

**From Suffering Mothers to Transformative Healers:  
Constructions of Indigenous Womanhood in the Zapatista Movement**

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## I. Introduction

Since its emergence on January 1, 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional<sup>1</sup> has aligned itself so closely with the fight for the rights of indigenous women that today the image of the masked indigenous woman has come to be representative of the movement as a whole. Indigenous women's participation in the agrarian/indigenous rights movement of the 1980s predates the existence of the EZLN, as does the deliberate political decision to construct and present the indigenous subject as feminine. However, while the agrarian movement's use of the indigenous feminized subject may have been an effective strategy for amassing international support, indigenous women did not benefit from this image within their own communities – though women may have been highly visible during the marches and land invasions that preceded the formation of the EZLN, they remained disenfranchised within their own community due to local systems of indigenous governance linking political participation to land ownership. It was within this cultural context that the EZLN developed the Women's Revolutionary Law in 1993.

Characterized by Subcomandante Marcos – cofounder and early leader of the movement – as the “first EZLN uprising (Rovira 2000, 74),” the Women's Revolutionary Law represented the EZLN's formal commitment to the rights of indigenous women. However, Subcomandante Marcos' description of the Law as the “first uprising” rightly suggests that its passage was seen as a confrontation against established ideas about indigenous womanhood. Indigenous women in EZLN-affiliated communities were thus presented with two conflicting constructions – publicly, they were feminized indigenous subjects who represented self-sacrifice and endurance, while privately, they remained the silent indigenous wife and mother.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as “EZLN” or “Zapatista.”

In this paper, I will analyze how these two constructions were employed in the period leading up to the emergence of the EZLN. First, I will discuss the collapse of the *ejido* system of communal land holdings as a major catalyst for the agrarian rights movement and the EZLN. Within this first section, I will also address the role of women in the *ejido* system, focusing on their exclusion from land ownership and participation in community decision-making. In the second section, I will discuss how women's experiences in the agrarian movement of the 1980s differed from men's in terms of (1) motivation for and perception of political participation, (2) the scope of their political participation being largely limited to public protests, and (3) their visibility in the movement. I will also discuss how these differences informed the process of passing the Women's Revolutionary Law. In the third section, I will discuss the Law as a document that both challenges and reinforces traditional constructions of indigenous womanhood. Though I grant that the Law has had a positive effect in the lives of indigenous women in EZLN-affiliated communities, in the fourth part I will highlight some of the challenges women continue to experience both within their communities and as well as the Mexican state.

I emphasize that my intent is not to employ a logic of racist feminism which casts indigenous women as victims of an inherently sexist and "backwards" culture. Other authors have pointed out the practice of using gender equity discourse as a means to regulate indigenous men and women or to deny them their autonomy altogether (Blackwell 2012, 704-705). Rather, I consider this a prescient issue because upcoming 2018 presidential election in Mexico will feature an indigenous woman for the first time on the ballot, calling us to reflect on the politics of representation and how the construction of the feminized indigenous subject can be at once empowering and oppressive.

## **II. The Collapse of the Ejido System and Indigenous Women's Exclusion from Political Participation**

Several changes to the agrarian system in Mexico throughout the 1980s and early 1990s brought about the conditions leading to the Zapatista uprising in 1994. Among these, the most devastating was the end of the *ejido* system of communal land tenure. The collapse of the *ejido* system signified the end of a successful system of land redistribution providing indigenous communities with a space to live and earn an income via small-scale farming. In 1992, as part of the North American Free Trade agreement negotiations, President Salinas de Gortari modified Article 27 of the Mexican constitution to end the *ejido* system (Blackwell 2006, 148).

