

Indigenous Feminism in Southern Mexico

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Abstract

Neo-liberal Globalization has pushed indigenous women more and more into contact with Western culture and feminism, and feminists are discovering how the rich and unique experience of the struggle of indigenous women can offer a more comprehensive and holistic feminist theory. Indigenous forms of feminism are an important site of struggle that explicitly recognize the vital issues of cultural identity, nationalism and decolonization. This paper explores the situations from which emerged indigenous feminism in southern Mexico and examines the ways in which indigenous women from this region struggle to draw on and navigate Western ideologies while preserving and attempting to reclaim some indigenous traditions, such as pluriculturalism and complementarity, which have been eroded with the imposition of the dominant western culture and ideology. Indigenous feminism contests the existence of a universal feminism and the existence of universal truths and rights in favor of a more inclusive discourse of equality as difference. The struggles of indigenous women hold a lesson and opportunity, not only for feminists, but for all people in the industrialized world to begin to open our eyes and make space for the plurality, not universality, of the earth and its rich cultures.

Introduction

The concept of indigenous feminism has taken hold and its distinct perceptions have brought new energy, depth, and debate into the realm of feminist theory. Some contest its existence while others celebrate its strengths. Spaces for indigenous feminism have developed in response to an opening up of and shift in both indigenous gender consciousness as well as more mainstream feminist consciousness. As indigenous women have found themselves coming into contact more and more with the Western world and its feminisms through the processes of globalization, feminists are discovering and learning from the rich and unique experience of indigenous women, advocating for a more comprehensive understanding of the many spaces women occupy. In Mexico, indigenous feminism has been a force to contend with, but a force that must delicately navigate the precarious space that inhabits the intersection between an imposed globalized culture and the divergent cultures and “otherness” that constitute indigenous feminist space.

The term feminism, even without “indigenous” attached, has long been elusive to those who strive to define and reify its meaning into one unified theory. In the United States feminism has never been widely popular and rarely understood, often reduced in its meaning to something similar to what is considered “liberal feminism”: a feminism largely based on improving women’s opportunity and rights to economic, social and sexual equality in the global capitalist system. In truth, there are a plethora of feminisms, some of which question the very basis of the socio-economic system of capitalism, which is deeply embedded with colonial, racist and sexist forms of oppression. For the purpose of this essay we will look at feminism as a tool of perception and action against oppression. With all the feminisms within the many cultures and classes that exist, Joyce Green describes feminism’s central characteristic being that

...it takes gender seriously as a social organizing process and, within the context of patriarchal societies, seeks to identify the ways in which women are subordinated to men and how women can be emancipated from this subordination...Feminism is also a movement fueled by theory dedicated to action, to transformation – to praxis.¹

All the different feminisms are derived from all the different unique situations that women find themselves in and their understandings of those situations. Feminism requires an acknowledgment of patriarchy and patriarchal conditions as unacceptable while being dedicated to action against these conditions.

In Mexico, indigenous women have become a strong voice in the denunciation of the economic and racial oppression that has characterized the violent insertion of indigenous communities into the national Mexican project; a project designed to adhere to the blueprint of neoliberal globalization which works to concentrate global power into the hands of Western governments and corporate CEO's under the guise of "progress". Oppression under this system has multiple effects on indigenous women in Mexico. Neoliberal globalization is the continuing legacy of colonization and, by design, assimilates and arranges cultures and people into its economic hierarchy. Within the neoliberal model of development indigenous women are many times subjugated once as indigenous, again as women and then as the poverty stricken of an "underdeveloped" country. While indigenous women are struggling to change the political and social elements that exclude and oppress them as indigenous women in their nations, they are also struggling to change the so-called "traditional" elements that exclude and oppress them within their organizations and communities.

Indigenous feminism does concur with Western and "third world" feminisms at times, but it also has its own unique flair. It is an important site of gender struggle that explicitly recognizes the vital issues of cultural identity, nationalism, and decolonization. Their struggle is based in a blend of their unique ethnic, class and gender identities². In Mexico, indigenous women, feminists or not, are deeply involved in the political and social struggles of their communities. Simultaneously to these struggles, they have created specific spaces to reflect on their experiences of exclusion as women, as indigenous and as indigenous women.

