



# Along the paths of berry pickers

Ascertaining the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden through Swedish media

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## Abstract

Sweden is one of the northern European countries that receive seasonal migrant labour annually from Thai and free/tourist pickers for wild-berry picking in rural northern forests and lands of Sweden. Both Thai and free/tourist pickers are subjected to different irregularities and unfair labour conditions within the Swedish wild-berries industry. Swedish media is a platform which gives visibility to voices and the labour conditions of Thai and free/tourist pickers by reporting occurrences, dialogues, debates and ideas related to these pickers. This thesis analyses the roles and positions of the seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden while examining the plight of these pickers closely from the perspective of Swedish media. The data emanates from 100 media publications published under 22 media publication brands in Sweden. A theoretical framework which incorporates theories and concepts of world system theory, social capital, economic capital, cultural capital and critical discourse analysis is used in the analysis and discussion to understand the roles and positions of the berry pickers while answering the research questions of the study. The results show that both Thai and free/tourist pickers' roles mainly involve being part of Sweden's seasonal labour immigration, maximising the efficiency of wild-berry supply within the food system and increasing the financial gain of the Swedish wild-berry industry. The results also emphasise that Thai berry pickers occupy a low socio-economic position in their country of origin while I could not draw conclusions on the free/tourist pickers' socio-economic position.

*Keywords:* Swedish wild-berry industry, seasonal migrant berry pickers, Thai berry pickers, free/tourist pickers, roles, socio-economic positions, labour conditions

# Table of contents

<b>List of tables .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Problem Statement .....	8
1.2 Purpose of the study .....	9
1.3 Research Questions .....	10
1.4 Thesis outline .....	10
<b>2. Thematic background.....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Permanent and temporary migration .....	11
2.2 Seasonal migration for agri-food work .....	11
2.3 Seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden before and after 2008.....	12
2.4 Dynamics around contemporary non-EU seasonal migrant berry picking in Sweden .....	12
2.5 Unrecorded free pickers in Sweden.....	15
<b>3. Theoretical framework.....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 World Systems Theory (WST) .....	16
3.2 Capitals (social, economic & cultural) .....	17
3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).....	17
<b>4. Methodology.....</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1 Basis of the study.....	19
4.2 Method of data collection .....	19
4.3 Method of data analysis .....	20
4.4 Reflexivity .....	21
4.5 Diversions, limitations and ethical concerns .....	21
<b>5. Empirical findings and analysis .....</b>	<b>23</b>
5.1 Discourses on seasonal migrant berry pickers' role in relation to interactions with different actors .....	24
5.1.1 The plight of Thai berry pickers and free/tourist berry pickers .....	24
5.1.2 Labour relations between seasonal migrant berry pickers and Swedish berry companies/ employers/ berry purchasers.....	25
5.1.3 Employment of Thai berry pickers through staffing companies.....	28

5.1.4	The impact of Swedish trade unions in shaping the role of seasonal migrant berry pickers .....	29
5.1.5	Swedish regulatory framework of seasonal migrant berry pickers and the municipalities' interactions with the berry pickers.....	30
5.1.6	Swedish legal framework of migrant berry pickers and their interactions with the social services, police and military forces.....	34
5.1.7	Health care facilities of migrant berry pickers in Sweden.....	35
5.1.8	Migrant berry pickers' interactions and confrontations with the Swedish local residents, landowners and hunters.....	36
5.1.9	Thai government's involvement in the regulatory framework of Thai seasonal migrant berry pickers .....	38
5.2	Berry pickers' remuneration or earnings, labour and living conditions and utilisations of earnings from berry picking.....	39
5.2.1	Thai berry pickers .....	39
5.2.2	Free/tourist pickers .....	42
5.3	Dependence of the Swedish wild-berry industry on seasonal migrant berry pickers .....	44
<b>6.</b>	<b>Concluding discussion .....</b>	<b>47</b>
6.1	How does Swedish media describe, frame and analyse seasonal migrant berry pickers? .....	47
6.2	How does seasonal migrant berry picking affect the socio-economic situation of the berry pickers?.....	49
6.3	How does seasonal migrant berry picking benefit the Swedish berry industry? ....	50
6.4	Overview of the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden	50
6.5	Reflections and further studies .....	51
	<b>References .....</b>	<b>52</b>
	<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>56</b>
	<b>Appendix I – Media publications related to discourses .....</b>	<b>57</b>

# List of tables

Table 1: Number of issued work permits per year for berry picking ..... 25

Table 2: Contractual salary for a Thai berry picker per month ..... 40

Table 3: Price per kilo of blueberries received by free/tourist pickers ..... 43

Table 4: Quantities of berry harvest picked per day by different categories of berry pickers ..... 45

# Abbreviations

CDA	Critical discourse analysis
CUF	Centre Party Youth/ Centerpartiets Ungdomsförbund
EU	European Union
MUF	Moderate Youth League's / Moderata Ungdomsförbundets
MV	Swedish Migration Agency/ Migrationsverket
Non-EU	Non-European Union
PCR	Polymerase chain reaction
S	Swedish Social Democrats/ Socialdemokraterna
WST	World Systems Theory

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problem Statement

The European commercial fruit and vegetable sector is highly dependent on seasonal employment. The need for this labour force to maintain the global food systems is mostly fulfilled through seasonal migration (Meuwissen et al. 2021). Berry picking in the northern parts of Sweden is one such sector that is mostly dependent on seasonal migrants who come from non-European Union (non-EU) countries, commonly from South-East Asian countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, European Union (EU) countries like Bulgaria and Romania and other European countries like Ukraine. Throughout time, these berry picking migrants have become a crucial element in functioning the food system of berries in Sweden (Augère-Granier 2021).

Every year during summer, approximately 5,000 seasonal migrant workers particularly from Thailand, are accounted as coming into Sweden in order to work as berry pickers. Thai berry pickers are considered the largest group of non-EU transitional migrant berry pickers who are employed by Swedish berry companies under work permits. Thus, they are identified as the contracted berry pickers. (Augère-Granier 2021)

According to Petra Herzfeld Olsson (2018) Thai migrant berry pickers who migrate temporarily to Sweden are one of the most vulnerable groups who are subjected to different economic and legal irregularities and unfair labour conditions. Some of these irregularities are; the lack of social benefits and guaranteed minimum wages according to Swedish policies for migrant employees, the complex system of recruiting migrant berry pickers through intermediate agencies by the berry production companies, labour exploitation of berry pickers, higher expenses related to migrant berry picking, Covid-19 outbreaks within berry picking communities in Swedish territory, and many more. The plight of the Thai seasonal berry-picking migrants and the economic and social context in Sweden is a matter that is subjected to debate nationally and internationally (Augère-Granier 2021).

On the other hand, Roma berry pickers who come to Sweden from EU countries, commonly from Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria and other European countries, like Ukraine, are identified as 'tourist pickers' or 'free pickers' as they migrate temporarily to Sweden for berry picking on tourist visas. Tourist pickers have the opportunity to enter Sweden for three months under tourist



visas and pick Swedish wild-berries due to the general public's right of accessing most of the public or privately owned land under the Swedish bylaw 'allmansrätten'. Thus, these free pickers are not usually employed by Swedish berry companies. Yet, they can sell the berries that they have harvested, to berry companies or to berry purchasers which are called 'bäruppköp' during their stay in Sweden. (Schneider et al. 2020)

Accordingly, in comparison to the contracted berry pickers who come from a different continent, free pickers have easier access to berry picking grounds in Sweden. Nevertheless, free pickers are also subjected to exploitation and manipulation in the food system of berries in Sweden, mainly because, unlike the contracted berry pickers, free pickers are unregulated. Free pickers are prone to becoming victims of human trafficking, fraudulent informal arrangements related to travelling between countries and selling berries, risk of having minimal financial gain, poor living conditions, health risks amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and many more (Mešić & Wikström 2021).

Both contracted berry pickers and free pickers who migrate to Sweden occupy a low and precarious position within the economic and power relations of the food system. Nevertheless, they travel to Sweden for seasonal berry picking on a regular basis. Why do these seasonal migrants choose to go to Sweden, despite the risk of being victimised? How important are seasonal migrant berry pickers to the Swedish berry industry? In order to find answers to these questions, I believe it is important to understand what type of role these seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden play and what type of position they hold. However, seasonal migrant berry pickers are not present in Sweden during spring as they mainly migrate to Sweden only during the summer. Thus, I was unable to focus my research on the direct experiences and inputs of seasonal migrant berry pickers to understand their roles and positions.

Instead, I have chosen to study how the roles and positions of the seasonal migrant berry pickers in the Swedish commercial berry picking industry are described, analysed and debated in Swedish media.

## 1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyse how Swedish media describes, frames and interprets the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Swedish media. The study also aims to explore how berry-picking affects the socio-economic situation of the seasonal migrant berry pickers and benefits the Swedish berry companies.

## 1.3 Research Questions

The research problem of the thesis, as stated above, is broken down into three explorative research questions.

- 1) How does Swedish media describe, frame and analyse seasonal migrant berry pickers?
- 2) How does seasonal migrant berry picking affect the socio-economic situation of the berry pickers?
- 3) How does seasonal migrant berry picking benefit the Swedish berry industry?

## 1.4 Thesis outline

After this first introductory chapter, the rest of the thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides the background to the thesis by explaining the nature of migration and seasonal migration for agri-food work while presenting the changes and evolution of seasonal migrant berry pickers in the Swedish wild-berry industry. Chapter 3 emphasises the concepts and theories used in the analysis of the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden. Chapter 4 mainly unfolds the methods of data collection and analysis, reflexivity and limitations of the study. Chapter 5 details the empirical findings together with the analytical discussion. Finally, Chapter 6 presents the concluding discussion which summarises the answers to the research questions, defines the roles and position of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden, provides contributions of this study to the academia and gives suggestions for further research.

## 2. Thematic background

### 2.1 Permanent and temporary migration

Migration of humans can be defined as the physical movement of people as individuals or groups from one particular place to another location in order to station permanently or temporarily at the destination. When one moves to a destination and settles there with no intention to return to her/his location of origin, it can be identified as permanent migration. On the other hand, when one moves to another location for a certain period of time after which she/he returns to the location of origin, it is described as temporary migration. These permanent and temporary movements can be defined as the flow of migrants and when the migrants are settled, they become a stock within the population of the destination. Migration can occur within the borders of a state or even across the borders of a state. According to Wilbur Zelinsky, migration mostly depends on the economic development of the place or the state of origin and the destination. He further emphasises that people tend to migrate to more developed places in search of better opportunities. (Gould 2015)

### 2.2 Seasonal migration for agri-food work

Seasonal migration can be identified as a form of temporary migration, according to which people as individuals or groups move to another location only during a specific season of the year to accomplish a certain task at the destination. Mostly, seasonal migration occurs for the purpose of undertaking seasonal employment at the destination with the intention of acquiring more financial gains (Gould, 2015). When the migrants are in search of better opportunities than where they were rooted, often they are even willing to provide strenuous labour for comparatively lower wages than the prevailing wages at the destination (Thieme & Wyss 2005). Thus, seasonal employments for seasonal migrants are most commonly available within the global agri-food system.

