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Part of the Family?

The experiences of Au Pairs in Ireland



**Part
of the
Family?**

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my sincerest thanks to the au pairs who participated in this study, for their honest and sometimes difficult accounts of their experiences au pairing in Ireland. Without this, the research would not have been possible. I hope it reflects and respects your experiences and contributes towards preventing further exploitation and abuse of au pairs in Ireland.

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Aoife Smith, Community Worker
October 2012

Foreword

The last decade has seen the au pair programme grow considerably in Ireland. Ireland is a popular destination for au pairs as it provides an opportunity to improve their English language skills and to enjoy Ireland's renowned reputation for hospitality.

Generally, when placements are regulated by reputable agencies, the programme works exceptionally well. Families avail of affordable childcare and make life-long friends while au pairs enjoy a rich cultural experience and return to their home country exhilarated by their experience in Ireland.

Despite the success of the programme, difficulties arise by virtue of families and au pairs not understanding the ethos of the au pair programme and its lack of regulation. Online recruitment methods are devastating the reputation of au pair services in Ireland as they encourage unsuitable candidates to apply and allow families to ignore the cultural aspect of the programme. It can also be perceived as an alternative to hiring qualified childcare professionals.

Although negative experiences are, to a certain extent, inevitable, most can be avoided by only allowing placements organised through officially recognised Irish agencies.

For the benefit and safety of both those who come here as au pairs and the families who invite au pairs into their home, the programme needs to be defined and a structure of regulations with strict sanctions should be imposed.

A clearly defined programme will avoid conflict and exploitation occurring due to a lack of understanding and varying expectations. Au pairs and families need to understand their rights and responsibilities, with expectations clearly set out.

Our sincere thanks are extended to the MCRI team for their dedication in undertaking this research. Their recommendations and strategies on standards and regulation of the au pair industry in Ireland have been invaluable to INAPA.

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Photo: Susan Gogan

Summary

Au pairing in Ireland is a thriving industry. A quick Internet search of the word 'Au Pair' produces countless options of websites offering au pair services. Despite the growing numbers of families using au pairs, accurate data on au pairing is extremely limited and little is understood or documented about the experiences of au pairs.

The following report provides qualitative and quantitative data on the experiences of more than fifty au pairs in Ireland. This small-scale research project was conducted by MRCI over a five-month period from November 2011 to March 2012.

The report shows wide interpretations of au pairing. The range includes individuals on cultural exchange programmes in addition to both domestic and childcare workers. The findings indicate a high level of exploitation and abuse, which includes au pairs working excessively long hours; carrying out heavy workloads; having too much responsibility and receiving extremely low pay. Cases of extreme exploitation are described and health and safety issues were also identified. In some cases, the au pair's freedom was restricted and personal documents were withheld. A few young women encountered physical and psychological stress at the hands of their host families and were left without the necessary support and protection.

The experiences documented point to the systemic abuse of the concept of au pairing. It seems evident that au pairs are being used as a cheap form of childcare, which also highlights the lack of regulation of the industry.

Section 1: Context

1. Introduction

MRCI has been working with women employed in private homes since 2001. 'Private Homes: A Public Concern' (MRCI 2003) first documented the difficulties facing migrant women carrying out essential caring and cleaning work in private households in Ireland. Since then, MRCI has been monitoring trends and new issues emerging for women employed in the private home sector. One emerging trend has been the growth of the au pair industry in Ireland and an increase in complaints from women from outside the EU/EEA, who are in au pair positions with families in Ireland.

Au pairs have been coming to Ireland for decades. Traditionally, young women travelled from European countries to learn English and experience a new culture. They would stay with a host family and were generally treated as a "family member" in a protective family environment¹. However, there has been little research into the experiences and conditions of au pairs in Ireland.

Au pairing is a growing, thriving industry and MRCI is concerned about the absence of industry regulations and mechanisms to monitor au pairing conditions. In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding, MRCI decided to undertake exploratory research on the experiences and situation of au pairs in Ireland with a view to identifying useful analysis and recommendations for future action.

The Background section provides the national and international context for understanding au pairing. It situates the au pair landscape in Ireland in the context of the demand for affordable childcare. An

¹European Committee for Au Pair Standards (ECAPS) aims to establish one set of guidelines and rules for au pairs, host families and agencies in Europe <http://www.ecapsweb.eu/>

overview of the surveys and discussion of the findings from the interviews conducted with ten au pairs follows in Section 2. The final section presents conclusions and recommendations for further action.