Chiapas, Mexico, along with Guatemala and parts of the Yucatan, is home of the Mayan people³. Chiapas has become an epicenter of the renewal of the struggle for indigenous identity

¹ Green, Joyce. "Feminism is For Everybody" in ed. J. Green, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. (New York: Zed Books, 2007), 20

² Postcolonial feminisms take into account the multi-system oppressions that indigenous feminism wrestles with and has reacted against the universalizing tendencies in Western feminist thought on the grounds that it is ethnocentric and does not take into account the unique experiences of women from third-world countries or the existence of feminisms native to third-world countries. This debate has been a large and substantial debate in the evolution of contemporary feminism theory. Postcolonial feminism is also embedded in western feminist theory and frameworks and has been critiqued as not leaving space from which 'the indigenous' can theorize itself. For a good argument contrasting indigenous and postcolonial feminisms see Rao, Shakuntala. "What is Theory? Interpreting Spivak, Postcolonial and Indigenous Theory" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Marriott Hotel, San Diego, CA, May 27, 2003*. 2009-05-26
<http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p112180_index.html>

³ The overarching term "Maya" is a convenient collective designation to include the peoples of southern Mexico and Northern Central America who share some degree of cultural and linguistic heritage; however the term embraces

and survival, which is inextricably linked to the huge surge of indigenous women's organizing in the region. The notorious Zapatista movement, a contemporary Mexican guerilla movement of mostly indigenous Maya, seethes with women, and this has been a catalyst to women's organizing around Mexico.

Locating Mexico's Indigenous Women

Indigenous peoples can be defined as any ethnic group who inhabits a geographic region with which they have the earliest known historical connection. While some countries have a predominant population of indigenous peoples, in areas that have been significantly settled and colonized by western Europeans, the term indigenous tends to have more significant implications. These indigenous peoples retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. A few examples of said groups are the Maori of New Zealand, the Saami of Northern Europe, the Inuit of the circumpolar region, the Maya of Central America and the Aymaras of Bolivia.

European colonization was the genesis of the continuing assault on the indigenous people of the so-called "New World." The diverse and distinct indigenous cultures (and languages) of Americas have since been being systematically devastated. Many cultures, along with their ways of life, have completely vanished and more do every year. As the legacy of colonialism, the globalized neoliberal agenda continues to absorb and eradicate cultural diversity at an alarming rate through violence, deprivation, assimilation and the processes of "progress."

Mexico has one of the most diverse and largest indigenous populations in all of the Americas even when you rely on government statistics which have a history of officially undercounting indigenous people. Until 2000, one wasn't even counted as indigenous unless one spoke an indigenous language, which lead to silliness such as an indigenous child not being officially indigenous until they began to speak. Folks not counted as indigenous are counted as mestizo.⁴ There are many different tallies on indigenous populations of Mexico, but we can confidently say that it is somewhere between 10% and 30% with the population speaking at least 92 languages, and up to nearly 300.⁵ Whatever the statistics say, Mexico's indigenous are many and have done an amazing job at keeping their distinct cultures and languages largely intact after centuries of colonization and numerous attempts at assimilation. There are still many indigenous who speak only indigenous dialects. The most heavily indigenous states are the ones sitting to the south of Mexico: Yucatán, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Chiapas where Mixtec, Zapotec, Chinotec, Maya and Mam groups live. These are also the most economically poor states in Mexico: statistically indigenous people are the most deprived of ethnic groups anywhere you go in the Americas; that is to say deprived of land, resources and opportunities to thrive in their communities. In this paper I aim the look at Mexican Mayan groups specifically, as I illustrate how Zapatista Mayas catalyzed the current indigenous women's movement in the region. However, much of the ideas in this paper reflect the indigenous of much of Southern Mexico and parts of Central America since, after spending many thousands of years living in close proximity,

many distinct populations, societies and ethnic groups who each have their own particular traditions, cultures and historical identity.

⁴ Mestizo is a person of mixed descent. In Mexico it's generally a mixture of European and Indigenous.

⁵ Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (Ohio:Center for International Studies, 2004), 126; and Yoshioka, Hirotoshi "Language and Self-Identification?: Estimates of the Indigenous Population in Mexico" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, Aug 11, 2006.* 2009-4-12 <www.allacademic.com/meta/p101535_index.html>

they share many similarities in culture and worldviews and likewise have suffered in many of the same ways at the hands of colonialism and Western imperialism.

One of the tactics that the indigenous of Mexico, particularly Mayan peoples, have used to keep a strong hold on their customs and language after more than 500 years of conquest and the push towards assimilation is gender inequality, mainly in the form of men controlling movement of women and their access to the money sector.⁶ Women are traditionally responsible for the reproduction of community and culture, in taking on the principal responsibilities of raising and teaching children, weaving clothing and passing on the art of creating meals for the family. In confining women to their villages and culture, and by prohibiting them from the things of the colonizer, (i.e. western style clothing and education, and the Spanish language) the process of assimilation by the dominant culture has been significantly averted while the global economy has forced men to migrate and work in the factories established by transnational corporations.

Communal land is of great importance to agrarian indigenous communities throughout the Americas and beyond. It is the central foundation for their livelihood, spirituality, and identity, and the cornerstone of cultural reproduction. When groups of people hold communal land, they come to rely more on each other and their community and less on government institutions. Self-determination, autonomy and cooperation are indispensable to the continuation of indigenous culture of Mexico. Governments, on the other hand, recognize the need for populations to be dependant on and utilize its institutions and infrastructure in order to maintain control of nations. Thus the battle for autonomy and land has been for many years the battle between Western style governments and indigenous people.

