



Canaries in the Coal Mine: Domestic Workers and the Future of Work

An interview between Ai-jen Poo and Natalie Foster

Description

Ai-jen Poo is the president of the [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#), director of [Caring Across Generations](#), and a leading voice for worker rights and dignity. And we had the pleasure of speaking with her as part of our series, "[Back to the Future of Work: Revisiting the Past and Shaping the Future](#)."

In this conversation with Economic Opportunities Program Senior Fellow [Natalie Foster](#), Ai-jen paints the picture of an economy that domestic workers have long known: low wages, unstable employment, unfair scheduling, and few workplace protections. Domestic workers like caregivers, cleaners, and home aides routinely work in precarious conditions, often without job security, clear contracts, or basic benefits like paid sick leave.

What's changed in the last 10 years is the degree to which their experience is no longer unique. From increased automation to the rise of the gig economy, work across many industries has become more unstable, mirroring the conditions that domestic workers have faced for generations.

"We saw that the conversation often overlooked workers' experiences in favor of technology-driven narratives," she notes. "But the real future of work is about ensuring workers — regardless of job classification — have power, rights, and dignity." In this conversation, we explore what the past can teach us about the future — and how we

can ensure that workers have a say in what comes next.

Transcript

Natalie Foster (00:00)

Hi, I am Natalie Foster. I am a senior fellow here at the Aspen Institute and president of the Economic Security Project and I've just published a new book called *The Guarantee*. Welcome to our series, *Back to the Future of Work, Revisiting the Past and Shaping the Future*. This 10-year retrospective project aims to gather reflections and insights from a wide set of leaders and innovators who have been engaged in the questions about the changes in technology, shifts in global business trends, and the implications for the shape of the future of work now and into the future.

I have the pleasure of curating this series with Anmol Chaddha, another senior fellow here at the Aspen Institute, and want to thank Maureen Conway for her vision on this project. It was about a decade ago when the Economic Opportunities Program hosted its first public conversation on the future of work. Now at that time, there were not only concerns about automation and how technology might be eliminating the need for certain types of work, but also about how technology was changing the employment relationship. The advent of platforms and the gig economy raised new questions about work and what work might look like.

So now 10 years later, we're at a new moment with technology and work, and AI is developing rapidly across all sectors of the economy and could have a wide ranging influence on the world of work. So in the face of these developments, we at the Aspen Institute, Economic Opportunities Program, wanted to reach out to a variety of voices to hear what they are thinking. What did we get right?

The last time we were addressing these issues a decade ago, what might we have done better? Is there something to be learned from that experience as we face this new challenge of AI? And fundamentally, what is the future of work that we want and how do we get there? So it is my great pleasure to welcome Ai-jen Poo as a guest in this series. Ai-jen is a next generation labor leader. She's an award-winning organizer, author and a leading voice across social movements. She is the president of the National

Domestic Workers Alliance, the director of Caring Across Generations. She's the co-founder of Supermajority and a trustee of the Ford Foundation. She's nationally recognized as an expert on elder and family care, the future of work, gender equality, immigration, narrative change, and grassroots organizing.

And she's the author of the book, "The Age of Dignity, preparing for the elder boom in a changing America", which really shaped my own thinking on the future of work when it was published, I think, at least a decade ago. So it's just really a pleasure to have you, Ai-jen. Thank you for being here.

Ai-jen Poo (03:14)

Thanks for having me. I feel like it's such an important moment to reflect back on this conversation in particular. I'm so looking forward to the conversation.

Natalie Foster (03:25)

Good, me too. Well, let's just kick it off with you. I mean, you've been one of the leading voices arguing that domestic workers who the National Domestic Workers Alliance represents are canaries in the coal mine, so to speak, that they've always worked in piecemeal, informal jobs as more and more work starts to look like that. So there's a lot of lessons learned. So start by telling us a little bit about that and your broad take on the future of work conversation.

Ai-jen Poo (04:02)

Well, so domestic workers are the workforce. It's about two and a half million strong - that work inside of our homes, providing caregiving and cleaning services. And it's a workforce that's isolated. There's typically only one person per workplace and disaggregated, kind of hidden. You don't know in any given neighborhood or community which homes are also workplaces. And it's mostly women, often women of color, immigrant women, women of marginalized social status. And it's a workforce that has faced generations of exclusion from basic rights and protections and really any kind of cultural or legal recognition that this is work equal to other forms of work, despite the fact that it's a full-time profession for over two million people. And so when I first started organizing domestic workers back in 1998, when I would raise this question of all of

these workers who kind of do this work inside of our homes that makes everything else in our economy possible, it was almost seen as kind of like work that was at the edges of our economy, at the margins, in the shadows, really just kind of an outlier. The kinds of vulnerabilities that domestic workers face like not having any job security, not having a clear work agreement, not having a regular schedule even, or even something as basic as a sick day.

