

# Being an au pair in London: Young Spanish women's employment trajectories and strategies in regimes of gender and precariousness

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## Abstract

The global economic crisis that began in 2008 led to major cuts to the welfare state in Spain and across Europe (Gambino, 2018), affecting key areas such as health, education, social care and youth employment. This was accompanied by drastic reductions in public spending and welfare benefits, which affected women particularly severely. Through ethnographic fieldwork with a gender and feminist perspective, this paper attempts to cast light on the trajectories of young Spanish women who emigrated to London in the ambiguous 'au pair' category. The figure of the au pair is interesting because it is an ad hoc, liminal, ambiguous, transient construction configured in such a way that it is 'between' categories, spaces and bounds, responding to the domestic care needs of English families' offspring as part of a commodification of care brought about by a lack of regulation and resources from the state. The employment trajectories and strategies of young Spanish women are embedded in a context of precarious employment, in which young women with secondary and higher education seek financial and personal autonomy but are compelled to negotiate gender norms in order to overcome structural inequalities that increasingly devalue care work. The naturalisation of care and its attribution to women, as well as the ongoing association of women with the 'good mother' model, serves to reinforce gender hierarchies.

**Keywords:** gender; instability; occupation paths; au pairs; domestic care; commodification; women; economic crisis; welfare; work

## Resumen. *Ser au pair en Londres: trayectorias y estrategias laborales de jóvenes españolas en regímenes de género y precariedad*

La crisis económica mundial que estalló en 2008 provocó importantes recortes en el estado del bienestar en España y en toda Europa (Gambino, 2018) que afectaron a ámbitos clave como la sanidad, la educación, la asistencia social y el empleo juvenil. A ello se sumaron drásticas reducciones del gasto público y de las prestaciones sociales que afectaron de forma especialmente grave a las mujeres. A través de un trabajo de campo etnográfico con perspectiva de género y feminista, este artículo intenta arrojar luz sobre las trayectorias de las jóvenes españolas que emigraron a Londres en la ambigua categoría de *au pair*. La figura de la *au pair* es interesante porque se trata de una construcción *ad hoc*, liminal, ambigua, transitoria, configurada de tal manera que se encuentra «entre» categorías, espacios y límites, y que responde a las necesidades de cuidado doméstico de la prole de las familias inglesas como parte de una mercantilización del cuidado provocada por la falta de regulación y recursos por parte del Estado. Las trayectorias y estrategias laborales de las jóvenes españolas se inscriben en un contexto de precariedad laboral en el que las jóvenes con estudios secundarios y superiores buscan autonomía económica y personal, pero se ven obligadas a negociar normas de género para superar desigualdades estructurales que desvalorizan cada vez más el trabajo de los cuidados. La naturalización del cuidado y su atribución a las mujeres, así como la continua asociación de las mujeres con el modelo de «buena madre» sirven para reforzar las jerarquías de género.

**Palabras clave:** género; inestabilidad; trayectorias profesionales; *au pairs*; cuidados domésticos; mercantilización; mujeres; crisis económica; bienestar; trabajo

### Summary

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### 1. Introduction

The 2008 financial crisis in Spain intensified instability in working and living conditions, bringing about a shift in the migration cycle in Spain and restarting intra-European migration by Spanish emigrants, among other effects. The main impacts of this social and employment insecurity in Spain were rising unemployment, personal and professional uncertainty and reduced independence for young people. The decline of social Europe amid the Washington Consensus and the advance of rampant capitalism has caused material security in the form of a decent salary, employment, money in the bank and savings, retirement pensions or benefits and healthcare to vanish (Demetriou, 2016: 481). Our analysis is based on a logic that reveals how an “all-encompassing, totalising mercantile rationale” (Brugère, 2011/2021: 104, 2021) is shaping the future of Western democracies in connection with neoliberalism and neo-

