

# **‘My home is my castle’. The Norwegian home in times of paid migrant domestic labour**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to explore the cultural meanings attached to the home in contemporary Norway, by way of studying the recent and rather contested increase in paid migrant domestic labour. Based on qualitative interviews with Norwegian au pair host parents, the article explores the ways in which this new monetised and globalised organisation of housework and care work influences both the cultural ideal of the Norwegian home and everyday life within it. Does the increasing occurrence of paid domestic labour bear witness to and contribute to the production of new perceptions of the Norwegian home, or does it instead protect the Norwegian home from societal changes in regards to gender and labour?

**Key words:** home; paid domestic labour; au pairs; Norway; gender; gender equality

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on cultural meaning making with regards to the Norwegian home, in a period in which egalitarian ideology and an explicit negative attitude towards servitude is being replaced by an ambivalent embrace of paid migrant domestic labour. Paradoxically, this replacement seems to be tightly related to the cultural ideal of gender equality. To explore this paradox, I examine the au pair arrangement, which has been known in Norway since the late 1960s as a cheap and accessible way for Norwegian young adults (in practice, young women) to become acquainted with another country and language. In recent years, however, the scheme has transformed into a migration route for young, less privileged people, usually women, from outside of the EU/EEA that enables them to live in Norway for up to two years.

As the au pair arrangement is defined by the exchange of housework and care work for lodging and pocket money in a foreign country, it is an example of the new monetised, globalised and gendered organisation of housework and care work that is often termed 'paid migrant domestic labour'. However, it is an extreme case, in the sense that au pairs are required to live in the house in which their work is performed (Cox 2015; Stubberud 2015, 2016). As Norway is known both for its particularly strong relationship between the home and the family and for challenging the traditional gender order through the dual earner/dual carer model of gender equality (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006), I use the au pair arrangement as a fruitful point of departure to explore cultural meaning making in regards to the home, as it has evolved over recent years.

I focus on the Norwegian host side of the au pair scheme in order to grasp the ways in which paid migrant domestic labour has affected the cultural ideal of the Norwegian home and everyday life within it. More specifically, I analyse how Norwegian au pair host parents' perceptions of and experiences with this kind of paid migrant domestic labour are framed by culturally specific ideas of the home, how the scheme contributes to new understandings of the home and how these possible changes are related to recent changes in the organisation of gender and work.

The article begins by introducing central writings on the home in Western culture. This review shows that the home is a private, exclusive and gendered space, that changes in the labour market for women have resulted in a care deficit in the home and that this deficit has been addressed by the employment of paid (migrant) domestic labour, including au pairs. It then moves on to a general discussion of the home in Norwegian culture, exploring both the ways in which this particular context reflects the wider Western context and the aspects that are specific to Norwegian culture. The following section addresses the recent increase in paid domestic labour in Norway and the social and cultural ambivalences that nuance this increase,

both globally and domestically, before outlining the methodology and strategies used to analyse the data material. The findings are presented in two sections, which illustrate some of the dynamics and ambivalences regarding the home in contemporary Norway. In the final section, I discuss my findings in light of the literature on paid domestic labour and the home as a specific cultural domain. The main argument presented in the article is that the introduction of au pairs into the domestic arena has had important effects on the cultural perception of the home in Norway. First, it has disrupted the traditional notion of the home as a private space – or a ‘castle’ – for family members, only. Second, because the vast majority of the au pairs are women, traditional gendered connotations of the home are reproduced and the cultural ideal of gender equal housework and care work is subsequently challenged. Third, the political aim and cultural ideal of equality for women in the labour force is undermined by greater inequality in the domestic sphere.

### **The idea of a home**

In the article ‘The idea of a home: A kind of space’, Mary Douglas connects the concept of home to that of space: ‘Home is “here”, or it is “not there”. The question is not “How?” nor “Who?” nor “When?” but “Where is your home?”’ (Douglas 1991, 288–289). A conventional Western understanding of ‘home’ typically involves exclusivity of membership for the protection of privacy and the security of select members (Wilson 2003/2004, 131). This means that the presence and inclusion of non-members might strain the identification of a select membership and reduce the sense of communal cohesion (Wilson 2003/2004). In line with this, Carsten describes the home as a central place for the creation of family ties, as relations of kinship often emerge ‘through the intimate sharing of space, food, and nurturance that goes within the domestic space’ (Carsten 2004, 35). This particular idea of the home goes hand in hand with an understanding of the family as a ‘haven in a heartless world’, as

described by Christopher Lasch in his book *Haven in a Heartless World. The Family Besieged* (1977). According to Lasch, a new bourgeois family system emerged in Western Europe and the United States in the late 18th century, characterised by, among other things, a radical separation between work and leisure and between public life and private life (Lasch 1977). This new family structure included new ideas about the ideal family and family life: ‘The emergence of the nuclear family as the principal form of family life reflected the high value modern societies attached to privacy, and the glorification of privacy in turn reflected the devaluation of work’ (Lasch 1977, 7).

As both Lasch and other researchers have demonstrated, this Western, modern home is also a gendered territory, wherein women are in control and are responsible for daily activities and chores; in contrast, men are more orientated towards the outer world (Lasch 1977; McDowell 1983; Saunders 2007). In line with this, women have tended to associate themselves – and be associated by others – more strongly with the house (Gullestad [1984] 2001, 1992, 2001; Lasch 1977; Solheim 1998, 2007). Following from this gendering of space and labour, the house has traditionally served different functions for women and men, in the sense that men have understood it as a place to withdraw and relax, whereas women have viewed it also as a workplace (McDowell 1983; Saunders 2007). In addition to managing unpaid domestic labour in their own dwelling, women have traditionally filled domestic jobs of cleaning, caring and cooking – jobs that are typically poorly regulated and poorly paid (Gregson and Lowe 1994). As more women entered the labour force in the 20th century, leaving both men and the public sector with increased responsibility for domestic tasks, the gender difference in these roles to some extent became less distinct (Gullikstad et al. 2016; Tronto 2002; Watts 2007). At the same time, women’s increased participation in the labour market has produced a care deficit that neither men nor the public sector have been able or willing to fill, paving the way for the ‘feminisation of migration’ and ‘global care chains’

(Gullikstad et al. 2016; Hochschild 2001; Isaksen 2010; Lutz 2008, 2011; Triandafyllidou and Marchetti 2015). While the feminisation of migration (describing the higher percentage of voluntary migrants who are women) has been proposed as a 'gendered pattern' in international migration (Lutz 2008), the concept of the global care chain covers 'a series of personal links between people across the globe based on paid and unpaid work of caring' (Hochschild 2001, 131).

