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# Care in crisis: Au pairing during a global pandemic

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## Abstract

This article considers how the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a remarkable social experiment in the market for migrant 'au pair' labour in Australia. As has been illustrated in broader accounts of the pandemic's 'care crisis', the global health emergency cracked open underlying fault lines, as capacities for social reproduction were stretched to breaking point. At the same time, the pandemic deepened the precarity of temporary migrants as they lost jobs and incomes, experienced housing insecurity, and were excluded from state emergency relief measures. Building on interdisciplinary feminist literatures on gender, work, migration, and social reproduction, this article adds to emerging scholarship on the growing phenomenon of au pairing in Australia to examine drivers of demand, migrant mobilities in and out of au pair labour, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the market. While au pairing emerged during the pandemic as a form of survival work where migrants had little negotiating power, the market ultimately shifted when emergency childcare measures were withdrawn, migrant labour became scarce, and visa restrictions on working hours were relaxed. In addition to providing new empirical insights into au pairing in Australia, the findings underscore the constitutive role of law and policy settings in shaping the distributions and divisions of reproductive labour, which can both consolidate and also challenge broader gendered care norms and distributions and the social reproduction bargain.

**Keywords:** Au pair; migrant workers; domestic work; care work; temporary labour migration; social reproduction; reproductive labour; women's work; pandemic; COVID-19

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*Especially when you know the borders were shutting and the people were kind of torn between should I stay here, or should I go back home? And then so many families that previously relied on the au pairs, they were kind of left with nothing. ... I feel like a lot of exploitation started happening as soon as the pandemic kind of took hold. Just because people were maybe desperate for work, because they couldn't go home because the situation there was even worse than here. Yeah, I just feel like you're kind of on your own.* (Anthea)

The COVID-19 pandemic put an intense and unprecedented spotlight on infrastructures and capacities of social reproduction as they were stretched to breaking point (Bahn et al 2020; Camilletti and Nesbitt-Ahmed 2022; Chatzidakis et al 2020; Kabeer et al 2021). Public institutions vital to social reproduction such as childcare centres and schools were forced to shut to slow the spread of the virus, while others such as aged care facilities went into lockdown. Meanwhile, lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing

requirements shut down economies and pushed a range of professional workers into indefinite conditions of 'working from home'. Thus, 'the pandemic ... abruptly revealed the fictitious nature of old and new dichotomies compartmentalising productive and non-productive/reproductive work, times and temporalities' (Mezzadri 2022, 385). These increased pressures upon households to care, support, and homeschool infants and children and those with disabilities, without the usual relief from public and privatised market services as well as other informal stop-gap care measures such as grandparent care (Gulland 2020; McCutcheon and Tugwell 2020), fell disproportionately on women and mothers, who were also more likely to lose their jobs in feminised service and care industries (Risse and Jackson 2021; Wood et al 2021). These pressures upon the means of social reproduction dragged on for not days or weeks but intermittently and cyclically for months and years. The strenuous and protracted nature of these gendered strains across social classes induced, to borrow Maud Perrier's words, a 'hypervisibility of childcare in public discourse' (Perrier 2022, 115).

At the same time as the pandemic's well-documented 'crisis of care', it also laid bare the racialised and securitised boundaries of nation states, halted taken-for-granted mobilities, and generated new forms of exclusions and inclusions. International migration came to a standstill, and lockdown orders enacted restrictions on internal movement within states. However, low-wage (and typically migrant and racialised) workers in industries critical to social reproduction such as health care, care, food provision and delivery services, transport, supermarkets, factories, agriculture, and meat processing plants were allowed (and in some cases, compelled) to return to work (Anderson et al 2021; Reid et al 2021). While praised as 'essential workers', their jobs remained low-paid and dangerous (particularly given disproportionate risks of COVID-19 transmission), with insufficient access to public health care, sick leave, job security, and other protections (Pandey et al 2021). At the same time, other migrants lost work without access to justice for unpaid wages or the benefit of social protections (Chan and Piper 2022; Foley and Piper 2021; Rao et al 2021). The pandemic therefore 'underscore[d] the contradictory position of being symbolically categorised as essential but made to be treated as indispensable and undervalued' (Pandey et al 2021, 1288).

In the settler-state of Australia, international borders were firmly closed indefinitely with the onset of the pandemic, shutting out non-citizens – and in some cases – citizens alike (Jefferies et al 2021). So-called 'temporary' migrants were ushered to leave. In a now infamous speech, then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated 'Australia must focus on its citizens and its residents to ensure that we can maximise the economic supports that we have' and told 'visitors' to 'go home' (Gibson and Moran 2020; The Hon David Coleman, Former Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs MP 2020). Unlike some jurisdictions that extended emergency relief much more widely, 'temporary' migrants (Mares 2017) such as international students and working holiday makers were excluded from the state's emergency relief measures (Berg et al 2020). Human rights advocates widely documented experiences of hunger and homelessness as migrants lost work in droves (Berg et al 2020; Clibborn and Wright 2020; Coffey et al 2021; Farbenblum and Berg 2020; Hastings et al 2023; Morris et al 2023), while media reports depicted long lines of students and backpackers outside soup kitchens and charities hoping to collect warm meals and small amounts of food (Bennett et al 2022; Henriques-Gomes 2020). The pandemic therefore activated a new kind of 'pandemic nationalism' as it brought about 'important novelties to the notion of membership' (such as for 'essential workers') while also 'reinforc[ing] exclusionary trends [about] national identity and the perception of external Others' (Triandafyllidou 2023, 2).

