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# A Very Private Business

## Exploring the Demand for Migrant Domestic Workers

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**ABSTRACT** This article considers whether there is a specific demand for migrant domestic workers in the UK, or for workers with particular characteristics that in theory could be met by citizens. It discusses how immigration status can make it easier not only to recruit domestic workers, but also to retain them. 'Foreignness' may also make the management of the employment relation easier with employers anxious to discover a coincidence of interest with the worker. Employers are not only looking for generic 'foreignness' however, but typically also seek particular nationalities or ethnicities of worker, which can raise difficulties for agencies who are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of 'race'.

**KEY WORDS** au pairs ♦ demand ♦ domestic workers ♦ employers ♦ immigration ♦ market ♦ race

### INTRODUCTION

The trend towards paying for household services where previously there was a reliance on unpaid family labour is increasing in Europe and indeed in many other post-industrial countries as well as the newly industrialized countries of Asia and in the Middle East (Cancedda, 2001; Gamburd, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Williams, 2003). The nature of these services and their relative size varies within and between states, and can include widely diverse jobs from childcare to garden maintenance, answering the door to cleaning the toilet. In Europe, attention has tended to be paid to the requirement for paid domestic workers to enable parents, women in particular, to work outside the home, but increasingly the focus is on the provision of care for older people within the context of the

ageing EU population. In most European countries at the turn of the century, employment in eldercare was demonstrating a noticeable increase (Cancedda, 2001). The unsustainability of relying on unpaid mid-life family labour when women are in full-time employment has been recognized, particularly in the absence of supportive policies (Anderson, R., 2006; Johnson and Lo Sasso, 2006), but equally, the high cost of formal eldercare can make other solutions untenable. There is, on the face of it, a requirement for affordable care that is likely to increase as the population ages. But who is there to do this work, particularly given the broader framework of concern about more general labour shortages as a result of demographic trends?

Migration has been posited as part of the solution, both to general labour and skill shortages resulting from ageing, and vacancies in care work in particular, though this is not uncontroversial (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2004; Coppel et al., 2001; European Commission, 2005; Harris, 2003). Labour migration in general, and noticeably in the UK, is increasingly perceived in terms of employer demand, with migration policies effectively regulating a tap that can be turned on or off according to the requirements of national labour markets (Flynn, 2003; Glover et al., 2001; Home Office, 2006). Non-EU nationals with capital to invest or with recognized skills are generally regarded as beneficial, and nurses, for instance, have until 2006 been able to enter the UK as skilled workers in a shortage occupation (Winkelmann-Gleed, 2006). However, those who are deemed 'unskilled' may only be admitted temporarily, when demand cannot be met in any other way. Thus for policy-makers, migration from outside the EU to fill vacancies in home care, work typically deemed 'low skilled', is problematic, particularly since while *socially* important the *economic* benefits to receiving states of commodified household services are more difficult to measure, not least because of their informality. The question of demand for migrant domestic labour then fits within the broader European policy debate concerned with ageing, labour markets and care, and raises key questions about the contribution that migrant women make to the EU.

This article explores UK employers' and host families' perceptions and attitudes to employment of migrant domestic workers and considers whether there is a specific demand for migrant domestic workers, or rather a demand for workers with particular characteristics that, in theory, could equally well be met by UK citizens. The factors influencing demand are influenced both by state policies and by local and national discourses on care, home, immigration and race. I first consider the UK policy context and go on to explore how 'race', nationality and immigration status interact to give migrants a particular place within the labour markets for home care. To do this I draw on data from two research projects. The first was conducted on the labour markets for migrant sex and domestic workers in

