### Article title: Framing the au pair. Problems of sex, work and motherhood in Norwegian au pair documentaries

### Journal title: NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research

### To cite the article: Elisabeth Stubberud (2015) Framing the Au Pair: Problems of Sex, Work and Motherhood in Norwegian Au Pair Documentaries, *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 23:2, 125-139, DOI: 10.1080/08038740.2015.1023072

### Author: Elisabeth Stubberud

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway

E-mail: elisabeth.stubberud@kun.no / elisabeth.stubberud@ntnu.no

Phone: +47 97 16 72 76

**Author biography:** Elisabeth Stubberud is a PhD candidate at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Her PhD project focuses on the cultural construction of au pairs in the public sphere, affective and emotional labour in the private home and possibilities of intimate citizenship through au pairing.

**Abstract**:

The Norwegian au pair documentaries Mammaranet (“The Mummy Robbery”) (2006) and Herskap og tenarar (“Masters and Servants”) (2013) tell the stories of two Filipina women who have left behind their children to become au pairs in Norway. The films portray the hardship of au pairing and focus on trafficking and labour and sexual abuse. Both films are problem-orientated, and I explore the way in which they construct the figure of the au pair. I argue that the films draw on a global care chain framework to construct au pairs as mothers who are primarily financially motivated, while their children in the home country are cast as self-evidently suffering. Furthermore, the films cross-cut between stories of sexual abuse and scenes of the au pairs’ highly feminized self-presentation. This cross-cutting contributes to a construction of the au pairs as vulnerable “girls”, but also as sexually available women. Using Bhattacharyya’s concept of “the exotic”, I argue that this particular construction draws on a colonial discourse that makes unequal racialized power relations appear more attractive to the privileged. In conclusion, I discuss the implicit solutions to the problems presented in the films, and argue that their constructions of au pairs contribute to a certain cultural circulation of “truths” that allows for discourses favouring certain policies—namely closing the scheme to mothers and, eventually, to all au pairs from outside the EU/Schengen Area.

Framing the au pair

Problems of sex, work and motherhood in Norwegian au pair documentaries

Elisabeth Stubberud

This article examines two documentaries on au pairing in Norway. *Mammaranet* (“The Mummy Robbery”)(Rommetveit, 2006)and *Herskap og tenarar* (“Masters and Servants”)(Sunde & Isungset, 2013) depict au pairs as Filipina women who have left their children behind in order to earn money through au pairing in Norway, yet put themselves in situations in which they risk both labour abuse and sexual abuse from their host families. In this article, I examine these portrayals of the au pair scheme and au pairs in Norway, and ask: How do the documentaries represent au pairing? What do the problems connected to au pairing appear to be? How does the au pair feature in these representations? And what solutions to the “problems” of au pairing are implicitly suggested?

The image of au pairing that is circulated in the Norwegian public sphere is ambiguous. While it is stated on the political and administrative level that the intention of au pairing is cultural exchange, this element seems largely insignificant to the practice of au pairing in Norway (Bikova, 2010; Sollund, 2010, 2012a; Tkach, 2014; Øien, 2009). Employment of au pairs is pitched in the media as a private solution for busy, career-orientated parents (see for example Borchgrevink, 2013; EnergyAuPair, 2014); yet, according to legislation, au pairs are in Norway on “cultural exchange” and should only engage in “light housework” and childcare for a maximum of 30 hours a week, in return for “pocket money” of 5,400 NOK per month (UDI, 2014). In 2013, Norway issued 1,476 au pair visas, of which 86 per cent were issued to women from the Philippines.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, these numbers do not incorporate au pairs from the EU/Schengen Area, who are not formally registered as au pairs. Thus, although the majority of au pairs in Norway seem to come from the Philippines, the relative number of Filipina au pairs might be much lower.[[2]](#endnote-2)

While au pairs come to Norway from various places, including Europe, media representations tend to focus on Filipina au pairs. This is also the case in both *Mammaranet* and *Herskap og tenarar,* which I analyse here. The media generally depict Filipina au pairs as migrant workers, often with dependent children who were left behind at home, and with little or no interest in cultural exchange. More often than not, the media spin au pair stories negatively.[[3]](#endnote-3) The two documentaries I analyse here thus seem representative of the way in which au pairs are imagined in Norway. This image of au pairs, however, may be both overly negative and reproductive of a particular stereotype.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The aim of this article is to closely analyse the two documentaries with attention to form and content, and to shed light on the politics of representation they exemplify. In the following, I present the films along with the methodological tool of “framing”. The films naturalise au pairs as Filipinas and focus on the themes of labour exploitation, motherhood and sexual abuse. I argue that the films use “global care chains” to frame au pairs as self-sacrificing poor mothers on the one hand, and, on the other hand, both vulnerable and sexually available girls. I theorise this construction by drawing on the notion of “the exotic” Oriental woman and colonial power hierarchies. In conclusion, I discuss these representations of au pairing and the figure of the au pair in relation to recent changes in au pair legislation, and argue that the films’ representations of problems and constructions of au pairs contribute to a certain cultural circulation of “truths” that allow for discourses that favour closing the scheme to mothers and, eventually, to all au pairs from outside the EU/Schengen Area.

# Material and methods

The documentaries *Mammaranet* and *Herskap og tenarar* represent important stories of the au pair scheme and au pairs in Norwegian society, and draw on and produce meaning in relation to the issue of au pairing. What follows is a brief outline of each film, and an analysis of the films through the analytical lens of framing.

