

INTERVIEW

Interview with Adilia Caravaca, President of WILPF

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Adilia Caravaca, a Costa Rican lawyer, has a long record as a peace activist. She has worked in numerous social organisations in Latin America, mainly in the fields of social development, human rights, indigenous people's rights, conflict resolution and food security. She is currently the President of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which was recently awarded the ICIP Peace in Progress Award 2014 for its century long history of work with women for peace and disarmament. In this interview, Adilia Caravaca weighs up these 100 years of WILPF and reflects from the point of view of gender on the current challenges on the road to peace.

First, congratulations on the ICIP Award. A prize that recognises, no more and no less, a hundred years of women's struggles for peace and disarmament. You must feel very proud of this century-long record...

Of course, we are very pleased and grateful. Above all in this very difficult period where wars go on and sometimes you feel that you're not getting anywhere, when suddenly they give you recognition it encourages all WILPF members all around the world.

WILPF will be a hundred years old in 2015. Of everything that the organisation has achieved over this time, what do you feel most proud of?

You have to remember that when the WILPF started in 1915, women still didn't have the right to vote in many parts of the world, and there was an important resolution on this

matter. Also in the interwar period many of our members were active in favour of civil rights, particularly in the United States. For example, two Nobel Peace Prize winners in the USA, Jane Adams and Emily Green, were very involved. This was also a very important fight. We do not mean to claim ownership of its achievements, but it is important to remember that many of our members were in those movements, on Martin Luther King's marches from Alabama to Washington... the women of the WILPF were there.

Throughout the twentieth century, the role and involvement of women in the cause of peace has been seen in numerous initiatives (groups such as Women in Black, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the mothers of El Salvador, the Women's Pacific Route in Colombia, Bat Shalom in Palestine, women's groups in the north of Ireland...). However, this intense activity at the level of civil society has not always managed to influence governments in the seat of power. Why do you think that is?

I think it could be due to the dominant patriarchal culture, which makes it very difficult to change things. Even when women have managed to get into positions of power they have often done so taking on roles that are not very different from the traditional patriarchal discourses and structures. The fight for another way of exercising power and promoting new forms of organisation is a task that remains to be done. There are significant efforts and initiatives, such as women's participation among the Zapatistas in Mexico, but we still need to have a broader consensus, we have to aim for a political platform run by women – with the participation of men also – which poses substantial programmatic questions about how power is exercised and why.

How can that be achieved? Is political will lacking in this regard?

It's not just a question of political will, because we can not depend on the will of those who are in power and have not understood what is needed. We need greater political organisation by those of us who want change, by all the social sectors that agree with women's groups on the basic questions. We need to connect the different social movements (movements of indigenous peoples, for land, for food security, etc.) so as to promote a political agenda that includes us. Time after time, women support different social struggles but when we women mobilise – particularly in the whole movement against gender based violence – we often don't find the same support and solidarity

from other social movements. Within the peace movement in general you don't find that reaction of saying 'that issue has to do with us.' The different movements still mobilise separately (for example, the International Day of Peace on 21 September and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November...) There is a pending issue of greater coordination and solidarity, we have to join forces.

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WILPF played a major role in the adoption of UN Resolution 1325, which recognises the contribution of women to peacebuilding. The resolution will be 15 years old in 2015. What is your assessment of its application? Has it been effective?

Here we definitely haven't seen any political will on the part of those who have the power to take decisions. It has always required a big struggle by women ourselves to obtain the spaces we should have as women in the debates and at the negotiating tables. How can it be that this hasn't been taken seriously? The resolution was adopted, but because they are so used to leaving women out of things, it's all very difficult, isn't it? You can see that in the processes of negotiation around Syria, Colombia, and so on.

What call would you make to the international community so as to change this situation?

We are already monitoring this, we are asking for it to be a permanent item when rendering accounts before the United Nations and in the different human rights committees. But the NGO sector and also the media play a very important role in reminding people and calling people to account. It is a question of rights; they have to comply with the rules and it is important that as women we continue to be effective in this regard.

WILPF carries out work of activism and mobilisations, and also that of influencing decision-making, of lobbying. In which of these areas can you achieve most?

Over the years, one major achievement has been to influence and change certain narratives at the United Nations, particularly on the Security Council and on the Human Rights Council, where we've worked systematically. It has been a significant step to have many women, especially from areas of armed conflict, getting their voices heard and getting their demands into different UN agencies. We have had a significant impact as an organization at the level of the international bodies but this is an ongoing task. In terms of social movements, there have been achievements in national campaigns, for example in the field of the Arms Trade Treaty or in the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. Our disarmament program, "Reaching Critical Will", has been very consistent in informing and being present at the committees.

“ Resolution 1325 hasn't been taken seriously. We haven't seen any political will to guarantee spaces for women participation at the negotiating tables ”

Disarmament is one of main lines of work of WILPF. You call for a shift from a war economy to a peace economy, where state security is based on human rights and not on arms. This could seem utopian, couldn't it?

This was one of the organisation's first resolutions and what we want to reaffirm it on our 100th birthday. You have to have utopias if you want to move forwards. The war economy is extremely powerful and the ideology behind it is also very strong, with huge economic interests at play. So the accusation, if you want to call it that, that we are utopian shouldn't lead us to give in or reduce our efforts to achieve disarmament. Centuries back, the struggles for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights for women also seemed utopian and we managed to reach those goals, achieving things that before had seemed impossible.

And in what way is progress being made?

There is progress in terms of awareness about the uselessness of weapons to achieve peace and about the threat they pose to the survival of the planet and of humanity. It's not a matter of one class or race against another, it is a matter of survival. Although it is slow, I like to maintain my hopes that we are moving towards a different consciousness. Keeping our utopia, or whatever you want to call it, motivates us to continue struggling, even if the short-term results seem scarce or limited. But there's no way that we are going to be frightened off.

“ You have to have utopias if you want to move forwards even if the short-term results seem scarce or limited. We can't give in nor reduce our efforts to achieve disarmament ”

On receiving the ICIP award, you said that the road to peace continues to be difficult. What challenges are pending?

I don't want to sound fatalistic, because we've made significant progress. Now there are a lot more people involved in the work for peace, we have peace studies, there are masses of organisations working for peace and human rights... But although the wars are fewer, they are very intense. To this we must add the nature of the weapons, the use of drones, the levels of what they call “collateral damage”... the number of civilian deaths in these attacks is tremendous and disproportionate. In the field of respect for human rights, for example, we sometimes see progress and then suddenly we have a situation like what is going on now in Mexico, where once again we see disappearances of students and the reappearance of mass graves and torture, and these things are very worrying. There are still many challenges: how can we convince the people at the top, those in the strongest centres of military power, that these increasing wars that we are seeing are harmful and useless? And above all, we need to change minds and make politicians accountable: no one must be exempt from international justice, because

there is an issue of responsibility. How can an industry as destructive as the industry of war – what they call “security” – grow while so many human needs are left unattended, needs whose fulfilment could bring enormous economic progress?

Photography: Adilia Caravaca

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