Building upon interdisciplinary feminist literatures on gender, work, migration, care, and social reproduction (Fudge 2012; Hill et al 2017; Kofman 2012; Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Parreñas 2015; Piper and Lee 2016; Yeates 2005), this article considers how the twin

'crisis of care' alongside the racialised exclusion of temporary migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic coalesced to produce new conditions in the provision of gendered migrant care and domestic work in Australia. Although official statistics are rare, anecdotal accounts suggest au pairing is a booming industry, even despite deepening border securitisation globally ('About AuPairWorld: We Bring Au Pairs and Host Families Together' 2023; Pavlou 2021, 29–30, 42–3). Yet, until recently, 'research on au pairs has been sparse [and] concentrated on particular locations (particularly the UK and more recently the Nordic countries)' (Cox 2015b, 236). Writing in 2015, legal scholar Laurie Berg noted 'an almost complete dearth of critical scholarship' on au pairing in Australia (Berg 2015, 194). This article therefore joins a small but burgeoning body of scholarship drawing attention to au pairing in Australia (Berg 2015; Berg and Meagher 2018; Hamilton et al 2024; Oishi and Ono 2020; Yodanis and Lauer 2005) to address empirical gaps, including by focusing on perspectives from parents as employers (as well as au pairs) and considering the global pandemic as an illuminating case study of shifts in the axes of the 'care diamond' in action (Razavi 2007, 2015).

The pandemic offers some insight into the country's hidden reliance on low-wage migrant workers, as well as highlighting the underlying structural and gendered inequalities in the provision of care and social reproduction as systems and infrastructures were stretched to their breaking points. The article considers what this unprecedented event reveals about the role of law and policy in shaping – and shifting – the social reproduction bargain (Fudge and Mundlak 2022; Pearson, 1997). As care needs intensified and temporary migrants were without work, the pandemic triggered a remarkable social experiment in the market for au pair migrant labour. Migrant au pairs (like other invisible and feminised 'essential workers') emerged as a 'reserve army of care labour' (Farris 2015) who homeschooled children and cared for infants while childcare centres and schools were closed. Yet at the same time, they were rendered doubly invisible in public discourse due to both their non-recognition as workers and their exclusion from emergency relief measures as non-citizens and temporary migrants.

## Background and theoretical literature

Migrant au pair labour is an illustration of new 'international divisions of reproductive labour' (Glenn, 1992; Parreñas 2000) under post-Fordist capitalism (Hamilton et al 2024; Parreñas 2014). Feminist scholarship on social reproduction highlights that reproductive labour (such as but not limited to care and domestic work) does not simply 'maintain[] life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally' (Brenner and Laslett, 1991, 314) but is also crucial to the sustaining of labour power and the means of production under capitalism as well as the reproduction of capitalist norms and ideologies such as constructions of 'motherhood' and the 'family' (Bakker 2007).

Despite escalating care needs, welfare states are withdrawing from once-central roles in the direct provisioning of social reproduction (Brennan et al 2012; Castles et al 2010; Fraser, 1994). One form of outsourcing is the routine use of migration regimes to recruit care and domestic workers (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Pavlou 2021; Shamir 2011; Williams 2014). While au pairing is 'always imagined to be outside [of global care] chains' and instead considered to be 'privileged and temporary' (Cox and Busch 2018, 62, 8), emerging critical literature challenges the distinctions between au pairing and other forms of migrant domestic work (Berg and Meagher 2018; Clinic et al 2018; Cox 2015a; Cox and Busch 2018; Parreñas 2014). Official 'au pair' visa schemes exist in Western Europe (e.g. Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands) and Nordic countries (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) as well as the United States (Calleman 2010; Chuang 2013; Kintominas 2024). Given that EU nations can freely move within the EU, au pair visa

schemes in Europe primarily create migration routes for non-EU citizens, and there is a strong correlation between restrictive border practices and the introduction of bespoke au pair schemes (Pavlou 2021, 30, 42–43). Formal au pair schemes typically have restrictive criteria for entry (age limits, unmarried, no dependants/pregnancies), require au pairs to lodge contracts with authorities, regulate weekly wages ('pocket money'), exclude au pairs from labour law protection as 'non-workers', and tie visas to staying with the employer/ sponsor (Kintominas 2024).

The settler-state of Australia has historically had a peripheral status in the expansive 'global care chains' literature (Brennan et al 2017). The perceived lack of migrant domestic work in Australia is attributed to the country's highly resilient model of the male breadwinner/female home-maker sexual contract and related norms about domesticity, motherhood, and non-delegable duties of motherly care, as well as strict immigration controls for 'non-skilled' migration and national mythologies of egalitarianism (Baxter 2005; Daiger von Gleichen and Seeleib-Kaiser 2018; Higman 2002). Unlike counterparts in Europe and the United States, Australia does not have a formal 'au pair' visa. However, au pairing is arguably more surreptitiously linked to the country's working holiday visas and student visa programmes (Berg 2015; Hamilton et al 2024; Kintominas 2024). No statutory instrument, modern award, or judicial decision has clarified au pairs' legal status as employees, though the national labour inspectorate has made some faint remarks that 'au pairs are often employees too' (Fair Work Ombudsman 2023). The rise of au pairing can be linked to dramatic expansion of working holiday and student visa programmes in recent decades (Wright and Clibborn 2017), lack of affordability and accessibility of formal Early Childhood Education and Care, and increasing public discourse emphasising the importance of women's workforce participation and productivity while cultural norms around motherly in-home care remain stubbornly intact (Adamson 2017; Hamilton et al 2024).

