



A Better Life?

Rosa's Story: Unemployed and Undocumented in the Pandemic

Undocumented hotel housekeepers are among some of the most vulnerable workers in the pandemic. In this episode, we hear their stories.

Ad Break

Zahir Janmohamed: I'm Zahir Janmohamed, and this is A Better Life?...a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds about the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants.

Undocumented immigrants are some of the hardest hit by Covid-19, in part because they do not qualify for federal aid.

They're also routinely attacked by politicians who scapegoat them for problems in America. It often makes immigrants wonder whether it is still possible for them to live the American Dream, especially when they are constantly worried about their own safety.

Maritza Félix is a journalist based in Arizona. She's an immigrant from Mexico, and she's been covering issues on both sides of the U.S. / Mexico border for more than a decade.

Maritza Félix: What I like about this story...I wrote it for a mainstream media. It wasn't just a typical story that I do for a Spanish media outlet, that they probably know this already. They're living it themselves...they feel the pain and they actually joke about it.

Zahir: Earlier this year, Maritza reported a story for Slate about undocumented housekeepers in Arizona working during the pandemic. She focused on a worker who used the pseudonym Rosa.

I sat down with Maritza to check in on this story.

Maritza: Rosa is an undocumented immigrant that came into the U.S. more than 20 years ago. She was from Sinaloa. One of the hardest places in Mexico for drug dealing and so many violence that they're living over there. So she wanted to have a better life. And that's why she came into the U.S. and she's still building her life over here. She was actually living her American Dream 'til the pandemic hit. And she was about to lose almost everything, but she's still holding on.

Rosa: “A todos nos afectó el coronavirus, pero yo pienso que más a nosotros, porque nosotros sí que no tenemos ayuda de nada, más que el cheque y luego nos lo detienen...”

Translation: “The coronavirus affected everybody, but I think it affected us more. Because we don’t have any help besides the checks, but they were withheld...”

Zahir: So tell us how COVID-19 changed her life.

Maritza: Well, she's a housekeeper and she was working for a hotel for the past 20 years. And then obviously, the hotels were closing and then she was laid off. The thing was that since she's undocumented, she doesn't get any benefits from the government. So she didn't get the stimulus check. So she was, like, very desperate and looking for help because she needs that money to survive. And she was dependent solely on her partner to pay the bills and pay the apartment and buy food and provide for him and for her. And he wasn't doing good at his work either because he worked at a restaurant and they were cutting hours, and then they were making minimum wage. So it was extremely difficult for them. She doesn't have an insurance and she couldn't afford to go out and look for work, because if she gets sick, what's she going to do? She doesn't have any money to live. She doesn't have any money to pay any of her bills. How is she going to end up paying a hospital bill? She felt in her 20-plus years that she has been living here, that this pandemic has been the hardest for her to survive in the U.S.

Zahir: So Maritza, in your article, you mentioned that a lot of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. pay social security benefits, they pay for Medicare, but they're not eligible for those benefits.

Maritza: Exactly. When they're working, most of them, they work with a paperwork, with another name and they use a random social security number, something that they came up with. But the thing is that they still pay taxes. The employer actually takes the money from their checks to pay taxes, but they're not entitled to, because they're undocumented.

In Arizona, [there is a state law that prohibits them to solicit any kind of public benefit](#), any, any kind. So they cannot get unemployment. They cannot get food stamps. They cannot get any other kind of help.

But the thing is that she was so frustrated because she was paying taxes and everybody else was collecting the unemployment checks. And this is not just Rosa's stories. There are so many other undocumented that are paid under the table, or they start working before E-Verify was mandatory in Arizona or the United States or so many that worked, like, at houses or doing landscaping or doing work. They're not...they cannot get any help.

Zahir: Now tell us, Maritza, what is E-Verify?

Maritza: [E-Verify is a program, the federal program that ask the employers to check the work authorization of every single employer that they have in the United States.](#) They need to make sure that the name and the social security matches and they belong to the same person who's applying for the work. If they don't have that, they're not eligible to work in the United States. We then mean E-Verify doesn't start to be mandatory in Arizona before Rosa started with that company.

So if you were with a company before E-Verify started, they don't need to check your paperwork again. What they need to do is just to check the paperwork for those that are just newly hired to the company. And that's why Rosa felt so safe with that company. And that was Rosa didn't want to leave that company because looking for a new job, being undocumented during that pandemic, it can be extremely difficult.

