



## “Any Sacrifice Is Worthwhile Doing”: Latina Au Pairs Migrating to the United States for Opportunities

Sondra Cuban

To cite this article: Sondra Cuban (2018) “Any Sacrifice Is Worthwhile Doing”: Latina Au Pairs Migrating to the United States for Opportunities, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16:3, 235-254, DOI: [10.1080/15562948.2016.1263775](https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2016.1263775)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2016.1263775>



Published online: 04 Jan 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 215



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)



## “Any Sacrifice Is Worthwhile Doing”: Latina Au Pairs Migrating to the United States for Opportunities

Sondra Cuban

Health and Community Studies, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, USA

### ABSTRACT

A study of 20 highly educated Latin American women who entered the United States on au pair visas showed that they struggled to improve their opportunity structures. The study draws on skilled female migration theory to focus on the participants’ ambitions, work experiences, and their trajectories in the United States. The findings focused on the contradictions between the participants’ aspirations and the realities of their work lives, legal status, and prospects in the United States that impacted their advancement. They exercised their agency despite difficult circumstances.

### KEYWORDS

High-skilled; women; gender;  
Latin America; higher  
education

### About the study and the issues facing au pairs

This article focuses on the problematic ways higher education, gendered migration systems, and global labor markets intertwine in migrant women’s career trajectories, particularly women from Latin America who migrate to the United States with au pair visas. It is based on a study (2014–2015) of 20 participants from Mexico and South American countries (Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, and Colombia), their motivations for becoming au pairs, and how these motivations related to their higher education, career aspirations, and trajectories in the United States. I investigated the clash between the aspirations of the participants, their experiences, and the strategies they used to express their agency. I asked why highly educated Latin American women at the cusp of the 21st century were ghettoized in child care, similar to a long line of Latinas, within the “New World Domestic Order” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007, p. 3). Their “invisible underemployment” (Mollard & Umar, 2012, p. 15) was the anomaly I addressed to dispel myths about Latinas as unfit for care through highlighting their expertise that was unused. In focusing on these women’s education, skills, and ambitions, as well as their agency to change their situations, the study fills a gap in the au pair literature focused on the work lives of migrant domestic workers.

**CONTACT** Sondra Cuban ✉ [sondra.cuban@wwu.edu](mailto:sondra.cuban@wwu.edu) 📍 Western Washington University, Health and Community Studies, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA 98225-9008.

© 2018 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

The participants in the study discussed their struggles to launch careers in Seattle, Washington, amidst difficulty. Washington is considered a “gateway” (Kao, Vaquero, & Goyette, 2013, p. 73), like so many other U.S. states, for highly skilled migrants or those having tertiary education. One group of skilled migrants who are not often recognized as such is au pairs because they work in home-based child care as “household employees.” They are classified as “non-immigrant aliens” and arrive to the United States under student visitor exchange visas (J-1) that are sponsored by the State Department through for-profit agencies. Au pairs are considered to be “guests of the host families on temporary sojourn” (Cox, 2007, p. 282). Their status therefore is ambiguous and a “historic result of imposing a form of vision and division that promotes a type of policy that, while restricting and problematizing certain population movements, facilitates and normalizes others” (Araujo, as cited in Perez, 2015, p. 207). Despite their temporary status, highly skilled young women are motivated to become au pairs in the United States.

The main pull factors for becoming au pairs are spending time in a foreign culture, experiencing the United States, learning or practicing English, and profiting from a cultural learning experience (Geserick, 2012). Interestingly, few au pairs mention wanting child care experience and they often distance themselves from domestic work, choosing instead to see themselves as cosmopolitan explorers making conscious decisions about their lives (Perez, 2015). They view the au pair program not only as a “window to the American experience” but also as a way into middle-class U.S. life (Perez, 2015, p. 203). According to Christine Geserick (2012), there are two groups of au pairs. One is a privileged group driven by the urge to collect new experiences and qualifications while the other group uses the au pair program as a migration strategy to overcome economic strains in their home country. However these categories do not tell the entire story of why young women see au pair posts as “a good option,” as one of the participants in this study articulated. As we shall see, au pairs report diverse reasons for migrating to the United States.

Many au pairs join the U.S. program because of the emphasis recruiting companies give to cultural exchange and professional growth opportunities, which are interrelated in the minds of the au pairs. The prospective recruits are told that their acculturation into an American family will turn them into social cosmopolitans, back home and elsewhere, and add cache to their portfolios in the global marketplace. Calling the au pair system a cultural exchange program with opportunities to live and speak English with Americans and study options in higher education institutions then makes it appear to these young women that they will develop themselves both personally and professionally. Yet this outcome has been critiqued as unrealistic because as Jane Chuang (2013, p. 272) explains, the term, “cultural exchange participants is strategically used to disguise a domestic worker program to provide childcare for upper middle class families at below market price.” This is because, according to Chuang, the au pair companies who recruit these women have as their main focus profits. Although these companies are called “approved

sponsors” and operate under the U.S. State Department’s (formerly) United States Information Agency (USIA) and more recently under the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), they control the entire process of recruitment and operations. The cultural imperative is also promoted to host families in the program’s classification as, “an intercultural childcare program.” These agencies guarantee host parents that their au pairs will be cultured tutors: “Your children will receive a global education during their most formative years, learning about the world and your au pair’s culture and customs.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time the companies make explicit to these families that the program is also an “affordable” solution to childcare—one that is “flexible” and “dependable.”<sup>2</sup>

This promotional material attracts middle-class parents who receive no state support for childcare in the United States, with its liberal welfare model. Yet researchers have pointed to other reasons for middle-class parents wanting to hire au pairs, such as the societal emphasis on “intensive mothering” (helping children learn and develop cognitive skills) that can take place through a surrogate (Macdonald, 2011, p. 6). The logic is that “by hiring class peers, they expect their children to receive high-quality childcare that reflects their own understanding of how to raise a child” (Geserick, 2012, p. 52; see also Rohde, 2014). Yet, this elaborate structure focusing on cultural exchange, professional preparation, and cut-rate child care easily “shields them [companies] from scrutiny” (Chuang, 2013). A historical background may be useful for understanding how the au pair program in the United States came to exist and the current situation of au pairs.