## Method

In this qualitative study, interviews were conducted with 26 temporary migrants who had previously or were currently working as an au pair in Australia, as well as 6 parent employers (n=32). Interviews took place between August 2020 and September 2021, overlapping during the time of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Ethics Approval from UNSW Research Office [HC200210]).

Migrants who work au pairs are a 'hard-to-reach' or 'hidden' population due to their transience, precarity, and mobility as temporary migrants (Düvell et al 2009; Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2020), their invisibility as domestic workers in the 'private' sphere (Hatton 2017), their isolation from others in their industry, and limited connection with traditional unions, worker, and migrant advocacy groups (Singha 2019, 43). Migrants on precarious visas may be reluctant to speak to researchers where contact is made due to perceived, or real, risks to their visa status or safety. Similarly, employers of domestic workers are often 'uncomfortable talking about ... [paying] someone to perform housework in the private home' (Kristensen and Ravn 2015, 733) and so very little research globally – and none in Australia – has focused on parents as employers (cf in the UK Cox and Busch 2018).

Given these challenges, opportunistic/emergent sampling (Patton 2002, 240; Suri 2011, 71) and snowball sampling (Noy 2008) were used to recruit participants, in particular by using social media (particularly au pair and related Facebook groups). While social media facilitated access to a hard-to-reach population, there are clear limitations. For example, active members in au pairing and other Facebook groups are more likely to have positive affiliations and experiences with au pairing, those who have exited the sector are less

**Table 1.** Demographic profiles of temporary migrants working as au pairs (n=26)

| Pseudonym | Gender | Nationality | Age | Visa |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Alejandra* | F | Latin America | 22–25 | Student |
| *Beatriz* | F | Latin America | 30+ | Student |
| *Caterina* | F | Eastern Europe | 26–29 | Working holiday |
| *Diana* | F | Western Europe | 30+ | Working holiday |
| *Eloise* | F | Eastern Europe | 26–29 | Student; Working holiday |
| *Francis* | F | Eastern Europe | 22–25 | Student; Working holiday |
| *Gina* | F | Latin America | 26–29 | Bridging; Student |
| *Helen* | F | North America | 26–29 | Temporary activity; Student |
| *Inka* | F | Western Europe | 22–25 | Working holiday |
| *Jill* | F | North America | 22–25 | Working holiday |
| *Kevin* | M | Western Europe | 22–25 | Working holiday |
| *Liana* | F | Western Europe | 26–29 | Working holiday |
| *Mary* | F | Western Europe | 22–25 | Working holiday |
| *Nina* | F | Western Europe | 22–25 | Student; Working holiday |
| *Olivia* | F | Latin America | 26–29 | Student |
| *Rachel* | F | North America | 22–25 | Student |
| *Sally* | F | Western Europe | 26–29 | Working holiday |
| *Ursula*[*] | F | Western Europe | 18–21 | Working holiday |
| *Vanessa*[*] | F | Western Europe | 18–21 | Working holiday |
| *Wendy* | F | North America | 22–25 | Partner; Student |
| *Xanthe* | F | Western Europe | 18–21[**] | Working holiday |
| *Yasmin* | F | Latin America | 30+ | Bridging; Working holiday |
| *Anthea* | F | Western Europe | 18–21 | Working holiday |
| *Clara* | F | Latin America | 30+ | Student |
| *Francesca* | F | North America | 30+ | Student |
| *Henrietta* | F | North America | 18–21 | Working holiday |

[*]Conducted as a joint interview at request of participants.
[**]Interview took place several years after the interviewee worked as an au pair – indicated age is the participant's age at the time of commencing their first au pair placement.

likely to remain in groups, and more isolated migrants and parents are less likely to be members.

Interviews were semi-structured, with a prepared list of interview themes and topics but remained flexible to follow lines of inquiry that emerged (Brikmann 2020). Data were analysed via contemporaneous reflective journaling and then using thematic analysis using multiple rounds of deductive, inductive, and axial coding (Braun and Clarke 2021). Reflecting the highly gendered nature of care work, almost all interviewees were women.

**Table 2.** Demographic profiles of parents/employers (n=6)

| Pseudonym | Gender | Nationality | Visa |
|-----------|--------|-------------|------|
| Penelope | F | Australia + other | Citizen |
| Zoe | F | Australia | Citizen |
| Brianna | F | Other | Permanent resident |
| Deidre | F | Australia + other | Citizen |
| Eileen | F | Australia | Citizen |
| Gabrielle | F | Other | Permanent resident |

Although some temporary migrants were very young, aged between 18 and 21 (n=5), most were slightly older, between the ages of 22 and 25 (n=9), 26 and 29 (n=7), or 30 and above (n=5). More au pairs interviewed were from Western Europe (n=11), but some were from Latin America (n=6), North America (n=6), and Eastern Europe (n=3). Therefore, although popular depictions of au pairing in the Australian media tend to assume au pairs are overwhelmingly from Western Europe (Hamilton et al 2024), this study encountered au pairs from other regions; however, I was unable to recruit migrants from Asian or South Asian backgrounds (cf Oishi 2022; Oishi and Ono 2020). Almost all migrants were on temporary visas, but in addition to working holiday visas, student visas were common. Parents were not asked detailed demographic questions but were asked their visa/ citizenship status. Further demographic profiles of au pairs and parents are set out in Tables 1 and 2. Given the nature of qualitative research and the small sample size, it is not possible to draw broader conclusions about the representativeness of interviewees (parents or au pairs) in relation to the wider population.