2. Methodology

The research is both qualitative and quantitative in its approach and incorporates an analysis of relevant literature. Surveys were conducted with 53 au pairs living in Ireland from both EU and Non EU countries to reflect various placement scenarios. This was conducted over a five-month period from November 2011 to March 2012. Ten in-depth interviews were also conducted to provide more in-depth information and analysis. Field research included site visits to ten language schools to establish contact with au pairs and agencies to assist with identifying survey participants. Outreach and site visits also enabled information to be obtained, which covered a variety of recruitment experiences including agency, online and word of mouth.

Two au pairs and two research volunteers assisted with conducting surveys and targeting au pairs to participate in the research. Two focus groups were held with au pairs to discuss the survey design and outreach strategy during the initial stages of research. Two further consultations with au pairs were carried out to discuss recommendations and findings.

Consultations were held with the International Au Pairs Association (IAPA) and the Irish National Au Pair Association (INAPA) and conversations were held with two au pair agencies.



3. Background and Context

Defining what is meant by 'Au Pair' is problematic. In Ireland there is no established definition or legal framework governing au pairing. The industry operates without regulations and Ireland has not signed international treaties that provide a framework for pay, duties and conditions². For the purpose of this research the definition provided by the European Committee on Au Pairs (ECAPS) is used. This states that an au pair should be between 17 and 27, unmarried, and without dependents. It limits the hours of duty to a 30-hour maximum, including babysitting. It defines the role of an au pair as 'to help families with light household duties, help with routines, act and integrate as a family member; take part in family activities and share his/her own culture with the host family and vice versa' (ECAPS, 2011, p4). The salary is to be determined by national agencies. It explicitly states that the motivation for au pairing is not financial but cultural and linguistic; it is 'based on enriching their knowledge of another culture and language, while he/she has no financial reasons' (ibid).

²European Agreement on Au Pair Placement, Council of Europe Treaty Series No. 068
<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=068&CM=1&CL=ENG>

³European Commission Report (2007) 'EU quality standards in support of the fight against trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of children'
<http://www.abc-families.com/au-pair.html>

Despite the limited availability of accurate data, it is recognised that au pairing is a growing global market developing in new countries each year (IAPA, 2010). This growth has spurred concern from the international community about the rights and safety of the young women involved in this industry and was the focus of an EU parliamentary commissioned report investigating abuse of au pairs in a number of European countries (Stenum 2011).

The European Commission in 2007 attempted to address the vulnerability of au pairs, describing them as 'vulnerable' to trafficking and exploitation³. It recommended establishing measures to protect the rights of au pairs at an EU level. Questions have also been raised about maintaining a system where au pairing is constructed as "women's work", which remains unpaid and unprotected (Cox 2012).

Before analysing the findings, it is necessary to look at "childcare" in Ireland to understand the context in which the growing au pair industry operates. Ireland has one of the highest birth rates in Europe. Even though the public childcare system has improved somewhat in recent years, it is the private sector that provides most of the childcare and domestic work in Ireland. Public spending on childcare in Ireland is low compared to other EU countries. Parents faced the highest levels of childcare costs out of all the OECD countries in 2001. Only a small percentage of children under three years are registered in childcare (Stenum 2011).

Increased female participation in the labour market and pressures in balancing work and family life has resulted in a demand for affordable childcare solutions. In the current economic climate, crèche costs, child minders and other childcare options have become increasingly challenging. As a consequence, the option of hiring an au pair has become increasingly attractive as it is often advertised as an affordable and legitimate childcare solution.

'Thinking of hiring an au pair or nanny for in-home childcare? You're not the only one! The rising cost of childcare is causing families to take a better look at the au-pair programme. In the past, having an au pair may have been too costly. However, rising day care rates are leveling the playing field. When initially determining if an au pair is a smart financial move for your family... look at the number of children you need care for. If you only have one child, then traditional day care will probably be more economical than au pair. If you have two children, the cost of au pair will be more or less the same. But if you have three or more children, you will actually find it more economical to have an au-pair than to use other forms of childcare.' (Website advert)⁴

Research shows migrant women are increasingly filling the gap in the demand for care workers in western countries. Research on the care industry in Ireland shows a similar trend (Cangiano et al 2009). Reports of exploitation experienced by migrant care workers, including in private homes, have increased

³<http://www.gmanews.tv/story/204635/rp-lifts-ban-on-deployment-of-au-pairs-in-europe#>

⁴<http://www.kildarestreet.com/wrants/?id=2011-11-15.1391.0&s=au+pair#g1392.0.q>

significantly in the past decade. In addition, the vulnerability of migrant women in private homes has been well documented (MRCI 2003, Human Rights Watch 2007, Anderson 2009).