London and Barcelona with Professor Julia O'Connell Davidson at the University of Nottingham.<sup>1</sup> This developed a four-country pilot study on demand for labour in sex and domestic services. In London, we surveyed 50 employers of migrant domestic workers, conducted in-depth interviews with 10 employers of live-in and live-out domestic workers, staff at six agencies and other stakeholders such as police, support organizations and campaigning groups. We also interviewed expatriate employers in Thailand and Hong Kong. The second research project, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives', examines the consequences of granting most of the economic and social rights of an EU national to new citizens of the EU when it enlarged in 2004. It focuses on the employment experiences of migrants from East and Central Europe working in low wage occupations in agriculture, construction, hospitality and the au pair sector. It surveyed 106 au pairs before and after EU enlargement and 267 host families. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with six host families, five au pair agencies and 19 au pairs.<sup>2</sup>

#### DEMAND: THE UK POLICY CONTEXT

In considering the factors underpinning demand, one must first consider the question of demand for *what*. Household services is a broad sector, and can include home and garden maintenance, window cleaning, food preparation and so on (Cancedda, 2001; UK Household Satellite Account, 2000). They can crudely be classified into household maintenance and cleaning, and care, but of course many tasks and workers straddle both (Anderson, 2000; Meagher, 2003). For the purposes of this article, I have principally focused on care, which raises particular challenges inherent in the relationships around it.

In the UK, as in other European states, there has been an expansion in forms of care delivery called 'cash payments for care', part of a more general shift 'from mutuality and towards contract in entitlement and delivery as regards welfare rights' (Morris, 2006: 92). Under these systems, care users receive an allowance from the state (at local or national level) rather than care services and then use this cash to pay people to provide them with care. One of the arguments for this is that it transforms care users from passive beneficiaries into agents actively involved in their own care. Such arrangements can now be found, in different forms, in several European states including France, Spain and the UK. In some states, such as Italy and the Netherlands, relatives of care users are among those eligible to receive such payments, and as Ungerson (2003) points out, there are interesting ramifications for the construction of what is considered to constitute 'work' and 'care'. In all states these changes have had, and will continue to have, impacts both on the labour market for care and on individual care relationships. They may also foster the development of an informal market for care in which

migrants, and particularly undocumented migrants, may be regarded as desirable workers (Ungerson, 2003). Markets for care in private households, then, are not simply constructed by the demand of a collection of individual householders. While the family is imagined as a 'natural' formation to be protected from state interference, and any intrusion of the 'nanny state' into private life is highly contentious, the state nevertheless does have a role in constructing markets for care within private homes (Williams, 2003).

The UK has seen a steady increase in employment in all types of household services over recent years as a result of a complex interaction of demographic, labour market, social and economic changes (Cancedda, 2001). While more 'family-friendly' policies such as increased maternity provision, possibilities for part-time and flexible working have contributed to female employment (Walling, 2005), state-funded provision of care for pre-school age children continues to be limited (Cox, 2006), and it would seem that many parents have greater trust in informal rather than formal childcare provision (Gregson and Lowe, 1994). While there continue to be challenges regarding the provision of childcare, the availability of provision and of employment protection for those who are caring for elderly relatives is even more limited (Anderson, R., 2006).

The state also plays a role in the construction of categories of workers who might be available to do this work, not least through immigration legislation; and indeed the question then arises, to what extent does immigration status itself facilitate the supply of labour by creating a marginalized group without access to the formal labour market (de Genova, 2002)? In the UK, the only visa regime that allows private households directly to recruit domestic 'help' from abroad is the au pair system (see Cox, this issue, pp. 281–96). The demand – if demand there is – for overseas care workers has for several years been satisfied by cobbling together a range of immigration statuses, as well as of course by illegal employment. Those working in domestic service may have the immigration status of spouses, asylum seekers, students, visitors, work permit holders and they may or may not be working within or in breach of the extremely complex regulations that govern each of these statuses. There is one specific 'domestic worker's visa' but this is only for those who enter the UK from abroad *accompanying an employer*. There are also systems whereby migrants may enter legally to do domestic work, but are not constructed as workers even though in practice they are performing the same tasks as others who may be defined as domestic workers (working holidaymaker visa, volunteer visa, au pair visa).<sup>3</sup> Thus migration for domestic work can challenge the old dichotomies of migration study that have led to inferences about the characteristics of migrants ('poor', 'uneducated') and suggested that certain groups such as au pairs are not 'really' migrants because they do not conform to particular assumptions (King, 2002).

