

From El Barrio to La Realidad, Women Lead Struggles to Transform the World

Written by Jessica Davies

13 July 2014



Source: Americas Program

On May 24, hundreds of members of the Movement for Justice in El Barrio from New York, mostly women of all ages, came together to honor the life and struggle of the murdered Zapatista from La Realidad, “Galeano”. For this event, the prominent Mexican feminist, activist and thinker Sylvia Marcos sent her reflections on *Being*

“Jovena” (a young woman) and Zapatista in La Realidad.

The women of El Barrio and the Zapatista women of La Realidad are two examples of how women in struggle all over the world are coming together to inspire and learn from each other, and how, in the process, women are transforming the world.

The Movement for Justice in El Barrio is a community-based organization, led by immigrant women that works for dignity and social justice and against oppression, gentrification and displacement in El Barrio, New York.

The organization was founded nearly ten years ago by Mexican immigrant mothers, many of them indigenous. They had been displaced from their native land and forced to emigrate, and now found themselves faced with racism, brutal landlords, appalling living conditions, and a constant threat of displacement. These women had never participated in social struggles in Mexico, and they did not speak English. But they started listening to their neighbors and realized that they all shared the same problems, and had the same needs: decent housing, a strong community, justice. The women started to go from door to door, building by building, listening to each other’s problems and thinking together about how they could be solved. They gradually established a base and the Movement for Justice in El Barrio was born.

It is the women who have built the organization. The Movement now has 850 members, in 80 building committees, of whom 80% are female. As immigrants, these women work very long shifts, 6 to 7 days a week, for very low pay, in addition to all the work they have to do at home. Many are mothers raising children.

Despite these heavy demands on their time, they continue to be deeply committed to the struggle against neoliberalism and gentrification, and against the capitalist property owners, multinational corporations and government institutions who seek to displace them from, and destroy their community. Determined, they still manage to make the time to organize with their fellow neighbors and to work to build a strong community base for the organization.

Inspiration from the Zapatistas

The women of the Movement for Justice El Barrio, the majority of whom are from the Mexican states of Puebla, Guerrero and Oaxaca, have been inspired by the remarkable struggles of women everywhere, but especially from their Zapatista compañeras in Chiapas. They share many experiences and basic principles, including the fundamental importance of “listening” (something women are very good at doing), the belief that the collective defense of the community is essential, the importance of making each other’s struggles their own, and how if one is affected, all are affected.

Like the women of El Barrio, the Zapatista women are also indigenous Mexican women in struggle, though in a rural rather than a city-based environment. The members of the Movement, as adherents to the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, see their struggle as a form of urban Zapatismo, and have adopted various tools of struggle and methods of organizing used by the Zapatistas in Chiapas.

One of these is the “*Consultas del Barrio*”, neighborhood consultations in which all local residents are consulted, thus ensuring that members of the broader community of El Barrio are able to decide the direction of the organization. The *Consulta* is an excellent example of participatory democracy and horizontal decision-making used to build and strengthen community at a local level, and an ideal way of bringing more people into the struggle. One form of the *Consultas del Barrio* is the community-driven consultation, where members—mainly women—ask people from their community to identify the issues that most affect their lives, through town hall meetings, public forums, community dialogues, street outreach, door knocking, house meetings, and a community-wide vote. The Movement then campaigns around the issues selected.

Another Zapatista tradition that the Movement has used successfully in both New York and Mexico, again with women at the forefront, is the *Encuentro* (Meeting). They define it: “An *Encuentro* is a space for people to come together, it is a gathering, a place where we can all speak, we all listen, and we can all learn. It is a place where we can share the many different struggles that make us

one. An *Encuentro* seeks to be a bridge between dignified peoples from across the city and around the world.” The *Encuentro* helps to bring together and strengthen the many struggles of marginalized communities and their organizations, and to form networks of mutual support and solidarity between them.

