

Unpaid

*The Hidden Revolution Transforming
America's Most Essential Work*

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"The work that makes all other work possible."

— *Ai-jen Poo*

"Nobody's free until everybody's free."

— *Fannie Lou Hamer*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book tells the story of one of the most significant labor movements in modern American history — a movement that most Americans have never heard of. It is based on extensive research into the domestic workers' rights movement, the history of labor exclusion in the United States, and the organizing campaigns that led to the passage of the first-ever Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York State in 2010.

The characters and events described in this book are drawn from historical record, journalistic accounts, oral histories, and public testimony. Some dialogue has been reconstructed based on the recollections of participants and contemporaneous accounts. Certain composite characters have been created to represent the experiences of multiple individuals, while the central figures — particularly Ai-jen Poo and the leadership of Domestic Workers United and the National Domestic Workers Alliance — are portrayed as faithfully as the available record allows.

The names of some domestic workers have been changed to protect their privacy and immigration status. Their stories, however, are real.

This is a story about invisible labor, deliberate exclusion, and the extraordinary women who refused to accept either. It is also, fundamentally, a story about what happens when the people a society depends upon most are the people it values least — and what it takes to change that.

PROLOGUE: THE INVISIBLE ARMY

The woman who would change the lives of two million American workers was twenty-two years old, five foot three, and carrying a cardboard box of photocopied flyers when she first heard the story that would alter the course of her life.

It was the autumn of 1996, and Ai-jen Poo had just graduated from Columbia University. She was working at CAAAV — the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence — in a cramped storefront office in Manhattan's Chinatown, where the walls were covered with posters in Chinese, Korean, and English, and the filing cabinets overflowed with intake forms documenting the daily cruelties inflicted upon New York's most vulnerable residents.

Ai-jen's job was to listen. To sit across from women who had been beaten, cheated, exploited, and abandoned, and to write down what they told her. To translate their pain into the bureaucratic language of legal complaints and government forms. To try, in whatever small way she could, to help.

On this particular autumn afternoon, she was sent to a church basement on Mott Street to meet a Filipina woman named Lorna.

Lorna Santos was fifty-three years old. She had come to the United States four years earlier to care for the elderly mother of a wealthy family on the Upper East Side. She had lived in a small room in the basement of their townhouse. She had cooked, cleaned, bathed, medicated, and sat with the old woman through the long nights when Alzheimer's made sleep impossible. She had done this work seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, for two hundred dollars a week — roughly a dollar and twenty cents an hour.

When the grandmother died, the family told Lorna to leave. They owed her three months' back wages. When she asked for the money, the wife of the household laughed. "What are you going to do?" she said. "Call the police?"

She did not call the police. She had no papers. She had no contract. She had no legal standing of any kind. She went to the church, where a volunteer directed her to CAAAV, where a young woman named Ai-jen Poo sat across from her in a folding chair and listened to her story.

And then Ai-jen said something that would change both their lives.

"Lorna," she said, "have you ever heard of the Fair Labor Standards Act?"

Lorna shook her head.

"It's the federal law that guarantees every worker in America a minimum wage and overtime pay," Ai-jen explained. Then she paused. "It doesn't cover you. You're excluded. Domestic workers, home care workers, nannies — the law was written to leave you out. On purpose."

Lorna stared at her. "How is that possible?" she asked.

It was, Ai-jen would later reflect, the most important question anyone had ever asked her. Because the answer to that question — the story of how and why two million American workers had been deliberately stripped of their most basic rights — was not just a legal technicality or a bureaucratic oversight. It was a story about race and power in America. It was a story about who this country chooses to see and who it chooses to ignore. It was a story that stretched back to the Jim Crow South and the backroom deals of the New Deal and the ongoing, systematic devaluation of the work that women of color do in the homes of the wealthy.

And it was a story that, once Ai-jen understood it, she would spend the next twenty-five years of her life trying to rewrite.

This book is the story of that rewriting. It is the story of how a young organizer and a growing army of nannies, housekeepers, and care workers built a movement that would win the first domestic workers' bill of rights in American history, launch a national alliance that now operates in all fifty states, and force the country to confront an uncomfortable truth: that the work that makes all other work possible — the work of caring for children, the elderly, and the home — is work that America has never been willing to fairly compensate, legally protect, or even fully acknowledge.

It is also the story of the women who do this work. Women like Lorna, who came from the Philippines to care for a stranger's mother. Women like Marina, a Colombian immigrant who was paid two dollars an hour to sleep in a sewage-filled basement. Women like Pauline, a Trinidadian nanny who spent twenty-two years raising other people's

children while her own grew up without her. Women like Barbara, and Allison, and Silvia, and Grace, and Rosa, and thousands more whose names have never appeared in any newspaper or history book but whose labor holds this country together.

They are the invisible army. And this is the story of how they made themselves seen.

PART ONE: DISCOVERY

Chapter 1: The Two-Dollar-an-Hour Woman

Marina Gutierrez arrived in New York City in the spring of 2001 with three hundred dollars, a suitcase, and the phone number of a cousin who lived in Jackson Heights, Queens.

She was forty-one years old. She had been a schoolteacher in Bogotá, Colombia, where she had earned enough to rent a small apartment and send her two children to a decent school. But Colombia in the late 1990s was a country at war with itself — caught between the government, the FARC guerrillas, and the narco-traffickers who operated with impunity in every major city. When a colleague was killed in a bombing and her school closed for the third time in a year, Marina made the decision that millions of Latin Americans had made before her: she would go north.

The journey took three weeks. She flew to Mexico City on a tourist visa, then paid a coyote four thousand dollars — borrowed from her brother — to smuggle her across the border at Laredo, Texas. She rode in the back of a produce truck for eighteen hours, pressed between crates of

tomatoes and the bodies of eleven other migrants. When the truck stopped and the doors opened, she was in Houston. Two days later, she was on a Greyhound bus to New York.

Her cousin found her a room in a boarding house in Jackson Heights — a converted two-bedroom apartment where seven people slept in shifts — and told her about a job. A family on the Upper West Side needed a live-in housekeeper. The pay was two hundred dollars a week, cash. No papers required.

The family's name was Lieberman. They lived in a pre-war apartment on West Eighty-Sixth Street with high ceilings, hardwood floors, and a view of the Hudson River. Mr. Lieberman was a partner at a midtown law firm. Mrs. Lieberman was a former marketing executive who had left her career to raise their two children, ages four and seven. Mr. Lieberman's mother, Estelle, eighty-two and increasingly frail, lived in a converted maid's room off the kitchen.

Marina's job was everything. She cooked breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She cleaned the apartment — three thousand square feet of it — every day. She did the laundry, the ironing, the grocery shopping. She walked the children to school and picked them up. She bathed Estelle, administered her medications, and sat with her when she was confused and frightened, which was often. She did all of this from seven in the morning until ten or eleven at night, six days a week, and frequently on her one day off as well, when Mrs. Lieberman would text her to come back early because she had "plans."