The European agri-food sector is a popular destination for seasonal migrants who come from non-EU countries as well as EU countries. Specifically, southern European countries such as Italy, Spain etc., western and central European countries such as Germany, France etc., eastern European countries such as Poland etc., and even northern European countries such as Sweden, Denmark etc.,

maintain their agri-food systems because of the seasonal migrants. Since 1945 the dependency of agri-food systems in Europe on seasonal migrants has been gradually increasing to date. (Augère-Granier 2021)

According to the statistics of the EU parliament, the employment number of non-nationals in the European agri-food sector is higher than the employment number of intra-European seasonal migrant workers. At the same time, a significant number of seasonal migrant workers in Europe are unrecorded. Sweden is one such northern European country that attracts seasonal migrants from both South-East Asian countries and Eastern European countries for wild-berry (blueberry, cloudberry, raspberry etc.) picking in rural northern forest lands of Sweden. (Augère-Granier 2021)

## 2.3 Seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden before and after 2008

Until 2008, harvesting wild-berries for commercial purposes in Sweden was done by seasonal migrants who arrive in Sweden from both non-EU and EU countries on tourist visas (Schneider et al. 2020). Their berry picking labour was ‘unregulated and uncontracted’ but, the harvested berries could be sold to Swedish berry purchasers (Mešić & Wikström 2021). Nevertheless, along with growing national and international attention towards scandals related to non-EU seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden, Swedish authorities started regulating and tightening the recruitment laws of the berry pickers for Swedish berry companies. Accordingly, since 2008 seasonal migrants from non-EU countries are granted work visas in order to enter Sweden for berry picking. When granting work visas by the ‘Migrationsverket’ or the Swedish Migration Agency (MV), berry picking companies are required to provide a work contract with the employee which states the minimum wage. Nonetheless, seasonal migrants from EU countries and some other European countries and the free pickers are still entering Sweden for berry picking on tourist visas (Schneider et al. 2020).

## 2.4 Dynamics around contemporary non-EU seasonal migrant berry picking in Sweden

Among non-EU seasonal migrant berry pickers who enter Sweden every year, the number of migrant berry pickers who come from Thailand is recognised as the highest and every year their number is increasing (Hedberg & Axelsson 2019). Along with the annually increasing flow of Thai migrant berry pickers in Sweden, they have become an essential part of the Swedish berry industry. The role of Thai migrant berry pickers and the conditions of their labour has been examined through different

perspectives within previous research. Apart from that, research also depicts how the actions of several actors that are involved in the berry picking sector can be instrumental in shaping the Thai berry pickers' roles and positions within the food system.

According to Petra Herzfeld Olsson (2018), the Thai migrant berry pickers are one of the vulnerable social groups, subjected to different irregularities and manipulations. Relatively higher costs associated with berry picking labour are considered one of the irregularities (Olsson, 2018). The report by Hedberg & Axelsson (2019) also depicted that around 50% of the total earnings by each Thai transitional migrant from berry picking is spent to pay back the money they loan each year. Loans are obtained to cover recruiting agencies' fees and the cost of fuel, food and accommodation during their stay. Thus, the remittances of the pickers can be very low. Based on the perspective of migrants themselves, the report emphasised that the net financial gain of Thai berry pickers for the strenuous labour and time they provide for berry picking in Sweden is low and that makes their role vulnerable within the food system (Hedberg & Axelsson 2019).

Even if the Swedish berry picking sector consists of several loopholes regarding migrant berry picking labour, this sector is still a highly sought-after alternative source of income for Thai migrant berry pickers. Despite the fact that Thai migrant berry pickers in Sweden are paid rather a low remuneration, it is considered a higher amount of earning in Thailand. The salary of a transitional Thai migrant berry picker, who obtains the highest remuneration of seasonal berry picking, is twelve times higher than what she/he earns in Thailand. Moreover, most of the Thai berry pickers had already been to Sweden at least seven times or more than that for berry picking. Thus, for Thai seasonal migrants, the berry picking labour market in Sweden is a highly demanding source of income. (Hedberg & Axelsson 2019)

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Petra Herzfeld Olsson (2018) depicted that the Swedish trade unions are a group of actors who is prominent in shaping the roles and positions of Thai berry pickers. The involvement of Swedish trade

unions within labour migration regulations in Sweden and collective agreements on work conditions regarding Thai berry pickers so far was significant. Especially, along with the 2008 Swedish labour migration reformations which gave broader access to labour migration from countries outside the EU, different scandals and misconducts related to Thai migrant berry pickers were reported by the media. In response to those issues, trade unions have played a substantial part in improving the standards, rights and working conditions of these berry pickers, up to some extent. Trade unions are further referred to as a mediator between another two actors; berry companies/employers in Sweden and the MV who are linked to the berry pickers' role. While establishing communication between those two actors, trade unions usually provide recommendations to collective agreements and verify the terms and conditions in berry pickers' work contracts with the collective agreements. (Olsson 2018)

Petra Herzfeld Olsson (2018) projected Swedish municipalities as another actor who is related to the role of Thai migrant berry pickers. Swedish municipalities are involved in inspecting shortcomings of accommodation provided to Thai berry pickers by the Swedish employers and ensuring the pickers are facilitated with health and safety, fire protection etc., in their accommodation. Private stakeholders such as food retail companies are also another actor who is connected to the role of Thai migrant berry pickers. Some of those companies conduct social audits<sup>1</sup> by hiring social auditing companies and some others follow certification systems related to ecological sustainability and social requirements for the berry-picking sector to uplift "decent treatment of the migrant berry pickers". (Olsson 2018)

Eriksson, et al. (2019) showed that the Thai berry pickers are an integral part of a global food system characterised by asymmetrical gaps and divisions of economy and labour. They highlighted that these migrant berry pickers in Sweden are located in a vulnerable economic and social position in the contemporary world system<sup>2</sup> where "production, consumption and trading patterns create unequal exchange of embodied labour and natural resources". The intensifying need for global food production amidst the prevailing internationally interwoven food systems and power relations have pressurised the producers to produce more food through supply chain capitalism<sup>3</sup>. Thai migrant berry pickers are also severely constrained within this system of berry production. According to the perspectives of the actors; producers of berries and berry products, berry buyers, sellers and consumers within the global food system of Swedish wild-berries, the role of migrant berry pickers

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<sup>1</sup> An audit/assessment of the company's balance between procedures, profitability and social responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> A system with uneven resource flows, which makes wealthier parts of global arena possible to save time and space at the cost of human labour and environments in the poorer parts. (Hornborg 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Companies and organisations around the world relying on outsourced/subcontracted labour.

is still a grey area. Thus, the whole berry industry gives less visibility to the migrant workers' voice and ultimately made the irregularities easily overlooked. (Eriksson et al. 2019)

## 2.5 Unrecorded free pickers in Sweden

Along with the inflow of non-EU seasonal migrant berry pickers, EU and some non-EU European seasonal migrant berry pickers can also be sighted engaging in berry picking in northern Sweden during the summer season. However, the statistical and specifically recorded data related to the mobility of free pickers are not available as much as the information related to contracted pickers. Since the seasonal migration of free pickers is not regulated and contracted to the same extent as the non-EU berry pickers' seasonal migration and free pickers are entering Sweden on tourist visas, keeping track of data related to the inflow of free pickers has been a difficult task. However, the mostly unrecorded plight and the information related to free pickers can be visible through Swedish media sometimes, as the local media publications unfold and report different incidents and stories regarding problems and frauds connected to free pickers. (Mešić & Wikström 2021)

Nevertheless, according to the free-lance journalist and evaluator Mats Wingborg both contracted berry pickers and free pickers, who migrate seasonally every year to Sweden, are equal in numbers. The majority of the free pickers are coming from eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria and Ukraine (Wingborg 2016). Besides, during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in 2020, the Swedish berry companies had to rely mostly on the berry supply of free pickers as contracted pickers could not migrate to Sweden due to the travel restrictions (Krakovsky 2020). It emphasises the significant part that free pickers play within the Swedish berry industry.

Swedish media functions as a platform that is instrumental in giving visibility to subaltern representation, and at times, voices and the plight of both contracted berry pickers and free pickers. There are number of articles, videos and audios published on Swedish media that report occurrences, dialogues, debates and ideas related to both categories of pickers every year in different areas of Sweden. Therefore, I intend to examine the economic and social roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden from the perspectives of Swedish media.

### 3. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I draw out the concepts and theories that are instrumental in identifying the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden through Swedish media.

#### 3.1 World Systems Theory (WST)

WST is a theoretical framework which provides a social analysis of the prevailing economic system of the world by framing the global context on social relations and dependencies. It focuses on how that the majority of states, countries and institutions are interconnected and interdependent within the world system. Immanuel Wallerstein's emphasis on WST depicted that the modern world economic system resulted over a long span of time through a series of economic and political transitions within and between countries in which the division of human labour played a major role. Wallerstein (2004) projected a three-level hierarchy which consists of core (economically and politically dominant capitalist countries), periphery (economically and politically least dominant countries) and semi-periphery (countries that are economically and politically less dominant than the core and more dominant than the periphery). Accordingly, the core countries in the developed world dominate peripheral countries by extracting labour and raw materials from the periphery. Peripheral countries provide labour and raw material to the core and also depend on the core for capital. Semi-peripheral countries have characteristics of both periphery and core, in which semi-periphery has dominant economic relationships with the peripheric countries and less dominant relationships with the core countries. Thus, the prevailing economic system is also considered a 'capitalist world economy' where capitalist powers accumulate not only labour and raw material from the periphery but also accumulate wealth in the core. For instance, peripheric countries perform labour-intensive jobs in the core for cheaper wages. This system makes some countries benefit while the other countries are exploited and subsequently creates inequalities in the social context. (Wallerstein 2004)



David Harvey further emphasised this system as developed capitalist countries of the Global North centralise their wealth and power by exploiting the peripheric countries. That system creates a volatile situation and a chronic state of underdevelopment in the countries of the Global South. (Harvey 2006)

Therefore, WST is an important approach in order to understand the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers within the labour-intensive and profit-oriented Swedish wild berry-industry.

### 3.2 Capitals (social, economic & cultural)

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that modern society is divided into specific social arenas, which he labels social fields, which are dominated by specific values, norms and institutions, and struggle between groups and individuals for certain resources, called ‘capitals’. The most common forms of capitals are: social, economic, cultural and symbolic, which the groups and individuals covet and draw on to achieve mobility within the specific social fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, this study focuses only on three capitals; social, economic and cultural.

Social capital entails a network of social connections and relationships among people which are formed based on individual potential or/and the certain social category to which an individual belongs. Those social networks can be formed horizontally where people who belong to a similar social class connect with each other, whereas vertical networks can be formed through associations like patron-client relationships. Economic capital incorporates different forms of financial assets such as monthly monetary income, fixed assets like properties etc. On the other hand, cultural capital includes another set of assets which can be identified as education, intellect, experience in work within a specific field or occupation. Increasing these capitals by individuals is considered to be influential in climbing the ladder of social mobility. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992)

Thus, I consider Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts of social, economic and cultural capital are specifically instrumental in understanding the positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in the society based on the gathered evidence related to how the berry pickers engage in berry picking, how much they earn and how they utilise what they earn.

### 3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is identified as an interdisciplinary approach in the study of discourse. Discourse addresses the meanings conveyed by language in social, cultural, historical and political contexts. CDA is further acknowledged as a qualitative method used to study language in relation to the social practice which includes social problems, social relationships and the ‘role of discourse on the production and

reproduction of power abuse or domination in communications'. Language in a discourse consists of values, assessments, concepts, perceptions, structures etc. On the other hand, language also has the power to create opinions, concepts, ideologies etc., in the social context. (Dijk 2001)

Norman Fairclough emphasise the CDA as an approach to examining how ideologies and concepts are reproduced through language and text while identifying and understanding the connotations that the language and text imply. Fairclough's CDA approach encompasses three components: description, interpretation and examination. It can be further explained as;

Description of the text or the discourse while identifying the perspectives of discourse, choice of words used in the discourse, tones and styles etc.

- Interpretation of the production or the construction of text or discourse while understanding who is behind the discourse, how it is created by the author(s), whose representation it is etc.
- Examination of influence of discourse on the society, organisation of social structures etc. (Fairclough 1992)

In this thesis, 'description' and 'examination' are actively focused on different levels. Identifying perspectives and choice of words in the discourses under 'description' is essential to answer all three research questions in data analysis. Moreover, recognising the influence and impact of discourses on the society and social structures under 'examination' is necessary to answer research questions two and three and also to draw conclusions in the end. However, I also looked into the background of the discourses in the Swedish media publications that I selected for this study although, I am not elaborating on that component in the thesis. I tried to understand who the authors are of these publications, how they extracted data or what are the sources of data in the discourses and what sort of political and social perspectives media publication brands uphold. Accordingly, I consider 'interpretation' of the production or the construction of discourses in the media publications as a stimulant factor to better identify and understand 'description' and 'examination'.

