

# 77 | 'big sisters' are better domestic servants?! comments on the booming au pair business

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## **abstract**

The au pair program in general is still known as a form of cultural exchange program and a good possibility for young women to spend a year abroad, although it has undergone great changes during the last 10 years. This article argues that due to different socio-economic and cultural processes in Western postindustrial societies as well as in the eastern and southern parts of the world the au pair program is becoming a form of domestic work with quite similar working and living conditions to that of live-in migrant domestic workers. This article which is based on two empirical studies on the globalizing au pair business in Eastern and Western Europe as well in the United States looks into the motivations and expectations, the living conditions and interactions between the au pairs and the employer families and contrasts these findings with the discourse of the au pair agencies still advertising au pair as a form of cultural exchange. In doing so the paper can show that it is the still dominant image of au-pair as a cultural exchange program (disarticulating the work aspect) that leaves the young au pair women even more vulnerable to exploitation: 'big sisters' are the best domestic servants. This article draws attention to the racialized economization of the private sphere and care work, the inherent traps and exploitative features of this very specific work place.

## **keywords**

gender; globalization; transnational migration; domestic work; au pair; new division of reproductive labor

## introduction

'Isn't au pair only a nicer word for a housemaid?' asks Tatjana, a 21-year-old woman from a small town in eastern Slovakia, prior to heading for Germany as an au pair in the early summer of 2000. Like many other Slovakian au pair applicants, she had recently completed the last of her school exams and was unemployed. Although her parents had just found new jobs after several years of unemployment, they could not afford to send their eldest daughter to university. Tatjana, therefore, had decided to go to Western Europe as an au pair. She had heard that the local Protestant church was helping to arrange au pair placements and applied for one immediately. Since the mid-1990s, commercial agencies had been cropping up in every moderately sized city in Slovakia but Tatjana had heard that some au pairs placed by the agencies had had negative experiences and felt that a church-run agency would be more reliable. While she had faith in the church, she remained somewhat uncertain about the kind of family she would be placed with. Stories of long workdays and little free time were making the rounds among former au pairs, who frequently described themselves as being little more than 'housemaids.' This was not how they had envisioned life as an au pair. As Marianna, another prospective au pair, said, 'I don't think that this is a job where I'm the servant of the family but rather I'm supposed to be a member of the family. In a limited way, of course, but still a member.'

After her arrival in Germany, however, Marianna soon realized that this was not the case. She had been placed in a small southern town with a family of five and, as all the children attended school, it was clear they did not need a nanny. Rather, with both parents working long hours, they needed someone to do housework. From 8 o'clock in the morning until two in the afternoon, Marianna was expected to clean, tidy up, do the laundry and the ironing, as well as cook. Whereas most au pairs did a combination of childcare and housework, Marianna's work was done when the family was not at home, providing few opportunities for personal interaction. The distance between them was increased by the spatial separation between Marianna's room and the rest of the house, which she only ventured into during working hours and for supper. After three months, Marianna was forced to conclude, 'I'm nothing but an employee to this family. Cheap labour.' Despite this, Marianna soon began to appreciate her situation for her workday was relatively short and her tasks clearly defined, whereas au pairs responsible for both childcare and housework never knew when their workday would end. In most cases, their daily routine consisted of getting up early to feed and dress the children before bringing them to school or kindergarten and then watching them until their parents returned. If their parents did not come home immediately after work, the au pair was left minding the children. In comparison, Marianna's position offered a number of advantages but she still struggled with her isolation from the family. She felt they looked upon her as a domestic servant, which she considered degrading.

Such dissatisfaction after a few short months with a family is common among au pairs. Gabi, an au pair responsible for the care of a one-year-old, had also had a number of disputes with her host family over working hours and her integration into the household. She argued, 'They want an au pair who doesn't eat or take a shower, who is cheap and nothing else. But I'm also a human being and not servant.' Another au pair reported that this was all too common, saying, 'Only one out of four au pairs is lucky with her family.' She had changed families on her own, the agency refusing to support her because they trusted the host family more. But her new host family exploited her as well. 'I was used as cannon-fodder and treated like a maid,' she said resignedly. But due to limited prospects and an unemployment rate of 20 per cent among young people in Slovakia, she did not want to miss an opportunity to live abroad and predicted she would 'soon come back, without official papers if necessary.'

