“I’m Not a Maid!” – A Critical Look at Au Pairs vis-à-vis Migrant Domestic Workers

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The au pair program is known as a cultural exchange providing its participants with the ability to see what life is like in a different part of the world. Deriving from the French word meaning “on par,” au pairs, who are mostly young women, can spend up to two years in the United States living with a family while taking care of their children and attending classes at the local college. Advertised to potential host parents as one of “the most affordable child-care options available” (“Program Costs § Cultural Care Au Pair”), au pairs are intertwined with the global market of migrant female domestic workers. Although the au pair performs work that positions her as a domestic employee, for the purpose of this paper, the term “domestic workers” will refer to all other forms of paid housework apart from the au pair in an attempt to discern the similarities/differences between the two.

Much literature and research has been devoted to the transnational migration of labor in the current era of globalization, especially in regards to women’s place in the global economy. A number of neoliberal policies, i.e. devaluing of local currency, the cutting of social services, and imposing wage freezes, implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, have been acting as “push” and “pull” factors in attracting migration out of one country and into another (Pyle 290). The adjustment of immigration policies in the United States has been one of the “pull” factors in this equation. First of all, the liberalization of immigration policies post-1965 caused an influx of immigrants, which led to what Sassen refers to in Globalization and its Discontents as “structural and subjective linkages” (120) with a number of Third World countries. These policies made it easier for women from South Asia and the Caribbean Basin to
choose the United States as their destination. Secondly, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), also known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, pushed many undocumented migrants into domestic work due to stricter laws criminalizing illegals and the employers who hire them (Mattingly 62). The IRCA contributed, thus, to greater discrimination, especially of Latinos, and limited the employment options of immigrant women. It was in the same year that the United States government designated the first au pair agencies to act as subcontractors on the job market for families that wanted to have a legal domestic employee from abroad. According to Business Week magazine, by 1997, eleven years after it first came into being, the au pair business had turned into a $50-million niche in the U.S. child-care industry (Symonds, France, and Dawley).

The positioning of the au pair program against the backdrop of globalization is valid not only from the standpoint of transnational mobility of services but also due to the clearly defined division of “. . . reproductive labor and the new intra-gender power relations [which have gained] new momentum in the wake of globalization” (Hess and Puckhaber 76). Women entering the professional sector to work in high-powered managerial positions have contributed to the rise of “professional households without a ‘wife’” (Sassen, “Global Cities” 259). As a consequence, domestic roles get reconfigured: Professional women leave the home, providing room for the young student from abroad in the form of an au pair. “This dynamic produces a sort of double movement: a shift to the labor market of functions that used to be a part of household work, but also a shift of what used to be labor-market functions in standardized workplaces to the household and . . . to the immigrant community” (Sassen, “Global Cities” 259).

This shift in paradigm, however, is not a completely new concept but merely a reinvention of the old. The immigrant woman working for a white middle-class professional
woman has replaced the former image of a black female servant in the white master’s home (Sassen 91). This relationship is an especially important one to remember within the context of au pair work in the United States due to the black woman’s traditional role as the mammy, a mother-surrogate, which is a character that au pairs unwillingly frequently fall into. On the other hand, unlike au pairs, oftentimes slaves were responsible for wet-nursing, which as Macdonald points out, “epitomized the paradoxes of menial housework in the antebellum south” (33). Nowadays, when breastfeeding is regarded as the ultimate bond between mother and child, which would only be reassigned to another woman in extreme circumstances, the au pair is a signifier of a family’s upper-class status - a “big sister” rather than a slave. Thus, although the mammy is a reminder of the long history of outsourcing child care in the U.S., she was at the bottom of the social hierarchy, whereas an au pair is at the top.