*Mammaranet* (“The Mummy Robbery”) is a 22-minute long documentary that was originally shown on Norwegian television (TV2) in 2006, about the former au pair Emmalyn. The company that produced the documentary is connected to the University of Bergen, and makes research-based documentaries. It draws on the work of Lise Widding Isaksen (Isaksen, 2001) and Marianne Hovdan (2005). The film follows Emmalyn, a Filipina woman in her mid- to late 20s, who left her 4-year-old daughter Hannah in the Philippines in order to become an au pair in Norway. The overall theme of the film, as suggested by the title, is criticism of Norwegian authorities’ and host families’ willingness to “rob” children in the Philippines of their mothers through the au pair scheme. Hannah lives with her grandmother and extended family, and Emmalyn’s au pair work earns the family enough money to build a new house, put food on the table every day and provide for Hannah’s future. Au pairing, however, is hard, as Emmalyn’s host family makes her work longer hours than her contract allows and assigns tasks that stretch well beyond “light housework”. Despite these difficulties, Emmalyn remains in Norway and marries a Norwegian man. The film follows the couple as they travel to the Philippines, where Emmalyn sees Hannah for the first time in almost three years; this is depicted in an emotional scene in which a sobbing Emmalyn embraces a sceptical looking Hannah. The film ends with Emmalyn leaving again, but hoping to eventually take Hannah to Norway through family reunification. The film relies heavily on voiceover to tell the story.

The NRK documentary *Herskap og tenarar* (“Masters and Servants”) is part of the documentary series *Brennpunkt* (“Focal Point”), televised by the national broadcasting corporation NRK. The series focuses on social critique and investigative journalism, and the hour-long programme on au pairs was originally shown in 2013. The film, guided by voiceover, follows Christy, a Filipina au pair in her mid- to late 20s who left behind her daughter Precious and fiancé Melvin in order to work as an au pair in Norway. She was allegedly taken to Norway against her will by her former host family, and, with the help of a lawyer, was pursuing a trafficking case against them. Meanwhile, Melvin and Precious’ lives go on in the Philippines. Melvin talks about his sadness over Christy’s absence and tearfully tells the local congregation about her struggles in Norway. Nevertheless, he and the extended family take good care of Precious. Various representatives who facilitated the au pair placement also feature in the film, including an au pair agency in Oslo and the Norwegian Embassy in Manila, and the documentary also includes scenes from a preparatory course for au pairs that was organised by Filipino authorities.[[5]](#endnote-5) The Filipino community in Oslo plays a big part in the film, featuring in scenes of a Christmas party at which a group of female au pairs performs a dance, and the Miss Au Pair beauty pageant in the Catholic Church. The film cross-cuts between these events, Christy’s story and interviews with anonymous au pairs[[6]](#endnote-6) who talk about labour exploitation and severe cases of sexual abuse in their host families. The title of the programme, “Masters and Servants”, indicates that the explicit goal was to address unequal power relations in Norwegian society.

Here, I am interested in the way in which the films frame au pairs and the au pair scheme. The analysis is based on a close and critical reading with attention to both form and content, wherein the films’ themes structure the analysis. I generally chose sections that appeared to be important in the films by nature of their repetition; these include scenes from *Herskap og tenarar* that feature Melvin and Precious, and scenes in which the anonymous au pairs talk about abuse. I also analysed sections with characters and stories that play key parts in building the main narratives of the films; for example, scenes in which Emmalyn tells her story in *Mammaranet*.

Visual representations “both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions” (Rose, 2012, p. 17), and documentaries utilise specific ways of “framing” reality. According to Mieke Bal, framing can involve numerous ways of presenting, shaping and making sense of an object, in practical and symbolic terms (Bal, 2002). Framing, and being framed, is politically saturated and might also refer to the power of some to represent others and their deeds, where “some way of organizing and presenting a deed leads to an interpretive conclusion about the deed itself” (Butler, 2009, p. 8). I use the concept of framing when I discuss the films’ particular constructions of the object: “au pairs and au pairing in Norway”.

To portray au pairs and the au pair scheme, the two documentaries draw on established metaphors, stereotypes and conceptual frameworks that would be instantly recognisable to the imagined audience (here, the “Norwegian public”), in order to make a “credible, convincing and compelling” argument (Nichols, 2010, p. 109). In other words, what is analysed here are not people and practices, but the films’ representations of au pairs and the au pair scheme.

The main subjects of both films are au pairs, the au pair scheme and the largely negative outcomes of au pairing. In the analysis, I investigate the apparent problems of au pairing, as depicted in the films, as well as the way in which the au pair features in the representations to make the documentaries’ framing seem plausible. These questions open the analysis not only to the events in the films and the representations of the different actors, but also to what appear to be important issues in the au pair scheme, what the underlying premises of certain problems might be and what the consequences of the representations and implicit solutions to the problems might be(come). Before moving on to the film analysis, I will flesh out some themes that are particularly important to the films’ framing of the au pair scheme.

# Theoretical perspectives

Both *Mammaranet* and *Herskap og tenarar* rely implicitly on the concept of global care chains in their framing of the au pair scheme; this suggests that critique of this concept is relevant to the analysis. The films also partly reproduce a sexualised image of au pairs. In this section, I theorise the connection between the domestic sphere, domestic work, sex and “the exotic” in order to flesh out the films’ peculiar constructions of au pairs as not only mothers, but also sexually available, exploitable girls.