The phenomenon of paid (migrant) domestic labour embraces the two often related phenomena of feminised migration and global care chains, and within it one can find a wide range of live-in and live-out work arrangements and positions. Although the practice of paying a person to perform housework and care work within the private home is not new, its scope and global character have escalated in recent years (Cox 2006, 2015; Gullikstad et al. 2016; Hochschild 2001; Isaksen 2010; Lutz 2008, 2011; Triandafyllidou and Marchetti 2015). According to Anna Triandafyllidou and Sabrina Marchetti (2015), the combination of increased access to cheap labour (due to globalisation) and the care deficit in the West is causing a 'proletarianisation' of paid domestic work. Domestic services were previously a luxury that only few households could afford; now, they are being purchased by the middle and lower-middle classes, who regard it as 'not a luxury but a necessity' (Triandafyllidou and Marchetti 2015, 231).

As we will see in this article, this particular work arrangement represents a break with some of the characteristics of the Western home. First, it implies a disruption in the cohesion between the home and the family. Second, it challenges the privacy of the home. Third, it undermines the idea of exclusivity. However, as most domestic labourers are women, the gendered aspect of the domestic home is maintained. At the same time, one can say that the gendering has been given a new meaning, as the women who have replaced the female homemaker are no longer (only or necessarily) of a different class, but often also of a

different nationality and/or ethnicity and colour (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Gullikstad et al. 2016; Hochschild 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2008).

A central theme in the literature on paid domestic labour is the idea that the home is a particular kind of workplace – one in which the boundaries between private and public, and the very concept of work, are continuously renegotiated (Davidoff 2003; Triandafyllidou and Marchetti 2015; Yeoh and Huang 1999). A related theme in the debate is centred on the relationship between employers and employees, which is often characterised as undefined and ambiguous (Triandafyllidou and Marchetti 2015). Groves and Lui (2012), who interviewed couples who had hired domestic helpers in Hong Kong, found that the employer–employee relationship was characterised by ongoing negotiation between social distance and physical closeness. Another finding was that female employers paid more than men, as they were more frequently involved with the domestic labourer on a daily basis (Groves and Lui 2012). From the opposite vantage point, Rosie Cox, who has focused her research on au pairs in the United Kingdom, has asked whether ‘sister’ or ‘servant’ is the most apt designation for an au pair. Whereas ‘au pair’ refers to the equal terms on which the au pair is supposed to be treated, and the regulations call for a familial relationship, the everyday life of many au pairs fails to reflect equality and inclusion (Cox 2006, 2007, 2015).

### **The Norwegian hearth and home<sup>i</sup>**

I now turn to the Norwegian context to explore which meaning is ascribed to the home in Norwegian culture, and how this meaning is affected by paid migrant domestic labour. According to the Norwegian social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, who has done extensive fieldwork in Norwegian working class families, housing is a very important part of Norwegian life, both practically and ideologically ([1984] 2001, 97). As houses and apartments are expensive, they are often a family’s most important economic asset.

Furthermore, both Norway's wet and cold climate and the lack of a vibrant pub or restaurant culture makes the home a necessary setting for activities that, in other cultures, would take place outside or in a local pub or restaurant (such as birthday celebrations and anniversaries). Thus, the home is a setting for interactions with both family and friends (Gullestad 1992, 66). This ideological aspect implies that, in the Norwegian context, housing embodies the value of autonomy, and autonomy is very much a matter of being 'lord of one's own castle' (Gullestad [1984] 2001, 97). Furthermore, in contrast to private enterprises and the labour market, which are conceived of as rational, hard and efficient, the Norwegian home is conceived of as kind, close, dear and irrational; in other words, one's home is a place in which one can be oneself (Døving 2001; Solheim 1998; Sørhaug 1996).

Another important aspect of the Norwegian home is a strong cohesion between home and family and, more specifically, home and the nuclear family (Gullestad 2001). This means that the home is central to the Norwegian family's territory, and key for intimacy and socialisation, both between spouses and between parents and children (Gullestad 1992). In addition, the home in Norway is perceived as a particularly important context for finding peace and becoming whole (1992, 145). It is a context in which people are away from paid work, and where there is more freedom in the organisation of time and activities (1992, 145).

When it comes to style and aesthetics, a good Norwegian home is considered cosy, homely and warm, and the process of making a home these things has been described as a kind of modern folk culture (Gullestad [1984] 2001, 1992, 2001). A characteristic of this modern folk culture is that it is highly gendered, in the sense that men have traditionally bought homes and been responsible for maintaining their physical exteriors and interiors, whereas women have traditionally been responsible for making houses into homes (Gullestad [1984] 2001, 1992, 2001). This was particularly true in the post-war era, during which men were breadwinners and women were homemakers who set new standards for the domestic

sphere (Danielsen et al. 2014). With the introduction of the dual earner/dual carer model of gender equality, this traditional model was challenged (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006). In recent years, Norwegian men have generally taken a more active role in housework and care work, whereas Norwegian women have decreased their role in such work, relative to women in previous decades (Kitterød 2012). Nevertheless, for many Norwegian families, the time-bind is a heartfelt challenge that they attempt to solve in a variety of ways (Danielsen et al. 2014). For example, the sociologist Helene Aarseth found that, for Norwegian middle class dual career couples who embrace the political and cultural ideal of gender equality, making all domestic tasks – including construction work – joint, self-realising projects is one such solution (Aarseth 2011). Another widespread solution is for women to reduce their working hours to take on the role of primary homemaker (Kitterød 2005, 2012). Yet another solution is for couples to pay a third party to assist with domestic tasks.

