

THE INVISIBLE WORKFORCE

Advocate and author Ai-Jen Poo says domestic workers are an integral yet overlooked facet of the nation's economy

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Domestic workers make up a sort of "shadow economy" in the United States.

These people, who provide child care, senior care, house cleaning and many other services, often work in isolation and outside the view of most workers.

Ai-Jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in New York, has been organizing with domestic workers to protect their employment rights and secure better wages.

There are about 2.5 million nannies, housekeepers and elder caregivers in the United States, a group that Poo calls the most visible and invisible workers, because they are seen everywhere but often ignored.

She has been organizing with immigrant women since 1996. She has also helped establish bills of rights for domestic workers in a few states.

Poo recently published "The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America," a book looking at what is known as "the age wave," referring to the growing population of seniors. By 2025, 20 percent of the U.S. population is projected to be over the age of 65.

Aaron Burkhalter: Tell me how you first began this work supporting domestic workers and immigrants.

Ai-Jen Poo: I guess that you could say that it started when I was a college student in New York City, and I started volunteering at a domestic violence shelter for Asian immigrant women. And it was so clear to me that it was almost impossible for most of those women to restart their lives and break out of the violent relationships that they were in. Mostly because they weren't able to gain access to living-wage jobs where they could actually support themselves and their children. And when I looked around at the kinds of work that people were doing, it was restaurant work, nail salon work, domestic work: jobs that have been for too long low-wage, poverty-wage jobs where women are working incredibly hard but still unable to make ends meet.

And so that's when I started to get interested in how do we make the jobs that

women hold — especially women of color and immigrant women — how do we make those jobs good jobs where you can really take pride in the work you do and support your family? And so a group of volunteers at another Asian organization that I was a part of started a project to bring together women working in low-wage service jobs.

A.B.: What does it take to bring domestic workers together, given that so many of them work in isolation?

A.P.: When we first started this work, it was very slow and incremental because there is a lot of fear. A lot of the women who do this work are undocumented and also working, barely making ends meet and very fearful of losing their jobs. And so it really took tapping into networks of workers, it really took the worker-leaders themselves really convincing their peers that it was safe and that it was a good thing to join. So you know it was very difficult to get five or six women in a room together initially, but once a handful of women who did this work decided they wanted to be leaders, they were able to organize their peers.

A.B.: You've said domestic workers are the most visible and invisible workforce. What do you mean by that?

A.P.: Pretty much in every city that you could live in these days, you will see women on the street pushing strollers with children that are not their own; you will see caregivers pushing elders in wheelchairs or taking them to senior centers. This work is everywhere. Everyone has loved ones (who) need care, whether they're children or elderly, and each of us interacts with this workforce in different ways all the time. But because it's so undervalued in society, we don't often think of it as real work, and we don't often account for the incredible dedication of this workforce that makes everything else possible. It's both present everywhere and also not very present at all in our popular imagination.

And the other thing is, you could go into any neighborhood and not know which households were workplaces, which apartments are workplaces because there is no place that the workplace is registered.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MS. FOUNDATION

Ai-Jen Poo is the director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Her recent book, "The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America," examines "the age wave," or the growing population of seniors — many of whom will eventually need to be cared for.

There's no list, there's no factory floor or water cooler, so there is also a way the workforce is incredibly spread out even as they are everywhere.

A.B.: Are there common misconceptions people have about domestic workers? What kind of issues do you talk about to make people more aware of the issue?

A.P.: Whether it's unpaid family care or professional care, it's always been taken for granted. It's never really been recognized for the true value it brings to society. So oftentimes all you have to do is ask a room full of people to share a story about someone in your life who has cared for you, and the value of that relationship in your life, and everyone always has a story. Even if you don't have children, everyone has a parent and someone who raised them. And so care stories are everywhere, we all have them, and it's about tapping into that experience that people have and to understand that these relationships that we take for granted are actually at the heart of everything else working in our families and our economy — and really talking about that.

