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**Au pairs in Britain: 1945-2021**

**I. Project overview**

“Whatever may be the purpose of the girls in coming here, it is not for the purpose of taking up a job”.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was the response of William Whitelaw, then the Parliamentary Secretary to the British Minister for Labour, when asked in 1964 whether a group of young female migrants who performed childcare and domestic labour in British homes should be protected from exploitation through being made eligible for labour permits. These “girls” were au pairs – young women, mainly from Western Europe, who came to live with a British family for up to two years, exchanging her help with childcare and housework for room, board, a small amount of pocket money and the chance to gain or improve her knowledge of English.[[2]](#footnote-2) They were not to be considered as employees or domestic servants. Rather, they were to be treated and conduct themselves as a “daughter of house” would. Issuing these young women with an au pair visa entangled the British state with questions usually left to the realm of the private – what could a “daughter of the house” expect, and what could be expected of her?

My dissertation is the first history of au pairs in Britain, extending from 1945 to the present. The core of my dissertation focuses on a period from the late 1950s into the early 1970s when the British state faced pressure from various fronts to take a more active role in regulating au pair arrangements to prevent au pairs from being exploited as a cheap source of household labour. I ask why the British state was so reluctant to regulate this form of labour, particularly during the post-1945 period, usually considered the high-point of the social-democratic welfare state. In answering this question, I draw on scholars of migrant domestic labour who argue that attempts to regulate migrant domestic labour trouble the boundaries of the public and the private as “the law at once jealously guards the public borders of the state through immigration laws, while reifying the private borders of the home despite the public activity that proliferates behind its doors.”[[3]](#footnote-3) I argue that au pairs are a particularly trenchant example of this paradox created by migrant domestic labour. The definition of au pairs as guests who were to be treated as a member of the family brought the boundaries of public and private into particularly sharp relief. As one civil servant put it, welfare organisations who lobbied the Home Office to provide and to enforce detailed guidelines as to how au pairing should work had failed to ask “what authority the Home Office has, or could ever have, to give “instructions” to housewives about the way in which house guests are to be treated.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Although au pairing had existed from the late nineteenth century, the actual number of au pairs in Britain remained small until after the Second World War. It had earlier origins, developing from the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century practice of informal exchanges between British and European families. The daughters of middle-class families would swap places for a short amount of time to improve their language skills. Their numbers remained small. From 1934 to 1936, the Ministry of Labour issued only around three hundred permits annually for foreign women to reside in Britain on an au pair basis.[[5]](#footnote-5) After the Second World War, these small numbers increased, enough that by 1963 approximately 25,000 women were admitted to Britain each year as au pairs.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although the au pair visa was never restricted explicitly to Europeans, the overwhelming majority of au pairs were from Europe. Au pair arrangements also largely ceased to be based on direct exchanges between households who knew each other or had mutual friends, with au pair agencies springing up to arrange placements.[[7]](#footnote-7) It began to resemble something more like a job than a genteel form of cultural and linguistic exchange. By 1973 MP Joan Vickers remarked that au pairing was now “to a certain extent…a paid occupation.”[[8]](#footnote-8) A journalist commented that although “in theory they live equally with the family”, they were “usually looked upon as a cheap source of labour.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet even as the actual practice of au pairing changed, coming to resemble something more like an employment arrangement, the idea that the au pair would live as an equal with the family, that she was not a domestic servant, and the help she provided did not constitute employment, persisted.

