Zapatista Women Warriors: Examining the Sociopolitical Implications of Female Participation in the EZLN Army

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Zapatista Women Warriors:
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EZLN Army

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Dedication Page

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Abstract
The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), a group of indigenous Mayan peasants commonly known as the Zapatistas, declared war on the Mexican state on January 1, 1994. Rising from the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, Mexico, the Zapatistas echoed the cry of other Central and South American indigenous groups that were struggling to protect their culture and territory from the predatory forces of globalization and neo-liberalism that threaten the peasant way of life. The Zapatistas spoke out against the negative consequences of globalization, and demanded autonomy from the Mexican government. Notably, the Zapatista platform emphasized a focus on women’s rights and gender relation issues, whereas most rural movements have not directly addressed this topic. On the surface, these facts suggest that the Zapatistas have established unprecedented social and political agency for female combatants and supporters. However, this thesis will demonstrate that indigenous women were active in having their rights prioritized as part of the Zapatista platform. It will demonstrate that external conditions have influenced and frustrated realistic improvements in Zapatista gender relations. Finally, this thesis will assess the future of female participation within the Zapatista movement, and illustrate the limited social and political changes in indigenous communities.

Keywords:
Zapatistas, EZLN, Chiapas, Indigenous Rights, Women’s Rights, Female Combatants, Social Movements
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Chapter 1: History of the Zapatista Uprising

Introduction

On January 1, 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) announced its uprising against the Mexican government. The EZLN, commonly known as the Zapatistas, was led by a mestizo man named Subcomandante Marcos. Marcos and his guerilla troops occupied seven cities throughout the Southern state of Chiapas, reclaiming land that had been lost by indigenous populations throughout the past decade. The Zapatista army demanded that the Mexican government recognize that its pursuit of neo-liberal economic policies was contributing to the hardship and death of six distinct indigenous populations throughout the Lacandon Jungle.

The Zapatista platform demanded rights to land and services from the government that had been revoked as a product of President Salinas’ amendment to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Zapatistas decried the Mexican government for ignoring the social and economic destruction that had been instilled on indigenous territory when their right to land and their ability to profit from agricultural labor had been threatened. They also spoke out against the limited educational and health services that were available to people in the highland region.

Notably, the Zapatista movement also placed a large influence of indigenous women’s rights. The Zapatistas criticized the limited social and political agency of women within their communities and established a series of laws that guaranteed indigenous women’s rights. The Revolutionary Law of Women granted indigenous women the right to join the guerilla army, work for pay, participate in community affairs, marry the spouse of
their choice, receive education, and choose how many children to birth. The Zapatista focus on women’s rights, and its expression of this priority through the Revolutionary Law of Women, made the EZLN distinct from other rural social movements; previous movements had welcomed female guerilla participation, but did not focus on alleviating the grievances of indigenous women.

The Revolutionary Law of Women was created as a result of several factors. Most importantly, changing social and economic conditions within indigenous communities created conditions of gender transition that encouraged them to demand that women’s rights be included as part of the Zapatista movement. Since the declaration of the Revolutionary Law of Women, and the well-publicized existence of strong female guerilla leaders, Zapatista communities in Chiapas have been exposed to a rhetoric that emphasizes the indigenous women’s rights.

Emerging from the Lacandon Jungle

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) officially declared war against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994. “The uprising was designed to make indigenous voices heard at the national level in Mexico and appeared primarily to be a challenge to Mexican domestic policies on land and indigenous affairs” (Cleaver, 1998, 625). The Zapatistas claimed that voices of indigenous people had been passively ignored or brutally oppressed for the past five hundred years. By occupying seven cities in Chiapas, the 2,000 person Zapatista army strove to bring international attention to the acute poverty and lack of arable farming land that plagued the indigenous communities in the southernmost state of Mexico. The Zapatista army chose to announce its insurrection
on January 1, 1994 because its was the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico, and Canada was put into effect. The adoption of NAFTA represented Mexico’s adherence to neo-liberal, market-based economic policies that threatened the survival of many agriculturally-based indigenous communities. The Zapatista’s goal was to speak out against these kinds of liberal Mexican land reform policies because they threatened traditional indigenous identity and way of life. Researchers summarized the historical importance of the Zapatista movement by stating that,

Zapatista men and women are charting political road maps that maneuver through a complex terrain marked by a rearticulation of neoliberal hegemonic focus….Zapatista knowledge offers an analysis of the way in which the cultural logics of late-capitalism articulate to political interests, in terms of both the ethnic-radicalized ordering of society and the tendency of the neoliberal state to govern by encouraging individuals to meet their own socioeconomic needs. [Moran, 2007, 67]

The Zapatistas formally pronounced their uprising by emerging from the Lacandon Jungle, where they had been gathering a support base for their army over the course of several years. The Zapatista Declaration of War stated that the Mexican government was an enemy of indigenous people. The Declaration articulated 500 years of indigenous frustration with struggling against the repressive forces of slavery, imperialism, discriminatory reform laws, and most recently, globalization and neo-liberalism. The Declaration also expressed outrage at disparate conditions of present day indigenous communities, which were lacking food, shelter, healthcare, and education systems. Specifically, the Zapatistas criticized the Mexican government for denying indigenous peoples the right to freely and democratically elect authorities who would represent their
interests and help improve the quality of life in their communities. The introductory words of the Declaration stated:

Today we say, Enough! We are the heirs of those who truly forged our nationality. We the dispossessed are millions, and we call our brothers to join in this call as the only path in order not to die of hunger in the face of the insatiable ambition of a dictatorship for more than 70 years led by a clique of traitors who represent the most conservative and sell-out groups in the country. [Womack, 248]

The strong language evident in this excerpt illustrates the extreme dissatisfaction among residents of indigenous communities living in disparate conditions that the Mexican government had forced upon their communities. This passage particularly refers to indigenous discontent at actions taken during the presidential term of President Carlos Salinas de Gotari (1988-1994).

Salinas served as President of Mexico from 1988 to 1994. The legitimacy of his election to the presidency is often contested since he was a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had ruled Mexico by corrupt methods for the past seventy years. Irregularities associated with the election process led many people to believe that the PRI rigged the 1988 elections so that Salinas would win. During his presidency, Salinas enacted two major legal and institutional reforms that reduced the Mexican state’s obligation to the campesinos and focused on creating an international, privatized economy in Mexico (Harvey, 1998, 1). First, Salinas amended Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. Article 27 became part of the Mexican Constitution in 1917 as a product of General Zapata’s efforts to provide land to poor peasants during the Mexican Revolution. During the 1910-1917 Mexican Revolution, Zapata successfully mobilized peasants to demand that portions of large-landowners’ property be distributed to impoverished, landless groups of peasants. Article 27 protected communal land from
being sold or rented so that the indigenous peasants that work on communal land would be protected from people who want to break the land into individual plots. Article 27 also entitled people working on collective and distributed land to receive government subsidies for agricultural supplies and tools. More broadly, Article 27 provided indigenous communities, which work the communal lands through collective labor, from being privatized by large corporations.¹

In 1992, President Salinas’ decision to repeal Article 27 was poorly received in indigenous communities because the land rights guaranteed by Article 27 were one of the most important agrarian gains during the Mexican Revolution (Harvey, 1998, 2). The land reform allowed communal land to be privatized if the majority of landholders voted in favor of this proposal. Although the land reform change did not require privatization of communal land, the alteration of this article was predicted to cause devastation in indigenous communities because no future communal land grants would be approved by the government. The new law also mandated that pending requests for communal land were finalized by the national government; however many large landowners held powerful political status due to ties with the PRI and refused to vacate land that had been granted to groups of indigenous peasants. Indigenous peasants suffered from lack of government monetary subsidies, which they had used to buy valuable fertilizers and adopt better farming technology. Also, wealthy private investors invaded the Mexican countryside, and bought individual plots of land from poor peasant farmers who could not support themselves without help from the community. Fortunately, the widespread destruction of communal landholdings has not been as severe as predicted. Although

¹ This overview of Mexico’s land reform history was provided by a representative from the Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action (CIEPAC) during an interview in March 2006.
indigenous communities face increased pressure from private investors as a result of these land reform laws, they have been able to maintain control of community land by voting in favor of communal tilling and refusing to sell to outside investors.

As previously mentioned, President Salinas enacted the North American Free Trade Agreement as his neo-liberal reform. NAFTA is a tri-lateral trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico that abolished protective trade tariffs on valuable goods such as corn, beans, powdered milk, and sugar. The stated purposes of NAFTA are to eliminate barriers that block trade between borders, promote conditions of fair competition, increase substantial investment opportunities, protect intellectual property rights, create effective procedures to implement trade agreements, and establish a framework to expand trade agreements. In Mexico, the signing of NAFTA meant that indigenous goods such as corn would be exported less and become less valuable in the international market because goods from other countries, such as the United States, would be cheaper without the trade tariff costs. In effect, the goods of indigenous farmers would become more expensive and less desirable in national and international markets. NAFTA exacerbated the sufferings of indigenous peasants in the Mexican countryside, who were already reeling from subsidized imports of agricultural grains from the United States. Mayor Ana María, who was an early Zapatista army leader, labeled NAFTA and it’s free-market reforms “death sentences for the indigenous people of Mexico” (Foran, 2001, 117).

As a result of these two major neo-liberal policies promoted by President Salinas, and later his successor President Zedillo, widespread discontent and panic erupted in indigenous villages. Market-based economic policies represented a significant shift away
from the state-centered, corporatist procedures that had governed Mexican land reform during most of the early to mid-twentieth centuries. This fundamental change in national policy threatened the collective indigenous way of life since more than eighty-eight percent of indigenous people worked in agriculture. Furthermore, members of Mexican indigenous communities were dismayed their collective sociopolitical interests were being ignored by the national government. Indigenous people were frustrated with the lack of reception and downright oppression that they encountered while attempting to speak out against these new liberal policies. For all these reasons, the Zapatista uprising in 1994 represented an organized attempt by members of indigenous communities to gain attention and ultimately win many basic human rights.

After the Uprising

A ceasefire between the Zapatistas and Mexican government was signed twelve days after the New Years Eve uprising. The armistice was negotiated by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, a well-known liberation theologian from the Catholic Archdiocese of San Cristobal. Since January 12, 1994, there have been no official declarations of war against the Mexican government. The Zapatistas have maintained control of several villages in Chiapas, all of which operate under a system of Indian-based traditions. Unfortunately, the Zapatista army’s effort to maintain the control over collective land captured during the rebellion has been frustrated by many factors.

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2 This data was provided by a representative from the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center during an interview in March 2006.
3 Bishop Ruiz would later establish one of the first human rights centers, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center, which works to ameliorate relations between the Zapatistas, paramilitary and government troops.
First, the Mexican government responded to the indigenous uprising with massive army repression that resulted in the deaths of more than 500 Zapatista combatants (Foran, 2001, 117). Several more were abused and tortured. Second, in February 1995, the Mexican army staged a surprise raid against Zapatista communities which scared many indigenous peasants and Zapatista supporters off the land. Finally, the Zapatista’s efforts to ratify their rights to territory were hampered by the Mexican government’s refusal to recognize indigenous peoples’ right to communal land during the San Andres Peace Accords (Klein, 2008).

The San Andres Accords were part of a dialogue process between the Mexican government and the EZLN. The principle points of negotiation centered around the following topics: basic respect for the indigenous population in Chiapas, conservation of natural resources within indigenous territory, greater participation of indigenous communities in the decisions of public expenditures, participation of indigenous communities in determining development plans, autonomy of indigenous communities and the right of free determination from the state (Global Exchange, 2007). In February 1996, the Zapatista army and the Mexican federal government signed an agreement reached through discussion of the aforementioned topics. It was hoped that this agreement would mark the beginning of amiable relations between the Zapatista army and the Mexican government. However, the Mexican government refused to fully ratify the agreements of the San Andres Accords into the Mexican Constitution (Global Exchange, 2007). The failure of the Mexican government to support the reforms that were agreed upon during the San Andres negotiations was extremely discouraging to
Zapatista supporters because it further illustrated the national government’s lack of commitment to indigenous peoples.