Many of the factors underpinning migrant women's vulnerability such as gender, immigration status and their isolation in private homes also apply to the situation of au pairs. This is an area of increasing focus internationally (Stenum 2011; Cox 2012).

Cox (2012) concludes that the role of the au pair in some situations is indistinguishable from the description of the nanny in all but payment for work and services provided. The fact that the position of host families is ungoverned further compounds the vulnerability of the au pair to being abused and exploited.

Actions of the Philippine government in 1997 highlight problems with the lack of regulations to protect au pairs. The government banned Filipino au pairs from travelling to the EU due to the high level of exploitation reported. Restrictions were lifted late in 2010 for some European countries; Switzerland, Norway and Denmark⁵. These countries have established legislative protection and visa regimes for au pairs, which can now be regarded as examples of good international practice.

A number of media reports have drawn attention to the abuse some au pairs have encountered in Ireland. Despite lobbying from au pair agencies which have called for industry regulations, the Irish government recently confirmed it has 'no plans to introduce additional legislation specifically to regulate arrangements in relation to "au pairs" in Ireland'⁶.

Section 2: The Experiences of Au Pairs

1. Introduction

The following section provides an overview of the data gathered from the surveys, interviews with au pairs and consultations with au pair agencies. The information is presented under a number of themes that emerged in the process of analysing the data.

These include pay and conditions; treatment and experience; 'blurred boundaries'; immigration status; recruitment; and au pair agencies.

Discussions from the ten detailed interviews offered a valuable opportunity to understand more deeply the range of issues identified in the surveys and enabled an analysis of the complex range of factors shaping the au pairs' experiences.



2. Pay and Conditions

In general, au pairs expressed dissatisfaction with their placements. 75% are doing in excess of the 30 hour maximum working week recommended by The European Committee of Au Pairs (ECAPS) and the Pan European Agreement. Surveys showed more than one third of au pairs are on duty between 40 and 60 hours weekly, with a further number working in excess of 60 hours. For this the average weekly 'pocket money' is €110. More than 50% said they felt dissatisfied with their position due to their expectations not being fulfilled. The findings document a range of pay and conditions across the spectrum, with au pairs

experiences ranging from excellent, to reasonable to extreme exploitation. It must be noted that some au pairs were enjoying the experience and felt embraced by their host families. However, as many as one in three participants reported being exploited. Heavy workloads incorporating a broad range of household and domestic duties, in addition to minding children, were described in the interviews. These included doing laundry for the family, housekeeping, cooking, cleaning, gardening and car washing.

- 36% reported being exploited as an au pair
- 42% received no written contract
- 51% claimed the situation was worse than they expected
- 15% had to be 'on call' at night
- 13% reported not being free to leave the house after duties were done
- 21% worked more than eight hours a day
- 26% worked between 40 and 60 hours weekly
- 8% worked in excess of 60 hours weekly
- 17% were paid less than €100 per week
- 49% were paid between €100 and €119 per week
- 21% did not receive regular breaks
- 27% worked Sunday - 83% of these did not receive extra payment
- 41% worked Bank Holidays - 76% of these did not receive extra payment
- 30% reported not getting any holidays
- 29% felt they had not learned about Irish culture
- 26% reported not being included in family activities

Table 1: Table of pay and conditions of 53 au pairs surveyed

Maria, 33, South Africa

I applied for the position on the Internet when I was in South Africa. When I arrived I had to start work straight away. I was told I would be looking after the children and that I would get €400 a month. I was working from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. six days a week. I finished whenever the last person in the house went to bed. I did not feel like part of the family. I was treated like a servant. I asked for a contract in writing to state my hours, pay, duties and off-time but I was told not to complain about the long hours. I was not allowed talk to people or go out. I felt like a slave. I was afraid and did not know where to get help.

On the father's birthday they had a party and, they invited people over. I was not invited. I finished work and went to my room. They had no interest in me. I felt like an outsider. They wanted me to clean and take care of the children. They always gave me the same food. Even if I went to the shop to buy other food, the mother questioned me about what I was doing.

