



## THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND DEMOCRACY VIDEO-

### INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIA CÁCERES HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST, HONDURAS

Video on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDxz6gPfTic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDxz6gPfTic)

#### Transcript English

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My name is Olivia Marcela Zúñiga Cáceres. I am 32 years old and I belong to the Lenca indigenous people of Honduras, the largest indigenous people in this country, which is located in the middle of the American continent.

I have dedicated the last 6 years of my life to fighting for justice for Berta Cáceres, who is my mother. I am her eldest daughter. I was a deputy for 4 years, from 2018 to 2021, representing the territory of Intibucá on behalf of the party Libertad y Refundación. I worked for human rights, especially women's rights. All my life I have been active in this field, thanks to the influence of my mother, my father, my family and my grandmother, who shaped us from a young age. Although in an unofficial way, we became involved as children.

*You talked about the experiences of your family, all of whom were active in civil society, especially your mother Berta Cáceres. What do you think is the importance of social engagement for sustainability and democracy?*

I believe that the spaces of civil society, non-governmental organizations and resistance organizations are very important, regardless of which government is in power. Regardless of whether it is a dictatorial government that is linked to drug trafficking or a government from which people hope for something different. I think that the voices of women, men, and young people in these spaces are very important and should always be very independent and very autonomous. They should reflect one's own experience, and not be aligned with the interests of the government, or some corporations, some small elites or oligarchies in the country. These voices seem to me to be particularly important so that there is justice, so that there is freedom, in all its beauty, right? I want to achieve that these voices, these spaces of civil society can create democracy and sustainability, especially in countries with so much inequality and historical oppression like Honduras, where there are a lot of indigenous populations. There should be diverse voices, voices from the indigenous, the peasant, the worker, the union, the student sector, from the youth, which is a very important voice, and from feminist organizations, which also have very important arguments that should be taken into account at the governmental and corporate level. In my opinion, the main goal is to provide justice, social justice and general equality, to open opportunities and to create a more participatory country where freedom of expression is not violated. It has now been 12 years since the coup d'état.

We have been silenced, we have been threatened, persecuted, criminalized, and we are tired of it. We want our Honduras, which recently experienced the change from a dictatorial government to a democratic government in an electoral process where people were able to cast their vote, where there was a higher participation in the elections than ever before in history. And now we have the first female president, an extremely subtle and humble woman. And I feel that Xiomara Castro is struggling with all the difficulties that come with being a woman, because both the international community and the machismo of the Honduran people and the focus of the media, which is controlled by the power groups, are attacking her because of her being a woman and because they have no confidence in her abilities and her intelligence.

*You talked about the importance of civil society and its activities in Honduras. In your view, can civil society act freely?*

Well, in Honduras, I think that is not the case. I think it is a very, very difficult task here and an almost impossible goal to achieve. Above all, the government of Juan Orlando Hernández violated the Constitution of the Republic as well as laws that prohibit re-election. And yet he was elected to office against the will of the people. There was unprecedented electoral fraud and corruption. I believe that this anti-democratic, dictatorial government then made it its business to silence voices, to silence them. Media lynching were committed, as well as political and physical murders, through hate campaigns directed against human rights defenders, against women, against defenders of Mother Earth, and against young student leaders. There were a number of young people, men and women, murdered in the streets. According to the United Nations, there were some 38 murders in 2017 during protests against the re-election of the president, who is now accused of having links to drug trafficking and who is the subject of extradition proceedings; his visa has already been cancelled. The entire media structure that he had at his disposal, the entire economic structure that was paid from the public funds of the Honduran people, was designed to persecute, criminalize, and condemn all leaders who raised their voices to protest the systematic violations of the rights of the population in general, especially the indigenous population, women, the LGBTI community, and young people organized in the universities and schools. A circumstance that caused fear among the population. One of these significant murders is the murder of my mother, Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores. She was killed even though she was considered untouchable, because she had received international awards and the world community had supported her, and yet she was murdered. This is just one of many cases in which men and women who had raised their voices in defense of territories, in defense of natural livelihoods, were murdered. There are families who have decided to stay in this land to fight against injustice and continue their lives. We understand that fear should not stop us, that we cannot flee from a country where we want democracy, in which we may peacefully express ourselves and defend our rights without being murdered. So we decided to stay to speak out and defend ourselves against the criminal structure that murdered my mother. And after the persecution she suffered, her family suffered, the organization she led suffered, the Lenca communities she defended suffered.