conservatism and how it employs expansionary political tactics and applies an implacable commercial logic to care work that has a direct impact on the lives and behaviours of ordinary citizens. The 2008 financial crisis had a serious impact on the wellbeing of Spanish families, crushing many people's hopes and dreams and causing levels of personal, social and intergenerational wellbeing, which had taken decades to achieve and were taken for granted, to fall (Betrisey et al., 2017). Millions of people fell into unemployment, whole families lost their homes, and many young Spaniards became part of a 'lost generation', finding the future that they had been promised unavailable to them in Spain (Domingo and Blanes, 2016). Although this is not a new concept and Alba Rico used the term 'precarious generation' in 1992 to refer to the effects of labour flexibilisation and austerity measures, which were critically labelled 'precariousness', it is important to emphasise the recurring nature of the phenomenon and note that it took on a whole new dimension in 2008. A considerable proportion of young Spaniards saw emigration as a way to escape their situation (Betrisey et al., 2017). Indeed, the 2008 financial crisis has confirmed the 'premig hypothesis', which posits that "the working conditions suffered by emigrants today (such as informal contracts, vulnerability in the workplace, low salaries, lack of union rights, seasonality, demands for total availability, etc.) are spreading to the rest of the population, including natives from the EU" (Toret and Sguiglia, 2006: 108, Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2017: 2). According to Nancy Fraser (2015: 13), neoliberal globalisation aims to turn the clock back on equality and is reconfiguring the gender order in our societies. This new form of capitalism is affecting the boundaries between production and reproduction, between market and state, and between the national and the global. This can be seen in the demand to cut public assistance in the name of austerity and in the impacts on the health system in almost every country in the world, whose effects became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a gender perspective, the financial crisis has two main consequences. Firstly, cuts to the welfare state and the precarisation of the labour market have broken the social and sexual contract, which has resulted in the feminisation of social exclusion, giving rise to 'new types of servitude' and forms of patriarchal violence (Cobo, 2011). Secondly, women suffer even greater job insecurity than men. The consequences of the economic recession on women's employment have led to an even greater proliferation of precarious contracts among Spanish and foreign women in the country. During periods of crisis, women's status and economic rights have historically been rolled back and progress on equality has stalled or been reversed (Gálvez and Rodríguez, 2011). As Standing (1999) observed, women constitute a sizeable labour reserve, which has often led to them working in the informal economy. These labour circuits generate substantial economic resources, which often go unnoticed (Sassen, 2003). Research has shown that the lack of sexual redistribution of social reproduction work has given rise to a demand for women's labour in both the Global North and South and resulted in a global transfer of care, domestic labour, and sex work (Morokvasic, 2007, 2013; Ehrenreich and

Hochschild, 2003; Parreñas, 2001). Despite these debates, there has been little research into new Spanish migration from a gender and feminist perspective (Muñoz-Rodríguez and Santos Ortega, 2015, 2018; Oso, 2017; Cortés et al., 2019, 2021 Capote et al., 2021; Capote Lamas and Fernández Suárez, 2021).

Meanwhile, global cities have played a crucial role in the reordering of intra-European migration, as in the case of London, which is analysed in this paper. The growth of global cities is driven by an economy based on financial services, insurance, and property, creating a 'new urban regime' of capital accumulation. This economy is supported by an army of labour employed in the informal sector and a subclass dependent on state welfare, which comprises new immigrants, minority groups, and disadvantaged people struggling to survive (Sassen, 2001). The way in which these groups were brought into the labour force made their participation invisible and transformed them into marginal workers. The demand in global cities for professionals and managerial workers, both male and female, increased demand for a 'serving class' largely made up of women and immigrants, who covered the domestic labour needs of the former group's homes, like the au pairs analysed in this paper. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis differed for men and women due to the sexual division of labour, both from a material perspective (unemployment, salaries, job insecurity, and emigration) and a moral perspective (unequal distribution of the social effects of the crisis, return to the family sphere, increase in care work taken on by women). However, the unequal impacts of the crisis by gender among Spanish migrants have been rendered invisible by other discourses, such as that of social class, which presents Spanish migration in terms of skilled and unskilled migration, diluting the intersection of gender, generation, national origin, class, and 'race' in the position occupied by Spanish migrants. Particularly, this hides the situation of young Spanish women working in some of the most precarious sectors of the economy with the worst working conditions, such as cleaning and care work, which is represented in our analysis by the figure of the au pair. In the context of migration, gender intersects with hierarchies of age, class, national origin, and 'race' in transnational contexts. The act of migrating can represent a challenge to established gender norms and grant power, or it can give rise to new forms of dependence and reinforce existing gender differences and social hierarchies (Morokvasic, 2007). With this in mind, it would be pertinent to question how gender imperatives are redefined rather than challenged through migration, preserving tensions between traditional gender norms and imaginaries of equality and between continuity and change (Donato et al., 2006; Lutz, 2008; Cortés et al., 2021). Within the context of intra-European migration, we will focus on the case of Spanish au pairs in London on the grounds that they are an invisibilised group (in plain sight) who experiences highly precarious conditions, like other groups of non-EU and Eastern European migrants working in London. In our research, we paid attention to the au pairs' migration projects, which present a certain particularity. Although the migration project can be understood as "a disposition of spirit that covers the entire journey (...), it is a fibrous fabric

