

The Struggles for Women's Rights in Chiapas:

**A Directory of Social Organisations Supporting
Women in Chiapas**

A PUBLICATION OF THE LILLA: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S NETWORK



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Women's organisations in Chiapas: A mosaic of light and hope

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The diversity of women's groups in Chiapas is so rich that it is a challenge to write this introduction without committing involuntary omissions. In any case, I apologise in advance and will be happy to correct any errors made. It is important to mention that my objective, rather than covering all the groups which operate in the state, is to give an panorama of some moments and forms in which the presence of women in progressive spaces has been significant, as well as certain dynamics we have participated in that have thus enriched the popular movement in recent decades. While I accept that work has been done from government institutions, in this essay I focus only on the history of women's organisations that have set themselves free of the patriarchal captivity of the neoliberal capitalist system.

In the first section, before writing about specific organisations, I refer to Chiapas's exhausting political and social context, so our struggles can be better understood by the reader. I will subsequently deal with the first meetings and agreements which occurred between the women of Chiapas, thus putting down the roots of a broad-based movement that has seen ups and downs, connections and separations. Despite this, and in fact because of its ongoing ramifications in our contemporary movements, I consider this process to have been a focal point of meetings, celebrations and collective reflections.

In this introduction I would like to mention the multiplicity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some consider them 'institutions of the political non-movement', but I see them as workplaces for women who work with a commitment to indigenous, rural and urban women, supporting the strengthening of their processes and their self-determination, and accompanying them in their search for alternative solutions to the difficulties of their daily lives.

I'll also make mention of an organisation, registered as an NGO and with a long, rich history as part of the popular church movement. This group is the Diocesan Coordination of Women (CODIMUJ), and is the organisation with the largest number of participants in the state.

In vocal opposition to government policy, the work of the National Front for Socialist Struggle (FNLS) has played an important role in the state. It is a mixed organisation that has achieved a significant level of participation among its women members, both in positions of responsibility and in their public actions and mobilisations.

Within 'neutral' spaces, we can also consider the gender-based work conducted in Chiapas universities and research centres. I haven't included them in this essay as, in general, these centres remain disconnected from women's organisational processes.

In the final part of this essay, I refer to two organisations that share the same political position, although they are organically different: the work of the women of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) as part of the EZLN's political project, and the feminist space which is being constructed within The Other Campaign.

I have chosen not to include the work on women's issues carried out by mixed NGOs and social organisations, such as trade unions, peasant organisations and political entities. Their work is diverse and requires study in its own right, based on information not yet at hand. However, I wish to take this opportunity to recognise the work of the women trade-union leaders of Section 40 of the Secretariat of Healthcare Workers' Union (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Secretaría de Salud), which operates throughout the state of Chiapas; their members usually participate in our Independent Women's Movement (Movimiento Independiente de Mujeres, MIM).

CHIAPAS: A KNOT OF COMPLEX CONTRADICTIONS

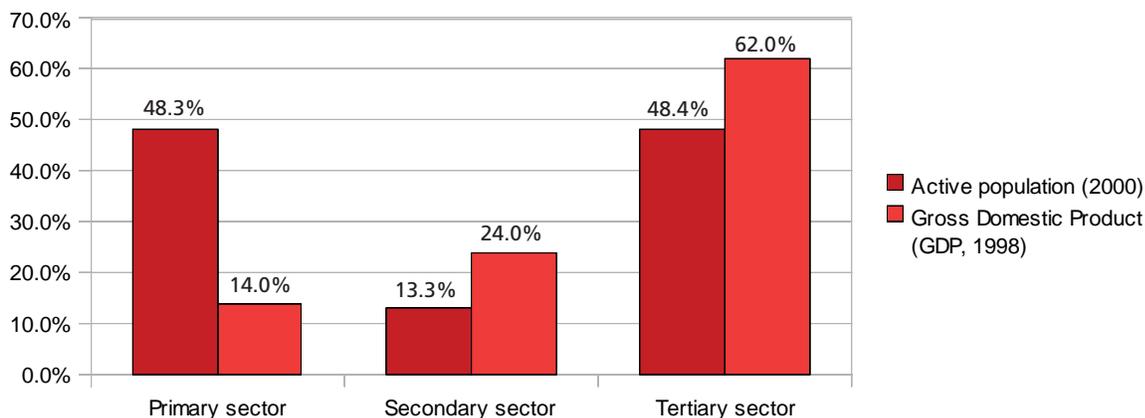
To understand the nature of our struggles as women, it is necessary to outline at least three important characteristics of the state of Chiapas. Some of these factors are certainly shared with other areas in Mexico and the world, but without a doubt they give a particular structure to the demands of Chiapas women.

