

Women in Business

Childcare

Nanny or friend? Reports from the home front

Relationships between women who outsource childcare and chores and their — usually — female helpers



Helping hands: women remain the main bearers of responsibility for hiring domestic and care workers © Getty

7 HOURS AGO by Layli Foroudi

Pavita Cooper is an expert in hiring. She has recruited global executives and identified the best people for organisations such as Barclays and Shell, working with teams around the world. But putting those skills to use to hire a nanny was new and alien.

She learnt fast. For her first son, Ms Cooper took on a full-time nanny, and developed a reserve of emergency babysitters. She also moved home to be closer to her mother, a retired headteacher.

“With my second child, [we] were having to look at multiple carers to manage our kids. I decided to leave my corporate career and set up on my own,” she says, referring to her consultancy, More Difference.

Managing such a patchwork of care is largely the domain of women, whether the hirer or the hired. While working women may be able to afford to outsource caring and cleaning, for the most part they still carry the “[mental load](#)” in a household of hiring domestic and care workers.

Fiona Williams, emeritus professor of social policy at Leeds university, describes an “increasing dualisation between women”. There are women who can afford childcare and can work the same hours that men work, and women who provide support to these workers, she says.

“It makes [for] very complicated relations between women,” says Bridget Anderson, a professor in Bristol university’s school of sociology. “It is the woman that is having to do all that negotiation in a fraught relationship. It is seen as a women’s issue but guys are getting let off the hook.”

A [report](#) by Eurofound, an EU agency, said 72 per cent of workers employed in European households have a female boss, compared with 28 per cent for other workplaces.

Lyn Patawaran, in her early 50s, started working as a nanny for the Cooper family nine years ago.

Ms Cooper mentors women to develop themselves and their careers but she sees Ms Patawaran differently.

“As someone who campaigns and pioneers as an advocate for women, one perspective is to think, have I held her back?” reflects Ms Cooper. “Another is, I’ve given her exactly what she wanted. There is a cultural element here as well, she has a family to support back home in the Philippines.”

On the mother-nanny relationship, Ms Cooper pauses: “I think we are friends,” she says. “At the end of the day, it is an employer-employee relationship. She works for us, that is the reality, however we treat her as a member of the family.”

Friend, employee, family: is a nanny all of these things at the same time?

“Ultimately, it is the employer who decides when you are an employee and when you are part of the family,” says Prof Anderson, who was a live-in domestic worker in the

mid-1980s. “Sometimes it is an excuse for not paying someone the minimum wage and for making them available at all hours. Whereas other times it is genuinely about a kind of a care that an employer feels towards a domestic worker.”

Juliana, a 36-year-old au pair in Dublin, who declines to give her full name, leaves handwritten notes to her employer rather than discuss work-related problems face to face because “she’s too emotional, she can’t see that it’s my job”.

Another question is time. Living in solved Juliana’s housing problems when she arrived from Brazil to study but the arrangement blurred boundaries: relaxing morphed into babysitting; days out with the family turned into an extended shift. “I think she thinks I’m a thing she bought in the market,” she says, about the expectation of flexibility before adding: “She’s very kind. At the end of the day she’s a person I can count on.”

When planning childcare, flexibility was a priority for Kate Vernon, a partner at the London office of US law firm Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, and her husband, also a lawyer. They employ a nanny, Lara Powrie, four days a week and Ms Vernon’s parents help on the fifth day.

For Ms Powrie, who has a qualification in childcare, the long hours and close relationship are part of the career she has chosen. She plans her social life around her employers’ changing schedule. “I definitely feel part of their family and I get invited to all their social gatherings to do with the children and birthdays,” she says, speaking on her day off. “[The home] is such an intimate place to work that you should want that sort of relationship.”

Prof Anderson says: “The main thing is to make sure that your expectations of the relationship are in tune.” There is a split, she says, between employees who value their contribution and those who see the work as just a phase.

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Marta, who declines to give her real name, falls into the latter category. An English-language graduate from Poland, she moved to London 12 years ago and eventually joined a media agency. Office life, however, was not for

her and nannying is a way to launch herself into the gig economy as a Reiki therapist.

“I was looking for something that would give me stability and freedom,” Marta says, serene in a noisy café in north London. As well as her healing practice she is planning a postgraduate degree. Would she take care of children if these other opportunities were not available? No, she replies.

Prof Williams says limiting the rights of care-providing Europeans after Brexit is likely to affect the supply of childcare providers, au pairs in particular, since many are recruited from eastern Europe. “This is simply because there may well be restrictions on what [else] they can do,” she says. Since the UK vote to leave the EU, the number of applicants has halved, says Rebecca Haworth-Wood, chair of the British Au Pair Agencies Association and owner of A2Z Au Pairs.

The temporary thinking of some nannies is what led Karen Blackett, chairwoman of MediaCom UK, to hire someone who was part of her extended family — her godfather’s son, Julian. Three of the four nannies Ms Blackett has hired have been “mannies” (the need for a gender-specific noun underscores just how gendered care work is).

As a single mother, she wanted to hire a “positive male role model” for her son. “I also wanted to make sure he doesn’t have gender stereotypes, the idea that men have certain roles and women have certain roles,” Ms Blackett adds.

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