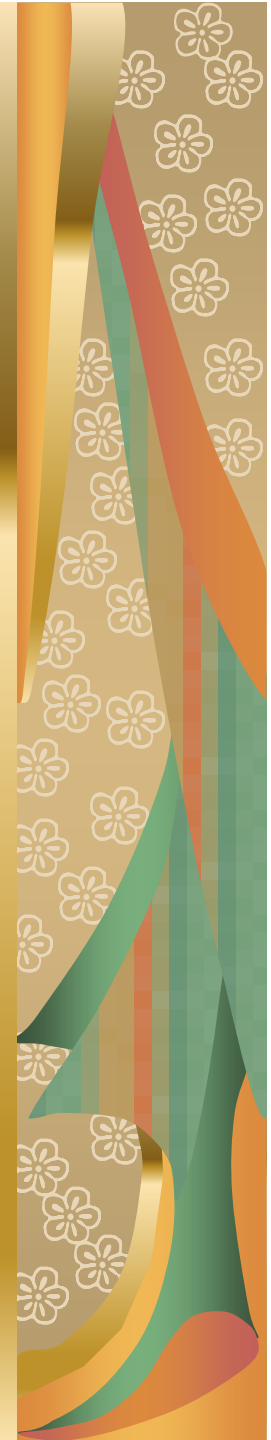


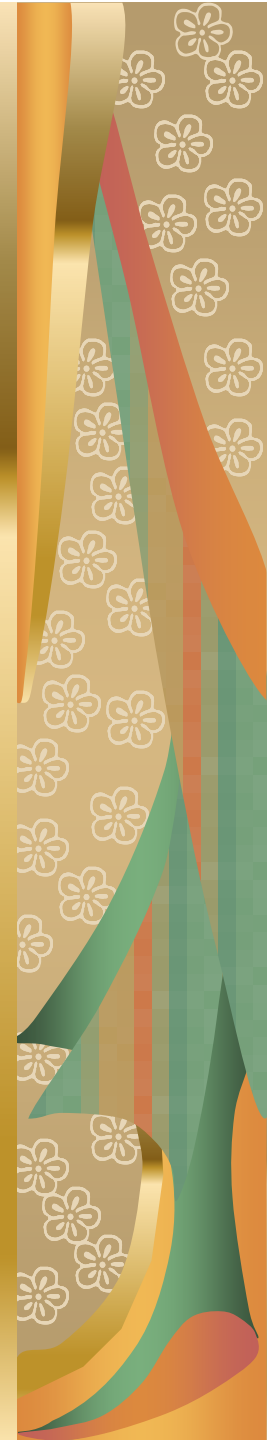
The Invisible Mothers: State Policies and Immigrant Women in Australia

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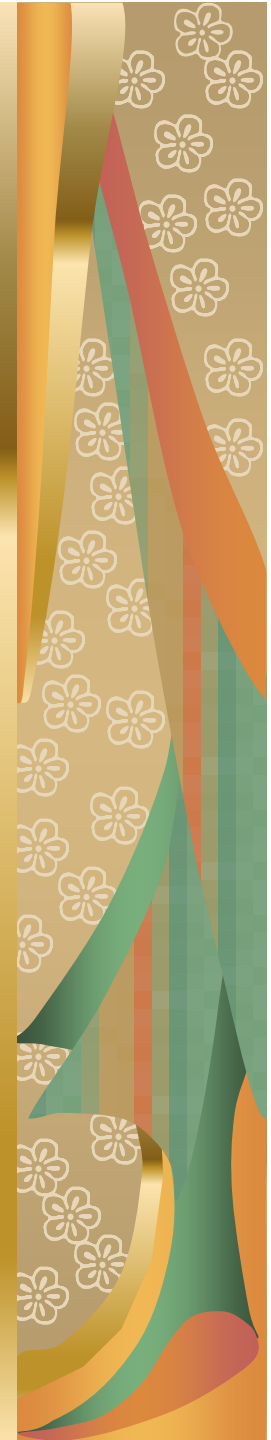
Motherhood & Feminism

- Motherhood has been a subject of feminist debates from late nineteenth century.
- Early feminist writers see motherhood as an oppression of women's identity.
- In many patriarchal societies, women are expected to give birth and take full responsibility for rearing the children.
- Becoming a mother, for many women in the last few decades, meant leaving their jobs, sacrificing their own needs, losing their own identity and spending their energy, physical and emotional, on their children.
- At the same time, women received little support, both inside and outside their domestic spheres.
- This view of women's oppression has led many feminists to see motherhood as a way of limiting women's choices, and as a result many of them oppose motherhood.