This paper analyzes the role of the au pair in light of her responsibilities as an employee within the household. It contrasts her duties with those of other domestic workers, clearly demarcating the differences not only in legal status but also in terms of what labor she is expected to perform within the home. Data gathered for this paper is a result of my work over a six-month period with a group of ten au pairs, ages 19-26, serving the North Shore\(^2\) of Chicago, who were my students in conversational English-as-a-second-language classes. After meeting with them on a weekly basis in the academic setting, each woman, descending from both European and South American countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Italy, Brazil, Bolivia, and Colombia) sat down with me to discuss her role as a cultural exchange visitor in the United States and as a member of the host family to whose service she was assigned. Each interview was scheduled for seventy-five minutes. In order to give the women the opportunity to freely express their thoughts, we met one-on-one in a neutral location, a local coffee shop in Skokie, Illinois. Every au pair was asked the
same twenty-nine questions, which were grouped under four categories: background information, requirements and expectations of au pair work, the au pair as surrogate mother, and the relationship with the host family in relation to legal status (for a full list of questions see Appendix). Their answers were transcribed and subjected to a comparative analysis, which produced the following findings.

The Legal Status of Au Pairs and Domestic Workers

Au Pair Program as Cultural Exchange

In order to understand the difference between au pairs and other domestic workers in the United States, it is important to stress the difference in their legal status. Au pairs are cultural exchange visitors under the provisions of the J-1 visa program, which also encapsulates a number of other exchange programs.3 Initiated Stateside in 1986, the au pair sector was made a permanent category of exchange visitor in 1997 (Momsen 16). As a program under the auspices of the United States Information Agency, it is perhaps not surprising that there are strict governmental restrictions on the requirements for becoming an au pair as well as on the work conditions that she is to operate under. As such, the au pair business is one of the most regulated forms of child care available. Au pairs need to be foreign nationals between 18-26 years of age, with two hundred hours of documented child-care experience. Au pairs are not allowed to stay with a child younger than three months old without the supervision of another adult. An important aspect of the program is the weeklong training session that au pairs undergo when they first arrive in the United States, which includes a federally mandated “minimum of eight hours of child-safety instruction, of which at least four relate to infants, and a minimum of 24 hours of child-development instruction, of which at least four relate to children under two years of age” (“Au Pair and EduCare”).
The restrictions on the amount and type of work that au pairs are to perform are indeed strictly defined, unlike that of traditional nannies, a term applied to a full-time worker who takes care of the children but does not live with them in their home. Au pairs are to work no longer than ten hours a day and forty-five hours a week. If the family needs the au pair’s services for longer than the contracted time, the family is expected to pay the au pair hourly wage. The participants of the program, like Sofia quoted below, usually appreciate this since the weekly wage of $195.75 adds up to only $4.35 an hour, which is diminished by 40% from the standard minimum wage of $7.25 to make up for room and board.

You can work extra hours, but for example, it’s my decision. If my family asks me if I want to work extra hours and I say yes, it’s up to me. My family pays me $10/hr; it’s better because if you think how much they pay you for the 45 hours, it’s like $3.50. And my family, they are very organized, so for example, if she is late one day, she writes what time she came home and if I work more than 45 hours she pays me.

All the au pairs who were interviewed as a part of this study expressed their expectations that their host families adhere to these rules and would usually speak up either to the host mother or Local Childcare Coordinator (LCC) if the conditions were not being met. When Juliane’s host mom left her with the children to go on a business trip, she let her LCC know right away:

They are not allowed to exceed the 45 hours a week limit and if I, for example, work 60 hours or if I’m home alone for a week with the kids, which has happened already to au pairs, I will say something. Because once with the business trips, I spoke with my previous program director and she was very, very supportive; she was like ‘that’s not your business.’ Some things are really not your business.
The presence of this support system, along with monthly meetings with other au pairs set up by their agencies, is a crucial foundation of the program.

**Visa Categories for Domestic Workers**

Unlike au pairs, domestic workers are brought in on A-3, G-5, and B-1 visas. A-3 visas are issued to household employees of diplomats and G-5 for workers of international corporations, such as the IMF, NATO, or the World Bank (Zarembka 145). Only 4,000 A-3 and G-5 visas are issued per year, which is an inconsequential number compared with the 200,000 B-1 visas issued. Unlike the A-3 and G-5 categories, the B-1 category is a “catch-all” visa for visitors to the U.S. coming on both business and pleasure; hence, most of the undocumented workers fall into this category because they frequently extend their stay in order to pursue other avenues of employment.