### **Paid domestic labour in Norway**

Compared to many other European countries, Norway has not demonstrated widespread use of paid domestic labour. Particularly in the post-war era, social democratic ideologies introduced a strong focus on public welfare, equality and sobriety, and an explicit negative attitude towards social hierarchies and servitude (Gullestad 2006; Sogner 2004; Sollund 2010). In the last decades, however, such attitudes seem to have changed and the employment of various kinds of domestic labourers has steadily grown.

The most common forms of domestic labour in contemporary Norway are home cleaning and au pairing. Whereas 4 per cent of the population reported paying someone – generally immigrant women from Eastern Europe (Friberg and Tyldum 2007) – to clean their home in 2000, this number increased to 8 per cent in 2010 (Kitterød 2012). In terms of numbers, au pairing is a much more marginal phenomenon in Norway than is home cleaning,

but it has shown rapid growth in recent years. When Norway ratified the European Agreement on Au Pair Placement in 1971 (two years after the ‘Strasbourg Agreement’), au pairs generally originated in Western countries (including Norway), and very few persons in this category wanted to come to Norway (Gullikstad and Annfelt 2016).<sup>ii</sup> Over the last 20 years, however, Norway has become an au pair receiver country, and in recent years, growth in the number of au pairs entering Norway has been considerable. In 1991, 370 resident permits were given to au pairs in Norway, and in 2013 this number grew to 1,476.<sup>iii</sup> Of these, a majority were granted to women from the Philippines. In addition to those granted an au pair visa, an unknown number of people from within the EU/EEA (who do not require visas) have taken on work in line with the au pair scheme and official au pair regulations. According to the regulations of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), au pairing, unlike home cleaning, is not legally defined as work, but as cultural exchange. This means that au pairs do not receive salaries, but ‘pocket money’ and free lodging and food in exchange for performing light housework and child care for up to 30 hours a week – as a family member.<sup>iv</sup> The family relation is, however, temporal, as au pair visas expire after two years. To be granted a visa, an applicant must be between the ages of 18 and 30 and cannot have any children of her or his own. It must also be likely that the au pair will return to her or his country of origin upon expiry of the visa.

As the number of au pairs has increased, the au pair scheme has been hotly debated in Norwegian media, politics and academic research (Bikova 2010; Gullikstad and Annfelt 2016; Isaksen 2010; Sollund 2010). A recurrent theme in these debates has been the exploitation of au pairs as cheap labour and hence the violation of the au pair regulations. In recent years, there have also been lawsuits in which former au pairs have taken their host families to court – and won – and this has attracted significant media attention. Another recurrent theme, partly following revelations of abuse and offences, is the question of whether

the au pair scheme should be terminated, or at least reorganised. Overall, the discussions indicate that the position of a non-worker is highly problematic and that the au pair regulations are somewhat outdated. For example, recent research on au pairing has found that au pairs in Norway – and particularly those from the Philippines – perform a substantial amount of domestic labour for the families with whom they live, and in many cases also perform more than the regulations allow them to do (Øien 2009; Solund 2010; Stubberud 2015, 2016). In line with this, research has shown that the need for an extra pair of hands to cope with the time-bind is a significantly more common motivation for hosting an au pair than the wish to take part in cultural exchange (Bikova 2010, 2015; Kristensen 2015, 2016; Øien 2009; Sollund 2010). These studies do not imply that cultural exchange does not occur. Still, as argued by Elisabeth Stubberud on the basis of research on au pairs in Norway, the unclear situation for au pairs necessitates a certain amount of boundary work – performed by the au pairs – in order to draw lines between, for example, work and leisure or the au pair and the host family (Stubberud 2016).

## **Methods**

The analysis is based on qualitative research that was conducted in 2012 and 2013 on paid migrant domestic labour in contemporary Norway, and more specifically on the ways in which Norwegian consumers of home cleaning services and au pair arrangements perceive and experience this organisation of everyday life. The study is part of a broader research project on paid migrant domestic labour and gender equality in contemporary Norway, which – in addition to the study of consumers of paid migrant domestic labour – analyses Norwegian political regulations of the au pair scheme, media and film representations of paid migrant domestic labour and comments provided by au pairs residing in Norway, themselves.

In this article, I draw on data from 11 interviews with 16 Norwegian au pair hosts (four individual interviews and six conducted with couples) and one further interview with two au pair ‘parents to be’. The pre-defined selection criteria in this project were relevant experiences with paid domestic labour and parenthood of young children. In addition, I felt it was important to talk to the spouses together, in order to get information about the ways in which they constructed joint narratives about their experiences with paid domestic labour. The recruitment process was rather challenging, as many of my requests for an interview were either not answered or turned down, and the lesson learned from this – apart from the reminder that interviewing is challenging – was that there is still a culturally specific taboo related to having domestic staff in Norway (Kristensen 2015; Kristensen and Ravn 2015). I also noted that recruiting two informants for each interview seemed twice as hard as recruiting one informant – at least in the population I was targeting, which is widely known for having a busy lifestyle.

The interviewees lived in different Norwegian cities and had various kinds of families and careers. Whereas fourteen were in cohabiting relationships, four were single parents (women). The number of children in each household varied from two to five, with a predominance of three. All interviewees were employed, and with two exceptions they were working full-time, with working hours ranging from normal (which in a Norwegian context is 37.5 hours per week) to very long (50–60 hours per week). In relation to social class, interviewees’ education levels and salaries implied that they could be classified as middle class and upper class.<sup>v</sup>

The interviewees’ experiences with au pairing were rather varied. Whereas seven families had previously had one or more au pairs, three families were employing their first au pair and one family was waiting for their first au pair to arrive. Altogether, the families had hosted 26 au pairs from a wide range of countries (15 from the Philippines, five from other

non-European countries and six from Europe [within the Schengen Area]). All of the au pairs were women, and their ages ranged from 19 to 30 years old.