Originally passed in 1917, Article 27 was a concession to the peasant armies' demands following the end of the Mexican Revolution. It declared all the land, water, and minerals within the national boundaries to be the original property of the "nation," and therefore transferable from one private person to another by the Mexican government. The law authorized the Mexican government to expropriate lands from rich landholders and redistribute them to eligible peasant villages. Once the land was apportioned to the community, it would then be further divided amongst individual families. The actual implementation of the *ejido* system, however, was often sporadic and the quality of redistributed land usually poor (Kelly Jr. 1994, 543). Furthermore, though they were allowed to work and live on the land and could pass it on to their relatives, *ejidatarios* (shareholders) did not own the land themselves, meaning that the Mexican government could at any time expropriate the land from the *ejidatarios* just as it had once done to the rich landowners. Despite this, peasant families relied on the *ejido* system as a means of securing housing and income within their community. By 1988, more than three million peasant households were located in *ejidos* (Kelly Jr. 1994, 543).

The *ejido* system as proscribed in the Mexican Constitution also served as a multi-level system of local governance which included: (1) the *ejidatario* (shareholder) who had the right to use a plot

within the ejido community; (2) the decision-making *asamblea ejidal* (ejido assembly) made up of ejidatarios in the community; (3) and the *comité de vigilancia* (vigilance committee) composed of a president, secretary, treasurer, and commission members, who oversaw the *asamblea* (Stephen 2006, 159).

Because the ejido system only allowed the transfer of land through inheritance (meaning that land could not be sold from one party to another), indigenous women gained limited rights to land ownership. In the event of the male head of household's death, a woman could become owner of her family's land until she remarried or her son(s) came of age (Hamilton 2002, 122). In 1971,<sup>2</sup> revisions to the ejido system allowed re-married women to maintain ownership of their ejido, gave the first right of inheritance to partners/spouses, and set aside communal plots of land for women to engage in productive activities.<sup>3</sup> Despite these revisions, cultural gender norms about ownership prevailed and households headed by *ejidatarias* (female shareholders) averaged only about 15% throughout the 1980s (Hamilton 2002, 122). Correspondingly, *asamblea*-membership was largely male. Though some women did participate in the *asamblea* and had voting rights, there is no record of an *ejidataria* having ever being elected to the *comité* (Stephen 2006, 159-160).

The revision of Article 27 in 1992 privatized ejido ownership, leaving *ejidatarias* vulnerable to dispossession of land. Under the new system, though women remained the default inheritors of an estate, the mostly-male *asamblea* could vote to force the *ejidataria* put the estate up for sale to other members of the ejido. Spouses and children were granted the right to challenge the sale by purchasing the land themselves; however, this "right" did not provide much compensation to

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<sup>2</sup> *Ley Federal De Reforma Agraria*, 1971, [https://www.pa.gob.mx/normatecapa/disposiciones%20jur%C3%ADdicas/41.-%20Ley\\_Federal\\_de\\_la\\_Reforma\\_Agraria.pdf](https://www.pa.gob.mx/normatecapa/disposiciones%20jur%C3%ADdicas/41.-%20Ley_Federal_de_la_Reforma_Agraria.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> In terms of political representation, the women's communal plots granted them one representative with voting power in the *asamblea* (Hamilton 2002, 122).

women as they were less likely than men to have the means to purchase land (Hamilton 2002, 123). Furthermore, even if a woman were able to purchase her land, she would still be vulnerable to dispossession because consistent occupation<sup>4</sup> of the land was required in order to maintain ownership (Hamilton 2002, 123; Stephen 1994, 256). Lynn Stephen notes several instances in which a woman, after parceling out some of her land so that a male relative could help with the farming, later had her ownership contested in the *asamblea* by the same relative who argued that he – and not she – was the one consistently farming the land (Stephen 1994, 256).

Prior to the collapse of the *ejido* system, an indigenous agrarian movement had been organizing around the issues of land privatization, de-regulation of the state-subsidized coffee market,<sup>5</sup> and importation of U.S.-grown corn.<sup>6</sup> At first, local groups acted spontaneously and within their own region; however, they gradually unified into a unified movement as more indigenous groups became involved and their cause gained national and international attention (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris 2006, 98-99). Despite being excluded from land ownership and participation the

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<sup>4</sup> “Occupation” of land could be interpreted to mean either (1) that the land was being inhabited or (2) that it was being farmed. Interpretation of “occupation” was decided upon by the male-dominated *asamblea*, who was likely to sympathize with the argument that the person farming the land had a stronger claim to it.

