



The Right to Rest: Women's struggle to be heard in the Zapatistas' movement

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ABSTRACT *Marisa Belausteguigoitia examines how demands of Zapatistas' indigenous women have been treated differently from the claims made by indigenous representatives inside official negotiations with the Mexican state during the 1990s. Taking the example of the claim for the right to rest, she explores the ways in which indigenous women's voices, in Chiapas and inside the Zapatistas' rebellion, have been edited and reduced to be bearers of community traditions.*

KEYWORDS *autonomy; Chiapas; identity; indigenous; patriarchy*

The Zapatistas' rebellion

The Zapatistas' rebellion erupted in Chiapas, a state on the southern border of Mexico, on 1 January 1994. That same day the NAFTA agreement went into effect. The Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican state. Negotiations were held during the first weeks of the rebellion in order to open a dialogue among the Zapatista representatives and the state. The Mexican government sent 40 percent of its military force to surround Zapatista territory while talks were held. In this atmosphere, the San Andres Accords were signed in February 1996. These accords represent the political will to change constitutional rights in favour of an autonomous government in the state of Chiapas. The accords, however, have not been respected and the military presence has been intensified in the Zapatista region. The military presence continues to grow, paramilitary groups have proliferated and Zapatista communities live surrounded by the military. One of the most devastating events since the uprising was the massacre of Acteal in December 1997. Forty-seven people (mostly women and children) were assassinated inside a church while praying. Investigations about the responsibility of the massacre still go on.

Indigenous rights

The claims of autonomy and citizenship rights made by indigenous peoples of the Zapatista rebellion have many meanings (CONAI, 1996; Hernández Navarro and Vera Herrera, 1998: 53–66).¹ We look here at how indigenous women tried to create laws (Comunicación e Información de la Mujer, 1996) that may provide a legislative space to govern themselves with independence, or with strategic dependence on indigenous traditions, patriarchy and the laws of the nation. We ask if there is any symbolic and legislative space for the governance of the self by indigenous women outside patriarchy, communal tradition and national constitutional laws (Clarke and Ross, 1994: 39).²

At stake are two notions through which modernity has constructed systematically its frame: time and space. How may time be transformed to allow the recovering of women's bodies from exhaustion when those bodies are located in the space of abjection? How may indigenous women create, protect, preserve time and recreate space to be able to rest?

The Pink Book: time to rest, space to reflect

What is surprising is not this gigantic war machine, destroying, assassinating and persecuting more than a million Indians. What is really extraordinary and marvellous is that, the Zapatistas not only do not surrender but grow ever stronger. As they say in the mountains, the Zapatistas have a very powerful and indestructible weapon: the word (EZLN, 28 November 1999).

During the summer of 1998 I travelled to Mexico to find materials, texts, videos and photographs where I could find the voices or the images of indigenous Zapatista women in rebellion. Besides Rosa Rojas's *Chiapas ¿y las Mujeres qué?* (1994), the journal *Debate Feminista*, special newspapers sections like *La Doble Jornada* (*La Triple Jornada*), and books like Guiomar Rovira's *Mujeres de Maíz* (1997), Rosalba A. Hernández's *La Otra Palabra* (1997) and *Las Alzadas* by Sara Lovera and Nellys Palomo (1999), there is little available. The

literature concerning indigenous women's voices and demands can only be found from newspaper articles, small circulation newsletters, magazines and pamphlets of limited circulation.

I gathered this material for a course entitled 'Gender and Globalization: The Case of Chiapas'. Norma Alarcón taught it in the spring of 1999 and I was the teaching assistant. In the course of my research, I visited non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that collect these types of texts and made photocopies of a considerable amount of materials. Many of these photocopies were of poor quality because they were copied from badly preserved materials, or came out of newspapers. In the classroom I addressed the 'poor' quality of the photocopies that dealt with the question of women in the Zapatistas' movement. I noted that it is not only that there is little written, in comparison with that which is produced to address the Zapatistas' movement or its spokesman subcomandante Marcos, but that which is available can hardly be read. Many materials are scattered, fragmented and blurred.

We collected the materials for the course in a reader that we called the Pink Book, to differentiate it from the Red Book, the reader that addressed the wider contexts of the indigenous rebellion. One phrase jumped out from the Pink Book during our classes. It represented one of the demands that indigenous women uttered in a workshop organized by an NGO in Chiapas. The indigenous women were asking for a most extraordinary right, the right to rest (Rivera, 1997).³ The brutality of that phrase made me reflect on the significance of such a demand and the questions that could emanate from it. The indigenous women were asking for the right to stop triple and quadruple journeys, to rescue their bodies from permanent exhaustion.

