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Cinderella Chooses an Exchange Programme: Au-pairs from the Gender Perspective

"I am staying here in Germany. Leaving? Not now! My life here could be better, but I do not complain. I want to stay here and study. I think I can handle language problems, the constant shortage of money and expensive food. I do not think that it is wrong that my guest-family does not invite me to eat at their table or that I have no key to my room. Sometimes I even forget that it could be different! However I have a mobile, but I got it so that my host-mother could reach me whenever she needs me. So I do not like phoning that much."

(— an anonymous female au-pair)

CINDERELLAS ON SALE

A journalist from the radio program *Deutsche Welle* named his report about au-pairs "Cinderellas of the Modern World." He was exactly right: since the liberalisation of the regulation of au-pair agencies in 2002, any person (at least in Germany) can open an employment service agency.

The Internet is full of sometimes serious and appealing, but also dubious agents, who place photos of girls on their sites as if they would be chosen for the way they look or could present themselves *on-line* for the "exchange job." Unfairly, applicants from the South often have more chances.

It is known that the some agencies can find a family more easily for a girl from Brazil, for example, than for an applicant from Ukraine. This prejudice can be based on individual likes or dislikes of the hosting families; their awareness of cultural differences; experiences of previous conflicts; or familiarity with certain temperaments of au-pairs from one country or another.

"If I spend already 600 Euros for coming to Europe, I cannot risk being evicted on the street or disappoint my hosts by asking for more time on weekends. They pay me more than 200 Euros if I stay overnight alone with the kids. Once I was left alone with just a list of phone numbers for two weeks," says a Peruvian au-pair.

African or South American au-pairs are more easily accepted since they come from far away and have fewer estimations of what it is to be an au-pair. In general, they dream about the European *way of life*, if such a life exists. Those girls are simply more "attractive" to host families. They lack the social or native networks which could catch them if they fail to fit into their host family; they are more relaxed, bring more temperament into the daily life. To be an au-pair can support the unenviable need of being attractive to the host family. The phenomenon of servitude -mail-order brides, au-pairs or nurses, live-in care givers- predominantly concerns employment of women migrants, where race- or gender-abusive mechanisms can occur.

PICTURE OF A WOMAN BEHIND A STOVE

Yet women's gender identity overrides their national, ethnic or class identity. The gender policies of the recent decades have emphasized social status and education of women - instruments of *empowerment* for self-reliance.

They have focused less on *equity* in the politico-economic field or professional integration of mothers.

As a result of that, more and more mothers return to work for productiveness reasons and get support -when in need of external help- from nannies. Thus young mothers pay the price for enjoying equality in their workplace! This leads to a sort of social Darwinism in a loop, where some women are soliciting assistance (without a thought about the children's need of a mother) in order to be free for outside-the-home work, whereby a big part of the income is spent for the childcare or nanny.

Families are more often forced to move for work, limiting their access to the help from extended family members. Mothers are challenged more than fathers by a labour market which constantly demands productive career progress. This imperative for mobility often leads to a gender-based division of labour, in which productivity overrules social interest of the family members.

The au-pair host mothers are either affluent and can afford the time off from the children and home in taking an au-pair, or they are not so well-off and need free time for more work while putting their children's education and well-being into the hands of an unprofessional au-pair. In this fashion au-pair programmes reinvent and fortify the boundaries between the choice for women to be independent or to be taken back to the warm kitchen for the sake of the family.

And the role of an au-pair? In their contracts it is fixed work: 30 hours, including small jobs in the household, cooking, taking care of the children and getting an opportunity to attend a language course. But the main role of an au-pair is the *CCC work*: cooking, cleaning and children. This sends women back to the unconditional role of household keeper.

REGULATIONS RECOMMENDED

A proper working contract is much needed for au-pairs. It protects against misuse and abuse on both sides. The regulation of the Parliamentary Assembly in the Council of Europe in 2004 recommends a "certification" system for all agencies placing domestic workers and recommends the provision of support networks for them in each member state.

Yet currently it is up to the individual preference of each agency aspiring to success and each host family to manage and interpret the au-pair role according to their wishes. "Good-will family guest," "exchange language student," "nanny from Russia," "exchange daughter," "friend of the children," "cheap cleaner and cook," "servant on call," "housekeeper" and "student on holiday" hardly fit the recommendations and contribute to an ambivalent au-pair status.

The Council of Europe recommends: zero tolerance for hidden domestic slavery; protective measures (i.e. help-lines and counselling); fair working conditions and social coverage; reasonable fees and clear status, rights and duties; and institutional oversight of the trade (accreditation of agencies).