## 4. Methodology

This chapter unfolds the basis of the study, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis, reflexivity, ethical concerns, diversions and limitations related to the study on exploring the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden through Swedish media.

### 4.1 Basis of the study

The basis of this qualitative study is situated within a constructivist theoretical and methodological paradigm. The constructivist approach is centred around the hermeneutic notion (Ricoeur 2008) that, “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Creswell 2018). When carrying out this study, a point of departure was my assumption that the Swedish media will frame the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden from specific perspectives depending on their geographic, social and political positions. Thus, I intend to explore the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden through the understanding(s) and interpretations of Swedish media and try to grasp the framing of those perception(s). The concept of framing emanates from the writings of the sociologist Ervin Goffman on what he labels ‘collective action frames’ (Goffman 1974). This study is also informed by a critical perspective, based on the notion that research needs to be interwoven with “politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs” and address constructive change towards the “underrepresented populations” in the society (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

### 4.2 Method of data collection

This study is based on qualitative methods of data collection. In order to identify and analyse the Swedish media’s description and interpretation of the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden, I identified and selected different Swedish media publications. Those publications consist of newspaper articles, magazine articles, audios and videos published from 2019 to 2021 on

Swedish print, broadcast and internet media platforms. I had help from my supervisor and the Uppsala city library to be familiarised with a wide range of media publication brands in Sweden as I am not much familiar with a lot of them. While being familiarised with the media publication brands, I realised most of the newspapers and magazines are linked with different counties, cities or areas from north to south of Sweden. In order to have a representation across the whole country, I selected 20 newspapers and magazines printed and published online randomly, from each one of three commonly identified regions; Götaland (southern Sweden), Svealand (central Sweden) and Norrland (northern Sweden) in Sweden. Those newspapers and magazines are: Affärsliv.com, Aftonbladet, Arbetaren, Corren.se, Dagens Arena, Dagens Industri, Dagens Nyheter, Hallandsposten, Landets fria, Länstidningen Östersund (LT), Lantbrukets Affärstidning (ATL), Norrbottens-Kuriren, Nörrköping tidningar, Norrländska Socialdemokraten (NSD), Piteå, Svensk Jakt, The Local, Timbro, Uppsala Nya Tidning (UNT) and Värmlands folkblad. Apart from that, I selected Sweden's national television broadcaster; Sveriges Television (SVT) and radio broadcaster; Sveriges Radio. Afterwards, I selected 100 Swedish media publications including articles, audio and video clips related to seasonal migrant berry pickers that are published under above mentioned 22 media publication brands, as the sources of data for my study. Those media publications were in Swedish except for one. Thus, I translated those 99 publications into English, although I can understand Swedish up to some extent. Subsequently, I extracted three main discourses constructed around the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden in those 100 media publications.

- 1) Discourses on the berry pickers in relation to interactions with different actors in the social strata.
- 2) Discourse on remuneration or earnings, labour and living conditions and ways of utilising the salary earnings from berry picking.
- 3) Discourse on the dependence of the Swedish wild-berry industry on seasonal migrant berry pickers.

## 4.3 Method of data analysis

Once I identified the discourses by reading, listening to and watching media publications several times, I prepared an abridged version of each discourse according to the way I interpreted them. Subsequently, I tried to recognise media perspective(s) towards seasonal migrant berry pickers projected throughout 'discourse one' to understand how Swedish media describe, frame and analyse

seasonal migrant berry pickers (research question one). Apart from that, to identify the answers to research question two and three, I observed the data presented in discourses two and three.

## 4.4 Reflexivity

I believe that I, as the researcher play a vital role in the study as I gather, present and examine the data. Thus, it is important to think about incorporating reflexivity into the study. A main aspect of reflexivity encompasses identifying and examining one's own experiences, values, views and interpretations during the study and how they affect different phases of the study (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Accordingly, I put my effort to recognise my values and views related to this study area and taking them into consideration when analysing data.

Although currently, I am residing in Sweden, I come from Sri Lanka. Being a non-ethnic Swedish researcher with minimum exposure to any of the actors and the location of the study, on the one hand, one can point out that I am completely detached from the background of the study. On the other hand, I argue that having roots in a country in the global south, where skilled and unskilled labour migration is prevalent and being familiar with the fragile conditions of unskilled migrant labourers, have an impact on my perspective of analysing the media discourses. Thus, before preparing the abridged versions of the media discourses, I memoed my own observations and immediate impressions I got on each discourse while reading, watching and listening to the media publications hoping that it would be useful in data analysis. That way, I attempted to bring out reflexivity yet, I have attempted to remain as unbiased as possible when analysing the discourses. My own framing of the discourses, and the values they display, are mainly unpacked in the final discussion.

## 4.5 Diversions, limitations and ethical concerns

At first, I intended to identify the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden through the berry pickers themselves. However, as berry pickers are not in Sweden during spring, I could not proceed with the initial plan. Even if tried finding possibilities to contact them for data collection via zoom or other online communication platforms, I found out that it is not a viable option. I adapted accordingly and started looking into the same research problem from a different angle i.e. through Swedish media.

Nevertheless, while carrying out the research I encountered different challenges and limitations. As I am not familiar with the media publication brands in Sweden, I had to spend a lot of time identifying them and getting an entry into data collection. On the other hand, I do not have excellent knowledge of the Swedish language. Therefore, I had to translate 99 media publications from Swedish to English for my reference throughout the study. Translating without or with minimum mistranslations was again a difficult and time-consuming task. Apart from that, extracting discourses was also a challenge and had many limitations. I identified discourses according to the way that I understood and interpreted the given facts in the publications (secondary data). Unlike when gathering primary data through semi-structured or unstructured interviews, I had the minimum opportunity to further clarify unsure or ambiguous facts except by reading, watching or listening to the publications several times.

Nevertheless, when gathering data, I did not have to pay much attention to being ethically concerned as media publications are open sources available for the general public to read, listen and watch, unlike when conducting interviews by myself. Finally, I emphasise that the conclusions and arguments of my study are based only on the empirical data that I extracted from the above-selected sources between 2019 and 2021.

## 5. Empirical findings and analysis

In this chapter, empirical evidence that I gathered from Swedish media about the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden is unveiled. The chapter elaborates on the insights of views and perceptions of discourses in selected Swedish media publications together with participants' thoughts and views within those media publications on the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden. In the analysis of documents (media publications), I have been able to identify several discourses on seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden. Those media discourses were based on secondary data (documents related to the topic) and primary data (interviews of berry pickers and other participants).

The first section of the chapter mainly emphasises nine discourses on the role of seasonal migrant berry pickers in relation to interactions with different actors in the social strata together with the discourse analysis. Those actors vary from the ones within the food system of Swedish wild-berries and the external actors. This particular part aims to address research question one in this study, to understand how Swedish media describes, frames and analyses seasonal migrant berry pickers for the general public. The second part of the chapter unfolds the discourse analysis of remuneration or earnings, labour and living conditions and the ways of utilising the earnings from berry picking by the berry pickers in Sweden. This section intends to address research question two, in order to ascertain how seasonal migrant berry picking affects the socio-economic situation of the berry pickers. The focus of the final part shifts particularly towards the discourse analysis of the dependency of the Swedish berry picking industry on seasonal migrant berry pickers. This focus aims to discuss and answer research question three, to clarify how seasonal migrant berry picking benefits the Swedish berry industry.

## 5.1 Discourses on seasonal migrant berry pickers' role in relation to interactions with different actors

### 5.1.1 The plight of Thai berry pickers and free/tourist berry pickers

I intend to present this particular discourse briefly in this section as some of the facts, arguments and narratives are mostly linked to the coming discourses in this section and section 5.2. Thus, I will further elaborate on them in that section. One of the main arguments in this discourse is the effects of issues on seasonal migrant Thai and free/tourist berry pickers. Specifically, sixteen media publications (refer to Appendix I:1. p.57) have depicted the effects of labour exploitation, extreme weather conditions and the Covid19 pandemic on Thai migrant berry pickers. The narratives in the discourse unfolded that Thai berry pickers are still mostly get paid for the quantity of berries (per kilo price) that they pick during their stay in Sweden and they “do not receive a salary according to agreements”<sup>4</sup> with Swedish companies. It makes the pickers work for long hours sometimes even without a weekly day off to pick larger quantities of berries. As a result, the berry supply for companies gets increased.

Besides, the media explained that the Thai berry pickers are further burdened by the latest Swedish tax policy<sup>5</sup> introduced in autumn, 2020 as they do not get higher salaries, as expected. Thai berry pickers are seldom aware of their rights and conditions in the collective agreements. Moreover, it is revealed that Thai migrant berry pickers were destructively affected by the Covid19 pandemic due to travel restrictions which limited their seasonal mobility between Thailand and Sweden. The narratives further revealed that the berry pickers lost most of the blueberry and cloudberry harvest as the cloudberry plants and “many blueberry plants dried up in 2018’s summer heat”<sup>6</sup>. That made it difficult for the berry pickers to earn what they expected. There were also numerous Covid19 outbreaks in Swedish territory among Thai berry picking groups who managed to migrate to Sweden. A newspaper article emphasised the fact that “something would be wrong with the system if the point was to eventually target the poorest and most powerless player in the chain - the Thai pickers”<sup>7</sup>.

Even though both non-European berry pickers and Thai berry pickers, are subjected to these problems, the publications also highlighted that the mobility of those non-European seasonal migrant berry pickers to Sweden has significantly increased in comparison to the decrease in 2020 due to the

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<sup>4</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>5</sup> All the guest contracted workers need to pay tax in Sweden. (This will be explicitly explained in section 5.1.5)

<sup>6</sup> TT. (2019). Bärhandlare spår bra lingonår. Hallandsposten.

<sup>7</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.



pandemic. By May 2021, it is revealed that “over 5,000 non-European berry pickers are expected”<sup>8</sup> to be migrated to Sweden in 2021. According to the statistics, the total number of work permits granted for non-European berry pickers to enter Sweden each year are as following before: explicitly

*Table 1: Number of issued work permits per year for berry picking*

Year	Number of issued work permits
2021	5,111
2020	3,092 including 2,900 Thai pickers
2019	6,199
2018	4,987
2017	3,079
2016	3,079

On the other hand, twenty media publications (refer to Appendix I:2. p.58) have projected the impact of human trafficking, exploitation, extreme weather conditions and the Covid19 pandemic on free/tourist pickers. Many media publications have discussed the informal arrangements of transporting free/tourist pickers from European countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine to Sweden. The informal organising parties of transportation abandoned free/tourist pickers in the middle of northern Swedish forests sometimes without providing food and accommodation. Furthermore, it is shown that even free/tourist pickers’ groups were suffering from Covid19 outbreaks during the seasons of 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, there is no direct official authority within the Swedish food system of berries to take responsibility for them. Apart from that, just as Thai berry pickers, free/tourist pickers were also going through difficulties in harvesting berries and earning money during the seasons of drought in Sweden. At the same time, an article also reported that “the number of tourist pickers has decreased to around 1,000 pickers”<sup>9</sup> in 2021, especially as a result of the latest Swedish government’s tax policy. It is a drastic decrease “in many decades”<sup>10</sup>.

### 5.1.2 Labour relations between seasonal migrant berry pickers and Swedish berry companies/ employers/ berry purchasers

When presenting the concepts, concerns and issues in media discussions on seasonal migrant berry pickers in relation to different actors in the social strata, firstly, I am depicting the discourse on interactions between berry pickers and Swedish berry companies/ employers/ berry purchasers. The

<sup>8</sup> TT. (2021). 5 000 bärplockare väntas i år. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>9</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

storylines and arguments related to this discourse have been displayed in fifteen media publications (refer to Appendix I:3. p.59-60). The stories unfolded the stories and instances where Thai berry pickers were facilitated by Swedish berry companies/ purchasers to perform the task of berry picking to subsequently maximise the berry harvest. It is revealed that the berry purchasers, like Blommor och Bär, provided facilities such as quarantine homes with food for Thai seasonal migrant berry pickers during the Covid19 outbreaks among them in 2020 and 2021. In addition to that, Blommor och Bär AB made arrangements to pick up berries that are picked by Thai berry pickers by cars at night during the last two years. At the same time, a Swedish employer of Norrskensbär AB berry company was saying in a media publication in 2021 that, “they were not aware of the requirement of Covid test upon entry for berry pickers”<sup>11</sup>, yet, they opened special quarantine homes for Covid19 infected Thai berry pickers. Some companies have even taken preventive measures to keep berry pickers away from getting infected with Covid19. For example, “in Ånge the closed Bolbyskolan has been converted into a residence”<sup>12</sup> by a berry company to arrange spacious dining and living for Thai berry pickers, prohibiting unauthorised persons to enter. These kinds of arrangements were not implemented by the Swedish berry companies until 2020.