After the Mexican government failed to enshrine indigenous and women’s rights to communal land in the Mexican Constitution, “the Zapatistas decided to turn them into facts on the ground” (Klein, 2008). In an effort to show their opposition to the policies of the Mexican government, the Zapatistas formed rebel municipalities that had their own autonomous bodies of governance, called good-government councils (Moran, 2007). The Zapatistas also began the construction of autonomous schools and clinics in these new communities, although the availability of these services varied based on the location and population of each community. There are currently thirty-eight autonomous Zapatista communities in the Lacandon jungle of Chiapas. None of these communities are officially recognized by the national government.

Unfortunately, the federal and state governments’ determination to undermine the Zapatistas has intensified as they expand their role as the de facto government in large areas of the Chiapas countryside (Klein, 2008). Peace talks have ceased and the Mexican government has increased paramilitary efforts against the Zapatista army. The national government does not want to tolerate the existence of independent indigenous communities for fear that the mass base of Zapatista support will continue to grow and oppose the neo-liberal goals of the Mexican government. Although the Mexican government denies supplying paramilitary troops with supplies to enact violence against Zapatista community members, researcher Ernest Ledesma Arronte from the Center of Political Analysis and Social and Economic Investigations estimates that “the

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4 This data was provided by a representative from the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center during an interview in March 2006.
government has spent approximately $16 million expropriating land and giving it to many families linked to the notoriously corrupt Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)” (Klein, 2008). Most of the land is taken from Zapatista families, and given to “thuggish” paramilitary groups that force other Zapatista families from newly tilled land.

The violence enacted by paramilitary troops in Chiapas has escalated significantly in the past decade. Subcomandante Marcos gave a speech on January 6, 2008 titled “Feeling Red: The Calendar and Geography of War” (Klein, 2008). Marcos’ speech decried paramilitary violence against indigenous villagers and was widely interpreted as a warning that the Zapatistas could return to armed warfare in the near future if relations between the Zapatistas and the government continue to deteriorate. Marcos stated that “[t]hose of us who have made war know how to recognize the paths by which it is prepared and brought near…The signs of war on the horizon are clear. War, like fear, also has a smell. And now we are starting to breathe its fetid odor in our lands.” Marcos also specifically emphasized that the Zapatistas will take up arms if paramilitary violence continues to target women and children that comprise the Zapatista base of support.

Arronte and fellow researchers at the Center of Political Analysis and Social and Economic Investigations have gathered data which confirms Macros’ claim that violence against Zapatista communities has been increasing. Arronte measured that “[o]n the fifty-six permanent military bases that the Mexican state runs on indigenous lands in Chiapas, there has been a marked increase in activity. Weapons and equipment are being dramatically upgraded, new battalions are moving in, including special forces” (Klein, 2008). Although this data proves the Mexican government has been augmenting its
efforts against the Zapatista army, it remains to be seen if and when the Zapatista army chooses to respond to this increased violent activity in an aggressive manner.

**State-Level Repression**

It is important to note that state-level politics in Chiapas have historically been associated with extremely high levels of violence and oppression. Since the early 20th century, economic, political, and military power in Mexico was condensed in a bureaucratic organization under PRI control. When Salinas was elected president of Mexico in 1989, the PRI had been dominating Mexican party politics through corrupt enforcement mechanisms for more than seventy years.

The small group of upper-class people associated with the PRI party enacted violent terrorist acts against indigenous activists to maintain control over Chiapas and continue instituting unfavorable neo-liberal reforms. Specifically, state-level politicians prevented indigenous people from being represented in their national government by engaging in corrupt election practices\(^5\). Furthermore, “the government immediately suggested sinister plots” by trying to link the EZLN guerillas to drug trafficking when the Zapatistas first emerged as a social movement in Mexico (Rovira, 2000).

State and national government interest in oppressing indigenous voices in Chiapas was severe, especially after the Zapatista rebellion, because Chiapas is simultaneously one of the most resource-rich and poorest states in Mexico. According to data provided by the

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\(^5\) It is widely acknowledged among current day Mexican politicians that the PRI party rigged the 1988 presidential election, by which Salinas assumed the presidency. On Election Day, a computer blackout occurred, which erased valuable polling data and led to Salinas being declared the formal election winner. It is assumed that the PRI party forged this computer failure.
Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center, thirty percent of the country’s water is located in Chiapas. Twenty-one percent of national oil and forty-seven percent of natural gas is located in Chiapas. Valuable uranium reserves have also recently been discovered. However, in stark contrast to the rich resources that surrounded their communities, rural indigenous populations were extremely impoverished. The mean life expectancy of indigenous community leaders was 44 years old, seventy-five percent of the population was malnourished, and 30% of children did attend school (Rovira, 2000). The Mexican government wanted to continue exploiting Chiapas’ natural resources and was unwilling to create public policy initiatives and increase agricultural subsidies in improve indigenous quality of life. Therefore, state and federal officials did not want the indigenous people to gain power by which they would be able to exercise control over the management and profit distribution from these resources.

The national government tried to instill fear in indigenous villages by sending paramilitary troops to monitor activity of these areas. State-level repression intensified after the Mexican government realized that Zapatista popularity and success in Chiapas, and the majority of eastern Mexico, was due to its deep, organic link to indigenous communities; the Zapatista guerilla army was composed of six distinct indigenous ethnic groups that had united as Zapatistas. Paramilitary soldiers would employ scare tactics against indigenous communities to discourage indigenous social movement participation. A specific paramilitary tactic that was often employed involved shooting of a series of gunshots around the perimeter of the community. This ploy was intended to signal to the

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6 This data was provided by a representative from the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center during an interview in March 2006.
7 The six different indigenous groups that are represented by the Zapatistas are as following: the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, Tojolabal, Mam, and Zoque.
residents of the indigenous village that their activity was being monitored by the PRI officials. Indigenous people understood that complaining about the repressive living conditions in Chiapas would warrant consequences such as torture, rape, and death.

Conclusion

The Zapatista army declared war against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994 by seizing seven major cities in the state of Chiapas. The Zapatistas declared that they wanted to put an end to 500 years of indigenous oppression by improving the lives of indigenous community members. The popular support with which the Zapatista movement was received was surprising to the national government and warranted a great deal of international attention. The Zapatista movement’s focus on women’s rights was also unexpected because past rural movements had not prioritized the agency of indigenous women.

The Revolutionary Law of Women and the high percentage of female combatants in the guerilla army are the two main aspects of the Zapatista movement that illustrate its unique treatment of women. Whereas typically individual rights were seen as contrasting with communal well-being, the Zapatistas asserted that women should be able to live satisfactory community lives while having increased access to social and political agency. The leadership of female combatants and the declaration of the Revolutionary Law of Women illustrated that female participation within the EZLN was extremely important.

Unfortunately, in the years following the 1994 rebellion, the Mexican government attempted to end formal warfare against the Mexican state and put a silence to the indigenous voices criticizing government policies. Attempts at peaceful dialogue
between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government failed. The 1996 San Andres Peace negotiations were ineffective, and as a result, Zapatista supporters declared independence from the Mexican government. The Zapatistas organized rebel indigenous peoples into autonomous communities that refused government aid and created their own justice and school systems. The Mexican government responded by deploying paramilitary forces and establishing military bases whose purpose was to threaten and debilitate indigenous voices calling for social, political, and economic change.

The militarization of the Chiapas region frustrated Zapatista attempts at asserting women’s rights. Since the safety and security of Zapatista supporters was constantly threatened by military and paramilitary troops, it became increasingly difficult for Subcomandante Marcos and other leaders to fight a battle in favor of indigenous women’s rights. Limited access to basic resources made it difficult for women to leave their communities and families to join the guerilla struggle. Thus, although the Zapatista movement strongly encouraged women’s increased agency in its original declarations, realistic conditions in Zapatista refugee communities made it difficult for women to actualize their espoused increased social and political freedom.

The next chapter will look more exclusively at the lives of indigenous women before the Zapatista rebellion. It will examine the repressive conditions under which women lived, and illustrate several factors that elicited women’s rights becoming a priority in the Zapatista movement. Chapter 2 will also show that the presence of these main female guerilla combatants, in conjunction with the strong women’s rights rhetoric in the Zapatista platform, led many Zapatista supporters to believe that women’s lives would be radically changed as a result of this post-modern movement.
Chapter 2: Lives of Indigenous Women

Introduction

Life for indigenous women before the Zapatista rebellion was extremely challenging. Due to the pervasive existence of machismo attitudes, women were seen as being capable of only completing domestic duties. Also, as a product of strong gender divisions that existed in indigenous communities, women were systematically denied access to participation in social and public forums. Daughters were not given the opportunity to receive an education, which perpetrated a lifestyle in which indigenous women had severely limited mobilization. Most women never left their native communities, and were forced to marry a spouse that their family deemed appropriate. After being married at a young age, indigenous women existed at the mercy of their husbands. They were often forced to have many children since large families were seen as a sign of fertility, and were subjected to oppression and domestic abuse. Sadly, women’s low status in indigenous communities prevented them from being able to speak out against these injustices.

Changes that occurred within indigenous communities as a result of migration and the presence of new industries elicited conditions of improved social agency for indigenous women. Husbands began migrating to the cities so that they could earn profit from industries such as petroleum, and wives were left alone to manage their households. Also, in some cases, women traveled to the cities to sell artisan goods. These new experiences helped women develop a sense of independence and self-confidence. Indigenous women embraced their newfound self-determination by moving permanently to cities such as San Cristobal and Ocosingo. Others chose to become more active
members in their communities, defying social norms and demanding increased rights for women.

As indigenous people in the Lacandon jungle began organizing into a social movement that deplored the abuses of the Mexican government, women were provided with an opportunity through which they could express a demand for indigenous women’s rights. Women were able to articulate their grievances in the Zapatista platform because the Zapatistas needed to garner as much indigenous support as possible. Zapatista leaders realized that female participation in their army would be crucial to the uprising’s success. Furthermore, Zapatista organizers were aware that national and international attention would be augmented by the unique character of the Revolutionary Law of Women.

Thus, the Revolutionary Law of Women was negotiated among a group of indigenous people that were sympathetic to the struggles of indigenous women and their children. The establishment of this law showed that women’s rights were a crucial part of the Zapatista rhetoric argument. Indigenous women were inspired by the potential to improve the condition of females within their community and decided to join the guerilla forces. Currently, approximately thirty percent of Zapatista combatants are women. Many of these women emphasize that their participation in the army was encouraged by the examples of strong female guerillas such as Major Ana María and Comandante Ramona. These two women are revered in indigenous communities for having enabled women to step out of the domestic confines to which indigenous women were traditionally limited.
Before the Rebellion

Before the Zapatista uprising in 1994, indigenous women were limited to participating in domestic duties such as child-rearing, food-preparation, and housekeeping. The patriarchal nature of indigenous communities prevented women from being active members of their communities. Women were excluded from political and public arenas, and expected to maintain order in their households (Craske, 1999). The typical day of an indigenous woman began at approximately 3:00am and ended at 11:00pm. During this time, indigenous women were expected to work two or three domestic jobs that included preparing tortillas, collecting firewood, and caring for children.

Socially, women were “completely exploited and repressed” (Foran, 2001). Wives were expected to wake up before their other family members so that they could make coffee and serve breakfast to their husbands and children. While their husbands went to work in the fields during the day, women were left home to attend to domestic duties. Indigenous women rarely left the confines of their small houses, except to complete chores.

In many rural indigenous communities, gender was often discussed in terms of complementarity. According to the complementarity model, “men were actors in the public, powerful world of politics and the economy, while women were dominant in the private world of domestic organization and reproduction” (Craske, 1999, 10-11). Thus, women were defined as the passive gender which was supposed to obey the demands of more dominant, intelligent males. This strict understanding of gender division contributed to the low status of women in indigenous communities. Furthermore, obeying the model of complementarity often led to oppression of women in indigenous
communities. Machismo attitudes, which resulted largely as a product of the complementarity model, were common in indigenous communities. Machismo behavior encouraged indigenous men to drink excessively, perpetrate domestic violence, and the demand that a wife stay at home to concentrate on family life.