A.B.: Some states have a domestic workers bill of rights, such as New York and California. (Oregon takes effect Friday, Jan. 1.) What has that done for workers?

A.P.: Legislation is a tricky thing because it's definitely not an end in and of itself. But for so long, this workforce has been excluded from some of the most basic labor protections. In the 1930s, when Congress was debating the New Deal, Southern members of Congress refused to support the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act — which are kind of cornerstones of our labor laws in this country — if farmworkers and domestic workers were included. And, of course, at the time they were black workers. And so in a concession to those Southern members of Congress, those two bills passed with the exclusions in place. So for more than 70 years, domestic workers have been living and working in the shadow of this racial exclusion and (are) incredibly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation as a result.

And so what we've done with these laws in these states is really bring attention to

this incredible injustice in our labor law and really raise awareness about how many gaps there are in our labor protections. And so we've been able to establish basic minimum standards in six states for domestic workers, but it's really not enough. It's just the beginning. So now in those states, workers have a floor that they can build off of and rights that they can assert on the job. But really it doesn't bring the living wages and the benefits and the economic security that they really need.

A.B.: What did you learn when you and 100 other women marched to Washington, D.C., to see Pope Francis?

A.P.: You know, I really learned a lot. It was a very transformative experience for everyone involved. When we first decided to do the pilgrimage, it was because for months, all we were hearing about immigrants in the news was what Donald Trump was saying; this incredible anti-immigrant hatred. Pope Francis is a leader who carries a very different image about migration and immigrants, and he was calling upon leaders all over the world to embrace migrants, to demonstrate compassion and cooperation and really uphold the human dignity of migrants. And so we saw it as an opportunity to really lift up the stories of immigrant women, everything that they contribute to their communities and our economy and their stories of love, of faith, of suffering, to really humanize the conversation and to take the conversation in the media in a different direction.

A.B.: I want to ask you about your book "The Age of Dignity." What is the age wave, and what will seniors need when it hits?

A.P.: Well, the age wave is already upon us. The baby-boom generation began turning 65 and reaching retirement age three years ago at least, maybe even before. Essentially, what is happening is a massive demographic shift that not many people in this country are talking about. A lot of us talk about the racial demographic shift and how immigrant communities are growing, and we are soon to become a so-called majority-minority nation.

But there's this other shift happening

parallel to that, where essentially people 85 and older are the fastest-growing demographic in this country. Advances in health care and technology have allowed people to live longer than we have ever imagined. And the baby-boom generation, which is an incredibly large generation, is now hitting retirement age. By the year 2050, 27 million Americans will need care just to meet their basic daily needs, and we are in no way prepared for the amount of care and support that our elders will need in this country.

So there are huge implications, and it's one of the reasons why in-home care (is) the fastest-growing occupation in our economy today. And it's a very dangerous situation because the average annual median income of home-care workers is \$13,000 per year. I don't know what the cost of living is here in Seattle, but I imagine that it would be pretty hard to survive off of \$13,000 per year. And that's pretty much the case in every single city in this country.

So we're talking about a workforce that's going to be more necessary than we ever imagined, that is actually struggling, working and still living in poverty. We kind of need what I call a care revolution, where we really think about every aspect of our economy and our family structures in such a way that enhances our ability to take care of one another. And so a lot is going to have to change. But I think it's a huge opportunity to make these jobs really good jobs that you can support your family on and take pride in. I mean these are the jobs of the future.

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Oregon's Bill of Rights

The Oregon Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, which Gov. Kate Brown signed into law in the summer, takes effect Friday, Jan. 1. The law establishes certain workplace rights for domestic workers, including overtime wages, rest periods, paid personal leave, and protections against misconduct such as harassment.

OTHER STATES: Connecticut passed labor protections for domestic workers in June. New York, California, Hawaii and Massachusetts also have domestic workers bills of rights.

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