CHAPTER SEVEN

MIGRANT AU PAIRS IN NORWAY:
FROM MULTI-FACETED WORK
TO PROSPECTS OF SETTLING DOWN

OLGA TKACH

Au pair placement is a legal form of international mobility popular among youth seeking to live in Western Europe, the US and Australia. It provides an opportunity for a young person to visit a new country and learn the language and culture while temporarily living as a host family member and providing light domestic work for this family (see Council of Europe 1969). After almost 45 years of existence au pair placement has begun to attract the attention of scholars. Researchers, particularly in the Nordic countries, Germany, Switzerland and the UK come to a common conclusion that since the early 1990s this institution has been transformed from a primarily intra-Western exchange program, mostly for middle-class girls, to an economic, predominantly female, migration from the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia to Western Europe. Thus, under the guise of “cultural exchange”, au pair placements meet the demand for domestic labour in Western European middle- and upper-class families (Cox and Narula 2003; Hess and Puckhaber 2004; Anderson 2007; Cox 2007; Calleman 2010). Generally, an au pair placement is considered to be a fixed period of live-in migrant domestic work. It is typically assumed that “many au pairs remain in their target countries even after the expiry of their au pair status” (Hrženjak 2007, 45), though researchers are not examining follow-up trajectories.

This chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Oslo, Norway, in 2010–11. The empirical data included 24 in-depth biographical interviews with young women and men who arrived from various parts of Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine as au pairs, or became so shortly after arrival.¹ Their duration of stay in Norway varied from three months up to ten years, which allowed observing different aspects of their career.
trajectories and the long-term consequences of their decisions to migrate as au pairs. A peculiar and unique feature of this mobility program is that it has low entry expectations – neither special preparations nor certificates are needed to enter foreign countries as an au pair. In turn, the applicants get an opportunity that provides an avenue for various modes of mobility. Regardless of official expectations, many au pairs who initially planned to move back home become rooted in their countries of settlement and begin to work steadily towards personal goals. The interviewees often described and evaluated their experiences of being au pairs in terms of transit – as a “door”, “chance”, “start”, “ticket”, “jump”, “soft landing”, “gates”, “way to the future”, “possibility”, “step”, or “loophole”. The emphasis on transition, preferably to a better state, evoked a metaphor of career that resonates strongly with the data collected. Former Russian au pair Alla gives an illustrative example defining her eight-year migration experience as a combination of discovery and work in a wider sense with settling down as its climax:

You exchange cultures, you live in this country, and you see what is going on around you, but you also work. Au pairs should fully appreciate that when they picked up this program, because they want to come here, they have to be prepared to work in order to move here. By work I do not mean au pairing, I mean work in general.

The aim of this chapter is to uncover meaning that au pair experience has to the participants of the program who arrive from the Commonwealth for Independent States (CIS). They narrate of au pairing as a process including multi-faceted work and mobility that leads to follow-up strategies of settling down in Norway. The first section introduces the status of au pairing in the Norwegian context. The analytical approach taken to the data collected is elaborated in the second section. The next section recounts au pairing as multi-faceted work – physical, emotional, intellectual, and communicative – as a realm of agency and achievement. In the last section I consider consequential milestones of the au pairs’ immigrant careers, and also conceptualize how they enhance their class position in Norwegian society.

**Au pair placement in the Norwegian context**

In the official page of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) au pair is ascribed to a category of study visit. Foreigners who are above 18 years of age and under age 30 can apply for it. The au pairs are paid NOK 5,000 (about 700€) per month before tax as pocket money and up to
NOK 7,500 (over 1,000€) annually to attend Norwegian language courses. Their working hours must not exceed five hours a day, and the maximum number of working hours per week is 30. However, host families are supposed to treat au pairs like family members rather than employees. They can stay in Norway up to two years, but are expected to return to their countries of origin at the end of their stay (UDI 2012). Table 7-1 demonstrates that during the last seven years the number of au pair permits granted by Norway is on the rise. Au pairs coming to Norway from the Philippines make up the majority (up to 85%) of au pairs in the country. Although a number of au pairs from CIS countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, is also noticeable and remained in the top 10 of all sending countries, Filipinos are seen by many as a representation of all au pairs.

