

Zapatista Women: A Revolutionary Process Within a Revolution

by Sirena Pellarolo

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In a recent interview with Subcomandante Marcos at the Centro de Documentación de Son Jarocho, in Xaltipán, Veracruz, (Mexico) local KPFK journalist, paisana and jaranera Aura Bogado asked the legendary spokesperson of the Zapatistas, "What can men do, for example, to increase the representation of women anywhere in the world -- from families to cultural centers and beyond?"

The relevance of this question for the purposes of this panel on "Freedom Fighters: Women in Revolt Around the World," and the symbolic importance of this interview in the framework of this event in **East** Los Angeles is multiple. First, the interview was conducted in the heart and birthplace of the *son jarocho*, in the context of Subdelegado Zero's visit to the State of Veracruz, as part of "La Otra Campaña." This new campaign spearheaded by the Zapatistas is a continuation of their effort to connect to and get acquainted with the myriad of struggles of the Mexican civil society, in which members of the indigenous Comandancia tour around Mexico, talking and listening to grassroots organizations and individuals, getting to know the struggles of "la gente humilde y sencilla," building a network from below, in the hopes of creating a grassroots social agenda, a new social pact that would eventually lead to the rewriting of the Mexican Constitution. This "otra" campaña, this intimate and direct contact with the needs of the people contrasts of course with the official presidential campaign that is flooding the Mexican political imagination in this moment, with its hollow promises and staged simulacrum of democratic practice. As usual, it's the Zapatistas' way of doing a different kind of politics, "una política muy otra."

The setting of the interview was very telling in many aspects. First, because I know of Aura's passion for *son jarocho*, a passion that she shares with Subcomandante Marcos, as this traditional music from Veracruz not only recovers ancient multicultural roots and asserts a local identity, but has a history as a practice of resistance and as such, has prompted the creation of a grassroots movement of *jaraneros* who are committed to anticapitalist and decolonizing practices networked transnationally, in Mexico and the U.S. The fact that Aura belongs to the *jaranero* movement "de este lado," alluded to a longstanding history of mutual inspiration between the Zapatistas and the Chicano/a movement. Suffice it to mention the Chicano/Zapatista Encuentro in Chiapas in 1997, where more than one hundred local activists and artists traveled to the liberated communities to share with their indigenous brothers and sisters their music, art and forms of resistance. And following that experience, the inspiration that the Zapatista movement, its forms of governance and thrust towards self-determination and autonomy has had in local community venues and collectives, as the Eastside Café in El Sereno, Casa del Pueblo in Echo Park and the contested piece of land occupied here, in the heart of L.A. by the South Central Farmers.

Subcomandante Marcos' answer to Aura's question was, "there is still a really big distance between the intention of actually being better, and really respecting the Other - in this case women - and what our real practice is." Although he continued his response acknowledging the very important advances that the indigenous women had made on their own, and how they had created a "revolution within [the] revolution," with their participation in community life, shared governance and even in insurgency practices, he introduced this his- (or better yet, **her**story) of empowerment by reminding us that what is going on is a work-in-progress, a process that is still developing as we speak.

This response struck me as very honest, and it referred me back to other mentions of this process of empowerment among Zapatista women, that is still not yet fully achieved. I remembered what mexicana journalist Gloria Muñoz Ramírez -- who lived in the Zapatista communities, "embedded" in their culture and traditions-- for 10 years, and how she had "embroidered" the many testimonies that she collected of community participants in a beautiful and plural tapestry that resulted in an authoritative history of the EZLN, *20 y 10 el fuego y la palabra*, a celebration of the twenty years of struggle of the movement. In her account, she records the *palabra* of many individuals, who recognize that the participation of women is still not as active as they -- the women--would like it to be, although they give credit to the evident progress that women have made in the transformation of millenary customs and traditions that used to oppress them. Ofelia, one of the women Gloria interviewed in Los Altos, reflects, "we see the rights of women and the need to change some customs. In this

way, education is a tool so that both men as well as women become conscious of the importance of women's work. This is not easy, because there are many things we have in our head and we need to change, but we're on our way" (328).