The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' private homes in the evening, when the children were either in bed or out of sight. In addition to making the interviews more feasible for the participants, conducting the interviews in the participants' homes also provided me with invaluable information for understanding and decoding the recorded verbal information, allowing me to supplement this information with non-verbal knowledge.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, and they were organised into four parts. In the first part, I asked the interviewees to describe their family's everyday life. In the second part, I asked them about their decision to become a host family, focusing on their explanations and justifications. In the third part, I encouraged the interviewees to share their reflections on the au pair(s) they had hosted and/or wished to host. Finally, I asked them to share their positive and negative experiences with paid domestic labour.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Norwegian and subsequently translated into English by myself. To protect the interviewees' identity, I changed their names and withheld identifying information that was not of importance for this specific analysis. The initial stages of analysis followed a reading technique that resembled the basic techniques of grounded theory, wherein I coded the transcribed interview data and grouped similar codes into conceptual categories (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Inspired by the conceptual categories that evolved from the material, I focused explicitly on the ways in which ideas about the home were activated in the interviewees' narratives of everyday family life and their experiences with au pairing.

When conducting the analyses, the interview material was perceived as a collection of co-produced narratives. This means that the interviewees' perceptions of and experiences with au pairing were not perceived as mere reflections of what was thought, said and done, but as

accounts of cultural meaning making across a range of themes, including that of the home. Although the au pairs living in the selected families played important roles in the cultural meaning making around the home, their perceptions and experiences are not included in this article. Their perspectives are, however, included in the larger research project by another researcher, and are thus addressed in other publications.

### **The great value of a tidy and clean house**

Although the interviewees' descriptions of their everyday life were tremendously varied, my analysis detected some rather striking similarities in the ways in which interviewees framed their decision to host an au pair and their experiences with being a host family. One such striking likeness of particular relevance to the home was the widespread narrative that the family needed help with the time-consuming and unrewarding housework in order for the parents to focus on paid work and care work, which stood out as both more meaningful and more rewarding. A common statement was that the parents – in most cases the mother and in a few cases both the mother and the father – would have needed to reduce their working hours considerably if the au pair had not been able to perform the majority of the housework.

Another recurring formulation found in the interviews was that there would be more arguments in the family, both between the spouses and between the parents and children, if the au pair were to quit and leave. In most cases, these statements were underpinned with stories about the family dynamic before the au pair arrived and during short periods (often holidays) when the au pair was off duty or when the family was 'between au pairs'.

An example of this framing is found in the interview with Unni and Tor. The couple had three children and two and a half years' of au pair experience with two au pairs. When I asked Unni and Tor why they had initially decided to host an au pair, I was presented with a story about the turmoil that had characterised the initial period after the twins had been born

and there were three children under the age of 3 to look after and no family or friends nearby to help with the housework and childcare.

The situation was absolutely chaotic when the twins were born. It was just crazy. [...]  
There were so many things that needed doing, day and night. We just didn't have enough hands to manage it all. That is why we decided to host an au pair.

As I read this answer, the couple did not initially desire a domestic labourer or an au pair, but, in their difficult situation, the au pair arrangement was the most feasible.

Another example of this story is found in the interview with Hanne, a single mom of three young children. Hanne had gone through a divorce two years prior to the interview, and, at the time of the interview, she was hosting her third au pair. Her decision to host an au pair was taken when she was still married, and it was grounded on the fact that the birth of three children in a very short span of time – as well as her husband's frequent travel for work – was too much for her to cope with. At the time of the interview, Hanne was living by herself and acting as more or less the sole caregiver for her children. She was able to have an 80 per cent job outside the house, and, at the same time, take care of her children and maintain a rather tidy and clean house without wearing herself out completely. When asked about her reasons for becoming a host mother, Hanne answered:

The reason why I have an au pair is that I can't see how I could manage without. I don't have time to clean the house and things like that. And that is one of the things the au pair does for me. In addition she does the laundry and cooks, and makes sure the house is fairly tidy and clean. And she helps out with the children. And those are the things I have difficulty managing by myself. It would have been different if I had a partner. The au pair is here because I am by myself.

Nowhere in this quotation is au pairing presented as desirable, in itself. Rather, it is described as a solution to a difficult situation for which there are no good alternatives. What also comes through in this excerpt is that housework is an important au pair task; thus, the end result of an au pair's efforts should be a tidy and clean home and a working mother.

Whereas Unni, Tor and Hanne related their au pair arrangements to the situation of having several very young children, the couple Anette and Are presented a somewhat different argument for their decision to take on their first au pair 18 months prior to the interview. The couple had been married for five years and, together, made up what is often labelled a 'blended family', with both separate and common children. Are had a demanding, very well-paid job and was away from the house for 12 hours each day, whereas Anette had reduced her working hours from what she described as 'very long' to normal full-time, a few years prior. When asked about their reasons for becoming an au pair host family, Anette answered:

The reason why we wanted to have an au pair is to be able to take care of all the children, to be able to spend time with them and with each other. We are sort of newlyweds and have hundreds of children and a lot of fuss, and we really need time to just be together and not be running about, sweeping and cleaning and being grumpy. [...] If it weren't for the au pair, I would be a bitch. Seriously.

Here we see that keeping the dispersed family together and, in particular, saving the marriage, is presented as the main argument. We also see that making the house into a social space for togetherness, cosiness and relaxation is an important aspect of this. Yet another message that is conveyed is that Anette, more than Are, is more fully revealed by the au pair, in the sense that she would suffer the most if they were to terminate the au pair arrangement. This last

point was also confirmed by Are, who said that his main reason for hosting an au pair was to help his wife take care of the household; as long as he was working in his particular job, an au pair would be necessary for this purpose.

In line with these stories about more or less desperate needs and worries about the consequences of not having an extra pair of hands to help out, the interviewees' experiences of an au pair doing a substantial part of the housework, making dinner and occasionally looking after the children were overwhelmingly positive. The single mother Hanne described her thoughts as follows:

I can't see how I would have managed without the au pair. [...] If I didn't have an au pair, I would have at least needed a home cleaner and a babysitter, and would have had to reduce my working hours rather considerably.