Indigenous and poor campesina women have been organizing for centuries in battles for tribal self-determination. They have also long been engaged in struggles to regain their people's lands from the colonizers along side their male comrades. Much of the research on indigenous movements throughout history does not document women's participation well. Indigenous women were, however, often in charge of the "logistics" of many of the marches, sit-ins, and meetings that have been documented.⁷ Parallel to their participation in the struggle for land and radical democracy many women have begun to demand the democratization of gender relations within the family, community and organizations.

While Western culture tends to favor the "melting" of cultures and assimilation, Mayan peoples traditionally respect and value culture and difference, as can be seen in the pluricultural⁸ landscape of their territories. Even in instances when Mayan rulers would defeat another ruler or take control of territory, the cultures of the defeated people were decidedly recognized and accepted. The indigenous tendency against assimilation into the dominant culture is based in an understanding that equality requires acknowledgement, and at least a tolerance, of difference.⁹ This value of difference is prevalent in indigenous women's feminism, partly in that indigenous women generally embrace what is considered women's work and gender differences. However, many women are now also reserving the right to choose their work, rather than having it imposed upon them. Besides working in the home, women have traditionally worked in other subsistence

⁶ Nash, June. *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in the Age of Globalization*. (NY:Routledge, 2001).

⁷ For more information, see Jesús Morales Bermúdez, "El Congreso Indígena de Chiapas: Un Testimonio," in *Anuario 1991* (Tuxtla Gutiérrez: Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, 1992), 241-371.

⁸ Pluricultural is when various distinct cultures live and coexist inside one country, as opposed to multi-cultural, where the cultures tend to mix into something that looks more like a melting pot.

⁹ June, Nash. *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in the Age of Globalization* (NY: Routledge, 2001) 42; Esteva, Gustavo and Prakash, Madhu Suri. *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil Cultures* (New York: Zed Books, 1998).

roles such as caring for the animals and agriculture. Rather than understanding equality as the right to work in the money economy and/or do work that may be traditionally reserved for men for the same salary as men, many women are looking more towards valuing women and their differences for what they are at present. These women want to be seen as different and equal and not sucked into a struggle for jobs that men are already struggling amongst themselves to attain and retain. This could be a very critical and innovative concept to some feminists who struggle in an economic system where work such as caring for the home and children is undervalued and thus underpaid. The current Western ideology dictates that if one decides to work in the home or chooses a “feminine” vocation of nurturing and/or subsistence work, one is probably also choosing a low level of status, cultural value and economic potential regardless of gender.

The “oil boom” of the 1970s, together with the scarcity of available land, caused many indigenous men from Chiapas, and other southern Mexican states, to migrate to the petroleum zones, leaving women to deal with family economic matters.¹⁰ Indigenous women’s entry into the money economy has been analyzed as making their domestic and subsistence work evermore dispensable to the reproduction of the labor force and thus reducing women’s power within the family.¹¹ Indigenous men have been forced by the need to help provide for the family in the globalized capitalist economic system that favors paid economic labor while depending on female subordination and unpaid subsistence labor¹². These ideals are internalized by many workers and imported back into the communities. This was a blow to the already deteriorating Mayan concept of complementarity, which is part of Mayan customary practices and cosmovision. In complementarity, male/female labor is seen as basic to social survival, “male labor produces the raw materials, and female labor transforms them into objects of use and consumption”.¹³ There is a definite gendered division of labor, but both are considered of equal importance. Complementarity is equality. Respect of difference is equality. Alma López, a Maya from Guatemala is nostalgic:

The philosophical principles that I would recover from my culture are equality, complementarity between men and women, and between men and men and women and women. That part of the Mayan culture currently doesn’t exist, and to state the contrary is to turn a blind eye to the oppression that indigenous women suffer. The complementarity is now only part of history; today there is only inequality, but complementarity and equality can be constructed.¹⁴

In complementarity, there exists a male/female duality, as opposed to a polarized concept

¹⁰ Collier, George. *Basta. Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: Food First, 1994) 123.

¹¹ For more information on this topic see: Collier and Merielle Flood, “Changing Gender Relations in Zinacantán, Mexico,” in *Research in Economic Anthropology*, Vol. 15, 1994.

¹² Though it is true that in some zones of neoliberal economic development, such as the maquiladora zone along the US-Mexican border, women workers are preferred due to women’s tendency to have small nimble hands, accept lower wages, and be easier to control than men. These women are often still expected to perform unpaid “feminine” labor in the home. Thus far, in indigenous areas of Southern Mexico women have largely stayed in the villages while men have migrated for work. The majority of women who have left their villages to work in the formal sector do not return to the village.