made up of attitudes, expectations and images that migrants bring and take with them” (Izquierdo Escribano, 2000: 226). In the case we are dealing with, Izquierdo Escribano (2000), the migratory project is very nuanced since we cannot exactly speak of a project as such because we are not dealing with a migratory process in the classic sense, but with a temporary experience in a programme of cultural and linguistic exchange. In this case, the images and expectations of young Spanish women are inherited from a ‘cultural brand’ that the Au Pair Programme developed throughout its 55 years of existence in the European Agreement on Au Pair Placement (ETS No. 068). This agreement was signed by several states in 1969 and Spain joined in 1988. Consequently, the migratory project to which we refer is informed by the representations that the young women have of the Au Pair Programme and of leaving for the United Kingdom to learn and improve their English and participate in a cultural exchange programme with a family component. The young women set off excitedly for an experience that would integrate them into a ‘migratory cycle’ (Izquierdo Escribano, 2000), with the time horizon set by the year-long training and educational exchange. In this study, the images and expectations that precede the experience of staying in the homes of the host parents only emerge when they personally live with the English families and the real living conditions they encounter. Precisely, the perception of the lack of a future in Spain is a subjective element that contributes to evaluating the impact of the economic downturn on young Spanish migrants (Navarrete, 2014), especially in terms of their belief in a good future in Spain. The symbolic subjective elements that concur for this expressed opinion/belief occur in an intimate, emotional, and relational horizon, in which human experience takes place and which the theoretical-ethnographic discourse registers in its research practice. Young people see themselves ‘outside’ the community of membership and look to the future with despair, while the idea of leaving Spain is also synonymous with opportunity: education, vocational training, learning a new language, and transnational and cosmopolitan relationships with friends linked to the social representations of the destination cities (Navarrete, 2014: 119), represented in our study by the city of London.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative methodological approach was used in this study, which is based primarily on ethnographic interviews. The aim of the fieldwork was to reconstruct young Spanish women's transnational geographic mobility strategies and employment and reproductive trajectories (domestic and care work). With this in mind, the migration projects of young Spanish women who had migrated to the United Kingdom were analysed. The people interviewed for the study were skilled and unskilled young women and men with different employment backgrounds who had seen their professional prospects deteriorate in Spain and their legitimate aspirations for the future dashed. This study presents accounts of life plans shaped by social, demographic, personal, contextual,

Table 1. Interviews conducted

Sex	Age	Occupation	Qualifications	Years residence	
				London	Birthplace
Female	40	Housewife	Higher Education	6	Spain
Female	32	Interior design	Higher Education	5	Spain
Female	37	Photography production	Advanced training	17	Spain
Female	25	Au Pair	Higher Education	4	Spain
Male	50	Jobless	Advanced training	20	Spain
Female	25	Cultural industries	Higher Education	5	Venezuela
Female	21	Au pair	Student	3	Venezuela
Female	19	Cleaning	Compulsory education	3	Spain
Male	29	Banking	Higher Education	7	Spain
Female	29	Nursery educator	Higher Education	7	Spain
Female	33	Researcher	Higher Education	4	Spain
Female	24	Nursery educator	Higher Education	4	Spain
Female	31	Public policy assessment	Higher Education	6	Spain
Female	24	Clothes shop salesperson	Higher Education	3	Spain
Female	43	Technical NGO	Higher Education	17	Argentina
Female	48	Administrative	Advanced training	25	Spain
Female	33	Cleaning	Compulsory education	10	Ecuador
Male	34	Cleaning	Higher Education	4	Spain
Male	32	Administrative local government	Higher Education	18	Spain
Female	24	Architecture internships	Higher Education	3	Spain
Male	30	Video game design	Higher Education	4	Spain
Male	24	Building	Compulsory education	5	Ecuador
Male	31	Researcher	Higher Education	5	Spain
Male	25	Au Pair	Advanced training	4	Spain
Female	25	Waitress	Higher Education	3	Spain
Female	26	Au Pair	Advanced training	4	Spain
Female	38	Unemployed	Compulsory education	3	Ecuador
Female	18	Au Pair	Compulsory education	4	Spain
Female	39	Home nursing	Advanced training	18	Spain
Female	39	Chef	Advanced training	5	Dominican Republic
Female	26	Administrative	Advanced training	15	Ecuador
Male	27	Aeronautical engineering consultant	Higher Education	4	Spain
Female	22	Au pair	Advanced training	3	Spain
Female	29	Accounting	Higher Education	4	Spain
Male	28	Agronomy company technician	Higher Education	5	Spain
Female	32	Telecommunications engineer	Higher Education	3	Spain
Female	26	Student	Student	2	Spain
Female	33	Social worker	Higher Education	6	Spain
Female	24	Nurse	Higher Education	2	Spain
Female	31	Fast food industry	Higher Education	4	Spain
Male	39	Administrative	Higher Education	12	Spain
Female	23	Au pair	Higher Education	2	Spain

Source: Own elaboration

cultural, ideological, economic, and political variables that intersect and offer different layers for interpreting and analysing the individual narratives that were gathered. A total of 42 in-depth interviews were conducted in the Greater London area, which has the highest number of Spanish residents in the UK, in two different periods: 2015 and 2017. The key variables of our research were sex, age (18-30 years old), education level, and/or absence of academic qualifications, and length of stay in the United Kingdom (more than 15 years and less than 5 years in London) (see Table 1 at the end of this section). The data supplied by Spaniards by birth and Spaniards by naturalisation were also cross-referenced. It should be noted that in addition to interviewing 7 Spanish au pairs at the time of our research, 6 other women we interviewed had worked as au pairs in London prior to their current jobs. A literature review of research on Spanish migration in Europe and intra-European migration was conducted by searching, identifying, selecting, and examining academic literature on the subject (articles in scientific journals and specialist publications, conference and seminar proceedings, etc.). Access to the field and the informants was gained in several different ways: via personal contacts, organised groups, and social media. The majority of the informants did not know each other. The fieldwork was supplemented with observation and collection of additional relevant data. Informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to the start of the ethnographic fieldwork, and all personal information has been replaced by pseudonyms, as is the norm in social anthropology.