Tatjana, Marianna and Gabi are just three of the 10 Slovakian au pairs interviewed by Sabine Hess in 2000. In this essay, the authors, Sabine Hess and Annette Puckhaber, examine the experiences of Slovakian au pairs in Germany as well as German au pairs in the United States and explore their response to being treated as domestic servants by host families, showing that this practice should be viewed as a form of migratory domestic service. They argue that due to the structure of this institution and the absence of laws governing it contributing to unregulated hours and poor working conditions, leaving au pairs open to exploitation by agencies and host families. Furthermore, the discourses and practices of the agencies and host families illustrate their attempts to turn this institution to their advantage. Annette Puckhaber's research began as a group research project on domestic work at the International Women's University Hanover in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Her focus has been the discourses found in advertising by international au pair agencies, which aims to make this an attractive institution to both host families and young women. These are compared with descriptions of the reality of au pair life from interviews with German au pairs in the US. In contrast to Puckhaber's research into the au pair market in the West, Sabine Hess' ethnographic research concentrates on the au pair market between Eastern and Western European countries, which has been growing since the mid-1990s.

**1** Annette Puckhaber is deeply indebted to Helma Lutz and Umut Erel for their valued advice.

In the spirit of 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus, 1995), Hess followed a group of 10 au pair women over two years, beginning prior to their departure from Slovakia, continuing through their stay in Germany, and then as the women planned what to do once their one-year au pair visas had expired. The coaches passing between Slovakia and Germany, used by disproportionate numbers of au pair women, offered her deep insight into the range of working and living conditions for au pairs in Germany. As a participant observer, Hess witnessed the treatment of au pairs by non-commercial agencies and gained access to host families that, according to them, had no conflicts with their au pairs. The differing regional focus and varied research design precludes a systematic comparison of the au pair markets of the

US and Germany. However, the results do suggest similarities in the experiences of au pairs from post-socialist Eastern European and from Western industrial countries, regardless of their country of origin, diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and motivations for becoming au pairs. (For gender-specific effects of the processes of transformation in post-socialist countries see. Jähner, et al., 2001) Due to the capitalist globalization of Western post-industrial nations, one might assume that similar developments may be found in countries such as Great Britain, with respect to the practices of commercial au pair agencies and host families.

## the official picture of cultural exchange

While the statements of au pair women from Slovakia and other eastern European countries, who have increasingly come to dominate the German au pair market since the end of the Cold War,<sup>2</sup> point to the fact that host families employ au pairs as domestic workers, the predominant picture promoted among the general public is still that of au pair as a form of cultural exchange. 'Living and learning with a German host family' is one of the slogans used in glossy brochures and increasingly on the Internet by German agencies attempting to attract young women under the age of 25 from Eastern and Western European countries (Gesellschaft für internationale Jugendkontakte, 2001). Au pair, its French origin meaning 'share and share alike,' is presented as a good opportunity to go abroad, particularly for young women because they get to live with a host family instead of travelling alone. In return for board and lodgings, an accident insurance policy and a little pocket money (205 Euros in Germany), au pairs are expected to help with the housework, generally presented as childcare, with enough free time to take language courses and participate in other activities aimed at getting to know the country and its people. The German government has also promoted this picture of cultural exchange, stating in its reply to a parliamentary question in 2001:<sup>3</sup>

The main aim of au pair placements is to give young people the opportunity to get to know foreign countries and cultures and to learn foreign languages by staying in a host family, thereby fostering international understanding. The amount of work an au pair has to do within the families is limited to **assisting** [emphasis added] with housework, which is typical within the family division of labour.