However, the narratives have depicted that Swedish berry companies also overlooked conducting Covid19 tests on Thai berry pickers immediately upon arrival, according to the recommendations from the Swedish Public Health Agency in 2020 and 2021. Sometimes, there were instances where even though, the Thai berry pickers were tested positive for Covid19, if there were no symptoms or had mild symptoms, they were immediately sent to work by the berry companies. It shows that the companies expect the berry pickers to bring the maximum benefit from chain capitalism and immigrant labour during the berry season.

On the other hand, there is also an instance reported in an SVT publication<sup>13</sup> where a small-scale berry company in Sweden was involved in providing employment opportunities for Thai seasonal migrants based on the long-term employee-employer relationship. It described that the recruited the family members in Thailand of the Thai employees at her business premises, as berry pickers. This was in practice for some years and in 2020 the owner/employer was worried if they “do not get the Thais, who will pick the berries”<sup>14</sup> and how can they fulfil the demand for berries. Apart from that, a media article<sup>15</sup> from the Dagens Arena also reported an occurrence where the largest Swedish

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<sup>11</sup> Nilsson, J. & TT. (2021). Smittskyddsläkare i krismöte med bärbranschen. Corren.

<sup>12</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>13</sup> Fiske, E. (2021). Blåbärskrisen. Sveriges Television (SVT).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

company, Olle Svenssons AB took steps to ensure Thai staffing agencies pay berry pickers the right salaries, by visiting the authorities in Thailand. One of the main suggestions that are pointed out in the discourse is that berry companies that hire labour should be more actively involved in the process of ensuring that the berry pickers get paid properly. According to the sources that came from Thailand, one newspaper article<sup>16</sup> also raised speculations on bribing Thai officials by Swedish berry companies to send Thai berry pickers to Sweden although companies deny it.

In 2020 and 2021, the Covid19 pandemic not only limited Thai berry pickers' migration but also created more drastic changes in recruiting Thai berry pickers by the Swedish berry companies and purchasers. As the companies were requested to pay an extra fee for berry pickers' post berry picking quarantine, out of the "four large companies and wholesalers dominate the Swedish berry industry"<sup>17</sup>, three companies; Polarica AB, Norrskensbär AB, Bothnia AB, reduced or stopped hiring Thai berry pickers. However, the other large-scale wholesaler company Olle Svenssons AB/ Finnerödja has increased recruiting of Thai berry pickers. In result, "over 70% of the Thai berry pickers ended up working for Olle Svenssons in 2020"<sup>18</sup>. The extra fee paid for berry pickers is calculated as around SEK 10,000 per picker.

The storyline related to free/tourist pickers unveiled the fact that Swedish berry companies are buying berries harvested by free/tourist pickers through berry purchasers while maintaining the berry supply through non-European berry pickers. Free/tourist pickers commonly sell their berry harvests to berry purchasers, which are mostly the direct suppliers to large scale berry companies. Yet, the Swedish berry companies or purchasers are not responsible or accountable for free/tourist pickers' labour. However, sometimes there is also competition between Swedish berry companies and purchasers to buy berries directly from the free/tourist pickers. That competition has been instrumental in offering free/tourist berry pickers higher per kilo prices than one another. Besides, during 2020, due to the Covid19 pandemic, the demand for free/tourist pickers was increased among Swedish berry companies and purchasers, as the recruitment of Thai berry pickers was significantly reduced. Nevertheless, a media article emphasised that the berry companies expressed their reluctance to depend completely or mostly on free/tourist pickers as "there is no structured network"<sup>19</sup> among them. Most of the Swedish companies collectively opposed the implementation of the government's latest tax policy as the companies pointed out, that the policy will bring down the inflow of Thai berry pickers which subsequently will increase the sector's dependency on free/tourist pickers.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>18</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

### 5.1.3 Employment of Thai berry pickers through staffing companies

Thai staffing companies are another category of actors that directly interact with Thai migrant berry pickers in Sweden. The narratives related to this discourse were evident in four Swedish media publications (refer to Appendix I:4. p.60). These publications clearly mentioned that Thai migrant berry pickers are hired by Swedish berry companies and berry purchasers via Thai staffing companies or agencies through collective agreements between berry companies, staffing companies and the Swedish trade union Kommunal. By 2019, there were “twelve Swedish carrier companies that hire labour from Thai staffing companies”<sup>20</sup>. A media article<sup>21</sup> has reported that the representative(s) of Thai staffing companies are mostly presented on-site in Sweden so that they could inspect whether the agreements between berry pickers, staffing companies and berry companies are met. For instance, the representative Prajuab Khemkhan of the staffing company through which Bothnia AB hire berry pickers was on-site in Brännberg and Gunnarsbyn to inspect the berry pickers’ work during the berry season of 2019. It is further revealed that in 2020, Thai staffing companies were also involved in the discussions with berry companies to arrange an extra fee for berry pickers’ post berry picking quarantine.

Nevertheless, staffing companies are commonly accused of not providing the berry pickers’ salaries that they are entitled to according to the collective agreements. Staffing companies are further blamed for bribery and corruption as they are misusing the money, they get from berry companies for their personal expenses or to pay bribes to Thai higher authorities by reducing berry pickers’ salaries. A media publication has exposed a lawsuit in Thailand that was filed by a group of berry pickers who worked for Polarica AB and Blåtand AB in 2019 against “the Thai staffing company led by Chaiyuth Kitsawat”<sup>22</sup> for “withholding payments and that the pickers did not receive the guaranteed salary”<sup>23</sup>. In addition to that, the media blamed the staffing companies of not providing accurate details about collective agreements for berry pickers. Mats Wingborg (2019) also suggested that staffing companies should be pressurised to act more transparently for all the parties they interact within the food system of berries.

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<sup>20</sup> Wingborg, M. (2019). Bärplockare luras på sin lön. Dagens Arena.

<sup>21</sup> Rousu, A. (2019). Rekordmånga bärplockare i skogen – men bären saknas. SVT.

<sup>22</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

#### 5.1.4 The impact of Swedish trade unions in shaping the role of seasonal migrant berry pickers

Five media publications (refer to Appendix I:5. p.60-61) displayed different storylines and arguments related to Swedish trade unions in shaping the role of seasonal migrant berry pickers while contributing to the labour immigration regulatory framework in Sweden. Those media publications highlighted Sweden's largest trade union, the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union (Svenska 'Kommunalarbetareförbundet) which is commonly called Kommunal, as an actor who plays a vital role in upgrading regulations for berry pickers in the Swedish berry industry. According to the Federal Ombudsman at Kommunal, Jörgen Gustavsson, "Kommunal had to work hard during the years to improve conditions"<sup>24</sup> in 2009 for non-European berry pickers, while meeting the requirements of berry companies and the MV. Since then, Kommunal kept following up on the collective agreements between berry companies or berry purchasers and staffing companies when recruiting non-European berry pickers and monitoring their working conditions, even though it is a complex process. There were also instances presented where Kommunal in Västernorrland, Västerbotten and Norrbotten was involved in visiting employee accommodation, staffing companies' temporary offices and employers before and after the arrival of the berry pickers. Yet, it was a difficult task to be implemented during 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid19 pandemic and the visits were mostly replaced by online meetings. One newspaper article<sup>25</sup> emphasised that Thai berry pickers are provided information about their accommodation, collective agreements etc. translated into Thai by the Kommunal, although it is still not sufficient to create awareness properly among berry pickers.

Furthermore, Swedish media revealed that the Kommunal came forward to defend and pursue the cases within Sweden when berry pickers were deceived and exploited, even if they were not members of the trade union. However, Kommunal stopped providing that privilege for non-members in 2019. Kommunal, being a "non-profit association with limited resources"<sup>26</sup>, claims that it is difficult for them to prioritise providing this type of service to non-members. It is also described that the Kommunal is strongly against decreasing receiving labour from non-European countries and increasing labour from European countries as it can lead the Swedish berry picking sector to "poorer conditions and less control"<sup>27</sup> since currently there are no regulations for free/tourist pickers. On the other hand, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation or 'Landsorganisationen' commonly referred to

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<sup>24</sup> Reh binder, C. (2020). Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

<sup>25</sup> Wingborg, M. (2019). Bärplockare luras på sin lön. Dagens Arena.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Reh binder, C. (2020). Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

as LO, has a contradictory opinion to Kommunal's view. LO is not in favour of boosting migrant labour as LO believes, it is "unreasonable"<sup>28</sup> to not hire Swedes for berry picking.

### 5.1.5 Swedish regulatory framework of seasonal migrant berry pickers and the municipalities' interactions with the berry pickers

Throughout this discourse, different storylines, arguments and issues on seasonal migrant berry pickers in relation to Swedish central government and government policy, Swedish national agencies, party politics and municipalities are presented. Precisely, seven media publications (refer to Appendix I:6. p.61) have focussed directly on the Swedish central government's involvement in seasonal migrant berry pickers' role to regulate the labour immigration framework and maintain the wild-berry industry in Sweden. Most importantly, the media portrayed how the policy decisions and changes that the Swedish central government make impacted both Thai and free/tourist berry pickers' mobility and working conditions.

The latest tax policy decision of the central government is imposed on all the guest contracted workers, including non-European berry pickers in Sweden starting autumn, 2020. According to the Swedish tax policy, non-European berry pickers have to "pay tax in Sweden instead of their home country"<sup>29</sup>. Despite the opposition of Swedish berry companies towards implementing then "Minister of Finance Magdalena Andersson 's proposal for taxation of staffed berry pickers"<sup>30</sup>, the parliament passed the bill. Her argument was that the berry companies will survive under these tax regulations as the way that they survived when paying an extra Covid fee for post berry picking quarantine for non-European berry pickers. It is also revealed by the media that one of the purposes of implementing this policy by the government "was to create fairer competition between domestic and foreign companies, especially in the construction industry"<sup>31</sup>.

One of the media articles' arguments was that this government tax policy will be unprofitable for non-European berry pickers and that the berry picking sector cannot be compared to "the construction industry, where there are professional Swedish construction workers"<sup>32</sup>. Another media article brought up an argument that explained that "the tax for the Thai pickers has not been as high as the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>32</sup> Hagner, U. (2020). Stoppa skattechocken på vilda bär. Värmlands Folkblad.

berry industry initially feared”<sup>33</sup>. This government tax which is identified as SINK-tax (särskild inkomstskatt för utomlands bosatta), will be reduced for berry pickers when they claim Swedish income tax and also, they have the right to deduct for travel and accommodation. Nevertheless, the anti-tax policy argument further stressed that this tax policy could still not be in favour of non-European berry pickers as they do not earn much as predicted. The argument further pointed out the necessity of the adequate involvement of the government agencies such as the Swedish Tax Agency (Skatteverket) in monitoring and reviewing of tax claiming process of the non-European berry pickers closely.

According to the narrative of free/tourist pickers in relation to the new tax policy, earlier the “prediction was that the tax would lead to the tourist pickers increasing at the expense of the employed pickers”<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, in reality, the number of free/tourist pickers has decreased. This occurred because when the policy arrangements are made to adjust non-European berry pickers’ fixed salary, the per kilo price for harvested berries was lowered by the berry companies, for both non-European pickers and free/tourist pickers. That made free/tourist pickers demotivated to come to Sweden for berry picking in 2021. Apart from that, an article published on the Värmlands Folkblads hinted that the government policy according to which the free/tourist pickers need to pay tax “when the income from the berries exceeds SEK 12,500”<sup>35</sup> also has a negative impact on free/tourist pickers’ inflow to Sweden. The article suggested that in order to attract more free/tourist pickers Sweden also “needs to abolish the berry tax”<sup>36</sup> like in the neighbouring countries.