¹³ Devereaux, Leslie. “Gender Difference and Relations of Inequality in Zinacantan” in *Dealing with Inequality: Analyzing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond*, ed. Marilyn Stern (Cambridge and New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 93.

¹⁴ Castillo, R. Aida. “Zapatismo and the Emergence of Indigenous Feminism” in *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35, No. 6 (2002) 40.

of masculine and feminine. Living off of the land, as indigenous cultures historically have, tends to make for more flexibility in gender and labor rolls than does Western capitalist systems of development and culture. There usually were allowances even in strict indigenous cultures allowing for those who practice different gender rolls. Gender rolls became more restrictive with the arrival of the Europeans and their polarized views of home/work, domestic/productive (soon to become the public and the private).¹⁵ Though much of the erosion of complementarity is undoubtedly due to the erosion of the Mayan peoples' subsistence base, indigenous women's traditional realm, and push into the dominant European system, it is ironic to note that what may have been an attempt on men's part to preserve culture—through the isolation, thus domination, of women—has also helped to erode a very fundamental concept of the traditional Mayan Worldview. Complementarity is similar to the basis of many other American indigenous belief systems based on male/female duality, which are likewise being devastated.

The desire of indigenous women to reclaim good traditions such as complementarity is bound up with their struggle for autonomy and respect as indigenous people. This struggle could be of great importance and inspiration to the rest of us in its call for self-determination, autonomy, and dignity. This is especially important since so many cultures that comprise the world are no longer isolated from each other. With the system of global capitalism in crisis, perhaps it is time to look to more pluricultural ways of coexistence over the monoculture that capitalist development and progress require.

Women Unite

As their position within the family was being restructured by a homogenizing globalized system, indigenous women entered into contact with other indigenous women and mestizas in the informal sector. They began to organize women's spaces for collaboration, communication and reflection outside the home. This often took the form of the artisan cooperatives that have been blossoming across the nation over the last decades.

Likewise, feminist organizations had begun working in the countryside of Mexico to support development projects and promote gender consciousness-raising among campesina and indigenous women. In this line, the organization Comaletzin A.C. lead the way in working with indigenous women in Morelos, Puebla, Sonora and Chiapas on the development of gender perspectives in the late 80's and many others followed suit.¹⁶ The Catholic Church, a strong force in all of Mexico, was also changing its ideology of women around this time in many parts of Mexico. The Church's discourse on the "dignity of women"¹⁷ was being replaced by a discourse about women's rights and claims of gender equality. This new discourse by the

¹⁵ LaRocque, Emma. "Métis and Feminist" in *Making Way for Indigenous Feminism* (New York, Zed Books Ltd., 2007) 64.

¹⁶ Other feminist groups that did early work in indigenous Chiapas are The Center for Research and Action for Women (CIAM) and the Women's Group of San Cristóbal de las Casas, both founded in 1989. They initiated work against sexual and domestic violence and in support of organizing among indigenous women of the Chiapas highlands and Guatemalan refugee women. Women for Dialogue, working with women of Veracruz and Oaxaca, and the consultants of Women in Solidarity Action (EMAS), who work with Purépecha women of Michoacán, were also early promoters of rural indigenous women's rights, gender perspective, a literacy program and small business education for women. The above is but a taste of Feminist work in Chiapas. See Castillo, R. Aida. "Zapatismo and the Emergence of Indigenous Feminism" in *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35, No. 6 (2002).

¹⁷ The church's discourse of dignity of women was based in an ideology of "marianismo," that is a woman's dignity based on her self-sacrifice, devotion to her children and purity.

Catholic church was by no means feminist, as it still held men as the patriarch of the household. Nonetheless, indigenous women appropriated the ideas about rights and equality and it gave new meanings in their dialogue with feminists.¹⁸

Zapatismo as a Catalyst

The eve that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, in the wee hours of the morning of January 1st, 1994, a little known indigenous rebellion became public. The EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional or Zapatista Army of National Liberation in English) took to the streets and took over the cities of the State of Chiapas in Mexico. This guerrilla army was not out to over-throw the government or forge their own country, but to make such demands as basic rights to autonomy, dignity and land for their communities. This seemingly small, but significant group of rebels became champions in the movement against neoliberal globalization and colonialism.

The EZLN had a large number of women within its ranks from the get go, rivaling the view of the subservient uneducated indigenous woman often held by the more affluent population of Mexico and the world. In fact, the person who planned and led the take over of San Cristobal de las Casas, the former capitol city of the State and urban hub to indigenous Chiapas, was Infantry Major Ana Maria, a woman. Her triumph has served as an inspiration to young women throughout Mexico.