While most indigenous women did not resent their domestic roles as mothers and housewives, they were frustrated with the lack of appreciation and freedom for their role in traditional communities. More than all of their other grievances, indigenous women disagreed with the lack of support they received from their husbands. Often, the physical labor required of women was intense; however, men did not help their wives with laborious tasks. “The men did not help us with our work,” proclaimed many indigenous women in a Chiapas highland community in a documentary produced by the Chiapas Media Project (We are Equal, 2005). This documentary also exemplifies the female burden by showing women collecting firewood while carrying one child on their back and leading a few others into the forest with them.

Within the confines of their limited social status, indigenous women took small steps towards lessening the burden of their work. For example, there was increased cooperation among women when physical labor was intensive. Women collecting firewood in the same location would often help each other load large packs of firewood onto their back and be carried back to the village. Men, however, discouraged women from organizing formal networks of domestic support. Husbands would constantly monitor their wives’ activities and question women about where they were going. It was widely understood that women should not be visiting or socializing with other members of the community.
Furthermore, women were strongly discouraged from leaving the house without the permission of their husbands. Women who ventured outside of their home without making it explicitly known that they were walking to an acceptable location such as Church or the fields would be harshly reprimanded by men in their communities. Husbands that did not exert control over the daily activities of their wives were chastised by other indigenous men for not having been able to train a “good woman” (Craske, 1999, 11).

**Religious Practice and Community Organization**

Women were also not granted equal recognition when organizing religious celebrations. Religion played an important role in the lives of many indigenous people because communities organized and delegated communal religious duties, called *cargos*². Cargos were an important indicator of social status in indigenous communities because they provided a means through which individuals and households gained political power and prestige. Cargos involved funding various religious festivals and events, often dedicated to a particular Saint or Holy Day. Cargos that were the more prestigious involved more personal expenditures (in terms of labor and money).

Traditionally, an indigenous family volunteered to complete a cargo when their economic situation was deemed stable enough for them to support this responsibility. Although both men and woman worked to prepare this event, women often were forced to perform more arduous tasks than men. For example, women prepared and served food to guests during the religious ceremony, while men drank mescal and celebrated the

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² *Cargos* is a Spanish word that can be interpreted in English as “charges,” “responsibilities,” or “offices” (as in roles).
success of their cargo. Overall, women were recognized for their service less than men during these ceremonies (Stephen, 1991).

Similar to the way that female participation in cargos was devalued, women and men were treated differently during weekly church services. For example, men were traditionally able to rest on Sundays after attending Church with their families; however, women were not afforded this luxury. Instead, women were expected to serve prepare and serve mescal, a traditional alcoholic indigenous drink, to their husbands. “Men get to rest on Sundays, as is custom. Women do not get to rest,” explained an indigenous woman from a highland community in Chiapas (Chiapas Media Project, We Are Equal, 2005).

Women’s sense of marianismo also discouraged them from demanding greater recognition for the responsibility that they accepted during cargos and other religious activities. Marianismo, which is the female corollary to machismo, asserted that the position for women is motherhood. Marianismo encouraged female moral superiority and spiritual strength, combined with submissiveness toward men. The iconography of the Virgin Mary and the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which were frequently featured at indigenous religious services, reinforced a motherhood mandate by setting parameters for socially accepted, passive female behavior (Craske, 1999).

Education, Healthcare, and Domestic Abuse

Before the 1994 Zapatista uprising, indigenous women were frequently prevented from attending school and receiving an education. As compared to women, males were more commonly sent to school and had the opportunity to learn a second language
(usually Spanish) by migrating to work in an urban Mexican city or the United States. The Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights, reports that indigenous women in Chiapas represent the most marginalized group of people in Mexico due to their lack of access to primary and secondary schooling\(^9\).

Women’s healthcare was another large problem in Chiapas. The Mexican government was aware that little medical assistance was available to pregnant mothers and young children living in the countryside; however, it refused to create initiatives and subsidies to address these critical issues. Women’s lack of education about children’s health and development also contributed to extremely high infant and maternal mortality rates. Although limited reliable data was available before the uprising, the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights estimated that in 2006, 35 infants died for every 1,000 births. Also, 117 for every 100,000 mothers in Chiapas died during childbirth as compared with 51 for every 100,000 in the rest of Mexico\(^10\). These statistics from 2006 are extremely grave, and it can be assumed that morality rates were even worse before the 1994 uprising.

Domestic abuse was another critical factor that contributed to the poor quality of indigenous women’s lives before the Zapatista revolution. Due to the challenging and often impoverished nature of many indigenous family lives, men often resorted to alcohol to escape their problems and frustrations. Martial rape and domestic abuse (which included hitting, kicking, and yelling) were considered commonplace occurrences in many households. Women were discouraged from discussing any kind of domestic abuse.

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\(^9\) This information was provided by a representative from the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center during an interview in March 2006.

\(^10\) This statistical data was provided by a representative from the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center during an interview in March 2006.
mistreatment with their family members or friends. Women that violated this social norm by reporting violent behavior of their husbands were accused of deserving harsh treatment from their spouses. The forced silence of women in indigenous communities prevented them from creating support networks of those suffering from similar afflictions. “There was no real justice for women before the 1994 uprising,” claimed an indigenous woman in Chiapas (Chiapas Media Project, We are Equal, 2005).

**Changing Gender Relations**

Social, political, and economic changes that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century helped create gender relation transitions that permitted and encouraged increased indigenous women’s participation in social and political movements. Beginning in the 1950s, the Mexican government encouraged the colonization of the Lacandon jungle, which covers the eastern third of the state of Chiapas. As a result of this policy, which was intended to help Mexico economically develop, various groups of indigenous people migrated to various parts of the jungle. New, multi-ethnic communities were formed as product of indigenous people from different Mayan groups inter-marrying and interacting with each other. Strict, gendered hierarchies that had dominated older highland communities did not exist in the newly formed communities. While forming communities with people from different ethnic backgrounds, indigenous people maintained some traditions from their old communities and adopted traditions from other ethnic groups (Kampwirth, 2002). The result of this intermixing of customs was a population with a more diverse understanding of community organization and social patterns.
Within the newly created hybrid communities, indigenous people from diverse ethnic backgrounds began a dialogue through which they discussed common grievances related to their history of poverty and landlessness. Women, who had arrived in a new community after being forced to move by their husbands, learned other indigenous languages as a result of interacting with indigenous females from different parts of Chiapas. Most indigenous women before the 1950s were illiterate; therefore, the ability to speak two languages represented an unprecedented educational opportunity for indigenous women.

In the years leading up to the Zapatista revolution, sense of unification formed within new communities in the Lacandon Jungle. This sense of community was much stronger than most indigenous people, especially women, had previously encountered; it encouraged women to speak with each other about their life experiences, frustrations, and challenges. Additionally, a few outspoken women circulated rumors about forming religious and women’s committees to combat this oppressiveness.

Another new opportunity for indigenous mobilization was created when men from highland communities migrated from the jungle to work in new jobs in the petroleum, trucking, and tourism industries (Kampwirth, 2002). Due to the absence of men in their communities and households, indigenous women were required to take on new responsibilities. Men became more dependent on women for overseeing economic and familial affairs during the long periods of time that they were away from the home. For example, wives of truckers were responsible for taking on new responsibilities related to managing the household while their husbands were away on long drives or working long
hours. Women in indigenous movements developed increasingly confident, self-aware images of themselves while their husbands were absent.

Indigenous women also were also exposed to outside influences as a result of migrating to ladino-dominated cities such as San Cristobal and Ocosingo for short amounts of time. Indigenous women in the cities typically traveled there to make money to support their family in the highlands; women worked as maids, provided childcare to wealthy families, and sold artisan goods on the streets. Other indigenous women entered the market as producers or vendors. While in the city, women became independent and were exposed to urban conditions that contrasted greatly with their traditional indigenous lifestyle. They were free to leave the house and wander the streets without the restriction of their husbands. Upon arriving home, women had to assert themselves and defend their right to return to the city. Women who ventured outside of their communities for long periods of time were often criticized by their communities. In extreme cases, women were ostracized or murdered “by their own relatives for stepping out of bounds of their proper roles through the cooperative movement” (Kampwirth, 2002, 93).

Some women responded to newly-discovered feelings of independence by abandoning their family life in the jungle and permanently moving to the cities. “In the period from 1980 to 1988 alone, the urban population of Chiapas increased from 700,000 to more than 950,000” (Kampwirth, 2002, 93). Women that moved to cities avoided criticism of city life from members in their native community. An indigenous woman named Susana articulates the newfound sense of independence that she discovered while working as a maid in San Cristobal de Las Casas when she stated that after living in the city, “I came
to think that living like that, why am I suffering? … I thought about it some more, deeply, and I thought it is not good that they treat us so badly (Kampwirth, 2002, 93).

When women moved to the city, they would remain in contact with their relatives who stayed beyond. Family networks provided a means through which women learned rhetoric that allowed them to express frustrations that they held previously about domestic hardship and poverty. Family networks are also an important way in which women are recruited into guerilla armies, given that women are excluded from other pre-existing social and political networks through which men may be recruited (Kampwirth, 2002).

Overall, women’s desire to have an active voice in indigenous communities helped create an atmosphere that was more open to women’s political and social participation than the past. Several anthropologists that had been working in the Chiapas region noted that women began to articulate concerns using new language during the late 1980s; indigenous women began to develop a rhetoric around which they could express frustrations with domesticity, spousal violence, and poverty (Eber, 1998). When the formation Zapatista movement provided an outlet in which indigenous people could unite to express their grievances, women were eager to express their concern. Kampwirth states that as a result of their desire to become more active in their indigenous and national communities, “[w]omen, equipped with new independence and new skills – but also new grievances – became open to mobilization directly in the EZLN, or indirectly to a social movement that sympathized with the EZLN” (Kampwirth, 2002, 93).
The Revolutionary Law of Women

The Revolutionary Law of Women is a document in which indigenous women manifested the sociopolitical struggles that had been plaguing their gender since the beginning of the pre-colonial period. The main architect of the law’s formation was an indigenous Zapatista woman known as Comandante Susana. When explaining how the law was originally conceptualized, Susan explained that,

I decided that things would be better if there was a Law of Women, so we [indigenous women] began to organize in each community…We went to all the villages, in each one we held an assembly and collected the opinions of women. Later we met with the men and joined together everyone’s ideas. [Foran, 2001, 124]

The process of visiting villages and gathering opinions that Susan refers to occurred in the early 1990s.

After a series of negotiations led by Comandante Susana and her supporters, a draft version of the Revolutionary Law of Women was created in the early 20th century. “Containing ten points, the original law gives women the right to work and own land, to choose their partners and the number of their children, to be educated and to receive healthcare, and to take positions of revolutionary leadership” (Foran, 2001, 124). The law was approved in 1993, one year before the official Zapatista uprising. Although the law underwent changes and was subjected to re-organization in the following months, the basic focus on women’s rights remained the same. The presence of women, manifested in the laws, was so strong that Subcomandante Marcos remarked, ‘the first EZLN uprising happened in March of 1993, and was headed by [indigenous] women. There were no causalities and they were victorious” (Foran, 2001, 124).
During the January 1, 1994 Zapatista uprising, the rebels distributed the Revolutionary Law of Women as part of a twenty-page booklet titled The Mexican Alarmclock\(^{11}\) (Kampwirth, 2002, 112). The Mexican Alarmclock contained a series of demands regarding community life that the Zapatistas wanted recognized by the Mexican government. Women’s rights were listed as the 5\(^{th}\) major concern in this series of indigenous reforms, and the specific legislative reform that corresponded to the demand for women’s rights was the Revolutionary Law of Women (Womack, 1999).