As the number of au pairs increased, so did calls for the state to play a greater role in defining and regulating what an au pair arrangement was. Much of this pressure came from welfare organisations such as the National Council of Women, the British Vigilance Association, and the International Catholic Girls’ Society. Their members engaged in extensive correspondence and meetings with the Home Office about the welfare of au pairs. Yet Home Office was reluctant to become involved in overseeing au pair arrangements beyond the issuing of visas. This reluctance did not stem from ignorance of the abuses which au pair arrangements could hide, something about which senior civil servants were remarkably frank about in departmental correspondence. The archival records documenting the four-year-long process, starting in 1959, of developing an information leaflet that immigration officers would distribute to au pairs, which would define the rights and responsibilities of au pairs and their hosts, are an illuminating example of this reluctance. Mr. Paice, a senior civil servant in the Home Office, had been closely involved in drafting the leaflet. Towards the end of the process, he described the leaflet as “an exercise in unrealism”, the ideal vision of au pairing described within having “little relation to the operations of “dud” agencies, skinflint employers on the lookout for cheap foreign domestic labour, and foreign “good time girls” seeking a ready means of admission to this country”.[[10]](#footnote-10) His colleague, Mr. Macdonald Ross, made it clear that the leaflet, which described the ideal parameters of an arrangement which the Home Office had no intention of policing, was chiefly intended to appease the largely women-led organisations which had been persistently lobbying on behalf of au pairs; in his words, to “‘fob off’ the various ‘monstrous regiments’.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The lobbying of welfare organisations on behalf of au pairs produced a rich bureaucratic archive where the collision of public and private, the home and the market is evident. The existence of the au pair visa scheme continually entangled the Home Office in questions about the ordering of familial and domestic life it was reluctant to answer. For instance, was a bachelor household a suitable place for an au pair? Internal Home Office correspondence noted that while there was no policy expressly forbidding this, “the prohibition is regarded as implicit in the proposition that a British family atmosphere is inherent in the au pair system.” But after discussing whether this prohibition should be made explicit, civil servants decided it should not because such a rule “could not be publicly defended”, as it would require them to explicitly define precisely what a suitable “family atmosphere” was.[[12]](#footnote-12) These kinds of questions surfaced again and again throughout the 1960s. Mr. Oakley, a senior civil servant in the Home Office, remarked that the idea of au pairs as “members of the family” had “more or less disintegrated under social pressure” as they became more and more like employees and that this would likely necessitate “the institution of a more realistic system of a part-time (labour) permits to which we may ultimately have to ask the Ministry of Labour to agree.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Such a labour permit system was never implemented. The closest Britain came to implementing greater regulatory control over au pair arrangements occurred from 1966 to 1971, when the Home Office sent representatives to a sub-committee set up by the Council of Europe to investigate the living and working conditions of au pairs. This sub-committee, composed of representatives from Britain, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and France, worked on drafting the European Agreement on Au Pair Placement, which would set out common standards and practices for au pair arrangements across signatory countries. It was opened for signature in November 1969. Despite having been closely involved in drafting the agreement, Britain delayed signing it. By 1971 it was becoming increasingly apparent that Britain was unlikely to become a signatory. J.R. Davies in the Department of Employment and Productivity wrote to his colleagues in the Home Office to express his fears that “dragging our feet on this matter” was “scarcely in accordance with the image of “good Europeans” we are at pains to cultivate at present.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Such “pains” to appear to be “good Europeans” must indeed have seemed important in 1971, as Britain was in the midst of negotiations over its application to join the European Economic Community, from which they had already been rejected twice. These negotiations were a success, with Prime Minister Edward Heath signing the Treaty of Accession on 22 January 1972. Not so for European Agreement on Au Pair Placement, to which Britain never became a signatory.

I hypothesise that these two events were connected, although not in the way that J.R. Davies feared. Britain’s involvement in the Council of Europe’s attempts to standardise and regulate the conditions of au pairing across Europe was the denouement of a protracted conflict as to whether and how the British state should regulate the practice of au pairing. But at the moment when it appeared that greater regulation would be introduced, entry into the EEC changed the rules of the game. Britain’s entry into the EEC and the associated freedom of movement for EEC nationals marked the beginning of a process where au pairing became increasingly decoupled from immigration and visa controls and any form of state regulation. Because most au pairs coming to Britain were from Europe, the number of au pairs requiring a visa declined as the EEC expanded and became the European Union. In Britain, au pairing became increasingly reliant on freedom of movement for EEC (and then EU) nationals. Having become essentially obsolete, the au pair visa scheme was closed in 2008, cementing the association between au pairing and EU freedom of movement. Those lobbying for the welfare and protection of au pairs had used the au pair visa to argue that, in issuing them a visa, the British state assumed a level of responsibility for au pairs and should better regulate the conditions of their stay. By releasing the state from the need to issue au pair visas, European freedom of movement also decreased the already limited and reluctant level of state involvement in what they had always preferred to treat as private arrangements.

