, are usually not very open about this. Exceptions here include some of the men who live with their wives in areas with a sizable sex industry in areas like Pattaya. Among some of these very special social groups, marrying women they meet in the sex industry is a widely accepted practice. However, the discourse

concerning this very particular group does not seem to influence general discourses in Norway to a great extent.

### **The oppressed victim**

The idea of the woman as victim of patriarchy and men's violence against women in various forms has accompanied the modern women's movement and human rights movement. Jacobsen and Stenvoll (2008) argue that in recent years this victim category has increasingly been occupied by migrant women, such as Muslim women and foreign women who sell sex. We can recognize this victim category in some discourses on transnational marriages as well. We find traces of this discourse in the interviews with representatives from women's shelters, and other persons or organizations that set out to assist and help the women, but also in media's coverage and some of the existing research literature.

The following quote from one Internet chat room is one of the more vulgar expressions of this discourse; however, it serves to illustrate the point. Susanne has been provoked by an attack on Norwegian women, in relatively vulgar language, by a man married to a woman from Thailand. She writes back (own translation from Norwegian):

I think that men (like you) are indecent because you exploit poor, desperate girls who would do anything in order to get some money...You know that she in reality didn't even like you in the beginning, but you love her because you are ugly and cannot get anything else, so then you go to Thailand to get a poor girl who thinks you are kind because you have money, and consequently also kind and caring because you don't hit her etc. But it is quite normal not to hit girls, and to have a house etc. But to Thai girls this is paradise, so they take you ugly men because they don't have any choice, and their family will get money that way. [...] Why can't you find a girl who is as ugly as you in Norway to live with? No, because you ugly (fat?) men wouldn't accept that you can never have a pretty woman, and therefore you exploit pretty, thin, sexy, poor Thai ladies, to get a pretty woman that can cook, clean, have sex etc, just to live in a house with OK money. This is true – you know it deep down inside<sup>25</sup>.

In her description of the transnational marriage migrant, Susanne leaves very little space for the women's individual agency. The Thai women are married to these "ugly" Norwegian men, because they have no choice. According to her the men are only in it for sex and a domestic worker, while the woman is only in it to have someone to support her and her family economically. As pointed out by Jacobsen and Stenvoll (2008),

<sup>25</sup>Translated from Norwegian. (<http://debatt.sol.no/node/510402115/11/2005> - 16:47)

such connotations of passivity, defencelessness, powerlessness, and naive innocence are common for this victim category. The migrant woman is the 'done-to' rather than the "doer", and is marked by a lack of both agency and autonomy. Consequently, victim discourses often call for someone from the outside to intervene, to help the person who is deprived of autonomy. Feminists have criticized this tendency of associating women with children as being in line with a long patriarchal tradition of depriving women of agency, by treating them as someone who, like children, needs to be protected (Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008)

In sources where marriage migrants are presented as victims, we find two slightly different parallel male representations; first there is the weird "village idiot" that nobody in Norway would marry. This is someone who lives far from urban developments, who does not have any education and who barely maintains a minimum of personal hygiene. In a sense he is a victim himself, but while she is a victim of circumstance, he is more a victim of societal development. An alternative representation of the man that marries the "Victim" marriage migrant, is the calculating and cunning psychopaths who seek out foreign women because they can be easily controlled and abused. This makes the women not so much a victim of circumstance, but victims of the exploitation of individual men.

### **The traditional wife**

The last, but probably most important, representation we find of marriage migrants is the description of the foreign woman as a perfect housewife and a woman with traditional values. This representation is central in explaining why both men and women enter into transnational marriages and is used to give legitimacy to the practice itself. It is prominent on the web pages of marriage and dating agencies, but is also a dominant representation among some of the men who are married to, or plan to marry, a Thai or Russian woman.

In Norway this view of marriage migrants was given some attention in the national media during the summer of 2007, when a local politician from the right-wing Progress Party (FRP) went public with his advice to Norwegian men to marry women from Asia. He argued that Asian marriage migrants are: "... reserved and polite, and see the value in taking care of the home and keeping the family together." (VG 12.07.2007, own translation). According to the newspaper VG, the politician goes on to argue that the politics of gender equality have gone too far in Norway, at the cost of the family and children. The polite and family-oriented Asian women are contrasted against the Norwegian women who are "picking up men's bad habits and behave like men" as they: "...drink more, fight more, are rude in traffic and pick up men when out on the town."

Although these statements were condemned even by the politician's own party, and fuelled general ridicule among most official organizations and the national media, the

discussions continued in many chat rooms. The quotes below are taken from the same newspaper's chat room the day after:

There is no doubt that the good, old housewife had a positive effect on both the family and society. Because when the housewife disappeared, divorce rates skyrocketed. And that wasn't only men's fault. If I could afford it and had the opportunity I would have gone to get an Asian wife myself. [...]. Yes, I know I will be branded as a male pig by all feminists now, but they really do not understand what this is all about! It isn't about getting a submissive slave who runs between the kitchen and the bed, but an equal partner who wishes a stable family life, and can be depended on. For this is what too many Norwegian women have lost today.

(VG Internet discussion 13 July 2007, own translation)

It is damned uninspiring for a man to have a wife whose main project is to measure and compare the job done in the home at any time. Or who insists on competing in being as good as him in his arenas. This is totally disgusting. It is truly uninspiring for the man's masculinity to feel the absence of femininity in his female partner. Women from other cultures have this femininity, and men blossom in the presence of such femininity [...]

(VG Internet discussion, 13 July 2007, own translation)

In all the above quotes the Asian women (or 'women from other cultures') are presented as something qualitatively different than the Scandinavian women. Note that what is appealing to the first writer is not that Asian women can make good housewives, but that they actually want to be at home and take care of children and their husband. The second writer goes even further, insisting that women from other cultures do not feel a need to enter into the man's arena, and accept a hierarchical relation between man and wife. Moreover, according to this writer she is not forced to be this kind of woman, she does it because this is what she wants and what comes natural for her.

This representation of marriage migrants is not invented by these two writers, or the Progress Party politician quoted above, for that sake. The ideal of the perfect wife is clearly the dominating representation of marriage migrants in the Internet match-making agencies (Sahib, Koning & van Witteloostuijn, 2006). The Internet is filled with illustrative text – but below are three representative quotes. As one international marriage agency writes, under the heading "Why would Western men want to marry foreign brides?":

Many Western men have grown tired of the mind games and gender politics that have taken the sincerity and fun out of the Western dating scene. They perceive Western women to be increasingly difficult to satisfy because of their unrealistic expectations of men and relationships. Many Western men say all they want is a

loving, caring, family-oriented woman to come home to at the end of a gruelling work day. Having grown up in societies that foster traditional family values, foreign brides perform their roles as nurturers and homemakers with pride. Foreign brides take their duties as wives and mothers seriously. This is the reason why foreign brides make the perfect life partner for Western men who are looking for a wife who will appreciate, love and care for them.

[www.mailorderbrides.com](http://www.mailorderbrides.com)

For Thai women family-mindedness and respect for the husband is emphasized:

This gentle Thai culture produces women with high moral values and a strong sense of commitment to their families. Thai women are raised to be loyal and supportive wives. But that's not unusual in a culture where people are expected to put the interests of others before their own. [...]

Thai girls are raised with a strong feeling of loyalty towards their partner. They will be loyal to you and do everything to please you and make you happy when you show them that you are willing to be good for her and take good care of her too. Thai girls are very caring towards their partner. This is something they learn when they are raised by their parents. In Thai tradition it is even so that the man is in a higher position than the woman.