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## 'RACE' AND NATIONALITY

Demand for labour in household services is highly gendered (Cancedda, 2001; Rubery et al., 1999) though this has been somewhat undertheorized (Wolkowitz, 2006). While men may work in certain occupations such as gardening and window cleaning, most are female dominated. Data from both research projects confirmed a strong preference for women workers. The majority (64 percent) of host families responding to the survey would not consider hosting a male au pair. There was concern about the appropriateness of men looking after children, both boys and girls, and of their influence on pubescent girls. Twenty-six percent of those who would not consider hosting a male au pair specifically cited concerns of sexual abuse, bathing and touching children, and 42 percent said it was inappropriate because they had female children, or because they were a single mother (7 percent cited their husbands' concerns). Twenty-one percent felt that women were more nurturing, better carers, tidier, etc. As one host mother put it when asked if she would employ a male au pair:

When I looked at applications and photos on one occasion they all looked like burglars or child molesters. Feel unconvinced that a normal boy would want to come and do washing and ironing and look after small children. (Respondent to host family survey, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

There has been some exploration of the racialized nature of demand for domestic workers (Anderson, 2000; Bakan and Stasiulis, 1995; Bott, 2005; Cheng, 2004; Palmer, 1989; Parrenas, 2001; Wolkowitz, 2006). In the UK, private households are exempt from the Race Relations Amendment Act and it is legal for a private householder to refuse to employ someone on the grounds of their colour, their nationality or their religion – although outside the private home this is permitted only in the most limited of circumstances – and from our interviews with employers, it is clear that they do:

It's very risky to say this . . . I think that white people look cleaner. Maybe it's silly to say that just because they are black. It doesn't mean they are dirty, but it seems to me that in many ways they are more untidy. Dark people, right, not just black people, dark people are not so clean. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

Perceived differences in 'race' may equally well be a reason *for* hiring someone:

It's difficult having someone working for you from the same race because we have this idea of social class in our minds, don't we? And that would be uncomfortable in your house. Whereas when it's somebody from a different country, you don't have all that baggage. . . . There's none of that

middle-class, working-class, upper-class thing . . . it's just a different race. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

While discrimination on the grounds of colour or nationality does not contravene the Race Relations Act for private householders, the issue is rather more complicated for employment agencies catering to this market since they are in the public realm and hence not allowed to discriminate. The fact that employers and host families do often seek particular nationalities, or, indeed, refuse to employ people on the basis of their race or nationality was described by one agency as 'the unmentionable: the race issue'. This can be key to the 'matching' services that they provide, and must be carefully negotiated:

I had one employer say, 'No coloured people for me' so I sent somebody from Morocco . . . and the employer looked from the window and she phoned to say 'she's dark, she's dark'. (Domestic placement agency, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

Agencies and employers can use 'nationality' as shorthand for 'race', as does this interviewee. This is particularly clear in the case of au pairs as au pair visas can only be issued to nationals of particular states. However, au pairs are also coded as 'white' (Cox, 2006; see also Cox, this issue, pp. 281–96). (This being said, the fact that whiteness is socially constructed and moreover should not be understood in a binary opposition to blackness [Dyer, 1997; Skeggs, 1997] means that there are perceived degrees of whiteness likely to be played out in the labour market increasingly with EU enlargement.) Of course, an immigration system that discriminates on the grounds of states of citizenship does not, ostensibly, discriminate on grounds of colour. The problem of placing black au pairs (mainly from France) has been a challenge to au pair agencies for some years, and agency interview data support previous findings that host families commonly assume that au pairs, with the exception of those from Turkey, are white and Christian (Newcombe, 2003). However, they were increasingly finding an even more intractable problem: white au pairs not wanting to work for black families (see Spencer et al., 2007). While it is possible to find out the 'race' of an au pair without asking for it on a form (which would be illegal) because au pairs furnish photographs, this is not the case with host families:

I had a family I was placing au pairs with for five years. They never told me they were black. Then the girl I've just placed with them phoned me up and said, 'Why wasn't I told? I've a right to know' and I said, fair enough, and gave her to another family. (Au pair agency, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

While there is a growing literature on 'race' and domestic work there has, as Moors (2003) has observed, been less work done on the role of religion in

employment in private households, and certainly this seems to be a factor that employers and host families feel able to make reference to:

I mean, when I meet Muslims and see them in Portobello then I think that's great, but to actually have one in your house. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

However, while some employers do use the crude language of 'race' and religion to indicate who they would not want in their homes, preferences and dislikes are more commonly expressed in terms of nationality and 'national characteristics': 'caring', 'warm', 'docile', 'natural housekeepers', 'happy'. There is no compunction about using such generalizations – for since these are construed as positive qualities, then they are not imagined as racist. Forty-six percent of host family survey respondents said that they had a preference for hosting a particular nationality/ies of au pairs, often because they associated particular nationalities as having good English-language skills, with being good with children, more likely to stay or having a good 'work ethic' (Anderson et al., 2006). Of course, this works both ways, and interviewees often contrasted one nationality or ethnicity negatively with another:

. . . they're [Nepalese] so quiet and discreet. Filipinos are brasher. They're more social and they like to chat and gossip. They are quite pushy. Some people would say they were greedy. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

The distinction in discourses that refer to race, religion and nationality should not be overemphasized, and interviewees easily slipped between them. As one interviewee remarked when explaining why she would be reluctant to host a Turkish au pair:

The thing that would really worry me about having them is the, where's the nearest synagogue, where's the nearest you know, nearest um, brown or black or yellow au pair? You know they're all white around here. So that's the only thing that would put me off. (Host family interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

Nationality (i.e. broadly speaking whether one's country of origin is, for example, the Philippines, Czech Republic or Nigeria) is important not just because it is associated with particular characteristics, but because countries of origin are often associated with poverty, with having a difficult life and limited opportunities. For employers and host families, 'foreignness' (Anderson et al., 2006), that is, coming from outside the UK or in practice, outside the EU 15, often indicated poverty. They described, often with real pity the miserable situation that their domestic worker or au pair had left behind, and spoke enthusiastically about the difference that being in the UK makes both to the migrant and to their families:



I really feel strongly that it's a positive thing you can do for somebody. . . . I think it's liberating for a girl from the Philippines to . . . leave the rice paddy fields and the village and to be able to send back huge amounts of money and to be able to get a job in England. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

While some of these employers and host families may be relating to their workers as 'windows to exotica' (Rollins, 1985) it also seems that references to poverty are not simply voyeuristic but a way in which being 'foreign' as well as being 'racially' different can help employers in the managing of their relation with domestic workers. Twenty-eight percent ( $N = 74$ ) of 267 host families responding to the 'Changing Status, Changing Lives' mail survey said that one of the reasons they hosted an au pair was to improve her opportunities, while more than half of our small-scale survey of UK employers gave one of their reasons for employing a migrant as being that 'they need the opportunity more than locals'.