(ibv 2001: 1169) (translation by the authors)

A similar discursive strategy may be found in the promotional material of British and American au pair agencies. As one au pair agency states, 'For generations, young Europeans have chosen to spend a year in another country living as part of a family while helping to look after the children. This experience provides them with an opportunity to learn about a different culture, enhance their foreign language skills, and expand their understanding of the world around them.' (<http://www.eurapair.com/page1.cfm> [as at 3 August 2000]). Further analysis of the promotional literature indicates that au pair agencies use the image of 'big sister'

**2** The available German data concerning au pairs is not only very limited but also questionable since the Bundesanstalt für Arbeit (BA) (Germany's federal employment office) as the main controlling authority relies solely on information supplied by the licensed agencies. In addition, the BA did not start recording EU-Europeans and non-EU-Europeans separately until 1998. In 1999 it recorded 27,376 au pairs altogether, 13,900 of which came from non-EU-countries. According to non-commercial agencies in Germany, East European women have made up almost 90 per cent of all applicants since the mid-1990s. At the same time, Germany was only third behind the United States and Great Britain in the list of the most popular destinations of au pair applicants from Slovakia. In 2000 the German embassy to Slovakia issued 1,700 au pair visa.

**3** With this statement the government follows the

formulations of the 1969 'European Agreement of the Council of Europe on the Employment of Au Pairs' which reads: 'Au pair' placement is the temporary reception by families, in exchange for certain services, of young foreigners who come to improve their linguistic and possibly professional knowledge as well as their general culture by acquiring a better knowledge of the country where they are received.' (cf. Council of Europe, 1972, p.22, article 2,1)

4 Another au pair agency points out that inclusion in family activities like family meals and holiday celebrations shows that an au pair is not like an 'employee' or a 'servant'. From our own experience we know it is not that simple. Even the intention behind including an au pair in a vacation can be for the purpose of having a full-time babysitter at hand (de Jongh, 1998: 102).

5 To this day, Germany has not signed

in depicting the relationship between an au pair and her host family, suggesting that the women will be integrated into the family unit (<http://AUPAIR-Network.com/aupair/aupair.htm> [as at 28 July 2000]):<sup>4</sup> 'In their host country they live with a family, they are treated as a family member, look after the children and help around the house. In return, the au pairs receive free room and board as well as weekly pocket money.' ([http://AUPAIR-Network.com/ap\\_germany/english.htm](http://AUPAIR-Network.com/ap_germany/english.htm) [as at 28 July 2000]; Anderson, 2000: 122–125; Hempshell, 1998)

The statements of Slovakian au pair applicants before their departure indicate that they also expected this type of relationship to develop between themselves and their host families and did not expect to 'work' as part of their au pair placement. Instead, they expected to share the housework with the host family and did not view it as an 'employer–employee' relationship. Influenced by the gendered image of domestic work as being a 'natural' female domain within the family household, they did not view the required housework as a form of paid labour. As they were all used to performing domestic tasks within their own families, they believed that they knew how to do it and that this was all that would be expected of them. They were also influenced by the 'moral economy' of domestic work (Geissler, 2002: 39). In contrast to the 'rational, monetaristic contract' underlying paid labour, domestic work is typically viewed as a 'mutual moral contract,' embedded in the dense social and gendered relations of the family. The women, therefore, saw their reward for helping with the housework not in monetary terms but first and foremost in the 'moral currency' of appreciation, caring and familial integration.

Given their expectation of being treated as 'members of the family', the women did not view the required tasks as work but as 'help', as is understood within the moral economy of domestic work. The image of the 'big sister' and the notion of 'helping around the house', as portrayed in agency advertisements, also play on the logic of the moral economy of domestic work and its promises. But, as has been pointed out, the 'moral economy' entails the promise of appreciation and caring in return. Yet, the au pairs Hess interviewed waited in vain for the recognition and gratitude of their host parents, who saw the arrangement in very different terms. On the other hand, given the number of stories about ill-treatment and use of the term 'housemaid' among au pair networks, it may be that hopes of being treated as a 'member of the family' were aimed at easing misgivings about becoming an au pair and calming fears of being treated as a 'servant.' As Salazar Parrenas's research has shown, it is common for domestic workers from the Philippines in Italy and the United States to describe themselves as members of the family, thereby using 'intimacy to de-emphasize servitude' (2000: 179.).

