

# Empowering Individuals & Creating Community

– THAI PERSPECTIVES ON  
LIFE IN BRITAIN



A RUNNYMEDE COMMUNITY STUDY  
BY JESSICA MAI SIMS



## About Runnymede Community Studies

In reflecting on the changing nature of ethnic diversity in Britain, it becomes increasingly clear that we have to move beyond binary notions of white and non-white to explain the ways in which racisms operate, identities are formed and people live out their lives. The societies in which we live are becoming more diverse and will continue to diversify as migration patterns change, and the impacts of globalisation are reflected in labour markets as well as in transnational movement of capital.

This series of community studies aims to promote understanding of the diversity within and between different ethnic groups. Our intention is to build up a collection of studies which focus on communities; their demography, links to civil society, and key political and social issues. We hope that over time this will provide a rich resource for understanding how diversity is lived and experienced away from the necessarily crude ethnic monitoring form, in a vital and dynamic multi-ethnic society.

To find out more about the Runnymede Community Studies series, please visit: [www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org)

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# Empowering Individuals and Creating Community

## Thai Perspectives on Life in Britain

JESSICA MAI SIMS

### Thais at a Glance

#### Demography

- As of the 2001 Census there were 16,256 people 'Born in Thailand' in the UK, of which 72 per cent were women.
- The Census also estimated that there were 4,824 people 'Born in Thailand' living in London, of which 68 per cent were women.
- According to the Home Office, between the years of 2001 and 2006, the majority of Thai nationals naturalised as UK citizens were marriage migrants – only one-third of citizenship grants occurred through residence.
- According to the Home Office, between the years of 2003 and 2006, 64 per cent of total settlement grants for Thai nationals were given to wives, 3 per cent granted to husbands, and 14 per cent to children.
- If the majority of Thais are in fact marriage migrants, then they are more likely to be scattered to wherever their partners are already settled, rather than follow a trend of migration and settlement like some other migrant groups.
- The majority of Thais in Thailand are Buddhist. Reflecting this, there are many Thai Buddhist temples in the UK.

#### Health & Housing

- In our UK sample, the research participants felt that many Thai women may not be able to access health information because of language barriers.
- Research participants' responses echoed finding from Thais in Australia; women felt they did not have the resources to feel independent because of language barriers, and their reliance on informal networks for information limited their options.
- Moving to a new country with lack of existing social networks resulted in feelings of isolation and depression in many of the research participants.
- Many of the research participants identified domestic violence as a concern for Thai women. While the British Crime survey reports that inter-personal violence does not vary when taking into account ethnicity, immigration status can influence a woman's options and access to resources.
- In London, there are fewer people in the 'Born in Thailand' group in Council rented accommodation (9.5 per cent) than the London average (16.7 per cent).

#### Education

- The Home Office reports that for the years between 2003 and 2006, half of all passengers – who are assumed to be Thai nationals – given leave to enter the UK were overseas students.
- British Council data reveals that the most popular areas of study for Thai overseas students are English language, Master's degree courses, and PhD courses.
- The 2001 Census reported among the 'Born in Thailand' group within greater London, 39 per cent had higher level qualifications, 8 per cent higher than the London average.
- Along with private tutors, research participants named Wat Buddhapapida, the Bournemouth Thai School, the Brasshouse Language Centre, and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) as where their children had taken Thai language classes.
- Judging from the responses of the research participants, the proportion of Thai migrants enrolled in some type of education or training is high since many were, or had been previously, enrolled in English classes after entering the UK.

#### Employment

- According to the Census, people born in Thailand and living in London were most likely to be working in industries such as hotels and restaurants (40.8 per cent), wholesale and retail trade (13 per cent) and real estate and renting (11.8 per cent).
- The concentration in hotels and restaurants was significantly higher than the London average (4.6 per cent).
- Thailand-UK.com estimates that there are at least 1,587 Thai restaurants in the UK.
- Similar to finding from Australia, the research participants' barriers to employment included: lack of qualifications, limited English, and differences of job experience and expectation.
- Discrimination was cited as a strong barrier to employment opportunities.
- While not constituting a majority in any one borough, one report found Thais working as sex workers in 20 of the 33 London boroughs mapped.
- The Home Office has speculated that Thailand is one of the most likely countries of origin for women trafficked into the UK for sex work.

## Relevant Organisations and Websites

### **Bournemouth Thai Language and Culture School**

King's Park Primary School  
Annex Building  
Ashley Road  
Bournemouth BH1 4HB  
Web: [www.thai-school.org.uk](http://www.thai-school.org.uk)

### **The Anglo-Thai Society**

TJ Knox Esq  
'Southwood'  
62a Dore Road  
Sheffield S17 3NE  
Web: [www.anglothaisociety.org](http://www.anglothaisociety.org)

### **Am Thai**

2nd Floor  
42 Rupert Street  
London W1D 6DP  
Tel: 020 7371 9295  
Web: [www.amthai.co.uk](http://www.amthai.co.uk)

### **Royal Thai Embassy London**

29 - 30 Queen's Gate  
London SW7 5JB  
Tel: 020 7589 2944 Ext. 5502-5507  
Web: [www.thaiembassyuk.org.uk](http://www.thaiembassyuk.org.uk)

### **Thai 3 Counties**

Tel: 012 3429 0489  
Web: [www.thai3counties.com](http://www.thai3counties.com)

### **Samaggi Samagom**

28 Princess Gate  
London SW7 1QF  
Web: [www.samaggi.org](http://www.samaggi.org)

### **The Thai Cultural Association Wales**

Web: [www.thaiwales.co.uk](http://www.thaiwales.co.uk)

### **www.Thai-UK.org**

The on-line magazine promoting positive links between Thailand and the UK

### **www.Thailand-UK.com**

A wealth of information for Thai nationals, their friends and family staying in the UK

### **Thai Culture Forum UK**

54 Portland Street  
Manchester M1 4QU  
Web: [www.thaiforum.co.uk](http://www.thaiforum.co.uk)

### **Thai Smile Media Ltd.**

283-285 King Street  
London W6 9NH  
Tel: 020 8846 9960  
Web: [www.thaismile.com](http://www.thaismile.com)

### **Orchid of Siam**

8 Palmer Avenue  
Willerby  
Yorkshire HU10 6LJ  
Tel: 014 8265 6590  
Web: [www.orchidofsiam.com](http://www.orchidofsiam.com)

### **www.Thai4UK.com**

An online shop dedicated to Thai food, cookbooks and tableware  
Tel: 011 6251 3328

### **Women's Aid**

Provides 24 hour National Domestic Violence Helpline with Thai language support available  
Tel: 0800 200 0247  
Web: [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

### **www.Thailand-Sussex.com**

Thai community in Sussex

### **Wat Buddhapadipa**

14 Calonne Road  
Wimbledon Parkside  
London SW19 5HJ  
Tel: 020 8946 1357  
Web: [www.buddhapadipa.org](http://www.buddhapadipa.org)

### **Forest Hermitage**

Lower Fulbrook  
Warwickshire CV35 8AS  
Tel: 019 2662 4564  
Web: [users.zetnet.co.uk/phrakhem](http://users.zetnet.co.uk/phrakhem)

### **Amaravati Buddhist Monastery**

St. Margarets Lane  
Great Gaddesden  
Hemel Hempstead  
Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ  
Web: [www.amaravati.org](http://www.amaravati.org)

### **Dhammapadipa Temple**

199 Slateford Road  
Slateford  
Edinburgh EH14 1LA  
Tel: 013 1443 1010  
Web: [dhammapadipa.spaces.live.com](http://dhammapadipa.spaces.live.com)

### **Wat Charoen Bhavana**

Gardner House  
Cheltenham Street  
Salford M6 6WY  
Tel: 016 1736 1633  
Web: [nw-meditation.tripod.com](http://nw-meditation.tripod.com)

### **Buddhavihara Temple**

Eastfield House  
Alrewas Road  
Kings Bromley  
Burton On Trent DE13 7HR  
Web: [www.watthaiuk.com](http://www.watthaiuk.com)

# Introduction

The UK has a history of strong diplomatic relations with Thailand, which has manifested through military alliance, tourism, trade, investment, education and more recently sport. According to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the UK is Thailand's largest European export market and largest European investor.<sup>1</sup> Also the numbers of tourists visiting Thailand from the UK are unmatched by those from other western countries, and it has been claimed that the British Embassy in Thailand is one of the busiest in the world.<sup>2</sup> Considering these existing connections, it is unsurprising that there is also movement from Thailand to the UK – in Manchester a 'Thai Town' has been planned and the deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has recently purchased Manchester City Football Club.<sup>3</sup>

Still, despite these links, relatively little is known about the individuals who come to the UK from Thailand aside from sensational headlines and the spattering of local government research. This report, as part of Runnymede's Community Studies series, focuses on Thais in the UK precisely because of the lack of constructive information. Seeking to go beyond the stereotypes to discover the everyday realities of Thais in Britain, this report reflects on individuals' stories of migration and settlement, and aims to challenge the trope of the 'Thai bride' by presenting individuals' voices, opinions and perspectives. Though this report is not definitive, it does provide an opportunity to understand the demography and history of Thais in the UK, and the areas in which policy can address relevant concerns.

