

The Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law as it is lived today

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This essay on the Zapatistas' Women's Revolutionary Law twenty years on, draws on Zapatista women's reflections, together with a decades-long engagement with indigenous feminism and Zapatismo. Engaging difference through respect rather than negation can also move us beyond impasses within contemporary feminism, political theory, and rights-based activism.

“ The capitalists had us believing this idea ... that women are not valuable”

– *The Participation of Women in the Autonomous Government*[\[i\]](#)

We know that the Women's Revolutionary Law was passed by consensus within the ranks of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) many months before their public emergence twenty years ago on January 1, 1994. From one of Subcomandante Marcos' letters, we know that reactions to it were varied within EZLN ranks, and that its acceptance had to be defended vigorously as a central objective in the Zapatistas' struggle for justice.

Both Comandanta Ramona and Comandanta Susana spent over four months travelling throughout those then-Zapatista communities. They visited each and every community dialoguing with the Zapatistas collectively through community assemblies, as is the custom of the people of the region. Once accepted in each Zapatista community and village, it was proposed that the Law be included in the EZLN publication, *El Despertador Mexicano, Organo Informativo del EZLN* (México, No 1., Diciembre 1993).

I remember the novelty of it, in that December of '93, when I came across this publication, the first of a revolutionary social movement or “guerrilla” movement, which has included as an integral part of its first public appearance – its “letter of introduction” so to speak – its demands for women's rights. This was truly innovative at the time. One could hardly believe it, and much less so when the first images appeared confirming the undeniable presence of women in positions of authority. It would be a woman – a *Mayora* – who would lead the taking of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas; it would be a woman – Comandanta Ramona – at the centre of the subsequent peace dialogues in the Cathedral.

Ever since, this Law has expressed itself through the Zapatistas' own practices. If there is something that has given Zapatismo its distinctive characteristic, its colour and its flavour, it has been its emphasis on including and defending women's rights as defined through the Women's Revolutionary Law.

What has happened to this law over the past twenty years?

How is the Law being practiced among the Zapatistas in their everyday lives?

Throughout the *Escuelita* [little school] in August 2013, in the communities that housed those 1,700 invitees, we heard and saw the possibilities and the advances, but also the difficulties encountered in implementing this Law in all its implications.

It must be said that in all of the *Escuelita*'s sessions, the Zapatistas constantly tempered any possible triumphalism for their success in creating and maintaining their autonomy throughout these years. They often took self-critical positions and made reference to the “little bit” that they have advanced; to the errors they have made throughout this process; how they are trying to amend them; and how difficult it has been to accomplish what they have – “... nos ha costado mucho [It's been an uphill battle]”

From each one of the five *caracoles* [civilian units of self-government], their experiences have emerged in detailed descriptions. They have distributed in all four books which they themselves put together as a way to present their work to us. Under the heading *Freedom According to the Zapatistas*, the four volumes were:

I) *Autonomous Government I*

II) *Autonomous Government II*

III) *The Participation of Women in the Autonomous Government*

IV) *Autonomous Resistance*

In these books, once again, women's rights have been prioritized. One might think that, as in other revolutionary struggles, the "issue" of women only remains implied or relegated as marginal. But this is not the case here. Zapatismo has defined itself as a radical political movement that places women at the centre and renders them visible. In the volume devoted to them (*The Participation of Women in the Autonomous Government*), the ten points of the Women's Revolutionary Law as they were initially outlined are regularly reviewed to see how they have been practiced since then and how they are lived today. Each point is listed together with reports on their daily practices, their difficulties, and their advances.

In their own voices, Zapatista indigenous women describe to us their experiences, priorities, difficulties in taking up command, and their desires for change. Theirs are highly relevant voices for gaining a deep understanding of the process through which indigenous Maya women walk, emerge, accept, and collaborate within the Zapatista stratagem. This process is presently the most successful proposal for constructing another world that is more just for women and, indeed, for everyone. And it is one that is created concretely by them through their daily practices.



"We are not only in the house or in the kitchen... we work together with the male *compañeros*[\[ii\]](#)." "We go along little by little in this work that is autonomy, and we are going to encourage others who don't yet want to get out of the house..." affirms a 17 year-old *compañera* and teacher in the *Escuelita*. She has shown in her voice and in her strength, and through the position that she held in this pedagogical space, that many of them have advanced well beyond the understanding we feminists have tended to achieve from "outside" Zapatista territory. "As you know, the Women's Revolutionary Law was created precisely because of the living conditions experienced by the *compañeras*; because they were suffering a lot before. We now have this Law written down and we have it in the five *Caracoles*. But this problem that we have does not only belong to the *compañeras*; it also includes the *compañeros*

because when a *compañera* is tasked with work, sometimes the *compañeros* do not let their wives or daughters leave to go do it. There are times when they do not allow them the right to freedom, and because of this problem, the Law also includes the men... we will analyze little by little how much we have been able to comply with this law as women.”

