DISSIDENT WOMEN
Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas

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violence confronting organized women, see Hernández Castillo (1998b). For an analysis of other problems facing indigenous women in their attempts to organize, see Magallón 1988.

13. Co-participative investigation and the projects of popular education developed in the late 1970s and the 1980s in rural Mexico stem from a reworking of Freire's investigative model. Considered by many to be Latin America's contribution to world social science, co-participative investigation, also known as action-investigation, became popular as a methodology that sought to further science that was committed to the popular sectors. In 1977 investigators from five continents formed the Participative Investigation Network (Red de Investigación Participativa), headed by the Latin Americans Fáls Borda, Francisco Vio Grossi, and Carlos Rodríguez Brandao.

14. A critical reflection on the relation between mestizo counselors and indigenous peasants during the 1980s may be found in Garza Caligaris and Toledo 2004. I have taken part in self-evaluation of feminist methodologies with colleagues in Comaletzin and COLEM. These lines of reflection have also been developed in Latin American feminist encounters; see the contents of the Taller sobre Feminismo y Diversidad Cultural (Workshop on Feminism and Cultural Diversity), organized by Sylvia Marcos in the VII Congreso Latinoamericano y del Caribe, in Marcos 1999a.

15. For the point of view of journalists, see Lovera and Palomo 1999; Rojas 1994; Rivira 1997; Marcos 1997; and various issues of the periodical Cuadernos Feministas, 1997 to the present. For the academic view, see Alberi Manzaneras 1997; Bonif 1997; Garza Caligaris 2002; Hernández Castillo 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Millán 1996a, 1996b, 1997.

16. A collection of these documents may be found in Lovera and Palomo 1999; see also Sánchez Nestor 2000.

17. Liberal feminism argues that equality for women can be achieved through legal means and social reform and that men as a group need not be challenged. It leans toward an equality of sameness with men and conceives politics in individualistic terms, looking to reform present “liberal” practices in society rather than advocating a radical change. The pro-choice agenda is central in the struggle of liberal feminism using the argument that every individual should have control over his or her own body and that this also affords them the right to make medical decisions. An important theoretician of liberal feminism is Betty Friedman.

18. See “Women's Rights in Our Traditions and Customs” in Section 1 of this volume.

19. For a critique of Western feminism, see Trinh 1988; Alarcón 1990; Mohanty 1991.

20. Document of presentation of the CNMI.


INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ZAPATISMO

New Horizons of Visibility

MÁRGARA MILLÁN MONCAYO,
TRANSLATED BY MARÍA VINÓS

Women have become visible in contemporary Zapatismo in various ways, a fact that this movement has had to grapple with. Subcomandante Marcos is not making light of the issue when he states that women belong in Zapatismo not because it is a feminist movement but because they have earned their place in it. Women have articulated this space with specific demands that have made them visible in a new light and—most important—in their own eyes. This chapter discusses the forms of visibility that indigenous women have adopted and explores how they have gradually altered traditional gender relations by redefining female indigenous subjectivity and by transforming the way they are perceived by Mexican society.

SOCIOECONOMIC AND ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The presence and participation of women in Chiapas’s social conflicts predates their public appearance as part of the organized Zapatista movement. The armed uprising took place in the context of a long tradition of organization and mobilization among a sector of the peasant movement, a tradition recognized in the demands of the Zapatistas, whose strategies have been implemented since 1994 through Zapatista civil resistance. The strategies comprise a series of organized actions such as the occupation of land and government halls, hunger strikes, organized ballot abstention (or, where appropriate, suffrage), and the protection of open dialogue, which entails the constant presence of a human chain formed by indigenous people wherever negotiations are
taking place. In all these actions—and especially after 1992, in the marches to occupy San Cristóbal de las Casas—indigenous women of all ages, many of them carrying small children, have had an overwhelming presence. It is estimated that women comprise about 30 percent of the membership of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), but it is also acknowledged that the percentage is much higher among the support base.

Present-day Chiapas is diverse. Along with the state of Oaxaca, it has the largest indigenous population in Mexico and is also one of the most marginalized from the benefits of development. It has seen soaring rates of congenital malnutrition, infant and adult mortality from preventable disease—so-called poverty deaths—and illiteracy and continuing social and economic marginalization and cultural segregation. Life expectancy in indigenous communities is forty-four years, whereas the national average is seventy years. In Chiapas, 150 babies die for every 1,000 live births, whereas the average in the rest of the nation has been reduced to 45. Chiapas is simultaneously one of the states with the greatest wealth in natural resources and the one with the highest poverty index. This situation is evidence of the dominance of racist and discriminatory policies in Mexican society and of the contradictions of global capitalism.

Women are the most seriously affected by poverty and marginalization. Their greater vulnerability is conditioned by class, race, and gender, and it is translated in the ways women live and die in Chiapas. In the region of the Cañadas, the overall annual fertility rate for women of childbearing age is 7.32; that is, women may have more than seven children, of whom on average two survive. The main causes of women’s death are related to reproductive health. According to the Mexican Foundation for Indigenous Children’s Health, half of the total indigenous population is malnourished, and among these, girls are usually more severely affected. Poor nutrition and congenital malnutrition have affected the growth of indigenous peoples, especially of women over the age of fifteen, who a decade ago averaged 142 centimeters and today average only 132 centimeters. Chiapas, Guerrero, and Mexico State have the highest rate of maternal mortality (Espinoza Damián 2004:172–173).