"We're on our way." *Caminando preguntamos* (as we walk, we ask questions), as the Zapatista maxim goes in that attitude that promotes an alternative way of doing things, with no blueprints, with no maps, just the reliance on the wisdom of the community, as they believe that "entre todos, sabemos todo" (amongst all of us, we know everything). "We're on our way" seems to have been what I heard last January in the Caracol of Oventic, from the only woman participating in the Junta de Buen Gobierno (the council of good government, the new form of communal self-governance that the Zapatistas have implemented since August 2003). When I asked her about how things were going for women, she responded, sitting very dignified in the corner of the table she shared with four other compañeros, that there was still a lot of work to do in order for real equality to be practiced between genders, that there was still a long way to go.

I also remembered Comandanta Kely and Comandanta Hortensia's participation in the launching of La Otra Campaña on January 1st of this year, flanked by several of their fellow male comandantes of the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, Speaking to a mostly indigenous audience of over 10,000 Zapatista support community members, who had peacefully taken the zócalo of San Cristóbal de las Casas, and who felt empowered to be there, in the center of the colonial capital of the State of Chiapas, not peddling their crafts for peanuts or begging, as tourists usually see them in their walks in front of the cathedral, but in a gesture that asserted the centrality that they had grown to adopt in their twenty years of struggle, "Aquí estamos, y no nos vamos!" (here we are, and we're not leaving). Comandanta Kely invited all the women of Mexico to participate in La Otra Campaña, so that they would show "a todos los hombres machitos" (to all the machito men) that women are able to participate, that they also have the obligation to struggle to uphold their rights, because, "como mujeres que somos, no sólo somos de la cama o de la casa, nada más" (as women, we don't only belong to the bed, or the house only), she exhorted them to organize and fight for liberty, democracy and justice, those three pivotal demands that the Zapatistas have fought for from the very beginning.

On her part, Comandanta Hortensia addressed "all the women indigenous and non-indigenous of Mexico and the world" on behalf of all the women, girls and elders of the Zapatista base communities who, on that 12th anniversary of the armed insurrection, are still fighting against the Bad Government and the Mexican Army and all the injustices they still suffer as indigenous women. And she added

We are going to continue our fight to conquer the place and the right we deserve as women, because until now we still don't have the right, the liberty nor the total participation in the different jobs, and for the development of our people and in the construction of our autonomy. As women everywhere, we are still suffering injustice, contempt, bad treatment, discrimination, humiliation, and the violation of our rights. This unjust situation that we women live, we cannot permit this to continue always, but some day, it has to change.

She then invited the women to get together and organize around La Otra Campaña, because without their participation, it would not be an-"other" campaign, that is, one that is inclusive and respectful of differences, and which has the intention of creating "a world where many worlds fit."

These different expressions of an incomplete process, of a lack, of a desire that still propels Zapatista women forward in their march towards gender equality is also noticed by anthropologist Lynn Stephen in her ethnographic work with Zapatista women in the late '90s. In her book *Zapata Lives! Histories on Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*, she notes,

A major theme in some of these conversations is whether greater equality has been achieved in relationships between men and women within the Zapatista army and in Zapatista base communities. Such equality has been referred to as "the revolution within the revolution." This revolution is ongoing and far from over. While significant experimentation in gender roles may be taking place among the groups of men and women who live completely separately from their communities while training as full-time armed insurgents in special camps, women in Zapatista base communities often continue to struggle for recognition and participation in decision-making (176-7).