I. GLOBAL CRISIS IN ADDITION TO STRUCTURAL CRISIS

Chiapas is one of the poorest, most marginalised and most underdeveloped states in Mexico. A total of 93.16% of the state's municipalities are classified as being of 'high' and 'very high' marginalisation by the National Population Council (Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), 2001). To understand this situation, we will briefly cite some statistics from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI). Chiapas has a total population of 4,293,459; one half are women and one third are indigenous. Illiteracy rates across the state reach 21.35%, yet among indigenous people the rate is 39.1%. Almost half of the population (43%), principally women, have not finished primary school, and 33% have no access to basic services and live in houses with dirt floors. Even more significant is the fact that indigenous women live in an even more disadvantaged situation when compared with these state-wide statistics¹: almost 40% are illiterate, 69% have not completed primary education, 30% speak only their indigenous mother tongue (not Spanish) and more than 63% receive no income, a clear disadvantage in the capitalist system the women are bound to.

Of the state's total population, some 48.3% of people list their primary occupation as agriculture; however, the sector's contribution to the Chiapas economy represents only 14% of the GDP, indicating extremely low agricultural productivity. In addition, since 2000 there has been a reduction in corn production for domestic use – corn being Chiapas's staple food product – as the cost of production cannot compete with the purchase price of the genetically modified corn being imported from the United States.

COMPARISON BETWEEN ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION (EAP) AND GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT (GDP)



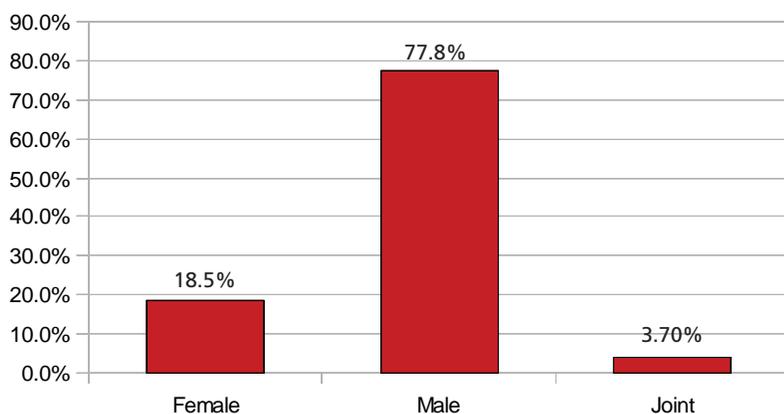
Sources: *Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 2000* (INEGI 2001); *Anuario Estadístico Chiapas, 2000* (INEGI 2001).

It is also important to note that the increase in population since the 1970s has caused great pressure on the land and its resources. It has been calculated that around 30% of peasants aged over 15, or married minors, either own no farmland, own their land on credit, rent small properties and/or work as agricultural day labourers (Olivera & Rasgado, 2004). The average expanse of land per owner is 3.5 hectares, although many individuals own less than one hectare. Most farmland is exhausted, requiring the application of more insecticides and fertilisers. Another important characteristic is that women have traditionally been excluded from land ownership; only 22% of land owners in Chiapas are women, generally widows who care for the land until their children reach adulthood. In the absence of men, it is the widows who cultivate the land, normally sowing only the amount required for domestic consumption. Recently, with the application of PROCEDE (Program of Certification of Communal Land Rights and Urban Agricultural Land [Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos])², many women have been dispossessed of their land, as although they do farm work they are not the land's legal title-holders.

