

**New America
Resilience Audio Interview**

CECILIA MUÑOZ

The bigger burden is pretending you're not scared.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: Cecilia Muñoz. It's such a pleasure to have you here.

Cecilia Muñoz: Thank you so much for having me.

AMS: We're going to talk about resilience, this big word that means different things, I've discovered, to different people. I've always thought about it as hunkering down like a rock, and yet others think of it as adaptability or flexibility. I want to start by saying—when I say resilience, what does that mean to you? What do you think about?

Cecilia: Well, I learned that term in the policy context because I'm a policy nerd. So the first thing that comes to mind is climate resilience because that's something we worked on as a policy matter. But as I dig into the idea, I also think of it as people's ability to withstand what's coming. You do that as a community, you do that as an individual, you do that as a family. Being here is fraught with challenges always, no matter where you are. So I think of resilience as the capacity to adjust, to adapt, and ultimately, as the sources of strength which then make it possible to thrive.

AMS: I love that: the sources of strength that make it possible to thrive. Anybody who knows Cecilia Muñoz knows she has a wonderful ability to capture particular phrases or feelings. So if you think about resilience in your own life, what are those sources of strength that allow you to thrive? How do you think about that?

Cecilia: The time when I really thought about it as a specific thing was right after 9/11. It was such a shock to the system; something like this hadn't happened, at least in our memory in the U.S., and I'd lost a friend, so I was shaken to my core. My mother-in-law, who's from India, happened to be staying with us. She was supposed to be flying that day. And my parents are of course immigrants from Bolivia, and I thought that my mother-in-law and my parents would be completely freaked out about us living in D.C., potentially facing these threats. You'll remember there was also an Anthrax threat. There was a lot going on. But they were so much less freaked out than I was and I was surprised. Then I realized that to me, it was new that these kinds of things could happen. But to my parents in Bolivia it was not new, and to my mother-in-law who's from India, but who also spent a lot of her adult life in Kenya, it was also not new. In the places they lived, in the lives they led, terrible things happened that they adjusted to. The difference between them and me is that I happened to be born in a place and at a time where it mostly didn't happen. So I was kind of joining the rest of the world. We were joining the rest of the

world in the United States, as there are all kinds of parts of the world, where unfortunately, unthinkable things happen. We just didn't know we were part of that world.

AMS: I think that's very well put. I also remember feeling this loss of innocence. Although you're right, it's specifically our generation, because my father can tell you where he was during Pearl Harbor. Of course Pearl Harbor is in Hawaii, but it was that same sense that suddenly, Fortress America had been breached. That was new for that generation. I actually saw the flip of that because I was teaching at Harvard Law School and I was teaching 150 foreign law students. Some of them were deeply traumatized because they had come to a country where they thought it couldn't happen. They had come from countries where they knew it could happen, but they thought they'd feel safe here. Then suddenly we were going through this trauma, so that was a kind of double trauma.

Cecilia: We went through it as parents too, because my kids were little at the time and I remember saying to my husband, "how do we prepare them to live in a world where these things happen?" My husband's a very wise man. He said, to a degree you can't protect them, you do your best but you can't. But he said you can try to provide them with what he called the spiritual resources to live in a world where these kinds of things happen. That's another way of thinking about resilience, as the inner strength that helps you recognize nothing is permanent, that safety is kind of an illusion. It helps you figure out how to live with that knowledge.

AMS: Yes, then the resources help you thrive. So the spiritual capacity to accept that life is finite, and that so much of what we love passes. I like that idea. I also had young children. We drove down the New Jersey turnpike three days after it happened and you could still see the smoke rising from where the towers had been. I often wonder whether that marks that generation differently. It certainly did for my parents. My mother was a child of war in Brussels and it does change your perception from an early age of what can happen. You mentioned that your parents are immigrants from Bolivia and you grew up in Michigan with a strong family. So talk a little bit about resilience in families, and maybe particularly in immigrant families.

