

The New Radicals: How Wage Labor, Physical Abuse and an Agrarian Crisis Shaped Women's  
Participation in the Zapatista Rebellion

*HIST 495H: Introduction to Historical Research*

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## **Introduction**

Feminism is alive and well in southern Mexico. Agents of the feminist movement are actively protesting the economic and social oppression of indigenous peoples by the federal and state governments. In doing so, they are expanding access to formal employment, quality education and healthcare for indigenous women. In San Cristóbal de las Casas, the cultural capitol of the southernmost state of Chiapas, the movement for women's autonomy and empowerment is especially strong. The city's bridges, plazas, and the walls of ordinary houses are being painted with graffiti by feminist envoys who loudly protests the suppression of indigenous women.

In the summer of 2016, I lived in San Cristóbal de las Casas while conducting archival research on the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). The focus of my research was on the indigenous rebellion led by the Zapatistas against the Mexican government in 1994-95. In my free time, I wandered the city and could not help but to appreciate the feminist graffiti and become informed of the plight of indigenous feminists. I captured dozens of photographs of graffiti. Now they are digitally stored alongside my photographs of primary sources uncovered in the archives. There is a historical connection between contemporary feminists in Chiapas and the women who participated in the Zapatista Rebellion around twenty years earlier. The expansion of indigenous women's autonomy through greater access to jobs, schooling, and healthcare has been the focus of both groups.

My experiences in San Cristóbal de las Casas have been the primary motivation for my interest in female Zapatistas. Ever since I concluded my research project, I have had a question that has been largely unanswered by scholars. What are the separate economic and social factors

that motivated indigenous Tzeltal and Tzotzil men and women to volunteer in the Zapatista Rebellion, and how has feminism influenced indigenous women's participation in the rebellion? Up to this point, few historians have studied the gendered nature of the causes for indigenous participation in the EZLN. Those who have been concerned with the impact feminism had on women in revolutions, without appreciating the vital role of female Zapatistas in Latin American feminism. Historians of Chiapas and the Zapatistas continue to repeat the accepted narrative that *all* participants in the rebellion pursued land reform and greater rights for indigenous people. This explanation reveals a clear gender bias, for it leans heavily on male Zapatistas and does not address the separate causes that compelled indigenous women to enter the revolution.

Yet the social and economic challenges that indigenous Tzeltal and Tzotzil sought to resolve were gender specific. Males were concerned with inequalities caused by land distribution and lack of rights provided to indigenous people, for men were the chief income earners and depended on employment in an agrarian economy. Females were compelled to fight in hopes of resolving women-centered issues, which were insufficient access to primary education, employment, and healthcare for indigenous women. The majority of female Zapatistas had absorbed the popular messages of the expanding feminist movement in Mexico. Thus, indigenous women saw participation in the Zapatista Rebellion as an opportunity to pursue feminist causes.

To elaborate my argument, I will utilize articles from newspapers and magazines from the historical archives in Chiapas, as well as Zapatista declarations, letters and interviews published during the rebellion by the official EZLN newspaper *El Despertador Mexicano*. To support my argument, I will employ the published works of women's and gender historians that discuss the significance of feminist-thought in the Zapatista Rebellion, and the major scholarly

publications which support the explanation that land reform and indigenous rights were the universal interests of indigenous Zapatistas. This gendered re-reading of Zapatista motivations also allows us to see how Chiapas women have contributed to 21<sup>st</sup> century indigenous feminism.

### **A Brief Survey of the Zapatista Rebellion**

On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. The trade agreement made inexpensive corn and textile products from the United States and Canada available for purchase throughout Mexico, thus destroying the agrarian economy of Chiapas.<sup>1</sup> For the state's main products were maize, livestock, coffee and handmade jewelry and wool garments sold in the tourist markets of southern Mexico.<sup>2</sup> In response to NAFTA, the Zapatista National Liberation Army emerged from the Lacandona Jungle in southwest Chiapas and executed a planned, well-calculated occupation of several important cities in Chiapas, including San Cristóbal de las Casas, Zinacantán, Chamula and Ocosingo.<sup>3</sup>

In the following weeks, Zapatista forces took over municipal buildings, freed prisoners from jails, and opened government warehouses to the population. The General Command of the EZLN published a stream of declarations in the Zapatista newspaper *El Despertador Mexicano* ("The Mexican Alarm Clock"). Their initial "Declaration of War" was published on December 31, 1993. It denounced NAFTA as a "death sentence" for Mexican people, promised the Zapatistas were not seeking political power, and demanded the Mexican federal government to "suspend the robbery of natural resources in areas controlled by the EZLN."<sup>4</sup> In the conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Shannan Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion* (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 33.

<sup>2</sup> George A. Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quartiello, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2005), 112-113.

<sup>3</sup> For a map of Chiapas and the major conflicts in the state during the Zapatista Rebellion, see the example in: Todd A. Eisenstadt, *Politics, Identity, and Mexico's Indigenous Rights Movements* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 79.

