

We Are All in This Together

BY AI-JEN POO

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I am 19 years old, and I was born in Los Angeles. I want you to hear my story, and I want this story to help you understand why immigration laws need to change now. In 2008,

when I was 14, my mother was stopped at an immigration checkpoint while she was driving to pick me up at school. While I waited, and she didn't come, I imagined she was working late or might've been caught in traffic due to a rainy afternoon. I finally went home and waited and worried. Two days passed by with no sign of her and then I finally got call from my mother. She was in Tijuana, and she told me she had gotten deported. There is no feeling that can compare to what I felt that night besides death. I felt totally empty and alone.”

— Eliza Morales, Congressional Briefing, Washington, D.C., December 12, 2012

Like so many other teenagers, Eliza struggled to keep her grades up, to fit in, to find the things in life that could affirm her sense of her potential and worth. A typical 14-year-old, she sometimes felt alone and isolated. But all of that was nothing compared to having her mother deported. Five years later, she longs to be reconnected with her mother, who is still in Tijuana, Mexico, without a way to return.

Eleven million people in the United States live in constant fear of deportation. These are hardworking people who love and care about their kids. Yet in the past two years, close to 205,000 parents of citizen children like Eliza were deported. As a result, many parents and children have been permanently separated.

Don't think that they are the only people hurt by this. Among the 11 million are many people on whom we—U.S. citizens—count on every day to take care of our families. A recent study on domestic

work in the United States, “Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work,” found that most of the nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly—people who keep modern American families functioning—are foreign born. What’s more, about half of them are undocumented. The study also found that 85 percent of abused domestic workers without documents endure these abusive situations specifically because they fear that their immigration status will be used against them.

But even those domestic workers who are lucky enough to find good employers are often still trapped in a life of poverty and fear. Consider Carmen, a live-in senior caregiver in California. Originally from the Philippines, she always believed that caregiving was her calling. For a mere \$50 per day, Carmen helps to ensure that the elderly couple she cares for receives the support they need to live in the familiar surroundings of their home, with dignity. The couple treats Carmen like a daughter. Their children even call her for regular updates, counting on Carmen to manage a complex web of prescriptions and doctors. Women like Carmen provide critical support to millions of American families, and yet they live in constant fear of deportation and cannot support their own families under such conditions. Without a road map to citizenship, they are trapped in a state of vulnerability and poverty. And that poverty creates a downward gravitational pull on wages and business growth across our entire economy.

Today’s American family includes people from all different nationalities and traditions. We are already

deeply connected across lines of race, class, and generation. We are interdependent, not only economically but also through our caring relationships, and this interdependence grows every year. As people live longer, we will only become more dependent on one another to ensure that our loved ones receive the care, support, and services they need. This growing interdependence is happening as we speak: The Baby Boomer generation is turning 65 at a rate of one person every eight seconds. Our nation is in serious need of people who are willing to provide the difficult and intimate labor of care. Currently, the



direct care workforce—which includes home health aides, personal care aides, certified nurse aides, and domestic workers, among others—is larger than any other occupational group in the country, and it is also the fastest-growing sector. That demand for care workers is growing faster than the number of individuals who are able and willing to fill these jobs. It is physically and emotionally exhausting labor with long hours and low pay—even if it was at least minimum wage, which it is currently not.

More and more this tremendous need is being met by immigrant workers from all over the world, including Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Their care work is crucial for ensuring the productivity of millions of women and men who have to leave their children and aging parents at home while they go to work. If that caring labor were not available, the ripple effects would hurt families and businesses alike. The Child Care Action Campaign found that companies in the United States lose more than \$3 billion every year due to child-care-related absences alone. We simply cannot afford to leave our care workers behind. Even the proponents of anti-immigrant state legislation in Texas created an exception for domestic workers for fear of losing their caregivers and housekeepers to deportation.

No one who is responsible for caring for the most precious elements of our lives—our families and our homes—should be at risk of being torn from

their own homes and families. To support these immigrant workers who provide the most important kind of support for our families, we need a road map to citizenship for undocumented people. All 11 million undocumented immigrants who live in the United States should have access to legal residency and a path to full citizenship. And we cannot close the door on the future; we need a proactive method for welcoming new immigrants who come to United States to improve the lives of their families *and* ultimately ours as well. We also need to raise workforce standards in the care industries and other industries populated by immigrant workers; this will, in turn, raise the quality of life for all Americans.

A broad and inclusive road map to citizenship for all is the cornerstone of a healthy, 21st-century American democracy and economy. We are fundamentally a multiracial society and as such we need immigration policies that reject “us versus them” approaches that treat immigrants as “foreigners” while seeing the rest of us as the “true” Americans. That kind of oppositional approach can never work because it is not how our lives and families operate in this day and age. We are all in this together. Instead, we need to support integration and connection between all Americans, including aspiring Americans. Our country is stronger when we include all people as full citizens. It’s not only demographic destiny; it’s the only way our families and our economy can thrive going forward. ■