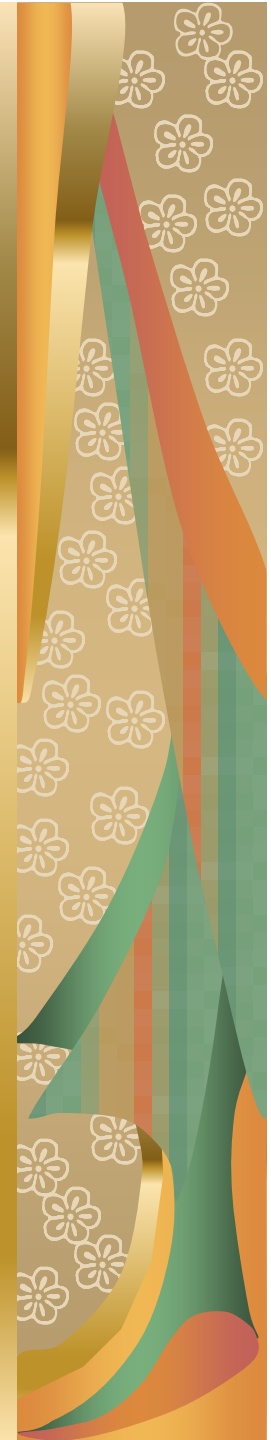
Motherhood & Contemporary Feminism

- Contemporary feminism has looked at motherhood from a different perspective.
- Many recent feminist writers have reclaimed motherhood for women.
- They see motherhood as a source of "power, creativity, and insight".
- These feminist writers, however, also acknowledge that motherhood has been a "bitter trap" for many women.



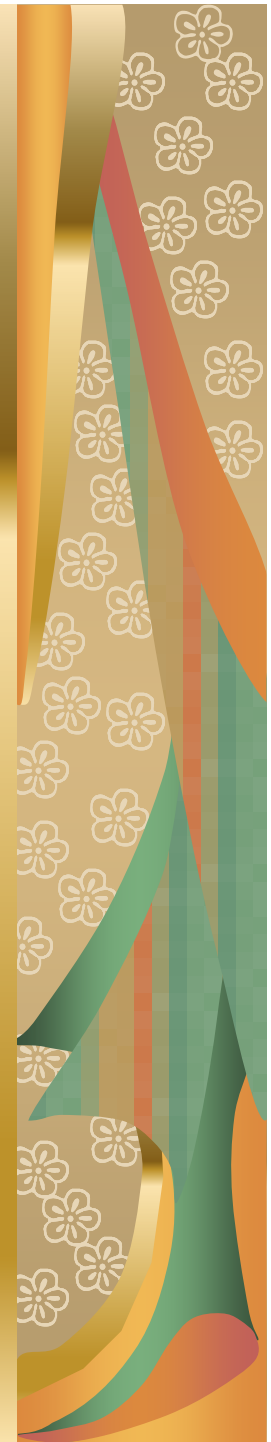
But.....

- The opportunities and constraints concerning motherhood will differ according to the backgrounds of individual's social class, age, sexuality & ethnicity.
- The situation of a person who is a mother as well as an immigrant is more complex.
- As Liam (1999:137) contends:
This applies particularly to those migrants who were transplanted from an Eastern to a Western culture and also find themselves face-to-face with a value system, a social and political structure different from where they came from; at the same time they are segregated from the rest of society like any other mothers of contemporary Western society. Role change and associated practices in the context of environmental changes is quite a complicated issue if we take into consideration the additional tasks confronting a migrant woman in the migration process.



