

# Presentation on Women, Peace and Security for the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development



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## Introduction:

Thank you for the invitation to speak to a theme that is close to the heart of my organization, Inter Pares. We are a feminist social justice organization dedicated to empowering people in Canada and around the world to be at the center of their own development. We work in longstanding partnership with local organizations in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Canada and have enjoyed support from Global Affairs Canada for over three decades.

Since our founding 40 years ago, we have sponsored numerous South-South exchanges with women on issues related to peace and security. We have convened roundtables on the issue of sexual violence in countries in conflict or in post-conflict situations and we have supported programming targeting women's involvement in peace processes and political decision making in countries such as Burma, Guatemala, Sudan and Colombia.

Within Inter Pares, I share programmatic responsibilities for Latin America – a region where sadly, sexual violence against women and girls has been used as a weapon of war. Although most of the region's armed conflicts have ended, levels of violence in general and violence against women in particular remain extremely high. Indeed, '*femicide*,' the crime of murdering females because of their gender, is a leading cause of death among young women in countries including El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

Today I would like to share some developments from the region that highlight the importance of enhanced support to the women, peace and security agenda, and, based on this, to present five recommendations for your consideration.

## **The Sepur Zarco Trial**

About a month and a half ago, I was in Guatemala's Supreme Court attending a trial and meeting once again with a group of Indigenous Maya Q'eqchí women from the area of Sepur Zarco. These courageous women were making history as plaintiffs in what is both the first criminal trial for sexual violence during Guatemala's armed conflict, and the first ever sexual slavery case to be heard in a national court<sup>1</sup>.

Sepur Zarco is a small rural community in the Polochic valley of north-eastern Guatemala. In the early 1980s, at the urging of local landowners, the military government established an outpost there. After forcibly disappearing 15 men from the region who had been engaged in a struggle to get legal title to their land, the soldiers assigned to the base went to the men's communities. There, they set fire to the houses and crops, and stole the few belongings

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<sup>1</sup>Other cases, most notably those of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, were prosecuted outside the countries where the crimes were committed through UN-sponsored International Criminal Tribunals.

they found. Before leaving, they raped the wives of the men they had abducted and subsequently forced the women to move into shacks right outside the military base.

In the following years, the women were held as slaves and forced to do rotating shifts at the base. They were required to wash the soldiers' clothes, provide food (although their own children were starving) and cook for them. And they were repeatedly raped.

Guatemala's legal system has historically excluded and re-victimized Indigenous women. This, together with their feelings of shame and trauma, meant that the women never sought legal redress. For over 25 years, they kept silent about what had happened. But very slowly, over a decade ago, and with the support of grassroots women's organizations that are longstanding partners of Inter Pares, the women began a long path towards justice.

This past February 26, after decades of impunity, two former military defendants were found guilty of war crimes and handed down sentences totaling 360 years in prison. The men sentenced in this case were just the tip of the iceberg but the verdict is highly significant. It represents not only a major step forward towards justice for the women themselves, but it also serves to promote long term transformations and behaviours in society so that what was once deemed to be acceptable or even celebrated is exposed to be unacceptable and repugnant.

If time permitted, I could give other examples of similar milestones that are taking place now as a result of the persistence and courage of the victims and the grassroots women's organizations supporting them.<sup>2</sup> Through its development assistance (and in some cases diplomatic support) the Canadian government has contributed to these outcomes. But suffice it to say that these achievements would not be possible were it not for the long term accompaniment provided by the grassroots women's organizations.

### **Canada's role**

Canada has been a leader in the promotion of women's rights globally, although we have lost ground in that area in recent years. The news that Canada has been elected to the governing body of the UN Commission on the Status of Women is a welcome development. But it also means that with such a high profile role, we have more responsibility to ensure we are walking the talk. There is much that we can do:

- ❖ Firstly, it is clear that without the voice and participation of women, peace is not possible or sustainable. To advance implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, **we must listen to, respect and support the voices of women at the grassroots level who are actively experiencing conflict.** This is done by working with women's organizations in the countries where we are engaged. As one of our partners in Burma told us: *"[There should be] nothing about us without us"*.

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<sup>2</sup>An example of strategic litigation is that against Peruvian military personnel who are charged with crimes against humanity for sexual violence, including rape, inflicted on scores of women from Manta and Vilca, Huancavelica province. This was the first case to have reached the Peruvian courts of sexual violence committed during the internal armed conflict. A second important development has been the establishment by the Government of Peru of a national registry to document the estimated hundreds of thousands of forced sterilizations of Peruvian women and men that occurred during the Alberto Fujimori dictatorship.