The Zapatistas' movement was the first time a guerrilla movement held women's liberation as part of the agenda from the first uprising. Besides the high number of women in its rank and file, the EZLN's public appearance served in even greater ways as a catalyst for the organization of indigenous women in Mexico. Likewise, Zapatista women have been catalysts for some of the most important advancements of indigenous women's rights, largely arising from the "Women's Revolutionary Law."

The idea for the women's law began over a year previous to the first uprising, when the Zapatistas decided that they needed to present their own set of laws with their demands to the government. "A general law was made, but there was no women's law. And so we protested and said that there has to be a women's law when we make our demands. We also want the government to recognize us as women. The right to have equality, equality of men and women." Explains Major Ana Maria,¹⁹ who was not only the woman who lead the EZLN capture of San Cristóbal de las Casas during the uprising, but also one of the women who helped create the women's law.

A woman named Susana was put in charge of the creation of The Women's Revolutionary Law. She and Comandanta Ramona traveled to dozens of communities to ask the opinion of thousands of women. The laws were drawn up, voted on and passed unanimously. In the words of Subcomandante Marcos, "The first EZLN uprising took place in March of 1993, there were no casualties and we won".²⁰

The Women's Revolutionary Law was released publicly during the uprising on New Year's Day of 1994, in the pamphlet of Zapatista demands were aimed at the government.

¹⁸ Castillo, R. Aida. "Zapatismo and the Emergence of Indigenous Feminism" in *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35, No. 6 (2002) 41-42.

¹⁹ Ana Maria, Major. "Interview with Major Ana Maria" in *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, ed. El Ejercito Zapatista Liberación Nacional (New York: Autonomía) 1994.

²⁰ Marcos, Subcommandante. "The First Uprising: In March 1993" in *La Jornada*, (January 30, 1994).

However, it was obvious that some of the demands in the Women's Law were written specifically to those in their own community, including those in the ranks of the EZLN and local Juntas (indigenous governments). The document includes the right to political participation and to hold political leadership posts; freedom from sexual and domestic violence; the ability to decide how many children one has; fair wages; the choosing of a spouse; education; and to quality health services (see appendix). For the first time in the history of Latin American guerrilla movements, women members were analyzing and presenting the "personal" in politically explicit terms. This is not to say, however, that in Zapatista communities women don't have to fight for equality and dignity. Revolutionary laws are a means, and usually a beginning, not an end. But all in all, the existence and knowledge of the law, even for women who don't actually know what it says, has had great symbolic importance as the seedling of the current indigenous women's movement in Mexico.

It wasn't only the *inspiration* of the Zapatista movement that promoted women's organizing. The Mexican government's rapid response to the Zapatista uprising, the militarization of Chiapas and other indigenous communities in Mexico, created a crisis. Indigenous communities began to suffer from heightened tension, violence, displacement, and the loss of freedom of movement. Women have paid the highest price in the militarization of the indigenous communities of Chiapas, as they have been by far the most victimized during military and paramilitary attacks. Women's organizations that had previously acted in isolation began to form coalitions and women joined groups out of both the new found courage inspired by Zapatista women and also out of desperation caused by the crisis.

Indigenous movements also seized the opportunities and crises introduced by the Zapatista uprising and movement to make their case to local, national and even international populations and governments. They began forming new coalitions as well as reclaiming lands and making demands for indigenous groups. Within weeks of the rebellion, 288 indigenous groups formed a coalition called CEOIC (Coordinadora Estatal de Organizaciones Indigenas y Campesinas).²¹ Some women's artisan cooperatives and campesina women's groups participated in these meetings, though the demands they made on the part of women were not a priority. It was, however, progress for women within their own ranks. Their demands were for rights to land and money and for the creation of women's spaces in the political, social and cultural realms. To keep the CEOIC on it's toes in regards to women's demands, a women's commission was created, though it did take almost a year of struggle on the women's part as most men did not consider it a main concern and often got pushed back due to meeting time restraints.²² In the end, women's spaces were created within indigenous coalitions.

Women Unite Part II

The inclusiveness of women in the Zapatista agenda and the evidence of indigenous women's emergence into the political sphere along with the Revolutionary Women's Law peaked the interest of mestiza feminists in Mexico. Before the "women's revolutionary law" movement, mestiza and indigenous organizations rarely collaborated. Indigenous women's organizations were generally artisan cooperatives, which were not considered feminist, being

²¹ Collier, George. *Basta. Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: Food First, 1994) and Rojas, Rosa. *Chiapas, And the Women?* (Mexico DF: Ediciones del Taller Editorial La Correa Feminista, 1994). 2009-4-28 <<https://webpace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/bookintro.html>>

²² Ibid., Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (Ohio: Center for International Studies, 2004).