1. Among peasant women in Chiapas, 38.28% speak Tsotsil, 18.6% Tseltal, 12% Ch'ol, 4.6% Tojolabal, 1.6% Mam, 1.6% Zoque, and 3.8% Kanjobal and other languages. They're principally concentrated in the Highlands, Jungle and Northern Zones of the state (Olivera & Rasgado, 2004).

2. PROCEDE is now known as 'Fund for Support of Unregistered Agrarian Centres' (Fondo de Apoyo para Núcleos Agrarios sin Regularizar, FUNDAR)–Ed.

LAND OWNERSHIP



Source: *Diagnostic Study*, Chiapas Centre for Women's Rights (CDMCH), 2004

According to Villafuerte (2002:85), rural Chiapas entered a severe crisis from the mid-1980s onwards, as a consequence of the limits on subsidies, reduced public investment in rural development, a reduction in the real prices of basic grains, restrictions in credits and, on a global level, adverse macroeconomic conditions and low international prices for agricultural products, particularly coffee and banana.

The state's severe levels of poverty have become more acute since the 1980s. Currently, 78% of families receive an income of less than two minimum salaries³, classifying them as 'extremely poor'. Poverty has affected the majority of the state's population, but especially peasants, the largest sector of the population, which works primarily in agricultural production⁴. Since 2000, poverty has extended even further across the state because of the high degree of breakdown in the peasants' productive systems. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has created a competitive disadvantage between our native corn and the genetically modified corn subsidised and imported by the US government. In research we conducted on women's property ownership, we found that the average income per person in peasant communities in 2004 was just 7.35 pesos a day, considerably less than two minimum salaries, while tortillas then cost around 9 pesos per kilogram (Olivera y Ortiz, 2008).

To the growing poverty of the rural population⁵ should be added the privatisation of socially owned land, known as Salinas's [Agrarian] Counter-Reform (1992), which has been implemented through PROCEDE. The impact of migration to the north of Mexico and to the United States on women's lives should also be taken into account. 'The number of identified Chiapas residents who work in the United States is around 260,000, many of them young peasants, not necessarily from the poorest families' (see Villafuerte & García, 2008). Most migrants have in fact completed primary education. 'Migrations, which represent the most desperate response to the economic crisis, have broken down the structure of traditional family relationships and collective social organisation; the land, which was previously the basis for all peasant organising, is being displaced. It is no longer the fundamental source of income, but merely a complement. Remittances, which don't offer a lasting solution in rural areas as they are not invested there, has increased 1500-fold in the last 15 years from USD 238,000 to USD 530 million' (see Villafuerte & García, 2008). Although remittances act as a retaining wall for social discontent, together with migration they are associated with acute social problems such as vandalism, increased feminicides, increased drug addiction, increased transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV/AIDS (particularly among housewives), etc.

The crisis has particularly affected women. In a recent diagnostic study, we found that rural women consider that the problems which are having the greatest negative impact are poverty, migration, violence and their forced participation in the workforce (Rubio et al, 2009). The breakdown of the family, alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual harassment, dispossession of land, rape and the suicides of young men and women are associated problems which take their toll. The Chiapas Centre for Women's Rights (CDMCH) has documented, reported and defended hundreds of cases each year.

3. The current minimum salary in Chiapas is 51.95 pesos per day. For more details, see http://www.sat.gob.mx/sitio_internet/asistencia_contribuyente/informacion_frecuente/salarios_minimos/default.asp.

4. A person is considered a 'peasant' if he/she works on the family farm, even though he/she may hire labourers in periods of increased workload.

5. In 2000, 40.7% of the Economically Active Population (EAP) occupied in rural work received no income. Of those who did, 74.5% received less than one minimum salary and 16.2% received between one and two minimum salaries (Villafuerte & García, 2008).