### **3. Spanish au pairs in London: the traditional attribution of care to women and the blurring of the intimate and private spheres**

London has always been part of the Spanish imaginary of modernity, avant-gardism, and freedom. Its status as a global city, its leadership in the international economy, and its central role in the artistic avant-garde and cultural industries have made it a popular destination for Spaniards looking to work, study, or spend time in a society believed to be more democratically open than Spain. The artistic and cultural avant-garde, sexual and reproductive rights such as abortion, the presence of LGBTQ+ communities, and the English teaching market formed part of the cultural and personal imaginary of many young Spanish women, and Spain's accession to the European Union (EU) brought many more opportunities to work as an au pair in the United Kingdom and combine work and study. Since the 2008 economic crisis, this migration flow towards the United Kingdom was reactivated in the context of new Spanish migration to Europe. Meanwhile, over the last 20 years, the domestic work sector in Europe has been characterised by growth, feminisation, a concentration of migrants, and persistently poor working conditions (Andall, 2013; Giordano, 2019), making it a niche for young migrants to enter the labour market, especially as cleaners and au pairs.

By law, au pairs are young foreign women who are housed by receiving families for a maximum period of two years in order to learn English and



improve their knowledge of the country. In the case of young Spanish women in London, they were able to enter the United Kingdom without a visa. The European Agreement on Au Pair Placement<sup>1</sup> states that:

[...] it is advisable to define and standardise, in all member States, the conditions governing such 'au pair' placement.

Considering that 'au pair' placement constitutes in member States an important social problem with legal, moral, cultural and economic implications, which transcends national boundaries and thereby takes on a European complexion.

[...] persons placed 'au pair' belong neither to the student category nor to the worker category but to a special category which has features of both, and [...] therefore it is useful to make appropriate arrangements for them.

Au pairs are meant to be treated as an additional member of their receiving family and receive £70-85 in pocket money each week. They must not be registered in the social security system unless they earn more than the amount stipulated in their contract and they are not entitled to the minimum wage or paid holiday because they are not considered to be employees or domestic workers. Therefore, au pairs are not a professional category on the productive scale (Walby, 2009). The figure of the au pair is indeterminate, distorted, and vague, but the practical functions and services to be provided by au pairs are established contractually between the two parties: the young au pair and the receiving family. The au pair 'is to share the life of the receiving family, while at the same time enjoying a certain degree of independence' (European Agreement, 1969). Articles 8 and 9 of the agreement stipulate that au pairs will receive board and lodging from their receiving families and occupy a separate room, where possible. They must be given sufficient time for language courses and cultural and professional improvement and all necessary accommodations must be made with regard to working hours in this regard. Au pairs must have at least one full free day per week, with at least one of these free days each month being a Sunday and will have full opportunity to participate in religious worship. Article 9 also sets out the tasks that au pairs are expected to perform in the receiving family's home; namely, participation in everyday domestic chores, which must not exceed five hours per day.

In practice, the tasks carried out by au pairs are rendered triply invisible. Firstly, the work that they perform is framed as caregiving within the family setting, which has traditionally been considered a cost-free, altruistic activity

1. European Agreement of 24 November 1969, which approves the annex to the agreement on au pair placement, made in Strasbourg, ratified by instrument of 24 June 1988 (BOE 6 September 1988 and 11 October 1988). (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Resolution of 15 June 1989. BOE no. 152 of 27 June 1989), consulted at: [http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/empleo/anexos/ccarl/2\\_268\\_1.pdf](http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/empleo/anexos/ccarl/2_268_1.pdf) [Consulted: 05 March 2023].



rather than a 'real' job. Here, it is relevant to recall that au pairs are supposed to live "as part of the receiving family" (Búriková, 2006: 101). Secondly, this type of work is associated with affect and moral obligation, making it very difficult to obtain recognition of the labour rights of the people who undertake it, especially if the relationship is viewed as a cultural exchange (Búriková, 2015) or as a task performed as part of a fictitious family relationship. The figure of the au pair is a special category, occupying the categories of student and worker simultaneously but falling into neither. Finally, the work is primarily carried out by young women as part of their 'natural' role according to the cultural assumptions that naturalise this type of work (Comas, 2017; Cox, 2018, Cox and Busch, 2016). Therefore, the figure of the au pair is built on gender inequality, based on the historical practices of a social reality that naturalises care work, and on a relationship of dependence that is asymmetrical in several respects: au pairs live with a foreign family, do not know the language, must be fed by the receiving family but are also asked to participate in daily domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning, looking after children, etc. Once they have been 'placed' in the (fictitious, temporary, contractual) family space, they must rise to two challenges: studying in a new language and performing domestic work that requires certain skills and 'personal intelligence' from them (Kittay, 2019). Au pairs appear to be members of their receiving families, but they are not. They participate in family life but receive pocket money, have a degree of independence and privacy, and must be given breaks to allow them to participate in religious and other activities. The gender order combines here with what is 'natural and expected', permitted, and desirable. However, this is not a job; it is a care activity. As such, au pairs are subject to negotiations between the parties regarding healthcare coverage for the au pair in the event of sickness, pregnancy, or accidents. If healthcare coverage is not available under the national social security system, the competent member of the receiving family must take out health insurance for the au pair (Article 10 of the Agreement, 1969).