### ***History of au pairing: From Europe to the Americas***

The system of au pairing began in Europe prior to WWI with the exchange of daughters of middle-class families. These young women engaged in au pairing to increase their marriage prospects through housekeeping skills. The au pairing system has its roots, then in what Bridget Anderson calls, “the lifecycle service of servants,” which she explains, has been “replaced by the modern day student as a period of protected transition from the family home to adulthood (2009, p. 417).”

In postwar Britain, with the reduction of domestic servants, au pairing became a popular option for the modern young woman (with few career prospects) as well as for middle-class host families who wanted a symbol of modern-day wealth but “didn’t want the dark histories of the master-servant relationship” (Liarou, 2015, p. 19). The Au Pair Agreement was extended across Europe in 1969 to deal with increasing flows of single young women. It introduced age restrictions, work specifics, and rights (Cox, 2015). Importantly the Agreement would stem the moral panic surrounding these women’s sexuality as well as potential “white slavery” (Liarou, 2015, p. 22). It was at this point that child care and housework were considered to be the major work of au pairs. However despite the media sensation since the 1970s of au pairs as sexualized young women or as “pink slaves,” as

Liarou's (2015, p. 219) historiography has highlighted, the foundations for au pairing were both cultural and economic.

Au pairing began in 1987 in the United States and today it is the top destination for au pairs (Macdonald, 2011; Cox, 2015). At any given time, 12,000–14,000 au pairs reside in the United States (Cox, 2015; Macdonald, 2011; Jordon, 2014). Au pairs migrate to the United States from the following top exporting Latin American countries: Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Although Europeans are the most preferred group in the U.S. due to racial and nationalistic stereotypes (Cox, 2006), the number of Latina au pairs is growing (Jordon, 2014). A majority of au pairs are women, as they are favored in households, and many recruiters only permit them. Gender, then, is a key factor in au pairing.

Although the requirements for becoming an au pair in the United States are not complicated and involve being 18–26 years of age and physically fit, having basic proficiency in English and either a secondary school diploma or equivalent<sup>3</sup> there are many hidden requirements. Their low pay especially has been viewed as problematic: Au pairs in the United States are not allowed to earn more than \$197 for working 45 hours a week, up to 10 hours a day. In 2015, a class action lawsuit claimed that the au pair program was engaged in a “price fixing conspiracy,” with wages “so low that it violates Federal and State minimum wage laws” (DePillis, 2015). The minimal cash compensation is rationalized through the study options within the student exchange visa the au pairs receive upon joining the program. The au pairs’ host families are required to spend \$500 on noncredit courses at accredited postsecondary institutions, in addition to room and board. Yet as the findings show, these are problematic substitutes.

While the au pair companies promise prospective recruits further educational opportunities and a safe place to live and work in the United States they market the Latin American au pairs to host family employers more in terms of their love of children. These gendered and nationalized representations of Latin American women as good housekeepers and child care workers promote them as “traditional women” with domestic work as natural to their identities (Perez, 2015). It further represents Latin American au pairs as prepared subjects for the 21st-century U.S. service economy in line with their colonial legacy as maids. This servant identity creates contradictions for the au pairs’ professional aspirations and trajectories. These au pairs after all are highly skilled and desire to advance their life and careers through the au pair program.

### **Skilled female migration theory to analyze the situations of au pairs**

This study examines au pairs’ educational and career trajectories, aspirations, strategies, and opportunity structures through a framework known as “skilled female migration” (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005, p. 4; Kofman, Phizacklea, Raghuram, & Sales, 2000; Mollard & Umar, 2012; Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2015). This theory focuses on the migration of highly skilled women from low-income countries to

high-income countries and the struggles they face as they adapt to new places of settlement and incorporate into destination countries' labor markets. This theory builds on the "feminization of migration" phenomenon, whereby more women than ever before are migrating for work at an international level but they may be invisible to policy makers (Castles & Miller, 2009). This theory reframes au pairs' situations by making their high skills and gender visible as well as their agency in accumulating human capital and then migrating to make it pay off. Normally the human capital of this population, that is their tertiary education and professional experiences, are not analyzed in au pair research (R. Cox, personal communication, 2014; Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2015). Yet these young women's human capital is a key factor in their trajectories; au pairs are overwhelmingly well-educated women from upwardly mobile backgrounds. Therefore, by all accounts, au pairs are part of the "high skilled" group according to current definitions (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2015). Yet, policy makers almost never view this population as "skilled," which then makes it easier for these women to be classified and treated as domestic workers who are thought of as "low skilled" (Anderson, 2009).

This mislabeling of au pairs in large part is due to policy makers generally viewing women immigrants as passive followers of men rather than expressing their agency as pioneers (Kofman et al., 2000). Female-skilled-migration theorists explain that this gap limits knowledge of the global mechanisms for the migration of women, which are complex and include economic and social policies and practices as well as institutional and colonial histories (Lutz, 2011). These mechanisms connect to migration management systems such as the visas that determine au pairs' labor market value. These visas put young women in precarious and weak labor market positions that give them little negotiating power or protections, which limit their capacities to advance their livelihoods. Still, as I show in the findings, the participants engaged in "educational work" to make themselves visible within the global economy by attending colleges and universities among other strategies (Devos, 2014, p. 403). Their work focused on developing the "metaphoric and material boundaries that defined their position and identities" (Devos, 2014, p. 403) as high skilled. Their struggle to become visible disentangles romanticized notions within the transnational literature of a seamless transition of skilled migrants to a host country (Kandiyoti, 2003).