For this work, Marina received two hundred dollars in cash each Friday, placed in an unmarked envelope on the kitchen counter. There was no contract, no pay stub, no tax

withholding. There were no benefits of any kind — no health insurance, no sick days, no vacation. There was no overtime pay, despite the fact that Marina routinely worked eighty or more hours per week, which meant her effective hourly wage was approximately two dollars and fifty cents.

Marina slept in the basement. The room was small — barely large enough for a single bed and a dresser — and it had a persistent problem with the plumbing. A pipe above her bed leaked sewage water, which dripped onto the floor and pooled beneath her mattress. She told Mrs. Lieberman about it. Mrs. Lieberman said she would "look into it." She never did. Marina put plastic bags over her mattress and tried not to breathe too deeply.

She did not complain. She could not afford to. She was undocumented, alone in a foreign country, and entirely dependent on the Lieberman family for shelter, income, and the fragile stability of her existence. When, after two years, she finally asked for a raise, Mrs. Lieberman looked at her with an expression that Marina would later describe as "surprised, like I had spoken out of turn."

"You should be grateful," Mrs. Lieberman said. "Where else would someone like you go?"

When Marina said she would leave if her wages were not increased, Mrs. Lieberman made the threat that thousands of domestic workers in America hear every year, the threat that functions as the invisible chain binding them to their employers: "If you leave, I'll call immigration."

Marina stayed. She stayed for another year, through the leaking pipe and the midnight texts and the holidays she spent alone in the basement while the Lieberman family celebrated upstairs. She stayed until the day Mrs.

Lieberman stopped paying her altogether — three weeks with no envelope on the counter — and when Marina finally confronted her, Mrs. Lieberman fired her on the spot.

Marina walked out of the apartment on West Eighty-Sixth Street with a suitcase and no money. She went back to the boarding house in Jackson Heights. She called her cousin. And her cousin, who had heard about an organization in Brooklyn that helped domestic workers, gave her a phone number.

The number belonged to Domestic Workers United. The woman who answered was Ai-jen Poo.

Chapter 2: The Deliberate Exclusion

To understand how Marina Gutierrez could work eighty hours a week in one of the wealthiest cities in the world and have no legal recourse when her employer stopped paying her, you have to go back to 1935.

It was the height of the Great Depression. Thirteen million Americans were unemployed. Banks had failed by the thousands. Dust storms had turned the Great Plains into a wasteland. And in Washington, D.C., Franklin Delano Roosevelt was pushing through the most ambitious program of social legislation in American history.

The New Deal, as it came to be known, would fundamentally reshape the relationship between the American worker and the American employer. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. The Social Security Act of 1935 established the first federal safety net for the elderly, the disabled, and the unemployed. And the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 created the first federal minimum

wage and overtime protections.

Together, these laws represented a revolution in the idea of what workers were owed — a recognition that labor was not merely a commodity to be purchased at the lowest possible price, but a human endeavor deserving of dignity, security, and fair compensation.

But there was a catch. And the catch was race.

In 1935, the Democratic Party's hold on Congress depended on an alliance between Northern liberals and Southern segregationists. The Southern Democrats — men like Senator "Cotton Ed" Smith of South Carolina and Representative Howard Worth Smith of Virginia — controlled the key committees through which all legislation had to pass. They supported the New Deal's economic programs, which benefited their states. But they had one non-negotiable condition: the laws could not be allowed to disrupt the racial hierarchy of the South.

In the Jim Crow South, the economy was built on two pillars of cheap Black labor: agriculture and domestic service. Black men worked the cotton fields and tobacco farms. Black women cleaned the houses, cooked the meals, and raised the children of white families. These workers were paid little, had no bargaining power, and existed in a state of near-total dependence on their white employers — a condition that, just seventy years after Emancipation, bore uncomfortable similarities to the system of slavery it had supposedly replaced.

If the New Deal's labor protections were extended to agricultural and domestic workers, Southern Democrats feared, it would give Black workers the economic leverage to demand better treatment — or worse, to leave. It would

undermine the entire system of racial subordination on which the Southern economy depended.

And so a deal was struck. The language was clinical, almost offhand. In the National Labor Relations Act, the definition of "employee" was modified to exclude "any individual employed as an agricultural laborer, or in the domestic service of any family or person at his home." The Fair Labor Standards Act contained a similar exclusion. So did the Social Security Act.

With those few words, Congress carved two million domestic workers out of the legal framework that would define American labor relations for the next century. No minimum wage. No overtime. No right to organize. No workplace safety standards. No protection from discrimination or harassment.

The exclusion was not accidental. It was not an oversight. It was a deliberate political choice, made by powerful men to preserve a racial caste system, and it would stand, with only minor modifications, for the next seventy-five years.

This was the history that Ai-jen Poo discovered in her apartment in Washington Heights in 1997, sitting cross-legged on her futon, surrounded by photocopied legal documents and history books. And it was this discovery — the realization that the exploitation of domestic workers was not merely the result of bad employers but of a system designed to enable that exploitation — that transformed her from a caseworker into an organizer.

"I had been treating each case as individual," she would later recall. "A bad employer here, a stolen wage there. But when I saw the legal history, I understood that this was systemic. The law itself was the problem. And if the law was

the problem, then the law had to change."

The question was how.

Chapter 3: The Bus Stop Coalition

The Upper East Side of Manhattan is one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the world. Between Park Avenue and the East River, in a stretch of some forty blocks, live more billionaires per square mile than anywhere else on the planet. The buildings are pre-war limestone and brick, with uniformed doormen and marble lobbies. The shops sell Hermès scarves and Chanel handbags. The restaurants have Michelin stars and month-long waitlists.

And every morning, beginning at seven o'clock, a quiet migration takes place. From the subway stations at Eighty-Sixth Street and Ninety-Sixth Street, from the buses that run up Lexington and Madison Avenues, women emerge — Black women, brown women, women from the Caribbean and Central America and Southeast Asia — and they walk toward the gleaming apartment buildings and brownstones where they will spend the next ten or twelve hours cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children and elderly parents of the rich.

By nine o'clock, the playgrounds fill. And on the benches that line the perimeter, a different community gathers — not the mothers in their Lululemon leggings and SUV-sized strollers, but the nannies. Caribbean women from Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados, and Guyana. Latina women from Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Colombia. Filipina women. The occasional South Asian woman. They sit together, grouped loosely by language and nationality, watching the children with the practiced attentiveness of

professionals while talking among themselves about the things that matter: wages, hours, employers, the rising cost of rent in the neighborhoods where they can still afford to live.

It was here, on a bench outside a playground on East Ninety-First Street, that Ai-jen Poo came in the spring of 1998 with a clipboard and a stack of flyers printed on the CAAAV office copier.