The major points of discussion arising from the survey, interview and focus group data focus on the areas of education, employment, health, discrimination and community development. Because Thais represent a migrant group, their health and well-being is influenced by living in a new country where rights and entitlements, language and culture are often different from

those of their home country. For those who are migrating, employment becomes a primary condition for settlement. Many Thai migrants reported the need for employment-related training to supplement their existing qualifications and English-language classes to help them improve their employment opportunities. Since many Thais are involved in the restaurant and hotels industry, their employment concerns are related to business training and support and low-paid work subject to unsociable hours. As a result, their ability to care for their families and make friends can be circumscribed by their lack of English language skills and restrictive work schedules. Beyond socialising and employment opportunities, the Thai women involved in the research recognised the need for fluency in English to help them make informed choices and lead independent lives. For example, many feared that language barriers combined with ignorance of rights would lead to otherwise avoidable health risks and even render Thai women more vulnerable to domestic violence. Compounding these policy areas is the overwhelming feeling from the research participants that Thai people are stereotyped and discriminated against in British society, influencing both their public and private lives. The impact of these policy concerns, along with the desire to challenge negative perceptions of Thais has prompted a grassroots movement towards building a Thai community. Providing social and service related support, these organisations and individuals also promote positive images in order to counter discrimination and build community confidence.

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Commonwealth Office (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Renton (2005) and Head (2006)

<sup>3</sup> Property Week (2005)

## Methodology

A central point to consider when conceptualising the ‘Thai community’ is the interplay between gender, location, migration and family structure. As discussed later, the Thai community’s demography is unique compared to other ethnic minority groups; in order to reflect this dynamic a variety of people participated in the research. The reference to people as ‘Thais’ includes all people living in the UK who are in some way from Thailand, or are a descendant of someone from Thailand – regardless of their citizenship status. This definition includes people who also identify as Mixed Thai and White British and people who are ethnically Chinese from Thailand. Where appropriate Thai migrants are differentiated to refer to specific migratory motivations; there is a designation between marriage migrants, overseas workers and overseas students. Categories cannot always be easily distinguished, as sometimes overseas students or workers become marriage migrants, and marriage migrants participate in education before becoming permanent residents. However research participants were designated according to their self-identified primary migratory purpose. Partners of Thais who may or may not be Thai themselves were also involved in the research process since data suggests that many, if not the majority of, Thai women are in ethnically mixed relationships.<sup>4</sup>

In order to build a picture of the Thai community this research employed a variety of methods, including primary and secondary research. There is little literature on Thai people living in the UK; occasional local authority reports on services or research focusing on trafficking for prostitution sometimes mentions the inclusion of a Thai sample. However, the information deriving from such samples is typically very limited, and do not provide a full understanding of a Thai group living in the UK as a whole. A few in-depth studies from Germany and Australia have been referenced in this report because of the similarity of their Thai populations – predominately female and migrant – and have also explored policy areas relevant to this study: access and attitudes towards health care, cultural identification, family structure, marriage migration, and settlement. This research is based on three different forms of primary qualitative research, namely in-depth qualitative interviews, two separate focus groups and a detailed household survey.

To develop greater understanding of the experience of Thai people and families in the UK, a range of people were involved in the research through interviews across the UK and through two focus groups in Milton Keynes and Eastbourne. The interview and focus group participants reflected a range of ages, genders, citizenship and visa status, ethnic backgrounds and locations. Yet, the commonality that most shared was providing or participating in formal and informal services for Thais in the UK (and British Isles).<sup>5</sup> In an effort to include Thais living outside of South East England, Thai and English language surveys were distributed through contacts and advertised on British Thai websites. Sixty-three surveys were completed in total, 45 in English and 18 in Thai. Both Thai and English language surveys were household surveys and so collected information from Thai families including a primary respondent, their partner, and their children. The reasons behind this flexibility were to determine the structure of Thai partnerships and families and also to allow respondents to complete a survey with their Thai partners in case of a language barrier.<sup>6</sup>

The Thai respondents of the surveys were 57 women and five men who migrated from Thailand, and one British-born Mixed Thai and White British woman. Of the Thai men, four of the five were overseas students with an average age of 23. Among the Thai women, the majority first entered the UK as marriage migrants, and their average age was 34. Among those who have migrated to the UK, the most frequently cited place of origin was the central provinces of Thailand, in particular the capital city of Thailand, Bangkok, and then the Northeast provinces, notably the province of Nakhon Ratchasima. The most common cities of current residence were London, Cambridge, and Bournemouth, which reflects the networks contacted.

Because the survey sought to explore Thai people’s families, there were also questions about respondents’ children. Thirty-four of the 63 survey respondents reported that they had children of Thai origin – 51 children in total between the ages of one and 33. Of the respondents that stated their children were living in the UK, 31 children were mixed Thai and White British and 11 were Thai only. Six respondents stated they had children in Thailand (representing 11 children in total; 10 Thai and one Mixed Thai and White British) and reported these children were not in the UK due to such reasons as waiting for visas, cost of immigration, children being adults, and ex-partners taking care of children.

Some of the interview and focus group participants also had children; from this sample there were 15 children in total: eight Mixed Thai and White British and three Thai in the UK, and four Thai who were still in Thailand. By including information about the survey respondents’ children, the research developed a better sense of family structures, especially highlighting their mixed composition; many Thai children also had siblings who were mixed Thai and White British.<sup>7</sup> Overall, this report reflects the responses of Thais and their families and those working with Thai people, living in England, Scotland, Wales and Jersey.

<sup>4</sup> In the survey, the respondent was given the option to include information for their partner. For the question that enquired about ethnicity, the respondents were presented with an unprompted fill-in answer. Because of this, responses ranged from, Thai, Mixed Thai and English, Asian, Oriental, Thai-Chinese, English, Irish, White British, Caucasian, European, Anglo-Italian. The ethnicity options of the respondents were analyzed alongside their stated citizenship statuses (UK, UK through naturalisation, Will be UK through naturalisation, Thai, and Other). While perhaps misleading, throughout the discussion these mixed relationships are generalised as Thai and British to denote either nationally or ethnically mixed relationships, and as Thai and western to denote where culture and ‘race’ influence the perception to these relationships.

<sup>5</sup> To retain the anonymity of those participating in the interviews and focus groups, pseudonyms were assigned. However, the names of the research participants who provide actual services to Thai people in the UK have been maintained. For more details on those involved in the interviews and focus groups, see Appendix I.

<sup>6</sup> The survey included 63 primary respondents, 43 partners and 51 children. For more details on the survey participants, see Appendix II.

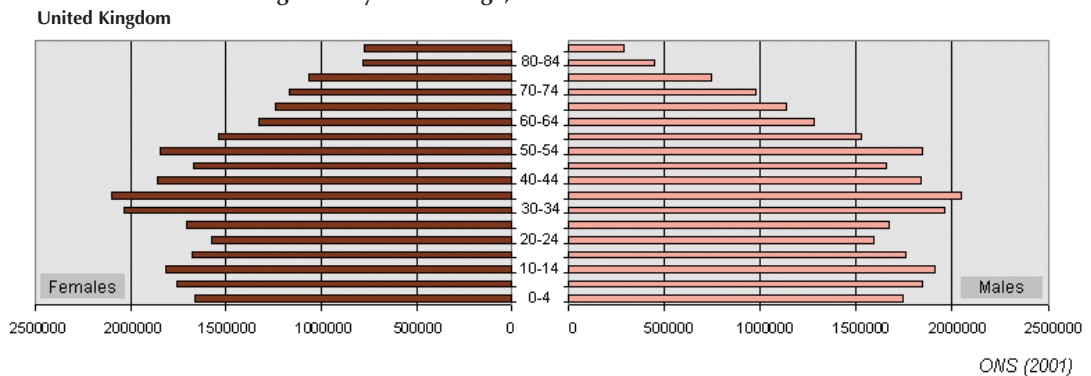
<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion on mixed Thai British families and identities see: Sims (2007)

# Thais in the United Kingdom

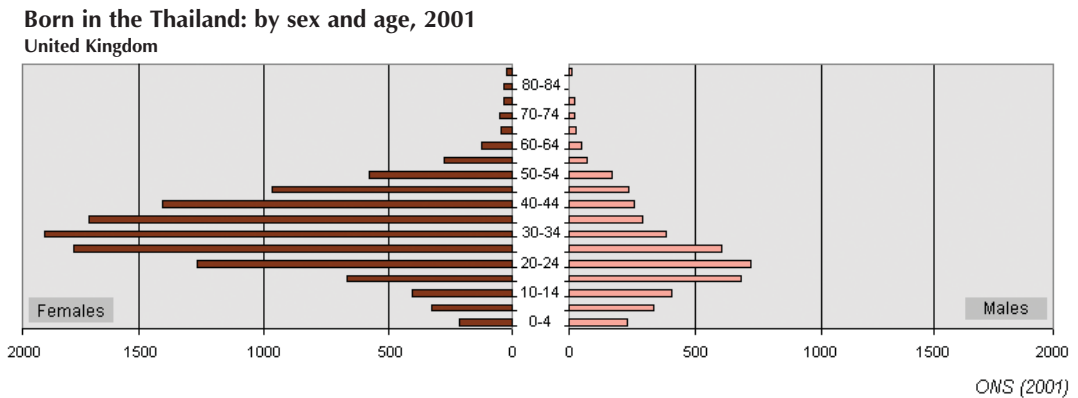
In 1965 Wat Buddhapadipa was the first Thai Buddhist temple to be built in London and in Europe. It also later became the first formal temple with the inclusion of an ordination hall

(*ubosot*) in 1982. The presence of Wat Buddhapadipa is a significant milestone for Thais in Britain, not only because it is a centre for spirituality but also a landmark of the community; 94 per cent of Thais in Thailand are Buddhist.<sup>8</sup> Located close by are other markers of Thai migration: the Royal Thai Embassy, the Thai-owned Royal Lancaster Hotel, Thai

