

# RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ TUM

“I WAS A MILITANT WOMAN IN THE CAUSE OF JUSTICE . AND FOR TWELVE YEARS I DID NOT HAVE A HOME OF MY OWN OR A FAMILY.”

Rigoberta Menchú Tum is a heroine to Maya Indians in Guatemala and indigenous peoples throughout the world. Born into an impoverished family in 1959, the daughter of an active member of the CUC (Committee of Campesinos [Agricultural Workers]), she joined the union in 1979, despite the fact that several members of her family had been persecuted for their membership. In the early 1980s, the Guatemalan military launched a “scorched earth campaign,” burning over four hundred Maya villages to the ground, massacring hundreds of children, women, and the infirm; and brutally torturing and murthering anyone suspected of dissenting from the policy of repression. The military killed up to two hundred thousand people, mostly Maya Indians, and forced one million people into exile. Menchú’s mother and brother were kidnapped and killed, and her father burned alive. While the Guatemalan army marched against its people, the rest of the world remained almost completely silent. In 1983, Menchú published her autobiography, an account of the Guatemalan conflict. I, Rigoberta Menchú was translated into twelve languages, and was an influential actor in changing world opinion about support for the military. Fifteen years later, discrepancies were found about certain details of the work, but there is no dispute regarding its essential truth and the massive suffering of Guatemala’s indigenous peoples at the hands of the hemisphere’s most brutal military government. In 1992, Rigoberta Menchú Tum won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. In 1993 she was named as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. Menchú has been forced into exile, three times for her advocacy within Guatemala. Despite the threats, she continues her work today on human rights, indigenous rights, women’s rights, and development. She has been active in trying to attain justice for the Guatemalan genocide, even pursuing claims today in Spanish courts due to the legacy of impunity in her home country.



Rigoberta Menchú Tum ©Eddie Adams

INTERVIEW TAKEN FROM KERRY KENNEDY’S BOOK *SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER*, 2000

Struggles for the rights of poor people, for dignity, for human life, seem to be very, very dark tunnels, but one should always try, in that struggle, to find some light and some hope. The most important thing to have is a great quantity

of positive feelings and thoughts. Even though one can easily be pessimistic, I always attempt to look for the highest values that human beings could possibly have. We have to invent hope all over again. One day, sadly, I said to myself with great conviction: the death of my parents can never be recuperated. Their lives cannot be brought back. And what can also never, never be recuperated is the violation of their dignity as human beings. Nothing will ever convince me that anything could happen to pay back that debt.

Now, I don’t think this realization is a personal matter; rather, it is a social question. It’s a question of a society, of history, of all memory. Those of us who are victims are the ones that decide what pardons are going to take place, and under what sort of conditions. We, who have survived the crimes, are the ones who should have the last words, not those observing. I respect the opinions of those who say that a decree or an accord or a religious philosophy is enough to pardon others, but I really would like, much more than that, to hear the voice of the victims. And at this moment, the victims are really not listened to.

An amnesty is invented by two actors in a war. It’s hardly the idea of the victims, or of the society. Two armed groups who have been combating each other decide that it is best for each to pardon the other. This is the whole vulgar reality that the struggle for human rights has to go through at this moment.

An agreement with real dialogue would bring war to an end as soon as possible. But I never could accept that two sides that have committed horrendous atrocities could simply pardon themselves. What the amnesties do is simply forget and obliterate, with one simple signature, all the violations of human rights that have taken place. Many of these abuses continue in the lives of the victims, in the orphans of that conflict. So even though there are amnesties in countries such as Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala, I can see that people do not forget the human rights violations that they have suffered, and they continue to live them. These are things that are not going to be forgotten.

---

A real reconciliation has to be based on the search for truth. We who are the victims of these abuses have a right to the truth. Finding the truth is not enough. What we also have to find is justice. And the ways, the processes, and the means by which this justice can be accomplished are through law and through the courts, through procedures that are legal.

This is why I now have a legal case in Guatemala against the military. We have a lot of corrupt judges, we know about bribery and threats. The military does not want to set a precedent for real justice, so they bribe the entire legal system. One of these days that system will become more fair. But we have to give time to the system of justice to improve.