<sup>5</sup> Starting in 1985, the Mexican government had begun taking steps to de-regulate domestic coffee production and “open up” the market to the importation of cheaper, foreign-grown coffee. This impacted indigenous peasant farmers the most because coffee production in Mexico took place primarily on *ejido* tracts of land. Because coffee was one of Mexico’s major cash crops during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mexican government was incentivized to assist *ejidatarios* in their production of coffee. The National Coffee Institute of Mexico (INMECAFE) was thus created in 1958 as a government-sponsored organization that provided rural coffee farmers with technical assistance, loans, transportation, and marketing (Martinez-Torres 2006, 4). In 1989, President Salinas de Gortari’s administration – responding to pressure from the World Bank and other international monetary institutions to cut spending – announced that it would relinquish its control of the Mexican coffee market and dismantle the INMECAFE (Renard and Ortega Breña 2010, 23). The dismantling of the INMECAFE dealt a harsh economic blow to peasant farmers in the southernmost part of Mexico, who could no longer compete with giant coffee-producing corporations in the global market (Renard and Ortega Breña 2010, 22). That same year the International Coffee Agreement, which established a quota system guaranteeing countries access to the coffee market and regulated prices, was broken up. This resulted in an immediate drop in the price of coffee and further hurt small-scale growers (Martinez-Torres 2006, 65-66).

<sup>6</sup> Mexico began to import U.S.-grown corn in the 1970s as a cost-effective way to meet the demand for food. Peasant farmers who grew maize – an indigenous food staple – could not keep up with large-scale U.S. corn farmers and increasingly depended on corn for sustenance. As part of NAFTA, the Mexican market would increase its importation of U.S. corn and further disadvantage maize farmers (Appendini 2008).

agricultural economy under the ejido system, indigenous women participated alongside men in protests and grassroots organizing efforts against neoliberal economic reform (Olivera 2005, 611; Stephen, Speed, and Hernandez Castillo 2002, xi-xiii).

### **III. Indigenous Women in the Agrarian Movement**

The EZLN and the Women's Revolutionary Law both developed from the agrarian movement of the 1980s. Though women were key participants in the 1980s agrarian movement, organizational leaders were not originally motivated to include women out of a commitment to gender consciousness. Rather, they valued indigenous women's participation in the agrarian movement to the extent that their presence feminized, and thus sympathized, the movement. Outside the scope of public protest and demonstration, women continued to be excluded from political participation in the community asamblea meetings. On the rare occasion that they were given access to the asamblea space, women's voices were subsumed to the agenda of the peasant movement. Women also differed from men in that they were compelled to participate in the movement out of necessity, to ensure the future of their children, and not necessarily to secure their own rights. Thus, women's experiences in the agrarian movement of the 1980s differed from men's in three key aspects: (1) their motivation for and perception of political participation, (2) the scope of their political participation being largely limited to public protests, and (3) their visibility in the movement. In this section, I will analyze each of these aspects individually, then discuss how they informed the process of drafting and passing the Women's Revolutionary Law during the nascent phase of the EZLN.

**Motivation/Perception:** In recounting their participation in the protests to researchers Sonia Toledo Tello and Anna María Garza Caligaris, women reported the experience as a shameful necessity. Organizations such as the *Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos*

(CIOAC) had a mandatory requirement that all member families participate in the political actions of the movement. Widowed women were thus placed in the uncomfortable position of publicly displaying their lack of a husband. At the same time, widowed women felt compelled to participate because they stood to gain a better life through securing land rights for their sons (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligari 2006, 106). Although women participants were presented to the public as empowered, class-conscious, and devoted to the movement for indigenous rights, the women participants themselves did not think they accurately represented the rest of the women of their village and instead saw their political participation as a necessity arising from their vulnerable situation as poor, mothers, and without a male head of household – not as an exercise in agency. Rosa, one of the women interviewed, implies that she had no choice but to participate in the protests because “unfortunately, God didn’t send [her] as a man (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligari 2006, 106).”