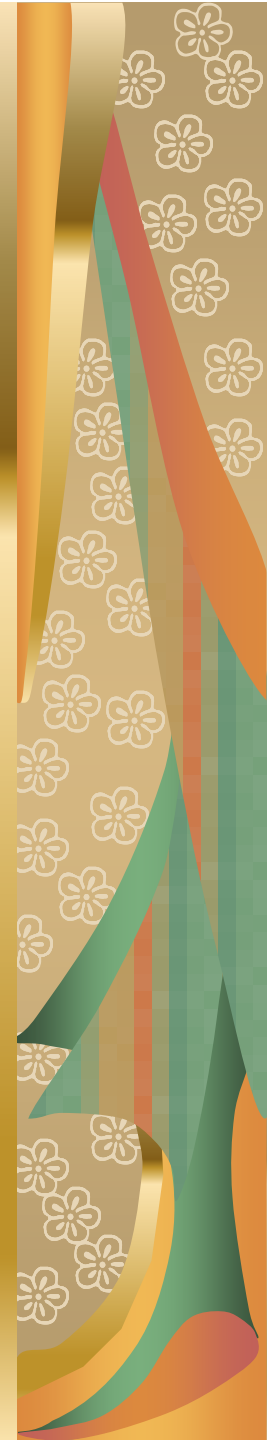
What I will do in this presentation?

- I discuss the experience of immigrant motherhood from a feminist perspective drawing evidence from my own experience as a mother, a contemporary feminist and a migrant woman.
- My intention here is to use a narrative approach to write a personal account, which I believe will be instructive, as it is written from an immigrant mother's perspective.
- The narrative account will be used to briefly examine feminist position, but largely as a means of recommending implications for planning and practice that health and social professionals need to consider in the course of working with Thai immigrant mothers.
- My personal account will also be supported by narrative account of other women in my study on childbearing and childrearing among Thai immigrant mothers in Australia.
- I do not intend to prove any new theoretical position, but to illustrate how my experience is one way of giving attention to the problem which immigrant mothers are facing in their new homeland.



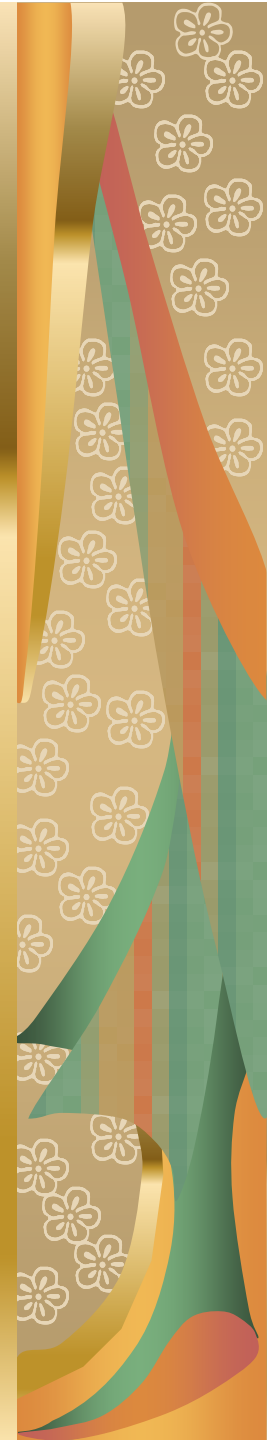
Childbearing & Childrearing: Conflicting Ideology

- Childbirth is always fraught with risk and, for many women, traditional practices bring assurance and well-being in a new and often bewildering environment.
- Failure to carry out traditional practices can increase anxiety, and is believed to cause health problems in later life.
- Whether the women came as immigrants or refugees, they have brought with them a wealth of beliefs and practices concerning childbirth, which are considerably different from the western notion.
- Traditionally, Thai women must observe many postpartum practices in order to regain good health after birth, to ensure good health in old age, and also to ensure the survival of their newborn baby, eg., *yu fai* ritual.