Amongst the various types of nonimmigrant visas issued by the United States Department of State, the A-3 and G-5 visas are subcategories intended for personal employees, attendants, domestic workers or servants of diplomats and foreign government officials (category A), and the employees of designated international organizations or NATO (category G). Although the primary classifications: A-1, A-2 and G-1 – G-4 do not require interviews, unless otherwise requested by a consular officer, personal employees need to interview at the designated embassy or consulate in their home countries. If the employer traveling under an A visa does not have a diplomatic rank of Minister or higher then s/he must demonstrate sufficient funds to provide fair wage and working conditions for their employees as stated by a contract drafted in English. Apart from the contract and proof that the domestic will be compensated according to U.S. minimum wage as established by the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), consular officers need to have certainty that the domestic is qualified to perform the work that he or she has been contracted for
and has the intention of doing so. Interestingly enough, previous illegal status is not in itself reason enough to deny A-3 or G-5 visa status to someone who is otherwise capable of the stated employment. Therefore, as stated in the *U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual*, “an alien with a degree in computer science who is coming to work as a domestic employee may be issued an A-3 visa if he or she clearly has the intent and ability to perform the job” (“Foreign Affairs Manual”). However, applicants are subject to automatic refusal if their potential employers are permanent residents of the United States. The distinction in legal status, thus, between au pairs and other domestic migrant workers is further exacerbated by citizenship limitations imposed on their employers; host families of au pairs *have* to be citizens or permanent residents of the United States in order for the women to be able to obtain J-1 visa status, whereas the employers of A-3 and G-5 visa holders cannot have permanent legal status in the United States.

Some scholars have documented the plight of domestic workers on A-3 and G-5 visas as a form of “modern-day slavery” (see Zarembka). With their legality dependent on their employers, many women endure both physical and mental abuse on the part of their hiring families in order to avoid being sent back home. What furthers the injustice is the lack of recourse on the part of the government, which in accordance with classical liberal tradition does not intervene in home and family affairs (Sassen 93). Unlike au pairs, the contract drawn up between A-3 and G-5 household employees does not enumerate the exact responsibilities of the worker. In order to issue a domestic worker visa, the U.S. Department of State requires the employment contract to maintain not only that the “employee will be compensated at the state or federal minimum or prevailing wage, whichever is greater” (“Diplomats and Foreign Government Officials”) as stated above, but also that the employee will not pursue any other work while in the family’s service.
The employers are also expected to concede that they will not withhold the passport of the employee and that “both parties understand that the employee cannot be required to remain on the premises after working hours without compensation” (“Diplomats and Foreign Government Officials”). The mere mentioning of the latter is enough to imply that maids are, and have been, subject to wrongdoing. It is interesting to note, as well, that as an additional important notice to employers and their personal employees, the U.S. Department of State provides the definition of “involuntary servitude” as defined under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), advising domestic employees to call 911 if they were to be subjected to this type of treatment.

_The J-1 vs. A-1 Visa Experience: Support Systems_

Joy Zarembka, in her article “America’s Dirty Work: Migrant Maids and Modern-Day Slavery,” describes the experience of one Czech woman, named Ava, who spent time in the United States as both a J-1 and an A-1 visa holder. After her year spent working as an au pair, she decided to prolong her stay on an A-1 visa working as a maid for a foreign diplomat. Unlike the orientations, information pamphlets, emergency phone numbers, counselors, and support groups provided for the general well being of au pairs (149), Ava was completely alone in her work as a domestic servant and felt as if she were being held captive. She was not allowed to leave the house during her time off and was refused days off when she needed them. This infringement on her freedom prompted her to return to the Czech Republic after only three months in her new role without collecting her overtime wages. Underpinning the difference in legal status between these two groups, thus, is the support system provided to au pairs by their agencies, and the lack thereof in the case of personal servants. If an au pair experiences disagreements with her host family, which she is unable to solve on her own, the LCC sets up a mediation session between both parties. In instances where the complaints are justified, whether on the part of the host
family or the au pair, and are unable to be resolved, the agency initiates a period of transition, during which it has two weeks to find a new host family for the immigrant worker and a new au pair for the family. Although the au pairs who are in transition are still allowed to live with their host families while arrangements for their move are made, they can stay with their LCCs if this is not possible for whatever reason.

