



UN's President María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés is Making Room for Women

Fun fact: This was the first time we had to check protocol before interviewing someone. And Alicia had to call the current head of the United Nations' General Assembly Madame President. It was amazing! And María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés deserves that accolade and so much more for her decades-long career in international affairs and diplomacy. Only the fourth woman to preside over the assembly, she is steadfast in her belief that women should lead at every level--and she's working from within to make it so at the UN.

Alicia Menendez:

Hey, for those of you who follow us on Instagram and Twitter, you probably already saw we recently hit 100,000 downloads. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you to each of you who has shared this, who has reviewed it, who listens week after week. We could not do this without you. To celebrate, we are releasing some swag. We've got a mug that has the logo on the outside, perfect for your morning café con leche or matcha latte. We've got these canvas pouches that I love for keeping in your purse, great to keep yourself organized. Also, a glossy sticker set because it's basically a podcast rule that you have to have a sticker set. I put mine on my laptop. It already looks so much cooler.

We love making this podcast, and we also really care about quality. That means that we use studio time. We use a sound engineer, and all that stuff costs money. If you love this podcast as much as we do and you want to continue to see it grow, we would love your support. Check out all the swag at latinatolatina.com/shop. Again, thank you so much for listening and for loving the show.

Clip (María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés):

I'm a true believer in gender equality, in respect, the enormous value of multiculturalism. At the end of the day, when you do things that are right, it's because you do them with conviction, with principle and with love.

Menendez:

When Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés became the president of the United Nations General Assembly, she was only the fourth woman and the first Latina to ever lead the international representative body. By necessity, she is making the role her own, pushing an ambitious agenda, and constantly thinking about how she will leave her mark on the institution. Madam President, what an honor. Thank you so much for being here.

Fernanda Espinosa: No, Alicia, I'm delighted, delighted to be here, really very, very happy to be able to have this conversation with you and share a little bit of my experience and the challenges being the president of the UN General Assembly.

Menendez: The challenges are what we're here for, but first, I want you to take me back. Were you the family diplomat?

Fernanda Espinosa: Well, not really. Yeah, I have to be very honest. I was the nerd of the family. I was the academic. I was very much into studying and reading. I was a poet since my early ages, and I decided to become a linguist first and then a political scientist, an anthropologist. I specialize on Amazonian studies. I lived and worked with indigenous peoples in the Amazon in my country, and then I became a geographer. I started to work with international organizations. I spent several years working for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, which is based in Switzerland and I started my international work.

Menendez: First Latina, fourth woman to preside over the UN. How did you cultivate your leadership style given that there weren't many women for you to look to and say, well, I'll just do what she was doing?

Fernanda Espinosa: I try my best to be very open, in a listening mode, in a learning mode. I repeat again that I have an extraordinary team. Every morning when I wake up, I say, well, today it's all going to be yet another day of learning. I think that attitude is really very good. It's, yes, you have to be in a learning mode but also in a leading mode and to say, I have every day, you have to make the difference in a little detail to improve the way we do things at the UN, even if it's small to change sometimes the stiffness of the bureaucracy at the UN. We've been quite successful so far. When I organized for the first time this event, Women in Power, I invited all female presidents, heads of state in government to come to New York and to share with younger female leaders their struggles, but also their experiences as women in power in this mentoring mode that I think is so necessary.

Menendez: You've served your country in various roles. I wonder when you were a minister of defense. So often when we talk about women in leadership, there's always this question of is she tough enough? Did you have to prove that you were tough enough? Were there questions about whether or not you were tough enough?

Fernanda Espinosa: Oh yes, and especially at the beginning. It's really sometimes for us, for women, it is very unfair the way we're treated by media, by public opinion, by our sisters, women in public office, women from the opposition. When I was appointed minister of defense, it was unbelievable. No one would look at my professional credentials. There are headlines in Ecuadorian newspapers saying a poet to become the next minister of defense. What experience that she has? Well, I'm a geographer. I have experience and background in geopolitics. You don't need a military person to lead the Ministry of Defense. I proved myself. I had to work very hard, especially to bring down all the prejudice and the very machista-oriented environment of the military.

Believe me. The last day of my tenure, I had the most respectful, incredible relationship with all the generals and almirantes. How do say that in English? Very

respectful, horizontal relationship. They really respected me, but I had to prove myself. I really need it, and I had to show that I was fit for purpose.

Menendez: How do you then foster that sense of cooperation? If people hadn't been able to do it for three years, what did you do that finally carried it over the finish line?

Fernanda Espinosa: Well, first of all, I was co-leading with the ambassador for Norway at the time. More than 10 years ago, my phrases were please, I mean to the member states, to the governments of the world, just please think about the people that we represent, the people that are suffering out there, that are expecting us to deliver. I was privileged enough to come 10 years after as president of the General Assembly with exactly the same sentences, but also the theme for my presidency, which is to make the United Nations relevant for all. It comes from a long way the idea of relevance, the idea of accountability, of bringing the United Nations closer to the people and the people closer to the United Nations.

