

**A Just Path, A Just Peace:
A Narrative of the Life and Work of
Luz Méndez of Guatemala**

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Acronyms

ACS	Assembly of Civil Society
AEU	University Students' Association
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
FMLN	Farbundo Marti National Liberation Front
MINUGUA	United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PGT	Guatemalan Labor Party
UNAMG	National Union of Guatemalan Women
URNG	Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity

The *Pila* and the Road

Luz's mother was washing clothes in the *pila*, the fountain in the central patio of their house in Guatemala City. Chatting with the other women in the family, she suddenly heard aircraft overhead as shells fell on the patio. She huddled near the *pila*, paralyzed from fright and unable to run away for shelter as the others had; instead, she took a metal washing basin and shielded her pregnant stomach.

Simultaneously, to the east of the capital, in Puerto Barrios on the Gulf of Honduras, Luz's father was working as a driver for a state engineer overseeing the construction of the Atlantic Road. The road was a key project of the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán to encourage state sovereignty. The president wanted to break the monopoly on transportation maintained by the United Fruit Company, a United States-based corporation with enormous political and economic power in Guatemala. When Luz's father and his co-workers realized that an invasion of the country was occurring and the soldiers in the local army barracks were doing nothing, they joined a local trade union leader and, armed with sticks, forcefully entered the barracks. He confronted a military official: "*Soldadito cobarde*.¹ It is your duty to defend the nation, not only because of the achievements of the government for the Guatemalan people, but also because of your sense of nationalism. If you don't have the courage to defend our country, we will do it. Give us your weapons. We are being invaded by an external force."

It was the close of spring, 1954.

¹ "Small, cowardly soldier."

Interwoven Histories

“If you understand the history of Guatemala, you’ll understand my story.”² Luz’s life began later in the same year that a decade of socioeconomic and democratic reforms came to an end in Guatemala. Presidents Juan José Arévalo Bermejo (1945-1951) and Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (1951-1954) undertook major land reforms to transform the unequal distribution of resources that plagued the country since the Spanish conquest. The U.S., frustrated by Arbenz’s progressive changes and policies toward the United Fruit Company, enlisted the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to lead Guatemalan opposition forces based in Honduras in an invasion of the country. After the fall of the democratically-elected Arbenz, the U.S. installed Col. Carlos Castillo Armas as president, who soon began a systematic policy of repression in Guatemala. Widespread killing began in 1960 as the U.S. trained and backed counterinsurgency methods by the government army to quash an officer’s rebellion, likened by the government and the U.S. to a communist insurrection; in response to the military’s brutal tactics, the guerilla movement expanded. While Luz spent her childhood in Guatemala City and watched her family’s reactions to national events, she became aware “of what a tragedy the invasion was for my country.”

Family and Country

Luz sat at her grandmother’s side as her namesake toiled at a sewing machine and recited stories from the past. The older woman, Luz’s paternal grandmother, was from the highlands; she married young and gave birth to five sons. But she fled the beauty of the countryside and her husband’s beatings to come to the capital city to make a living and provide for her children,

² Quotations that are not cited in the text or part of dialogue within a story are taken from interviews with Luz Mendez between September 26 and November 19, 2004.

becoming a dressmaker. She still sat at the sewing machine each day. Also at the side of her grandmother were Luz's aunts, her grandmother's nieces, who often complained about their domestic troubles.

My grandmother was always giving them strong advice: 'Stop that. You are not to stand that anymore. If you think there is no solution, leave that man. Don't live with him anymore.' She never mentioned the word 'right,' of course, but that was the sense of the message she conveyed. I had the idea at the time, 'Oh my God, all these aunts have so many problems at home.' Then, years later I realized that it was not only a problem for those women, but also that violence against women is a huge problem in Guatemala. So, what I saw in my extended family was and is the reality for the whole society.

In her own home, Luz had another non-traditional role model in her mother, who, like her husband's mother, had moved to and worked in Guatemala City, and then met and married Luz's father. "She came from a very poor family in the countryside. She lived in a tiny village in the highlands, without the support of her parents. She was raised by her grandfather and grew up very freely." Though her mother performed typical domestic duties befitting a woman in Guatemala—household chores and taking care of the children—she also had a great deal of authority in making decisions in the home, unconventional for women in traditional society. In the distribution of chores among Luz and her sister and two brothers, her mother was egalitarian, with the boys doing every chore a girl would do and vice versa. "It was perhaps because she didn't have the influence of a mother to teach her how women must behave in this society that my mother gave her children, and especially me, a lot of liberty." She entrusted her children, in particular the "very responsible" and mature Luz, with a great deal of freedom, an uncommon privilege for a young girl in Guatemala.

A manifestation of Luz's maturity was in her clear ability to organize. Children from her block would play innocently on the street every afternoon, only to find themselves soon rounded

up by Luz to perform songs, dances, and theater pieces in a tent her father constructed in the backyard for them.

If Luz had strong models in her mother and grandmother, two proud and independent women, she had just as an important influence in her father. He constantly retold for Luz the story of June 1954—“He very often lamented the loss we had as a result of the overthrow of that government”—and imparted a passion for the democratic revolution to his daughter. “I remember seeing him when a new coup took place, watching television and being very, very angry, condemning the violence in our country, saying that we would never have a democracy if we were ruled by dictators.”³

Inheriting this love of the country and a “sense of justice” from her father, Luz would stand before the other children in her tent and in the classroom, reciting poems that celebrated national symbols. During summer camp as an eleven-year old, Luz won a declamation contest for her reading of “*La Patria*”:

*La patria de los bosques se llama Guatemala.
Se llama chirimilla;
Se llama monja blanca;
Se llama campesina cubierta de guirnaldas;
Se llama zurco alegre y eterno batir de alas;
Se llama quetzal libre zurcando la esperanza;
Se llama gran futuro;
Se llama Guatemala.*

The country of forests is called Guatemala.
It is called *chirimilla*;
It is called *monja blanca*;
It is called a peasant woman covered in garlands;
It is called a *zurco*, happily and eternally beating its wings;
It is called a free *quetzal* weaving hope;
It is called a great future;

³ Beginning with the overthrow of Arbenz and lasting until the end of the armed conflict, Guatemala underwent a series of coups and/or rigged elections. There were more than a dozen heads of state, almost exclusively military dictators.

It is called Guatemala.⁴

Putting Faces to the Numbers

One evening in the 1960s, when Luz was a child, she overheard an auntie talking with her grandmother. Her auntie had just returned from the morgue and was distraught, lamenting, “It’s incredible how someone can cause this suffering to a human being. It is incredible how a human being is able to do these horrible things to another person.” Both were crying; the young Luz was just learning about the dangers of her beloved country.

“My uncle was very special. His knowledge was huge and his way of thinking was different from the rest of my family members. When he spoke with my father, he used to analyze things in a very deep way. He was very kind with children, so I liked him.” Her uncle was a leader in the student movement in the 1960s and part of the generation that formed the initial armed guerilla groups in opposition to the repressive military governments. As the opposition grew, the security forces began using forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial executions as methods of state control and governance—systematic techniques to discourage agitation for social changes. While some opposition, or perceived opposition, leaders were shot outright or kidnapped and then left tortured or burned in the streets, others were taken by security forces. They were “disappeared”—generally tortured, killed, and quite literally thrown away into volcanoes, rivers, the sea, or buried in mass graves. Luz’s uncle was disappeared when Luz was still a child.

⁴ *Chirimilla* is a Latin American flute. *Monja blanca* is the national flower of Guatemala. *Zurco* is a type of bird. *Quetzal* is the national bird and national currency.

“I recall my auntie saying to my grandmother, ‘I have lost hope to find my son alive, but I just want to have him in a grave, to be able to go and stay with him.’” She would search for her son every day.

‘This day I am going to this cemetery, I am going to this morgue, I am going to this hospital, I am going to this prison.’ She became ill and very thin. And I recall her daughters asking her, ‘Please, don’t do it anymore.’ After several years passed, they said, ‘He must be dead, so don’t do it again because you will go mad if you continue.’ But she said, ‘No, I can’t stand to live without knowing what happened to my child. I have to find him.’