Most domestic workers, in fact, more than 80 % of domestic workers don't have a single paid sick day. And so in that time, when you would describe these conditions, was seen as kind of very, almost exotic, because it felt like so much of an outlier. But then over time, as we've looked around, more and more work in America, in so many sectors of our economy has become precarious, like domestic work, inconsistent, and work that frankly does not add up to a decent quality of life for the people who do the work.

So early on, we started to say, hey, domestic workers are almost like the ultimate futurists, because this kind of work environment is what domestic workers have been living with forever. And in the last 20 years that we've been trying to organize and change those conditions, we've learned many, many things about what is required to establish dignified work in this industry. And some of those lessons could be really helpful as we think about how we turn the tide on a trend in our economy that is becoming really an epidemic of low wage precarious work. And so that's why I started to say, hey, when we think about the future, let's look to the margins and look at where solutions have been being built in the shadows for some time, because that might tell us what we need to think about in terms of structuring the mainstream of the economy.

Natalie Foster (07:30)

I love that. Domestic workers are the ultimate futurists. That is just a really important insight that does indeed feel like I see reflected in your work. So as you think back to the future of work conversations, are there things from the National Domestic Workers Alliance or carrying across generations that stand out as things you got right, like that you knew from the beginning?

This is what we need to focus on and then it becomes mainstream as you're saying. And then are there things that were overlooked that are now obvious?

Ai-jen Poo (08:09)

Yeah. So I have to shout out Palak Shah, who really led this body of work for us in the organization. When she came on board right as tech platforms were entering into domestic work. We started to see online marketplaces like Care.com and CIDR City and Urban CIDR pop up. Some started to emerge in the elder care space like Honor.

And Palak Shah joined our team to really lead an effort to understand how shifts in technology would impact the quality of work for the workers and to see how we could set up a seat at the table for workers to actually shape how technology was being deployed and built in the care sector and how it could potentially be leveraged to improve the quality of jobs for domestic workers and

care workers. So a couple of things that we noticed, one was that a lot of the conversation about the future of work when we entered the scene was about robots and technology and about a certain inevitability that a lot of these technological changes, well, there was an idealism in the beginning that technology was gonna democratize the marketplace for both workers and for consumers and create new agency and freedom and community. And right, we remember that period. And then the future of work conversation became very quickly about how jobs were gonna be displaced by technology.

And our first thought was we're talking too much about the technology and the robots and we're not talking enough about actual workers. And when we look around - if what we want to do is shape a better future of work, we have to actually start with the workers whose experience of work is actually at the heart of the question, but it wasn't at the heart of the conversation. And so what we tried to do was put the worker back into the future of work conversation. So that was one thing. And then another thing we saw was that there was a whole debate when it came to the question of platform and gig work. There was a whole debate about whether we needed to protect and secure a W-2 economy where everyone had W-2 employment status, or whether we needed to start to think about how people who are independent contractors and had a different worker classification actually could start to have rights, could have benefits, and essentially accept that the future was gonna be a lot more 1099 than it was gonna be returning back to a W-2 dominant future.

That debate took up so much air time and from our perspective as domestic workers, there are many domestic workers who are W-2 employees and then there are many domestic workers who are 1099 and some who are part-time and well, there's all kinds of arrangements. And our experience was that there are really crappy jobs in every category and the quality of the job was not actually about what the classification of work was, but it was about a seat at the table, how much protection you had in the workplace. Obviously if there is an opportunity to join a union and you had rights in the law like that come with W-2, you're in a better position.

But the reality was, it didn't seem like we were going to be able to convert a whole bunch of the 1099 economy back to W-2. So then the question is, if we want to make change from the world as it is in reality, what does that look like? How do we actually improve the quality of work across the economy, including for 1099 workers? And so we tried to focus the conversation there.

And, you know, I think we're in a different place now. Things have kind of changed. There are unions who are organizing independent contractors. are, know, independent contractors who've just won the right to collectively bargain, or at least to begin the process. There are innovations now, 10 years later, in experimentation of how you improve the quality of work and life for independent contractors and 1099s.

Also, the culture around unionization and worker organizing and giving workers a voice at work has really shifted and unions are very popular among young people and we're seeing kind of a rise, a resurgence in unionization, which I think is a big part of or a big factor in having a future of work where workers do have a seat at the table to shape it.

Natalie Foster (13:49)

Yeah, that absolutely makes sense and I really appreciate the broad perspective you're bringing here. I hear you saying there's a role for government, there's a role for business, and there's a role for workers and unions, and it seems like you and Palak, as you mentioned, and others on the team have really pushed in all those places and have forged some interesting partnerships with government or business over the years as things changed, as you're saying, as new platforms emerged. What are some of the partnerships you think were important in giving us signals for where we might be heading?

