Part I
Au Pairs in the UK

The UK is one of the most important destinations for au pairs globally; the British Au Pairs Agencies Association (BAAPA) estimates that there could be 90,000 au pairs in the country (Smith, 2008). The combination of the opportunity to learn English, the draw of London as an exciting global city and the unregulated au pair sector make it an extremely popular destination for au pairs. The high costs of childcare combined with long working hours for parents and a cultural preference for in-home care, all make au pairs popular with British families. Government policies have encouraged au pairing in various ways over the course of around a century and the chapters in this section show how these changes have allowed au pairing in the UK to adapt to fit with wider migration and political contexts.

Unlike the Nordic countries (see Part II) there is no particular cultural antipathy in the UK towards employing domestic workers, but few families can afford to do this. There is a preference for in-home care for children, both because of its flexibility and because ‘mother-like’ care is popularly portrayed as best. There is very limited provision of state-funded childcare for the youngest children, and private nurseries are often much more expensive than hosting an au pair. One result of this desire for a maximum number of hours of childcare and housekeeping at relatively low cost is that au pairs are treated as low-waged nannies. As both Búriková’s and Busch’s chapters show, there is little clarity about what an au pair is and what tasks she may or may not do. Making sense of what might be acceptable in these circumstances causes extra work for au pairs and makes their personal networks particularly valuable as Búriková shows. In the period since the UK au pair visa was abolished in 2008, there has been even less difference between nannies and au pairs, as Busch explores in her analysis of advertisements for au pairs on line.
The result is long working hours and demanding duties – such as the care of infants – for au pairs and declining pay and conditions for nannies.

Eleni Liarou’s history of au pairing during the twentieth century firmly locates au pairing as a response to a servant shortage. Despite the rhetoric of cultural exchange in order to improve relations between European neighbours, au pairs were only really welcomed into British homes because of the work that they could do. Liarou shows that au pairs were considered to be both a threat to moral standards and in danger themselves – as young women far from home. The organisations which offered them support and which lobbied government for policy changes to protect them were all motivated by concerns for au pairs’ moral well-being and were largely religiously motivated.

As attitudes have changed these organisations have declined and one result is that there are no voluntary organisations which primarily or largely work with au pairs. In her chapter Jenny Moss shows how the work of the organisation Kalayaan, which supports migrant workers on domestic worker visas, has relevance for au pairs in the UK today. Moss describes the broader context within which au pairing is regulated in the UK and that is one which does not treat work done inside the home as equivalent to other forms of work. This chapter shows why recognising au pairs as workers is a necessary but not sufficient step in ensuring their fair treatment, a theme I return to in the conclusion, Chapter 15.

Even those domestic workers who are technically ‘employees’ are not assured access to employment protections or fair pay under UK law.

Reference