Table 7-1: Au pair permits granted in 2006–2010 in Norway, selected countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRIES</th>
<th>YEARS</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td></td>
<td>958</td>
<td>1,590</td>
<td>2,092</td>
<td>2,379</td>
<td>2,222</td>
<td>2,298</td>
<td>1,903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td></td>
<td>294</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td></td>
<td>148</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,456</td>
<td>1,990</td>
<td>2,352</td>
<td>2,579</td>
<td>2,368</td>
<td>2,424</td>
<td>2,026</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share*</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Norwegian academic and public debate the predominance of Filipino au pairs is directly linked with a qualitative transformation of the au pair phenomenon from a cultural exchange program to “an organized distribution of migrant domestic workers” (Isaksen and Stenum 2011, 86). The legitimacy of the scheme has been sharply criticized, as certain distinctive features of Filipino au pair migration run counter to norms of social and gender equality promoted in Norwegian society (Sollund 2010; 156; Øien 2009, 22–23; Bikova 2010, 52). Filipinos have a reputation as au pairs who “cite economic need as their main reason for migrating” (Sollund 2009, 119). They are portrayed in public discourse as obedient and timid servants who are not interested in cultural exchange. In turn,
Migrant Au Pairs in Norway

Norwegian families inviting au pairs are negatively labelled as exploitative and abusive users of cheap domestic labour. Even though a strong state welfare apparatus in Norway provides families with a way to combine career and family, it does not adequately compensate for the care deficit in the private sphere. The state limits the development of private day-care in order to prevent inequality in access to social services, while legal recruitment of live-out care workers is very expensive and unaffordable for many. Therefore, the au pair placement is used as a convenient loophole for satisfaction of families’ demand for domestic helpers. As Isaksen and Stenum (2011, 94) stress, “We are about to institutionalize a culture of master-and-servants when one can buy domestic help instead of finding a solution where families share the housework and care responsibilities in a democratic and fair way”. “Evolutionists” advocate going back to the basics and restoring the au pair model, while “revolutionists” insist on the fact that au pairing as a cultural exchange program has died and has to be redesigned as a labour contract with legal protections for both workers and families (Isaksen and Stenum 2011).

All these ideas are mainly drawn on the example of Filipino migrants who are overwhelmingly either studied as suppressed live-in domestic workers (ibid.), or transnational mothers who compensate separation from their children left behind with reimbursements (Sollund 2009). By contrast, experiences of highly educated participants of the program who arrive from other countries, apart from Philippines, and whose financial relations with home and families left behind are not so tight, remain relatively neglected. The case of au pair migrants from Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine in Norway contribute to the emerging body of scholarship on the au pair migration more generally. It adds different research approach that goes beyond domestic work and includes the study of non-economic strategies of class improvement and settling down. The analysis of in-depth interviews with young au pair immigrants from the Commonwealth of Independent States in Norway is set out below.

**From dependency to agency: research data and methodology**

The Norwegian au pair program differs from many others in the relatively high age limit of 30 years which attracts not only students but rather graduates of about 23–24 years old. The sample for this research includes nine first- and second-year current au pairs and fifteen former au pairs from Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. Having working- and
low-middle-class origin, almost all interviewees received higher education in their home countries. Apart from their mother tongues, almost all speak at least one European language. Just before leaving au pairs-to-be lived independent personal and professional lives. Some even built careers, for example as a university teacher or NGO coordinator, or ran their private businesses. Young age, education and life experience, the absence of serious affiliations and commitments, or dependants left behind facilitated an easy departure for the migrants. By the project period, eight of the former au pairs were BA and MA students in Norwegian universities and high schools, and seven were employed as skilled workers in public or private sectors. Six former au pairs are either in long-term relationships or married, two with baby sons.