It was after one of these trips to the morgue that her auntie, sobbing and distraught, spoke to Luz’s grandmother about the cruelty of human beings. She had searched through the tortured corpses, so disfigured they were difficult to identify.

Through this event that so marked her family and in observing her father’s anger at the military coups and the end of the progress of the democratic revolution, Luz began to understand the political situation in Guatemala.

Somehow you learned that you lived in a dangerous country where you couldn’t express your thinking. You heard on the radio about the killings and disappearances. It was so common to hear, ‘*Tengan cuidado porque las paredes oyen.*’⁵

When Luz eagerly paid attention to her father’s conversations with his friend from a leftist political party, her father would dismiss her from the room, shielding her from the “dangerous topic” of politics.

With no intention of direct political engagement, Luz became involved in social organizations at her high school. She joined the Students’ Association in order to advocate for student needs: raising money for a library, forming a cooperative to lower prices for school supplies, and constructing a basketball court. “I just became involved because as in almost all the

⁵ Literally translated, “Be careful because the walls are listening,” the phrase implies that even “the walls have ears.”

public schools in Guatemala, we lacked a lot of things. So I found a way to support my classmates, to support the students at school to overcome those needs.”

But as political organizations were not permitted to operate freely in the increasingly repressive climate of the country, social groups became more and more engaged in political matters. From an atmosphere of fear and control—the same atmosphere that led Luz’s uncle to become an activist in the 1960s—emerged an entire generation of young Guatemalans who met the silence, fear, and violence with an expansive sense of possibility and responsibility.

Each morning on her way to school, Luz walked by a slum, reeking of poor sanitation, with barefoot kids clearly malnourished. “I used to pass by without noticing. Each house, if it could be called a house, was very close to the next, with no space to play.” Luz started studying Guatemalan history and combined with her more overt political engagement in the Students’ Association—as class president, secretary, vice president, and finally, association president—she became aware of the socioeconomic conditions that kept people in the squalid living conditions she passed by each day. She read the statistics on extreme poverty, land ownership, education, and health in the country, but “I couldn’t just see them as plain figures.” Luz put faces to the numbers.

I couldn’t just see those figures as sixty-five percent of the arable land in the hands of two percent of land owners, eighty percent of people living in poverty, or many millions of illiterate people. I put those figures together with what I saw around me.

Luz, together with her *compañeras* and *compañeros* who were also eager to advance social justice and make change in their country, created a small space for exercising political liberties inside the school.

We negotiated with the authorities of the school about the main issues that affected students. The executive board of the association had a close relationship with students. We used to go to classrooms to make speeches. We organized

democratic elections and encouraged students to vote. We were having a democracy exercise inside a country without democracy.

After learning that the high school students' movement was all but destroyed by the government in the 1960s, Luz and her fellow leaders tried to rebuild it beyond their own school in the early 1970s, gathering student leaders from other schools and working to create a national association of high school students. They expressed their beliefs beyond the confines of their own classrooms by publishing statements in newspapers, relaying not only the needs of the school, but also analyzing the larger political situation and expressing a voice of opposition. The expansion led to increased attention from the government; one statement even provoked a visit by the minister of education, who warned them not to continue their activities.

Some professors at school began to tell us, 'Now, be careful, don't say that. It will be dangerous for you. You know what happened to students in the past.' But fear did not control or paralyze us. To live under an authoritarian and repressive military regime that was terrorizing the population, and to challenge that regime, it was indispensable to overcome fear. The goal moved me. The goal was so big that my constraints vanished.

Selected to deliver the graduation speech at her high school, Luz chose the occasion to criticize the government, but not before a heated argument with her father.

"Someone has to say that!"

"But why you? You are so young, let other people do it," her father responded.

"No! This is the occasion. It's a way to send a message that we are not just a group of people who bow and accept everything, that here there are some people who don't accept this unjust system."

Vamos Patria a Caminar

Vamos patria a caminar, yo te acompaño.

*Yo bajaré los abismos que me digas.
Yo beberé tus calices amargos.
Yo me quedaré ciego para que tengas ojos.
Yo me quedaré sin voz para que tu cantes.
Yo he de morir para que tu no mueras,
para que emerja tu rostro flameando al horizonte
de cada flor que nazca de mis huesos.*

Tiene que ser así, indiscutiblemente.

Let's go, country, I will go with you.

I will descend the depths you claim for me.
I will drink of your bitter chalices.
I will remain blind that you may see.
I will remain voiceless that you may sing.
I will die that you may live,
so your flaming face appears on the horizon
in every flower born of my bones.

That is the way it must be, unquestionably.⁶

Luz entered the University of San Carlos in 1973 with Otto Rene Castillo's poetry and national protest songs on her lips: "We're going to triumph, millions already know the truth, the people united will never be defeated!" The university had always served in a progressive capacity in Guatemala: proposing legislation, raising political and economic leaders, and analyzing and evaluating state policies. When Luz arrived at the school, leftist intellectual leaders were also changing the curricula of the entire university to reflect a more progressive philosophy. The University Students' Association, the *Asociacion de Estudiantes Universitarios* (AEU), played an important political role in the country, voicing opposition and taking positions critical of the government.

⁶ From Otto Rene Castillo's poem, "*Vamos Patria a Caminar*," or "Let's Go, Country." Otto Rene Castillo, *Let's Go*, trans, Margaret Randall (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1971).

Luz joined the AEU and helped found a students' party in the School of Economics. She also became part of *Frente*, a group composed of students from various schools within the university and who were pushing for social, political, and economic changes in the country. For several years, this group won elections to lead the AEU. Luz worked with her colleagues to raise awareness among the general public about social inequalities and their sources, and to promote student and popular organizations—creating a force to make structural changes.

We were not only advocating for students' rights, but were strongly involved in the political life of Guatemala. As the AEU was a prestigious organization, we had the possibility to reach the public, so it was very common that we made statements, organized marches and rallies. In practice, we acted like a political party. Opposition political parties were not allowed, so we were a voice of the opposition.

In addition to the activities that made the AEU a de facto political party, Luz decided to join an actual party, the *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT), or Guatemalan Labor Party. Since all political parties were banned, she did not publicly reveal her membership; all activities of the organization were carried out in secret. Many fellow students and faculty members at the university were making similar commitments to revolutionary organizations in order to challenge the military regimes.

To multiply the intensity of her work and study, Luz also got married and had two children while still a student.

It was an incredibly active time because I was a student leader, I was studying, I was taking care of my children, I also had a job, so I did a lot of things. I barely slept during those years. My memories of being pregnant and being a young mother are very closely linked with activism in the students' movement and the political life of my country.

For around seven years, maybe less, even though selective repression continued, we were able to organize and mobilize very, very strongly. Without resorting to violence, we were speaking, mobilizing, marching, making statements, using all possible ways to organize.

But the selective repression soon cast its net wider. In 1978, a new army general won the presidency through fraudulent elections. The period of strong and open social organization “finished very violently—very violently.”

Grim Holidays

It was October 20, 1978, a national holiday in Guatemala—the anniversary of the 1944 revolution that ushered in the ten years of democratic spring. As Luz marched with her three-year-old son, Juan Pablo, to the central plaza as part of the celebrations, she recalled the previous year’s anniversary: she had given birth to her other son, Rodrigo. She somehow knew he would be born on that significant date, telling her friend, Oliverio Castañeda, just days before the birth, “*¿No piensas qué ese es un buen día para nacer?*”⁷ When she actually gave birth on the twentieth of October, Oliverio was in disbelief, but celebrated with her.

Grinning at the memory as she walked, she was eager to hear Oliverio’s speech—he was the Secretary General of the AEU and had been her colleague on the executive board—but many leaders had been threatened in recent days, so she knew it was safest to go home with Juan Pablo to celebrate her youngest son’s first birthday. Later that afternoon, friends rushed into her house. After he delivered his speech, Oliverio had been killed.