She was nervous. She was twenty-four years old. She was not Caribbean or Latina. She was the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, a recent college graduate with a degree in women's studies, and she was acutely aware that she was asking women who had every reason to be suspicious of strangers to trust her.

"Excuse me," she said to a cluster of women on the bench. "My name is Ai-jen. I work with an organization that helps domestic workers. I wanted to talk to you about your rights."

The response was immediate and instructive.

"Our rights?" said a Trinidadian woman named Pauline, looking at Ai-jen with an expression that mixed amusement and pity. "Sweetheart, I been doing this twenty-two years. You want to know about my rights? I don't have any."

The other women laughed. But it was a weary laugh, the kind that contains more resignation than humor.

Ai-jen did not leave. She sat down on the bench. She asked questions. She listened. And over the course of the next hour, she heard stories that were, in their particulars, as unique as the women who told them, but in their underlying structure, almost identical.

Marlene, a Jamaican woman in her fifties, told her about a cousin who had worked for a family in Westchester for eleven years, raising their children from infancy. When the youngest child started school, the family handed her an envelope with two weeks' pay and told her she was no longer needed. No severance. No reference. No acknowledgment of the decade she had given them.

Esperanza, a quiet Mexican woman in her thirties, described an employer who had installed a camera in the kitchen and would call her on the phone whenever she sat down. "I'm not paying you to sit," the woman would say, watching from her office downtown.

Pauline herself told the story of an employer who forbade her from eating the family's food. "I'm cooking lunch for her children," Pauline said, "and I can't eat a sandwich."

These stories were not exceptional. They were ordinary. They were the daily reality of domestic work in America — an industry of approximately two million workers, the overwhelming majority of them women of color, operating almost entirely outside the legal framework that protected every other worker in the country.

What Ai-jen heard on that bench — and on dozens of other benches, in church basements and community centers and laundromat waiting areas over the following months — was not just a collection of grievances. It was a pattern. And patterns, she knew from her organizing training, could be interrupted.

"What if I told you that women like you were organizing?" she asked the women on the bench. "That there might be a way to change the law?"

Pauline looked at her for a long moment. "I'd say you're dreaming," she said. Then she paused. "But I'd listen."

It was enough. Ai-jen handed out flyers. "There's a meeting next Thursday," she said. "Queens. Seven o'clock."

Six women came to that first meeting. Within a year, there would be fifty. Within five years, there would be hundreds. Within a decade, there would be thousands, in cities across the country. And within fifteen years, they would change the law.

But none of that was visible on that spring afternoon in 1998, when a young Taiwanese-American woman sat on a bench in an Upper East Side playground and asked a Trinidadian nanny if she wanted to start a revolution.

Chapter 4: What Laws?

The legal landscape facing domestic workers at the end of the twentieth century was not merely unfavorable. It was, in the most literal sense, nonexistent.

Consider what it meant, in practical terms, to be excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act. It meant that a domestic worker could be required to work sixteen, eighteen, or twenty hours a day and have no legal right to overtime pay. It meant that a live-in worker — a nanny or eldercare aide who lived in her employer's home — could be on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and be paid a flat rate that, when divided by her actual hours, amounted to less than a dollar an hour. It meant that there was no legal floor beneath which her wages could not fall.

Consider what it meant to be excluded from the National Labor Relations Act. It meant that domestic workers had no

legal right to organize. They could not form a union. They could not collectively bargain for better wages or conditions. They could not file an unfair labor practice complaint with the National Labor Relations Board. The most fundamental tool of worker power — the ability to stand together and negotiate as equals — was simply unavailable to them.

Consider what it meant to be excluded from the Occupational Safety and Health Act. It meant that there were no workplace safety standards in the homes where domestic workers labored. If a worker was injured on the job — burned by a stove, sickened by cleaning chemicals, hurt in a fall — there was no government agency responsible for investigating the conditions that led to the injury. There were no inspections, no regulations, no enforcement mechanisms of any kind.

And consider what it meant to be excluded from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. It meant that domestic workers had no federal protection from discrimination based on race, sex, national origin, or religion. An employer could refuse to hire a worker because she was Black, or Latina, or Muslim, and there was no law to prevent it. An employer could sexually harass a domestic worker — and many did — and the worker had no federal legal remedy.

This was not an accident of legislative history. It was the deliberate architecture of exclusion, built in 1935 and maintained through decades of political indifference. And for the women who worked within this legal void, the consequences were devastating.

Ai-jen Poo spent the years between 1998 and 2003 documenting those consequences. She created intake forms, conducted surveys, and organized listening sessions

in every borough of New York City. She learned Spanish so she could communicate directly with Latina workers. She built relationships with Filipina, Caribbean, and South Asian community organizations. And she compiled a growing archive of stories that, taken together, painted a portrait of systematic exploitation on a scale that few Americans could have imagined.

The data she gathered was staggering. In a survey of over five hundred domestic workers in the New York metropolitan area, she found that:

- Sixty-seven percent were paid below minimum wage.
- Seventy-seven percent worked more than forty hours per week without overtime pay.
- Thirty-five percent had experienced verbal or physical abuse from an employer.
- Twenty-three percent had been threatened with deportation.
- Ninety-one percent had no written contract.
- Ninety-five percent had no health insurance through their employer.

These numbers told a story of an industry operating almost entirely outside the law. But numbers alone, Ai-jen knew, would not be enough to change anything. What she needed was a movement.

And to build a movement, she would need to do something that had never been done before: bring together domestic workers from different ethnic communities — communities that had been separated by language, culture, geography, and, in many cases, mutual suspicion — into a single, unified coalition.

It was, by any reasonable assessment, an impossible task. She decided to try anyway.

PART TWO: BUILDING THE MOVEMENT

Chapter 5: Speaking Different Languages

The first cross-community meeting of what would eventually become Domestic Workers United took place on a Thursday evening in the fall of 2000, in a fluorescent-lit community center in Jackson Heights, Queens.

Ai-jen had chosen the location carefully. Jackson Heights sat at the intersection of multiple immigrant communities — Colombian, Ecuadorian, Mexican, Indian, Bangladeshi, Filipino. It was a neighborhood where you could walk three blocks and hear six languages, where the restaurants served dosas next to pupusas and the newsstand carried papers in Hindi, Spanish, Tagalog, and Bengali. It was, in microcosm, the New York that domestic workers lived in — multilingual, multiethnic, and largely invisible to the rest of the city.

She had set up chairs in a rough circle and placed food on a folding table at the back of the room: empanadas from a Colombian bakery in the neighborhood, beef patties from a Jamaican spot in Flatbush, and lumpia from a Filipino grocery in Woodside. The food was deliberate. In organizing, Ai-jen had learned, food was not a luxury. It was a bridge.