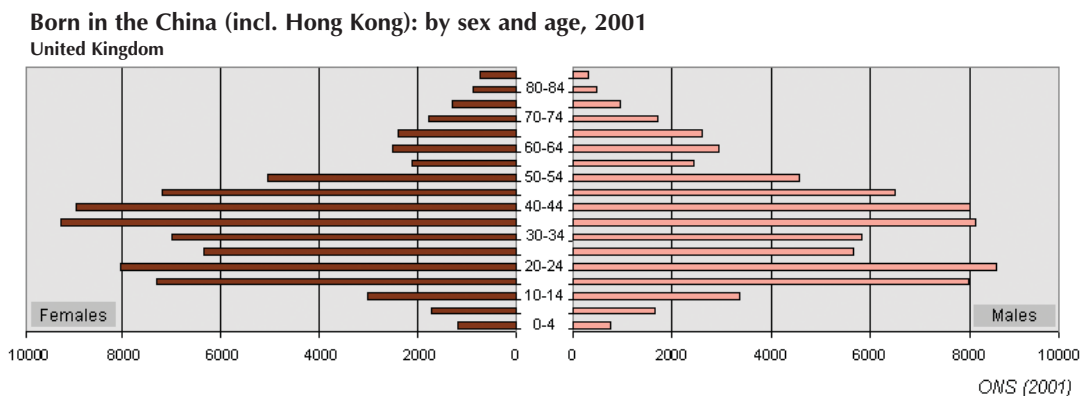
**Figure 1.1** Born in the United Kingdom: by sex and age, 2001



**Figure 1.2** Born in the Thailand: by sex and age, 2001



**Figure 1.3** Born in the China (incl. Hong Kong): by sex and age, 2001



The charts above illustrate the sex and age data for the 'Born in the United Kingdom', 'Born in Thailand' and 'Born in China' (including Hong Kong) groups living in the United Kingdom. The sex and age breakdown of the 'Born in UK' group is taken to be the 'control' group, as it includes all people born in the UK regardless of ethnic group. 'The born in Thailand' and 'Born in China' groups are both migrant groups from East Asia, having age concentrations between 20 and 54. However, while the male-female ratio is broadly equal for those in 'Born in China', this is clearly not the case for those included in the 'Born in Thailand' group. The comparison between these groups illustrates the extent of the gender disparity in the 'Born in Thailand' group.

[Charts generated from ONS (2001) 'Table ES03: Usual resident population by sex; country of birth and age group'. London: Office for National Statistics]

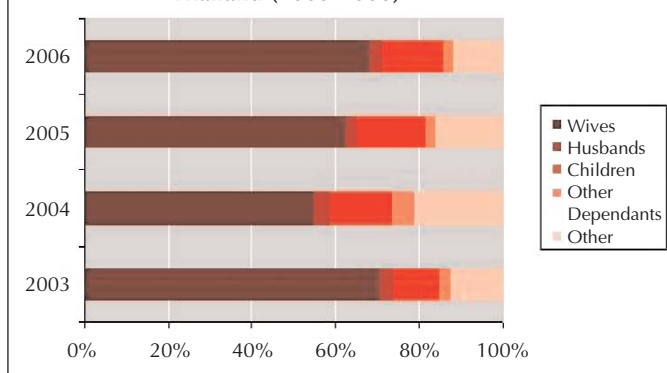
Airways UK headquarters, the bi-annual Thai Festival in Battersea Park, and Thai supermarkets and restaurants. Wimbledon and west London in general are often cited as the centre of the Thai community.

## Population

Despite the lack of ethnic monitoring of Thais in national surveys, it is possible to estimate the community's current demography. From Census data there were a reported 16,256 people born in Thailand living in the UK, of which 72 per cent were women. London's 'Born in Thailand' population represented about a third of the total at 4,824 people, with 68 per cent being women.<sup>9</sup> The gender imbalance of this population is marked when compared to other groups. Figures 1.1–1.3 compares the sex and age spread of the 'Born in the UK', 'Born in Thailand' and 'Born in China' (including Hong Kong) populations living in the UK. The 'Born in the UK' and 'Born in China' groups have similar sex ratios (with slightly more women than men) providing a stark contrast to the 'Born in Thailand' group.

When we compare Home Office immigration data for Thai nationals to the Census data, a pattern begins to emerge; namely, Thai women are entering the UK as marriage migrants. During the years between 2001 and 2006, the majority of Thai nationals naturalised as UK citizens were marriage migrants, whereas only one-third of citizenship grants occurred through residence.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, from 2003 to 2006 roughly 64 per cent of total grants of settlement for Thai nationals were given to wives, as compared to 3 per cent granted to husbands, and 14 per cent to children.<sup>11</sup> The full grants of settlement for those years are shown in Figure 2 below. The high

**Figure 2** Grants of Settlement by Nationality, Thailand (2003-2006)



percentage of grants of settlement to children suggests that women coming as marriage migrants may also bring their children from previous relationships to the UK. This process of family migration was consistent with the experience of some of the research participants.

Considering 72 per cent of the 'Born in Thailand' population are women, and that 64 per cent of total settlement grants are given to 'wives', it is reasonable to assume that in the UK there are twice as many Thai women as men, and that many of those women are likely to be in ethnically mixed relationships.<sup>12</sup> These figures, however, should not be taken to imply that Thai women generally are turning to marriage to gain access to the UK. Between 2003 and 2006, half of all passengers from Thailand<sup>13</sup> given leave to enter the UK were students, while 19 per cent were wives/fiancées. In other words, we can speculate that women are a majority of the settled Thai population, but because annually half of incoming Thais are overseas students we cannot conclude that most Thai women are entering the UK on the basis of marriage.

## Education

There has been a long history of Thais coming to study in the UK; notably, King Rama VI of Thailand attended the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst and Oxford University at the turn of the 20th century, and subsequently created the Thai students association, Samaggi Samagom in 1901.<sup>14</sup> Since then, as the economy in Thailand has grown, so have the proportion of Thai overseas students. Annually about 5,000 Thai overseas students are given leave to enter the UK.<sup>15</sup> The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office have attributed this demand for studying

8 Foreign Commonwealth Office (2007)

9 Finella (2005)

10 Dudley & Hesketh (2002); Dudley & Woollacott (2003); Dudley & Woollacott (2004); Mensah (2006); Mensah (2007); Woollacott (2005)

11 Home Office (2004); Home Office (2005); Home Office (2006)

12 Interestingly, In Renton (2005) it has been estimated that during 2003, 68 per cent of adult British holiday visitors to Thailand were male and that there are more British citizens visiting Thailand than any other non-Asian country. This article mainly explored the possibility that British men go to Thailand for sex tourism, yet there is also the possibility they are bringing home wives.

13 This is a broad category that records passengers travelling for various reasons, and who may or may not be Thai or British. Ordinary and business visitors, passengers in transit, passengers returning after a temporary absence, have been omitted from the analysis in an attempt to isolate newly arrived Thais to the UK.

14 Samaggi Samagom (2007)

15 Home Office (2003); Home Office (2005); Home Office (2006)

the English language in the UK as “driven by more internationally orientated parental aspirations”.<sup>16</sup> As Jon from Thai-UK.org explained, independent schools and British universities have been a popular choice for the sons of wealthy Thais, and increasingly so for daughters. For the 2005-2006 school year approximately 62 per cent of student visas were issued to women.<sup>17</sup>

Information on education participation is largely centred on those coming as temporary overseas students, rather than permanently settled migrants or second generation Thais. From British Council data, we know that the most popular areas of study for overseas students are English language (47.5 per cent), Master’s degree courses (29.5 per cent), and PhD courses (7 per cent).<sup>18</sup> From Census data, 34.6 per cent of people ‘Born in Thailand’ living in London had obtained no or unknown qualifications, while 26.4 per cent had lower level qualifications and 39 per cent had higher level qualifications. Compared to the London averages, there were more people from the ‘Born in Thailand’ group with no qualifications (5.4 per cent) and higher qualifications (8 per cent).<sup>19</sup> From the research conducted for this report, 28 out of 63 of the Thais surveyed had university qualifications (11 had first entered the UK for the purpose of study), 17 had secondary school or college level qualifications, and 18 had no or unknown qualifications.

While there is some education information available on people born in Thailand, there is none for British-born Thais. In both the interviews and surveys, parents indicated when their children had participated in early years and higher education, but no conclusive patterns emerged. However, it seems that higher education is highly regarded among the sample. The six research participants who had children over the age of 18 all reported that their children attended university (two women’s children had done so in Thailand) and the three British-born Mixed Thai and White British people had also all gone to university. A further three who had

children in secondary school expressed a clear preference for their children to go to university. Nid and Tom went as far as to say that their daughter had no choice but to attend university when she was older.

### *Learning Thai*

During the interviews, some parents expressed a desire for their children to be bilingual, and when the option was available they sent their children to supplementary language school on the weekends. For most parents however, this is not possible as very few places teach Thai, aside from select locations like Wat Buddhapapida, the Bournemouth Thai Language and Culture School and specialist language centres, such as the Brasshouse Language Centre in Birmingham and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). A few parents mentioned that they did not want to pressure their children to think they had to be Thai, and so avoided structured language classes. Jane and her younger sister, both British-born Mixed Thai and White British, were not taught Thai growing up because their mother was afraid of confusing them. However as an adult, Jane’s sister chose to take a Thai language course at SOAS. One woman, a private Thai language tutor, said the majority of her students are learning for business, but she also had a few young British-born Thais who had decided to learn without the influence of their parents.