Cecilia: I grew up in one of those big, messy, wonderful immigrant families. It was not just my parents who came in 1950 as newlyweds to Detroit, but my aunt and uncle who came with five kids, and an aunt of my dad's who was raising her grandchildren. So there were a lot of us Bolivianos in the Detroit suburbs, and I was related to all of them. My Dad recently passed away and I have in my kitchen a picture frame that we gave him for his last Christmas. It's one of those digital frames, and because he had dementia we loaded literally hundreds of photos from throughout his life and they're all these pictures of my parents and my aunt and uncle and all of their kids in the fifties, which is before I was born. They were immigrants to this new place and what shines out at me is their optimism. My parents had nothing when they came, except my dad's education, which is not nothing because that's how they came to the University of Michigan. But they had to figure it out. My mom didn't have a college education, and she ultimately found a career for herself, but there was this sense of "here we are and everything is

possible.” And of course in Detroit in the 1950s it was true, even for Latin American immigrants. My mother was learning English, although they did almost get kicked out of their first apartment when the landlady accused them of “speaking Mexican,” as she put it. They told me that story after I joined the civil rights movement because they thought it was funny. I saw a terrible civil rights violation, but they saw a landlady who was so ignorant that she didn't know that the language is called Spanish, not Mexican. They faced the stuff that you faced in the 50s, but they came up with a sense of optimism, and that is the thing that immigrants bring. If you come on purpose that's already an impressive thing, to leave everything and come to a new place where you don't speak the language. You think about immigrants today who are going through so much, resilient people who are working two and three jobs and raising kids. I was talking to a friend just last night who teaches limited English proficient little kids, and she said anybody who is struggling with the presence of immigrants in this country should come and meet the families that she teaches. They drop their kids off, and their kids are shining, their hair is perfect, and the parents are so engaged and involved and hopeful for what school will provide to their kids, even as they go off to their two or three jobs. She said that you can't help but feel good about people who would choose this place on purpose and give this country their most precious resource, which is their children.

AMS: That is lovely. When I think about my own experiences and people I know, a sense of optimism, not “everything's great all the time,” but a sense that you can see the good, you can find a way to either laugh or imagine something good coming out of things that are bad, that is a key part of resilience.

Cecilia: I think it is. To find a way to be optimistic, to see a future, and to understand your contribution to that future is a fundamentally resilient thing.

AMS: When you talk about your parents in the 50s, I agree that it was such an optimistic time, the 60s too. On the other hand, when we elected Barack Obama in 2008, I think many of us also felt deeply optimistic. But I do feel increasingly that America as a whole—and maybe that's connected to the way we perceive and treat immigrants—has lost some of that sense of a better future. It was seen as a given that it was going to be a better future, and that's particularly American. I don't know about Bolivians, but it's not European. My family's Belgian, and it's not Belgian.

Cecilia: We may be losing some of that, but not all of us always had it either. So the 1950s was an optimistic time for some people, but not for everybody. In some ways, I think what's happening now is that we're grappling with the fact that we have been multiple things at the same time. We have been a hopeful, optimistic place. We have also been the place that enslaved people and subjected them to terrorism. All of that was true at the same time. As you might imagine, I was working in the Obama Administration when the 2016 election happened, I felt some despair at that result. But even the next day, I was able to say, “look we are still the same place that elected Barack Obama twice.” We didn't stop being that place, but we're also

the place that interned Japanese-Americans and took Native American kids from their parents and had Jim Crow laws. We are all those things simultaneously, but the thing the president that you and I worked for believes fundamentally and communicated so effectively is the fundamental goodness of the American people, and our ability to become a more perfect union. We have that capacity. But it ebbs and flows. Our job is to make sure that it flows.

AMS: You're also right, when I think about my mother, the people who choose to leave what they've known for a better future for themselves and their children have to have hope and a measure of optimism. Otherwise, they don't leave, they just accept what life has dealt them. So it may well be tied to these waves of immigration and waves of optimism. I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about organizational resilience. You have done many different things in your life, but you spent a large part of your career at the National Council of La Raza, now Unidos, a civil rights organization, a non-profit. Talk about the existence of that organization for such a long time, since lots of non-profits come and go and fundraising is always an issue. I'd love for you to reflect on what you see that makes for organizational resilience, because there are ebbs and flows of people, ebbs and flows of money. Your issues are salient when you're up and then they get pushed off the agenda. So how do you think about organizational resilience?

