



Conversation with Ai-jen Poo

Ashley Hopkinson

August 13, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me what brought you to this work and how you would describe the work that you do now?

Ai-jen Poo: My name is Ai-jen Poo, I am the executive director of Caring Across Generations and the president of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. I'm an organizer. I've spent most of my life organizing with domestic workers, care workers and family caregivers.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is missing from the current conversation in the U.S. around domestic work and labor? Is there a gap you would like to see addressed?

Ai-jen Poo: It's a huge opportunity that we have where we have this workforce that is among the fastest growing in the entire country. Home care is the fastest growing occupation in the entire U.S. workforce because there's a huge demand from the growing aging population in our country, especially for care in the home as opposed to in a nursing home.

These are jobs that can't be outsourced, they're not going to be automated anytime soon, but they're currently poverty wage jobs that are overwhelmingly held by women and majority women of color, including lots of immigrant women. This is a workforce that is the foundation of the economy. What I mean by that is, there is this work that is happening that is actually enabling all other forms of work. So it's the child care worker who makes it possible for the working parent to go to work and do what they do every day. They're job enabling jobs.

So investing in making them good family sustaining jobs has the biggest return on investment of any investment that we could make in our economy or in our workforce. You have the ability to lift a whole bunch of people in a workforce that's growing out of poverty.

Those jobs support those families and communities, but then they also support all of the people who rely on that care, the services that they provide, in order to then participate in the workforce. And then all of the children who will have the care to realize their potential in life, or the older adults who will be able to age with dignity, or the people with disabilities who will be able to live independently because they actually have the supportive services that they need.

It's kind of this incredible win-win-win investment that you could make that not only creates opportunity and possibility for literally everyone, but it addresses this deep inequity in our economy that is about how women, and women of color in particular, have been relegated to jobs that are not sustainable or family sustaining.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does it take to convince people that this is an area that requires a lot more attention? And by attention, we mean investment. What are the approaches that you've taken that have worked? What do you think it will take to continue to have that perspective be more prominent?

Ai-jen Poo: It's a part of the economy where a lot of people who don't have political power are concentrated, arguably, right? It's women, children, people with disabilities, people of color, immigrants. On the other hand, it is an issue that actually impacts everyone directly and so you could see the potential for building a very broad and powerful coalition around these issues.

But I will say that the association of care and care work with women and as a profession of women of color in particular, has deep seeded cultural roots. And so there have to be some pretty deep culture shifts that are about making care more visible, and its role in the economy more visible, about helping people to see that care is not a problem that can be addressed by individuals or individual families alone. That we actually need common and shared public infrastructure and public investments, just like any other kind of infrastructure, in our caregiving systems and in our workforce in order for it to work. So there are deeply seeded cultural norms and narratives that need to be addressed.

In our country, we historically have seen care as kind of an individual personal responsibility to be shouldered mostly by the women in our families. And because of how powerful that narrative and that expectation is, we have all failed to have an expectation that our systems and our government should actually support us. We experience the crisis of care as a crisis of personal failures as opposed to a system failure.

We will always all have to take individual responsibility for caring for the people we love. It's one of our most important and fundamental roles as human beings and as societies. And as societies, we also need to design our systems, our workforce, our policies in such a way that acknowledge and support the fact that we have families, and that we live in intergenerational communities, and that we are interdependent across generations. Until we do that, every single inequity in our society will be exacerbated by our failure to design for care.

Ashley Hopkinson: Did you see anything shift during the pandemic that is noteworthy or sustained any lasting change or have we now shifted back to the status quo?

Ai-jen Poo: I think that the designation of care workers as essential workers was really significant. Even though not a lot has changed in terms of wages and policies. The designation and how we define reality is the basis upon which everything else gets sorted and decisions get made and (whether) behaviors change or don't change. I think that having a designation of care work as essential work is the crucial first step.

We also made a big shift in the pandemic around this idea that care is a collective social responsibility. That it should be a societal priority, not just an individual one. When the care crisis came to everybody's doorstep in the pandemic, it was a really unique and historic opportunity to point out to each and every one of us how caring alone is not enough.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there an example of something that gives you a sense of progress, a sense that we're moving toward positive shifts? Can you share one of those with me? What do you think are the ingredients that make it stand out as an example of progress?