What is really at stake? Time, time to rest, time to reflect, time to sleep, dream and think. But who has time to rest? Who has time to think and to be? What does it mean to live in the abject zones, in the unliveable zones, from where such a demand on time and space, the demand to the right to rest, unfolds?

Indigenous women's revolutionary laws

The now famous 'Revolutionary Women's Laws' address different demands that focus on the management of time and space from the position of Indian women living inside indigenous traditions and with puncturing contacts with modernity. The right to be in time and in space, independently from national and communal gender restrictions, the right to rest, and the right to move beyond pre-assigned and constricted spaces of mobility (physical and also subjective) represents a demand evolving from the first document, made public in 1994 – the 'Revolutionary Women's Laws', which concentrated their most urgent demands.

Since the Zapatistas' uprising in January 1994, indigenous women have been increasing the time of mourning and reducing their space of movement due to the density of military presence in the state. The Zapatistas have been reporting the conditions under which indigenous people live after their uprising and due to the military presence in the rebel zones. The most intense reports concerning women have been triggered by two occurrences: their bodily resistance in front of soldiers and the mourning for their dead. Erect or bent, strong or overtaken by pain, women are portrayed through images and words.

Notwithstanding this adverse scenario and their marginal access to the Spanish language, they have articulated 10 demands, 10 revolutionary laws annexed to the First Declaration of War of the Zapatistas' National Liberation Army. 'The Revolutionary Women's Laws' appeared with other sets of measures and regulations involving a declaration of war to the Mexican state days after the indigenous uprising in 1994. We look below at how indigenous women's demands were incorporated, translated and edited by members of the EZLN into subsequent official documents. The totality of the 'Revolutionary Women's Laws' shows that the demands for education, mobility and equal access to leading and community positions are made to the state and also to their communities. My point by underlining the demand for the right to rest is to address the failure of the promises of well-being for every citizen that are offered by the state, bearer of

modernity, but also the failure of a commitment of their own community to attend, respect and represent properly their voices and demands inside official agreements signed with the state.

The 'Revolutionary Women's Laws' make clear the way in which they want to be incorporated into modernity, and the traditions they want to change inside their own communities. The ultimate benefit of the modern world and the ultimate right asked of their tradition is the right to rest, to free time, to a symbolic and legal space 'to think and so to be'.

The right to rest does not guarantee that indigenous women have the space to reflect. The laws and the traditions of nation and community may capture them again in systems of juridical/traditional/patriarchal frames that again exclude women from the possibility of resting. It is not only time to think, but also a precise location from where to think, from where to reflect on the restrictions that allow modernity and tradition to exclude women from the legitimacy of their claims. The right to rest must be guaranteed by the systems that regulate women's demands: modernity, patriarchy and communal traditions.

Demand 29: mediation and erasure of indigenous women's demands

On 8 March 1994, International Women's Day, a special communiqué was delivered by the Zapatistas. It listed the 34 demands that emerged after the first round of negotiations for Peace and Reconciliation in the San Cristóbal Cathedral in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas.⁴ One of the 34 demands, demand 29, addressed the women's question (Clarke and Ross, 1994). Twelve specific demands were made by the official representatives of the Zapatistas: child care centres, food for their children, kitchens and dining halls, corn mills and 'tortilla' pressing machines according to the number of families in each community, livestock including chickens, rabbits, lambs, pigs, with technical assistance, bakery projects, artisan workshops, fair prices for their craft work, and transportation.

Demand number 29 did not include the ending of traditions like forced marriage, or the right for

women to hold authority positions inside their communities, the punishment against rape inside the family, or the right to be safe at home and not to be beaten. These demands were clearly specified inside the 'Revolutionary Women's Laws'.

The demands that emerged from this first round of negotiations for Peace and Reconciliation involved the nation as a whole: clean elections, democratic government, multiethnic constitution, indigenous autonomous government on a municipal level were demanded; even the president's resignation was included. It is clear that the 34 demands encompass the alternative way in which the nation should be governed and the socio-political and juridical changes which need to be implemented in order to live in a democratic multicultural nation. The national character of the demands also acknowledges what Massey calls 'settings of interactions' (Massey, 1994). What happens in Chiapas is the product of a wider set of social relations or processes that locates Chiapas and precisely Las Cañadas en los Altos – Zapatista terrains of resistance and the poorest regions in Chiapas – at the margins of the nation. The nation in its totality needs a redefinition of the social pact. The stigma of difference and conflict is not only located in the South.