Au pairs experience asymmetrical relationships of power and vulnerability within the social space of the receiving families. Before the au pair's stay, the receiving family must have written an invitation letter stating the basic conditions offered to the participant (board, approximate number of working hours, living conditions, free time, and amount of pocket money). This is a requirement stipulated in the legislation, but the accounts of our informants suggest that it is frequently overlooked. In practice, au pairs may perform a long list of domestic tasks, ranging from washing dishes to Hoovering, shopping, and walking or feeding pets, for example. Despite this, au pairs are not workers but domestic assistants, who have been used in recent decades to meet the need for cheap care among middle-class receiving families. In this way, the deregulation of the sexual division of labour and that of the labour market are in patriarchal collusion. The young Spanish women in our study access placements with receiving families due to the effects of a gender divide that determines the assignment of care roles and domestic tasks with their

employers and dependent family members (children). Therefore, it is not only the sexual division of labour but also this gender divide that situate them in a chain of individual commercial exploitation geared towards providing domestic services to receiving families.

Although the aim of this cultural exchange programme is to offer participants an opportunity to improve their English and learn about cultural aspects of life in the United Kingdom, their situation is akin to that of immigrants living in precarious conditions and framed within a hierarchy of class, nationality, and gender, which is in turn channelled by informal employment structures, low status, labour exploitation, and risk of abuse and sexual assault, as some of the women interviewed for the study described. For the receiving families, hiring a man for a care role is not the same as hiring a woman. Gender stereotypes, the sexual division of labour, unspecified flexible schedules, and the flexibility and reduction of benefits promoted by neoliberal policies contribute to the privatisation of public, affordable child support (Stenum, 2011), with figures such as au pairs used to establish and perpetuate these structural dynamics. For the young women in this study, the modes of entry to the labour market in the United Kingdom are a consequence of the way in which professional, sexual and disciplinary hierarchies, positions of power and gender relations (Bourdieu et al, 1998) operate in a coordinated manner within the sex/gender system and care practices. Moreover, they oblige us to reconsider the materiality of au pairs' 'family' life in a private space where they are promised a cultural experience based on learning a new language, which proves almost impossible in practice due to the excessive domestic workload that they are required to take on. The lives of the Spanish au pairs interviewed for this study straddle a fine line between the private (receiving family home) and the public (cultural exchange programme).

An initial inference is that, in today's democratic United Kingdom, the gender order specifically maintains and discriminates against British and foreign women in assigning gender roles and establishing social positions in the labour market and domestic sphere via the figure of the au pair. This ambiguous figure, which is blurred around the edges and straddles the occupational and family spheres, draws au pairs into a complex apparatus in which their status as immigrants is made still more precarious. Indeed, it reinforces the gender norms and order relating to the division of labour in the domestic sphere, thus contributing to the construction of hierarchies of gender, social class, 'race', nationality, and social status between women from rich countries in the Global North and women from the Global South and Eastern and Southern Europe; women who serve as cheap, precarious, migrant labour. Meanwhile, placement agencies paint a harmonious picture of the au pair experience and portray the process as an exchange of experiences and family immersion, playing down the care and social reproduction workload and leaving the young women in an even more delicate position (Hess and Puckhaber, 2004: 65). These 'de-responsibilising' forms (Brugère, 2011/2021) of amoral

neoliberalism affect individuals' lives, transforming them into what Wendy Brown (2007) terms 'neoliberal constructivism', which reorients individuals to become self-inventors or self-entrepreneurs. As we have seen, mercantile rationale pervades every sector of society and placement agencies play a private role in redirecting interested potential participants to a cultural exchange programme with no apparent negative consequences for their lives. However, the young women in our study did not experience an equitable relocation and the empathy and solidarity of their hosts, who had told them that they would be treated as 'family' and as 'big sisters', declined over time. Similarly, the caring tasks carried out by au pairs inevitably evoke the debate around affects, affectivity, and affective work, which have been so extensively discussed in recent years that an 'affective turn' has been identified in the scientific literature (Massumi, 2002; Clough and Halley, 2007, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2011). A blurring of the boundaries between the intimate and the private (Brugère, 2011/2021: 104) occurs as transitory bonds, domestic work, intra-European migration by young Spanish women, commodification of care, and the interests of middle-class families in London intersect. In other words, the Au Pair Programme is an extension of the amoral chains of neoliberalism, whereby women's labour and skills are used in an instrumental manner because of the traditional attribution to women of care, dependencies (emotional, affective, caring, good mother, daughter, and big sister), and affects. These are surrounded by a persuasive language of 'kinship' that mystifies and overlooks the value of women's labour productivity and refuses to relinquish references to sexed gender.