Piyanan, who taught language classes to young people at Wat Buddhapapida, founded her own language school in Bournemouth when she moved there with her husband six years ago. Even though they originally moved in order to open a Thai restaurant, local Thais in the area recognised her as a teacher and came to her to teach their children Thai. With the support of Bournemouth Council, the Thai school started with eight children and now has increased to 22, as well as additional classes for parents. The school offers one class for mothers to promote bilingualism in the home for children under five and two levels for young people aged five to 12. The school is recognised by the Thai government as the Non-Formal Education Centre at Bournemouth in UK, with young people having the option of passing an exam to receive a Thai government recognised certificate.

<sup>16</sup> Foreign Commonwealth Office (2007)

<sup>17</sup> British Council (2007)

<sup>18</sup> British Council (2007)

<sup>19</sup> Finella (2005: 258)

While the school was primarily opened to teach children, Piyanan decided to offer a class for adults in the form of the bilingual mother's class. She said that some of the mothers came to her and asked for an introductory English class because they were not confident enough to begin a basic ESOL class at the local college. The women wanted someone to be able to explain the basic points of English grammar in Thai, which is not available in ESOL classes. For example, when learning English, Thais have to work with an alphabet very different from their own and may require more assistance in the beginning than other students who are already familiar with Roman script. Lack of confidence to begin first learning English in formal classes may be a wide concern for Thai migrants irrespective of location; a similar experience was reported by Thai and Chinese research participants in a study focusing on BME groups in Moray and the Highlands and Islands in Scotland.<sup>20</sup> The Thai and English bilingual class for parents and small children is becoming increasingly popular and now also attracts people who do not have children.

### *Learning English*

Judging from the responses of the research participants, the proportion of Thai migrants enrolled in some type of education or training is high since many were, or had been previously, enrolled in English classes after entering the UK. English classes were in high demand because people wanted to improve their fluency, their employment opportunities and to ensure they pass the English language requirement for permanent settlement in the UK. The majority of survey participants had taken accredited English classes in universities, colleges, language or community centres. Overall, students had very positive comments about their classes, but described a situation where teachers were stretched to accommodate many pupils with different abilities. As expected, finding classes that fit with work and childcare schedules was a major complaint from the surveys, which was also true for some of the

interviewees. For example, Ratana had been taking classes at a local college, but had to quit because the class schedule was not compatible with her new work schedule. Because of the limited choice of opportunities to enrol in English classes, people are often forced to choose between a combination of studying, working or raising families.

With the government's new plans to limit funding of ESOL classes, some students, like many marriage migrants, will need to prove they are eligible for unemployment or social assistance payments to be able to qualify for subsidised courses. Without subsidy, some may find classes too expensive, with a 15 hour a week ESOL course costing up to £900 a year.<sup>21</sup> Adding to the high cost are the long waiting lists in some areas, which could prevent many from enrolling. As a recent article in the *Economist* underscored, the restrictions to spouses attending subsidised classes may also result in isolation in the critical first year of adjusting to a new country, culture and language:

Many [wives] are not registered as unemployed or in receipt of benefits so will soon have to ask their in-laws to pay. Without English they cannot attend parents' evenings at school, visit the doctor unaccompanied or integrate socially in a hundred ways.<sup>22</sup>

Integration in a new culture and society becomes difficult without the ability to communicate in the host language, also leaving the migrant potentially vulnerable through limiting knowledge of opportunities and rights. Free English classes for migrants in the sex industry have been reportedly set up precisely to limit their vulnerability – without the ability to negotiate prices and conditions, such as requesting use of a condom, they cannot ensure their own safety.<sup>23</sup> There is clearly a need for more low cost and flexibly scheduled English classes to ensure migrants are equipped with the resources to understand life in the UK, especially since language has become a precondition for citizenship for third country nationals. Additionally, most Thais desire to learn English in order to engage in social interaction beyond other Thai speakers.

<sup>20</sup> Lima et al. (2005: 89)

<sup>21</sup> Salusbury (2007)

<sup>22</sup> The Economist (2007)

<sup>23</sup> It has been estimated that 80 per cent of women involved in off-street work are migrants, with Thais – along with Brazilians and Eastern Europeans – one of the groups that predominate. For more information see, Taylor (2005)

Aside from English being vital for communicating with the majority of British society, English classes also provided opportunities for social interaction for many adjusting to their new life. When Nid moved to London three years ago with her husband, she felt discriminated against because she is not a native English speaker – an experience similar to a small sample of Filipino and Thais living in the Bath area.<sup>24</sup> Yet Nid described her experiences in class and with her peers fondly:

There are lots of students like me, but they're Black African, Black Caribbean, and Eastern European. We get along alright; we have the same problem with White English people! They look at us like we're silly, or that we can't speak English! ...My college has 16 and 17 year old English people, but apart from that it's people like me: immigrants. I feel normal when I'm there.

Nid described her English class almost as if it was a reception centre for new migrants; despite their varying backgrounds, they were all becoming accustomed to the new language and environment, and in the process were able to learn about each other. Many survey respondents likewise mentioned that one reason they enjoyed their English classes was because of the diversity in age and ethnic backgrounds of their peers. During a focus group, Jasmine described how her English class provided social activity and support for the students in the class (migrants), but like Nid, felt learning English was not helping them to integrate with native English speakers. Jasmine explained, "Spanish, Iraqi, Indian, etc; we're all different and when we talk its English but with different accents... We understand each other but it's a shame that English people don't understand us!" The positive aspect of their

courses was the social interaction gained, but only among other migrants. Social integration with native English speakers proved more difficult to achieve because, as the women explained, many native English speakers were simply not patient enough.

While fluency in English may be essential for long-term integration in the UK, English classes can be an excellent medium for connecting migrants from different communities during the first years of residence. Therefore, learning English had complex benefits for marriage migrants in the study, to be able to access information and make friends and network with other migrants. These benefits are a strong justification for more widely accessible classes.

### Employment

The public perception of Thais in the labour market is limited and mainly based on stereotyped images – arising, for example, from the prevalence of Thai restaurants across the country, the popularity of traditional Thai massage and the media portrayal of Thais in and outside of Thailand involved in sex work.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to judge how many Thais actually work as massage therapists because of the informal nature of this profession's organisation, with many people working either peripatetically or from their home.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the rough estimates of Thais involved in 'off-street work',<sup>27</sup> there is a lack of conclusive data and so there is no way to know the number of Thais involved in sex work. One POPPY Project<sup>28</sup> report mapping sex workers in London found Thais working in 20 of the 33 boroughs, although not constituting a majority in any one borough.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the Home Office has speculated that Thailand is one of the most likely countries of origin for women trafficked into the UK for sex work.<sup>30</sup> More research is needed to evaluate the extent of Thai involvement in sex work or Thais trafficked for the purpose of sex work.

According to London employment figures from Census data, people born in Thailand are most likely to be working in industries such as hotels and catering (40.8 per cent), wholesale and retail trade (13 per cent) and real estate and renting (11.8 per cent). Of those living in London and economically inactive, 46.5 per

<sup>24</sup> Prentice et al. (2006)

<sup>25</sup> For more information see: Mix & Piper (2003); Caouette & Saito (1999)

<sup>26</sup> The massage therapist associations contacted for this study reported that they do not ethnically monitor their memberships or keep track of members whose qualifications are from Thailand.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor (2005)

<sup>28</sup> The POPPY Project works to support women who have been trafficked into prostitution, through providing accommodation, outreach work and research and development. For more information see: [http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY\\_Project/POPPY\\_Project.php](http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/POPPY_Project/POPPY_Project.php)

<sup>29</sup> Dickson (2004)

<sup>30</sup> Kelly & Regan (2000: 23)

cent were students, and 31.9 per cent were looking after the home or family. From the survey data, aside from students (12) the most cited employment categories were housewives (12), not stated or unemployed (eight), factory work (five), catering (four), administrative (four) and care assistance (four). These labour market categories place most of the Thai sample in low-paid (and sometimes unpaid) occupations.

### *Employment Focus: Catering*

Returning to Census figures, of the people working in hotels and catering, the data is striking in terms of the variance among different ethnic groups. While only 4.6 per cent of Londoners work in these industries, the figure for those born in China is 26.5 per cent,<sup>31</sup> despite the perception of Chinese people as a prime example of ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’<sup>32</sup> Since many Thais also work in the hotel and catering industry, there may be specific implications for employment and training in these areas. For example, the councils of Horsham, Crawley and Worthing partnered to provide a course specifically for Thai restaurant staff. Translating information into Thai, 17 people participated and passed the course and gained a certificate in food hygiene which was a benefit to both the staff, in that they gained skills, and the employers, who then had trained staff.<sup>33</sup> Besides hygiene training, support for those wishing to set up a restaurant can be provided through such public services as Business Link, a form of assistance taken up by at least one interviewee.

Tim and Damrong set up their own restaurant after Damrong had been working as a chef for a number of years. Through Business Link they were able to receive training and resources to help with the start-up, but they felt the support was limited to signposting. Tim felt that for those wishing to start up businesses who are non-native English speakers, more support would be needed. He speculated about the challenges his wife would have faced without him:

You never know if it is free or if it is important legislation, or if it’s just for her

knowledge... It does worry me that if I had died five or six years ago she would have had to manage by herself—and it’s not because she’s stupid, it’s because the services are just difficult. When I’m in Thailand how would I go about setting up a business or doing a tax form? I wouldn’t have a chance!

The training provided by Horsham District Council is notable because it is targeted support. If the country’s Thai population is like London’s, then a significant number work in restaurants, providing a potential point for local authorities or Business Link to conduct targeted outreach work, training and support.