“He was assassinated by members of the police; the director of the police led the execution. Some of my other close friends almost died. It was a miracle they didn’t get hurt or killed because a lot of shots were fired at Oliverio.” The leader who took over Oliverio’s office as secretary general was kidnapped eight days later and never reappeared. Other members of the secretariat were also disappeared or killed.

⁷ “You don’t think it’s a good day to be born?”

That was just the beginning, just the beginning, of what was the worst wave of repression in Guatemalan history. I had heard a lot of stories about some dictator and another and another after Arbenz was overthrown, but we really didn't imagine what would happen after that. So, Oliverio was killed, and it shocked me a lot. That day, I saw it was a real possibility that I could be killed as well.

Luz “attended so many funerals” as more and more leaders, intellectuals, and organizers were killed or disappeared. After the funeral of a faculty member from the university, the funeral home was surrounded by security forces. Luz stayed inside until late in the evening, afraid she would become yet another victim of the military government. Finally, an acquaintance agreed to help her escape. She laid down on the backseat of his car, covered only with a coat.

Not long after Oliverio's assassination, three leaders were killed just before *Huelga de Dolores*, a traditional parade in the capital dating from the nineteenth century. Students at the university don masks that allow them to parody and denounce dictators and the government without being recognized. After these murders, Luz decided she could no longer carry on her activities in the open—too many of her friends and colleagues had been killed or kidnapped. “The techniques of torture were so brutal, so brutal, that nobody could be sure they would keep the secret” of the names of others, like Luz, also involved in the movement.

At that moment, I realized I had no other choice. *Fué la gota que rebalso el vaso.*⁸ Such horrible things were happening around me. We had to see everyday in the newspaper that someone else had been killed, someone else had been kidnapped, that someone's body had appeared and had been tortured. It hurt me enormously emotionally to imagine how my friends and colleagues had been killed.

After these three fellows were killed, I had to leave my house. We never returned there to live. We spent several nights and several days hiding in different houses. That was the moment when our lives became totally clandestine. I had to leave my house without telling anybody where we were going. We had to look for another place to stay, we had to change our names, we had to change our children's school, I had to leave my job, I had to leave my studies completely. I had to become another person.

⁸ “It was the drop that overflowed the glass.”

This marked the beginning of a new stage, when I left the activities in the social movement and became totally dedicated to the revolutionary struggle.

No Sanctuary

Luz hadn't seen her friend, Ligia, since they had both started living clandestinely. But her birthday was approaching, and Ligia had said, "I can't pass your birthday by without giving you a hug." She was "the best friend I ever had in my life. We considered each other sisters. My mother loved her as another daughter." Through an acquaintance they had in common, they arranged to meet at a cafeteria on the outskirts of the city. Luz arrived at the appointed time and waited. Hours passed with no word or sight of her best friend.

A few days later, she learned that Ligia had been captured, tortured, and her body burned. "Finding that out was one of the toughest experiences in my life; it has been so hard to take that memory out of my heart, out of my mind."

Ligia had previously joined the guerrilla movement, while Luz decided to stay active within the PGT, as both women went about their work in secret. It was a huge transformation to learn how to function clandestinely. "We spent a lot of time learning how to organize in the new political atmosphere, how to move around, how to disguise ourselves." They could no longer gather in groups and did not know where friends and colleagues lived. Saying anything over the phone was dangerous. "But we kept active. What we wanted was to keep people organized, to keep our hope, to keep denouncing what was happening, to keep explaining to the population what was happening."

Her clandestine activities often took place at night. She went to poor neighborhoods to talk with young people and encourage them to continue the struggle: "We don't have to give up hope. We have built so much; we have to continue struggling, but we must be more careful now,

we can't do it openly.” The PGT continued printing their newspaper and Luz slipped out of her house at night while the city slept. Together with her *compañeros*, she slid the papers, just a few sheets thick, under the doors of houses. At night, “we used to take the bus, but once inside we just spread some sheets around and immediately got off.”

But as Ligia's brutal death demonstrated, the government wanted to purge any opposition in the capital city, to eliminate anyone who was supporting the guerillas in the countryside. The AEU responded with marches, statements, and denunciations of the government intended for the ears of the international community. “That's what they wanted to annihilate. They said, ‘We will have a free hand in the countryside after we have finished with everyone in the capital city, anyone who will say something.’”

After this period of continuous kidnappings and assassinations in the capital city, the army began a *tierra arrasada*, or “scorched earth” policy, in the countryside. “Hundreds of villages disappeared from the Guatemalan earth at that point.” The military killed thousands of peasants under the pretense that the primarily indigenous villagers were actual or future supporters of the armed guerillas. “When the army felt they had destroyed everything in the countryside, they came back to Guatemala City and began to look for us,” again attempting to destroy the structures of the revolutionary organizations in the capital city.

At the beginning of 1984, a series of kidnappings resumed. Almost all the people with whom I was in touch were killed or disappeared. A person with whom I was meeting today, tomorrow I would read in the newspaper had been killed or kidnapped, or simply didn't attend a meeting that day. Those were very difficult times—very, very difficult.

Five Minutes

Luz was rummaging through her home, collecting important papers—her sons’ medical records, school histories. The young boys, now six and eight years old, were staying with Luz’s mother in the countryside. Luz and her husband also hid in the countryside with relatives when they discovered their house was under surveillance. “I realized I couldn’t move anymore because almost all of my colleagues had been killed, disappeared, or had gone into exile.” Luz and her husband agreed that they needed to leave the country; they planned to travel separately and meet at a designated spot in Mexico. But first, she had to return to her home in the capital to retrieve the documents and gather some clothes and photographs.

She told her father-in-law she would arrive at the house at exactly noon, and asked him to pick her up at the same time: “I will be very quick. I will be there for five minutes.” A mere two minutes after she arrived, a man in a black suit knocked at the door, posing as a salesman. Luz dropped a half-filled suitcase, grabbed some of the important papers, and left the house out the backdoor. She turned the corner into a side street and saw a white van, like those used to kidnap her colleagues, turning the opposite corner en route to her house. She scrambled through several other narrow streets and then hopped the nearest bus.

Meanwhile, Luz’s father-in-law parked his car and walked a few blocks to the house. Armed men dressed in black were standing beside the van directly outside the front door. Unnerved, but not wanting to attract attention, he kept walking, only to be stopped and questioned by the men. He invented an excuse for why he was in the area, raced back to his car, and drove erratically through the city to keep from being followed. Thirty minutes later, he arrived at the house where Luz had been staying; positive that Luz had already been captured, his face lost all color and he was speechless when he saw her still alive. “I came to the conclusion

that I saved my life by five minutes. If I would have stayed there for five more minutes, they would have entered the house and taken me.”

Body in Mexico, Soul in Guatemala

In my previous life I was very straightforward: I knew what was coming, I knew what I wanted, I knew how to do things, I knew what I expected. But suddenly everything changed and the future appeared without anything for sure, in total uncertainty.

A few months shy of her thirtieth birthday, Luz arrived in Mexico with no money and no change of clothes. After rejoining her husband, friends from a leftist Mexican political party found refuge for them in the home of an elderly couple who could easily empathize with Luz’s situation: they were a Jewish couple from France and had narrowly escaped the Holocaust.

She thought initially that she would return to Guatemala in a matter of weeks. For years prior to her own exile, as Luz watched colleagues flee the fighting and leave the country, she believed that leaving the country meant abandoning the struggle. “I said, ‘I will never leave Guatemala.’” But the violence did not subside inside the country, and Luz knew it would be impossible to return. “I couldn’t believe I was finally at the end of the road, that I could do nothing more inside of Guatemala, that I had to leave.” She soon celebrated her birthday—a quiet evening with her husband. Amid the stress of arriving in a new nation, worrying about her home country, facing an indistinct future, temporarily away from her children, she enjoyed the night of rest and slight refreshment. “You know you will continue walking in the desert without water, but you have this small sip of water and you will enjoy it, no matter what happens afterward.” While she celebrated another year of life, she closed a chapter in her story, choosing to stay in exile, leaving her youth behind in the violence of her country.