*What does it mean to you, after your mother was the victim of such a crime against humanity, to actively participate in political processes and to protect and defend human rights, especially those of women and indigenous people?*

Well, I was in a terrible situation. I was a political woman, which meant that because of my gender, because I was a woman, I was always the focus of political violence. I was a congress woman of the opposition and also the daughter of Berta Cáceres and a human rights activist. So, to fight all these battles meant a very high political, emotional and also physical price. Under the dictatorship of Juan Orland Hernández, we were attacked by crowds, and more than once one of my children was injured, beaten, and I felt completely defenseless, apart from the fact that my mother had been murdered. The fact that I am a Lenca woman, that I am Lenca and also young, was very strongly emphasized in the media. For me it was a very difficult and upsetting experience. I actually feel traumatized. That's why I decided to quit, now that we can take some time off, because we hope that the new government is democratic, and we can express ourselves without being silenced or censored. For me, as a politician, it meant enormous media censorship because I am Berta Cáceres' daughter, and because in the political spaces I have conquered, especially in the media, I have always mentioned my mother's murderers, I have always mentioned their names and last names. There were four very influential men who were the main figures behind the crime. I mentioned them again and again, I always mentioned their names and surnames. And that caused me total censorship by all the mass media and a campaign of hatred, stigmatization, discrediting of my private life along with police harassment. Also, because I denounced numerous murders of women, girls and teenagers, as well as sexual assaults by officials of the national police and military, persecutions and violation of the rights of children who protested in their schools and were subsequently tortured psychologically and physically. I received precautionary protection measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as did my children and my brothers and sisters, the Lenca people, the Copín organization and my grandmother. What happened next is quite traumatic, because it was about the way the government provided for our security. They instructed the police to monitor us, while at the same time I was fighting against the violation of women's rights and the murders committed by the police. So, they were following me and used my protective measures to get information about my life, to attack me publicly with my private, intimate, family and love life. This was followed by constant harassment by the media, but above all, the national police was harassing me in a very focused way. These things have been very difficult for me, because I am a mother of two very young children. I have resisted a lot, with a lot of strength, and I have always felt strong. But lately I felt like I should take a break, because I feel like I don't have the power anymore. So those are the things that I can tell you, but at the end of the day, that is the testimony of the vast majority of Hondurans who have had to leave the country. I have often felt the desire to leave this country, not because I don't like it, quite the opposite, I love this country, I love living here. But the state of defenselessness and persecution, the machismo that has spread in this society, deeply disturbs me. It makes me feel that I don't want to be here because I feel that my life is in danger, that it is constantly threatened and that I am completely defenseless. I don't know what fate we would have suffered if it hadn't been for the civil society organizations that offered us a space and a platform for protection, and if my mother's crime hadn't been so symbolic. The reality of many Honduran families, where a member has been murdered, is that the crimes are not brought to the public eye, even if the victims are environmentalists, human rights defenders, women's rights defenders, or defenders of the LGBTBI community. Because they do not have this protection of publicity, they are more at risk of becoming victims of assassination. The worldwide publicity of my mother's assassination meant that we, her children, her organization Copín and the Lenca people, have not been assassinated, at least until now. The forces that we oppose are huge economic powers, they are the most