Cecilia Menjívar describes a similar situation in her book *Enduring Violence*. Estrella, one of the women interviewed by Menjívar’s, describes herself as “unlucky” in love because she has lost several partners and must raise her children as a single mother. Despite her romantic misfortunes, Estrella manages to carve out a comfortable living for her family through her photography work. Estrella states that she began her photography business out of financial necessity – “by force,” in her words (Menjívar 2011, 185). Though she is proud of her work and success, Estrella laments not having a partner to give her “the respect that a man brings to the house (Menjívar 2011, 122).” Estrella does not measure her success in terms of the agency and financial independence her business provides her; rather, she strives towards an ideal of herself as a woman who no longer has to work and who is cared for by her husband. Ultimately, she perceives her agency as something imposed on her by force and an indicator of her abnormal position in society. Though

in many ways Estrella, who is a Ladina woman in Guatemala, differs from Rosa, both women demonstrate the pervasive effects of symbolic violence: rather than to perceive their exercises in agency as empowering, both women instead feel forced, unlucky, and ultimately stigmatized by their community.

**Scope:** The stigma and shame experienced by women like Estrella and Rosa when they venture into economic or political participation is tied to the belief that women naturally belong in the home while men engage in politics and income earning. Though the agrarian movement made political participation available to indigenous women in some contexts, it reinforced a gender ideology that segregated women into the private/domestic realm and men into the public/political sphere. While their presence may have had mandatory in the context of public demonstrations, women were not considered vital in the movement's strategic meetings. For the most part, women were not allowed to attend *assemblea* meetings in their communities, nor were they allowed to attend organizational meetings at larger gatherings amongst peasant organizations. After the moment of political action had passed, women were expected to return to their household work while a male relative represented her in the *assemblea* (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris 2006, 99). In the event that a woman was widowed and without a suitable male relative to represent her, she would be allowed to attend her community's *assemblea*; however, once there, women were not likely to voice their opinion (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris 2006, 114). When asked why this was the case, women stated that they did not believe that their concerns had a place in the *assemblea* (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris 2006, 108).

Women's inability to voice their gender-specific concerns is on one hand a practical limitation: women were less likely to understand Spanish than men, which made following and participating in the discussions difficult. Their silence, however, also calls to mind the experiences of other

women of color who – as a result of their membership in a racial/ethnic-rights based organization – are often expected to suppress their gender-specific needs so as to not jeopardize the organization’s agenda. Jennifer Goett illustrates this in her analysis of how community leaders dealt with state-sanctioned rapes in the Afro-Nicaraguan community of Monkey Point.

Monkey Point is a small, autonomous Afrodescendant community that has been under heavy military presence since 2004 (Goett 2015, 477). Soldiers stationed at Monkey Point regularly undermined the authority of community leaders by committing sexual violence against women and girls with impunity. Community leaders were compelled to file a complaint against the soldiers following the gang rape of a young girl. Goett notes, however, that this was not attributed to a “woman-centered consciousness,” but rather out of a desire to assert their political autonomy as an Afrodescendant community. Though gendered violence set the stage for the Monkey Point community leaders to confront the racism of the Nicaraguan state, Afrodescendant women’s needs were not centered as much as they were made an object of political confrontation. Community leaders did not consult with Afrodescendant women during the formal complaint process, nor did they consider how existing community norms about Afrodescendant women’s sexuality facilitated their sexual abuse at the hands of the state (Goett 2015, 480).

The Afrodescendant women in Monkey Point and the indigenous women in the *assemblea* both had their voices silenced and their needs subsumed within the race/ethnic-centered agenda of their community. Leaders in both contexts did not grant women the space to question existing inequalities *within* their communities. The interests of women were assumed to be identical to the movement’s and thus, not meriting resources or attention. For the few women who were granted access into the mostly-male *assembleas*, this access did not translate into meaningful political participation and for the most part, they remained silent.