Along with the mixed outcomes of these government tax policies, the Swedish central government’s decisions and policies regarding berry picking were compared to the Finnish berry industry by Ulf Hagner (2020). Accordingly, he suggested that in order to compete with Norwegian, Finnish and Russian berry industries and to get the maximum benefit to Sweden from berry picking, the Swedish central government cannot impose higher taxes on berry pickers. Sweden also needs to absorb the “well-functioning regulatory framework”<sup>37</sup> that Finland has in the Finnish berry picking sector. On the other hand, another media publication unfolded its criticism of “disgusting human trafficking and this disgusting exploitation of poor people”<sup>38</sup> and called attention to the measures that the government has already taken to minimise these issues related to seasonal migrant berry picking. It explained that the government vested more power in the police, increased the penalty fees for illegal

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<sup>33</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>34</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>35</sup> Hagner, U. (2020). Stoppa skattechocken på vilda bär. Värmlands Folkblad.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Abrahamsson, O. (2021). Vidrig människohandel. Piteå.

labour, introduced human exploitation to the Swedish Penal Code as a crime and appointed eight authorities “eight authorities including the Swedish Work Environment Authority, the Police and the Swedish Tax Agency”<sup>39</sup> to work against illegal labour and human trafficking. Together with that emphasis, five Swedish media publications (refer to Appendix I:7. p.61-62) depicted the indirect yet significant link specifically between non-European berry pickers and the MV. Berry pickers’ chance for seasonal migration for berry picking each year mainly relies on the decisions made by MV’s officials, along with the recommendations provided by other institutes such as the Kommunal.

When unveiling the discourse on the regulatory framework of seasonal migrant berry pickers, it is hard to avoid the narrative of party politics, as party politics is mostly interwoven with the government decision making process. Three media publications (refer to Appendix I:8. p.62) presented the debates and viewpoints between a few political parties that influence seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden. Those publications projected the contradictory narratives between the political parties Swedish Social Democrats/ Socialdemokraterna (S), a ruling party in the current government and the Centre Party Youth/ Centerpartiets Ungdomsförbund (CUF). S emphasised that labour immigration should be encouraged only in place of labour shortages in Sweden and that the labour legislation system must be stricter whereas, CUF argued that both low-skilled and skilled labour immigration should not be constrained as S says. CUF pointed out that “Sweden would be a much poorer country”<sup>40</sup> without immigrant employees, such as berry pickers and, most of the resources in Swedish forests would be underused. Moreover, S expressed its intention to reintroduce the union veto (facklig vetorätt) on non-European labour immigration, which implies that employees like non-European berry pickers can be prevented from hiring.

However, Almquist, Pontus (2021) further depicted that “employers in berry picking and other industries with a large proportion of labour immigrants testify that there are few or no Swedes looking for jobs at all”<sup>41</sup>. Thus, the suggestion was that S should be bringing forward propositions to eliminate the loopholes of the system which made “it easier for rogue actors to offer jobs on inconvenient conditions and in this way exploit labour from poor countries”<sup>42</sup>. However, the political party Liberals/ Liberalerna upheld the existence of this right as the way it is currently functioning. On the contrary, the youth branch of the political party, the Moderates, Moderata Ungdomsförbundet (MUF), showed how the right of public access clashes with the right of ownership. MUF’s narrative described that the landowners have no control over the excessive usage of their lands and forests by

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Almquist, P. (2021). Sverige behöver invandrad arbetskraft. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



the berry pickers who work in the commercial berry sector. Thus, MUF emphasised that this system that suppresses landowners and nature should be altered to “secure strong property rights”<sup>43</sup>. MUF’s narrative suggested Sweden should be inspired by the procedures of “Norway, Finland, Iceland and the United Kingdom”<sup>44</sup> where the general public is given the privilege to enjoy the legislated right of public access to wilderness.

Apart from the central government, Swedish municipalities, mostly in northern Sweden, interact with both non-European and free/tourist berry pickers. Nine media publications (refer to Appendix I:9. p.62-63) projected the municipalities’ diverse interactions with seasonal migrant berry pickers. An article<sup>45</sup> unveiled how the municipalities engaged in mediation to provide health facilities like vaccination and PCR tests for both Thai and free/tourist berry pickers during the 2020 and 2021 Covid19 pandemic. One of the instances which were highlighted is, where between 750 and 800 Thai berry pickers in each county Jämtland Härjedalen and Västernorrland received the second dose of the Covid19 vaccine as per the request and arrangement of SKR (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner /Swedish Municipalities and Regions). On the other hand, municipalities also became instrumental in assisting free/tourist berry pickers when they were subjected to human trafficking and exploitation. Älvsbyn municipality involved, together with police and social services, in rescuing 100 Bulgarian free/tourist pickers including men, women and children at Vidsel, Älvsbyn in Norrbotten county, helping them to access temporary accommodation and other facilities, collaborating with the Bulgarian Embassy in Sweden and sending the berry pickers back to Bulgaria. However, one newspaper article<sup>46</sup> highlighted that this whole process of assisting the berry pickers costed the municipality SEK 64,000. According to the Social Services Act in Sweden, “it is the municipality's task to ensure that children are safe and not harmed, that there is food and good housing”<sup>47</sup>. At the same time, it is a difficult task for municipalities to handle issues related to free/tourist pickers as the municipalities are not aware in advance of how, when and where these berry pickers come and who arranges their trips. It makes the municipalities continue to monitor closely the instances where free/tourist pickers appear in Sweden and investigate their situation. Aside from that, a media article<sup>48</sup> underlined how free/tourist pickers become a challenge in another way to municipalities when they litter forests and start campfires in forests despite the prohibition of fires.

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<sup>43</sup> Johansson, T. & Nordlander, J. (2021). Skydda skogen från Liberalerna. Lantbrukets Affärstidning.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> TT. (2021). Över tusen utländska bärplockare vaccineras. Piteå.

<sup>46</sup> Öberg, H. (2021). Dyr nota efter sommarens bärplockarkaos. Piteå.

<sup>47</sup> Mattsson, M. (2021). arnfamiljer omplacerade i Arvidsjaur. Piteå.

<sup>48</sup> Santiago, J. (2020). Bärplockare lämnar bajshögar och skräp efter sig. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

### 5.1.6 Swedish legal framework of migrant berry pickers and their interactions with the social services, police and military forces

Among many others, the Swedish legal sector, social services, police and military forces are another set of actors who intersect with the path of seasonal migrant berry pickers in various ways. Two Swedish media publications (refer to Appendix I:10. p.63) projected narratives and arguments around interactions between free/tourist pickers and the legal sector while highlighting these berry pickers' susceptibility within the Swedish berry industry. Those media publications presented the instances where berry pickers got assistance from Swedish legal sector officials when the berry pickers were subjected to unjust treatments by the person(s) in Sweden, with whom the pickers were having informal arrangements to find berry picking opportunities in Sweden. The narratives disclosed that 50 Bulgarian free/tourist pickers in Norrbotten and 35 free/tourist pickers in Stockholm who were found stranded and exploited, received legal assistance to proceed with reporting the case to the police and proceeding with a court case against the suspects by Swedish legal officials through law firms. Apart from that, a media article<sup>49</sup> reported about a court case at Jönköping District Court in 2019 where a prosecutor was defending a female free/tourist picker who was promised a berry picking job but, deceived. However, the Swedish lawyer, Martin Karlsson emphasised that "these crimes often take place in difficult situations where individuals are unprotected"<sup>50</sup> and are being exploited "in a way that is completely unacceptable"<sup>51</sup> but "human exploitation is a difficult crime to prove"<sup>52</sup> legally.

Swedish media presented the interactions between Swedish police and seasonal migrant berry pickers in ten media publications (refer to Appendix I:11. p.63-64) which projected the vulnerability of the berry pickers as well the disruptions caused by berry pickers to the social order within some Swedish localities. One of several examples of such interaction is where the police got involved in investigating and unveiling labour exploitation and human trafficking of free/tourist pickers occurred in Vidsel, Norrbotten. There were instances reported where the Swedish police conducted "night raids to confirm that the berry pickers are really sleeping in the houses"<sup>53</sup>. There were also instances where the police took action against free/tourist pickers when they were involved in criminal acts. When the Bulgarian berry pickers at Norrbotten were accused of burglary, theft, and vehicle speeding by the villagers, the police took action to arrest four berry pickers.

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<sup>49</sup> TT. (2019). Kvinna tvingades tigga och sälja sex. Hallandsposten.

<sup>50</sup> Matsson, M. (2021). Fallet om människoexploatering åter på åklagarens bord. Piteå.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Kazmierska, N. (2020). Kaos kring bärplockare i byn: "Det är modern slavhandel". Aftonbladet.

Three Swedish newspaper articles (refer to Appendix I:12 p.64) also showed that social services are working along with police and the municipalities in assisting free/tourist pickers who were subjected to labour exploitation and human trafficking. Besides, free/tourist pickers are provided with “medical care, material support and information about their legal rights”<sup>54</sup> by the social services such as the Salvation Army being stationed at “trafficking centres and sheltered housing”<sup>55</sup>. It is further emphasised by the media that, “people are rarely exploited where there is a full police force or staffed social services”<sup>56</sup>.

Although interactions between seasonal migrant berry pickers and Swedish military forces are rare to be heard of, one media publication<sup>57</sup> reported such an instance which depicted a confrontation of berry pickers with the Swedish military. According to Mattias Axner, firing range manager at Marma firing range in Älvkarleby municipality, Uppsala County, free/tourist berry pickers were caught entering the firing range by military personnel despite warning and entrance prohibition signs. The media publication also pointed out that, it is impossible not seeing any “yellow and red warning signs”<sup>58</sup> displayed around the firing range.

Nevertheless, one media publication also stressed the lack of involvement by the “Gender Equality Authority and the preparedness from the national police authority and the Swedish government”<sup>59</sup> regarding these vulnerabilities of free/tourist berry pickers. In addition to that, the same publication depicted the need for a “sustainable national support program” to provide those berry pickers proper accommodation and give access to other human rights while Public Prosecutor's Office's national unit against international organised crime in Sweden should handle the cases regarding human trafficking and exploitation cases of berry pickers.

### 5.1.7 Health care facilities of migrant berry pickers in Sweden

Swedish media depicted that the health sector in Sweden as another important actor that interacts with both Thai and free/tourist berry pickers especially, through twelve publications (refer to Appendix I:14. p.64-65) published in 2020 and 2021 but not in 2019. Although the Thai pickers are not entitled to sickness benefits through their work contracts, the Swedish health sector has been the main facilitator for all the Covid19 vaccines, PCR tests and medicine for Thai seasonal berry pickers in Sweden during the pandemic. The Covid19 vaccination was provided by the Swedish health sector

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<sup>54</sup> Sundell, M., Landälv, L. & Livion, J. (2021). Sveriges största fall av människoexploatering. Dagens Arena.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Santiago, J. (2020). Bärplockare lämnar bajshögar och skräp efter sig. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Sundell, M., Landälv, L. & Livion, J. (2021). Sveriges största fall av människoexploatering. Dagens Arena.

for berry pickers mainly to avoid spreading the virus among berry picking groups. However, the acting vaccination coordinator in the Jämtland Härjedalen region, Urban Tirén's said that "everyone benefits from the fact that these individuals<sup>60</sup> are included in our vaccination plan"<sup>61</sup>. It emphasises that facilitating healthcare for Thai berry pickers is also important to maintain the Swedish berry industry as well as the whole food system of Swedish wild-berries. However, there was no disclosure on any interaction between free/tourist berry pickers and the health sector except, one publication mentioned that the free/tourist pickers "have the right to medical care"<sup>62</sup>.