When they speak of their experiences, the interviewees refer to mixed motifs of movement. For some the au pair placement provides an easier though postponed access to a foreign education, including at least some language courses. To others the desire to move abroad occurred when they encountered economic inequalities common in post-socialist societies, such as informal distribution of material resources between certain families and the impossibility of obtaining the kinds of careers to which they aspired. Au pairing is planned as a sort of vacation from stressful life or unpromising jobs in the homeland, an attempt to slow down and decide what to do next. The will to move somewhere can be even more existential, as an attempt at self- and world-discovery or a test of one’s luck outside the borders of the native land. It can be an escape from standard biographical and gendered frames: “I always thought a life formatted like ‘school – university – work – home – family’ is not for me” (Eugenia, Russian, former au pair, 3 years in Norway, BA student). Au pairing was also imagined as an appropriate avenue to accomplish such blurred plans as “traveling”, “seeing the world”, “finding myself” or living abroad for a certain period of time (cf. Laliotou 2010, 46, 52).

It has been argued that au pair migration can neither be taken out of the biographical context nor separated from the socialization period of the immigrants (Rohde 2011). The biographical approach enables us to examine au pairing as a fluid experience inscribed in an emigrant’s life trajectory, rather than stagnation or mere displacement of the labour force (Sayad 2007, 29). The focus on the individual life reveals “the way in which other categories of social differentiation such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. intersect with generation, as well as how these categories relate to very individual life experiences” (Rohde 2011, 133). An individual biography is a crossroad of structures and actions, however in this analysis I emphasize a concept of agency in order to avoid generalization
and simplification of au pairing as cheap live-in domestic work. Agency means a capacity of social actors not only to survive and cope with specific situations of change or crisis (Castels 2007, 265), but also to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take actions to achieve their desires (Bakewell 2010, 1649). From a feminist perspective agency means ways in which migrant women make choices and plans for themselves and their families (Anthias 2012, 106).

Au pair migration is a transitory temporal state and activity (Búriková and Miller 2010, 156–168) or discovery, a “relatively short-duration mobility, […] an exercise in knowledge accumulation, and social network construction, which potentially informs subsequent mobilities” (Williams 2009, 315). As Jokinen and Veijola (1997) note, an au pair enters a foreign language above all other entities – a foreign culture, a foreign locality, a foreign family, and a foreign baby. Apparently, au pairing as a specific trajectory of traveling abroad involves not only care and domestic work, but also communication with a host family and a significant volume of emotional labour. Emotional management (or emotional work) is considered to be one of the aspects of agency. It emphasizes the ways that workers strategically manage their interactions so as to resist degradation and gain power and dignity on the job (Wharton 2009, 150). Au pairs also work intellectually – learn languages and host cultures, grasp local formal and informal daily rules. Even though a considerable part of relationships within the program is located in host households, outdoor activities and work on establishing, maintaining and reclaiming relationships with others are also significant for au pairs. Social networks fold together different forms of mobility, which generate consequential migrations over the life course (Williams 2009, 317). Au pairing can also entail follow-up modes of mobility depending on the resources accumulated and developed during the stay.

Overall, au pairs can be understood as agents in realms of mobility and multi-faceted work, including domestic, care, emotional and intellectual work. They also participate in active networking with host family members and other individuals and communities, and devise follow-up strategies to maintain their legal status in receiving countries.
Performing multi-faceted work

Between patience and resistance: rationales of domestic and emotional work

Host domesticity becomes a major social framework for au pairs newly arrived from the CIS. Their relationships with host families, which link domestic and emotional types of work, entail various scripts. The first one is formed by stories of a perfect match between newcomers and their hosts when the relationships are characterized by transparency, mutual trust and constant possibility to talk about and negotiate any misunderstandings. When it comes to domestic chores, basically the hosts follow legal requirements, and any attempts to violate them meet the au pair’s prompts and direct reaction:

Soon she [host] says, “Maybe you’d clean the shower cubicle, behind it? […] You need to move it” – “How am I supposed to move it? […] But if you move it, I will clean, for sure” […] I could talk with her on equal terms, like with a friend. She tried to move it. Of course, she could not move it even a millimetre. […] We did not have conflicts. […] It is necessary to resolve them immediately: “OK, I won’t be able to move it, I am not much stronger than you are”. She had never asked for that again. (Alena, Ukrainian, former au pair, 5 years in Norway, accountant)

