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Social Networks and Organization of Thai Migrants in Europe: An Interview with Chongcharoen Sornkaew Grismann, President (2019-2022) of Thai Women Network in Europe

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The interview with Mrs. Chongcharoen Sornkaew Grismann, a long-term member and former president of Thai Women Network in Europe (TWNE), was originally conducted in English over email by Sirijit Sunanta and Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot in July 2022. It was supplemented by an online interview (via WebEx) in Thai by Sirijit Sunanta in November 2022. Mrs. Grismann served as the President of TWNE from 2019 to 2022. TWNE is well-established and one of the most active organizations of Thai migrant women with individual and organizational members in 16 European countries, the US, and Thailand. TWNE seeks to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organizations, both in Thailand and the destination countries, to improve the welfare of Thai migrant women. They organize annual general meetings to discuss topics relevant to Thai migrant women's lives in destination countries and publish an annual newsletter *Sarn Satree* (สารสตรี) to circulate information. Mrs. Grismann has extensive experience of providing community service as a social volunteer and working with international organizations, particularly in the area of women and children's welfare. She is now based in France and Thailand.

Keywords: Europe; Migrants' Social Network; Migrants' Social Organization; Thai Migrant Women; Transnational Social Organization



INTRODUCTION

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *Could you tell us the history of TWNE?*

GRISMANN: TWNE is an association of Thai social volunteers for Thai women and people living in Europe. It's overall goal is to promote smooth integration of Thai societies abroad through partnership and collaboration with member organizations and individuals. The formation of TWNE took three and a half years

from late-2000 to mid-2004. The founding period comprises of four key events. First was the working group meeting in 2000 to assess the needs and problems of Thai women in Europe and roles of key volunteer groups. Second was the meeting in 2003 to set up *Thai Network for Women in Europe and Asia*, followed by the third meeting in the same year to refine the network objectives and to change its name to *Thai Women Network Abroad (TWNA)*. Fourth was the meeting to sign a Joint Statement on Collaboration and Guidelines to assist women and children who are victims of trafficking and other problems in Europe with the Thai government agencies¹.

The network's name was then changed for the last time to Thai Women Network in Europe, to be in line with the Joint Statement. Over the past 20 years, TWNE has maintained a prominent position in the Thai social work scene in Europe thanks to strong, dedicated and charismatic leadership and also because of competent and active members and partners. On 12 November 2015, TWNE was recognized as an overseas Thai public benefit organization, according to Article 34 of the Royal Act of Thailand on the Promotion of Social Services B.E. 2546. TWNE celebrated its 20th anniversary in September 2021 in Caserta, Italy. Its annual magazine *Sarn Satree 2021: Parcourir-Enrichir-Agrandir* documents its 20 years of journey (in Thai language) and can be downloaded from the TWNE website. Much of the recount in this dialogue came from this magazine.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: *Can you tell us about the driving forces of the network?*

GRIMSMANN: Dr. Pattaya Ruenkaew (Germany) was the network pioneer. Other founding members or driving forces include but are not limited to Ms. Pathummas Maanyan (Denmark), Ms. Panithane Taburel (France), Ms. Srismorn Meyer and Ms. Nonglak Trepp (Switzerland), Ms. Sermsee Boonsoot and Mr. Saha Sarapunt (the Netherlands), Ms. Payungsri Kulawong (then-Adam), and Ms. Prapairat Mix (Germany). What drove Dr. Pattaya to start forming the group was the inpouring of Thai women to Germany and other European countries in the early 2000s and the problems the women faced in their living and working conditions. Furthermore, there was a lack of information about social support for Thai women in destination countries.

SUNANTA: *What are the problems that Thai migrant women have faced? Have the problems changed over time?*

GRIMSMANN: The most important problem that Thai migrant women have faced, now as well as in the early days, is the lack of language skills. They do not have enough language skills to cope with the situation they are facing or to communicate with their partners. Language is a big challenge for most Thai migrant women, even for myself. It took me seven years to master the language. Another problem is the underestimation of the risks, the lack of preparedness, and the attitude that bad things will not happen to them. Some Thai women think that relatives in the destination country will help them out if something happens to them or believe that their partners will always be good. As for legal issues, sometimes Thai women arrive in the destination

1 Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

country with a visa type that does not match their travel purposes. For example, some work while on a tourist visa or get married while on a visiting visa. Moreover, many Thais do not report to the Thai embassy when they arrive in the destination country. Thus, we do not have a good record of where Thai people are.

