

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Marielena Hincapié

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Marielena Hincapié, executive director of the [National Immigration Law Center](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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Transcript begins.

[Marielena Hincapié, a Latina woman with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing a red blouse, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a floral shirt.]

[on-screen text: Marielena Hincapié, Executive Director, National Immigration Law Center]

MARIELENA HINCAPIÉ: One of the lessons that I think we've learned from the pandemic is how interdependent we all are. Here in the US, immigrants are part of that essential workforce that we really believe need to be recognized by the law, as well. Our ability to eventually recover is going to depend on all of us recovering.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Marielena Hincapié]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY PENNINGTON: I am speaking with Marielena Hincapié, the executive director of the National Immigration Law Center, the nation's leading organization dedicated to defending and advancing the rights of low-income immigrants in the US. As an immigrant from Colombia, Marielena brings her lived experience to her work, as well as outstanding legal and strategic expertise and leadership. And I'm really, really eager to speak with you, Marielena.

MARIELENA: Great. Thank you, Hilary. Thank you so much for this invitation.

HILARY: Can you remind us what the goal of systemic immigration reform actually is?

MARIELENA: I think your question is really important because immigration, especially in these last four years, has been used as a weapon to divide our country. When, in

fact, we are a nation of indigenous people, right? So, if you take the Native Americans and then you take people who are descendants of African slaves, everyone else is a descendant of an immigrant.

One of the lessons learned of the last 20, 25 years is that we actually need to help the country understand that immigrants are a valued political constituency, that everyone has that story, someone in their—either their own story or their family's story—their family's life or a loved one who has an immigrant background. It's not that immigrants are a problem that need to be solved but instead that we need to be recognized for our humanity.

HILARY: Yes, 100%. Let's come back to what might be the parameters of a better way of actually welcoming and supporting people who do immigrate here. Because what you just said made me think, even our policy prioritizing Dreamers as sympathetic cases is in some ways a trade-off. You know, a decision to start that may be strategic, may be necessary but can also be problematic. So I would love to hear your reflections on that.

MARIELENA: Yeah, that's such an important question, Hilary. Because, in fact, you know, when we look at the moment that we're living in, right, like, so much of that is about redefining who we are as America and who we are becoming as a nation and understanding that at the end of the day, we are all human beings. One of the lessons that I think we've learned from the pandemic is how interdependent we all are. Our ability to eventually recover is going to depend on all of us recovering.

Here in the US, immigrants are part of that essential workforce that we really believe need to be recognized by the law, as well. And so, yeah, I think the narrative change and the cultural change is going to be critical as a strategy for us to actually get to a place where all immigrants have an opportunity to really thrive in this nation.

HILARY: You called out the importance of recognizing that people who are immigrants are political constituencies. And I think, you know, people tend to oversimplify differences within the immigrant community itself, assuming all immigrants hold similar political views or should hold similar political views or that their, you know, their political views are dominated by one dimension of their identity—their status as immigrants. What does this get wrong? And how do you see that playing out right now?

MARIELENA: Yeah, when people are like, "Oh, the Latino—with Latino votes." It's like, no, it's not monolithic, right? We've got many countries represented, many like—like anyone else, immigrants are also diverse. And, you know, one of the things that's really interesting, Hilary, is that, unfortunately, for far too long immigration has been equated with Latinos, when in fact Latinos have many other interests and needs besides immigration. There is socioeconomic diversity, there is gender identity diversity, there is social conservatism among a lot of immigrants, as well.

And what's interesting, that I think that we're at a moment in our country where, as we look at finally, hopefully, getting to a place where we do recognize immigrants as a political constituency, there's going to need to be some very hard work and organizing

and advocacy done. So there's an opportunity for us to ensure that immigrants are seen as a political constituency and for the different parties—whether it's at the state level, at the federal level—to fight for that vote, right, to actually earn the vote of future American citizens, as well.

HILARY: So many people are outraged that the Trump administration separated migrant children from their families at the border. But even before Trump, you know, Democratic presidents were also ramping up deportations.

MARIELENA: Absolutely.

HILARY: What does it mean to treat people we turn away with dignity and respect?

MARIELENA: We need immigration reforms, and I would argue that we need them from the ground up, right? We need state and local policies that actually help improve the lives of low-income immigrants—and that's access to health care, access to education, workers' rights, etcetera, access to driver's licenses.

It is just incredible that a country that so relies on immigrants for a whole host of reasons has allowed, right—and I would say that this is a failure in leadership at the congressional level—has allowed for such a large percentage of our society to be not only disenfranchised but on the margins of the law. And so we absolutely need to reform our laws and, you know, first and foremost, we need a legalization path, a path to citizenship for the, you know, close to 11 million members of our communities, right? The majority of undocumented immigrants in this country have been here for over a decade, right? They have US citizen children, they are small business owners, they are homeowners, they pay taxes.

There's this myth of, like, "Why don't people get in line?" Well, there is no line to get into, right? We can't be a country of laws and not have the legal channels for people to be able to become a citizen.

Second is, we need to make sure that we restore due process to our system, right? That people who are coming to the United States seeking safety, right, who are fleeing persecution, violence in their home countries, including femicide, right? So many of the women and children who are leaving the Northern Triangle, who are fleeing the Northern Triangle, in Central America—so El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—they're leaving because of gender-based violence. And so we have to ensure and restore that ability, that due process, right, that people should apply for asylum and have immigration judges available to do that.

In the United States, since the Department of Homeland Security was created, since 2003, we have spent over \$381 billion on interior and border enforcement—more than all federal law enforcement agencies combined. Yet we have not gotten legalization for the undocumented immigrants.

HILARY: Well, these are huge, huge issues—sort of, you know, invisible in plain sight, visible in plain sight, but not yet something the country is really, I don't think, getting its

head around. And, you know, when you talk about—you think about the resources that we spent, and those are resources that could be spent in other ways. And this is, I think, back to the points you were making about COVID. You know, what does it mean? What is safety, really, in a society—other than the ability for people to live lives of dignity? You could take the money that we are putting into law enforcement, in so many dimensions, and invest it in a different way.

So, you know, I want to really thank you for those insights and also just, Marielena, how you lead. You know, it's so, so important to—and exhausting, you know. It's so important to get this country to turn the corner. Because you are right. This is about all of who we are, who we all are. So thank you so, so much.

MARIELENA: Thank you, Hilary. I'm so grateful for you. Thank you.

HILARY: Yes, and you. Be well.

MARIELENA: Gracias. You as well.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

End of transcript.