Such a large proportion of Thais working in restaurants has social implications; many research participants remarked on how much time and energy go into maintaining restaurants. This becomes a challenge for parents especially since work is likely to be for irregular and long hours, making it difficult to spend time with their children. Piyanan and her husband decided to sell their restaurant in Bournemouth because they felt they would not have enough time to raise their daughter the way they wanted to. Tom worked full time to support his family so Nid would have the time to focus on her education to get qualifications relevant to the area she wanted to work in. They admitted that it was more difficult to have only one earner, but they felt it was the best solution in balancing work, school and childcare:

My wife could get shift work, work at nights, but that’s not good for us, it’s not a quality standard of life. We wouldn’t get time to see each other or our daughter... People see us as individuals, but really we are a family unit.

Essentially, families did not find restaurant work compatible with raising a family. Charles, a second generation Mixed Thai and White British man, described how many of his peers in his Thai language class had parents working in restaurants. He reflected how those parents worked harder to support their families and had less time to spend with their children because of it, which he believed negatively impacted their

<sup>31</sup> Finella (2005: 257)

<sup>32</sup> For more on the discourse of the success of the Chinese in Britain see: Parker (2000)

<sup>33</sup> Horsham District Council (2007)

children's upbringing. So, in addition to public support for such services as Business Link for Thais to develop their business, attention might also be usefully given to how families working in this industry could benefit from social support.

### *Barriers to Employment*

Regarding general labour market participation, Jirowong and Manderson's study of Thai migrants in Australia found recurring barriers to employment; specifically, a lack of qualifications, limited English, and differences of job experience and expectation between the two countries.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, while being able to communicate in English increased employment prospects, discrimination was still a factor in limiting opportunities. These findings were broadly consistent with the research participants' labour market experience in the UK. Some of the women who had low or no qualifications had very limited options for finding employment. Nid, who had no previous qualifications, was surprised to learn that jobs she considered simple, such as work at a grocery store, still required some basic educational qualifications. Furthermore, the existence of a language barrier may change a person's ability to perform an occupation that they are already otherwise qualified for.

Despite working as a radiographer in nuclear medicine in Thailand, Kathy did not seek work in her field until after living in the UK for eight years because she felt her English was not good enough. During that period she would return alone to Thailand to work on research projects for six to eight months and when back in the UK, would find work as a server or cleaner in hotels and restaurants. Even when she felt ready to work in medicine again, she felt intimidated initially because the only jobs the first hospital she approached offered her were as a care assistant on a low grade and working nights. Feeling overqualified for those jobs, she was lucky to find another hospital which employed her straight away as a radiographer. Jasmine agreed with Kathy that they faced discrimination in finding employment and in career advancement. Jasmine lamented to her friends:

I'm not perfect in English, and they think what are you talking about? Sometimes I feel let down and it's difficult to get a job. And they think of Thai people... they don't care about your certificate or what your experience is, they just put you down. That really hurts sometimes and I try to apply for jobs and keeping interviewing, interviewing... If I was in Thailand I would [snaps her fingers] get a job.

The women felt that discrimination in employment occurred on three levels, 1) because their qualifications were from a non-western country, 2) because they are non-native English speaking immigrants and 3) because they are Thai women. Both Kathy and Sumalee described incidents of racism and harassment from clients in the hospitals they work in. Along with Jasmine, they also all felt that they had to work much harder to prove to their colleagues they were qualified for their jobs and that they were deserving of promotions.

### *Areas for Engagement*

In terms of policy, a great deal can be learned from analysing the available information on Thais' experience in employment, particularly in considering the concentration of workers in low paid employment such in as the catering industry. Targeted support, like the training course sponsored by Horsham, Crawley and Worthing, would ensure that, regardless of language barriers, restaurant staff would receive the standard health and hygiene training. Additionally, for business supporting agencies and organisations, having bilingual link staff would ensure that non-native English speakers would better understand the process of starting up businesses.

Beyond business support, awareness of the prevalence of Thais in the catering industry provides vital knowledge in other areas, such as children and young people's services and education. Creating opportunities for Thai parents to engage in their children's education may be a matter of providing more flexible school activities because of parents' irregular working hours. The general barriers to employment that Thais face – the possible lack of

<sup>34</sup> Jirowong and Manderson (2001:177)

qualifications, limited English or limited professional English, differences of job experience and expectation, and discrimination in the workplace – are quite possibly barriers that other ethnic minorities or immigrant groups face, which may call for broader employment and training reforms.

### Health and Well-being

Since the demography of the research participants reflected the demography of the Thai community as a whole, this discussion on health has an admitted gender bias. This is not to say that there are no health issues potentially important to Thai men, only that the information is not readily available for discussion in this paper. Research into the health of female Thai migrants in Australia can shed light on the situation in the UK, because in both countries Thai migrants have to adapt to a new system and culture of health services.<sup>35</sup> By specifying the particular relationship of gender and migration status, we can better understand the general health of Thai women and how they access care and support.

In the interviews, healthcare was not mentioned as an issue of concern; many women felt they had access to better services in the UK because until recently there was no universal healthcare in Thailand. Research exploring the use of healthcare by Thai women in Australia found that access to and perceptions of healthcare were influenced by communication with healthcare providers and social services; women were less receptive to healthcare when there were language barriers and after they had experiences with unfriendly general practitioners.<sup>36</sup> This was also true for a small sample of Thais in the Bath area which found language barriers prevented correct diagnosis and that their experience with healthcare was unsatisfactory because it was not patient friendly.<sup>37</sup> In our sample, the research participants felt that language barriers would prevent many Thai women from accessing vital health information. When prompted with the question,

“Does your local council offer information or interpretation in Thai?” all but two said, ‘no’ or ‘I don’t know’. When prompted, “Do you think there is a need for more services or information available in Thai?” the majority of people said yes. Further explaining their responses, many said it was necessary to have interpreters in emergency situations and translation would enable Thais to have a better understanding of UK institutions and thus be able to participate in more activities.

A few survey respondents did make reference to translation not being necessary because they felt immigrants had an obligation to learn English. However, that translated information may discourage some people from learning a country’s language is not the most important consideration;<sup>38</sup> rather, the point is that it provides information to those who may not otherwise receive it. If many Thai women are in fact married to British men, then the argument for not wanting to integrate into British society weakens substantially – such migrants have relocated to the UK in order to join their British partners and so have already made one significant decision to ‘integrate’. Without translated information, women are forced to rely on friends or acquaintances for information, which can possibly be an obstacle to necessary and useful information. Voicing concern over the spread of misinformation, a Thai woman living in Preston supported the idea of more translated material, stating: “Yes. Most of Thai women in my area are not very good in reading and writing English. They, sometimes, spread wrong information among Thai community”. Second-hand information has an increased risk of being incorrect and thus has serious implications for individual well-being.

Similarly, due to marriage migrants’ dependent status, they may rely on their spouses for information. One non-Thai survey respondent said in his family’s case, translated information was not necessary, “I accompanied my wife on all official business, (opening bank accounts, registering with a doctor, etc.). When we bought a house I again handled everything, explaining as necessary to my wife”. Family structure will no doubt vary with different members being responsible for ‘official’ business in different situations; yet it is worrying if one partner must

35 Jiruwong & Manderson (2002: 205)

36 Jiruwong & Manderson (2002: 203)

37 Prentice et al. (2006: 96)

38 See comments by Ruth Kelly in: Simpson (2007)

live with a lack of privacy and cannot fully be involved in decision-making because information is not available in alternative formats. In Australia, a sample of Thai women felt that they did not have the resources to feel independent and that their reliance on informal networks for information limited their options.<sup>39</sup> Accessing information regardless of format is linked to social and civic participation and can potentially help migrants to avoid situations that negatively affect their well-being. Information access should not be likened to a zero-sum situation where migrants have less incentive to learn English and integrate when translation is provided. Access to information is a cornerstone to knowing rights and opportunities, which then leads to integration.

### *Mental and Emotional Health*

Although not discussed as a health issue *per se*, depression, loneliness, and isolation were raised as concerns for many of the research participants at least one time in their life in the UK. These feelings were related to moving to a foreign country where many of the women did not have existing social networks. A change in family structure (an absence of large extended families) and limited social networks (Thai speakers) can intensify feelings of isolation while adapting to new networks of social, emotional and practical support.<sup>40</sup>

During a focus group, Jasmine, Maree and Kathy stressed how appreciative they were to their in-laws who helped them to settle by taking them around the area, teaching them about seemingly banal aspects of daily British life, and helping them with more difficult situations. Kathy described to the group that even though she wanted to divorce her British husband, her mother-in-law continued to support her by ensuring Kathy received a fair separation agreement and helped her to apply for British citizenship. The relationship Kathy had developed with her then mother-in-law was a source of strength, “My ex mother-in-law took me to see the solicitor—she’s really fair. She told me that I had to get on with my life... She lives in Seaford but every week she will phone me or come see me”. These three women, Jasmine,

Maree and Kathy, also commented on how their extended families helped to organise their Thai cultural showcases during a recent multicultural summer fair. For many marriage migrants, their husbands’ families become not only their family, but their friends and general support networks which help them to adjust to their new life.

Having people around with similar interests or similar problems can also help lessen feelings of loneliness. Even with her in-laws living nearby and being very active in her family’s life, Nid felt lonely. Considering herself a bit of a “loner” in Thailand, she was not particularly concerned with meeting other Thais *per se*, but rather with having the kind of social dynamics she was used to in Thailand. Comparing Bangkok and London she commented, “London can be lonely because people are individuals; they don’t have much contact with each other”. She felt that she was “invisible” which could work to her advantage – she is not the only non-white person in her area – but she felt in London people were too busy to make new friends.