Cecilia: I've spent a lot of my career on this, and I'm actually going to plug a book that I'm in the middle of reading now by my friend Charles Kamasaki who's at Unidos now. He's been there for 30 years. He wrote a book called *Immigration Reform: The Corpse That Will Not Die*, which is about the work that he and others engaged in to pass an immigration bill in the 80s, but it has an amazing historical framework around groups like NCLR in the other Latino civil rights organizations and their trajectory from their founding through today. It's had me reflecting on what it took to bring these organizations into being and then what it took to help them survive. I got to NCLR in 1988 which was only a few years after the Reagan Administration, which absolutely decimated the budget. It was founded with war on poverty money. It's a great story, it was founded really by the Ford Foundation who gave three Mexican American Scholars a budget for a year and told them to go out and dream their dreams. What they came back with was an analysis that the African-American community had the historically black colleges and universities and the black church as an anchor of their community and as backbone for the civil rights movement, and because so many of us are Catholic we didn't have that and we don't have our own colleges and universities. They posited that you needed to build a network of community-based organizations to become the backbone for a civil rights movement in the Latino community. They started in the Mexican-American community, and then in the 70s the organization made a decision to become a pan-Hispanic organization to try to reflect all Hispanic Americans. So one lesson about institutional resilience is knowing what your North star is and knowing what your purpose is. For 16 of the 20 years I worked under Raul Yzaguirre, who is a great man and who has his compass set almost better than anybody I know. It was clear to him why the organization existed: we were advancing the economic status, we were fighting poverty and discrimination. It was clear to him and he made it clear to us, and that clarity helped him make some remarkably difficult decisions. When funders would come to us

and say, “we want to work with you, we want to give you money, but could you not talk about poultry workers?” He would say “no, I won't take your money. But here's what I think you should do, you should set up a blue ribbon commission. I will tell you who will be on it and it's going to be independent, and let them look at poultry workers and provide data so that you can figure out if there's something you want to do.” That was the kind of guy he was. He was perfectly willing to turn down money, including when he needed it very badly, for the sake of principle because he understood that the integrity of the institution was actually it's best marketing device. He diversified the funding base after the Reagan Administration cut out the war on poverty money.

AMS: So it was government money originally?

Cecilia: It was war on poverty money originally. When Reagan came in he cut those grants, including federal grants that were three year grants originally that they just cut them right in the middle. So a bunch of NCLR affiliates went out of business and they went from a staff of over 120 down to less than 50. But he diversified the funding base. So, when I left 10 years ago the budget was about a third corporations, a third foundations, and a third government funds. The deal with corporations was: “This is who we are, and if you want to be associated with it, understand that you don't get to tell us what to do.” The corporations that understood that that was a sign of good corporate citizenship, and that they actually wanted to be associated with that kind of integrity, as opposed to the ones who were interested in pay-to-play, they were the ones who were good partners. That's really important. So from Raul I learned integrity, how that kind of integrity latches to institutions, and how important a North star is, and how important it is for an institution to be clear about “this is what we do, come on board if you want,” rather than doing what so many NGOs do, which is chase the funders wherever they happen to be. It's not easy to keep that kind of focus.

AMS: I love that kind of thinking. I have not thought about resilience as integrity and direction, but I certainly think it is a spiritual resource. I always say to my children, “when I die, if you remember nothing else of me, I hope you'll hear my voice in your ear saying do the right thing, don't compromise your integrity, figure out what is the right thing and then do it.” That is a solid rock on which to stand, and this idea of focus and direction. I certainly find that in running a non-profit it is very easy to follow the fat of the day, the funder of the day, but you're right, when the winds come, then you've lost your foundation.

Cecilia: Exactly. When the winds come, if you're able to harken back to what is the strongest thing at your core, when you're faced with a tough decision that core generally makes the decision really clear. It may mean that there's a cost to that decision, but it clarifies things in a remarkable way. And if you have to agonize over whether it's the ethical decision, it's probably not.

