

INTERVIEW

Interview with Luz Méndez, feminist and peacebuilder

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Luz Méndez, *feminist and peacebuilder*

Luz Méndez is a Guatemalan feminist, an activist for women's rights and a peacebuilder. She was the only woman who participated in her country's peace negotiations in the 1990s, and her voice was crucial in ensuring that peace agreements included a gender perspective. Two decades later, she continues defending the political participation of women and fighting for states to take UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security seriously. Because peace cannot be built without listening to women.

Feminist organizations offer a bittersweet account of Resolution 1325. Its very existence is a success, but its implementation and acceptance is not living up to its expectations. To what extent is 1325 useful?

We must recognize the value of the resolution, since it provides us with elements that strengthen the struggle for peace and security. But, on the other hand, in the case of Latin America, 1325 is not very well known, either by states or by civil society. And that is one of our main challenges: dissemination. Furthermore, to achieve the best results in terms of its implementation, we must expand the concepts of peace and security to make them commensurate with the context of our region.

In what way?

In Latin America, most of the armed conflicts that arose in the decade of the 70s have ended – with the exception of Colombia, where there is a peace process underway that

will soon conclude. However, we are experiencing a process of increasing violence that affects society as a whole, and women in particular. In recent years, state and non-state actors that generate violence and insecurity for the sole purpose of accumulating capital illegally have emerged. We live in a new war context, characterized by militarization and the growth of organized crime, deriving from the trafficking of drugs, human beings and light weapons. This is a serious problem that affects the region. And that is why the concept of what constitutes a conflict, what constitutes peace and what constitutes security must be expanded in order to adapt the content of the resolution to the local reality.

Would women then be more likely to identify with it?

Yes. There is a lot of violence in our countries driven by transnational corporations in extractive industries, which generates great violence against women and their communities. These women should feel protected by Resolution 1325 because they are defending peace and security in their communities. They are peacebuilders, just like the women who struggle for justice and memory, and they should be seen and recognized as such. In this way we could contribute to a greater dissemination and implementation of the resolution. It is also essential that governments do their part by moving forward in the formulation of national action plans. In Latin America, only Chile and Paraguay have approved these plans.

“ In Latin America we live in a new war context characterized by militarization and that is why we should expand the concepts of peace and security ”

Are the lack of political will and the lack of funding the main obstacles to the implementation of 1325?

Yes, both are definitely serious obstacles. Because it is ultimately the governments who are mainly responsible for the implementation of the resolution and that is where work needs to be done. UN member states should show greater political will through concrete actions and policies. And funding should be increased. Coinciding with the presentation of the Global Study on implementation of 1325, several countries have pledged to increase funding. However, we don't want these funds to go towards more weapons and militarization, but rather to more empowerment of women and more investment in economic and social development.

In fact, under the pretext of Resolution 1325, some governments have decided to simply increase the presence of women in the security forces. However, this militaristic use was not the spirit of the resolution...

Interpretations of this type contravene the main essence of the resolution. 1325 was conceived as a tool of women's human rights and not as a mechanism to increase armed and police forces. Of course there should be gender balance in all areas of decision-making, not only in the armed forces and UN peacekeeping missions, but also in political participation at the national level. The tendency to think that 1325 is about more women in the armed forces and in peacekeeping missions is very worrisome.

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The data on women's participation at peace negotiation tables (9%) are not encouraging either, despite the fact that, according to a UN report, the presence of women considerably increases the probability of a stable agreement. What do you attribute this contradiction to?

First of all, this is a result of the patriarchal system. Women are underrepresented in all areas of policymaking, such as peace negotiations. This is the main obstacle to be overcome. All actors involved in peace tables, particularly the international community,

should make an effort to ensure that women are incorporated in negotiations so that peace agreements have a gender perspective. I am convinced, based on my own participation in the peace negotiations in Guatemala (1991-1996), that, had it not been for the presence and capacity of influence of women, commitments related to the situation of women would not have been incorporated in the peace agreements. And that was also the lesson I drew when I participated in peace negotiations in Burundi as part of the team of experts in gender. At the end of the process, when the incorporation of the presence of women was achieved, it became possible to include commitments related to their empowerment and gender equality. It is absolutely essential to ensure the participation of women, not only their presence, but also the quality of their influence.

In the negotiations in Colombia and the Philippines women have been incorporated. Is that an achievement of 1325?

1325 has undoubtedly been a factor. In the case of Colombia, international actors who are involved in the negotiation process know the resolution and support it. And, most importantly, 1325 has empowered women. In the Philippines, too, there is a women's movement that has used the resolution decidedly.

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Should more mechanisms of control and accountability exist with respect to the implementation of 1325?

That's right. It is necessary for UN member states to be accountable to the citizenry and to the Security Council on the actual implementation. But I also think that we do not need more nice stirring speeches in UN debates; what we need are mechanisms to know exactly what each country is doing in favor of the implementation of the resolution.

Should women's organizations themselves increase pressure on states?

Yes, and to do so it is necessary to strengthen our alliances worldwide. We must remember that the resolution is precisely the result of this ability to forge alliances, the political will of women's movements internationally. We must unite more, not only women's movements but also other types of institutions including, for example, academic institutions.

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