I thought if all of us who were forced to leave our country just dedicated ourselves to our own lives, despite our awareness of the difficult conditions inside the country, this struggle of so many years would be defeated. Even during the difficult moments we had in the mid-'80s, I didn't feel that was a defeat for us. I thought the defeat would come when all of us gave up—because there would be no hope. Almost the next day [after arriving in Mexico], I continued to do things for the struggle in Guatemala.

Luz began work as an international representative for the PGT, denouncing the atrocities that were being committed, talking and sharing information with an international audience who was largely ignorant of the extent of violence happening inside the country. She traveled and met with people from many institutions and organizations, but “mentally, I remained completely connected with Guatemala. The first thing I used to do when I got up was to look at the news to see what had happened the previous day in Guatemala. I never cut the connection.” Luz still supported activities of the revolutionary movement inside her country, traveling secretly and not informing family members or personal friends of her visits. Remaining in contact with the struggle also kept her close to the feeling of constant danger. She had nightmares of being chased, waking just as she was about to be caught.

The clandestine mentality was too deep inside me. I continued using my pseudonym in Mexico for several years. I continued in the same way of life: checking my back regularly to see if someone was following me, being aware of the scene in front of me and to the sides, aware of neighbors and people around me. I was always thinking something could happen to us.

Disclosure

In 1989, Luz's political party, the PGT, joined the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, or the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), a coalition of political-military organizations struggling for social changes in the country. After several years of preparatory talks, a formal process of peace negotiations began in 1991 between the

Guatemalan government and the URNG to find a political solution to the three-decade-long armed conflict. That year, Luz was appointed by her party to the URNG Political-Diplomatic team, which soon became part of the delegation at the peace table.

As an actor and a witness to the main political events of the previous twenty years, Luz understood the enormous importance and potential of the negotiations to impact the fate of the country—but it would also become a profound learning process for her as well. “The first thing I learned was the need to communicate with people with totally different backgrounds, political positions, and views than mine.” In one of the first receptions for the two parties at the negotiations, a stern-faced military general approached Luz. Unable to forget the horrific actions of the army, Luz did not even want to greet the man, much less have a full conversation with him. But she knew that avoiding him now would sabotage any chance of making progress together at the peace table.

During the first round of negotiations, the parties agreed on an eleven-point agenda and framework for the peace talks. The agenda was comprehensive, indeed, revolutionary. According to the agreement, the process of the talks had to address the underlying roots of the armed conflict, such as socioeconomic inequalities, political exclusion, and ethnic discrimination; the tackling of these issues would help generate sustainable peace. Therefore, the negotiations included discussion of substantive issues, such as human rights, the status of indigenous peoples, socioeconomics, democratization, the role of the army in political life, and the resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons. The process had to simultaneously discuss the operational topics of ceasefires, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of the URNG, and other measures to end the armed conflict.

As part of the Political-Diplomatic team, Luz was required to sign the agreement. But she had been using her pseudonym for so many years that she had forgotten how to sign her real name. A few minutes before going to sign this first document, Luz practiced writing her name and old identity again: María Luz Méndez Gutiérrez. As she put the pen to paper, Luz emerged back into public and political life. She revealed her membership in the outlawed political party after fifteen years of concealing it.

So many people had been killed in Guatemala just for being suspected of being part of a left party, and suddenly here I am, appearing in the media with my face and my name. My mother almost died. For years she used to warn me, ‘Never get involved in politics. I never want to see any of my children involved in politics.’

As a student activist, her mother “asked me, begged me, ordered me,” to stop the work; likewise, on the day that Luz’s participation in the negotiations was made public, her mother ripped out a plaque with Luz’s name on it from the front of the house, fearful that the entire family was now in great danger.

With the signing of the initial agreement, Luz was hopeful that the political solution to the civil war was indeed possible, though the process would be arduous. “It was a challenging task for all the participants in the process. And for me, from the very beginning, I realized that I did not have the same power as my colleagues in the Political-Diplomatic team because I was representing a political party with no armed force.” But during the peace process in the ensuing years, Luz would also come to understand another dynamic. “It took time for me to understand that I also had less power because I was a woman.”

Woman at the Table

In 1991, as Luz glanced around the table during the first year of negotiations, she saw that each party's delegation consisted of ten persons. In the URNG delegation of which she was a part, Luz was the only woman. In the governmental delegation, there was no woman at all.

"I must confess that at the very beginning I was not aware of the gender dimension." In the students' movement at the University of San Carlos, Luz was surrounded by fellow women leaders—a unique setting which obscured the reality of unequal gender relations and delayed her own awareness of gender oppression. She realized that women were underrepresented in leadership positions within her political party, but it was not until the peace negotiations that she was able to fully comprehend the implications.

One year after the peace negotiations began, I had had enough time to realize, and enough experiences to realize, that something was wrong, that I was not equal to my colleagues, that they did not look at me as an equal—and not only my own colleagues, but also the rest of the men taking part in the peace negotiations.

Luz "felt she needed help," and turned to a branch of the *Unión Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas*, the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG). UNAMG was founded in 1980 to promote women's rights, but during the armed conflict, many of its leaders had been killed or forced into exile in Mexico. The group continued to gather outside Guatemala, and Luz immediately joined after the peace negotiations began.

Joining this women's organization was a turning point in my life because I began to discover the reasons why I was feeling badly, why I was not treated as an equal with men even though we shared the same goals of social change, the same risks, the same work. I immediately began a process of gender awareness. I became so interested in studying and knowing more.

To her years of studying the situation in Guatemala, she added a profound understanding of feminist theory and applied it to her countrywomen. However,

it was not only the question of discovering a new dimension of social relationships. It was not only a question of being aware of those inequalities or having more knowledge about the situation of Guatemalan women. I made a commitment at that time. I committed myself to dedicate an important part of my time to the struggle for gender equality, without giving up on the other struggle in which I was involved. I would say I had two struggles. One was the advancement of the whole process to achieve peace with justice, which I did together with my colleagues [at the peace table]. The other one was the inclusion of a gender perspective in the peace process, which I did alone.

As a member of the Political-Diplomatic team, Luz contributed through study, analyses, and recommendations; but as the only woman revolutionary at the negotiations, she attended to the specific needs and experiences of Guatemalan women.

Because the peace process, as mandated by the initial framework and agenda, was comprehensive and inclusive of substantive issues of the armed conflict, Luz was well aware of the opportunity for discussions of gender equality. Furthermore, in 1994, the format of the negotiations changed, allowing for voices outside of the official process to be heard—a parallel table of dialogue known as the Assembly of Civil Society (ACS) was created. Diverse constituencies—churches, labor unions, indigenous groups, women’s groups, journalists, political parties—presented recommendations from their sector to a general meeting of the ACS. A collaborative document of recommendations was then offered to both the governmental and URNG delegations, who decided what to include in their own proposals that would serve as starting points for negotiations at the official table.

The women’s groups that re-formed in the early 1990s were initially left out of the ACS; demanding and then eventually gaining a place in the assembly, these diverse women’s organizations forged a strong alliance, developed a common agenda, and forcefully argued their proposals within the ACS. The peace negotiations took place mainly in Mexico, and Luz was unable to communicate with the women’s groups in Guatemala because of continued political

repression within the country. Even so, Luz “felt as if we were connected and I felt supported by them.” She was further empowered when ACS documents were delivered to the URNG delegation.

I was so happy to see inclusion of women’s demands in assembly documents. It strengthened me. I made the decision to defend those proposals in order to ensure their inclusion. I began to work on them, improve them, add some other ideas that I thought were necessary.