[www.Thailandlovefinder.com](http://www.Thailandlovefinder.com)

Eastern European women are also portrayed as being more family-oriented and more feminine than their Western sisters:

Russian women no doubt are very attractive and what makes them different from western women is that they may be career-oriented, but when it comes to their family they can give up anything to be with them, for their sake. They are far less concerned with material wealth and more determined to be good wives and mothers. A Russian lady knows that she is a woman and she likes it... Deep inside she feels like a tender, weak and beautiful being created to have a family and children.

[...] They have a very high work ethic and always make sure that they create a comfortable home and please their husbands in every way. They enjoy showing affection to the men in their lives, and tend to make their minds up quickly. Unlike the west, there in the east, most of the women have no interest to be in direct competition with men.

[...] To save the family they would endure material problems their husbands may have. The scale of priority for a Russian lady is the following: first she is a wife, then a mother, and after it she thinks about professionalism and career. The same

traditional culture that you would find in your mothers and grandmothers, Russian women still carry that with honour and pride. They like to care for their husbands, and allow their husbands to take care of them and they do not consider this as a weakness. It is in fact a sign of well being in Russia, when a wife can stay at home, and a social status of a housewife is high.

<http://www.mypoppet.com>

According to these quotes, marriage migrants are not only more family-oriented and feminine, they are also more loyal and faithful than other women. This is in direct opposition to the other representations, of the prostitute and the cunning materialist that we presented above.

We should also note that in this representation of marriage migrants, there is usually no mention of any striving for upward social mobility (or economic security) through marriage. The fact that the women are looking for a husband abroad is generally explained as due to difficulties in finding good, family-oriented men in their home country; that Thai or Russian men drink, cheat and are not suitable for marriage. As the quote from “www.mypoppet.com” above illustrates, Russian women are presented as far less concerned with material wealth than their western sisters, and they are prepared to endure material problems in order to save the family.

Where the perfect wife is described and referred to, we find two slightly different representations of the man. First of all we find the kind and family-oriented, but somewhat disillusioned, man who has been manipulated and fooled by a ‘selfish’ local woman. The second representation is that of “the real man”, who is not ashamed of his masculinity and who wants “a real/traditional woman” with whom he can create a home based on traditional family values. He argues such women cannot be found among modern Scandinavian career women and feminists.

It could be noted that we also have a corresponding idea of the Scandinavian women here. This idea of marriage migrants as more feminine also presents the western women as less feminine. As such, the idea of western women who have lost touch with their feminine side increases the status of transnational marriages. When we ask Sara if she has ever considered establishing a profile on a web page for Russian men she scrunches, and looks a bit shocked at it even being suggested:

Well – such agencies exist.. But – no... I wouldn't. When Russian men place a profile in places like that I find it a bit strange. Russian men who are not able to find a woman in their own country – it makes me a bit suspicious. But if you are going to find someone abroad you need the assistance of the agency because not all have access to the Internet, and then you need translation and stuff... but here in Russia.... Then there must be something wrong with him.



Sara has much higher expectations of foreigners who engage in Internet dating than she has of Russians who do the same. Because of the scarcity of real, marriageable women in other countries, foreigners have a legitimate reason for looking for wives abroad. This is in contrast to Russian men, who after all, are surrounded by Russian women all the time. The representation of the western woman who behaves like a man, becomes an important factor in legitimizing marriage migration for the women themselves.

## Living with stereotypes

These representations of marriage migrants are not particular for Norway, nor for Thai or Russian marriage migrants as such. We find similar descriptions of marriage migrants in much international literature. For instance, Caren Freeman (2005) finds that Chosonjok marriage migrants to South Korea are described as either powerless victims of practices deemed as trafficking in women, as traditional and hardworking wives, or as heartless opportunists who actively exploit the South Korean men they marry. Louisa Schein (2005) shows how Hmong emigrants to the USA return to China in search of the traditional “homeland woman”, but through their behaviour create a prostitution stigma for the women they become engaged to.

In our interviews with women in the process of finding a foreign husband, we found that they surprisingly often embraced the stereotypical representation of themselves as traditional and family-oriented. For instance, we asked Sara if she had given any thought to why the men were looking for a wife abroad. *Russian women are popular in the West because we are more feminine and have good family values*, Sara claimed, somewhat embarrassed, to our Norwegian female interviewer. She goes on:

This is what they say... not only the guy I am dating; everybody says this. We have family traditions. Mothers teach their daughters to appreciate family values so that she becomes a better housewife. So it's my impression that this is why they look for a wife abroad. It is my impression that women abroad first and foremost are concerned with their careers. And that is not the way it is here. Even if such tendencies are starting to develop here too. I, for instance, was raised to have an education and a good job.

*But don't you want a career?* Now that I have succeeded with my job, and am where I am today, I would really like to have a family. I would like to have children. [...]

*But if you have children, are you going to work then?* No – while the children are small I wouldn't work. But I can't live without working at all. I don't say I will work

from early morning to late night, but I need to work at least four hours a day. I like working – I need to develop professionally to be satisfied.

It is interesting that a highly educated and successful woman like Sara accepts the idea that western men are looking for a wife with traditional values, but she does not seem to reflect much about what consequences this will have for her. Although she does not really know how to cook, and cannot imagine life without work, she still presents herself as a traditional woman. Of course, at best, this will merely lead to some extra initial discussions between her and her Dutch boyfriend about how work at home should be organized, and they may end up hiring a maid and babysitter like many career women do. However, this representation of the marriage migrant becomes problematic if it becomes necessary to play this role in order to find a husband on the international marriage market.

To Anne her husband's expectations of her to be the submissive wife came to the forefront when she got pregnant, and he wanted her to get an abortion. He was too old for children he said; he just wanted a Thai girl:

He told me that he came to Thailand with the dream of finding a sweet girl and flowers, and to come home from work and see somebody smile – somebody who could take care of the home and smile. *He wanted you to be home and make his home beautiful?* Yes, he said so several times. He had read a book about Thai girls before he came to Thailand. *What kind of book?* A story of how this is a culture where people are soft and kind, and where the man should be superior, and the women just submissive. Kind of Muslim in a way. But it was like that [in Thailand] in the old days. *Did he tell you to be like that?* Yes, he wanted that, and he didn't think I would be like Norwegian women. He dreamt of this. But I am a strong woman, and I learn quickly about our society. But his daughter didn't agree with him and supported me. She even told him that I needed to get out and meet people and learn about society, how people live in Norway, that I shouldn't just sit there as in a prison.

Anne felt her husband's expectations about how Thai women should behave were suffocating. The images he had of how Thai women should behave were very old fashioned even in a Thai context. Anne is a smart and independent woman, and even if her husband wanted her not to be influenced by Norwegian values, she learned and observed, and wanted to assimilate into society.

As Caren Freeman (2005) points out, cross-border marriages appeal to women who have the will and strength of purpose to change their lives. Marriage migrants are often particularly ambitious women, who rather than being passive, have been active and resourceful in order to get out of their communities. It is therefore problematic that their agency is so seldom recognized as something positive, and that there is no positive representation of marriage migrants which allows them to show agency. One excep-

tion to this can be found in some communities, where marriage migration has taken place for a long time. We found this trend to be particularly strong for Russian women in some urban areas in Northern Norway (in particular in and around Kirkenes, the town closest to the Russian border). In this area we could even go as far as saying that a fourth representation of marriage migrants is manifest. This is probably a consequence of extensive interaction across the Norwegian-Russian border in recent years, as well as historically, even during the cold war. Here we also find the representation of the smart, strong, educated and independent Russian woman, who knows what she wants, and who is a valuable resource to the community. This position is generally not available to marriage migrants in other parts of Norway where we have done our fieldwork.