---

**I DON'T THINK THIS REALIZATION IS A PERSONAL MATTER; RATHER, IT IS A SOCIAL QUESTION. IT'S A QUESTION OF A SOCIETY, OF HISTORY, OF ALL MEMORY.**

---

Living in a country of such violence, of such a history of blood, no one, no one would want to bring a child into this world. I was a militant woman in the cause of justice. And for twelve years I did not have a home of my own or a family. I lived in refugee camps when I could. I lived in the homes of nuns in Mexico. I left behind many, many bags in many different countries, in many different buildings. Under those circumstances, what would I have done with a child? I was involved in all kinds of risks, and thought that maybe I would have to sacrifice my life for my people. When one says that, you understand, it is not just a slogan, but a real-life experience. I exposed myself to the most difficult kinds of situations.

I met my husband in 1992. When I met him, I really didn't think that it was going to be a longstanding relationship. How could it, when I was always going from one place to another, almost like a vagabond? My husband's family, in particular, helped me a great deal in stabilizing my life. It only happened because my future in-laws were really very persistent and just insisted—all the time—that we get married, even if it was only a civil wedding. They were worried about what the family, what the society, what the community, what everybody else would think, if we weren't married. For me, it didn't have any particular importance.

For me stability began with another wish: it was very important to find, once again, my sister Ana. She was the youngest of the family. She had decided that she was going to live with me, but I didn't have a home where she could live. I began to actually have the desire to have a home, a desire that coincided with the time when I was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Many friends, people who gave me counseling thought that it would be better for me, too. After all, you can't have a Nobel Prize winner wandering around the world semi-clandestinely!

I give thanks to Mexico—to the people of Mexico, and at that time, to the authorities, the officials of Mexico City—who offered me that sense of stability in a very short period of time. The office of the mayor gave me a house, and in that house we were able to construct for ourselves, once again, a very normal life. We were once again a family. I'd left Guatemala in 1981, but though I'd

returned in 1988, I was detained, so I was forced to leave again. After that I would come and go in and out of Guatemala, but I could never stay for very long. Finally, in 1994, we went back, officially.

Home is important to me for another reason. I have two children now—one who I lost. It just changes around your life completely when you have a child, doesn't it? You can't be just moving around the world in any way that you want anymore. So you live life according to the circumstances that you are in. I can't say, though, that I ever had the intention of living my life, or any part of my life, quite the way in which I lived it! Things just happened. Suddenly I was caught up in the situation. And I tried to overcome it, with a lot of good will and not a whole lot of introspection. Now my son lives with my family, with my sister and my nephews; there are seven children in the house. There are two twins, two years old, a daughter of my sister-in-law, and four children who don't have a father. But we live in a large family, and that gives my son a great deal of satisfaction. He has a community every day.

My youngest son, whose name was Tzunun, which means hummingbird, was part of a very, very difficult pregnancy. It was risky from the very first day. It required a tremendous desire to be a mother, to carry it through, and I had decided to have this child. All my work, all my activities had to be stopped. Still, so sadly, he lived only three days. But when he died I thought that he had lived with me for many, many years. I talked to him, I understood him, we thought he could perceive things around him.

During this time, I was always thinking about the world and listening to the news and trying to find out what was going on. And when you really listen it has a very, very big impact on you. Because when you are going around to conferences and talking to people and people are applauding you, you really don't fully realize what a terrible situation that women and children are in. But being at home, in your own four walls, and knowing what is happening in the world, you really feel very limited in what you are doing and what you can do. My child gave me time to sit back and to think about the condition of women, and children, and children who don't have parents, and children who are abused by their parents. My situation, my condition as a mother is a great, great privilege: not just some kind of decree, or law, or desire, but something that, fundamentally, has transformed my life.

There have been a lot of successes in my life. And when you have success, it helps you to want to continue the struggle. You are not alone, for it's not true that it is only pain that motivates people to continue struggling to make their convictions a reality. The love of many other people, the support that one has from other people, and above all, the understanding of other people, has a lot to do with it. It's when one realizes that there are a lot of other people in the world that think the way you do, that you feel you are engaged in a larger undertaking. Every night when I go to sleep, I say a prayer that more people, more allies will support the world's struggles. That's the most important thing. That would be so good.

# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS

## RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ TUM

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES: LEGAL PROTECTION;  
DISCRIMINATION; TORTURE; GENOCIDE; PROPERTY;  
FREE EXPRESSION

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

**Article 1:** Right to Equality

**Article 3:** Right to Life, Liberty, and Personal Security

**Article 7:** Right to Equality before the Law

**Article 9:** Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Exile

**Article 15:** Right to a Nationality and the Freedom to Change it

**Article 17:** Right to Own Property

**Article 19:** Freedom of Opinion and Information

### TIME REQUIREMENT:

205 Minutes

### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy?
- What factors influence people's perspectives?
- What were the key events in Rigoberta Menchú's experiences?
- How were human rights violated in Guatemala?
- How did Rigoberta Menchú's Nobel Prize affect the world's view of the incidents in Guatemala?

### OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe the key events in Rigoberta Menchú's experiences.
- Analyze the causes and effects of the decisions Rigoberta Menchú made as she became a defender.
- Explain the meaning of specific human rights and provide examples of human rights violations in Guatemala in the 1980s.
- Explain what it means to be an indigenous person.
- Evaluate text and write critiques from two perspectives.

### MATERIALS

- Copies of newspaper article for activity 3  
<http://www.argentinaindependent.com/currentaffairs/latest-news/newsfromlatinamerica/guatemala-spanish-embassy-massacre-trial-begins/>
- Rigoberta's Nobel Acceptance Speech:  
[https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1992/tum-lecture.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1992/tum-lecture.html)
- Copies of the UDHR: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

### COMMON CORE LEARNING

#### STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

#### VOCABULARY:

- Indigenous
- Discrimination
- Marginalized
- Repression
- Oppression
- Condemned
- Exile
- Inhospitable
- Emancipation
- Embassy
- Red Cross
- Amnesty International

#### CONCEPTS:

- Human Rights
- Social Justice
- Power in society

#### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

- Internet
- LCD projector to show video clip
- Student activities

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

---

### ANTICIPATORY SET:

Students will briefly respond to prompts in their notebooks:

- Describe a time you or someone close to you has been a victim of unfair treatment.
- What are three words to describe how this experience made you feel?
- How did you respond to this treatment? (e.g., yell, fight, talk with a friend or adult, stay quiet)

### ACTIVITY 1:

- Watch a video clip of film trailer for *When the Mountains Tremble* (available on TeacherTube and YouTube). This clip briefly introduces a situation in Guatemala when thousands of people were victims of unfair treatment and how Rigoberta Menchú chose to respond.
- Students will read the biography of Rigoberta Menchú Tum (<http://www.peacejam.org/nobels/rigoberta-mench%C3%BA/>) and answer the six questions below:
  - What were the major events in Rigoberta Menchú's early life?
  - How do you think these experiences made her feel?
  - What did these feelings motivate her to do? How did she stand up to violence and injustice?
  - What was she putting at risk when she made these choices?
  - What did she accomplish with her choices?
  - What were the negative consequences of her choices?
- Class discussion and debriefing about questions 1-6 and their personal connections from the warm up.
- Students write their responses to questions 7 and 8, in class or as homework.
  - What would motivate you to take the kinds of risks and suffer the negative consequences she did? Choose one situation that would affect you or someone close to you and choose one issue that would affect a bigger group of people whom you aren't personally connected to.
  - In light of your personal reflection, what type of person do you think Rigoberta Menchú Tum is? What is most important for someone to know about her?

### ACTIVITY 2:

- Students will respond to the following question: What rights do you think all people deserve?
- The teacher will divide the class into small groups.
- Students will work with their small group to read quotations from Rigoberta Menchú Tum's Nobel acceptance speech, match them with UDHRs, and write explanations of how each quotation represents a universal human right or a violation of a universal human right.
- The teacher will lead a class discussion about the groups' explanations of quotations and human rights.

### ACTIVITY 3:

- Students will read an American newspaper account of a peasant protest in Guatemala City in 1980. <http://www.argentinaindependent.com/currentaffairs/latest-news/newsfromlatinamerica/guatemala-spanish-embassy-massacre-trial-begins/>
- Students will write a critique of this article from two perspectives.
  - How do you think a Guatemalan Maya peasant, like Rigoberta Menchú Tum, would respond to this newspaper account of the 1980 peasants' protests? What would he or she think is most and least accurate about the article? Write at least one sentence that this person would want to add to the article.
  - How do you think a Guatemalan government official, like the president or an army general, would respond to this newspaper account of the 1980 peasant protests? What would he or she think is most and least accurate about the article? Write at least one sentence that this person would want to add to the article.
- Teacher will lead a class discussion in which students share the responses they wrote.