In terms of family relations, there have been cases of verbal and emotional violence either to the wives, husbands, or children. Sometimes, because of some forms of violence they have acted, Thai women lose custody over their children and they do not understand why. Next is the emotional difficulty. Migration is a very emotionally challenging process for Thai women and it induces depression. A friend of mine said that the emotional problem of Thai migrant women is like the elephant in the room. You think that you will overcome it but each step is very challenging – the weather, the unavailability of Thai food. When going out with the husband and you cannot communicate with anybody, it is like you are there but not heard or seen. You lose your sense of self and this leads to depression. Some do not even realize they are depressed. We train our volunteers to recognize and respond to depression and suicidal signs.

In addition, there are ad hoc problems, such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Thai migrant women, as some have lost their loved ones, both in Thailand and their destination countries.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: What are the purposes and objectives of TWNE? What does the network do to reach the objectives?

GRIMSMANN: TWNE works to improve the social welfare and resolve social problems faced by Thai people, especially women and children living in Europe. We focus on providing information and sharing it among member associations and on cooperation and mutual aid between members and governmental and non-governmental organizations, both in Thailand and the destination countries. We want to ease the adjustment and improve the well-being of Thai migrants. We hope to show the host society that Thai migrants have potential. They do not just wait to receive social benefits but they also contribute to the society. We conduct field studies in member countries in Europe to better understand situations and needs at the country level and conduct workshops and training sessions to strengthen the capacity of TWNE members and partners. We expand our membership base and partner groups in more countries and mobilize funds from international organizations and Thai authorities. We also organize annual meetings and seminars to report progress, exchange experiences and lessons-learned, analyse problems faced by member organizations and their target groups, and identify ways to resolve these problems and move forward. In addition, we publicize our work in the annual newsletter *Sarn Satree* and through our social media, website, and other channels.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: Who are the members of TWNE: their general profile and main countries of residence?

GRIMSMANN: TWNE members come from all walks of life. They are homemakers, retirees, social workers, tour operators, students, teachers, accountants, civil servants,

nurses and health workers, medical doctors, interpreters/translators, NGO workers, employees, business owners, entrepreneurs (particularly in restaurants and massage/spa sectors), to name a few. Over a half of the members are middle-aged and are well-established in their work or life. This explains why they could devote their time, efforts, and resources to the network. As of August 2022, TWNE has 87 individual members and 25 association members. All but five individual members are women. The five male members are from Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Thailand, and the Netherlands. Members are spread across 16 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK), plus Thailand and the United States. The largest individual membership is in Germany and the largest association membership is in Switzerland. Members empathize with fellow Thai women who face hardship in destination countries. TWNE refers cases across countries when necessary.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: As an international network and association with members from different European countries, how does the TWNE function?

GRIMSMANN: While TWNE is a national association registered in France, its scope of work is indeed international. TWNE annual general meetings (AGMs) take place in different major cities in Europe each year, and country partners take turns in hosting the events. The annual general meeting strengthens membership and partnership and acts as the final decision-making body. Every three years, a team of Executive Committee is elected, comprising a President, two Vice-Presidents, a Secretary and a Treasurer. Two auditors are elected every two years from among the members. In each member country, there is a country representative (committee member or coordinator) who assists the Executive Committee in country-level affairs and in communicating with members on matters related to TWNE. Main tasks of the Executive Committee are partly managerial (membership, finance, publications, reporting) and partly case assistance, collaboration, and public relations. TWNE's main source of income is from membership fees (30€/person/year, 50€/organization/year) and occasionally from donations or projects. TWNE annual meetings are an important venue for members to meet and exchange ideas and experiences. The annual gathering broadens members' knowledge, reinforces their sense of belonging to the network and builds comradeship between members from different countries. Moreover, it is fun (*Sanuk*) to be with friends and meet new people, making the AGMs a special and *must-go* event. Each year, TWNE organizes a seminar on a selected theme that is of interest and relevant for members. The list of thematic seminars can be found in our Milestones.

FRESNOZA-FLOT: How does TWNE address existing social stereotypes about Thai migrant women in Europe?