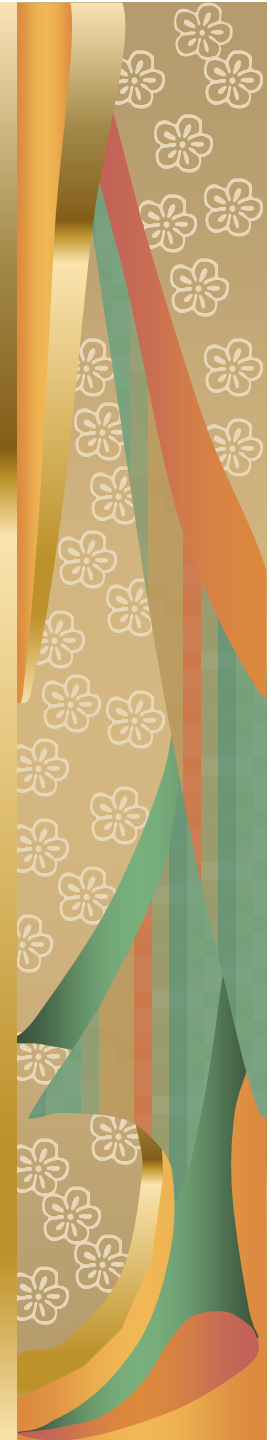
Challenges of Immigrant Mothers

- The women's cultural knowledge and customs are challenged by the Australian health care system.
- Many women talk about being unable to follow their traditional customs when they have a baby in Australia because of the different system of beliefs and practices surrounding childbirth.
- Others talk about the need to follow the instructions of health care providers about birth, confinement and caring for their newborn.
- This is partly because they are now living in this society, not in their home country any more.
- It is also because they fear offending the authority of Australian health care providers.
- This results in distress for many women.



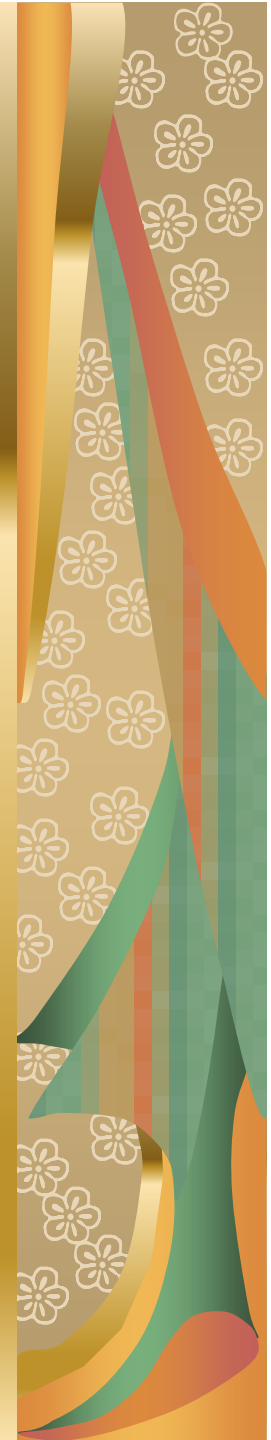
Challenges of Immigrant Mothers

- Since childbearing is a critical life event for women, care given to women during the time of pregnancy and birth has a marked influence on the well-being of the women and their children.
- This also has profound effect on how well they are able to integrate into Australian life, their new home, since many Thai women have the first point of contact with the Australian main-stream health system through the use of maternity services.
- Have Thai immigrant mothers received satisfied care when they become a mother in this country?



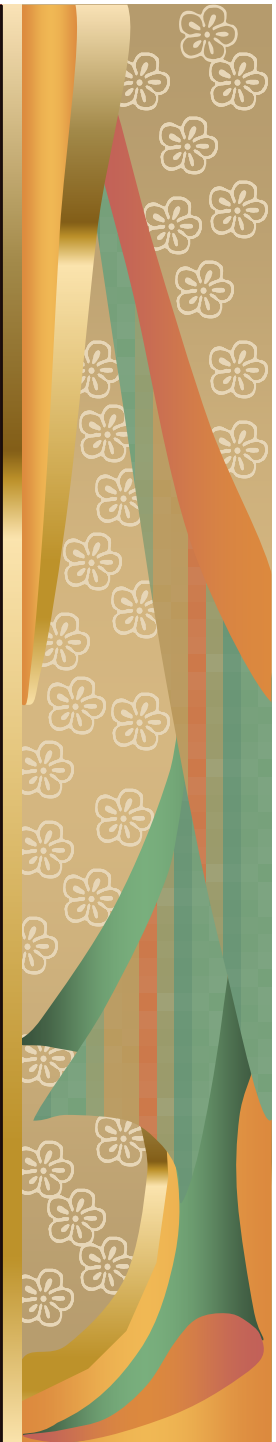
Challenges!