Zahir: Even those who are working under the table, they're still paying taxes.

Maritza: Yes, they do. A lot of them. Why? Because they have this promise for immigration reform. And one of the, the requirements for this immigration reform is that you have to pay taxes and be a good, law-abiding citizen in order to get in the line to legalize your status in the U. S. So that's why they get an IT number and try to pay taxes, or they, they, they create an LLC so they can be able to report to the IRS what they're making, because they have the hope to one day, become a U.S. citizen and living here legally, that's their dream. And that's, they're trying to obey the law because they want to be here. They want to deserve the opportunity to be living here legally.

Zahir: Maritza, one of the chilling things in your story, well, two things. One was that Rosa, even if there was a traffic stop, Rosa could be deported back to Mexico. And the second is that Rosa is not even her real name and the other character in your story, Judith, that's not her real name either. That sort of says a lot about the fear that undocumented workers feel right now.

Maritza: Well, they're afraid that's something...they're undocumented, they're uninsured, and they're are afraid. They're unemployed too. So the thing is, like, retaliation is something really common with our minority communities. And if their bosses saw this article, she was afraid that she's not going to be able to get her job back. That's why she asked me to change her name. And also, Rosa is the name that she uses to collect her checks every week because she uses another name to, to work and to use another social security number to work because she has to have one on her own and probably she could get in trouble for it.

And she wants the world to know her story, because so many times we, as Latinos, or sometimes the undocumented, are talking to the same undocumented and then mainstream media doesn't have a clue of what's actually going on on those communities. So she wants to know that she's a hardworking woman, that she's doing everything that she can to deserve to be in this country. That she's here not to ask for help, but to give something to this country and to have a better life. The one that probably she is not going to be able to have in Mexico, even though that she works really hard.

Rosa: “Como nosotros no tenemos papeles, nosotros no tenemos derecho a nada, nos conformamos con que nos den trabajo para sobrevivir.”

Translation: “Since we didn't have papers, we didn't have any rights, we made do with what we were given to work and survive.”

Zahir: Early on, Maritza, you said that Rosa was pretty much living a good life in the U.S. until COVID-19 happened, even though Rosa is undocumented. In your experience doing interviews, has that been your findings that a lot of undocumented workers were living relatively a good life in the U.S. and then COVID-19 hit? What's been your experience?

Maritza: For Rosa, the American Dream was that she was making enough money for her and to send money to Mexico to Sinaloa to her daughter. I know so many other undocumented workers that their American Dream is just to work really, really, really, really hard and save so much money and send it back to their countries with the hope to go back, like, a very successful person with money in their pockets, in their bank accounts, and go back and retire in Mexico or Guatemala. So the American Dream is different for them, but for Rosa, I think it was just the hope to be here and see her grandkids grow up. And spoil them as much as she could, because she could afford it. She could do it. But now she doesn't have the money even to go to Walmart herself and buy the thing that she needs for herself, because it's been three or four months that she received a paycheck.

Zahir: Maritza, tell us about Rosa. What's she like, what does she like to do in her spare time? Paint a picture of who Rosa is.

Maritza: She's really happy. That's something that I noticed about these undocumented workers that I have interview. They are extremely positive. It doesn't matter if they're going through this really rough period of their life. She's a very family-oriented woman. She's in love with her partner, not just because he's supporting her right now. And she believes in God. She's always praying. And I think that's the thing, faith — that's the thing that has made her to survive this pandemic with still a good sense of humor. But she's also a fighter. I can tell. Because she doesn't like to be treated wrong.

And she fought for her last checks. Like, she was posting on Facebook. She was going to the office and looking for her supervisors. And she was like, 'I work for my money. I deserve the money. It's not a gift. That's something that I earn with my work.' But she also has a daughter in Sinaloa. And she misses her a lot, but she doesn't want to go back to Sinaloa to her. It's like, she's afraid.

Clip: Sinaloa state officials confirmed that as the mayhem unfolded, a jail break also took place. Culiacán has long been a stronghold of Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán's Sinaloa cartel. He led the cartel for decades.

Maritza: Sinaloa is one of the hottest places with violence in Mexico right now. And there are not that many work opportunities. She doesn't have an education. She doesn't have all these skills that she will need to survive over there. Right now being a housekeeping in, in

Arizona has been the, the most rewarding work for her. And she thinks that she's doing good and she's doing great, but if she wanted to be a housekeeper in Sinola, she will be starving because they don't make that much money. And she's not used to it. She's a hard worker, but she wants to get paid as a hard worker woman, not somebody who's doing somebody else a favor.