## Setting the scene: demands for au pair care prior to the pandemic

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, parents described experiences of care overload, work–life conflict, and the insufficiency of public care systems to meet care needs. This was particularly the case for women working 'non-standard' hours and in demanding professional careers. Au pairing therefore emerged as a strategy for (some) women to reconcile the competing demands of intensive mothering (Ennis 2014) and as 'ideal workers' (Acker 1990), as well as to overcome gaps and insufficiencies in formal care. In these ways, interviewees described unmet needs and strains upon social reproduction in terms of 'depletion' and crisis (Perrier 2022; Rai et al 2014). For example, Zoe was a front-line healthcare worker who worked 'incredibly irregular hours' including during the night and on weekends. She felt that 'the government does basically a completely terrible job of anything to do with childcare' and experienced how 'the daycare situation . . . was dire'. She recalled:

> honestly . . . must have been on 50 or 60 daycare lists and I just couldn't find anywhere to put my kids . . . you're faced with . . . forced to be a stay-at-home parent? Which for me would have been my absolute fucking nightmare.

Another parent, Eileen, also worked long and unpredictable hours and travelled frequently for her work, living away from home for extended periods. She explained, 'our jobs have both always demanded that we [my partner and I] can't leave work until everything's done. So we were never going to be reliable enough to pick up from daycare'. Because she felt

that 'we really felt like we didn't have that much of a choice. You know, we sort of felt like we had to get an au pair. Otherwise . . . how are we going to survive?'.

At the same time, not all mothers interviewed worked outside of the home. Brianna, who was a stay-at-home parent, found having au pair care important because she struggled with isolation and postnatal depression, compounded by her husband working long hours and having 'no family around' as an immigrant:

> not only did I need help, but it was nice to have an adult in the house even if there was a 10 plus year age gap between us . . . I think it helps with postnatal depression and just keep me a bit more sane.

The demanding nature of infant care and insufficiency of formal childcare services were compounded by uneven intrahousehold gendered distributions of care and other household labour (Hess and Puckhaber 2004, 76). For example, mothers were typically in charge of recruiting, onboarding, and managing au pairs. Zoe described how 'although I was obviously married, I was functionally alone' given the hours and amount of travel her partner did for his job. Thus, hiring an au pair 'rarely challenges the gendered division of reproductive labour, and may in fact cement it, as the work of childcare and housework becomes more invisible to fathers in au-pairing households' (Cox and Busch 2018, 156, 155). Au pairing care was also sought after when other (gendered) informal care, such as grandparent care (see, e.g. Hamilton et al 2022), was unavailable because parents had moved overseas or interstate away from family and other support networks.

Desires for au pair care were also informed by cultural norms favouring full-time in-home, familial care, particularly for very young children and infants. Some mothers expressed strong cultural or normative preferences for in-home care that would be most similar to care by a stay-at-home mother. As a form of round-the-clock familial in-home care and domestic help, au pairing assisted women to meet these expectations of 'intensive mothering' (Macdonald, 1998; Sekeráková Búriková 2021). For example, Deidre liked having a 'second mum' to help her manage her parenting load:

> having an au pair was a way to only get the best, best moments with my kids. If I wanted to give them the bath I could, but if I was too tired, instead of just yelling at them because they don't want to wash their hair, I could just get the au pair to do it and as soon as they are out, play with them and have a good time. It was a way for me to get more in my life, of what I wanted, instead of just doing a lot of chores and not having energy for anything else.

Other women described how it meant they could keep their house cleaner, someone could give their children closer or undivided attention for activities and help with homework, or there would be more nutritious food served at meal times, thus meeting norms and high expectations about parenting that remained firmly their responsibility.

For some parents, au pairs were important to help 'plug gaps' in care, supporting with variable and logistical care work and running the household. For example, Zoe did not rely on au pairing as a complete childcare solution as she also had a combination of nannies, formal childcare, and after-school care. However, au pairs provided out-of-hours and flexible care. Her au pairs' work focused on the beginning and end of the day and 'non-standard' working hours: 'get [the children] dressed, take them to school or daycare, and then do pick up, make them dinner and bath'. Nonetheless, even with these less-comprehensive duties, it 'actually starts getting you to that 30 hours, or whatever it is, pretty quickly' (Zoe).

Parents were also clearly motivated by cost and the broader regulation of the childcare market, including their (in)eligibility for childcare subsidies. As one au pair put it: 'here in

Australia, everyone depends so much on au pair[s]. It is the easiest way to get childcare. Because childcare here is so expensive' (Caterina). Almost all parents interviewed had combined family incomes were too high to be eligible for childcare subsidies under current policy settings. Zoe described how 'we've never been eligible for any of the childcare subsidies', though even with her high income, she 'always spent more on a combination of childcare and au pairs than I earnt'. Eileen also described that while 'not resentful about the financial side of things', she felt that it meant 'we just do it ourselves'. Another mother felt both 'too rich and too poor', given she was 'not earning enough to be rich enough to afford childcare' (Deidre). Brianna, a stay-at-home parent, did not think the government had a role to play in care provision. She explained, 'I don't feel like it should be the government's job to say what is available to families' though as a migrant she was 'not sure what the government offers . . . as far as kickbacks [subsidies]'.

In summary, needs and desires for au pair care emerged in a context of longer-standing strains upon privatised modes of social reproduction including gendered care norms of intensive mothering. Middle- and higher-income earners' exclusions from childcare subsidies meant they had less incentives to use public services. Additionally, strong cultural and legal norms that position care as women's work as well as difficulties to reconcile work with care demands often motivated mothers to seek out au pair care. Au pair care was often seen as a means to get through intensive years of parenting infants and young children, especially where women had returned to work but were still seen as primary carers. In this way, au pair care helped women to meet and reconcile demands of being both an ideal worker and an ideal parent, while preserving the gendered norms of care as 'women's work' and preserving the household as the normative site for ideal care. Overall, desires for au pair labour were strongly shaped by the broader context of inequalities in the household division of labour, cost, lack of other informal sources of care, and gendered norms of home-based familial care and intensive mothering. Strong desires for affordable, accessible, and flexible care and household assistance were much more significant than any pursuit of 'cultural exchange' as a result of hosting an au pair as has been documented more widely in the emerging critical literature on au pairing (see, e.g. Cox and Busch 2018).