In rural and indigenous communities, those who stay behind are the old men and women and the poorest families who cannot even afford to become indebted to pay for the costs of migration. Many women have also been left behind by their partners. Around 35% of Chiapas families are headed by women, who are now responsible for continuing their traditional domestic work as well as supporting the family by working in the family farm or participating in the workforce. Many sell their craftwork, run food stalls, or work as domestic servants or in other unqualified positions in nearby cities. One woman put it this way:

Now I'm both a man and a woman ... except that I earn a lot less than my husband did ... he migrated, and never came back because he found another woman over there.

AGE AND OCCUPATION OF WOMEN

Occupation	Age			Total*
	18-25	26-40	Over 40	
Home	40%	44.62%	48.81%	45.98%
Home and farm	2%	21.54%	28.57%	23.56%
Home and informal work	8%	21.54%	16.67%	17.24%
Home and fixed-salary work	30%	12.30%	5.95%	10.35%
Students	20%	0%	0%	2.87%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Total compared to the complete sample

Source: *Diagnostic Study*, Chiapas Centre for Women's Rights (CDMCH), 2004

Another impact on women has been the increase in stress as a result of the considerable increase in workload, and the responsibility of both maintaining a family and fulfilling community obligations.

II. NEOLIBERAL POLICIES AND GENDER-BASED SUBORDINATION

In addition to this structural violence, which saps the day-to-day lives of most Chiapas women, the neoliberal policies which support the voracious concentration of capital also result in the weakening of the State, the polarisation of society and the new vulnerability of Mexico's national sovereignty. Not only have both land and public services been privatised (making access even more difficult for the poor), but the government has joined the neoliberal dynamic which reinforces women's traditional social roles, tying them more ruthlessly to the home and coopting their maternity to service the needs of the neoliberal system. As one peasant woman said, 'I've sold my body to the government in exchange for food for my children.'

Poor women in Latin America are effectively forced by the World Bank – the official program in Mexico is called 'Opportunities' ('Oportunidades') – to have few children, take contraceptives, and submit to surgery for tubal ligation or hysterectomy if they have more than three children. In addition, in exchange for the 'financial assistance' they receive so each child can attend school, the women must ensure that the children eat well and complete their studies with academic success (at least to the end of primary school), as well as completing additional community service. In this way women are forced to be 'good' reproducers of the cheap, servile and efficient workforce that transnational companies require both in Mexico and in popular migration destinations.

Combined with this, Mexico's neoliberal public policies – aimed at protecting the free market and favouring the financial and business sector – have increased the degree of marginalisation experienced in relation to income, healthcare, education, transport, communication and access to water and electricity. Currently, the assistance offered by government programs is only centred in the short-term solution, and has increased social divisions and excluded the poorest of the region's poor: landless peasant families who receive no assistance of any kind from the government. The State has resignified its population control, coopting leaders and diluting any collective attempt at independent social organising (such as peasant, union and urban organisations).

We cannot fail to mention the human rights violations suffered by Central American women who migrate to or through Chiapas. The authorities, fulfilling their servile responsibility of stopping migration to the United States, have made the Mexico–Guatemala border a police wall of persecution, robbery and the criminalisation of migration. People trafficking and the enforced prostitution of young people are managed by international networks, with the complicity of civil servants of different levels of authority, night-club owners, drug traffickers, *polleros* (people smugglers) and delinquent gangs. The participation of these individuals has been reported by both Mexican and Guatemalan human rights organisations, but they are often protected and allowed to act with impunity (Figueroa, 2008).

Femicidal violence on the border is a gender-based crime which brings shame to us all. Thousands of women killed, disappeared, raped, prostituted, tortured and robbed are part of the annual toll of violations, seemingly in competition with the treatment received by Mexican citizens attempting to cross the northern border. The following quote is sufficient to understand the danger posed to women who cross the Chiapas border:

We already know that before crossing the border we have to get contraceptive injections – there's a special place we go to on the Guatemalan side. The least that can happen to you is that you get raped.

III. COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE

The third element which characterises our situation in Chiapas is that (together with the terror spread in our region by drug traffickers), we have to tolerate the presence and the counterinsurgency actions of soldiers and paramilitaries who dispute the land occupied by the Zapatistas since 1994, with the aim of eliminating the grass-roots support for the Zapatista's political project. The 'Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas' Human Rights Centre has reported an average of three cases a week of human rights violations linked to conflicts of this kind. The most recent is the disappearance of eight peasants from Chilón, all adherents of The Other Campaign. The peasants were blocking the Ocosingo–Palenque highway to demand that the government resolve an issue of dispossession of ejidal lands, land subsequently to be used in the construction of a large tourist complex. The FNLS has also repeatedly reported cases of repression by state and federal governments against their members in the Coastal and Highlands Zones.

Unfortunately, we cannot provide extensive information here on the problems of injustice and impunity in the carriage of justice. We only wish to make it clear that in Chiapas we are not living in peacetime; we are living amid the silent war of voracious capitalism, neoliberal policies, counterinsurgency, social violence and terror. It is a war which oppresses us, and as women has multiplied and increased the forms of subordination against us, including our gender-based subordination.

This is the reality we are struggling against in Chiapas, indigenous and mestiza women, rural and urban. As such, our claims as women take a special form. They don't resemble those of women who live in the centre of Mexico, which tend to emphasise sexuality and personal growth issues; these political positions have been termed 'hegemonic feminisms'⁶. Because of the situation women experience in Chiapas, we need to fight for gender equity while we fight for our very survival and that of our children. As women and as the poor, we suffer – in the flesh, and in a particular way – the injustices, the arbitrariness and the crises of the current political and economic system. Perhaps because of this, many Chiapas women clearly understand that we will not be able to change inequalities of gender unless we change the system itself and create another world, as the Zapatistas propose.

WOMEN WEAVING REBELLION

In Chiapas, as everywhere, women have always participated in social struggles, although never visibly. Here, although some women stood out (like the teacher María Adelina Flores), the strict division of sexual roles has only recently permitted women's greater public participation in popular struggles, which continue to be led by men. It is sufficient to mention the peasant movement which spread across the state between the mid-1970s and the end of the 1980s. Through this movement, peasants struck the death blow to the structure of feudal landholdings, as they belatedly achieved the application of Mexico's Agrarian Reform in Chiapas. Women participated in land occupations, workers' strikes and roadblocks, but not in the leadership of social movements. Furthermore, when *ejidos* (communal farms) were granted and extended, the women didn't even get to hold a candle at the funeral: the land itself, the financial support, the farm cooperatives, all ended up in the hands of the men. In the new population centres and in the communities, the women returned to their traditional tasks, under the aegis of their husbands. One woman from the communal farm of San Miguel, in the municipality of El Bosque, shared with us her pride and her complaints:

I was the wife of Domingo, the peasant leader. We fought for the land, not only against the boss but also against the peasants who supported him and were satisfied with just the enormous chandelier he took from his house and gave them to hang in the church. But afterwards, when the *ejido* was won and the properties surveyed, my husband didn't take me into account. I kept quiet, speaking only in Tsotsil; I didn't learn to speak Spanish until I started going to Simojovel to sell my wares.

Women also participated in the mobilisations of the 1980s, together with the indigenous promoters and teachers who sought the recognition of their professional roles as equivalent to those of teachers employed by the federal government. The resistance movement was heavily repressed, and the leaders suspended from work for several years until their positions were eventually recognised in the next six-year electoral term.

6. For the concept of 'hegemonic feminisms', see Hernández, 2008.

However, women's organisations as such didn't appear in Chiapas until the 1990s. In the Faculty of Social Sciences in the Autonomous University of Chiapas (Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, UNACH), a group of female academics and students, under the supervision of Walda Barrios, edited the magazine *Antzetik* ('women' in Tzeltal and Tsotsil) for ten consecutive years. For the first time in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the magazine analysed and disseminated feminist political positions. A feminist current was being developed within the group, formed by former leftwing militants who subsequently founded Comal Citlalmina; the work of Julieta Hernández and her companions deserves a special mention in this regard. Later, these women founded the Women's Collective of San Cristóbal (Colectivo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal), working against the violence against women which proliferated alarmingly throughout the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Julieta went on to organise the Independent Organisation of Indigenous Women (Organización Independiente de Mujeres Indígenas, OIMI) with women from the Council of Indigenous Representatives of the Chiapas Highlands (Consejo de Representantes Indígenas de los Altos de Chiapas, CRIACH). At the same time Yolanda Castro, who worked with women craftworkers within the National Indigenist Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, INI), left the government sphere and founded, with Nellys Palomo, the craftworkers' organisation Paz Jolobiletik. Others in the collective later formed the NGO called the 'Mercedes Olivera y Bustamante' Feminist Collective (COFEMO).