When I asked about my immigration status, she told me she would get me a permit. I was worried because my tourist visa was going to expire soon. She had my passport. I wanted to go back to South Africa but she said she would not pay me the three weeks

she owed me and she wouldn't pay for my ticket home. She said I was in Ireland on her invitation and said if I left she'd report to the police that I was in the country illegally. I had taken my savings to come here. I'd no money. What could I do? She knows nothing would happen to her if I complained. I had no idea of what to do. In the end I was picked up by the immigration and they helped me to leave, gave me accommodation and referred me to the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland who are assisting me with a case against my employer.

The absence of written contracts was a significant issue identified. In most cases au pairs were verbally informed of their duties and placement conditions prior to starting, which was confusing as au pairs did not fully understand their role and duties from the outset. Even where written contracts were signed, the interviews showed that the agreements were generally ignored and nine of the ten interviewed au pairs felt overloaded with duties. Being expected to work extra hours for free was a frequent complaint mentioned. Marina was working seventy hours a week and being paid €120. She was not allowed to leave the house in the evenings when her duties were finished, as she 'might be needed'.

I had to wake up with the baby and change the baby's nappy. I was expected to be on call all night. My room was beside the baby's. I remember I was sick and was still expected to wake up with the baby. I was expected to be on call 24/7. When the children were sleeping I had to do the cleaning and the ironing. (Marina, 26, Brazil)

In some situations, the au pairs felt completely undervalued and disrespected by their host families. Oppressive terms such as 'servants' and 'slaves' were used to describe how they felt treated. Working long hours, being on call, being expected to babysit every night without pay, being expected to work at weekends and 'off-time' including Sunday's and public holidays were common complaints shared by many au pairs.

Au pairs identified how the lack of regulations in place was facilitating their exploitation.

Child-minding is not slavery like an au pair. Child minding has rules and breaks. An au pair is forced to do everything. Au pairs have no legal contracts. I didn't know the employers would treat me like a slave (Sofia, 42, Mauritius).

A fundamental guiding principle underpinning the au pair concept is to be treated as a host family member, with sharing and learning from each other's culture included in this. The survey findings identified that one in four au pairs were not experiencing this. On the contrary, women described being deliberately excluded from family celebrations such as birthdays and weddings. Many shared the view that they were only included in host families' activities to 'work' and felt they were treated like 'housekeepers'. "Once they took me to Limerick to a family wedding but I had to mind the children" explained Luiza, 23, from Brazil, "Yes they give us food and shelter, and that's important, but they never once checked to see if I needed anything. They only want me to work".

3. Treatment and Experience

The treatment of au pairs was varied and very much depended on the host families' interpretation of the au pairs' role. 36% of research participants reported exploitation, which is evidence of the negative treatment that many endured. More than a fifth reported feeling disrespected by the host family and felt excluded from family activities, which created a negative experience for them. Despite the heavy workloads and being unhappy with their situations, the au pairs tended not to complain. More than half of those surveyed never made a complaint about their conditions because they were either too frightened or they did not know who to complain to. It was also clear from the interviews and survey findings that au pairs did not complain as they did not believe they had a right to do so. Most au pairs did not know if they had any rights. In addition to the lack of knowledge and information available to them on their rights, au pairs felt they could not complain as the host family provided them with food and shelter. Many reported they did not want to feel 'uncomfortable' in the home of their host family if they raised a complaint. Others said they were frightened of losing their job and home. This was a particular concern for au pairs from outside the EU.



- 23% claimed they did not feel valued and respected by their host family
- 36% reported being exploited in Ireland as an au pair
- 25% had worked previously as an au pair in Ireland - 77% of these reported being exploited in a previous au pair position
- 58% of all respondents had never made a complaint.
- 32% of these claimed they did not complain as they were too afraid or did not know where to go.
- 68% were aware of au pairs being treated badly in Ireland

Table 2: Breakdown of survey findings of au pairs' treatment and experiences

Mental fatigue, physical pain and exhaustion from heavy workloads, fear and emotional stress featured in many of the interviews. The women felt trapped with few options to improve their situation. In some extreme cases, the au pairs described how their freedom was restricted and opportunities to socialise and interact with others were controlled and limited by host family members. One Spanish au pair described the stress she suffered, caused by the routine verbal and mental abuse she experienced during her eight month position with a host family in Dublin.