Female-skilled-migration theorists then see the invisibility and deskilling of highly educated immigrant women, like au pairs, as part of a deep-rooted gender pattern that deserves more attention (Cuban, 2013; Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2015; Kofman et al., 2000;). Looking closely at this pattern would be important. These young women's initial entry into the au pair program is considered to be part of a "gender selective" system of migration (Kanaiaupuni, 2000). Gender selectivity is related to skilled migration. It means that a woman from a particular country with higher skills is more likely than a man to migrate (Docquier, Marfouk, Salome, & Sekkat, 2008). In fact, having a higher education *increases* the risk for women to migrate because they "have to go further in order to reduce the risk

of discrimination” (Docquier et al., 2008, p. 231) within their home country’s labor market; in other words, they have fewer job opportunities and believe that migrating will produce more of them. In the case of the au pair program, these women expect to live with an American family and practice English, as well as study at an American college. They are willing to engage in domestic labor even if it encompasses high opportunity costs, which includes their human capital, time, energies, and resource investments. In this study, for example, a Mexican former engineer became an au pair to improve her life chances, explaining: “I tell myself that any sacrifice is worthwhile doing.” Like her, many Latin American skilled women are less concerned about the opportunity costs or losses incurred to their careers due to their limited choices back home. Another participant explained:

The reality of returning is scary. ... The Europeans look forward to going back but in Europe the situation is way better than ours. We are, like, I miss my family but I don’t miss my country ... many of us will try to risk everything not to go back.

Yet few job opportunities in high-income countries are available for them to work in so they end up taking low-paying service work, which is in demand, like childcare. They do this with the intention of climbing the socioeconomic ladder, assuming that their competencies will be recognized and they will recover their losses from working in the domestic child care sector (Dumont & Monso, 2007). Yet their competencies are often not recognized because the system of assessing skills is “ideologically constructed, with some competencies being defined as skills and others being excluded from the definition, mostly on the basis of gender stereotypes” (Mollard & Umar, 2012, p. 14). Still, many skilled women take the gamble and expect it to pay off, because as one au pair in this study rationalized: “I had bigger ambitions and being an au pair was one step.” Their agency was expressed in terms of their neoliberal subjectivities to improve themselves at whatever cost; they became “empowered,” “responsibilized” citizens proving their legitimacy by collecting qualifications (Clarke, 2005, p. 447).

The au pairs represent other highly skilled female migrants who pursue higher education. Women’s higher education enrollments have increased nearly everywhere in the world. Across OECD countries like Mexico, women are now also more likely to complete a university degree than men. However when it comes to returns in the labor market, the employment rate is higher for men than women, whatever their education level. In Mexico, for example, young men and women spend similar amounts of time in higher education but more young women spend time out of the workplace, which has serious implications for their careers (OECD, 2013). As we shall see, higher education is critical to the migration industry—almost all au pairs are pursued by recruiters and migrate within months to a year after they finish their degrees and they come to the United States because of the prestige of its higher education institutions. The internationalization of higher education has been heavily impacted by the migration of skilled women on student visas. By slowly pursuing their careers through furthering their education in the



United States au pair program young women believe they can advance, regardless of the cost. One participant, for example, held a master's degree in industrial engineering from Mexico and transferred from her original J-1 (au pair visa) to an F-1 (international student visa) and earned an online master's degree in business in the United States. During this period she worked illegally as a nanny and was so underpaid that her parents sent her cash to survive. However she couldn't locate a job afterwards and married a U.S. citizen as well as sought out a PhD program to improve the quality of her life.

## Methods and analysis

I situated the participants' experiences in global and national contexts to highlight their struggles to advance. Latin American women account for a large portion of the au pairs in the United States and as such were represented in this study (Jordan, 2014). Furthermore they have long histories—social, cultural, political, and psychological—within the United States. I therefore wanted to create a diverse and robust portrayal of this population.

The data was derived from snowball sampling through immigrant gatekeepers who were informants in the study. Although the sample of 20 is small due to the limited networks of these informants, the nationalities represented in the sample reflected nationalities of au pairs in the United States. These informants were former au pairs, and having changed their legal status to F-1 international student visas, were currently nannies working in the gray economy to afford living costs as they studied. They queried their Latina contacts. Seven of the participants in the study were from Mexico, representing both the majority minority in Washington (Brown & Lopez, 2013) and one of the top nationalities of au pairs in the United States. South American countries were also represented including Colombia (9), another top exporter of au pairs. Most of the participants were au pairs on J-1 visas (12) but there were others (6) who changed to F-1 visas as international students. Most of the participants were single but three had married and changed or were in the process of changing their legal status. Yet no participants had become regularized U.S. citizens during the study period. The participants ages ranged from the early 20s (20 being the youngest) to 30 years, with the older ones residing in the United States the longest under other visas and those in their mid 20s joining the program before the cutoff date. The participants all attended universities in their countries, with nearly all graduating, and those on F-1 visas were attending U.S. college degree programs. The women's degrees from their home countries included engineering, medicine, law, psychology, architecture, design, music, teaching, and communication/journalism. Notably, 4 of the participants were in science and technology (STEM) fields and 12 others were in professional fields, which by all accounts should have yielded more lucrative or sustainable career trajectories among these participants. Yet upon graduating, all of these participants reported that they could not locate satisfactory careers in their countries. This finding was