- ❖ Secondly, **long term, stable and predictable institutional funding to grassroots women's organizations is essential to build local capacities that will hold governments to account.** This is not quick work.

Canada's funding architecture has shifted a great deal over the past years. It is doubtful whether organizations spearheading the cases I just referred to would be able to count on the same levels of support from our government. Partnership branch once enabled Inter Pares and other Canadian CSOs to be responsive to the needs identified by our partners on the ground. The current framework that privileges unpredictable funding through periodic Calls for Proposals based on themes pre-selected by the Canadian government is simply inadequate. Global Affairs Canada needs to increase its support to fund responsive, comprehensive, long term and grassroots initiatives that promote women's active participation.

- ❖ Thirdly, we have seen a shift in the past years away from supporting the broad range of women's rights and instead, focusing narrowly on supporting women as mothers. And there has been a further narrowing of support excluding women's sexual and reproductive rights.

UN Security Council Resolution 2122 provides important directions in this regard, in particular **the need of women affected by armed conflict and post-conflict situations to have access to the full range of sexual and reproductive health services without discrimination including regarding pregnancies resulting from rape.**

- ❖ Fourthly— and here I am thinking particularly of the situation in Colombia – **it is crucial that women play an active role in formal peace processes, and in monitoring the implementation of accords reached.**

Women are still largely underrepresented at the main negotiating table in the current process between the Government of Colombia and the FARC. But as a result of women's mobilization, relentless advocacy and international support, it has become impossible for both sides to ignore their concerns.

**It is critical for countries like Canada to maintain pressure on all sides to ensure that women's proposals will be transformed into policy options that promote sustainable peace through gender equality and empowerment of all girls and women; and that there is gender parity in the committees charged with the eventual implantation of the accords.**

In Colombia, our main counterpart, Project Counselling Service (PCS), has facilitated exchanges with women who took part in the peace processes in Central America. One of the key messages was that the eventual signing of peace accords does not necessarily mean the end of conflict.

Too frequently, with the formal signing of peace agreements, international support moves elsewhere. Or it is directed principally at large government entities, leaving aside the community-based organizations that have made these processes possible. Indeed, it has been the historic exclusion of marginalized peoples that created conditions for the conflict in the first place.

**Therefore, continued support to women's grassroots and community-based organizations will be crucial to strengthen participatory and inclusive democracy in "post" conflict scenarios.**

- ❖ **Finally, it is essential to look more closely at conflict prevention and address the root causes of conflict.** In my meetings over the past years with the women of Sepur Zarco and the organizations that support them, I have been struck by their comments of how conditions for Mayan communities in Guatemala are very similar to those existing prior to and during the armed conflict.

Little has changed in terms of entrenched racism, poverty, and the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. Land ownership – which was at the root of the Sepur Zarco case – remains highly unequal. 57% of the country's land is owned by only 2% of its people; while 3% of the land is shared among almost half of the population.

Today, we are seeing a re-militarization of citizen security including declarations of states of emergency; judicial persecution of community leaders; and, once again, the establishment of military bases on territories of Indigenous communities where there are existing land disputes. This is happening to support large-scale resource development projects, in particular mining and hydro-electric dams.

Today another group of Maya Q'eqch'í women – forty years younger but from the same region and ethnicity as the women of Sepur Zarco – are plaintiffs in a case before Canadian courts involving gang-rapes committed by private security forces employed by a Canadian mining company along with Guatemalan police and soldiers. This took place during a forced expulsion of the families from their farms and homes in the remote community of Lote Ocho.

Whereas Canada was once known for its role in peace-building and the promotion of human rights, increasingly, in my travels, I am hearing repeated concern expressed regarding the actions of a number of our mining companies, and doubts about the commitment of the Canadian government to the imperative of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).

Inter Pares and our counterparts have a wealth of experiences that relate to this study, but to conclude and sum up, our key recommendations are that Canada must:

- 1. Listen to local women directly impacted by the conflict;**
- 2. Provide long term, stable funding to women's organization, before, during and "post" conflict;**
- 3. Support access to the full range of sexual and reproductive health services;**
- 4. Insist that women are at the negotiation table for peace processes; and**
- 5. Invest in conflict prevention and address the root causes of conflict.**

Thank you very much for your attention. I look forward to answering any questions you have.