<sup>4</sup> General Command of the EZLN, "Declaration of War", *El Despertador Mexicano* (December, 1993).

of their war declaration, the General Command welcomed all volunteers, stating, “we ask for your participation, your decision to support this [revolution] that struggles for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace.”<sup>5</sup>

The men and women who volunteered to fight in the rebellion were mostly indigenous citizens of Chiapas who belonged to the Tzotzil and Tzeltal tribes.<sup>6</sup> In Ocosingo, following the insurgent occupation on January 1, 1994, an indigenous man who was very thin, barely five feet tall, and clutching an AK-47 was interviewed about his personal motivations for entering the rebellion. The indigenous man exclaimed, “We's here in arms cuz they never resolve our problems. Look, sir: We have no house and work, or education. They never do [the indigenous population] justice, sir, and many solicitations have been forgotten by the [government of Mexico].”<sup>7</sup> By this man’s testimony alone, it can be understood that the social and economic issues in Chiapas did not originate with NAFTA. How did the living standards for indigenous people devolve to a state of armed rebellion? In order to understand the motivations for the Zapatista Revolution, we must reach farther back into the historical past, to identify the factors that compelled both men and women to join the EZLN.

### **Land and Rights: The Gender-Neutral (Male Biased) Argument**

According to the overwhelming majority of scholarly publications on the EZLN, the compelling reason for the Zapatista Rebellion was agrarian reform. Indeed, interviews with indigenous Zapatistas have identified that a desire for land and rights seemed to be at the center of the conflict. In the “Declaration of War”, the Zapatistas stated that land reform is crucial in

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<sup>5</sup> General Command of the EZLN, “Declaration of War”.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Shannan Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Roberto Carbajal, “Report About Events of January 1, 1994,” *El Despertador Mexicano* (January, 1994).

order to halt the exploitation of natural resources in Chiapas.<sup>8</sup> Though the need for better food and nutrition, education, healthcare, housing and sanitation were also compelling factors for participation in the revolution.<sup>9</sup> The widely accepted explanation does not deny the presence of other economic and social issues that were present in Chiapas. How, then, have historians of Chiapas and the EZLN arrived at the conclusion that land was at the center of the Zapatista's guerilla insurgency in the mid-1990s? Well, scholars argue the social and economic problems in indigenous communities were the *result* of an agrarian crisis; therefore, they thought agrarian reform would resolve the issues of insufficient education, healthcare, housing and nutrition in their communities.

Until the early 1980s, the agricultural sector of the economy provided the majority of the income for indigenous people in Chiapas, though most indigenous farmers did not own plots of land large enough to provide a living wage.<sup>10</sup> Indians rented agricultural land from non-Indian maize and cattle producers in the lowland valleys of central Chiapas.<sup>11</sup> Because their villages and hamlets were located in the highlands through the state, the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indians had to migrate in order to plant, harvest, and maintain their fields.

Farm work was done entirely by hand. To assist with the demands of weeding, planting and harvesting, farmers employed poor laborers. Payment was provided in the form of food and usually housing.<sup>12</sup> The dependence of indigenous farmers on laborers provided a social safety net within communities, for poor and elderly people were able to secure a basic livelihood by

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<sup>8</sup> General Command of the EZLN, "Declaration of War".

<sup>9</sup> Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 114.

<sup>10</sup> There has been a long tradition of indigenous communities in Chiapas maintaining *milpas*, or small plots of land used for subsistence farming. Milpas were, in essence, community gardens that helped put food on the tables and reduce expenses.

<sup>11</sup> Rus, Hernández and Matiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

performing menial work for their wealthier neighbors. Aside from rent, the only cash expenses the farmers had were for tools and transportation of their crops via trucks to markets.<sup>13</sup>

In their monograph on the central importance of agrarian reform to the revolution, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, George Collier and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello identified the beginning of the modern land crisis in Chiapas to be in the late 1970s.<sup>14</sup> This “beginning of the end” was the result of an oil boom that slashed prices across nearly every sector in the Mexican economy.<sup>15</sup> In the interest of increasing agricultural output, the federal government subsidized the costs of chemical fertilizers and pesticides for indigenous farmers in Chiapas.<sup>16</sup> The chemically intensive farming allowed fields to be utilized continuously (traditional methods require fields to lay fallow, or unused, for a period of time in order to regain their nutritional potency). Though as a consequence of the new methods, much of the available agricultural land became dependent on chemical fertilizers for production.