**Visibility:** Although indigenous women were for the most part not present in the assemblies, they were made highly visible in media depictions of the agrarian movement. In their public actions, peasant organizations deliberately used the image of the indigenous woman as passive, peaceful, defenseless, and enduring as a political tactic to amass the public's support (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris 2006, 109). One such tactic involved sending women, children, and the elderly to "invade" private land while men hid in the mountains. The women would then wait with their children and the elderly for the armed police to arrive and "confront" them. As a form of visual protest, this was an effective tactic because it juxtaposed women, children, and the elderly – seen as weak, defenseless, and nonviolent – against the militarized state so as to invoke sympathy for the cause. At the same time, women's bodies served as a first-line of defense because they diverted attention away from the men hiding in the mountains. Movement leaders assumed police would be less likely to use violence against women due to their common image as nonviolent and incompetent, and so they capitalized upon this image in order to hide the men — the "real" fighters and leaders of the cause (Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris 2006, 109). The bodies of indigenous women in the land-invasion scenarios thus functioned as both public displays of nonviolence and as buffers to any potential state violence directed at the men.

Indigenous women were also made highly visible in public marches and protests. Images circulated of the women often highlighted their situation as impoverished, indigenous, and mothers. Toledo Tello and Garza Caligaris note, however, that not all participants in the agrarian marches were equally poor, exposed to violence, in need of land, female, or even indigenous. Despite this reality, the image of the impoverished indigenous woman functioned as a symbol of unity.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses strategic essentialism as a tactic employed by subaltern groups to unite under a shared identity and history for a political cause. By constructing an essentialized subaltern subject, subaltern groups regain a sense of dignity and value while also outlining a unified political agenda (Spivak 1987, 205; Ashcroft 2013, 75). Spivak, however, rightly calls attention to the essentialized subaltern subject as a tool of political insurgency that is itself shaped by a colonialist and stereotypical understanding of the subaltern (Spivak 1988, 82). That same colonialist understanding employs a construction of gender in which the male is dominant, and the female passive (Spivak 1988, 82). While essentializing the agrarian movement as the image of an indigenous woman may have been a successful political tool, the feminization of indigeneity has also functioned as a tool by which the Mexican state committed violence against indigenous women and men.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the period directly preceding the formation of the EZLN, women's political participation in the agrarian movement was treated as abnormal, secondary, and symbolic. Women in the movement were only valuable to the extent that they could be stereotyped and presented to the public as silent and enduring indigenous subjects. It is within this context, and against the backdrop of the patriarchal ejido system of governance, that the Women's Revolutionary Law was formed.

#### **IV. Women's Revolutionary Law as a Challenge to Constructions of Indigenous Womanhood**

In the latter half of the 1980s, a clandestine organization that would later become the EZLN was beginning to organize amongst various peasant organizations. The political momentum following the reform of Article 27 presented the incipient EZLN with the challenge of maintaining

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<sup>7</sup> See: Stephen, Lynn. (2000). "The Construction of Indigenous Suspects: Militarization and the Gendered and Ethnic Dynamics of Human Rights Abuses in Southern Mexico." *American Ethnologist* 26(4):822-842.

its operations a secret from the Mexican government at the same time that it was experiencing a surge in its recruitment. To that end, EZLN movement leaders saw the value in recruiting women from the surrounding indigenous communities believing that women would be willing to guard the movement's secrecy if they were given a stake in its wellbeing (Stephen 2006, 164).

Starting in 1993, as part of its recruitment efforts aimed at women, the EZLN sent women members out into the various EZLN-affiliated communities with the task of organizing women's-only meetings (Rovira 2000, 72). There, the female EZLN members would discuss the importance of collective work and facilitate a discussion at the end of which the group would draft a list of women-centered needs. Afterwards, the female EZLN members collected the lists drafted by the various communities and presented them to the (mostly male) EZLN leadership for review. The leaders then consolidated and edited the lists into one document which was then distributed back to the communities for approval as the proposed Women's Revolutionary Law.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Major Ana María of the EZLN explains the process of drafting the Law to reporter Guiomar Rovira:

“Each place drew up a draft, then all the versions were attached and send back to each community. Then we explained it to them, ‘listen, we collected the opinions from all the *compañeras* [female comrades] and here are the laws...’ And we explained to them, along with the [EZLN] Committee, what each law meant. And they said, ‘no, you have to take that out, because it isn’t good for us...or we have to have this in too...’ They studied it again and deleted what they disagreed with and sent it back again and it came to them, and that’s how the law was established (Rovira 2000, 72).”