AMS: Yes. That is definitely one thing I've learned. You can rationalize anything, but the fact that you have to get there means you shouldn't have gone down that road. Well, that is a real addition to the way we're thinking about resilience. Let me turn to your time in the White House. You were the director of the Domestic Policy Council under President Obama for five years and before that you worked in Intergovernmental Affairs. You were the chief White House official for domestic policy, that includes a lot of stuff—immigration, health care, education, labor, and agriculture. So in the first place, it's an extraordinary portfolio. Did you think of resilience as part of policymaking? You started by talking about climate. Absolutely, we all get resilience is something we're striving for. But if you're thinking about education or healthcare, are you thinking about the resilience of the system, or are you thinking about resilience of people, is that even relevant to the way you framed various issues?

Cecilia: I think it is. I'm not sure we use the term specifically but I do think that's actually what we were doing. The healthcare system is a great example. The Affordable Care Act is taking the existing system rather than turving it out the door and coming up with something else, which certainly couldn't have passed the Congress that we had the time, you take the existing system and you find ways to make it healthier, ways to make it work. For us that meant legislation that balanced the values we were trying to put forward—making sure people had coverage, making sure they had protections for like preventive care and other things. But if you require those kinds of things and you set standards that health insurance policy must meet, which we did for the first time, you also need to make sure you can create a robust market or else it doesn't work. If the only people who get health insurance are people who are sick, we're in trouble and the market fails. It was about the resilience of the market, the resilience of insurance. Because that's the only way to bend the cost curve. As much as the Affordable Care Act was about getting people coverage, it was also about bending the cost curve for the healthcare system. So I think that's about resilience of systems. A lot of us, including some of the people you recruited to come to New America, think a lot about the resilience and health of government systems that are delivering all kinds of services. The reason that we were building a Public Interest Tech project here at New America is because people liked Tara McGinnis and I came out of the government really worried about government implementation of our ability to deliver big things that help address issues like inequality. Among the tools that we want to make available to governments and NGOs so that they're effective are the tools that technologists bring to the table. I think that's fundamentally about government's ability to do what it sets out to do. To me, that's a resilience question that affects not just the capacity of the government to do what it needs to do, but our ability to have faith that the government can deliver. If a letter from some agency of the government that says you must get some new document, the first reaction of an American is going to be to roll their eyes and brace themselves for a lot of inefficiency. If that's what we think about how our government works— and it's not without reason— that affects the resilience of our democracy. That's a thing we have to deal with, and there's no reason we can't.

AMS: Actually, a couple Governors ago, they really overhauled the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles and it makes all the difference in the world. You go and you're in and out in 10

minutes and you think oh, that's not so bad. You also really start thinking, "well government can do that, government's fast, government's efficient." We always remind people that "good enough for government work" used to mean a higher standard than private sector, it meant that it is good enough to be sold to the government or to be used by the government, which is not the way most people think of it today.

Cecilia: Well think about it: we've invented ways that you and I sitting here right now could be on our phones ordering a pair of shoes. There's no reason that our interactions with the government shouldn't be that simple.

AMS: Exactly. So you have a book coming.

Cecilia: I do.

AMS: It's a wonderful book called *More Than Ready*. It's a book that I think everybody should read, but it is aimed at the Latin community and specifically Latinas, right?

Cecilia: Yes, young women of color.

AMS: So I won't ask you to preview the whole book, but if you're thinking about what it takes, what you have to build to be able to withstand what life's going to throw at you because life is going to throw a lot of stuff at you, what do you say?