I have to be there all the time. The mum doesn't like it when I go out. She told me I had to stay home for the first two months to get to know the house; I wasn't allowed go to school. I have lived in Dublin for seven months and I don't know the place. When she is here I have no life. She never talks to me, only to ask me to clean. She complains that I don't clean properly. I feel like a servant. I even have to make her tea when the kids are in bed. Where would I go if I left? I have nowhere to go. (Ceny, 20, Spain)

Repeated instances of exploitation were not uncommon. Au pairs struggled to pay for private accommodation and did not have access to social welfare protections as they cannot pay tax and PRSI contributions. Therefore, many are forced into taking up a second or third exploitative position to avoid being homeless and destitute. This was particularly relevant to those who relied on Internet recruitment, namely au pairs from outside the EU, although not exclusively.

I've been with three families and have yet to be treated like a 'big sister'. The parents leave me with all the responsibility. They want me to be a substitute parent, giving food, love and discipline. In the first house I was not well paid, and I was overworked. I was not embraced and I felt uncomfortable in the family. I stayed there for nine months, working 45 hours a week for €100. I was always tired. It was very demanding. I didn't complain because I didn't know where to go. The agent just recruits, we don't have anyone to mediate for us. Even in my family now, I feel more like a housekeeper than an au pair. (Alli, 30, Brazil)

Another woman had no idea how she would be treated before starting her position. She came to Ireland to improve her life and found herself living with a family who treated her like a slave.

I wanted a free independent life, but I was like a prisoner. I was not allowed to call my family at home. I had no privacy or free time. Staying in a different culture is hard. There should be a law to stop them treating us like slaves. There should be a contract and holiday pay. If the family is not capable of having an au pair then it is better that they don't have one. I had no idea where to go to get help. (Sofia, 42, Mauritius)

Tina, 21, Brazil

I got the job on the Internet through a Brazilian agent. I paid her €200. I was expecting to do 35 hours a week, doing light housework and taking care of the four kids, two of them under 2 years. I was receiving €100 weekly. It was wrong. The mum was working all day from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. I was working more than 50 hours a week.

I couldn't attend college and I was afraid this would affect my student visa. I couldn't stay there any longer. I was taking care of four young children. It was too much responsibility and I couldn't study.

It was hard. They had family issues. I was not included in any family activities. I felt isolated. They lived in the countryside. I was freaking out and afraid.

The mother was withdrawn and unstable. Sometimes she was mad. The father left to work abroad and things got worse from then. I had to take on more responsibility. I had to work on my free time at weekends. I was never asked to but felt that I had to. She would never talk to me or engage with me.

One day she told me I had to leave. I put my things in a plastic bag and moved into a friend's house with one days' notice.

The agent told me I could make contact if something went wrong but I was afraid. I thought the host mother would send me away and then I would lose my job and my home. I called the agent after I left and warned her not to send another au pair there. The second family was no better. I was working 14-hour days, every Saturday and Sunday with no extra pay. I was taking care of an 11-month baby for a single mum who worked full time as a nurse.



4. 'Blurred Boundaries'

A clear finding from the research is the absence of clear boundaries in relation to the role of the au pair and expectations on both sides. This makes it difficult for au pairs to assert their rights and address problems experienced. Blurred boundaries very often create the conditions for the au pairs' exploitation. A critical 'blurred boundary' identified was the confusion that exists in relation to the au pair as a worker or as a participant in a cultural programme. The survey findings clearly show that for many there is little difference between au pairs and full-time child-minders and housekeepers.

Au pairing is generally understood to be for young people from within the EU. Yet 42% of those surveyed in this study are from outside the EU. 38% of those hold Student Visas that carry strict conditions including work restrictions of twenty hours per week during school terms, yet only 9% were adhering to these hours. The other 91% were doing between 40-60 hours in the home a week.

68% of participants reported that both parents were in full-time employment. This indicates a clear conflict with the general definition of au pairs as 'assisting in host families'. A significant number of these au pairs were left completely unsupported with full time responsibility for minding between two and four children, including infants as young as six months.

The issue of when an au pair is on or off duty is a further area of concern. The lack of clarity about personal time and boundaries in relation to availability and privacy were recurring themes. Seldom was the au pairs' 'off-time' respected, adding greatly to them feeling disrespected and undervalued.

Usually you get the weekend off, but if you have nowhere to go the families find a way of putting you to work. Most au pairs try and get out for the weekend. It's hard to stay in the house. We have no privacy. Families and kids have difficulty understanding that it is you're 'off-time'. (Alli, 30, Brazil)

Sharing space and negotiating relationships while living with a family presents many challenges for au pairs. Many of the participants felt dependent on their host family to provide food and shelter. This created a power imbalance and meant that they felt they could not complain if they were not being treated properly.