## Migrant mobilities into au pair work before and during the pandemic

Legal and cultural norms portray au pairs as 'neither workers nor migrants but as "guests" of "host families" on a temporary sojourn' (Cox 2007, 282). Within this imaginary, au pairs are legible only as highly privileged (very) young women, from the Global North, seeking a cultural exchange (rather than employment or longer-term migration/resettlement). Interviewees' pathways highlight how these dominant descriptions of au pairing as a 'gap year' obscure the wider range of mobilities and pathways. Abrupt changes in migrant mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus how au pairing can also be a form of subsistence and survival work during crisis, unemployment, or housing insecurity and where there are limited desirable opportunities for other decent work.

Some interviewees fit within the more conventional image of an au pair on a time-limited cultural sojourn. For example, Anthea, in her early 20s from Western Europe, heard about the working holiday visa scheme in Australia and decided after finishing high school, 'you know what, this sounds fairly easy . . . let's do this'. She thought au pairing sounded like a much better option than 'fruit picking and all that'. So she saved up money for flights, put up a profile on the digital platform AuPairWorld, conducted some video calls, and found her first host family before she left home. The host family picked her up from the airport the day she arrived. Nonetheless, Anthea did not stay with just that one family but instead worked multiple au pairing jobs, regularly changing employers to try to secure

better conditions and pay. Two other young women from Western Europe, Ursula and Vanessa, likewise viewed au pairing as a means to facilitate their 'fun experience' abroad before starting university. However, unlike Anthea, they did not organise their au pairing placement in advance but rather turned to au pairing after they arrived, and it seemed like a practical and desirable option for work. Au pairing was also not part of their career or work plans:

> I don't want to work in a childcare sector ... when I'm older. So, yes, I think, it was just like a, just, very fun experience. And that was very nice to have, or it's very nice to have a family, on the other side of the world. But yeah, I think definitely don't want to work in that sector again. (Ursula)

However, not all women were so young, nor were they always from Western or Northern Europe or North America. Caterina was a care professional in her late 20s from Eastern Europe. For her, au pairing was both a means to facilitate her ambitions to travel and was relevant to her work. She 'really wanted to be an au pair to a child that has autism' and had learned that the Australian system was 'quite advanced in autism', and so her 'reason to come here was also to participate in some of the schools, or in autism support groups' and 'get the best things out for my future work'. Caterina was one of 9 out of 26 au pair interviewees who had a specific educational qualification and/or professional background in care work, education, or health (such as nursing, occupational therapy, speech therapy, childcare/preschool, or teaching). For these women, their skills, qualifications, and experience sometimes helped them to acquire better placements (more childcare-focused, less cleaning and housekeeping). Parents also often described how their ideal au pair would in fact be older and with some professional qualifications in care or education – that is, not 'gap year' young women. Temporary migrants who had worked in care or education before often turned to au pairing because it was similar to their professional background or because it was easier to find work in this high-demand sector.

However, for another cohort of interviewees, au pairing was just a job they turned to out of necessity, circumstance, or strategic avoidance of worse forms of migrant labour. For example, Inka described:

> when I first arrived in Australia I didn't really know what kind of job I'll be doing. So I literally Googled, what kind of job foreigners can do overseas? What are the most common jobs? And I found about au pairing.

For some interviewees, au pairing felt like their only job option in a difficult job market in Australian cities – reflecting the broader challenges for temporary migrants trying to find decent work (Wright and Clibborn 2019). For example, Alejandra from Latin America described how she struggled to find work in hospitality because of her limited fluency and confidence in English. She ultimately turned to au pairing because she 'fear[ed] it was my only option of work in Australia'. Similarly, Francesca, from North America had 'tried to work in like hospitality and ... they wouldn't hire me. And I, you know, I was struggling. ... So I was like, fine, let's go do this au pair thing.' Interviewees on student visas described how they felt particularly constrained by the then visa limitation of a maximum of 40 allowable working hours per fortnight, which pushed them into informal, cash-in-hand jobs. For example, Francis described how 'with the student [visa], it's very hard to find a full-time job. I mean, impossible'.

While some turned to au pairing because they struggled to find work in other sectors, others thought au pairing sounded like more desirable, safer, and better-paid work than in agriculture, fruit-picking, cleaning, or hospitality. In particular, several migrants described how au pairing helped them to circumnavigate the legal requirement to work in a regional

or rural area in order to have their working holiday visa renewed for a second or third year (Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government 2022a, 3, see also 2022b, 2022c). They would do by finding a family who had a farm who would hire them as an au pair but would still 'sign off' on their papers without them in fact doing any farming work.

Several interviewees had been au pairs multiple times in different countries and had used au pairing as a means to facilitate their short-term migration and mobility. For example, Francis from Eastern Europe described how she was 'really into travelling', but 'of course, I wasn't able, with the money, to just travel, you know, just like this'. She relied on au pairing to make it financially possible for her to live overseas and to overcome her inability to acquire a skilled visa. This use of au pairing to facilitate circular migration has been observed in the wider literature on au pairing, in particular how 'highly mobile migration strategies and the associated lifestyles and cultures [of au pairs] transcend our common understanding of migration as a unidirectional process of emigration and immigration' (Hess and Puckhaber 2004, 77). Without the option of applying for a skilled visa, using a temporary student or working holiday visa was the most practical means to live abroad for an extended period with the right to work.