From the beginning of the 1990s, we should also mention the midwives group of Organisation of Indigenous Doctors in the State of Chiapas (OMIECH), which operated under the supervision of Dr Bárbara Cadenas. Adela Bonilla, then a member of the organisation Chiltak, worked in healthcare and reproductive health in various communities in the region of Morelia. We can make mention of the grass-roots groups of Christian women, present in most of the parishes of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. From these efforts CODIMUJ was born, thanks to the efforts of Mari Carmen Martínez and feminist European sisters. In Comitán, the Latin American Women's Centre for Research and Action (CIAM) (where I worked) carried out projects with funding from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) in a self-managing gender project with Guatemalan refugees who had come to the states of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo. We were working for the refugees' safe return to Guatemala, taking into account the proposals of the refugee women. Three organisations of indigenous refugee women were founded at the time: Mamá Maquín, United Flowers ('Flores Unidas', later known as 'Ixmucané') and Mother Earth (Madre Tierra). In addition, from the liberation church and the field of healthcare, various NGOs worked with Guatemalan refugees training catechists, midwives and women healthcare promoters.

I believe it is important to mention the organisations of the 1990s, as they were at the vanguard of women's organisations in the state. Most of us, except for the Guatemalan women, made a first attempt to construct a broad-based women's movement in Chiapas in 1992. Workshops were held in different parts of the state to analyse the Salinist Counter-Reform⁷ and the reform of Article Four of the Constitution of Mexico. This reform would recognise, for the first time ever, that Mexico is a multiethnic nation, and thereby recognised the indigenous people as citizens with the right to preserve their languages and customs. At the time, peasant and indigenous women recognised the importance of these articles, but they brought into question the right to preserve traditions and customs, as 'there are customs which do us harm, like when the men get drunk and abuse the women, like the custom which excludes us from land ownership, but also that they sell us to the man who wants to marry us'. In this way the broad-based women's movement was born, and within it, feminist thought in Chiapas. It experienced strong opposition from communal and peasant authorities, as well as from some governmental sectors.

Other efforts followed. In 1994 – in response to the EZLN's first invitation for civil society to organise – we organised the State Convention of Chiapas Women, with the participation of more than 300 delegates from women's organisations across the state. We conducted various sessions, and shortly afterward some of the group decided to participate in the State Coordinating Agency of Indigenous Peasant Organisations (Coordinadora Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas Campesinas, CEOIC)⁸. Others participated in the transition government, formed in 1995 in opposition to the electoral fraud that stopped Avedaño (an EZLN-supporter) from being inaugurated as governor of Chiapas.

The war and the opportunism of peasant organisations laid this effort to waste. In a standard act of counterinsurgency, the government offered peasants legal recognition of their land, financial credits and other perks in exchange for them abandoning their support of the EZLN. The peasant organisations' acceptance of these offers was the source of the women's movement's first negative experience: the women decided that we would not accept negotiations with the government. In a subsequent assembly the male leaders of the CEOIC brought many women to participate in the decision-making process; these women had never participated before and, because of their numbers, overrode our decision regarding government negotiations. Beaten and divided, we left with the women who chose not to work with the CEOIC (either from the very beginning or as a result of incidents such as these).

7. President Carlos Salinas reformed Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, a harsh blow against the traditional *ejido* (communal farms) which legally authorised individual title and sale of land. It was one of the causes which inspired the Zapatista Revolution.