A substantial number of the communiqués delivered by subcomandante Marcos were oriented to displace the 'place-bound', circumscribed, and restricted character of the problems in the poorest regions in Chiapas, not only the space of the nation, but the spaces where minorities throughout the world are struggling for democracy and forms of government that address multicultural forms of identity inside a national frame. Marcos himself describes this multicultural and fluid form of identification in one of his communiqués. He writes:

Around all this fuss about Marcos being homosexual: Marcos is gay in San Francisco, Black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Isidro, anarchist in Spain, Palestinian in Israel, Indian in the streets of San Cristóbal . . . Marcos is all the oppressed minorities, resisting, exploiting claiming: "Enough". (EZLN, *Documentos y Comunicados*, 1994: 243)

84 The communiqués do not only underline the national 'settings of interactions' that produced

the Indian uprising as an effect of precise social relations that capitalism favours, but they locate the margins, the expelled from the promise of modernity all over the world. The perversions of capitalism and neoliberalism located in Chiapas are extended nationally and internationally.⁵ In the face of such a capacity of interconnections, interactions, extensions, relational causes and margins effects, one cannot help asking why are not women's demands, as uttered by them, an integral part of the official proposal exhibiting the 'inter-connected settings of interrelations' that reproduce poverty and abjection? Why are indigenous women's demands not included in its totality? Why is patriarchy not considered as pervasive as capitalism, or as any other order that excludes, oppresses and marginalizes?⁶ Why is women's marginalization inside and outside their communities not considered to be an element of the interconnectedness of oppressions and relational asymmetries of power interactions?

None of the 34 demands made to the government in this first round of negotiations includes the necessary and particular socio-political and juridical changes that need to be implemented in order to incorporate indigenous women into the frame of rights of the proposed democratic nation, nor is their extreme vulnerability considered to be a symptom of an undemocratic society. The specificity of women's demands was reduced in subcomandante Marcos' reports and in demand 29 to their role as educators, food providers and mothers. There is not a reference to the demands made by women in the 'Revolutionary Women's Law' related to their claims to leadership, participation in community government and rejection of violence, rape and mistreatment by their family members or strangers, the call for a just salary, or the demand that encompasses them all: the right to rest. Indigenous women's demands go beyond the role of motherhood. Were these demands, this local rejection of precise traditions and practices, considered to be lacking the necessary status of interconnectedness to be recognized as part of the 'setting of relations' that constitute intolerance, repression, and oppression?

A closer look at the 'Revolutionary Women's Laws' reveals two addressees of the demands: the

state and indigenous communities. The state is addressed in relation to demands like fair salaries, reproductive rights, education, health, protection against and punishment of rape and other forms of violence. Their communities are asked to legislate around the right to choose their partners, the right not to be forced into marriage, the right not to be beaten or physically mistreated by their family members or by strangers, the severe punishment against rape, and the right to occupy positions of leadership in the organization and to hold military ranks. There are also demands that allude to an overlapping zone where the state and the indigenous community could provide solutions, such as the protection against rape and violence, the right to decide the number of children they will have and care for, the right for education, and ultimately, the right to rest. Indigenous women are challenging both the national socio-political and patriarchal orders (in the nation-state and in the community). In other words, the political economy of the state and the use of traditions as a form of control of their time and their space inside their communities. None of these challenges was included in this first document. Clearly, the document was addressed to the 'only' perpetrator of the exclusion and oppression of the indigenous people: the government and its neoliberal economic policies. Under the demands that reflect these challenges to the 'single perpetrator' of oppression, we may find: free and democratic elections, the implementation of a government in transition, recognition of the EZLN as a belligerent force, a new pact which ends government resistance to indigenous political, economic and cultural autonomy, revision of the NAFTA agreement, the right to information and the possibility of having a communication system independent from the government.

The specificity of the 'women question' and the way their situation relates to wider relations of oppression is not necessary for the democratic transformation of the nation. What is relevant for the women, what is needed by women is only the set of conditions that guarantee their role as mothers and nurturers, the legal conditions which will facilitate this space of nutrition and motherhood with technical devices, education, mill machinery,⁷ childcare, and bakeries.

Laura Mulvey addresses the progress from hand-mill machineries to steam mill as follows:

... Marx returns onto the agenda of cultural criticism with renewed, and significantly altered force, particularly the Marx who said: 'The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist.' The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with their material productivity, produce also principles, ideas and categories, in conformity with their social relations. (Mulvey, 1996: xiii)

It is stated in many different documents and diverse workshops done with indigenous women that these devices, sanitary and educational measures are accurate demands that emanate from indigenous communities. The problem is not that they ask for technical devices and support that could alleviate their daily journeys and grant efficient health and educational attention. The problem is that in planning the reconstruction of a nation that is systematically excluding Indians, the way of including indigenous women is reduced to the provision of childcare centres, technical devices and sanitary measures. The Zapatistas have made it very clear that the problems of Chiapas and its poverty are interconnected with national problems and the solutions would have to involve a new social pact that includes Indians, a new way of governing the nation, and a new constitution. But when it comes to the definition of the ways in which violence, oppression and subjection against women are interconnected with other forms of oppression, it all ends in bakeries and childcare centres. These are the promises that modernity and patriarchy may fulfil.