Table 1. Socio-Demographics of Au Pair Sample

Participant ID	Country of Origin	Age	Marital Status	Degree/Area	Current Occupational Status in U.S.	Year Migrated to U.S.	Visa Type
1C	Mexico	30	Single & engaged	Bachelors degree in Industrial Design	Nanny/former au pair	2010	J1 to F-1
2I	Mexico	26	Married	Bachelors and Masters in Industrial Engineering, Plus, MBA degree in US	Nanny/ former au pair	2010	J-1 to F-1 and in process of obtaining Green card
3P	Colombia	30	Single	2.5 years medical school and continued education in US community college	Nanny/former au pair	2011	J-1 to F1
4D	Mexico	25	Single	Bachelors degree in Chemical Engineering	Au pair	2012	J-1
5D	Colombia	25	Married	6 years law school at University. Did not graduate	Nanny/former au pair	2011	J-1 to Green card
6F	Colombia	23	Single	University Degree in Teacher Training	Au pair	2014	J-1
7V	Venezuela	26	Single	Bachelors Degree in Education	Au pair	2013	J-1
8R	Chile	30	Single	Bachelors Degree in Performing Arts, community college degree in Filmmaking	Nanny/former au pair	2010	J-1 to F-1 to undocumented
9L	Colombia	24	Single	Degree in Law	Au pair	2014	J-1
10P	Colombia	24	Single	Bachelors degree in Graphic Design	Au pair	2012	J-1
11G	Colombia	27	Single	Bachelors degree in Music Education, currently in AA program in US community college	Nanny/former au pair	2010	J-1 to F-1
12A	Colombia	30	Single	Bachelors degree in Communications	Nanny/former au pair	2010	J-1 to F-1
13B	Mexico	27	Single	Bachelors degree in Science Education	Au pair	2014	J-1
14C	Colombia	26	Single	Bachelors Degree in Journalism	Au pair	2015	J-1
15M	Mexico	27	Single	Bachelors Degree in Architecture	Au pair	2013	J-1
16R	Mexico	25	Single	Bachelors degree in Industrial Studies program (5 years towards completion and needs to pass English test to graduate and is retaking it)	Au pair	2015	J-1
17P	Argentina	27	Single	College of Design & Art (3 years not yet completed)	Au pair	2014	J-1
18M	Colombia	20	Single	Completed two-year professional degree at University	Au pair	2014	J-1
19V	Mexico	23	Single	Bachelors degree in Communications	Au pair	2014	J-1
20P	Venezuela	27	Married	Bachelors degree in Teaching	Teaching assistant/ former au pair	2011	J-1 to Green card

confirmed in other studies showing that a lack of labor market integration (unemployment, inadequate match for job and degree, or poor job placement) is a push factor for skilled women to migrate (Geserick, 2012; Kofman et al., 2000); see Table 1.

Participants were given hour-long-structured interviews, which were recorded. The questions addressed their biographies, previous education, and professional experiences, reasons for becoming au pairs, and their aspirations and experiences in the United States. I also relied on other sources such as participant-recorded videos, visitations, informant materials (i.e., weekly diary), au pair agency documents and emails, casual interviews with other au pairs, and a focus group. Combining these qualitative data sources and methods with international and national research enabled me to gain a comprehensive picture of the issues this population faced. A thematic analysis was used to capture patterns across the participants' stories. By using this form of analysis, it was possible to detect patterns, which, "at the minimum describe and organize possible observations or at the maximum interpret aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 2004, p. vi). The inductive method for coding was utilized to highlight the participants' responses to their situations, especially the sociopsychological issues that affected their relationships, work, educational experiences, and aspirations. The coding was systematic and took place over a year with a research team. Although coding can be reductive in its focus on detecting commonalities within a group, the participants' diverse responses were incorporated into the analysis.

## Findings

The findings reflected the participants' aspirations, experiences, and trajectories. Importantly, the findings reflected the participants' agency in developing their reputations and capabilities as well as their support networks as highly skilled women migrants. Although they lived and worked under difficult circumstances as domestics, they found ways to counteract barriers in their lives by securing support from their families at home. They also furthered their education, and they practiced their English as a means of establishing themselves as global professionals. Valeria's story illustrates these themes.

### Valeria

Valeria was a new au pair to Seattle. She Skyped with her parents daily in Mexico City. Her parents' advice helped her to adapt to her difficult situation. They told her: "It's a job Valeria. It's not like you're going to have fun. You have to deal with them. Think like a job." Although Valeria was using this experience to leverage her career opportunities in Mexico, "thinking like a job" was the furthest from her mind when she applied to be an au pair in the United States. She believed the definition of "au pair," which meant to be, "on par" (an equal), exchanging cultural practices and studying and learning new subjects in a foreign country that her recruiters pledged would help her grow professionally. Valeria

also believed that her doctor-host parents would be parents-away-from-home—terms her recruiters used to reinforce au pairs’ cultural exchange, their status as students, and “big sisters” to young children (Hess & Pukhaber, 2004, p. 65). The familial intonation appealed to Valeria’s mother who encouraged her daughter to enroll in this program, believing it would be a safe bet. Her mother told Valeria, “It could be a great experience. Be independent, travel! It will be an experience that could be helpful” to which Valeria assessed, “Coming back to Mexico, it will be useful for finding work.” So she decided “it would be a good option” especially because, it was “hard” for her to search for a job in the TV and radio industry right after graduating in communications. First though, Valeria and her mother felt that she had to “close the cycle” of her bachelor’s degree before she went abroad. After graduating, Valeria, being in limbo, had settled on the opportunity to “practice my English,” which the recruiter promised would influence her job opportunities even more upon her return. However when she arrived to the United States, her host mother told her to speak to the children in Spanish. This caused domestic conflict because, “they understand it but they don’t talk” and were adamant not to use it. Although Valeria ate dinner with her host family she questioned the familial relationship when they left her dirty dishes to clean and reduced the maid’s hours soon after she arrived. Knowing that housekeeping was not supposed to be part of her experience (and was legislated thus), she reflected: “I feel sometimes like a housekeeper—they feel I am their housekeeper. They don’t ask me ... they leave their stuff there and I have to clean up.” This role was doubly difficult because she rarely cooked or cleaned in Mexico as her mother did everything domestic. The longer Valeria stayed, the more she complained to her mother who was unable to do much else for Valeria than to reframe her aspiration that the “program” would be “a job” and that a good work ethic was nevertheless important. She could not help her daughter figure out the closed culture established in this home, which Valeria knew she’d have to negotiate herself. Valeria lamented: “It’s different rules. You have to control the kids with the rules in that family.”