It is complicated when you live in the house. You are afraid to be homeless and lose your job. I prefer to stay quiet. I don't want to feel uncomfortable. (Marina, 24, Brazil)

5. Immigration Status

- 58% were EU Citizens
- 38% held Student Visas
- 2% Undocumented
- 2% were Working Holiday Visas

Table 3: Breakdown of survey participant's immigration status in Ireland

Almost half of those au pairs surveyed came from outside the EU, primarily Brazil. As mentioned above 38% of the participants were Student Visa holders. One au pair was on a working holiday visa from Korea, and one was undocumented at the time of this research. The issue of immigration status adds a significant layer of complexity for au pairs coming here from outside the EU. Ireland does not have an au pair visa scheme. The majority of au pairs from outside of the EU held Student Visas as this is currently considered the most appropriate means of being legally resident. One au pair was told her host family would arrange immigration papers for her when she arrived in Ireland. However, she soon realised this would not happen and she became undocumented when her tourist visa expired after 90 days. Her undocumented status was then used by her host family to threaten her with deportation should she complain or run away. A second woman interviewed in the research held a Student Visa when she entered Ireland but she was unable to maintain her college attendance and she subsequently became undocumented. She was unable to find other work and was pushed into au pairing to survive. She said her host family knew she had no immigration papers and used this to exploit her, as they knew she was desperate for money.

Motivation for becoming an au pair differed between EU au pairs and those from outside the EU. EU au pairs in this study who came from France, Germany and Spain came to Ireland with the intended purpose of au pairing. Their motivation was not financial and fits more into the traditional understanding of the au pair concept. They tended to have a better experience than their non-EU counterparts. On the other hand, au pairs from outside the EU generally arrived in Ireland with the intention of studying full-time. The lack of available job opportunities forced them into au pairing as a means to support their studies and stay in Ireland. The decision was almost always financially motivated.

I came to Ireland from Mauritius to study nursing but I could not find any other job. I had no idea what an au pair was. I knew the role was responsible for minding the kids, but I didn't know about the rules or the payment. (Sofia, 42, Mauritius)

Poor college attendance places Student Visa holders at risk of losing their immigration status. Despite this, some host families put pressure on au pairs to miss college. The heavy workloads expected of them often required them to stay home in order to complete their duties. This was a source of serious stress for au pairs as they are required by immigration authorities to register and attend full time education in order to maintain their student status.

I had to do all the jobs, mind kids, school runs, clean everything and wash all the laundry. Every Friday and Saturday I babysat. I had to spend summer holidays with them. I was not able to attend college. That's why I left in the end. (Maria, 24, Brazil)



In addition to the attendance issue, au pairs on Student Visas were worried about renewing their immigration status as the majority of them were working in excess of the 20 hour working restrictions. They also expressed concern about the informality of au pairing, where they were not contributing to the tax system.

My friend told me Immigration does not like you to work as an au pair because you are doing more than 20 hours. She told me not to tell Immigration I work as an au pair. They don't like that you don't pay taxes. (Alli, 30, Brazil)

6. Recruitment

There was a clear distinction between how au pairs from the EU and those from outside the EU were recruited. Most EU au pairs applied for their position before leaving their home country and paid a fee to an agency offering the service (62%). In most situations, the conditions and placement were reasonable. However, a significant majority (95%) of the Non EU au pairs applied for the position when already in Ireland, using either online options or word of mouth methods (68%).

- **51% used au pair agencies (65% of EU used agencies compared to 32% of Non EU)**
- **49% used websites and word of mouth (68% of these are Non EU)**
- **43% paid for au pair placements in Ireland (only 27% of Non EU paid for placements)**
- **65% paid less than €200 for their placement**
- **10% paid between €450-€500 for the placement**
- **10% paid €3000 - this included language school course fees**
- **10% were unsure**

Table 4: Breakdown of recruitment methods and fees paid by au pairs surveyed

A direct link between exploitation and online recruitment was identified as a clear trend. Eight of the interviewees responded directly to online adverts or used an online agent to find their positions. No third party was involved in monitoring the placement of those conditions or to check the suitability of the host family. This left the au pair without support and without access to information on where to seek help. In all eight cases, the au pair was exploited. The absence of rights to protect au pairs meant they were left with no options to improve their situation other than to run away. They had no access to redress or to compensation. They could either stay in the exploitative situation or leave.

