La Lucha Sigue: Zapatista Women Building Communities of Resistance

On January 1st, 1994, the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) declared war on the Mexican government, protesting their economic and political exclusion from decision making processes that affect them. The Zapatistas are unlike any other revolutionary group to date; they do not aspire to replace the existing political party in Mexico; rather, they wish to wake up Mexican and international civil society to organize against the neo-liberal economic model which sees indigenous campesinos (peasant farmers) as dispensable. For the Zapatistas, maintaining traditions is a way of rejecting neoliberalism which values individualism and devalues collective identity. At the same time, EZLN women are adamant that practices which support gender discrimination are not justified as traditional customs. They actively speak out against domestic violence and forced marriages.

This article will examine the role of indigenous women participants in the Zapatista struggle for autonomy in Chiapas, Mexico. First, I will provide necessary background information on the political, economic and social circumstances which led to the Zapatista uprising. Then, I will discuss how Zapatista women are defining autonomy in a way that promotes gender equality. Finally, I will focus on the structure and internal organization of Zapatista women’s artisan, bread, and garden cooperatives, examining the cooperative as a space for women to develop leadership skills, organize with other women, and create alternatives to the neoliberal model.¹

¹ Though I focus on the Zapatista movement, women in Chiapas have always organized and been active in fighting for their rights both as women and as indigenous people (Eber and Kovic, 2003).
This article is a preliminary project in preparation for a larger masters thesis which will focus on Zapatista autonomy. Much of the research for this article is based on secondary sources.\(^2\) Though I rely heavily on secondary sources of information, my insights are informed by the four years I spent in Mexico between 1997 and 2002. Additionally, my subject position as a white Jewish woman engaged in academia and social activism informs the way I understand the Zapatista struggle and their vision of autonomy. I am extremely impressed with the alternatives put forth by the EZLN and I believe that their models of empowerment, especially those of Zapatista women, have many insights to offer the rest of the world as it faces the challenges of neoliberalism.

**The Demographics of Chiapas and the Effects of Neoliberal Policies**

Chiapas, with a population of 3.5 million, 1 million of whom are indigenous people, is one of the most resource-rich states in Mexico. Chiapas generates 48% of Mexico’s hydroelectricity, 47% of Mexico’s natural gas, and 21% of Mexico’s oil (Chiapas: Present and Future. 1999 as reported in Eber and Kovic, 2003). However, 43% of the homes in Chiapas do not have sewage, 21% do not have electricity, and 33% have no access to running water. Thirty-two point seven percent of females 6 years of age and older have had no primary education (Instituto Nacional de Estadistica, as reported in Eber and Kovic, 2003). The infant mortality in Chiapas is 54.7 deaths per 1000 births, which is more than twice the national average. Concurrently, indigenous women in Chiapas live an average of 2 fewer years than men, the opposite of the general trend of other developing countries (Eber and Tanski, 2003). This is due in part to increasing incidences of cervical cancer and deaths during childbirth as well as

\(^2\) I am especially grateful to Christine Eber at New Mexico State University. She has been extremely generous by sharing her expertise on women’s cooperatives in Chiapas and the manuscript to her and Christine Kovic’s book, *Women of Chiapas: Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope* (2003) prior to publication.
structural racism that treats indigenous people as second class citizens when accessing health services.

The 1980s were particularly bad times for Chiapas. In response to the debt crisis and pressure from international lending agencies, coupled with pressure from the United States, Mexican president Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) reinserted Mexico into the global economy. Beginning in 1982, the Mexican government began implementing structural adjustment policies which resulted in decreased social spending, reduction of trade barriers, deregulation of markets and prices, and the promotion of foreign investment (Eber and Kovic, 2003). The value of Mexican corn dropped 64% between 1985 (when Mexico signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade-GATT) and 1999. Laura Carlsen, director of the Americas Program of the Interhemispheric Resource Center, attribute this to US dumping of corn in Mexico, leaving Mexican corn producers without a market (Carlsen, 2003). Campesino farmers in Chiapas cannot compete with grains sold at less than US production costs. In 1989, businesses took 1,222,669,000,000 pesos from Chiapas and only left behind 616,340,000,000 pesos worth of credit and public works (Marcos, 1992).

In 1992, due to pressure from proponents of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution was reformed, allowing for ejido lands to be bought and sold. In effect, this turned communally controlled land into private property. The reform of Article 27 was done without the consent or even consultation of indigenous

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3 The 2001 Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy analysis showed that while corn cost an average $3.41 a bushel to produce in the US, it is sold for $2.28 a bushel on the international market. This translates into a 25% dumping margin (Carlsen, 2003).
4 The exchange of pesos to dollars in 1989 was 3000 pesos for one US dollar. In dollars this translates to $407,556,333 US taken from Chiapas, leaving only $205,446,666 US worth of credit and public works.
5 Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 recognized the autonomy of indigenous territories and mandated land distribution so that the indigenous and peasants would be ensured land parcels to work and sustain their families. In 1992, in preparation for NAFTA, then President Salinas amended this article, declaring the ejidos to be private property, and did not enforce the redistribution of the lands taken illegally by the large landowners, as they required more space for their cattle (Marcos, 2001).
campesinos who would be most affected. Extreme poverty often pressure poor farmers to sell their land as the only viable option to survival.

