

Women in Zapatista Movement

Hilary Klein

On December 29-31, 2007 women from all five Zapatista Caracoles (centers of resistance) gathered in the community of La Garrucha, Chiapas to meet with women who had come from all around the world to hear their stories of struggling, of organizing, and of participating in the Zapatista movement; and to share their own experiences. It was the Tercer Encuentro de los Pueblos Zapatistas con los Pueblos del Mundo-the Third En-counter/Gathering between Zapatista Peoples and Peoples of the World.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) is best known for its brief uprising in January 1994. In addition to being a guerrilla army, the EZLN is a broad social movement; its principal demands include land and indigenous rights and culture. For the past decade or so, the EZLN has been constructing indigenous autonomy in its territory including its own government, health and education infrastructure, and economic institutions. Zapatista territory covers much of the eastern part of the Mexican state of Chiapas. Hundreds, if not thousands, of villages in the Lacandon jungle, the canyon region, the highlands and the northern zone of Chiapas make up the Zapatista support base.

The Zapatistas have organized a number of national and international gatherings and mobilizations to dialogue with "civil society." One of the best known of these gatherings was the Intercontinental Gathering for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism in 1996, seen by many as a key event for the worldwide movement against capitalist globalization.

This is the first time, however, that the EZLN has organized this kind of space dedicated to women's rights and participation. At the First Encounter Between the Zapatista Peoples and the Peoples of the World a year ago, a panel of Zapatista women spoke. Though it was one of many panels on a number of different topics, this was significant because it was one of the only times that public space has been dedicated specifically to Zapatista women telling their stories. And it was during that women's panel that the announcement was made of a planned gathering for Zapatista women and women from civil society to come together and share their experiences.

Approximately three thousand participants attended this recent women's encuentro (gathering). For three days, women from different parts of Mexico and the world sat on rows of hand-made wooden benches, listening to the Zapatista women. There were perhaps 200 Zapatista women there, representing each of the five Caracoles, or Zapatista regions. The Zapatista women are Mayan, and speak different Mayan languages: Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Chol. The groups could be distinguished by their traditional outfits - the colorful embroideries on their blouses and the style of their hand-woven skirts differ depending on their language group and where they live. At the beginning of each two-hour plenary, the Zapatista women walked single-file into the auditorium.

La Garrucha is a small indigenous village two hours drive on a dirt road from the nearest city, and during the gathering it was overflowing with people. Almost

every member of the community had people sleeping on the floor, tents set up in the patio, and hammocks hung from any available posts. Many families from the community had set up stands to sell food, music played until late into the night, and the whole community took on a festive air.

CHANGES THAT ZAPATISTA WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED

The Zapatista women touched on a series of topics and these guiding themes created a framework for an overall narrative: what women's lives were like before the uprising, the changes that they've seen, and how women have organized and participated in the Zapatista movement.

When women talked about their mothers' and grandmothers' lives, they described horrendous conditions: the exploitation that they faced living on the plantations and working for the large landowners, the violence and discrimination that they suffered as women in their own homes and communities, and the lack of access to health care and education.

Monica, a regional representative from the Morelia region, spoke of the triple oppression that Zapatista women have historically encountered: "We have suffered discrimination because we are women, because we are poor, and because we are indigenous."

Amina, an older Tzeltal woman, described life growing up on a finca (plantation) called Las Delicias: "Before, our grandparents, our mothers and fathers worked for a patrón (boss/landowner). They treated us like animals. They didn't care if we died from working too hard. We had to work in the fields, but we also had to carry the patrón's cargo to the city because there were no horses and no roads.

"The women also had to go to work in the patrón's kitchen to make tortillas. The patrón wanted them to start making tortillas at 6 or 7 in the morning. When the patrón would get up he would go to the kitchen and if the tortilla basket wasn't full of tortillas, he would kick the women."

Several women talked about how the landowners systemically raped the young indigenous women working on their plantations. Amina explained why one of landowners only wanted young women to work in his kitchen. "The patrón is bad, he's very bad. The young women told their mothers and fathers that they didn't want to go back to make tortillas in the kitchen anymore [because they were being sexually assaulted]. The mothers went instead but the patrón said no, he wanted the young women to work in the kitchen."