The sociopolitical conditions in Chiapas are complex. The forced migration of people from diverse ethnic groups into the jungle region has given rise to a lifestyle that combines community affirmation with the exercise of pluralist forms of political, cultural, and productive organization (Leyva Solano 1994b). Grassroots groups with varied ideologies have been added to this mix. These regions are in effect a social laboratory: interethnic exchange combines with progressive and leftist religious ideologies, including some officialist ideologies, all, however, related to the defense and reconstruction of community. This has promoted a high degree of social and dynamic cohesion by matching traditional authority and community structures with basic demands—democracy, justice, and dignity. This process has seen the important construction of new identity spaces where indigenous men and women are modernizing the ways in which their community and culture work.

The demands of Zapatismo contain both an affirmation and a redefinition of what is indigenous. Recently, the indigenous movement has become politicized by rearticulating its traditional forms around the most important contemporary debates. Indigenous peoples have thus shown their ability to keep pace with the modern nation and destabilize the dominant notion of indigenousness as premodern, archaic, or even authentic. At the same time, the larger society must do its part: it must recognize the reality of contemporary indigenous peoples and modernize its views so that indigenous peoples are seen as citizens whose rights are equal to those of other citizens but who also have specific ethnic and cultural rights.

THE FIRST HORIZON OF VISIBILITY

Indigenous women have gradually articulated a discourse that strikes precisely on the relevance of their link to change and tradition and focuses on the idea of updating the meaning of indigenousness through the affirmation and transformation of tradition. On this issue, as in others, the EZLN acts as a magnet for the rest of the indigenous movement, as a symbolic reference point that unites diverse and contradictory experiences.

There are several ways in which women have joined with the tradition of organization and struggle with which the peasants of Chiapas have confronted the “policies of modernization and development” imposed by the national government. During the 1970s, Chiapas saw the rise of peasant groups that became part of three national organizations: the Organización Campesina “Emiliano Zapata” (Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization, OCEZ), the Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala (Plan de Ayala National Council, CNPA), and the Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (Independent Confederation of Agricultural Workers and Peasants, CIOAC). Women then began to form their own organizations, such as those comprising artisans or Christian women. In the past decade, women from nongovernmental
organizations (NGOs) and academia have added a gender perspective to issues such as reproductive health, civil rights, and human rights. By the 1990s, a number of mixed organizations had formed that have been defining women’s claims, such as the comunidades eclesiales de base (eclesiastical base communities, CEBs) and the Organización de Médicos Indígenas del Estado de Chiapas (Organization of Indigenous Healers of the State of Chiapas, OMIECH), as well as Mujeres de Motozintla, Mujeres de Margaritas, Mujeres de Ocosingo, and Mujeres de Jiquipilas. In addition, we have established cooperative and productive associations, such as the Organización de Mujeres Artesanas de Chiapas J’pas Jolovelantik and J’pas Lumetik in the Chiapas highlands, the Organización Independiente de Mujeres Indígenas (OIMI), Nan Choch, and Indígenas de la Sierra Madre de Motozintla (ISMAM). The Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres (Diocesan Council of Women, CODIMUJ) has formed a broad human rights defense network in the jungle and the highlands.

Another important experience that has helped women’s organizational efforts in Chiapas has been contact with women refugees from Guatemala who have also called for gender and ethnic identity. In recent years other organizations have formed, such as Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal Women’s Group), Centro de Investigación y Acción para la Mujer (Center of Investigation and Action for Women, CIMAM), Centro de Capacitación para la Ecología y Salud de San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal Center for Ecology and Health, CESC), Chiltak, and K’ínal Antzetik. All these organizations provide support for communities and women’s organizations with a gender perspective (Olivera Bustamante 1994; Hernández Castillo and Zylberberg 2004).

Women have also gained increased access to posts of social responsibility in their communities. As members of cooperatives, as health promoters, by creating savings cooperatives, and in many cases through direct negotiation with the authorities, they have transformed their position inside the community and have created spaces for their specific demands as women within the general set of demands. This process has to a greater or lesser degree developed everywhere. In the highlands, a more traditional region than the jungle, organization has come as a result of artisans’ cooperatives, in which the participation of Tzotzil women, most of them monolingual, has increased. Women’s spaces, like the Casas de la Mujer in the Tojolabal ejido community in Santa Martha and El Porvenir settlement, both in the La Trinitaria municipality, and Poza Rica, in Las Margaritas municipality, have been created. These projects received the support of the CESC for the purpose of creating community pharmacies (Hernández Castillo 1994b).

The point I want to make is that the context of women’s Zapatismo is one in which women’s incorporation in social and political work was already under way. It is in this context that, alongside the ethnic and community demands of Zapatismo, indigenous women in Chiapas began to develop gender demands: the construction of democratic relations within the family, the community, and local organizations; the participation of women in decision making related to both communal and organizational structure; the right to inherit land; the right to choose when and whom they marry; the right to receive an education and to work; the right to be respected by men when in positions of leadership; the need to change traditions and customs that disadvantage women.