### Global care chains

The concept of global care chains (GCC), as coined by Arlie Hochschild (2000), refers to “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring” (Hochschild, 2000, p. 131). Hochschild draws on the work of Rhacel Parreñas, who analyses international divisions of reproductive labour, wherein:

class-privileged women [in Rome and Los Angeles] purchase the low-wage services of migrant Filipina domestic workers, [while] migrant Filipina domestic workers simultaneously purchase the even lower wage services of poorer women left behind in the Philippines. (Parreñas, 2001, p. 62)

Hochschild builds on Parreñas work and assesses the impact of globalisation on care, arguing that globalisation has further contributed to lowering the value of carework (2000, pp. 143-144).

The GCC concept has been critiqued in different ways (see for example Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Lewis, 2006; Manalansan, 2006; Yeates, 2005, 2012). Yeates notes that GCC, despite its gender-neutral language, tends to be used in discussions of female migrants and traditional women’s work, such as childcare and housework, which “reinforces dominant sociocultural construction of care work as women’s work” (2012, p. 145). She argues for a broadening of the concept to include a wider range of care services, because well-skilled workers who are not parents may still have other care obligations in their home country (Yeates, 2005, p. 10). More generally, this could be understood as a criticism of the very narrow understanding of motherhood that the GCC framework relies on.

Martin Manalansan (2006) offers a similar critique, arguing that studies like that of Parreñas (2001) too often privilege stories of migrant mothers over those of queer, single or male informants.[[7]](#endnote-7) The implication of this, Manalansan claims, is that “the work of the home, including caring for children, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores, is rendered in heteronormative terms”, and that the GCC framework privileges the experiences of migrant women with children (2006, pp. 238-239). He furthermore argues that, within this frame of interpretation, Filipino men (and other third-world males) are “pathologically prevented by cultural ‘tradition’ from participating in domestic affairs” (ibid., p. 240). In the film analysis that follows, I draw on these critiques, as they are relevant to the films’ construction of the problems of au pairing.

### The exotic in the domestic

Au pairs feature in the documentaries as mothers, women who marry Norwegian men, or young exploitable girls. To make them “fit” these categories, the films rely implicitly on gendered, classed and racial or ethnic social structures. In order to explore the meanings of au pairing in the films, it is necessary to understand that the au pair scheme is located as part of a historical colonial discourse in which domesticity denotes both a space and a “social relation to power” (McClintock, 1995, loc. 773). Thus, the au pair scheme is located in a broader history of servitude, colonialism and slavery. Furthermore, sexualised stereotypes of au pairs circulate culturally (Cox, 2007), and, due to the unequal relationship between au pairs and host families, au pairs’ control over their own bodies may, in practice, be limited (Anderson, 2000, p. 138; Sollund, 2012a).

Gargi Bhattacharyya (2002) notes that, while the construction of the domestic and the exotic went hand in hand in the colonial era, it remains relevant today, through “the exotic” as the continued sexualisation of the abuse of power. She states that:

the titillated gaze is enabled by material power and privilege, and the vulnerability to becoming the object of that titillating gaze comes from a lack of material power and privilege. However, it also assumes that the exercise of that exoticising gaze fulfils some need for the powerful [namely that] sex, or imagined sex, stands in here as an opportunity to make the exercise of power more acceptable and appealing. (Bhattacharyya, 2002, pp. 105-106)

Bhattacharyya here argues that the process of exoticising has a therapeutic function for the holder of the gaze, in that it makes the abuse of power not only bearable, but also desirable. She furthermore argues that “the desired object is your slave, your enemy, your absolute other” (ibid., p. 107), who is both a “scheming temptress and hapless victim” (ibid., p. 113). She notes that trafficked women are constructed in these seemingly contradictory terms, arguing that concerns about trafficking are part of “a larger narrative that fears all population movements” (ibid., p. 114). Bhattacharyya and McClintock provide a theoretical framework to discuss the meanings of trafficking and sexual/labour abuse as ways of framing the au pair scheme; I will now turn to the films to scrutinise their particular constructions of problems and implicated characters.

# Framing problems: Displacement of care, trafficking and sexual abuse

*Mammaranet* and *Herskap og tenarar* are both problem-orientated documentaries that aim to educate viewers about a topic of current interest in Norway. Although they were produced seven years apart, the films present the practice of au pairing similarly. The documentaries rely on “all knowing”, unseen voiceovers that speak directly to the viewer, providing additional information (Nichols, 2010, pp. 114-115). By enhancing the overall argument, the voiceovers encourage audiences to read the films in certain ways; in a subtle but authoritarian way, the voiceovers suggest how scenes and characters should be interpreted. In this section, I ask how the problem of au pairing is represented in the films, often *through* the voiceovers, and focus on the displacement of care and the seeming exploitability of au pairs, as these are key themes in both films. I analyse the way in which stories are told to construct au pairs and the au pair scheme as problematic, and map out what the particular focus on the displacement of care and exploitability might mean.

## Displacement of care

Both *Mammaranet* and *Herskap og tenarar* follow Filipina au pairs who have migrated to Norway. Emmalyn and Christy’s motherhood plays a key part in the films, and their absence from their own children is portrayed as problematic. Through this particular construction of problems, the au pairs in question are primarily portrayed as mothers, and their migration, joys and sorrows are interpreted within this frame. In the following, I argue that when the films use the frame of GCCs, a highly complex issue is reduced to specific ideas of what constitutes “good mothering”.