Menendez: I think when you talk about climate change, especially for my generation, which will be the generation that is left contending with this issue in a very real way, there's a question of where do you even start with a challenge that is that big?

Fernanda Espinosa: I organized at presidential and ministerial level event on climate with a special focus. I think that is very important because what was the point of entry was an intergenerational responsibility. We had 80 young leaders from around the world come to New York, sit and talk with heads of state in government, with ministers to say, "Let's do this together." You have a very, very important role to play, and it's not about blaming our generation. We should be blamed. Our generation should be blamed, but it's not only about blaming and shaming. It is about collective action. This intergenerational dialogue between youth, women, the elders, it's extremely necessary.

Menendez: The other group that you have situated at the core of this conversation is indigenous peoples. My question to you is how you make sure that the people who are most affected by this also have a role in determining what the solution looks like.

Fernanda Espinosa: We do have at the UN several mechanisms. We have the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues that meets every year in April. We are about to receive hundreds of indigenous representatives in New York at the UN. There is a climate platform for indigenous peoples that was created under the UN Convention on Climate Change. I've been working with indigenous rights a big part of my life, and I know how much quality improves when you bring the voices of indigenous peoples to the discussion, to the table, and to the decision-making process.

Menendez: Can you tell me about one of the formative experiences you had during the time you were living with indigenous communities in your home country?

Fernanda Espinosa: My first experience when I recently graduated as a linguist, I was hired to assess the bilingual education system of southern, the Shuar group at the southern part of Ecuador. I was a vegetarian at the time. When I came for the first time to one of the indigenous communities, I realized that some are still hunter-gatherers so you ate the game of the day. At that time, I had to decide whether I wanted to work with and for indigenous peoples or to remain of a vegetarian. Of course, I took the

decision to eat the monkey meat, the snake meat and all the meats that you can imagine. It was transformative just to understand that cultural diversity is one of the most important wealth of humanity. It's a source of knowledge, extremely important knowledge, especially, for example, when you're speaking about understanding better livelihoods, respect for nature, nature-based management decisions.

These are knowledge systems, science that is extremely sophisticated. That's why whenever we have to take decisions on climate, on adaptation, on resilience-building, on disaster risk reduction, on how to be prepared to the big events that happen because of climate change, to cyclones, major floodings or droughts. These communities, indigenous peoples, they have knowledge for thousands of years and how to better adapt, how to respond, how to ensure food security. I even learned about taxonomy. They have this huge wealth of ... For me, for example, the color green, for Westerners green is just dark green or light green. For them, they had 10 words just to describe the diversity of greens in the tropical rainforest, and it came with conservation decisions.

Fernanda Espinosa: I have a great respect for indigenous science, indigenous knowledge, ways of coexistence, family values, the respect for nature. I don't want to be an essentialist because there are so many challenge also within indigenous communities, but just to open up my mind to different cultures, different worldviews. It was such an extraordinary transformative experience.

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Menendez: One of the biggest challenges for women who want to lead is that moment where you say, well, what about me? I want to know how you made the decision to run for president, because it is an elected office.

Fernanda Espinosa: Yeah, it is an elected office. Well, I have to be very honest with you. I was the foreign minister of Ecuador. We were facing difficulties to agree on a candidate for the position of president of the General Assembly. When I say we were, the Latin American and Caribbean group, because the presidency rotates.

Menendez: Yes, regions.

Fernanda Espinosa: Next time is going to be Africa and then the Western European group, etc. It was the turn for Latin America. At the end of the day, we had two candidates. Several presidents around the region, they started calling the President of Ecuador and say, why don't you consider presenting a candidature, Ecuador? The president suggested that I consider that option that it would be an honor for Ecuador. He suggested my candidature. It wasn't something that I was looking for. I had a big responsibility as foreign minister, but then I decided, why not? To accept the challenge and to say yes, I think it would be good to be only the fourth woman in 73 years of the UN history. I'm also a strong believer in multilateralism and the role of the United Nations.

Menendez: For someone who doesn't know, can you break down what multilateralism means?

Fernanda Espinosa: Sure. It's a big word. Multilateralism, very complicated. What it means is international cooperation. It means collective action. It means solidarity. It means an international rules-based system. It means that for the global challenges we face, there is a need for strong international leadership. It means that when you want to tackle climate change or terrorism or the world drug problem or migration, you need to really unite and decide because the challenges we face in this very interconnected world are common to humanity and then we need to work together. Multilateralism is about joint effort, collective action. The main house of multilateralism is the United Nations and the General Assembly because it has universal membership. We are all there. The 193 countries are represented there. It's a privileged place to take the right decisions for humanity and with humanity.

