

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace, through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm here today with Ai-jen Poo, and we are at the Milken Institute Global Conference. And we wanted to talk about a little bit of what has happened since COVID, with caregivers and domestic workers. So, why don't you give me your assessment on where we're at today, two years into this?

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

I think where we are today is that most caregivers are back at work, and most care workers are back at work. Family caregivers are coming back to work at a much slower pace, mostly women, disproportionately women of color, because they lack really good care options that are affordable and accessible. And we have shortages of workers in childcare and in direct care, for older adults and people with disabilities.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And that is because the wages for the workforce have not increased. And if you think about the rising costs for everyday families right now, and you think about how expensive care was to begin with, and then you think about the fact that most workers who work in childcare or in home care earn less than \$15 an hour, you can understand why there's a really difficult choice there, between working and staying home and caring for your own family members.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

So, this is a huge issue and a little bit of a vicious cycle where, until we secure the care workforce, it's going to be harder for family caregivers across sectors to go back to work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That is a very important point, that we think of the care workers as just providing a service. But we don't think about what they have to deal with on their own side of it, whether they have somebody to help watch their child or an older adult or someone who's sick. And at \$15 an hour, that is an incredibly difficult, as we know, even if for someone who makes more than that.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

It is. And we just surveyed domestic workers, thousands of domestic workers around the country, a few weeks ago. And we learned through this survey that seven out of 10 domestic workers, which includes nannies, home care workers, and house cleaners seven out of 10, earn less than \$15 an hour and don't have access to healthcare or benefits or paid time off.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, what is being done to try to solve that?

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

We have been campaigning for an investment in childcare and in Medicaid home and community-based services for over a year now, that would allow for the wages for the workers to be increased, to raise the pay for childcare workers, early childhood educators, and home care workers who work through the Medicaid program.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

We've been fighting for that for over a year now. And we have a window, in this month of May, where the Senate could move that forward. And, so, we've got to push on the Senate to get that done, so that we can make these jobs better jobs.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And then we're also fighting to pass a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. And that is federal legislation that would establish basic protections, including paid sick days, for domestic workers, who've been dealing with explicit exclusions from labor protections since the 1930s.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is the protections that you're talking about, is that because they work in homes? So, if I needed that home healthcare worker or that nanny, I maybe am not subject to the same laws?

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

So, actually, the exclusion dates back to the New Deal, and Southern members of Congress refused to support the labor laws that were going to be a part of the New Deal, if they included equal protections for farm workers and domestic workers who were black workers at the time.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

So, it was an exclusion that was rooted in a legacy of slavery and racism in our country and really shaped how this workforce would be treated for generations going forward. We're still dealing with that legacy today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, what you're advocating for and what you're going to go to Congress for tomorrow, is to get them included in a funding bill? Maybe explain that to me a little bit, so I understand?

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

Sure. Yeah. There's two bills, two actions, we want members of Congress to take. One is in the Senate. We want the Senate to move forward on what's called Budget Reconciliation, which is a bill that is about government investments in things like climate and energy policy, tax reform, making prescription drugs more affordable, and also in care, childcare and home and community-based services for older adults and people with disabilities.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

It allows for Congress to adjust the budget according to what's needed, and we think care is needed. So, we're going to push for that.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And we're also going to push for a piece of legislation called the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights. And that is a bill that would address the historic exclusions from the 1930s and bring the workforce into the 21st century, creating protections from discrimination and harassment and addressing things like the need for paid sick days, the need for training, the need for a voice at work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you think, in general, that these workers that you are representing and trying to help, do you think they are, I want to say mistreated, in a sense, in the home, or if it's just on a policy level? I mean, do you think there's a disrespect for people in that role?

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

Well, if we think about it, even from a cultural standpoint, we don't think about this work as the profession that it is for millions of women, women of color, and men too, who do this work every single day, as their living. Many of them see it as a calling, not just a job.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And it is a full-time living for more than two-and-a-half million people every day. And, so, it's high time that we recognized it as a profession. And I will say, also, that there is a culture when we don't recognize something as legitimate as a career, as a profession, having real value in our economy. It creates a kind of shadowy dynamic where anything goes. And that's why we often compare this industry to the Wild West, because you might find a family who actually does see your work as a true profession and treats you with respect and pays you a living wage, maybe even offers you benefits.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And then you have the whole other end of the spectrum, where you have cases of human trafficking. You have rape and sexual assault. You have people who are treated as less than human, and everything in between, because there's no standards. There's no guidelines. Even if you want to do the right thing, sometimes it's hard to know what that is in this environment that's not really recognized. Right?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's a very, again, a very, very important point because if you don't respect, at the outset, somebody's job, and you look through them. I think that's what society has taught us to do in a lot of ways.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

Exactly.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is it that drove you to this career of your own, this mission?

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

Well, I think just growing up in a household, a multi-generational immigrant household, and seeing how much responsibility my mother and my grandmothers carried, to not only work outside the home and bringing home an income, but also care for everyone. It's a lot of work. And so much of what they did

was not recognized, was not valued. It was not accounted for. It was just taken for granted and assumed.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And I think, as I grew older, I realized that there are actually millions of people who do this work for a living, on top of they care for their own families. And they're not recognized or supported either. And a lot of that has to do with the fact that this is work that is associated with women, that is taken for granted, that women will just take care of, right? On top of everything else.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

And that has to change because it's just not sustainable, in a time where we have a huge and growing aging population that needs more care than ever before. Millennials are having 4 million babies per year. Most people have to have every adult in the household working outside of the household to make ends meet.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

It's just not tenable to assume that women will just hold it all, without support, without infrastructure, without a care workforce. It's just not possible.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you very much, Ai-jen. Ai-jen Poo, Co-founder and President, National Domestic Workers Alliance. Thank you for sitting down for Work in Progress.

Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance president:

Thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief, for WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.