One such proposal concerned indigenous issues and included gender provisions that the women’s organizations had managed to incorporate. In the case of indigenous rights, the URNG had for many years included in its political philosophy and platform the need to eradicate existing discrimination and racism against indigenous people—around half the population of Guatemala. During this phase of the negotiations, Luz, a *mestiza* woman,⁹ spoke with several indigenous leaders to gain more knowledge of the issues. These talks, together with the URNG’s pre-existing analyses, enabled Luz to recognize that cultural oppression is connected to but distinct from economic exploitation, and that ethnic and cultural differences are used as a pretext to justify exploitation of indigenous peoples. Traditional indigenous dress, for example, while a source of pride, also marks its wearer as a target of discrimination. Indigenous languages, of which there are more than twenty in Guatemala, function in the same way; as ethnic identity is not always obvious through physical differences, language signals status. Her discussions with the leaders were

an extraordinary opportunity for me to better understand interethnic relations and pervasive ethnic discrimination. I was better able to understand my own country and its three dimensions of injustice: economic exploitation and its corresponding unequal distribution of resources, gender oppression, and ethnic discrimination and racism.

⁹ *Mestiza* and *mestizo* refer to people of mixed indigenous and European descent.

However, when the URNG delegation invited indigenous leaders from their coalition to discuss the content of the ACS proposal and what to incorporate into the official proposal, Luz “immediately realized that we had opposing ideas concerning one topic: the specific situation of women among indigenous people. I made a section specific to indigenous women to be included in our proposal and they didn’t like the idea at all.” The men held that women were not discriminated against within the indigenous population, and Luz, the sole woman—and a mestiza woman, at that—was left to confront the men on behalf of indigenous women.

To begin her argument, she expressed her sincere commitment to the rights of indigenous peoples and the fight against racism. She then made explicit the connection between all forms of discrimination: “You are being discriminated against just because you are indigenous, and we women are discriminated against just because we are women.” In this way, she could illuminate the double burden that indigenous women suffer. But if that did not convince them, the numbers spoke for themselves. “It is not so hard to demonstrate this. The statistics on the socioeconomic situation clearly show that the most disadvantaged sector of the entire Guatemalan population is indigenous women.” Enough of the indigenous advisors were persuaded to include the section on women in their recommendations, but Luz had to explain the importance of the provisions to her fellow URNG colleagues as well. They accepted the entire proposal.

Generally, the Political-Diplomatic team merely advised the General Command of the URNG, the head of the delegation, at plenary meetings involving both parties to the conflict and the moderator. But during this meeting on indigenous issues, Luz spoke to the full gathering.

I made a strong presentation, giving arguments and concrete data in favor of each one of the elements of the proposal. At the end, I remember I said, ‘We cannot take recommendations from the assembly that address everything except women’s rights. We must send a message that we care about women, because addressing women’s rights is a way to strengthen the peace process as a whole.’

Initially some government delegates argued against particular aspects of the proposal. “The whole process of incorporating gender commitments in the accords was not easy, but this time, after a break in the proceedings, when the governmental delegation returned to the table they said they accepted everything I proposed.” The proposal, eventually included in the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, included the establishment of an Office for the Defense of Indigenous Women’s Rights, penalties for sexual harassment—with “an aggravating factor in determining the penalty for sexual offences the fact that the offence was committed against an indigenous woman”¹⁰—and requirements for the dissemination of and compliance with the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The agreement was the first time that a political instrument recognized the existence of indigenous peoples and their specific rights and identity—and the discrimination directed against them.

Her perseverance paying off the day the government delegation accepted her proposal, Luz opted for a solitary walk in the late afternoon in the Mexican town of Valle de Bravo, where the negotiations were being held. “People come from the surrounding villages to sell their products on the *Día de la Plaza*. I remember the women shaking out their blankets. I was walking in the streets, thinking about what had happened. I said to myself, ‘Oh, it has been worth it.’”

Though Luz’s work to ensure a gender perspective was included in the accords was successful,¹¹ it was a strenuous battle.

Being the only woman in my delegation was a hard task because it meant I had to face specific problems stemming from gender oppression. At times I considered leaving the peace negotiations. I always discarded that possibility, not only

¹⁰ Translated text of the “Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” *Conciliation Resources*, Accord Guatemala Project, <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/guatemala/identity-rights.php>.

¹¹ Gender-specific commitments were eventually included in five of the peace accords.

because I was guided by a sense of responsibility to the goals of social change, but also because I felt that if I left it would reflect badly on women in high level positions as a whole.

A boost to her work came when she was able to attend the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in 1995. Thousands of representatives from civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from around the world gathered at the parallel NGO Forum to discuss common issues for the advancement of women.

In a workshop organized by the World Federation of Democratic Women, Luz met a woman commander of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN, a revolutionary organization in El Salvador, fought a civil war with the Salvadoran government throughout the 1980s, but signed a peace agreement in 1992. During the workshop, the commander

said with deep sadness, ‘I regret that even though Salvadoran women had a very strong participation in the armed struggle of El Salvador, and even though several women took part at the highest level of the peace negotiations, we didn’t include anything about women, about our rights, nothing at all. I regret a lot what we did, or what we didn’t do, at the table of negotiations.’ I learned a lot from the Salvadoran experience hearing her. I said, ‘I wouldn’t like to say the same when the Guatemalan peace negotiations finish.’

The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the conference, affirmed that peace is closely linked to equality between men and women, and also demanded the full participation of women in decision making during conflict prevention, resolution, and all other peace initiatives. After her experiences at Beijing, Luz “felt connected.

I came back to the table of negotiations feeling the strength of the 30,000 women that had attended the NGO Forum. I came back with the Platform for Action under my arm that affirmed the right of women to take part in peace negotiations. That strengthened me.

Cheers

Thousands of Guatemalans crowded into the central plaza of Guatemala City and spilled over into the streets surrounding the square. It was the close of December 1996, nearly the official end of thirty-six years of civil war in the country. Luz sat with several indigenous leaders and representatives on a second floor balcony of the National Palace, beside the plaza. While her colleagues and friends were jovial, Luz was solemn. “One of them embraced me and said, ‘You look sad. Aren’t you happy? Isn’t this a great occasion for Guatemala? You were part of the negotiations, you must be happy.’ I said, ‘I am happy.’ I simply couldn’t express it because I was so overwhelmed with emotion.” She moved off to be alone. Standing before a circular glass window, Luz scanned the crowd in the central plaza. She beckoned memories of her time in the students’ movement and the years following when so many of her intimate friends and fellow revolutionaries were tortured, murdered, or disappeared. “And I began to think of the people who were there, many of whom I hadn’t seen for a long time. It was good to see they were alive.” In the crowd she recognized a woman whose partner, Luz’s close friend, had been disappeared. The agreement about to be signed was a step on the path to healing for this widow and others like her.

Whereas:

The signing of this Agreement puts an end to more than three decades of armed conflict in Guatemala and thus to a painful era in our history, . . . the Peace Agreements provide the country with a comprehensive agenda for overcoming the roots causes of the conflict and laying the foundations for a new kind of development . . .¹²

Two days after the Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace was signed, and a mere three days since Luz’s return to her country, she feasted on a New Year’s Eve dinner with her husband’s family. Her father-in-law drew Luz and her husband aside. “He took a cup and said, ‘I

¹² Translated text of the “Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace.” *Conciliation Resources*, Accord Guatemala Project, www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/guatemala/firm-lasting-peace.php.

want to make a toast.’ I expected him to make a speech. But he said simply, ‘*Brindo, porque están vivos.*’ Cheers, because you are alive.”

UNAMG *está Presente!*

When the negotiations ended and the accords were signed, in many ways the real work of peace had just begun. Civil society organizations needed to be valuable resources and forces for change on the issues of gender equality and the full development of the country. Luz and other vocal women leaders were convinced of the importance of an autonomous women-led organization that could articulate their demands and needs, generate their own instruments for transforming gender discrimination, take hold of their own priorities and decisions, and strengthen an independent women’s movement that would encourage the democratization of Guatemala.

During the last years of the peace negotiations, the UNAMG branch in Mexico which Luz was a member of began planning the reconstruction of the organization within Guatemala. On that second day of January, 1997, Luz convened their first meeting in the capital, gathering mainly young women in order to impart the story of the founding of UNAMG seventeen years earlier during the armed conflict. Founded in 1980 by “remarkable women committed to women’s rights and social justice,” the exiled union had survived the murder and disappearance of many of its members and leaders, as “almost all the social organizations that were created in the ‘70s and ‘80s disappeared.”

