

## **AU PAIRS AND AU PAIRING IN THE UK: An under-regulated occupation**

High levels of demand and supply and non-existent regulation mean that au pairs are increasingly indistinguishable from informally employed nannies and other domestic workers, except that they are paid pocket money instead of a wage. That is one of the conclusions of research to be presented to the NORFACE migration conference at University College London this weekend.

Au pairs are one of the cheapest and most convenient forms of childcare and domestic work in the UK. And at the same time as demand for the services of an au pair has risen, the expansion of the EU from 2004 meant a growing number of people from a wide range of countries were eligible to become an au pair.

Then, in 2008, the au pair visa was abolished so that anyone performing childcare and housework could be called an au pair and there were no longer government visa or other regulations outlining pay, hours of work or length of service.

This has led to a situation where young, mostly female migrants are employed in private homes where they lack control over their work and home environment. In addition, because au pairs are not considered to be 'working', they are excluded from minimum wage legislation and employment laws.

A two-year research project into au pairing in the UK by Dr **Rosie Cox** and Dr **Nicky Busch** at Birkbeck College involves analysis of advertisements for au pairs placed by host families and extensive interviewing of au pairs and the families that host them.

Dr Busch says:

'Our findings to date have suggested that there is a definite market for what might be called 'working au pairs'.

'We have come across a number of young women, and a smaller number of men, who have been an 'au pair' in the UK for anything up to 10 years.

'Many of these working au pairs are from newer EU states to the East and there is no element of cultural exchange or language acquisition in the arrangements they have with UK families.

'They are here as very low-paid childcare and domestic workers. But the work they do is entirely informal and unregulated.'

The research suggests that au pairs are standing in for more formal, but much more expensive, forms of childcare and at the same time providing the kind of wraparound cooking, shopping and cleaning services that allow parents to combine paid work with the demands of the home.

But as long as a worker is called an au pair, it is possible for these arrangements to be conducted outside formal labour markets.

ENDS

The study by Dr Rosie Cox and Dr Nicky Busch in the Department of Geography, Environment and Development Studies at Birkbeck College is funded by the ESRC

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