

Case Study
Labor of Love
By Sharon Lerner

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Ai-Jen Poo, cofounder and director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, is helping to build a movement to improve the lives of 2.5 million US home care workers. **BY SHARON LERNER**

AI-JEN POO'S GOAL IS "to bring dignity and respect to all workers." In its huge scope and almost limitless ambition, such an aim can seem on a par with achieving world peace or ending hunger. It would be easy to mock Poo for her lofty vision if, at age 39, she hadn't already made huge steps toward achieving it.

Poo can already take credit for leading the fight for the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, the country's first, which went into effect in 2010. She helped found Domestic Workers United (DWU), the group that pushed that bill into law, and she is now at the helm of two other organizations she helped found: Hand in Hand, which is devoted to solving the country's care crisis, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), a fast-growing organization that has 43 local affiliates and represents more than 10,000 nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly. Through the NDWA, she has spearheaded a campaign to change federal labor rules that are soon expected to bring minimum wage and overtime protection to some 1.7 million home care workers.

The United States media have begun to take notice of these unprecedented feats. The *New York Times* dubbed Poo the "nannies' Norma Rae." Last year, *Time* anointed her one of the 100 most influential people in the United States. *Dame*, an online magazine for women, referred to her as "the rock star of community organizing." She was probably the only person ever named one of the "40 under 40" by both *Crain's New York Business* and the Feminist Press. And recently, *The American Prospect* magazine called for Poo's appointment to replace Hilda Solis as Secretary of Labor in the second Obama administration.

Poo, who wears bangs and has a tiger tattoo on her upper arm, is not the first to try to improve the lot of the mostly female workers who toil in other people's homes. The history of organizing this underpaid and widely mistreated workforce is long and, if one is focused on actual changes in pay and working conditions, dispiriting. As far back as the 1860s, when black washerwomen in Jackson, Miss., petitioned the mayor for his help in securing higher wages, domestic workers were banding together to improve their working conditions. In 1881, the washerwomen of

Atlanta, or "washing Amazons," as they were called at the time, enlisted the support of some 3,000 workers and mounted an actual strike. Historian Tera Hunter writes about that effort—and the arrests that followed—in her book, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*.

Many middle-class reformers also took up the cause. After surveying 5,000 domestic workers and employers, historian Lucy Maynard Salmon waged a campaign on their behalf, as Vanessa May recounts in her book *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940*. And, in a project that could have inspired Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America*, journalist Inez Godman worked as a domestic and wrote about her experience in a series of muckraking articles in 1901. Yet even when organizations—including the National Urban League, the National Women's Trade Union League, the YWCA, and the Domestic Workers Union of New York—took up the cause, abysmal conditions for domestic laborers persisted.

DAUGHTER OF IMMIGRANTS

It's worth asking how and why Poo, a young woman who's never worked as a nanny, housekeeper, or health aide or organized any other workforce, has succeeded where so many others have failed. In some ways, Poo, who was featured in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* in a designer dress and Tiffany earrings,



Ai-Jen Poo (front and center) with members of NDWA during the group's 2012 National Congress, held in Washington, D.C.

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seems an unlikely activist. Her language sounds more like that of a spiritual healer than that of a union boss. She grew up in seeming security; her mother was a doctor, her father a scientist. And, though her father, who, like her mother, emigrated from Taiwan, was a pro-democracy activist, Poo initially thought she would

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become a potter and set off to study ceramics in college.

But after a year at Washington University, she transferred to Columbia University, where she majored in women's studies and became involved in the student movement protesting the university's lack of cultural diversity in courses. She also volunteered at a shelter, the New York Asian Women's Center, where she met

women trapped in violent situations. Poo's job was to help them cope with the violence in their lives, but the experience got her thinking about the structural issues that made them vulnerable.

"I saw women struggling to get out of cycles of violence," she says. "But rather than just helping women facing abuse, I got interested

in organizing and rights of workers." When Poo graduated from Columbia in 1998, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence hired her to organize low-wage Filipina workers, and soon she began to think that this work should be expanded to the broader population.