The original conception of *Au-pair* was an exchange "on

equal terms” (as the French word indicates). According to research and studies it appears that this has become a mockery of the original meaning of the 1–2 year programme, which thirty years ago was designed as a safe and controlled chance of learning a new language and gaining experience in living overseas legally. In fact today’s so-called au-pairs do not want to be that kind of old-fashioned au-pairs anymore and also generally cannot be advertised as such. Both sides - host families and the au-pairs themselves seldom accept the terms of the “exchange on equal terms”.

NEW CHANCES FOR MOBILE MIGRATION

Mobility, short-term migration (“*transmigration*”), life from a suitcase characterise the life of the new generation of au-pairs. The au-pair programme mirrors demographics: people are more flexible, take more risks and more fully exploit opportunities; they do not live permanently in one place any more. The global movement of “intelligent goods” (human capital) changes the face of the world.

Despite the threat of impermanent living conditions, modern au-pairs choose to take the risk of losing home or status or limited personal career. The programme is a perfect chance for bringing cultures together by peaceful means. Living in the midst of a family abroad has its joys founded on the condition of permanent trust: seeing the unmasked lives of people with their joys and conflicts, celebrating children’s birthdays and holidays, watching TV together or discussing problems in a kindergarten.

The mobility of this one-year visit has great value in getting to know the depths of neighbourliness and teaches patience and understanding on any level of dialogical or exchange projects. Openness to mobility underlines the importance of learning by doing and accepts the factor of change implicit in any international process aimed at alliance and unification.

Eighty percent of au-pairs come from the transitional societies, from Eastern Europe. They want to reach EU labour markets. In this the position of an au-pair differs from the position an exchange student or a cultural exchange participant. This unclear status and mixed motivational position is in the grey zone between what is *productive* and *reproductive*, between what is *private* and *public*. Au-pairs do not threaten labour markets with defaulting loans, but they are not volunteers either, they live in the family but are neither guests nor family members.

EXCHANGE VS. LABOUR-MIGRATION

In the given context the state successfully “provides” affordable childcare to families and manages migration without coming into collision with national labour interests. This can be seen as a *win-win* situation. Hence the relative silence around the au-pair issue in academic discussion is a dis-

crete signpost of the invisibility of this type of the temporary migration.

Uncontrolled and free over-the-internet “au-pair jobs” can be close to domestic slavery, operating very often illegally and without transparency on the same level as “maid” or “child-minder” jobs. Serious agencies suffer from this kind of competition. For their services families have to pay, in exchange they get support and help. But for many families this is beyond their possibilities, they cannot afford such “luxuries.”

An au-pair is not a friend, but also not a servant, she is not a paid contract worker, but at the same time not an unpaid one either; she is somewhere in-between. Young people leave their countries to see the world, but also to earn money. There is a huge contradiction in demanding this type of exchange to be treated solely as a cultural exchange. A language student from Russia who works as a nanny reports:

“The children are direct, they are very clever, if they do not like you, they say, ‘We have you for five more months and then you are back out to Novosibirsk.’ They even know where Novosibirsk is—‘Very far from here!’ They feel I have not much choice but to accept it—the family is the guarantee for my visa!”

She continues: “One morning the guest-mother brought me to the corridor and asked me to clean the shoes. I was standing in front of a 3–4 metre high cupboard full of family shoes. I was not sure if I really understood her right! She meant exactly that, so I spent my five-hour workday with polishing. I think I did more than 50 pairs of shoes. It may sound funny, but on that day I was thinking how to prepare for the German exam of the following week.”

Is cleaning windows a light duty? Is sitting with a child in front of the television work? Is a family unfriendly to leave an au-pair alone with three dogs in the house for two weeks while travelling to the Mediterranean? It depends on family practises, on the individual situation and the stamina of the au-pair. They have to struggle for their studies. And it is for just “one year”!

The motivation of the contemporary au-pairs to improve their language skills, stay abroad, make new friends and study comes above childcare duties, which are necessary

for survival. And most of them make it! They make it as daytime students, as brides, or as successful translators back home. The lucky ones get working visas and stay longer.

There is a whole network of foreign student friends in Germany, who trick the immigration offices by sharing the money required for the proof of support over several bank accounts. There is a well-organised informal network of families who take nanny-students or servants for the elderly. Some ex-au-pairs managed to live in both of their worlds at the same time: planning for their return while serving as cheap helpers now.



INTEGRATION OR ONE FOOT IN EACH COUNTRY

Statistics show that over time the nanny business has turned predominantly into a bridge for young women and sometimes young men from countries like Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria or Romania to enter the EU. "To fit in"? It is not very clear to fit into what: *whether to stay or to leave—neither here nor there.*

These patterns of motivational mishmash in young women illustrate the prototype of the aforementioned new mobile migration. Some scholars call it *transmigration*. Recent studies confirm the fact that there is no increase in long-term migration to Western Europe as the number of short-term labour migrants grows.