8. The CEOIC was integrated by the unofficial peasant organisations that took land in Chiapas in the shadow of the Zapatista movement: the General Peasant Workers and Popular Union (Unión General Obrero Campesina Popular, UGOCEP), the Independent Centre for Agricultural Workers and Peasants (Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos, CIOAC), the Independent Regional Peasant Movement (Movimiento Campesino Regional Independiente, MOCRI), and the Peasant Organisation 'Emiliano Zapata' Coordinator National Plan of Ayala (Organización Campesina 'Emiliano Zapata', Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala, OCEZ CNPA), the Rural Association of Collective Interest (Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo, ARIC), among others.

The organisations and NGOs who worked with women dispersed with time. Several years had to pass before we could meet again. In 1998 several mestiza promoters and consultants formed Feminario, a group of feminists which aimed to promote actions and the political vision of Chiapas women. At that time, we were greatly distressed by the counterinsurgency war unleashed against the EZLN in Chiapas, and wars overseas (like the situation in Kosovo). In 1999 we called an assembly, entitled 'Women's Demands against Violence, Impunity and War'. More than 3000 women attended the different activities, which were held over several days. In the assembly, 500 representatives participated on behalf of women from 48 municipalities. Six working groups were held on the different kinds of violence: war, sexual violence, domestic violence, governmental violence, and violence in the carriage of justice. More than 50 cases of rights violations were reported and documented; the Women's Group of San Cristóbal (Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal, COLEM) continued to monitor these cases. Among the important agreements we came to, in addition to continuing to monitor the development of Chiapas's counterinsurgency war, were the following: to organise a broad-based and independent movement, and to organise a centre for women's rights. From these agreements the Independent Women's Movement (Movimiento Independiente de Mujeres, MIM) was formed, which, despite many ups and downs, continues to unite Chiapas women twice a year.

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERSPECTIVES

It is impossible to include all the details of the history of our movement and our organisations. Suffice it to say that our work and our feminisms are not like those of other latitudes: the structural situation that we described earlier and the situation of violence that we experience daily has made our movements and organisations come to fruition at ground level, that is, paying due attention to women's immediate needs. Poverty, decline in agricultural production, migration, participation in the labour market, social and domestic violence are priority issues that give our work an unmistakably earthy flavour. We seek strategies that convert merely palliative solutions into opportunities to slowly transform the relationships between men and women. Our aim is that these obstacles to our rights become the motivation for our policy of reporting violations and voicing our demands to the State, ensuring that they comply with their obligations. This characteristic places us in an operative mode that some among us conceive as the exemplification of the Zapatista's motto 'from below and to the left', yet it also comes from within, from ourselves as women, from the changes in 'our bodies, our minds and our hearts'.

In Chiapas we don't run the risk of running out of reasons for feminist struggles, as some feminists believe is happening in countries of the Global North⁹. We hold in our hands the proof that the patriarchy continues to exist and that the social polarisation makes our problems more numerous and more acute every day.

From our vision we nourish our positions and our resistances, and we trust that our struggles will allow us to make advances. To accompany our efforts with a kind of smiling confidence in our future, to convert it a thousand and one times into hope, has helped us to move forward in solidarity, make our voices heard, see our reality 'with the head and heart of a woman' (as the women from CODIMUJ say). It allows us to value ourselves as sexed people and to have a consciousness of our problems. It allows us to struggle against subordination, beginning with ourselves.

We have made progress. Our partners and our male companions in organisations and NGOs are learning to accept the need for changes in women's subordinate position. Many already accept this and consider it necessary to accept us as subjects of actions and decisions. Some have included a gender focus in the policies and programs of their organisations. Many NGOs and some mixed organisations have signed the Political Pact (entitled 'Non-Governmental Organisations, Collectives, Social Organisations and Institutions of Chiapas, Free of Violence Against Women', see p122), a non-aggression pact towards women within the organisations themselves, promoted by COFEMO. The Gender Observatory (Observatorio de Género) is another collective initiative that is taking shape. The search for horizontality in the structures and function of organisations is being accepted as a challenge. The Chiapas Centre for Women's Rights (CDMCH) – in addition to the accompaniment it provides women by dealing with their problems through dialogue, fair negotiation or legal defence – has begun to form collectives of women's rights promoters, aiming to prevent violence against women in many indigenous communities in three areas of the state. Formación y Capacitación (FOCA), as part of their promotion of reproductive healthcare in many communities in the Jungle, looks to promote an indigenous feminism that moves forward according to its own cultural parameters and not according to those defined by Western feminism. CODIMUJ focuses on gaining personal autonomy for women, and establishing their organic autonomy in relation to the Catholic Church. The MAFALDAS Collective, in reclaiming a position of autonomy from the left, has become a reference point for feminist militancy and practice for the women of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