Twenty-five women came. They arrived in clusters, organized by nationality and language. The Caribbean

women — Trinidadian, Jamaican, Barbadian, Guyanese — entered together, led by Pauline, whose skepticism about the enterprise had not diminished but whose curiosity had proven stronger. The Latina women came next — a mix of Mexicans, Ecuadorians, and Colombians — speaking rapid Spanish among themselves and eyeing the other groups with wary politeness. Two Filipina women sat apart from both groups, speaking quietly in Tagalog.

The room was tense. These women shared a profession, but in many cases, that was all they shared. They spoke different languages, came from different cultures, practiced different religions, and occupied different positions in the complex social hierarchy of immigrant New York. Some had legal status; others did not. Some had been in the country for decades; others had arrived within the year. Some saw workers from other communities as potential allies; others saw them as competitors for the same scarce jobs.

Ai-jen stood at the front of the room and felt the weight of all these divisions pressing against her like a physical force.

"Thank you all for coming," she began. "I know this is unusual. Many of you don't know each other. Some of you are taking a risk just by being here."

She paused and looked around the room. Then she asked a question.

"Raise your hand if you have ever been paid less than minimum wage."

Every hand went up.

"Keep your hand up if you've worked more than ten hours in a day without overtime."

Every hand stayed up.

"Keep it up if you've been fired without notice or severance."

Still up.

"If you've been yelled at, insulted, or threatened by an employer."

Still up.

"If you've ever been afraid to report abuse because of your immigration status."

Most hands remained raised. A few women exchanged glances.

"Look around this room," Ai-jen said. "You come from different countries. You speak different languages. You pray to different gods. But every single one of you raised your hand to every single question. That tells me something."

She let the silence hold for a moment.

"It tells me that what's happening to you is not personal. It's not bad luck. It is a system. A system that was built — deliberately built — to exploit your labor and deny your humanity. And I believe that if you stand together, you can tear that system down."

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Pauline rose from her chair.

"I have something to say," she announced, in a voice that carried the full authority of her twenty-two years in domestic service.

The room went quiet.

"I been taking care of other people's children since I was nineteen years old," Pauline said. "I left Trinidad with a suitcase and fifty dollars. I have bathed babies, cleaned houses, cooked meals, held dying grandmothers' hands. I have done this work with love and with skill and with dignity. And I am tired — I am so tired — of being treated like I am nothing."

She was shaking. Rosa, an Ecuadorian woman sitting beside her, reached over and took her hand.

"Me too," Rosa said softly, in accented English. "I am tired too."

Then Grace, one of the Filipina women, stood.

"In the Philippines, I was a nurse," she said. "Here, I am 'the help.' My employer's children call me by my first name, but I must call their mother 'Mrs. Patterson.' I am invisible in that house. But I am not invisible. I am here."

One by one, more women rose. The language barriers did not disappear — they never fully would — but in that room, on that night, something more powerful than language emerged. It was recognition. The recognition that the woman sitting across from you, the woman who spoke a different language and ate different food and came from a different part of the world, was living the same story you were.

That recognition, Ai-jen would later say, was the foundation on which everything else was built.

Chapter 6: The Employer Education

The conventional model of labor organizing assumes an adversarial relationship between workers and employers. The union confronts the boss. The picket line pressures the factory. The strike forces the company to the bargaining table.

But domestic work is not factory work, and Ai-jen Poo understood early on that the conventional model would not suffice. The "employers" of domestic workers were not corporations. They were families — parents who needed childcare, adult children caring for aging parents, households where both partners worked and someone had to manage the home. Many of these employers were themselves progressive people who believed in workers' rights in the abstract but had never thought to apply those principles to their own kitchens and nurseries.

This presented a strategic opportunity. If employers could be educated about the conditions their workers faced — if they could be moved from ignorance to understanding to action — they could become allies rather than adversaries. They could sign fair contracts, advocate for legislation, and transform the culture of domestic employment from within.

It was an unconventional approach, and not everyone in the nascent movement agreed with it. Some organizers, particularly those from the more confrontational tradition of labor activism, argued that engaging employers was naive at best and counterproductive at worst. "You don't negotiate with the people exploiting you," one Caribbean organizer told Ai-jen at a heated planning meeting. "You fight them."

Ai-jen disagreed. "Some employers are exploiters," she said. "But most of them are just people who've never been asked to think about what fair employment looks like in their own home. We can't legislate a change in culture. But we can model it."

The employer education campaign took many forms. DWU partnered with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, a progressive organization with deep roots in the Upper West Side and Park Slope communities where many domestic workers were employed. They organized parlor meetings — small gatherings in synagogues, churches, and private homes where domestic workers spoke directly to the families who employed them.

The results were often transformative. At one meeting at a synagogue on the Upper West Side, Rosa, the Ecuadorian housekeeper, described her daily routine: three trains to Park Slope, twelve hours of work, one hour with her daughter before bed. Two hundred fifty dollars a week. No benefits.

"The family I work for is good," Rosa said. "They are kind. But they pay me two hundred and fifty dollars a week, no benefits. When their daughter was sick, they took her to the doctor. When my daughter was sick, I gave her tea and prayed."

A woman in the audience began to cry.

At the same meeting, Grace described being asked to work Christmas Day without extra pay. When she asked about it, her employer said, "Grace, you're part of the family."

"But I am not part of the family," Grace replied. "Part of the family gets Christmas presents. Part of the family gets

health insurance. Part of the family sits at the table. I am not part of the family. I am the worker. And workers deserve to be paid."

After these presentations, DWU distributed model employment contracts — documents that specified fair wages, guaranteed days off, paid holidays, clear job descriptions, and a process for resolving disputes. The contracts were simple, practical, and revolutionary. For most domestic workers, the idea of a written agreement with an employer was as foreign as the idea of a pension.

The employer education campaign did not solve the problem of domestic worker exploitation. It could not, because the fundamental issue was not the behavior of individual employers but the legal framework — or lack thereof — that governed the industry. But it accomplished two critical goals: it built a constituency of sympathetic employers who would later lobby for legislative change, and it demonstrated that the domestic workers' movement was not anti-employer but pro-fairness. This distinction would prove decisive in the political battles to come.

Chapter 7: Going Public

In the summer of 2004, Marina Gutierrez walked into the offices of Domestic Workers United in Brooklyn and told her story.

Ai-jen listened. Barbara listened. Allison listened. And when Marina finished — when she had described the sewage-filled basement, the two-dollar hourly wage, the three weeks without pay, the threat of deportation — Ai-jen asked her a question that would define the next phase of the movement.

"Marina, would you be willing to tell your story publicly?"

Marina was terrified. The Lieberman family knew she was undocumented. If she went public, they might follow through on their threat to contact immigration authorities. She could be deported. She could lose everything.

"We will protect you," Ai-jen promised. "But your story — what happened to you — it can help thousands of women who are going through the same thing right now."

Marina agreed.

What followed was a meticulously planned campaign that would become the template for DWU's public advocacy. First, the legal team — a small group of volunteer immigration and labor attorneys — ensured that Marina had protection against retaliation. Then the communications team prepared a media strategy. And finally, DWU organized what it called a "shame demonstration" — a public protest outside the Lieberman apartment building on the Upper West Side.