This reliance on European freedom of movement as the primary avenue for au pairs to enter Britain has meant that au pairing became one of the many unintended and yet unexplored casualties of Britain’s recent withdrawal from the European Union. This seems an opportune moment, then, to write the history of a practice that is being radically restructured. My dissertation traces the regulatory history of au pairing in Britain. What understanding of the division between public and private, the state and the family, was enacted in this legislation, or the lack of it? This negotiation over the boundaries of the family was not only played out in discussions between the Home Office and welfare organisations but also individually between au pairs and the families who hosted them. Au pairs and families were thrust into a concentrated form of intimacy and dependency. Elaine Grand, who in 1970 assembled a comedic collection of au pairs’ observations on the British, remarked that the au pair “is a constant observer, both outside and *inside* the home.” This could result in comical complaints about British manners or cooking - one French au pair described the meals as “like watching a terrible murder three times a day” - but au pairs could also be astute observers of their ambiguous position somewhere between guest, family member, and worker.[[15]](#footnote-15) When Carla Allori, an au pair from Italy, filled out a survey about her time as an au pair in 1966, she recounted that she had left a family where she “was treated as an elder daughter” for a family that offered her more convenient working hours. Far from desiring a quasi-familial relationship, Carla was wary of it, remarking that “with their kindness they oblige you to do all what they want. They are very clever.” (CITE).[[16]](#footnote-16) The tensions in this relationship, while experienced at the level of everyday interactions in private homes, left their mark in many places - in guidebooks advising families how to deal with au pairs, in surveys au pairs filled out about their working conditions, in newspaper articles where irate families vented their frustration with unreliable au pairs and in popular fiction that portrayed au pairs as hapless ingénues. My dissertation is at once a regulatory history while also drawing upon this disparate range of sources to construct a social history of au pairing.

1. **II. Historiographical and conceptual overview**

My dissertation project speaks to several developing literatures. Firstly, there is a literature produced mainly in the social sciences about global flows of domestic and care labour. A large body of research has shown that in countries such as the US and the UK, increases in the number of middle-class women working outside of the home was not followed by a proportional change in labour division in the household or state support for childcare, increasing demand for private domestic services, demand that migrant women largely meet. This work is characterised by precarity, lack of regulation, low pay and vulnerability to exploitation.[[17]](#footnote-17) I use this literature to think about the structural position of au pairs in replicating particular forms of gendered labour. Excluded from the status of worker and classed as a “guest” who provided “help”, au pairs provided a usefully flexible form of childcare and domestic labour which could provide auxiliary support to middle-class mothers without disrupting the normative family structure in which married women’s wage-earning was imagined to be an anomaly. However, with a few notable exceptions, this literature has not paid as much attention to au pairs as to other forms of domestic work. As primarily white, European and often from middle-class backgrounds, au pairs in Britain have not been obvious subjects for research on labour migration, which focuses on flows of labour from the “Global South” to the “Global North.”

Secondly, there is a historiography on domestic service in Britain, which my dissertation will speak to. Historians have focused on how relations between servants and their employers illuminate the role that class has played in British history, with the working class live-in servant in the upper or middle-class household as the most quintessential expression of class relations in a highly stratified society.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the popular imagination, the post-1945 period marked the demise of domestic service in Britain, marking a transition to a modern, individualistic, affluent and democratic society. Many forms of domestic service such as the live-in housemaid and cook did disappear after the Second World War, as the numbers of skilled career domestic servants declined dramatically. But new forms of private paid domestic work, including au pairs, took their place. Yet while histories of domestic service have challenged the periodisation which confined it to the first half of the twentieth century, post-war forms of paid domestic labour such as au pairs still occupy a marginal place in this historiography, usually appearing as a kind of coda.