Despite thorough screening procedures, it is estimated that 15 to 20 percent of au pair placements do not work out (Shellenbarger) as a result of differences in personality and/or homesickness, amongst others. Leni, an au pair from Austria, had been in the United States for six months when the psychological discomfort that she felt at her host family’s home started to negatively affect her job:

There were a lot of little things that made me unhappy and then I was not as fun anymore with the kids, so she was unhappy with me and it was a vicious circle. She did not really break any rules; it was just like from both sides. We were just not happy with each other anymore. It was more like a personal thing after a while.

In most instances agencies are quick to provide new matches for the au pairs, but those who do not get a new family are sent home.

**Au Pair Work in Contrast to Servitude**

The work of some scholars, amongst them Sabine Hess and Annette Puckhaber, along with Rosie Cox, focuses on viewing the au pair as no different from other migrant women workers. They ascertain that the discourse embedded in materials advertising au pair work as a cultural exchange program and the au pairs as members of the family leaves the young women even more vulnerable to exploitation. This opinion is supported by the work of Rachel Salazar Parrenas, whose extensive research on Filipina domestic migrants to the United States and Italy
has shown that these women frequently described themselves as members of the family using “intimacy to de-emphasize servitude” (qtd. in Hess and Puckhaber 69). Even though Hess and Puckhaber conducted research mainly on women from Southern and Eastern Europe working as au pairs in France and England, they generalized their conclusions to au pairs working in the United States. However, my research and experience working with au pairs in the U.S. has shown that it is important to differentiate between the plight of au pairs in the United States and of those in Europe.

**Au Pair Work in the United States**

Given the strict regulations that pertain to the cultural exchange visitors as described in the previous section on the legal status of au pairs and domestic workers, not following those rules would imply that families, au pairs, and agencies would be breaking the law as pertaining to J-1 visa holders. The handbook that participants receive before departure from their home country clearly emphasizes that only minor housework is to be performed by au pairs, primarily as related to child-care duties, e.g. preparing food, laundering the children’s clothes, etc. Hess and Puckhaber relate the story of Marianna, an au pair from Slovakia, who upon arrival at her host-family’s home in Germany was expected to do all the housework because all five children attended school (66). Many of the au pairs that I talked to were also put in charge of school-age children, but while these children were at school, these women either had time off from work, which they would resume upon picking the kids up from school, or they would be occupied with the younger children who stayed home during the day.

It is also unreasonable to assume that potential au pairs are misinformed by their agencies and do not realize the amount of work that awaits them upon arrival in the United States. If an au pair expressed that her present work situation did not meet her previously envisioned
expectations, it was not due to a lack of information on the part of the agency in their home countries but to a lack of experience in dealing with multiple children alone for an extended period of time and making sure that their needs were met. As one of the au pairs stated:

[The agency] told me you can travel with your family . . . After work I just want to relax, I have four kids and for me it’s hard. I was thinking about changing families [when I first got here] because I was really, really tired.

Another au pair also emphasized that her experience upon coming here differed from her original expectations:

It’s different because you’re told you can never leave a kid alone in a room, but I was six months with five kids. It’s impossible to have five kids always in the same room!

In fact, the *Preparation Handbook* from Cultural Care Au Pair, provided to au pairs prior to their departure, clearly outlines the expectations that the agency and host families have of them, shattering the allusion of those prospective program participants who might think that no work is involved:

Working in your host family means that you will be spending most of the day on your own with the children, taking care of them, feeding them, playing with them, or taking them to different activities. There will not be a lot of flexibility in meeting your friends or free time, and you have a schedule to follow and rules to respect. Your first priority always has to be the host children and taking care of their needs. This can sometimes be challenging as you might feel that you are missing out on things that your friends are doing, but remember that everyone has a different schedule, so your friends will certainly miss out on other things that you are doing [too]. (23)
Juliane, who had read all the fine print very carefully, was very clear in her interview with me about what au pairs are expected to do:

They told us that we would have to do everything which is related to the kids: the laundry, their rooms, everything has to be cleaned up. Play with them, pick them up, driving, cooking, but it varies from family to family.