Interviewees were often acutely aware of their limited permanent migrant options due to their nationality, age, or level of recognised qualifications. For example, Diana, who was formerly a primary school teacher, described how 'because of my age, you can't just get [more] working holiday visas [in Australia]'. Clara from Latin America described how, 'you want to stay. Why get out of this country?' but at the same time knew that 'I'm not Australian … I'm never going to be an Australian'. Despite these difficulties, many still expressed desires and hopes for longer-term migration in Australia or elsewhere. Thus, while au pairing is portrayed as resolutely 'temporary' (Anderson 2009), it was often a stepping-stone for more ambitious plans. For example, Eloise from Eastern Europe 'realised that Australia is a really good place to live'. Highly dissatisfied with the working conditions and pay in the care sector in her home country, she began to take steps to extend her stay in Australia:

> I went to an immigration agent … he told me if I will do Diploma of Early Childhood Education, then I could have a pathway. … working myself to a PR [permanent residency]. But to, to have a PR, I have to work three years in early childhood education, and au pairing doesn't count … if I finish the course, I can have a … a graduate visa, and then a training visa, and then with that I could … I have enough time to get the three years' experience to have the work visa.

Transitioning to student visas was a common strategy, not only to secure residency and work rights in the shorter term but also to try to navigate a path towards continued residency. Several interviewees had enrolled, or planned to enrol, in early childhood and care courses because this stood out as a viable pathway towards a sponsored work visa. For example, Francis reflected that au pairing 'got [her] into the children mood' and so she had also started studying a diploma in childcare, even though she 'never thought that I [would] want to actually … work in childcare or enjoy it that much'. Liana, a care worker from Western Europe, similarly explained that she planned to 'switch to a student visa', possibly by doing a course in nursing. Informal care work in au pairing therefore emerged as a pipeline towards work in formal care sectors, reflecting the broader ways in which 'migrant labour is surreptitiously channelled into non-professional care' (Howe et al 2019; Overgaard et al 2022, 666).

The pandemic had a profound impact on temporary migrants' ability to find secure housing and work. Many could not, or did not want to, return to their country of nationality, given that the situation was often even worse there, borders were already closed, or flights were cancelled or unaffordable (Berg et al 2020, 6). As Liana put it, 'there's

no point to go back home in the middle of the pandemic, without a job, without a place to live'. A number of interviewees therefore turned to au pairing for their survival. For example, Clara, in her mid-30s, had been working in hospitality before the pandemic. However, she lost her job when the city went into lockdown. She was in a precarious, urgent situation, 'when you're stuck in a country that is very expensive and you don't have job'. Clara emphatically realised: 'if I don't get inside of an Australian family, I'm fucked'. Diana likewise recalled:

> I was starting to panic a bit because of COVID, everywhere was shutting. And I was like, money, rent, everything .... So I saw this job come up ... I think with the schools closing and stuff, as well, because I was a teacher, I think that was a big sort of draw for that.

In summary, even prior to the pandemic, migrants' pathways into au pairing work were diverse within the small qualitative sample and did not always align with the stereotype of a temporary cultural sojourn. While some women had organised placements in advance, they did not necessarily remain in the same job for their entire stay; meanwhile, others had turned to au pairing when they were looking for practical work options as a temporary migrant. Others had engaged in au pairing as a mobility strategy to live abroad multiple times or had ambitions to remain in Australia for the longer term (usually by staying in care work).

## Au pairs' roles and working conditions

Au pairs described how both before and during the pandemic they had responsibilities for the care of infants, children, and sometimes children with disabilities. In addition, many were also responsible for grocery shopping, cooking, housekeeping, laundry, ironing, 'light cleaning', gardening, and the logistical and emotional labour involved in running a household. Au pairing work thus traversed both the 'everyday mundane and taken-for-granted activities' of running a household, as well as more complex and intimate work of 'sentient care' (Eldén and Anving 2016, 616). While some resented where it 'just made the whole experience [feel] like ... I'm just a housekeeper' (Eloise), 'basically like a maid' (Francesca), others felt deeply connected to and responsible to their families, worrying about how their employers navigated the 'challenge to be a mum and a worker' (Beatriz).

A key feature of au pairs' roles was to provide *flexible* care. For example, au pairs were relied upon outside of standard working hours (weekends, evenings, overnight) and were on-call for unscheduled care if children were sick or the parents were delayed at work. For example, Francesca was left with the couple's older children for several days when they went into the hospital to give birth to their youngest child. Mary described how she was paid for only three hours of work per day, but these hours were not fixed, so she needed to be on-call for whenever she might be needed to help: 'those three hours literally were decided the day before ... I feel like I'm a puppet'.

With the onset of the pandemic, au pairs' roles often shifted to encompass more intensive work in facilitating children's learning when schools closed or providing round-the-clock care when childcare centres closed. As Clara explained:

> I need[ed] to do all the school program with the kids. ... It was a big challenge, because one was 3 and the one was 7. So the difference of age was really challenging ... He was a little behind in reading and writing and math. So I said to parents, I cannot teach that, if I need to take care of the three year old, I can't. I cannot be at both times at the same place.

The pandemic therefore created conditions for vulnerability and exploitation as some migrants took on more intensive and longer hours of work, particularly while schools and childcare centres were closed as cities cycled in and out of lockdowns. For example, Anthea 'took over a lot more tasks than I originally should have. Like I did all of the boy's schoolwork with him and … So I was kind of his teacher in all the different subjects'.