This was also noted by Subcomandante Marcos in his response to Aura Bogado's question in the interview that prompted these thoughts, this *palabra* that I'm sharing now with all of you. In his response he refers to the transculturation process that was created by the arrival of the (mostly urban and mestizo) insurgents into the indigenous communities twenty years ago, when the women, who were used to traditional gender roles, now

went to the mountains to receive military training, where, “in addition to the hostile mountainous conditions, they also ha[d] to be able to put up with the hostile conditions of a patriarchal system of our own machismo, of our relationship with one another.” The example of the women insurgents promoted a “very strong revolution” among other women who demanded to participate in the local assemblies and hold positions of responsibility. Issues of domestic violence, economic dependence, the sale of women, arranged marriages and the consequences of the use of drugs and alcohol in the communities have, since then, been amply addressed in public assemblies. These discussions are so pervasive, that it is a major theme in the broadcasting of their autonomous radio station, Radio Insurgente, which constantly transmits messages or shows about the need to uphold gender equality among the communities. A good example of this is Subcomandante Marcos’ story “La bruja Pánfila y la princesa Panfililla,” a radio-drama that addresses women’s rights, in whose ending—very typical of the fairy tale genre—, the anti-hero, who is in love with the heroine, Toñita, a woman insurgent, discovers the truth that she sent him to seek: “what women want is that they be respected.”

So, what is the place from where this “lack,” this incompleteness in the process of women empowerment is addressed by these disparate agents involved in, or who accompany the Zapatista movement? It is undoubtedly from a consciousness of the need of gender equality among indigenous communities, a consciousness that was developed **BY** the Mayan women, and their organizing effort in articulating their needs for a just society that would address the history of domination that they still experience **as women**. From the awareness that this is an on-going process, that even if the 1993 “Women’s Revolutionary Law’ drafted by women, passed after consultation with the communities, the implementation of this law needs to be fought for continuously. This law states,

First, women have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in the place and at the level that their capacity and will dictates, without any discrimination based on race, creed, color or political affiliation.

Second, women have the right to work and to receive a just salary.

Third, women have the right to decide on the number of children they have and take care of.

Fourth, women have the right to participate in community affairs and hold leadership positions if they are freely and democratically elected.

Fifth, women have the right to primary care in terms of their health and nutrition.

Sixth, women have the right to education.

Seventh, women have the right to choose their romantic partners and should not be obligated to marry by force.

Eighth, no woman should be beaten or physically mistreated by either family members or strangers. Rape and attempted rape should be severely punished.

Ninth, women can hold leadership positions in the organization and hold military rank in the revolutionary armed forces.

Tenth, women have all the rights and obligations set out by the revolutionary laws and regulations.

It exceeds the scope of this presentation to delve into the issue of whether the articulation of this law was inspired by a Western influence on Mayan mores and traditions. Although it is a fascinating topic that needs to be addressed, I would just like to say that it is evident that these Indigenous women, when they allow themselves to think for themselves and when they put themselves in situations of empowerment, they are able to transcend received oppressive customs, that clearly the capitalist system and the Mexican government took advantage of in order to harass and disrupt community life. Because these women are the “glue” of the community, they are the ones who, through the performance of their traditional practices and ceremonies, the feeding and education of their children, and even the resistance to foreign agents like the Mexican army or the paramilitary forces who intrude in their communities and disrupt the safety of their daily lives, keep communal

ties together. We have all seen photos or clips of colorful Mayan women resisting with their own small bodies the presence of armed soldiers in their territories. The courage and strength that those images convey are an inspiration to many women around the world who are fighting much lesser evils.

Among the traditional practices that the Zapatista women have used in order to achieve economic independence, is their remarkable craftsmanship, their embroidery skills known throughout the world. Women have gathered in cooperatives where they support each others' work and sell their crafts at a fair cost, as a way to acknowledge the artistry and the work put into them. Indeed, these alternative economic practices provide major sources of income for their autonomous communities, as the cooperatives have networked internationally to exchange their goods -- that also include fair trade organic coffee, among others --, to organizations like the local El Puente a la Esperanza or Casa del Pueblo.

I would like to end this presentation addressing this traditional practice of embroidery as a symbol of the celebration of differences that the Zapatista women promote, and that is the hallmark of La Otra Campaña. The place of intersection of all these issues is undoubtedly located in an incredible woman from the Chiapan Highlands, who crossed over on January 6th of this year, the Day of Los Reyes Magos, and who is a very important referent for the EZLN struggle. Of course, I am referring to Comandanta Ramona, who was as skillful with the yarn as with military strategy, a woman who went from *bordadora* to insurgent, and back to *bordadora* again, when her health did not allow her to continue in the public arena. No matter what she did, she was always weaving Life.