After working for the Citizens Advice Bureau for a number of years, Sopit realised that there was need within the Thai community for support on a range of topics. Sopit created Thai3Counties telephone advice line in order to provide services for Thai people, such as helping callers to rehearse for job interviews and write CVs. Along with practical advice regarding institutional systems, Sopit noted that the advice line also receives many calls about depression; Nid’s situation is commonplace, some women feel lonely and isolated and need someone to talk to. Other cases are more extreme, such as one case of a woman who tried to commit suicide after finding out she was HIV positive. Through working at CAB and running the advice line Sopit had an extensive list of casework:

I worked as an interpreter for many years; since 1996... I saw a lot of problems, lots of Thai women with no way out or any way to express themselves, no group to support. [One woman] killed her husband and she was in the hospital and they called me into the hospital to interpret with the psychologist. And I was thinking why is there this problem?

<sup>39</sup> Jiruwong & Manderson (2001: 182)

<sup>40</sup> Liamputtong & Naksook (2003: 657)

Sopit mentioned that some women want someone to talk to, and for those who are marriage migrants, they may have no one except for their husbands when they arrive. Also, as marriage migrants, Thai women are more likely to be scattered to wherever their husbands are already settled, rather than follow a trend of migration and settlement like some other migrant groups. Yet, even though there is a need for support groups, because women are widely dispersed these groups may be impractical. Circumventing this obstacle, the creator of Thailand-UK.com was prompted to set up his website because he and his wife had experiences of settling in the country. He felt that when they were going through the immigration process in the mid-90s there were fewer avenues to seek support, and did not know other couples undergoing the same process in their area in Wales. Now the Thailand-UK.com site has around 2,000 active members. Aiming to provide support for Thais and their partners in the UK, the most common topics for discussion are making friends, updates on visa regulations, and inexpensive ways to communicate with and visit Thailand. Since the language of use in the main forum is English, its participants are mainly white males. The moderators of Thailand-UK.com thought it was important to also have a Thai language section which was also made as a protected area for Thai-speakers to be able to network with each other; there are currently just over 250 members in the Thai language section.<sup>41</sup> The benefit of using communication technology, such as the Thai3Counties advice line, and online forums and magazines such as Thailand-UK.com and Thai-UK.org, is that Thais can have access to information, support from other Thais and a sense of community regardless of their location.

### *Domestic Violence*

During the interviews, a few women raised domestic violence as an issue that concerns

Thai women. This is unsurprising as domestic violence is a reality for many women in the UK; according to the British Crime Survey:

one in four (26 per cent) women and 17 per cent of men aged 16-59 have experienced at least one incident of non-sexual domestic abuse, threat or force since they were 16. If financial and emotional abuse are excluded, limiting the violence to the use of non-sexual threats or force, then 21 per cent of women and 10 per cent of men had experienced domestic violence since age 16.<sup>42</sup>

While the figures show that inter-personal violence does not vary when taking ethnicity into account,<sup>43</sup> immigration status does influence a woman's options and access to resources. Namely, marriage migrants have fewer options in terms of support, which puts them at a disadvantage when seeking assistance. Not only are marriage migrants often new to the country, language and institutional structure, they may only know their spouses. In the UK, indefinite leave to remain must be applied for with the UK spouse two years after the marriage migrant's arrival—thus, the UK spouse controls their partner's legal status.<sup>44</sup> There is a 'domestic violence rule' which provides an exception to the probationary period rule for women who leave their relationship due to domestic violence,<sup>45</sup> but women under the probationary rule still have no recourse to public funds.

Without recourse to public funds, they have considerably less social support, such as the inability "to obtain welfare benefits and emergency local authority accommodation and more importantly, as a consequence, access to women's refuges".<sup>46</sup> Skalbergs & Gulicova-Grethe argue that marriage migrants inhabit a precarious position because of their immigration status:

Being neither informed about their rights nor about where they could turn to in need of help, the women are stuck in their relationship. One also has to consider the fact that especially female

<sup>41</sup> Members need special permission from the forum moderators to enter the Thai language section.

<sup>42</sup> Walby & Allen (2004: 12)

<sup>43</sup> Walby & Allen (2004: 79)

<sup>44</sup> Border & Immigration Agency (2007)

<sup>45</sup> Southall Black Sisters & Women's Resource Centre (2006)

<sup>46</sup> Southall Black Sisters & Women's Resource Centre (2006: 28)

marriage migrants who have only recently arrived in the UK are normally the last ones who would dare to address the authorities or the police. They do not know what to expect from the authorities and fear that they will be sent back to their home country.<sup>47</sup>

Those who may qualify for subsidised assistance or qualify for the probationary period rule may not be aware of this information. Tom, who works in health and social care, speculated that the fear of authorities asking about legal status deters the women in greatest need of assistance. Nid believed that outreach work informing Thai women about their rights and entitlements was very much needed:

They have one charity called the [Southall] Black Sisters, they help people when their husbands are abusing them, but Thai women don't know about it. They don't know that they can get help. Maybe they can go to a friend's [house] and their friend give them support and let them stay and they work out themselves... But sometimes they don't know there's a problem. They don't know that they are being abused, they don't know their rights. They don't know that when their husband's shouting at them it's called abuse. And they have to keep up with that because they don't know otherwise. It would be nice if someone told them what their rights are, that people care about them.

There are many support services for women who are in abusive relationships, but this information may be lost to women who are new to the country or who cannot communicate in English. The relationship between Thai women and immigration status, ignorance of rights and entitlements, language barriers, and not knowing

where services exist, have been identified as increasing the risk of domestic violence for immigrant women in the US.<sup>48</sup>

Other less obvious factors also contribute to Thai women's vulnerability to domestic violence. For example, Thai women are dispersed throughout the country, and many may be economically inactive. These additional trends have also been identified as domestic violence risk factors; living in isolated communities or not having an active social network restricts access to resources such as emotional support or information and professional advice,<sup>49</sup> and research has found that women who are unemployed or are housewives are more than twice as likely to face domestic violence.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, a disparity of at least ten years has been identified as another domestic violence risk factor,<sup>51</sup> with risk increasing with age difference. There is a popular perception that mixed relationships between Thai women and western men have a significant age difference, and many, though not the majority, of the couples participating in the survey had an age difference of over ten years.<sup>52</sup> These domestic violence risk factors should not be taken to mean that Thai women in mixed relationships are being abused by their husbands, but that the risk factors associated with a higher incidence of domestic violence – immigration status, ignorance of rights and entitlements, language barriers, not knowing where services exist, social isolation, being either unemployed or a housewife, and having a large age disparity in partnerships – correspond with the demographic profile of Thai migrant women.

#### *Targeting Services to the Thai Community*

From running the advice line Sopit recounted a range of cases of, for example, husbands telling wives they are not allowed in their children's schools, women being sexually abused by their husbands, women fleeing abusive relationships to friends in the area and one case where following the death of a Thai woman's husband, his family tried to force her back to Thailand and take her inheritance. Although some of her work is directly assisting victims of domestic violence, Sopit does not want to replicate services that already exist. Instead, she feels that partnering with existing organisations is the most effective solution, by providing information to these

47 Skalbergs & Gulicova-Grethe (2004: 29)

48 Wilt (2004); Mama (1989)

49 Stuart & Holtzworth-Munroe (1995)

50 Walby & Myhill (2001); Mirrlees-Black (1999)

51 Aldridge and Browne (2003); Wilson et al. (1993)

52 Of the 42 couples from the survey involving a Thai woman, 16 couples had an age difference between 10 and 29 years

organisations about how they can assist and work with Thai women, and prompting more people to become interpreters.

Communication with existing services is crucial; Thai women would know that an advice line exists for them, and women's organisations would know that they can use the advice line when they need information particular to the Thai community. When Thai women began turning to the Jersey Women's Refuge for assistance, staff were at a loss on how to help them because of language barriers and their immigration status. As more women began seeking out support they organised a meeting with other service providers to discuss how they could better serve the Thai community in Jersey, but had no previous experience of working with Thai migrants. Unlike for accessing other benefits in Jersey, including housing and employment, women do not have to be residentially qualified to receive assistance from the Refuge.<sup>53</sup> However without financial assistance or the ability to gain employment, women cannot sustain independent lives in Jersey. This can result in women potentially being forced to choose between returning to Thailand where there is still a stigma around divorce, staying in Jersey despite possible destitution or staying in an abusive relationship.<sup>54</sup>

Recommendations for health service provision from studies of Thai women in Australia may have some resonance in the UK. Those working in healthcare do not necessarily need a manual to help Thai women, but they may require knowledge and appreciation for their cultural values, practices and social circumstances for sensitive healthcare.<sup>55</sup> When available, interpretation services should be publicised; as demonstrated through the survey responses, it should not be assumed that people know that they have the option. Additionally, service providers should be able to refer people to culturally or linguistically relevant organisations

when needed, such as support groups or women's refuges. Clearly, with the lack of organisations that provide services for Thai speakers, the last point is more challenging. However, the lack of services only reinforces the need for focused outreach work. Existing organisations which already assist Thai women therefore require greater capacity to partner with mainstream organisations and mainstream organisations need to be more creative in thinking how they can deliver services that will reach less visible minority groups.

### *Areas for Engagement*

The particular pattern of Thais migrating and settling into the UK challenges traditional notions of community. Thais are found all over the country, probably best witnessed through the broad reach of Thai restaurants. Also, since the majority of Thai women who choose to settle long-term in the UK are marriage migrants, they are probably more likely to move to wherever their spouse is already settled. In this regard, Thais may not form a concentrated ethnic community in any one city, which poses an administrative challenge for ethnically oriented policy. However, lack of concentration should not be equated with the absence of common concerns and challenges. As previously discussed, despite location, Thais, and Thai women in particular, share similar obstacles in education, employment and health.

