Au Pair Arrangement in Norway and Transnational Organization of Care

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Introduction

Norway has an advanced welfare system that aims to ensure the equality and well-being of its citizens. The United Nations Human Development Index has for the past ten years ranked Norway as “the best country to live in” (United Nations 2012). National and international media celebrate Norway as the “professional women’s paradise” (Bergens Tidene 2008) and “the best place to be a mother” (Save the Children 2012); universal kindergarten coverage, generous parental leave schemes and a family-friendly labor market enable the reconciliation of work and family life. Despite the existing flexible welfare arrangements, an increasing number of Norwegian families are turning to private solutions and hire au pairs to assist them in childcare and housework. As a result, Norway has, since the beginning of 2000, become a receiving country for au pairs from around the world.

Prior to the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007, the majority of au pairs in Norway were from the Baltic countries and Eastern Europe (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration 2010). The au pair placement in Norway became a strategy for entry, work and higher education for many citizens in these regions. Since their inclusion in the EU, however, the number of au pairs from these states has decreased considerably. This is due to the fact that citizens of new member states receive better opportunities for achieving the same aspirations as well as free movement between EU and the European Economic Area (EEA) countries. While the EU enlargement meant increased opportunities for mobility for EU and EEA-nationals, the increased control of the outer borders of the European Union has meant reduced opportunities for entry into the European countries for third country nationals, that is, non-EU/EEA-nationals. However, it is exactly the third country nationals who have dominated the au pair statistics in Norway for the past few years. The largest growth is in the number of permits issued to Filipino au pairs – from 78 in
Au Pair Arrangement in Norway


During the last ten years, thousands of young women from the Philippines have come to Norway to work as au pairs despite the Philippine ban on deployment of au pairs to Europe since 1998. Issued by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to protect Filipinos from abuse as domestic workers in Europe, the ban on deployment created precarious situations for Filipino au pairs making them illegal migrants in the receiving countries. The ban also created conditions for corruption, as the au pairs had to pay a bribe to some airport officials in order to be allowed to leave the country. Paying a bribe and exiting the country as illegal migrants, Filipino nationals started their au pair careers as indebted and highly vulnerable migrants with very limited rights and protection.

European countries responded differently to the ban on deployment of Filipino au pairs to Europe. Some countries stopped issuing au pair permits to Filipino citizens as did, for example, Sweden and Finland. Other countries continued accepting au pairs from the Philippines, among these Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Germany (Calleman 2011; Stenum 2011b). Norway being among the few European countries accepting au pairs from the Philippines has become a preferred destination for Filipino au pairs and has also attracted mothers with children to migrate for work.

Based on interviews with Filipino au pairs in Norway and representatives for the Philippine immigration authorities, this chapter aims to explore how national and international regulations of the au pair scheme are experienced by the au pairs in Norway and their families in the country of origin and what strategies they deploy to cope with these regulations. For that objective the European and Norwegian regulations of au pair placements are elaborated on with a special focus on how au pair migrants are constructed as non-workers and non-citizens of the receiving society. The case of Filipino au pair migration to Norway is introduced further in this chapter to inform the discussion of migrants’ access to the right of family life, and two cases of Filipino au pair migration to Norway are presented. The chapter closes with a discussion of the tensions related to migration management and migrants’ rights to family life. But first, a brief introduction to the methods, sources, and theoretical perspectives framing this chapter follow.

Method, sources, and scope

The Norwegian regulations of the scheme are based on the Council of Europe’s European Agreement on “au pair” Placement since 1969 (hereafter the European Agreement or the Agreement) (Council of Europe 1969). The European Agreement is an important international document that