In case of Alena one gentle hint brought the relationship back within the legal terms of her contract. Other hosts expand the list of tasks and increase working hours of their au pairs, and also subordinate and oppress them. Usually, it dismays newcomers who were prepared for egalitarian relationships and strictly limited workloads. They endure hardships and react passively:

At first, I tried to follow the Russian method of patience. You always keep silent, swallow tears, and cry in the pillow. The [host] saw I was crying. […] First I endured and endured. (Larissa, Russian, former au pair, 5 years in Norway, tour operator)

Also hosts might draw boundaries between themselves and au pairs as strange foreigners, for example, tell an au pair that she cannot eat dinner with the family. It demands painful emotional work on the part of the au pair in order to cope with the isolation. A newcomer does not have enough social and cultural recourse to look ahead with confidence, and is cautious of jeopardizing the legal status in Norway, so she/he carefully fumbles for
a path in social and affective domestic space. A short period of enduring, patience and dependency gradually evokes resistance via talks and negotiations with the adult hosts with references to the official requirements of the program:

I was not going to overwork anymore. [...] They were rather tough with me. [...] I started talking to them same way. [...] I say, “You have a grandfather. Please invite him after 5 p.m., solve your issues and plan your day somehow”. (Sveta, Russian, former au pair, 10 years in Norway, translator)

Once the platform for negotiations is formed and the relationships are re-established on an equal basis, the au pairs actively use it to decrease domestic chores. For the rest of the stay, domestic work is marked as less problematic and even pleasant and healthy (for instance, walking with a stroller is interpreted as a needed physical exercise). However, when this script does not work and au pairs begin to see themselves as maids, they may decide to change host families. Unpleasant experiences with a first host family make an au pair more self-confident and mature. She becomes empowered to clearly define her social position and physical space:

I explained to them [hosts] in details what I wanted. [...] I said, “There is a contract. [...] If you want more, let’s consider extra payment. I did not need to be a family member of any sort”. [...] They said, “We have a tradition – we have dinner together and discuss the day”. I said, “I can join you for 5 minutes, then I will wash my plate and leave at 5 p.m.” [...] I work whole day and then I need to go to the language courses. (Galina, Ukrainian, former au pair, 7 years in Norway, works at customs)

Many second-year au pairs redirect their energy to outdoor activities – learning the language, getting together with friends, dating, or planning further education. Thereto they find ways to communicate with their hosts while maintaining distance with adults (e.g. interact with them via notes on the fridge) and shallow though friendly relationships with children. They look after or keep an eye on them and quite pragmatically measure out their emotions. For instance former au pair Sveta focused on her childcare work as much as it let her care about her personal prospects in Norway:

I had my own motivation, because I knew that if he [the child] fell sick, I would have to stay at home with him, and wouldn’t be able to go for extra work.5 I gave him vitamins. If he was getting a cold, I gave him a foot
massage. As soon as I saw he became too cold in the daily care, I immediately gave him a foot massage. I looked after him very well.

Even if the au pairs get disillusioned with the prospect of trustworthy relationships in the private sphere, they at least try to do their best to stick to the legal working requirements and win respect as employees. Thorough calculation and registration of working hours serves as an instrument of management. It turns over the power hierarchy and gives an au pair a feeling of control over her situation. By the end of the second year, au pairs realize how they should have positioned themselves in their families from the very beginning. Like Larissa, the former au pair quoted below, they learn how to be persons with voices and rigorously regulate their domestic responsibilities:

Then, by the end, she [second host] wanted me to clean toilets. In fact, according to UDI, that are some regulations that it is neither allowed to do, nor to enforce doing it. I told her once. She stopped asking, and then approached me again. I said, “Sorry, but UDI…”. When it is your second year and you gained your voice, and I am aware of my rights, I speak the language (speaks up), so I already could do something and rebuff. I already comprehend this psychology that one should not keep silence. No way! Do not keep silence! [...] A lot depends on me, my self-positioning. I did not know this in the first family. I showed to the second one that I would [do] this, this and this. I put limits. Perhaps, that is why it was much easier.