Like other activists before her, Poo faces a labor organizing landscape that is uniquely challenging. Domestic laborers are spread out across a large number of private households. Whereas organizers of factory workers, for example, can connect with many potential union members in a single location, nannies, housekeepers, and caretakers of the elderly are often isolated. Toiling by themselves in

individual homes, they are extremely difficult to reach and organize.

And then there's the matter of unionization itself. Domestic workers were specifically excluded from the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), so most of them have no legally protected right to form a union or collectively bargain for higher wages or better conditions. What's more, for much of the past century, many of the major players in the labor movement didn't consider the cooking, cleaning, and childcare that these workers did to be the kind of labor that was amenable to organizing. As a result, the domestic workforce has been largely left out of the labor advances made over the last century.

UPHILL BATTLE

In many ways, improving the lives of domestic workers is now more difficult than ever before, since various laws have evolved to specifically exclude them. Along with the NLRA, the Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, also passed in the 1930s, leave out domestic workers. Even the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which passed in 1970, doesn't apply to domestic workers, because most of them work in settings with fewer than fifteen employees. Further complicating the outreach process, these days many domestic workers don't speak English, and many are undocumented and fear deportation.

Almost one-quarter of US domestic workers earn less than the minimum wage. Of those who live with the people they care for, two-thirds are paid less than the minimum wage, according to a survey of 2,086 nannies, caregivers, and housecleaners in 14 metropolitan areas conducted by the NDWA and published last year in collaboration with the Center for Urban Economic Development and the University of Illinois at Chicago Data Center. That study, "Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work," also found that 70 percent of those workers earn less than \$13 an hour and 65 percent of them do not have any health insurance. Because of their isolation, moreover, domestic workers are especially vulnerable to wage theft, sexual abuse, and other violations.

Domestic workers have virtually no job protection, as Debra Cole, age 53, learned a few years back. Cole, a nanny who was working in New Rochelle, N.Y., at the time, offers some insight into just how precarious domestic employment can be and the unique ways in which Poo has approached the problem. Cole had been working with the same family for almost two years when, in a rush to get her young charge to nap, she accidentally dropped a painkiller she was about to take for a back spasm. When her employers found the pill on their floor, they unaccountably took it as evidence that Cole was on drugs and a danger to their child. They fired her on the spot.

It was a difficult time for Cole, a single mother who had three children of her own. She was told to leave the home immediately and given no severance pay. But she reached out to DWU, the New York City-based advocacy group that Poo then headed. Cole had consulted the group before, and had followed their advice to

put the specifics of her work arrangement into writing. Because of this contract, Poo was able to help Cole get more than \$6,000 in back pay, penalties, and interest from her former employer. But perhaps just as important, Poo encouraged Cole to share her story and help other domestic workers connect to the organization.

"[Poo] has made me a better person in that I'm more focused than before [I met her]," says Cole, who now works both as a DWU organizer and as a nanny. Cole serves as an ambassador of sorts for the organization, reaching out to other nannies in parks and distributing information about domestic workers' rights to all who might benefit from it. She also does public speaking on behalf of DWU, something she says she couldn't have done without Poo's help. Before standing up before a crowd, "I'd say, 'I don't think I can do this.' And Ai-Jen would say, 'You can.' We didn't know anything about organizing when we started," Cole says of herself and her fellow domestic workers who became DWU organizers. "Ai-Jen taught us."

NOT EXACTLY A LABOR ORGANIZER

If such hands-on motivational work seems unusual in labor organizing, that may be because Poo isn't, in the strictest sense, a labor organizer. Mostly, the legal constraints hindering their ability to bargain collectively are a handicap to domestic workers. But even as membership in traditional unions is declining throughout the country, domestic workers' unique legal situation has set the stage for an alternative vision for improving workers' lives. And Poo has supplied it in spades.

"She's a unique figure in the history of organizing," says Eileen Boris, a historian who has written several books about the history

Domestic workers are the "backbone of the US economy," Poo says. If they went on strike, "every single sector of the economy would come to a standstill."

of domestic labor and occupies the endowed Hull Chair in Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Boris sees Poo as a cross between Gloria Steinem and Dora Lee Jones, a domestic worker who founded the Domestic Workers' Union in Harlem in the 1930s.

