



PeaceWomen Across the Globe
FRIEDENSFRAUEN WELTWEIT
نساء من أجل السلام عبر العالم
Femmes de Paix Autour du Monde
Женщины мира за мир на земле
MUJERES DE PAZ EN EL MUNDO
Mulheres pela Paz ao redor do Mundo
DONNE DI PACE NEL MONDO
ピースウーマン—国境を越え平和をつくる女たち
全球和平妇女

“Feminism empowered me at the table of peace negotiations”

Interview with Luz Mendez, Guatemala PeaceWoman and Peace Negotiator, June 2014



Was it a long way from guerilla to peace negotiator?

I took part in the peace negotiations in Guatemala from 1991 to 1996, as a member of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), a coalition of four revolutionary organizations with a common program for social, economical and political change. One of those organizations was the Communist Party, which I was part of. Not all the members of URNG were in the mountains; some others were in the political and the international fields. So I was not a guerrilla. I took part in the political and international activities.

My way began as a teenager, when I was 15 years old, advocating for students' rights at my



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Maulbeerstrasse 14 / 3011 Bern / Switzerland / Fon +41 (0)31 312 02 40 / info@1000peacewomen.org

high school. Guatemala had been ruled by military dictators for a long time, with the exception of only 10 years. That meant to live under extreme political repression and lack of liberties, besides the huge social and economic inequalities.

When I entered the School of Economics at the national university, I got involved in the students movement and became the Secretary of International Affairs of the Association of University Students. Then I became a member of the Communist Party, which was outlawed in 1954. I became involved because I thought we needed to create a stronger political force for a revolutionary change. It was really hard to go underground. I had to change my name and houses very often. I was already married and had two small children.

By the time the negotiations began, I had been involved in the struggles for social and political changes for 20 years already. A new stage of my life began when I joined the negotiations team.

In 1982 the four organizations got together to form the URNG, and some years later, after more than 25 years of war, the URNG decided to look for a political solution to the war. A period of dialogue between the URNG and leaders of the civil society - trade unions, peasants, indigenous people, academics, and churches - led by the National Commission of Reconciliation, paved the way for the formal negotiations, which began in 1991. The delegation of the URNG to the peace table was made of the four main leaders, the Political-Diplomatic Team, and two lawyers. I was appointed to the Diplomatic Team. All together we were 10 people but I was the only woman.

What were for you the most emotional and difficult moments during the negotiations?

In the first night before the negotiations began, the moderator of the peace talks invited the members of the government and the URNG to an informal meeting in order to meet each other. The governmental delegation consisted of 10 men, including four army generals. You have to know that I lost my best friend, my uncle, and many very close colleagues during the times of the repression, when many people died in horrible ways. And to be there and shake hands and look into the eyes of the responsables was a very hard moment for me. The massacres, the murders, and extrajudicial executions of so many loved people came to my mind. They gave me a glass of wine and I could not drink it. When we left the place, I felt something in my throat. I am sure my colleagues had also strong emotions, but we never spoke about that. Men usually do not talk about their feelings.

Being a woman in that male-dominated atmosphere for such a long time was a big challenge. Since the beginning I realized that actually I was not seen as equal, even by my own comrades. I kept wondering why, without being able to find a reasonable answer. That answer came two years later, when I became a member of the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG), which had a branch in Mexico - where the main part of the peace talks took place. I began to study feminism and since then have been a feminist.



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That allowed me to understand that what I was experiencing at the peace negotiations was the result of the patriarchal system, which is embedded in all the ideologies and political affiliations. That knowledge and commitment to feminism were strong tools for my own empowerment at the peace table. That was also a turning point in my life.

Halfway through the negotiations, a change in the format of the peace talks was introduced, opening a space for the participation of a variety of organizations through the creation of the Assembly of Civil Society. The women's groups were able to influence the discussions of the Assembly. The Assembly's documents, which came to the formal table as recommendations, brought the proposals of the women organizations. That was a great moment for me.

Through the women's proposal from the civil society I could feel their presence, even though they were absent from the peace table. As my colleagues and I worked in order to integrate some of the civil society points into the URNG's proposals to the table, that created an opportunity for me to include as much as possible of the women's recommendations. For getting that, first I addressed my own colleagues in internal meetings, then the moderator, and, in some cases, I could address the governmental delegates through plenary meetings. Several negotiators initially were reluctant to accept that specific commitments in favour of women, such as the penalization of sexual harassment or the creation of an office for the defense of the indigenous women, to be included in the peace accords. They said they had never seen such types of issues included in peace agreements.

Another very emotional moment for me took place when we discussed the rights of indigenous people, one of the topics of the peace agenda. During the last round of negotiations I spoke in the plenary meeting to defend the content of the women's chapter to be included in the accord. I had to provide convincing and strategic arguments. I spoke passionately. At the end, the government accepted the whole proposal. When we were leaving the meeting room, the head of the UN delegation, a Brazilian man, for the first time, congratulated me for my participation in the talks.

A remarkable experience was my participation in the NGO Forum during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. For me it was the first time I attended an international women's meeting. Being there with more than 30,000 women, seeing the Platform of Action addressing women's right to be part of peace negotiations. Wow! That was another source of empowerment for my participation in the peace negotiations. When I flew from Beijing to Mexico to take part in a round of negotiations addressing the socio-economic topic of the peace agenda, I was feeling the strength of the international women's movement!

What changes are possible when women are sitting at the peace table?

After almost six years of negotiations, the final peace accord was signed in December of



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1996, putting an end to 36 years of armed conflict. The Guatemalan Peace Accords are well known because of their bold gender approach. Women's economic, political, and social rights were included in majority of the accords. This is the result of the direct participation of women, strengthened with gender awareness, at both the Assembly of Civil Society and the peace table even though deeply under-represented in this last space.

Although the peace accords have been weakly implemented, the negotiating process and the accords were a remarkable ground for women's empowerment, and nothing or nobody can take this away from us. This empowerment has been pivotal in the current struggles undertaken by the women's movement to tackle the high levels of violence against women, as well as looking for justice for gender crimes, especially sexual violence against women, during the war.

Interview: Gaby Vermot, Co-President of PWAG, and Ute Scheub, PWAG Coordinator for Western Europe.



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