- When I had my children here my mother told me to observe many cultural practices in order to regain my health after childbirth and to maintain good health until old age.
- During my stay in the hospital, I remember vividly being offered icy-cold drinks; being asked to take a shower soon after I gave birth; being given a green salad accompanied by beef stroganoff because I was not in the ward to have a choice of food; being asked to do postnatal exercise, which I was told, would be good for my own sake; the list goes on in the same ways as Thai mothers talked in my study
- These are hospital routines, which most women have experienced commonly, but, these are things which Thai mothers need to avoid if they wish to have good health.
- Not only do many mothers not have "choice" in conforming to their cultural beliefs and practices, but also they are forced, against their will, to follow hospital routines.
- Their sense of feminist ideals and their ideals of motherhood are, therefore, affected by the practice of the dominant culture; here I refer to the mainstream health system.



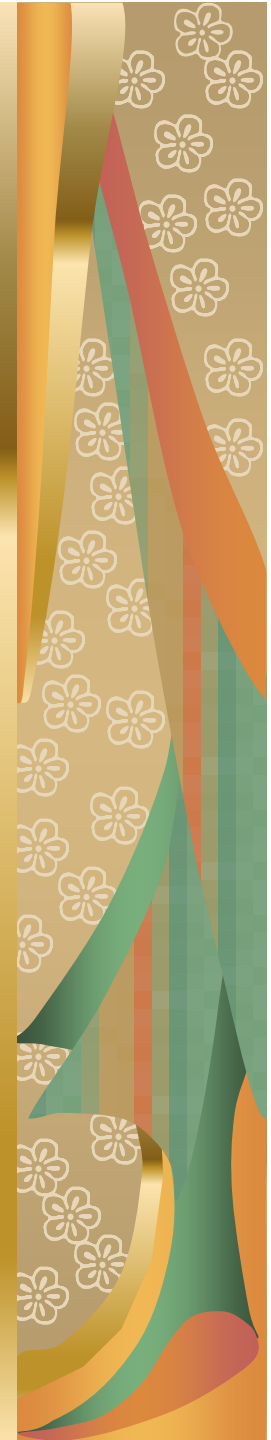
More Challenges...

- Due to cultural differences, and perhaps the ideology of "good parenthood", many Thai mothers and their husbands have a lot of conflicts about the way the children are to be raised.
- This is particularly marked for women who are married to Anglo-Australian men.
- Often, mothers are accused of training the children to be dependent on the mothers.
- This, perceived by their Australian husband, will only jeopardise the children's self-confidence because the mothers do a lot of thing for their children, such as feeding them, dressing, and bathing them, breastfeeding on demand and not sticking to a four-hour schedule, and letting the children sleep with them.
- Many Thai mothers believe that close contact, physical and emotional, between a mother and her child creates self-confidence and happiness in oneself.
- However, this childrearing practice does not fit in with their husband's notion of a good mother in his culture.
- So the conflicts go on.
- This time, their feminism and motherhood is challenged by their patriarchal dominant male partner.