powerful families in this country, and just because we are still alive does not mean that they have not tried to do a lot to us. My sister suffered attacks, and I suffered them too, a year after my mother was murdered. Constant threats, especially on social media, everywhere. And this is the testimony of many Honduran families who emigrate, not only because of their economic situation, but also because of the lack of security in this country, where there is no democracy, no rule of law, no independence of powers, no republic. The country is obviously still controlled by the drug trade, still ruled by the criminal structures of the big companies that have made it their business to push us off our land. We even have a current example in Azacualpa, where machines are destroying the graves and the cemeteries of our people. A cemetery is a very sacred place for us and we don't want them to destroy it just because there is gold and valuable minerals below. Now they have completely destroyed the cemetery of Azacualpa. They are destroying every archaeological site, every place with anthropological richness, whether it has great biodiversity or whether thousands of families depend on it and live in it. These criminal structures of extractivism and business that are in cahoots with the military and with the armed forces of this country are not being dismantled, that is, the criminal structures that murdered Berta, that murdered Keyla, that murdered Suad Nicolle, that murdered Kimberly Dayana Fonseca are not being dismantled. It is the structure under which so many women and so many men were murdered just for speaking out. And these de facto groups of the oligarchy of this country are always active, they have a great influence in the media and in the legal system of our country. And they have a very important part of control in the national Congress.

*Why is it like that? Where do you see the problem, what are the reasons why Honduras is in this situation and other countries too?*

I believe that over the years very harmful laws have been created. Laws that directly hit people, meaning these civil society groups, in order to criminalize them. In other words, persecution is made legal. The restriction of the right to freedom of expression is made legal. In order for this situation to change, I think it is not enough to change the government and elect the first woman president. We need a change of laws in our country and a change of authorities, and we need a Congress that abolishes, repeals, and nullifies these harmful laws, such as the widespread impunity in Honduras or the laws that violate freedom of expression or allow wiretapping and persecution of opposition leaders. Such harmful laws represent a serious step backwards for us women and the gains we have made in this country. It is also about laws in favor of impunity for aggressors and laws passed under the narco-dictatorship, under which children are even more vulnerable, and laws directly against indigenous people, who are seen as a danger because of their resistance to these extractivist projects, many of which my mother denounced. Such projects must be reversed because they were illegally granted during the coup: illegal permits for businesses and totally illegitimate permits for energy projects. All of this needs to be changed, and as long as there is no change, no revolution in Congress regarding these laws, it will be very difficult for civil society to be able to express itself and do its work freely and safely. Because that is the biggest problem, the insecurity for people who think or want to think differently than a narco-state dictates. Unfortunately, we have been a colony of the United States. And this entanglement, this military influence, this geopolitical control that the United States wants to exercise over our territory has worked, it has advised, recognized, and supported the government that assassinated us, that was linked to the drug trade, in times of crisis, while we, the people, were on the edge of overthrowing it. The United States kept the government alive, kept it in

place. I think until we stop being a colony, we can't be a completely free country or live in better conditions because there is a historical, millennial injustice of exploitation of everything, not just our resources. We have been cheap labor for the big transnational corporations. I believe that a change of government is not enough, but that everything has to start with a long-term approach to really become a more democratic, more independent country. Because there can be no freedom for citizens or civil society if we as a country are oppressed by transnational corporations, by major powers, in this case not only the United States, but all corporations that want to invest in this country. I believe that we can create a country with better conditions, with the active participation of civil society, with the watchful eye of civil society, and with a government that listens to civil society and has a direct connection with the people. For example, there is something that I liked very much that Xiomara brought forward. It's about holding people's assemblies so that civil society is not just a channel to listen and act, but that there is also a direct connection to listen to the people, to hear what they want. I think this is very important because it leads to participation. The population loves to be listened to, they love to be asked, they love to be invited to participate. There are many young people who have also become politically active, there is a tremendous force of youth, also from civil society. And I feel that this force of youth has managed to bring about such a drastic change in our country, where the national party has been disrupted. And I believe that the youth will continue to be the main actors of the great changes that are coming to Honduras. I believe that we are all human beings, and I believe that all human beings want to live with dignity, because nobody wants to leave their country, nobody wants to suffer somewhere else, nobody wants to leave their culture behind. I personally for example, I think I always had the possibility to leave, but I never wanted to because I love my culture. I love this country, we love it, and for me it would be the most painful thing in the world to leave, it would be like a mourning, the second biggest mourning after the death of my mother. But I believe that we are all human beings and that love should prevail, solidarity, empathy, sensitivity to the realities of other people and other countries that may be living in a more difficult situation. So, this is a message of happiness, love, tenderness, solidarity and compassion.