Some were not paid for their extra hours and responsibilities in homeschooling children and looking after them seven days a week. In addition, several interviewees had their pay reduced or stopped. This often happened when parents – generally mothers – lost their own jobs during the lockdowns and market shocks. For example, Nina's employer's business suffered during the pandemic and was told her hours would be halved. She recalled how she 'assumed that my pay would be halved. But … I didn't get paid for three weeks'. Nina needed to navigate asking the parents about being paid again. In other instances, au pairs volunteered themselves to have their pay reduced. For example, Ursula described, 'I didn't want her [a single mother] to pay . . . . [when] corona [COVID] came, she lost her job, and I told her, "Hey, I'm fine with $250 a week [instead of $350]"'.

Others navigated new tensions in trying to manage childcare with their employers working from home. Alejandra recalled how the children she looked after were excited to see more of their father, who was not usually home so much, and that she struggled to keep them 'out of his way'. She recalled him yelling at her: '"I pay you, you need … to entertain … the kids…" and that 'he was very rude with me'. The pandemic also exacerbated pre-existing issues regarding freedom of movement and control of day-to-day life characteristic of live-in employment. Alejandra recalled how even before the lockdown began, the family wanted her to stop using public transport and leaving the house to go to her college classes:

> The mum say you can't go to the class because if you catch the virus, all the kids all of us we catch the virus. I was like OK, I don't go to class anymore. So I lost class for 2 weeks. And later was like, all the class was online, so you can't leave the house.

On the other hand, one parent recalled how she faced the challenge of her au pair engaging in 'what we considered unsafe behaviour … she's out doing things, that are kind of legally allowed at the time, but definitely not ok' (Zoe). The pandemic therefore raised sensitive issues around risk and safety for families and au pairs to negotiate. Without the opportunity to leave the house during lockdown, au pairs were unable to create any physical distance between themselves and their workplace or the children they looked after.

Alongside these heightened risks of exploitation, a context of profound mutual vulnerability created some moments of solidarity. For example, Beatriz described her host family delivered her some basic supplies while she was in quarantine before she had met them, reaching out to make sure she was ok in a way that felt like they were 'real family'. When loved ones died overseas or conditions worsened in their home cities, this sometimes brought migrants closer to their host families, who supported and cared for them.

## Shifts in the market

At the onset of the pandemic, as temporary migrants lost work in other sectors, there were more migrants looking for au pairing placements than there were families searching for au pairs. Many interviewees recalled struggling to find an au pairing placement or losing their jobs. Anthea described how 'the mother of that family lost her job. So that's why after some time they kind of said … "Oh well I can do the school pick up, and drop offs myself, and

we don't really, we don't really need you anymore'". Beatriz likewise lost her placement when her employer lost her own job as a flight attendant, and 'it was really hard to find [another] family at that time'.

Given the competition to find an au pairing placement, interviewees feared they would become homeless and without a safety net from the government. This compelled migrants to take on whatever placements they could find with limited alternatives or negotiating power. Clara described how her negotiations with her prospective employer were desperate. She recalled telling them: 'I really need the job because I have no job and no savings to survive through COVID. So anything that you are going to offer me, I'm going to say yes'. Similarly, although Anthea was very unhappy with her au pair arrangement, especially due to the amount of cleaning involved, her long hours, and the low 'pocket money' wage, she decided to stay with her current employer:

> I was just so scared of being like thrown out because I thought, Okay, you're lucky to have a home in a pandemic. The hostels are closing down. So if they say, well you've got your two weeks to find something else – maybe there won't be anything to find. So I didn't want to risk anything by bringing that [wanting more pay for overtime] up.

Emergency measures implemented by the government had significant impacts on the market for au pairing labour. In the early days of the pandemic, rather extraordinarily in the context of decades of marketisation, Australian governments temporarily made childcare free. Between 6 April 2020 and 12 July 2020, the federal government made formal early education and care services universal or 'fee-free' for all families via a three-month federal subsidy scheme for care service providers which temporarily replaced the existing child care subsidy (*Child Care Subsidy Amendment [Coronavirus Response Measures No 2] Minister's Rules 2020* [Cth]). In September 2020, the federal government introduced a further A\$305.6 million dollar 'Childcare Recovery Package' providing transitional payments for care providers at risk of closure and later a 'Viability Support Package' in August 2021 as well as other support packages to cover gap fees when children were absent with COVID-19 until June 2023 (Department of Education, Australian Government 2025a). Additional measures were also taken by some state governments, including gap fee waivers, additional allowable absences, and 'business continuity payments' (Department of Education, Australian Government 2025b; NSW Education Standards Authority 2020; The Hon James Merlino MP, Deputy Premier, Minister for the Coordination of Education and Training – COVID-19, Minister for Education, 2020).

Parents were therefore prompted by these measures to rely more readily on formal and institutional forms for childcare provision. For example, one parent had initially described strong preferences for in-home care but decided 'we could leave the kids in daycare much more just because it was free' (Deidre). With this change to public childcare services, au pairs in turn described how they were no longer needed. For example, Beatriz lost her au pair job at the time when childcare was made free – and stated that this had happened to other au pairs that she knew too.