A document in which it is possible to observe clearly the enunciation of the horizon of gender awareness among indigenous women of various ethnic groups is that produced in the workshop “Women’s Rights in Our Traditions and Customs,” held in San Cristóbal de las Casas on May 19 and 20, 1994, and promoted by several NGOs. The workshop was attended by more than fifty Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, and Mam women from very different communities. The document questions patriarchal “common sense”—on the state’s part as much as on the part of the community—and articulates the discourse of women’s new experience and new expectations. Below I focus on some of the demands; the full text can be found in Section 1 of this book.

a) Recognition of different structures that discriminate, segregate, or mistreat women: poverty, making the state responsible for; discrimination and racism, as rights denied indigenous women by authorities and cashlines (mestizos); communities, meaning costumbrismo or indigenous law, also rights denied to women; and also, “our husbands, our children, our parents, and even by ourselves.”

b) Education, tradition: “We have been taught from childhood to do as we are told, to be silent, to cope, to keep quiet, to bypass participation. But we no longer want to remain behind: we do not want to be walked on. We demand respect as indigenous peoples and as women. We demand our rights to be respected. We want respect for our traditions, those that are beneficial to all women, men, and children. We want to take part in the making of legislation that takes into consideration the rights of indigenous people and indigenous women. We want to enforce our rights.” (“Women’s Rights in Our Traditions and Customs”)
Here we can see not only the subordination of indigenous life to national life but also the subordination of women in the traditional gender system—subordination that women will no longer accept. This document is the inner reflection, the counterpoint, of the Zapatista Women’s Revolutionary Law.

In both of these documents, which indeed are in dialogue, we can see women wanting to be social agents, to transform their lives. We can also see women demanding recognition for their own cultural forms. This combination of community transformation and affirmation is what is particular to women’s struggle. A detailed reading of “Women’s Rights in Our Traditions and Customs” reveals this combination/appropriation of knowledge and practices, as, for example, in the proposal that physicians and midwives work together.

Generational change is also evident:

Our parents believe working in the fields as they do is more useful than going to school. We believe knowledge will allow us to work better. . . .

In our communities we are sometimes forced to marry. We are sometimes traded for a cow. This treatment is unfair, we are violated by forced marriage. A daughter’s decision should be respected, and marriage should be only the couple’s decision. When a woman is forced into marriage there are problems from the beginning and she is more exposed to the man’s violence. The parents are to blame for marrying a daughter by force. This is part of our tradition. Sometimes what parents want is to have a servant for a while rather than a bride for their son. (29–30)

And what I will call the self-determination principle:

Women have the right to choose their husbands, and should not be made to marry someone they don’t want, should not be taken by force or sold. The husband, children, father, mother, the parents or brothers-in-law: they have no right to mistreat or batter us, and neither do the police or the army or any other person. (30)

Clearly differentiated are the various planes in which women are subject to violence: family, community, Ladino society, the state. The need for support among women is also clearly stated.

Family structure works as a contradictory core: it is simultaneously a unit of solidarity and resistance, which implements cooperative strategies for survival and reproduction, and a power structure, which establishes the internal relations and women’s place within them, where inequality is marked by gender and generation. Thus the authority that the older men exert over women and over the younger generations is established both in the domestic and in the political, religious, and community spheres. This authority operates through the control of sexuality, material resources, work, and participation in decision-making processes and government institutions.

Men’s control of resources begins with their control over land and extends into the family. Sóledad González Montes writes:

The position of women in relation to the authority hierarchy varies according to the stage of the domestic cycle women are in, to their age and to whether they are or not married . . . Women’s progression is not the same as men’s. Most women will never be heads of the family or control a significant share of the more valued resources. As long as there is a man above them (father, father-in-law, husband), women are “not their own boss.” (González Montes 1994:236)

The family structure may continue as a unit of solidarity, but the accompanying hierarchical structure will have to be gradually modified, because the demands of indigenous women today go to the very core of domination: elimination of control by the head of the family over children’s marriages, transformation of the marriage standard, access to control of resources—most important, of land—and participation in community government.

It is women who are more sharply highlighting the relationship between change and tradition, and they are doing it from a perspective that reveals the complicity between a national culture of “respect for tradition” and the persistence of marginalization:

It is not true, as some mestizos think, that our only tradition is to eat vegetables and pozol. We want the right to eat meat, to drink milk, to have our children not die of malnutrition, to have women not die in childbirth. ("El grito de la luna," 31)

And women are pointing the way toward an ethical norm for the modification of a specific tradition:

We must also think about what needs to be remade in our tradition. The law [meaning national law] should protect only those traditions and ways
that are deemed beneficial by the community. Our traditions should not hurt anyone. (12)

THE SECOND HORIZON OF VISIBILITY: THE INSURGENTAS

The EZLN opens a space where indigenous women and men can have diverse experiences. There is a “frontier” between indigenous women who remain in their communities and those who have joined the rebels (insurgentes). The experience of command, the undifferentiated work of men and women, and the control of their own individual sexuality are three practical dimensions of the redefinition of gender. It is, paradoxically, an exceptional situation, in which women, in the words of Marcos, “have had to stop being women to become soldiers,” but also in which through this negation of “womanhood” they may access another kind of regulation and experience of the feminine.