Finally, my dissertation contributes to the historiography of mid-twentieth-century Britain. The decades between 1930 and 1970, particularly after 1945, saw a dramatic expansion of the state, with massive, state-led revolutions in warfare, housing, social welfare, health, macroeconomic management and the nationalisation of industry. Commonly referred to as social democracy or the welfare state, this period is seen as characterised by the wide-reaching intervention of the state in the social and the economic. My dissertation places debates over the largely unregulated nature of au pairing in Britain into this context, asking what the reluctance of the British state to regulate this form of labour can tell us about the *limitations* of state intervention in this period usually considered to be its apogee. I argue that the kind of work that au pairs performed was crucial to the relative lack of state intervention in their lives and work. Au pairs cared for children and performed housework in the intimate space of the family home. Although it was not usually stated explicitly, they were in effect substitute housewives, performing the domestic labour that wives and mothers usually did unpaid. The social insurance system of the post-war welfare state enshrined a particular model of the division of labour within the family, treating men’s contributions “as made on behalf of himself and his wife, as for a team.”[[19]](#footnote-19) A normative model of family structure, in which men were the principal breadwinners and women were economically dependent, was built into the social insurance system of Britain’s post-war welfare state.[[20]](#footnote-20) This reinforced the status of the domestic and care labour as vital but unwaged, uncommodified, and unregulated. Given that this was exactly the work performed by au pairs, introducing greater regulation of their pay and working conditions had the potential to advance a radical new understanding of childcare and housework as waged, formal labour. The regulatory history of au pairing is entwined with the broader status of domestic and care labour in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Archives*

**The National Archives of the UK (TNA)**

HO 352/95 Home Office: Revised arrangements for ‘au pair' girls during temporary residence in UK

HO 394/15 Home Office: Au pairs in bachelors' households: policy

HO 394/16 Home Office: Au pairs: general policy

HO 394/42 Home Office: Record of au pairs and domestics from Eastern Europe

LAB 8/3111 Ministry of Labour: Placing of "Au Pair" girls and other trainees in this country: request for help from Finnish, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish embassies

LAB 13/1484 Ministry of Labour: "Au Pair" arrangements in the UK: general papers, production of guidance leaflet

LAB 13/2565 Ministry of Labour and successors: Council of Europe, employment and placement of "Au pair" girls: notes and papers

PREM 13/1789 Prime Minister’s Office: Correspondence and Papers, 1964-1970: SECURITY. Employment of foreign au pair girls: advice to ministers

**The Council of Europe Archives**

Thematic Files of the Council of Europe, European Convention on “Au Pair” placement,

Box 1771 vol. 1.

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**The Women’s Library, LSE**

Records of the British Vigilance Association, 4BVA/A, Campaign and resources files, 15-34, “Au pairs”

**The British Library**

Sheila Williams and Frederick Flower. *Foreign Girls in Hendon: A Survey*. Hendon: Hendon Overseas Friendship Association, 1961.

T.N. Postlethwaite. “Young Europeans in England.” *Political and Economic Planning,* vol. xxviii, no. 460, 26 March 1962.

1. 691 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (16 March 1964) cols. 976-977. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The UK did not allow male au pairs until 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Adelle Blackett, "Promoting Domestic Workers' Human Dignity through Specific Regulation", in *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th-21st Centuries*, ed. Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 247-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. TNA HO 352/95 Home Office: Revised arrangements for ‘au pair' girls during temporary residence in UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 318 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (23 November 1936) cols. 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 686 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (17 December 1963) col. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eleni Liarou, “‘Pink Slave’ or the ‘Modern Young Woman’? A History of the Au Pair in Britain,” in *Au Pairs’ Lives in Global Context: Sisters or Servants?*, ed. Rosie Cox (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 851 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (21 February 1973) col. 620. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lucia van der Post, "The au pair jungle", Sunday Times, 8 Feb. 1970, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. TNA HO 352/95 Home Office: Revised arrangements for ‘au pair' girls during temporary residence in UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. TNA HO 394/15 Home Office: Au pairs in bachelors' households: policy [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. TNA LAB 13/2565 Ministry of Labour and successors: Council of Europe, employment and placement of "Au pair" girls: notes and papers [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Elaine Grand, *You British: as the au-pair girls see us* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Women’s Library, 4BVA/A/25, *Records of the British Vigilance Association,* Campaign and resource files, “Evidence from Au Pair Girls, Oct.-Nov. 1966”. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for example, S.R. Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Rosie Cox, *Servant Problem: Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lucy Lethbridge, *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Selina Todd, “Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950.,” *Past & Present*, no. 203 (May 2009): 181–204; Leonore Davidoff, “Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England,” *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1974): 406–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Social Insurance and Allied Services. A Report by Sir William Beveridge (hereafter Beveridge Report), 1942, Cmd. 6404 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 337–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)