2017 Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Awards

*Freedom from Want*

Ai-Jen Poo

On behalf of the nannies, housecleaners, and home care workers who are members of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, thank you for this great honor. Thank you to the Roosevelt Institute for your scholarship and your partnership over the years, and especially Felicia Wong for your leadership. I want to dedicate this award to the domestic workers and home care workers who power our movement because of what they teach me about freedom from want.

Domestic workers, who are disproportionately women of color and immigrant women, care for our children, they support our loved ones with disabilities, they care for our aging parents, they maintain order in our homes. This work of caring, at its heart, is about nurturing and upholding the dignity and quality of life of others. What could be more important? And yet, it’s some of the most undervalued work in our economy today. The annual median income of a home care worker, for example, is $13,000 per year. The workforce we’re counting on to care for us can hardly care for their own families on these poverty wages. Still, they care and clean with dedication, patience, and skill everyday, working long hours without access to benefits, a safety net, training, or career pathways.

Many domestic workers live in poverty in substandard housing, take public transportation for hours per day to get to work, and struggle to put food on the table. Then they go to work in homes that are at the other end of the wealth spectrum. I have heard many stories about the heartbreak of seeing employers come home with a pair of shoes that cost more than an entire week’s wages. And yet, when your job is to care for another human being, you cannot de-humanize the person in your care. You wouldn’t be able to do your job.

So, you see, domestic workers have both an incredibly clear view on inequality in America and a boundless humanity, a sense of deep compassion for other people. And this what I’ve learned: I’ve learned that it is possible—and in fact, necessary—to be both crystal clear about the cruelty and inhumanity of inequality and refuse to dehumanize anyone in the process of addressing that cruelty.

From the racial exclusion in labor laws that were part of the New Deal to the devaluing of “women’s work” as less than real work, the experiences of this workforce are rooted in a hierarchy of human value that has not only reinforced inhumane economic hardship but has left unfathomable amounts of human potential on the table—the incredible capacity of each and every human to add value to our world only happens when each and every life has value, and in turn all work is valued.
Domestic workers have taught me that to achieve freedom from want, we must undo the hierarchy of human value that legitimizes that want. And that we must do so with sharp clarity about injustice and inequality, while affirming the dignity of every soul in the process. We must be vigilant about both. And on the other side of that vigilance, we will unleash the potential of every human, regardless of the work they do, what they have done, their race or where they come from, who they love, the gender they are born with or the gender they choose. We will all be able to contribute and be valued for our contributions, so that we may achieve freedom from want, once and for all.