Zapatismo as a Way of Life

Captain Elisa, one of the twelve women who, along with one hundred armed revolutionary militia, attended a press conference on January 19, 1994, said: “When I was living with my family, I knew nothing. I could not read, I did not attend school. But when I joined the EZLN I learned to read and write, to speak Spanish, and I trained for war” (La Jornada, January 20, 1994). Laura, a twenty-one-year-old Tzeltal who has held the rank of captain of assault troops for three years, said:

I attended school as far as fourth grade. I was very young when I heard about the EZLN. I was working the land with other women who got together to grow some food. That’s where we started talking and began to understand why we live in poverty and cannot find a better way of living. . . . I joined out of conscience, to fight for the poor; it is not right that children go on dying. (La Jornada, January 20, 1994)

The great majority of women who join the armed movement are young, just girls. From the choices available to them, many preferred joining the Zapatistas to working in San Cristóbal as servants or remaining in their communities. Subcomandante Marcos reported:

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ZAPATISMO

When revolutionary women left for the mountain, the older women in the towns accused them, saying they were going whoring, that there would be no one to look after them up there. Women would ask the women revolutionaries how they were treated. . . . “If you don’t want to be taken, do they punish you?” “No, no one can take you if you don’t wish to be taken.” “If you don’t want a man, can you not marry him?” “If you don’t want to marry you don’t marry.” And so we started to get loads of women joining in. (Quoted in Durán de Huerta 1994:33-34)

Something similar happened to the men. They could hire out to work and bring in a bit of money, but joining the Zapatistas began to seem a more interesting option. A boy who came back to his town to get his papers and join the Mexican army was convinced by his parents to join the Zapatistas instead.

The Zapatista armed movement is a community movement. Its links are blood links: parents have two, three, or more children in the mountains. The community sets aside food for them and provides whatever is needed so that the organization can survive. Families have given their sons and daughters to the Zapatista army.

The young insurgentes begin to look different to their counterparts who have remained in the communities. They are women of eighteen or twenty who have not had multiple births, have eaten well, and speak Spanish. They speak with confidence. The difference is illustrated by Hermann Bellinghausen in his article on a Zapatista camp in the jungle:

María Elena can speak Tzeltal, although she is a Chol, and she is old. The women of the EZLN are educated and healthy. They have led for years a Spartan life, but have had regular meals and health care. Like Amelia, María Elena thinks she is better off than if she had stayed in her town. Had she stayed, she would be like those sad mothers, barefoot, thin, surrounded by sickly children; any mother older than twenty has lost one or more children already and speaks with a fixed sadness that María Elena doesn’t have. In her conversation there is no fatalism or ideological stiffness. She speaks without pretension, but when asked specifically she answers that she fights so that people can live better. Dying in battle does not worry her, and she already had a close encounter on January 2. Today marks three months of borrowed life. (La Jornada, April 4, 1994)

Infantry Major Ana María, age twenty-five, arrived in San Cristóbal with Comandanta Ramona for the first negotiations with the federal
government there. She told how she joined the EZLN when she was twelve or thirteen:

The EZLN responds to my personal interests. We joined the fight more than ten years ago. At first we had peaceful struggles where I participated alongside my brothers and sisters. ... When I joined, there were only two women. All together we were only eight or nine compañeros up in the hills. They taught us to walk in the mountain, to load a weapon, to hunt. They taught us military combat exercises, and when we had learned that, they taught us politics. Then we went to the communities to speak with our people, to tell of our struggle and how we could reach a solution, and many began to come to us: men, women, and children. Most of us are young. ... [W]e need support, especially women, because women suffer the most. It is painful to see children die, die of malnutrition, of hunger, of preventable disease. Women suffer. And that is why we fight. (La Jornada, March 7, 1994)

**Women's Place in the EZLN**

Captain Laura, about twenty-one years old, sits on a rock and holds a weapon across her knees as she speaks with journalists. They ask her about Marcos, of whom she says, “He is a man who belongs to our struggle, although he is a mestizo, as you have seen.” “How did you manage to defeat all those soldiers?” “Well, we earn our rank according to our experience in the mountains, our capacity to work, and how we handle responsibility. When you start working as a member you are just one more subordinate. Your superior observes your progress, starts to give you people for you to lead and command. That is how I rose, I got some people, they saw I did well, and gave me rank.” She coordinates one hundred fifty militia members. (Proceso magazine, April 18, 1994, 39)

Women earn their place in the military structure. Major Ana María was commander of the operation to take the San Cristóbal City Hall. But what really demonstrated the Zapatista women's military importance was the fighting at Ocosingo.

Before the war there was a lot of suspicion from men when a woman held a command post. It was havoc; I spent all my time straightening people out. They'd say, “No bitch is going to tell me what to do.” Well, that is how they were educated. ... The problem came to an end in Ocosingo,

because the women officers fought best there. They were the ones who brought the wounded back from the field, where we were surrounded ... brought them back alive. That put an end to whether women are able to command troops or not. (Subcomandante Marcos, quoted in Durán de Huerta 1994:32–33)

In a set of laws first made public on January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas included a women's law. There are various testimonies indicating that the law was sketched out during extended consultations among Zapatista communities. The law (see Section 1, this volume) was published in the EZLN bulletin El Despertador Mexicano, along with the First Lacandon Jungle Declaration, “Today We Say Enough!”

Subcomandante Marcos referred to this law as the “first Zapatista uprising” in his comments on the passage of the law in March 1993 and pointed out how the law upset the traditional norms governing indigenous relationships.