Learning Norwegian: on priority of intellectual work

It is the responsibility of host families to pay for Norwegian language courses for au pairs. The right to learn the language points to an intellectual component of au pair work. Regardless, some au pairs have to strive to enjoy it when hosts postpone search for the courses, offer free, cheap or short classes, and even try to avoid this obligation. Then the au pairs push the hosts to pick up a school, bravely bargain with them on the price or offer extra babysitting for the classes. In fact, English seems enough for the majority of interviewees to feel comfortable in home interactions. However, participation in family events or conversations with teenage children positions an au pair in the periphery of the household as incompetent and silent. When an au pair improves her level of Norwegian, her identity and self-esteem also adjust:

I arrived and said right away that I wanted to attend the courses. They [hosts] said: ‘There are no courses’. [...] I protested and said: ‘I will grow stupid here. I cannot do dishes whole days’. They simply bought me a
textbook, and I learnt with it, I learnt the whole book by heart in a month and a half. I remember they invited me to Christmas dinner and I began… everyone was delighted with my Norwegian. (Sveta, Russian, former au pair, 10 years in Norway, translator)

Many au pairs frequently practice enthusiastic and laborious self-directed learning such as that described by Sveta. They study in libraries, online, watch Norwegian movies with subs, use textbooks and any chance to talk with native speakers in the streets. Narratives on schedules and techniques of self-directed learning and polishing pronunciation demonstrate that this activity underpins the au pairs’ desire for intellectual development. The au pairs manage to turn the hosting homes into classes where they ban speaking English and use Norwegian as the only means of communication. Reading books and singing songs for young children just starting to talk is also recognized as a very effective technique for a beginner who wants to improve her language skills.

Sooner or later, almost all au pairs get an opportunity to attend classes, albeit of different levels, qualities and costs. Being highly educated persons speaking other foreign languages, CIS au pairs progress very fast and pass tests better than other group-mates. The vision of language learning as a targeted climbing up exposes the au pairs’ student identity and their aspirations to self-position in the receiving society:

There were many different classes, and you use different footsteps and go upstairs, up, up, and up. In the end you pass Bergenstest which gives you an opportunity to enter the university and proves that you demonstrate a certain level of the academic Norwegian language. (Alla, Russian, former au pair, 8 years in Norway, on maternity leave)

Second-year au pairs shift their attitude to Norwegian from predominantly a means for everyday communication to investment in future education. This is a turning point in an au pair’s immigrant career – from being in limbo to having prospects of settling down. Au pairs reflect on the status of the Norwegian language, which unlike English for instance has very limited geographical scope. As former Russian au pair Eugenia put it, “Only 4.5 million people in the world speak Norwegian, nobody else needs it”. They argue that if so much intellectual and emotional work is done to gain this unique and localized language, it should bring some future benefits in Norway exclusively:

It would be silly just to turn and go back, and that’s it, good-bye. When you come home you’ll never ever use Norwegian you started to learn here, you’ll merely forget it. […] There are so many people who arrive who
know nothing, but feel OK here. So, why wouldn’t I try? (Eva, Ukrainian, second year au pair)

**Networking in the receiving community and related benefits**

Except for a few cases from the sample, au pairs-to-be did not have relatives or friends already living in Norway. Online technologies come to the rescue, and the newcomers compensated for their isolation and loneliness by staying in touch with loved ones left behind. Therefore, technology is used not only as a means for maintenance of relationships over long distances, but also a possibility for agentic action in a vulnerable position (Medianou and Miller 2012). Au pairs get more attached to their host families, especially if they live in remote areas, but in a little while they start to lack outside contacts. This, for instance, describes the situation of first-year au pair Valia, who arrived to Norway from Russia about five months before we met, and lived in a farm far from Trondheim:

I sat at home, did not get in touch with anyone. Communication with my [host] family was just enough for me. When I had made friends in Trondheim, I figure out that I missed them. I see them once a week, and any time I can’t leave the village it makes me sick, because I have to ask someone to drive me to the railway station.