Although Valeria took courses at the local community college that she regarded as “interesting,” like “screen writing, American film history, and acting techniques,” she desired degree program courses that were financially unaffordable. Also many of the courses she preferred conflicted with her child care schedule. She said, “I wanted something that proves I took something important like at the University of Washington—to show them.” Valeria found a way to reframe her negative situation by coming to terms with the limits of her au pair post. She said, “What is done is done. So it’s okay. Now that I’m ‘fine’ I can laugh about it.” She used her film knowledge to make a movie of her life in the United States. In it she posed as the underdog, “Rocky,” lifting the children to exhibit their heaviness and her heroism in being their au pair.

The following themes demonstrate the participants' aspirations and experiences as well as their diverse agentic responses to their difficult situations in terms of the strategies they used to persist.

### ***Conversing with family to secure a base of support***

The place where the au pairs lived was also their workplace and their lives revolved around their host-parent employers' needs and interests. Although the employers gave their au pairs weekly schedules, these often changed and the unpredictability meant that most if not all of the au pairs worked on an on-call basis and were often inside. Subsequently, the participants felt they had little control over their lives and found it difficult to negotiate for free time. Although the participants were allowed to work a maximum of 45 hours a week, many of the au pairs worked over this amount. One participant explained: "Sometimes they follow the rules and respect my hours, and sometimes they go past it." The domestic chores became all consuming and the au pairs often felt like they had little time for themselves, like one au pair, Gabriela, declared: "I don't think this is a cultural exchange program. It's a lot of work and it's more time working and being locked in than getting to know around." Gabriela's employers not only worked her over the maximum hours but also cited the lack of a driver's license as a reason for her to stay inside and work more hours. However, she said, "I would prefer to go out in the evenings and take classes, or during the weekend." Another problem was that the au pairs' rooms were exclusively for sleeping and they had a lack of privacy. For example, they didn't often have the desks or lamps needed for studying, or any other furniture aside from a bed. Their rooms were often small, near public spaces, and, without locks, allowed the family full access to them. One au pair described her room as having "no windows, no TV, nothing. I have a dresser. It's very small." The close proximity also meant being careful when they spoke to those outside. One participant said: "I always feel there is someone listening to what I'm saying. My host mother is in everything." Still, most felt, as one participant expressed, that the "room is my home."

The au pairs sought the support they needed from their away-families because it was absent in the homes where they resided. One participant, for example, felt like an outsider. She said, "They never ask me to come with them ... that makes me feel I miss my family. I am family oriented." The calls they made to their families reestablished their premigration identities, relationships, and sense of worth, and this was an important strategy for developing a base of support for their lives. They used voice calling, texting, messaging, Skyping, and every means possible to contact their families. One participant explained, "When I need support, they are always there." All of the participants had smartphones that they brought with them or purchased in the United States and they negotiated with their host families for the data plans. One participant, Cielo, used video conferencing "because I can see them and the house and what they're doing, and share lunch and dinner.

Sometimes I am lonely and for those moments ... we have lunch together ... I like that.” Conversing with her family was especially important for the encouragement they provided as well as their interest: “With my mom, if I am wearing a dress she says, ‘you’re wearing a dress today? Yes, yes! Did you get it from Goodwill?’” From their away-families, they secured the emotional support they needed to persist in their jobs, with conversations that were affectionate. One participant described these conversations as such: “On weekends for two hours we are Skyping. WhatsApp every day ... ‘I’m so proud of you...Yay, yay, yay, yay!’” Although this far-away family communication did not compensate for the lack of physical proximity, it reminded the au pairs of the emotional validation they so desired to persist.

### ***Furthering education to widen opportunities***

The women in this study all obtained university education before they migrated, what Pierre Bourdieu (1986, p. 84) referred to as “institutionalized” cultural capital; that is, they participated in programs and acquired degrees and qualifications from established tertiary institutions in their countries, both public and private. They studied subject areas that were rigorous and in career track fields (that required specific steps) such as medicine, law, and education but also noncareer track industries like engineering. Yet the degrees, even those in nonfeminized fields like engineering, did not open doors to careers afterwards, as with one former engineer, who bemoaned, “If I had a job in Mexico, I wouldn’t do it!” They felt they needed more to open those doors, like one participant who believed that the au pair program would do just that: “If you have a job in the U.S. doesn’t matter,” she thought, “It’s like wow, no one cares—you open a lot of doors.” They wanted to further their education in the United States, even if it wasn’t specific, like one au pair who said: “I wanted to study *something* here.”

Yet their education was appreciated by their host parent employers insofar as it symbolized their “embodied cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 84), which are habits, discourses, and ways of thinking that are part of socialization into higher education and the middle class. Their university ‘badges’ allowed recruiters to market these women’s skills and characters as part of a “cultural exchange” to the host families to reassure them that they were getting top quality child care. One au pair described the process of creating her profile as: “Sell yourself. I’m the best au pair because of this, hire me hire me.” They saw ads posted at their universities, and university colleagues promoted the program, which lent it credibility. One participant remembered, “I saw a poster at my college promoting it and practice your English and have a year experience, in U.S. The U.S. was easiest for me.”

The host families, on the other hand, saw these women as having enough cultural capital to pass on the right messages to their young children but little else. For example, one au pair who had a medical background was chosen by her host parents to care for their diabetic child. However once she arrived, the host parents

who were doctors were uninterested in their au pair's advice regarding diabetic care and expected her to follow their orders. Likewise a former architect who tried to advise her host parents' planning to redesign their home recollected, "I give them ideas, but she said, 'thank you but I can't use your drawings ... I appreciate it but you can't be our architect.'" Furthermore, the host parents did not connect their au pairs to career contacts even though most of them were well networked professionals in Seattle; one senior executive at a prestigious engineering firm that had many facilities around the United States told his au pair with a master's degree in engineering as she left with no job, that he was "sorry he couldn't help her because he didn't know anyone there." A common theme, as an informant for the study bluntly put it, was that once au pairs were no longer watching their children the host parents "washed their hands clean." Furthermore, the familial rhetoric of au pairing as a type of labor of love made the au pairs' labor invisible as if it were a natural act that any member of the family could undertake, like one au pair, who said, "They *say* you're part of the family" adding, "I don't feel part of the family"; while another participant complained: "Generally, I didn't feel part of the family, we never spend time together." The notion of false kinship suggests a surrogate relationship that reduces the discomforts for Seattle's professional elite engaged in domestic employment; although au pairs are considered to be "one of the family," "au programmes allow states to provide a non-commodified source of household assistance" (Parrenas, 2014, p. 61). The participants reported that their employers didn't recognize the difficulties associated with caring for children 10 hours a day, like one au pair who commented, "Childcare is hard!"