I have selected these local responses to the question, “How is the Women’s Revolutionary Law lived today in the *Caracoles*?” and present them below in the order of the “Ten Points” themselves:

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, colour, or political affiliation.

From *Caracol* II, Oventik, Highlands Zone of Chiapas: “...What we have accomplished has not been accomplished 100%... [several] *compañeras* are taking charge of education and health as coordinators in the zone... when this law was made it was not because women wanted to give orders... dominate their husbands, their *compañero*... we do not want to create something that continues on the same history [of domination] that we have been involved in... where the *compañeros* rule and they are chauvinists... and now the *compañeras* rule... and now the *compañeros* are valued less...”

Second: Women have the right to work and to receive a just salary.

From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “Women have the same rights as men to receive the same salary because we are of the same blood... here there are no salaries in the organization, whether to males or to females...”

From Oventik: “... nobody within the organization is salaried... unless the *compañera* goes to the city...”

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “...those who deserve a salary are those women who work in the cities... They are the ones that deserve a just salary...”^[iii]

Third: Women have the right to decide how many children they will have and take care of.

From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “We as women have the right to decide how to live in our homes and we have the right to decide with our partner how many children we can have and take care of. We have the right to not be obligated by anyone to have more or less children, not to be obligated to use birth control if we don’t want to, and we have the right to have our decisions and opinions respected. In our autonomy, we want all of these rights to be respected. Before, the bad government in our villages would promote a lot of bad ideas, saying that women are worthless and that they have no right to speak.”

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “We saw it was better if decisions were made between partners...”

Fourth: Women have the right to participate in community affairs and hold positions of authority if they are freely and democratically elected.

From *Caracol* II, Oventik: “Here we are able to say that this is now being achieved...”

From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “As women we have the same rights as men, we have the right to decide which duties we can carry out in the communities as we can now take up positions as *agentas*, *comisariadas*, and *promotoras* of health, sexual reproduction... and education.”

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “We see that this is being fulfilled in our zone...”

Fifth: Women have the right to primary care with regard to their health and nutrition.

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “On this point, we see that some communities do have their health clinics. Where health clinics exist, it is not difficult to find the *compañeras* in good health, and they can

also find medical attention for their children there. The women go with the health *promotoras* to the clinic, and here is where this point is being realized... in some communities if there are no clinics they go to other nearby communities that do have clinics.”

“In terms of feeding ourselves in our zone, our food is not far away from us. We *compañeros* and *compañeras* ourselves must follow our ancestors’ customs, how they lived before, how they ate. It is what we see in our zone, that we do not abandon farming what is ours, the *chayote*, the yucca (manioc/cassava), the squash, and everything else that exists in our community. If we do not do this, if we do not produce, then we will die of hunger. It is there where malnutrition comes from, when we do not eat what we have...”

From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “...we work in the field, harvesting our natural foods such as corn, beans, coffee, and other things.”

From *Caracol* II, Oventik: “With women who are nursing their child or are pregnant, it is important to eat well, rather than how sometimes women are the last ones to eat, that is, if food was leftover and if not, then no... we see that this is already being changed.”

Sixth: Women have the right to education.

From *Caracol* II, Oventik: “In the case of girls, when they are in their community this is accomplished all the more because they attend the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Primary Schools (EPRAZ).

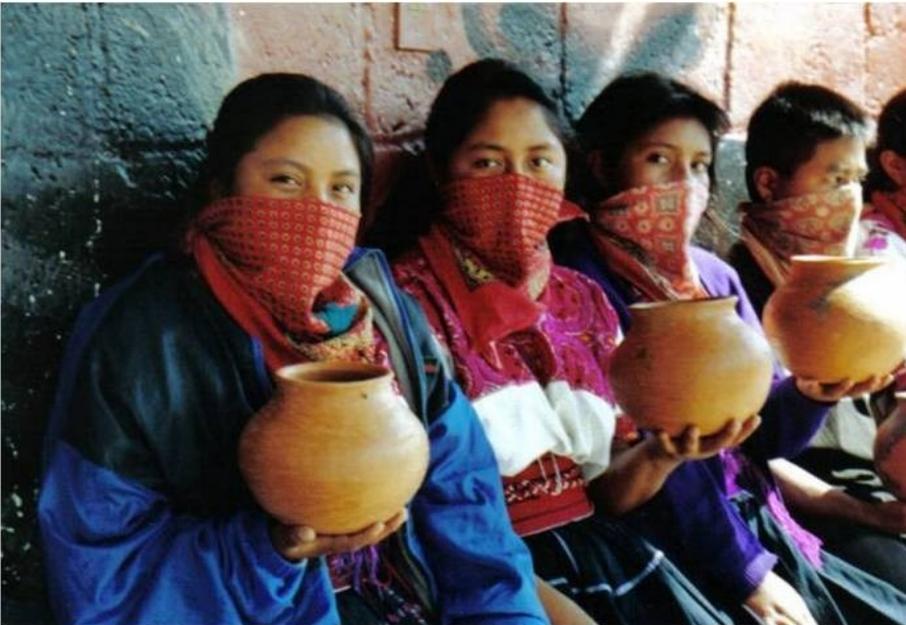
From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “...we do not want it to be like before when we were really exploited, when we did not have a good education as we have today... with women we also continue moving forward in education.”

