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Rights and citizenship of indigenous women in Chiapas: a history of struggles, fears and hopes

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Introduction

The Zapatista rebellion began in 1994 in the state of Chiapas in the south of Mexico, and called into question social practices and government policies, as well as the basic premises of the neo-liberal model. At the same time as it challenged the position of indigenous people as citizens in Mexico, the rebellion gave momentum to an indigenous women's movement that is demanding respect for the rights and dignity of indigenous women and for new forms of sovereignty. This chapter discusses how this movement has led to changes in the lives of indigenous women in Chiapas. Drawing on the daily experiences of women, it identifies the fundamental elements of the struggles that motivate them. It also explores the fears that these women have had to overcome, and the hopes that maintain their struggle. The changes that are emerging as a result of this movement are complex, and are deepening as they are perpetuated across a range of experiences.

The emergence of the Zapatista movement and the struggle for indigenous women's rights

The situation of indigenous people in Mexico is an extremely difficult one. They represent around 10 per cent of the national population and live largely in rural areas. They make up the poorest section of the population in Mexico. Chiapas is one of the states with the highest proportions of Indians in its population. However, indigenous women suffer additional disadvantages. Gender inequalities within their communities are greater than in the rest of society, and exclusion, violence

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and oppression are common features of their daily life. While their exclusion has social and cultural roots, it is reinforced by legal or political practices. Their subordinate status is manifest in a range of different practices, from violence within the home – often associated with male alcoholism – to their exclusion from basic services, such as health and education.

Indigenous women's struggles for their rights therefore cut across different spheres of life and imply the transformation of power relations at all levels, from the family to the nation. Various factors have facilitated these struggles, including the shift from subsistence production to market-orientated production (which provides women with an additional income), increasing participation in organized groups, and, of course, social movements, such as those organized by indigenous women related to the Zapatista movement. For indigenous women, the Zapatista movement has led to a heightened awareness of their rights and of possibilities for social and cultural transformations that would allow them to realize both their right to difference as indigenous women and their right to equality as human beings.

The demand for indigenous rights came onto the agenda in 1974, when the Indigenous Congress, held in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, condemned unequivocally the situation of indigenous people. However, it was not until 2001 that representatives of indigenous people were able to present their demands in the National Congress. Between these years, as the struggle for indigenous rights began to gather momentum, a number of different organizations offered their support for women within these communities. Since the 1970s, for instance, organizations of artisan women and peasants have been among those who have contributed to the women's movement in Chiapas. Parallel to their efforts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and political, academic and religious activists began work with a gender perspective on reproductive health, civil and human rights, and campaigns against violence. The participation of different actors, such as social organizations, NGOs and the Catholic Church, helped indigenous women to organize. The roles of these actors have been very important over the past three decades in demanding changes in the situation of indigenous women.

In January 1994, the Zapatistas emerged to claim from Mexican society political changes for its indigenous population. After a short time in talks, from 1995 to 2000 the government responded with a 'low intensity war' against the movement, considering the problem to be a military rather than a political one. The demands of indigenous women were submerged by the militarization of public spaces and by the

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violence against them. However, the repression did not hinder the growth of indigenous groups as social actors demanding changes in the cultural, political and social arenas. Actually, the principal demand is the implementation of the San Andres Agreement by the Mexican government. While these demands addressed different priorities (such as health, education, collective rights), they were united in their attempts to raise awareness, build social organizations and define an independent political agenda ('Declaración política de la sociedad civil...' in *Revista Chiapas*, 1999, p. 237).

With the change in government, the Zapatistas made a mobilization to present their demands for national political change at the Mexican National Congress in 2001. However, it was their demand for a Revolutionary Law for Women that gave concrete representation to the struggle of indigenous women and translated it into a political agenda. Commandante Esther, a member of the Zapatista political leadership, gave a speech at the National Congress that announced the demands of indigenous women as part of the general agenda of the Zapatistas (Congreso Nacional Indígena 1996, p. 181). She emphasized that she was speaking not only as a Zapatista but also as an indigenous woman.

This moment was central to the indigenous women's movement because it was the first time that the demands of their struggle were articulated and presented at the National Congress. More than any other aspect of the Zapatista agenda, women's demands implied the need for Mexican society to embrace the principle of multiculturalism (Villoro 1998). The speech also highlighted some of the new dimensions that the indigenous women's movement was bringing to political life. What Commandante Esther asked for in her speech was the 'amendment of the national constitution in light of the feelings, values and relations of everyday life'.¹

However, the rich, multi-dimensional politics that developed out of the analysis of the subordination of indigenous women was reduced in the proposal for constitutional reform on indigenous rights to the phrase 'men and women are equal'. Nevertheless, while constitutional change fell well short of what had been hoped for, important changes took place at the local level. For example, local education efforts, regional organizations and communitarian assemblies all began to focus on indigenous women's experiences. And in remote and isolated areas, there has been a movement to increase awareness and articulate a vision of rights that will create new spaces of participation by indigenous women (Cornwall and Schattan 2004).