The recruiters understood that the participants desired more education within a privileged country and swore to these young women that they would gain more qualifications, as one participant remarked, "I was sold the American dream." The au pairs trusted the J-1 visa rhetoric on being a student, like one participant who said, "I have known friends who did it and I wanted to study something here." Yet unbeknownst to them, the J-1 visa was limited to noncredit courses, which did not provide the type of further education that was sustainable or useful to their future careers. Their educational work though involved enrolling in these noncredit courses. The au pairs took classes ranging from art to Zumba (jazz aerobics) to English as a Second Language, which they found interesting but which did not increase their professional capabilities. What they really wanted was to receive diplomas or certificates in accredited programs and/or masters degrees to build on their previous education—that is their human capital. One participant said, "I really want to study, graduate master's, study something else to complement my bachelors and work in school." The au pairs, prior to arriving, were not informed about how expensive higher education was in the United States. This gap left many au pairs to stay longer, invest more, and reapply for F-1 visas so that they could bolster the human capital they had previously acquired. However to afford the cost of an American university education and to stay in the United States, they had to continue their child care jobs either in the gray economy with the same family or

as a nanny with someone else. This was a problem because their employers determined their schedules, rates of pay, and autonomy. One participant who was an au pair, for example, became a full-time nanny to her former host family and they paid her a cash stipend of \$125/week including room and board as well as her quarterly tuition (\$3,500) and books to study in a human service program at a community college. However the family stalled her progress in the program due to the hours they insisted she work for them. The beginning of every quarter was a complex power negotiation between herself and her employers about which courses she could take and when and which books she really needed. In addition, she frequently had to leave Seattle to vacation with them, which interrupted her studies. The wrangling these participants engaged in with their employers each quarter made it difficult for them to study and graduate.

There were few opportunities for the participants to develop their educational potential other than through these routes. A “worker visa” (H-1B visa) took years to obtain while the J-1 visa was only for a maximum of 2 years and meant studying cultural subjects that did not benefit their professional goals. If they left earlier than their visa stipulated, there were punitive consequences. The F-1 international student visa embedded them into the shadow economy as nannies while they studied but made it difficult to persist due to numerous obstacles. Acquiring a green card (which designates a holder as a lawful permanent resident of the United States) through marrying a U.S. born citizen was also problematic. One participant described her visa struggle:

I am limited because I’m on a J-1. I can go to school if I’m on an F-1, but there is a limit because I can only work under the table and even though I’m studying I can’t take a good job and it’s stressful. Even though I might have good opportunities, I can’t take good jobs. It’s stressful. I may want to get a green card but it’s not a possibility.

For the participants that used the marriage route, it was unclear whether they could advance themselves, when they were attached to a spouse whose trajectory determined much of their own. Yet they reported their marriage decisions as a pragmatic strategy to enhance their lives (Geserick, 2012). One participant recollected:

I went back home and had a boyfriend [in the United States] and not sure what’s going to happen. My aunt suddenly said, “go back I’ll pay for your ticket” and I said “why not?” I came back and we were living together for some time. And then again what’s next? In the end, we were going to get married.

Helma Lutz (2011) has documented how au pairs often use marriage as part of a legalization process. At the same time it puts them at risk for being deported. She points out how residency is so strict that it automatically limits immigrants’ options. One former au pair and nanny who was undocumented and living with her boyfriend put it this way, “I had no money and I can’t afford to keep going to



school [in the United States].” She added, “Sometimes I get frustrated and I think what the fuck am I doing?”

The main problem for au pairs, according to Perez (2015, p. 208) is that “au pairing is a form of aspiration migration, which draws on imaginary social mobility and cultural capital.” In a sense these women were in a type of “cosmopolitan dilemma” (Perez, 2015, p. 203) because the au pair program was promoted not only as a cultural exchange but also as an educational opportunity that appeared impossible to achieve. One participant, for example, complained, “If we study something, that doesn’t have good opportunities.” Despite all of these obstacles, the au pairs persisted in their educational pursuits and most of them attempted to pursue higher education either in the United States or in other countries to progress their upwardly mobile ambitions.

### ***Practicing English to become global professionals***

Recruiters vowed that the au pairs would gain greater English language fluency as part of the cultural exchange of the program, if these young women joined it. One participant, for example, said, “They [recruiters] said: “Do you want to learn English, make money and live abroad?” I fell for it.” Another participant attested to the importance of English language learning:

My biggest desire to come to the States for one to two years was to practice English and get experience ... I was living with my mom and could not pay and could not save. Security and politics is really bad now for me. It was a good opportunity.

While the research has shown that English acquisition is an important pull factor for au pairs (Cox, 2006), what has not been discussed is the weight they give to it as part of their livelihood strategy (Cox, p.c., 2014), as this anecdote demonstrates. A new privatized landscape was emerging in Latin America that held new linguistic demands for workers. Participants reported that when companies had job vacancies, preference was given to candidates who could speak English and it was considered valuable for professional parlance, as one participant explained:

I did it for English. It [au pairing] was the best option was for improving English. We get better chances to get jobs we want to get. In Colombia the English is not good. Only a few companies are hiring. They are asking for English.

