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March 11, 2004
HST 351
Professor Rector
On the early morning of January 1, 1994 a rebellion broke out in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. A rebellion group made up of indigenous people calling themselves Zapatistas marched into and took over cities in Chiapas and declared war on the Mexican government. Their objectives were work, land food, housing, education, health, independence, peace, freedom, justice and democracy. Although this uprising is known by most as an indigenous rebellion one it was also a women’s rebellion. Many of the objectives that for which the Zapatista’s were rebelling women integrated their issues. The women of Chiapas had as much reason to fight for as the men but their reasons for doing so and the role they played in the EZLN or the Zapatista Army for National Liberation is overlooked.

The uprising itself made it quite clear to the world that something was terribly wrong in Chiapas, Mexico. Why else would something like this happen? The government was failing its people in many ways and the objectives of the Zapatistas clarified them. If one is to look at the economic conditions under which many indigenous communities in Chiapas lived before the rebellion the failures of the Mexican government is crystal clear.

The majority of indigenous communities were living in poverty. They were the poorest of the poor of their country. The average poor Mexican was better off then the average poor indigenous person. They lacked adequate housing. In places where the majority of the population was indigenous there was a lack of electricity and lack of running water. Altamirano is an example of one of those places. There 74.2% lacked electricity and 64.3% lacked running water compared to San Cristóbal de las Casas where the majority were not indigenous, 17.3% lacked electricity and 31.1% lacked running
water. The work many of them did which paid little did not help to the situation. 80% of the indigenous population made less then 10 pesos a day.

Two other signs of extreme poverty the indigenous population of Chiapas were living under were the lack of adequate healthcare and malnutrition. Many people died of curable diseases every year. There were either no doctors to attend patients, or doctors had no medicine to give to patients or neither of the two. As for malnutrition 67% of the indigenous populations were recognized as malnourished and of that 67%, 33% were extremely malnourished.

All the indigenous people suffered physically, emotionally, and psychologically from living under such terrible conditions. The signing of NAFTA did not help the situation but added to the fears of many indigenous people. They saw NAFTA as a threat and why not? This trade agreement led former president Salinas to reform the constitution’s article 27 opening up community owned land to U.S agriculture businesses in order to serve the objectives of NAFTA instead of the people.

In addition to suffering for economic conditions women suffered in other ways. Women lived under strict patriarchal society. They were controlled by their fathers or husband and were treated as second-class citizens by them. Women were seen as slaves or property that could be bought and sold. The patriarchal society limited women from receiving a formal education. Formal educational opportunities were given to boys. So it was boys who were more likely to learn to read and speak Spanish. Women had “no need” to learn Spanish and therefore were raised monolingual. In being raised in such a way many women knew that there existed little opportunities for them to support themselves because of the language barrier. In addition to the language barrier women
had to overcome two more barriers for being indigenous, the culture barrier and caste discrimination.⁹

Despite all the barriers women faced, many of them left their towns for the Lancandón Jungle. This area was being encouraged by the Mexican government to be settled.¹⁰ These women moved there in search of more independence and equality then back home. What they found was that the jungle offered a different society. One in which the traditional ties of men and women were cut. The variety of different cultures that migrated there created a society that spoke multi different languages. What happened a lot of times are that when women and men married who spoke different languages the women learned the language of her husband. It was by these cases that many women became bilingual. The language skills that countless of women acquired were critical in the Zapatista movement.¹¹

The ability to speak many languages allowed women to communicate more with the people who lived around them. Many indigenous women had contact with refugee Guatemalan women, many of whom helped create a vision to organize and change their situation and of their people. A lot were also opened to this vision through peasant organizations they belonged to.¹² It was with the help of these two cases that women began to organize and integrate themselves with their men to form the EZLN or the Zapatista Army for National Liberation. They made up one third of the combatants and half the base support for the EZLN. Those women who served in the military (they were not forced to serve) were taught how to read, write and to speak Spanish in order to be able to communicate with the outside world. They were also trained to handle weapons
and how to teach others to do so as well. Women agreed not to have children while serving and if they did they had to drop out of the military.13