Ai-jen Poo: The Biden-Harris administration has treated investments in the care economy as core to the economic agenda, not just a women's agenda. They've actually really tried to position it as an economic issue and set of investments. And that shift is huge, and it has enabled a totally different conversation about the kind of policy change we need for this generation.

Another thing that's been significant has been that it's not just about one area of care. It's not just child care or it's not just paid family and medical leave, which is how it's historically shown up in different times, as kind of a one solution to a lifelong, holistic, varied set of experiences in terms of need.

So this administration has said, first of all, care is economic. It's an economic issue. It is the economy. And then they have said it's child care, it's paid family medical leave. It's also access to aging and disability care, especially in the home and community, or long-term care. Some people use the word long-term care. It's also good jobs, good union jobs for the care workforce.

And all of those things tell a story about care as an essential investment in order to support dignity, quality of life, and a strong economy at every stage of life. That to me has been the biggest shift of the last four years, which then creates a different context for talking about policy and policy change. Meanwhile, the states have made progress. There are 14 states that have passed paid family and medical leave programs. The state of Washington has passed the first long-term care benefit in the country. It's called [WA Cares](#). It supports people to have access to long-term care, even if they're not eligible for Medicaid.

A number of states have made pretty historic investments in child care and expanding access to pre-K to make it more universal. So you're seeing cities and states take on bites of these investments in ways that are very significant. They show us what's possible and they create a constituency behind this agenda, and a set of champions who really understand what's at stake.

We've kind of been in this era, this several decades long era of technocratic incrementalism in terms of making policy progress in these little bites around the edges. We have now entered a phase where we can imagine a level of transformation in our systems that is actually attempting to meet the moment.

I believe that we're going to be the generation to build the care infrastructure that we need in this country to put the wheels in motion, to be catalytic at a level that is far beyond the kind of incrementalism that has defined the last few generations on this issue.

Ashley Hopkinson: As I'm reflecting, the narrative shift is powerful. Is there another building block to progress that you think we're overlooking or not seeing as powerful as it is?

Ai-jen Poo: It's very important because narrative is like the water that we swim in, the air we breathe. It is the way that people are making meaning of our realities. And to unlock a fundamentally different reality when it comes to care means that the water has to be a very different temperature. There has to be just a very different appetite and demand and expectation of what we deserve when it comes to care. The people who provide care, family caregivers and care workers have been so invisible in our dominant public narrative, in our economic narrative that we have just a lot of work to do to write them into the story at all.

If somebody said, working class hero and the archetype that came into your mind was a woman of color in scrubs, a home care worker, then I would say we would be swimming in different waters. And the truth is, she is the working class hero of today, but for some reason, we draw up a man in a hard hat or somebody on a factory floor. And those people are working class heroes for sure but there's

massive sectors of our economy that are not in that archetype, that dominant archetype of a working class hero yet. When they are, we will know that we are in a different era for change.

Ashley Hopkinson: When you talk to people who are not deeply entrenched in labor and workforce conversations, how do you explain the importance of this work? Outside of just these fiery moments where there's a walkout or the teacher's union is up against the school district?

Ai-jen Poo: I feel like I'm lucky on this front because I represent a group of workers who touch everyone's lives in one form or another.

Literally every room that I'm in, doesn't matter where, we start the meeting with sharing of care stories. I ask people to turn to the person sitting next to them and share a story about someone who's cared for them or someone that they care for and the importance, the value of that relationship in their lives. Everyone has a story and all of those stories are deeply emotional and personal and meaningful.

That's the starting point. And that's usually how people connect to this workforce. Everybody has been or will be a caregiver or knows a caregiver, an unpaid family caregiver, and most people know a professional caregiver as well. So it's just tapping into people's stories. It gets to the heart of just being a human being.

I can't imagine organizing another sector of workers because I think it would be really hard to get to people's hearts as quickly as I'm used to doing with this work.