The Zapatistas rose up on January 1, 1994, which coincides with the implementation of NAFTA between Mexico, the United States and Canada. The EZLN’s decision to rise up on January 1, 1994 makes a strategic statement against the implementation of NAFTA and the assumption that Mexico is a ‘first world country’ ready to compete with the US and Canada.

Under NAFTA, the Mexican government privatized essential government services of credit, technical assistance, insurance, marketing, and agricultural advising, precisely at a time when campesinos need such services to diversify and modernize their production. Additionally, some North American and Mexican economists argue that the peso was artificially overvalued in 1994 to reduce the cost of imports encouraged by NAFTA (Collier and Quaratiello, 1999). This put Mexican producers at a disadvantage as their crops became less competitive on the international market. In a interview with EZLN Subcomandante Marcos, he says:

“NAFTA is a death sentence for the indigenous people. NAFTA sets up competition among farmers, but how can our campesinos—who are mostly illiterate-compete with US and Canadian farmers? And look at this rocky land we have here. How can we compete with the land in California or Canada? So the people of Chiapas, as well as the people of Oaxaca, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Guerrero, and Sonora, were the sacrificial lambs of NAFTA” (Marcos as quoted by Sampaio, 2002: 48).

However, the push for open markets does not end with NAFTA. In an effort to further expand the open market, representatives from 34 countries have been working to expand NAFTA to Central America, South America and the Caribbean (except Cuba) in what is called the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The FTAA is expected to force countries to further privatize such services as education, health care, energy and water (Global Exchange, 2002). In preparation for the implementation of the FTAA, Mexico has initiated the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). PPP is a $20 billion, 25-year industrial development and transportation
infrastructure project that runs from the state of Puebla, Mexico south to Panama, directly through the state of Chiapas. Mexican President Vicente Fox claims that the PPP will help promote tourism, health care and education in the region. Under these espoused improvements, campesinos would be forced off their lands due to the development of the transportation corridors, factories and export agriculture, diverted water resources for international consumption, and destroyed and harvested biodiverse ecosystems (ACERCA, 2002).

NAFTA, PPP and the FTAA are important examples of neoliberal policies at their most devastating. Indigenous and non-indigenous groups maintain that the PPP will likely force campesinos to sell their lands and become low-paid workers in factories. The industrialization of the Chiapas/Guatemala border will likely result in new forms of gendered violence and repression, as is the case along the US/Mexico border where hundreds of women have been raped, murdered and disappeared. (Nathan as reported in Eber and Kovic, 2003).
The Zapatista uprising has called attention to how free trade policies exclude indigenous and other marginalized groups of people from shaping their own futures. They are organizing against the effects of NAFTA, and the implementation of the PPP and the FTAA. They have demanded that cultural values are viewed as important and they have been leaders in the global resistance to Neoliberal economic and social policies. The Zapatista uprising is in response to and against neoliberalism.

**Zapatista Women’s Demands to the Mexican Government**

Within the Zapatista movement, women have been at the forefront of organizing. In March of 1994, 2 months after the uprising, the EZLN made specific demands to the Mexican government regarding the needs of women. These demands address practical gender needs that value Zapatista women’s work. The demands were included as the 29th point of the March 1, 1994 communiqué to the Mexican government. (The following is taken directly from the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CCRI), 1994).

We, the peasant indigenous women, ask for the prompt solution to our urgent needs which have never been solved by the government:

- birth clinics with gynecological services for peasant women to receive necessary medical attention;
- child care centers for children in the communities;
- sufficient food for children in the rural communities such as: milk, corn starch, rice, corn, soy, oil, beans, cheese, sugar, soup, oatmeal, etc;
- communal kitchens and dining halls be built for the children in the communities with all the necessary facilities;
- corn mills and tortilla pressing machines be set up in the communities in accordance with the number of families in each community;
livestock projects of chickens, rabbits, lambs, pigs, etc., with technical assistance and veterinary support services;

bakery projects with ovens and supplies;

artisan workshops with machinery and raw materials;

fair-priced markets to sell craftwork;

schools for women to receive technical training;

pre-school and infant care in rural communities where the children can enjoy themselves and grow up physically and morally healthy;

transportation available to move around as needed, and to transport supplies and products to make projects work..

To date, the demands have not been met by the Mexican government.