The new au pairs saw English acquisition as a step forward in gaining more and better opportunities in their countries’ labor market. Many of the participants knew that they would be engaged in highly communicative roles such as customer service and wanted to master all levels and types of English to compete with those at home who had fewer cosmopolitan experiences. For those participants who aspired to be teachers, the motivation to learn English at an advanced level meant securing teaching positions with international schools in their home countries. According to one participant, “I wanted to teach in an international school in Caracas so I had to have really good English.” In many cases it was a requirement

for graduating from their universities. Passing English tests was mandated for most bachelor programs, even in disciplines such as engineering; one participant did not pass an English test in her industrial engineering program and entered the au pair program specifically to gain enough English skills to return to pass her exam and graduate. Participants also wanted to increase their scores on the International English Language Test Service (IELTS) exam, which would in turn increase their university admission choices (at masters and doctoral levels). Overall, mastery of English was viewed as leverage in any sector in Latin America and there was pressure from their network members to gain better English fluency, which was seen as a valuable commodity; one participant commented, “I wanted to study English ... I feel bad when I cannot understand nothing on TV. And my sister is studying English all the time.” Many of the participants’ extended family and friends traveled to the United States and other English-speaking countries, which enabled them to acquire English and have successful careers. The participants wanted to do likewise.

Although the participants’ English skills were vetted by recruiters and host families and their levels were advanced upon entering the United States, they desired more academic and business English, American idioms, pronunciation, and general professional English fluency. However advanced English courses were in short supply and a number of the participants were rejected from community colleges due to their high entry-level test scores. There were also informal barriers that prevented them from gaining English fluency. Most of the participants, like Valeria, were pressured by their host families to speak only Spanish to the children. Similarly, those who spent time with very young children couldn’t practice either. Furthermore they were often isolated from other Americans their age and only mingled with au pairs from the same country or region. Still the participants often felt that, in the end, the efforts to learn English would be recompensed and that, overall, their English skills had increased. A number of the participants decided to switch careers to focus on English. One participant said:

I came here and it’s helping me to learn English ... I will take classes on design online by computer. I didn’t find anything yet. My goal with English is helping me here ... When I got the opportunity to travel, I want to keep traveling, and if I have to work as a something, I prefer to work as an English teacher.

## Discussion

This representation of aspiring middle class and highly educated Latinas residing in Seattle as au pairs dispels much of the statewide policy literature focused on Latino migrants from poor rural areas who have less education and are undocumented farmworkers and maids. Therefore, this study offers a unique picture of migration, focusing attention on a population—au pairs—with an invisible status as highly skilled immigrant women. Yet it is important to note that many of these participants, in their posts as au pairs and later as nannies were subject to

marginalization in Seattle, similar to the undocumented migrant workers. As we saw, the participants' experiences, as diverse as they were, carried complications that affected their decisions, trajectories, and strategies. At the same time, they found ways to express their agency by securing support from their families, acquiring additional education, and practicing the English language. None of these however were solutions to the intractable structural barriers that they encountered, including gender and labor segmentation as well as migration policies.

I showed that the participants attained higher education in their home countries. However these did not offer the windows of opportunities they expected in their countries and in the U.S. au pair program. As such, they were faced with the uphill task of improving their capabilities with little support other than to rely on their own persistence. This situation was made more difficult due to being engaged in low-paid domestic work in the United States that left them without resources or support to advance into the professions. Yet they persisted by developing strategies to further their aspirations and change their downward trajectories. The first strategy was to secure the emotional support from family back home to survive their current situations and project identities as they used to be—professional women. The second strategy was to further their education in the United States by switching visas to attend higher education institutions regardless of whether or not they were credited. Thirdly, they sought opportunities to practice their English as a means of establishing their identities as global professionals. The more these highly skilled women invested and the greater the losses they incurred through child care, the more they wanted to recoup these losses to achieve their long-term goals of being successful. In order to establish genuine opportunities, the participants had to stay longer in the United States and in doing so had limited choices; they either worked in the shadow economy as nannies to build their academic capital on F-1 international student visas or they got married as a trade-off for a better life through eventual citizenship. These women gambled on a program that claimed it could offer them opportunities in the United States with cultural exchange as the “hook.” The agencies were disingenuous in telling the au pairs that they could engage fully in cultural exchange with their host families and other U.S. citizens while positioning them almost entirely as domestic workers. One participant initially believed that it could be a “great opportunity to understand a culture and [gain] direct contact with culture.” Also by promising the au pairs higher education “study options,” they were led to believe by their recruiters that they could develop themselves professionally and academically in the United States. Yet the au pairs became disappointed when they realized that the small amount of funds that were designated for this purpose limited their choices in conjunction with other barriers born of their domestic lives. Drawing on gambling terminology, the participants doubled-down on education and time. Yet they had to keep moving forward, collecting skills and degrees as part of their never-ending search for human capital rewards, because, as one participant declared, “Having *any* college on your resume from the U.S. makes you stand out.” They adopted a pragmatic

strategy of “cruel optimism” (Grindel, 2014, p. 293) to leverage the global job market, doing child care as part of this deal. One participant reflected:

It’s more of a personal growth kind of thing more than a professional growth because the only professional growth I could get here is to improve my English by taking classes or take a class related to my field of study.

They played fairly by the rules in this unequal game and persisted in finding ways to win. Yet their “over-education” (Griesshaber & Seibel, 2014)—that is, their advanced education that was mismatched to the labor market—led to their high opportunity costs and low returns and subsequent de-skilling. Highly educated women often become de-skilled after they migrate (Kofman et al., 2000; Cuban, 2013). The participants in this study had valuable skills that were lost through “information asymmetry” between Latin America and the United States because of the lack of harmonization of qualifications and careers (Dumont & Monso, 2007, p. 143) but also because of a legacy of colonialism and gendered labor segregation in addition to a sanctioned system of trafficking of au pairs. One participant wondered, “In my professional life I don’t know if this has been a step back or I’m just stuck.”