### 5.1.8 Migrant berry pickers' interactions and confrontations with the Swedish local residents, landowners and hunters

There are five media publications (refer to Appendix I:15. p.65) that presented the narratives and instances related to interactions between free/tourist pickers and local residents in the areas of berry picking. The Two media articles highlighted that the situation of free/tourist pickers is referred to as "a modern slave trade"<sup>63</sup> by a resident in Vidsel, Norrbotten. It further implies that the free/tourist pickers' labour is subjected to abuse and exploitation. The narratives unfolded several occurrences where the residents came to help by several means when the free/tourist pickers were subjected to human trafficking. In one instance, in Norrbotten county, Susanne Karlsson, a resident sheltered some stranded Bulgarian pickers and she initiated gathering help from others through social media where she received only positive responses. As a result, those Bulgarian pickers received "shoes, clothes, blankets and SEK 2,700"<sup>64</sup> and food. Moreover, the local residents stated that they help free/tourist pickers this way and "try to take social responsibility every year and try to ensure that all our berries are picked on fair terms"<sup>65</sup>. However, the residents emphasised that they are unable to understand the entire system of the berry business. It implies that the local residents witness the vulnerable situation of these berry pickers but do not comprehend precisely what causes this situation and how this system in the berry industry functions.

On the contrary, there were also incidents which emphasise the confrontations between free/tourist pickers and local residents. Swedish newspaper article<sup>66</sup> reported that Bulgarian free/tourist berry pickers in Vidsel were rented dilapidated accommodation by one of the local residents. At the same

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<sup>60</sup> Thai berry pickers

<sup>61</sup> TT. (2021). Över tusen utländska bärplockare vaccineras. Piteå.

<sup>62</sup> Sundell, M., Landälv, L. & Livion, J. (2021). Sveriges största fall av människoexploatering. Dagens Arena.

<sup>63</sup> Kazmierska, N. (2020). Kaos kring bärplockare i byn: "Det är modern slavhandel". Aftonbladet.

<sup>64</sup> Mattsson, M. (2021). arnfamiljer omplacerade i Arvidsjaur. Piteå.

<sup>65</sup> Rehinder, C. (2020). Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

<sup>66</sup> Kazmierska, N. (2020). Kaos kring bärplockare i byn: "Det är modern slavhandel". Aftonbladet.

time, the free/tourist pickers also disrupted the lives of residents by breaching Swedish civil and criminal law although, sometimes the berry pickers denied the allegations. For instance, in Vidsel, some adult Bulgarian pickers were engaged in burglary and thefts of items such as trailers and bicycles, driving on exercise tracks and high-speed drives. Sometimes, the adult pickers sent their children to shoplift “luxury products” like night creams and reindeer meat from the shops around the areas of berry picking. Due to such disturbances in the social environment, the local residents stressed that they are even “afraid to let the children cycle in the evenings” in those areas. The residents requested that the police should patrol the village Vidsel to guarantee its safety. However, a newspaper article<sup>67</sup> also reported that the residents in Vidsel became aggressive and even attacked the Bulgarian pickers’ vehicles. One of the residents’ stated that “it’s the wild west up here now”<sup>68</sup>. These incidents show that the free/tourist pickers are also considered a hindrance to the residents in berry picking localities. Nevertheless, there were no instances to be found in the media publications on interactions between non-European berry pickers and residents.

Three media publications (refer to Appendix I:16. p.65-66) discussed the interactions between migrant berry pickers and land/forest owners in the areas of berry picking without specifying which category of berry pickers. These publications reported the frustration of landowners over both non-European and free/tourist berry pickers engaging in berry picking for companies or to sell to berry purchasers. According to the narratives, “busloads of berry pickers clean entire forests”<sup>69</sup> for commercial purposes and they are protected by the right of public access (*allmansrätten*) in Sweden. The landowners who own the lands and forests where berries commonly grow have “neither the right to obstruct them<sup>70</sup> nor demand compensation when they make money on the land”<sup>71</sup>. In addition to that, there were complaints about berry pickers littering and lighting fire in forests despite the fire bans. Hence, the landowners’ dislike of all the commercial berry pickers and berry companies was reflected in the discourse.

Two Swedish media articles (refer to Appendix I:17. p.66) projected the interactions between non-European and free/tourist berry pickers in relation to hunters in the areas of berry picking in two publications. According to the publications, hunters are also another category that is disturbed by commercial berry picking. Commercial berry picking is “considered a nuisance”<sup>72</sup> by hunters as hunting is disrupted by the berry pickers who walk through and pick berries all over the forests which

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<sup>67</sup> Kazmierska, N. (2020). Kaos kring bärrplockare i byn: ”Det är modern slavhandel”. Aftonbladet.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Nilsson, V. (2021). Uteslut företag från *allmansrätten*. Lantbrukets Affärstidning.

<sup>70</sup> All types of berry pickers who pick berries for commercial purposes

<sup>71</sup> Johansson, T. & Nordlander, J. (2021). Skydda skogen från Liberalerna. Lantbrukets Affärstidning.

<sup>72</sup> Dahlgren, S. (2020). Vad är det som gäller kring jakt och *allmansrätt*. Svensk Jakt.

are also the hunting grounds of local hunters. Thus, the hunters had to move the hunting period from early summer to the end of summer till the autumn, to decrease “the risk of confrontations between berry pickers and hunters”<sup>73</sup>.

### 5.1.9 Thai government’s involvement in the regulatory framework of Thai seasonal migrant berry pickers

Swedish media has given substantial space in the publications to highlight the involvement of the Thai government in the regulatory framework of Thai berry pickers. Eight media publications (refer to Appendix I:18. p.66) presented storylines and instances related to this subject. Primarily, the narratives emphasised the Thai government’s involvement in controlling the mobility of Thai seasonal migrant berry pickers during the Covid19 pandemic. The Thai government imposed strict travel restrictions on Europe and the Thai Ministry of Labour stated that “Thai berry pickers are not allowed to travel to Sweden or Finland”<sup>74</sup> in 2020. However, much later, the government allowed Thai berry pickers to travel to Sweden only if the Nordic berry companies would agree to fulfil the demand of arranging “transport and housing without the risk of congestion”<sup>75</sup> and paying extra-fee for berry pickers’ post berry picking quarantine, while providing them with the guaranteed “minimum wage for seasonal workers of at least SEK 22,049 a month”<sup>76</sup>. These instances and narratives show that the Thai government contributed to the regulatory framework to provide better work conditions for Thai berry pickers to maintain the food system of Swedish wild-berries.

On the other hand, in 2021 a Swedish media publication<sup>77</sup> raised speculations of irregularities of Thai authorities when conducting PCR tests for seasonal migrant berry pickers, 48 hours before their departure from Thailand. Those irregularities led the whole group of berry pickers travelling together to a risk of getting infected with Covid19. Another newspaper article pointed out that “Thailand is also deeply corrupt and people in senior positions in government and the military often charge for their services”<sup>78</sup> and that makes it hard for actors in the Swedish berry industry to “have full insight into what happens”<sup>79</sup> and how the berry pickers are regulated by the Thai government. It proves that the Thai government involves in shaping the Thai regulatory framework for berry pickers constructively as well as destructively.

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<sup>73</sup> Jakt, S. (2019). Förslag om senare jakt på björn. Svensk Jakt.

<sup>74</sup> Salomonsson, R. & TT. (2020). Thailand stoppar bärplockare efter coronaoro. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>75</sup> TT. (2020). Thailand låter bärplockare komma till Sverige. Affärsliv.

<sup>76</sup> TT. (2020). Bärplockare tillåts resa till Sverige igen. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>77</sup> Alm, S. C. (2021). Covidutbrott bland bärplockare: ”15 nya fall igår”. Aftonbladet.

<sup>78</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

## 5.2 Berry pickers' remuneration or earnings, labour and living conditions and utilisations of earnings from berry picking

Through this section I present and discuss the narratives, arguments and instances related to both Thai and free/tourist berry pickers' remuneration or earnings, labour and living conditions and the ways of utilising the earnings from berry picking.

### 5.2.1 Thai berry pickers

Eleven Swedish media publications (refer to Appendix I:19. p.67) unfolded about the Thai berry pickers' remuneration or earnings, labour and living conditions and the ways of utilising the earnings from berry picking. According to the narratives unveiled in Swedish media publications, Thai berry pickers who migrate to Sweden for two to three months every year during the summer season are "often rice farmers"<sup>80</sup> and "sugarcane farmers"<sup>81</sup> from north-eastern Thailand. A significant number of Thai berry pickers have been working as berry pickers in Sweden for many years. In 2019, it was the sixth berry picking round in Sweden for one rice farmer and it was the fifteenth time for another rice farmer in 2020. Moreover, "85% of these berry pickers are men"<sup>82</sup>. Thai berry pickers are recruited in Sweden and given work visas and work contracts. Thus, they are not allowed to sell berry harvest to berry purchasers as berry companies directly own Thai pickers' harvest. Furthermore, these berry pickers are unable to change their employer company in Sweden until two months have elapsed from their stay in Sweden. However, sometimes the pickers get recruited by employers in Sweden based on the employer-employee connections.

The majority of the Thai berry pickers loan money every year to travel to Sweden. The berry pickers are usually recruited by the berry companies in Sweden through Thai staffing agencies. In 2020, each berry picker spends around SEK 20,000 for the "cost of travel, visa and administration"<sup>83</sup> through staffing agencies. Apart from that, around SEK 250 is spent per day on food and accommodation in Sweden. Thus, the total expenditure for the travel to and stay in Sweden per year for berry pickers is around SEK 35,000. Nevertheless, Thai pickers are willing to bear the expenses as they consider "the berry picking income is important to support the family"<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> Hagner, U. (2020). Stoppa skattechocken på vilda bär. Värmlands Folkblad.

<sup>81</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Rousu, A. (2019). Rekordmånga bärplockare i skogen – men bären saknas. Sveriges Television (SVT).

According to the collective agreement, the contractual salary for a Thai berry picker per month is as follows from 2019 to 2021:

*Table 2: Contractual salary for a Thai berry picker per month*

Year	Salary per month (SEK)
2019	21,533
2020	22,049
2021	22,675

It shows a gradual increase of the contractual salary for Thai berry pickers. The berry pickers who can “pick berries to an amount that exceeds the contract can earn more” as they get paid by per kilo price for every extra kilo they pick. In 2020, berry pickers were paid SEK 15 per kilo of blueberries. “An average picker picks between 70-75kg of blueberries per day”<sup>85</sup> but, the Rice farmer Decha Kaesaneha says “during a good berry year, it can be 100kg per day”<sup>86</sup>. In result, a picker can earn SEK 1,500 per day. In 2021, the price per kilo of blueberries became SEK 20-30. The berry pickers also had a good cloudberry year in 2021 and they managed to exceed the average 22% of harvest per day by a picker and reaped around 23-25% per day. In that case, a picker can make a monthly income “far above the level of agreement”<sup>87</sup>. An average Thai berry picker’s gross earning is calculated at approximately SEK 60,000 in 70 days. Yet, in order to pick that much of berries, a berry picker needs to be in the forest for about 10-12 hours per day for three months even amidst the rain and then “clean the berries at night”<sup>88</sup>.

However, exceeding the contractual salary depends on three factors: favourable weather conditions for a good supply of berries from the forests, reasonably higher per kilo price and the berry pickers’ health and safety. A media publication<sup>89</sup> published in 2019 stated that the berry pickers went through a hard time in 2018 due to extreme heat conditions the supply of berries was much smaller than usual. Although the berry harvest was really good in 2019, in 2020 and 2021, again due to the pandemic, Thai berry pickers’ health conditions were threatened by Covid19 outbreaks among the berry pickers’ communities in Sweden. Under such circumstances, if the berry pickers were unable to exceed the amount mentioned in the contract, they should be paid with the fixed salary in the agreement. Nevertheless, there were instances where Thai berry pickers were not paid the contractual salary

<sup>85</sup> Sandström, M. (2021). Mer blåbär i de svenska skogarna: ”Växer väldigt mycket”. Värmlands folkblad.

<sup>86</sup> Rousu, A. (2019). Rekordmånga bärplockare i skogen – men bären saknas. Sveriges Television (SVT).