Following the oil boom, there was a worldwide collapse of oil prices in 1982. The oil bust resulted in an economic crisis in Mexico where the government was unable to meet the payments on its foreign loans. In *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion*, Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Shannon Mattiace analyzed the impact of the greater financial crisis on the agricultural economy in Chiapas. The authors reported that the federal government was forced “to agree to an austerity program that curtailed all ‘discretionary’ spending. Public works projects as well as numerous social and developmental programs abruptly ended.”<sup>17</sup> The government’s subsidization of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Rus, Hernández and Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, 42.

agricultural chemicals, which the indigenous farmers had come to rely on for production, had suddenly halted.<sup>18</sup> The economic collapse also ended government spending on expansive infrastructure projects. The truckers and laborers employed for urban improvement initiatives as well as to build and maintain roads, bridges and dams were suddenly jobless. Worldwide coffee prices plummeted, which drove the immense coffee plantations in southern Chiapas to lay off even more poor laborers.<sup>19</sup> In every corner of the state, the working classes became unemployed, desperate, and in need of cash.

The expenses of farmers then rose dramatically, as the prices of transportation, fertilizers, weed sprays, and labor all increased. The costs of fertilizers and weed sprays were dropped fully onto the shoulders of farmers. As a result of the heightened rate of inflation, the poor laborers who worked as field hands could no longer afford to be paid in food at the conclusion of the harvest. Instead they required payment in cash at the time of their work. Indeed, every component of the farming process became more expensive; the oil crisis even caused the prices of field tools to rise.<sup>20</sup>

The poor indigenous laborers who previously relied on the room and board that was provided by the traditional agrarian labor system were struggling to maintain even a basic existence. Collier and Quaratiello write, “Prior to the 1980s, Chiapas had been a place where the disadvantaged could count on others for their basic livelihoods as long as they were willing to help out with corn production. But as maize cultivation was displaced from its central place in Chiapas life, the poor found themselves utterly marginalized.”<sup>21</sup> They lacked any reliable means of earning enough money to buy food and provide their own housing.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 109.



In sum, the very nature of the agrarian economic system in Chiapas changed after the oil bust in 1982. Farming was no longer a mostly cashless enterprise. The need to pay for products and services had shifted the agrarian economy to being cash-based. As a consequence of rapid inflation, the price of growing, maintaining, harvesting, and transporting crops increased. Farmers became more poor, and truckers and laborers were more desperate for formal employment. The breakdown of the economic safety net provided by the informal labor model of “work for food” had strained indigenous communities by broadening the economic inequalities and creating new sub-classes of people within the working classes.<sup>22</sup>

At this point, the argument made by Collier and Quaratiello, and other “land and rights” Zapatista historians, is that increased farming costs and the severing of the dependency relationship between farmers and poor laborers resulted in the swift decline in the quality of housing, food and nutrition, education, and healthcare in indigenous communities.<sup>23</sup> In response to their growing poverty, these EZLN historians explain the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indians eventually released outbursts of passion and popular organization. Their desires for agrarian reform and rights for indigenous people resulted in the Zapatista Rebellion.

The argument of these scholars is flawed for several reasons. First, the agrarian sector of the Chiapas economy was entirely dominated by men. Every component of the production process, from the non-Indian land owners who controlled the indigenous people’s rented fields, to the planting, harvesting, and weeding done by laborers, to the transportation of crops to markets by truckers, was the work of men.<sup>24</sup> This is understandable, as males were the chief income earners in the indigenous family unit. Women were, for the most part, excluded from

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>24</sup> Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 108.

formal agricultural work and were, therefore, not subject to the same experiences as those engaged in farming.<sup>25</sup> The labor of indigenous women was separate, domestic, and therefore outside of the sphere of formal agricultural production.<sup>26</sup> Thus, when Rus, Hernández Castillo and Mattiace exclaimed, “every Indian had become a leader in their struggle for land reform”, the authors neglected to establish the proper motivations which compelled women to participate in the reform.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the mainstream argument does not holistically analyze the broad and relevant compulsory factors that resulted in the participation of women in the Zapatista Rebellion. There is a significant amount of attention paid by scholars to the worldwide crash in oil prices that influenced the agrarian crisis in Chiapas, as my summary of the traditional argument has demonstrated. But indigenous female Zapatistas were not directly involved in the formal agrarian economy. The frustration that women experienced, which compelled them to take up arms, must have been received from difference sources. Up until now, scholars have recognized that women in the Zapatista Rebellion supported the economic and social changes which the movement sought to achieve; in other words, the plight of Zapatista females were the same as males.<sup>28</sup> This gender-neutral explanation has not accounted for the critical presence of indigenous feminist thought in Chiapas before the revolution. Feminist thought compelled women to enter the movement in the hope of resolving women-centered issues that men did not experience due to their involvement in the formal agricultural economy.

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<sup>25</sup> June C. Nash, “Autonomy Begins at Home: A Gendered Perspective on Indigenous Autonomy Movements,” *Caribbean Studies* 38 no. 2 (2010): 121

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Rus, Hernández and Matiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 116.