More favourable locations do not necessarily guarantee immediate and smooth inclusion into social networks and communities. The newcomers meet current and former Russian-speaking au pairs in person or online, attend Russian discos or date merely to fill a social vacuum. Institutionalized forms of interaction, such as church and ethnic communities (e.g. Ukrainian community “Gromada” in Oslo), occasional meetings and events for newcomers in au pair agencies and commune libraries are used temporally, as they provide emotional refuge during a period of isolation and uncertainty. The language courses and schools become one of the major sources of the au pairs’ networks and outside activities. Attendance of the classes enables to explore a town or neighbourhood, discover social groups to join, and meet some friends to spend spare time with (cf. Laliotou 2010, 60). Going outside the host family gives an au pair a sense of attachment to people unrelated to her/his role of domestic worker or host family member, therefore diversifying their belonging. Language courses also make the au pairs’ networks more international (e.g. including highly skilled Europeans living in Norway), and redirect their interest away from exclusively Russian-speaking networks.
Usually, the members of au pairs’ host families are their only relationships within Norwegian society. If families and au pairs form a good match, au pairs perceive the hosts and their children as a part of their closest circle. Some hosts accompany their friendly attitude with provision of economic benefits, such as extra-payments (for domestic work, public transport, sport clubs, health care or vacations). Though over the course of two years au pairs manage to travel over Norway and Europe on their own, they enjoy going for distant and exotic family tours and cruises which they could not otherwise afford. The family members might help second-year au pairs navigate the Norwegian educational system or advise them on their job searches. This proves that some au pairs succeed in self-positioning as family members who can obtain valuable resources from their “relatives”. However, they figure out that getting in contact with other Norwegians is not that easy. Second-year and former au pairs recognize that the lack of Norwegian friends makes them poorly integrated. For instance, regardless of seven years of life in Norway, and employment and marriage to a Norwegian with whom she has a son, Chulpan desperately tries to form social bonds with Norwegians. She assumes the position of an active and affective investor in becoming a member of the community:

Once I was going home from the clinic together with two women, Norwegians. Those two are good friends, and I was following them like a tail. Although I sincerely tried to ask some questions and pretended I did not see they were ignoring me (laughs). [...] I feel they ask me, they ask, I answer, I answer, and then they suddenly ran out of questions, and they do not know what to talk about with me. I have to express an interest myself. If I express an interest myself, then they let me in better. (Chulpan, Russian, former au pair, 6 years in Norway, on maternity leave)

**Follow-up steps and social mobility of former au pairs**

Former au pairs claim they deserve to stay in Norway due to the volume of physical, emotional and intellectual investments they have made within two years. Entrance to universities or institutions of higher education becomes an efficient post-au pair step. Au pairs from the CIS manage to convert up to 60% of their educations in their home countries into credits within the Norwegian system. They usually prefer to enter national rather than international programs in order to improve their language and get a Norwegian degree, which seems more sufficient for the local labour market. Some students manage to find temporary jobs via their own or their former hosts’ networks. Others work illegally or even
continue staying with a former host family while providing some babysitting. One way or another, independent student life immerses the former au pair in a new international milieu and diversifies and enriches her/his contacts:

It was the most exciting period in my life, as there were Americans, Germans, and the French. We hang out together so much! All of us were from different cultures; we organized something all the time. We still stay in contact with many of them. [...] I met my current boyfriend there and started another period. (Sveta, Russian, former au pair, 10 years in Norway, translator)

After getting bachelor or master degrees, former au pairs get employed as specialists and obtain residence permits as skilled workers. Some of them even felt competitive professionally and linguistically without Norwegian education and switched from au pairing to a full-time qualified job. Once they get a chance, young specialists move from the public to the private sector, for the latter often better suits their career ambitions.

Former female au pairs also get another option to settle down in the form of marriage to a person of Norwegian or European citizenship that confers the right to family reunification. Their reflections on marriage reformulate migratory identity and experience. While previous migrant career steps consisted of independent hard work and investment in education and professional growth, these women rely on their womanhood to save energy and delegate work on integration to someone else:

[When you marry a Norwegian], you do not have to assimilate together. [...] He takes in the system in details. He understands the culture very good. He assimilates you, and it is simply very easy for you to live here. It is much easier to live here with a Norwegian man. (Alla, Russian, former au pair, 8 years in Norway, on maternity leave)