In contrast, women described the dramatic changes that they have experienced in the last decade and a half, primarily due to the Zapatista movement. "Before we didn't have any rights; before we were not valued as women," they said again and again. "But now we have rights as women. Now no one can tell us that we don't have rights."

Women talked about changes within their families: a decrease in domestic violence, the right to choose who to marry and how many children to have, and not being restricted to raising the children and working in the home.

Changes in the private sphere are directly linked to women's ability to participate in public life. In the past, their fathers or husbands literally did not allow women to leave the house. Mireya, who described herself as a "young married woman," said, "I got married after 1994. No one forced me to get

married. I chose my own partner, because I recognized my rights. And my husband gives me the freedom to participate, in whatever work I want to do.”

Now women in the Zapatista movement serve as local and regional representatives, political leaders and members of the autonomous government, health and education promoters.

Women talked about different ways that they organized to achieve these changes. Forming women’s collectives was one example. These economic collectives - vegetables gardens, bread-making collectives, artisan cooperatives - have been an important source of financial resources which were invested back into the communities. But having an all-women’s space was also key for women to come to voice; the collectives acted as a springboard for their participation in other areas of the Zapatista movement. Rosa Isabel, a member of the Production Commission, explained : “Working together in the women’s collectives is where we get over the fear and embarrassment that we feel. We work together and we’re happy working together.”

Many women also recognized the importance of having role models. They gave thanks to the women who had come before them : as guerrilleras, las caídas, as primeras luchadoras—the women warriors, the women who have fallen in the struggle, the first women fighters.

There were some women in key positions of leadership in the EZLN since the beginning. Major Ana Maria, one of the first military leaders of the EZLN, was the military commander in charge of the takeover of San Cristóbal de las Casas on January 1, 1994. Comandanta Ramona, one of the early Zapatista political leaders, was part of the EZLN’s team of negotiators in the peace talks with the Mexican government, and was the first Zapatista to break out of the Mexican military’s encirclement of Zapatista territory when she traveled to Mexico City to help found the National Indigenous Congress in 1996. Ramona died of cancer in January, 2006 and is remembered with a great deal of admiration, respect, and love. This women’s gathering of Zapatista women and women of the world was dedicated to Comandanta Ramona.

In the early years however, these women were the exception, not the rule. They faced a great deal of machismo as they were forging a path for other women. When she was talking about how they organized themselves as women Comandanta Sandra, one of the primeras luchadoras herself, said simply, “No fue fácil. Nos costó.” “It wasn’t easy. It took a lot.”

Women also recognized that increasing their political participation is not something that can happen overnight. Rebecca, a member of the autonomous council, said: “At first we didn’t participate much as women. Little by little we began to participate more.” Other women talked about accepting responsibilities for which they didn’t feel prepared. Laura, a member of the Agrarian Commission, explained: “Before, they didn’t take us into consideration as women. Later they realized that we needed to have women authorities too, to strengthen our autonomy. Now, as women, we are conscious and we’re moving forward. We don’t know much, but as authorities we learn as we go, by doing the work.” And Daisy, a local authority: “A lot of times we’re still nervous and shy. There are still a lot of men who think that we can’t do the work.”

Sometimes however, men in leadership have pushed women to the forefront. The comandantas from Oventic explained how they came into positions of leadership. "When Comandanta Ramona left to seek treatment for her cancer, there was only one woman left in the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, or CCRI) in the region of Oventic." The CCRI is the highest level of political leadership within the EZLN and is a fairly large body so it was significant that there was only one woman. "Even though we had passed the Revolutionary Women's Law," the comandantas continued, "there were no women." The Revolutionary Women's Law was created by thousands of indigenous women and passed by the EZLN in 1993. It states that women's rights include the right to hold positions of political leadership. "So in May 1995 the representatives of all the communities held an assembly and we were asked to do this work. It was hard for us to accept this responsibility. None of us had ever held any position of authority in the organization [the EZLN]. But we knew the work was important so we accepted. And here we are."