<sup>87</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>88</sup> Fiske, E. (2021). Blåbärskrisen. Sveriges Television (SVT).

<sup>89</sup> TT, (2019). Bärhandlare spår bra lingonår. Hallandsposten.



according to the agreement, instead, they got paid per kilo that they picked. Many of the pickers were not even aware of how much of a contractual salary they are entitled to.

On other hand, from 2021 onwards, Thai berry pickers who come to Sweden “must pay tax in Sweden instead of their home country”<sup>90</sup>. In that case, 25% of the earnings of berry pickers should be paid to Sweden as of SINK tax. Yet, there is an opportunity for berry pickers to replace SINK tax with Swedish ordinary income tax. Accordingly, if the berry pickers earn “90% of their annual income from berry picking in Sweden”<sup>91</sup>, the tax will be reduced as the estimated net annual income gets reduced. Moreover, berry pickers “have the right to make basic deductions and deductions for travel, food and accommodation”<sup>92</sup>. However, in reality, it hardly happens. The average earning of a berry picker from berry picking is “under SEK 20,000 after deductions for travel, accommodation, etc.”<sup>93</sup>. That amount is equivalent only to 40-45% of what they earn from berry picking in Sweden.

However, in 2020 and 2021 Thai berry pickers received accommodation for pre-berry picking quarantine and for Covid19 infected berry pickers with food free of charge. Sometimes, the pickers were even provided travelling facilities within Sweden by Swedish employers. Furthermore, the Thai berry pickers were also paid an additional fee of around SEK 10,000 per picker by the Swedish employers for post berry picking quarantine in Thailand.

On the bright side, the media reported that generally over the years, most of the berry pickers earned “significantly more than the collective agreement wage”<sup>94</sup>. Moreover, Thais are considered the “price leader”<sup>95</sup> in the Swedish berry industry. Although a significant amount of each Thai berry picker’s gross income from berry picking is spent to cover the loans, they “earn significantly more from picking berries in Sweden than they can earn as rice farmers in Thailand”<sup>96</sup>. Thus, despite all the constraints and hardships they undergo, many Thai berry pickers come to Sweden for berry picking every year (refer to Table 1).

Except for using everyday expenses of the berry pickers in Thailand, the net income from berry picking is most commonly used to support each berry pickers’ family in diverse ways. Many Thai berry pickers use their earnings “to expand their houses, to buy a motorcycle or/and to pay the children’s school fees”<sup>97</sup>. A media publication unveiled the story of a Thai couple who came to Sweden for berry picking around fourteen years consecutively managed to pay school fees for their

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<sup>90</sup> Hagner, U. (2020). Stoppa skattechocken på vilda bär. Värmlands Folkblad.

<sup>91</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>95</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>96</sup> Wingborg, M. (2019). Bärplockare luras på sin lön. Dagens Arena.

<sup>97</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

two daughters, now twenty-six and twenty-eight years old and both of them are teachers. They further highlighted that if not for berry picking in Sweden, they could not afford their children's school fees.

### 5.2.2 Free/tourist pickers

There were seventeen media publications (refer to Appendix I:20. p.67-69) which wrote about free/tourist berry pickers' earnings from berry picking and labour and living conditions. The feature stories unfolded that most of the free/tourist pickers are coming from Bulgaria and Ukraine to Sweden. Besides, free/tourist pickers come from Romania, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania to Sweden. There is also a significant number of Thais who come to Sweden as free/tourist pickers apart from coming as contracted pickers. Unlike Thai contracted pickers, free/tourist pickers enter Sweden on tourist visas and engage in berry picking in Sweden. The pickers who come from Ukraine and Bulgaria usually arrive by land, crossing the borders of several countries like Romania, the Czech Republic, Belarus and Poland. However, according to some Ukrainian pickers in Sweden, in 2020, due to pandemic travel restrictions between countries, they had to follow a long and difficult route to reach Sweden. The most common destination of free/tourist pickers in Sweden is Norrbotten county.

According to the narratives, some free/tourist pickers pay money informally to a person(s) in Sweden who is referred to as "boss(es)"<sup>98</sup> by the pickers with the promise of arranging travel from their countries to Sweden, dropping them at northern Swedish forests and sometimes arranging temporary accommodation. There were five instances between 2019 and 2021 where pickers who come as large groups of around 30 or above were deceived, stranded or exploited by the bosses in Sweden. "Sweden's largest case of human exploitation"<sup>99</sup> and human trafficking was the situation where the group of nearly 50 Bulgarian pickers who were stranded in Vidsel in Älvsbyn Municipality, Norrbotten in 2021 by their boss(es). Each of these pickers was promised to give berry picking jobs with an earning of "SEK 2,000-3,000 per day"<sup>100</sup> although, in reality, they received SEK 100 while some received nothing. Another occurrence was revealed where a woman who was brought to Sweden "with promises of medical care and a job as a berry picker"<sup>101</sup> by a couple in Sweden yet, later on, made the woman "beg and sell sex"<sup>102</sup>.

Some of the pickers travelled on their own or hired vehicles without paying an intermediate person. Mostly, when those pickers travel to Sweden, they come along with their families. Once they are in

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<sup>98</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>99</sup> Sundell, M., Landälv, L. & Livion, J. (2021). Sveriges största fall av människoexploatering. Dagens Arena.

<sup>100</sup> Abrahamsson, O. (2021). Vidrig människohandel. Piteå.

<sup>101</sup> TT. (2019). Kvinna tvingades tigga och sälja sex. Hallandsposten.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Sweden, they station their caravans, camp or rent housing during the time of berry picking. In addition to that, the free/tourist pickers need to supply food for them by themselves. Thus, the pickers tend to find food from naturally available sources to reduce the food cost. For instance, during the daytime, the pickers pick berries while going perch, pike and trout “fishing in the evenings”<sup>103</sup> in the surrounding streams. Sometimes the pickers’ rented houses during their stay in Sweden have poor conditions where there is no warm water or heating.

Free/tourist pickers sell the reaped berry harvest to one or several berry purchase(s) in Sweden. They get paid per kilo of berries that they harvest. The prices per kilo of picked blueberries that the pickers were offered by the berry purchasers in Sweden from 2019 to 2021 are as follows:

*Table 3: Price per kilo of blueberries received by free/tourist pickers*

Year	Price per kilo of blueberries (SEK)
2019	12-15
2020	16-22
2021	15 (except in Vidsel)

The pickers in Vidsel claimed that they receive SEK 20 per kilo in 2021. However, according to the above table, there is a decrease in the per kilo price offered to free/tourist pickers in 2021 in comparison to 2020. Many Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Romanian pickers were disappointed in both 2019 and 2021 as the berry harvest was low for free/tourist pickers because Thai pickers reaped most of the harvest. As a result, pickers had to return home earlier without raising money. At the same time, “the number of free/tourist pickers has decreased”<sup>104</sup> a lot, in 2021.

In 2020, according to the narratives, there was an extremely low number of Thai berry pickers. Thus, most of the free/tourist pickers who managed to come to Sweden were satisfied as they could pick more berries and sell more except 56 Romanian pickers who arrived at Strömsund municipality. According to the media article, these Romanian pickers came to Sweden too early, before berries became ripe and it made them frustrated. In result, three of them were accused of “stealing in the local ICA”<sup>105</sup> market store, some of the group went back to Romania and some travelled by bus to Småland to engage in forestry while some others of the group travelled to Skåne for strawberry picking. It implies that when the free/tourist pickers could not earn what they expected, they tend to go for alternative methods to find the money. There were also other instances where the pickers were

<sup>103</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>104</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>105</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

deceived, so that the children who come along with adult berry pickers engaged in berry picking labour and begging.

In addition to that, free/tourist pickers need to pay tax to Sweden, if the pickers sell for berry purchasers “to a value exceeding SEK 12,500”<sup>106</sup>. This is valid only for pickers who come from EEA (European Economic Area) countries in Europe such as Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania except for Ukraine. However, the media speculated that the actual harvested quantities of berries were not reported all the time by the pickers, this rule is applied to them.

A media article<sup>107</sup> stated that SEK 60,000, which is the gross average earnings of a Thai picker within 70 days, is four times as much as a Bulgarian picker’s earnings. It is also mentioned that free/tourist pickers hope “to build up a financial buffer for the winter”<sup>108</sup> from the earnings of berry picking. Nonetheless, the media has not revealed explicitly the reasons behind free/tourist pickers engaging in berry picking in Sweden or ways of utilising the earnings from berry picking.

### 5.3 Dependence of the Swedish wild-berry industry on seasonal migrant berry pickers

Eleven media publications (refer to Appendix I:21. p.69) stories, arguments and examples related to this discourse. According to the narratives, the Swedish wild-berry industry sells blueberries, lingonberries and cloudbberries to the national and global food industry. Among all the wild-berries, blueberries are highly demanded and considered more valuable and profitable to the industry because blueberries “contain high levels of antioxidants and are therefore also a major export product, especially to South Korea and Japan where they are used to make medicines and skin creams”<sup>109</sup>. In an average year, Sweden exports around 10,000 tonnes of lingonberries and 15,000 tonnes of blueberries to a value of nearly SEK 500 million. In 2020 Swedish wild-berry industry “has a turnover of SEK 2.5 billion per year and is dependent on foreign labour, partly from the EU but above all on Thais”<sup>110</sup>. It is further stressed that “96% of the berry industry work with Thai pickers”<sup>111</sup> and “thanks to their professional picking that there are Swedish berries in the shops and Swedish jam for the pancakes”<sup>112</sup>. The media depicted that 80% of the Swedish commercial berries are picked by Thais,

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Rehbinder, C. (2020). Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

<sup>108</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>109</sup> Wingborg, M. (2019). Allt hårdare villkor för thailändska bärplockare.

<sup>110</sup> Hultgren, V. (2020). Kanonår för blåbär – men brist på plockare driver upp priset. Dagens Industri.

<sup>111</sup> Fiske, E. (2021). Blåbärskrisen. Sveriges Television (SVT).

<sup>112</sup> Rehbinder, C. (2020). Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

while the remaining 20% comes from free/tourist pickers through approximately 150 berry purchasers located in Sweden. Furthermore “about four out of five berry pickers are Thai”<sup>113</sup>. Sylve Björkman, CEO of Ransäter Invest AB emphasised that “the industry is almost standing and falling with Thai pickers”<sup>114</sup>.

One of the arguments for the main reasons behind berry companies hiring Thai pickers is that the “system has long been tax-exempted”<sup>115</sup> until the summer of 2020. Thus, it was beneficial for the companies to hire Thai pickers. The companies opposed implementing the new tax policy (refer to Section 5.1.5) fearing that it will reduce the inflow of Thai berry pickers to Sweden. However, despite the new tax regulations and higher remuneration costs that companies had to bear (refer to Section 5.1.2), even in 2021, the companies and berry purchasers hired more Thai berry pickers (refer to Table 1). If not, the companies believe “a lot of companies will go bankrupt”<sup>116</sup>.

A media publication<sup>117</sup> brought some unofficial statistics that the media received through berry companies, to project the quantities of blueberry harvested per day by different categories of berry pickers by nationalities. The statistics are as follows:

*Table 4: Quantities of blueberry harvest picked per day by different categories of berry pickers*

Category of berry pickers	Quantity of berries picked (Kg) per day
Thais	133
Ukrainians	50
Russians and Belarusians	40
Poles and Balts	10
Swedes	4

The statistics suggest that Thais pick more wild-berries than any other category of pickers. Therefore, “companies do not believe that Swedish pickers can compete with Thais”<sup>118</sup>. Even if the Swedes who became unemployed during 2020 wanted to work as berry pickers, the companies were reluctant to hire them. Another publication depicted that an average Thai picker “picks around 70-75kg of blueberries per day”<sup>119</sup> but, during a good berry year it can be 100kg per day and it is comparatively a large quantity. Apart from that, “over a seven-year period, a Thai berry picker picks between 4 to

<sup>113</sup> Franssen, A. G. (2020). Why it's Sweden's best year for bilberries in decades – but no one's around to pick them. The Local-Sweden.