In March 1993 we were discussing what would later become the revolutionary laws. ... Susana [head of the women's commission of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, CCRI] had the job of visiting dozens of communities to talk to women's groups and gather the content for the women's law. When the CCRI met to vote on the the laws, the commissions passed to the front one by one—the justice commission, the agrarian law commission, the war taxes commission, the rights and responsibilities commission, and the women's commission. Susana had to read the proposals she had written from the thoughts of thousands of indigenous women. ... [S]he began to read, and as she read, the CCRI assembly grew restless. Voices whispered in Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Mam, Zoque, and Castilla. Comments flew from one end to the other. Susana did not falter, she went on, tearing down everything and everybody: “We don't want to be made to marry someone we don't want. We want to have the number of children we decide we can raise. We want the right to hold posts in the community. We want the right to speak and have our words respected. We want the right to go to school and even to be chauffeurs, if we choose.” She continued until she was finished. There was a heavy silence. The Women's Revolutionary Law that Susana had just read meant a real revolution for indigenous communities. The men looked to one another, nervous, restless. Suddenly, all at the same time, the translators finished, and in a gradually increasing movement, women began to clap and speak among themselves. It goes without saying that
the law was unanimously approved. A Tzeltal representative commented, “Thankfully my wife does not understand Spanish, otherwise…” And a revolutionary official, a female infantry major, exploded: “You’re fucked, because we are going to translate it into every dialect.” The representative lowered his gaze. The women were singing; men were scratching their heads. I prudently called for a recess. . . . That is the truth: the first Zapatista uprising was in March 1993 and was led by Zapatista women. There were no losses, and they won. Such things happen in this land. (La Jornada, January 30, 1994)

Subcomandante Marcos’s description illustrates the tensions around women’s demands inside the Zapatista movement. In this context, the Women’s Revolutionary Law articulates women’s relationship to Zapatismo. Unlike other revolutionary laws, it is not only a declaration to the government and the nation but also a demand to indigenous communities, to indigenous men, whether they are Zapatistas or not. It is also a demand to the internal organization. Women are integrated as a sector, and their specific situation of discrimination is recognized, and therefore the corresponding responsibility for gender subordination is placed on men. By opening the space for its enunciation, the Women’s Revolutionary Law puts into action within the Zapatista movement one of its own principles—listening to those who have no voice. The voice of women is the intimate voice of the personal and daily life of indigenous communities. It is the voice that questions the internal hierarchy and the places where gender difference and subordination are practiced.

In this sense, the law is only a formal representation of a larger process in which women are speaking out to change their political condition at the same time that they are transforming their daily lives. Not with evident success, as is pointed out in the self-critical communiqué titled Leer un video (Reading a Video). In the second part of the communiqué, “Two Failures” (August 2004), Marcos points out that there has been little change in day-to-day gender relations in communities.

In a way, current conditions have stopped the processes of change in indigenous communities. These communities are preoccupied with resisting counterrevolutionary attacks and laying out strategies to achieve results on the national level. In this plane, the demands made by the Zapatistas to the Mexican government on behalf of women are very clear. They are basically contained in point 29, “Petition by Indigenous Women,” of the thirty-four demands presented on March 1, 1994, by the Clandestine Revolutionary Committee, General Command of the EZLN, on the negotiation table of the Peace and Reconciliation Talks in Chiapas. These demands form the basis of later debates on the issue of women. They are transcribed below.

We indigenous peasant women request the immediate solution to our urgent needs, which the government has so far failed to meet.

a) Childbirth clinics where qualified gynecologists give indigenous women necessary medical attention.

b) Child care centers in our communities.

c) We request from the government enough food for all children in rural communities: milk, cornmeal, rice, soy beans, cooking oil, beans, cheese, eggs, sugar, soup, oats, etc.

d) Well-equipped community kitchens and dinners for our children.

e) Nixtamal (corn-paste) mills and tortilla factories in each community, depending on the size of the population.

f) Farm projects (chickens, rabbits, sheep, pigs, etc.) with technical and veterinarian assistance.

g) Bakery projects with ovens and basic materials.

h) Artisan workshops with equipment and basic materials.

i) Fair market prices for our crafted products.

j) Technical schools for women.

k) Early education (nursery and preschool) rural centers where our children can enjoy a healthy moral and physical start to education.

l) As women, adequate transportation to travel and take the products from our various projects.

The difference between this petition and the Women’s Revolutionary Law is clear. Subcomandante Marcos explains:

Why is the Women’s Law—which the women imposed on us—on March 8, 1993, not among the demands to the government? Zapatista women replied: “Some things must be asked for, and others must be imposed. We ask for minimal material conditions. . . . But our freedom and dignity are things which we shall impose, whether or not they are recognized by the government or by our partners.” And they are advancing, in spite of the newspapers, churches, laws and our own resistance—we need to recognize this—as men to be thrown out of the dominant position we have inherited. Women have a long way to go still, but I don’t see the least sign that they might be getting tired. (La Jornada, May 13, 1994)
THE THIRD HORIZON OF VISIBILITY:
GENDER NEGOTIATION AT THE COMMUNITY
LEVEL IN THE ZAPATISTA CONTEXT

Periodically from 1997 to 2004 I visited a community in the Tzotzil-speaking highlands of Chiapas. During this time, I met and interviewed the women of the community many times. The main tensions I found with regard to what was gradually defined as “women’s rights” were related to marriage, to the role of the man as the woman’s “educator,” and to women’s political participation. I also uncovered what I will refer to as the figures of the new possible order.

Renegotiating Marriage

Taking part in the Zapatista movement requires that communities assign new activities, or “charges,” to women, which in turn requires that they remain single for a longer period. In the community I studied there is a group of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who have remained single and who defend this status as a right. This has been possible because of the new “possibilities” the movement has created and because the women’s families have accepted the new rules.

