

Speaker 1 (00:05):

Welcome to Sabin's Community Conversations on Vaccines presented by Immunization Advocates. Imagine this, you are a journalist covering your country's election, and the COVID-19 pandemic breaks out. How would you continue to do your job while keeping yourself and your family safe? In this episode, we explore those very challenges with Nazima Raghubir, a Guyanese journalist and president of the Guyana Press Association. Vince and Francesca talk to Nazima about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted her and the stories she tells, the importance of working with health workers and public health officials to communicate effectively, and what stories are still to be told related to the pandemic and reporting on COVID-19 vaccines.

Francesca Montalto (00:45):

Hi, and welcome to Community Conversations on Vaccines. I'm Francesca Montalto.

Vince Blaser (00:49):

I'm Vince Blaser.

Francesca Montalto (00:51):

So Immunization Advocates works primarily with health workers and journalists around the world to increase vaccine acceptance and demand. Health workers and journalists are key community gatekeepers for vaccine and immunization information, and their outlook and testimony allows stakeholders like Sabin to better understand the present and future needs to fight the infodemic and increase vaccine access and equity. In the previous two episodes of this podcast series, we talked with doctors who provided global and regional perspectives on vaccines, both in terms of routine immunization and the changes in the field as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vince Blaser (01:28):

Yeah. Getting my career started in journalism myself, I'm really excited about this episode today, Francesca. Covering stories about health, and especially vaccines and immunization, is a challenge. The science of the immune system, navigating health systems, and understanding the nuances of access and acceptance are difficult stories to get the sources and the background you need and craft clear, understandable stories. Before COVID-19 that complexity often led to a lack of adequate coverage of immunization. And of course, these last six months or so journalists of all beats have started to cover COVID-19 vaccines and the rollout of them. And that's great, but the daily torrid of information combined with the personal challenges that journalists and newsrooms are facing during the pandemic, only really deepens that challenge of delivering clear reporting. So we're thrilled for this episode to be joined by Nazima Raghubir, a journalist that has covered anything and everything Guyana the last 20 years. Nazima, welcome to our podcast.

Nazima Raghubir (02:31):

Thank you, Vince, and thank you, Francesca, for having me today.

Vince Blaser (02:35):

Sure. So maybe you could just start by telling us a little bit about where you're from there in Guyana, your personal story, and why you decided to become a journalist.

Nazima Raghubir (02:46):

Sure. So I walked into a newsroom at about 17. I was just out in high school, and I knew that I did not want to be confined by four walls and knew wanted to do something that was so different. Back then, television, you know, newscasts were such big, you know, such a big deal. I walked into a newsroom because a friend had introduced me to two persons, and I walked in with my application and I remember my former editor saying to me come back tomorrow. And coming back tomorrow, I mean, I didn't sit down to do an interview. What I did the next day, it was follow him on an assignment to our cabinet secretary, which is sort of like your press secretary. I attended that press briefing. And I went back to the office, and he's like, you're going to write a story based on what you've heard and all that, you know. My interview lasted for probably a month because I kept writing these stories and going on these assignments and that was their assessment of my ability.

Nazima Raghubir (03:54):

It turned out, I passed, and I got the job as a young rookie reporter. And I got confirmed like a year after to an agency called Prime News of which I am still apart of today. I've done so many things otherwise. But, you know, being able to contribute to journalism in a country, a developing country that is still finding herself after independence from Britain since 1965. You know, there's so much that is happening here in journalism, you know, it's one of those things that contribute to the development of any country. So I'm proud to be part of that institution and to be part of this profession. I've always wanted to do something different, as I mentioned, and this profession has allowed me to be able to do that in so many different ways. I've not only covered health stories or health-related stories; I've covered crime; I've covered politics; I've been a parliamentary reporter for as long as I can remember. And that sort of versatility and so on, I'm really appreciative of at this age.