Major Ana Maria (one of the major cities San Cristóbal de las Casas, taken over on the first day of the rebellion was lead by this woman) was one of those brave women who have put aside their fears for what they have been denied for so long by their government and even their own people. The word of one militant woman shows just how brave these women were. She said “I am not afraid to die. A bullet is fast. We have nothing to lose by fighting for change.” For women living under conditions where women nursed their babies until their breast dried up, people died of curable diseases, hunger, and murder was more then enough.14

Although women fought for the same objectives as the indigenous men they had additional demands. These demands came to be known as the Revolutionary Women’s Law. These demands were for all women. They all had the rights for which the demands consisted of. These demands consisted of women’s right participate in the revolutionary struggle, the right to work and earn a fair salary, the right to choose the number of children they want to have, the right to participate and take office in their communities, the right to health care and basic nutrition, the right to education, the right to choose who to marry (ban on forced marriages), to occupy leadership positions in the military and receive military ranks.15

These laws were declared on the same day the rebellion began. They were included in a 20-page booklet released by the Zapatistas titled “El despertador Mexicano.” There is no doubt that what the Zapatistas were including its women, but just how included were women and how important were the demands of women in reality?
Paloma an activist for the Women’s Group of San Cristóbal de las Casas commented regarding the inclusion of women saying “The EZLN is not against working with women but I think it has been careless about working with women.” One of the ways that the EZLN has been careless in working with women is in its failure to effectively include women into their meetings. Many women had to demand that public meeting not be held in Spanish because the majority of women did not speak it. This is something that the EZLN could have taken into account in the first place. Women also demanded that because of the language barrier the Revolutionary Women’s Law be translated so that women learn their rights even just know that these laws exist.

Paloma went on and commented on her feelings regarding the importance of the issues of women for the EZLN by stating that “the topic of women is always treated as less important than other topics.” The placement of the Revolutionary Women’s Law themselves say a lot of their importance. They are found on the last two pages of the booklet. This makes it seem that although women were included their demands were not top priority.

Women played a critical role in this rebellion but it seems that it is looked over. These women had more reasons to fight for then their men though their reasons were lost in mist of things. On March 8, 1994, the first round of negotiations for peace and reconciliation took place in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Thirty-four demands were listed and number 29 addressed those of women in general. It did not include three of the original demands stated in the Revolutionary Women’s Law, the right to choose who to marry (or ban on forced marriages), the right to hold office in their communities and severe punishments for mistreatment of women. The demands involved the nation as a
whole but it failed to incorporate women into it. It is as though the Zapatistas had given in and their own fears of loosing their patriarchal society. Although the Zapatistas wanted to improve the lives of the indigenous people they wanted to do so by maintaining patriarchal and traditional ties.\textsuperscript{21} The Zapatistas declared on January 1, 1994 that they wanted freedom, justice and democracy for all indigenous people. I guess it was too good to be true.

\textsuperscript{1}Tom Barry, Zapata’s Revenge: Free Trade and the Farm Crisis in Mexico (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 175.


\textsuperscript{3} Barry, 175.


\textsuperscript{5} Kampwrith, 87.


\textsuperscript{7} Kampwrith, 88.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 88.

\textsuperscript{9} John Ross, Rebellion from the Roots, Indian Uprising in Chiapas (Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995), 289.

\textsuperscript{10} Kampwrith, 90.

\textsuperscript{11} Ross, 289. and Kampwrith, 91.

\textsuperscript{12} Kampwrith, 105.


\textsuperscript{14} Glusker, 549.

\textsuperscript{15} Kampwrith, 112-113.

\textsuperscript{16} Kampwrith, 114.

\textsuperscript{17} Cuninghame and Corona

\textsuperscript{18} Kampwrith, 114.
19 Kampwrith, 113.

21 Belausteguigoitia, 86-87.
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