Highlighting the challenges facing the community is not meant to equate Thai women as a helpless group with no agency or capacity for self-help. As one woman representing the Thai Cultural Association in Wales frankly put it:

We do not sit and wait for someone to include us in social events; neither do we wait for someone to consult with us. If we feel we want to participate we do get in touch with them as well. If we feel we need help we make appointments to have consultations with representatives of local government departments. Please do not forget that things work both ways.

The organisations included in this report, such as the Bournemouth Thai Language and Culture School, Thai3Counties Advice Line, Thai Cultural

<sup>53</sup> To become exempt from housing, employment and benefit restrictions, an individual must fulfil a consecutive five year residency requirement. For more information on rights and entitlements see: Jersey Citizens Advice Bureau (2007)

<sup>54</sup> Jersey is part of the British Isles but not the UK, yet Jersey residents can bring their spouses to the island by way of the UK. Because of this, there is no official figure for the population of Thais in Jersey. The Jersey Women's Refuge speculates there are about 300 Thai women on the island, of which the majority are not in work. Until recently fathers in Jersey had sole legal custody of their children. The Jersey Women's Refuge explained that there have been cases where women and their children are forced to remain on the island because their husbands have asked the court to issue an injunction or husbands have retained their passports. With their passports, women have the right to live in the UK, but if their husbands are granted custody of the children, this means leaving their children behind.

<sup>55</sup> Liamputtong & Naksook (2003: 666)

Association in Wales and more informal locally based social clubs, are all examples of emerging grassroots efforts to engage with the above concerns. The final section will focus on perceptions and stereotypes directed at the Thai people from British society, how these stereotypes affect their life in Britain, and how they have mobilised their friends and families to promote positive images.

### **Building Social Relations and a Thai Community**

The gender imbalance conveyed by the 2001 Census – 78 per cent of Thais in the UK are women – gives rise to a popular perception of the Thai population: Thai women migrating as the wives of British men. Unfortunately, with the image of the ‘Thai bride’ – shorthand for Thai mail-order-bride – come hyper sexualised stereotypes because of Thailand’s reputation for sex tourism. As Enteen puts it, Thai women have the image of being “exotic, young, alluring, yet potentially HIV-positive ‘hookers’, eager to please western clients; or dutiful, devoted wives of western men who dismiss the tenets of western feminism and appreciate the financial and emotional generosity of their husbands”.<sup>56</sup> These sexualised stereotypes of Thai women who seek relationships with western (white) men were well known to all of the interview and focus group participants. Jane, a second generation Mixed Thai and White British woman described it bluntly:

The stereotypes are that women are sex objects – that the women are here because they’re sex objects – they work in the service industry as massage girls, bar girls, prostitutes, or in Thai restaurants.

The daily lives of most of the Thai women interviewed and subsequently their partners were imbued with these stereotypes. In one focus group, the women discussed the preconceptions

others had of their marriages, namely that they were arranged. A Thai woman living in Glasgow explained some of the negative images and common questions she hears: “How old is your husband? How much did you pay for your wife?” making reference to the widely held assumptions that women come as mail-order brides for much older western men.<sup>57</sup> Many involved in the research felt the prevailing perception of their presence in the UK was because they were “ordered” or arranged, and thus morally distasteful and deserving unprompted comment and criticism.<sup>58</sup> They recounted “incidents”; rude comments from both men and women who were co-workers, clients, strangers, children, and even extended family members. Similarly, men who marry Thai women are also stereotyped and find themselves at the receiving end of unsolicited remarks. One survey respondent, a British man married to a Thai woman, described his experience:

Unbeknown to my wife, a contractor at work asked if the photo on my desk was my wife. ‘Yes’ I said. ‘How much did you pay for her?’ was the reply. We were stared at wherever we went even though there is little age difference between us. I did not experience this in any other country, including Canada, the US or Singapore.

The ‘Thai Bride boom’<sup>59</sup> or growth of mixed relationships between British men and women from Thailand, was immortalised through the television programme *Little Britain*, when it introduced its ‘Thai bride’ character Ting Tong Macadangdang in 2005. This has resulted in the characters Ting Tong and her White British husband Dudley being the most infamous Thai-White British relationship in the country. As perhaps the only representation of Thai people, and of a Thai-British mixed relationship in British media, many research participants were embarrassed by the programme: “It has given a name to the stereotype, ‘Oh so you’re a Ting Tong’” Jane explained: “It makes it worse; it gives an image to the caricature”. Thus current discourse reduces Thai women to commodities bought through agencies. A survey respondent from Glasgow felt she has been specifically

<sup>56</sup> Enteen (2005: 458)

<sup>57</sup> See for example: Pavia (2005). This stereotype is not only limited to relationships between Thai women and British men. See Humbeck (1996) for discussion on the experiences of Thai women in Germany.

<sup>58</sup> A small research sample of Thais in the Bath area were reported to find English people patronising and with the belief that they are culturally superior to Thais based on their limited knowledge of Thailand and Thailand. For more see: Prentice et al. (2006)

<sup>59</sup> Head (2006)

harassed “Not by being Thai, but by being Thai woman and married to a white man”. A White British man from London remarked how he felt it was interesting how discrimination towards Thai women is tolerated: “If it was another nationality, it would probably be deemed as racism, or at the very least, sexism”. *The Times* followed this familiar trope in one article by simultaneously equating Thai women (coming to the UK as students and visitors) as being disingenuous, illegal immigrants, willing to sell themselves to western men over the internet, and being prostitutes on arrival.<sup>60</sup>

Less commonly seen relationships, namely British women married to Thai men, or Thai women married to Thai men, are not immune to stereotypes or harassment. A White British woman who completed a survey with her Thai husband voiced her annoyance over comments she and her husband often hear:

People assume I eat green curry all the time and ask if my husband eats dog. People also feel the need to discuss the topic of Thai bar girls and the sex industry. When people hear that I am married to a Thai they always want to tell me a story which is along the lines of: a guy who’s a friend of a friend, who was an old guy who took a young girl from Thailand, who stole all his money and ran off – this seems to be an urban myth. I feel that this is a prejudice which people in the UK hold...

Piyanan, whose husband is also Thai, commented how people are shocked to learn that she did not marry a White British man to gain entry to the UK, and ask if she comes from Pattaya.<sup>61</sup>

The assumptions experienced through comments and incidents have prompted some Thais to actively challenge these stereotypes to promote a positive Thai identity. For example, the women in the Eastbourne focus group sought to counter the negative representations of Thai people by sharing what they believed to be the

‘real Thai culture’. Together with their husbands and friends, the women participated in a multicultural festival by demonstrating Thai dance, massage, and cuisine. It was hoped that showing the diversity and breadth of Thai culture would give local residents positive representations to supplant negative opinions about Thai people and their families. However, it was not only important to circulate positive images for the general public; the women felt that the sexualised stereotypes were unfair and could possibly make Thai women and their (Thai or Mixed Thai and White British) children ashamed of being Thai.

Jon, a White British man whose wife is Thai, developed the website Thai-UK.org to provide information for Thais living in Britain and as a support resource for mixed families and Mixed Thai and White British people. Distressed at the lack of Thai positive images and role models in Britain for his Mixed Thai and White British children, he was prompted into action: “I want my children to speak Thai, feel positive about being Thai and proud that they are of dual heritage”. And while some parents did not want to pressure their children to speak Thai, or feel as though they had to choose between being Thai or British,<sup>62</sup> others, like Jon, felt knowing Thai and English would support identification with both communities. Piyanan, who started the Thai language school, felt it important for her own daughter to have her Thai identity as a source of pride and confidence. She believed that a sense of heritage was a particularly important resource against discrimination as children become teenagers, “People say we are the same and have equal opportunities, but the teenagers they know; they know that they are different”. Growing up Jane admitted feeling a bit like an outcast from her peers because she “looked different”, which was also influenced by not having any Thai influence growing up. Once when she was younger her aunt took her to a Thai cultural exhibition at the Barbican, “There were pictures of Bangkok and the King and Queen there, and I remember being really impacted by it, and it gave me a sense of identity”.

Because Thais are a smaller minority ethnic group, research participants felt it was important to organise their own cultural activities and events. Echoing the sentiments of the Thai Wales

<sup>60</sup> Black (2003)

<sup>61</sup> Pattaya is a beach resort town known for sex tourism.

<sup>62</sup> These responses were true for both mixed families with Thai children and mixed families with Mixed Thai and White British children.

Association, these individuals building community related activities are not waiting to be included, but are pushing for recognition. Despite experiences of discrimination in British society, the research participants wanted to 'reach out' to their local communities'.<sup>63</sup> Sopit and Piyanan organise Thai holiday celebrations and Thai summer festivals in their towns that are family oriented and feature Thai cultural exhibitions and cuisine. New Thai summer festivals have started to appear across the country every year, and are aimed at both Thai and local communities. It was not only important to circulate positive images and promote Thai culture for the general public, also to strengthen confidence and pride among Thais about their heritage, and overall to foster a sense of community between Thais.

Many survey respondents chose to go to Thai activities to meet other Thais, to remind themselves of home, and for their family to have the opportunity to be around other Thais and Thai culture. Essentially, they wanted the opportunity to enjoy themselves with something they were familiar with, and in so doing are forging the social networks that lead to community building. Liamputtong & Naksook<sup>64</sup> found that Thai women in Australia wanted to take their children to temple as much as possible in order to learn about Thai traditions and to meet other Thais to practise their language skills. This experience was true for Charles, who made weekly visits to Wat Buddhapadipa while growing up. When talking about picking up Thai culture he explained:

I mean obviously a lot of it comes from home, but meeting other Thais and being involved with other Thais at the temple I learned a lot more about Thailand. I mean you learn a lot from your parents but you also learn from others around you, what you pick up.