<sup>114</sup> Salomonsson, R. & TT. (2020). Thailand stoppar bärplockare efter coronaoro. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>115</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>116</sup> Salomonsson, R. & TT. (2020). Thailand stoppar bärplockare efter coronaoro. Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>117</sup> Rehbinden, C. (2020). Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

<sup>118</sup> Wingborg, M. (2021). När covid-19 kom till skogen. Dagens Arena.

<sup>119</sup> Sandström, M. (2021). Mer blåbär i de svenska skogarna: ”Växer väldigt mycket”. Värmlands folkblad.

4.5 tons of lingonberries and blueberries per season”<sup>120</sup>. Besides, it is underlined that a Thai berry picker picks 23-30kg of cloudberry per day on average and the companies consider “that is a lot”<sup>121</sup>. On the other hand, in 2020, instead of hiring more Swedes during the berry season the companies relied on the majority of the berries which were sold by free/tourist pickers for berry purchasers. However, except in 2020, the companies were reluctant to depend completely on free/tourist pickers. When the companies were questioned by the media about the reason for that, they stated that the companies do not want most of the berry industry to be “unregulated”<sup>122</sup>. Apart from that, Thai pickers are considered “absolutely admirable, magical and they never whine either, always happy, humble and grateful”<sup>123</sup>. Therefore, the Swedish wild-berry industry mostly depends on and prefers depending mostly on Thai pickers.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Åström, V. & TT. (2021). Rekordår för hjortron – "aldrig sett på maken". Uppsala Nya Tidning.

<sup>122</sup> Wingborg, M. (2020). När marken färgas blå. Dagens Arena.

<sup>123</sup> Fiske, E. (2021). Blåbärskrisen. Sveriges Television (SVT).

## 6. Concluding discussion

Each discourse analysis based on the Swedish media publications presented under three main sections in the previous chapter, addresses the three research questions that I have raised at the beginning of the thesis. Answers to each research question are provided under two main categories (Thai berry pickers and free/tourist pickers) of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden. The answers to the three research questions are summarised below.

### 6.1 How does Swedish media describe, frame and analyse seasonal migrant berry pickers?

The Swedish media have described, framed and analysed Thai berry pickers and free/tourist pickers in a variety of ways during the period 2019 and 2021. All the media publications that contributed to the discourses related to Thai berry pickers argued that Thai berry pickers are an integral part of the Swedish wild-berry industry, food system of Swedish wild-berries, labour immigration in Sweden and subsequently contribute to the economic development in Sweden. Thai berry pickers are framed as subjects of a regulated framework in Sweden when they are contracted on work visas. This regulatory framework is constructed by various authorities in Sweden as well as in Thailand, such as agencies in the Swedish central and local governments, Swedish political parties, Swedish trade unions, berry companies in Sweden and Thai government authorities.

Thai berry pickers are entitled to remuneration through work contracts. The majority of Thai berry pickers do not have direct access to berry picking employment in Sweden. They acquire berry picking jobs commonly through Thai staffing agencies. However, some Thais are privileged to acquire berry picking jobs directly from the Swedish berry companies based on vertical social capital, such as long-term employer-employee relationship. Thai berry pickers were provided with quarantine facilities and post berry picking quarantine fees by the berry companies and PCR tests and vaccination by the Swedish healthcare sector during the Covid19 pandemic. The pandemic has been influential in uplifting the working standards and conditions of Thai berry pickers and there was an increase in the inflow of berry pickers to Sweden in 2021 after the sudden decrease in 2020. Thai berry pickers'

work conditions are supervised and monitored by the Swedish municipalities and trade unions and Thai staffing agencies to ensure the conditions of the work agreement are met and, in case of breach of contract, the pickers who hold the trade union membership get legal assistance. There is a yearly gradual increase in Thai berry pickers' monthly salary. Moreover, Thai berry picking labour is favoured by berry companies and trade unions, except LO, over free/tourist pickers' labour. However, between 2019 and 2021, the Swedish media also framed Thai berry pickers as victims of labour exploitation, negligence of regulating authorities and berry companies, extreme weather conditions and the pandemic. Furthermore, Thai berry pickers are impacted both positively and negatively by the Swedish regulatory policies.

On the other hand, free/tourist pickers are described as the second most important part of the Swedish wild-berry industry, next to Thai berry pickers. The media framed free/tourist pickers as subjects of an unregulated labour system where no one in Sweden is responsible for free/tourist pickers' labour conditions. They are also being described as victims of exploitation, human trafficking, extreme weather conditions and the pandemic, and their economic situation and working conditions are deemed more vulnerable than those of the Thai berry pickers.

As the work of the free/tourist pickers is unregulated, they are not provided berry picking jobs by any official actor in the Swedish berry industry. Thus, free/tourist pickers are not entitled to any of the facilities or financial benefits under a work contract. Nevertheless, free/tourist pickers come to Sweden on tourist visas for berry picking either by themselves or through informal arrangements with persons(bosses) in the Swedish territory. The Swedish media emphasised these informal arrangements often led berry pickers subjected to exploitation and human trafficking because the bosses tend to transport the pickers to Sweden and use them for forced labour or sexual exploitation or abandon them without providing the promised berry picking opportunities. When such cases are reported, these pickers are assisted by the social services, police, municipality and local residents in Sweden. In 2020, the Covid19 pandemic has become beneficial for free/tourist pickers as they got more opportunity to engage in berry picking and earn more from it as the majority of Thai pickers could not come to Sweden due to travel restrictions. However, in 2021, the per kilo price for wild-berry harvest offered for free/tourist pickers was decreased and so did the inflow of free/tourist pickers to Sweden.

Being in a vulnerable and liminal position in Sweden, these pickers mostly chose alternative options to earn more money, such as engaging in other seasonal jobs in Sweden and, sometimes, being involved in criminal acts. During their stays in Sweden, sometimes they even violate civil laws in Sweden by littering the forests and violating fire bans. Thus, sometimes free/tourist pickers there



were hostilities reported between the pickers and local residents, police and military forces in Sweden. Thus, the media also portrayed free/tourist pickers as a threat to social order in Sweden.

Apart from that, Swedish media described both Thai and free/tourist pickers as a hindrance to Swedish landowners and hunters in the berry picking areas. Finally, the media unanimously highlighted that the policies of the Swedish regulatory framework need to be strengthened so that Thai berry pickers, free/tourist pickers, the Swedish general public and the whole Swedish berry industry may prosper.

## 6.2 How does seasonal migrant berry picking affect the socio-economic situation of the berry pickers?

For both Thai and free/tourist pickers, berry picking is a crucial source of income. At the same time, it is an uncertain source of income, as how much the pickers can earn depends on weather conditions, the quantity of berries that they harvest, the per kilo price for berry harvest and the berry pickers' health and safety.

For Thai berry pickers, berry picking is not their main employment, but an alternative employment which is a crucial source of income. Most of the Thai seasonal migrant berry pickers are engaged in rice and sugarcane farming in rural Thailand. Berry pickers are willing to bear the initial expenditure of the process of getting hired as berry pickers as they consider berry picking income is an important source to support their families. The majority of the berry pickers earn more than the collective agreement wage. Thus, berry picking contributes to improving Thai berry pickers' economic situation. Furthermore, the discourse analysis presented in section 5.2.1 showed, that the Thai berry pickers use a part of their berry picking income to cover the loans. The rest of the berry picking income is utilised to upgrade their social lives standards and their family members' by spending berry picking earnings on expanding their houses, buying vehicles and paying for children's education.

On the other hand, Swedish media between 2019 and 2021 does not report on free/tourist pickers' backgrounds or on their main sources of income in their countries of origin. The media unveiled that the free/tourist pickers also spend money to find opportunities to pick berries and sell them in Sweden. They get paid per kilo of berries that they harvest. However, the free/tourist pickers' uncertainty of receiving financial gains from berry picking is higher than for the Thai berry pickers, as free/tourist pickers are not even guaranteed to be able to pick and sell berries in Sweden. Generally, free/tourist pickers earn less than Thai berry pickers. There were also cases reported by media where these pickers did not obtain any financial gain from berry picking in some years. In such cases, berry picking affects

free/tourist pickers' economic situation in a negative manner. However, Swedish media between 2019 and 2021 also does not report on how berry picking affects the social situation of the free/tourist pickers.

### 6.3 How does seasonal migrant berry picking benefit the Swedish berry industry?

The whole Swedish berry industry is depending on seasonal migrant berry pickers. The berry companies and purchasers in Sweden believe that migrant berry pickers are more efficient in berry picking than Swedes. Of all types of migrant berry pickers, Thai pickers are recognised as the most efficient in picking berries by the Swedish berry companies and purchasers. Next to Thais, the free/tourist pickers are considered the most efficient. Thus, the Swedish berry industry profit more from Thai berry pickers in bridging the majority of the gap between demand and supply of berries for the local as well as global market. Before 2021, the berry companies in Sweden benefited even more by hiring Thais for berry picking as the system was tax-exempted until 2021. Even after implementing a new tax policy and providing Covid19 pandemic related expenses to Thai berry pickers, the Swedish berry industry kept hiring Thai berry pickers, as the berry companies and purchasers emphasised that they prefer relying on regulated labour rather than relying on unregulated labour.

After fulfilling the majority of the gap between demand and supply through Thai pickers, the rest of the gap between demand and supply for berries in the Swedish wild-berry industry is fulfilled through free/tourist pickers. Moreover, free/tourist pickers were the group that enabled the Swedish berry industry to fulfil the majority of the demand and supply of wild-berries during the berry season in 2020.

### 6.4 Overview of the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden

In review of the above answers to the research questions of this study based on discourse analysis, three main and common roles of both Thai and free/tourist pickers can be identified. The seasonal migrant berry pickers fulfil the following roles for the berry picking industry in Sweden: 1) to maintain the food system of Swedish wild-berries by maximising the efficiency of wild-berry supply and minimising the gap between demand and supply for berries, 2) to maximise the financial gain of Swedish berry industry and subsequently the Swedish economy, and 3) to be a part of Sweden's

unskilled seasonal labour immigration. The roles and tasks of berry pickers suggest that these roles of berry pickers are framed within a system which is based on profit-based commodity chain capitalism and division of labour (cf. Wallerstein 2004). Moreover, the whole system of Swedish wild-berry picking industry reflects the world system where the core countries extract cheap labour from peripheral countries, and thus the former boost their own economic profits and growth (cf. Harvey 2006).

On the other hand, Thai seasonal berry pickers occupy a low socio-economic position in their country of origin. Since ample empirical material is not available in Swedish media regarding free/tourist pickers' background and utilisation of earnings from berry picking, I am unable to grasp the socio-economic positions of the free/tourist pickers. However, both Thai and free/tourist pickers are two of the groups who struggle to accumulate economic capital through earnings from berry picking. It also seems that Thai berry pickers are investing the money they earn from berry picking to achieve socio-economic mobility, by obtaining cultural capital such as education for their children (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

## 6.5 Reflections and further studies

Based on the empirical data and analysis I was able to depict the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden. By studying this subject area through Swedish media, I was also able to understand the manner which Swedish media report on the plight of these berry pickers to the general public. In the broader picture, I believe that my study and its outcomes contribute to giving significance to the marginalised and vulnerable groups of Thai and free/tourist pickers in academia. My search for previous research publications related to seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden showed that this subject area was not studied from the perspective of Swedish media. Thus, I also believe that my study is an important attempt to fill that research gap.

Although I tried to understand the roles and positions of both Thai and free/tourist pickers, as I mentioned earlier, there were limited writings available about free/tourist pickers. Thus, I suggest further examination of the roles and positions of free/tourist pickers, based on observations and interviews of the berry pickers themselves, would provide a more detailed picture of their roles and positions. Apart from that, studying the economic and social positions and stratification of Thai and/or free/tourist pickers in their countries of origin would constitute an essential contribution to a more holistic understanding of the berry pickers' life-worlds and plights.

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Anudini Wijayarathna



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## **6. Swedish central government's involvement in the regulatory framework of seasonal migrant berry pickers**

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## **7. MV's involvement in the regulatory framework of seasonal migrant berry pickers:**

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