created to augment the family income, while mestiza feminists focused on popular organizations and elections to affect change in women's positions through political action and the national government. When mestiza and indigenous women's organizations did collaborate it was generally in the context of indigenous women as a sort of project of a mestiza feminist organization. Shortly after the emergence of the Zapatistas, mestiza and indigenous women groups began to collaborate in a much more meaningful way. Six months after the EZLN uprising, the first Chiapas State Women's Convention was held. Then about six months after that, the first National Women's Convention was held in Querétaro with the participation of over three hundred women from fourteen different states.²³

Besides all of the obvious advances and learning that these meetings inspired, inside the first women's conventions women came to some hard realizations as well. One of the issues that arose within the conventions where the difficult dynamic developed where the mestizas tended to "help" and the indigenous women tended to be "helped".²⁴ This dynamic was counterproductive for both groups, so they decided to set up working groups during one *encuentro* for each ethnic and linguistic group. But this created a problem of separateness, which was one of the obstacles that the conventions had worked to overcome. So in the next *encuentro*, again they tried to work together, without the segregation, but also without the "helping" dynamic. According to Paloma, "many of the indigenous women were surprised that, despite the class and linguistic advantages enjoyed by the mestizas, they also had problems; a reality that had been obscured by the advisor-advisee relationship that was a legacy of the older paternalistic model of organizing, predominant before 1994".²⁵

Finally in August of 1997, indigenous women organized the first National Gathering of Indigenous Women, which was held in the state of Oaxaca, attended by over 400 women from twenty-three indigenous regions, and inaugurated by the late commandant Ramona of the EZLN²⁶. In the first words of her speech she declared, "All of us should ask ourselves if Zapatismo would be what it is without women. Would indigenous civil society and that of non-indigenous people, who have helped us so much, be the same without its women? Can one imagine the new rebel Mexico we want to create without new rebel women?"²⁷ Indigenous women had come to know and claim their place in the revolutionary movements of Mexico. It had become and continues to be a prominent one. The indigenous women's movement has achieved a visible and coherent presence in the international social justice movement.

The Westernization Question

The very notion of right and law is a western notion...it is but a window among others on the world, an instrument of communication and a language among others. The word not only is non-existent among the traditional indigenous cultures, but it will never come to their minds that human beings can have

²³ Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (Ohio:Center for International Studies, 2004) 119-120.

²⁴ Ibid.121

²⁵ Ibid, 121.

²⁶ Comandanta Ramona died on January 6th, 2006, of a kidney condition that she had spent years contending with. She was one of the two women who were the main people who developed the Revolutionary Women's Law. She was the woman who had also presented the Mexican flag presented at the peace talk between the Zapatistas and the government.

²⁷ NCDM (National Commission of Democracy in Mexico). "Ramona Recovering!" in *Libertad*, no. 7:1 (1996) 3.

rights...for them it is difficult to understand that rights or entitlements could be homocentrically defined by a human being. That they, furthermore, could be defined by a sovereign state, that is, by a state of sovereign individuals, is almost ridiculous.²⁸

Feminism is often understood as evidence of Westernization when perceived from the standpoint of indigenous culture. The Zapatistas' demands, including the Women's Revolutionary Law, indicate that the Zapatistas along with the indigenous women's movement that was born within it take not only from its indigenous roots but also from Western feminist discourses. This aspect has been a site of debate between indigenous groups who want to adopt some parts of the Western feminist identity and other indigenous groups who are contemptuous toward Westernization as well as a third group of non-indigenous people who look to indigenous cultures as a favored alternative to capitalist hegemony. Indigenous feminist women have something to say as well; following the lead of the Zapatistas they too have chosen to adopt the modern, legal discourse of "women's rights" as an instrument of communication with the world that it seeks to connect with and this tactic has been successful in gaining the attention of feminist groups around the world. The Western activist is familiar with the discourse of rights, even the right to one's own customs and traditions but would probably not so easily identify with "usos y costumbres." Alas, due to privilege, it is necessary only for the under-privileged to learn the cultural language and philosophies of the privileged, if only as a device of survival, while the privileged remain mostly oblivious to the "other."

It is important to note that even as the Zapatista women utilize the discourse of "women's rights" to communicate their concerns and demands, it is done in a non-Western setting. The separation of public and private did not exist in Chiapas the way it has for countries in the Western world. Lisa Poggiali describes some examples of the spaces from which Zapatista women claim their rights:

The Mexican state has only recently succeeded in producing such a distinction [between public and private] through its promotion of neoliberal economic reform...For Zapatista women then, leaving the private sphere of the home and entering into the public one of the workplace does not constitute a revolutionary or 'emancipatory' act. Rather, it involves inserting oneself into a newly created neoliberal political economy, a position many Zapatista women are forced into, but one few willingly accept.²⁹

Another example is the Zapatista stance on abortion. Though abortion is illegal in Mexico, the Zapatistas provide women among their ranks safe, free abortions. However Zapatista women have rallied for the right to have a child while remaining within its ranks, arguing that life inside the EZLN is often easier than life in the village. In contrast to Western feminism's claim to the right to an abortion, Zapatistas have contrasted that with a clamoring for the right to have a child.