Menendez: Very focused on the issue of gender parity. What does that vision of equality look like?

Fernanda Espinosa: We shouldn't take gender parity for granted. If we look at the numbers, they're really not right. When you see that out of 193 countries, we only have 5% female presidents, 5% female prime ministers. Out of 193, only 20 around the world. If you look at parliaments, the average around the world is 25% female, which means that 75% of parliamentarians are men. Mediation and peace processes where 3% are female mediators. Our peacekeepers, I think it's 5% peacekeepers. Of our peacekeeping operations on the ground, only 5% are female. The numbers are not right.

Menendez: What is the dominant theory on barrier to entry?

Fernanda Espinosa: Well, it depends on the areas, but I would say that there are some structural bottlenecks there. One of them is just prejudice. It's about thinking that women in general are not fit for purpose, especially when you deal about the role of women in peace and security issues. I was Minister of Defense myself. I know what it's like. It's prejudice. It's discrimination. It's lack of trust. Discrimination is naturalized. It's part of the roles in society, but we need to continue the struggle. I was among the group of people thinking that the quota system was not necessary. Now I've changed completely my mind. I think that the issue of numbers count, but at the same time, I'm a strong believer that we need to have gender parity, the right

numbers, but with quality. We need to make the difference in the way we lead and the way we participate in different areas of society.

Menendez: Does the UN itself have gender parity?

Fernanda Espinosa: We've done great progress. We have a secretary general, Antonio Guterres. He has proclaimed himself as a feminist. He is, because in only two years, he was able to have the senior management positions of the UN. 50% of them are women. It was him taking that decision. If you look at female ambassadors at the UN, out of 193, 42 female ambassadors, not bad, but I don't know what is the percentage, but it's not. We're not there yet, but 42 out of 193 was much better. When I was ambassador of my country, we had 25 female ambassadors out of 193. It's not only about arithmetic and numbers. It's about the value added that we bring to the diplomatic scene, let's say. I think that we need to continue the struggle.

Menendez: One of the issues the UN has been focused on is the question of migration. What do you think we, in the United States, get wrong when we think about immigration?

Fernanda Espinosa: Today, we are facing serious conflicts around the world, shortages, hungry people, the numbers are increasing unfortunately, people that are escaping from droughts, from floodings, from climate-related disasters. They have to go and look for a future for themselves and for their families. It's part of world dynamics. What we have done at the UN is to come up with the Global Compact on Migration, which is basically a pact, a referential document to encourage cooperation, burden-sharing between countries of origin, of transit and destination. The compact calls for orderly, safe migration. I think that we need to govern migration. We need a proper migration governance that encourages cooperation and dialogue. I think that countries more and more are realizing that migration is by nature a trans-boundary issue that requires international cooperation.

I think that what the UN is really worried about and working on that is to avoid human trafficking. This is a major disaster, major crime. It's a major crime of \$4 billion per year. The victims of human trafficking, 72% are women and girls. This is something that we need to avoid at all costs.

Menendez: Most of our listeners live in the United States. I have to ask, do you think the international community's understanding of the United States as a cooperative ally has changed during the Trump presidency?

Fernanda Espinosa: Well, I think that the multilateral system and the United Nations has to also be flexible and adapt to dissent. For one reason or another, some countries are not prepared to join or be part of or support, and we have to deal with that as well.

Menendez: You're a great diplomat. I don't know if anyone has ever told you that. What is your advice for a Latina who wants to pursue a career in diplomacy?

Fernanda Espinosa: I would say that the context is much better than what it was 10 years ago. To always have principles and values that guide your career, no matter if it's in diplomacy or in any other career we might choose. This may seem simplistic, but to have clarity on the principles and values that you stand for. That helps. That

really helps. Be very much aware. In my case, wherever I am, whatever role I have professionally, I've always worked hard to make life easier for the generations to come. When I passed the gender equality policy at the Ministry of Defense, that was a big step forward, and I established a quota system and affirmative action for women military in Ecuador. These are the things that remain, but it's not because it looks good. It's because I'm a true believer in gender equality, in respect, in the enormous value of multiculturalism.

At the end of the day, when you do things that are right, it's because you do them with conviction, with principle and with love. I'm a true believer on the transformational power of love. I don't want to seem like these books, you know, the best seller books on self and all that. At the end, it pays off. It pays off. Sometimes, when you do things, when you're angry or when you ... At the end of the day, it does not work. Conviction and passion and principle and love, it does help.

Menendez: Madam President, what a good note to end on. Thank you so much.

Fernanda Espinosa: No. I thank you. Thank you very much, Alicia. It was a privilege, really.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. *Latina to Latina* was originally co-created with Bustle. Now the podcast is owned and executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel was the sound designer on this episode.

We want to hear from you. Tell us who you want to hear from and how you're making the show a part of your life. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Spotify, Apple Podcast or wherever you're listening.

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