For the rest, the three stereotypes presented above are the ones that influence the expectations and responses they encounter when they meet their husbands and his family, but also other members of the community, and official authorities. This has, as we will show, severe consequences for many.

## **Internet marriage agencies as providers of interpretive models of marriage migration**

The Internet marriage agencies play an important role in organizing and facilitating marriages, but also function as providers of information and advice to men and women looking for a foreign spouse. This information and advice can be provided directly to clients who contact them in their search for a foreign spouse, or to the more distant Internet user, searching for information on transnational marriages on the web. This way we see marriage agencies as important, not only as facilitators of marriage migration, but also as key providers of interpretive models for marriage migration. Through their presentation, and to some extent marketing, of marriage migration, some of these agencies not only present the advantages of marriage migration, but also serve to develop and reproduce stereotypes and misconceptions. This way the marriage agencies can be seen as an important source for the ideas of marriage migrants as “the traditional wife”, and “the manipulating materialist” as described above, and as such serve to influence behaviour and expectations of the involved agents.

We have met with and interviewed representatives from six different agencies, varying from one of the major commercial, American-owned agencies, to small home-run Internet sites producing next to no income and few successful couples. Some of the agencies are based in Norway, others in Russia or Thailand. In addition to these interviews, we have collected information on the Internet, on the agencies’ websites and various discussion groups. This information is supplemented with information provided by women and men who have used their services.

### **Marketing or informing?**

Marriage agencies play an important role in creating ideas of what marriage migration is, and who the marriage migrants are. This way the agencies also partake in the cultural stereotyping of Thai and Russian women. These agencies can be seen as places 'where race and ethnicity laden concepts of gender are manufactured, packaged and commodified to serve the perceived needs of Western male customers' (Ridenhour-Levitt (1999) in Sahib, Koning & van Witteloostuijn, 2006). This is mainly done through the presentation of Thai and Russian women as traditional, feminine and family-oriented, as described in the sections above.

Many sites also go quite far in explaining what the women advertising on their sites want and expect from a marriage. Although some sites do suggest that there is some variety in background and motivation among the women who look for a partner abroad, the main trend is towards explaining the wishes of the Russian or Thai women, and sometimes marriage migrants at large, in a uniform manner. As this quote from [www.thailandlovefinder.com](http://www.thailandlovefinder.com) illustrates:

For most of them it is not important if they live in Europe, United States, Thailand, or anywhere else in the world, as long as they are with a partner that loves her, respects her and treats her good. If you want her to live in your country, she will not have any problems with that as long as she can stay in touch with her family. But if you want to live with her in Thailand, that will be just fine for her too. [...] The girls are more than willing to do their very best to learn your language and you will notice she makes fast progress in doing so. Again she will show you that she wants to please you. She will not disappoint you in that. ([www.thailandlovefinder.com](http://www.thailandlovefinder.com))

Although it may be true that most of the women advertising with this agency would accept her husband's decision of where to live (although even that is a quite radical suggestion), we find it difficult to believe that they do not even have a preference as to where they want to live. Another site presents Russian women in the following manner:

Unlike Americans, Russian Ladies understand the realities of life all too well. They are traditional, unpretentious, down-to-earth, and their views of relationships have not been ruined by unreasonable expectations. They are not yet subverted by the media and remain highly educated, cultured and conversational.<sup>26</sup> ([www.russianladies.com](http://www.russianladies.com))

<sup>26</sup> Russian women are more often presented as cultured and educated, but also as sexy and suggestive. Thai women are more likely to be presented as submissive, quiet and faithful. However, only some sites emphasize such cultural differences. The similarities in the way Thai and Russian women are presented are more striking than the differences.

It is difficult to see these quotes as actual attempts to inform potential clients about what they can expect from a life with a foreign wife. Rather these descriptions must be understood as a form of marketing of marriage migrants, attempting to convince the reader that it could be worth paying the fee to contact these women. This kind of marketing would not have much consequence if the couple had the time and opportunity to sit down together and get to know each other and discuss their expectations and plans for the future. However, strict visa regimes and the relatively high cost of travelling limit many couples' opportunities to spend time together before marriage. Furthermore, many couples do not have a common language, and are dependent on translation services for almost all communication in the first couple of months. As depending on translators is quite cumbersome, and often expensive (unless acquaintances can serve as translators), there are limits to how much information couples are able to share through these sources. Consequently, the "information" given out in these information pages (and similar information presented by various "experts" in the field), often turns out to be important in forming the male clients' expectation of his new wife, and sometimes also her expectations of him.

Here we would like to emphasize that many of the men married to Russian and Thai women who we have been in contact with did not present these stereotypical ideas of what marriage migration is, but expressed respect for his wife's individuality, and her ideas, preferences and expectations of what marriage should be. However, we have also met men who, in expressing expectations for a future marriage, or even when describing their own wives, seemed to lean heavily on these cultural stereotypes. As we have shown in the chapters above, the husbands' expectations of what marriage to a foreign woman will be like are instrumental for how their marriage will be organized.

### **Family-based and commercial agencies**

In our material we find it useful to distinguish between two main types of Internet marriage agencies. On one side we find the Internet marriage agencies published by women who are themselves marriage migrants who wish to create an arena for female friends and relatives in their home country to marry abroad. The business can be assisted by her husband; however, she is usually in charge of following up, and not the least, translating. Typically these sites have relatively few active profiles and relatively few couples that actually end up getting married. In interviews with representatives from such agencies they expressed a strong commitment to their clients, in particular their female clients (who may in some cases even be relatives or acquaintances of the owner). Owners of such agencies actively check and remove profiles of both men and women they expect are not "marriage-minded", or not "marriage material". Although their services are also paid (although only by the men), because of the extra work and attention given to each couple, the income they are able to raise in this business is

quite limited. The women we have talked to who organize such sites claim that this is something they do to keep them occupied as they have not been able to find another job in Norway. We will call these agencies *family-based*.

On the other hand we find the commercial “mail-order bride” agencies. The most dominant ones on the Internet are typically American-owned and run; however, there are also sites run from Norway with similar traits. Although they are usually run from one specific country, men from all over the world use their services, although they may lack some services, i.e. visa assistance for all countries or translation services for more than a few languages. These agencies are commercially driven, and in interviews as well as in self-representation on the Internet, most of them do not try to conceal that it is the western male who is the paying customer. Services are consequently tailored to the (western) males needs. This has several consequences for how marriage migration is presented and organized.

### **Putting your best self forward**

One area where the differences between these two types of agencies are quite clear is in what advice they give to the women. Generally the commercial agencies have little information available for the women, if any at all, but one area where even commercial agencies sometimes have instructions (or advice) is with regard to photos. It should be noted that these agencies, when comparing themselves with competitors, would emphasize the number of women with a profile, and the “quality” of the profiles on the sites. This quality is mainly evaluated based on profile pictures on display. Furthermore, as some sites also charge per picture downloaded, this may also serve as an incentive to encourage the use of pictures that clients enjoy watching. Some agencies openly state that they do not accept amateur photos, but insist that the women go to a photographer, or a stylist specialized in taking photographs for these occasions. Some sites have profile pictures with relatively heavy sexual overtones; in Figure 3 we have selected some of the more explicit pictures used in profiles in various Internet agencies. Although not all profiles have this kind of picture, such positions are far from rare, and are clearly encouraged by some agencies.