Conclusions

In the case of indigenous women in Chiapas, the promise of liberation and emancipation does not touch women. The document that contained demand number 29 makes a clear division between internal (private) and external (public) affairs. The demands made to the community were conceptualized as internal and had nothing to do with the process of democratization. The women's demands remain contained 'inside' the space and temporality of the private frames of patriarchy, tradition and

modernity. Modernization and nationalism have a complicated relationship. The erasure of the ultimate indigenous women's demand, the right to rest, constitutes an effect of the tensions between tradition, modernity and nationalism.

Will bakeries and childcare centres guarantee their right to rest and their demand to be treated fairly? What kind of response to their demands is it to provide them with nutritional and educational equipment to facilitate their household labour

journeys? To what extent may the daily journey be 'facilitated' in order that Indian women enjoy what has no place in the imaginary of patriarchy and modernity, time for women to rest outside the functions of motherhood? What needs to be provided, other than culinary and childcare devices, to grant women time to rest? In which language do they have to speak, not only to be heard, but also to be properly represented?

Notes

1 The dialogue between Zapatistas and the government began on 21 February 1994 with the discussion of 'Rights and Indigenous Culture'. After several interruptions talks resumed and ended with the signing of the 'San Andrés Accords' on 16 February 1996. The 'San Andrés Accords' made specific references to the question of indigenous women's rights and culture. These references are inscribed mainly in the propositions of an autonomous and indigenous juridical framework. This autonomous framework certainly challenges the national juridical realm and its forms of governance, inscribing the possibility of a multicultural nation regulated by at least two juridical languages.

2 The Revolutionary Women's Laws appeared for the first time in the official organ of the EZLN, *El Despertador Mexicano*, No. 1, December 1993. They were released to the mass media in early January 1994. The Laws synthesize the demands of indigenous women belonging to the different ethnic groups integrated under the EZLN. The ten laws refer to: right to participation in the revolutionary struggle regardless of race, creed,

colour or political affiliation, right to work and receive a just salary, right to decide the number of children they will have and care for, right to participate in the affairs of the community and to hold authority positions if democratically elected, right to health and education, right to choose their partner and not to be forced into marriage, right to freedom from beating or physical mistreatment. They also call for rape to be severely punished. Women will have all the rights and obligations elaborated in the revolutionary laws and regulations.

3 See Comunicación e Información de la Mujer (1996). This workshop was organized by different NGOs and indigenous women's organizations in Chiapas and Mexico: La Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos (ANADI), K'inál Antsetik, Servicio Desarrollo y Paz, A.C. (SEDEPAC), Comisión de Mujeres de la ANIPA (Asamblea Nacional Indígena Plural por la Autonomía), Comunicación e información de la mujer (CIMAC), and others.

4 The peace dialogue between Manuel Camacho Solís, the government representative, the EZLN and Bishop Samuel García as mediator began on 21

February 1994, shortly after the ceasefire, on both parts, was declared. The first round of negotiations ended two weeks later. On 3 March 1994 the EZLN made the demands known to the public. See EZLN, *Documentos y Comunicados I*, 155–85.

5 Indigenous groups in Chiapas have been submitted to different models of economic growth. The latest models are anchored in a neoliberal ideology and centred in the increasing reliance on free market forces to allocate national resources as the most efficient route to economic recovery. This approach has deteriorated the indigenous conditions even more, due to the lack of representation and possibilities of negotiation, productive land ownership and possibilities to compete in an international market. The logic of the free market applied in countries like Mexico, with extremely uneven development framed by centuries of authoritarian governments and with profound anti-democratic state institutions and traditions, makes the adoption of neoliberal paradigms extremely unfair, especially towards specific indigenous groups in poor states like Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Morelos, among others.

6 It is worthwhile mentioning that

during the six years of the rebellion there have been diverse evidences that the struggle is not only against capitalism, but also against machismo and patriarchy, and that the EZLN is fighting against these orders too. The most recent *Consulta* (national consultation of opinion) organized in March 1999 sent 5000 Zapatistas, 2500 women and 2500 men throughout Mexico to express their vision about their demand of incorporation and autonomy as Indians and Mexicans. To point only to what has been excluded or neglected erases the genuine efforts, practices and political actions that the Zapatistas have undertaken to reverse their own patriarchal drives. Notwithstanding this evidence it is clear that when it comes to legislating around women's demands, the Zapatistas' representatives erase and edit what has been clearly asked by their women.

7 Indigenous women spend three to five hours in the preparation of the corn to make tortillas.

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