The San Andres Accords and the Communities in Resistance

As a response to the Zapatista uprising and the Mexican governments failure to meet Zapatista demands, members of Mexican civil society including students, activists, religious leaders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocated that the Mexican government negotiate with the EZLN. The negotiations resulted in the signing of the San Andres Accords on February 16, 1996 by representatives of the EZLN and the Mexican government. The accords included joint proposals for respect, cooperation, and political autonomy for indigenous communities in relation to the federal government. Despite signing the San Andres Accords, the Mexican government has failed to implement them. If passed into legislation, the San Andres Accords would grant a large degree of autonomy to indigenous communities and recognize their unique form of social organization (Global Exchange, 1998).  

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6 For a translation of the accords see http://www.ainfos.ca/98/jan/ainfos00250.html
Autonomy was not one of the original demands of the EZLN at the time of the uprising. During peace negotiations and discussions on indigenous rights and culture, the right to autonomy for indigenous people emerged as a central demand. As a result of governmental non-compliance, the Zapatistas established over 30 autonomous municipalities known as Zapatista base communities or “communities in resistance.”

Zapatista base communities are comprised of civilians who provide material support to the EZLN and partake in decisions about EZLN actions (Eber and Kovic, 2003). As a form of resistance, autonomous communities refuse to receive subsidies directly from the government. This is in reaction to governmental counterinsurgency methods which give communities subsidies, but never at an amount sufficient to reach everyone. This technique is effective at dividing community members who fight over the limited supplies. Domingo Perez-Paciencia, member of the displaced communities of the autonomous municipality of Chenalhó, explains that Zapatista communities refuse to accept anything from the government because “their hands are stained with indigenous blood.” In a 1998 communiqué which spoke for his community, he asked members of Civil Society to review the condition of government aid and to be the mediating body which delivers it (Perez-Paciencia, 1998).

Despite political divisions that are present in some of the autonomous communities, EZLN members block the communities from public access. I was in Chiapas in the summer of 2003 when anti-Zapatistas installed voting booths in the autonomous community of San Andres for state elections. The Zapatistas responded by burning the voting booths. The autonomous communities will not participate in the electoral system that attempts to co-opt their vote. Some opponents argue that Zapatistas are trying to “balkanize” and secede from the state. The reality is that EZLN communities are blocked off in response to the high amounts of militarization in
the region. Mexican NGOs estimate that there are approximately 60,000 military troops or 1/3 of the Mexican military in Chiapas. In many indigenous communities, the military ratio is 1 soldier for every 3 civilians. After the 1997 massacre at Acteal, the Mexican government doubled the federal army presence surrounding EZLN communities (Global Exchange, CIEPAC and CENCOS, 2000).

Additionally, there is a significant presence of state-supported paramilitaries. In many ways, paramilitaries are more brutal than the federal military because the state is not held accountable for their actions. This strategy is increasingly being implemented by the Mexican government to maintain the perception that their hands are clean of the violence. Consequently, the federal government turns a blind eye and blames the violence on indigenous people simply not being able to get along (Halkin, 2003).

The increase in military presence in communities has particular effects on indigenous women: Many women no longer feel safe to go to the river to bathe and wash clothes because soldiers are there. This adds an additional stress to women’s lives and has been linked with women losing breast milk, having constant headaches, nervous ticks, skipped menstruation and more (Speed, 2003; Salas, 2003). Additionally, soldiers are known to bring alcohol into communities resulting in higher incidences of domestic violence, as well as the introduction of prostitution, which has brought sexually transmitted diseases and a growing rate of cervical cancer (Speed, 2003).

**Autonomy**

Indigenous women are responding to state-supported militarization by strengthening the

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7 The massacre at Acteal took place in December of 1997, in which 46 indigenous were killed, mostly women and children, including 4 pregnant women. The massacre was linked to a pro-government paramilitary group known as “Paz y Justicia.” For more on Acteal, see Speed, 2003.
struggle for autonomy. Melissa Forbis, in her article *Hacia la Autonomía: Zapatista Women Developing a New World*, writes that for Zapatista women, “autonomy includes economic rights, the control of production, human rights, physical rights to their own bodies, and a socio-cultural right to decide how they will structure their identities” (Forbis, 2003: 242).

Zapatista women are putting their goals into practice within their communities. The Zapatista practice of autonomy creates alternatives to the neoliberal model by controlling their own production. When Zapatista women are asked to illustrate what autonomy means to them, their answers vary. In some cases, women say that though they are not sure what it is, they are in favor of it (Forbis, 2003). However, these same women quickly begin to articulate how they are implementing autonomy in their lives.