Vince Blaser (05:10):

Yeah, well, that's fascinating. And starting out as a journalist myself, I can appreciate that start story and just how it kind of, those first interviews just hook you in and you kind of just want to keep going at it more and more and more. It's quite a feeling. Well this past year has been quite a year for

everybody and the entire world. Just wondering if you could share with us a little bit what it's like been for you personally and with other reporters and editors you've worked with.

Nazima Raghubir (05:52):

Sure. I wanted to provide a brief context about Guyana, if you don't mind. Guyana is geographically located in South America. We're the only English speaking country in South America. But we connect a lot more with what is known to the world as the Caribbean and the West Indies because of how our ethnic makeup is. It's largely, the countries populated by descendants of African slaves and indentured servants from India, from China, from Portugal, and, of course we have Native Americans of whom we refer to as Amerindians or indigenous groups who were initially here before the Europeans came. So I just wanted to give you that little background. The majority of our activities happen on what we consider our coastal plain. And it's our capital is in region four, which is the most populated region, but we're largely a forested that country.

Nazima Raghubir (06:58):

We have a lot of natural resources. We're known for our timber, our gold, our diamonds and exporting our...

Vince Blaser (07:08):

What's the population?

Nazima Raghubir (07:08):

It's only 784,000. We have large migrant population, Guyanese, obviously in North America and Europe, because a lot of people leave for better opportunities and better job opportunities. And the past year we had our first COVID case in March and that person passed away. And it was only after she passed away that, you know, the body was tested and the authorities said, this is our first case. All of this happened while they Arno was in the longest electoral cycle ever in this country. We had our elections on the 2nd of March and that election cycle lasted for five months. This has never happened. There was a lot of irregularities with our elections process that ended up in a national recount exercise, which lasts for like a month and a half.

Nazima Raghubir (08:12):

We had court cases. So the pandemic for us started while this electoral cycle was, you know, heating up and so on and quite very unprecedented because right there and then you knew that the things that you came to expect, what an election could not happen. Like we all, we have a history of protests around elections time. So people gathering, obviously, that could not have happened in

the way that you saw it happen before, but it was still happening. Work as media workers were obviously affected because of course you were very conscious of, you know, everything that was going on at this time. And you became very conscious of your personal space and things like that. For me, I was a new mother. My son was born in November of the previous year, and I was still breastfeeding by the time, you know, we started elections.

Nazima Raghbir (09:13):

And for me, it was such a very traumatic period because here it was everything that you thought that you knew about your life changed very, very quickly, and you had to be able to adjust, but not only adjust in a way that adjust the suited, you had to think about the people around you, which as oftentimes we don't do. So I had to think about my elderly mom, who I was dropping my child off so that she could babysit. I had to think about my partner who was not interfacing with the crowds as I usually do when I'm covering court and I'm going on assignments and so on. And I had to also think about, most importantly, my baby and the risks, you know of coming home to him and you know, taking whatever precautions I needed to take. That was my, my year in a nutshell.

Nazima Raghbir (10:08):

I remember at the beginning of this year and after the new government was sworn in, in August, I said, you know, maybe it's time for me to unwind a little. But it sorta became a little impossible because COVID-19, the pandemic has challenged every individual in different ways, especially for journalists. We are still covering so many things. We are covering the deaths, we're covering access to service. Just this morning, we were discussing migrant issues because Guyana shares a border with Venezuela, and we have a large migrant population coming over to Guyana to eke out a living and a livelihood. We have Haitians traveling to Guyana to get on to Brazil and so on. So there are so many life issues that are still there for us to cover and for us to track. We started giving vaccines recently and, you know, these are life stories that are going to, you know, develop within months and years to come. So there were so many things that definitely I could not take a back seat on

Francesca Montalto (11:17):

What point did you as a journalist realize that, you know, not just family and community life, but your reporting would change?