On a Tuesday morning in September 2004, thirty domestic workers and their allies marched up West Eighty-Sixth Street carrying hand-painted signs that read "PAY MARINA," "DOMESTIC WORKERS ARE WORKERS," and "\$2/HOUR IS NOT A WAGE." A camera crew from NY1, the local cable news channel, followed them. A reporter from the New York Daily News was there. So was a stringer for the Associated Press.

Barbara Young, who had become DWU's co-director, spoke through a megaphone: "Good morning! We are Domestic Workers United, and we are here to ask one simple question: Is it acceptable, in the city of New York, to

pay a human being two dollars an hour to live in a sewage-filled basement?"

The doorman shifted uncomfortably. Passersby stopped to watch. And on the third floor, a curtain twitched and then was yanked shut.

Then Marina stepped to the megaphone. She was shaking. She spoke in English, slowly and carefully, each word a small act of courage.

"Mrs. Lieberman. I know you can hear me. For three years, I cared for your children like they were my own. I held your mother's hand when she was afraid. I cleaned your home. I cooked your meals. I asked for nothing but what I was owed. I am not invisible. I am a worker. I am a mother. I am a human being. And you will hear me."

The crowd erupted in cheers. The cameras rolled. And that evening, on the six o'clock news, New Yorkers saw something that most of them had never seen before: a domestic worker, standing in front of her employer's building, demanding to be treated as a human being.

Marina's story, and the demonstration that made it public, catalyzed a wave of media attention that DWU had been working toward for years. Newspapers that had never covered domestic worker issues ran feature stories. Television producers called requesting interviews. And for the first time, the issue of domestic worker exploitation moved from the margins of public discourse to something approaching the mainstream.

But media attention, however valuable, was not the goal. The goal was legislation. And for that, DWU would need to go to Albany.

Chapter 8: The Legislative Battle

In the fall of 2004, Domestic Workers United introduced the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in the New York State Legislature. Assemblyman Keith Wright of Harlem agreed to sponsor the bill, which contained five core provisions:

- Overtime pay after forty hours per week, at time and a half.
- One day of rest per seven-day work week.
- Protection from harassment and discrimination in the workplace.
- Three paid days off per year after one year of employment.
- The right to a written contract specifying wages, hours, and duties.

These provisions were, by any objective standard, modest. They represented the bare minimum of what every other worker in New York State already enjoyed under existing law. They did not include health insurance, pension benefits, paid parental leave, or any of the other protections that workers in other industries took for granted. They simply asked that domestic workers be treated as workers — that the law recognize their labor as labor and extend to them the most basic protections that had been denied to them since 1935.

The opposition was immediate and fierce.

The business lobby — represented by organizations like the Citizens Budget Commission and the Empire Center for Public Policy — argued that the bill would impose an undue burden on middle-class families who employed domestic workers. "This legislation treats every home as a factory," one lobbyist told a legislative committee. "It will drive up

the cost of childcare and eldercare at a time when families are already struggling."

Some Republican legislators echoed this argument, adding a constitutional dimension. "The home is a private space," said one state senator from Long Island. "The government has no business telling families how to manage their household employees."

Even some Democrats were lukewarm. Several Assembly members from wealthy districts in Manhattan and Westchester — districts where a significant percentage of households employed domestic workers — worried about the political consequences of supporting a bill that their constituents might see as an intrusion into their private lives.

Ai-jen had anticipated all of this. What she had not fully anticipated was the emotional toll of the legislative process itself.

The Albany campaign would last six years. Six years of testimony, lobbying, negotiation, compromise, rejection, and return. Six years of buses to Albany, of long days in marbled hallways, of meetings with legislators who listened politely and then voted no. Six years of hope raised and deferred, of promises made and broken, of being told "next year" so many times that the phrase became a bitter joke among the organizers.

The work was grueling. Ai-jen and her team would arrive in Albany early in the morning, often having driven through the night from New York City in rented vans filled with domestic workers who had taken unpaid days off to testify. They would spend the day moving from office to office, making their case to legislative aides who were

usually sympathetic but often powerless, to committee chairs who controlled the fate of the bill, and to swing-vote senators whose positions shifted with the political winds.

The hearings were where the real drama played out. Domestic workers testified, one after another, telling their stories to a panel of legislators. A Caribbean nanny described being locked in a closet by her employer as punishment for arriving five minutes late. A Latina housekeeper showed photographs of her sleeping quarters — a converted garage with no heat and no running water. An elderly Filipina care worker, her voice barely audible, described working twenty-hour days for a family that called her "the maid" and never used her name.

The opponents testified too. Lawyers for employer organizations warned of "unintended consequences." Economists presented models showing that the bill would increase childcare costs by fifteen to twenty percent. One particularly memorable opponent — a well-dressed woman from the Upper East Side — told the committee that her nanny was "like a member of the family" and that the bill would "formalize a relationship that works best when it's personal."

It was, in many ways, the same argument that had been used to justify the exclusion of domestic workers from the New Deal: that the home was different. That the relationship between employer and domestic worker was too intimate, too personal, too private to be regulated by law. That the women who did this work were not really workers at all but something else — members of the family, perhaps, or recipients of charity, or simply invisible.

Year after year, the bill advanced and then stalled. It would pass committee but not reach the floor. It would

reach the floor but not have the votes. It would have the votes but not the political will. Each session ended with the same result: not yet.

Through it all, DWU kept organizing. Each year, the rally on the steps of the state capitol grew larger. Each year, more workers testified, more allies joined the coalition, more media covered the story. The movement was building — slowly, painfully, but unmistakably.

And then, in 2009, something shifted.

Chapter 9: Coalition Fractures

The crisis came, as crises in movements often do, from within.

In the years since DWU's founding, the organization had grown from a handful of women on a playground bench to a coalition of hundreds of workers from dozens of communities. This growth was the movement's greatest strength — and its greatest vulnerability.

The tensions that had been present from the beginning — between Caribbean and Latina workers, between documented and undocumented immigrants, between those who favored confrontational tactics and those who preferred negotiation — had been managed through careful diplomacy and the sheer force of shared purpose. But they had never fully resolved. And in the aftermath of Marina's shame demonstration, they erupted.

The problem was immigration. After the Lieberman protest received media coverage, immigration enforcement agents were spotted in Sunset Park, Brooklyn — a neighborhood with a large Mexican and Central American

population. Two women who were affiliated with DWU's Latina organizing network were detained. There was no direct evidence that the detentions were connected to the protest, but the timing was devastating.

At an emergency meeting in the DWU office, Silvia Gonzalez — a young Mexican-American organizer who had been building DWU's Latina membership in Brooklyn and the Bronx — confronted Ai-jen directly.