GRIMSMANN: TWNE addresses social stereotypes through dialogues, empowerment and knowledge sharing among its individual and association members. Much of TWNE's strengths lie in the work of members in each country who handle integration issues faced by Thai women through educational, language, social, cultural, and legal

interventions. One social stereotype is that Thai women marrying Westerners must support their families in Thailand at all costs, which puts a lot of pressure on migrant women. TWNE works with Thai government and academic partners in Thailand to prepare women before their departure and to strengthen social volunteers in areas of case counselling. However, there should be more efforts to empower women's natal families regarding economic and employment opportunities so that they do not need to depend solely or largely on their daughters in Europe. Another social stereotype is how Thai women regard one another in the labour market. Those who do hard labour or cleaning jobs are perceived as less accomplished than those who own businesses or hold high-income positions. This is a Thai social norm that does not sit well in the West, where all jobs are considered decent and dignified. Women in so-called low-ranking jobs may experience shame or a 'loss of face' if their Thai peers or families know what they are doing. However, this has improved over the years after more and more Thai people understand the employment structure in the West better.

SUNANTA: What are the main obstacles/challenges for TWNE in achieving its goals? How does the organization overcome them?

GRIMSMANN: During the 22-year period, many Thai personalities have helped manage and forward the network. The evolution was not an easy one. There were managerial disagreements and clashes in personalities as could be expected in most organizational and social settings. Thanks to strong leadership and a clear vision of key persons at that time, TWNE survived difficult periods by focusing on its mission. Another challenge is to respond to the needs of migrant women. Why? Firstly, because women in trouble often wait for too long before they ask for help, so problems become too complicated and time-consuming to resolve. Secondly, the number of Thai women moving overseas keeps increasing. Thirdly, the TWNE membership base has not grown much in the last 15 years; thus the number of competent volunteers remains just a handful. TWNE overcomes this challenge by engaging new volunteers through social media and other platforms, broadening its civil society partners, and arranging more case referrals to state and other organizations. Another challenge is that being volunteers demands a sacrifice of personal time and resources, often jeopardizing work-life-family balance. It is therefore difficult to find competent persons who could assume management responsibility of the association on a long-term basis.

SUNANTA: How do you imagine the future of TWNE? What new developments are underway?

GRIMSMANN: TWNE will go on for many more years because it still has much to offer to Thai women and people. Also, TWNE holds a symbolic meaning for its members in all countries who perceive the network as 'one family'. One of the new developments will be to help members and Thai women to overcome a drastic change in communication technology so that they are not left behind in the world that is increasingly digitized. The way in which volunteers had functioned in the past has completely changed. Encounters with those needing help are becoming less and less face-to-face but more and more online, thanks to the new normal created by the COVID-19

epidemic. In addition, in the second half of 2022, TWNE is implementing a project to develop a model of support for Thai widows and capacity building for social volunteers working on this issue. In 2023, TWNE will organize an annual seminar on diversity of work and occupations of Thai women in Europe.

SUNANTA: *What role do you think the Thai and European destination country's governments should play in supporting Thai migrant women and their organization(s)?*

GRIMSMANN: Governments in destination countries should prioritize a migrant-sensitive and friendly approach in their administrative procedures and system. I am talking about having instructions available in Thai language (or Khmer or Laotian, for that matter) so that new coming migrants can easily handle online or offline transactions, such as residence cards, visa extensions, health insurance, social security, pension payment, and driving licenses. This would be an important step toward migrant empowerment. As for Thai government agencies, more focus should be placed on enhancing everyday survival skills and handling paperwork for Thai people wanting to move abroad. It is time for the state to see migration and integration as a hard and hands-on science and offer practical training courses rather than orientation courses. Migrants must be able to take control of their lives and master their own paperwork because only with the right knowledge and practices they can integrate into the new society smoothly.

SUNANTA: *Please share with us some recent highlights of the network's activities.*

GRIMSMANN: TWNE's most recent Annual General Meeting was organized on the topic "Alone but not Lonely". It deals with Thai women who undergo the loss of European partners and face emotional, legal, and economic difficulties. Death of partner is the most challenging time for Thai women. It is a loss of a loved one who is also the key person of the family. Many Thai women struggle through this period, especially those who do not have legal marital contracts with their European partners. TWNE received funding from the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to carry out a project on this topic. We aim to train volunteers to provide support to Thai women in this situation.

SUNANTA: *Thank you very much for your insights. They are very helpful. We hope to collaborate with you again in the future.*



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