Ashley Hopkinson: What represents progress for you? What metrics/measures do you use as an organization that indicates we're moving forward and advancing change on some level?

Ai-jen Poo: Are people's lives better? Can more people afford good care for the people that they love? Can more people in the care workforce go to work every day knowing that they are valued and seen and then able to take care of their own families doing this work as care professionals? Are people with disabilities able to live full, whole lives independently with the support that they need? Are people like my grandparents able to get access to care that's culturally competent to allow them a dignified aging process? Will people's lives be better, more dignified, more respected, more supported?

Ashley Hopkinson: In the time that you've been organizing around this work, what would you say is a challenge that you find yourself up against, and how do you work to overcome that particular challenge or challenges?

Ai-jen Poo: Mostly, people are just trying to survive. It's hard for people to believe that things can be different, honestly, that change is possible. And that's why I try to stay very solutions-oriented. So there's that. The culture of individualism and the pull towards a reality that has not existed for a couple generations now, where you had a nuclear family where one working age adult would stay home and take care of the family, that was never a reality for some segments of our workforce. Certainly now, it is simply not our reality and that ship has sailed.

People have a hard time with just accepting the reality that we're in, in a way that allows us to design for this reality and into the future. There's this idea that somehow getting support for childcare or long-term care is taking away from the sacred role of families to take care of their loved ones and I actually see it as the opposite. I feel like it's actually investing and doubling down on the sacred role of families.

Whereas, right now, it's just kind of a free for all. You're just out here and in an economy where 60% of working people earn less than \$60,000 per year, and the average cost of childcare is \$10K a year, and the average cost of a nursing home is \$100K a year, the numbers just don't add up. So let's deal with that reality.

Ashley Hopkinson: How have partnerships or collaborations helped in the work? How have you been able to build bridges and connections?

Ai-jen Poo: Sometimes you really do have to slow down and build relationships and build trust and show up for people and listen a lot and learn a lot. And when you make mistakes, try to figure out how you can make amends.

I have spent 26 years building bridges with people who have, frankly, experienced pretty deep trauma and injury, whether it's people with disabilities or undocumented immigrant care workers. Or even just the middle class mom in Manhattan who doesn't have good childcare options and is struggling to afford the nanny or whatever it is.

People have a lot of emotional pain around care. So in that landscape, it's just really important to be human and to create the space to listen to people, to help people feel seen and heard, and try to connect interests as much as you can. Sometimes it takes years to do that. But also the best way to build trust is to fight for common goals together.

One thing this administration (Biden administration) has done for us, is we have kind of shed our scarcity mentality that pits us against each other. And we have kind of said, "You know what? We've been in this scarcity mindset for 40 some years and it's not really working for us. Let's try something

different. What if everyone who cares about care actually got together and started working together and fighting for a bigger pie as opposed to a bigger piece of a pie?" So that's where we are. That's what we're trying right now. For me, I've carried the baton for 26 years, but before me, lots of other people did.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is an insight or a takeaway from the care economy work that you think would be valuable to pass along to someone else who is entering this space? What have you learned that you think is worth sharing?

Ai-jen Poo: Sometimes in order to achieve your goals, you have to subsume them. And what I mean by that is, I started out organizing with domestic workers, and I then started working with older adults and people with disabilities because on the consumer side, it felt like these interests were interdependent and interconnected, and we needed to find a way to work together. Each time we have broadened our vision, our aperture and our goals, it has allowed for more things to be possible, including more power behind our agenda.

So I'm not just narrowly focused on domestic workers, although I will always be focused on domestic workers. But opening the aperture, seeing how the issues that you care about are connected to others, and seeing how you can create a vision and a story about the future that as many people as possible can see themselves in that vision is actually the best way to achieve any goal that you might have, even if it's for a specific community.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow and develop?

Ai-jen Poo: I would love to see a very broad, multiracial, multigenerational coalition movement, behind a care agenda that is about supporting each of us and our families at every stage of life to be able to have what we need to live, work, and care with dignity. It's starting. It's happening. I'm feeling a different kind of energy around the country, but I think we're just at the beginning of what it could be in terms of power to change the country.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

Ai-jen Poo: Thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*