²⁸ Vachon, Robert. "L'étude du pluralisme juridique: Une approche diatopique et dialogale" in *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 29 (1990) 165, cited in Esteva, Gustavo and Prakash, Madhu Suri. *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil Cultures* (New York: Zed Books, 1998) 110.

²⁹ Poggiali, Lisa. "Reimagining the possible: Zapatista Discourse and the Problematics of Rights" *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, 8 (2005) 13.

With all that talk of the Western and non-Western, it would be a mistake to conceive of the two as an either/or concept; nothing is pure and completely separate. Culture and tradition change in response to internal conflict, pressure from dominant cultures and exposure to and assimilation of other cultures. Culture and tradition can also vary slightly from family to family, person to person, because in reality, people don't live out their lives inside culture and tradition, but inside communities.

Tradition is often perceived by the 'modern' world as something set in time, pure, strict and unchanging; something from the nostalgic past or perhaps lost in the past that ensnares the young generations. The Oaxacan writer Gustavo Esteva offers up another concept of tradition:

One of our best traditions is how we change tradition in a traditional way. Each generation inherits the customs that govern our community life, but each changes them autonomously, adapting them to the times and learning from others. By refusing to break with the past--to escape to the future as the 'moderns' would have it--we maintain our historical continuity.³⁰

Tradition and custom are practices that are part of the reproduction of culture; they are ever changing and adapting.³¹ The state that adheres to a homogenized Western ideology, seeks to monopolize the production of social norms and laws under the guise of progress and it generally portrays indigenous customs as being backward and stuck in the past. Historically, feminists looking through a Western lens have not always viewed indigenous women as competent to wage their own battle towards equality and happiness; stuck in their culture. They also often lack understanding or knowledge of the thousands of years of (non-western) experience, traditions, and theory that indigenous women are born out of. But, if we take a step back and see how much Western culture itself that has contributed so strongly to women's loss of status in indigenous communities, it is easier to understand that imposing Western ideals even more could not correct the predicament of indigenous women.

Western culture already has affected indigenous culture and to a lesser extent, vice versa. We have seen how the custom of complementarity has changed through colonization to a more patriarchal custom (and this is the custom that the peddlers of hegemony would have you believe is "truly" indigenous and not a result of the imposition of Western culture). Indigenous women are electing to incorporate the discourse of rights into their own traditions and customs. While it is true that indigenous peoples are being imposed upon by a Western universe (to which belong human rights), with its "universal truths", indigenous people in resistance are also adopting the discourse of rights into their pluriverse³² in their own strategic terms. "Their evolving modes of cultural coexistence protect their pluriverse; adapting to each new condition of oppression and domination without losing their historical continuity."³³

Indigenous people have always gotten along very well without human rights, as human

³⁰ Esteva, Gustavo. "A Flower in the Hand of the People." *New Internationalist* 360 (2003). 2009-7-25
<<http://www.newint.org/issue360/flower.htm>>

³¹ Western culture being co-opted into this form of creating tradition can be seen very clearly in the specific form of indigenous Catholicism that exists in Chiapas which is sort of a religious hybrid in which saints take the place of comparable Mayan gods, while Mayan ceremonies have changed very little other than they are practiced in Catholic Churches. The Catholic Church was unable to completely convert indigenous Mayas to Catholicism.

³² Pluriverse is being used as a rough translation of the Mayan concept of a world of many universes.

³³ Esteva, Gustavo and Prakash, Madhu Suri. *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil Cultures* (New York: Zed Books, 1998) 111.

rights are really only 200 years old! “The philosophy and the institutional agreements on human rights were constructed after extraordinary practices of social and personal deprivation took root among the ‘developed’ peoples and places of the planet.”³⁴ Now that all have been affected by a globalized agenda and indigenous peoples live under new conditions and mostly hold a desire to communicate with allies and enemies alike, the discourse of human rights has become an important mode of communication.

Historically, the indigenous of Southern Mexico have used the discourse and tradition of obligation (*usos and costumbres*) and not “rights.” The adoption of the discourse of rights has allowed for cross cultural and international collaboration and empathy between indigenous and Western advocates of women’s equality. On the other hand, the discourse of rights is perceived by many indigenous and non-indigenous as further degradation to other ways of being and assimilation into Western hegemonic structures. It is unfortunate that diverse forms of thought are not recognized in mainstream discourse, philosophy or the status quo of First World Countries. Embracing diverse thought has never been consistent with the traditions of colonial states and the promoters of globalized capitalism, which prefer assimilation and conformity to plurality and the celebration of difference.