On the site Dating-world.net we found the following advice (own translation from Russian):

“Your photograph is what the men will look at above all else. You may be “Miss Charming” herself, but with a bad picture you still have basically no chance. [...] In the first stage the man cannot appreciate your charm or intellect; the only thing he sees is your photo. You might already have a photo that drives men crazy, but if you are not among those lucky ones, you should follow these points: ...”

Figure 3 Explicit profile pictures from various online marriage agencies



The agency goes on to insist that the women go to a professional photographer, and that the pictures should be inspired from women's fashion magazines. The site then continues with a lot of advice on appearance, including: "Make sure your advantages are clearly visible, and not something you have to study with a magnifying glass to find", "Even if you usually don't wear makeup you should use some for your picture" and "Full lips look more sensual. Too thin lips can be corrected with a lip-pencil and lipstick, but know what is enough."

In contrast, one of the family-run websites presents the following advice under the heading "Some reflections on profile pictures" (own translation from Russian, somewhat shortened):

Seductive glances, sensually uncovered breasts, naked skin... Of course the men want to see you like that, very much so, but at another place and another time. Only when you belong to him and are close to him. Don't hurry to show off all your assets at once, believe me, there will be time for that later. [In the picture] show who you are – demonstrate your personality – not the opposite. Scandinavian men are conservative and not that concerned with pretentious clothes. High heels, coloured nails, bare bellies and superfashionable clothes – it is not for them. It is possible that there are some men who like this; however, I don't think you will be happy with a man like that. You are smart, good and sympathetic – let it be like that.

We will not be the judge of which advice is the most effective in finding a partner, and which leads to the most successful marriages. However, in a Norwegian context some of these pictures (as illustrated in Figure 3 above) resemble pictures used as 'page three girls' in male magazines or even in prostitution ads. We would expect that this somehow influences the expectations male clients of these agencies have of the women they meet. With their strong sexual connotations, these pictures contribute to and accentuate the image of some marriage migrants as someone who is just in it "for fun" or "for money" as suggested by those who see marriage migration as a prostitution-like practice, as described above.

Agencies also differ in how they relate to male clients who are not "marriage-minded". For representatives of marriage agencies, the "marriage-mindedness" of their male and female clients was a central topic in our interviews. The problem is of course that some persons may engage in dating through these agencies only for sex or money (and not contemplating marriage). These "non-marriage-minded" persons may expose the "serious" marriage migrants to much frustration, and in some cases, even fraud. All the agencies we were in touch with claimed to have policies for removing women they believe are frauds (for instance, women who ask the men for money). However, only some of the small, family-run agencies also claimed to remove men that they suspected of not having serious intentions. This is further discussed in section "Are international marriage agencies problematic? below.



## **Advising male clients on marriage migrants' motivations and expectations**

It is not only in the advice to the women that the family-based and commercially oriented marriage agencies differ. Additionally, in their advice to the men we find some differences, for instance with regard to the economic expectations of the women.

The family-based marriage agencies for Thai women sometimes mention that it is often a search for economic security that has motivated some of the women to look for a husband abroad, and that the women sometimes will be expected to support her family economically. However, most agencies do not mention this. It can even be argued that some of the more commercially driven ones go to great measures in arguing that marriage migration has nothing to do with a search for economic security. Or in the words of one marriage agency's FAQ page:

### **Are these foreign brides simply looking for an easy way out of their country?**

No, they are simply seeking a good man. If they could find a gentle, loving, decent man in their own country, then there would be no demand for international dating services. But as things stand, the number of foreign brides participating in mail order bride sites continues to grow. This is because good men are hard to find in foreign brides' own countries. Non-Western men are known to treat women very poorly and are not interested in women as people. Foreign brides only want a secure and happy future and they believe that Western men are capable of providing that.

([www.mailorderbrides.com](http://www.mailorderbrides.com)).

Or as another site explains:

Russian ladies are simply seeking to get to know a good man. Their own men are poor prospects for companionship. Why? Because there is a shortage of men over 30 and 50% of them are alcoholics, and they have a tradition of treating women very poorly.

Russians are enamoured with everything western, and the ladies consider it quite an honour to have a foreign boyfriend. In public they will always take your arm to trumpet this fact. It must be said, however, that the ladies of the [RussianLadies.com](http://RussianLadies.com) network are not poverty-stricken, desperately seeking a way out of Russia. Their attitude is: "If I'm going to fall in love, it may as well be with a good man". They want to find a good man, and you represent everything the Russian man is not: sophisticated, healthy, energetic, considerate and sober.

([www.russianladies.com](http://www.russianladies.com))

These sites insist that the main motivation for Thai and Russian women in looking for husbands abroad is the lack of decent men in their home country. Russian and Thai

men are portrayed as lazy, selfish and with substance abuse problems. Western men, on the other hand, are portrayed as modern, kind and caring. This strong emphasis on the non-economic reasons for the women to look for a husband abroad can be found in most Internet marriage agencies. This echoes the modern western determination to distinguish love and money; western movies and literature are replete with references to wealthy persons who need to make sure they are loved for their own sake, and not for their money. The true test of love is if she still wants him when she believes he is poor. However, the agencies' emphasis on non-economic motives of the marriage migrants strengthens the perceived distinction between the unreliable women that are in it for the money (the 'materialists'), and the 'real' foreign brides with traditional values and non-economic motives. We believe that this perceived distinction, and fear of getting the "wrong kind of lady", leads to expectations and strategies among both men and women that lead to frustration at best, and neglect and exploitation at worst.

### **Are international marriage agencies problematic?**

When we have given so much attention to the way international marriage agencies describe and present marriage migrants, it is because we believe that they are quite influential in explaining and describing marriage migrants and their intentions and actions, and that their practices increase marriage migrants' vulnerability. First of all, it can be argued that many international marriage agencies participate in objectifying marriage migrants, both through the types of pictures they use (and encourage the women to submit), and through the standardized and stereotypical presentation of who the marriage migrants are; the agencies' dominant representations of marriage migrants are based on cultural stereotypes, with little focus on the women's individual characteristics and differences. Such objectification and "exotification" of specific groups of women can be argued to make the women more vulnerable. When they are presented in this disconnected manner, as distinguished by a set of characteristics different from the "ordinary Norwegian woman," it makes it easier to justify that they can be treated differently than other Norwegians. This is further exaggerated when individual preferences and the need for individual treatment are ignored, and their preferences are presented as characteristics of the collective group.

In addition, few agencies emphasize the need to spend time together and get to know each other before marriage is decided upon. Through this the agencies reinforce the idea that one Thai or Russian woman is more or less the same as another, with appearance, age, and possible age of children, as the main distinguishing factors. This idea make it possible (perhaps unconsciously) for western men to propose marriage after spending only a few hours with their future bride, as many of our respondents report. This attitude also makes it possible to assume that one marriage migrant can easily be replaced by another, if the one they got turns out not to be expected, according to the agencies' descriptions.