Cecilia: It's reflected in the title. I'm going to reason we landed on *More Than Ready* as a title is not just to reflect that the country is more than ready for women of color to lead, which it is, but that part of the ways that I, and all the women of color that I spoke to in preparing the book, overcome our own doubts and fears is we prepare like crazy. Whether we're going to give a presentation, whatever it is, we work it and we make sure we know our stuff and that's the way we overcome not just other people's doubts about us, but our own doubts about ourselves. Doubts about whether we really belong, whether I really belong at the table in the Roosevelt room sitting across from the President of the United States. The way to answer that question for me was to make sure I know my stuff, and make sure I do my homework, and that's how I'll know I'll be more than ready. Every single woman that I spoke to in preparing this book said, "Oh, yeah. I hope I totally over-prepare. And that's how I get my confidence, from the fact that I know my stuff. That's how I crowd out the little voice in my head that says, 'what the heck are you doing here? Nobody else like you has ever sat in this seat, what makes you think you should sit in this seat?'" You can crowd out that voice by saying, "well, let me describe for you the 16 ways we're going to reform the healthcare system and the reasons that it's important that people have access to preventive care" and whatever else the the facts tell you. Confidence in what you know, and in my case the confidence that the President had asked me to do that job on purpose knowing what he was getting into, that did a lot to remind me that I did belong there. It's hard when you're the first one, and so many women of all kinds are the only one in the room,

and certainly people of color are the only one in the room or the first one in their role. And that's really hard. You realize you're blazing a trail. Our own colleague Tyra Mariani, who was one of the women that I spoke to, talked about how she spoke to someone who said to her, "I carry my blackness in the room all the time." Yeah, I'm aware of it all the time and people react to it all day long. We all have strategies that we use to make sure that people we're sitting across from understand that we have what it takes to do what we're doing.

AMS: What's so interesting is that you have to withstand what comes from without but also from within. You have to push back on that that little voice that says, "well, maybe I don't belong here. Maybe there's a reason there's never been a woman in this seat, or a woman of color in this seat." You have to defend internally as well as externally.

Cecilia: Yeah, that's exactly right and some of the doubts come from outside, but a lot of them come from the inside and that's hard. It takes deliberate work. So one of the things I try to do in the book is describe strategies that I used and that the women I spoke to used to make sure we could deliver the goods.

AMS: Although, you're also sharing your own vulnerabilities to strengthen others. And that's certainly something I found when I talk to audiences of young people and young women in particular, it was worth just telling them, "yes, of course I was absolutely terrified on day one of the job, I wanted to stay in bed in the fetal position rather than run my first faculty meeting or take over as director of policy planning." Showing them and drawing aside the curtain on your vulnerabilities gives them greater courage.

Cecilia: That's exactly right, and I ended up making a practice of it when I was in the White House because it was scary, and I was sure I couldn't be the only one. I started asking people. So I remember on one of our very first days I saw Robert Gibbs, who was the press secretary, who was about to go in to do his very first press briefing, where you have to walk in and be ready to answer whatever questions the media has. And Robert is somebody who has some swagger. I saw him in the hallway and I was like, "Oh my God, you're doing the briefing, are you scared?" And it was like a mask fell off of his face and he looked at me, he's like, "Oh my God, I'm scared." But there's something sort of liberating about giving people the room to admit it because of course you're scared. The women had an easier time admitting it than the men but I think it's important because it's already enough of a burden to do hard things, but it's more of a burden if you have to pretend that they're not scary, because of course they're scary.

AMS: Absolutely. I remember this when I was teaching at Harvard Law School. Lawrence Tribe, who is one of the great constitutional law professors and is legendary, was feeling the same thing. It was the day before school started and I ran into him and he said "well, I won't sleep tonight." I thought: *you're Lawrence Tribe. What are you talking about?* But it was the day before class and there's always those butterflies but you walk back into the class and you face it. So I do think that's very important. I think that's a great note on which to end because one of the

themes of our conversations have been that resilience is about “we” more than “I” and about having a community, having those resources of strength. They can be internal but they can also be external, raising this idea that it's hard enough to do it, but it's even harder to do it alone. So if you can establish a virtual or actual community of people who feel the same way and who have gone through the same thing who you can lean on, that is a critical part of taking what life delivers and adapting, surviving, and thriving.

Cecilia: The question were trying to answer as a country as well, is whether collectively we have the capacity to do that. That's that's the ultimate group resilience and how we answer that matters.

AMS: It does indeed. Cecilia Muñoz, It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

Cecilia: Thank you so much.