In the following sections, I will expand upon the social and economic issues that women faced prior to the Zapatista Rebellion, and the impact that feminist thought had on compelling women to enter the revolution. Though before moving on, it will be helpful to introduce the critical hardships faced by indigenous women shortly before the rebellion. The informal work performed by women was in the interest of maintaining a family's subsistence. Growing food in local milpas, hauling water and firewood, grinding corn and making tortillas, weaving woolen clothes, cleaning and cooking for their household were all the responsibilities of indigenous women.<sup>29</sup> Following the oil bust in 1982, more pressure was applied to women by their fathers or husbands to provide for their families. Women worked to harvest more food from their communal gardens and to make handcrafts, such as embroidered clothing, baskets and jewelry, that could be sold in the markets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Zinacantán, Ocosingo and Chamula.<sup>30</sup> Along with the financial stressors of the new cash-based economy also came an increase in depression, alcoholism, father-daughter and spousal abuse for women.<sup>31</sup> In being drawn out of their homes in order to earn money in the formal economy, indigenous women were relieved of much of the subservience, isolation, and dependency created by the men in their communities.

### **Wage Labor and Physical Abuse: Tailoring Women's Issues in the Greater Conflict**

In the isolated indigenous villages and hamlets of the Chiapas highlands, the responsibilities of men and women were highly gendered. From an early age, young girls were schooled in the menial, repetitive tasks that were demanded of women in order to be the

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<sup>29</sup> Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Christine Eber, *Women and Alcohol in a highland Maya Town: Water of Hope, Water of Sorrow* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 231.

caretakers of their home and family.<sup>32</sup> A young girl could not expect to have a life that was different from that of her mother's, for the roles of indigenous women were fixed; they were supported by cultural gender norms that had changed very little throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> Thus, young girls could not expect to be anything more than domestic servants.<sup>34</sup> In the previous section, the daily tasks that women were expected to perform in order to provide for the subsistence of their families were introduced. The informal responsibilities of indigenous women had forced them to be servants within both their homes and their greater communities.

Yet most indigenous women accepted the burdens of their gendered status within their communities, because the consequence of retaliating against the gendered roles of society was far greater. Typically, those women who did not embrace the female gender norms were unable to marry and leave their father's household in good standing. Thus, they were forced to leave the community and live in greater poverty while selling their handmade clothes and trinkets in the city markets.<sup>35</sup> Usually, though, the opportunity of retaliating against the traditional gender concepts was never conceived, for in isolated communities, there was only one world that was known to exist: it was the present community in which they lived.

To broaden the concept of indigenous women living without much personal choice in the direction of their lives, where the other members of the society around them do not support women who desire freedom of movement and responsibilities, I will elaborate on the domestic culture within indigenous villages and hamlets. A woman was always expected to serve and

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Heidi Moksnes, *Maya Exodus: Indigenous Struggle for Citizenship in Chiapas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 148. This section explains the responsibilities and lifestyles of indigenous midwives and nurses in greater detail.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Collier and Quaratiello, *Basta!*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> A minority of indigenous women learned the trade of folk medicine and worked as "healers". These women were the exception, for they experienced greater independence and mobility than did most women, who could be framed as housewives or (if they were unmarried) domestic servants.

<sup>35</sup> Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, "The Emergence of Indigenous Feminism in Latin America," *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 539.

obey her husband. With such obedience, she was compelled to embrace the fury of his temperament. In *Maya Exodus: Indigenous Struggle for Citizenship in Chiapas*, Heidi Moksnes cautioned, “Many women suffered physical abuse, especially when their husbands were drunk. Most women were taught to be obedient and submissive as children, and many learned to accept physical punishment as a means to correct their behavior.”<sup>36</sup> By applying physical beatings, the husband was reinforcing the behaviors that the greater community approved of. Those behaviors were, in addition to obedience and submission, a positive working attitude that fostered productivity and responsibility.<sup>37</sup> The *best* indigenous women lived and worked with their eyes open, their ears and mouths shut, and their heads down.

In addition to obedience and submission within the household, it was also expected that women did not voice their opinions outside of their homes. Women truly were not their own agents and instead were represented by the men who controlled their household.<sup>38</sup> Whenever an indigenous female ventured into the public sphere, she was seldom permitted to be alone; there was usually an adult male relative or spouse present who was responsible for her.<sup>39</sup> The possibility of using the established political action channels within indigenous communities in order to benefit their interests and concerns were heavily limited.<sup>40</sup> If a woman wanted to express her voice in public, within a community meeting or a government office, she would have to parrot her messages through her male keeper. The messages would have to align with the male’s interests, though that goes almost without saying, for the wife was always expected to identify with and be loyal to her husband’s interests.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Moksnes, *Maya Exodus*, 144.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

In a 1996 interview conducted at a Sunday service in Yibeljoj, a small Tzotzil village in the Chiapas highlands, an unnamed indigenous woman elaborated upon the restrictions to women's participation in community events. The woman said,