According to letters written by Subcomandante Marcos, the proposed Law was initially met with resistance from people both within the EZLN ranks and in the EZLN-affiliated communities. In one instance, after hearing the Law read aloud by a *compañera*, Subcomandante Marcos recalls

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<sup>8</sup> For the full text of the Women's Revolutionary Law, see Appendix A.

one of the committee representatives remarking that it was “good thing” his wife did not understand Spanish, implying that she would therefore not be able to read the Law for herself (Millán Moncayo 2006, 86; Rovira 2000, 74).

The testimonies of Subcomandante Marcos and Major Ana María demonstrate the cooperative effort behind the passage of the Law as well as the internal conflicts within the community over the rights of women and established gender roles. Major Ana María’s testimony further demonstrates that while women were given a space to voice their gender-specific needs, the mostly-male EZLN committee still exercised the discretion to edit and delete demands that they did not agree with.

In the 1990s, Marisa Belausteguigoitia collected documents related to early organizational efforts of women in the EZLN movement. One document stood out to Belausteguigoitia because it detailed a group of indigenous women’s demand for “the right to rest (Belausteguigoitia 2000, 82).” This group’s demand for a right to rest, and the fact that their demand never made it into the final version of the Women’s Revolutionary Law, has us consider to *whom* their demand was being made and why. With respect to the first consideration, we can interpret the Law as a set of demands made by indigenous women to the Mexican state *and* to the men in their communities.

The Law contains several demands that directly challenge traditional understandings of indigenous womanhood as they relate to marriage and childbirth, such as the Third<sup>9</sup> and Seventh<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Three: Women have the right to decide the number of children they have and care for.”

<sup>10</sup> “Seven: Women have the right to choose their partner and are not obliged to enter into marriage.”

demands. Other demands, such as the First,<sup>11</sup> Fourth,<sup>12</sup> and Ninth,<sup>13</sup> assert that women have a right to political participation without making their participation contingent upon their status as landowners. In doing so, these demands challenged the belief that women's political participation was the result of misfortune or that it was stigmatizing.

Though these demands represent positive efforts to ease gendered restrictions on women's behavior, we must bear in mind that the Law – a document that was edited and given final approval by men – represents not just a formal commitment to the rights of women but also a declaration about what aspects of indigenous womanhood can and cannot change. Women's demand for the right to rest is poignant because it implies that indigenous women felt overworked within their communities as a result of an unequal, gendered distribution of labor<sup>14</sup> and that their demand for a right to rest was an attempt to address the expectation that they constantly perform housework. That the male-dominated EZLN chose to omit it indicates that housework was still largely considered a duty for women. Thus, although the Law challenged some ideas about indigenous womanhood, in the process of being edited and approved by EZLN leadership, it also reinforced others.

## **V. The Situation of Indigenous Women Today**

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<sup>11</sup> “First: Women, regardless of their race, creed, color or political affiliation, have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in any way that their desire and capacity determine.”

<sup>12</sup> “Four: Women have the right to participate in the matters of the community and have charge if they are free and democratically elected.”

<sup>13</sup> “Nine: Women will be able to occupy positions of leadership in the organization and hold military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces.”

<sup>14</sup> Argentine women in Barbara Sutton's *Bodies in Crisis* report similar feelings of chronic tiredness and overwork resulting from the expectation that they constantly perform housework (Sutton 2010, 46).