In the introductory scenes of *Mammaranet,* Emmalyn proudly holds up her mobile phone with a picture of her daughter Hannah on it, stating that she migrated in order to provide for her, financially. The voiceover informs viewers that Emmalyn’s family is dependent on remittances to buy food, and the camera cuts to Hannah, who lies on the floor sulking while her grandmother tries to feed her. The voiceover states that “no one knows the price Hannah pays growing up without her mum”[[8]](#endnote-8), and continues by saying that one in every ten Filipino children grows up with absent migrant parents. It is not mentioned who cares for these children in their parents’ absence. The next clip shows an interview with Emmalyn, who argues that Hannah is not like herself – always smiling and happy – but rather has a sad face. The film cuts to Hannah’s unhappy face as she is being washed by her grandmother, to confirm this unhappiness.

In *Herskap og tenarar*, Christy buys Precious a doll for Christmas. The invisible reporter asks her if she finds it hard to look after other people’s children when she could be looking after her own. Christy starts to sob, talking about her desire to secure Precious’s future. Christy also cries when she is reminded of the triplets in the abusive host family, whose picture she still carries in her wallet. The voiceover states that Christy “feels like she let them down, too”.

The scenes described above show that, as migrants, Emmalyn and Christy are primarily constructed as mothers who left the responsibility for caring for their own children behind in order to care for wealthier children in Norway. The voiceovers underline this displacement of care, pointing to the women’s absence and the misery that follows this decision. The narratives are constructed around sympathy for the children who are left behind, and partly for the sobbing, self-sacrificing mothers who miss them. This narrative implies that the only acceptable arrangement of care is for a mother to physically care for her biological children. Regarding care, the films represent two interlinked problems: the displacement of care from the mother to supposedly less competent carers, and the corresponding “bad care” exercised by the mother.

The first problem of “less competent carers” is portrayed through the representation of Emmalyn and Christy’s absence as problematic. Here, the childcare practiced by the grandmother and Melvin is implicitly constructed as inadequate. Nevertheless, these carers are shown feeding, bathing, brushing the teeth of and generally interacting with the children. In addition, Melvin is portrayed as a sensitive man who sings love songs to Christy and openly discusses the family’s struggles. Yet Melvin, the grandmother and other carers’ efforts are never acknowledged by either of the films’ voiceovers, and the interpretation of these individuals as competent carers is subsequently discouraged. This could mean that care is perceived as *belonging* to the figure of the mother, rather than something that can be *performed* by anyone. Thus, the care shown by fathers, grandmothers and other family members is implicitly devaluated. Manalansan notes, in relation to so-called third-world fathers, that:

[it] is not only ethnographically erroneous, it belies a particular kind of knowledge ‘imperialism’ [that] portrays third-world men as lacking the cultural knowledge to be authentic modern fathers. (Manalansan, 2006, p. 240)

The problem-orientated framing of absent mothers as part of a global care network prevents the explicit framing of Melvin in *Herskap og tenarar* as a modern “new dad” or even a “superdad”, who is not only present in childrearing, but also unafraid to show emotion (Kaufman, 2013).

The second problem concerns “bad motherhood”, combined with a prescriptive notion of what constitutes “good motherhood”. Emmalyn and Christy exercise many types of care for their families in the Philippines; they budget and send remittances, speak on the phone and online, and buy presents. Nonetheless, the voiceovers emphasise the children’s suffering over the family’s increased financial security. If care “travels” with women, the long-distance care exercised by Emmalyn and Christy – such as mobile phone parenting and the sending of remittances – is not acknowledged as proper motherly care because it is not present and direct. Through the circulation of these ideas, the films place migrant mothers in a “no-win” situation in relation to their children (Parreñas, 2005b). The films seem to advocate a normative and prescriptive version of motherhood, wherein housework and childcare are naturalised as women’s work. At the same time, the films could easily have framed migration as a potentially positive re-arrangement of the families, and long-distance care as an alternative form of mothering (ibid., p. 325).

The choice to portray Hannah as a suffering child with an absent mother suggests a politics of representation that aims at raising Norwegian authorities’ and host families’ bad feelings about “robbing mothers” from children. A more nuanced picture of “abandoned” children could have been shown – one in which it would be clear that Filipino children with migrant mothers *or* fathers are slightly more likely to report being less happy, but that other factors, such as caregivers’ mental health and family functioning, are much more important for children’s well-being (Jordan & Graham, 2012). Furthermore, the vilification of migrant mothers by authorities and the media is likely to produce more suffering for the children than is the absence of one or both parents (Parreñas, 2002, p. 53). In other words, the films’ narratives rely on a system of values in which present care for children is celebrated; this system of values seems to have limited room for interpreting au pairs as good (enough) mothers, due to their absence.

## Sex(ualisation) in the au pair scheme

Stories of abuse play an important part in both *Mammaranet* and *Herskap og tenarar*, and in the latter film these stories lend legitimacy to the documentary’s educational and current affairs genre by adding a sense of urgency: au pairing is portrayed as a form of domestic service with the risk of sexual abuse and trafficking. In the following, I look at how *Herskap og tenarar* constructs trafficking and sexual abuse as problems in the au pair scheme, and examine how this particular framing of feminine vulnerability impacts the conceptualisation of au pairs.

