Left holding the baby [UK] [1]

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EXCERPTS

A few years ago, Jana left the Czech Republic to work as an au pair for a family in London. Although au pairs are legally allowed to work 25 hours a week, Jana found herself rather busier than that. "I got the little girl up at 7.30am. I put her to bed at 7pm. Yes, I suppose it was about 12 hours most days."

For that she was paid less than £100 a week, but when I commiserated, saying to Jana that it was a long week of hard work, she put a brave face on it. "I didn't see it just as work. In order to be happy I had to say to myself, this is also play, I like playing with children." And did she do housework, too? "Yes - but, you know, if I was a mother in my own country I would do cooking and cleaning and I wouldn't see it as work."

It is a bitter irony that the rising level of women's employment in the UK is being underpinned, in many instances, by the low-paid work of other women cleaning their homes and looking after their children. Many of these women currently come here from eastern Europe, and although this pattern of temporary migration might provide solutions for many families, the question still has to be asked: what kind of liberation is it that is pushing other women into labour that is so undervalued?

On the individual level, many women who are involved in this exchange - both the women who provide the care and the women who employ them - can testify to how well it can work. I write that from the heart, having myself employed a nanny who moved to London from Slovakia and whose experience of working here has, I believe, been happy on all sides.

But I am constantly surprised by how hidden most of this labour is, and how little debate there is about the problems that it can produce. When countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia enter the EU next year, this labour force is likely to increase, and it may also become more open. Then, perhaps, we will start talking about what we should do for them as well as what they can do for us.

Because despite the positive side for many families and workers, we should be honest that many of these women are being exploited in a society that does not put a true value on their work. Yet we need their work, desperately; 300,000 more child carers are said to be needed over the next four years in Britain. We just do not have enough workers here to fill our exponentially growing demand for people to love our children. Or, to put it more precisely, we do have not enough workers who will do it well given the low value that our society is prepared to put on caring work.

The government's new earnings survey states that in "childcare and related occupations" the average pay rate is £240 for a full-time week - one of the lowest of any sector. But many of those who work for cash find that wages can fall far below that. Elena, who came from the Czech Republic to work for two years for a family in London, was paid £70 for a 45-hour week in sole charge of three children, including a baby. "They were my children too," she says when I ask her why she didn't ask for more. "And I loved them, so if the family asked me to do more I would say yes." This is the age-old problem of the low value put on traditional women's work; that women are encouraged to see the work they give as not "real" work, but as a gift of love, of care, of happiness.

These wages clearly look a lot more attractive to women who come from countries that are still struggling in the transition to a market economy, where unemployment is high and salaries are low compared to western Europe. But the liberation of western women means little if it rests on the exploitation of women from poorer economies - especially if it is exploitation that is going unrecognised and undiscussed.

Even if two parents are working full-time, it is impossible for most to cover another full-time worker's wages out of their taxed income. As long as families have to meet almost the entire burden of childcare themselves, as they do at the moment, childcare workers will always be underpaid. The fact is that women's liberation has not gone far enough; women have been allowed to enter the workforce, but we have not seen the necessary changes in men's behaviour and in social policy to compensate for their absence from the home.

If the government would increase public funds given to nurseries and allow tax relief on childcare payments, we would see a shift in the labour market that would put a fairer value on the work of caring. If employment patterns became more flexible and men more ready to take on domestic work, then fewer families would require such long hours from their replacement home-makers. That is the social revolution that is still waiting to happen. As it is, Jana and women like her, deserve better than to be used as a stopgap for our society's

failures.

Some names have been changed.

- reprinted from The Guardian

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