The Revolutionary Law of Women that was circulated in 1994 elucidates ten specific, claims regarding women’s rights\(^{12}\). First, the Revolutionary Law of Women stated that women have the right to take part in the revolutionary struggle in the place and to the degree that their personal will and capacity determine. Thus, the Zapatistas incorporated women into the revolutionary struggle without concern for their race, creed, color or political affiliation. The only requirement for guerilla combatants was to take up the demands of exploited people and to commit to obey and enforce the laws and regulations of the revolution (Kampwirth, 2002). Second, the Revolutionary Law of Women declared that women have the right to work and receive a fair wage. Third, women had the right to decide the number of children they give birth to and care for. Fourth, the Law asserted that women have the right to take part in community affairs and to hold community office so long as they are elected in a free and democratic manner. Fifth, women and children had the right to primary consideration in provisions for health and food; sixth, the Law declared that women have the right to education. Seventh, the Law affirmed that women have the right to choose their mate and not be obligated by force co

\(^{11}\) “The Mexican Alarmclock” refers to a Zapatista document originally published in Spanish as “El Despertador Mexicano."

\(^{12}\) A full text of the Revolutionary Law of Women, translated to English, is located the in the Appendix.
contract marriage. Eighth, the Law stated that no woman could be beaten or mistreated physically, either by members of her family or by others. Crimes of rape and attempted rape would be severely punished. Ninth, women could occupy positions of leadership in the revolutionary organization and hold military rank in the revolutionary armed forces. Lastly, the Law stated that women have all the rights and duties that the other revolutionary laws and regulations indicate (Rovira, 2000).

As the aforementioned declarations demonstrate, the Revolutionary Law of Women represented a departure from previous views of indigenous struggle in which “women’s specific problems were not considered very different from those of marginalized groups as a whole” (Hernandez-Castillo, 105). The Revolutionary Law of Women gained attention from several international sources because overt concentration on women’s rights was more greatly emphasized among the EZLN as compared to other post-modern movements (Harvey, 1998).

The lyrics of a new song composed by Zapatista indigenous women illustrated the dramatic shift in gender rhetoric resulted from the Zapatista’s focus on women’s rights. The song expressed happiness about women being able to live freely. This new rhetoric evident in this song underscored the active participation of indigenous women in their communities. The lyrics state that,

We know, comrades, that all women have the right to participate. That’s why we respect what women do, they know what to do, in their search for peace. We know, comrades, that all women have the right to live freely. That’s why we respect what women do, they know what they need to do, in their search for peace. [Chiapas Media Project, We Are Equal, 2005]
Female Combatants in the Zapatista Movement

A large number of indigenous women have decided to support the Zapatista movement by dedicating their lives to fighting in the EZLN army. It is estimated that female combatants comprise thirty percent of the Zapatista army (Glusker, 1998). Women combatants joined the Zapatista army because they were “encouraged by the Zapatista egalitarian ideology that allowed them greater control over their lives and provided them with an opportunity for public responsibility” (Cleaver, 1998). The large number of women in Zapatista troops illustrates the extent to which women’s rights have been incorporated into the Zapatista movement. The Zapatista movement has supported the presence of women in their army by affording them the same treatment as male combatants. As the Revolutionary Law of Women states, women are guaranteed equal opportunity to training and education when they volunteer to join guerilla troops. As a product of the Zapatista movement demonstrating a strong interest in asserting women’s rights, many indigenous women have been compelled to join the army.

It is important to note that women forsake their family life as mothers and wives to participate in the EZLN. Home life in indigenous communities is not compatible with being a member of guerilla troops. Therefore, many indigenous women claim that fighting with the Zapatista army will benefit their community more greatly than if women stayed at home to care for their families when explaining their motivations for joining the insurgency. Young indigenous female combatants emphasize the hardships associated with domestic labor and childcare in their villages when they are asked to comment on women’s rights. Furthermore, female guerillas rarely have positive remarks to make about the lives of indigenous women in their communities. For example, a Zapatista
soldier explained in an interview that, “women get married when they are fifteen, and after that they have children so their life is worth nothing. Their role is reduced to taking care of their husbands and children, and working” (Eber, 1998, 8).

Life as a Zapatista guerilla combatant differs greatly from village life. Upon joining the army, Zapatista men and women have several responsibilities. First, the Zapatista combatants must learn Spanish. “This enables them to speak to one another, as well as to communicate with the outside world and understand the enemy” (Glusker, 1998, 545). Women who learn Spanish as a result of joining the Zapatista army gain status in their native communities and serve as examples of educated women for indigenous wives that remain in rural villages. Second, the Zapatista combatants must learn to read and write. As with learning to speak Spanish, the ability to become literate is an important opportunity for indigenous women insurgents. After these basic academic and communication skills are mastered, Zapatista troops are trained in handling military weapons.

Zapatista combatants wear ski masks when they are active in the military. The masks serve two purposes. First, the Zapatistas wear masks to symbolize that they are people without a face to the Mexican government. Second, the Zapatista masks keep individual combatant identities secret so that they are not targeted by paramilitary troops. Maintaining anonymous identities is crucial to avoid being targeted by paramilitary assassins; this is especially important for women because they face an increased risk of being raped by men in paramilitary troops.

For practical reasons associated with childbirth, women must agree not to have children while serving in the army. If a female combatant becomes pregnant, she is
forced to leave the troops. This aspect of the Zapatista military discourages some women from being active in the army, and also serves as an example of the incompatibility between guerilla life and tradition indigenous women roles. Fortunately, couples in the armed forces that do not have children can choose to marry and live together; however, they must first be granted permission from their commanding officer (Glusker, 1998).

One of the major reasons that women are discouraged from participating in the Zapatista guerilla forces is because men in their communities fear that traditional indigenous village life will suffer if women do not fulfill their duties as domestic homemakers and mothers. For this reason, female combatants often emphasize that their participation in the army benefits the collective community more than individual families. This argument shows that indigenous women are aware of the conflict between individual and collective rights that exists when they leave the home. Men often argued that women needed to perform laborious domestic tasks so that their family could continue contributing effectively to their community. Women were told that it was their duty as an indigenous wife to complete the chores that husbands and other males demanded. Since the assertion of the Revolutionary Law of Women and the strong presence of female Zapatista combatants,

[indigenous] women are creating the foundations for greater gender equality while preserving their culture’s traditional emphasis on social responsibility, economic interdependence between spouses and generations, and spiritual strength as collective rather than individual achievement. [Eber, 1998, 1]

This quote illustrates that increasingly, women have been agents of political and social actions in their communities as a result of their participation in the Zapatista army.
**Famous Female Guerillas**

An indigenous woman named Ana María helped lead the Zapatista takeover at San Cristóbal de Las Casas on January 1, 1994. Ana María was recognized as the first prominent female combatant in the Zapatista movement. According to popular rumors about her life, Ana María ran away from home when she was a young adolescent because she was captivated by the Zapatista movement and had a strong desire to support its declarations by joining the army. Ana María’s military success was widely discussed in indigenous communities; her reputation in the highlands of Chiapas encouraged many other indigenous women to join the Zapatista army.

In a public speech about the Zapatista uprising, Subcomandante Marcos discussed Major Ana María’s critical participation in the Zapatista armed insurrection against the Mexican government. Marcos stated that Ana María,

> came to the mountains of the Lacandon jungle in December 1984, not 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 woman and several thousand indigenous people not only say but shout “Enough is enough!” so loudly that all the world hears them. [Kampwirth, 2002, 83]

Major Ana María’s active participation in the guerilla army represents the sentiment of empowered female combatants that is common in the Zapatista movement.

Comandante Ramona is another indigenous woman who became a national symbol of the EZLN after joining the Zapatista army as a young adolescent. Until her death in 2006, she led the Zapatistas alongside Subcomandante Marcos. Marcos keeps his identity secret; however, it is widely known that he is mestizo and was formerly a professor of sociology at a large university in Mexico (Foran, 2001). Ramona is a native
indigenous women and her title, which translates to “Commander Ramona,” is considered higher in status and power than that of Subcomandante Marcos.

The story of how Comandante Ramona joined the EZLN military is widely circulated among highland villages. Similar to Major Ana María, Ramona ran away from home during her early teenage years to join the Zapatista army. She was an ambitious, strong-willed girl who had heard about the formation of a guerilla army and wanted to actively participate in expanding the role of women in indigenous communities. After joining the army as a young woman, Ramona became a member of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, which made decisions about military activity and organization for the Zapatistas.

As a Zapatista activist, Ramona condemned the low status of women in indigenous communities. She declared that women have been the most exploited group in the past 500 years of Mexican history. Ramona regretted that “women do not have the right to speak out and participate in assembly, but they still get up at three in the morning to prepare the corn for their husbands breakfasts, and they don’t rest until late at night (Enriquez-Leder, 1995). Ramona, who received limited formal education and speaks broken Spanish, encouraged women to demand better treatment in their communities. She expressed that, “the Indian women in modern Mexico have decided to take up arms and become Zapatistas” because they want to speak out against their limited rights as women (Enrique-Leder, 1995, 2). Ramona connected women’s suffering to the struggles of their native communities, emphasizing that the time had come for all indigenous people to demand improvements in their standards of living. This was manifested when, “Ramona spoke at a rally at the Zócalo central square of Mexico City, declaring
emphatically that the indigenous peoples of Chiapas would not bow their leaders any longer” (Glusker, 1998, 546).

Ramona delivered powerful speeches in which she emphasized the low status of women in indigenous communities. She encouraged other indigenous women to follow her example by becoming active participants in the Zapatista movement. Ramona’s goal was to “broadcast this struggle so that many women elsewhere might take the example and do something…” (Zwarstein, 2006, 2). As Ramona received increasingly greater recognition for her prominent role in the Zapatista movement, her strong character served as a prominent example of women’s activism within the EZLN. She won the hearts of many Mexicans, especially indigenous women, when the media showed her negotiating assertively among fellow commanders that tower above her small physical status (Zwarstein, 2006). Ramona provided fellow indigenous women with an example of a strong female guerilla participant because she “demanded dignity, not just in words, but in practice” (Zwarstein, 2006, 2). Ramona’s work in indigenous communities was also influential because she addressed grievances that were directly expressed by indigenous women. “Ramona’s work in Zapatista-protected communities included determining women’s needs as they saw them” (Zwarstein, 2006, 2). Thus, unlike Mexican government officials and politicians that neglected indigenous women, Ramona listened and was responsive to indigenous women’s demands.

Comandante Ramona’s strong female leadership elicited a great deal of attention from the international press. Writers from The New York Times, The Boston Globe, and other widely circulated publications often reported on Comandante Ramona’s activity and speeches. These publications recognized the importance of a strong indigenous woman
taking on a position of importance in a major post-modern social movement. They often emphasized one of Ramona’s most central messages which states that, “[i]n Mexico, poor indigenous women are easily the most disenfranchised group, and empowerment of the usually powerless is a cornerstone of the Zapatista philosophy” (Zwarstein, 2006, 2). International publications helped Ramona broadcast the message of indigenous women’s rights to a large audience outside Chiapas.

Sadly, Comandante Ramona died on January 6, 2006 after a long battle with kidney disease. Articles published after Ramona’s death proclaimed that as a result of her leadership, many women now occupy “senior positions in the Zapatista army and play prominent and substantive roles in negotiations and public events” (Zwarstein, 2006, 2). “Fighting alongside the men, Zapatista women such as Ramona have pushed their particular agenda forward making sure that women’s rights issues are equally important within the [Zapatista] movement itself” (Grosso, 2002). Comandante Ramona’s legacy is now remembered and honored by the small, wooden Zapatista combatant dolls that indigenous women produce and sell in women’s cooperatives.

Zapatista Female Participation Compared to Nicaragua and El Salvador

Social movements in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Southern Mexico were motivated by campesinos\(^\text{13}\) that wanted to improve the deplorable living conditions that corrupt national governments with neo-liberal agendas imposed on their communities. Women’s role as active combatants in these indigenous social movements is generally

\(^{13}\) Campesino is a Spanish word that refers to “peasants” or “people that live in the countryside.” It includes members of indigenous and non-indigenous populations.
acknowledged. The Sandinistas, FMLN, and Zapatistas had nearly equal proportions of female soldiers; each movement’s guerilla army is characterized by approximately thirty percent female combatants.