## 8 Conclusions

Transnational marriage migration may give women from transitional and third world countries not only a more comfortable life in the West, but also a chance to find husbands who love and care for them, that they can love back, and create a good life with. While looking at the vulnerabilities inherent in marriage migration, we also need to keep in mind that this mainly represents an opportunity for women to *improve* their lives; moving across large distances can also mean moving away from repressive gender roles, family control and poverty, and as such, it creates potential for greater freedom and opportunity (Constable, 2005). Similarly, we should not forget the vulnerabilities and potential for exploitation in focusing on all the gains.

With this report we have tried to shed light on some of the challenges marriage migrants to Norway face. We have described the paths that lead into transnational marriage; motivating factors, facilitators, structural and legal frameworks that inhibit or stimulate movement, and not least, perceptions of risk and gain and the women's reflections concerning the various stages of the migration experience. Furthermore, we focussed on the challenges marriage migrants face in the process of breaking out of a marriage, and how economic, structural and legal conditions influence the options the women have.

Women who obtain right to residency through marriage to a non-immigrant Norwegian make up an important immigrant groups in Norway. In spite of their increasing importance in numbers, this group is rarely given much attention in immigration discourses or integration policies. Foreign women marrying a Norwegian are generally presented as different than other immigrants, who come as asylum seekers, refugees or persons who gain residency through marriage with a Norwegian with immigrant background. We have shown how three main representations dominate how marriage migrants are perceived in media, and in public and private discourses. While the idea of the marriage migrant as a traditional wife, with traditional family values and true femininity, is dominant in many groups where marriage migration is widespread, other discourses presents marriage migrants as either cunning materialists (with agency) or passive victims (without agency). These perceptions influences the way marriage migrants are treated by their husbands, as well as by social services, immigration office and other public authorities. These discourses make up an important part of the framework that determine what options marriage migrants find available at the various stages of their life in Norway.

Another important part of this framework that determines what options marriage migrants have in Norway is the legislation that regulates transnational marriages. We have shown how the current framework sometimes, rather than protect the women who come here through marriage, serves to increase the women's vulnerability. The most problematic element of the legislative framework is the 3 year rule and the interpretation of the abuse clause (the Foreigners Regulation §37 clause 6), which we will come back to below.

The legislative and discursive framework combine with a general lack of economic, human and social resources to create a number of vulnerabilities for women who come to Norway through marriage. The geographic distance to family and friends in their country of origin, produce greater isolation and cut the women off from their networks and potential support (Schein, 2005). Lack of language skills, networks and knowledge of "how things work" in their new place of residence make the women strongly dependent on their husbands. There is nothing in our findings that suggest that men who marry women from transitional or developing countries are more likely to have an intention to exploit or in other ways behave worse than those who enter into other forms of marriages in Norway. However, the discursive and legislative frameworks described in this report, in combination with the women's lack of resources, creates a greater potential for exploitation and abuse if someone is tempted to abuse their position of power. Simultaneously this framework gives these women less protection than other women that are exposed to abuse. In other words, transnational marriages differ from other marriages in that if they do go wrong, the potential for exploitation and abuse is more severe because of the power he has in controlling her stay in the country, and her dependency on him.

## **Too easy – and too complicated**

Peter has been married to Siv for five years. They know many Thai-Norwegian couples, and claim that most of them are doing fine, but not all. Peter claims that not all understand what they had gotten themselves into:

What many men who want to find a wife abroad do not recognize is that it is a lot of hard work. Marriage in itself is difficult, and marriage to someone from a totally different culture isn't easier. It is more complicated. However, one of the main problems with transnational marriages is that they can sometimes be too easy to enter into, and people are not prepared for what comes once they are married. Because transnational marriage takes a lot of work."

When Peter talks about transnational marriages being too easy to enter into, he refers to the vast number of women from transitional and developing countries searching for western men and the relative scarcity of men who seek them as wives. According to Peter this is taken to its extreme for those who meet in the sex industry in areas like Pattaya. He claims most men would be able to find someone to marry without much hassle during their first night on the town.

When Peter refers to transnational marriages as being too easy to enter into, he does not talk of the process of getting visas, “fiancée permits” and family reunification. Several of our respondents were refused a tourist visa or fiancée permit, and had to marry in their home country, deciding to move to Norway without having ever been in there, or having never seen him in his home. We do not believe having the possibility of visiting him in his home country would make many reconsider, as the potential gains for many women from marrying and moving to Norway are too great. However, we believe that if it was easier to come to Norway to visit prior to marriage, many would be better prepared for what awaits them. It is therefore tempting to recommend more widespread use of “fiancée permits” to allow women to assess what they are (potentially) getting themselves into. For some this would most likely strengthen their position, and increase their negotiating power before entering into a marriage. On the other hand, more widespread use of tourist visas and fiancée permits could turn out to be exploited. There are several reports of women who are heavily exploited while in the West on tourist or fiancée visas as well, where *the possibility of marriage* is used to make the women comply. Women in the country on tourist or fiancée visas may in other words be less exposed to violence and exploitation, but if they were to be exploited they have even less protection under the current Norwegian law, as they cannot even apply for residency with reference to the abuse clause of the Foreigners Regulation.

## **Forcing outdated gender roles on migrant women**

The Scandinavian countries have come a long way in securing equal opportunities and rights for men and women. There is now relatively widespread acceptance of women in politics and management positions; women are just as likely to pursue a higher education as men, and men and women both have right to (and will be expected to) take substantial parental leave, with pay, if they have a child.

In some groups of society this development has not been welcomed. We have shown how some express a form of nostalgia, longing for the traditional gender roles; the time when men were allowed to be men, and women would love them for it. Some of the men who promote this view believe that the extreme focus on equality of the sexes has been damaging for traditional family values, and say they want to marry women

who will take it upon themselves to take care of the house and children, while he is responsible for supporting them financially. They claim such women can no longer be found in Norway, but see marriage migrants as carriers of these values, and as such, more marriageable than Norwegians.

This needs not be problematic in itself. Although many would disagree with the claim that traditional gender roles are better for all parts, most would also support a notion that any couple should be allowed to organize their home life as they want to themselves. However, in the case of marriage migrants we need to ask ourselves to what extent it is the women themselves who choose traditional gender roles, or if this is the only role available if she wants to marry in Norway. Is playing the role of the traditional wife sometimes a prerequisite for being considered as wife in the international market for marriage migrants?

On page 112 Anne tells us how she experienced her husband's expectations of how she should behave. She tells that he had read a book that described Thai women as submissive and passive and keen to please their husbands. This is the way things used to be in the old days, Anne claims, but gender equality has come some way in Thailand too. The way her husband expected her to behave did not correspond with how she saw herself before she came to Norway, and even less so after she came here. As she lived in Norway, she learned how other Norwegian women live, and gradually came to adopt the modern Norwegian gender ideals. To her husband this might have been disappointing, and he openly criticized her for "becoming too Norwegian". The relationship turned abusive and violent.

Several respondents reported being told not to become "Norwegian", in the sense that they should not adapt to Norwegian gender roles. In order to stay married, they had to embrace the traditional, old-fashioned gender roles offered by their husbands, and make sure they did not integrate or adapt too much to Norwegian society. This is of course not the case for everybody, and many men and women in transnational marriages also pride themselves of modern gender roles in their marriage. Furthermore, we would emphasise that among of the ones who base their marriage on more traditional gender roles, several respondents clearly did not mind, and for some this still represented more liberal gender roles than what they had grown up with. But some had to adapt to gender roles that were old-fashioned compared to Norwegian norms, and sometimes also compared to the roles in their home country. This can in its most extreme form be interpreted a setting where these women's possibility to stay in Norway depends on them not being integrated and adapting to Norwegian norms; that in order to stay married (for at least 3 years) they must avoid embracing the values of equality held by others in the society.