Many people mentioned Wat Buddhapadipa as a centre for the Thai community, either visiting at least once in their life or yearly. Though some

people visit the temple for religious reasons, such as for prayer and making merit to the monks, a few people felt that more Thai social events should be external to temple. Nid admitted that she would never go to Wat Buddhapadipa in particular for social events because she felt it was for upper class Thais, while a Thai language teacher interviewed felt the temple should primarily be the centre of religious rather than social events. Similarly, the temple also may not appeal to the six per cent minority of Thais who are not Buddhist, such as Nichaphat, an overseas student who went to a church to find other Thais. In areas where there is no temple, people have said they participate in informal gatherings organised by friends or British Thai online forums, various summer festivals, events sponsored by Thai university societies and even local restaurants. Ultimately though, because Thais are widely dispersed throughout the country even with the increase of Thai events, time, distance, and cost of travel remain barriers to participation.

The events and work with Thai people that have been described are largely organised in isolation from each other, but with the same intent: to build a positive Thai community and identity in the UK. Positive examples of Thai identity and culture through social activities and electronic media were promoted to build community feeling, confidence and pride in Thai heritage for Thais living in the UK. The people involved in the research were tired of being harassed and stereotyped, and their conviction to build respect for their community has prompted them to mobilise themselves through grassroots efforts with the support of their local authorities.

<sup>63</sup> This has also been expressed elsewhere. Thais in a Bath research sample reported that they felt it important to "bridge the gulf of misunderstanding" and that "Thai people should reach out to the people of Bath, and play an active role in sharing their culture, their history, their language and their cuisine". For more see: Prentice et al. (2006: 97)

<sup>64</sup> Liamputtong & Naksook (2003: 661)

## Conclusion

The compilation of research and statistics on Thais living in the UK, Europe and other English speaking countries, along with the primary research conducted for this report has attempted to create a picture of the Thai community in Britain in the absence of comprehensive data. From these sources it seems that the majority of Thais living in Britain are adult females entering the country through marriage migration, are working in the restaurant and hotel industry, and are involved in some type of education or training. While there is probably a range of family and partnership structures, the majority of Thai women in Britain appear to be married to White British men. This picture is limited, and could not convey the range of voices that would make up a Thai community. Research looking into the experience of Thai males, those involved in sex work, British-born Thais and the Thai business community could enhance our understanding of experience of Thais living in the UK.

The presence of people from this ethnic/national group poses a challenge to a number of policy areas. Firstly, this group is spread over the country, with no known central communication structure. There are a variety of locally centred community initiatives that are working in isolation from each other. While many of the interviewees said they felt they had a Thai community in their area, this did not necessarily equate with the feeling that there is a unified Thai community in the UK. Furthermore, because many of the interviewees were women in ethnically mixed marriages, Thai ‘families’ may not necessarily fit within the confines of a singular or discrete ethnic identity, posing a challenge to models of ‘community’ engagement. Likewise, policy that is directed at the ‘mixed-race/heritage’ group should also take note of its varied membership, such as the presence of Mixed Thai and White British young people.

However, this is not to say that because many Thais are in mixed relationships and dispersed across the country that they will not have particular issues and concerns related to their ethnic identity. In fact, as the research has demonstrated, individuals’ health and well-being is influenced by

living in a new country where rights and entitlements, language and culture are often different than those of the home country. Building on this, Thai women recognise the need for fluency in English in order to make informed choices, lead independent lives and have the resources to make personal and professional gains in the UK.

Across the interview and survey data collected, women especially wanted to communicate that while they do not dispute that there are Thai prostitutes, and some Thai women use marriage agencies to find husbands, not all Thai women are in those positions. Many felt that these stereotypes of Thai women negatively affected their lives and the lives of their families and friends. Thai women are often simply viewed as ‘Thai brides’ when they are the customary complex mix of women, wives, mothers, workers and citizens.<sup>65</sup> The frustration caused by this discrimination fuels their conviction to fight against these stereotypes through promoting positive images, but they knew their efforts could only go so far. Campaigning that includes the voices of smaller ethnic groups such as Thais would go far in building momentum for broader anti-racism work.

Through the Community Study programme, a series of patterns are emerging among the different ethnic minority groups discussed. In general, barriers to employment have been mentioned throughout, whether from discrimination, deskilling, or reliance on low-paid employment or work in the informal economy. For the communities discussed to date – Bolivians, Vietnamese, Francophone Cameroonians and Romanians – English as a second language persists as a barrier to accessing correct and detailed information about rights and entitlements. Also because these communities all represent smaller ethnic minority groups, there is the point of community development which was cited as important for retention of culture and for civic life. From these studies a common thread has emerged: the development of strong relations within communities is needed to achieve government’s ideal of overall community cohesion. As research in this study has shown, the commitment to anti-discrimination and promoting equal opportunities – whether by individuals or government – empowers individuals to further enrich the society in which they live, a benefit for all members of that society.

65 For more on the critique of Asian women’s simultaneous identities of wives, workers and citizens, see: Piper & Roces (2003: 1-21)

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## Appendix I. Summary of Interview and Focus Group Participants

Contact	Description	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Reason for Migration
Email Correspondence	Organises Thai cultural activities in Wales	F	Thai	Unknown
Focus group	Thai woman (Milton Keynes)	F	Thai	Marriage
Focus group	Thai woman (Milton Keynes)	F	Thai	Marriage
Focus group	Thai woman (Eastbourne)	F	Thai	Marriage
Focus group	Thai woman (Eastbourne)	F	Thai	Marriage
Focus group	Thai woman (Eastbourne)	F	Thai	Marriage
Focus group	Thai woman (Eastbourne)	F	Thai	Marriage
Focus group	Thai woman (Eastbourne)	F	Thai	Study
Focus group	Thai woman (Eastbourne)	F	Thai	Work
Interview	Married to a Thai; set up website	M	White British	n/a
Interview	Thai language teacher	F	Thai	Work
Interview	Mixed Couple	M	White British/Irish	n/a
Interview	Mixed Couple	F	Thai	Marriage
Interview	Second generation	F	Mixed Thai and White British	n/a
Interview	Second generation	M	Mixed Thai and White British	n/a
Interview	Overseas postgraduate student	F	Thai	Study
Telephone Interview	Married to a Thai; set up website	M	white	n/a
Telephone Interview	Jersey Women's Refuge representative	F	unknown	n/a
Telephone Interview	Thai restaurant manager	M	white	n/a
Telephone Interview & Interview	Thai language teacher	F	Thai	Study
Telephone Interview & Focus group	Advice line coordinator	F	Thai	Marriage

## Appendix II. Summary of Survey Participants

No.	Primary Respondent			Partner			Children					
	Sex	Self Reported Ethnicity	Primary Citizenship	Sex	Reported Ethnicity of Partner	Citizenship of Partner	Reason for Migration to the UK	Do you have any children?	Thai: in UK	Mixed Thai & White British: in UK	Thai: in Thailand	Mixed Thai & White British: in Thailand
9	F	Thai	Thai	M	British	UK	Marriage	Yes	3	2	5	
5	F	Thai	Thai	M	British	UK	No Response	Yes	2	7		
1	F	Thai	Thai	M	Irish/British	Irish and UK	No Response	Yes		1		
1	F	Thai	Thai	M	English	UK	Marriage	Yes			2	
1	F	Thai	Thai	M	Thai	Thai	No Response	Yes			2	
1	F	Thai	Thai	M	English	UK	Marriage	No				
4	F	Thai	Thai	M	British	UK	Marriage	No				
2	F	Thai	Thai	M	British	UK	No Response	No				
1	F	Thai	Thai	M	British	UK	Study	No				
1	F	Oriental	Thai	M	White	UK	Study	No				
1	F	Asian	Thai	M	Caucasian	UK	Marriage	No				
1	F	Thai	Thai	M	Anglo-Italian	UK	No Response	No				
1	F	Asian	Thai	M	European	UK through naturalisation	Marriage	No				
1	F	Asian	Thai	M	European	EU	Work	No				
1	F	Thai	Thai	No Response	No Response	No Response	Marriage	Yes		2		
1	F	Thai	Thai	No Response	No Response	No Response	Study	Yes	1			
4	F	Thai	Thai	No Response	No Response	No Response	No Response	Yes	3	6		
1	F	Mixed Thai & English	UK & Thai	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	No				
1	F	Thai-Chinese	Thai	n/a	n/a	n/a	Study	No				
4	F	Thai	Thai	n/a	n/a	n/a	Study	No				
4	F	Thai	Thai	n/a	n/a	n/a	No Response	No				
1	F	British	UK	M	Thai	Thai	Marriage	No				
4	M	Thai	Thai	n/a	n/a	n/a	Study	No				
3	M	White British	UK	F	Thai	Thai	Marriage	Yes	1	2		
4	M	British	UK	F	Thai	Thai	Marriage	Yes	1	5		
1	M	British	UK	F	Thai	Thai	No Response	Yes		2		
1	M	British	Irish	F	Thai	Thai	Study	Yes		2		
1	M	British	UK	F	Thai	Thai	Marriage	Yes			1	1
1	M	English	UK	F	Thai	Thai	Marriage	No				
1	M	British	UK	F	Thai	Thai	No Response	No				

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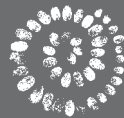
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# About Runnymede

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 Educational Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in close collaboration with eminent thinkers and policymakers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. We believe that the way ahead lies in building effective partnerships, and we are continually developing these with the voluntary sector, the government, local authorities and companies in the UK and Europe. We stimulate debate and suggest forward-looking strategies in areas of public policy such as education, the criminal justice system, employment and citizenship.

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.



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