Shifting gender relations were a major factor that encouraged female combatant participation in Central American guerilla armies during the late 20th century. “Identifying female participation is crucial to understanding the impact of such rebel groups as the Sandinistas, the Zapatistas, the FMLN supporters because it allowed a shift in occupations, such as the military, that were previously dominated by men” (McPeters, 2004). Changes in gender relations occurred as a product of many factors, including the growth of agro-exports, changes in family structures as a product of migration, increased female migration, the transformation of the church by liberation theology, and longstanding frustration with political authoritarianism (Kampwirth, 2002, 9). Also, the need for Latin American guerillas to recruit as many supporters as possible forced them to accept the potential participation of women.

Although all three social movements have similar amounts of female combatants in their guerilla troops, significant differences exist between the Zapatista movement as compared to the FMLN and Sandinistas. For example, the Zapatista movement is distinct because rather than seek to remove and replace the national government, it wanted to work with the Mexican government to achieve freedom of choice, access to sustainable land, education, democracy, and recognition of women’s rights (McPeters, 2004). The EZLN demands autonomy, rather than independence, from the Mexican government. The FMLN and Sandinistas are movements that sought to overthrow and replace the national government of El Salvador and Nicaragua, respectively. Also, the Zapatista

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14 FMLN is an abbreviation for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.
movement is an ethnic based movement while the FMLN and Sandinistas organized class-based movements.

With respect to female guerilla participation, the most important distinction between these three Central American social movements is that the Zapatistas considered women’s rights as a priority of the movement, while the FMLN of El Salvador and Sandinistas of Nicaragua did not directly consider changing gender relations a primary issue (McPeters, 2004). The Zapatistas wanted to eliminate the one-party control that dominated the Mexican state and systematically marginalized indigenous populations by creating conditions for wider citizen participation in public policymaking and electoral politics. The Zapatistas valued women’s participation in the movement and in the army because it helped achieve a more representative, direct democracy and improved social status for women within indigenous communities. Thus, the Zapatista movement went beyond accepting the participation of women as guerilla members to directly tackling women’s social issues. Women fighting within the ranks of the Zapatista guerillas recognized that they were fighting to win the right to marry whomever they want and divorce at will, to use contraception, to become literate and learn Spanish, to command male insurgents, and to demand that chores such as cooking are shared by both sexes” (Rovira, 2000, 5).

Contrastingly, women were invited to join rebel troops in Nicaragua and El Salvador because they helped advance the goals of class-based movements, without a placing exclusive pressure on improving the condition of women. Whereas women’s rights were excluded from the rhetoric espoused by the Sandinistas and FMLN, the Zapatistas cited
the Revolutionary Law of Women as one of the most important components of its revolutionary platform.

**Conclusion**

Before the 1994 Zapatista uprising, indigenous women were limited to domestic roles and were considered of secondary status in their communities. Women were uneducated and largely controlled by their husbands and fathers. However, gender relations changed during the mid 20th century when new migration became more common in indigenous communities. Male migration provided women with an opportunity to develop self-confidence and assert a sense of independence. Women that traveled to the cities on short trips also encountered a newfound sense of self-worth.

These assertions of women’s autonomy cumulated with the establishment of the Revolutionary Law of Women. The Revolutionary Law of Women directly addressed grievances of indigenous women from communities throughout Chiapas. The Law made many women hopeful that their demands of increased social, political, and economic agency would become a reality in their native communities.

When the Zapatistas formally declared war against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994, they asserted the importance of women’s rights within their movement. It was widely recognized that the EZLN was distinct from other Central American social movements, such as the FMLN in El Salvador and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, because of their focus on women’s rights. Although female guerilla participation in all three movements in roughly thirty percent, women in the FMLN and Sandinista rebel armies
fought on behalf of the entire class-based movement, rather than with a specific concentration of women’s rights within the movement.

The Zapatista movement received widespread international attention as a result of its unprecedented commitment to women’s rights. Several non-governmental organizations, human rights organizations, and international observers became active in the Zapatista region. Furthermore, the Zapatistas accumulated a strong internet following that augmented its international reputation. As a result of the immediate infiltration of external influences in the Zapatista movement, the Mexican government increased the amount of repression in the Chiapas region. Militarization became more pronounced, and conditions in Zapatista autonomous communities became more dangerous.

The next chapter will examine the effect of external actors before, after, and during the Zapatista uprising. It will focus on the effect that influence from the Church, non-governmental organizations, and the internet have enacted on the Zapatista women’s rights platform.
Chapter 3: The Influence of External Actors

Introduction

The Zapatista movement is distinct from other movements because it has focused on women’s rights and strongly encouraged the participation of female guerillas. Other Latin American social movements, such as the FMLN in El Salvador and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, incorporated women into their troops on the basis of supporting the general goals of the movement. Whereas women joined the ranks of other Latin American rebellions because they wanted to improve the condition of their class, Zapatista female combatants joined the army with the intention of representing the rights of women within their ethnic communities. Guiomar Rovira articulated the unique role of Zapatista women combatants when he wrote, “[t]he flow of young women into the guerilla…represents a series of individual revolts against the patriarchal status quo, and has been vital to the EZLN’s success” (2000, 5).

It is important to note, however, that female participation in the Zapatista army was influenced by a series of additional factors. The positive Zapatista attitude towards women did not emerge from the unadulterated experience of indigenous communities; external actors that played a role in the Zapatista women’s rights frame. These outside influences include the Catholic and Protestant churches, non-governmental organizations, the internet, and other media projects. Thus, “the EZLN is the product of interaction between local reality and broader, national and international tendencies and ideas” (Rovira, 2000, 7).

The presence of international actors exerted significant influence over women in the Zapatista movement. In most cases, women’s social and political activism increased as a
product of their exposure to these influences. However, external actors have not been able to prevent or eradicate military violence against Zapatista communities. Therefore, although human rights observers try to monitor militarization of the Chiapas region, there is still a large danger in being labeled as a Zapatista combatant or supporter, especially for women. Increased incidences of paramilitary violence and targeted rape have been reported since the 1994 uprising. Unfortunately, the power of the women’s rights demands within the Zapatista movement dwindled as the army focused on more pressing, realistic concern such as maintaining the safety and security of their autonomous communities.

**The Role of the Church**

During the early 20th century, a Catholic movement known as liberation theology became extremely popular in Latin America. Liberation theology preached the gospel as a call for social justice and encouraged the democratization of religious authority. In Mexico, indigenous populations were exposed to the influx of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries. These missionaries preached that they would help the poor “confront institutionalized violence and social injustice, which threaten to beat them into passivity, fatalism, and apathy” (Burdick, 1993, 2). Indigenous women, who were traditionally excluded from being pivotal social actors in their communities, were attracted to liberation theology because of its focus on the bottom-up activism. Furthermore, since Catholicism’s liberation theology focused on helping the poor overcome fear, rediscover a sense of community, and combat violence preventing social change, indigenous women were given an opportunity through which they could
transform their responsibility to maintain a strong household through improving community conditions (Burdick, 1993).

Catholic and Protestant groups interacted with indigenous people in the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas as early as the 1940s. Numerically, Catholic and Protestant missionaries were successful in convincing indigenous peasants to become religious. “In 1960, fewer than 5 percent of the jungle’s residents identified themselves as Protestant, while by 1990, 25 percent identified themselves that way (Kampwirth, 2002, 96). Protestant and Catholic missionaries did not enter indigenous communities with the intention of promoting women’s rights. In fact, these religious groups entered the jungle with the support of the Mexican government, which hoped that adherence to Catholicism or Protestantism would weaken the collective indigenous identity. Many aspects of these two religions reinforce patriarchal and traditional ideas related to gender roles. For example, according to these traditions, family life is viewed as private and unquestionable. Therefore, women and men are discouraged from voicing domestic disputes to the larger community.

However, opportunities for leadership and exposure to strategies for spiritual empowerment provided indigenous women with the means to become interested in other political and social issues. Researcher Carol Ann Drogus articulates the unintentional liberalizing effect that conversion to Protestant religion had on indigenous women when she writes that, “Pentecostalism sets out to reinforce patriarchal gender norms, not to undermine them. Nonetheless, it may offer new ideas and roles that women can utilize to reinterpret gender norms and may even ultimately destabilize the prevailing hegemonic gender ideology” (Drogus, 1997, 57).
Christian based communities (CEBs) were also established in many parts of Chiapas during the late 20th century. “CEBs are Catholic congregations in which clergy and pastoral agents are engaged, in one way or another, in efforts to raise political and social awareness” (Burdick, 1993, 2). CEBs transformed indigenous community life because they increased the agency of its inhabitants. Indigenous women of the late 20th century CEBs were particularly attracted to the idea that men and women are equal under God’s eyes. Sister Caridad, who worked with indigenous women in Christian-based indigenous communities in Chiapas, explained that “At its base, the word of God is about equality… Women have to understand that because of their own dignity, they are the equals of men” (Kampwirth, 2002, 97). As a consequence of the teachings women received in CEBs, they were motivated to stop the expenditure of money on unfavorable substances, such as alcohol. Women argued that it was their religious duty to provide a safe and healthy environment for themselves and their family.

In general, indigenous women’s exposure to liberation theology during the early to mid-twentieth century provided greater motivation and legitimization for autonomy, individuation, and action outside domestic roles, without directly challenging those roles (Drogus, 1997). Generally speaking, liberation theology changed the way that indigenous women thought about themselves without devaluing their domestic responsibilities. In other words, Catholic teachings had a transformative effect because they did not force women to choose between being assertive and being a member of their community. Instead, Catholicism legitimated greater autonomy and individualism for women without requiring them to reject familial attachments. “Perhaps no movement that directly challenges or subverts gender ideology could succeed as well, particularly
among poor women, for whom financial independence and abandonment of domestic roles are neither feasible nor desirable options” (Drogus, 1997, 68). Liberation theology teachings also motivated indigenous women to encourage their husbands to adopt religious moral values. Indigenous woman had the most success in asserting egalitarian household practices when husbands attended religious services and adopted the teachings associated with this religion.

As the Zapatista platform was being developed, the influence of liberation was extremely strong. Liberation theology promoted a class-based understanding of what was wrong with society. Liberation theology theologians argued that capitalism and globalization were agents of harm that are causing marginalization and oppression of the poor. As the Zapatista platform was being developed, there was a strong focus on realizing the destructive effects that neo-liberal policies which promote globalization can enact on indigenous communities. Indigenous women in particular were able to participate in the Zapatista discussion because their newfound voice helped them become more dedicated to social and political change. Furthermore, liberation theology’s effect on indigenous communities made it more acceptable for women to take part in these discussions. Women argued that it was part of their religious and domestic duty to demand participation and recognition in the Zapatista movement.

Women that did not join the guerilla army manifested their newfound sociopolitical awareness in other venues. For example, many women that work on indigenous women’s rights issues mention prior work or exposure with the church as being a critical motivational factor that prepared women for mobilization within the Zapatistas and other supporting social movements (Kampwirth, 2002, 98). During the late 1980s, women’s
groups devoted to feminists studies and discussions of violence against women were organized in San Cristobal de Las Casas. Their pastoral projects focused on claiming the dignity of each indigenous woman (Kampwirth, 2002, 97). “This holistic mobilization effort included discussing the Bible; teaching literacy (in both Spanish and native languages); advocating for human rights; providing health services; and aiding women in forming economic projects such as cooperatives, communal cornfields and corn mills, chicken production, vegetable gardens, and craft cooperatives” (Kampwirth, 2002, 97). Although these groups were typically small and short-lived, they provided a foundation from which later bases of support would grow because these church groups taught women to re-evaluate their everyday experiences “through the light of the Bible” (Kampwirth, 2002, 98).