"Like Gloria Steinem, she's coming out of a social movement and has become the member of that larger movement with many leaders who can travel the differences between educated elites, the general public, and the grassroots," says Boris. "But unlike Steinem, with worker organizing, she's been in the nitty-gritty of the field from the start." Both Poo and Steinem are clearly trying to elevate not just the women who do domestic work, but also the work itself. Indeed, Poo cites Steinem's 1994 essay "Revaluing Economics" as a critical influence on how she thinks about domestic labor. In that essay, Steinem notes that pay is all too often based not on the difficulty or importance of the task, but on the "sex, race and class" of the people doing it.

A pay structure based on the social value of the worker helps explain how domestic labor can be at once so essential and so



A home care giver and her client embody the spirit of the Caring Across Generations campaign that NDWA is co-leading.

poorly paid. Poo likes to talk about domestic workers as the “backbone of the US economy”—and notes that their absence, could it be collectively organized, would be profoundly felt. “If one day all the domestic workers went on strike, every single sector of the economy would come to a standstill,” she says. But domestic workers can’t employ the traditional tools of labor unions, such as strikes or contract negotiations, so Poo has been forced to find other ways to push for better working conditions.

The channel through which she has had the most success is that of state and federal law. She’s defined NDWA’s scope broadly. The group works on immigration reform as well as the minimum wage, and it is also pushing for other states to pass bills like New York’s Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. NDWA also aims to change domestic workplaces by holding training sessions with both workers and their employers.

But Poo may be even more unusually gifted in “changing hearts and minds,” which is how she describes the task on which she spends much of her time. Poo shines in this role as a public ambassador for domestic workers, “bringing respect and awareness to the millions of domestic workers today,” as she puts it. She talks and writes regularly about the woes of the women who, in making it possible for so many other people to work, are a critical part of the economy. And perhaps more important, she strives to get domestic workers to tell their own stories.

This ability to build trust and amplify voices is especially helpful when combined with her technical savvy. In Cole’s case, for instance, Poo knew how to get redress through the proper channels. She efficiently guided the nanny through a legal process that ultimately yielded her back pay, penalties, and interest. But she

also attended to Cole’s fears, acknowledging the pain and the humanity that underlie her dilemma and that of so many other domestic workers.

CHANGING LAWS AND POLICY

Poo’s first major policy achievement, spearheading the movement that got the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights passed, also involved both technical know-how and a deep understanding of people. She helped draft, champion, and ultimately pass the country’s first “nanny bill,” which entitles New York’s estimated 200,000 domestic workers to overtime pay; one day of rest a week; three paid days off a year after one year with the same employer; and inclusion in the state’s Human Rights Law, which protects against sexual harassment and discrimination. The new law has already allowed dozens of domestic workers to collect awards of back pay and pen-

alties ranging from \$5,000 to \$100,000.

The passage of New York’s law, a momentous first, wouldn’t have happened without Poo’s hard work in the legislative arena. For seven years, she went back and forth between New York City and Albany more than 50 times, speaking passionately of domestic workers’ personal struggles and encouraging workers whose lives would be changed by the law, including Cole, to speak about it themselves.

Poo’s strategy in the ongoing effort to address the lack of overtime and minimum wage protections for some domestic workers employed by agencies has been similarly two-pronged. On one side, she has focused on the fine details of US labor law, which, since it was updated in 1974, has specifically excluded babysitters and companions for the elderly (along with farm workers) from those basic protections. Poo understood that the most expedient way to fix the problem would be to update the labor law through a rule change by the US Department of Labor. She knew that the process would involve a comment period, in which workers could share their opinions and experiences. And she persuaded thousands of domestic workers throughout the country to write to the Department of Labor about their experiences.

“It’s not like the Obama administration would have looked to change the regulations for companion workers, had it not been for these efforts,” says Dean Baker, an economist who co-directs the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. “Ai-Jen has really put some strength together by pulling people behind a common goal. And she’s pulled in people who have done research on the low-wage labor market, like ourselves.”