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “In our zone, we talk about how women did not go to school before. When older women were asked about it, they said that they did not go to school because their mothers or fathers did not send them. It is not their fault if they did not learn to read and write, and we realized that it was also not their mothers’ fault. The capitalists had us believing this idea, their story that women are not valuable; that if a girl is born then she is worthless. We realized that the parents of the family were not at fault. The blame is with this bad idea that they have put into our heads.”

“...in our struggle we have everything, we have education.”

Seventh: Women have the right to choose their partners and not be forced to marry.

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “On this point, as we see today, the *compañeras* decide who they would like to marry. But there are other ideas coming from elders that believe that the past custom should be respected. And so there are occasions when young women have not exercised this right... yet, it must be exercised with the revolutionary struggle in mind.”



From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “It is no longer how it used to be when the fathers and mothers would force us women to marry someone they chose... we have the right to decide who our partner is and who we want to marry.”

From *Caracol* II, Oventik: “We know that before they could not decide... they were traded in for liquor, for animals, for money... the majority of the fathers now ask their daughters if they want to marry or who they want to marry, and this is why we say that we have made progress on this point.”

Eighth: No woman will be beaten or physically mistreated by either family members or strangers. The crimes of rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.

From *Caracol* V, Roberto Barrios: “There are still cases of this in our communities because that is a bad custom that persists in the mind, that contaminates, where machismo still exists: ‘I am stronger than you, so you have to respect me,’ are words that still exist... Those of us who have been authorities, the ones that have spent some time working, perhaps we understand all of the talks that we receive... but there are some *compañeros* that do not...”

From *Caracol* IV, Morelia: “...there are also some things that are not being carried out; there are still *compañeras* that are mistreated and there is still fear in demanding rights.”

From *Caracol* III, La Garrucha: “When we travel, we sometimes come across accidents, and sometimes the men do not behave while travelling... Some men from other organizations mock those of us women who go out to fill a post, laughing when they hear that we are tasked with responsibilities... they say that what we are doing is worthless. This is where the problem is, but in those organizations there are many problems of rape and mistreatment, while with us, Zapatistas, it is not that way because we are always explaining the Women’s Law.”

Ninth: Women can occupy positions of authority in the organization and earn military rank in the revolutionary armed forces.

From *Caracol* IV, Morelia: “...as women we hold authority posts in areas such as autonomous health, education, and production. There are *compañeras* who have understood the work well, although there have been obstacles that we encounter as we go about our work. But we have come out to spread our efforts...”

From *Caracol V*, Roberto Barrios: “Over in the northern zone, this is being done as we say, although we are moving along slowly in participation. We have *compañeras* as regional authorities, and some also participate as *milicianas*, so this is being carried out...”

From *Caracol II*, Oventik: “...we say that this point is being carried out because there are *compañeras* integrated in all authority positions. There are women at the local, regional, and zone level positions. And there are *compañeras* occupying different military ranks... they have exercised their rights depending on their will and capacity.”

Tenth: Women have all the rights and obligations set out by the revolutionary laws and regulations.

From *Caracol III*, La Garrucha: “We well know that in our Zapatista struggle, that we don’t only say that we have rights, but that in our autonomous struggle, we have obligations to realize these rights as we want to within our villages by way of organizing.”

“In 1994 it became known that we had the Women’s Law. It is so good that this law existed and that we have been able to participate... The *compañeras* suffered a lot before ’94: humiliation, mistreatment, rape. But none of that ever mattered to the government... and neither to the landowners. Neither of them ever took women into consideration. The landowners had the *compañeros* in peonage, and the *compañeras* had to get up very early to work. Those poor women had to continue working alongside the men. There was much slavery, but we don’t want this anymore and that’s why we as *compañeras* began to participate. ... What we want now is for our autonomy to function, for women to participate, to not stay behind. We will continue to go forward so that the bad government can see that we will not let them exploit us as they exploited our ancestors.”

From *Caracol II*, Oventik: “What we seek is something like a re-construction of humanity... that is what we are trying to change; another world is what we want... it is the struggle that we are all a part of, men and women, because it is not a struggle of women and it is not a struggle of men. When one speaks of a revolution, they go together, among men and women, and that is the struggle.”

“We women who are here today know who made that Revolutionary Law. Somebody had to struggle for it and somebody defended us. Who was that somebody who struggled for us, the *compañeras*? Comandanta Ramona was the one who put that effort in for us. She did not know how to read or write, or speak Spanish. But why do we, as *compañeras*, not make the effort? She is an example, that *compañera* who already made the effort, for us to continue moving forward and keep on working in order to demonstrate what we know in our organization.”