RHETORIC VS. REALITY

One of the tensions in the history of women's participation in the Zapatista movement has been the gap between rhetoric and reality. This is not unique to the Zapatista movement - it is a common contradiction in radical and revolutionary movements. Rhetoric about women's rights is an important first step, and can open the door to real changes, but inevitably there is a need for the reality to catch up with the bold and impressive statements being made by the (usually male) leadership about women's role in the movement. The Zapatista movement has been well-known for its women leaders and its promotion of women's rights. Zapatista supporters were therefore often surprised when they visited Zapatista communities and found women largely still in subordinate positions. In a 2004 communiqué, Subcomandante Marcos recognized this shortcoming. "Even though Zapatista women have had a fundamental role in the resistance," Marcos writes, "respect for their rights is still, in some cases, just a declaration on paper."

This tension between rhetoric and reality was also present within the gathering itself. Listeners walked away from some of the presentations with the distinct impression that the women were describing conditions as they ideally should be, not as they currently exist.

The differences between the presentations made by each region were particularly interesting. The women from Morelia, where women have achieved a relatively high level of public participation, made some of the strongest presentations. While most of the women from the other regions read prepared statements, the women from Morelia spoke directly to the audience.

In the Garrucha region, on the other hand, there is a much smaller percentage of women who are active in their communities. Yet, listening to the women from La Garrucha, one would think that the situation of women's rights and women's participation is much more advanced than it is. Perhaps the women felt pressure to live up to the Zapatistas' public image of women's empowerment.

Women in the Highlands region of Oventic also have a limited level of participation. But the group from Oventic painted a complex and realistic picture,

which seemed to reflect a decision to be more honest in their assessment. For example, they drew a rather dismal picture of the machismo that women still face in their own families. "When a woman gets married is when the problem begins," said one, "because most husbands still don't want their wives to participate." There was sadness in their voices as they described women who never participate in their communities because "they can't get rid of the ideas that they were taught since they were little." At one point they said: "We didn't bring any women agentas or comisariadas [types of local authorities] to this encuentro because there aren't any." This simple statement felt like a confession, a desire to acknowledge how much work there still is to be done. Their honesty allowed the audience members a real glimpse, a window into their day-to-day struggle to exercise the rights that they know they have but are often denied to them. Knowing the obstacles that they face, their determination was that more compelling: "We are not going to let women continue to live the same way our parents and grandparents did," they concluded.

While the adult women conveyed how difficult it has been to get this far, the presence of young women and girls, strong and self-confident, was one of the most powerful manifestations of the changes that are taking place in the Zapatista communities. While the older women talked about the historic reasons that they don't know how to read and write, young women read their declarations aloud before an audience of thousands.

THE OTHER CAMPAIGN & DIALOGUE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

The final theme of the encuentro was women and the Other Campaign. The Other Campaign is the EZLN's most recent mobilization and process of dialogue with civil society and so far has consisted primarily of Subcomandante Marcos and other comandantes traveling throughout Mexico to meet with different groups and sectors of society - especially the most marginalized - and listen to each others' experiences.

Comandanta Dalia, who has participated in the Other Campaign, said: "Women of the Other Campaign, we know that you suffer the same things that we do, as Zapatista women, because we have gone personally to visit you where you live. You told us the pain that you feel as women and there's no difference between your suffering and our own. You told us how you are mistreated by your boss at work. We met with housewives, workers, students, teachers, doctors, nurses, secretaries, sexual workers, day laborers, artists, all sectors of workers." Her talk was also a call to action: "That's why, compañeras, we need to organize - in your own neighborhoods, your own regions; wherever you are, organize."

Of course most of the political work of the Zapatista movement is not done with a specific focus on gender. The EZLN is a broad movement working towards a more just society and its ideology encompasses women's rights but also indigenous rights and culture; the right to land, housing, education, health-care; and self-determination for all oppressed communities. The Other Campaign is part of building this broad, long-term vision. As Comandanta Dalia put it: "The main problem is not the men, it is the mal gobierno (bad government). We have to struggle together, men and women, to be able to overthrow the bad government and the capitalist system." While perhaps not recognizing patriarchy as one of the systemic roots of oppression, this statement speaks to the fact that

the Zapatista movement is made up of whole families and communities who are trying to create the world today that people would like to live in tomorrow. □□□