However, a clear shift in dynamics emerged as the pandemic wore on. In particular, federal and state governments wound back temporary relief measures for universal free childcare. Thus, the federal government's seemingly radical federal subsidy ended up as a temporary 'bail out' scheme to prevent market collapse rather than one that fundamentally overhauled the country's heavily marketised model of childcare delivery (Hunkin and Alsen 2024). Meanwhile, the longer that international borders stayed closed, the more time passed without temporary migrants arriving to do low-wage work. The supply of migrant labour available for au pairing work therefore dried up, while care demands remained high, and temporary relief measures, such as universal free childcare,

were withdrawn. In response to growing workforce shortages in 'essential work', the government (temporarily) lifted restrictions around migrants' visas. Student visa work restrictions were relaxed for some sectors (e.g. in supermarkets, 'to keep Aussie shelves stocked' [The Hon Dan Tehan MP and The Hon Alan Tudge MP, 2020]) early in the pandemic and then completely removed in January 2022 until they were reintroduced in July 2023 (at an increased rate of 48 hours per fortnight) (Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government 2023; see also The Hon Alex Hawke MP, Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs 2021a, 2021b). This also helped to shift bargaining positions for migrants in the job market, by giving those on student visas access to less precarious work with longer hours.

In the later days of the pandemic, most parents were simply unable to find temporary migrant workers willing to work as au pairs or were worried they would not be able to find someone after their placement ended. As Deidre explained, 'people [families] are posting now and no one is replying because there are no more … backpackers who want those jobs'. Because of this 'everyone gave up on au pairing, because there's none'. Another parent, Eileen, described how 'we've been lucky to still get au pairs … there's definitely … an imbalance in the demand and supply'. Other parents recounted stories of families trying to recruit 'au pairs' from New Zealand, or Australian citizens from regional or rural areas wanting to move to major cities.

This 'massive deficit of au pairs available' (Helen) gave those temporary migrants who stayed on in Australia more scope to negotiate better conditions and wages in their au pairing arrangements. For example, Mary described:

> so many families are desperate for au pairs at the moment that it's kind of just bombarded with families posting … I've been looking on AuPairWorld for a new family for about six weeks' time. And I've had quite a lot of messages. It's been a bit overwhelming. Because people are desperate. Like people are willing for you to start like next week. People are like, 'We will pay for flights. We'll pay for … as long as you can get to us, like we just need someone'. And I have a lot of qualifications compared to a lot of au pairs, so I feel like that's really helped me as well.

Migrants such as Mary therefore felt more confident at this point to negotiate higher rates of pay or to be able to do other jobs on the side because it was now a changing market that worked more in their favour. Helen described how, although she didn't feel comfortable pressuring the family for more pay, she knew she at least had 'a bit more security working with the family – I know there's not going to be this quick turn over'.

Other temporary migrants took the opportunity to look for more secure and higher-paying employment and therefore moved away from au pairing, as well as other low-wage work in other forms of care (such as nannying) and cleaning altogether. Clara described how she left her au pairing placement at the end of the lockdown in search of higher-paying opportunities that used her skills, qualifications, and professional experience from abroad. Although her former employer wanted to find a replacement, the family was unable to find anyone willing to take on the au pair position:

> because of COVID, now, there is no people, who is going to work for cheap money …. before we were a lot of us trying to stay in the country. And now the ones we've been locked inside, we have a lot of power now. Because … the demand of … employees is super high. So now we can start to work in the things that we are able to, even if English is not good enough, because there is no one else. So no one is grabbing the cleaning, and the nanny, and those types of jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic therefore generated a dramatic social experiment in the migrant au pairing labour market and led to an extraordinary shift from high labour market saturation to labour market scarcity. At the start of the pandemic, temporary migrants lost work in a range of industries, which led to a wave of migrants desperate for work and housing. Au pairing therefore emerged as a form of survival work for people experiencing significant housing and food insecurity while they were excluded from emergency relief measures. There were more migrants than placements available, and temporary migrants were compelled to take on placements with low pay and long hours and had little ability to separate their home and work. Yet as the pandemic wore on, borders remained closed, and free childcare was withdrawn, while intensive homeschooling and childcare work continued. The once fungible supply of temporary migrants available for low-wage, informal work across a range of industries began to disappear. This led to a dramatic power shift in au pairs' favour, which allowed temporary migrants to negotiate higher wages and better conditions or to leave the sector altogether. These shifts in the provision of care across the domains of the family/household, public sector/the state, the market, and the community/not-for-profit sectors reflect Shahra Razavi's notion of the moving axes of the 'care diamond' (Razavi 2007, 2015). As Razavi argues, 'boundaries of the responsibility mix often shift in response to the claims of social networks and organised interest groups … as well as through state action … [and] countries often move back and forth across different sectors' (Razavi 2007, iv).

## Conclusion

Findings in this small qualitative study illustrate how long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, au pairing had become an individualised strategy for (some) women to manage strains and overloads of social reproduction – by assisting them to reconcile competing demands of household management, care, and paid employment, all the while reproducing strongly gendered and familial norms around mothering and provision of care. Similarly, even without a formal au pair or care work visa, this study contributes to growing research indicating that au pairing has emerged in Australia as a migration strategy and form of employment for temporary migrants on student and working holiday visas. During the pandemic, temporary migrants took on 'au pairing' placements for their survival and subsistence. Critically, the conditions of the au pairing market did not remain static but shifted alongside other policy and legal shifts. For example, legal experimentations such as federal and state government decisions to temporarily make childcare 'free' prompted interviewed families to use more formal centre-based childcare services. In doing so, this also shifted seemingly strong preferences away from in-home, maternal-like au pair care. Further, the closure of international borders and the relaxation of visa rules around working hours ultimately shifted migrants' bargaining positions and empowered them to negotiate better conditions or leave the sector altogether. This highlights the constitutive role of law and policy across the welfare, migration, and labour law nexus in shaping the distributions and divisions of reproductive labour, which can both consolidate and also challenge the social reproduction bargain.

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