Foreignness can help employers and host families manage their deep discomfort around the introduction of market relations into the home. The notion of the 'public' in the dichotomous presentation of the public/private divide elides state and market, both of which separately may be set in a dichotomous relationship with the 'private' (Olsen, 1983). The home as imagined in opposition to the market structures our affective lives as the market structures our productive lives. The market, while esteemed for self-reliance, rationalism and modernity is also decried for being driven by self-interest and instrumentalism. Market actors are not woven into relations one with another, but are imagined as individuals fiercely competing for resources who may enter into agreements to cooperate, each for their own interests. Market relations are amoral and are forged between atomized actors, governed by contract, in which individuals buy and sell their labour. This transaction is imagined as separate from notions of the 'real' self. The home, in contrast, is imagined as governed by mutual dependence and affective relations, altruism, responsibility and duty. The opposition of these spheres is mutually reinforcing. As Olsen notes in her examination of the history of these dichotomies:

The family and home were seen as safe repositories for the virtues and emotions that people believed were being banished from the world of commerce and industry. The home was said to provide a haven from the anxieties of modern life. (Olsen, 1983: 1499)

Nearly three-quarters of the British employers we surveyed in the 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers' project felt that their home was a refuge from a competitive world, and nearly all felt that their home was an expression of themselves. Not only, then, may the introduction of market relations into the home be experienced as deeply discomfiting, one

cannot abdicate moral responsibility with the ease with which this is possible 'outside'. This is not only because the home is a repository of moral values, but also because the power exercised over domestic work may be very direct, and 'personalistic' as well as 'materialistic' (Anderson, 2000). In general, the power exercised by an employer in the informal economy is not hedged by protections of contract or other legal safety nets. The worker may have the power to withdraw their labour, but other responses to abuse or exploitation may be very limited. For migrants this power is particularly brutal (International Labour Organization, 2005), as for live-in domestic work the employer/host family has the power to control access to the means of survival – accommodation and food – as well as power over wages and social intercourse. Having migrants who are 'desperate' for work makes it easier to construct a coincidence of interest with workers. Such coincidences are not simply fantasies: while employers want a worker who may be available whenever they need them, workers often need safe housing, and both workers and employers have access to overlapping networks through local friends and relatives. Both, for different but overlapping reasons, may be concerned to avoid state control. In fact, employers and host families interviewed often dealt with the discomfort of power by using the language of 'helping'. The trick seems to be to view the gap in personal wealth between employer and worker as 'unbridgeable'. As one employer put it, her migrant employee would no more be envious of her than she would of someone who owned three personal planes – she could not begin to aspire to this. The generic 'foreignness' of migrants, the image that they come from impoverished lands, assists with the idea that there is little one can do to remedy the injustices of the world, but employing a desperate migrant is a small contribution (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson, 2003). Working as a domestic worker or as an au pair in a private household can be transformed from a grim necessity to a golden opportunity when it is undertaken by a hard pressed migrant with limited opportunities:

I feel very happy, it may sound silly, but she has come here to earn money and I just feel happier asking her because that is what she has come here to do. I would feel embarrassed asking somebody who by an accident of birth [i.e. class] is in a position where she had to be subservient to me. (Host mother interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

So power is clothed in the language of obligation, support and responsibility, rather than power and exploitation. The relationship is presented as one of mutual dependence: the domestic worker is impoverished and needs money and work, the employer/host family needs a 'flexible' worker, and both fulfill the other's needs. The relationship draws on notions of protection and responsibility, with the master/mistress having a duty of care towards the servant or helper, who is subject to them and

bound into their family through a set of hierarchical relations but with some degree of reciprocated responsibility. By entering into such a relation, the employer/host family not only demonstrates social status, but also kindness, for which the migrant can be grateful, a gratitude that is expressed in pleasure in service. In interviews with employers, favourite employees, those spoken of in the most glowing and expansive terms, were those for whom the work and its social relations appeared to be a pleasure:

The kind of relationship between me and the local girls was very instrumental, of economic dependence, there was no human element to it, strictly professional. As soon as she got married she went without much explanation. I was so angry, disappointed, that I decided to have a girl from Mauritius. Now she's like part of the family. We make sure she doesn't need anything and I never have the feeling that she's staying one hour extra only because I'm paying her that hour. These coloured girls are really in need. They have strange relationships with their families. They send money to them. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