Honoring women’s struggles

Members of the Movement believe it is of great importance to recognize and celebrate the amazing contributions of women to the struggle against neoliberalism and discrimination in all their forms. In El Barrio and throughout the world women remain at the forefront of these struggles – developing strategies, imparting wisdom, building community, and fighting tirelessly for justice and dignity for all. These women show great courage in the face of violence and aggression, and great strength and dignity in standing up against oppression, while working together and supporting each other.

The Movement honors the women of El Barrio and the world through a series of events held throughout the year. On June 4, 2014, they held a “Public Forum on Gender, Dispossession and Gentrification,” including a forum on the struggle of the Zapatista women. This was followed, on July 2, by “a discussion inspired by the Zapatista women, about the roles and contributions of women to the struggles around the world and here in our community, entitled: *The Struggles of Women Transform the World.*”

March 8, International Women’s Day

El Barrio holds a special celebration every year for March 8, International Women’s Day. This year the women of the Movement for Justice in El Barrio gathered together and, following the annual tradition, all received a red rose on arrival, followed by a dinner prepared and served by the male members so the women could fully celebrate and enjoy the evening.

The program began with a slideshow of photographs from the past year showing women of the Movement for Justice in El Barrio leading and participating in actions and community assemblies, often with the children demonstrating beside their mothers.

The event also featured a documentary about the 2008 *Gathering of the Zapatista Women with the Women of the World*, in which Zapatista women, young and old, told of their lives and dignified struggles. Women from many other countries also spoke, while the men cooked, washed dishes and cleaned, just like the men during Movement for Justice in El Barrio’s celebrations.

Another video with the message “Women’s Struggles Transform the World” portrayed inspiring images and words of women in struggle in cities and countries around the world: Egypt, Greece, South Africa, Chiapas, the Philippines, Tokyo, Madrid and New York.

Following the presentations, many women, visibly moved, shared their thoughts and feelings and paid homage to rebel women in every corner of the world. All the women came together with their fists in the air and a cry went up of “long live the women of the world in struggle!”

A vital part of the celebration of International Women’s Day in El Barrio is the recognition of the role and achievements of the women of the Movement for Justice in El Barrio, who have assumed much of the leadership and are seen as examples of “*Indignadas*” in this immigrant neighborhood. Women were celebrated and honored this year for their tireless work in grassroots outreach, listening to their neighbors and creating a strong base in the community. The membership recognized several brave women of the organization who had stepped up into the media spotlight during the year to expose their landlord, who had been threatening and harassing them. All these women have showed outstanding courage and commitment to the growth of the organization and to getting their neighbors together to fight for justice and in defense of their community in El Barrio.

Celebration of struggle

The migrants from El Barrio had much to celebrate at this event, including their remarkable victory the past year in a year-long battle led by the women against a new landlord who has some 1,800 apartments. This landlord had been targeting his tenants based on their perceived immigration status.

A film showed women leaders of the building committees in public interviews denouncing injustices without fear of retaliation from their abusive and influential landlord. The company was effectively exposed due to their actions and protests and immediately stopped all forms of harassment and attempts to displace the tenants in its apartments.

The tenants in these buildings did not know each other prior to organizing to put a stop to the threat of displacement and now they have created relationships with each other, and have fought, and celebrated together. As a result of their organizing campaign, these members have built community with one another and the rest of the membership.

This is the most recent in a long series of battles by the remarkable women and

men of Movement for Justice in El Barrio against property speculators, multinational corporations, corrupt politicians and government institutions that seek to displace them from their community. The daily struggle continues, and in turn, inspires others.

On International Women's Day, and every day, the women of the Movement for Justice in El Barrio support each other and fight for rights, justice and dignity for their community in El Barrio, for the women of the world, and for all those who are excluded and marginalized by neoliberal globalization.

On March 8, 1996, the late Subcomandante Marcos spoke of the role of women: "Tomorrow, if there is to be one, will be made with the women, and, above all, by them."

Jessica Davies is an activists and contributor to the Americas Program at www.cipamericas.org.

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