**The Role of Cooperatives**

Indigenous women began organizing into artisan cooperatives during the 1950s. These cooperatives increased women’s economic independence because they allowed “thousands of women to earn small amounts of cash, often without leaving the villages” (Kampwirth, 2002, 103). Collective work among women became an important organizing tool because the experience of organizing in an unarmed capacity pushed women into joining the guerilla struggle. Women were motivated to become involved in the Zapatista movement as a product of their growing political skills and consciousness. Indigenous cooperative members were also attracted to the Zapatistas because they were increasingly aware and frustrated with the Mexican government’s escalated violence against indigenous communities (Chiapas Media Project, Women United, 2000).
The formation of artisan cooperatives was supported by the Mexican government, especially through the National Indigenous Institute (INI). The government helped other cooperatives form in Chiapas because it believed that these small economic structures would aid the tourism industry and encourage indigenous cultural assimilation (Moran, 2007). Also, the Mexican national government wanted to create organizations that would be loyal to the ruling political party. “In most of the rest of Mexico, the ruling part had employed a much more inclusionary strategy than in Chiapas, and so it enjoyed more popular support than did the government of the state of Chiapas” (Kampwirth, 2002, 109). In an effort to rally popular support for the national government in Chiapas during the 1980s, the PRI opened its politics in many ways (i.e. allowed elections to be contested) and supported government organizations such as the INI.

Ironically, rather than garner support for the national government, cooperatives had the effect of politicizing women who were involved in these organizations. Indigenous women became politicized because the cooperatives provided them with an opportunity to be economically independent. These freedoms gave indigenous women the ability to critically analyze their position within indigenous communities. Women gained self-confidence as a result of participating in cooperatives. Many women had been previously frustrated with the impoverished and oppressed conditions under which they were living; therefore, they joined the Zapatista social movement as a way to express and act on these concerns.

Cooperative members that did not become female guerillas as a result of their newfound political consciousness often became part of cooperative organizing efforts in Zapatista communities. Thus, after the 1994 uprising, women living in Zapatista
communities formed cooperatives that produced baked goods, indigenous crafts, and Zapatista crafts. The companionship that cooperatives provided to Zapatista supporters helped them cope with the social and political challenges in their communities. As intimidating tactics and militarization of the Chiapas region increased, participation in Zapatista cooperatives provided women with an additional security network in which they could feel united. A woman working in a Zapatista community in Lucio Cabanas reported that the “women in cooperatives are happy and calm working as collective companions because the works is unifying and no one feels alone” (Chiapas Media Project, Women United, 2000).

Collective work also gave the opportunity for women to become more educated. Women in Zapatista cooperatives have received financial support from within their communities and also from external sources such as non-governmental and religious organizations. These funds have been used to send some cooperative members to agricultural and craft conferences where women learn how to improve their cooperative techniques. This knowledge is shared with other members of the cooperatives, which helps Zapatista women become educated about their sales and production methods.

**The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations**

Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were established in Chiapas, Mexico in response to the Zapatista uprising in 1994. There are many positive impacts associated with the presence of NGOs. For example, NGOs provided local Zapatista campaigns

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15 The Appendix features a picture of a small Zapatista doll, which is one of the most commonly produced crafts in Zapatista cooperatives that cater to tourists. It is extremely common for international supporters of the movement to purchase one of these dolls. Often, the dolls are replicas of Comandante Ramona and Subcomandante Marcos.
with an international profile through solidarity work and they offered practical advice and professional expertise in project development and resources. With regard to benefits specifically provided to women, NGOs have helped develop gender sensitive programs that ensure women’s centrality to Zapatista demands and they have brought female workers that serve as role models into the communities. Lastly, NGOs have supported women’s community initiatives (such as artisan cooperatives and religious cargos), which have reinforced the importance of women’s roles (Craske, 1999).

One of the most well-established non-governmental organizations currently operating in the Chiapas region is the International Service for Peace (SIPAZ). SIPAZ is an international observation program that was started in 1995 to monitor the conflict between indigenous people and the national government in Chiapas. Today, SIPAZ is comprised of more than fifty organizations from North America, Latin America, and Europe. Each of the coalitions associated with SIPAZ have experience with peace-building projects (www.sipaz.org). NGOs such as SIPAZ have specifically focused on the women’s rights frame of the Zapatista uprising; they have asked international and national civil society to support their international observation efforts.

SIPAZ has been particularly effective in reporting and condemning groups of people that enact violence against indigenous people and those who work within indigenous communities. For example, SIPAZ has tracked intimidation tactics used against indigenous women and female human rights workers in the Chiapas region since the Zapatista uprising. SIPAZ recognizes that female human rights defenders are more likely to be the target of violence than men. In response to a particularly personalized attack against a woman named Marina Pages in 2006, SIPAZ published an international report
which called “international and national civil society to be attentive and to support our international observation efforts, so that space in which this sort of work can be performed is not threatened” (SIPAZ, 2006). Forceful defense of women, both indigenous and non-indigenous, has helped the Zapatista forces continue to resist oppression from the Mexican government.

The Fray de Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center is another organization that was founded in response to the Zapatista uprising. The “Fray Ba” Center, as it is called, was started by Bishop Ruiz in 1989. Bishop Ruiz is well-known in Chiapas for having negotiated a ceasefire between the Mexican government and the Zapatistas after the January 1, 1994 uprising. Ruiz’s organization specializes in helping indigenous people cope with the low-intensity warfare that threatens the well-being of their communities (www.laneta.apc.org/cdhbcasas/index.htm). It has also maintained important data measurements related to the health, education, and lifestyles of many indigenous communities. For example, the Fray Ba Center has been tracking mother and infant mortality rates since the 1994 Zapatista uprising.

The Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action (CIEPAC) is a non-profit organization that helps populations of people, including the Zapatistas, organize themselves “in the face of difficulties and adversities imposed by governments and dominant classes” (www.ceipac.org). CIEPAC was founded in 1998 and consists of a nine-person team that focuses on the impacts of economic globalization. CIPEAC actively supports the Zapatistas in their desire to maintain communal indigenous land and condemns the Mexican government’s failure to protect indigenous territory. CIEPAC asserts that because ninety percent of tillable countryside land is owned by a minority of
wealthy landowners or large companies, the Zapatistas should be entitled to territorial protection from the government.

CIEPAC also views migration as a major threat to indigenous communities because the absence of young men causes problems for family members left behind. Each year, more than 150,000 indigenous people to migrate or move to work in the United States. CIEPAC emphasizes that cultural breakdowns occur as a product of migration. During an interview, a CIEPAC representative explained that,

> When men leave to work in America, they leave women to work in the field. Then, when the men come back, they want to drink Coca-Cola and obtain other material things they were used to having in the United States. This inevitably leads to the breakdown of indigenous cultural practices, mainly changes in food and clothing.\(^{17}\)

Furthermore, since women usually do not migrate to the United States, it is difficult for them to deal with husbands that return from long periods of time abroad disinterested in indigenous Mexican culture. Indigenous women struggle with holding their families together and are poorly regarded if they are not able to ameliorate these domestic challenges. CIEPAC has worked with the Zapatistas by decrying the large-scale migration of indigenous workers and identifying the concrete indigenous practices that are being threatened by globalization and free trade practices elicited by NAFTA. From their base in San Cristobal de Las Casas, CIEPAC publishes bulletins that detail the current events and threats in Chiapas. This information helps the international community keep a watchful eye over paramilitary activity and the effects of globalization and migration in the southernmost state of Mexico.

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\(^{16}\) This data was obtained during an interview with a CIPEAC representative in March 2006.

\(^{17}\) The information in the statement was obtained during an interview with a CIPEAC representative in March 2006.
With regards to women’s rights, CIEPAC has supported the Zapatista movement by mounting an international campaign against Coca-Cola. The campaign involves discouraging supporters of the indigenous people from selling and consuming Coca-Cola products. One of the major reasons that CIEPAC and indigenous people oppose the presence of this corporation in Chiapas is because incidences of rape have increased dramatically since Coca-Cola factories were established in this region. Although there is limited tangible evidence to support this claim, it is suspected that Coca-Cola employees are perpetrating many of these rapes; factors such as lack of accountability, limited policing, and inadequate security explain why Coca-Cola employees are able to commit rape without fear of prosecution. Women in Zapatista communities are afraid to work in the fields and walk around their communities for fear of becoming a victim of rape. Therefore, Coca-Cola employees have joined paramilitary troops in being a fear factor keeping indigenous women within the walls of their homes.

Lastly, CIEPAC has also been instrumental in supporting the Zapatista attempt to establish autonomous schools. Since CIEPAC decries the Mexican government for misrepresenting the interests of indigenous peoples, it applauds the Zapatista’s initiative of creating autonomous systems that defy the “animalistic” practices of the Mexican government\(^1\).

**The Role of the Media**

Dispersal of information over the internet has been an important way that the Zapatistas have bypassed censorship by the Mexican government and spread information

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\(^1\) The information in the statement was obtained during an interview with a CIPEAC representative in March 2006.
about their uprising to an international audience. Zapatista leaders recognized the importance of recruiting external alliances and support networks before their formal uprising on Jan 1, 1994 occurred. The Zapatistas were also aware that the international left-wing political actors were sympathetic to the feminist cause. Therefore, in the years leading up to the uprising, Zapatistas reached out to feminists, secular human rights organizations, Catholic and Protestant churches, and other related groups. Since Zapatista communities often do not have access to computer communications, electricity, or phone systems, information about Zapatista activity in the highlands of Chiapas is usually relayed by a foot messenger to a small office in San Cristobal de Las Casas or another small city in Chiapas; this information is then disseminated by Zapatista supporters, reporters, and other mass media channels over the internet and television. Activists in the international community provided support to the Zapatista movement because they were outraged at the harsh repression enacted against indigenous communities by the Mexican national government.

The media, especially via the internet, has provided a crucial link by which the Zapatista recruits and communicates with its wide support network.

There are dozens of web pages with detailed information on the situation in Chiapas specifically and the state of democracy in Mexico more generally...These interventions operate from many countries and in many languages, and they are all the result of work by those sympathetic to the rights of indigenous peoples and to the plight of the Zapatistas. [Cleaver, 1998, 628]

This passage illustrates that the Zapatistas have employed the power of media technology, especially the internet, to bypass internal censorship by the Mexican government. Zapatistas call for the “democratization of democracy,” which would recognize the voices of oppressed indigenous communities and widen political
participation to include marginalized indigenous people. The internet has been instrumental in garnering support for this aspect of the Zapatista platform because the demand for electoral reform “has struck sympathetic cords” in many parts of the world (Cleaver, 1998). Notably, many internet sources cite the Zapatista’s focus on women’s rights in the post-modern era as a major reason for their support. The Chiapas Media Project is an example of an organization that employs the internet and other visual mediums to encourage sympathy with the Zapatista movement.

The Chiapas Media Project is an internet and video-making project that was formed in 1998 in an effort to help Zapatista combatants spread the world about their uprising and mission to the international community. Since its establishment in 1998, the Chiapas Media project “has been working as a bi-national partnership to provide video and computer equipment and training to indigenous and campesino communities in Chiapas and Guerrero, Mexico” (www.chiapasmediaproyect.org). This partnership was established as a result of conversations with autonomous Zapatista communities that wanted to use television and the internet as a way to bypass censorship by the Mexican national government, especially members of the corrupt PRI political party which maintained control of many public networks.

The Chiapas Media Project has headquarters in Chicago, Illinois and Chiapas Mexico. It “was created in response to repeated requests for media access from indigenous leaders in Chiapas” and since then, the project has proliferated into a strong base of support for indigenous peoples, especially the Zapatistas (Singer, 2000). The Chiapas Media Project has gained international recognition for working in close contact with indigenous communities. Many scholars and practitioners applaud the Project’s ability to publicly
and powerfully demonstrate the struggles of indigenous people’s through film. The Chiapas Media Project website currently has a link through which people from the international community can make online donations to the Chiapas Media Project. The willingness of supporters to make monetary contributions to this organization illustrates its well-reputed and well-received efforts at publicizing the indigenous struggle.

The documentaries that are produced by the Chiapas Media Project are short-length, independent productions. The productions are often filmed and produced by indigenous community members that have been trained by Chiapas Media Project staff members. The documentaries are in English and/or native indigenous languages, accompanied by English or Spanish subtitles. In 2008, the Chiapas Media Project had produced more than twenty-six documentaries about the life of indigenous people in southern Mexico. Many publications by the Chiapas Media Project have focused exclusively on the lives of indigenous women and guerillas. These documentaries compare women’s lives before and after the Zapatista revolution, explain the role of women in indigenous cooperatives, and examine the role of women in indigenous family life.

