

Women's work, women's struggle in Chiapas

The following fact sheet was compiled in July 1998 from various sources by the International Wages for Housework Campaign .

"Women have been the most exploited . . . We get up at three in the morning to prepare corn for our husband's breakfast and we don't rest until late at night. If there is not enough food we give it to our children and our husbands first. So the women now have decided to take up arms and become Zapatistas."

Comandanta Ramona, EZLN

WOMEN'S WORK, WOMEN'S STRUGGLE In Chiapas, Mexico

Between 1519 and 1552 Mexico's Indigenous population was decimated - as many as 12 million Native Mexicans died.

Mexico has the largest Indigenous population in Latin America - 40% of the estimated 40 million Native peoples. The Native population of Mexico is 8 to 12 million, or 10-14% of Mexico's 86 million. It is expected to reach its pre-Colombian 16 million early next century. There are 56 distinct cultures and 100 languages. Of Mexico's 32 states, Chiapas is one of six with a high proportion of Indigenous people. The Chiapas Indigenous population is 1.2 million. Two million Indigenous people live in Mexico City.

Chiapas produces 55% of Mexico's hydroelectric energy, 20% of Mexico's electricity. The estimated oil potential of Chiapas and bordering Guatemala combined could exceed that of Saudi Arabia. Yet 7 out of 10 homes have no electricity, and 6 out of 10 homes have no water (9 out of 10 Indigenous homes). Chiapas produces 28% of Mexico's meat supply, but 90% of Indigenous communities rarely can afford meat.

Wages are three times lower than the national average. 20% of people have no income. 40% of farmers get \$1.74 a day, half the minimum wage. 64,000 families, almost all of them Maya Indian, farm coffee which has lost 60% of its market value since 1990.

Infant mortality (66 per 1,000) is double the national average. 66.74% of the population suffers from malnutrition, one of the highest causes of death. The average life span in "Indian Mexico" is five years less than in "non-Indian Mexico".

In Las Canadas women have on average seven children (2.8 Chiapas average). 60% of the population is under 20. 30-40% women speak only their mother tongue and no Spanish (the official language). 60% are illiterate.

Women's demands

Women work a double and triple day: knitting, fetching water and firewood are vital to

the economic survival of the family.

Women are about 1/3 of Zapatista fighters and 55% of its support base. (Zapata's 1910 army included battalions of women.) Women and children have been vital in challenging military occupations of villages and refugee camps and picketing police stations to get men released.

The EZLN Revolutionary Laws include the Women's Revolutionary Law. Women have the right to: participate in the revolutionary struggle, regardless of race, religion or political affiliation; work for a fair wage; decide the number of children to have and care for; participate in community affairs and hold political office; health and nutrition; education; choose their partner and not be forced into marriage; not to be beaten or physically abused by relatives or strangers - attempts to rape will be severely punished; hold military positions and ranks in the EZLN; all rights and responsibilities under the other Revolutionary Laws.

The majority of Native people live on ejidos or common land won by the 1910 Mexican revolution led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution guaranteed land and water to Indigenous and campesino people. Shortly before the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the USA, Canada and Mexico, President Salinas amended Article 27 so that people could be thrown off the land and imprisoned, and ejido land privatised and sold. The Zapatistas chose 1 January 1994, the first day of NAFTA, for their uprising.

In May 1994, Indigenous women from several communities and areas met in San Cristóbal de las Casas and drafted many demands, including the right to own land. In 1996 representatives of the 56 Indigenous groups formed the National Indigenous Congress, and presented their demands to the Zapatistas in Jan 1996. These demands were basic to the San Andrés Agreement between the government and the Zapatistas. The Agreement on Indigenous Rights to self-determination, autonomy, control of Native land and resources, and self-government, was signed in Feb 1996. The women's demands presented by Comandante Ramona included health, education, nutrition and housing - cooking stoves, refrigerators and washing machines. The Agreement has never been implemented. As a result, the Zapatistas withdrew from the talks.

At the 1996 National Indigenous Congress in Mexico City attended by 680 delegates from 135 Indigenous communities, women raised again their autonomous demands: the right to and protection of the land and the resources of their environment.

Women and children - military prey

Mexico's military is the second largest in Latin America (behind Brazil) - 175,000 troops.

Women and children are the main victims of war. 90% of people killed or wounded in armed conflicts worldwide are women and children compared to 5% during the world wars. (UN figures, Olira Otunno, Children in Armed Conflict, Reforma 4 April 1998 p.2)

Most of the 45 people massacred by government para-militaries at Acteal, Chiapas, on 22 Dec 1997, were women and children - 22 women, 14 children and 9 manily older men. The women couldn't run fast enough, they were carrying small children!

Women and children are 80% of refugees worldwide. Over 100,000 people fleeing genocide in bordering Guatemala took refuge in Chiapas in the 80's. Since 1994, over 18,000 Native Chiapans have been displaced within Chiapas by paramilitary and army raids on their villages.

Since 1994, there are 684 documented assaults on women and girls, including over 300 rapes mainly by government forces. "Before the massacre at Acteal those who organize the Priistas [government forces] told us: 'The daughters of Zapatistas will be raped. First the wives, then the daughters.'" The whole community of Taniperlas has been threatened with rape if the men who escaped military attack do not return.

Violence is not confined to Chiapas: 115 women have been murdered since 1994 in the border town Ciudad Juarez, most of them maquiladoras (sweatshop garment workers). No one has been arrested. CJ is one of the most militarized areas outside of Chiapas.

On 24 Jan 1998 the 1,000 Women For Peace Caravan left Mexico City for Chiapas in support of: Implementation of the San Andrés Agreement. Demilitarization of Chiapas and return of soldiers to their barracks. Dismantling and disarming para-militaries; investigation of crimes committed by them and punishment of the guilty. Bringing to trial ex-governor Ruiz Ferro for his responsibility for the Acteal massacre. Safety measures enabling women and men refugees to return to their homes. Stop war crimes against women.

"Cuando una mujer avanza, no hay hombre que retroceda." When women go forward, no man goes backward. (The 1,000 Women Caravan)