Ai-jen Poo (14:37)

Well, the interesting thing about the care economy and our work is that we did spend a lot of time trying to pursue partnerships and collaborations with tech companies, with platforms that were with the goal of trying to improve the quality of work for the people who were working on those platforms. And I think one of the fundamental challenges that we face in the care economy is that because we have left so much to the marketplace, we are in a situation where

Families can't afford to pay more for care and workers can't afford to be paid less for care. And there's a limit to what technology can do to create efficiency in the dynamic.

I think what we've realized is that this is precisely when the role for government, the role of government becomes so clear. It's like the problems that you cannot solve through private sector solutions alone, you really do need a role for civil society government and the private, there's a clear role for the government and the care economy to help families afford the care that they need so that you can actually build a sustainable workforce that earns the kind of wages that allow for them to sustain in care jobs in a way that allows for those services to be available to people and to have quality to them. And so I think that we have done no shortage of attempts and we will continue to do the exploration of collaborations in the private sector. But one of the big takeaways I have is that for a challenge and part of our economy that is so enormous, like the care economy.

Ai-jen Poo (16:48)

And for a need that is so fundamental to everything else in our economy functioning, which is the need for care, whether it's for children or older adults or people with disabilities, the government really does need to play a role and does need to offer us the tools that we need to then actually work and care. And then there is a role for the private sector in strengthening how that care is delivered and helping to create new innovation in delivery of services and all these kinds. And using technology to improve the quality of care and the quality of job. But the fundamental piece at the bottom of it is that the government has not created the infrastructure for that care to be delivered in a way that is affordable for families and good enough jobs for workers. And so that piece is what we've kind of anchored into as something that is a really fundamental

priority of ours as we help to harness the power of technology and potential private sector partnerships as well.

Natalie Foster (18:03)

That makes sense. And so there are some models, as you look around the country, that you could imagine scaling that would address both sides of the market, right? The challenge families have for affording care and the challenge caregivers have for wages that are enough and jobs with dignity and voice on the job.

Ai-jen Poo (18:31)

Yeah, I mean, I always brag about Washington state because it really is a reflection of when the labor movement and civil society and government and consumers work together to create a public infrastructure that is a strong enough foundation so that private sector and individual families can really do our thing. It's kind of like that's the closest model I can think of. So in Washington State they have

There's a very strong union for home care workers, SEIU Local 775, and they have built a coalition with the AARP and multiple older adult and disability and family caregiver groups. And that coalition has over the years built pieces of infrastructure, some of which are owned by the union and some of which are publicly owned. And one of the big publicly owned pieces that was built

In the last 10 years there has been a social insurance fund at the state level called WACARES and that fund is meant to address the people who need long-term care but who don't earn enough money to pay for it all out of pocket, and who earn too much to be eligible for Medicaid, which is basically most working and middle class people. And so it prevents a segment of Washingtonians from having to completely impoverish themselves to be eligible for Medicaid when they need care. And it prevents bankruptcy and supports the effect of accrual and transfer of wealth from one generation to the next while ensuring that people can get access to care when they need it. A big, big step. It's the only state in the country that has a long-term care benefit that's available to everyone.

And I think that's exactly the kind of thing we need at the federal level that would help us raise the wages for care workers and also help us make care affordable. And it

would provide the tools that we need truly to take care of the people we love. And then on top of that, Washington also has an incredible training fund for home care workers where the workforce is really prepared and there are tons of continuing education and cultural competency work for diverse elders and all kinds of things that are really, really important and about recognizing the incredible skill that goes into care work and the diversity of needs that consumers of care have. So I think it's a pretty exciting model and there was actually an attempt to try to roll it back recently that voters voted out and resoundingly voted to build the program, to strengthen it, to keep it in place, which is a very exciting affirmation.

Natalie Foster (21:51)

Yeah, you were the first to put this model on my radar screen. And as I traveled to Washington state this year, I saw some of that campaigning happening and was really tuning into it. And I think if we if we use WACARES, the Social Insurance Program for Long Term Care in Washington state as a signal of, you know, of where we might be heading, the fact that just withstood a really significant political attack bodes well for how much people need this infrastructure in their lives.

Ai-jen Poo (22:25)

That's right. I think we've got so many signals that this kind of care infrastructure is our future. And I certainly hope so because we are a country that needs a lot of care.

Natalie Foster (22:37)

Yeah, yeah, well, let's actually turn to that. We need a lot of care and therefore I've seen some estimates that say caregivers are the fastest growing occupation and maybe the largest. At one point we were saying the largest occupation by 2040. Is that still true? And what's your sense of how the market will grow?

