

Thai women call for a stronger community to fight discrimination

Despite Thailand and the UK having a strong history of diplomatic and economic cooperation, marriages between Thai women and British men have been the most 'visible' portrayal of relations between the two countries. In attempt to move beyond the stereotype of the 'Thai bride' Jessica Mai Sims focuses on the experiences of Thais in the UK, with emphasis on the needs and concerns of Thai women.

A new report by the Runnymede Trustⁱ enabled Thai women to express their views about being Thai in Britain. Not much is known about the Thai community in Britain, as the community is only monitored by national surveys by their country of origin.ⁱⁱ

Nearly 180 people were surveyed for the report. Most of them were Thai women who had first entered the UK as partners to British or sometimes other EU nationals. The majority of the women felt that they experienced discrimination for being a Thai woman, and sometimes more acutely as Thai women married to white British men. Discrimination in the form of racism and sexism – and sometimes a complex mixture of the two – were features of their daily lives in the UK, which they felt was due to the stereotypes of Thai women as either prostitutes or subservient mail-ordered brides. The research participants – women and men, Thai and non-Thai – would recount incidents with ease of unsolicited remarks and comments about the Thai sex industry and the assumption that they were 'mail-ordered'.

In response to this perception of exclusion, many were involved in organising cultural activities for both their local Thai and British communities to change the perception of Thais and Thailand. Many hoped that by reaching out to the broader community, positive images of Thais and Thailand would prevail over the sexualised stereotypes. In addition, they felt positive cultural activities would give their children pride in being Thai, and help to create a greater feeling of community between Thai people in the UK.

Aside from cultural events, many people wanted to build a strong Thai community to address what they felt to be pressing needs, such as social support for newly arrived migrants and vulnerable women, assistance in transitioning into the British labour market and interpretation and translation services for vital information about rights and entitlements.

Since the research was mainly concerned with women, domestic violence was raised as an area of particular concern. Although there are not necessarily more incidents of domestic violence involving Thai women as victims, immigration status does have an impact on a migrant's options, knowledge and access to resources. Because a foreign spouse to a British citizen has no recourse to public funds

for the first two years of residency, many recently arrived foreign spouses, especially those with language barriers, are in potentially vulnerable situations. This situation calls for the government to provide more options for migrant women in seeking support, and to support women's organisations to better help these potentially vulnerable women.

Jessica Mai Sims, the report's author commented;

Too often smaller ethnic minority communities are ignored by both mainstream media and policy initiatives, and if they are mentioned, it is often in pejorative terms. We hope that this study brings about the recognition of this community and their very real experiences and concerns and furthermore, that those concerns are addressed.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The report is part of a broader 'Community Studies' research series by Runnymede which focuses on 'invisible' minority ethnic groups which are otherwise subsumed under the ethnic monitoring categories of Asian, Black, White or Other.
2. The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Founded as a Charitable Education Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in collaboration with eminent thinkers and policymakers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Since 1968, the date of Runnymede's foundation, we have worked to establish and maintain a positive image of what it means to live affirmatively within a society that is both multi-ethnic and culturally diverse. Runnymede continues to speak with a thoughtful and independent public voice on these issues today. For further information visit www.runnymedetrust.org.
3. Michelynn Lafleche, Director of Runnymede is available for interviews. To arrange an interview, please contact Michelynn Lafleche on 020 7377 9222 (office hours).

ⁱ *Empowering Individuals & Creating Community – Thai Perspectives on Life in Britain* - is available to download free from www.runnymedetrust.org

ⁱⁱ Due to the means of data collection by country of origin there are only figures for people born in Thailand, and not Thais born in the UK. As of the 2001 Census there were 16,256 people born in Thailand in the UK, of which 72 per cent were women. Further, according to Home Office statistics during the years of 2003 to 2006, 64% of total settlement grants for Thai nationals were for wives, and during the years of 2001 to 2006 the majority of Thai nationals naturalised as UK citizens were marriage migrants.