If the women and girls don't want to speak, it's because they are afraid of their husbands. If they go to the [community] meeting, they will be scolded. 'Why are you speaking if I am not? I don't care if you know how [to speak in a group],' the husband says... 'Why are you speaking if I'm not speaking?' they say to their daughters. [The men] say, 'You are shaming me,' if we speak.<sup>42</sup>

How were indigenous women able to improve their standard of living, when their voices were silenced or their speech was censored in order to promote the interests of men? The traditional codes of female conduct did not allow women to experience anything more fulfilling than what their mother's had, or what their grandmother's had. For the gendered customs of conduct and behavior in isolated indigenous communities fostered the exploitation of female labor, the physical and emotional abuse of women, and the restriction of physical and social movement, resulting in indigenous women's domestic servitude in Chiapas.

So why, with the wretched social status of indigenous women in Chiapas in the past, have they not participated in a feminist rebellion before January 1, 1994? The answer is that there had not been a significant shift in the agrarian labor model. For the financial crisis of the 1980s had compelled men to forcefully direct women into the formal workplace in order to help provide for their family's monetary subsistence. The villages and hamlets were usually the locations women were married in and could expect to live out their lives in.<sup>43</sup> That said, something significant

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<sup>42</sup> Interviewer unknown, interviewed by Heidi Moksnes, Yibeljoj, Chiapas, Mexico, April 28, 1996, transcript, Heidi Moksnes, *Maya Exodus: Indigenous Struggle for Citizenship in Chiapas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012): 151.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

occurred when indigenous women left their communities and entered the formal economy. Previous to the 1980s, most indigenous women who left their homes did so in rebellion or shame, for they were not willing or able to conform to the cultural codes of conduct which governed the lives of females. Once the agrarian crisis occurred and poverty worsened, the freedoms of movement and of profession were available to them (to a limited extent, as women usually produced goods for sale that they already knew how to make).<sup>44</sup> Those out-of-community experiences would cause masses of indigenous women to volunteer to fight in the Zapatista Rebellion. Though their reasons for participating in the revolution were not what most would have expected.

There were several consequences for women, as a result of the increased demands for earning cash money. In exchange for having the experiences of self-assigning their own tasks and responsibilities, and of interacting with other indigenous women and non-indigenous people in the marketplaces *without* a male handler, the necessary domestic chores of women became more burdensome. Just like indigenous men, the standard of living of women decreased in the agrarian crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s. For women, the exhaustive need to both maintain their households by performing the traditional gendered tasks as well as earn cash by producing and selling goods in the markets weighed heavily on their shoulders.

The economic collapse physically and emotionally damaged their living standards as well, with an increased rate of domestic abuse inflicted upon them and their children by husbands and fathers who were pushed into alcoholism and financial destitution as a result of the

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<sup>44</sup> The major constraint to both of those freedoms was a language barrier. Tzotzil and Tetzil girls were raised in monolingual households. They spoke the indigenous language and dialect that was present in their community. The people in the lowlands of Chiapas, where all of the significant market cities were, spoke Spanish.

agrarian crisis.<sup>45</sup> In 1988, a researcher was conducting field work on the growing problems of alcoholism in indigenous highland villages. She transcribed the statements of a woman in the community of Yav Teklum who was criticizing the wife of a rum merchant. The merchant's family was profiting from the misery felt as a result of the agrarian crisis. The unnamed woman exclaimed,

Look, my son hit me. My son get's drunk, too. It's your fault that my son and my husband hit me. You're to blame! You're nice and fat because your stomach is full of shit. But it's because of my money that you're fat... I haven't been able to buy any clothes. I haven't been able to buy our food. I'm the one who has to buy our food when they're passing their drinks around. How can I pay for clothes? How can I pay for the things we need?<sup>46</sup>

The traditional gender codes which had sheltered women within their households were loosened and reworked. The developing roles of indigenous women in the family unit, those of a domestic laborer *and* a wage earner, exposed them to greater stressors than they had experienced in the past. The need to earn money created new issues for females. Those women-centered issues would be the motivational factors that compelled them into revolution.

Thus, indigenous women who participated in the EZLN rebellion were not exclusively protesting the status of the agrarian economy in Chiapas. Their struggle, while linked with that of men's, took on a gendered dimension in the defense of indigenous women's issues.<sup>47</sup> The work of women (as well as the consequences of women's work) as semi-formal cultivators and

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<sup>45</sup> Christine Eber, *Women and Alcohol in a Highland Maya Town: Water of Hope, Water of Sorrow* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995): 218.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>47</sup> June C. Nash, "Autonomy Begins at Home: A Gendered Perspective on Indigenous Autonomy Movements," *Caribbean Studies* 38 no. 2 (2010): 119.



artisans was their particular concern.<sup>48</sup> In order for indigenous women to experience a greater standard of living, the reforming of the agricultural and small-scale market economy in Chiapas was essential.