**Conclusion**

As they were planning their rebellion, indigenous Zapatista supporters were aware that the Mexican government would resist their uprising. In an attempt to garner support from external actors while acknowledging the grievances of indigenous women, the Zapatista’s developed a platform with an explicit focus on women’s rights. As anticipated, the Zapatista movement has received with a great deal of international attention as a result of prioritizing the demands of indigenous women. Although rural
movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador also promoted indigenous equality and garnered attention from international press, the assertion of women’s rights among the Zapatista’s is striking because the Revolutionary Law of Women places an explicit focus on the rights of women.

The presence of external actors has had various effects on the Zapatista movement. In most cases, external actors in the Zapatista movement portray Zapatista supporters in a positive way. Thus, the Mexican government is depicted as the antagonist fighting against a righteous, well-intentioned indigenous population. Also, external influences have encouraged women to increase their participation in social and political movements. Liberation theology teachings had the unintended effect of encouraging women to demand economic and social equality. NGOs have provided assistance to women within the Zapatista movement by providing them with increased access to healthcare and education. NGOs also have developed specific support systems that aid women in the development of cooperatives and other organized women’s groups. The international press, the internet and other mediums of technological communication have widely publicized the unique nature of the Zapatista movement.

The external actors identified in this section illustrate that the presence of outside influence in the Chiapas region serves as an additional source of encouragement and provides an added sense of security for female participation in the Zapatista movement. Thirty percent of the Zapatista guerilla army is comprised of female combatants; many of these women warriors cite exposure to liberation theology, NGOs, and cooperative activity as major reasons that they joined the Zapatista guerilla forces. Unfortunately, none of the external actors discussed in this thesis have been able to eradicate the threat
of military and paramilitary troops imposed by the Mexican government. Although Church and non-governmental organizations try to monitor paramilitary activity within the Chiapas region, the uncooperative attitude of the Mexican government has frustrated attempts at ensuring the presence of indigenous peoples. Consequently, the Zapatistas have found it difficult to maintain a strong focus on women’s rights because they must address pressing safety and security concerns before they make the Revolutionary Law of Women reforms a reality in indigenous communities.

The next chapter will assess changes that have occurred in Zapatista communities since the 1994 uprising. It will illustrate challenges associated with asserting women’s rights in indigenous communities, and analyze the future of female participation in the EZLN.
Chapter 4: Conclusions

Introduction

After the Zapatista uprising in 1994, there was widespread hope for the establishment of women’s rights within indigenous communities. International media declared that the Zapatistas’ Revolutionary Law of Women and their welcome attitude toward female combatants marked an unprecedented focus on indigenous rights. Important female characters such as Comandante Ramona and Major Ana María were praised for being active female social movement participants, and provided strong examples of indigenous women that successfully participated in the Zapatista movement.

In the years leading up to and following the Zapatista uprising, external actors such as liberation theology, NGOs, and the internet were involved with the EZLN. Although institutions often had their own interests in mind when interacting with indigenous populations, the overall effect of outside influences helped the Zapatista movement draw attention to its goal of attaining indigenous women’s rights. Thus, whether or not it was intentional, external actors also provided indigenous women with the desire to seek increased social, political, and economic agency by participating in the Zapatista movement.

However, as the Zapatistas gained international attention and clashed with the neoliberal interests of the Mexican government, militarization of the Chiapas region dramatically increased. With more than one-third of the Mexican army deployed to monitor rebel activity in Chiapas, Zapatista troops were forced to dedicate increasing amounts of human and material resources to establishing security among autonomous Zapatista communities. As a product of pressure from the Mexican government and
intimidation tactics by paramilitary troops, it has become difficult for the Zapatistas to meet many of the women’s rights demands that were originally proclaimed by their movement.

The most recent major Zapatista gathering occurred when Subcomandante Marcos organized The Other Campaign during the 2006 Mexican presidential election. During the organization of The Other Campaign, women’s rights were not considered a major priority of the Zapatista political agenda. Many female combatants and Zapatista supporters were discouraged at the lack of focus that was placed on women’s rights during The Other Campaign assemblies. Indigenous women that had previously encouraged female participation in the Zapatista movement expressed disappointment at the lack of monetary or political resources necessary for promoting women’s rights within indigenous communities. As the episodes surrounding The Other Campaign illustrate, failure of the EZLN to protest the continued abuse of women, both from within their communities and from the Mexican army, policy, and paramilitary groups, has led to decreased faith in the EZLN’s commitment to confront gender equality on par with other issues they would reform.

Currently, there is debate among the Zapatista community about how to become more accountable to the women’s rights framework that was originally considered paramount to the EZLN platform. Female participation in the Zapatista movement is being called into question as indigenous women’s lives fail to improve as a result of supporting the EZLN.

A New Identity for Indigenous Women
Women’s participation in the Zapatista movement has improved the previously limited view of indigenous women. As a product of the sociopolitical climate that existed before and during the 1994 Zapatista uprising, indigenous women committed themselves to the EZLN army, played important roles in Zapatista community organizing through cooperatives and family networks, and became involved with external actors (such as liberation theologians and NGOs). These actions taken by Zapatista women transformed the way that the international world perceived indigenous women in Chiapas. Therefore, by becoming important actors in the Zapatista political scene, indigenous women carved out a “space and a political vision that links home, community, and nation to a new framework for being indigenous in Mexico – autonomous in economic, cultural, and political decision making but part of the Mexican nation” (Stephen, 2001, 64). This passage emphasizes that a new female indigenous identity was created by Zapatista women activists; this identity was associated with increased social, political, and economic agency for indigenous women.

The focus that the original Zapatista platform placed on women’s rights, through publishing the Revolutionary Law of Women and emphasizing the achievements of early Zapatista combatants such as Comandante Ramona and Major Ana María, also empowered indigenous women that were not originally sympathetic to the Zapatista movement. After recognizing the importance of the Zapatista focus on women’s rights, indigenous women throughout southern Mexico adopted a new rhetoric through which they could articulate their grievances. Indigenous women’s internalization of specific gender understandings provided motivation for women to participate in social movements and other areas of political activism. Christine Eber articulates this phenomenon by
reporting that after the 1994 uprising, indigenous women began expressing concern about sociopolitical participation with a language that they learned from the Zapatista movement. Eber illustrates that before the Zapatista uprising, indigenous women were not able to articulate their grievances in a powerful way because they were not educated about the ways in which they express these demands. Now, indigenous women complain about a “load that has become too heavy to carry anymore” (Eber, 1998, 19).

In dealing with the conflict between individual and community rights, Zapatista females have also been instrumental in showing that women’s rights can be asserted within indigenous communities without threatening crucial traditions. Indigenous women have asserted that they can remain loyal to their traditional domestic duties, while still exercising increased social, political, and economic agency. Zapatista women combatants and activists serve as examples of women that value traditional indigenous customs while simultaneously critiquing customs that force women into subservient positions. The Zapatistas have been successful in breaking down barriers in indigenous communities that previously prevented women from being educated, being politically active in their communities, speaking out against domestic violence, and joining the Zapatista army (McPeters, 2004).

Summarily, within the content of a highly patriarchal indigenous culture, young women have been encouraged by the EZLN to exert greater control over their lives and become publicly responsible citizens (Cleaver, 1998). Zapatista women embody a new understanding of indigenous women’s identity because they “participate in the positive valoration of traditions but also exercise their right to analyze, critique, and change traditions” (Moran, 2007, 74).
Resistance to Identity Change

Although indigenous women have gained increased social, political, and economic agency as a result of their participation in the Zapatista movement, the majority of young generations of women born into autonomous Zapatista communities still marry at a young age, have many children, and assume domestic responsibilities. Researchers note that women and children can live independently or without children in Zapatista communities; however, this lifestyle is challenging and atypical. Women who join the Zapatistas are less afraid to be outspoken, but they must continue to voice their opinion while maintaining a pre-colonial, impoverished lifestyle (McPeters, 2004). In the face of opposition from the national government and paramilitary troops, there have been no major land or constitutional reforms that guarantee improved treatment of landless peasants or women.

The problem of stunted progress has infiltrated the Zapatista army as well. Whereas joining the army provided educational and social benefits at the inception of the Zapatista movement, the relative inaction of the Zapatista army since the 1994 ceasefire has decreased its illustrious political and social regard in the minds of indigenous communities. Additionally, the life of a combatant is very different from a traditional indigenous lifestyle because female guerillas must give up or postpone motherhood to join the army, and motherhood is still extremely valued in indigenous communities. Therefore, the inactivity and increased danger of joining the Zapatista army has discouraged women from becoming female combatants (McPeters, 2004).

Although it is true that Zapatista women have created a new identity for themselves by demonstrating that they are capable of increased social, political, and economic
freedom, there are several factors that frustrate the establishment and sustainability of this new role for women. These factors include the Zapatistas need to focus on establishing security around autonomous municipalities in the highland region as the Mexican government and paramilitary troops increasing endanger Zapatista supporters living in these communities. The Mexican government and large landowners want the Zapatista indigenous movement to be silenced so that neo-liberal reforms continue to be enacted in Mexico. Unfortunately, many of the methods that Zapatista antagonists have enacted have hampered aspects of the movement that first helped it be successful and gain international recognition.

Low-intensity warfare, which is characterized by militarization and paramilitary threats, has been occurring in Chiapas since the 1970s. The pressure of paramilitary troops has becoming increasingly strong as they are contracted by the Mexican government and private, wealthy landowners to scare Zapatista supporters off their land. The national government fears that the national marches, meetings, and networks that have emerged as a result of the Zapatista movement will usurp national attempts at liberalization and privatization. The tactics that the national government has chosen to employ against Zapatistas and their supporters are extremely cruel. Indigenous men and women are often subject to torture at the hands of paramilitary troops. International observers confirm that the Mexican national government has provided paramilitary troops with the physical and mechanical means to interrupt indigenous life in newly-formed autonomous communities. It is reported that more than one third of the entire Mexican army, or 70,000 soldiers, are currently stationed in Chiapas. This figure does not include the several thousand paramilitary troops that are unrecorded. In 2002, there were fifty
three military checkpoints and seven military bases throughout the highland region (Grosso, 2002).

In a paper about “Militarization and the Gendered and Ethnic Dynamics of Human Rights Abuses in Southern Mexico,” Lynn Stephen describes several of the human rights abuses that paramilitaries perpetrate against indigenous populations. She states that “since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, more than a third of Chiapas has been heavily militarized” by paramilitary troops that employ scare tactics, such as setting off gun shots around the outskirts of Zapatista communities. In the years following the Zapatista uprising, there was at least one soldier for every three to four indigenous community inhabitants (Stephen, 2000). Indigenous men are more often targeted via torture, illegal detention, and random assassination. Women, although targeted less often than men, are the victims of cruel and frequent rapes.

Rape is an effective tactic used by paramilitary troops because it instills fear in women who are active in the Zapatista guerilla forces. Paramilitary troops recognize that Zapatista women comprise thirty percent of their troops. Paramilitaries also know it is extremely difficult for indigenous women to defend themselves against rape because of their weak physical stature and lack of support from the legal system. “Human rights report on rape point out that most state legal systems characterize rape as a crime against honor or custom, few rape victims targeted by military or police forces receive justice” (Stephen, 2000, 831). In Chiapas, rape is deliberately employed as a scare tactic, intended to discourage women from ongoing participation in social and political reforms. Since military bases are often established near autonomous Zapatista communities, “the actual rape of women and the continuously implied threat of rape is the greatest tool of
terror used against women in the militarized zones of Chiapas as well as the city of San Cristobal” (Stephen, 2000, 835).