In order to restart the women’s group, “we had to do what the founders of UNAMG had done in 1980.” A group of women, led by Luz, traveled the countryside to meet small groups of women, beginning a “deep process of raising gender awareness.” This reconstruction committee

offered a gender-based analysis of the situation of women in Guatemala, opening space for the women to step outside the day-to-day focus on survival and consider the impact of gender oppression on their lives. Many of these women were already participants in other types of civil society organizations.

Some of them said, ‘Oh, should we leave the party?’ ‘Should we leave this peasant organization?’ ‘This other organization?’ We told them, ‘No, it doesn’t mean that. You can continue taking part in this organization. Women don’t have to alienate themselves from any type of social or political participation, but be aware that in all these organizations, women are discriminated against, no matter if the organization has the goal of social transformation. In order to struggle to eliminate gender discrimination in all spaces of society, we women need to create a social force. That is why we need to be organized as women.’

This was the early work of UNAMG: organizing and educating women, encouraging them to realize they have the right to be free of political and domestic violence, strengthening their organizational and leadership skills, and demanding a response to gender-based violence.

Luz was indeed an instigator of the rebirth of the women’s organization, but “since the very beginning of the reconstruction of UNAMG, we have been promoting collective leadership. It is the only way for oppressed groups to transform their condition.” As an autonomous women’s organization, they have the opportunity to create an alternative approach to decision making that differs significantly from the male-dominated institutions in the rest of society. The structure of UNAMG may appear traditional—it includes a general assembly, an executive committee, and an advisory board—but the process is collective.

We don’t believe in the idea of having a powerful man, or in this case a woman, who knows everything and performs everything by herself. We hate authoritarianism. We think there are some other ways to practice leadership: listening to people, addressing the needs of people, convincing people, but never imposing things. We promote a respectful and sisterly treatment among us.

Led on by these strong values and visions that compose the struggle for women’s rights, on the first International Women’s Day in post-civil war Guatemala—March 8, 1997—Luz and

UNAMG organized a march to celebrate women, the hope for a peaceful Guatemala, and the rebirth of one of the oldest women's organizations in the country. They carried photographs of women who “died to have a better society,” women who were murdered during the vicious repression and internal conflict.

We just wanted to give honor to them, to show others: look, here they are—they were looking to have a democratic society, they were struggling to overcome authoritarianism. I was holding the photo of Silvia Gálvez who had been one of the main leaders of UNAMG and was kidnapped and disappeared in 1985. Carrying her photo was a way to keep her memory alive.

When I saw the group of women members marching on the streets of Guatemala City, holding our banners, carrying placards with these photos of many Guatemalan women who had died in the struggle displaying our symbol, I said to myself, ‘Now, I can say UNAMG is alive again in Guatemala. UNAMG is alive. UNAMG is here.’ We were shouting, ‘*UNAMG está presente!*’

Creative Re-Creation

The sense of joy, hope, and optimism that resonated with Luz that day in 1997 carried over into the activities of UNAMG in the coming years. There was an understanding among many of the women that traditional ways of organizing did not effectively capture people's attention and commitment in the post-conflict environment. Therefore, UNAMG's work emphasized creativity and collective leadership, reaching out to new constituencies, and bringing the voice of women into the public sphere.

Young women were particularly selected for outreach by UNAMG. They wanted to introduce new components of demonstrating that prioritized the leadership of youth. A university student suggested the idea of a *comparsa*, an existing strategy among the students' movement in which the youth take to the streets dancing and “expressing their feelings through songs.”

Another student liked the idea, but wanted to “change the patriarchal approach completely.” For International Women’s Day on March 8, 1999, the young women

chose a pop song and changed the text of it. They introduced new text that included their feelings, their ideas, their hopes, their protest. It was funny to hear the same popular song with a new text, a feminist text, written by young women. They went on the streets singing and dancing to a song that was so attractive because the music was nice, but the words were totally different.

Rather than rallying and chanting about gender equality in the same manner Luz and her colleagues had previously done, the young women of the late 1990s “conveyed the same messages in different ways. This non-traditional organizing activity attracted young women a lot. They loved to do it.”

In 2002, Luz also joined the young women—and older women—of UNAMG in singing and dancing to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 25. “I was dancing the whole day in the central plaza of Guatemala City.” The women held hands and danced in a circle, just like children. But their message was anything but childish. UNAMG members interrupted dances and songs with short messages informing passersby—including thousands of indigenous women who toil as domestic workers in the capital—about domestic violence. Their speeches and flyers contained messages such as, “Not a single woman should stand to be treated violently,” “It is our right to be free of violence,” and “Nobody has the right to beat a woman.” In the same rally, they held up banners to express their strong opposition to the potential U.S. invasion of Iraq, a move which linked their local fight against violence with the international opposition.

Mural paintings also became a creative and powerful means of commemorating November 25. In the weeks leading up to the day, UNAMG held educational workshops on violence against women, but which included painting lessons.

One was made in San Lucas Tolimán, one of the towns on Lake Atitlan. Indigenous women became involved in this activity. Many of them didn't speak Spanish, so they had another obstacle besides the obstacles that come from gender oppression to express what they think and feel. They painted a beautiful mural on one of the walls of the market of the town.

Recalling her grandmother's reprimands of Luz's aunties when they tolerated domestic violence, Luz participated in these activities.

I took part in painting the mural in Colonia el Limón, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Guatemala City. What impressed me a lot was seeing women so concentrated, silently translating onto the walls their feelings and experiences of gender-based violence, and their hopes to eradicate this social problem. And they painted beautifully.

The women then invited local officials to the unveiling of the murals, presenting their list of demands or proposals on how to address violence against women. They told the authorities, "This is a gift for the community, this is not for us. This is a public place. We ask you to take care of the mural so it will not be destroyed."

In addition to the creative acts of singing, dancing, and mural painting to express women's specific oppression and unique responses to it, Luz and UNAMG developed other ways of enabling women to find their voices. Women who lamented to Luz that they were not listened to or recognized as leaders within their organizations or communities also professed shyness and lack of confidence in their public speaking abilities. Recognizing a need for oratory training, Luz constructed workshops that incorporated an awareness of gender inequalities in a social context. She would tell the women, "It is quite natural that you feel fear when you are going to speak. Women in general have no power in society. So, it is not you, it is not your fault—it is the result of gender discrimination." The public speaking workshops resulted in a booklet which summarized this new methodology for UNAMG trainers and other organizations. The success of

the methodology led to a more substantial training process, *La Escuela de Lideresas Comunitarias*, a school for community leaders run by UNAMG.

We select some women, especially women who live in very poor conditions in the countryside or in poor neighborhoods of Guatemala City. For almost one year, we organize workshops and other training activities. So, in this period, they can strengthen their leadership skills a lot. It's a very good experience.

An essential vision of the re-creators of UNAMG, including Luz, was for the organization to play a vital and unifying role in larger coalitions in the women's movement and progressive causes for social justice, including groups overwhelming composed of men. "I believe a lot in unity; I believe a lot in creating alliances; I believe a lot in building bigger movements. Isolation is the worst thing for any force that wants to produce changes." The former student revolutionary and political negotiator knew how to effectively engage in coalition building; she advised her colleagues to pay attention both to the unique experience and socialization of women in general and to practical considerations. Counseling the leaders and volunteers in her own organization to let go of specific ideas if the alliance's activities stayed true to UNAMG's goals, Luz also encouraged patience and lack of egoism.

'Be patient, be patient.' And I always tell them to take into account the subjectivity of women. The subjectivity of women is based in gender oppression, in the role women are given in society. Listen to them with attention and try to find the common points first, rather than the points of difference. Build on the common points. Never criticize someone behind their back. If you have to make a criticism, make it directly in front of that person. No matter what happens, reject the temptation to criticize a woman when she is not present. One problem is the excess of egoism. Many times only one person wants the credit for the work of the group, so give credit to everybody, give credit to all the groups involved.