Along a similar vein, when I asked Anette and Are whether their expectations of the au pair had been met, Anette replied:

I am really, really satisfied. We have talked a lot about how well this has worked out for us. Not only does our au pair do a wonderful job, but her presence has a very calming effect on the children. You just don't argue and yell at each other when there is someone... you can call them a visitor... in the room. And she's such a lovely person. Calm and... she really has a very soothing effect on the children.

In addition to reducing stress and conflicts in the couple and between the parents and children, and allowing more time for the family to be together, the au pair was, in Anette's opinion, also making the home a better place for the whole family, not only in terms of tidiness and cleanliness, but also in terms of social atmosphere.

To summarise, according to the interviewees, the au pairs contributed to making the home an ideal social place: tidy, clean and friendly. However, as is demonstrated in the next section, not all aspects of paid domestic labour were valued.

### **The great value of having the house to oneself**

Parallel to the explicit and very positive presentations of the au pair arrangement as a way of managing the work-life balance and creating a happy and sound environment in the family home, I also identified some ambivalent feelings related to opening up one's home to a domestic labourer for a period of time.

To illustrate this ambivalence, I will start with Hanne. As we have already seen, Hanne felt that she *needed* her au pair, and she was very satisfied with her au pair's work and effect on the family's everyday life. However, despite this overarching positive framing, Hanne's interview contained statements indicating that she was also experiencing some disadvantages related to the arrangement:

Having someone stay in your house is both positive and negative. I know that a lot of people find the lack of privacy difficult. When our first au pair arrived, we were living in another house with two bathrooms but only one shower. So we had to use the same shower. I can remember that my husband found that somewhat problematic, but to me it was not really a problem. And as each of the three au pairs I have had have been very careful and considerate, I think it has worked out all right. When we moved, the au pair had her own floor, so then it wasn't a problem at all. Now, in this house, which is much smaller, we live very close. Her bedroom is just across the corridor, and we use the same bathroom. But to me this is not a problem, as I realised a long time ago that for me the advantages of having an au pair in the home are so much more substantial than the disadvantages. But of course, the arrangement does have an effect on your private life.

[...] In particular, when the children are at their father's place I sometimes miss having the house all by myself.

Here, we can see that although Hanne was generally very happy with the au pair arrangement, she also felt that sharing her home with an au pair, no matter how nice the au pair was, meant that she could not fully enjoy the benefit a Norwegian home could offer: a private space.

To Unni and Tor, however, the situation was somewhat different. After three years of au pairing, the children were no longer very small, and, at one point, the balance between the positive and negative effects tipped to the other side. Unni described this as follows:

The situation is not so chaotic any more. Little by little, we have retained control and now I really feel that things are going fine. The last six months have been much better. Lately we have had the feeling of surplus. That we are not drowning in domestic work and paid work.

Having realised that they could manage without the au pair, Unni and Tor began to find the au pair's presence more annoying. In particular, Unni, who was working shifts and often spent several hours in the house when the children were in kindergarten during the day, started to dream about what it would be like to *not* have an extra person in the house. After sharing these thoughts with her husband, the decision to terminate the contract with the au pair, who had been with them for a year, was easy:

Now we would like to have the house to ourselves. Finally we are able to take care of our family, and we would like to do that. Now we want to be together the five of us. [...] It has been a great advantage to have an au pair for two and a half years, but now we are ready to go on by ourselves.

My reading of this is that Unnia and Tor perceived their au pair arrangement as a feasible and legal solution to a demanding life situation, but they did not feel that life with an au pair could last forever. Later in the interview, I learned that the couple had also been looking into home cleaning – a service they had used prior to hosting their first au pair. But even this arrangement, which would normally be scheduled for a couple of hours a week, stood out as too intrusive:

I do not want to employ a home cleaner straight away. First, I want to enjoy having the house all to myself, and then maybe I will feel that we do not need it.

Although home cleaning was affordable and would relieve the couple – particularly Unni, who had been primarily responsible for the domestic tasks since the children had been born and she had reduced her working hours – was not very keen on the idea. Rather, she was looking forward to not having a stranger in the house, even if this stranger would only be present for a few hours a week. My interpretation of this is that, in this particular situation, the ability to feel *at home* in the house overruled the perceived benefit of an extra pair of hands.

Whereas Hanne, Unni and Tor were living in close proximity to their au pairs, this was not true for all of the interviewees. For example, Anette and Are had a separate flat in which their au pair dwelled and ate meals, and two other couples reported having prepared a guest room and a guest bath in the basement to ensure that the family and the au pair had some space between them. This suggests that physical space could be a solution to potential tensions relating to domestic labour and the Norwegian ideals of a home; indeed, this might explain why the issue of privacy was never raised in the interviews with host parents who had orchestrated this space.

This theory finds support in the interview with Silje and Stein. The couple had two children who were both at school, and, at the time of the interview, were hosting their third au pair. Similar to most of the informants, Silje and Stein related their decision to take on an au pair to what they described as a need for help, and thus also more time to just be together as a couple and as parents and children. More specifically, they sought an au pair to assist Silje with the housework, so she could focus more on her paid work without compromising their – or rather her – high expectations for childcare and housework. As the au pair was given the role of ‘house manager’, in charge of the vast majority of housework, the couple – and again, particularly Silje – was very satisfied. Of course, on the basis of this satisfaction, both Silje and Stein felt it was important for their au pair to be happy. Silje put it like this:

If the au pair is not happy, she will not be able to do a good job, and we really need her to do that. An au pair is never only an extra pair of helping hands, she is also a part of the family. At the same time, it is important for us to draw some lines. You can put it like this: We are happy that she retires to her room in the basement in the evening, so we can have the house to ourselves.

Here we can see that the couple organised au pairing in a way that balanced the fine line between the au pair being part of the household – and, as they describe it, part of the family – and the au pair being a foreigner whose presence might disrupt the feeling of ‘being at home’.

