

# Underpaid, humiliated, enslaved...

*As British parents are accused of abusing au pairs, Judith Woods meets the mothers fighting back*

**A**fter the third girl did a runner, it occurred to me the reason why we're called host families is because a lot of au pairs are parasites."

Ouch. If that sounds a bit harsh, you've probably never had a phone call from school inquiring whether anyone is planning to pick up the children, or should they be left in the lost property cupboard overnight?

A war of words has broken out on the home front and it's turning uglier than Nanny McPhee. The opening salvo was fired with the recent incendiary publication of *Au Pair* by Zuzana Burikova and Daniel Miller, a brutally frank exposé of the way we allegedly treat the young women (in practice few au pairs are male) who come from overseas to learn English and carry out childcare and chores.

The consensus among Slovaksians – who are one of the largest groups of the 90,000 au pairs estimated to be working over here – is that not only do British domestic goddesses have feet of clay, they fail to wipe them before tramping into the house. Apparently, we not only regard our au pairs as indentured slaves, but we are also lazy and dirty, and appear to have little interest in our children. It's a stinging criticism – but one that works both ways.

"We once had an Italian au pair who lasted just two weeks," says Justine Roberts, co-founder of Mumsnet, who has four offspring. "She insisted on smoking in front of the children; didn't seem to like them; and was given to histrionics at the drop of a hat. She also lied about a relative being ill so she could phone her boyfriend for hours.

"After a fortnight of the lying, smoking and screaming, we got rid of her. She's probably gone on to have a stellar career."

Roberts has had many more successful experiences with au pairs, but concedes that the whole set-up for both family and girl is fraught with danger from the outset.

"It's a tricky situation because an au pair is half guest and half employee, and it's not easy to strike a balance between welcoming them into your home as part of your family and making it clear that they are expected to work for their keep," says Roberts.

"It doesn't surprise me that au pairs have toe-curling tales to tell; after a few months in the bosom of your family, this girl will have seen you warts and all. Unfortunately, when you have young children, you tend to be at your most chaotic."

Officially, au pair and family are participating in a cultural exchange, hence au pairs are exempt from UK employment law because they are given board and lodgings and "pocket money", rather than a salary, in exchange for childcare and housework. The going rate is £60-£80 per week for 25 hours' work, rising as high as £200 for more than 40 hours.

Host families typically find au pairs via agencies or personal ads on websites such as Gumtree. While it might seem that the whole world can speak English these days, au pairs very often can't utter a word of it. A wise family pays for English lessons to speed things along a little, although it's not obligatory.

"We had an au pair from Turkey who was really sweet with the children and very smiley, but she



Spoilt brats? Scarlett Johansson plays a graduate in charge of a rich boy, played by Nicholas Art, in *The Nanny Diaries*

honestly couldn't understand a thing, even when I mimed," reports one mother, who works part-time in retail management. "I would have to text her instructions on how to load the washing machine or when to make supper, which she forwarded to her sister in Turkey who called her back with the translation. It sounds insane, but it worked."

Scrape the surface and the scare stories are legion, such as the French girl who asked the host family to pay her air fare to Britain and then promptly did a bunk at the airport; or the Bulgarian girl who regularly ate all the meat in her host family's fridge, including a dozen chicken thighs destined for a barbecue. When confronted, she would weep so inconsolably that her host family found it easier to buy

twice as much and hide it in the freezer in the basement. Currently on Mumsnet there is a comically earnest discussion about a German au pair who gets through six loo rolls a week.

Attitudes to au pairs vary tremendously; some people regard them as glorified skivvies and others as trophies, who can tutor the children in a second language and be paraded in public.

"There's a bit of school-gate competitiveness over who has the most accomplished, attractive au pair," admits a friend of mine who wishes to remain anonymous for reasons that will become clear.

"After all, this girl is representing you when you're not there, so you don't want her pitching up looking like trailer trash with peroxide hair

and blue eyeliner. I used to be quite particular on appearance but after two of them left early – I've compared notes with other families, and these girls always, and I mean always, claim their grandmother is sick and they need to go home to look after her – I'm more than happy to take a spotty one."

If such political incorrectness leaves you aghast, then you are clearly new to the au pair world. Accommodating a teenager from another culture who may be homesick, needy or sulky, is not to be undertaken lightly. When the relationship turns sour, the differences are irreconcilable.

American-born Karen Doherty, a former television news producer and co-author of the parenting book *Sibling Rivalry*, relied heavily on au

pairs when she came to Britain as she had no family over here and all four of her children were under five.

"I'm not sure which of my terrible au pairs was worse," she muses.

"The one who spilt a bowl of spaghetti on her bed and left it for a week, by which time her room was colonised with ants, or the au pair who gave three of my four children cold sores – gee, thanks."

"Then there was the one who chased my toddler around the house, picked her up by the arm and dragged her to the coat cupboard," says Doherty. "Given that's what she did quite unthinkingly in front of me, as though it were perfectly normal, there was no way I was leaving her alone with the children, so I fired her immediately."

Of course, some au pair stories have happy endings; Trudie Styler – Mrs Sting to you and me – started off as an au pair to an actor and his wife in Stratford-upon-Avon before rising to more elevated circles. French politician Ségolène Royal once au paired in Dublin, and a management consultant friend of mine who was widowed when her son was a toddler, still sings the praises of the string of loving Spanish au pairs who enabled her to continue work and support her son.

One of her au pairs even entered into a relationship with a friend more than twice the girl's age, and they went on to marry and have children, despite the 30-year difference. Author Wendy Holden worked as an au pair in France the summer before she went to university in the early Eighties.

"My mission was to look after two incredibly spoilt twins who lived in a spa town near the German border," she recalls. "The mother was a depressed former model, the father a lascivious dentist with a penchant for flared suede suits."

"Among the challenges I faced was the family rottweiler, a garrulous but incomprehensible Spanish granny, a Benny Hill-style Portuguese gardener, and a cook who kept slapping my hips and telling me I was putting on weight."

Holden claims she "slaved night and day" and had to shower in the garage, but nevertheless looks back with great nostalgia at this steep, but formative, learning curve.

"It was hell, but it taught me a lot," she remembers. "By the time I got home, I'd acquired fluent French and learnt that *salade niçoise* is made with boiled eggs, not raw ones."

"One night I was left to make dinner for the dentist; his face, as I presented him with leaves drenched in uncooked yolk, was something I can visualise even now."

Host families could do well to remember it takes a certain amount of gumption to leave your own country to be an au pair – or they could well find that their au pair's grandmother has been taken ill unexpectedly and she has left – taking all the loo rolls with her.



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Wendy Holden, author and former au pair



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