Zahir: We'll be right back with more of Rosa's story after this.

Ad Break

Zahir: This is A Better Life? From Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Zahir Janmohamed. Let's get back to my conversation with Maritza Félix.

So it is an election year. The president has on numerous occasions, made attacks against undocumented people in the United States. Does the election ever come up? Is Rosa or others that you've interviewed, who are undocumented, nervous about the upcoming elections?

Maritza: Before the pandemic, there were so many undocumented workers that got together and they start promoting civil engagement in Arizona. There are so many DACA students, for example, that they were working for that.

Clip: ASU DACA Protestors: "This is what democracy looks like!"

Clip: News announcer: "All different kinds of voices coming together as one and fighting for the rights of Dreamers."

Clip: Protestor: "I am an ally, so I support DACA and I support their rights to be here."

Maritza: But now I think they are more worried or having food on the table, then talking about politics. They do care about politics, even though they don't have a say directly in elections, because if not, they wouldn't be before the pandemic trying to push Latino vote and try to make people aware of the labor work rights or anything else that is important for these immigrant communities. But right now, politics is the last thing on their mind. I think surviving is first.

Zahir: So speaking of surviving, she didn't have income for a few months. How, how did she get by during those few months and how did she spend those few months?

Maritza: Her partner's and she's in a lot of debt. That's what she told me. I spoke with her and she told me that after three or four months, she just got a job, but it's going to be just two days per week and half shift, part time. Her partner has been really supportive of her, but it's not enough because she was...he works actually in a restaurant and his hours were cut as well, and he's not making the same amount of money. So I think she's, she's in debt and she needs to do it.

And her new job is not at the same hotel. The company that she worked for that owe her money and to come- two months to pay her those back wages. And she's like expecting and hoping to work overtime as much as she can as soon as possible...so she can start making the money that she didn't make in this two, three months back.

Zahir: So I know that [coronavirus numbers in Arizona are now falling](#)...but earlier, how did Rosa cope?

Maritza: Good. And she's not afraid of the pandemic anymore. When everything is started, she's she thought that the, everybody was overreacting and she was working at the hotels and she was like, "Nothing is going to happen." 'Til her daughter-in-law got sick, really sick with the flu. And they thought that it was coronavirus. And that's when it hits her saying, "Oh, this, this pandemic is real." Because she was so afraid for her grandkids that getting sick. And I'm talking about March. Then she spent Easter alone. Then she spent Mother's Day alone. And then she's looking at the clock and saying, "My grandkids are not coming home. And I miss them so much that this pandemic is real." But now I think the need of going out and work is making or forcing her to change her idea of the pandemic.

But now she's thinking since I cannot stop this pandemic, it's lasting longer than she expected, what can I do to protect myself? Because her hope is to see her grandkids soon and not spread the virus to them. I think Rosa's life is always around the kids, the grandkids. She's so in love with them, that everything that she does and every decision that she makes is based on them.

Zahir: How has her job changed because of COVID? Does she have to wear a mask, gloves? Do people treat her differently? What's it like for her?

Maritza: She told me that she's actually wearing the mask and she's wearing goggles. And then these shields to protect her head. She has no contact with the guest. The hotels are completely different, so she doesn't clean the rooms when the guest is in the hotel and they don't get into the room till they check out, they wait 24 hours. And then they go in trying to prevent this, the spread. They have these special gowns to go in and clean the rooms. And they're, like, very picky with how they clean those public areas, where the guests can come in. For example, if they're doing the checking in the night, but because they tried to limit the contact from the guests with the receptionist, it's like, they needed to wait for him to leave. And then they'll clean everything and, and try to sanitize everything around it, but try to minimize the human contact with them. She's taking all the precautions. And she's saying that she feels safe because the hotel is doing their part as well.

Zahir: I imagine that must be tough, putting on all those extra, extra layers and the distance, like, how, how is she feeling like during this whole process? It sounded like she enjoyed her work before. Does she still enjoy it? Is it weird, all those precautions? And is it exhausting? Is she getting paid extra for this because of the, the risk that's involved? Is there any sort of what they call danger pay in this?