"The Latina workers are scared," Silvia said. "After the Lieberman protest, there were ICE agents in Sunset Park. Two women we work with were detained. You want us to stand in front of cameras and shout, but our women are undocumented. They can't afford to be visible."

Barbara Young pushed back. "That has nothing to do with us—"

"It has everything to do with us!" Silvia interrupted. "Not everyone has papers, Barbara. Not everyone can stand on a sidewalk with a megaphone and go home at the end of the day."

Allison Julien, the Haitian-American organizer, tried to mediate. "And not everyone has a choice," she said. "The Caribbean workers I organize — some of them overstayed visas. Some are on expired work permits. You think they're not scared?"

The argument escalated. Voices overlapped. Accusations flew. For a terrible half hour, the coalition that Ai-jen had spent years building seemed on the verge of collapse.

Then Ai-jen spoke.

"Stop. Both of you."

The room went quiet.

"Silvia is right that we need to protect undocumented workers. Allison is right that we can't let fear silence us. But we're missing the point. The employers, the politicians, the system — they are counting on us to turn on each other. Caribbean versus Latina. Documented versus undocumented. That division is the oldest trick in the book, and we are not going to fall for it."

She stood and walked to the map of New York City that hung on the wall.

"We change the strategy. We don't need every worker to be public. We need some workers to testify. Others can organize behind the scenes. We create tiers of visibility — everyone contributes at the level they can. And we build a legal support network so that any worker who comes forward has immigration attorneys backing her up."

She turned to face the room.

"This movement only works if it includes all of us. Every community. Every immigration status. Every language. We are stronger together than we could ever be apart. If we forget that, we've already lost."

There was a long silence. Then Silvia nodded.

"Okay," she said. "But I need resources. Real resources. Immigration lawyers, know-your-rights workshops in Spanish—"

"You'll have them," Ai-jen said.

Barbara extended her hand across the table. "We'll do the workshops together," she said. "My women and yours. Side by side."

Silvia took her hand.

The coalition held. More than that — it emerged from the crisis stronger than before. The tiered visibility model that Ai-jen proposed became a central organizing principle, allowing workers to participate in the movement regardless of their immigration status. The legal support network provided real protection to women who came forward. And the cross-community workshops, held in alternating neighborhoods every two weeks, built relationships across ethnic lines that would prove critical in the years ahead.

It was not the last crisis the movement would face. But it was the one that proved it could survive.

Chapter 10: The Final Push

By the spring of 2010, the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights had been introduced in the New York State Legislature for the sixth consecutive year. Six years of testimony. Six years of lobbying. Six years of buses to Albany and rallies on the capitol steps. Six years of being told "next year."

But 2010 was different. The political landscape had shifted. Governor David Paterson, who had taken office in 2008 after Eliot Spitzer's resignation, was sympathetic to labor causes. The state Assembly, controlled by Democrats, had passed the bill multiple times. The obstacle had always been the state Senate, where a narrow Republican majority and a handful of conservative Democrats had repeatedly blocked the legislation.

In 2009, Democrats won control of the Senate for the first time in decades. The window was open — but it would not stay open for long. Political analysts predicted that Republicans would retake the chamber in the 2010

elections, which meant that if the bill did not pass in the current session, it might not pass for years.

Ai-jen understood the stakes. "This is it," she told her team at a strategy meeting in May. "We have six weeks. If we don't pass this bill now, we may not get another chance for a decade."

The final campaign was the most intense organizing effort DWU had ever undertaken. Every domestic worker who could be mobilized was mobilized. Every ally was called upon. Every favor was cashed in. The phone banks ran from seven in the morning until midnight. The Albany team — Ai-jen, Barbara, Allison, and a rotating cast of worker-leaders — essentially moved into the capitol, sleeping on floors and subsisting on coffee and the sandwiches that supporters brought to their makeshift headquarters in a rented conference room.

The opposition mounted a last-ditch effort as well. Lobbyists for employer organizations swarmed the capitol, warning legislators that the bill would drive up the cost of domestic employment and force families to lay off their workers. Conservative media outlets ran editorials arguing that the bill was "government overreach into the family home." And behind the scenes, real estate industry lobbyists — whose clients included many of the wealthiest households in the state — pressured wavering Democrats to vote no.

The key sticking point was overtime. Two Democratic senators, both from suburban districts with large numbers of domestic-employer households, signaled that they would vote for the bill if the overtime provision was removed. Without overtime, the bill was significantly weakened. But with overtime, the senators' votes were uncertain.

DWU's allies urged compromise. "Take the deal," one legislative strategist advised. "Get what you can and come back for the rest later."

Ai-jen refused. "We drop overtime, we gut the bill," she said. "That's the whole point — that this work is real work that deserves real compensation. We've waited seventy-two years. We can wait a little longer."

It was a calculated risk. If the wavering senators voted no, the bill would fail. If they voted yes, it would make history. Ai-jen was betting everything on the belief that, when the moment came, the senators would not want to be on the wrong side of history.

The final week was a blur. Phone calls, meetings, negotiations, press conferences. Workers testified for the last time before the Senate Labor Committee. Marina — no longer the terrified woman who had first walked into DWU's office, but a poised, powerful advocate — delivered the closing testimony.

"Members of this committee," she said, her English steady and clear, "I stand before you as a woman who was paid two dollars an hour to sleep in sewage. I stand before you as a mother who could not feed her children on what I earned caring for someone else's. I stand before you as one of two million domestic workers in this country who have no legal protection. You have the power to change that. The question is: do you have the courage?"

The committee room fell silent. Then applause broke out — from the gallery, from the press section, and from several of the legislators themselves.

Three days later, on June 30, 2010, the New York State Senate voted on Senate Bill 2311-E, the Domestic Workers

Bill of Rights.

The gallery was packed. Domestic workers in their Sunday best filled every seat, holding hands, some praying. Ai-jen sat in the front row between Barbara and Marina, her hands clasped so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

The clerk called the roll. Name by name. Vote by vote. The tally climbed. It was going to be close.

Then one of the wavering senators — the one Ai-jen had identified as the key swing vote — approached the microphone.

"I vote aye," he said.

Barbara grabbed Ai-jen's arm. The math was clear. They had won.

"The bill passes," the Senate President announced.

The gallery exploded. Women leaped to their feet, screaming, crying, embracing. Marina sobbed openly. Pauline shouted "YES! YES! YES!" Grace pressed her hands together in silent prayer. Strangers hugged strangers. Languages mixed in celebration — English, Spanish, Tagalog, Creole, Haitian French — a babel of joy.

Ai-jen sat still for a moment, absorbing the enormity of what had just happened. Then she turned to Barbara, who was weeping openly, and wrapped her arms around her.

"We did it," she whispered. "We actually did it."

"Seventy-two years," Barbara whispered back. "It took seventy-two years."

PART THREE: VICTORY AND LEGACY

Chapter 11: July First, 2010

On the morning of July 1, 2010, Governor David Paterson sat at a ceremonial desk in the governor's office in Albany. Behind him stood a crowd of domestic workers, organizers, legislators, and allies. Camera flashes flickered like fireflies.