Reflections from “outside” Zapatista territory

Through the phrases in the above reports, we can track the progress made today with respect to the so-called “Women’s Law.” A prime example is when a *compañera* says that it is not the fault of the fathers and mothers who did not send their daughters to school previously. This attitude, they tell us, is a product of “the capitalists [who] had us believing this idea... their story that women are not valuable.” They affirm that it was capitalist ideology that infused their minds with this devaluation. It is not the fault of the mothers or the fathers who did not allow women to study, nor was it their own fault when they did not put in efforts to study. It is a product of the slave condition they were forced to live.



Here a sophisticated analysis appears, one which some psychologists call the “internalization of oppression.” It expresses itself when we ourselves become convinced of our own lack of value as we appropriate and reproduce the values of the dominant order that reduces and exploits us.^[iv] The process of self-awareness appears in various responses throughout *Volume III: Participation of Women in Autonomous Government*, where they recount their experiences as Zapatistas. As they have mentioned many times, they are “working under sheer political awareness,” putting into practice their demands for autonomy and freedom as women. Today they recognize that this internalization/appropriation of the dominant values continues to be present in the minds of their cultural environment, in males, fathers, brothers, sons, and even within themselves because it “contaminates” the mind.

Rights and duties, individual and collective

Also worthy of comment is the recognition, by the *compañeras*, that it is not only rights that are demanded, but that they also have a counterpart: accepting these rights’ corresponding obligations and duties. This has been theorized as the “inter-relational” aspect of rights.^[v] This is a mature and reflexive appropriation of what claiming women’s rights implies. It is not about claiming “my rights” without limits, without measure, but about constructing them within a new normativity that emerges from the process of constructing their collective autonomy. “It is not my right only and I get to do whatever I want.” This level of analysis also appears when they refer to girls’ freedom to decide whom they will marry. This right to select their partner, which most young girls today exercise, must adhere to and enter into harmony with the Zapatista struggle’s proposals and priorities. “It must be exercised with the revolutionary struggle in mind.”

With these phrases, a profound collective and inter-relational elaboration is expressed on how to go about walking along living women’s rights – fully linked and interwoven with collective rights. These phrases clearly demonstrate that women’s rights are not conceptualized as the rights of individual entities that would respond only to the needs of an “individual” woman. They also do not refer to a collective



made up exclusively of women. Rather, they go “*juntos y a la par*” [“together and side by side”].

“...when one speaks of a revolution, they go together, among men and women, and that is the struggle.”

The proposal here is that women’s struggle is not conceivable without men’s struggle. A revolutionary struggle consists of both men and women, and there are many references throughout *Volume III* on the inextricability of all walking together. These references implicitly resolve the interrogations put forth by many academics over the exercise of human rights. Their analyses debate what is convenient and/or what are the appropriate ways of resolving the dilemma between prioritizing the individual or the collective subject of rights. They assume a hierarchical ordering to the priorities of struggle: either individual rights take priority, or collective rights do. Their philosophical reference is the “principle of the excluded third.” That is, they pit seemingly mutually exclusive categories against each other, understanding them within a hierarchical ordering: individual rights are first and later collective rights, or vice versa.

The Zapatistas’ thinking has another reference. For them, individual rights and collective rights form a duality of opposites that are at once complimentary.^[vi] The foundation of and referent to this duality’s poles, fluidly opposed, allows them to speak and act according to a fusion of both sets of rights in their practice as well as in their thought. This fluid duality prevents hierarchization; its range is horizontal. They speak and present us with a way of *simultaneously* living individual rights (of women) with those emerging from the collective rights of their people in struggle. “What we seek is something like a reconstruction of humanity...” It is the very quest to create another world.

In the overall Zapatista proposal, the struggle for women’s rights is never arranged hierarchically as an inferior or secondary end. “...This is why for us there is no hierarchy of domains: we do not claim that the struggle for land takes priority over gender justice... On the contrary, we think that all emphases are necessary...”^[vii]

This inclusive form, based on simultaneity of doing/thinking, while seemingly paradoxical, is part of the Mesoamerican philosophical heritage that is also revealed in the story of the cat/dog or the dog/cat.^[viii] This epistemic category of thought is present, in a certain way, in the fusion of the cat/dog and its many metaphorical adventures that allow it to continue being a dog and a cat at the same time.

This is how they move beyond the “...encasing of the entire world into a closed box of mutually exclusive options.” We have to rethink the world, struggle, and gender beyond binary dichotomies in order to “fully understand the grammar of the Zapatista rebellion.”^[ix]

Women walking in equilibrium and on a par with men

Continuing on in the analysis of the *compañeras*’ responses on how they live the Women’s Law today, some emphasize that their struggle against *machismo* does not imply that what they now seek is to dominate males or “value them less.” On the contrary, they are asking for a “reconstruction” of society, a different ordering where dominant and dominated do not exist: whether they be women or men.