When asked about autonomy, Carmen, a Tzeltal woman in her early thirties and mother of four children who is the woman leader of her region in one of the autonomous townships, responded:

“Sometimes we women don’t know how to respond to what autonomy is. But later we figure out that we are doing autonomy by doing the things we do. We know we can speak; we are doing away with the fear, the shame. We can speak in assemblies. We are doing our work. It is there that autonomy is formed. Sometimes we don’t know what autonomy is, but in our deeds, we are doing it. Sometimes we don’t understand that when people are asking us, but later we reflect and see that we are already inside of it, we are already doing it, but without recognizing what we are putting forth” (Carmen as quoted in Forbis, 2003: 243).8

Carmen’s description of autonomy is in direct contrast to the Mexican government’s expressed understanding of autonomy, which claims to protect indigenous women’s rights by denying autonomy arguing that indigenous traditions are sexist (Forbis, 2003). In addition to being paternalistic and racist, this claim denies the fact that Zapatista women, as well as men, are demanding autonomy.

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8 From interviews that Melissa Forbis conducted in the autonomous community of Santa Rita (Forbis, 2003).
EZLN women are articulating their vision of autonomy in a way that is speaking to the world. In the early nineties, Comandanta Ramona undertook consultations with women in the indigenous communities of Chiapas. Within the communities, Zapatista women realized that although they had the right to participate in the assemblies and in study groups, there was no internal Zapatista law about women’s rights and responsibilities. They protested. From there, the Revolutionary Law for Women was born. Women formulated the law together and then men and women voted on it. The law was internally passed in 1993 and made public in 1994 (Ramona, 1994). The Revolutionary Law for Women reads as follows:

**The Zapatista Revolutionary Women’s Law** (Taken directly from [http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/booklaw.html](http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/booklaw.html); Translation from Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution)

In their just fight for the liberation of our people, the EZLN incorporates women into the revolutionary struggle, regardless of their race, creed, color, or political affiliation, requiring only that they share the demands of the exploited people and that they commit to the laws and regulations of the revolution. In addition, taking into account the situation of the woman worker in Mexico, the revolution supports their just demand for equality and justice in the following Revolutionary Women’s Law:

- First: Women, regardless of their race, creed, color, or political affiliation, have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in a way determined by their desire and ability.
- Second: Women have the right to work and receive a fair salary.
- Third: Women have the right to decide the number of children they will bear and care for.
- Fourth: Women have the right to participate in the affairs of the community and to hold positions of authority if they are freely and democratically elected.
- Fifth: Women and their children have the right to primary attention in matters of health and nutrition.
- Sixth: Women have the right to education.
- Seventh: Women have the right to choose their partner and are not to be forced into marriage.
• Eighth: Women shall not be beaten or physically mistreated by their family members or by strangers. Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.

• Ninth: Women will be able to occupy positions of leadership in the organization and to hold military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces.

• Tenth: Women will have all the rights and obligations elaborated in the revolutionary laws and regulations.

The fact that the law was a result of women organizing around issues that affects them speaks loudly to the political weight that they have within the movement. In addition to the Women’s Revolutionary Law and the demands for women in the communiqués to the government, Zapatista women are articulating their demands through their actions. Zapatista women played a major role during the armed uprising and within the military ranks.

**Zapatista Women’s Role in the Military**

Women make up 35% of the Zapatista army, and many of them hold leadership positions (Berger, 2001). These women voluntarily give up having a family so that they can enter the armed struggle. Among the insurgents, there is family planning. Those who already have children leave them with their parents, so as not to abandon the struggle (Ana Maria, 1994). On March 8, 2001, the International Day of Rebel Women, Comandanta Esther said that she had to pay a price for her convictions in the beginning of the struggle.

“Men did not understand why it was necessary for women to fight. The men did not like the idea and felt that women were only good for having children and taking care of them” (Esther, 2001-B: paragraph 5).
Major Ana Maria, who had charge over the command that took San Cristobal de las Casas on January 1, 1994 entered the EZLN at age 14. At the time, the Zapatistas had only ten members, two of which were women.9

“The women were joining because they saw our presence in the army. Then the women in the towns began to teach their daughters, sisters, nieces, telling them ‘it’s better to take a gun, its better to fight’” (Ana Maria, 1994: paragraph 15).

Comandanta Esther says that it took a lot of work to convince some Zapatista women that they were not incompetent and that they had the right to fight (Esther, 2001).

Zapatistas make decisions communally. The decision to rise up in 1994 was voted on. After the vote, the attack was organized, with the support of the high commanders. Ana Maria led her unit in the takeover of San Cristobal, the second most important city in Chiapas. This operation, led by an indigenous woman, was considered a success by the EZLN because no Zapatista lives were lost (Marcos, 1996).