And of course, I make them aware of how difficult it is to achieve agreements in coalitions. No matter if they are made by women or men, it is always difficult. And I used to say to them, 'You will never achieve everything you want. You go to that meeting with some ideas that maybe we have discussed in UNAMG. If the final product of the meeting is not

the same as we discussed here, but you think the goal will be the same, let's do that, let's go, no matter if it's not our idea that prevailed.'

Coalition building remains a great necessity as civil society and the social movement pursue changes in the country, specifically the implementation of the peace accords.

The Incomplete Peace Process

“‘Struggling for gender equality, we are building peace’ is a slogan that we have been repeating and repeating and repeating for many years.” Luz and UNAMG’s work played, and continues to play, an important part in the political reconstruction of the country. Their diverse activities demonstrate the new opportunities for women’s participation in political life made possible by the peace process, and the importance of defending the gender components of the accords through to implementation.

The country now faces the task, in which all Guatemalans must share, of preserving and consolidating peace . . .
Compliance with these Agreements is an historic, unavoidable commitment . . .¹³

With the Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace, the armed conflict ended; massacres, disappearances, and violent political repression largely halted; disarmament and demobilization of combatants was thoroughly successful; yet, tied up in executive and congressional bureaucracy and blocked by the economic elite, most of the social and economic provisions of the peace accords have not passed into law or public policy. Besides that, progressive forces within civil society were not prepared and lacked the adequate coordination to strongly push for the full implementation of the agreements.

Luz’s own varied activities with UNAMG and others contributed to the dissemination, monitoring, and struggle for implementation of the peace accords and set an example for civil

¹³ Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace.

society of how revolutionary struggle can manifest itself in the postaccord period. Upon the reestablishment of UNAMG, the women began propagating information about the provisions in the accords that specifically addressed gender equality. In many ways, the organization's growth went "hand in hand" with the dissemination of the accords: peacebuilding opened the door for the reconstruction of UNAMG, while the group itself opened the door for peace. Yet, "we are aware that though we made a strong effort, it was a tiny piece compared with what was needed."

Major portions of the peace accords were put to a national referendum in 1999, including proposed changes to the constitution that would recognize Guatemala as a multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational country (an important recognition of indigenous peoples), and the revocation of the army's control of internal security, a status that had allowed the military to practice repression and wield an extraordinary amount of political power. The progressive movement, including UNAMG, was in favor of the passage of the constitutional reforms and educated women about the importance of these measures for the progress of democracy and the rights of women in the reforms. They organized workshops on voter's rights and procedures, and "in some places we used bicycles with microphones to invite women to attend forums." Luz quickly found, however, that many women were not even aware they could vote.

[Literate] women achieved the right to vote in 1945; ten years later the universal right of women to vote was achieved. In 1999 during the campaign in favor of a 'yes' in the referendum, we launched a lot of workshops. I recall in several of them, women said, 'Excuse me, I want to ask you something. Can we women vote?' Can you imagine? I said, 'Yes, we can vote and we must vote in this special occasion.' We had to address women's political marginalization, beginning with very basic women's rights.

But their efforts were no match for political lies, distortions, and rumors. "Rumors are the best way in Guatemala to achieve something. People with resources can spread rumors."

Conservative political parties and elite economic forces launched a campaign of racist rumors to

discourage support for the referendum, claiming among other things that if the referendum passed, indigenous people would take power and outlaw the use of Spanish. Luz also identified a traditional lack of confidence in the political system, the absence of birth and citizenship documentation among indigenous women, and the complicated electoral process as major causes of low voter turnout and the defeat of the reforms. “Unfortunately, it was a big setback for the peace process and for the Guatemalan nation.”

But still, Luz continued to champion the accords by other means. In addition to her contribution to the rebirth of UNAMG and the group’s intensive struggle to monitor and implement the gender provisions of the accords, Luz worked in a variety of other settings in an effort to build peace in Guatemala. In her role as part of the peace commission of the URNG and then her appointment to the Follow-Up Commission for the Implementation of the Accords, she again “paid special attention to the gender commitments.” For the URNG, she followed and analyzed implementation procedures and mechanisms, and produced documents for national and international institutions involved in the verification of the accords. When appointed to the commission—consisting of representatives of the government, URNG, civil society, and the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA)—Luz initially felt she had missed the opportunity to have a major impact on the realization of the gender provisions: she was appointed several years after the signing of the accords, after many important decisions had already been made. Despite this, she continued to push for gender issues, often finding herself in familiar situations. When the commission was preparing a list of the most essential bills pending in parliament, the members agreed to several selections, including the reform of electoral law and the creation of a registry of land ownership, or cadastre.

At a certain moment I realized that the law for the punishment of sexual harassment had not been included in that list, so I asked for the floor and I

proposed that we include this particular law in the list. Some colleague, a man, said, ‘Well, I understand this is an important issue. However, we cannot place the same value on this law as these other topics we have included in the list. I understand sexual harassment is a problem for women, but how can we put it on the same level as the cadastre? As the electoral law reform?’ So, I said to myself, ‘OK, it is necessary to speak again.’

Luz proceeded to give nearly the same speech she had given at the peace table, convincing the commission that sexual harassment was an expression of discrimination against women, that the problem of discrimination against women held the same importance as the rest of the problems with which they were dealing, and that indigenous women experience more discrimination and deserve more protection under the sexual harassment law. The provision was indeed included on the list submitted to parliament.

Luz celebrates minor successes like this one in the commission, but the government’s unwillingness to pursue timely, substantial implementation of the transformative aspects of the accords has made her work an uphill battle. The economic situation of the majority of the population—especially indigenous peoples and women—has not improved and in many respects has deteriorated, leading to a sense of desperation and a culture of continued violence in the country. The progressive, visionary aspects of the accords in the economic and political fields are not yet a reality. Women are increasingly marginalized from access to income and are underrepresented in the government. That reality leads Luz to advocate for the re-thinking of tactics: “We must reflect deeply on the accords and the lessons we have learned in order to find new strategies and new paths,” for the accords do contain a “beautiful” but as yet unrealized agenda for peace.

Footprint on the Globe

Luz always has a foot firmly planted in the Guatemalan struggle; this was true even when in exile in Mexico. But as a woman with varied experiences on both the grassroots and formal, official levels of the peace process, she is conscious of and grateful for the global women's movement. The influence of the international movement on the social climate in Guatemala dates back at least to the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, where some of the original founders of UNAMG got a boost to establish the organization. UNAMG continues to strengthen and rely on this movement through recognizing international women's days, taking part in global conferences on women, strengthening international coalitions and contacts, joining the World Federation of Democratic Women, and disseminating knowledge about CEDAW and other pertinent UN resolutions and declarations. But as Guatemalan women benefited from events on a global level, Luz has taken her own experiences as part of the Guatemalan peace process to other contexts as well. The regional progressive movement for social causes during Luz's youth and early days of activism, in neighboring Nicaragua and El Salvador; her regional travel performed as Secretary of International Affairs for the AEU; exile in Mexico and subsequent outreach to outside networks as an international representative for PGT and URNG; and the role of the UN and the Group of Friends in the Guatemalan peace process were invaluable experiential knowledge and examples for her as the demands of women all over the world called her beyond the borders of Guatemala.¹⁴

¹⁴ Luz stresses the influence of outside actors on the peace process, particularly the UN, who mediated the accords beginning in 1994: "The international community played an important role in the Guatemalan peace negotiations. Providing information about the process was crucial. That was another of my responsibilities during the negotiations: once a year I went to New York to meet with diplomats from several countries' missions to the UN. I updated them about the developments and asked them to keep their attention focused on Guatemala and to support the peace negotiations. I paid particular attention to keeping in touch with the representatives of countries that made the 'Group of Friends' of the peace process." The Group of Friends consisted of Colombia, Mexico, Norway, Spain, the U.S., and Venezuela.