## RETHINKING MATERNALISM

Research on the personal aspect of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers has tended to focus on 'maternalism', or close personal relations between worker and employer, as a mechanism of labour control (Anderson, 2000; Romero, 2002). It is argued that some employers use close personal relations with their workers as a means of exerting pressure on them to do tasks or hours that the worker would otherwise refuse or for wages that they would otherwise deem too low. It is worth considering the way in which this is codified in the au pair system. The low financial recompense that au pairs receive is in practice a key distinction between an au pair and a worker. Their 'pocket money' is described as a 'reasonable allowance' at approximately £55 a week. 'Any sum significantly in excess of this might suggest that the person is filling the position of domestic servant, or similar, which would require a work permit' (UK visas, entry clearance general instructions). But the au pair must also live 'as part of the family', and it is this relationship that exempts au pairs, and others in similar arrangements, from minimum wage legislation.

Living as part of the family, then, indicates that emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) is not only required of the worker, but also of the (female) employer/host family. It is not necessarily a positive model:

I would say to them 'Try and treat me like you treat your mother'. But it depends on how well they get on with their mother. (Host mother interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

**TABLE 1**  
**Problems with Au Pairs as Reported by Host Families**

Type of problem	
Smoking/alcohol/drugs	18
Boyfriends/sex/pornography	18
Unhappiness/mental health	40
Unable to do job	72
Problems with host family relations	134
Other	36
Total	318

Indeed it is clear from both qualitative and quantitative data that many host families, but particularly host mothers, find the responsibilities that this gives them extremely onerous. Thirty-three percent of our female host family respondents cited having to deal with the au pairs' personal problems as a negative aspect of hosting an au pair. This was a feature of interviewees' experiences as well, two described the trauma of au pairs being sexually abused, while more general problems cited included homesickness and loneliness, and taking time to settle in.

Fifty-nine percent of host families surveyed for 'Changing Status, Changing Lives' said that they had problems with au pairs. Of the 318 problems listed, they were mostly problems with the relationship between family members and the au pair (134), or described as mental health, homesickness or eating disorders of the au pair (40) including alleged depressive illnesses (see Table 1).

Comments such as 'hated child and our form of discipline – wanted to take over responsibility', 'inappropriate behaviour towards my spouse and elder son', 'wanted to be my friend, have dinner parties with me. Did not want to spend time with kids or do housework', 'thought she was lady of the manor and became very arrogant, trying to order me about', give some indication of the challenges that exist in establishing good personal relationships between au pairs and host families, particularly host mothers. Moreover, relationships did not have to be conflictual to be onerous. One interviewee described her troubling relationship with a Hungarian au pair:

I have never shared a house with anybody who made me feel so uncomfortable. It was terrible. I think she had a really hard life and we have a really fantastic one and I think she found it terribly hard to adjust to our values and everything. (Host mother interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

These interviews indicated that host mothers regard the emotional labour inherent in hosting an au pair as potentially a significant disadvantage to a

system that is economically cheap. Interestingly, data from interviews with employers of domestic workers suggest rather different attitudes. Some alluded to instrumental personalism along the lines described by Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), whereby a personal relationship is perceived as a 'necessary evil' that brings with it certain advantages:

I wouldn't share any problems with them, but they from time to time do share problems. But it is a quid pro quo because their loyalty and willingness to go the extra mile is assumed by that support. They feel loyal, they know they're not going to be dropped and left in it. They're in a difficult situation. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

But more typically, employers felt that the advantage of employing a migrant was that one did *not* have to communicate with them:

Well an English girl might want to talk to you and that would be awful! . . . Migrants don't have that attitude. You're foreign. You're foreign to them that's what you have to remember. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

I really feel like we're doing a favour to them. I like how they don't expect to always be friends. Everyone knows their particular niche. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

## RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND IMMIGRATION STATUS

Migrant labour, then, has particular advantages and challenges to employers and host families in terms of their management of the relationship with their worker because of ideas around race, religion and countries of origin. However there are more practical advantages to employers arising from the immigration status of workers.