But not all families were successful in finding this balance. An example of this lack of balance is found in the interview with the single mother Eva. Two years prior to the interview, Eva’s husband and the father of her two young children had suddenly moved out and left her with full childrearing responsibility. In order to keep her job, which required both commuting and some traveling, Eva decided to host an au pair. To a great extent, the arrangement was a success, in the sense that it allowed Eva to solve the time-bind she was experiencing. As the

au pair did most of the housework, Eva was able to focus on her children when she was at home. However, during the interview, Eva also confessed that the presence of the au pair had started to bother her, to the extent that she was dreaming about the day when she could manage without an extra pair of hands:

I am rather fed up with always having her around. I miss being alone with my children. I miss having breakfast with them and not having to speak in English, and not having someone watching us. I know it's kind of cruel, but now I regret not telling her to have her breakfast after we have left in the morning. Also, when the children are with their father, I would love to have the house to myself. When the au pair is out and I am home alone, I always try to make the most of it: playing really loud music, dancing, just enjoying having the house to myself and not having to worry about someone else.

Although Eva requires an au pair to manage her work-life balance, and hence benefits from the arrangement, she also feels that she is sacrificing something by sharing the house with the au pair – namely the great value of a private space.

I found similar thinking in the interview with Elisabeth and Erik. This couple had three children and, at the time of the interview, they were hosting their third au pair. Mostly due to communication problems, but partly due to cultural problems, neither of their two prior au pair arrangements had been successful. With the third au pair, who had come from a country with which the couple was familiar and had experienced fewer problems settling down and tuning in to the family's everyday life, Elisabeth and Erik finally felt that they could lower their shoulders and reap the rewards of the au pair arrangement. To a large extent, this is what happened. The au pair helped out with the housework and looked after the children to the level specified in the au pair contract. Although Elisabeth would have preferred her to be a bit more eager in terms of housework and more flexible in terms of

childcare, both she and Erik were satisfied. However, after some time, a new problem occurred. In contrast to the previous au pairs, who had not blended into the family and had spent most of their spare time in their room, the third au pair tended to hang around in the living room, taking up physical and social space when not 'on duty'. After some time, the au pair's presence started to annoy them – particularly Erik, who worked long hours and appreciated cooling down in front of the television in the evenings, either alone or with his wife. After an incident in which Erik felt that his plan of crashing on the sofa was spoiled by the presence of the au pair, Elisabeth talked to the au pair and told her to stay in her own room after 9pm. In the interview, it was clear that Elisabeth had not found it easy to say this to the au pair, as she had been aware that the au pair would feel offended and hurt (which, according to Elisabeth, she did). Moreover, even though Elisabeth admitted feeling uncomfortable about excluding the au pair from this specific setting, she upheld her statements by referring to both Erik's and her own urgent need for private space.

Whereas several interviewees mentioned the lack of privacy as one of the main disadvantages of hosting an au pair, this practice of explicitly excluding the au pair from a family room and hence violating the idea of the au pair as part of the family was more of an exception than a rule in my material. Several interviews included narratives of explicit *inclusion* strategies in which the home played an important role. An example of this is found in the interview with Tone and Tom, who were married parents of three young children. After four years with three au pairs, the couple felt that they had learned some important lessons about au pairing that they wanted to share. Tom stated:

One thing I find very important when it comes to au pairing is making the au pairs feel like a part of the family. On this point, we were successful with the two first au pairs but not the third one. When I say part of the family, I mean a full-fledged family member. One who is allowed to [...] have friends come around without having to ask

us, and who can stay with her friends in the living room even though we are at home.

Because that question I get from time to time: How do you cope with having a stranger in the house? But the point is that she is no stranger. In the mornings, I can walk around the house in my underwear. There is no stranger there anymore.

Here we can note some interesting points in regards to the home and the au pair. On the one hand, by describing his everyday routines in the house, Tom acknowledges both the strong cohesion between home and family and the idea of the home as a space for intimacy and privacy. On the other hand, by claiming that he sees the au pair as part of the family, he challenges the notion of family as including only parents and children, and argues that the house can remain a private space even when domestic labourers are present.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, I have demonstrated some of the complexities involved in the au pair arrangement and the ways in which the Norwegian au pair host parents' perceptions and experiences with this organisation of family life relate to cultural conceptions of the home. By drawing on various research on the home in Western and Norwegian contexts and on paid migrant domestic labour in global and Norwegian contexts, I have identified some Norwegian particularities that – on the one hand – seem to be rather persistent, and – on the other hand – seem to be changing.

An important finding in this regard is the strong emphasis on the ideal home as a physical and social space in which parents and children can congregate in peace and harmony, which has a strong resemblance to the cultural notion of the ideal Norwegian home described by Marianne Gullestad in the 1980s and 1990s (Gullestad [1984] 2001, 1992). This particular perception of the home is clearly communicated in the host parents' reflections on their decision to host an au pair, in which the wish to be relieved of some domestic tasks in order to

spend time with one's spouse and children when not at work is highlighted. In line with this, it is also communicated that the au pair arrangement allows more time for partners and children to spend with each other and, in particular, more time for them to enjoy life as a family instead of becoming worn out with the challenging task of solving the ever persistent time-bind. In other words, a warm, cosy and relaxing atmosphere seems just as important for the ideal Norwegian home today as it used to be in times when more women had the home as their primary workplace.

With respect to the cohesion between home and the family – which, according to Gullestad, is particularly strong in Norway – the au pair arrangement represents an interesting case. On the one hand, the data material shows that the au pair could, in some instances, be included into the entire sphere of the family, both in the sense that she could use the house as a home and in the sense that her presence did not disturb the dwelling's status as a home. This, however, was not true for the majority of the informants. Rather, the general message conveyed by the host parents was that the au pair somehow disturbed this feeling of being 'at home'. Her presence changed the dwelling's status, from being perceived and experienced as a private heaven to a sort of in-between space where one cannot necessarily be alone and let the hair down. When the need for help overruled the irritation of a lack of privacy, this could be ignored; but when the need for help became less strong, most families preferred their home to be a family-only dwelling. However, although the disturbance caused by the au pair could be frustrating, I claim that the presence of the au pair to some extent highlighted, and maybe also strengthened, family ties by making everyone in the family more aware of the difference between insiders and outsiders. A more important aspect in this respect however, was the au pair's facilitation of familial togetherness and harmony, which might be difficult for many Norwegian dual earner or dual career families to achieve – at least when combined with high expectations for childcare and housework.