By 2005, indigenous peasant women who became a part of the EZLN either as combatants or — as described by Subcomandante Marcos — “support networks,” made up about one third of the EZLN (Olivera 2005, 616). Through their affiliation with the EZLN, many women have learned to read and write, how to use weapons, and how to organize politically. In addition, several women have risen to high ranking military and political positions within the organization. The EZLN also makes an effort to spread its feminist message throughout the indigenous communities; their official radio station, for example, often discusses the provisions in the Women’s Revolutionary Law and plays music with feminist lyrics (*We are Equal* 2004). In *We are Equal: Zapatista Women Speak*, a documentary directed by the EZLN, several indigenous women in EZLN-affiliated villages are interviewed about how their lives have changed as a result of the Law. Generally, the women agree that there was no real justice available to them before 1994, when the EZLN and the Law debuted. They reported that men were able to hit women with impunity and that women did not have any authority they could seek out in times of need. One woman recalls that sometimes, if a woman chose to report a domestic violence dispute to her community, she would be fined along with her husband. The women also report a greater degree of agency in their movements, saying that as a result of the Law, men could no longer tell them to stay home or keep them from participating in the community meetings (*We are Equal* 2004). Despite these improvements, the women in the documentary are frank about asymmetrical gender roles that remain entrenched in the community:

“The men do not help us with our work. We wake up at three in the morning, sweeping the house and everything else. We make coffee, give some to the man, and then he leaves to go work in the fields. We stay at home to do other work: grind the corn to make tortillas and *pozol*; make food for our children; we go cut firewood if there is no firewood... We have so much work to do in the house; it’s like having two or three jobs all in one day. We wake up at three o’clock in the morning and sometimes we don’t go to bed until ten or eleven o’clock at night... then we have to get up to work again.”

In a statement reminiscent of Belausteguigoitia's observation of women being denied the right to rest, another woman laments that, unlike her husband who does not work on the weekends, she can never rest from her housework.

Indigenous women continue to face other forms of violence as well. A study conducted in 2012 about the prevalence and severity of intimate partner violence (IPV) in eight indigenous regions in Mexico found that 15 percent of indigenous women experienced regular, severe IPV and that the Los Altos de Chiapas region showed the greatest prevalence of IPV at 41.37 percent (Valdez-Santiago 2013, 54). Though women's perceptions about intimate partner violence have changed as a result of education and knowledge of the Women's Revolutionary Law, about 8 percent of women in Mexico's southernmost region – where the highest population of indigenous persons is concentrated – reported in 2015 that a man is justified in hitting his partner for any reasons related to her failure to carry out her duties.<sup>15</sup> Within that same report, 17 percent of women with no education reported that a man is justified in hitting his partner for any such reason, compared to the national average of about 6 percent. A lack of education affects indigenous women most profoundly: as of 2015, they had the lowest average amount of years in school in Mexico<sup>16</sup> and had an illiteracy rate of 29 percent – almost five times higher than the national average (“Encuesta Intercensal” 2015, 80). Furthermore, although rates of child marriage have dropped in indigenous communities as a result of the spread of the EZLN's message, in 2015 about 35 percent of

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<sup>15</sup> The women were presented with a list of six situations in which a man may justify hitting his partner and asked to select as many of the reasons they agreed justified a man's use of violence on his partner or to select “any of these reasons” as an option. The list of possible reasons is as follows: (1) if she leaves home without informing him; (2) if she fails to take care of the children; (3) if she argues with him; (4) if she denies him sex; (4) if she burns the food; (5) if she does not have the food ready; and (6) if she does not keep the house clean (“Mexico” 2015, 232).

<sup>16</sup> A 2015 intercensus survey conducted by the Mexican government found that on average, indigenous women completed about five years of school, about four years less than the national average of nine years (“Encuesta Intercensal” 2015, 79).

indigenous women reported having married before the age of 18, compared to 23 percent of non-indigenous women (“Mexico” 2015, 296).

Even within the formal EZLN ranks, obstacles remain to indigenous women’s emancipation. Women who become pregnant and decide to give birth are expected to leave the ranks of the EZLN in order to care for the baby. The same is not expected of men who father the children, however. Women also report that some of the men in the EZLN ranks exhibit violent behavior towards them and that complaints of sexual harassment or rape often go unpunished (Olivera 2005, 617). Furthermore, though women are now more likely to be involved in the decision-making process within their communities, they report that their freedom has been constrained in other ways because now they have to ask permission from their EZLN supervisors when they want to go somewhere (Olivera 2005, 621).