In short, the Au Pair Programme maintains the gender order, which exploits moral sentiments anchored in the world of work (tedious, repetitive, constant, necessary domestic tasks) that serve the interests of a historical 'family order' that is preferably heterosexual, European, middle or upper class, and urban. Care-related employment is growing rapidly in many economies and increasing numbers of families (especially middle-class households) and individuals find themselves obliged to negotiate commoditised forms of care for themselves, their children, elderly relatives, and vulnerable adults (Cox, 2013; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Lutz, 2011). It is important to note that the growth of the care sector is linked not only to an increasingly unstable labour market and cuts to social policies, but also to the naturalisation of care, a persistent failure to question the sexual division of labour within couples, and power relations within domestic groups. As feminism reminds us, the family became the main site of patriarchal dominance because women perform labour required for the daily reproduction of their family members for free within it, paying what has been termed a 'reproductive tax'. Moreover, within the family, men exploit women's love and care, giving back far less than they have received (Cobo, 2008: 288). Of course, it is men who have benefited from this system. As we will see later, the social imposition of the ideal of the 'good mother', who must engage in intensive mothering, places responsibility for this type of parenting and guilt when it proves impossible on women's shoulders. Under this model, men are freed from this heavy moral burden while their children

are cared for by an army of young migrants with a flexible, deregulated role that exposes them to the worst possible working conditions.

#### **4. The tensions between gender imperatives and imaginaries in care work among Spanish migrants in London**

As we noted at the start of the paper, a greater understanding of the changes taking place in migration and gender regimes requires an analysis of the way in which gender imperatives are redefined rather than challenged through migration, thus preserving tensions between traditional gender norms and imaginaries of equality and between continuity and change. It is vital that we grasp the relationship between the migrant division of labour and the changes and discontinuities affecting the traditional sexual division of labour. This study is based on the premise that recent Spanish migration to London takes place amid tensions between patriarchal gender imperatives and imaginaries of gender equality, intersected by a crisis of care and social and cultural reproduction in the context of urban intra-European migration. Against a backdrop of neoliberal policies, which prioritise social cuts and a slimmed-down welfare state, the provision of care to middle and upper-class families is externalised by hiring home carers or contracting the services of care agencies. Similarly, companies outsource cleaning to migrant workers. For many young Spaniards, working as an au pair or office cleaner offers an initial opportunity to enter the labour market in London from the bottom. This entails accepting precarious employment, which intersects with tensions between traditional gender norms that naturalise care and assign it to women and more emancipatory imaginaries of gender that raise the possibility of equal opportunities between men and women.

The case of Yolanda, a young Spanish woman who had been living in London for two years at the time of the interview, is illustrative here. Yolanda is from a middle-class family in Barcelona. Her parents had attended university, and she had completed a degree in humanities, although she had never worked in the field and her work experience in Spain was as a clothes shop assistant. She travelled to London to live and work as an au pair with a Spanish family. Her working conditions were not agreed on with her receiving family prior to her arrival, so she ended up working longer hours than she should have. She likes children and believes that her work as an au pair has helped her perfect her caring skills for when she has her own children. She thinks that she will be a responsible mother and do a good job of raising her future children. Yolanda's story reveals how class distinctions change transnationally; she found that despite living and working with a family who were known to her and from a similar class, she was treated as a domestic worker whose task was to care for the family's children. She also worked for more than five hours per day, which is common among au pairs. The initial agreements regarding working hours and tasks are fluid and adapted to the needs of each household, which results in far longer working hours than those agreed. Yolanda's account

reveals her attachment to the idea of becoming a parent, establishing a clear link between the naturalisation of care as an au pair and the possibility of future motherhood. The woman/mother metonymy is a perfect fit in a model centred around care and gender imperatives. Indeed, Yolanda believes that her experience as an au pair will help her be a caring, 'good mother' in future. The gendered bourgeois order that assigns care, childrearing, and concern for others to women has allowed her to carry out her activities as an au pair in a private, domestic space assigned to the women of the house: the au pair and the 'host mother'. As we showed in a previous paper (Cortés, Moncó y Barbosa, 2021), the gender order is imposed on women's migration projects through ideas of present or future maternity, drawing on an old patriarchal norm to fuel a new neoliberal model of the 'good mother' based on intensive mothering. This model of female identity is underpinned by an instinctive understanding of childrearing, which is viewed as being the responsibility of women, who are relegated to the home as a result (Alzard, 2018). What is interesting about this shift in the model is that it is presented to society as a matter of free choice within gender imaginaries, despite being socially prescriptive and based on a gender imperative. For example, the relationship established between 'sexed gender' and the idea of the good mother/carer favours the modern patriarchy (Pateman, 1988) and the bourgeois conventionalism of the heterosexual family 'pushes women to take on certain roles and be blamed when they are unable to sustain them' (Brugère, 2011/2021:114). This gender dissonance, or in other words, the tension arising between the persistence of a traditional model of male provider/female carer and the emergence of an equal, co-participatory model, is used on both sides by social actors, especially migrants, provided that gender norms are respected. This constitutes one of the key elements of the new patriarchal order: the malleability of its norms and requirements, which has been termed 'metastability', or change without real change (De Miguel, 2015; Walter, 2010; Wolf & Reynoso, 1992; Greer, 2000, 2004).