While she was delving into the research and navigating the Department of Labor, Poo was also speaking and writing movingly about the issue. She brought the plight of home health aides,

companions for the elderly and disabled, and live-in childcare workers employed by agencies into sharp focus: One in five such workers lives below the poverty line, and about half rely on public benefits, such as food stamps and Medicaid.

Emphatically, and yet somehow gently, too, Poo managed to convey the basic unfairness of direct care workers' situation. Although she could—and did—debate with legislators, she also repeatedly returned to the fundamental discomfiting point that “the workforce we count on to take care of our families don’t have enough of their money to care for their own.” In outlets such as *The Hill*'s Congress Blog, a site aimed at federal lawmakers, Poo wrote not just about the impact that new regulations would have on the domestic workforce, but also about how they would affect the care that people—including the legislators themselves—are able to obtain for their loved ones. It's a novel way to approach the issue, to address the humanity of people on every side of it.

TALKING ABOUT LOVE

It's rare to hear the word “love” in a policy fight, but whether on the steps of city hall or on the dais receiving an award, Poo uses it often. She sees love as the force creating the complex tangle of human relations around domestic work—motivating immigrant parents to leave their homelands so they can support their children, for instance, and driving American working parents to seek out nannies for their own kids. But she also sees human emotion as the key to sorting out that tangle. “Love is the most powerful force for change in the world,” she has said.

Poo is particularly aware of the “deep sense of humanity and compassion and love” many nannies feel for the children they tend. “No matter how abusive an employer, I've never seen a domestic worker take it out on the children that they take care of,” she says. “The capacity for love and care against all odds is really tremendous.”

For the fifth anniversary of NDWA this past November, Poo even held an event called “Leading with Love.” The spirit was celebratory and spiritual. “This work has been truly transformative—for our members, for the families whose lives they touch, for the possibility of a more caring, just society,” she wrote in its announcement. “And it has been driven by love for one another, our children—and love for who and what our nation can become.”

In this spirit, Poo has made a conscious effort to unify rather than divide people. Whereas many labor fights take an us-versus-them form, she has found allies where others might have seen enemies. This has been particularly useful for nannies, many of whose employers have, under Poo's guidance, become allies in the fight for their protection.

The women's movement has long suffered a division along class lines, with privileged women's careers often being made possible by lower-paid domestic workers. Along with the New York City-based group Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, Poo helped form Hand in Hand, a group of employers of nannies who attempt to span that divide. Hand in Hand helped advocate for the nanny bill, and it held events where nannies' own children joined with the children of their employers to honor the domestic workers. Currently, the group is drafting ideal standards for employers of domestic workers.

Similarly, Poo has welcomed seniors and the disabled into the fight for their caregivers. In 2011, Poo, together with Sarita Gupta, the executive director of Jobs with Justice, formed Caring Across Generations, an organization that aims to bring the recipients of care together with direct care workers in a nationwide effort to create two million good jobs for caregivers and “ensure freedom and dignity for the workers who provide care and those they support.”

Poo and Gupta met at a National Planning Committee meeting of the US Social Forum in 2007 and were soon working together on the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. The two share a vision of “uniting people to create a long-term care system that supports and leans into this demographic moment,” according to Gupta, who says that the project aims to bring together consumers and workers, who often have been pitted against one another. “We can't afford to get caught up in fighting one another.”

As for Poo, Gupta continues to be struck by her ability to lead and take a back seat simultaneously. “As much as she's the one getting profiled, at the end of the day, it's not about her,” says Gupta. “She's really

NDWA members march alongside activists from other social justice groups at the US Social Forum, held in Detroit in 2010.



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clear about that. This is about the workforce she's working for." That perspective on her own role was on display at a Care Congress held in New York City this past June.

That event, one of ten such meetings organized by Caring Across Generations, attracted some 600 people, who crammed into Pace University's gymnasium to listen to Poo speak. "We're here because we care about each other and the future of our country," Poo said to the cheering crowd. She went on to discuss the humanity that unites care workers and their employers. As soon as she finished speaking, she receded into the crowd of activists.