Women in Zapatista Communities

Less well known, however, is the role that Zapatista women play in everyday life in the autonomous communities of resistance. Women’s daily struggle is reflected in their ability to create working alternatives to the dominant neoliberal model. Upon arriving at EZLN communities, women are taught practical revolutionary skills such as combat tactics, how to make artillery, and how to use a sewing machine to make boots. In addition, they are taught communication skills to be more effective revolutionaries. Illiterate women are taught how to read and write. Women who do not speak Spanish are taught so that they can read political

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9 In the late 1970s and 1980s the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (National Forces of Liberation-FLN) attempted to build a guerrilla movement in Chiapas. The FLN was initially inspired by revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua and various Latin American and Maoist forms of popular organizing. They soon learned that their survival depended on adapting to local forms of organization and decision making and in the early 1980’s, the FLN began to establish connections with local campesino organizations, creating a base for the EZLN (Barmeyer, 2003).
books available in Spanish. They are also taught how to use a typewriter and are encouraged to study the history of Mexico and about struggles in other countries (Ana Maria, 1994).

In many of the communities, workshops on reproductive and sexual health are given to adolescents. Communities are organized by services: health, arms, administration, and management. When asked about abortion, Zapatista women’s responses are less clear. Many indigenous people believe that abortion is bad. Nevertheless, many women die from botched abortions. Comandanta Ana Maria says that if a young woman becomes pregnant, she will commonly go with a curandera (healer) and ask her to perform an abortion. In Zapatista communities, a man is fined or detained if he impregnates a women without her consent. These men are imprisoned and forced to pay for the woman’s medical care (Ana Maria, 1994).

In Zapatista communities, work is done equally. Men and women share cooking duties by alternating days. They help in the work of making tostadas, pinole, pozol, and vegetables to send to the military camps. Men often perform non-traditional roles such as washing clothes while some women make pieces for guns as well as bombs for defense. Both women and men work in the sewing, tailoring and artillery workshops. Women organize to do collective work, study, and learn. Grandmothers take care of the children of the women who work outside of the communities (Ana Maria, 1994).

When asked about inequality between the sexes, Comandanta Ramona responded that there is still some gender inequality in the homes, but that it’s minimal (Ramona, 1994). Zapatista women have profoundly impacted the way that Zapatista men feel about women.

Comandante Javier, who has served as a translator for women who only speak Tzotzil, said:

"Before, man did not understand how society is. Before the participation of women wasn’t taken into account…. We gave orders and waited for our food but the poor women, really, carrying a crying child around, grinding corn, sweeping the house and,
though it was night, they wash the clothes because they hadn’t time to do it during the day…” (Javier as quoted in interview with Ramona and Ana Maria, 1994: paragraph 34).

Zapatista Women Keeping the Community Safe

One way that Zapatista women have changed men’s attitudes about women’s participation has been through the development of security measures. In the entrances to the autonomous communities, women watch for signs of danger, particularly paramilitaries trying to enter the communities. During the 1994 uprising, EZLN housewives strategically stayed behind and watched over the communities and the children, while other women went out to fight. Using their own bodies, they have actively blocked entrance into communities and chased off the soldiers (Global Exchange, 1998). In *Actions Speak Louder than Words*, Shannon Speed argues that these security measures are gendered responses to gendered violence and the female experience of war (Speed, 2003). Zapatista women feel that it would be harder for soldiers to attack them than men and they often situate themselves in direct confrontation with soldiers.

Zapatista women have suffered repression for their organization. In January of 1998, the Mexican Army pulled up on the Zapatista community of Nueva Esperanza. They pointed their guns at the families of the community that were gathered outside to celebrate the installation of their new basketball court. The twenty five families that made up this nuevo poblado immediately fled to the mountains. The soldiers stole, ate, killed or destroyed everything in the community, including the money from the two collective stores and the chickens from the women’s cooperative. They used the kitchens as their latrines (Global Exchange, 1998).

By that afternoon, women from Nueva Esperanza and women from 13 neighboring communities rallied in an attempt to run the soldiers out. They demanded that the soldiers leave and they slept on the highway since the soldiers were occupying their homes. The military did
not leave until the following day when the press arrived (Global Exchange, 1998). Women defended the communities, despite threats and sexual harassment. This is common, due to a fear that the men will be carried off by the army.

A similar story is related in the Ejido de Morelia, the capital of the autonomous municipality of 17 de Noviembre, and in the community of Galeana in the autonomous municipality of Francisco Gomez. Armed with only sticks and rocks, women drove out federal soldiers who were attempting to enter their communities. According to the women who participated, in both cases, the soldiers were shocked and did not know what to do. In Morelia, women recounted how the soldiers did not know how to walk in the mud and the women watched joyfully as the soldiers slipped and fell (Global Exchange, 1998). When news circulates in the communities that there is a threat of military entrance to the communities, the women gather and hold assemblies. In this way, Zapatista women are strengthening their capacity and in doing so, transforming political power dynamics and social relations.

Some anti-Zapatista groups in Mexico have criticized the EZLN for placing women at the revolutionary forefront despite danger (Forbis, 2003). This criticism implies that the EZLN leadership is made up entirely of men. In fact, EZLN women decided for themselves that they would not let soldiers enter the community. To imply that EZLN leaders are all men discredits and ignores the creative and courageous acts of resistance that indigenous women are making and that women are part of the leadership itself.