However, this model is built on tension and there are also examples of women who challenge and question it based on their own agency. Paula's case offers an illuminating example. She had been living in London for three months when she was interviewed. From a working-class background, Paula had an intermediate vocational training certificate. Her father was a lorry driver and her mother an unemployed hairdresser. Her employment background comprised periods of unemployment (five years) and exploitation in the agro-industry sector, where she worked 14-hour days and made 600 euros per month. She had also worked as a waitress, earning 300 euros per month for very long hours with no contract. To avoid burdening her family, she left her village and went to work in a shop in Madrid, but her salary only just covered the high rent on her flat in the capital. She would have liked to have studied and worked in Spain in order to pay to train as a personal stylist. This is what prompted her to move to London. Personal factors (desire for independence, acknowledgement of her parents' difficult financial situation, generational disenchantment with the employment opportunities available in Spain, and

desire to move abroad to find new social and economic opportunities and learn English for her future profession) combined with her structural circumstances in Spain (lack of work, weak household economy, prior migration in her family) to encourage her to register as an au pair in London as an easy way of entering the labour market. When she was in London, her mother fell ill, and her father and grandmother began to insist that she return to Spain to care for her. However, Paula deemed her mother to have sufficient support from her father and grandmother. Gender imperatives led to calls for Paula to take up her place as a good daughter, imposing immobility on her by assigning her to caring tasks, but she countered this with a gender imaginary based on her autonomy and mobility, regardless of the care needs of her family. Similarly, Begoña is a 39-year-old professional carer for terminally ill people in London, where this work is very well-paid in comparison with Spain. She has been living in London for the last 15 years after coming to the city to work, learn English and study, and undertaking specialist training as a carer. She did not plan to return to Spain despite her sister falling ill, requiring special care, and moving into a care home. She believes that the public health system and the Spanish welfare state should provide care, not family members.

Despite au pairs being part of a cultural exchange programme that is intended to offer participants an opportunity to improve their language skills and learn about cultural aspects of life in London, their actual situation is more akin to that of an immigrant as it is framed by hierarchies of class, nationality and gender, which are channelled through informal employment structures, low status, labour exploitation and risk of abuse and sexual assault. Helia's experience is helpful in illustrating these blurred boundaries, which are so easily crossed that the figure of the au pair is completely distorted:

Until one day I said, that's it, I'm not cleaning anymore. Because it's not my job, my job is to clear up after the children. For example, if I give them a shower and they get the floor wet, I'll clean it, and if I cook for them or for myself, I'll clean the kitchen. I've got no problem with that. But as for cleaning the microwave, fridge, oven... no, it's not my job. I got really angry, and she understood. Another thing is meals; I mean, they go shopping when they feel like it, any au pair will tell you that. Sometimes you go to the fridge and there's nothing there for you, or for the children, or for anyone. So, I have to go and buy something from the money they give me each week. I have to use that to pay for public transport, my studies and food, as well as all my other expenses, and it's not enough even though my housing is paid for. (Helia, 18 years old, au pair, London, 2017)

Au pairs are affected by unclear boundaries and required to perform tasks that are necessary to maintain domestic order but are not specified in advance, resulting in confusion between the role of au pair/big sister and family functioning and dynamics. These situations oblige young women to draw on their integrity and material resources to ensure the upkeep of their temporary homes. To explore a central theme in the experiences of au pairs in London,



we will return to Paula's account. As we saw earlier, au pairs often change the receiving family due to the labour exploitation and sexual violence to which they are exposed. As Paula explained, the father of her second receiving family sexually assaulted her and she was aware of cases of sexual abuse affecting at least three more au pairs, which had gone unpunished. The exercise of sexual violence against women is situated within a history of male dominance (Bourdieu et al, 1998) and a male moral model of individual rights (Tobío, 2012: 405), allowing these practices to be condemned as a clear violation of women's human rights for decades. There is an extensive body of scientific literature on the issue of male harassment of domestic workers or servants, which has identified the way in which the female figure of the au pair is portrayed in the British cultural imagination:

The idea of au pairs as sexually available and desirable appears to have great tenacity in the British imagination. There seems to be something about the combination of gender, youth and location within the family home that positions au pairs as willing and available sexual partners. Their slight foreignness, different but not dangerous, seems to add to this. (Cox, 2007: 286-287).