## You cannot divorce unless you get a good man

We have shown how many marriage migrants may be totally dependent on their husbands after they move to Norway. Many have limited opportunities to communicate with others, as they do not speak Norwegian, and relatively often, barely any English either. The lack of language skills makes them totally dependent on others, and often they know few people other than their husbands. Although the husband may not speak her language either, he can be relied on to arrange all practicalities to enable her to live in Norway, from arranging that immigration papers and other official documents are in order, to the day-to-day task of buying groceries and securing a place to live. Many are also dependent on their husbands for economic support as it takes time to find a job with adequate income to support themselves, and possibly other dependants in Norway or in their country of origin. It is our impression that most Norwegian spouses recognize this dependency, and also their responsibility in assisting their wives in obtaining greater independence, through encouraging her to take language classes and develop her own network, and if needed, assist her in finding employment or support her in getting her driving licence.

Nevertheless, our study has shown that some marriage migrants are left on their own in learning how to manage in the Norwegian society, while others again are purposely hindered in their attempts to gain independence and learn about life in Norway. This is what we have termed *forced dependency*. Women who end up in situations of forced dependency are also likely to be exposed to physical and psychological abuse. Their problem is however, that their dependency hinders them from leaving their husbands, even after three years of residence. Even after they have the right to independent residency, many feel they cannot leave because they do not have the necessary skills and resources to claim this residency, nor to manage on their own in Norway if independent residency is granted.

The dilemma here is that in order to be able to divorce, they need to be able to live alone in Norway, and for many marriage migrants who came with limited knowledge of Norwegian society and limited language skills, this demands some level of integration into Norwegian society. As social integration of marriage migrants is perceived as the responsibility of their husbands, successful integration depends on having a good husband. Consequently a relatively decent husband is a prerequisite for a divorce, and those who need it most will often not be in a situation where they dare to start a life on their own in Norway. The ones with the worst cases of mistreatment, where the abuse of power is most significant, are the ones less able to leave, partly because they do not know the opportunities inherent in the system, but also because they lack networks, information and resources (in terms of money, education or language skills) to manage on their own. The more carelessly or brutally the women are treated, in terms of

isolation, control and forced dependency, the longer time it will take before they have the necessary resources to break out of a marriage.

## A right to leave when abused

On page 34 Lene explained that when she accepted her husband's proposal she had told him that if they were to have a fight, and he hit her only once, she would never accept it, but would leave him immediately. Luckily Lene never needed to test this assertion but many other marriage migrants have come to learn that such principles may come with a price. They rather have to consider how much violence and abuse they can take before they are willing to consider going back to their country of origin.

The introduction of the abuse clause in The Foreigners Regulation §37 clause 6 was intended to protect immigrant women who have come to Norway through marriage, stating that women have the right to residence on an independent basis if they are exposed to violence in marriage. The legislation thus recognizes that many women are willing to put up with extensive abuse and exploitation in marriage in order to secure independent residency in the end. However, as Hilde Lidén (2005) and Helga Eggebø (2007) has shown, being hit once or twice does not in practice qualify for residency. In one case, the implementing committee concludes that the applicant should not be granted residency as the violence she was exposed to was not interpreted as part of a general behavioural pattern:

The plaintiff further claimed that the husband had hit her as a joke on several occasions, and on three occasions hit her so that there were visible marks. (...) It was referred to one occasion where the husband had taken stranglehold on the plaintiff, but the committee pointed out that this was a singular occasion, and did not emerge as part of a behavioural pattern

(Utlendingsnemda in Eggebø, 2007; 82; our translation)

The clause can in other words not be claimed to grant automatic protection to women exposed to violence. If Lene had been more unlucky she may have come to realize this. Like many other women before her, she might have reached the conclusion that going back to Thailand or Russia is no longer an option. Consequently, they choose to stay in a marriage with physical and psychological abuse, even when they realize that it is at the cost of their self-respect and their children's well-being.

Many women have been taught to react like Lene. They should never accept violence in marriage; Staying with a man that beats them, or abuses them in any way should never be an option. For women without permanent residence this is not so simple, and



today's interpretation of the abuse clause demands systematic abuse before it qualifies for independent residency and the right to leave. Several studies have shown how women who experience violence in transnational marriages, can risk losing their right to residency in Norway if they divorce before three years, even if the violence is well documented (Eggebo, 2007; Lidén, 2005). This way, immigrant women who have not yet secured independent residency seem to be expected to put up with more severe physical and psychological abuse than what is expected of Norwegian women (Lidén, 2005). This influences their situation in two ways; first of all it diminishes their possibility to negotiate a better situation for themselves, as the husband may be aware of his control of her residency, and consequently not take any threats of her leaving him seriously. Secondly, because the stakes are so high, many women will not even try to file for residency on the abuse clause, as nobody can promise them that they will be granted residency if they do; The way the abuse clause is currently interpreted and used (Eggebo, 2007; Lidén, 2005) make lawyers and other resource persons the women are in contact with reluctant to recommend the women to leave their husband and apply for independent residency unless the violence she has been exposed to is extreme. It can be difficult to convince their husband to take them back if the process fails. If she decides to use this clause she often has to be willing to risk being sent home. For many this is not an option, and consequently they rather choose to stay with their violent partner until residency is secured.

## **A victim of agency**

Anniken Hagelund (2002) has shown how discourses on immigration in Norway focus on identifying those worthy of assistance, where “decent” immigration policies are understood as offering residency to those who need it the most. The implementation of the abuse paragraph in the Foreigners regulation (§37 clause 6) should be seen in light of this. Helga Eggebo (2007) claims that the abuse clause in practice demands that the women take upon themselves a victim identity in order to gain residency. Looking into the stories of women who have applied for residency based on this clause, she finds that several women have been refused residency because they were claimed to be too resourceful, or because they have not been adequately victimized by the abuse (as they could not document significant psychological or physical problems) (Eggebo, 2007; Lidén, 2005). As Eggebo points out, it is not the abuse she is submitted to, but the way she responds to it that determines whether she will be granted residency or not. If she can be defined as a victim, she will be granted residency (Eggebo, 2007). In one case the decision not to grant residency to a women who has documented abuse from her husband is explained as follows:

When the committee has reached the conclusion that this should not be classified as abuse, it is because it happened over a relatively short time period, and the plaintiff's quality of life has not been significantly reduced as a consequence of the marriage, even if she has experienced angst and anxiety in the relationship. The fact that a woman is able to break out of the relationship early is in itself not a hinder for the provision to be used, but on the other side there is a requirement that the woman's life quality must be reduced.

(Utlendingsnemda in Eggebø, 2007; 81; our translation)

Also Hilde Lidén (2005) give examples of women who can document being exposed to violence, but who have not been granted residency by UNE, because she breaks out of the marriage before it can be argued to be part of a behavioural pattern from his side. Too much agency and independence can in other words disqualify women who want to secure independent residency outside an abusive relationship in Norway.