Chulpan, who like Alla was on maternity leave by the moment we met, also presumes that marriage and start of own family give her a legitimate right to quit or at least take a vacation from the “job” named migration and integration. Chulpan argues with her husband who convinces her to continue learning Norwegian while she stays at home and takes care of their son:

I came to Norway an as au pair and started to learn Norwegian language and culture. You know how much new here is for me, and I had to learn it, learn it, learn it, learn it all the time. I already got tired of this. Life in Russia is habitual, right? You know the language, you know the system
there. Here, when you go somewhere to the clinic, you have to check what bus goes there, all information is in Norwegian, how to get there, what timetable is there. [...] You need to learn a lot, remember the street names and bus stops, you have to learn everything. In fact, this is a great mental stress, and I do not want it anymore. (Chulpan, Russian, former au pair, 6 years in Norway, on maternity leave)

Former au pairs from the CIS make resumes of their achievements. They intersect categories of class, education and linguistic capital in order to explain how they dealt with the hosts. Even before they arrived to Norway, they felt “class peers” of the families for whom they provide care (cf. Mellini et al. 2007, 46). For instance Klaudia, a second-year Ukrainian au pair, was selecting a host family belonging to the same social class: “I saw it was an intelligent family. No, I did not want any churls or workers, because I am not that kind of person either”. The au pairs-to-be tried to avoid downgrading and devaluation of their professional qualifications, and portrayed themselves as the segment of educated nannies capable and intelligent enough to be firm with children, help them with homework, improve their English/French/Russian, and play them musical instruments.

Living in posh houses and privileged districts of Oslo, current au pairs recognize the economic gap between themselves and their host families. However, they highlight their cultural (namely educational) capital as a means to bridge this gap:

The [host] lady lives like a queen. The home interior is very elegant. She told me she wants to buy a fireplace for NOK 20,000. [...] She asserts herself like this. But I do not feel more stupid then local women. Many of my group-mates are delighted about the fact I speak many languages, English and French. (Zina, Ukrainian, first-year au pair)

Investment in education is exposed as the main technique of “passing” to “improve” class position (Skeggs 2002, 82–94) and cope with downgrading issues. Former au pairs believe that their efforts finally equated them to their hosts or made them even more competitive in Norwegian society. For instance, when Alla did her extra cleaning work in the community, she set herself a goal “to prove to the whole world that it was not in vain”. After eight years of life in Norway, she has an MA degree and works as a specialist at a public health institute in Oslo where she lives with her boyfriend and their new born son. Meanwhile, her former host divorced her wealthy husband and now works as a nurse. Another former Russian au pair named Alexei, now a student at the University of Trondheim, believes that he succeeded in overcoming inequality as he “resisted being classified as servant class” (cf. Skeggs
Alexei managed to combine his first year au pair work in Oslo with university studies in his hometown in North-Western Russia. Due to that he had issues with his host who preferred to treat him as a domestic worker:

I had a feeling that I was a cleaner who came, cleaned up and left, and everyone around treated me a bit with a smile. [...] Maybe, I proved to them that I am the same as them. When we finally had a frank talk and I explained my situations with the exams, the man said that if I need money he could always lend it to me, because I look quite a worthy person of the same academic level as they are. Thus, we had something in common to use as a base for our relationships. (Alexei, Russian, former au pair, 6 years in Norway, studies at the university in Norway)

The migrant stories told by current and former au pairs from the CIS are about equalization of relationships between au pairs and hosts, and about the reshaping of class boundaries between them and the receiving community. Current achievements show they are far from being the serving class and were so from the beginning of au pairing. Oppositely, if an au pair is not strong enough to resist exploitation and abuse, and neglects the opportunity to learn the language and build personal networks in the city, she/he risks ending up as a subaltern domestic worker, sometimes in a number of countries. In such a case au pairing is seen as a trap rather than an opportunity.

**Conclusions**

Biographical perspective allows studying how the institutions of migration work in dynamic interplay with the agency of groups and individuals following particular migration trajectories. Highly educated au pairs arriving to Norway from CIS countries describe their participation in the program as cultural exchange rather than economic strategy. Their experience implicates aspects of discovery mobility, such as meeting new people and seeing new places, free travel over Europe, getting new impressions, knowledge, and social competences. Yet, the au pairs have to do different types of work, such as physical, care, intellectual and emotional.