I got the position on the Internet. I was working for a single father taking care of one girl. I was doing more than 50 hours a week for €120. He worked as a security man and would come home very late at night with no notice. I worked every Sunday without extra pay. The man was aggressive and he would yell at me. My grandma was ill and I wanted to go home but he didn't care. He said I had to wait to see her. I tried complaining to him but he didn't care. I didn't know my rights. I didn't know where to get help. I was worried and desperate so I ran away. I was not the first au pair there. The last au pair lasted two months, I left after three weeks. (Maki, 25, Korea)

Au pairs were aware of an attitude in some host families where the au pair was viewed as 'disposable' and 'replaceable'. In four cases, au pairs interviewed knew the host family had previous au pairs who had left as a result of the bad conditions.

In the second family I left them, but they can just hire another au pair. With a law, families would have to change their behavior. But as it is now they can just enslave us. (Aline, 23, Brazil)

Sofia, 42, Mauritius

I came to Ireland from Mauritius to study nursing but I could not find any other job. I had no idea what an au pair was. I knew the role was responsible for minding the kids, but I didn't know about the rules or the payment. I didn't know the employers would treat me like a slave.

I was working from Monday to Friday from 7 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. for €125 a week. I got no breaks, no holiday pay, and no contract. I had no time for myself. I was taking care of three kids, doing the washing, ironing, cleaning, mopping, cooking and all the housekeeping. If I asked for more pay they said, "We give you a room. You would have to rent otherwise, and we are not paying you anymore".

I wasn't supposed to work Sundays but if I was in the house they would disturb me. When I asked to be paid for it they'd say "but you were just watching TV". But I was still working. In the end they just cut me off. They told me they were moving and didn't need me anymore. I asked for a reference but they left for Spain without giving it to me.

7. Au Pair Agencies

Four au pair agencies participated in the research. Three of the agencies interviewed have formed the Irish National Au Pairs Association (INAPA) with the purpose of establishing best practice and quality standards for the au pair industry in Ireland. INAPA has noted an increased demand in Ireland for au pairs for the purposes of carrying out childcare duties. In addition, they point to a noticeable upward trend in the online recruitment of au pairs. They stressed the potential threat to the welfare of au pairs being recruited online, which they felt generated poor standards among au pairs and host families alike. One agency believed there was an urgent need for industry regulations to be delivered in conjunction with an au pair education programme to ensure all parties understand the au pair concept. INAPA is currently advocating for industry regulation, and acknowledged the universal benefits of a safe sector for all parties involved.



Despite some au pair agencies advocating for best practice and for regulations to be imposed, the interviews conducted for this research demonstrate that the absence of measures from au pair agencies contributed to the negative experiences of a number of au pairs. This included poor vetting of host family suitability and the absence of follow-up contact after initial placement.

It is worth noting that MRCI attempted to contact a wider group of au pair service providers to co-operate in this research. The majority of au pair agencies approached in the course of this study were unco-operative.

The surveys showed au pairs from outside of the EU being charged exorbitant fees by language schools, who also provided au pairing placements in addition to studying at the school. One Mexican au pair who paid €3000 for such a course believed the au pair programme was being used to generate fees for the language school, without consideration for the welfare of the au pairs being placed.

They (the school) just treat us like money. All the girls complain about her (the director). She puts us with unsuitable families. We are alone. We should have some protections. (Zoe, 23, Mexico)

A Spanish au pair expressed her concerns about the practices of au pair agencies. She had a civil case pending against the Spanish agency, partnered with an Irish agency, which placed her with a host family in Dublin in 2010. After complaining about the conditions, she was asked to leave the house immediately. She found herself in a vulnerable situation where she was homeless with no money. She received no support and had limited communication with the agency.

There is stress for au pairs. No money. No home. No support. The family does not want you, but you have to pay for accommodation while you wait to find a new family. The way agencies act needs to be investigated. There has to be some responsibility. There needs to be a solution. We come here to learn English. The money has to be fair. We need someone to help us to know our rights. (Monica, 29, Spain)

In the interviews, au pairs spoke about the lack of options available for them and how the absence of legal protections and rights forced some au pairs to remain in exploitative situations. There was a sense of desperation articulated by some, who described feeling frightened and trapped with no idea how to improve their situation. They asked, “where would I go if I left?” and “what would I do?”

Au pairs felt strongly about the need for change to improve the situation for au pairs. They believed abuse of au pairs was widespread in Ireland. Regulating their hours and duties, applying labour laws including minimum wage and establishing an Au Pair Visa to recognise the work and contribution of non EU au pairs were all recommendations made by those interviewed.