This reluctance to acknowledge agency can be found in other arenas of female mobility as well. In international prostitution we see that those who are exploited and abused by traffickers and pimps are less likely to be offered protection as victims of trafficking if they say they entered prostitution by choice, compared with women who claim they are manipulated or forced, even if they have been exposed to similar forms of exploitation and abuse (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2008). In the last chapter of this report we presented three dominant representations of marriage migrants in the Norwegian everyday discourse, and argued that the one representation that recognizes marriage migrants as actors is a largely negative representation, of the cunning materialist. The more positive representations are the image of the traditional wife, or the passive victim. In this study we have found much that indicates that if the marriage migrant show too much agency, she risks being perceived as a cunning migrant, out to exploit the immigration system or her husband. This is likely to disqualify her from residency both by the individual male actors (the men looking for wife in the international arena) and by official Norwegian authorities. If the women want to secure residency, they are better off if they take upon themselves either the role of the submissive, traditional wife in marriage, or of the innocent victim, where they do not show any agency. In reality female migrants from third world or transitional countries can rarely be put in clear-cut categories of passive or active, as victims or manipulators. Naïve, innocent and passive persons are seldom able to get to the West from transitional and developing countries. The ones who are able to beat the system, and find a way through are likely to be resourceful and active. However, while third world women are increasingly mobile, this mobility is not often not controlled by them, but by western actors. We need to acknowledge that for female marriage migrants it is not the women themselves, but the western man who has the power to initiate and stop a woman's attempt to move through marriage (Freeman, 2005).

As Doreen Massey (Massey, 1994) has claimed, different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to possibilities for migration. This concerns not only the issue of who moves and who does not; it is also about power in relation to the flow and the movement; some people are more in charge of migration than others; some control and initiate flow and movement, others are effectively imprisoned by it. On one end we find the ones who benefit from influx of migrants, at the other end of scale we find the groups who physical move a lot, but who are not 'in charge' of the process in the same way at all (Massey, 1994). There is a need for a stronger awareness among those who are at the controlling or receiving end of this mobility, of their responsibilities and of the consequences of their actions, or non-actions.

## Trafficking through marriage

Several researchers, NGOs and politicians have claimed that some forms of organized transnational marriages should be classified as trafficking in persons (see for instance Chuang, 1998; Hughes, 2004; Jackson, 2002; Wijers & Lap-Chew, 1999; Zhao, 2003). There are however few attempts to describe the forms of trafficking that are associated with organized transnational marriages, and how we can distinguish marriage migration linked to trafficking from other forms of marriage migration. More established forms of trafficking, such as trafficking for prostitution, or trafficking for forced labour, are recognized to be a form of mobility, combined with an element of force with a purpose to exploit.<sup>27</sup> There is a general consensus that earning money from others' prostitution or forced labour is exploitative. However, we generally do not see marriage as exploitative in our societies. Is it then possible to talk of trafficking in relation to marriage?

To answer this we would like to briefly go back to Nina's story. When she was in her early twenties Nina's cousin and the cousin's husband had arranged for her to marry a man who had been married three times before, and was known to have treated his former wives badly. Nina was frightened of marrying him, but did not feel that she could say no, partly because she did not feel that she could turn down an offer to have "a family and a good life". Her story is extreme, and not representative of what marriage migrants experience in Norway. Our objective in telling this story is rather the opposite; we wish to illustrate how Nina's experiences in Norway clearly breaks with what are

<sup>27</sup> According to the definition provided in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nation's Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime.

dominant understandings of what constitutes marriage, both in Thailand and Norway. Nina is held captive, raped, physically and psychologically abused, and forced to do housework without pay. If someone treated a domestic worker in a similar way, this would clearly classify as trafficking. We need to ask, is it anything in the marriage that she is offered that legitimizes her being treated this way, and makes it less of a crime than if she had been a domestic worker?

Here are some parts of Nina's story in her own words. We have asked what she thought of the fact that she had been told that none of her husband's previous wives had been able to live with him, and Nina answers:

He promised that he would change. *Well – did he?* No. *How long time did it take before you realized that things were going wrong?* Not even a month. I suppose I had been here about a week – maybe two – when he threw a pan of hot water at me. *Why did he do that?* He had gotten up and went to make food, and I went after him, and asked if I could help. No, I don't need your help with anything, he said. I can make food on my own. I just asked nicely, I said, why do you have to yell at me for that, I said, and then he threw the pan of water at me. But he didn't hit me. It was like that every time he cooked. I would follow and see what he did, because I wasn't any good at making Norwegian food, and I wanted to learn, but every time I followed he would tell me to go away. It was quite annoying. But if I just sat and watched him make food, he would get upset as well, and say, what kind of wife is that, she doesn't speak the language and she doesn't help with anything. So in the end I didn't know what to do, or how to behave. And his eyes would follow me around all the time and he would try to do find something wrong that he could criticize me for. [...] *You got pregnant quite quickly?* After about five months. *Did he still treat you as badly when you were pregnant?* All the time. *Did you meet his friends?* No, I didn't. Because when I was with him I was only at home and did the housework and made food for him. I didn't go anywhere. I didn't have any Thai friends, nor any Norwegian friends. *Did you meet his family?* I never met them. *Does he have any family here?* He says he has two brothers, but I have never met them. [...] *Did he have friends – did he ever go out to see his friends?* Yes – often. During the week he would sometimes go into the city [several hours drive] to drink there, and then he wouldn't come back, and I would sit up until late and wait for him. *He didn't let you know?* He didn't say anything; he just said he was going to see his friends. And then he disappeared. *Did you have money so you could buy food and stuff?* No, I didn't. Because he would have the money, and he would bring it with him. But he would have bought food and put in the fridge for me. *So there was enough food?* Yes. [...] After a couple of days his friends would bring him back. Why does it have to be like this, I thought. I hadn't done anything. But once I wanted to ask him why he did this, he told me not to stick my nose in it. He could do as he

wanted, it was his right. I was only a little over 20, and he was 50. So I had no right coming there and telling him what to do. *When did you come to the crisis centre the first time?* This was when I was ill. You know, women have their period, but I had been bleeding like that for three months. And I wanted him to take me to a doctor, but he didn't want to. He said it wasn't a problem. I called my mother and asked what to do. After some time I also called my cousin and her Norwegian husband in Thailand. Her husband got very angry, and contacted my husband and asked why he didn't take me to the hospital. He said it was because it would be too expensive, that he was going to refurbish the house, and he didn't have money to spend on me. My cousin's husband got upset, and told him off. After this telephone conversation my husband yelled at me, and he hit me too. It made him angry. Why do you have to make trouble for me, he said. *Was it because of his beatings that you were bleeding so much?* Well, he hit me too... *Do you know why you had your period for three months?* I don't know, I never had that problem before... It could be because when we were together and had sex, he would be very aggressive, and do it very hard, so it started bleeding and it didn't stop. *Did you sometimes say you didn't want to have sex with him?* He didn't like that – he would start complaining. *Did he respect it?* No, he didn't really listen, would just do it anyway. *Did you ever meet anybody here in Norway before you came to the hospital?* No, I didn't meet anybody. It was only when the police came and got me, and took me to the hospital. You know, after he had talked to my cousin's husband, he was quite angry, and this was before the police came, so then he would pull out all plugs for the telephone and the lights, so that the whole house was dark. The police asked me if I wanted to go with them to the hospital, and I said I wanted to. The police also asked me if I wanted to go back to my husband, and said that they had a safe place they could take me to.