But there is still a long way to go. Moving from theory to practice is difficult, particularly given the adverse circumstances we work in. Our claim that gender equality should be considered a revolutionary principle has yet to be explicitly accepted.

9. Cf. Wallach Scott, 2004.

PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE OF THE EZLN IN OUR WORK

The presence of the EZLN has been a significant factor in our progress. We share population and territory with them as an organisation, but above all we share the dream of constructing another world. For us, this world should be one without kind of inequality, particularly in terms of gender, class and ethnicity.

We recognise that with the mere appearance of the EZLN, they legitimated the participation of indigenous women in military and political struggle. The Women's Revolutionary Law (see p121) is a document which proposes gender-based demands much more advanced than those we, urban feminists, have been able to propose until now, such as women's control of matrimony and maternity and their right to equal participation in decisions and public responsibilities in their communities and their organisation. Clearly, these and other principles are covered in the EZLN's laws because they are needed in reality. Note also that the Law is a valid document within the organisation's army but not necessarily within the Zapatista grass roots. Many communities have yet to hear of it, which suggests different levels of consciousness and progress within the organisation. Currently, each community and region establishes their own local norms within the revolutionary principles proposed by the Zapatista movement.

At the beginning, the EZLN didn't have a specific strategy for working with women: they believed that the work needed to be the same for the whole community, for both men and women. In 2003 the current structure of Caracols, Good Government Councils and autonomous municipalities (separating the grass roots from the military structure) was announced. At this time, the Zapatistas also recognised that although women in communities were invited to participate politically, they continued to be tied to their domestic roles and therefore didn't participate in the government, or in the education and healthcare structure, to the same degree as men did. The few who did participate resigned from their responsibilities once they married. From that time on, specific women's structures were established in each Caracol to promote the awareness raising and participation of women in all activities, including community assemblies and positions of responsibility.

At the end of 2007 in Caracol III (La Garrucha), the Zapatista women organised a gathering in which they informed Mexican and international civil society of the surprising advances they had achieved, and the differences between Caracoles, both in the rhythms and achievements, as well as in their forms of work. Women spoke from all five Caracoles and from all of the different structures, ranging from political leaders of the EZLN and participants in the structures of governance, justice and agrarian concerns, to those who participate in the working groups on healthcare, education and food production on a local and regional level.

To hear the Zapatista women tell of their progress and difficulties within their political process made us feel even closer to them. It helped us understand their internal dynamics, and realise that the logic and function of NGOs is very different to the work and vision of the Zapatistas. Particularly, it allowed us to understand that the Zapatistas' autonomous practice outside of the State structures allows them to make greater advances – despite the counterinsurgency war – than those of us who have been working with women for more than 15 years. We also realised that although Zapatista women don't recognise themselves to be feminists, the women of the EZLN are feminists, and very much so, if we consider that being a feminist is struggling for the elimination of the inequalities and injustices of the patriarchal capitalist system.

The adherence of many feminists and some NGOs and social organisation to The Other Campaign, in response to the Zapatistas' invitation, has granted us a space which, from each of our organic autonomies, allows us a political rapprochement with the Zapatista women and an opportunity to learn from their experiences, nourishing the construction of our Other Feminism.

From our humble political spaces and small achievements to the users of this directory of organisations and groups of women in Chiapas, we ask you not to lose sight of the terrible reality we live and work in, mere ants working to deconstruct the system around us. But we also ask you to bear in mind that our struggles and hopes are constructing and illuminating our future, which perhaps will be part of your own.

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