Human trafficking is a key theme in *Herskap og tenarar*,and is largely told through Christy’s story*.* Accompanied by gentle piano music, she talks sobbingly about never having had time off, her own room or a cell phone, and not having been allowed to eat with the family or to leave the house. The voiceover states that Christy had worked for the host family when they lived abroad, and she had felt pressured to go with them to Norway because she owed them money. Eventually, she managed to flee with the help of a neighbouring au pair, and, through the film, we follow Christy and her lawyer as they work to put forward Christy’s case as trafficking. Trafficking also comes up in a sequence in which the camera follows au pairs-to-be who attend a one-day preparation course in the Philippines. At the course, there are signs from organisations working against human trafficking, and the voiceover points out that “Filipino authorities want to protect their girls”.

The next sequence shows the anonymous au pairs, who talk about unpaid overtime and elaborate task lists before gradually speaking out about sexual abuse from the host fathers. Their stories are cross-cut with scenes from a beauty pageant and a Christmas party: Christy and the anonymous au pairs talk about the abuse of labour rights, and one au pair states that her host dad was “not looking for an au pair, but looking for a sex slave”. The next cut shows au pairs getting ready for the Miss Au Pair beauty pageant, putting on heavy evening make-up before joining in a shared prayer. The voiceover states, “tonight, they are all princesses”. The women are shown dancing on stage, followed by posing in spectacular evening dresses. There is also another instance of similar combination of scenes. One of the anonymous au pairs twists uncomfortably in her seat before beginning to cry, talking about the host dad’s sexual abuse. This is followed by several other stories of au pairs being sexually abused by host dads. The next cut shows a group of giggling, young au pairs in matching clothes performing choreography to a popular Christmas pop song at a party at the Filipino Association.

The potential for trafficking, labour exploitation and sexual abuse in the au pair scheme is highlighted throughout the film, which depicts au pairs as vulnerable. Yet, despite the recurring theme of labour exploitation in both films, trafficking and sexual exploitation take over towards the end of *Herskap og tenarar*, detracting attention from basic labour regulations and controls that could have been implemented had the private home been understood as a workplace, and traditional women’s work been understood as labour (Cox, 2012; Koren, 2012). Laura Augustín (2003) argues that Western governments’ inability to apply normal labour rights – proper pay, regulated working hours and sanctions against employers who break rules, to mention a few – to traditional women’s work devalues this work. She states that, “[t]he moral panic on ‘trafficking’ … [keeps] the social gaze fixed on extreme cases while neglecting the more prosaic needs of the majority of migrant women” (Augustín, 2003, p. 392). In this sense, focusing on au pairs’ labour rights by drawing attention to, for example, the lack of pay and the excessive working hours (when the goal is ostensibly cultural exchange), could both hit on a much broader argument about the status of traditional women’s work in Norway and deal with the myth of au pairing as cultural exchange.

The cross-cutting between the beauty pageant and testimonies of sexual abuse is an important framing tool used in *Herskap og tenarar.* In Norway, beauty pageants generally receive little media attention, and young women’s concern with traditionally feminine expressions of beauty is perhaps most widely associated with the so-called “pink bloggers”: girls and young women who write online blogs about beauty, fashion and aspects of their day-to-day lives – generally perceived in the public sphere as immature, insignificant, naïve, uncritical and exploitable (Dmitrow-Devold, 2013). Despite a lack of research on this question in Norway, beauty pageants are likely to be viewed with suspicion and linked to the devaluation of women (Bloul, 2012). Thus, when the Miss Au Pair pageant features as part of the representation of Filipina au pairs in Norway, the au pairs are relegated to a largely frowned-upon version of traditional femininity.

If it were not for this cross-cutting, the beauty pageant could have figured as a form of socialisation or network building and underlined cultural specificity that is not uncommon in diaspora communities. The Filipinas in *Herskap og tenarar* have a strong homosocial community in Oslo, judging from various scenes of socialisation. This could mean that women in abusive host families have networks to draw on that enable them to leave at short notice.[[9]](#endnote-9) Despite the stigma connected to beauty pageants, these can function as “re-integrative rituals for stigmatized identities” (Bloul, 2012, p. 4). Filipinas, along with other au pairs with racially marked bodies, are highly visible as low-status domestic workers in the rich white neighbourhoods in which many of them live. Bloul claims that: “In diasporic communities around the world, beauty pageants become a means of re-affirming cultural uniqueness … and cultural loyalty to the country of origin” (ibid., p. 7). The beauty pageant may have a different meaning to au pairs than to ethnic Norwegian viewers; for the participants and the Filipina audiences, they offer a chance to meet others, have fun, strengthen their community and mark themselves as different from a Norwegian society that essentially devalues their work.

While it seems likely that the intention behind the cross-cutting was to highlight the stark contrast between different au pair experiences, the effect is nevertheless that the beauty pageant and stories of sexual abuse appear connected. Given the likely Norwegian interpretation of beauty pageants, as indicated above, the cross-cutting depicts au pairs as constructing themselves as sex objects by drawing on Orientalist stereotypes. This provides an implicit explanation for their sexual abuse, drawing on culturally circulated stereotypes that suggest that Asian women are either hypersexual, innocent and titillating, or submissive and attuned to traditional gender roles and servitude (Petersen, 2009). The au pairs appear to invest themselves in a version of traditional, seductive femininity, while their racial markings place them in an imperialist male fantasy of the self-sacrificing “Oriental woman” (Chow, 2002; Pratt, 2004, p. 153). At the same time, the participants in the beauty pageant perhaps overstep the boundaries of au pairing by expressing too much femininity (Cox, 2007). In this light, the cross-cutting appears as a form of punishment, constructing the participants as highly feminised and “ripe for exploitation” (Pratt, 2004, p. 55), while the culprits remain invisible.