Ai-jen Poo (23:01)

Yeah, I think that is true because by 2040 we will have more people over the age of 65 than under the age of 18 in our country in the population and the number of people over the age of 85 will double also by the year 2040. So more people are aging and

living longer than ever. Therefore we'll need more care. It also means more people will be living with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and other chronic illnesses. It's just that care is our future.

If we were to actually intentionally invest in home care jobs, there would be even more exponential growth because the demand is only going to increase with the demographics changing the way that they are. And these are jobs that can't be outsourced or automated at least anytime soon.

Natalie Foster (27:04)

Yeah. One thing I really appreciate about that is that none of us know when we will or our loved ones will need care as you are naming with, you know, different diseases or how we'll age. And one thing I like about the Washington model is that it pulls the risk. We don't know when we'll need it, but when that moment hits, it's there. And so I really appreciate that.

Ai-jen Poo (27:31)

Yeah, and social insurance works best when you have a large pool. And this would be a very large pool if we established this kind of program at the national level. It would work like Social Security Works, which is one of the most popular programs in history.

Natalie Foster (27:49)

That's right. A bold idea. That's a future of work idea, yes, but really a future of the American economy idea. And then to the point you're making, I now would like to ask a little bit about AI because you're saying, well, these are jobs that won't be automated out. People would prefer to be cared for in-home. And even if Elon Musk's robots come to be, people will still prefer a human being to care for their loved one. And so in some ways, this occupation is future proof, which makes it more incumbent to get it right so that there is an optimistic future of work. So will you talk a little bit about AI and how you see it impacting the workforce?

Ai-jen Poo (28:40)

Yeah, I think that AI holds promise and it is inevitable that it will change much of how care and our healthcare works and in exactly what ways I'm not totally sure yet but I'm pretty sure it will have a profound impact and what I find to be so interesting is that most care workers do not worry about the displacement of their role in care because they know just how fundamental the human empathetic element is to the delivery of good care.

And I think that they're very intrigued about what some of these technologies could do to lighten the load and to make some aspects of their job easier. And so one of our priorities as a movement is to actually bring workers to some of these labs where the tools are being developed and have the engineers engage with workers on what it could look like to deploy the power of these tools to alleviate some of the stressors of care work that can be addressed through technology and what would it look like for us to design with their interests and their quality of life and work in mind alongside that of the consumer.

And I feel like there's gotta be unlimited possibilities. I've already been very impressed with the way that AI has had a profound impact for people with autism and other disabilities. So I feel convinced that it could be good for care workers too, but it requires that care workers have a seat at the table and a way to shape how these tools are being built and the right incentive structure. And, you know, if we've learned anything from the past, there's going to be very little in the private marketplace that is building in the interest of workers. And so how do we make sure that there are other elements who are investing in research, like the government, that actually is about deploying these tools and their power for good and for workers, for the future of workers, not just for profit.

Natalie Foster (31:26)

Yeah, that is a world I would like to live in, and ways of developing technology that I would like to see more of. Ai-jen, is there anything else that strikes you about the future of work? Where it went wrong, what it got right, and where we need to be heading that you want to leave us with today?

Ai-jen Poo (31:48)

Well, I mean, one thing that Palak always used to say is that, you know, whenever we would raise that in this country there is an epidemic of low wage work and we need to focus on how we are addressing that first and foremost, and then the conversation would immediately go towards workforce training and development and retraining with technology and changing technology and how are we adapting the workforce of the future to how technology is going to reshape the future. And in reality, there are literally tens of millions of low-wage service jobs that have been there for the last decade and are probably going to be there for the next decade, or at least some large share of them, where we have not raised the wages.

And we have not improved access to paid time off, paid sick days, health benefits, basic benefits that we know human beings have always needed and will continue to need into the future. And Palak used to always say, we need to stop talking about upskilling the worker and talk about how we're going to upgrade these jobs. And like it is still a fact coming out of a global pandemic where 82 % of domestic workers didn't have a single paid sick day today, to this day, that is still the reality. And so many jobs across America across retail service, even in light manufacturing, there are just too many jobs that don't earn enough to make ends meet. And that is no matter what happens in the field of AI, or whatever else. If we don't address that reality, the future of work will not be what it should be for us and future generations.

Natalie Foster (33:57)

Yeah, that is exactly right. It reminds me of another shift I saw over the past decade away from the quantity of jobs. How many jobs will be lost to the quality of jobs, like you're saying, that it's actually about pay and dignity and voice and the quality has to be there for it to matter. So I'm really appreciating you lifting that up.

Well, thank you so much for being with us, Ai-jen, and I look forward to more conversation as we move forward into this brave new world.