Adopting the discourse of rights while attempting to honor indigenous customs (such as *usos and costumbres*) has proven at times to be very tricky and has caused some problems. Tribal governments are elected to respect and uphold indigenous tradition and custom, not the West’s notion of “human rights”. While Indigenous people have been asserting their rights and using them to further their cause, there have also been instances of the government using this same discourse to harass and delegitimize indigenous ways of being that break international human rights laws³⁵; the systems are not always compatible.

The unique way that women are incorporating human rights discourse into their indigenous cultures keeps with their system of building tradition and customs and their idea of the pluriverse and pluriculturality. The complexity of the indigenous woman’s position in Mexican society today is not easy to navigate. To this day the struggle to define indigenous women’s struggle remains in a state of unrest. The term “feminism” has not found itself a comfortable home in many indigenous places in Mexico. Many men seem to have difficulty in trusting women with the reproduction of their culture, but really, feminism in indigenous communities is not something which men have much control over but something indigenous women are grappling with and defining on their own terms. Lisa from the FZLN (National Liberation Front of the Zapatistas, the now defunct civilian arm of the EZLN) exposes feminist

³⁴ Ibid. 119

³⁵ As an example, in 1998, two brothers from Guatemala were detained by the Autonomous Indigenous Authorities in the autonomous indigenous municipality of Tierra and Libertad because they had been accused of illegally cutting wood and failed to appear when summoned. They held one of the brothers in jail for a week while trying to negotiate a settlement with his accusers. When the second brother turned himself in the first brother was released. While attempting to negotiate the release of the second brother, approximately 1,000 police, immigration agents and soldiers invaded the community raided the community, accusing the authorities of kidnapping, assault and usurping the functions of legitimate authorities. These charges were brought against the autonomous authorities in the name of human rights. They accused them of denying the accused a fair and public hearing, negotiating with the accusers rather than presuming innocent before proven guilty and holding them in prison longer than the 36 hours allowed by the Mexican Constitution. All these actions can be considered human rights violations according to articles 9, 10 and 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The problem in this community is that the local authorities are elected to uphold the law and respect “*usos and costumbres*” (local indigenous customs). Human Rights law was used by the state “to strip agency from local authorities. (Poggiali, Lisa. “Reimagining the possible: Zapatista Discourse and the Problematics of Rights” *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, 8 (2005) 12.)

elements and reactions in her community:

As a woman I emphasize the necessity of promoting a world of equals. That is, we are trying to feminize the struggle. In fact, we are currently on the question of principals, on the question of women. In the meeting, I dared to use the term “women’s liberation” and it caused a lot of terror in the men. The goal is that the women assume the discussion...there were men that said that women’s liberation meant to be like the Europeans and take off our bras. I said that to take off one’s bra or anything else, one does not ask permission...I am a feminist, with all that implies. Because even inside the Zapatista Front, to say that I am a feminist implies that I am a radical.³⁶

Indigenous feminism is looking up from below and from a new and unfamiliar perspective than our relatively affluent Western feminist points of view. This view not only sees oppression from a woman’s standpoint, but it also endures and navigates through themes of extreme poverty, race, culture and colonialism. Indigenous women’s contributions are not just now materializing; they have been largely chronicled for years in the documents produced in their conventions, meetings, workshops and essays and interviews in feminist journals. The significance of the struggle of these women should no longer be over-looked or under-appreciated in any feminist theory. Just as indigenous peoples are not homogenous or stuck in a static tradition and culture, neither is feminism—nor are anti-colonial or social justice movements for that matter. Indigenous feminism is bringing colonial and indigenous history and racial and cultural oppression theory deep into the ever-changing feminist analysis, perhaps moving us into a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the face of oppression and power itself.

APPENDIX

The Revolutionary Women’s Law

In their just fight for the liberation of our people, the EZLN incorporates women into the revolutionary struggle regardless of their race, creed, color, or political affiliation, requiring only that they share the demands of the exploited people and that they commit to the laws and regulation of the revolution. In addition, taking into account the situation of the women worker in Mexico, the revolution supports their just demands for equality and justice in the following Revolutionary Women’s Law.

FIRST: Women, regardless of their race, creed, color, or political affiliation, have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in a way determined by their desire and ability.

SECOND: Women have the right to work and receive a fair salary.

THIRD: Women have the right to decide the number of children they will bear and care for.

FOURTH: Women have the right to participate in the affairs of the community and to hold

³⁶ Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (Ohio:Center for International Studies, 2004) 143.

positions of authority if they are freely and democratically elected.

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

SIXTH: Women have the right to education.

SEVENTH: Women have the right to choose their partner and not to be forced into marriage.

EIGHTH: Women shall not be beaten or physically mistreated by their family members or by strangers. Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.

NINTH: Women will be able to occupy positions of leadership in the organization and to hold military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces.

Tenth: Women will have all the rights and obligations elaborated in the revolutionary laws and regulations.

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