Nazima Raghbir (11:27):

It was the first, just after the first death. I think it was like a day after. So we were, we would have to go outside of our electoral commission's office, which is the Guyana Elections Commission Office, to monitor the meetings that the commissioners would have on the elections. And I was turning up to that place and seeing the first person, a fellow journalist, wearing a mask. And I was like, "Okay, this is weird. Why is she wearing a mask?" And I remember immediately going on Google and be

like, "Okay, what is WHO saying about wearing masks?" Because, you know, it was just pretty new and right there and then I was like, okay, well, this is obviously something we need to adopt because, you know we can't be next to each other, conversations obviously are going to change. How are we going to interview, you know, the people coming out of the commission? Obviously, we can't stand close to them. So this is so interesting, but for the first time in my life, I got a haversack to carry, among other things, my laptop, my mic and my sanitizing wipes, my Lysol spray...

Francesca Montalto (12:52):

You can't go anywhere without hand sanitizer.

Nazima Raghbir (12:52):

Exactly. The hand sanitizer and my masks. So it was all. So right there and then you, you realize that it was changing. You just didn't know to what extent it was going to change until the coming weeks, but you knew something was up. And it was in that moment.

Vince Blaser (13:14):

But before that point, had you covered many stories on health before that? And just I know that you have this past year, but curious if you had before that, and kind of, what are your impressions on health issues and what your experience in health reporting has been like?

Nazima Raghbir (13:36):

Sure. I've covered a lot of health-related issues over the past decades. One of the very first stories that I covered had to do with HIV/AIDS. And that is because my former editor in our morning musters said to us, one day, we have to do a story that is related to HIV/AIDS every single day to highlight this particular issue as a health issue. And it can range from, you know, protection to persons living with HIV, persons affected by HIV funding and stuff like that. So one of my very first story had to do with an interview with somebody affected by HIV. It moved on and these stories moved on and developed over time. Guyanese, in particular, rely heavily on public health system. Private health care is very expensive, and so a lot of Guyanese flock to our public hospitals, which the main hospital in Guyana, the Georgetown Public Hospital, is the largest health facility here.

Nazima Raghbir (14:54):

And they flock for everything. It can be the common cold and can be a very major issue. It can be cancer and somebody needs some diabetic foot care, that type of thing. So a lot of my coverage centered on the services that were provided through the public healthcare system, access to medication maternal mortality, which up to a couple of years, continue to be a very major issue. So

a lot of my coverage really looked at a lot of these issues and monitored a lot of what was going on with these particular issues and you know, covering the pandemic and covering the sort of effects that we've seen from the pandemic was not necessarily new. It was just that putting everything into a perspective, understanding what was going on that was new to us and to be able to sort of reduce the sort of panic that comes with these types of, you know these types of infections and diseases that we also have to work on because the media is often accused of, you know, spreading fear and spreading panic and, you know very early on. I'm president of the Guyana Press Association here in Guyana.

Nazima Raghubir (16:24):

So very early on, I remember doing sessions and working with our media people to sort of reduce that public panic because we would have seen, you know, people are like, oh, you do this, you're going to expose yourself; oh, I don't need to wear a mask and that type of thing. So that was the sort of things that you really have to let your stories try to dissuade persons from doing.

Vince Blaser (16:52):

Nazima, you and 14 other journalists from Guyana and elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean took part in a workshop in February led by the Thompson Reuters Foundation and supported by Sabin on reporting on vaccines and immunization. We know reporters, and everyone, really has little time these days. Can you tell us why you decided to spend the time taking this course and how, if at all, you have utilized what you learned from it?