There is little in Nina's story that resembles our contemporary ideals of what a marriage should be. She was put through extreme physical and psychological abuse, in combination with total isolation. There was no shared economy, no feeling of community or of spouses supporting each other, not even in the beginning. He left the house for days, and did not say where he was going or when he would come back. She did not have any money, and was expected to clean, cook and have sex with him. Nina's situation is best described as one of domestic and sexual servitude, where marriage was used as a factor to control her; their marriage put him in a position of power, which he decided to exploit. It could be argued that his actions should be described as a form of trafficking.

According to international conventions in order to classify something as trafficking, there needs to be an element of mobility, an element of force and a purpose to exploit. But how should we understand force and exploitation within the context of marriage? In one of the few publications that tries to clarify the use of the trafficking concept

for marriages, Marjan Wijers and Lin Lap-Chew (Wijers & Lap-Chew, 1999) define trafficking within marriage as a marital relationship when the husband exerts power as 'owner' over the wife. We find such a definition somewhat wide, and also in danger of not only targeting exploitative relationships. A relationship where the husband exerts power as 'owner' may indicate an uneven power-balance; however it is not given that that the husband acts on this power to exploit.

The elements of force at play with trafficking of marriage migrants are relatively clear. Nina's husband did not lock her up, or threaten her with violence if she were to leave, however this was not necessary. Nina was in an extreme form of forced dependency with no networks, no language skills and no idea where to go if she left him. She was not able to go. After she had been taken to the crisis centre the first time she decided to go back to her husband, because, as she said, she did not know how to live in Norway alone.

Other women report that they are threatened with divorce, and subsequent deportation, if they do not comply with their husband's demands. As they need to stay married for three years in order to secure independent residency, such threats of deportation can for some marriage migrants be felt to be real, and can lead to situations that should be classified as involuntary servitude. If we recognize the unequal power balance in most transnational marriages (due to legal and discursive frameworks and access to resources) such threats can also be classified as abuse of a position of power. Under the threat of deportation the women are not only forced to stay married, they also have to comply with the husbands' demands in order to do so.

There are in other words a number of examples of elements of force being applied (through direct force and isolation; through forced dependency, as abuse of a position of power; and threats of deportation) to control marriage migrants. We have also seen a number of elements of exploitation, from physical abuse and rapes, to demands of domestic labour (or labour outside the house) without pay that can be defined as exploitative, as domestic and sexual servitude. The main challenge in relating marriage migration to human trafficking is to determine to what extent it can be argued that there is a purpose to exploit: Did the Norwegian partner have an intention to find a partner to share their life with, or did they look for someone they could control, and that they could exploit for domestic labour or sexual services?

In this study we have had our focus on the female marriage migrants, with the aim of understanding their opportunities and choices. We are not in a position to say anything about the intentions of men who enter into exploitative marriages. However, if there are conscious steps taken to control the women by limiting their ability to be independent, more or less from the start of their marriage, we have to assume some intentionality, in that there is a will to use this control for purposes of exploitation.

## Legislation and information

In this report we have shown how a number of factors combine and make marriage migrants, like many other female migrant groups, vulnerable to exploitation. Reading about the exploitation described in this report, some may feel there is need to act – to implement policies that can stop such practices from taking place. We will however warn that for migrants policies tend to be a double-edged sword (Jackson, 2002). Some policies may reduce these vulnerabilities, for instance by introducing alternative forms of migration, through formal routes for legal, unskilled labour migration. We believe that the reduction in organized transnational marriages between Polish women and West-European men should be seen as a consequence of the increase in possibilities for ordinary labour migration from Poland; in other words, increased mobility decreases organized marriage migration. Similarly, as has been pointed out by many before us, migrant women's vulnerability in marriage would be significantly reduced if they were granted independent citizenship from day one of their marriage (Eggebø, 2007; Jackson, 2002; Kramvig & Stien, 2002; Lidén, 2005; Lien & Nørgaard, 2006). However, the current political climate in Norway, as in many other Western European countries, may not be favourable to such immigration-friendly policies. In this situation it may be tempting to develop policies that aim to stop undesirable and exploitative migration routes, for instance by making family reunification even more difficult. However, before we suggest limiting migration opportunities, we should take into consideration that the reason why some of these women have chosen high-risk marriage migration is that this was seen as the best of the available alternatives. If we also close these routes, the alternatives may be even worse.

Instead of developing policies aimed at reducing the women's room for action even further, we need to consider ways of strengthening their position; policies that enable third world women to improve their lives in other ways than through high-risk marriages; and policies that enable them to break out of marriage, if necessary. Two factors are of outmost important here. First of all, steps should be taken to make sure marriage migrants have all the necessary knowledge of their rights and opportunities once in Norway. This includes information about language training, child care, rules for obtaining residency and organizations to contact for various forms of information, and in case they need assistance and advice. This information should go directly to the foreign spouses, in a language they are comfortable with. It should also include information about the abuse paragraph in the Foreigners Regulation.

In this report we have pointed to a number of structural factors that make marriage migrants vulnerable. These are factors that in themselves are problematic, and make life in Norway difficult. Moreover, these factors leaves the women open to exploitation. This does not mean that men who marry women from transitional and developing countries necessarily exploit this vulnerability. Rather the opposite, it is

our impression that the Norwegian spouse usually does his best to compensate for the lack of resources his new wife have with her, and tries to assist her in learning to be more independent and integrated into Norwegian society. However, sometimes the husband does not. This is not necessarily because he has bad intent; sometimes he simply does not realize the need. Other times he does not have the resources himself to give the support she needs to be integrated, for instance because of problems of substance abuse or psychological problems. And in a few cases, it could be suggested that the husband consciously and intentionally protects and enhances the elements that makes her vulnerable and dependent on him.

The Norwegian partners should therefore, prior to their wife/fiancée coming to Norway, be informed of their responsibilities, not only to provide for and support their spouses economically during the initial period, but also to assist and facilitate integration into the Norwegian society. As such assistance seems to be of central importance to the foreign spouse's safety and dignity, it could be considered introducing some forms of sanctions or reactions if the Norwegian spouse fails to provide such support. If the Norwegian spouse can be shown to have actively prevented the foreign wife's from integrating into Norwegian society and from becoming independent here, it should be considered prosecuting within the framework of the trafficking legislation.

Official authorities have a responsibility to counteract the vulnerability that is so strong among marriage migrants. Throughout the last decades in the 20 century feminists movements have been fighting for, and have started to gain acceptance for the principle that how a man chooses to treat his family is not necessarily a private concern, but that official authorities have a responsibility to protect and prosecute when violence take place within the family sphere. This should be valid also for those who marry migrant women. But again, we should not fall for the temptation to think that this means the women who come to the west through marriage are weak, nor that the men who marry them are always bad. It is the structural factors that create this vulnerability. We should keep in mind that having the guts and initiative to travel around the globe and start a new life in a completely different place is not for everyone. It is the winners, the tough ones who are able to do that.



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## Someone who cares

This report describes opportunities and challenges for women who come to Norway from Thailand and Russia through marriage. The main emphasis is on ways into, as well as ways out of, transnational marriage. The report takes up topics such as motivation and expectations among those seeking transnational marriage, opportunities for marriage migration through networks and tourism, the role of international marriage agencies, consequences of divorce, the (lack of) willingness to return to country of origin and the women's opportunities for starting a life on their own in Norway. The report describes the economic, legal and discursive frameworks that the women have to relate to, and how this in combination with the women's personal resources for some can combine to create particular vulnerabilities and room for exploitation. In light of this the authors also discuss how exploitation of marriage migrants could raise the need for prosecution and protection within the human trafficking framework.



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