

Marc van Ranst: 'Mij is een grondige hekel aan onrecht ingepeperd' <sup>8</sup>

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Natalia  
lived in  
pause mode  
for years* <sup>28</sup>

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# Natalia and Najoua were in pause

**Najoua Sabbar and Natalia Robledo Contreras** grew up in Amsterdam, but couldn't study because they didn't have residence permits. They do now, but all of those years of uncertainty did leave their mark.

BY WELMOED VISSER  
PHOTOS MARTIJN GIJSBERTSEN

Receiving an official letter addressed to her is always special for second-year Law student Najoua Sabbar (23). She did not have any documents until eighteen months ago. She wasn't allowed to study or work. After completing her pre-university education in Amsterdam, she spent years waiting for a decision by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Years in which everything was uncertain, she was entitled to nothing and she felt less and less like a person. "The IND treats you like a number and that's how you end up feeling." She lived in a damp basement without windows with her sister and mother. Getting ill was not an option, as there was no money for a doctor.

Fourth-year Law student Natalia Robledo Contreras (28) had to wait even longer: her IND procedure took a total of ten years. She also had to quit her education when she turned eighteen, working as a cleaner and babysitter for years. "I tried to work a lot and save enough to one day maybe enrol as an international student, but I simply wasn't able to come up with that kind of money."

The many years of being stuck in a procedure took their toll: Robledo Contreras' mental health declined, not to mention her sister's. The IND made a number of errors, prolonging the procedure even more. At long last a judge decided four years ago that they were entitled to a residence permit based on their private lives. Two months later, Robledo Contreras could finally start studying at VU Amsterdam.

*'The IND treats you like a number and that's how you end up feeling'*



Natalia Robledo Contreras

# mode for years



Najoua Sabbar

*'We were told over and over again never to create problems, never to break the law'*

Eighteen months ago Sabbar was told she would be getting a residence permit, after the IND withdrew its appeal at the very last second. Now she could start studying as well. It's a dream come true, she says. She loves being at university because it reminds her of her time at school, where she could briefly leave her cares behind. She does, however, sometimes still feel the unrest she had to live with for so long.

### **Performing even better**

Even though Sabbar and Robledo Contreras have different background stories and were given residence permits for different reasons, there are also similarities: they both know what it's like to live in uncertainty for years and they both sometimes feel like they have to perform even better to justify their presence. Sabbar: "We were told over and over again never to create problems, never to break the law. Never to travel without a ticket, never to ignore a red light. The other day I was waiting at a traffic light with a friend. There was no traffic, but I still had to wait for the light to turn green."

They both grew up in Amsterdam. Sabbar left Morocco for the Netherlands as a baby, together with her mother and sister. Robledo Contreras left Chili when she was seven, also with her mother and sister. They went to primary and secondary school in Amsterdam. Together with their parents, they did their best to have as normal a childhood as possible. In part they cared about the same things as their classmates. And in part they had other concerns. Sabbar remembers the many times they had to move, that one time they were thrown out of their house by a landlord at ten in the evening, and that her mother worked long hours while she and her sister travelled from North to West Amsterdam



to go to primary school. And from secondary school, she remembers not being able to go on trips abroad.

### **Nobody knew**

Robledo Contreras remembers how her parents were always working to pay the rent, which was many times higher for them than for legal tenants. She was sent to a vocational school as her parents were said to be illiterate, but in the end made it all the way up to pre-university education. At secondary school, none of their classmates knew they didn't have residence permits. When Sabbar's story was published in the national newspaper *Het Parool* about eighteen months ago, she received texts from some of them: 'I would have never thought that about you.' Sabbar: "They meant well, but I did wonder: why? What *do* you think an undocumented person is like?"

Sabbar and Robledo Contreras tried to live as normally as possible, which is why they didn't tell classmates they had other concerns than whom to go see a film with. They sometimes lived in a schizophrenic world. Robledo Contreras: "Once I had an economics exam in the afternoon, preceded by a morning session at the IND where they had tried to convince me to buy a ticket to Chili as I was fighting for a lost cause."

"I remember feeling very low around the final exams," Sabbar says. "On the one hand, I was happy I did well, but on the other hand I knew it would soon be over for me."

### **Stumbling blocks**

After they reached adulthood and while they were waiting for their residence permits, Saddar worked at the Support Group Undocumented Women and Robledo Contreras was a spokesperson for undocumented house cleaners at the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV). Today they are still committed to helping people

### **Better guidance**

VU Amsterdam could offer better guidance to undocumented students, Najoua Sabbar and Natalia Robledo Contreras say. Students could use more support with administrative tasks, such as registering for courses, and are often unaware of psychological help opportunities and other facilities. "If you've been undocumented for years, you're not in any systems. You don't even have a bank account, but all of a sudden you need to register everywhere. All of those things are new to us", Robledo Contreras says.

*'I can't shake that uneasy feeling'*

in similar situations, accompanying them to hospitals and other authorities. "At the hospital they treat you very differently if you speak Dutch and show them you know the procedures", says Robledo Contreras.

Their lives were in pause mode for years, but they never lost sight of their dream to study. Robledo Contreras repeatedly tried to enrol at VU Amsterdam, the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. "I needed someone to manually fill in the paperwork for me and at VU Amsterdam I never found that someone", she says. At UvA she had already passed the content-based selection procedure for PPLE (Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics, in which Dutch Crown Princess Amalia is currently enrolled), but the formal registration turned out to be too big of a stumbling block.

Sabbar never even registered. She did type an email to VU Amsterdam asking if she, as an undocumented person, would be allowed to study Law, but she never sent it. "I didn't want my last bit of hope to go down the drain."

### **Afraid of endless procedure**

Nobody at the Amsterdam institutes of higher education wanted to stick their neck out. Nothing changed until last spring, when those institutes entered into a covenant with the City of Amsterdam agreeing to henceforth admit undocumented students if they were raised and rooted in Amsterdam, something that a number of teachers, including VU Amsterdam's Tara Rose Fiorito, had spent years lobbying for. This was an emotional moment for Sabbar and Robledo Contreras, even though they themselves have residence permits now. Sabbar: "My sister texted me the decision by the municipality. I could hardly believe it."

And have their lives improved now that they themselves are no longer in uncertainty? "I'm incredibly happy I get to study", Sabbar says, "but I can't shake that uneasy feeling. That doesn't disappear overnight." Both Robledo Contreras and Sabbar also feel guilty about having got a chance that other undocumented people don't get, which sometimes weighs them down quite a bit.

After completing their studies, Robledo Contreras and Sabbar can have their temporary residence permits converted to permanent ones and apply for Dutch citizenship. "That shouldn't be problem, normally, but sometimes I'm afraid something will go wrong after all and I'll once again be stuck in an endless procedure", says Sabbar. **AV**