Bhattacharyya points to how “foreignness” has been eroticised and made into “the exotic” through Europe’s colonial history (2002, p. 104). Exoticism, or the eroticisation of a racialised “other”, both assumes power in the first place and serves a therapeutic function for the person in power, as it “reworks cruelty and unfounded privilege as the more ambivalent position of desire, as if all this conflicted emotion was a product of psychic contradictions as opposed to class contradictions” (ibid., p. 106). These insights shed light on the structures of feelings that might make the particular cross-cutting and combination of scenes and themes in *Herskap og tenarar* appealing to a Norwegian audience. The effect of the cross-cutting – while likely unintentional – is a subtle play on desire by pointing towards sex(ualisation) as much as sexual assault. Considering the Orientalist and colonial legacy of the topic at hand, the mixing of the erotic through portrayals of traditional femininity with sexual abuse continues to eroticise unequal power relations by evoking the colonial masculine gaze.

The power relations that produce the “exotic” au pair as an object of desire, as well as a subject to abuse, are reconfirmed through the cross-cutting. By focusing on the au pairs, rather than the abusive host families, the film directs audiences’ questions and concerns about how these situations occur towards the au pairs (who are shown onscreen), rather than the abusive host families (who are not shown). Given that the film constructs the au pair scheme as problematic, the specific problem appears to be au pairs’ availability and vulnerability, rather than the host family’s exploitation. What might the solution be?

# Representing problems and problematic representations

Above, I have analysed the ways in which the films frame au pairs and the au pair scheme. Both films present a largely negative image of au pairing in Norway, and while both begin by focusing on labour abuse, this focus is gradually replaced – even though labour abuse is the problem that au pairs are most likely to experience in their day-to-day lives. In *Mammaranet*, the focus shifts to the joyous but temporary reunion between mother and daughter as the final answer to the problem of GCCs. In *Herskap og tenarar*,stories of trafficking and sexual abuse, cross-cut with scenes from a beauty pageant, take over the focus and portray au pairs as young, vulnerable and sexually available. While the filmmakers presumably intended to draw attention to some of the most problematic aspects of au pairing, their particular framing of problems is, in itself, problematic.

In “explaining” the way in which labour (and also sexual abuse) can occur, the films construct au pairs as poor mothers, always from the Philippines, who are desperate enough to put up with the conditions of au pairing. Filipina women thus become highly visible, ethnically marked stand-ins for poor women of the global south. Drawing on a GCC framework, the films favour stories of migrant mothers over other kinds of au pairs, and images of left-behind children and failing, yet self-sacrificing, mothers are combined with arguments that the au pair scheme does not function as cultural exchange, because this could not possibly motivate mothers. Thus, the problem appears to be that the “wrong” kinds of women become au pairs, and not that migration policy or au pair legislation is failing. Given that the films frame au pairs exclusively as Filipinas, it would be very easy from a legislative point of view to exclude Filipinas from the au pair scheme. Yet, as I pointed out in the introduction, far from all au pairs are Filipina, and au pairing, despite its obvious problem of ambiguous legislation, may also work well for host families and au pairs, alike.

The films’ framing of au pairs also highlights that gender equality is not a viable frame of interpretation in relation to the global working class. It seems somewhat ironic that documentaries produced for a Norwegian audience should portray female breadwinners as insufficient mothers. If gender equality means women’s increased participation in paid labour and men’s increased participation in childcare, then the films’ message seems to be that gender equality only concerns ethnic Norwegians, and that when poorer, darker women provide financial care while their male partners provide childcare, children are not properly cared for (Cox, 2011, p. 5; Manalansan, 2006).

The films depict the supposed poverty that lead Filipinas to migrate to Norway as au pairs as leading to labour exploitation, trafficking and sexual abuse. The main focus is on the vulnerability of au pairs to exploitation, while the host families stay invisible. I have argued that the technique of cross-cutting connects the beauty pageant and Christmas party to stories of sexual abuse, and implies that the au pairs, portrayed as both victims and highly feminised young, vain and sexually available girls, are partly responsible for their abuse. Using Bhattacharyya’s concept of “the exotic”, I have showed how this particular construction draws on a colonial discourse of the “Oriental woman”, making unequal racialised power relations appear more attractive to the privileged – here the host families.

Although au pair legislation has not been my focus, I do find it worthwhile to point to a few changes that could be “explained” through the films’ representations of problems. In 2012, Norway followed Denmark and closed the au pair scheme to parents, which means that some au pairs now lie about having children and risk having their visa retracted if they are discovered to be mothers.[[10]](#endnote-10) Thus, the “problem” of GCCs and the associated discomfort on behalf of Norwegian host families and authorities for “stealing mothers” was “solved” by closing the scheme to those who generated the most discomfort, but for whom the migration route may have been most needed. Furthermore, in June 2013, two months after *Herskap og tenarar* was televised, a quarantine was introduced for host families violating the scheme. Denmark has had a similar legislation in place since 2007, but, until 2011, only three families had been blacklisted, suggesting that the risk of deportation faced by au pairs who report their host families is too great (Stenum, 2011, p. 46).