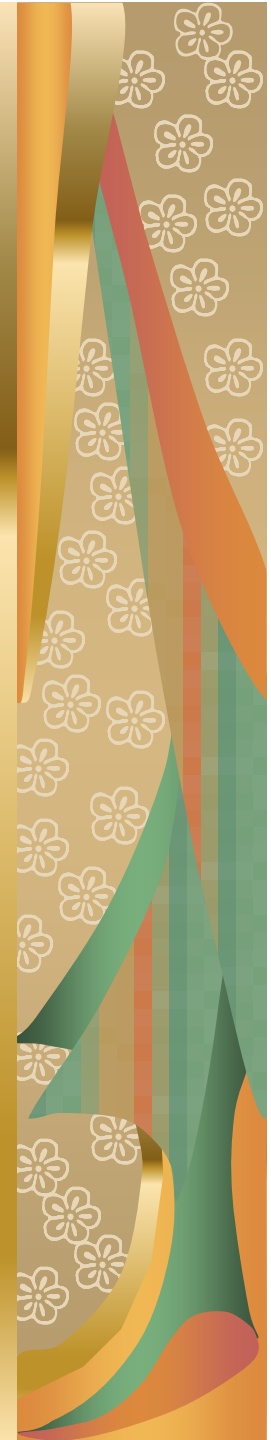
More Challenges...

- For migrant women who come from societies where kin provide social support, the migration process brings loneliness and anxieties.
- Kinship in many cultural groups is crucial at the time of giving birth and rearing children.
- Some Thai mothers are lucky enough to have their kin with them in their new home, but for many of them this is not so.
- Thus, many women have a strong desire to be able to "go home".
- Many dream of going home as often as they can, but for some, reality may limit the dream to at least once during their time in their country of settlement.
- However, "going home" is not a simple task for some Thai mothers due to the restrictions of male dominated legal system in Australia.



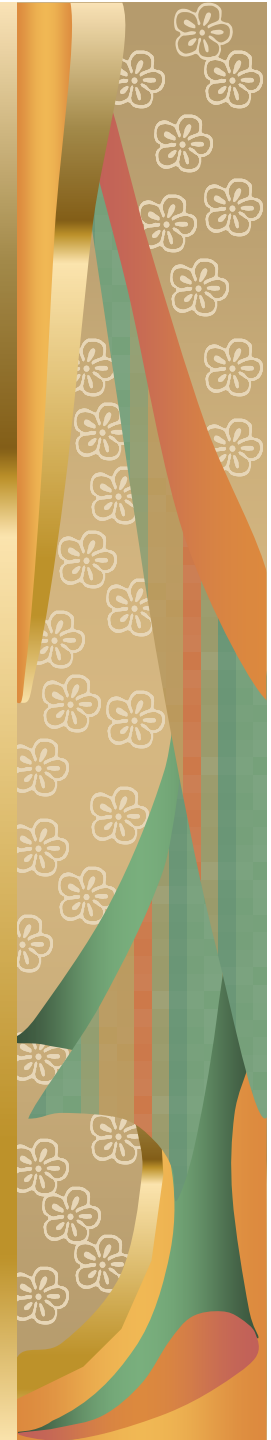
"Twice A Minority": Marginalised Migrant Mothers

- Since Prince Bahrin kidnapped the children from Jacqueline Gillespie, which has been a major controversial issue in Australia since July 1992, the Australian legal system has become cautious about families of mixed-marriage where one party is an immigrant.
- Often enough, at least in the Australian context however, the immigrant party tends to be a mother.
- There have been a few court orders stopping a mother or father leaving Australia with the children.
- But, more often this happens when the mothers attempt to do so.
- There have been many incidents (as have been reported in the media), when the Federal Police Force arrest a mother with the children at the airport because she is leaving Australia without any official papers.
- Sometimes, even if the mother had appropriate legal documents, the Immigration Department and the Federal Police were not informed about it, the mother was arrested.