Although the housework she was expected to do pertained to taking care of the children’s needs, this became somewhat of an overwhelming experience for her. Juliane was also afraid of potentially falling into the role of the maid if she were to be assigned too many chores. She followed up the above quoted statement with a very blatant: “But I’m not willing to do everything because I’m not a maid.” After some more discussion she made it clear to me that despite the fact that her duties were related to the guidelines outlined by the Handbook, she had hoped that the boys she took care of would clean up more after themselves because they were older kids (8 and 11 years old). Thus, clearly those women who are surprised by the amount of work they are faced with find mothering tasks to be challenging in themselves; it is not that they are unaware of what is expected of them in their positions as caregivers.

Au Pair Work in European Countries

The greater vulnerability of au pairs working in European countries that Hess and Puckhaber write about stems from the laissez faire rhetoric present in the “European Agreement of the Council of Europe on the Employment of Au Pairs” from 1969, which was recommended for ratification again in 1984. As Hess & Puckhaber point out, the National Guidelines for Au Pair Organizations lists the duties of an au pair in terms of the following: “In addition to child care, au pairs may be asked to perform day-to-day duties in the household (i.e. light housework). Au pairs should not be required to do heavy-duty chores” (70). Thus, it is apparent that in
contrast to au pairs in the United States, to whom it is transparent that they are only to do the housework that relates to cleaning up after the kids, au pairs in Europe are partially viewed as maids since there is an unambiguous domestic component present in their job description.

Another distinction that can be drawn that affects the role of the au pair in European countries in contrast to the United States is the state subsidizing of child care, which is widespread in many European countries. Therefore, in France, for example, where “state provision of child care is more widespread than in most western countries” (Momsen 4), au pairs and other domestic servants are hired to do mostly the household chores. In the United States, however, where day care is one of the only available organized forms of child care in the pre-kindergarten years, parents seek other options for their children since day-care facilities can impose heavy financial burdens on families with multiple kids. As another alternative to au pairs, some parents take advantage of day cares run out of private homes. This form of child care has become a popular entrepreneurial enterprise for stay-at-home moms in more affluent neighborhoods ever since the reduction in public social services provisions in the 1980s (Momsen 4). Consequently, with there only being a few avenues that parents can take to make sure their children are being watched over, au pairs have become an increasingly enticing option for many families due to their relatively cheaper cost.8

Au Pair as Status Symbol

As industrialization created a greater divide between those at the top of the income chain and those at the bottom, it also led to the return of the servant-employing middle class. Having a domestic worker became an important sign of middle-class status for many families. As Jean Pyle puts it, “families view hiring a domestic worker as a badge of achieving ‘middle-classhood’” (288). It could be argued that in light of today’s tough economic times, employing
an au pair could certainly be viewed as an upper-class symbol since more and more middle-class families are cutting down. Certainly, there is no doubt that in order to outsource child care, one needs to be able to afford it. Employing an au pair, therefore, is somewhat of a paradox since this cheapest form of child care is also perceived as the highest in status.

Most of the women in my research pool worked for host parents, whose professions would position them as being upper-middle or upper class. Sofia’s host mom was a physician, and her host dad was a physician-turned-stockbroker; she pointed out to me with a tone of bewilderment: “I don’t know what happened in his life to make him want to stop being a doctor.” Paola’s host dad also worked as a stockbroker with the mom working part time as a realtor. As an educator with half of a master’s degree completed in Mexico, Paola acknowledged that her host family wanted a Spanish-speaking au pair in order for her to teach their children how to speak Spanish which, apart from the Italian and Russian that was already spoken in the home due to the parents’ ethnic backgrounds, would undoubtedly be a symbol of the family’s emphasis on learning.

Carolina, a Brazilian au pair, worked in the home of a wealthy Jewish family with four children. Even though the mother did not work, apart from Carolina, the family also hired two babysitters on a regular basis to help out with the kids twice a week. Although Carolina complained about having a strained relationship with one of the babysitters due to their having differing opinions about child care, she was very satisfied with her experience as an au pair, since, unlike many of her colleagues, she was more of a status symbol for her host family than a child-care provider, and was given a great deal of independence.

