Part II

Au Pairs in the Nordic Countries

There has been a burgeoning of research on paid domestic work in the Nordic countries in recent years and within this a flurry of excellent work on au pairs (see for example the chapters in Isaksen, 2010). The analysis of paid care work in the Nordic countries reveals similarities with other parts of the world in terms of the poor conditions of the work and the class, gender and ethnic prejudice faced by care workers, but also important differences. The strength of welfare policies and rhetorics of equality in the Nordic states offers a unique context for examining a form of work which delineates the differences between women as much as showing the common causes that they have.

Au pairing in the Nordic countries takes place in a context where gender equality is culturally celebrated and paying for domestic work is generally frowned upon but the shape that gender equality takes is one which underpins demand for paid domestic workers. The strong welfare states of these countries actually support the employment of paid domestic labour in order to allow middle class women to enter the workforce on equal terms to men; they do not challenge families to redistribute reproductive labour between members. Women have gained substantial equality in the public sphere but men have not become equally responsible in the private sphere. The result of this demand for more labour in the home, combined with a cultural antipathy towards employing domestic workers, has been the rapid growth of au pairing – a form of domestic ‘help’ which is culturally palatable.

The chapters in this part show how migration policies are now important in supplying and regulating a care workforce which will alleviate the burden on middle class women without fundamentally addressing gender inequalities. Analysis of the au pair phenomenon in the ‘woman friendly’ Nordic countries highlights the differences between women
with citizenship and those without and locates paid care work within global political and economic arrangements.

Attention to citizenship and ethnic differences shows that the impression of gender equality and ‘woman friendliness’ in Scandinavia has been won at the cost of class and race equality and at some emotional cost to au pairs. Both Norway and Denmark receive the majority of their au pairs from the Philippines and, as Helle Stenum shows, many of these women are taking on au pairing as they would any other kind of migrant domestic work, but the Norwegian and Danish authorities are at great pains to construct au pairing as something else – a form of cultural exchange and mutual ‘help’. The result is both the imposition of strict regulations on the intimate lives of au pairs which continually put them at risk of being out of status, and the need for au pairs and host families to affectively negotiate the discrepancy between policies and practices, as Elisabeth Stubberud shows. Mariya Bikova’s chapter then enriches existing accounts of Filipina au pair migration to Norway by tracing au pairs’ locations within different circuits of care. Her chapter acknowledges the importance of being able to maximise earnings in order to remit to family members for some au pairs, while also showing that Filipina au pairs are not simply victims of global care chains. They have varied socio-economic backgrounds, diverse motivations and complex relationships with family in host and home countries.

Reference