Given that the quarantine does not seem to work, is another possible solution simply to outlaw au pairing, as proposed by the Ministry of Justice in May 2013 (NTB, 2013)? Scholars working in the field generally suggest that au pairing should be acknowledged as work (see for example Cox, 2015; Sollund, 2010; Øien, 2009) and a separate cultural exchange programme should be considered (Stenum, 2011). Yet arguments for unskilled labour migration are often met with claims that this would lead to social dumping and an ethnically based “underclass” (NOU, 2008). The films, which naturalise au pairs as poor Filipina women and fail to point out that they depict only a small part of the big picture, fuel these fears.

The films frame au pairing in seemingly fixed unequal power structures along the axes of gender, ethnicity and class. They thus carve out a space to argue that au pairs are vulnerable labourers who are (naturally) exploited. As the films do not suggest that the global economic inequalities that produce this situation should be dealt with, the framing of the problem also “frames” a specific subject – the Filipina au pair – as the culprit by association. The portrayal of all au pairs as Filipina ethnicises au pairing and live-in domestic work. Through their visible presence in the films, Filipinas/au pairs are used as reminders of difference, global inequality and exploitation. The au pair is made the embodiment of “multicultural intimacy”, defined by Anne-Marie Fortier as “the blurring of boundaries … between Self and the Other that interrupts nation/al certainty” (2008, p. 12). What solution could be better than simply abandoning the au pair scheme and stopping the exploitation of poor women from the global south? The UK arrived at this conclusion in 2008, yet young women and men from EU countries continue to work there as au pairs under completely deregulated conditions (Busch, 2015). There is reason to think that this might also be the outcome in Norway, as long as some Europeans are economically deprived enough to work for “pocket money”, as the increasing number of au pairs from Spain suggests.[[11]](#endnote-11) Yet, these workers would be less visible than Filipina mothers, and, in equality-orientated Norway, this would perhaps provide a new way of making existing unequal power hierarchies bearable.

1. Personal communication with Minja Tea Dzamarija at Statistics Norway, 15.12.2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. From January to May 2014, the Au Pair Centre in Oslo was approached 158 times; only 55 per cent of these approaches were from, or concerned with, Filipina au pairs (Au Pair Center, 2014, p. 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A newspaper search on “au pair” at Retriever.no within the publication dates of 01.01.2014 to 21.08.2014, revealed news stories on labour and sexual abuse, including reports from trials of host families (45), stories of successful Norwegian women who were previously au pairs (45), stories of successful Norwegian women who could “have it all” with the help of au pairs (26), stories of happy/well-adjusted au pairs or au pairs who had found new work or had become married in Norway (15) and stories depicting au pairs as a childcare solution for busy families (5). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The focus in this article is the documentaries’ framing of au pairing, and not the practice of the au pair scheme or who and what au pairs really are. For excellent discussions of the practice of au pairing, see, for example, Sollund (2012), Cox (2015), and Búriková and Miller (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The Philippine government banned Filipina migrants from working as au pairs in 1998—a ban that Norway, along with several other countries, did not respect (Stenum, 2010). The ban was lifted for Denmark, Norway and Switzerland in 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The nationality of these au pairs is not stated, but their accents suggest that not all are Filipina. The film, however, never mentions that au pairs come from other counties, so au pairs’ “default nationality” is Filipina. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Both Manalansan and Yeates acknowledge that Parreñas’s 2005 book, *Children of global migration*, is not subject to this criticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. All translations are my own. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Au Pair Centre in Oslo offers advice and some practical and legal help for au pairs, but does not provide emergency accommodation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Personal communication with Marit Vik at the Au Pair Centre in Oslo, 11.06.2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Personal communication with Marit Vik at the Au Pair Centre in Oslo, 11.06.2014.

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to Berit Gullikstad, Rosie Cox, Stine H. Bang Svendsen, Tina S. Stoum, Ingvill Stuvøy and Eirik Swensen for helpful comments on various drafts. The two anonymous reviewers, as well as the editors, greatly contributed to improving the text.

# References

Anderson, B. (2000). *Doing the dirty work?: The global politics of domestic labour*. London: Zed Books.

Augustín, L. M. (2003). A migrant world of service. *Social Politics, 10*(3), 377–396.

Au Pair Center (2014). Første Tertialrapport Au Pair Center 2014 januar til og med april 2014. Oslo, 15.05.2014.

Bal, M. (2002). *Travelling concepts in the humanities: A rough guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Baldassar, L., & Merla, L. (2014). *Transnational families, migration and the circulation of care: Understanding mobility and absence in family life*. New York: Routledge.

Bhattacharyya, G. (2002). *Sexuality and society*. London: Routledge.

Bikova, M. (2010). The snake in the grass of gender equality. In L. Widding Isaksen (Ed.), *Global care work*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

Bloul, R. A. D. (2012). Ain’t I a woman? Female landmine survivors’ beauty pageants and the ethics of staring. *Social Identities, 18*(2), 3–18.

Borchgrevink, R. (2013, April 30). Derfor har jeg au pair. *Bergens Tidende.* Retrieved from http://www.bt.no/meninger/debatt/Derfor-har-jeg-au-pair--2887625.html#.U3yTyfl\_tWo.

