Part III
The Au Pair Experience in the Rest of Europe

Despite the long history of au pairing in many European countries, there is a relative paucity of information about au pairs lives beyond the UK and Scandinavia. There is now a growing an excellent literature on migrant domestic workers in Europe (see for example the chapters in Lutz, 2008) but we know little about how au pairs fit within the recent growth in migration for domestic work.

The two chapters in this part give views of two contrasting au pair schemes – France and Ireland. France seems to encourage the ‘traditional’ au pair while Ireland is an example of au pairing being hardly distinguishable from unregulated migrant domestic work. Both, however, give examples of women from the global South – from Asia, Africa and Latin America – taking au pair placements in Europe.

Séverine Durin’s discussion of Latin American au pairs in Marseille traces how au pairs become ethicised through their experience of migration. Her argument is relevant to au pairs everywhere as au pairing is defined by difference; au pairs are always meant to be new migrants who do not know the culture they are moving to. Learning about their own place in racial and ethnic hierarchies and realising their own attitudes to people from other countries is part of the process of discovery that is meant to characterise au pairing. Durin’s chapter also highlights a trend that was introduced in Part II by Mariya Bikova and is taken up again in Part IV by Mirza Aguilar Pérez – the movement of middle class women from the global South to the global North to become au pairs. Durin’s participants were motivated to become au pairs as a way of seeing the world and studying French in relative safety. They seem to embody many of the original aims of the au pair scheme.

In contrast the experiences of au pairs from the South that Aoife Smith discusses in Chapter 11 are much more like those of migrant
domestic workers in the most marginalised conditions. Unlike the Nordic countries and France, non-EU nationals cannot access a special visa to enter Ireland as au pairs but instead enter on student visas. This situation puts au pairs at great risk of being out of status if they work too many hours. The exploitation and abuse that Smith records resonates with that presented by Jenny Moss in Chapter 5 in her discussion of the treatment of overseas domestic workers in the UK.

Reference