Ramona, the petite *tzotzil* woman garbed in her beautiful huipil manufactured by her own hands, with the designs of her place of origin, San Andrés Larráinzar, was the symbol of the woman in struggle for dignity, autonomy and solidarity. She chose the political work to channel the voice of her fellow indigenous women. A fervent promoter of the Revolutionary Law of Women, she courageously challenged some of the ancestral practices of machista and oppressive "usos y costumbres."

Together with Mayor Ana María, Ramona took part of the armed take-over of San Cristóbal de las Casas on January 1st 1994. Since then she acquired a legendary stature that was used by the EZLN as a symbol of the legitimacy of their struggle. In late January 1994 she participated -- in spite of being monolingual--in the first interview with the press. In February 1995 a video of the sick Ramona circled the world, in which she made a call to Mexican women to organize. But her most outstanding public appearance was on October 12 1996 when a multitude of supporters rallied at the zócalo in Mexico City, where she read a message from the EZLN that addressed the civil society in a plight for the recognition of indigenous rights,

We want a Mexico that will take us into account as human beings, that will respect and recognize our dignity.

That is why we want to unite our small Zapatista voice to the big voice of all those who fight for a new Mexico.

We came here to shout, together with all of you, that never again a Mexico without us.

That is why we are ready to participate in an big national dialog with all of you.

A dialog where our word will be one more word among many words and our heart one more heart among many hearts.

In agreement with these desires, Ramona made her last public appearance on September 16th in the Caracol of La Garrucha, on the inauguration of the Plenary talks that would summarize six weeks of preparatory conversations of the EZLN with the Mexican civil society towards the launching of La Otra Campaña in January 2006. Her appearance was brief, as she was already very sick, but it was powerful in its symbolic meaning. As a token of her love and symbol of how she understood the new campaign that the EZLN was embarking in, she offered the Comandantes a colorful embroidery that she had made many years ago, as she recovered from a kidney transplant, and had given as a present to the civil society. That same piece was given back to the EZLN by members of the civil society on one of the preparatory talks held in August. Alluding to the beautiful colors, Ramona said "this is what we want of La Otra Campaña," referring to the plurality of colors organized as one beautiful tapestry.

Because we are different, we are equal, "iguales, todos somos diferentes" is one of the many Zapatista maxims

that encode a very profound meaning in a dictum that reminds us of a Zen koan in its cryptic phrasing. What this “other” campaign is proposing--and I’m certain that the work of the Zapatista women has helped develop the consciousness of this need to respect differences even within the same struggle--, is a space that is heterogeneous, de-centered, horizontal, where every one of its participants is a leader by his or her own merits; an “other” campaign that affirms life and humanity and that fights against the death imposed by neo-liberalism and global capitalism; a space where differences are not only celebrated, but practiced as part of this downloading of “a world where many worlds fit.” That is why, in contrast to other revolutionary movements from the past, that encouraged a homogeneity imposed from the vanguard ranks -- constituted mainly by men--, the inclusive nature of this project attracts so much attention from the LGBTQ community, of sex workers, of the old, the sick, the handicapped. “This is how varied the colors are that form the yarns that are going to weave the embroidery called La Otra Campaña,” says mexicana journalist Eugenia Gutiérrez in a recent article published by *Revista Rebeldía* titled “Abajo y a la izquierda: El bordado de Ramona” (below and to the left: Ramona’s embroidery). She ends the article by saying,

We are many and diverse. We belong to different genders. We have many colors, many textures, we come in many shapes. But each one of us combines and seeks to find his or her own place in Ramona’s embroidery to defend it in this process that is starting, as it challenges us to transform the reality that they want to impose on us from above.

This is a process then, to transform the reality that those “in power”--be it the State, transnational corporations, traditional political parties or unions, or even revolutionary movements -- want to impose on the rest. The courageous practices against homogeneization that our sisters, the Zapatista women have been engaging in in this revolutionary process within their movement, is an inspiration for all women to create this “other possible world.” We’re indeed on our way.

Works cited

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