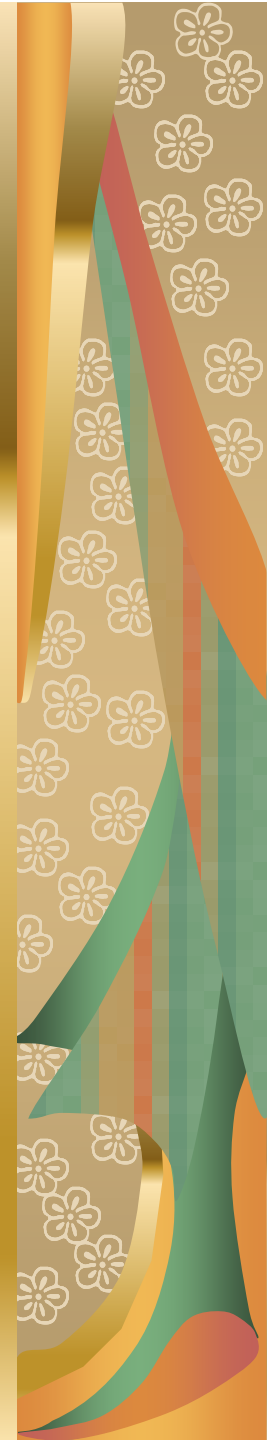
My Personal Context

- My personal evidence was that the father obtained a court order to stop a Thai mother (me) taking the children home for our annual holidays; the holidays that I and the children have been going on every year..
- His argument was that I would not bring the children back to Australia.
- Based on the husband's reason, **and without considering the mother's voice**, the Family Court issued a court order preventing overseas travel.
- Since then, I have to obtain a court order each time I take the children out of Australia.

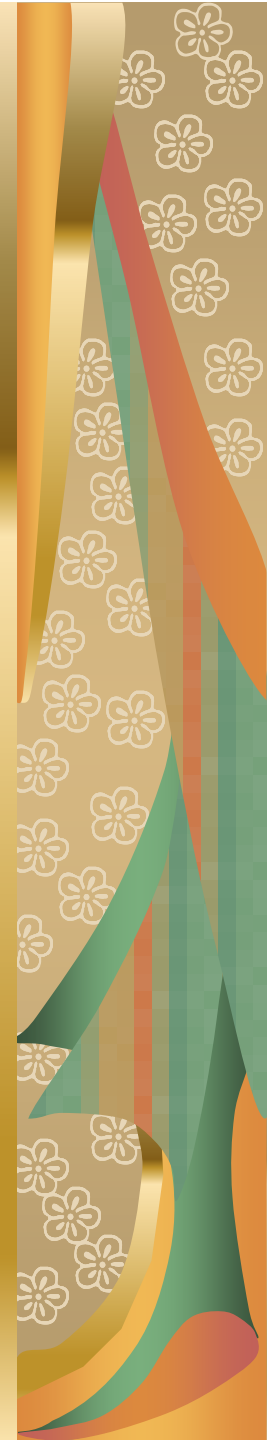


My Analysis...

- There are two points I wish to make here.
- First, as Glenn and her colleagues (1994:17) point out:
 - Motherhood takes place in social contexts, which involve unequal power relations between men and women, and between dominant and subordinate racial groups. Motherhood therefore cannot escape political and legal struggle.
- In addition, women, people who are poor, and immigrants are all marginalised people in this patriarchal society.
- Because migrant women are marginalised, they have to struggle more.
- Migrant women are, therefore, even more marginalised, or as in Magarita Melville words, "Twice a Minority".