In response to these physical and psychological threats, Zapatista women have gathered in large numbers to drive military troops out of their communities. Civilian women that compose the Zapatista base of support have aided these efforts by actively confronting, shouting, and forcing paramilitary members outside the boundaries of their communities. When it comes to combating paramilitary intimidating, “it is the women who are the hub of the community. They keep a sense of normality to the situation as they deal with the daily chores of cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, keeping a home and caring for the children” (Grosso, 2002). When indigenous women are asked about how they cope with the threat of danger on a daily basis, many report that their desire to support the Zapatista movement provides them with the courage to sustain a normal indigenous lifestyle. The women explain that “with each meal they prepare, each piece of embroidery they sell, each time they speak their Indigenous languages with their children, they are supporting and advancing their Indigenous cultures and the Zapatista cause itself” (Grosso, 2002). Non-governmental organizations and artisan cooperatives have offered secondary sources of support for women who are threatened by rape. These groups offer protection to women who take an active personal stance in spite of personal danger. NGOs and cooperatives focus on the Zapatista mission of “redefining indigenous femininity,” which helps many women cope with their fear; they encourage women to be active collaborators instead of passive victims (Stephen, 2000, 838).

The threat of rape represents one of several factors that have hampered the ability of the Zapatistas to put many of the aspirations of the Revolutionary Law of Women into
action. Threats to the safety and security of indigenous Zapatista supporters have frustrated agreements with the Mexican government; the Zapatistas try to avoid engaging in direct conflict with the government for fear military presence will increase. Subcomandante Marcos has become increasingly frustrated with the Zapatista’s lack of recognizable progress years since their 1994 uprising. After unsuccessfully staging a campaign against the presidential election in 2002, Marcos retreated to the Lacandon jungle, claming that it was necessary to re-evaluate Zapatista strategy and that the movement would re-emerge with a new strength when ready. In the meantime, many Zapatista women continue living under pre-colonial conditions.

When discussing obstacles to the Zapatista’s anticapitalistic movement, researcher Mariana Mora emphasizes that “the current political moment poses a number of challenges for an emerging left attempting to articulate different social political movements and their trajectories as part of a national liberation struggle” (2007, 65). The challenges that the emerging left, or the Zapatistas, faces in 2008 include militarization of the highland region and increased paramilitary violence.

The Other Campaign represented the most recent Zapatista attempt to re-emerge as a strong indigenous movement. The first assembly of the Other Campaign was held in September 2005. More than 2,000 representatives from urban youth forums, feministic collectives, nongovernmental organizations, and indigenous organizations from all regions were in attendance. Although the Zapatista platform asserted a strong focus on women’s rights in the past, many representatives from women’s organizations were disappointed at the lack of discussion on this topic that occurred during The Other Campaign assembly. They reported that,
Despite a decade-long struggle for indigenous rights, only a minority of speakers directly addressed the fact that this new form of anticapitalist politics needed to ensure the equal participation of actors across gender, ethnic-racial, and sexual identity lines. Rather than situating antiracist and antisexist politics as guiding principles throughout the day’s agenda, discussions on respect for differences were allocated to the agenda item labeled ‘A Special Place for Differences.’ [Moran, 2007, 66]

The structure of this agenda was criticized by indigenous men and women that argued it was essential to establish the importance of gender issues within the context of these political conversations. A representative from a feminist group commented that gender relations were paramount to the Zapatista movement and should not be suppressed in the face of pressing political concerns.

Unfortunately, the structure of The Other Campaign indicates that pressing political and economic concerns have decreased the extent to which women’s rights have been focused on and realized within Zapatista communities. Notably, the presence of external actors such as the Church, NGOs, and international media during The Other Campaign assembly did not affect the way in which women’s rights were disregarded during the meetings.

**The Zapatista Uprising: Failure or Success**

The Zapatista uprising has encountered many successes and failures since January 1, 1994. With respect to women’s rights, the Zapatistas have been able to champion indigenous support for women’s rights more so than any other rural Central American social movement in the past. Machismo attitudes that dominated indigenous villages and limited the mobility of women within their communities were commonplace before the Zapatista uprising. The Revolutionary Law of Women expressed Zapatista support for
women’s increased social, political, and economic agency in indigenous communities. Specific demands such as the right to female participation in the guerilla army, the right to work, the right to choose your marriage partner, the right to speak out against domestic violence, the right to be educated, and the right to participate in community affairs illustrated a new of life for indigenous women. Furthermore, Zapatista female combatants, which comprise thirty percent of the EZLN army, were respected and given many opportunities that augmented their social standing and educational status. Zapatista combatants were able to develop a strong sense of autonomy as a result of participating in the army, and strong examples of empowered women encouraged other indigenous females to become Zapatista supporters.

In comparison with other Central American rural movements, the EZLN has been instrumental in drawing attention to the rights of indigenous peoples, especially women, in the post-modern world. As compared with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador, which are two well-known rural movements that occurred either before or simultaneously with the Zapatista uprising, the EZLN prioritized women’s rights in the most overt fashion. The Zapatista’s intention of asserting women’s rights was well-received within the international community, and quickly garnered support from many religions, non-profit, and non-governmental organizations. The popularity of the Zapatistas, especially with respect to their focus on women’s rights, is evidenced in the large amounts of scholarly literature that is available about this movement.

When evaluating the impact of the Zapatista women’s rights frame, it is also important to take into account the scope of the movement. The Zapatistas were most effective in granting women the right to join the army, speak out against domestic
violence, and gain access to community decision making at the inception of the
movement. As the Zapatistas gained widespread international recognition and were
exposed to a myriad of outside influences, the scope of their support base increased.
Many social movement researches agree that the most successful “social movements in
the 20th century tend to be those of small grassroots organizations with relatively narrow,
concrete goals that connect themselves with other similar groups in wider political
organizations” (Eber, 1998, 46). Over the course of its existence, the Zapatista has
become an increasingly larger grassroots organization, which has made it more difficult
for the movement to adhere to the goals of its original platform.

These facts illustrate that female participation in the Zapatista movement has been
strong since the 1994 uprising and continues to be a priority even though antagonistic
factors have sometimes interrupted the achievement of women’s rights. Women that
participate in the Zapatista movement have high expectations for the realization of
women’s rights, which has created a new identity for indigenous women within their
native communities. Therefore, the Zapatistas made an important contribution to the
lives of indigenous women by stimulating conversation about women’s issues and gender
relations within indigenous communities. John Foran credits the Zapatista movement for
drawing attention to women’s issues within indigenous communities when he writes that,
“Indeed the world’s attention is now focused on the [indigenous] situation, so in that
respect, the rebels have already won a large measure of success. In the wake of the
uprising, much has changed and a lot of hard questions started to be asked in Mexico”
(2001, 117). Although limited resources and dangerous military conditions have
prevented the Zapatistas from fully accomplishing the women’s rights objectives that
they promised, the newfound ability for women to express themselves in public forums should not be overlooked.

**Conclusion**

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), commonly known as the Zapatistas, declared war against the Mexican state on January 1, 1994. The Zapatistas organized their uprising on the day that NAFTA, a tri-lateral stated agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico was signed into effect. The Zapatista movement decried the Mexican government’s implementation of neo-liberal policies that threatened the indigenous way of life. The EZLN accused the PRI party and President Salinas of being an elitist group that obstructed democracy and forced indigenous populations to struggle for survival under neo-colonial living conditions. Finally, the Zapatistas expressed disapproval at the lack of protection and support for indigenous communal land.

As part of their rebellion, the Zapatistas issued a list of demands to the Mexican government that called for autonomy, respect for indigenous culture, and women’s rights. The document that directly corresponded to the Zapatista call for women’s rights is known as the Revolutionary Law of Women. The Revolutionary Law of Women claimed that indigenous women should be granted the right to participate in the guerilla struggle, the right to work, the right to participate in community affairs, the right to choose their marriage partner, the right to education, the right to healthcare, and the right to decide how many children to have. The Revolutionary Law of Women was created as a product
of changing gender relations that occurred as migration, the development of new industry
during the 20th century.

The Zapatistas gained immediate international recognition for having prioritized
women’s rights as part of their central platform. Unlike other Central American rural
movements such as the FMLN in El Salvador and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the
Zapatistas organized themselves into an ethnic-based movement that expressed a direct
interest in advancing the rights of indigenous women. The EZLN army was also
comprised of thirty percent female combatants. Famous women warriors such as Major
Ana María and Comandante Ramona were revered in indigenous communities for being
powerful indigenous women that championed the cause of women’s rights. Many
Zapatista women that had been involved with social activism as a product of being
exposed to liberation theology and other community networks also chose to join the
Zapatista movement. Overall, the large amount of female participation in the Zapatista
movement helped to create conditions of increased social, political, and economic agency
for indigenous women in Chiapas.

External actors such as religious organizations, liberation theology, non-
governmental organizations, and the internet have also served to champion women’s
rights within the Zapatista movement. Although religious organizations and liberation
theologians did not enter Chiapas with the intention of motivating indigenous women to
join the Zapatista movement, many women exposed to liberation theology became active
in the EZLN. Furthermore, human rights organizations have been established to monitor
militarization of Chiapas. The presence of these non-governmental organizations has
aided the survival and safety of many indigenous communities, especially women.
Finally, the internet and other media sources have helped the Zapatista movement relay information about its goals and activities to a large international audience. These mediums have linked the Zapatistas with organizations that support their desire to improve indigenous women’s lives; the internet has also helped EZLN bypass censorship by the Mexican government.

Although conditions for women improved as a result of the EZLN focus on improving the quality of life for indigenous women, there are many factors that prohibit aspects of this goal from being achieved. Most importantly, opposition from the Mexican government and paramilitary forces prevented the Zapatista movement from achieving its goals. Although a ceasefire between the Mexican government and the Zapatistas was declared twelve days after the 1994 uprising, low-intensity warfare has been occurring since the Mexican government sent one third of the region into the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas to monitor the activity of thirty-eight autonomous Zapatista municipalities that have been established in this region. The government has also contracted paramilitary groups to intimidate indigenous peoples living within Zapatista communities. Unfortunately, incidences of rape and violence have increased in Chiapas as a result of this militarization.

Scare tactics and violent acts against the Zapatista supporters, especially women, have frustrated Zapatista attempts at establishing women’s rights in indigenous communities. The Other Campaign platform demonstrated in 2006 that the Zapatistas have recently decreased their dedication to women’s rights and focused more exclusively on politics associated with the movement. Many female participants are disappointed
that the Zapatista movement has stopped placing women’s rights as a top priority on their agenda.

Although Zapatistas have recently been criticized for not remaining loyal to the promises of women’s rights that were declared in the initial 1994 uprising, the Zapatista movement has been successful in creating conditions of increased social, political, and economic agency for indigenous women. The Zapatistas have established a rhetoric through which indigenous women can express their grievances. Previous to the Zapatista uprising, women did not have the means through which to express their sociopolitical complaints. Overall, Zapatista indigenous women have more opportunities to become educated, become financially independent, and participate in community affairs as a result of large number of female combatants in the EZLN army and the declaration of the Revolutionary Law of Women.
Appendix

Chiapas State Map

Chiapas State Map II

19 Map from www.travelchiapas.com/map/map-1.gif
20 Map from http://www.chiapas.ch/img/chiapas-map.gif
Map of Mexico

Map from http://www.utdallas.edu/~mar046000/mexicoweb/mexicomap_files/image001.gif

Map of Mexican States

Map from http://mexico-herps.com/Habitats/Mexico_Political_Map.jpg
Picture of Zapatista Doll

Picture from www.rebelimports.com/images/keychainwhitedoll.jpg

Picture of Zapatista Women against Army

Picture from artactivism.gn.apc.org/photos/ammador.jpg
The Revolutionary Law of Women

1. Women, whatever their race, creed or political affiliation, have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in accordance with their own will and ability.
2. Women have the right to work and be paid a fair salary.
3. Women have the right to decide the number of children they want to have and look after.
4. Women have the right to participate in community affairs and hold posts if freely and democratically elected.
5. Women and their children have the right to primary health care and food.
6. Women have the right to education.
7. Women have the right to choose their partner and not be forced into an arranged marriage.
8. No woman shall be beaten or physically abused by her family or strangers. Offences of attempted rape or rape will be severely punished.
9. Women can hold political and military leadership positions.
10. Women have all rights and obligations bestowed by the revolutionary laws and regulations.

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25 As written in Rovira, 2000, 73
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