The problem is that these people are not tourists either. Most of the young women are highly educated and risk lowering their qualifications and breaking their careers at home for the sake of the cultural capital they gain from the experience of living in the West. Their home countries are in a period of "transition": after university there are no jobs, they can't live with parents any more or they are underestimated in their new jobs. All this is worse than what they expect to find abroad.

Then the au-pair year passes by and there is no vision of what comes next. One thing they learn to deal with is extremely risky situations, so perhaps they hope for a job in the trans-national private business sector where there is need of foreign languages. Most of these young women are not going to integrate into their guest societies according to the principles of regular integration: to "fit in," speak the language and support themselves.

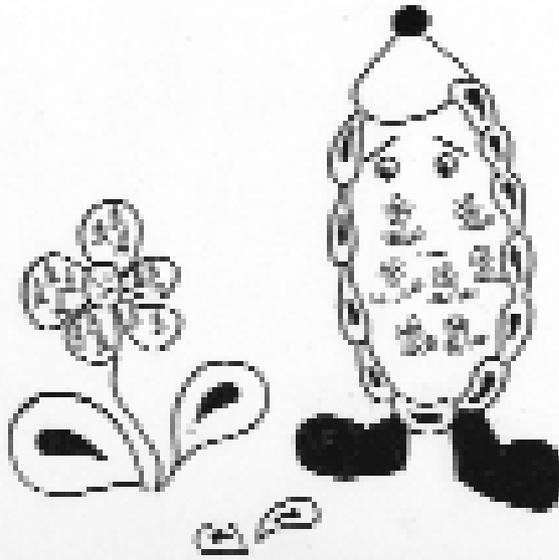
Their experience makes them adjust to any possible risks, even to seek them out for the sake of non-commercial life qualities; they grow out of their "narrow" and "normatively gendered" homes and proclaim the new position of double or triple belonging. Generation Y or Z or X, what ever we call it: these generations operate on different terms—terms of living from one day to the next, neither here nor there, maybe more free from communal responsibility and with more individual determination—a very post-modern perspective.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It would not reasonable to claim that no exchange is happening in transmigration. Even "servants" are participants in an exchange! The concluding question I raise is an ethical one, raised in the constitution of daily life and the roles which have to make sense and be arranged fairly.

The cultural and social pressures and opportunities make young women make their choices. The "suitcase economy" of trans-national migration creates a choice of multiple identities alongside a personalised idea of what a woman is and what the realm of her service is.

The open and ambivalent au-pair project of transformative migration can bring up to date our knowledge about



the understanding of cultural exchange; of the parameters of the role of women; of the market forces treating young people from the non-EU Europe as unequal in their status and jobs. The scenarios of holiday workers, volunteers, seasonal migrants and domestic servants tell us about the benefits—as well as risks—to individual and international development and emphasise their dependence on individual support and acknowledgement from well-intentioned institutions.

As a closing thought, the romantics of a dream-like nanny might be disillusioned by the role the au-

pair and nanny working world plays. Modern children are occupied more with Cinderella than with Mary Poppins. Despite that, the successful modern part-time Cinderella takes one further step: she overcomes the different post-modern role expectations and integrates her experience into her own life choice, she learns know-how and adaptation, if she respects the challenge "to be thrown into the unknown," making the best out of it as an integrated and clever young woman. If she gets the needed support, it can be a valuable opportunity for learning!

*"...you must be kind, you must be witty
Very sweet and fairly pretty
Take us on outings, give us treats
Sing songs, bring sweets*

*Never be cross or cruel
Never give us castor oil or gruel
Love us as a son and daughter
And never smell of barley water*

*If you won't scold and dominate us
We will never give you cause to hate us
We won't hide your spectacles
So you can't see
Put toads in your bed
Or pepper in your tea..."*

—"The Perfect Nanny" from *Mary Poppins*, written by Richard and Robert SHERMAN

Suggested Reading

HENSHALL-MOMSEN Janet, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*. London, 1999.
HESS Sabine and LENZ Ramona (eds.), *Geschlecht und Globalisierung. Ein kulturwissenschaftlicher Streifzug durch transnationale Räume*. Taunus, 2001.
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NEWCOMBE Emma, *Temporary migration to the UK as an 'Au-Pair': Cultural exchange or reproductive labour?*. Sussex Migration Working Paper No. 21. COMPAS, Oxford, 2004. http://www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/publications/working_papers/mwp21.pdf

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