In summary, this section illustrated ad-hoc recruitment practices, unsuitable placements, a lack of support available for au pairs, psychological stress of young au pairs, a lack of concern for the welfare of the au pair who is increasingly being relied on to provide full time caring roles by the State without any recognition.

Section 3: Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The situation of au pairs in Ireland demands urgent attention. Au pairs are increasingly being used for the purposes of childcare and domestic work, but are without even the most basic rights and entitlements. They are not considered workers or employees and their host family has no legal responsibility towards them.

This small scale research provides an insight into the numerous issues facing au pairs including the absence of rights for au pairs; the absence of guidelines establishing acceptable workloads, hours, duties and pay rates. It also highlights the lack of support available to au pairs; negligent agency practices; the absence of information available on rights and entitlements; isolation; health and safety issues; lack of privacy, in addition to physical and emotional stress.

The interviews show two categories of au pair placement. The first being the traditional au pair group motivated to come to Ireland for a culturally enriching experience and to develop their proficiency in English. This group is typically made up of young women aged between 18 and 22 from European countries including France, Spain and Germany. In most cases, this group travelled here through established au pair agencies and their conditions were reasonable.

The second category is the group of au pairs whose experience is indistinguishable from that of a domestic worker, a housekeeper or child-minder. The essential difference is that this category are not recognised legally or paid as a worker. The majority in this category are from outside the EU. However, a small number of European au pairs also reported experiencing similar conditions. Those who did fall into this category took up positions advertised online or through word of mouth.

36% of au pairs surveyed reported being exploited. The findings suggest that many more are experiencing exploitation but they do not recognise it.

Four interviews revealed situations of extreme exploitation where women's documents were withheld, their movements monitored and their personal freedom was restricted. In all cases, the women were unsupported, their safety was threatened, and they felt frightened and alone.

A trend of replacing au pairs is also evident. Women are facing repeat situations of exploitation. The evidence suggests that the unregulated system, where au pairs have no access to legal remedies to challenge abusive treatment, encourages the development of a culture where au pairs are considered 'disposable'. Instead of the core problem within the host family being resolved or future placements being barred, the host families are free to repeatedly recruit au pairs regardless of their behavior.

Au pairs from outside the EU face increased vulnerability. There is no au pair immigration scheme for non-EU/EEA au pairs. The majority of au pairs from outside the EU hold Student Visas and their immigration status depends on proof of attendance at college.

Many of the traditional au pair agencies do not take au pairs from outside of the EU because of difficulties with immigration issues, leaving this group to rely on precarious online recruitment, where families are not vetted and conditions are not checked for suitability. It is shrouded in uncertainty and the au pairs' fate is completely dependent on the goodwill of the host family.

The threat posed to the health and safety of au pairs recruited online is a serious concern that demands action to prevent further abuse.

In conclusion, the pattern of exploitation, neglect and precariousness experienced by au pairs is a matter of serious concern. Au pairs have become synonymous with a cheap supply of childcare and increasingly other forms of care work.

Failure to regulate and provide protections for au pairs will only lead to increased exploitation. This is a growing phenomenon worldwide. It is a key human rights and equality issue that deserves both national and international attention to ensure the safety and welfare of young migrant women who are being recruited into positions as au pairs.

Recommendations for Action

The recommendations presented here are based on best practice internationally where governments have regulated au pairing to establish industry standards and provide protections for au pairs.

1. Establish an Au Pair Immigration Scheme for non-EU and EEA au pairs. The practice used in Germany, Sweden and Denmark provides a useful model to develop this scheme.
2. Regulate the au pair industry by establishing standards and guidelines including
 - Defining the au pair concept as a short-term cultural programme with linguistic opportunities.
 - Establishing model contracts outlining conditions of placement including hours, duties, pay, holidays, sick days and termination details.
 - Establish a system of data collection for the industry including a system of registration for au pairs and host families in Ireland.
3. Establish and give resources to a national working group of relevant stakeholders including government departments, employment protection agencies, au pair agencies and au pair representatives. This group of stakeholders should provide advice on the development of standards and guidelines in addition to monitoring the implementation of the au pair regulatory framework.
4. Ensure au pairs experiencing exploitation have access to accommodation, health care and social protection.
5. Resource the development of mechanisms for au pairs to access peer support and educational opportunities and to take action on areas of collective interest.
6. Support and facilitate au pairs to access labour complaints mechanisms and employment legislation in situations where regulations are breached.
7. Ban host families who have breached au pair regulations from accessing further au pairs.
8. Advertise and widely disseminate national guidelines on au pairing rights and entitlements of au pairs.

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