Au pair applicants only have agency rhetoric and their own hopes to inform their expectations as there is no clear definition of au pair tasks in the 'European Agreement of the Council of Europe on the Employment of Au Pairs' of 1969,<sup>5</sup> the national regulations and the instructions of employment offices for au pair

agencies (Council of Europe, 1972). The National Guidelines for Au Pair Organizations list the duties of au pairs as follows: 'In addition to childcare, 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.' However, few agencies offer even the minimal labour standards laid down by the European Agreement to au pair applicants. These standards set the working week at 30 hours with a maximum five-hour day, permit two evenings of work, and require one day off per week on the weekend. Yet, Puckhaber's research suggests the information provided on au pair rights and duties in the agency brochures is cursory at best.

Hess has also found little evidence that commercial agencies in Slovakia attempt to supply applicants with information or to provide a realistic impression of au pair life, rather they appear to be more interested in making a quick deal. It, therefore, came as no surprise to find that au pair applicants with whom she spoke prior to their departure for Germany knew little about their rights or duties. Most seemed to think that 'If I am nice and help out, the host family will also be nice to me,' a belief informed by a notion of mutuality inherent within the moral economy of domestic work. A similar attitude exists among West Europeans going to the United States as au pairs. Expecting to be treated as a member of the host family, they were surprised by the amount of work involved and how difficult it was. As one German au pair commented, 'Hard as it is to believe, I never thought seriously about the fact that I would be working. It never once occurred to me that I would be working so hard, that looking after three small children would be difficult, frustrating and tiring.'

The absence of formal regulations governing au pair placements encourages commercial agencies to place greater emphasis on the quantity, rather than quality, of their placements, which has a negative effect on the experience of the applicants. As the type and amount of work is not specified in the regulations, it is up to the applicant and host family to negotiate working conditions. The au pairs are in a weak bargaining position due to a lack of information about their rights. Furthermore, au pairs from Eastern Europe are especially vulnerable because they are dependent upon their host families for their resident status, as the one-year au pair visa is one of the few legal means of entering and working in Western European countries.<sup>6</sup> This means that their work permit, and consequently their residence permit, expire early if the host families no longer want them and they are unable to find a new family.

While the absence of formal regulations governing these arrangements tend to have a negative effect on the experiences of the applicants, it offers an opportunity for agencies and host families to fill the need for domestic workers by employing au pairs. Under the guise of 'cultural exchange,' au pair placements meet the demand for domestic labour, and it is this perception of au pair as cultural exchange which discourages application of even the lowest legal standards. Instead, there is a somewhat laissez-faire attitude on the part of the national authorities (in Germany, the employment offices) towards the practices

the 'European Agreement of the Council of Europe on the Employment of Au Pairs' which was again recommended for ratification by the European Commission to its member states in 1984. The practical regulations still follow the minimal standards.

<sup>6</sup> Since the end of recruiting 'guest workers' in the 1970s, German immigration policy offers only a few temporary and subject-to-quota possibilities for working migrants who are non-EU-European citizens. Besides seasonal work for three months per year, which is mostly work in farming or building, there are

the options of a contract for work between a German and a foreign company as well as visas for artists, athletes and students. A work permit for housework is not available to date.

of the agencies and the working conditions imposed by host families. In the mid-1990s in Germany, the arrangement of au pair placements became increasingly open so that churches and non-commercial agencies began to speak out against the 'uncontrolled proliferation' of commercial agencies. Until 2002, the regulation of au pair arrangements was under the control of the employment offices, with private agencies having to apply for a licence to arrange au pair placements. Despite this, the employment offices relied on agencies and host families to evaluate and regulate themselves. Checking a potential host family, for example, meant having them complete a questionnaire, and although agencies were supposed to hand out leaflets to au pairs and families informing them about rights and duties and employment offices advised them to visit host families to monitor the au pairs' working and living conditions, Hess never heard of any agencies visiting host families during her two years of research. Even the practice of having agencies apply for a licence to arrange au pair placements was abolished in March 2003, thereby removing all controls on au pair placements. A trading licence is now sufficient to arrange placements, leading to a considerable increase in the number of both small and large commercial au pair agencies.

