

Who Cares about Au Pairs?

A Study on the Work and Social Protection Experiences of Filipina Au Pairs in the Netherlands

RESEARCH SUMMARY

There are diverse perceptions on the role being performed by au pairs in the Netherlands. From the perspective of the Dutch government, the entry of au pairs in the Netherlands is under the context of cultural exchange programme or voluntary work, as part of the European Solidarity Corps (IND 2020: 1). For the government of the Philippines, the au pairs are “intended to become a member of the family in the host country for cultural exchange to improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge which they can obtain better in the country where they are received” (Commission on Filipino Overseas 2020: n.p.). And from the perceptions of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging – FNV), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Bayanihan Foundation and FairWork, the au pair scheme must be improved as it results to cases of labour exploitation (Volder 2016; Stenum 2011; Waard 2004; Oosterbeek-Latoza 2007). Yet, the au pair’s actual voice and personal perspective appear to be missing in the existing literature.

The main intent of this research is to provide the missing voice and perspective of the au pairs in the literature of the au pair scheme. This research showcases and focuses on the au pair’s own perspectives and experiences as they share their stories from their own lenses or vantage points. This paper highlights how do the au pairs themselves perceive the au pair scheme by examining their work and social protection experiences. The aspect of social protection is also explored in this research in lieu of the reported cases of abuse or maltreatment of the au pairs. Building on the identified knowledge gap, this research posed these two main research questions: a) What are the work experiences of au pairs in the cultural exchange programme? and b) How do au pairs experience social protection in practice?

In culminating the research, two distinct statements of the au pairs became remarkable. It was when Sheila said that, “*What is really happening is cheap labour for the lack of better term. They disguise it as cultural exchange, but it is really cheap labour even to the point of exploitation.*” It was also when Angel stated that, “*Being an au pair is a stepping-stone. I know that better things will happen after I become an au pair here in the Netherlands.*” These two statements summarize the contradictory perceptions of the au pair scheme in the Netherlands that became my point of departure in writing this research.

Findings of this research reveals that the work experiences of the Filipina au pairs in the Netherlands cannot be generalized as either positive or negative experience. I argue that their work experiences can be comparable to a spectrum. On one side, to different degrees, the au pairs have positive work experiences for being exposed to a foreign culture, feeling like part of the host family, learning new knowledge and skills, attaining personal growth, and gaining a stepping-stone that is strategic for their future career plans. Yet, on the other side, again to different degrees, the au pairs have negative work experiences resulting to them being overworked, feeling like a slave, experiencing abuse and exploitation, and becoming precarious migrants. The research shows that the Filipina au pairs’ immigration status, involvement in insecure domestic work sector, ambiguous positionality in their host family, and “marginal social identities” have shaped their precariousness.

My discourse with the Filipina au pairs in the Netherlands further demonstrate their experiences of social protection as “assemblages” of informal and formal social protection. It shows that the protection provided by the social network of the au pairs—such as their au pair friends and second host families (or the informal type of social protection)—is more accessible. This is particularly true for the au pairs who experienced abuse and transferred to another host family. Reaching out to the formal type of social protection or the state-driven mechanisms became secondary in the experience of the abused au pairs. This upholds that the formal type of social protection is not superior over the informal ones. Nonetheless, it confirms that these mechanisms are interconnected for the au pairs to protect themselves from imminent social risk. On the other hand, the au pairs’ experience of social protection is not only limited to those who experienced abuse. Albeit being rarely used by the au pairs, this research also shows that there are formal type of social protection measures available for the au pairs devised by the Philippine and Dutch governments as part of their entitlements as Philippine citizens and as temporary legal migrants in the Netherlands.

So, did the situation of the Filipina au pairs improve after eight years since the government of the Philippines lifted the ban of their entry in Europe in 2012? Based on the findings of this study, I contend that indeed the lifting of the ban has resulted to safe and legitimized migration of the au pairs in the Netherlands. This was achieved through CFO’s administration and IND’s accreditation of the au pair agencies as the sponsor. However, if the work experiences of the Filipina au pairs are taken into account, I argue that the lifted ban did not end the cases of exploitation and abuse of the au pairs. Though I recognize that there are au pairs who undeniably benefitted and have positive experiences in the cultural exchange context of the au pair scheme, I also would like to highlight and recognize that there are au pairs who are still overworked and maltreated by their host families. My research uncovers that almost half of my interviewed au pairs are performing heavy domestic work and working beyond the IND’s prescribed 30 hours per week. There are also still persisting cases of au pairs’ who encountered insecurity, exploitation, and physical and verbal abuse, and even being treated as the slave of the host family.

After immersing myself in the situation of the au pairs, I would like to propose policy recommendations that might result in enhanced work and social protection experiences of the au pairs. First, I suggest stricter reinforcement of post-arrival registration of the au pairs in the Philippine Embassy. This is to ensure that the Embassy will have an updated and more accurate database of the au pairs that are under its jurisdiction and protection. As I found out, only one of my interviewed au pairs have registered, I deem that a complete record will be beneficial not only for the Embassy but also for the au pairs. Their participation in the events or seminars hosted by the Embassy will increase their awareness of the host country and their rights as au pairs. This will later equip them against any probable social risks that they might encounter. Second, I propose for a neutral and non-government entity that can serve as mediator between the au pair, host family, and au pair agency, most particularly if the au pair experiences abuse. As my interviewees shared that the au pair agency has the tendency to side to the host family, a neutral entity can balance the story of all the involved parties and advise the au pairs on the next steps that they can take. Thus, this can result to a smoother transition of the au pairs to a new host family. Last, I suggest for a more intensive and exhaustive study that focuses on the overworked conditions of the au pairs of different nationalities. The findings of this study can pave the way for improved work measures that can inform policy discussions on labour laws and regulations. In the end, I contend that the overall work and social protection experiences of the au pairs depends on the interplay of various actors—the au pairs themselves, au pair agencies, host families, and governments (both Philippines and the Netherlands).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of my research, below are my proposed suggestions for FairWork:

- To become the neutral and non-government entity that can serve as mediator between the au pair, host family, and au pair agency in the case of conflict of interest caused by the au pair's experienced abuse or maltreatment.
- To continue helping the au pairs who experienced abuse by assisting them in filing legal cases or formal labour complaints.
- To continue conducting awareness raising campaigns on the rights of the au pairs through the following:
 - By holding, twice a year, the gathering of au pairs that will be attended not only by Filipinas but also by the au pairs of different nationalities.
 - By including the special IND's reporting hotline for au pairs in the published video materials, as apparently some au pairs are not aware of it.
- To inform the au pair agencies, embassies, or IND of the type of support that FairWork can provide to the au pairs.

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