### CULMINATING ACTIVITY:

- Students will create a collage representing the basic human rights addressed in this lesson.
- After completing their collage, students will write a response to the following question:
  - Based on the images you chose for your collage, why was a government able to violate these basic human rights?

## INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, many other international documents—also called treaties, covenants, resolutions, or conventions—have been drafted to develop these rights further. Countries commit to protect the rights recognized in these treaties by ‘ratifying’ them and sometimes a specific institution is created within the UN to monitor their compliance.

Here are examples of relevant international documents:

### INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

- **Article 2:** Right to be free from Discrimination
- **Article 7:** Prohibition of Torture or Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
- **Article 14:** Right to Equality before the Courts and Tribunals and to a Fair Trial
- **Article 19:** Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion

### CONVENTION AGAINST TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN AND DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT (CAT)

### INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (CERD)

For more information, visit the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ website: [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)

## BECOME A DEFENDER

Students will design and carry out a campaign to make the student body aware of issues that may affect their peers. Students may create fliers, posters, buttons, etc. Topics may include the following:

- **Homelessness**
- **Poverty**
- **Undocumented individuals**
- **Bullying**
- **Abuse (mental and physical)**

After researching the issues that affect their local community, students may participate in the following activities:

- Volunteer in a homeless shelter
- Create a “drive” at their school for clothing, food, toiletries, or school supplies for the homeless

### EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

- Find a local defender: Explore their community and find an organization or individual who is a defender for their community. Students will interview these individuals for an oral history and nominate their “defender” for a Nobel Peace Prize.
- Students will identify a conflict happening around the world. They will analyze the role and the potential leverage the U.S. government (and/or corporations) plays in the conflict. Students will conduct an awareness campaign about the conflict (e.g., write letters, make phone calls, etc.) to U.S. Congressional leaders.
- The DREAM Act enables children of undocumented parents to be eligible for scholarship funding. Students will research and learn about the DREAM Act, educate their peers about provisions of the DREAM Act, and participate in an advocacy campaign to build support for national legislation.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Peace Jam:

<http://www.peacejam.org/nobels/rigoberta-mench%C3%BA/>

Peace Jam is an organization that brings young people together with Nobel Peace Laureates to tackle challenging issues facing the planet. Peace Jam addresses a broad range of issues, from basic needs, such as access to water, to basic rights, such as human security. Peace Jam online provides a short bio of Rigoberta Menchú Tum's early life and achievements, as well as a video interview of Tum and the Global Call to Action.

### About.com Website:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-rigoberta-menchu-2136348>

About.com is divided into topic sites, which are grouped into channels and cover diverse subjects and issues. The content is written by a network of writers, referred to as Guides, who have experience in the subjects they write about. Latinamericanhistory.about.com provides a brief bio of Rigoberta Menchú Tum's life and continuing legacy.

### American Indian Heritage Foundation:

<http://www.indigenouspeople.net/menchu2.htm>

This website is ideal for searching and reading the bibliographies and foundations of many leaders and defenders of American Indian communities.

### YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvnUEup1hC4>

1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum discusses her inspiring life as well as the human condition at The Human Forum Conference. Check out [www.anhglobal.org](http://www.anhglobal.org) for more information. Part One of Two.

### "A Voice for Indigenous People":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daMONiBBnwc>

Rigoberta Menchú Tum is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, indigenous woman and survivor of genocide in Guatemala. She seeks the observance of a code of ethics for an era of peace as her contribution to humanity. This YouTube video gives a brief overview of issues facing the indigenous population in Guatemala and provides a solid contextual basis for understanding the importance of Tum's work.

### Historical Clarification Commission:

[http://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/migrate/uploads/mos\\_en.pdf](http://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/migrate/uploads/mos_en.pdf)

The Historical Clarification Commission, ordered in 1994 by the Oslo Accords, investigated the numerous human rights violations committed during the Civil War period in Central America. The final report, though substantial (in length as well as content), provides a solid context for the work of Rigoberta Menchú Tum.