Daria is the eldest of Zoila’s twelve children. Zoila is proud that all her children “are still alive” and considers her family richer for that fact.

I have known Daria since she was eighteen. I have seen her grow stronger in her defense of her “right” to postpone marriage and decide who she will marry. These rights are clearly stated in the Women’s Revolutionary Law. She represents a generation of young women who have charges in the organization. Daria participated in the women’s commission and traveled to Aguaclairetas and to Caracoles.” At present she is in charge of the Autonomous Municipality women’s store, which is near her community. Below is a portion of the interview I conducted with her.

MM: Don’t your parents tell you that you have to get married?
Daria: No, because they have no right to do so. Whoever wants to get married it is up to them, but they can’t make me get married because they have no right, so I am not getting married.
MM: Are you happy?
Daria: Yes, I am happy. I’m going to play when I want to play [basketball]; not every afternoon, tomorrow we are going with the women. I’m not going to marry because then I won’t be free to attend meetings, to visit other communities, whereas like I am, I can go to my meeting, I can stay and chat, but if I had a husband he wouldn’t let me, so I don’t marry.
MM: Never?
Daria: I don’t know, maybe . . .
MM: And do men think the same way? That they won’t marry just yet?
Daria: Yes, there are men who are twenty-four, twenty-five years old, and still single. They think, when they have a family of their own, sometimes their family gets sick, then we can’t go out . . .
MM: Did your sister choose a husband?
Daria: Yes.
MM: And is she still participating?
Daria: No, he won’t let her.
MM: And your brother, does he allow Carmelina to participate?
Daria: No. She wants to, but he doesn’t. That’s how it is. People change a lot when they marry.

This interview took place on July 15, 1999.

Daria works in her household, but because of her responsibilities in the community, it is primarily her sisters who make the tortillas, work in the field, and bring in firewood and water.

Their husbands’ “permission” is not the only obstacle to married women’s participation. There are a series of responsibilities in a married woman’s life that stand in the way: preparing food for her family, caring for her children, and working in the home of her parents-in-law, as is traditional. All of this makes married women think twice before accepting a position in the organization, even if they support the movement. Practical life is difficult; there is no time for organizing.

Still, some married women do participate. In these cases, the husband’s agreement, his help with domestic tasks that are traditionally reserved for women, and his encouragement are important. Two couples in the community stand out.

One of these couples is the kollanum’ and his wife, who also “talks the word of God.” This couple is representative of another process that has upheld indigenous Zapataismo: religious practice committed to the poor. For this couple, there is no clash between their religious practice and the Zapatista struggle; they see them as having the common goal of dignifying indigenous life.

For years I have seen them participating in the movement, raising their five children in the Zapatista struggle. It is common to see the kollanum’ minding all five of them. Previously, when there weren’t so many
children, his wife went to meetings and he stayed home with their daughters. He also helps with traditionally female tasks, such as carrying water from the river, or firewood. The koltamun is a gentle person. His way of speaking and expressing himself shows a masculinity that is not based on exaltation. He cultivates the Tojolabal quality of temperance.

The other couple is much younger and recently married. The woman, whose name is Teresa, is a friend of Daria’s, but she is more reserved with me than her friend. Still, during one of my first visits, in April 1997, Teresa told me what her day is like: “I work in the house and in the field, I work all day. I am seventeen years old, and I have younger brothers. I get up at four o’clock, drink my coffee, make my tortilla, sweep up, serve my father...” By October 2004, Teresa had married a “true Zapatista,” a twenty-four-year-old man, and they had a six-month-old baby daughter. This has made her more firm in her decision to participate in the movement. She is less reserved and speaks better Spanish than before. Since the birth of her daughter, she has not gone on “long outings,” but she represents the women in her community and tries to encourage others to participate.

This is how, little by little, the idea of organization as something that relates to every man and woman in the community is absorbed. The movement demands that it be so: autonomy is not a simple project. The division of political labor requires every member’s participation and, very important, women’s participation.

**Domestic Violence**

Women’s participation has another limitation that some of them pointed out: the jealousy of their husbands. On different occasions, women told me that their absence had been immediately interpreted as deceit and infidelity by their husbands, that they were considered to have done wrong and that the situation often became violent. Alcohol is often part of this picture.

Women are increasingly seeking the help of collective institutions to arbitrate cases of domestic violence. Zapatista rules prohibit alcohol consumption, and this is one rule with which many women are very much in agreement, because they feel it benefits them directly in daily life. We could go so far as to say that it is one of the benefits they see in Zapatismo, that men are pressured from other fronts to not get drunk. This fact has been described in many written testimonies, and the interviews in this community provide ample evidence for it.

**INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ZAPATISMO**

Furthermore, in general, alcohol is known to have a clear relationship to violence.

In the interviews with men in the community, they immediately associated “women’s rights” with the right not to be battered. This idea has spread quickly in indigenous communities; which is not to say that violence is not part of everyday life, but rather that the pressure to avoid situations in which women are subject to violence is greater today than before. When such a situation occurs, it is taken before the community institution, like any other conflict, and a punishment is meted out.