During the Beijing conference, I saw thousands of women working together with the same goal. I recall several occasions late at night, watching women from the UN, from Pakistan, from Latin America, working around a table, strategizing and thinking, ‘What are we doing to do tomorrow in order to influence the discussions going on around the Platform for Action?’

With her significant experience as one of the only women at the peace table in Guatemala and the empowerment that resulted from her attendance in Beijing, Luz joined the chorus of women pushing for the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. She spoke at the first informal meeting in 2000 between the Security Council and women’s organizations preceding the vote on 1325 which mandates, among other provisions, the participation of women in all aspects of peace processes, affirming what Luz had witnessed and exemplified as a truism: women not only have been victims of armed conflict, but moreover, they are actors in conflict resolution. “Actors involved in peace efforts are not paying attention to women. They are not paying attention to how conflicts affect women. They are not paying attention to how to involve women. They don’t see women.” However, the resolution reiterated

the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.¹⁵

Following the unanimous approval of 1325, Luz was part of an advisory group providing an independent, expert assessment on women, war, and peace, and also became vice-chairperson of the Expert Group Meeting on Enhancing Women’s Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-Conflict Countries.

Also in 2000, Luz was invited by UNIFEM to be part of the Gender Experts Team to the Burundi peace talks. Meetings with the eighteen members of the Facilitation Team, led by

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1325*. (2000). http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf.

Nelson Mandela, and the nineteen negotiating parties were held in Arusha, Tanzania. “I said to myself, ‘OK, this is an African country, this is another reality. Here I am, a woman from Latin America coming from a totally different reality and a totally different conflict. I will do my best, but I don’t know if my help will be really useful for them.’” But after hearing several of the women’s stories she could state clearly,

I don’t think all women are the same, but I think all women confront the same problem called gender oppression. I was touched by what I heard and what I saw, to feel the suffering of women and to feel their power at the same time. I realized that my experience could be useful. That was what moved me.

When they talked about sexual violence, I recalled the horrible episodes of sexual violence in Guatemala during the armed conflict. When they spoke about their desire to have better political representation in the future government, I recalled the same discussions and efforts taking place in Guatemala.

She was also encouraged to share her own struggles when she realized that the UN Special Representative to the Burundi peace process was the moderator and chief of MINUGUA in Guatemala. He had already shared some information about the Guatemalan accords, but the negotiators and facilitators were eager for more. Luz was scheduled to speak for fifteen minutes on the process; instead, she spoke for over an hour on DDR, social and economic provisions, and the strengthening of civil society. “They were interested in everything. And as usually happens, only at the end was I able to speak about gender. I began speaking about their interests and at the end I addressed the topic I wanted to speak about.”

After the All-Party Burundi Women’s Peace Conference—where women from the opposing ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi, came together to form a common agenda, and where Luz was able to share more of her experience getting women’s provisions into the Guatemalan agreements—the Burundian women presented their proposals to Mandela. When the accord was

finally signed in August 2000, all the measures the women had proposed, save one, were included.

Luz also imparted her expertise, and in turn, gained more knowledge by working with women in other conflict situations around the world. In Colombia, she worked with civil society leaders who were trying to amplify the impact of women on peace efforts in the internal armed conflict. In Israel and Palestine, she also connected deeply with women's suffering and sought to understand the highly complex situation in the region:

I could feel fear on both sides, in women from Ramallah and Jerusalem. I know that sense—I lived in a country where I could smell fear. We went to the checkpoints and I witnessed how terrible it was. I saw a Palestinian woman holding a baby crossing the checkpoint. It was raining hard. It was getting dark. And here comes this woman carrying that baby and a big bag, walking in the mud, and it was so hard for her to find her pass. And a young woman from Israel who was a peace activist invited me for coffee and she was crying as she told me, 'We have no hope in this country. I don't plan to marry. I don't plan to have children because I don't want my children to live in this anxiety in which I am living.'

In response, Luz offered an expansive sense of hope, bringing a personal, concrete story of the end of civil war in Guatemala to those who were sometimes failing to imagine an end to their own wars. "When you talk to people who are suffering a lot and they see that they are not the only ones, that people in a very remote country have suffered a lot as well and yet have found ways to advance peace, it gives help, it gives relief, it gives hope."

In similar ways to how the global women's movement impacted the women of UNAMG in the 1980s, and how Luz used the energy and products of the Beijing conference in 1995, her journeys abroad in recent years have provided fodder for her work back in Guatemala. She has met Colombian women who have created a strong, well-organized movement encompassing different views and using diverse strategies; Hutu and Tutsi women who previously argued across ethnic lines about massacres in their families, but who were able to come together with a

common vision of peace; and Israeli and Palestinian women who are vigilant in searching for ways to end violence in a seemingly intractable conflict.

It has empowered me, strengthened my self-confidence, and expanded my understanding of social realities in the global sphere. It has made me aware of how everything in life is connected in this world. Whenever I feel that I'm not dedicating enough time to Guatemalan issues, I think of that—that I also have a duty outside of Guatemala, that this is part of the same struggle to have a better world, a more just world.

Imagining the Future

On a long, restless night in 1999, Luz allowed memories of one of the worst years of murderous repression in Guatemala to come flooding into her mind. The “Death Squad Dossier,” information collected by an intelligence wing of the Guatemalan army, was made public on the Internet that year. It contained the names, organizational affiliations, and photographs of many of the tortured and disappeared during the 1980s—it was a chronology of kidnapping and death.

It was terrible to see them, to see the photos of my friends, my *compañeros*, many years later. I spent a whole night looking at the photos, looking at the information, realizing who was captured first and then who followed, how long they had stayed alive, and trying to recall what happened—for years I had been trying not to remember what happened.

In the majority of cases, people were captured about five or six months before they were killed. So, that night I imagined what it meant to be detained by the army and tortured for five or six months in clandestine barracks. It was hard to see that file, to imagine their suffering, to re-create that year of 1984, and to think I could be on this list, my photo could be here were it not for five minutes.

The names and pictures she stared at on the computer screen were those of the same people she had summoned to her mind as she stood in the National Palace on December 29, 1996—her friends and colleagues who had not lived to see the signing of the final peace agreement.

Luz's family, both past and present, also provides sustenance and purpose to her labor. Giant, colorful *barriletes*, or kites, fly over cemeteries in the highlands on the first day of

November every year, *Día de los Santos*. Saint's Day is a traditional holiday dedicated to the deceased; Luz's family gathers every year to honor relatives. On this holiday during her childhood, Luz traveled to the highland hometowns of her parents and ate her mother's *fiambre*, "a delicious plate we ate only once a year." But now, Luz visits the graves of her mother and grandmother, laying flowers and decorations on the stones. She remembers the story of her mother in the pila. "She was so scared hearing the aircraft shooting so close by that she couldn't run. But what she did was to protect her stomach. She protected me." It was a manifestation of love that Luz continues to find in her family now, "the three wonderful men" who surround her. "I am very lucky because I found my *compañero de vida*,¹⁶ my husband, when I was very young and we have grown together. We have been struggling together all these years." Through all the turmoil of her sons' childhoods—changing homes and schools frequently, being separated from Luz and their father at times, enduring difficult financial times during the revolutionary struggle—the boys never complained.

Many times I felt guilty for leaving them so often to attend to my social and political responsibilities. Trying to reconcile my social and political activities with my responsibilities as a mother has not been easy. I am very aware of the tremendous responsibility it means to raise a child. Even in the worse conditions I took care of my children and educated them with love.

Luz continues working in the struggle for a just peace in Guatemala, but her story, like that of her country, is incomplete.

Children attending school, no illiteracy. Children wearing shoes, not barefooted. Families living in dignified houses. Hospitals providing health care to the population. No children dying from malnutrition. No women dying in childbirth. Women living in their houses and walking on the streets without the threat of sexual violence. Women elected equally to powerful positions. Flourishing of arts and culture. This is my hope.

¹⁶ "life companion"

Only with the realization of these advances in the country will it be possible for Luz to state unequivocally, “If you understand the history of Guatemala, you will understand my story.”

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