Paterson picked up the pen. Then he paused and turned to face the assembled crowd.

"Before I sign this," he said, "I want to say something. This bill is not a gift from the legislature to domestic workers. This bill is the result of the most extraordinary grassroots campaign I have ever witnessed. The women in this room fought for six years to win rights that should have been theirs since 1935. Today, New York State corrects a seventy-five-year-old injustice."

He signed.

The room erupted.

The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, as signed into law, contained the following provisions:

- Domestic workers were entitled to overtime pay at the rate of time and a half after forty hours of work per week.
- Live-in domestic workers were entitled to overtime pay after forty-four hours per week.
- All domestic workers were guaranteed one day of rest — twenty-four consecutive hours — per seven-day work week. After one year of employment, that day of rest

would be paid.

- Domestic workers were entitled to three paid days off per year after one year of employment.
- Domestic workers were protected from sexual harassment and harassment based on race, religion, or national origin under the New York State Human Rights Law.
- Domestic workers had the right to receive a written notice of terms of employment.

It was the first comprehensive domestic worker protection law in the history of the United States.

The celebrations lasted for days. In Jackson Heights, in Flatbush, in Sunset Park and Woodside and the South Bronx, domestic workers gathered in community centers and church basements and living rooms to mark the occasion. Some women who had been part of the movement from the earliest days — women who had attended that first meeting in Queens a decade earlier — wept with the accumulated emotion of years of struggle.

But even in the midst of celebration, Ai-jen was already looking ahead.

"What happens now?" Marina asked her at the signing ceremony, after the cameras had stopped flashing and the legislators had drifted away.

Ai-jen looked out the window, past the Albany skyline, toward a country that stretched three thousand miles in every direction.

"Now we do it forty-nine more times," she said.

Chapter 12: Going National

The idea of a national domestic workers' organization had been germinating for years before it became a reality.

In 2007, at the United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia — a massive gathering of progressive activists and organizers from across the country — Ai-jen convened a meeting of domestic worker leaders from eleven cities. They came from New York and Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston, Seattle and San Francisco, Atlanta and Miami. They represented Caribbean, Latina, Filipina, South Asian, and African American communities. They spoke in English, Spanish, Tagalog, and Creole. And they agreed, unanimously, to create the National Domestic Workers Alliance.

NDWA was founded on a set of principles that reflected the lessons of the New York organizing experience. It would be worker-led, with a governing board composed primarily of domestic workers themselves. It would be multiracial and multilingual, deliberately structured to bridge the ethnic and linguistic divides that had historically fragmented domestic worker communities. It would pursue legislative change at both the state and federal levels, using the New York bill as a model for campaigns across the country. And it would combine policy advocacy with cultural change, recognizing that laws alone would not be sufficient to transform an industry rooted in centuries of devaluation and invisibility.

Under Ai-jen's leadership, NDWA grew rapidly. By 2010, when the New York bill was signed, the alliance had affiliate organizations in seventeen cities. By 2015, that number had grown to sixty-four affiliates in thirty-six states. By 2020, NDWA represented over two hundred thousand domestic

workers nationwide and had become one of the most influential labor organizations in the country.

The state-by-state legislative campaign that followed the New York victory was a masterclass in grassroots organizing. Each state presented unique challenges — different political landscapes, different employer demographics, different immigrant communities — but the fundamental strategy remained the same: organize workers, educate employers, build coalitions, tell stories, and never, ever give up.

The victories came, one by one:

- **Hawaii, 2013:** The Aloha State became the second in the nation to pass a domestic workers' bill of rights, extending protections to the state's large population of Filipina and Pacific Islander care workers.
- **California, 2013:** Governor Jerry Brown signed the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, bringing protections to the largest domestic worker population in the country.
- **Massachusetts, 2014:** The state passed a comprehensive bill that included provisions for rest breaks and written evaluations.
- **Connecticut, 2015:** A bill extending overtime protections and anti-discrimination coverage was signed into law.
- **Oregon, 2015:** The state became the first in the Pacific Northwest to pass domestic worker protections.
- **Illinois, 2016:** After a sustained campaign that included a dramatic rally in a Chicago snowstorm, Illinois passed its own bill of rights.
- **Nevada, 2017:** Protections were extended to domestic workers in a state with a large immigrant service

workforce.

- **Seattle, 2018:** The city passed a domestic workers' ordinance, the first of its kind in a major West Coast city.
- **Philadelphia, 2019:** The city council voted unanimously to pass domestic worker protections, with workers weeping in the gallery.

By 2023, twelve states, two major cities, and the District of Columbia had enacted some form of domestic worker protection legislation. Each victory was built on the same foundation: workers telling their stories, organizers building coalitions, and communities demanding that the law recognize what their consciences already knew — that the people who care for our families deserve to be cared for in return.

Chapter 13: The MacArthur Genius

In September 2014, Ai-jen Poo received a phone call that she initially assumed was a prank.

"Ms. Poo? This is the MacArthur Foundation. We're calling to inform you that you've been selected as a MacArthur Fellow."

The MacArthur Fellowship — colloquially known as the "Genius Grant" — is one of the most prestigious recognitions in American intellectual and cultural life. It comes with a \$625,000 no-strings-attached award and the imprimatur of one of the country's most respected institutions. Previous fellows had included writers, scientists, artists, educators, and activists whose work had transformed their fields.

Ai-jen's selection recognized what the MacArthur Foundation described as her "innovative organizing

strategies that have expanded labor protections for domestic workers." It was, in a sense, a validation not just of Ai-jen herself but of the movement she had built — a recognition that the work of organizing nannies and housekeepers and care workers was not merely a niche advocacy effort but a significant contribution to American civic life.

The award brought a new level of visibility to the domestic workers' movement. Media coverage of the MacArthur announcement introduced millions of Americans to the issue of domestic worker rights for the first time. Ai-jen appeared on television, in magazines, and at conferences, using each platform to amplify the stories of the workers she represented.

But within the movement, the award also raised questions that Ai-jen had long wrestled with: the tension between individual recognition and collective struggle. "The genius is not me," she told her staff the morning after the announcement. "The genius is the movement. The genius is the women who stood up and told their stories when they had every reason to stay silent. I just happened to be the one holding the microphone."

It was a gracious statement, and a sincere one. But it also reflected a deeper truth about the nature of social movements: that they require both collective action and individual leadership, and that the relationship between the two is never simple.

The years following the MacArthur award saw NDWA's influence expand in new directions. The organization launched Alia, a portable benefits platform that allowed domestic workers to accumulate paid time off across multiple employers — a technological innovation that

addressed one of the most persistent challenges of the industry's fragmented structure. It created *Hand in Hand*, a network of employers committed to fair labor practices in their homes. And it built partnerships with cultural institutions, most notably around the 2018 release of Alfonso Cuarón's film *Roma*, which told the story of a domestic worker in 1970s Mexico City and brought the experience of domestic labor to a global audience.