Nazima Raghubir (17:22):

Thank you, Vince for that. Guyana is not known to be an anti-vaxx nation, but I have seen the sort of discussions emerging particularly on COVID-19 vaccine and the the sort of hesitancy that accompanies it. And I knew that it would have been a challenge to media to be able to present that information to the public and let them understand that, you know, the vaccines are nothing to be afraid of. So my participation was rooted in understanding that and understanding my role. I had, prior to taking part in the course, I had done two polls, one on Twitter, and one on my Instagram, to see what people were thinking about, you know, the vaccines, whether or not they would have taken them. I think general consensus was that people were hesitant because they were concerned about the short timeframe the vaccines were taken to develop. And, I mean, a lot of this sort of thinking and thoughts on the period and all of that could have simply been informed by little research, but I wanted to be part of a larger group of people, specialists, experts, who can break down that information to me., rather than me go reading the very expert analysis and medical analysis I've seen there.

Nazima Raghubir (18:55):

And that course provided that sort of guidance and that sort of information, and I'm in a much better position now to relate that information to the public. Until yesterday, I was having a discussion with a group of friends and one of them said, you know, she's not sure that she's going to take the vaccine. And two of us in the group were like, but, you know, the vaccines were not developed in a short period of time, look at the history of the development of the vaccines, and, you know, this is what it does, and, you know, this is what we can share with you on, you know, vaccines and these particular vaccines and stuff like that. So that is where I, that is why I really wanted to be part of something because I see the life changing effect of the pandemic. And if there is a solution to that I can do my part and being in that solution by informing myself as a journalist so I can inform the public. And that was the general reason I took part in that particular course.

Vince Blaser (20:03):

You mentioned your coverage of HIV, and I think it's interesting. And some of the parallels and some of the issues are really interesting between HIV and COVID especially some of the issues around stigma and that sort of thing. I'm curious, as you've talked to a lot of health experts, you've talked to a lot of people in communities through your reporting. What do you think that experts in the health field, we have a lot of global health stakeholders who listen to our podcasts and are involved in our programs, what do you think they could do better in terms of communicating with the reporters, communicating to communities to try to better improve that understanding that you're just speaking of in terms of vaccines?

Nazima Raghubir (21:07):

Two things, Vince. Being accessible is one and breaking down highly technical and scientific information is the other. I mean, in our discussion while we were doing the course with Thomson Reuters, we did speak about the need to access some of the experts, the scientists the immunization experts and so on because some highly technical information people are usually turned off, for the want of a better description from stuff like that. They're dissuaded easily, if they don't understand. And we need to, I'm not saying people are not intelligent. I just feel that if we reformat some of this information in a better way, we can get the buy-in of wider groups of people as they understand. People want to be part of something, and they want to understand what is going on. So for me, you know, even doing that, I think would help.

Nazima Raghubir (22:16):

Access, also, to experts. It doesn't have to be the media, you have to be only available to the media. I think there needs to be, I've seen some doctors here doing this, they take the social media and say, look, these are the facts. And these are, you know some of the useful tips that could be useful to help you. Some other experts, you know, are doing that, and there are roles for everybody. There are roles for the journalists. There are roles for the politicians, sadly, but there are roles for the politicians. There are roles for the public health experts. They're the roles to the people, developing

the vaccines, the pharmaceuticals, and so on to be able to allow people to understand what this is all about and how they can be part of the process. In Guyana, for instance, as I mentioned, we're not an anti-vaxx nation, but people have their hesitancy about taking the vaccines.

Nazima Raghubir (23:15):

And when you listen to them, you cannot ignore their points. What do you have to do is use the information. You have to inform them, you know, a lot better than this. And we have groups of people that even this information needs to be broken down into. Our indigenous people, for instance, still speak, some of them still speak with their native language. So you have to be able to take one of the messages you have and inform them better on that. One of the things like old people talk about side effects all the time. I mean, you get side effects from taking almost any foreign thing that you put into your body, but even breaking down what, you know, side effects are. Like our prime minister actually got the vaccine today because we started rolling out vaccines to persons sixty and older.