## **big sisters as domestic workers**

While au pair agencies try to attract applicants with slogans promoting cultural exchange, they present a very different image to potential host families, proposing an au pair as the solution to the difficult task of balancing work and family life (<http://www.efaupair.org/APFWhyEF.htm> [as at 21 July 1999]):

Perhaps you are familiar with this feeling: You love your children and would like to take care of them, but often you just cannot find the time with your job and other activities. This is why you have decided to look for a responsible person with a flexible schedule to take care of your children within the walls of your own home.

(<http://www.gijk.de/pages/aupair-deut-1.html> [as at 28 July 2000])

Hess's research on host families in Germany indicates that many working women seek au pairs for this very reason, as a form of paid domestic labour to help with housework and childcare. It is important to point out that, in contrast to post-colonial countries with a long tradition of live-in domestic workers (such as France), the private labour market in Germany has a very specific structure of what is called 'person-related services' ('personenbezogene Dienstleistungen' in German) which comprise mainly jobs like cleaning, ironing and babysitting, all paid by the hour (Lutz, 2000; Odierna, 2000). Looking back on the employment of her first au pair, one mother of two small children said, 'Gabi was the best solution. I needed someone who was there fulltime, whom I could fall back on if necessary.' She and her husband had initially planned to rely on their grandmother so that they could both continue working. But when the grandmother fell ill, the couple had no other childcare alternative in their small village. The mother made

inquiries to the authorities regarding their options for paid childcare but received no satisfactory answer. A friend, who had previously employed one au pair and was now applying for another so that she could return to work after having her second child, suggested she do the same. 'A child minder or foster parents would have meant that my children would have been out of their own home,' she explained. 'An au pair in the house simply comes in handy. I never know if I'll have to work overtime. .... And now and then something crops up. I want to be flexible.' The other host mothers Hess interviewed – all middle-class women – had similar reasons for seeking au pairs: the lack of public childcare in the form of a day nursery and kindergarten. And, if this option was available, the hours of operation were not always convenient and the absence of a family network meant having no one to fall back on in emergencies. For these reasons, and the desire to return to work as soon as possible after having a baby, made au pairs an attractive alternative to childminders or babysitters since they live in and can do housework.<sup>7</sup> Having a live-in childminder meant always having someone to call on, offering the utmost in flexibility. That was a crucial condition, especially for host mothers with demanding jobs and long working hours. Their husbands' careers were rarely questioned, it always being left to the wives to organize childcare and hire domestic help in order to compensate for working outside the home. The gender-specific division of labour was, therefore, reproduced even in the matter of delegating housework to another person (for motivations of employers, see Hess, 2002).

As a result, the au pairs primarily interacted with the host mothers and had little contact, personally or work-wise, with host fathers. Since the host fathers were never present during the day and their wives assuming the task of assigning childminding duties and housework, the host mothers were the primary targets of au pair criticism regarding living and working conditions. Au pairs were assigned the daily tasks of taking the children to school and picking them up, helping with homework, doing laundry, ironing, cleaning, Hoovering, and cooking.<sup>8</sup> While their German employers were glad to be freed of these 'thankless and monotonous' jobs, as they called them, the au pairs quickly grew tired of the double load of childcare and housework, finding them too much to handle. They also criticized the monotony and boredom of such work as well as the lack of adult interaction, particularly in the case of those responsible for infants. 'I'm relieving my host mother of all the tedious, day-to-day work and she only looks after the good advice and the financial affairs connected with the children,' complained Gabi. This kind of labour division is also described in other studies on domestic work. Simone Odierna's research on migrant part-time workers, for example, shows that jobs are often delegated to a third party according to the 'degree of inconvenience' and their perceived social value, whereas childrearing tasks entailing responsibility and creativity are done by the parents themselves (Odierna, 2000: 125).