**Women’s Rights**

To illustrate the two previous points, I would like to recount some of the discussions from three women’s meetings between 1997 and 1999 where the subject was the Women’s Revolutionary Law. Women’s conflicting positions were defined gradually and generally along generational lines. Two positions emerged after the general acceptance of the law. The comments below are representative of the views of older women and younger women, respectively.

The Law is good, because women’s work has value too. But we should not exaggerate. Women have duties. Now they don’t want to comply any more. That’s why men hit.

Men don’t have the right to hit women, regardless of whether they are fathers, brothers, or husbands, and whether or not they are in the right; that’s what talk is for.

The women also talked about other sensitive issues in the law: the lack of economic opportunities and resources; the way the central government (the bad government) treats both men and women and their communities; and the need for men to stop drinking, because alcohol results in violence.

The younger women felt strongly about being able to choose their husbands. The subject of deciding how many children they wish to have is also appropriated but not in practical terms (what contraception methods to use, sex education, etc.) Something similar happens with regard to the issue of women’s inheritance of land. So the issues that remained central were violence and decision-making power. As the discussion proceeded, the tone of the older women became more cautious, even
threatening: it's good that women are claiming their rights, but they should not ask for everything or oppose men.

The meetings also became, at times, a space for accusations: Have men changed? Only a little, they were still drinking, and when they drank, they hit. Morale was not very high. They seemed to agree that very gradually men were changing. They mentioned that women were still ashamed, that they could not "speak" very well.

Martín, a man in his mid-twenties, arrived at the end of one of the meetings. He is a one of the political representatives of the organization, is married, and has three children. Martín spoke about how it is important to change, to respect women, and to respect women’s rights. He said that women need to participate more. He spoke of the Women’s Revolutionary Law and of how Zapatismo also seeks to make relations between men and women equitable. The women listened to him.

During the last meeting, thanks to the assistance of a Tojolabal interpreter, communication flowed more easily. In contrast to the earlier polarized views—young women demanding their rights versus older women seeking to circumscribe those rights—the older women took a more moderate stance: Women should not stop “being women”; “men need to command”; sometimes hitting is needed for a woman’s education. What should be done if the woman is not carrying out her duties? There has to be some punishment. This is the dominant commonsense voice, the voice of the gender doxa, as used by Bourdieu (1980), the social law always “naturalized” and the voice of cultural precept.

Younger women take a different position. Those who clearly promote the movement, like Daría, also assert and define their discourse: no man, especially a husband, has the right to hit a woman. Zapatista law says that everything should be even. The women asked Daría, mockingly, whether she was never getting married. And she responded, “I will marry, but I will choose my husband very carefully.” “Well,” the women said, “You will choose well, but once you are married, he’s going to hit you anyway!” They say this and laugh. Daría laughs with them.

Laughter here shows their sense of irony and their full awareness that the dominant order cannot be changed just by insisting that it do so. The Women’s Revolutionary Law has limitations, and they recognize the delicate balance of forces between the sexes.

Daría represents the re/vision of the law, or more precisely, the enunciation of a new law that would modify cultural precepts, not in their essence—women have responsibilities and duties that make them women—but in its procedures—men don’t have the right to hit women; women have the right not to be hit.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ZAPATISMO

Each of those statements affects different spaces of the community doxa. The authority that community structures confer on the male as father, brother, or husband is accepted. However, having authority does not make physical punishment valid. Even if a woman is at fault, that is, when she has not fulfilled the duties that the community assigns to her as a woman (whether as daughter, sister, mother, wife, or grandmother), she still has the right to her physical integrity, under any circumstance. This is a right that belongs to her as a person, because she exists. It is not a circumstantial or negotiable right.

Tradition is ambiguous in regard to the right of people to their physical integrity, because there are responsibilities and hierarchies that are understood as educational. How can a woman be shown how to be “a complete woman”? There are some circumstances in which the doxa justifies physical punishment of a woman by her father, brother, or husband.

However, the person who can teach and relate to others, both in public and in private, without screaming, shouting, or hitting is held in high cultural regard. Temperance is a valuable quality among the Tojolabal, just as good behavior—within a rather strict framework of gender representations—is appreciated. Thus in cases of physical violence the community considers the reasons and circumstances and often punishes both members of the couple in a sort of exhortation to do better by each other.

As we have seen so far, the Zapatista process unleashes a tension inside the community we studied: people recognize, albeit rhetorically, that women’s rights are part of the demands of the movement in its search for a more just and democratic society. At the same time, this is to a certain extent in contradiction with the doxa or the instituted common sense.

During the discussion we generated, the contradiction was represented mainly in the discourse of some of the older women, who think that younger women should be under some sort of authority that ensures that they fulfill their duties. Younger women and the movement’s political participants created a discourse according to which there was no authority that would justify physical battering of women.

A recurrent metaphor of Zapatismo is that of “awakening.” Even their newspaper is called Zapatista Awakener. It would seem, then, that Zapatista awakening is also the awakening of an indigenous feminist consciousness that introduces a tension between tradition and change, affirmed both in cultural and in community forms. Indigenous women are demanding cultural and community change so as to fit better inside them as the feminine subject that at present they want to be.
The appropriation of “rights” that revolve around the physical security of women is, no doubt, a fundamental principle intended to broaden the sphere of individuality, an individuality that would seem to be completely overwhelmed by cultural precepts. In this way there is the potential for a “feminine individuality” that complies with community norms but modifies tradition. Understanding physical integrity as a right and having the power to decide when and whom to marry are spaces in which individuality is growing within the framework of community recognition; that is, an individuality that is seeking legitimation under the new order unleashed by Zapatismo. Social movements are also spaces of cultural creation, of reinvention of subjectivities, of contestation of the social order that has been naturalized (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998). If the nation can grant justice to indigenous people, then there should also be justice between indigenous men and women. If nondiscrimination is at the core of the Zapatista agenda, this should be translated also as gender justice in communities.