One major reason that employers gave for employing migrants was that they were the only people available to do paid domestic work. Of course, when employers claim that certain marginalized groups are the *only* people available to do 'unskilled' work this may well be related to employment wages and conditions: were the salary for this 'unskilled' work raised to £2000 a week employers might find the availability of non-migrants increases. However, while the employers and host families who were interviewed tended to stress the low status of domestic work as explaining availability, they did also recognize that some part was also played by terms and conditions, most notably living in. Migrants were felt to be more likely to live in and perceived as more 'flexible' both in terms of tasks performed (cleaning and caring rather than only personalized care, which

more professionalized groups do), and in terms of the hours worked. For many middle-class families in the UK, the borders between work and home are increasingly permeable, but only one way: work encroaches upon home life but not vice versa. So a carer who will be able to stay on when work at the office overruns for instance, or be available on a Saturday thereby facilitating a dash into the office, can be indispensable. This interviewee, for example, had recently changed from employing an au pair to employing a child minder:

I have to be home by a certain time now and worry about the time. I'm paying somebody on an hourly rate now . . . and you cannot ask a daily child minder to do the jobs that an au pair does. They're not really responsible for the ironing and the cleaning, just general cleaning up. Um, so I, I really feel I'm spending probably double what I was spending with an au pair. ([Former] host mother interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

Of course, there is no *prima facie* reason why live-in highly flexible workers have to be migrants, and theoretically they could be UK citizens. In practice, however, sectors such as hospitality and agriculture, where employees may have to live in or very close to work, and where hours may be long, erratic or anti-social, are often sectors where migrants provide labour (Anderson and Rogaly, 2005).

Retention, as opposed to recruitment, has received relatively little attention in terms of understanding demand for *migrant* labour. However, there are some theoretical and empirical indications that retention is an important factor (Anderson et al., 2006). In the UK, migrants are often in jobs that might be classed as precarious work characterized by atypical employment relations, low pay, long hours, temporariness, insecurity, inapplicable labour standards, or if applicable, difficult to implement (Rodgers and Rodgers, 1989; TUC, 2006; Vosko et al., 2003). Work in private households is part of this pattern, and employment is also often not regulated by formal contract. Since they are largely working in the informal sector, domestic workers are theoretically free to leave at any time. Indeed, the freedom to retract from an employment relation is one of the only means that workers have of limiting employers' powers over them, being not subject to statutory legislation and having limited opportunities to organize (Smith, 2006). Since domestic work is badly paid and often entails working long hours, workers have every incentive to move frequently until they find the most rewarding job. This can clearly be problematic for employers and host families, particularly for those who are looking for paid carers, or who have particularly precise requirements in the doing of household work. There is a disadvantage to having workers so flexible that they can leave at any time. Someone who knows how the household 'works', or who has established a relationship with a child or elderly person in the home, for all the work being 'unskilled', can be

extremely difficult to replace. Immigration legislation and the control that this gives employers over workers' mobility and hence the control it gives to employers/labour users in terms of the period of the contract (whether formal, informal or nominal) is an important factor in understanding these labour markets.

Where attention has been given to this it has very much focused on the employment of those working 'illegally' and to problems of abuse and exploitation rather than to retention. Some employers do undoubtedly regard illegality as facilitating retention:

. . . especially with the illegal, they're so desperate for work, they're not looking to get fired, they're looking to keep their job, so if you respect them and just let them get on with it, the loyalty that comes back to you and the hard work that comes back to you more than pays off . . . believe me, especially if they're migrant workers, they're so frightened of getting kicked out that they're not going to pull any stunts.<sup>4</sup> (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