Zapatista Women’s Cooperatives

Another way that Zapatista women have strengthened the struggle for autonomy is through collective projects or cooperatives. Many of the cooperatives are organized as women’s
cooperatives. These female dominated spaces provide a forum for women to build support networks with one another. These spaces allow women to maintain the traditional gender roles that suit them while still having a space to reflect on their own lives and make the changes that they deem necessary. These cooperatives are geared toward the pursuit of political, economic, and cultural autonomy and against neoliberalism (Eber and Tanski, 2003).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the National Indigenous Institute (INI) organized cooperatives to sell indigenous artisan work (Nash as reported by Eber and Kovic, 2003). However, these cooperatives were controlled by the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI) and they did not lead to political involvement. Despite cooperative status, Mestizo shop owners in San Cristobal de Las Casas controlled product sales. This model of government controlled cooperatives does not support autonomy. EZLN cooperatives, on the other hand, are controlled exclusively by Zapatistas.

Since cooperatives are predominantly women operated, cooperative meetings allow for women to discuss issues such as domestic abuse in female only spaces. For example, Zapatista women have been outspoken against the use of alcohol due to its correlation with drunkenness and abuse. Women were influential in the Zapatista prohibition of alcohol. In March of 2001, in Michoacan, Mexico, the Zapatista Army spoke to the National Indigenous Congress,

“Alcohol is poison for our blood, and the price we pay for the poison only serves to fatten the powerful. We ask for food and we receive alcohol, which corrupts our joy and ends up saddening our hearts” (CCRI, 2001: paragraph 23).

Cooperatives provide women with formal leadership roles within their communities. Cooperative members often serve as delegates from their community to regional political meetings. In this way, women in Chiapas strengthen networks with other women who may have

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10 The PRI dominated Mexican politics for seventy-years until the PAN won elections in 2000. The PRI was synonymous with corruption.
similar concerns. Women in cooperatives are also sent as representatives to different workshops to build capacity in areas such as health, education and weaving. They are then expected to teach these skills to the rest of the cooperative membership. Workshops are often designed to amplify the process of *concientización*, which promotes further political awareness and empowerment (Y. Castro, 2003).

**Artisan Cooperatives**

There are several different types of cooperative projects within Zapatista communities. Artisan cooperatives provide a way for women to be paid fair wages while maintaining their artisan traditions. Unlike the neoliberal model which has many different levels of involvement in production and manufacturing, women in artisan cooperatives gain control over every phase of production from the acquisition of raw materials to the sale of their own goods. This process epitomizes collective women’s control in organizational management. In this way, Zapatista artisan cooperatives resist neoliberalism.

Many cooperatives use a model which allows women to work in their homes and to meet less frequently (Eber, 2001). This allows women in cooperatives the freedom to carry on their domestic affairs as usual and provides them with greater personal autonomy. To some critics, the women’s choice to work from home seems like internalized gender inequality. However by choosing to work from home, Zapatista women maintain their traditions while still challenging the neoliberal production model. Within these cooperatives, women earn money for their families as well as for collective community activities in a way that is conducive to their lifestyles. Cooperatives also provide young women with more possibilities to remain single due to economic independence (Rodríguez, 2002).
Weaving cooperatives ensure that traditional weaving methods are not lost. The process of weaving is extremely time consuming and expensive and proponents of neoliberal development argue that it is not productive. They argue that women weavers would be better off if their were maquillas in their zone. By continuing to weave, Zapatista women reject the neoliberal ideology and ensure that their cultural traditions survive. It is common for women to wear traditional clothing that they weave in the autonomous Zapatista communities. This helps to identify their distinctive culture and strengthens their struggle for autonomy.11

The success of Zapatista weaving cooperatives to generate income relies on having an available transnational market to buy the weavings (Tanski and Eber, 2003). When sold on the tourist market, intermediaries commonly make the most profit, leaving weavers with little more than enough to cover materials. However, the reliance on transnationals calls the sustainability of artisan cooperatives into question. It brings up several ethical questions regarding the role of foreigners who often promote such artisan items. For people selling the products abroad, finding markets for the artisan products can be difficult. Additionally, transnational consumers may demand designs and styles of products which differ from traditional styles. Weavers are then confronted with deciding whether or not to alter their products to accommodate the market demand. Zapatista women weavers, however, have been able to modify their products while still maintaining traditional designs. In this way, Zapatista women have created a unique way for transnational Zapatista supporters to also engage in resistance to the neoliberal economic model. The sale of Zapatista women’s weavings abroad also provides the opportunity to raise awareness about the Zapatista movement and neoliberalism abroad.