**7** In contrast to, for example, Scandinavian countries or Great Britain and France, the prevalent model of upbringing in the west of Germany is still that of a 'private childhood' which manifests itself in the state-run school system where all-day schooling is the exception.

**8** Sabine Hess also encountered in her research instances of au pairs having to help in the garden or work in farming or the catering trade. She also learned about isolated cases of forced prostitution and sex work mainly through newspaper articles.



The au pairs with whom Hess spoke complained of this division of labour as well as about the long and irregular hours they were expected to work to accommodate their employers' work schedules. Puckhaber has found similar results. Marta's host mother, for example, was a midwife in Germany, meaning she did not have a fixed work schedule but could be called into work at any time, including on weekends. This meant that Marta was also on call. Liane, on the other hand, did have a fixed work schedule but spent most of her free afternoons outside the house so that she could not be called upon to do work during her spare time. Most of the au pairs interviewed expressed frustration at their lack of control over their own schedules. To them, the demands made by employers on their free time served to emphasize the power imbalance between themselves and the host families.

At the same time, however, it took most of the au pairs several months to recognize the dynamics of their relationships with their host families, to find their treatment 'unjust,' and to demand clear boundaries between working hours and free time. The lack of information on their rights and obligations as au pairs impeded their ability to reach this stage, as did their live-in status. The blurred line between workplace and home, between working hours and free time, between 'working for money' and 'helping out as one of the family,' had to be redrawn time and time again.

Ironically, those au pairs who were better integrated into their host families were at a disadvantage in this regard, for being treated as one of the family often deterred them from complaining about their working and living conditions. Hess found that these were the women who found it most difficult to express their dissatisfaction. As 'one of the family,' employers could ask the au pairs to work more than the hours agreed upon, their argument being, 'We are one family, you can not leave us alone with the child care.' In so doing, they disguised the working relationship by using the discourse of the moral economy emphasizing cooperation and mutual responsibility. This was how the au pairs had originally conceived their role in the household but within months of arriving in Germany, they realized that they would not receive anticipated recognition or gratitude for their service. As a result, they began to question the nature of their relationship to their host families and came to see their work equal to that of paid labour. However, due to their dependence on the host family, they were reluctant to raise issues that might result in a disagreement. Instead, some of the women began to think of themselves as having a maternal role, criticizing their working host mothers for neglecting their children. Having assumed responsibility for childcare and housework, it was difficult for them to remain uninvolved (Geissler, 2002; Resch, 2002). This was particularly true in the case of au pairs responsible for small children. In order to establish a good relationship with the children, they devoted themselves completely, wholeheartedly and lovingly to caring for the children, ignoring the hours involved. Furthermore, as it was often the children who developed the strongest attachments to the au pairs, coming to accept them unconditionally as

family members, the au pairs were willing to accept the long hours and felt guilty for demanding shorter hours and a set work schedule. As Gabi, one of the au pairs responsible for a young child, said, 'Can I really leave the small boy alone? I really like him. But I have cared for him all of the time now I have to look out for myself.'

In this respect, the 'big sister' image promises a more malleable domestic servant because being seen as a member of the family allows employers to use the logic of the moral economy to expect more than they could from a paid employee. While the discourse of the moral economy allowed employers to demand longer hours and greater flexibility, to the au pairs it meant exchanging service for gratitude and kindness. This, however, was not always the case. More commonly, the au pairs felt they were treated as second-class family members in their daily interactions with the host families. This was evident in terms of the 'spatial inequalities' within the household (Parrenas, 2001: 165) as well as in host parents' attempts to control them by placing restrictions on their eating habits, personal hygiene and even their sexuality. Such practices were considered humiliating and were ultimately responsible for creating the impression that the au pairs were really only relevant to the host families as employees.