In her research, Cox explores the images 'expected' and conveyed by agencies hiring young women and the stereotypes that circulate about each nationality, with different nationalities deemed more or less sexually attractive to British men. She explains that au pairs are portrayed as 'objects of desire' (McClintock, 2015) rather than as poor emigrants or vital childcare providers. These depictions contribute to shaping the context in which au pairs experience life and work in the United Kingdom (Cox, 2007: 288). As a general rule, sexual assaults are not reported, and the most immediate solution is to change family. This is an ancient, structural form of violence that is deeply rooted and visible across both social and political spheres. It is legitimated by a sexual contract that views women as men's property and is employed to send a warning to all women who leave their homes, go out to work, move around, migrate, and live or seek to live outside men's control. Paradoxically, violence in the domestic sphere is "a key tool in relegating women to the patriarchal home" (Cobo, 2011: 144). It is part of a patriarchal order that colludes with capitalism and neoliberalism to find scapegoats: excluded, marginalised, poor or migrant women that serve as cannon fodder for sexual violence and gender-based killings.

## 5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, new Spanish migration comprises a variety of skill levels, although the narrative of skilled migration has become hegemonic in discussions of new Spanish migration since the 2008 financial crisis. This is relevant because the construction of an overarching narrative that emphasises some characteristics and conceals others causes the experiences of part of the migrant



population to be overlooked and exacerbates their powerlessness, as their lack of visibility is used in their countries of origin and destination to justify depriving them of political and social rights (Brexit negotiations, lack of social security contributions for au pairs, loss of healthcare cover, obligation to apply for the right to vote abroad). Young Spanish women migrating to work as au pairs in London are a prototypical case. They have a higher education level than the Spanish women who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s and are driven by the need to improve their English language skills. The pressure to speak English fluently and become more competitive in an increasingly precarious market is a key factor in the migration of these young women, who view the Au Pair Programme as an easy way of establishing themselves in London, as they are able to live and work in the same place. In this sense, their migration projects are characterised by intimacy, invisibility, and ambiguity; by a fixed duration; and by being located between work and study categories. The fact that several of the women interviewed in our research who have now returned to Spain or are still working in London had previously worked as au pairs indicates that this figure is just another stage in the geographical and labour mobility trajectories of many young women. The ambiguity of this role, the ease of settling in initially (you live where you work), the apparent lightness of the workload as it is considered more of a student than a worker, and the possibility of practising the English language soon give way to long working hours, low pay, and a lack of language learning.

Despite the fact that au pairing is considered a cultural exchange figure, au pairs do not fall under the 'skilled migrant' category, which means that they and their experiences are rendered invisible. This invisibility contributes to concealing violations of their labour rights. On the productive scale, they are not considered to be workers despite forming part of the workforce by performing domestic and reproductive tasks. The naturalisation of care, which is the result of gender inequality and the relationship established between care, affects, and moral obligation, makes it very difficult to recognise the labour rights of the people performing this work. The sexual division of labour situates au pairs in a chain of individual commercial exploitation geared towards providing domestic services to receiving families. As a result, intra-European migration by young Spanish women proves to be a transfer of cheap labour for reproductive and care work within the neoliberal logic of supplying domestic services to middle- and upper-class British families. To ensure that these services can be delivered, a vague figure with flexible boundaries such as that of au pairs is required. In reality, the figure of the au pair is an ad hoc, liminal, intermediate construction configured in such a way as to be 'between' categories, spaces, and bounds responding to families' needs, labour market provision, and a lack of regulation and resources from the state. This deep-rooted care crisis is caused and sustained by a patriarchal, capitalist, neoliberal system that legally exploits cheap, young, foreign, and usually female labour. Young migrant women are the ideal candidates to work as au pairs. It is an activity that requires no qualifications (unlike the role of nanny), so women

are preferred because the gender order constructs an imaginary in which a lack of education is offset by 'gender essentialism' as a result of the naturalisation of care. When something is taken as a given, it prevents us from seeing the effort it entails: au pairs can look after children without having trained to do so; they can be like family without being family; they can work without being considered workers. Moreover, they are entirely at the whim of other people who hire them, pay them for their caregiving, set tasks and schedules with them, and, ultimately, are hierarchically superior to them. This is why there is such a wide range of experiences in the young women's relationships with their receiving families where care, migration, and gender form a triad that intersects with power every step of the way.

The naturalisation of care and its attribution to women, the cultural metonymy that conflates the maternal and the feminine and makes care instinctive (and therefore lacking in effort and determination), and the functions involved in care reinforce the patriarchal, neoliberal, and racial order in our societies. The intersection of these different orders blurs the 'women' subject to such an extent that they are practically and symbolically interchangeable in contexts of transnational migration. The question is not that a specific individual wish or be able to provide care, but that all women are able to and must provide care, forming a cheap pool of labour available to work as carers regardless of their studies, training, or initial aspirations. This is also why being an au pair has become a destination rather than an option for young migrant women. Paradoxically, these intersections of power remain hidden by the imaginary of gender equality and the social, political, and personal opportunities on offer.

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