In her article on the gendered nature of the Zapatista Revolution, “Zapatismo and the Emergence of Indigenous Feminism,” Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, a leading historian on feminism in political and social revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explains, “indigenous women [in the Zapatistas] have maintained a *double* militancy, linking their gender-specific struggles to struggles for the autonomy of indigenous communities” (emphasis added). She continues, writing on the gendered nature of revolutionary participation: “Women tended to focus on daily problems, the specific ways that they experienced racism and exclusion, while the men made political pronouncements.”<sup>49</sup> In carrying a double-edged sword in the revolution, indigenous women were able to support the interests of their greater communities (and the men whom they were attached to), as well as fight for their own interests, which were separate from the men’s. Ultimately, women’s interests were interwoven into the greater agrarian crisis.

### **Rules for the New Radicals: Female Participation in the Zapatista Rebellion**

When does a revolution begin? It certainly does not begin when the first shots are fired. As I have established, the wheels of revolutionary action in Chiapas began to spin more than a decade before the Zapatista Revolution. The separate experiences that men and women had as a result of the agrarian crisis led them to participate in the rebellion. Thus, a compelling question

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>49</sup> Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, “Zapatismo and the Emergence of Indigenous Feminism,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35 no. 6 (2002): 39.

to ask is how many social and economic victories won for indigenous women by the EZLN can be attributed to female *Zapatistas*, or *compañeras*?<sup>50</sup>

In the weeks after the beginning of the Zapatista Rebellion, along with their takeover of important market cities in Chiapas, the EZLN distributed thousands of copies of a twenty-page packet published by their official newspaper, *El Despertador Mexicano*.<sup>51</sup> On the seventeenth and eighteenth pages, there was a list of women's demands, also known as the Revolutionary Women's Law.<sup>52</sup> The women's demands began by inviting all women, regardless of "race, creed, color or political affiliation"; it only required that "they share the demands of the exploited [indigenous citizens of Chiapas] and that they commit to the laws and regulations of the [Zapatista] revolution."<sup>53</sup> The Revolutionary Women's law continued, listing ten laws that the EZLN demanded in order to allow for the reform of the social and economic issues of indigenous women. Several of the most influential laws are as follows:

*First:* Women... have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle [of the Zapatistas] in a way determined by their desire and capacity.

*Second:* Women have a right to work and receive a just salary.

*Fifth:* Women and their children have the right to primary attention in the matters of health and nutrition.

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<sup>50</sup> A *compañera* is the Spanish word most used to describe a female guerilla soldier in the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Male soldiers in the EZLN were known as *comañeros*. These terms are not clear to most non-native Spanish speakers, as a *compañera* is a female companion, friend, or a woman whom one frequently converses with. The word "compañera" makes sense in the context of the Zapatista Revolution when it is translated as "female comrade".

<sup>51</sup> The title "*El Despertador Mexicano*" has been directly translated as "The Mexican Alarm Clock". While this littoral translation is correct and has great symbolic meaning, a more symbolic translation is "The Mexican Awakener". This phrase more intensely communicates the meaning of the Zapatista's political and ideological messages. This translation conveys a sense of urgency and positive action.

<sup>52</sup> General Command of the EZLN, "Declaration of War".

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

*Seventh:* Women have the right to choose their partner, and are not to be forced into marriage.

*Eighth:* Women shall not be beaten or physically mistreated by their family members or by strangers. Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.<sup>54</sup>

The significance of the Revolutionary Women's Law as it applied to indigenous female participation in the EZLN cannot be overstated. It was used by the General Command of the EZLN to compel women to volunteer in order to bolster the ranks of the Zapatistas.

Nevertheless, the women's demands allowed indigenous females the opportunity to engage in a greater conflict in Chiapas, all the while working to resolve women-centered issues.

In an interview with journalists after several months of continuous rebellion, *Subcomandante* Marcos, the highest ranked commander and spokesman for the EZLN, explained why he thought women were drawn to participate in the rebellion. Marcos said that indigenous females "have no opportunity to develop themselves as people. What the compañeras say is that they cannot have their equality decreed from above, they have to achieve it through struggle. They say, 'You can like it or not, but now we are going to change these things. By force'."<sup>55</sup> That said, the Tzotzil and Tetzil women were not relegated to positions of lower-rank, or subservience, to the *compañeros* in the volunteer army.

The most infamous and dramatic achievement of an indigenous woman occurred in the very beginning of the conflict. It has been immortalized in the writings of historians and journalists, for it singularly displayed the significance of women's participation in the Zapatista

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>55</sup> Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente (*Subcomandante* Marcos of the EZLN), interviewed by Eugenio Aguilera, Ana Laura Hernández, Gustavo Rodríguez, Pablo Salazar Devereaux, somewhere in the Lacandona Jungle, May 11, 1994, transcript, "Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution", <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/Zapatistas/chapter11.html>: 7.