Puckhaber's research demonstrates that au pairs were frequently relegated to living in the host family's basement. As Liane, one such au pair, described it, 'The accommodations... left much to be desired. I spent the first five months in a windowless room in the basement.' Liane quit when her host family requested that she vacate her room temporarily to accommodate another guest. Not every au pair was as forceful, however. Some put up with shared accommodation during family vacations because the host parents did not want to pay for a separate bedroom, despite the fact that they had decided to bring the au pair with them to serve as a babysitter. Bathrooms were another issue. Although many au pairs in the United States are given a separate bathroom, this does not necessarily mean that it is restricted solely for their use. Sometimes they have to share their bathrooms with houseguests or with the children. The biggest issue when it came to living-in, however, was that the host family set the rules regarding visitors. Some were very generous and might even provide a bedroom for the au pair's parents when they visited but other host families were less accommodating, forbidding any visitors in their home. According to the interviews conducted by Hess, host families also attempted to place restrictions on the social interactions of the au pairs. Some tried, for example, to limit how often the au pair was allowed to receive phone calls from their families at home and even regulated local contact with other women.

Both researchers found that food was another area of complaint for the au pairs. The quality of the food varied greatly as groceries were bought and meals prepared according to the dictates of the host family. Some completely disregarded the likes and dislikes of their au pair. In the case of Heike who lived with a host family in the United States, they planned what she would eat with the children a day in

advance without consulting her. Whereas another au pair, Gudrun, was allowed to help herself to anything in the fridge on a particular shelf. This shelf, however, contained less desirable and smaller amounts of food than the shelf for the children. She ended up being the only au pair within her circle of friends who lost quite a bit of weight during her year-long placement. Some of the au pairs with whom Hess spoke also reported not being allowed to eat with the family. Other areas of complaint included being permitted to do laundry only once a week and the restrictions placed on matters of personal hygiene on the basis of a supposed environmental awareness.

It has been shown that the official image of the au pair placement as a form of cultural exchange helps disguise the nature of the work involved and ensures that working conditions are only minimally regulated, thus meeting the needs of host families. It has also been shown that au pair applicants had a very different expectation of their placements, anticipating a level of family integration rarely achieved. Instead, they found themselves treated as a convenience for working host parents for they could be called upon at any hour to perform childcare duties. This was how au pair agencies, expecting big business in Germany when licences were no longer obligatory and state control was removed, portrayed the placements to potential host families. Yet, due to the image of cultural exchange, few researchers who study paid domestic service perceive au pairs as domestic workers, even when host families report having employed au pairs (Odierna, 2000). With time, however, the au pairs in Hess' study began to express doubts about claims of cultural exchange and family integration and to question their position within the family.

## **big sister going her own way**

Through her longitudinal study of Slovakian au pairs in Germany, Hess found that the women also took advantage of the limited public attention given to their situation. Through their emerging networks – other au pairs often being their only social contacts outside the host family – they came to achieve an awareness of their situation. In their exchanges with other au pairs, they learned about conflict management strategies to help them achieve their goals. All of them, for example, eventually initiated wage negotiations with their employers and demanded regular working hours. Those who were not confident enough to openly confront their host families chose passive resistance, retreating from the family sphere whenever possible by staying in their rooms or going out to meet other au pairs. Some of the women, having no support from the agencies and seeing no way of resolving their situations, decided to return temporarily to their home country. During the final two months of her placement, Gabi noted, 'First, I had to learn that I was not their servant having to wait around all day for work to do. Now I immediately leave the house as soon as I've finished work.' When her year was up, she said, 'The work was

hard and boring but outside it was great. It was a good experience after all.' Being faced with unemployment in Slovakia and not having saved enough money to pay for university, she decided to work in Germany for another year. Nor did Tatjana's negative experience with her host family stop her from choosing another placement in Germany over unemployment and boredom at home in Slovakia.