Nazima Raghubir (24:10):

And it was interesting to see him say, you know, don't be afraid. I have not, since I took it this morning, I've not had any major side effects and all of that. And that was good, that was good that somebody, you know, other people identify with and see. But at the same time, if people are having side effects, explain why the side effects are normal, explain the side effects themselves and you know, what you've experienced. So, you know, I feel like access is important and breaking down that the type of, you know medical and other information is very important.

Vince Blaser (24:48):

You talked just mentioned indigenous communities in Guyana. You talked about some of the migrant populations there. Nazima, as head of Guyana Press Association just wondering what stories you think are not being told enough by journalists and kind of where, what are you going to be trying to do in this coming year in terms of your own reporting and potentially pushing others?

Nazima Raghubir (25:22):

So interesting that you brought that up because we have an annual media brunch with the president of the country. And this year in my remarks to the president, I'd made a special request for our president, who is our commander in chief to give special permission for media workers to travel to some of our border communities in which our army actually have different base camps set up. Reporting basically in Guyana is very city centered. A lot of our media houses are in Georgetown, the capital city, and a lot of the issues and some of the other communities, and I'm just going to name region one in particular, because that is largely where there's a lot of traffic between Guyana and Venezuela. And there's a large migrant population, Venezuelan population there. The border is

largely unregulated because for decades this has been a way of life for Guyanese and Venezuelans and our native. One tribe, in particular, the Warao they are very nomadic, so they travel in search of food and where the game is and, you know, fishing and so on. So they traveled between the two countries over the years in search of food and so on.

Nazima Raghbir (26:46):

So we then make, I made an appeal to the president for his permission, with the guidance of the Guyana Defense Force to take the media into these particular areas or accompany the media, sorry, into these particular areas, because I felt that these stories were not being told. And we're not getting a full understanding of what's been happening in some of these particular communities. I'm not going to limit it to region one, but we opted to do that particular region because it was very, and continues to be, a very live issue with migrants and their need for services and their need for access to certain services, but also for us to understand what was going on in that region.

Nazima Raghbir (27:37):

So those are one, that was one of the things on the cards as we speak. We're trying to develop a sort of agenda to push that out, but there are so many things that are happening all over Guyana that, you know, media houses are limited in their capacity and their coverage to cover. I've seen some changes, but I don't think it's enough. Like I've seen some people traveling to our border with Brazil in region nine to focus on some of the issues they've been having there. Some have traveled to region seven where we have very large mining communities. But it's a lot of work in progress Vince. For me, even in my capacity, as the president of the GPA, I always feel that, you know, Georgetown is not news coverage alone. We have to be able to tell stories from different places in Guyana. But I think that is going to come in time as media houses look at their own development and trying to find the resources to be able to tell some of these stories.

Francesca Montalto (28:50):

I think before we wrap up, we'd love to know where can we see your work?

Nazima Raghbir (28:55):

Sure. I have, right now, I'm actually working on a project with the Media Institute of the Caribbean. And I'm going to share that website with you. It's the, I'm going to look for it right now and share it. But the Media Institute of the Caribbean, we are actually started a project in which we're looking at, we're tracking COVID-related finances. The website is mediainstituteofthecaribbean.com. And once you go there, you will see some of the work that I've been able to put in on this particular project. I've been freelancing here and there a bit doing some coverage on a lot of our politics and governance issues here in Guyana, but largely the work that I've done in the past few months is for the Media Institute of the Caribbean. So let me just say, when you go to the Media Institute of the

Caribbean page you can actually see on top of the page is the COVID-19 Monitoring Hub. And there you'll see some of the work that we've been able to do on tracking financing in the COVID era.

Francesca Montalto (31:08):

Nazima Raghbir, thank you so much for joining us, and we hope that you will stay in touch and keep us updated on your health and immunization reporting during this pandemic and beyond.

Nazima Raghbir (31:17):

Great, thank you.

Speaker 1 (31:29):

Thanks for listening to Sabin's Community Conversations on Vaccines brought to you by Immunization Advocates. For more information, visit immunizationadvocates.org.