More typically, however, *legality* is referred to as an effective mechanism. Migrants may be easier to retain if they are bound into formalized arrangements through immigration status. Some immigration statuses give an employer direct control over a worker's visa renewal (that given to a domestic worker accompanying their employer to the UK, for instance) thereby making them easier to retain. Expatriate employers in Thailand who have lived in various countries in Asia expressed great satisfaction with the systems in Hong Kong and in Singapore precisely because migrant workers were legally tied to them. They contrasted this with the situation in Bangkok where workers are local and, so employers say, are harder to keep. Even if the migrant's status is dependent on them working in the particular sector, rather than for a particular employer, this is perceived as an advantage by employers. It is one reason that host families give for opting for au pair visa-holders as childcare for instance (Anderson et al., 2006), as they were more likely to stay and provide the kind of stability required for childcare.

[Families who have] had experiences that their au pair wants to get another job etc., . . . they, they're going for girls who have to get a visa and can't do something else. (Agency interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

It is striking that after EU enlargement the emphasis given by host families and au pair agencies was on increased labour supply and the implications of increased labour mobility:

Anybody now who has an au pair from any of the 10 accession states are in a vulnerable situation, because they know their au pair can leave at any time. Their immigration status was changed, they can find another job with

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more money and they will be off. (Host mother interviewee, 'Changing Status, Changing Lives')

Au pair agencies reported host families as specifying that they wanted Romanian, Bulgarian or Turkish au pairs because they can't legally 'run off', and indeed the agencies in turn were recommending visa nationals: 'My Romanian is going up [i.e. the number of Romanians on the agency's books]. I have to say, because Romanians can't get other jobs.'

Immigration status gives employers additional means of control over workers and some employers find this an advantage:

They're foreign and they're illegal and they're scared and timid and so they're not going to take up space. They're going to be very, very small, and that is generally easier to live with than someone who feels that this is their home. They're in really bad situations. . . . They're terrified. (Employer interviewee, 'Markets for Migrant Sex and Domestic Workers')

Migrants may be regarded as desirable household workers precisely because they are migrants, rather than simply because they are the only people available to do the work. The particular nature of their different immigration statuses may determine the mechanisms of control, but immigration status in its many variations does seem to afford employers some benefits.

## CONCLUSIONS

Unpacking demand for migrant labour reveals that it is highly complex. The market is clearly highly racialized, but that, in itself, does not explain demand for migrant labour as of course there are many British citizens who could theoretically 'compete' in such a labour market. In part, demand for migrant workers to work in private homes may be understood by conventional labour market variables, with immigration status helping to 'design' workers by giving the householder additional means of control over them, and I have argued that retention can be particularly important here. However, such considerations do not capture the complex ways in which immigration status, country of origin and race interact and are used by employers in their management of their relationship with a worker. Indeed, the immigration status of 'au pair' can function as a means of foregrounding the personal element of the relationship to such an extent as to suggest that the migrant is not really a worker at all. Employers and host families must manage their relationship with the migrants who work in their homes. For many of them it is important to feel that they are not just finding a cheap worker to do an unpleasant or undesirable job. Employing or 'hosting' migrants rather than UK nationals helps employers imagine



private work as an opportunity rather than drudgery, and themselves as benefactors as well as employers.

## NOTES

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1. Many of the interviews were conducted by E. Bott, whose contribution to the project is gratefully acknowledged.
2. For a full description of the methodology of this project, please see [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/changingstatus)
3. Changes to immigration policy put before parliament in 2006 will have a significant impact on this range of arrangements.
4. It is worth noting the lack of concern that the interviewee expresses about her vulnerability to criminal prosecution as the employer of a person working illegally, despite the fact that in theory she would be vulnerable to 'employer sanctions'. This is not surprising given the low level of prosecution rates and fines imposed on employers in all sectors – between 1998 and 2004 only 17 employers were successfully prosecuted. None of these were private householders and in practice prosecutions would be particularly difficult to enforce in private households.

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