This means that in a contemporary Norwegian context, the au pair scheme at least partly seems to contribute to the maintenance of strong cohesion between the home and the family. At the same time, the au pairs change the ways in which family members organise everyday life, and hence some of the cultural characteristics of the home. One such change applies to the gendered aspect of the home, as described by among others Christopher Lasch and in regards to the more general Western context (Lasch 1977), and by Jorun Solheim in regards to the Norwegian context (1998, 2007). Whereas the traditional gender division of the home implies that the home serves different functions for women and men – in the sense that men treat it primarily as a place to withdraw and relax and women treat it as a workplace (McDowell 1983; Saunders 2007) – the au pair (or rather the ways in which the au pair takes part in the domestic labour and in some cases even takes on the role of ‘house manager’) makes a substantial difference. In the interview material, both men and women spoke about the importance of being able to relax at home, or – to be more precise – the importance of not having to constantly perform unrewarding and tiresome housework instead of putting one’s feet up and enjoying a glass of wine with one’s partner, or helping children with homework.

This does not, however, mean that the Norwegian home is no longer a gendered territory. Similar to what Groves and Lui (2012) found in their study from Hong Kong, I detected a gendered pattern in the organisation of the au pair arrangement, wherein female hosts tended to be more involved with the au pair on a daily basis. Furthermore, I found that the gendered territory of the home was by no means altered by the au pair’s presence. Quite the contrary, the au pair (who, in my material, was always a woman), seemed to be contributing to a continuation of the traditional gender arrangement of a female homemaker, and hence may be even enact a regression from the political aim and cultural ideal of gender equality, in which equal participation by both genders in paid and care work is essential (Danielsen et al. 2014; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006).

Finally, the analysis indicate that the increasing occurrence of au pairs, who in a Norwegian context represent an important group of migrant domestic labourers, is contributing to a new kind of inequality within the domestic sphere, which is not only grounded on gender, but also on social class and ethnicity/race. Furthermore, whereas the Norwegian women, be that either as housewives or as part of a dual carer/dual earner gender equal couple, could (at least at times) enjoy the pleasures of being the queen of their own castle, this is not necessarily the case for the au pairs. Rather, we have seen that they can be excluded from the most social parts of the home at times of the day when the rest of the family is experiencing togetherness, cosiness, and relaxation. And even when they are not explicitly excluded, the au pairs' role in the home, as seen in the eyes of the host parents, is first and foremost to facilitate a homely atmosphere where this togetherness, cosiness and relaxation can take place in contemporary Norway; namely, a clean and tidy house with happy family members who are not worn out from time-consuming and tiresome housework. In other words, au pairs contribute to the production of the 'castle' in which host parents and their children are really 'at home'.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank the editors and three anonymous reviewers for their insight and also for the constructive care shown in their comments.

### **References**

Aarseth, H. 2011. *Moderne familieliv. Den likestilte familiens motivasjonsformer*. [Modern family life. The gender equal family's forms of motivation]. Oslo: Cappelen Damm.

- Bikova, M. In a Minefield of Transnational Social Relations: Filipino Au Pairs Between Moral Obligations and Personal Ambitions. In *Sisters or Servants? Au Pairs' Lives in Global Context*, edited by R. Cox. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bikova, M. 2010. "The Snake in the Grass of Gender Equality." In *Global Care Work. Gender and Migration in Nordic Societies*, edited by L.W. Isaksen. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Carsten, J. 2004. *After Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: SAGE.
- Cox, R., ed. 2015. *Sisters or Servants? Au Pairs' Lives in Global Context*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cox, R. 2007. "The au pair body: Appearance, sex object, sister or student?" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 14 (3): 281–296. 10.1177/1350506807079015.
- Cox, R. 2006. *The Servant Problem: Domestic Employment in a Global Economy*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Danielsen, H., E. Larsen and I.W. Ovesen 2014. *Norsk likestillingshistorie 1814-2013* [The History of Norway's Gender Equality 1814-2013]. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Davidoff, L. 2003. "Gender and the 'Great Divide': Public and Private in British Gender History." *The Journal of Women's History*, 15(1): 11-26.
- Douglas, M. 1991. "The idea of a home: A kind of space." *Social Research* 58 (1): 287–307.
- Døving, R. 2001. "Vaffelhjertets makt – norske kvinners hushold." [The power of the waffle heart – Norwegian womens' household. ] In *Varene tar makten*, edited by E. D. Holm and S. Meyer, 152–190. Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk.
- Ehrenreich, B. and A.R. Hochschild, eds. 2002. *Global Women: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. London: Granta Books.

- Ellingsæter, A.L. and J. Solheim (2002). *Den usynlige hand?* [The Invisible Hand?] Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.
- Ellingsæter A.L. and A. Leira, eds. 2006. *Politicising Parenthood. Gender relations in welfare states*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Friberg, J. H. and G. Tyldum, eds. 2007. *Polania i Oslo. En studie av arbeids- og levekår blant polakker i hovedstadsområdet*. [Polania in Oslo. An exploration of the working – and living conditions among Polish people in Oslo.] Oslo: Fafo.
- Gregson, N., and M. Lowe, 1994. *Serving the Middle Classes*. London: Routledge.
- Groves, J.M. and L. Lui, 2012. “The ‘Gift’ of Help: Domestic Helpers and the Maintenance of Hieratchy in the Household Division of Labour.” *Sociology* 46(1): 57-73.
- Gullestad, M. 2001 Det norske sett med nye øyne [‘Norwegianness’ perceived with new eyes]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Gullestad, M. (1984) 2001. *Kitchen-Table Society*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Gullestad, M. 1992. *The Art of Social Relations. Essays on Culture, Social Action and Everyday Life in Modern Norway*. Scandinavian University Press.
- Gullikstad, B., G.K. Kristensen and P. Ringrose, eds. 2016. *Paid Migrant Domestic Labour in a Changing Europe. Questions of Gender Equality and Citizenship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Gullikstad, M. and T. Annfelt, 2016. “The Au Pair Scheme as ‘Cultural Exchange’: Effects of Norwegian Au Pair Policy on Gender Equality and Citizenship. In *Paid Migrant Domestic Labour in a Changing Europe. Questions of Gender Equality and Citizenship*, edited by B. Gullikstad, G.K. Kristensen and P. Ringrose. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hochschild, A.R. 2001. “Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value.” In *On the Edge. Living with Capitalism*, edited by W. Hutton and A. Giddens. London: Vintage.

- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. 2001. *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Isaksen, L. W., ed. 2010. *Global Care Work. Gender and Migration in Nordic Societies*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Kitterød, H. R. 2012. "Rengjøringshjelp som avlastning i barnefamilier. Fortsatt få som tar seg råd til vaskehjelp." [Home cleaning as a help to children with young children. Still few who are hiring cleaning staff. ] *Samfunnsspeilet* 26 (4) 1: 64–70.
- Kitterød, H. R. 2005. *Han jobber, hun hobber, de jobber. Arbeidstid blant par av småbarnsforeldre*. [He is working, she is working, they are working. Working hours among parents with young children.] Rapport 2005/10. Oslo: Statistisk sentralbyrå.
- Kristensen, G. K. 2016. Paid Migrant Domestic Labour in Gender-Equal Norway: A Win-Win Arrangement? In *Paid Migrant Domestic Labour in a Changing Europe. Questions of Gender Equality and Citizenship*, edited by B. Gullikstad, G.K. Kristensen and P. Ringrose. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kristensen, G. K., and M. N. Ravn. 2015. "The voices heard and the voices silenced: Recruitment processes in qualitative interview studies." *Qualitative Research* 15 (6): 722–737. doi: 10.1177/1468794114567496.
- Kristensen, G. K. 2015. "A Fair Deal? Paid Domestic Labour in Social Democratic Norway." In *Employers, Agencies and Immigration: Paying for Care*, edited by A. Triandafyllidou and S. Marchetti, 207–227. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lasch, C. 1977. *Haven in a Heartless World. The Family Besieged*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Lutz, H. 2011. *The New Maids. Transnational Women and the Care Economy*. London and New York: Zed Books.

- Lutz, H. 2008. *Migration and Domestic Work: A European Perspective on a Global Theme*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- McDowell, L. 1983. "Towards an understanding of the gender division of urban space." *Society and Space* 1: 59–72.
- Øien, C. 2009. *On Equal Terms? An Evaluation of the Norwegian Au Pair Scheme*. Oslo: Fafo. <http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/20119/index.html>.
- Parreñas, R.S., 2008. *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization*. New York. NYU Press.
- Saunders, P. 2007. "The meaning of 'home' in contemporary English culture." *Housing Studies* 4 (3): 177–192.
- Sogner, S. 2004. "The Legal Status of Servants in Norway from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century." In *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity. Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, edited by A. Fauve-Chamoux, 175–188. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Solheim, J. 2007. *Kjønn og modernitet*. [Gender and Modernity]. Oslo: Pax Forlag A/S
- Solheim, J. 1998. *Den åpne kroppen. Om kjønnsymbolikk i moderne kultur*. [The open body. About gendered symbols in modern culture.] Pax Forlag A/S.
- Sollund, R. 2010. "Regarding au pairs in the Norwegian welfare state." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 143 (17): 143–160.
- Stubberud, E. 2016. "To Intimate Relations to Citizenship? Au Pairing and the Potential for Citizenship in Norway." In *Paid Migrant Domestic Labour in a Changing Europe. Questions of Gender Equality and Citizenship*, edited by B. Gullikstad, G.K. Kristensen and P. Ringrose. London: Palgrave Macmillan

- Stubberud, E. 2015. “‘It’s Not Much’: Affective (Boundary) Work in the Au Pair Scheme.” In *Sisters or Servants? Au Pairs’ Lives in Global Context*, edited by R. Cox, 121–136. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: SAGE.
- Sørhaug, T. 1996. *Fornuftens fantasier: antropologiske essays om moderne livsformer*. [The fantasies of the reason. Anthropological essays about modern lives.] Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Triandafyllidou, A., and S. Marchetti, eds. 2015. *Employers, Agencies and Immigration: Paying for Care*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Tronto, J. “The ‘Nanny’ Question in Feminism.” *Hypatia* 17 (2), 34-49.
- Watts, J. 2007. “‘Allowed into a Man’s World’. Meanings of Work-Life Balance: Perspectives of Women Civil Engineers as ‘Minority’ Workers in Construction” *Gender, Work and Organization* 16(1): 37-57.
- Wilson, A. 2003/2004. “Home: Being for a time.” *BC Studies* 140: 125–143.
- Yeoh, B. and S. Huang, 1999. “Singapore Women and Foreign Domestic Workers. Negotiating Domestic Work and Motherhood.” In *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*, edited by J. Momsen. London/New York: Routledge.

---

<sup>i</sup> This expression is found in Gullestad’s book, *Kitchen-table Society* ([1984] 2001).

<sup>ii</sup> Since Norway ratified the agreement on Au Pair Placement in 1991, there have been only minor changes in the legislation regulating the au pair placement. For example, specifications of the rules and obligations have aimed at underlining the function of the au pair scheme as cultural exchange and weakening the connotations of work (Gullikstad and Annfelt 2016).

---

<sup>iii</sup> Of these, 86 per cent were granted to women from the Philippines (Utlendingsdirektoratet 2013).

<sup>iv</sup> As of 2017, the minimum amount of pocket money given to au pairs in Norway is approximately 600 euros.

<sup>v</sup> As Norway has no aristocratic history, and as social democratic ideologies have produced a cultural ideal of sameness and equality, there is no tradition of talking about social class or classifying people into social classes in Norway.