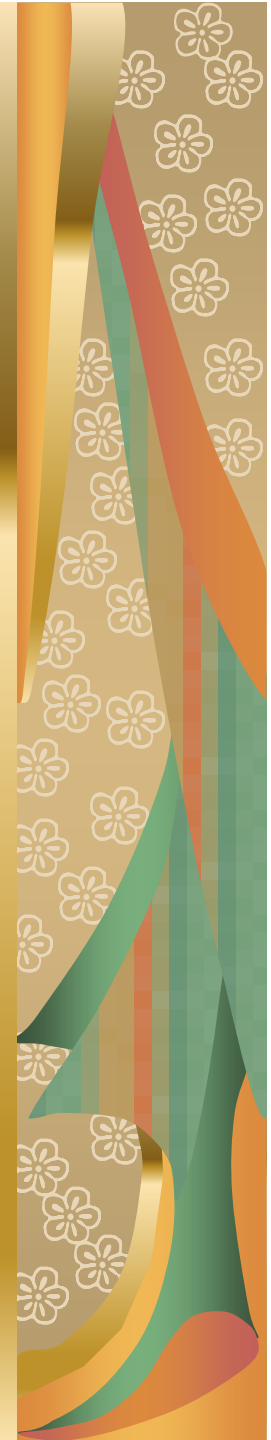


- My second, and more important, point is that the mother's voice is missing when the issue of power and control is involved.
- Ironically, what we have seen and heard in the media has been that the "male" partner is the one who abducts the children, as in the Jacqueline Gillespie case, and other cases presented in the media in the last few decades.
- Hardly any mothers have abducted their children from the father.
- Although we may have seen that the mothers have tried to take children home, the mothers have always granted access to the children's father and women have never had enough financial independence and/or power to hide the children.
- From my own experience, I would also argue that the mothers do not wish to take the children away from their fathers completely.
- However, when it is the father who does so, access is not granted and it may be that the mother may not see her children again.
- It took Jacqueline 14 years to see her children again.
- This issue of institutional control and power and control of men over migrant mothers is not rare.
- It is commonly shared by many migrant mothers, including the Thai women.



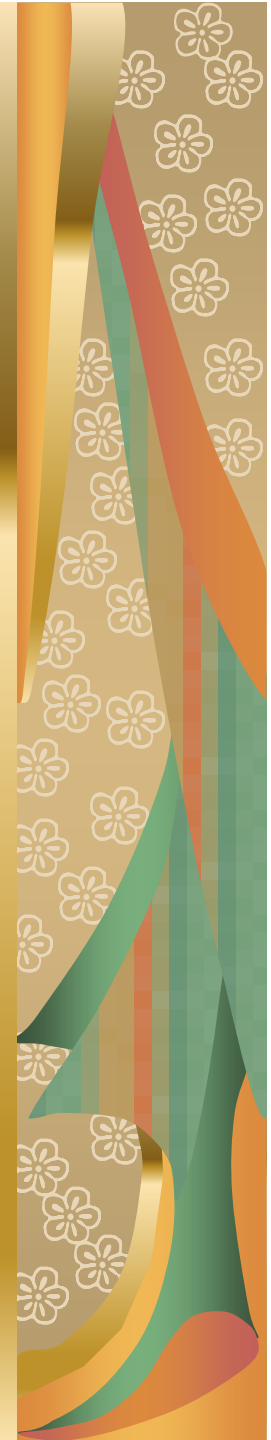
Conclusion

- Motherhood is not a universal experience; rather it depends on the particular conditions - *social, cultural, political and economic* - in which individual women give birth to and rear children.
(Richardson, 1993:144).
- The experience of motherhood for migrant women is exclusive in that it represents the distinctive power of patriarchy more obviously than the experiences of women from Anglo-Celtic background.
- Some feminists may argue that because of patriarchal dominance women may choose not to have children.
- However, this may not be the option for many migrant mothers such as Thai women.
- Thai mothers have special needs to bear and rear children, not only to fulfil the wish of motherhood, but also to help them to cope with the harsh life in the patriarchal society in which they have to live.



Conclusion

- Feminism argues strongly for the issues of equal rights and the needs of motherhood, and the provision of choice for mothers.
- But, at this point of time migrant mothers may not be in a position to avail themselves of the benefits.
- Several Thai immigrant mothers, including myself, have tried to be a feminist and a mother.
- Unfortunately, our ideals are thwarted because of the fact that we are also migrant mothers.
- We are now under the control of the "patriarchal" Australian health and legal system, which has limited our freedom and equal rights when comparing with those of many mainstream feminists in this country.



Final Conclusion

- ❏ The rewards of motherhood were immediate and lasting. I have established a relaxed physical intimacy with both my children which tolerates anger and laughter, built up over a decade of washing them, reading to them, and tumbling about with them. The relationship I have with my children is the single most important part of my present life.
- ❏ Similar to this woman 's account, motherhood has given many Thai mothers happiness in their inner self and this has helped us to survive tough times.
- ❏ There are, however, many other Thai migrant mothers who may not be in a privilege position to enjoy motherhood while trying to survive in their new country.
- ❏ These mothers, I argue, are the group who would possibly benefit from a social service intervention such as social support or a social network that attempts to reduce their marginal status in Australian society.

