

## VALUING AND SUPPORTING THE WORK OF CAREGIVING: A CONVERSATION WITH AI-JEN POO

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

### Abstract

*IJPS* Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler talks with Ai-jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, co-director of Caring Across Generations, recipient of a MacArthur Genius Award, and author of *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America*.

Keywords: caregiving, elderly, domestic workers, “women’s work,” poverty wages, women of color, immigrants, parental leave, sick leave, care infrastructure, new metrics, home care.

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**Riane Eisler:** Ai-jen, you are a leader in the movement to provide good care for the most vulnerable among us, especially children, the disabled, and the elderly, as well as an advocate for those who provide this care for poverty wages in the workplace and for free in homes. What in your life led you to this important work?

**Ai-jen Poo:** The women in my life. Both my mother and grandmother are, quite simply, powerhouses. And I don't think they're very different from millions of other working women out there who care for their families, support their communities, and work outside the home. And in every dimension of their lives and work, they were undervalued. As I look around, I see so many women who power our lives and economy, who remain unseen and undervalued. And in the 21st century, that's simply unsustainable, for our own families and for our economy. Like infrastructure, we must invest in the relationships that hold our economy and society together; otherwise our whole system is as vulnerable as a house of cards.

**Eisler:** You have noted that while we live in a world in which there is much lip service given to the virtue of caring for others, actually the work of care and those who provide it are devalued. Why do you think that is?

**Poo:** Unfortunately, there is a hierarchy of human value that reveals itself in our economy. In our society, the way we value work is often defined by who does it, or who's associated with it culturally and historically. Cultural norms are shifting, but we still have a way to go. Women's work, or work that is associated with women, is still considered less valuable, less skilled, more emotional. And caregiving is still associated with women, and as a profession, care work is often associated with women of color and immigrant women. These cultural associations are then reinforced by legal exclusions, like the exclusion of domestic workers from the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act. We are in a fundamentally different cultural and economic context than we were when these norms and exclusions were put in place; it's time for a major overhaul in how we protect and value care.

**Eisler:** Your book, *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America*, includes moving stories about women who provide care. Could you tell us one of these stories, and why you included it?

**Poo:** Well, I'm hoping your readers will read the book because there are too many important stories to name, and it just scratches the surface of what's happening right now in homes across America. I think stories are what help us make meaning of ideas. What does any of this matter, but that it actually matters in the lives of the people we love and care about? It's for this reason that I included a story of the woman who cared for my grandfather before he passed away. Her care transformed his quality of life at a critical moment in his life. He deserved nothing less. That really matters.

**Eisler:** Your Domestic Workers Alliance introduced minimum wage legislation in a number of U.S. States. What has been the effect from adoption of this legislation?

**Poo:** We have passed what we call the "Domestic Workers Bill of Rights" in eight states. Each state's version is slightly different, but beyond minimum wage legislation, the laws seek to bring domestic workers into the full protection of each state's labor and human rights laws, including protection from discrimination and harassment, and days of rest, among other protections. In some places, we were able to make breakthroughs in policy to expand protections beyond existing laws; in Massachusetts we were able to win maternity leave for domestic workers, and in New York we were able to win paid time off. The effect of these laws is both about establishing minimum standards, so that workers can actually assert and enforce their rights on the job as real workers like others, and about changing our culture and norms so that employers and workers see this as a profession like others, deserving of standards and professionalism.

**Eisler:** What do you think is needed in the long term to ensure good training, a living wage, and recognition of the value of the contributions of women (and it is still mostly women) who are employed as home caregivers in the United States, who today often have to depend on government welfare payments to feed themselves and their families?

**Poo:** We believe we need a whole new approach to caregiving in America, one in which we invest in care as infrastructure - as the work that makes all other work possible.

When we invest in the ability of families to pay for the care they need, and the workforce whose job it is to support families can earn a family-sustaining wage, then we have a system that is sustainable. We can create good care jobs and support the productivity of tens of millions of working family caregivers at the same time.

Our policy vision for this is called Universal Family Care, the idea that in the future, there should be one fund that we all contribute to, that we can all draw from, that helps us pay for child care, elder care, support for people with disabilities, and paid leave. This new framework acknowledges the 21st century reality that we're going to need a different system to support the care needs of working families.

**Eisler:** Home caregiving, whether for children, the elderly, or others, is supported in nations such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland, which provide paid parental leave for mothers and fathers, while the US has no such national program. What can we do to change this?

**Poo:** This is quite simply a question of priorities. As long as we live in a democracy, if enough of us tell our elected officials, and put our energy, money, votes and organizing behind the idea that care should be our national priority, it will happen.

**Eisler:** As a member of the panel that introduced the Center for Partnership Studies' Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs), you said, "We need SWEIs, to be able to talk about the material implications of not accounting for the family care needs of 21st century families . . . It's SWEIs that will help us make the arguments and help us raise awareness about this invisible architecture that actually is holding up our economy." How do you think we can convince policy makers to use these new metrics in deciding what to fund?

**Poo:** We do need proof of concept. I think if we can start to apply SWEI metrics to places where we are making progress in investments in the care economy, it will tell a

powerful story. For example, in Hawai'i, we have just passed the first family caregiver support program in the country, the Kupuna Caregivers Assistance Act (<http://www.care4kupuna.com/>).

**Eisler:** What else can we do to change the cultural devaluation of the “women’s work” of care, and the tragic consequences of this devaluation?

**Poo:** We can change culture, because culture is embodied in us. If we spark a different kind of conversation in our homes, communities, and the media, we can create momentum in the narrative environment about the value of care. We’re trying to do that at Caring Across Generations; you can find out more and get involved at [www.caringacross.org](http://www.caringacross.org).

**Eisler:** You have been working on a Universal Family Care proposal. Please tell us about that, and what progress you are making in this direction.

**Poo:** Caregiving families in Maine and Michigan are moving Universal Family Care campaigns forward in their states as we speak. There was even a candidate for state representative in Michigan who made Universal Family Care a feature of his campaign for office in 2016, and he won by 300 votes! Young candidates for office around the country are now reaching out to us, wanting to champion this idea as a future-oriented policy. We’re convinced that this is the future, and we now have lots of champions in communities around the country who will help make it a reality.

**Eisler:** How can scholars help change attitudes and policies that fail to adequately value the work of caring for people, from childhood to old age?

**Poo:** Scholars should work with family caregivers who are organizing in communities around the country to develop the research and data proving that investments in the

care economy are down payments on efficiency, productivity, and better quality of life and health all around.

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Ai-Jen Poo is the Executive Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and the Co-Director of Caring Across Generations. She is an award-winning activist, thought leader, and social innovator, and a leading voice in domestic workers' rights and family care advocacy. She has received numerous awards and fellowships. In 2011, she received the Independent Sector's American Express NGen Leadership Award, in 2012, she was named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world, and in 2015 she received a MacArthur Genius Award. She is author of *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America*.

Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon), is President of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS), Executive Editor of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, and author of *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, and other books and articles. She is founder of CPS's Caring Economy Campaign, keynotes conference worldwide, and has received many honors for her work for peace and human rights, including the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation's Distinguished Peace Leadership Award, the Feminist Press Pioneer Award, and the Shaler Adams Human Rights Award.

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