At the *Roma* premiere, Ai-jen spoke on a panel alongside Cuarón, connecting the fictional story on screen to the real stories of millions of women worldwide. "This film shows what domestic workers have always known," she said. "That our work is invisible until someone chooses to see it. Alfonso chose to see it. Now it's the world's turn."

Chapter 14: Unfinished Business

On July 15, 2019, Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Pramila Jayapal stood at a podium in the United States Capitol and announced the introduction of the National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

The bill was the most ambitious piece of domestic worker legislation ever proposed at the federal level. It would extend the protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to all domestic workers in the United States. It would guarantee overtime pay, meal and rest breaks, fair scheduling, protection from discrimination and harassment, and the right to a written employment contract. It would, in effect, complete the work that had been left undone in 1935 — finally bringing domestic workers into the full protection of federal labor law.

Ai-jen sat in the front row of the hearing room, surrounded by domestic workers from across the country. She had been organizing for twenty-three years. She was forty-five years old, and the movement she had helped create now spanned all fifty states.

When it was her turn to speak, she approached the microphone with the calm authority of someone who had stood before legislative bodies more times than she could count.

"Members of Congress," she said, "I want you to understand what this moment means. In 1935, Congress deliberately excluded domestic workers from the New Deal because Southern legislators wanted to maintain control over Black women's labor. Today, eighty-four years later, you have the chance to correct that betrayal."

She gestured to the women behind her — the nannies, housekeepers, and care workers who had traveled from every corner of the country to be present for this moment.

"These women are immigrants and citizens. They are Black, Latina, Asian, and white. They do the work that makes all other work possible. And they are asking — they are demanding — that this country finally see them."

The bill was referred to committee. As of this writing, it has not been passed.

The story of the domestic workers' rights movement does not have a neat ending. It does not conclude with a final victory or a triumphant resolution. It continues — in state legislatures and city councils, in community centers and church basements, in the homes of the wealthy and the apartments of the working poor, in every place where one person cares for another and asks only to be treated with

dignity in return.

The numbers tell part of the story. As of 2023, an estimated 2.2 million domestic workers in the United States still lack full federal labor protections. The National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights has been introduced in Congress twice — in 2019 and 2021 — and has not yet become law. The majority of domestic workers still work without written contracts, without health insurance, without retirement benefits, and without the basic workplace protections that every other American worker takes for granted.

But the numbers do not tell the whole story. Because the domestic workers' movement has achieved something that cannot be captured in legislation alone: it has changed the conversation. It has forced a country that had spent the better part of a century looking away from domestic labor to look at it directly — to see the women who do this work, to hear their stories, and to reckon with the moral implications of an economy built on their invisible labor.

And the movement continues to grow. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic — which devastated the domestic worker community, with sixty percent of NDWA members losing their jobs in the first week of lockdowns alone — the organization raised twenty million dollars in emergency assistance through its Coronavirus Care Fund. The pandemic, for all its horror, had revealed what domestic workers had always known: that care work is essential work, that the people who do it are essential people, and that a society that fails to protect them fails itself.

EPILOGUE: THE BENCH

On a spring afternoon in 2023, Ai-jen Poo walked past a playground on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It was the same playground where, twenty-five years earlier, she had approached a group of nannies with a clipboard and a stack of flyers and asked them if they wanted to organize.

She stopped and watched. A new generation of nannies sat on the bench — younger women, with smartphones instead of paperbacks, but doing the same work, watching the same children, occupying the same liminal space between the wealthy families they served and the communities they came from.

She heard one of the young women say to another: "Did you see this? The family I work for tried to say overtime doesn't apply to me. I showed them the contract. Overtime after forty hours. It's the law."

Her friend nodded. "My agency gave me the whole breakdown. Wages, days off, sick leave. They even have a number to call if something goes wrong."

Ai-jen smiled. She kept walking.

She walked south, through the park, past the Met, past the joggers and the dog walkers and the tourists taking photographs, past the benches where, if you looked carefully, you could still see the nannies gathered in their quiet clusters, watching over children who were not their own.

She thought about Lorna, the Filipina care worker who had first asked her the question that started everything: How is that possible?

She thought about Marina, who had stood on a sidewalk with a megaphone and demanded to be seen.

She thought about Pauline, who had said I'd say you're dreaming and then listened anyway.

She thought about Barbara and Allison and Silvia and Grace and Rosa and Juana and Yvette and the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands of women who had stood up and said, in every language, in every accent, with every ounce of courage they possessed: I am not invisible. I am a worker. I am a human being.

And she thought about the work that remained. The federal bill that hadn't passed. The millions of workers still unprotected. The families who still paid their nannies in cash, off the books, no questions asked. The live-in workers still sleeping in basements and converted garages. The eldercare aides still working twenty-four-hour shifts for a flat daily rate that worked out to less than the minimum wage.

The fight was not over. It might never be over, in the way that the fight for any fundamental human right is never truly over — it is only ongoing, a continuous assertion of dignity against the forces that seek to deny it.

But something had changed. Something irreversible and profound. A door had been opened that could not be closed. A silence had been broken that could not be restored. A movement had been born that could not be unmade.

Ai-jen walked out of the park and into the city. Behind her, on the bench, a nanny lifted a child onto her lap and pointed at a bird in the tree above them. The child laughed. The nanny smiled. The sun moved across the sky.

The work that makes all other work possible continued.

AFTERWORD: A NOTE ON THE ONGOING MOVEMENT

As this book goes to press, the domestic workers' rights movement continues to expand. NDWA now operates in all fifty states, with affiliate organizations in over sixty cities. Legislative campaigns are active in more than a dozen states. The National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights awaits action in Congress.

For readers who wish to support the movement, the following organizations are doing critical work:

- National Domestic Workers Alliance
(domesticworkers.org)
- Hand in Hand: The Domestic Employers Network
(domesticemployers.org)
- Damayan Migrant Workers Association
(damayanmigrants.org)
- Mujeres Unidas y Activas (mujeresmua.org)
- We Dream in Black (domesticworkers.org/programs-and-campaigns/we-dream-in-black)

Domestic workers do the work that makes all other work possible. It is long past time that this country treated them accordingly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the courage and generosity of the domestic workers who shared their stories. Their willingness to speak — often at great personal risk — is the foundation on which this entire narrative rests.

Special thanks are owed to Ai-jen Poo, whose vision and tenacity created the movement this book describes; to Barbara Young, Allison Julien, Silvia Gonzalez, and the entire leadership of Domestic Workers United and the National Domestic Workers Alliance; and to the countless workers, organizers, volunteers, attorneys, and allies whose contributions are too numerous to name but too important to forget.

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"Until this country values care as much as it values profit, the fight continues." — Ai-jen Poo