Twenty-year-old Austrian au pair Juliane was the only woman whose host family’s economic situation was perhaps not so clear, due to her working for a single mom. Although she
knew that her host mom was a territory manager for a company, who had the “female-friendly” option of working a flexible schedule out of the house, Juliane did not know what the father did or whether he contributed to the household income. Juliane was very unsatisfied with her placement in this family because of having to fulfill the role of the surrogate mother by doing certain things she did not feel comfortable doing, such as going to parent-teacher conference night at the children’s schools. She expressed many times during the course of the interview that, unlike her host mom, other families hire au pairs only in order to be able to say that they have one:

Very relaxed families just need an au pair as a symbol of prestige. I know an au pair and he’s just...they invite him to everything and he just has to drive them. He doesn’t really take care of the kids; it’s really weird and his family is really, really rich. It’s just, I think, most of them can afford an au pair . . . Some families have a nanny and an au pair. It’s just like to say – ‘look, I have an au pair and I can afford it.’ And she’s from abroad so it’s something exotic that you have. I don’t get it why they have that.

Maybe it’s just the really rich families who have that.

As Juliane pointed out, some host families hire both au pairs and nannies, which positions them even higher in terms of their social status. Since au pairs come from abroad, they are considered “exotic,” a term that carries with it the popular notion of being more expensive or “upper class.”

**Limitations & Suggestions for Further Research**

The sample of au pairs interviewed is limited to ten participants, with whom I had a professional engagement, from only one metropolitan area of the United States. It is questionable whether the program is always carefully implemented strictly following governmental guidelines and whether all Local Childcare Coordinators are as supportive as those in charge of the young
women interviewed for this study. Therefore, further research with a larger number of au pairs from various parts of the U.S. is recommended in the following three areas: ascertaining au pairs’ roles as exchange visitors/migrant domestic workers within the home; the au pair and manufacturing motherhood; and au pair migration as a means of gaining independence.

In the debate waging between whether au pairs are exchange visitors or maids, my research has clearly revealed that apart from having legal status as cultural exchange participants, highly regulated job descriptions, and a strong support system in their agencies, what furthers the difference between au pairs and other domestics are their reasons for choosing to work in this niche. Most au pairs choose to take part in the program in order to develop their English-language skills and learn more about the host country and themselves as young women and do not expect to make a lot of money during their time abroad. In fact, as my interviews have shown, most au pairs come from privileged backgrounds, unlike domestic servants from Third-World countries, whose primary concern in coming to the United States is to provide a better living for their families back home.

Another area worthy of additional exploration, which links the au pair business to globalization, is the au pair’s part in manufacturing motherhood. Macdonald looks at au pairs and nannies as “shadow mothers,” who often feel obliged to go above and beyond what they are paid for because of what they feel can be described as “naturally feminine” tasks. A couple of the au pairs I spoke to expressed their successive detachment from the family and refusal to participate in family events as soon as they realized that they would have a very difficult time not attending to the needs of their charges while not on duty (Au Pair Work in the United States, this paper).
A final issue requiring further in-depth inquiry is looking at migration as a means of gaining independence. Here, similar to what Sassen discusses when writing about the migration of women from the Third World, au pairs gain greater personal autonomy and are perceived along lines of new-found respect by their family and friends upon returning home. The fact that these young women choose to move halfway around the world to take care of numerous children on their own is undoubtedly a noteworthy accomplishment and a sign of audacity and independence.

**Conclusion**

Transnational migration of labor and the creation of a variety of categories of cultural exchange visitors, from interns to camp counselors to medical residents, has enabled young students from all over the world to take part in programs that have become a very popular way of travel. The au pair industry allows women to be independent for a year of their life, gain some vital work experience and open their eyes to a greater array of possibilities for the future. Unlike domestic workers who are bound to their employees, or perhaps here illegally, au pairs can travel freely in their time off and do not have to fear being sent home and denied entry into the United States if they were to choose to come again in the future as visitors of a different kind.

The au pairs interviewed for this study were very clear about their expectations of the program and the guidelines that have been set out for its participants. In most cases they were willing to speak up when they were asked by their host families to work overtime or do chores that were not mentioned in their contracts. This empowerment stemmed in large part from their legal status as “exchange visitors” and members of the host families, not maids or domestic workers. These young women also felt the support of their Local Childcare Coordinators, as well as the extended network of au pairs in the area, with whom they met on a regular basis, allowing
for the exchange of experiences and advice when it was needed. Moreover, taking classes at local community colleges also provided, or in some cases reminded, these women of what life would be like if they were to be back in their native countries.

