

The Zapatista Women

By Paula Grosso

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It was 4am preceding a July day in 2000. The dark and quiet enveloped me as I walked through the still streets of San Cristobal de Las Casas in the southeastern state of Chiapas, Mexico. I was heading toward the market where a small bus would take me north to the conflict zone – north to where the Zapatistas have established some of their 38 autonomous communities. I had read about human rights groups doing support work and educating people about the Zapatistas and I felt that it was important to become a part of this network of support. I became a human rights observer for the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas human rights center working out of San Cristobal.

Recent History

There was an increase in the number of organized peasant movements in southern Mexico in the late 1970s and the army responded with a heavy militarization of the region (known as low intensity warfare). Additionally, large landowners hired paramilitaries when peasants squatted on private land after decreases in land grants and a concentration of land into the hands of a minority. In response to the worsening situation, Bishop Samuel Ruiz established the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center in 1989. On January 1st, 1994 (the day of the official signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement) Mexico awoke to find itself immersed in an internal war that condemned Mexican economic and political policies. A group of Indigenous peasant farmers calling themselves the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) occupied various key centers in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. After the Zapatista uprising in 1994, militarization increased substantially. The demands of the Zapatistas are similar to other rebel groups throughout Latin America. They want land, housing, food security, access to markets, the right to establish co-operatives independent of the government, a fair price for their products and essential services for rural communities such as water and sewage treatment systems, roads and other infrastructure developments. Indigenous rights also play a vital part in the movement. The Zapatistas demand the right to control education, and political and judicial systems within their own communities in order to incorporate Indigenous languages, traditions and customs. The Zapatistas are also campaigning for the rights and empowerment of civil society, a democratization of the political system in Mexico, the right for regional autonomy with community based social organization, and alternatives to the dominant economic and political systems. Women's role within the movement is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, the movement has struggled to reconstitute the scope of women's domestic roles in terms of medicine and midwifery, education and the respect accorded to the preparation of food. They have done so in opposition to state efforts to curtail these roles. The movement brings together the struggle to preserve traditional roles with modern liberal feminism.

My Observations

I was ecstatic. I would soon experience everything that I had read about for two years. Following two hours of driving on narrow mountain roads, sandwiched in between women travelling to sell their crafts and men going to the fields to work, we finally arrived at our destination: the two communities of Acteal. We made ourselves comfortable on the school floor at the community of Acteal Bases (a Zapatista support base), but we visited daily the neighbouring community of Acteal Las Abejas (the bees) – a pacifist Catholic colony that supports the Zapatistas in their cause. Entering the community, we soon realized the severity of the situation. Clinging desperately to the mountainside were small shacks with tin roofs, built from scrap pieces of wood, old billboards or plastic sheets. A truck with bi-monthly rations of beans, rice and flour to make tortillas had just arrived and the men of the community were helping International Red Cross workers unload it. We were directed to the new latrines and water tanks that had recently been built by the Red Cross and other international agencies. Children were wandering the community as the school was not open, and the older men were sitting around waiting. What could have made a whole community trade their homes and land for such an existence? When I asked Marcelino, one of the community leaders, why they had left their home of Chimix, a community just two hours to the north, he responded: We were out on our lands harvesting our coffee crops when we heard shots being fired and saw smoke and flames emanating from our village. The paramilitaries were burning and looting our homes while firing their guns. We, the community, ran into the mountains and walked all night. We stayed there in the mountains eating what we could find, while living in makeshift shelters. After two months, we came down from

the mountains and settled in Acteal.

As an observer, it was my job to record the presence of the military and paramilitary along the highway passing the two communities. Almost every 5-10 minutes a jeep, truck or tank would pass, filled with soldiers and men with guns. During the time that I was in the community, there were 70,000 soldiers in Chiapas (not counting the paramilitaries), or one-third of the entire Mexican army. There were 53 military checkpoints and seven military bases. Those who attempted to leave the Acteal communities to find work or return to Chimix to harvest their coffee crops were promptly arrested because of their political affiliation with Zapatistas. In Acteal Las Abejas the military presence has a much more brutal resonance. On December 22, 1997, while holding a pre-Christmas prayer, 45 unarmed women and children were massacred by paramilitaries in Acteal Las Abejas.

Near the entrance to the community a monument to the infamy was erected to commemorate the dead. Murals of the massacre painted by children of both communities adorn the walls of the meeting hall, reminding the two communities of their shared resistance. I came to realize that these two communities are also full of creative re-imaginings and are re-building a better future. Quietly, behind the scenes it is the women who are the hub of the community. They keep a sense of normality to the situation as they deal with the daily chores of cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, keeping a home and caring for the children. As well, they are the only ones bringing income into the community. Although they are intimidated and harassed at checkpoints, they sell embroidered goods from their weaving co-operatives as well as fruits and vegetables from small gardens that they've carved out of the landscape. With each meal they prepare, each piece of embroidery they sell, each time they speak their Indigenous languages with their children, they are supporting and advancing their Indigenous cultures and the Zapatista cause itself.

The two communities of Acteal are rebuilding their communities and the women are an important part of this reparation. Acteal Las Abejas has just finished building a local community clinic which integrates traditional Mayan medicine with contemporary Western medicine. They have a strong solidarity network with other Catholic organizations and other Abejas colonies, and they have established both a weaving co-operative and a coffee co-operative. Acteal Bases is currently in the process of creating a community clinic and attempting to re-open a school that would service both communities with their choice of teachers and a curriculum that would integrate Indigenous languages, history and culture into the Mexican national curriculum. Women are guaranteed a key role in health and education facilities.

In traditional Indigenous communities, medicine and education have been their domain. In the public sphere Ramona, the famous Zapatista Comandanta, plays a key role in the Zapatista military. She is a key figure at protests and other Zapatista gatherings. Fighting alongside the men, Zapatista women such as Ramona have pushed their particular agenda forward making sure that women's rights and issues are equally important within the movement itself. Revolutionary laws decree that women have the right to take part in the struggle, lead community affairs, hold office, the right to an education, and the right to occupy any position of leadership in the Zapatista organization and hold military rank. There is also reference to women's rights and their role within the family.

The Zapatistas declare that no woman may be beaten or physically mistreated, that women have the right to decide on the number of children they have and care for, and the right to choose a partner and not be obligated by force to contract marriage. Finally, it is also decreed that the crimes of raped and attempted rape will be severely punished. These statements might seem redundant with protections already guaranteed by the Mexican National Constitution, yet they need repeating in traditional communities where women are often deprived of these basic rights. This is the dual role of Zapatista women: equal partners in the Zapatista military while acting as nurturers of the movement by preparing food for marches, mending and distributing clothing and housing Zapatista soldiers. Although they are often forgotten and the media has not captured their significance, Zapatista women are one of the most important links within the movement. They have a multifaceted role that needs acknowledgment.

Paula Grosso is a member of Oxfam and CHEP (Child Hunger and Education Program) and is currently working for the Anti-poverty Coalition in Saskatoon.