They want to escape the inevitable hierarchies found in the world of capitalist production and in any thought rooted in mutually exclusive categories. (The duality of opposites and complimentary inspires and sustains their efforts as, again, this duality prevents hierarchization in that its range is horizontal.) It is another world they seek to build through their demands as women, and in living their Revolutionary Law of Zapatista women.

Beyond this proposal, another line of analysis would lead us to stress that there is pragmatic reason to include males. The *compañeros*, the women tell us, “sometimes do not allow them the right to freedom” to a *compañera* who has been assigned a task and “because of this problem, the Law has also

to include men” so that the Law can be carried out.

It is a search for a masculinity without overtones of domination and with an understanding of how to live on a par, the fullness of the Women’s Revolutionary Law.

“They say that women are not worth anything.” This grievance comes to us from the voice of Comandanta Esther at the plenary session of the *Congreso de la Unión* [House of Representatives] in Mexico City in 2001. She turned to the public audience in the Chamber of Deputies to speak about one of their “bad customs” that they were attempting to eradicate. She assured us “...I don’t tell this story so that you feel sorry for us... We are struggling to change this and we will continue doing so...”[\[x\]](#)



What Zapatista women show us here is that culture is neither monolithic nor static.

In their deliberations on how to implement the Women’s Law in the *Caracoles* today, we find an analytical element for further comprehension. It is a historical review of how this devaluation of women originated. It is interesting to note the similarities that may exist between the Zapatistas’ reflections and scholars’ use of the Psychohistorical analytical method, or that of the History of Mentalities. From this perspective, it is no longer simply correcting a “bad custom” that exists in the Maya villages and communities where Zapatismo settled into. It is also not about simply changing “bad customs.” The Zapatistas speak up denouncing its origin: the exploitative practices from the plantation and land owners. It was these plantation owners who considered women to be inferior. It was they who put “this bad idea... into our heads.” One dramatic aspect of this devaluation of women is the “*derecho de pernada*” [“right of the first night;” literally, “right of the thigh”] whereby landowners had the “right” to abuse and use young indigenous women for their sexual satisfaction. This wretched “right of the first night” was still in force recently, and the rape of indigenous women did not occur only on young virgins.[\[xi\]](#) Indigenous women can report multiple cases of abuse later in the lives of many of their *compañeras*, for example, when plantation owners, landowners, and *coletos* [urban males from San Cristóbal de las Casas] raped and abused Indian women claiming they were “improving the race.” Rosario Castellanos’ literary stories report these abuses in Chiapas.[\[xii\]](#) These violent chauvinistic

customs tried to transform these women into objects and property to be at the disposal of those *macho* rapists. They abused with impunity “those human beings” that are Indian, poor, and female, encouraging through their contempt, the devaluation of women by their own fathers, partners, brothers, sons and more broadly, within their customary habits.

Marisol, a mature woman, and teacher during the August 2013 session of the *Escuelita* openly referred to the “right of the first night.” “Our grandmothers were raped,” she told us indignantly and explained further: “our grandfathers carried that same idea from their *patrones y capataces* [bosses and foremen], not taking us women into consideration.”

Reflections on the so-called “exchange” of women

We know through multiple ethnographic studies and monographs that this exchange has existed in many cultures worldwide. Its basis, both in matrilineal and patrilineal societies, is that women are especially valuable for their capacity to bring new beings into the world. Moreover, ancient economies were often centered on the family.^[xiii] When a family member of the “productive core” abandons the family – for example, to integrate into another familial network as would happen through marriage – that member must be replaced by another or by goods that would compensate for the loss in the family’s subsistence production. These customs, in all their ethnic and historical variations, are based not on the devaluation of women but in their valuation, and consequently, in the desire to acquire compensation for the loss of their contributions to the production unit.

Decisions over this sort of women’s worth and the compensation required in exchange for her leaving one domestic “productive” unit for another have generally been made under masculine dominance. Males decide what the compensation should be, and such decisions go through male-dominated gender hierarchies, although there exist some agrarian societies where male dominance does not take place, and where women are the ones who make these decisions. This exchange within households has been ritualized in multiple ways.

It is clear that the Zapatistas insist on transcending these patriarchal traditions. Anthropologically, the transformation of this custom, from a form of compensation to something that can be considered as a “sale” of women is a process that has transited across time and cultures since antiquity. Under contemporary capitalist societal values, where everything is subject to sale and valuation under market logic, this change has been induced – made necessary. It has taken diverse paths before reaching the point today that the *compañeras* Zapatistas critique: “they were traded in for liquor, for animals, for money...”