The more conservative women’s discourse sets a limit on women’s possible visions. The inertia and the power of symbolic order, on the one hand, and of everyday practice, on the other, can be recognized in the ironic laughter of the young women. There is no revolutionary law that can guarantee that the respectful man you choose through the exercise of your rights will not turn into a batterer after marriage.

Still, the law is the beginning of the enunciation of possible horizons, of envisioned forms, of acquired powers and expressed desires. In everyday micropolitics, this allows more space for the processes of self-representation of indigenous women. These are spaces founded in the positive valuing of feminine subjectivity, its capacities and powers, its specific weight in the processes of community reproduction.

One of the most interesting things about Zapatismo in relation to women is the two levels on which the movement is articulated: the statement of indigenous demands is expressed from the marginalized collectivity to the nation; the same structure of organization has an effect on its members that alters and underlines the relevance of gender order, between the ranks and between community members.

Two things are happening at this point: it is recognized that women’s rights are part of the movement’s demands in its search for a more just and democratic society, and the main subject of those rights is the women themselves, who must—and do, in fact—act on their own rights and against the dominant tradition, culture, and education.

It would seem that the Zapatista awakening is also an awakening of feminine indigenous awareness. It is an awakening that, based as it is on existing cultural and community ways, demands their transformation in order for women to better fit in them as their newly defined subjects. The axis around which the women’s movement is explained inside the Zapatista organization is democracy. It might be that the issue for organizations with close links to the Zapatista movement is to consider the type of structures, spaces, and dynamics that better realize indigenous women’s progress in the formulation of their own rights, needs, and desires.

What is happening in Chiapas sets forth many challenges to the Mexican nation in the twenty-first century. Foremost among them is the possibility that indigenous groups, today marginalized from resources, may be integrated into the nation in a way that they agree and decide is better for them. This depends also on the ability of the movement itself to make room for the demands and expectations of women, who are “marginalized among the poor,” “subordinated among the oppressed.” This means having the ability to articulate the specific differences between the movement’s components and to reverse the patriarchal and paternalistic constitution of dominant culture. This depends also on the ability of indigenous women and of the nonindigenous women with whom they have built networks to go deeper into the process of political and subjective self-representation that is now underway. This process of self-representation is based on a positive valuation of feminine subjectivity, of its abilities and powers, of its specific bearing in the processes of community reproduction.

Against the old belief in the absolute subordination of indigenous women and their inability to transcend it, the Zapatista women’s movement shows a combative resistance that, not without difficulty and contradiction, seeks to develop a new kind of politics, that is, a politics without gender subordination.

Today these social liberation processes face the threat of low-intensity warfare and the international polarization of the fight against terrorism. However much the Mexican political transition gave Chiapas the chance to catch its breath, conditions in the world at large are not very promising. Nevertheless, against the general flow, indigenous women’s own affirmation seems to grow every day.

NOTES

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1. La Jornada, April 8, 1995.
4. Insurgentas are female members of the EZLN who go to the mountains, leaving their families and communities. This section is based on press interviews with these women.
5. As formulated in Subcomandante Marcos’s speech during his intervention on March 1994 in San Cristóbal de las Casas: “Why is it necessary to die and kill so Ramona may come here and you may listen to what she has to say? Why is it necessary that Laura, Ana María, Irma, Elisa, and so many other indigenous women take up arms and become soldiers instead of becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers, or teachers?”
6. Aguaacallentes first and now Caracoles are regional political centers of Zapatismo.
7. The koltanum is the preacher, the representative of the diocese to the community, according to the indigenous theology of the San Cristóbal Diocese.
8. Aída Hernández Castillo uses the term “indigenous feminism.” See chapter 1, this volume.

Recent social movement history in Chiapas begins with the 1970s and 1980s. The peasant movement dominated the Chiapanecan political landscape of that time, and agrarian struggles became the centerpiece of social programs. Women participated actively in a wide range of peasant organizations; although they did not make gender demands or form part of the leadership, their experiences are the basis for the political formation of many of those who today comprise the women’s movement in Chiapas (Garza Caligaris 2000). The long road that indigenous and peasant women had to walk before they were recognized as political actors has been little explored. The analysis of this process presented in this chapter provides important insights into current scholarship on indigenous and peasant women’s activism in Chiapas. We begin our analysis by reflecting on some of the stereotypical representations of indigenous women that dominated the early years of the peasant movement and on how these representations were used by the agrarian social movement in their confrontation with government officials and political elites. We center our analysis on two events: an indigenous peasant march to Mexico City in 1983 and the organization of peasant towns to reclaim land they felt was rightfully theirs and to resist repression in the 1980s.

The representations of indigenous women that we focus on here were constructed from different perspectives, but they stand for widely used categories and social relations that reach much further than our personal experiences. While they do not embrace the experiences of all women in peasant movements in Chiapas in the 1970s and 1980s, they do reflect the kind of experience and treatment many received as a result of their political activism during this time. What is striking is that very similar images have operated in the conflicts that have developed since