Rebellion. It happened on the morning of January 1, 1994, when a Tzotzil woman *led* the takeover of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Her name was Major Ana María. She had experienced the financial and social decline of the indigenous population in Chiapas since the first years of the oil crisis; in fact, she independently began to organize against the suffering of indigenous women in her community a decade before the rebellion. On January 1, Major María captured the national flag of Mexico from atop the municipal headquarters in the *Plaza Mayor* and presented it to the commanders of the EZLN.<sup>56</sup> That same year, Subcomandante Marcos wrote about her accomplishment.<sup>57</sup> He exclaimed,

She (Major Ana María) came to the mountains of the Lacandón Jungle in December 1984, not yet twenty years of age and yet carrying the marks of a whole history of indigenous humiliation on her body. In December 1984, this brown woman says “*Enough is Enough!*” but she says it so softly that only she hears herself. In January 1994, this women and several thousand indigenous women not only say but shout “*Enough is Enough!*” so loudly that all the world hears them.<sup>58</sup>

As this statement made by Marcos signifies, the indigenous female Zapatistas were a numerous, energized and passionate fighting force within the ranks of the EZLN. Females were not relegated to a servile status in the Zapatista community; on the contrary, the Tzotzil and Tetzel women were able to fight along side men to resolve the gendered issues that compelled both sexes to take up arms.

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<sup>56</sup> The Plaza Mayor is the main plaza in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Most of the administrative buildings are located on or near it. Since the rebellion, the Plaza Mayor has become a place of organized, popular protest against the oppression of indigenous people by the Mexican government. While I was conducting research in San Cristóbal, there were new opportunities almost every day to view new graffiti created by indigenous feminists on the walls around the plaza.

<sup>57</sup> Subcomandante Marcos used this rank and name as his alias before, during and after the EZLN rebellion. His full, given name is Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente.

<sup>58</sup> Subcomandante Marcos, “The First Zapatista Uprising: An Extract of a Letter from Sub-commander Marcos,” *Awe:kon: A Journal of Indigenous Issues* 11 no. 2 (1994): 69.

With their plight for a higher standard of living for indigenous females, it was no surprise that compañeras had a colorful array of new, and indeed liberating, experiences while fighting in the cities and jungles of Chiapas. Almost all of the female volunteers were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five; in that stage of their lives, indigenous married women would have had as many as four or five children.<sup>59</sup> Thus, compañeras enthusiastically embraced the Zapatista's policy that required all female volunteers to utilize birth control, after they told their respective commander that they were in a sexual relationship.<sup>60</sup>

It was common for women and men in the EZLN to develop personal relationships during the rebellion. One particular cause of these "liberating relationships" was an unrestrictive policy on dancing. In the indigenous highland villages of Chiapas, women were not allowed to dance after they were married, for, as Subcomandante Marcos said, "she is now somebody's *property*" (emphasis added).<sup>61</sup> But in the Zapatista's camps, "the combatants dance whether they are married or single, and it is very common that the woman chooses her dancing partner. They dance just to dance, to have fun."<sup>62</sup> Understandably, when people are fighting in a revolution, it is appropriate to enjoy one another's company.

The freeing experiences that women had while in the EZLN were influential in developing them into indigenous feminists. For most compañeras, the Zapatistas offered them their first experiences of receiving adequate healthcare (including birth control and abortions).<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, female Zapatistas were not subjected to physical violence by the men in their community, for the Revolutionary Women's Law strictly prohibited rape, attempted rape, and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Transcript, Subcomandante Marcos: 7.

physical abuse. In an interview, Subcomandante Marcos elaborated on the Revolutionary Women's Law forbidding physical abuse against women, stating, "if there's a *compañero* who... begins to fight with his woman. Well, we...are going to call to attention [to the fact] that a *compañero* is doing this... Because it shouldn't be that you will do whatever you want. Even if it's not their wife but another *compañera*. We have to make it so that they have to obey [the Women's Revolutionary Law]." <sup>64</sup> How freeing it must have been for women who fought in the revolution: having the freedom to associate with men, with only the desire for companionship and not marriage; the freedom to not become physically tormented with pregnancies and childbirth; the freedom to not be burdened with the responsibilities of both maintaining a household and earning money for subsistence.

On January 12, 1994, a ceasefire was brokered between EZLN militants and the Mexican federal government. The events that followed went *almost* entirely according to plan. The General Commanders of the EZLN brought their demands to the Mexican government and engaged in lengthy negotiations. The Zapatista leadership periodically returned to the Lacandona Jungle to review the government's proposed compromises with the councils of indigenous communities. By June, 1994, the Zapatistas were able to secure multiple victories for indigenous people in Chiapas. For example, the Mexican federal government established protectionist trade policies for Chiapas, in an effort to lessen the agrarian crisis and make the market economy more accessible for indigenous people. <sup>65</sup> The state government of Chiapas also began efforts to make education and healthcare more accessible to indigenous people, especially women and children. <sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, though, the indigenous councils rejected the government

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Eisenstadt, *Politics, Identity, and Mexico's Indigenous Rights Movements*, 79.