Búriková, Z., & Miller, D. (2010). *Au pair*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press.

Busch, N. (2015). When work doesn’t pay: Outcomes of a deregulated childcare market and au pair policy vacuum in the UK. In R. Cox (Ed.), *Au pairs' lives in global context*. London: Palgrave.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war*. London: Verso.

Chow, R. (2002). The dream of a butterfly. In Y. J. Hwa (Ed.), *Comparative political culture in the age of globalization* (pp. 109–136). Lanham: Lexington Books.

Cox, R. (2007). The au pair body: Sex object, sister or student? *European Journal of Women's Studies, 14*(3).

Cox, R. (2011). Competitive mothering and delegated care: Class relationships in nanny and au pair employment. *Studies in the Maternal, 3*(2).

Cox, R. (2012). Gendered work and migration regimes. In R. Sollund (Ed.), *Transnational migration, gender and rights*. Bingley: Emerald.

Cox, R. (Ed.) (2015). *Au pairs' lives in global context*. London: Palgrave.

Dmitrow-Devold, K. (2013). "Superficial! Body Obsessed! Commercial!" Norwegian press representations of girl bloggers. *Girlhood Studies, 6*(2), 65–82.

EnergyAuPair (2014). Informasjon for familier. Retrieved from http://www.energyaupair.no/family-information/.

Fortier, A.-M. (2008). *Multicultural horizons. Diversity and the limits of the civil nation*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.

Hochschild, A. R. (2000). Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In A. Giddens & W. Hutton (Eds.), *On the edge. Living with global capitalism*. London: Vintage.

Hovdan, M. (2005). *Au pair in Norway. A qualitative study* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Bergen, Bergen.

Isaksen, L. W. (2001). "Kommer din praktikant også fra Litauen?" Om nye løsninger på gamle problemer. *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning, 2*.

Jordan, L. P., & Graham, E. (2012). Resilience and well-being among children of migrant parents in South-East Asia. *Child Development, 83*(5), 1672–1688.

Kaufman, G. (2013). *Superdads: How fathers balance work and family in the twenty-first century*. New York: New York University Press.

Koren, C. (2012). *Kvinnenes rolle i norsk økonomi*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Lewis, G. (2006). Imaginaries of Europe: Technologies of gender, economies of power. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 13*(2), 87–102.

Manalansan, M. F. (2006). Queer intersections: Sexuality and gender in migration studies. *IMR, 40*(1), 224–249.

McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather* (Kindle ed.). New York: Routledge.

Nichols, B. (2010). *Engaging cinema*. New York, London: W.W. Norton.

NOU (2008). NOU 2008: 14 Samstemt for utvikling? Hvordan en helhetlig norsk politikk kan bidra til utvikling i fattige land. Oslo: Utenriksdepartementet.

NTB (2013). Mener Faremos au pair-forslag ikke er nok. Retrieved from http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/mener-faremos-au-pair-forslag-ikke-er-nok/a/10103142/.

Parreñas, R. S. (2001). *Servants of globalization: Women, migration and domestic work*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, R. S. (2002). The care crisis in the Philippines: Children and transnational families in the new global economy. In B. Ehrenreich & A. R. Hochschild (Eds.), *Global women*. New York: Holt.

Parreñas, R. S. (2005a). *Children of global migration: Transnational families and gendered woes*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, R. S. (2005b). Long distance intimacy: Class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families. *Global Networks, 5*(4), 317–336.

Petersen, L. M. (2009). *Adopteret - Fortællinger om transnational og racialiseret tilblivelse.* (PhD thesis). Aarhus Universitet, Aarhus.

Pratt, G. (2004). *Working feminism*. Philadephia, PA: Temple University Press.

Rommetveit, A. (Writer). (2006). Mammarant [Documentary]. *Dokument 2*. Bergen: Univisjon.

Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Sollund, R. (2010). Regarding au pairs in the Norwegian welfare state. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 17*(2), 143–160.

Sollund, R. (2012a). The essence of food and gender and the embodiment of migration. In R. Sollund (Ed.), *Transnational migration, gender and rights* (pp. 77–98). Bingley: Emerald.

Stenum, H. (2010). Au-pair migration and new inequalities. In L. Widding Isaksen (Ed.), *Global care work*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

Stenum, H. (2011). Abused domestic workers in Europe: The case of au pairs. Brussels: European Parliament, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Dept. C: Citizens' rights and constitutional affairs.

Sunde, I., & Isungset, O. (Writers). (2013). Herskap og tenarar [Television series], *Brennpunkt*. Oslo: NRK.

Tkach, O. (2014). Migrant au pairs in Norway: From multi-faceted work to prospects of settling down. In M. Pajnik & F. Anthias (Eds.), *Work and the challenges of belonging* (pp. 134–152). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

UDI (2014). Au pair permit. Retrieved from http://www.udi.no/en/want-to-apply/au-pair/au-pair-permit/?c=phl.

Yeates, N. (2005). Global care chains: A critical introduction. In *Global migration perspectives* (pp. 1–19). Global Commission on International Migration.

Yeates, N. (2012). Global care chains: A state-of-the-art review and future directions in care transnationalization research. *Global Networks, 12*(2), 135–154.

Øien, C. (2009). On equal terms? An evaluation of the Norwegian au pair scheme. Oslo: Fafo. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)