Though the Law has been beneficial to the situation of indigenous women in EZLN-affiliated communities, they continue to grapple with asymmetrical gender roles that make them responsible for an excessive amount of labor. Women are still largely construed as belonging in the domestic sphere, and the work they perform within this arena remains unrewarded and unassisted. Women’s subjugation in the domestic sphere is embodied as tiredness or exhaustion, yet they are denied the right to rest by the men in their communities. Women further experience the subjugation in the form of domestic violence, which is justified on the basis of women failing to perform a task associated with her domesticity (cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, providing sex). That women accept physical violence on these grounds indicates that they also to some degree believe in a construction of indigenous womanhood that is domestic and are thus victims of symbolic violence as well. At the same time, indigenous men and women operate within a structure that consistently fails to provide them with access to education and economic

opportunity. Though the Law may assert indigenous women's right to an education and to work, indigenous women cannot exercise these rights without the support of state institutions who control the production of knowledge and access to employment. This is stated succinctly by the women in

*We are Equal: Zapatista Women Speak:*

“We don't have a good life because women just stay at home and do our work. None of the women know where else to look for work: it's not like we're the rich people who can go and work in an office. Most women barely know how to read and write. A woman only knows a little about how to live...”

## **VI. Conclusion**

The indigenous woman as a construction can be at once empowering and oppressive. Historically, indigenous women have had their image as enduring, silent mothers used to the advantage of political organizations that attempted to speak for indigenous people as a whole. Though indigenous women may have benefited from this high degree of visibility in the sense that it drew attention to their plight and gave them some access to political participation, this construction was ultimately rooted in a colonialist logic that equated women and indigeneity with passivity. Though the EZLN and the Women's Revolutionary Law have both challenged this understanding of indigenous womanhood, they are both the products of the agrarian movements and the patriarchal system of ejido governance; as such, they both still to some degree reinforce traditional understandings of indigenous womanhood, especially at it relates to the gendered division of labor. In calling attention to the shortcomings of the EZLN and the Law, I do not wish to suggest that they have not made positive changes in the lives of indigenous women or that indigenous men are incapable of overcoming sexism. However, I believe that if we only cast the EZLN movement and its agenda on women's rights through a romanticized lens, then we effectively ignore the efforts indigenous women have made *and continue to make* to gain emancipation within their communities.

Furthermore, the recent announcement that María de Jesús Patricia Martínez (known as Marichuy) intends to run for the presidency of Mexico as the first indigenous woman invites us to consider the multiple dimensions of indigenous women's visibility and how that visibility can be a site of political emancipation and a source of violence. Marichuy, a native Nahuatl woman born in Tuxpan, Jalisco, was selected to represent the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) in the presidential election because of her long history of participation in the CNI. At her political rallies, Marichuy highlighted her commitment to women's rights and exclusively opened the stage to indigenous women activists and performers (Castellanos 2017). Marichuy, a traditional herbalist, states that because women experience state and interpersonal violence the deepest, they are the best poised to "heal" Mexico (Tucker 2017). By invoking the language of "healing" and highlighting her experience as a traditional herbalist, Marichuy is also deliberately employing a construction of indigenous womanhood for political means. This construction differs from the construction of the 1980s because it recasts indigenous women as dynamic and capable of action. More importantly, it is a construction created by indigenous women themselves, and not one that was imposed upon them.

## Appendix A: Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law<sup>17</sup>

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

**First:** Women, regardless of their race, creed, color or political affiliation, have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in any way that their desire and capacity determine.

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

**Third:** Women have the right to decide the number of children they have and care for.

**Fourth:** Women have the right to participate in the matters of the community and have charge if they are free and democratically elected.

**Fifth:** Women and their children have the right to primary attention in their health and nutrition.

**Sixth:** Women have the right to education.

**Seventh:** Women have the right to choose their partner and are not obliged to enter into marriage.

**Eighth:** Women have the right to be free of violence from both relatives and strangers. Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.

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

**Tenth:** Women will have all the rights and obligations which the revolutionary laws and regulations give.

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<sup>17</sup> Translation from: Hansen, Devon, and Laura Ryan. 2007. "Teaching Women in the Zapatista Movement: Gender, Health, and Resistance." *World History Connected* 4:17.

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