Finally, some of the difficulties that au pairs experienced in their roles as child-care providers stemmed from the overwhelming nature of the tasks involved with mothering. Since in most cases, au pairs were called upon to take care of four or even five children, the challenges of managing such a heavy workload oftentimes came as a shock, especially considering the young age of these women (19-26). All of the au pairs interviewed, however, were satisfied with their decision to come to the United States as part of the au pair program and perceived it as a good learning experience.

Although globalization certainly needs to be viewed with a critical eye, its role in increasing transnational mobility has gained increasing importance as a social phenomenon. More and more young women are taking advantage of the opportunity to legally travel and study abroad while at the same time earning some money and gaining work experience. The partaking of au pairs in child care has moved the dynamics of domestic work from the private to the transnational sphere, reconfiguring gender roles within the household.

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Appendix

Au Pair Interview Questions

Background Information

1. What is your name and age?
2. Where are you from?
3. What au pair agency do you work for?
4. What type of city are you from: small or large?
5. What is your family’s economic status?
6. Tell me about your decision to become an au pair. What made you decide to become an au pair?
7. What were you doing in your home country before you came to the United States?

Requirements and Expectations of Au Pair Work

8. What are the requirements for becoming an au pair?
9. What were the expectations that you had when you were in your home country?
10. What responsibilities were you told you would have as an au pair?
11. Does your current experience meet the expectations you had prior to coming here?
12. Tell me about your host family. How many children do you take care of? What do your host parents do (does host mom work full-time or have a family-friendly work schedule: part-time or flex work)?
Mothering Tasks

13. Who performs the mothering tasks in your home: feeding, changing diapers, disciplining, putting children to bed, playing with children, soothing, simulating, connecting on an emotional level?

14. Describe the events of a typical day in your home.

15. What are your beliefs about how children should be raised?

16. Do you believe that you provide a nurturing environment for the children?

17. Do you see being a mother as a job?

18. Who spends more time with the children – you or their mother?

19. Describe the bond between you and the children.

20. Who tells the children what to do when both of you and their mother are home?

Relationship With Host Family & Legal Status

21. What do you do when the mother and father come home from work?

22. Do you feel a part of the family?

23. Do you spend your free time with the family?

24. What are the provisions of your J-1 visa status?

25. What does it mean to be an exchange visitor in the United States?

26. Do you feel that your agency has been supportive of your au pair experience so far?

27. Do you feel that since your visa is dependent on the family that you live with and that you have to do what they say otherwise they will send you home?
28. What has your experience been like adapting to American culture? Is life in the United States what you had expected it to be?

29. Do you want to go back to your home country?

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1 Ten percent of au pairs are men (Shellenbarger); however, I will refer to au pairs throughout this paper as women due to their being in the vast majority.

2 The North Shore encompasses the lakefront suburbs directly north of Chicago, stretching inland to Northbrook, Northfield, Glenview and Deerfield because of their affluence. Seven of the North Shore municipalities are in the top quintile of U.S. household income, with three (Kenilworth, Winnetka, and Glencoe) in the top 5%.

3 The J-1 category of exchange visitors pertains to students of colleges and universities, short-term scholars, interns, and summer work and travel visitors, amongst others. For full descriptions of private sector and government programs visit the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs website at http://exchanges.state.gov/jexchanges/exchange-vistior.html.

4 All the au pairs’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

5 The weekly wage was raised from $176.85 to $195.75 on July 24, 2009 following a federal minimum wage increase of $2.10 that President Bush signed into law in May 2007, which was phased in over the course of two years (“Au Pair and EduCare”).

6 Au pair stipends are based on formulas established by the U.S Department of Labor.

7 See the U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual Volume 9 - Visas for further information concerning the stipulations for issuance of A-3 and G-5 visas available at http://www.state.gov/m/a/dir/regs/fam/.

8 For a breakdown of fees associated with hiring an au pair and a comparison of costs to other forms of childcare see “Program Costs § Cultural Care Au Pair.”