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11 In informal conversations that I had with Zapatista educators at the ESRAZ (Zapatista Autonomous Secondary School in Rebellion) in the Oventik Caracole during the Summer of 2003, I was told that Zapatistas recognize that what they call traditional clothing came from Spaniards, but that they have appropriated it as their own.
The difficulty of sustaining a peasant farming lifestyle in the face of the flood of cheap agrarian imports has motivated some men to learn how to weave. In this way, traditional gender roles have been challenged and made more fluid. The fact that women perform a skill which generates much needed income for their families elevates women to a higher status within their communities (Eber, 2000). In the summer of 2003, I visited the Mujeres Por la Dignidad (Women for Dignity) Zapatista Weaving cooperative and noted that men’s artisan products were sold in the store. However, there were no men present in the store and it appeared that indigenous women continued to manage the store on their own.

**Food Cooperatives**

In many ways, food and garden cooperatives are more sustainable than artisan cooperatives due to the fact that they do not require a foreign market. Christine Eber and Janet Tanski, in their article, *Women’s Cooperatives in Chiapas, Mexico: Strategies of Survival and Empowerment in Times of Struggle*, write that, “Baking, general store, and gardening co-ops are geared to local production and consumption and are often integrally related with organizing for social justice.” In the Zapatista autonomous community of Emiliano Zapata, community members designed a project to grow vegetables to feed their children. One community member said, “We are doing this work because we suffer from many illnesses, especially the children. Malnutrition is the cause of why people are sick” (Video: Zapata’s Garden, 2002).

Unlike in the time of the haciendas, they now have land on which to work and produce. The community is proud of the garden because they reduce the consumption of and dependence on foreign imports by consuming what they produce. They say that they are excited since they can see the results of their hard work (Video: Zapata’s Garden, 2002). This is particularly
compelling given the fact that the free trade model creates a food dependency on the United States. Mexico obtains 40% of its food from abroad and it is commonly junk food imports and produced with chemicals (Carlsen, 2003).

Additionally, they avoid the use of chemicals due to the detrimental effects on the land and their health. Zapatista community members see the US model of farming with large amounts of chemical pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and mono-cropping techniques as harmful to biological, agricultural and cultural diversity. In Emiliano Zapata, they are planting beans, corn, lettuce and carrots (Video: Zapata’s Garden, 2002).

Community members say that their work brings them closer to autonomy. They actively resist government aid because they see the division of state resources favoring some over others and causing division in the communities. They see the Zapatista movement as well placed within the larger political context. They stand against the PPP, the FTAA, and other large corporate efforts to take their land. As stated in the video that they themselves produced:

"We want to be in resistance. We the people in our community are the government. No one has less and no one has more. No one works less and no one works more" (Video: Zapata’s Garden, 2002).

One case study of the Zapatista autonomy can be seen in community of 17 de Noviembre: Women successfully organized a collective bread project and used funds to start a garden cooperative. With money from produce sales, they began a cooperative store. Women from the community echoed one another when they reported that their work in the cooperatives is part of the struggle. One woman said, “We feel very happy when we work together. We saw that working together is better. It is unifying because no one works alone” (Video: Mujeres Unidas, 1999). They also added that working together helps to diffuse problems which may arise because if they see a problem starting, they can deal with it immediately before it escalates.
The food cooperatives are important because those involved in the cooperative otherwise do not have the money to buy food to feed their children. Since land is shared, Zapatistas avoid issues of dividing land for individual garden plots which could cause conflict over land conditions. Additionally, as in the community of Emiliano Zapata, the food that they are now feeding their families is healthier because they are using natural fertilizers rather than chemicals. The women learned that natural fertilizers were healthier when two women in the collective went to a workshop on gardening and came back to train the community (Video: Mujeres Unidas, 1999). Having this communal structure in place provides food for elders and disabled people who may not be able to work and/or who may not have family to provide for them. This successful case study was documented through a video produced by the Zapatistas themselves. The video has been shown throughout the autonomous zones and to international and national civil society.

Transnational Solidarity

The Zapatistas have successfully looked to members of international civil society to be in solidarity with them and provide a level of international security. Since the uprising, solidarity groups and sister communities around the globe have become part of the transnational resistance movement (Sampaio, 2002). In 1997, as part of a semester abroad program sponsored by the Center for Global Education, (Women and Development: A Latin American Perspective) I traveled to Chiapas, Mexico to learn about the struggles of the Zapatistas. The visit seemed beneficial for the Zapatista community who increased international awareness around their struggle and had a market to sell their products to at a wage that they determined. For me, the experience showed that my solidarity needed to extend beyond supporting Zapatista autonomy to
working within my own community against the marginalization of oppressed people. The idea that Zapatismo is applicable in all social spaces (manifested differently, depending on the circumstances) is part of what makes the Zapatista message so powerful.