Overall “their desire not to be seen as servant class” (cf. Skeggs 2002, 82) shapes the au pairs’ immigrant careers throughout the course of their programs and after that. Current au pairs work hard to reinstate au pair placement back into the idea of cultural exchange and communication with the hosts on equal terms; they control the volume of domestic chores and
resist discrimination. Apart from doing required care and domestic work, they gain valuable language skills and establish local networks that make them feel more self-confident and secure. The narratives of au pairs from the CIS highlight intellectual work and obscure domestic and care work, presenting the later as less significant to their identities. Their au pair work is predated by the identity of a “student” or a professional role (Cox 2007, 292). Even though highly educated and mature newcomers experience short-term professional downgrading, in the long-term perspective they see themselves as competitive in the Norwegian context. The immigrant career continues in educational and career strategies, as well as marital plans. Trying to settle down in Norway, au pairs emphasize their background capital, as well as new social competencies they get through the program and afterwards. Looking for their positions within Norwegian social structure, they consider employment with good career opportunities rather than a more marginal role in society, and the possibility of staying in Norway “on their own terms” rather than being dependent on a host family or a husband.

“This is a good program for those who want to try something new and know exactly what she or he wants”. Russian former au pair Marina gave this formula of a successful career of au pairs in Norway, who manage to benefit both from the opportunities of discovery mobility and routine deliberate work. Altogether these activities give access to valuable resources and relatively smooth linear integration. “A structural condition of economic inequality between regions does not necessarily mean that au pair migration is only economically motivated” (Búriková and Miller 2010, 189). This chapter has analysed the ways in which economically unrelated, sometimes aimless, mobility transitions to exciting and purposeful immigration careers with long-term prospects of settling down. In the case of au pairs from the CIS, closing down the program in Norway would mean a loss of a certain number of educated, professional, motivated, enthusiastic and trustworthy young citizens to whom egalitarian principles of Norwegian society mean a lot. These new immigrant neighbours will have higher education, prestigious jobs, beautiful houses, Norwegian surnames, and a very positive reputation in their communities. Then the locals who ignored them before will have to get to know them.
References


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Notes

1 “RUFA: Russian and Ukrainian Female Au pairs in Norway: Public Arrangements and Private Commitments” (2010 – 2011), project funded by the Research Council of Norway, YGGDRASIL mobility programme, No. 202723/V11. I implemented this project as a guest researcher at the Institute for applied International Studies Fafo in Oslo. All interviews were conducted in Russian.

2 The statistics is provided by Peter Akre, a senior advisor at Analysis and Development Department, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI).

3 Norwegian statistics proves that 79% of children age 1–2 and as many as 96% of children ages 3–5 attended kindergartens (Statistics Norway 2011a). A well-developed system of public day care facilitates active labour force participation for women and increases the number of dual-career families in Norway. In 2008, almost 71% of women and 77% of men ages 15–74 participated in the labour force (Statistics Norway 2011b, 12).

4 According to the au pairs I interviewed, hosts usually represent dual-career families of middle- and upper-middle classes employed in private and public economic sectors. They are primarily Norwegian couples, sometimes separated. Parents are 30–60 years old, with 1–4 children ages 1–15. Children attend day cares and schools, but a number of previous au pairs stated that for many Norwegian children, growing up with a series of au pairs is routine.

5 Higher education in Norway is free for everyone, except for a precondition to prove that an applicant has a considerable sum of NOK 92,500 (about 11,500€) on the bank account as a full support (academic year 2012/2013). Before 2006, all former au pairs as Norwegian tax payers enjoyed a right to get this money as a bank loan. The loss of this opportunity became a tragedy for many who were about to finish au pairing and expected to get this privilege. Now au pairs, such as Sveta, have to gain this money from different sources, such as their own and their relatives’ savings, payments for extra though illegal domestic work and babysitting and also generous support of their hosts.

6 Passing this exam is a precondition for studying at the Norwegian universities and colleges, and it is also required in some professional areas (e.g. healthcare) as a documentation of proficiency in the Norwegian language.