In her effort to be as inclusive as possible, Poo has also used popular culture and new media in innovative ways. When *The Help*, the movie based on the novel by Kathryn Stockett, came out in 2011, many feminists railed against it, criticizing its focus on a Southern white woman who comes to the defense of local maids as ahistorical and ridiculous. "The way the story was told, *The Help* had the real possibility of generating the feeling among Americans that racism was in the past—that it's a problem that's been dealt with historically in part—or in large part, according to the movie—as a result of the heroism of white allies," says Rinku Sen, president of the Applied Research Center, a national racial justice organization.

But Poo embraced the film as an opportunity to reach a greater audience. She launched a Twitter campaign, the #bethehelp project, which encouraged "everyone who has been moved by the motion picture *The Help* to be a part of improving domestic workers' lives." During the Academy Awards, Poo helped arrange viewing parties to keep the issue alive.

"The entrance of the domestic worker movement into an interpretation of *The Help* brought another perspective and made it clear there's still a lot of work to be done and the work to be done is going to be done by domestic workers," says Sen. "It was really innovative. You'll see that happening more and more as people take their example and replicate it."

Poo also enlisted the help of celebrities in NDWA's push for a nanny bill in California. This past summer, actor Amy Poehler joined the effort by appearing in a video in which she says she wouldn't be able to do all she does—be an actor and a working mother—without the help she gets in her home. "Our two-minute video by Amy Poehler got more hits than any other piece of media we did," Poo notes. Other actors, including Harold Perrineau and Octavia Spencer, also lent their voices to the cause.

But even with their high profile supporters, Poo and the NDWA encountered a major stumbling block in California. As recently as this past summer, a state nanny bill seemed destined to become law there. In conjunction with some 8,000 domestic worker activists, Poo had waged a three-year grassroots campaign in support of the bill, which would have provided domestic workers with overtime pay and breaks and also guaranteed live-in workers a decent place to sleep. In August, it passed the legislature. But when the legislation reached the desk of Gov. Jerry Brown in September, he vetoed it.

The veto came as an unexpected blow to many of the bill's supporters. And, unsurprisingly, Poo showed her emotional sensitivity

around the setback. Days after the veto came down—and well before she publicly discussed a counter-strategy—she organized a conference call with the activists who had been working on this bill for years "to create a space for people to come together and grieve and heal and be angry," as she puts it. Activists got on the phone and talked about how heartbroken they felt. "Opening up that space was incredibly healing and grounding," says Poo.

Of course, Poo is continuing the fight for the bill, which had previously been vetoed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Her plan, she says, is "to build an even broader and stronger coalition and continue to push." Along with allies, she officially re-launched the

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California campaign in March. But she has focused on next steps—which have already included an online campaign in which people sent Brown sponges in the mail so he could "clean up his act"—only after making sure activists felt heard and validated.

Poo learned about the importance of spiritual and emotional health when she was in her twenties and working tirelessly to get the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights passed. She was regularly traveling back and forth between New York City and Albany at the time, working late, and generally exhausting herself. She found that doing Ashtanga yoga brought relief from the grind. "It helped me stay centered through difficult times of growth and challenge," says Poo, who continues to practice it today.

Concerned about the emotional and spiritual well-being of her membership, Poo recently hired a firm to help NDWA's most active leaders "stay centered and connected." Creative Somatics is now training 90 of the group's members in martial arts, yoga, and "things that allow them to calm their minds and really connect to what's important in life and what's important in the world," says Poo. She decided to do this after thinking about past generations of labor leaders, many of whom were hampered by bitterness, internal disputes, addiction, and sheer burnout.

Poo has learned from the successes of previous generations of social justice advocates, too. "We've tried to take the best from other movements," she says. "From the civil rights movement, we take this notion of love and power. From women of color movements, we've learned about this notion of intersectionality—that you can't really separate people's experiences as women, people of color, that we're all human. And from the labor movement, we know the power of collective action and the power of workers coming together as people whose energy makes everything else in the economy possible."

From her perch atop—she would probably say amidst—one of the most dynamic social change movements in the country, Poo has been able to interact with the modern day incarnations of these efforts. "We feel very much a part of racial, immigration, and labor movements." And with them, she's creating a new movement of her own, a group of people helping domestic workers—and, yes, all workers—get the dignity and respect they deserve. ■