Here, we might be able to initiate a type of clinical anamnesis reviewing this process as it happens in the Highlands Zone and throughout the State of Chiapas more generally. Certainly, the intensification of patriarchal values reinforced this custom. In Chiapas they reached the point of frenzy with the “right of the first night.”[\[xiv\]](#) The rape and abuse of women with impunity, coupled with the colonialist contempt for the “*indio*” [literally, “indian;” the label often holds derogatory undertones] and the slavery to which the indigenous peoples were subjected to, contributed to the transformation of women, patriarchally considered a “value” that must be adequately replaced; or an object of scorn to be discarded and exchanged for liquor, a cow, or money. Women’s productive and reproductive contributions to the domestic unit and to the community, as well as a review of the several kinds of patriarchal abuses suffered by women, have been theorized profusely within Marxist feminisms.[\[xv\]](#) Yet the main paradox of this custom is that one cannot sell what is considered worthless.[\[xvi\]](#)

Through the Zapatistas’ organization, the *compañeras* have dramatically advanced in resisting this “bad custom” of exchanging women by putting forward constructive proposals for eradicating it. Field research in the same region reports that this is the area of Mexico where human rights violations are most frequent, precisely because of the so called “sale” of women.[\[xvii\]](#)

Agroecology and subsistence farming

In many of the *Caracoles*, they have developed original methods of farming for autonomous subsistence. This subsistence is never absolute, as these methods also generate surpluses that they sell on the market. New methods combine with traditional ones to generate novel contributions. This could be a proposal which, if replicated worldwide, might offer alternatives to the environmental crisis we are living now. Regenerating the fields through agroecological means could foster the survival of not only human beings but of the entire planet. Indeed, it could offer ways of ensuring food sovereignty.



“Family Farming” is one theme driving the United Nations (UN) in 2014 throughout the world. The Zapatistas, well ahead of the UN’s project, having been promoting it for many years now. “Culture is working the land.”^[xviii] “They will not be able to take away our culture. We will not allow it. We continue working in producing everything that we need, from seeds to everything else that is necessary... the seeds that we continue selecting and storing.” It is a call to support their own ancestral self-sustaining cultivation traditions which the Zapatistas know are appropriate to their lands. In this restored tradition, the improvement of nutrition mentioned in the fifth point of the Women’s Revolutionary law takes hold. “In terms of feeding ourselves in our zone, our food is not far away from us. We *compañeros* and *compañeras* ourselves must follow our ancestors’ customs, how they lived before, how they ate... that we do not abandon farming what is ours, the *chayote*, the *yucca* [manioc/cassava], the squash...”

In an era in which the small farm has by now been obliterated in most countries, and in which peasants, in order to survive, must emigrate and abandon their land and crops for other activities in other places, the Zapatistas enact a better future on the land. These experiments and their successes, although still in their initial stages, promise a revitalization of traditional farming practices and a return to a survival agriculture that many alternative projects worldwide today seek.

The Zapatistas have started on a path that contributes a future of hope, which does not only allow them to survive, but also serves as an example and as encouragement so that other people and other impoverished rural communities take their subsistence back into their own hands.

Healthcare: revitalizing traditional methods

The achievements of the Women’s Revolutionary Law on issues of the right to primary health care and nutrition reveal the Zapatistas’ path that at once offers a service and a political contribution.

They have created various health facilities, and in fact, just about every community or village has its own “*casa de salud*” that could be called a health clinic. Through them, the Zapatistas receive primary care, and they have insisted for years on revitalizing and relearning traditional Mesoamerican medical practices. Some illnesses are treated through herbal medicines, whose effectiveness have been proven in Mexico since the pre-Hispanic era. It is known, for example, that in Oaxtepec, a place in the State of

Morelos, ancient Mexicans established a botanical garden with well over 400 species of medicinal and healing plants. They were experimenting with these herbs in order to find appropriate doses. This was all being practiced before the Spanish invasion.

In addition to the revitalization and recovery of knowledges through herbal teas and poultices, and through recipes of concentrated healing herbs, the tradition of midwifery has been reappropriated and today flourishes. It is practiced in each *casa de salud*, together with massages and *manteadas* (manipulations of the foetus), attention is given to the process of pregnancy through the ingestion of medicinal teas. This traditional prenatal and childbirth care has been reclaimed through their very precise efforts to recover these techniques of ancestral midwifery, whose level of success surprised Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in the sixteenth century, as detailed extensively in his *General History of the Things of New Spain*.

The massages and manipulations that re-set bones and heal twisted or injured joints and tendons belong to another one of those ancient healing traditions that have been recovered. These are knowledges of female “bonesetters” that continue to be practiced in many parts of contemporary Mexico. Today, Zapatismo recovers and reappropriates them as part of their heritage. It is a cultural recovery and a cultural defense, as they told us during the *Escuelita*.