As Anna Sampaio writes, in her article *Transforming Chicana/o and Latina/o Politics: Globalization and the Formation of Transnational Resistance in the United States and Chiapas*, “actions taken in favor or against minority communities in the United States impact the conditions of Latin Americans and other members of developing nations” (Sampaio, 2002: 60). As she conveys with her story of solidarity with the women of Mayetik, the reverse is also true. For example, Zapatista women from the communities of Mayetik organized to build community ovens to bake their own bread. The project enabled women to avoid purchasing overpriced, nutritionally deficient bread and tortillas from government owned stores. To make this project work, the women of Mayetik needed both financial support and technical assistance. Hermanas en Lucha/Sisters in Struggle, a coalition of Chicanas/Latinas/Mestizas based in Denver, Colorado, whose goal is to form alliances with indigenous women outside the United States, organized for a year around the project while simultaneously raising awareness within their own community about the Zapatista struggle (Sampaio, 2002).

The Zapatistas have provided the opportunity for people everywhere to be in solidarity with them. They have received written statements of support from indigenous activists such as Leonard Peltier and Leslie Marmon Silko as well as from indigenous and non indigenous people in Mexico. It is the Zapatista stance against neoliberalism and injustice in all of its possible manifestations that makes their message so powerful to so many. In March of 2001, the Zapatistas marched to Mexico City, in what they called the March for Dignity, in an effort to invite the new National Action Party (PAN) government to implement the San Andres Accords.
Along the way, the Zapatistas made many stops. Everywhere they went, they were met with hundreds of thousands of national and international supporters. I myself brought 47 high school students from Canada to their last stop at the Zocalo. Comandanta Esther spoke first, about the role of women in the indigenous Zapatista movement. Midway through her speech, she declared "Never again a Mexico without the women!" The crowd yelled back to her, "You are not alone!" The March for Dignity exemplifies a successful EZLN strategy to involve people from around the world in the fight against neoliberalism.

**Conclusion**

Through their projects, Zapatista women struggle to achieve concrete goals such as access to health care and cooperatives. In the context of Zapatista women’s lives, their struggle is extremely powerful. Women’s resistance in Chiapas, through military and community action responds to threats against autonomy that indigenous men and women share. They are engaging in transformative actions that challenge myths of indigenous women’s subordination both within their outside their communities (Stephen, 97). In regards to men’s attitudes towards women, Comandanta Yolanda said:

> "The men are struggling to totally understand what we are asking for as women. We are asking to have rights and for the men to give us liberty, and for them to understand that we have to fight for that along with them. For them to learn to not take our participating here badly, because, before, we never went to meetings and encuentros. Now there’s just a few of us who go, but the path is opening up in all ways. There’s more freedom. The men now take our words into consideration, and they understand that we as women, have a place where we can present everything we feel and everything we are suffering” (Yolanda, 2001: paragraph 20).

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In many ways the March for Dignity was a success: the EZLN reaffirmed that they are in fact very active and they spoke at the National Congress; however, the San Andres Accords were never signed into law; instead, a watered down version that gave no real autonomy to indigenous people was signed into effect.
Additionally, as discussed in this paper and evidenced by Yolanda’s words, the participation of women in the military and public meetings, participation of men as weavers, and shared domestic chores, have in fact resulted in some gender divisions becoming more fluid.

Zapatista women are also building solidarity networks with transnational Zapatista supporters. At times Zapatista women articulate to transnational women how their struggle is different than “first world” women’s struggles for gender equality. Dalia, one of the two EZLN representatives to the 2nd Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism in Spain in 1997 stated,

“...The EZLN struggle for liberation is for the liberation of all women. But First World non-indigenous discourses often fail to recognize that the liberation of women in rural Chiapas is a process that must include all aspects of their identities, and the concurrent liberation of their men and children” (Dalia as quoted by Forbis in manuscript, 2003: ).

Zapatista women in Chiapas are speaking out against current neoliberal practices which devalue their work and culture. In 1996, Comandanta Ramona spoke for the Zapatista Army of National Liberation to the people of Mexico. In her speech she said,

“.... We want a Mexico that takes us into account as human beings, that respects us and that recognizes our dignity. Therefore we want to join our small Zapatista voice to the large voice of all who fight for a new Mexico. We arrive here in order to shout, together with all, that no longer, that never more will there be a Mexico without us. We want this, a Mexico where all may have a place with dignity. Therefore we are disposed to participate in a great national dialogue with all. A dialogue where our word will be a greater word in many words and our heart will be a greater heart within many hearts. For this national dialogue we are going to travel a lot and we are going to take many steps...” (Ramona, 1996: paragraph 8).

Zapatista women are taking these steps. Their collective demands for women’s rights coupled with their demands for indigenous rights are being heard. Women’s roles in the communities are crucially important in building an autonomous new society that is based on collective struggle. Women’s work in cooperatives allows them to contest the aspects of tradition that they define as oppressive to them and maintain the aspects of tradition that are important to them. Within their
struggle, they have made space for people everywhere to stand in solidarity with them. From their struggle and their collective organizing, people everywhere can learn to organize against the neoliberal model.


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