Maritza: No, of course not. She's been paid minimum wage too, but she told me that she's waiting to receive a bonus because she volunteered to start early, working in the hotels when the pandemic was, like, starting. And she was so excited about that because it's going to be a bonus, I think of \$500 that is going to make her, like, pay half of her rent or probably one of the bills. But she has exhausted because wearing that with this heat in Arizona, that is more than 110 degrees, is awful. Just walking outside with that suit, with the face mask, with the goal, we'll just start sweating like crazy.

She, and I think 99% of my interviews that I have done with undocumented workers, there are extremely positive. They do have sleepless nights because they don't know what they're going to do or how they're going to survive. But at the end, they're still smiling and they're still making jokes. And they're still positive that something better is coming into their ways.

Zahir: I'm glad you mentioned that. 'Cause what I was thinking is earlier you said that Rosa was sort of living the American Dream...was very happy, feeling very safe in the U.S., had a good job, enjoyed working at the hotel. The elections are coming up. How was Rosa feeling about her place in America? Her safety in America?

Maritza: She still thinks that this is her home and she's not going anywhere. I think she thinks that she has been working so hard to build this life and she's not going to let this pandemic to take it from her. And she knows that if she goes back to Mexico, she's going to be a foreigner over there. She wishes though that she had the opportunity for somebody to listen to their stories and make a policy change that will allow them to find a path to legalizing their status.

She's not asking for citizenship. Most of the immigrants that I have work on their stories, they don't want to be U.S. citizen yet, but they want to wait at that to legalize their status, a work permit, even though if they're not able to go back and forth to their countries, they want to be here legally and work legally and pay taxes legally, and try to have the opportunity to have health insurance for these cases, like the pandemic. To have unemployment benefits, just in case they are laid off or their hours get cut in their work.

Zahir: In the process of doing this story, how did your perspective on this topic change and perhaps, how did you change as a person in researching and reporting Rosa's story?

Maritza: What I like of this story is when we publish it, and I was looking through all the comments of the people did on that article, and I was looking some of, of people changing their minds about how they feel, not just because she was undocumented, but the thing is that they were abusing her, not paying the wages that they owe her for the work that she did before the pandemic, because they just realized that they're paying taxes because some of the rhetoric with the politics is that undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes.

And that's something that we as immigrants know that it's true. So after we published this article there were 13 women that reach out to me by voice messages or text messages or phone calls telling me that their story was the same as Rosa. So I think it's really

important for us to understand what's going on with this community that is very vulnerable to the pandemic, but not just during the pandemic. All the time. And we need to learn how this privilege that we have...nobody else has them. They don't have the opportunity to have this privilege that we have just because we're documented immigrants in the U.S.

Zahir: Did reporting this story, shift your own understanding of whether it's possible to live a better life in America or what it means to live a better life in America?

Maritza: I don't know if it changed it because I'm an immigrant myself, I felt empathy sometimes with the things that she was telling me, because I have lived them myself, but what it changed to me, that it was very refreshing and very needed, is that sometimes we treat these undocumented workers, like *pobrecitos* in Spanish like poor guys, and it's not because they're resilient and they're strong. And even though they're going through one of the most challenging periods of their life, they are willing to share with you these stories in something that I tried to really mindful in, remind myself when I'm doing this, these interviews is like, they're willing to share with you the most vulnerable times of their life for you to tell the story for somebody else to open the eyes to this reality that we're living the United States.

It's not just to advocate for them because they don't need a journalist to be the advocate or give them voice because they have their own voices. It's just to echo their words. So everybody else can know the reality and then they can make their own decisions. But the thing that they're willing to open to you and talk to you about their fears about how the worst periods of their life, their most vulnerable moments...it is really important. And that's something that sometimes we as journalists take for granted.

Zahir: Well, Maritza, thank you so much for joining us. I have a ton of respect for you, not just for your reporting but for *how* you've reported this story, with enthusiasm and empathy. Thank you for joining us.

Maritza: Thank you so much, Zahir. I think that these stories are really important to tell and it's good that we have a discussion about these topics that is so needed and to help us to spread the stories everywhere.

Zahir: That's all for this episode.

Maritza Félix reported Rosa's story for Slate. Special thanks to Roselyn Almonte, who provided English voiceovers.

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Our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I'm Zahir Janmohamed. Thanks for listening.

John Rudolph: Call Your Elders and A Better Life? is produced by Feet in 2 Worlds. For fifteen years, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and advancing the careers of immigrant journalists.

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