This differing socio-economic backgrounds between au pairs from western post-industrial countries and those from eastern or southern peripheral countries marks an enormous difference among the women studied (Hess and Lenz, 2001), and while the former enjoy almost global freedom of movement, the transnational mobility of the latter is highly restricted by the immigration policies of western countries (for specific effects on women see Kofman and Sales, 1998). The au pair visa in Germany, for instance, is valid for only one year and alternative opportunities for women wishing to emigrate are extremely limited. Hence, both Gabi and Tatjana had to find placements without official documents the following year. They had no difficulty in finding host families by word of mouth who were ready to employ them, even without visas and work permits, and other au pairs told them how to arrange a 'legal' entry into the country. They came as tourists, which entitled them to a three-month stay but did not give them permission to work. After three months they went back for a certain period of time only to try it again later.

With these follow-up strategies after their year placement, the young women assumed their place among the many migrant domestic workers without official papers who commute from their Eastern European home countries to Western European countries in the three-month cycle of tourist visa exemption (Irek, 1998; Morokvasic and Rudolph, 1994). Studies of unofficial domestic servants from Poland show how they make a virtue of necessity by forming job-sharing communities. Several women share employer families by turns. This rotational practice makes it possible for them to work and care for their own families at home while earning a living for their families in Germany, Austria or Switzerland, among other countries (Irek, 1998). In this respect the 'private household', almost invisible to public control, represents a flexible workplace for migrant women lacking legal status. On her coach rides between Germany and Slovakia, Hess met former au pair women who had been leading this kind of lifestyle for five years or more before deciding to marry a German – that being the only way of obtaining a permanent residence permit – or finding more promising prospects in Slovakia.

These migration strategies of highly mobile women participating in paid domestic work in the Western European countries only hints at the new division of reproductive labour and the new intra-gender power relations while the intersection of gender, ethnicity, nationality and class gains new momentum in the wake of globalization. The transnational migration strategies also raise a number of questions about traditional migration theories: First, they point to the fact that even under poor, unregulated working conditions, those involved manage to achieve some of their goals with respect to immigrating to the 'West'. In doing

so, they destroy our image of the dangerous public sphere where migrants without papers are hiding in order to evade controls. In the case of paid domestic work, the highly gendered notions of private and public sphere are being altered as in the public sphere au pairs experience a level of freedom. Second, the migration strategy of commuting and transnationalizing the life-project integrating at least two countries highlights the increasing importance of the social phenomenon of transnational mobility in the new millennium. At first sight this may appear as a contradiction to the fact that the European Union and its member states are trying to close themselves off against new migrants during the last 10 years. But it is the restrictive migration policy of Western European countries as Germany which limits immigration that is resulting in the prevalence of irregular entry strategies such as the use of tourist visas and job sharing (Hess and Lenz, 2001; Rogers, 2001).

These highly mobile migration strategies and the associated lifestyles and cultures transcend our common understanding of migration as an uni-directional process of emigration and immigration. They also question the political notion of integration in societies of settlement which is in most Western countries a prerequisite for getting citizenship rights. Migration research which wants to come to terms with this growing phenomena of transnational migration has to transnationalize its theoretical and methodological tools (Bash, et al., 1994). It has to focus on the practices and reasoning of migrants who try to find their way through the economic and political uncertainties and restrictive migration policies by combining the resources of more than one national context. Gender migration studies have to play a central role in this reformulation process as transnational research projects hint at the fact that gender is playing a decisive role in hindering as well as promoting specific transnational lifestyles (Anderson, 2001; Salih, 2000; Ong, 1999).

## author biographies

Annette Puckhaber has published on social history and migration.

Sabine Hess has been working as assistant lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology since 1998. Her PhD is on new migrational strategies of eastern European women to Germany against the background of the EU integration policies towards the Eastern European countries. Her main areas of research and teaching are globalization and transnationalization processes in Europe, migration and gender. Since 2003, she is coordinator and researcher in the research and film project 'trans-it! Migrations' founded by the cultural foundation of Germany, which is working on transit-migration in South Eastern Europe.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400177

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