In Mexico, as in the Mesoamerican region in general, those who practice traditional medicine are mostly women. The bonesetters, midwives, and herbal healers are the medical service providers in both the *casas de salud* and the bigger health clinics throughout Zapatista territory.^[xix] These healing capacities are much appreciated collectively, and provide women a community space of respect, self-esteem, and power.

It is mostly Zapatista female health promoters who are engaged in these tasks and preserve ancestral knowledges, relearning those that have been lost. This allows for a combination of traditional Maya medicine with allopathic care both in *casas de salud* and in the health clinics in each *Caracol*. The clinics that have been constructed in the *Caracoles* can then offer the highest quality attention, making allopathic medication accessible, as well as offering an infrastructure that allows for complicated and delicate surgical interventions.

Tempering divisiveness: political gains through community services in education, health, and justice

The health care offered by the State is of bad quality and often inexistent. It is well known that in rural regions, many people must walk hours and hours before reaching the nearest *Secretaria de Salubridad y Asistencia* (SSA) health clinic. Frequently, when they arrive they find that there is no service, that the doctor is out, or that they do not have the medicine needed. The Zapatistas have made up for this absence and offer their own services, and it is well known that they provide medical attention to all adjacent villages and communities, many of whom are non-Zapatistas. They are indigenous “brothers” and “sisters” as they told us during the lessons at the *Escuelita*. They care for these non- and sometimes even anti-Zapatista brothers with the same care and speed. Needless to say, in offering quality services to all who need it in those areas abandoned by official services, the Zapatistas have been able to defeat rivalries and confrontations fomented by the three levels of state power (municipal, state, and federal) that seek to deal with the peasants’ struggles for justice by dismantling the solidarity links among them. The methods used to divide the indigenous communities include every kind of handout (for example, the programs “Oportunidades” or “PROCEDE”), or even arming indigenous people so they become mercenaries who, in exchange for payment, function as paramilitaries at the service of the State. Once becoming illegal soldiers, these indigenous attack the Zapatistas with the intention of ruining their autonomous project.

The services the Zapatistas provide to indigenous people living in adjacent areas – to non-Zapatistas

and even ex-Zapatistas – include, beyond the health services mentioned above, the possibility for children to study in the autonomous schools as well as participate in conflict resolution for all kinds of offenses through the Zapatistas’ own form of “autonomous justice.” Throughout the sessions of the August 2013 *Escuelita*, we also had the opportunity to learn in detail about how they resignify, broaden, and improve, autonomous education and autonomous justice, and how they redefine them conceptually by putting them into practice.



Through their proposals that address community needs in health care, education, and justice, the Zapatistas move toward dissolving the inter-community clashes purposefully created by the State. Their calm response, given without violence and even without raising their voice, without using force, and also offering a solution to the needs of their indigenous “brothers and sisters,” has been the most effective antidote against the fratricidal confrontations that the “bad government” and the geopolitical models of the Global North have fomented. Per the instructions found in the counterinsurgency manuals developed by the Global North, “ethnic wars” should be promoted or manufactured and “religious fundamentalisms” should be created or intensified in order to divide, control, and destroy the justice struggles that start from below.

Final considerations

What would we write today if we could attempt to sum up what the Zapatista experience shows us about the women’s struggle to live and practice the Women’s Revolutionary Law? We can anticipate that these struggles do not end here. It is a process that continues on and on. It is also a process that transforms itself.

Returning now to the experience of the *Escuelita*, we recognize how the Women’s Revolutionary Law has advanced through practice. As it is inserted into the Zapatistas’ collectivity, any conventional feminist approach, whether theoretical or practical, cannot help us here. From the comments we have detailed and expounded upon here, we see that the Women’s Law escapes any rigid framework. It proposes and resolves some practical feminist demands, such as women’s “empowerment” and the advance of women’s “reproductive rights.” Under the aegis of Zapatista autonomy, with the enormous differences this political context offers, what is found is an “other” type of empowerment and an “other” type of sexual and reproductive rights, as they are transformed and permeated by collective identity, interdependence, and inter-relatedness.

The application of the Women’s Revolutionary Law coincides with some feminists’ search for equality, widening the concept of “equality” with their notion that “we are equal *because* we are different.”^[xx] It also seems to follow some theoretical legacies of the *feminism of difference* which it also subverts

with the expression of “egalitarian aspirations.”^[xxi]

It broadens all referents, expands them, transgresses them, and joins them “illogically” with its practices of inclusion into the autonomous collectivity that exceeds, while seeming to embrace, the narrow categories of gender, binaries and the mutually exclusive notions of the feminine and the masculine, and those feminist pursuits to correct them.

The Zapatista women’s struggles and demands for their rights do not fit neatly in any feminist theories or practices; they transcend them all. They sometimes sound like ecofeminism, egalitarianism, the revindication of difference, empowerment, reproductive rights, and sometimes like an elaboration of gender racialization in all its complex theorizations.