<sup>66</sup> "Timeline", <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/Zapatistas/timeline.html>: 1.

peace proposals in a final act of retaliation. Instead of reengaging the Mexican army, the General Command of the EZLN urged “civil society” to take up the struggle.<sup>67</sup>

What did Subcomandante Marcos and the rest of the EZLN leadership mean, when they declared the struggle of indigenous people should be passed onto a civil society? In effect, the Zapatistas wanted to put down their weapons and no longer engage in armed conflicts. The indigenous Zapatista men and women returned to their villages and hamlets. Women of the EZLN continued the struggle for improving the women-centered issues that first compelled them into the revolution. They assisted in developing organized, democratic activist groups whose missions included the alleviation of indigenous women from physical and financial destitution.<sup>68</sup> As a result, women were drawn into their communities, out of their homes and away from the men that governed their lives. They were encouraged to speak at village meetings on the issues that mattered to them, without the intimidation of a male handler who could skew their words for personal benefit. Thus, when indigenous women’s voices were supported, their concerns were taken as priorities in their communities.<sup>69</sup> Advances in women’s access to education, healthcare and the market economy followed.

### **Legacy of the New Radicals: Indigenous Feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Contemporary indigenous feminists in Chiapas are directly connected to the women who participated in the Zapatista Rebellion, through their hope and action in the support of positive changes to women-centered issues. On the topic of Zapatista women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is appropriate to return to the work of Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, one of the leading scholars

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<sup>67</sup> “Timeline”, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Karen Kampworth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>69</sup> Karen Kampworth, *Women and Guerilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 101.

on feminism in Chiapas. In her article on indigenous women's groups, "The Emergence of Indigenous Feminism in Latin America", Hernández Castillo writes,

if we consider feminism to be a body of social theories and political practices that analyze and seek to change inequality between men and women, then this budding indigenous women's movement [Zapatista females in their communities] can be seen as a new indigenous feminism. Most indigenous women associate feminism with urban upper-middle class women and regard it as divisive of their shared struggles with indigenous men... These preconceptions are starting to change.<sup>70</sup>

The women who participated in the EZLN Rebellion influenced other indigenous feminists throughout Mexico. What began as a sub-movement of female reformists within the Zapatista Revolution has grown into a struggle of unified indigenous women throughout Mexico.<sup>71</sup> As the Zapatista's developed their civic movement for indigenous rights, it also blossomed into a movement for indigenous feminism. The continuation of the indigenous feminist movement into the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been labeled the "second great Zapatista rebellion".<sup>72</sup>

The significance of a connected group of indigenous women from different tribal identities, meaning they do not share the same language or dialect, standard of dress, diet or cultural base, cannot be understated. Throughout the history of Mexico, state and private actors have purposefully isolated indigenous communities from their greater tribe and from other disadvantaged tribes.<sup>73</sup> The purpose of creating such division was to prevent the large-scale organization of the Mexican indigenous population. Having common threads of interest (i.e.,

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<sup>70</sup> Hernández Castillo, "The Emergence of Indigenous Feminism in Latin America": 541.

<sup>71</sup> Kampworth, *Women and Guerilla Movements*, 99.

<sup>72</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "Momentos culminantes," *Proceso* (April, 2001): 27.

<sup>73</sup> Hernández Castillo, "Zapatismo and the Emergence of Indigenous Feminism": 41.



women's issues and rights for indigenous women and children) have allowed distant indigenous peoples in Mexico to protest in physical numbers that were never witnessed before the Zapatista Rebellion.

In February 2001, indigenous people from different tribal identities protested in Mexico City, Mexico. The number of participants was estimated to be over seven thousand.<sup>74</sup> In fact, the event was one of the largest non-violent protests made by indigenous people in Mexican history. The main purpose of their protest was to bring indigenous rights and women's rights to the attention of foreign governments as well as the domestic and international media communities.<sup>75</sup> Several hundred indigenous Zapatista men and women, and several members of the General Command of the EZLN (including Subcomandante Marcos), had attended the indigenous protest. For the central goal of the EZLN has always been the liberation of indigenous people from the economic and social oppression of their governments, without concern for nationality, race, color or ethnicity.

With the continued presence of indigenous feminists in the EZLN, the circle of people which the Zapatista movement positively affects will continue to expand. The Zapatistas were never singularly compelled by issues of land and indigenous rights. It was women's issues that compelled so many indigenous females to swell the ranks of the Zapatistas. Indeed, it has been the continued action of female Zapatistas that has carried the "second great Zapatista rebellion" to the present day.

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<sup>74</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "Soy indígena y Soy mujer," *Proceso* (April, 2001): 43.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

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