The UK is home to up to 90,000 au pairs at any one time. For many families, au pairs are the only workable solution to the ‘childcare crisis’. However, often the experiences of au pairs and their host families don’t match up to expectations.

After two years collecting and analysing data from au pairs and host families, Drs Rosie Cox and Nicky Busch, from the Department of Geography, Environment and Development Studies, are calling for guidelines that will protect au pairs from poor working and living conditions and give them a means of redress if they are ill-treated by host families.

The study found that the average au pair in the UK works over 38 hours a week, although some work up to 70 hours, with expected duties sometimes including caring for elderly relatives or helping out in family businesses. Average pay is £108 per week, but 14% of au pairs do not receive the £85 a week recommended by the British Au Pairs Agencies Association.

Au pairing was traditionally supposed to offer young people the opportunity for cultural exchange, but most hosts interviewed conceded that meeting childcare needs was their motivation for employing an au pair and many au pairs felt that hosts were not interested in providing opportunities for cultural exchange. 44% of those advertising for au pairs expected prior experience and 26% were only considering applicants who are already in the UK, showing that there is a decreasing differentiation between au pair and nanny roles.

The nationality of the au pair appears to influence how they are treated, with au pairs from western Europe generally working shorter hours and being given more opportunities for study and cultural exchange than those from central and eastern Europe.

Dr Cox said: “Au pairs currently have no protection in terms of working hours, pay and living conditions. They are only affordable because au pairing is not recognised as work, while poor conditions are justified through discourses of cultural exchange and adventure. The government introduced guidelines in June 2014, but these contain vague terms which need clarification and they need to be backed up by providing au pairs with a means of redress if they find that they are being badly treated by their host family.

“The fact that so many families are reliant on au pairs and, in many cases, expect them to take on full-time care of very young infants highlights once again the need for access to flexible and affordable childcare. The government, and society at large, need to recognise that caring for children is valuable work, including when it is carried out in private homes. The people that do this work – including au pairs – should be recognised as workers and rewarded with appropriate wages and the respect they deserve.”

Au Pairs’ Lives in Global Context. Sisters or Servants?, edited by Dr Rosie Cox and published by Palgrave Macmillan, is out now.