If their own music “has the rhythm of polka-balada-corrido-ranchera-cumbia-rock-ska-metal-reggae-trova-punk-hiphop-rap-and any others that want to pile up...,”^[xxii] it is because their proposal, as it is lived today within Zapatista autonomous practice, contains every colour, sound, tonality, and dissonance.

And if we manage to perceive them: “...there will then be new eyes and ears that understand our commitment.”

Because, as in Subcomandante Marcos’ story of the cat-dog, a big challenge for the deep understanding of Zapatista women’s history is that “...all categorical options are a trap... The answer is neither here nor there. It is better to make a new path that goes where one wants to go.”

This new path is being created right now by Zapatista women.

English translation by Linda Quiquivix. *Written in the months after attending the first round of the Zapatistas’ recent Little School initiative in August 2013, Marcos’ essay was first published in Spanish by the Universidad de la Tierra/CIDECI, Chiapas (2014) and now appears in French as a chapter in a book entitled, Zapatisme: La rébellion qui dure (Paris, France: Syllepse/CETRI, 2014). The English translation is published here for the first time.*

End notes:

^[i] EZLN, *Freedom According to the Zapatistas, Volume III: Participation of Women in the Autonomous Government*, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico, 2013, p.72.

^[ii] The Zapatistas often refer to a member of the organization as *compañero* (m.) or *compañera* (f.).

^[iii] op. cit. p. 67; Neither women nor men within Zapatista autonomous territory receive salaries for their service to the EZLN. In the autonomous Zapatista communities, as is true of ancestral and contemporary indigenous communities, all work done to benefit the collective is conceived of as “service,” in line with *servir y no servirse* [to serve and not serve oneself], one of Zapatismo’s seven guiding principles. The point in the Women’s Revolutionary Law that demands that women must receive a just salary for their work is a demand that applies to the context of work done in non-Zapatista territory, specifically in cities where women and men live according to the neoliberal market economy which devalues women’s work vis-à-vis men’s.

^[iv] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1965.

^[v] Joy, Morny, “Womens Rights and Religions: a Contemporary Review,” In *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religions*, Vol 29, No 1, Spring 2013, (p9)

^[vi] Sylvia Marcos, *Tomado de los labios: genero y eros en Mesoamerica*, Quito: Abya Yala, 2012, cap.

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[vii] Subcomandante Marcos, “Ni el Centro ni la Periferia, Parte V.- Oler el negro. El calendario y la geografía del miedo” en *Primer Coloquio Internacional In Memoriam Andrés Aubry*, SCLC ,Cideci Unitierra Ediciones, Chiapas, México. 2009, p 230.

[viii] Comunicado “Rebobinar 3” (1) del 17 de Noviembre 2013, *Trigésimo aniversario de la fundación del EZLN* www.enlacezapatista.org.mx.

[ix] Sergio Rodríguez Lascano, “Carta a nuestr@s compañer@s del EZLN” www.enlacezapatista.org.mx , Dic. 2013.

[x] Sylvia Marcos, “Las fronteras interiores: El movimiento de mujeres indígenas y el feminismo en México” en *Dialogo y Diferencia: Retos feministas a la globalización*, CEIICH UNAM, México, 2008, p.205

[xi] Olivera, M. 1977, Presentacion, Primer Congreso Estudios de la Mujer, México, DF.

[xii] Rosario Castellanos, *Oficio de Tinieblas*, Miradas, México, 1962.

[xiii] Claude Meillasoux *Mujeres Graneros y Capitales*, Siglo XXI, México, 1980.

[xiv] Engels, *El origen de la familia , la propiedad privada y el estado*, 1884

[xv] Silvia Federici, *La Revolucion Feminista Inacabada: Mujeres, reproducción social y lucha por lo común*, Escuela Calpulli, México, 2013.

[xvi] Herman Bellinghausen, “*Corazón del Tiempo*” (Película), México-España, 2008.

[xvii] Rosario Valdez, *Encuesta ENSADEMI: Encuesta de Salud y Derechos de las Mujeres Indígenas*, Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica, México, 2008.

[xviii] Jean Robert, notas de la *Escuelita CIDECI*, 2013, Profesor Joel

[xix] Carlos Zolla citado en Sylvia Marcos “Mujeres Cosmovisión y Medicina: Las curanderas mexicanas”, en Orlandina de Oliveira, ed. *Trabajo. Poder, Sexualidad*, PIEM Colegio de México, México, 1992 [1989].

[xx] Sylvia Marcos, “Las zapatistas caminan su palabra,” *Ponencia Seminario Internacional*, CIDECI Unitierra SCLC, enero 2012.

[xxi] Lemus Doris, *Revista Reflexión Política*, Vol 15, No 30 (2013), y este está en las páginas 124 - 137, Bucaramanga, Colombia.

[xxii] Comunicado “Rebobinar 3” (1) del 17 de Noviembre 2013, *Trigésimo aniversario de la fundación del EZLN* www.enlacezapatista.org.mx.

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