Still, what is important here is that the participants exercised their agency by becoming strategic and persisting despite the obstacles. They moved, as we saw, from J-1 to F-1 visas, getting married and securing green cards or returning to their countries. Yet, they shouldered these burdens, alone. Larger structural reforms are needed at the international level to reverse the trajectories that highly skilled women often experience upon migrating. Policy changes are needed to enable skilled Latinas to achieve social and economic mobility in an intentional way that prevents the disadvantages of gender and nationality that they often experience.

## Notes

1. See: [http://www.aupairinamerica.com/what\\_sets\\_us\\_apart.asp](http://www.aupairinamerica.com/what_sets_us_apart.asp).
2. For example, see the language at an Approved Sponsor website: <http://www.aupairint.com>.
3. See: <http://j1visa.state.gov/programs/au-pair>.

## References

- Anderson, B. (2009). What’s in a name? Immigration controls and subjectivities: The case of au pairs and domestic worker visa holders in the UK. *Subjectivity*, 29, 407–424.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brown, A., & Lopez, M. H. (2013). *Mapping the Latino population by state, county, and city*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website at: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/08/29/mapping-the-latino-population-by-state-county-and-city/>
- Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2009). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Chuang, J. A. (2013). The U.S. au pair program: Labor exploitation and the myth of cultural exchange. *Harvard Journal of Law and Order*, 36, 270–342.
- Clarke, J. (2005). New labour's citizens: Activated, empowered, responsabilized, abandoned? *Critical Social Policy*, 25(4), 447–463.
- Cox, R. (2006). *The servant problem: Paid domestic work in a global economy*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris.
- Cox, R. (2007). The au pair body: Sex object, sister or student? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(3), 281–296.
- Cox, R. (2015). When is a worker not a worker? In R. Cox (Ed.), *Sisters or servants? Au pairs lives' in global context* (pp. 235–249). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cuban, S. (2013). *Deskilling migrant women in the global care industry*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- DePillis, L. (2015). Towards justice amended complaint. Case 1:14-cv-03074-CMA-CBS Document 101, Filed 03/13/15 USDC Colorado. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/doc/259396701/Towards-Justice-Amended-Complaint>
- Devos, A. (2014). The educational work of belonging. *Globalisation, Societies, and Education*, 12(3), 403–419.
- Docquier, F., Marfouk, A., Salome, S., & Sekkat, K. (2008, October). *Are skilled women more migratory than skilled men?* (Discussion Papers, No. 2009-21). Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: Institut de Recherches Economiques et Sociales (IRES), Université Catholique de Louvain.
- Dumont, J., & Monso, O. (2007). Matching educational background and employment: A challenge for immigrants in host countries. In *International Migration Outlook SOPEMI*. Geneva: OECD. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/migration/internationalmigrationpoliciesanddata/41561786.pdf>
- Geserick, C. (2012). “I always wanted to go abroad. And I like children”: Motivations of young people to become au pairs in the USA. *Young*, 20(1), 49–76.
- Griesshaber, N., & Seibel, V. (2014). Over-education among immigrants in Europe: The value of civic involvement. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(3), 374–398.
- Grindel, E. (2014). *How do the partners of international students adapt and contribute to their receiving communities*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Hess, S., & Puckhaber, A. (2004). “Big sisters are better domestic servants”: Comments on the booming au pair business. *Feminist Review*, 7(7), 65–78.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2007). *Domestica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Isaakyan, I., & Triandafyllidou, A. (2015). Female high-skill migration in the 21st century: The challenge of the recession. In A. Triandafyllidou and I. Isaakyan (Eds.), *High-skill migration and recession* (pp. 3–21). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jordon, M. (2014, January 24). New push to protect au pairs as U.S. program is reviewed. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304887104579304992013688328>
- Kanaiaupuni, S. M. (2000). Reframing the migration question: An analysis of Mexican nonmigrants, 1960–2000. *Latin American Research Review*, 43(1), 1311–1337.
- Kandiyoti, D. (2003). Multiplicity and its discontents: Feminist narratives of transnational belonging. *Genders*, 37. Retrieved from [https://www.atria.nl/ezines/IAV\\_606661/IAV\\_606661\\_2010\\_51/g37\\_kandiyoti.html](https://www.atria.nl/ezines/IAV_606661/IAV_606661_2010_51/g37_kandiyoti.html)
- Kao, G., Vaquero, E., & Goyette, K. (2013). *Education and immigration*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Kofman, E., Phizacklea, A., Raghuram, P., & Sales, R. (2000). *Gender and international migration in Europe: Employment, welfare and politics*. London, UK: Routledge.

- Kofman, E., & Raghuram, P. (2005). Rethinking female migrations: Sites and skilled work in globalized social reproduction. *Mobilities Au Feminin*, 15–19.
- Liarou, E. (2015). “Pink slave” or the “modern young woman”: A history of the au pair in Britain. In R. Cox (Ed.), *Sisters or servants? Au pairs’ lives in global context* (pp. 19–35). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lutz, H. (2011). *The new maids: Transnational women and the care economy*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Macdonald, C. L. (2011). *Shadow mothers: Nannies, au pairs, and the micropolitics of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mollard, B., & Umar, S. (2012). Gender, migration, and deskilling. In B. Mollard & S. S. Umar (Eds.), *Crushed hopes: Underemployment and deskilling among skilled migrant women* (pp. 11–36). Geneva, Switzerland: International Organization for Migration.
- OECD. (2013). OECD education at glance: Mexico. Retrieved from [http://www.oecd.org/edu/Mexico\\_EAG2013%20Country%20Note.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/edu/Mexico_EAG2013%20Country%20Note.pdf)
- Parrenas, A. S. (2014). Migrant domestic workers as one of the family. Chapter. In B. Anderson & I. Shutes (Eds.), *Migration and care labour* (pp. 49–64). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Perez, M. A. (2015). The cosmopolitan dilemma: Fantasy, work and the experiences of Mexican au pairs. In R. Cox (Ed.), *Sisters or servants? Au pairs’ lives in global context* (pp. 203–208). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Rohde, K. (2014). *Au pair migration: Transnationale Bildungs*. Leverkusen, Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich.