

Them and Us VII. The Smallest of them All 3: The Compañeras. The Long Path of the Zapatistas

March 1, 2013

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VII.- The Smallest of them All 3.

3.- The Compañeras. The long path of the Zapatistas.

February 2013.

NOTE: Below are fragments of the Zapatista women's "sharing," which form part of the notebook "Women's Participation in Autonomous Government." In these extracts, the *compañeras* talk about how they see their own history of struggle as women, and, along the way, shatter some of the racist, sexist, anti-zapatista ideas that people across the political spectrum hold about women, about indigenous women and about Zapatista women.

Good morning everyone. My name is Guadalupe, from the pueblo Galilea, in the Monterrey region. As you have heard, there are regions that don't have an autonomous municipality, and I come from one of those. My cargo^[1] is education promoter, and I represent Caracol II "Resistance and Rebellion for Humanity" of the Altos [highlands] zone of Chiapas. To start I am going to give you a small introduction to the subject.

We know that in the beginning of life, women had a very important role in society, among the peoples, in the tribes. Women did not live like we live now; they were respected, they had the most important role with regard to the conservation of the family, they were respected because they gave life, just like now we respect the mother earth because she gives us life. In that time, women had a very important role, but this changed over time with the arrival of private property.

When private property was established, women were relegated to another level, and what we call "patriarchy" began by dispossessing women of their rights and looting the earth itself. So it was when private property began that men began to rule. We know that with private property came three great evils: the exploitation of all of us – men and women – but more so of women; as women we are also exploited by the neoliberal system. We also know that with this came men's oppression of women, just for being women. And as women we also in that time suffered discrimination for being indigenous. So we have these three great evils; there are others, but we are not talking about those right now.

For those of us in the organization [EZLN], lacking so many rights as women, we saw that it was necessary to fight for equality between men and women, and that is how our Women's Revolutionary Law was written. Here in the Altos Zone perhaps we have not made great advances; they have been small advances, slow ones, but we are advancing compañeras and compañeros.

So we're going to talk here about how we have advanced in the different levels, the different areas, and the different places where we work. We are also going to talk about how we, men and women, analyzed the Revolutionary Law before we came here; we analyzed how we are doing on each of the points of the Women's Revolutionary Law, so we're going to talk about that too. It is very important that not only women participate in this analysis, but that men also participate, in order to hear what we think, what

we say. Because if we are talking about a revolutionary struggle, a revolutionary struggle isn't made only by men nor only by women, it is the work of everyone, it is the work of the people and as people we are children (niños and niñas), men, women, young people (jóvenes and jóvenes), adults, and elderly (ancianos and ancianas). We all have a place in this struggle and that is why we all need to participate in this analysis and the work that is pending.

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Compañeros, compañeras, my name is **Eloísa**, of the pueblo Alemania, San Pedro Michoacán municipality, I was a member of the Junta de Buen Gobierno [Good Government Council], of the Caracol I "Mother of the caracoles. Sea of our dreams." We are going to talk a bit about the subject of the compañeras, and my job is to talk about the compañeras' participation before 94 and a little about how we began to advance after 94.

So as we talked about in our zone, at the beginning we as compañeras did not participate, our compañeras from before did not have this idea that we could participate. We had the thought or idea that we women were only good for taking care of the home or the children or for cooking; maybe it was that same capitalist ignorance that put that idea in our heads. But we as women were also afraid that we weren't able to do things outside of the home, nor were the compañeros willing to allow that space.

Just as we didn't have the freedom to participate, to speak, we also thought that men were worth more than we were. When we were under our parents dominion, they did not give us the freedom to leave home, machismo was very strong then. Maybe the compañeros were like that not because they wanted to be, but because ideas of capitalism or of the system had also penetrated their thinking. Also the compañeros are not accustomed to doing the tasks of the household, taking care of the children, washing clothes, and cooking food, and so it is difficult for them, it is hard for them to take care of the children so that their compañeras can leave to do their work.

As I said before, the compañeras who live under our parents dominion or still live with our parents have this mode of respect, if our parents say we can work, then we go where we want to work. But if our parents say you're not going, as they sometimes do, well sometimes we obey, sometimes we have it in our heads that we must respect our parents' wishes. So there are times that our parents don't let us go, or it has also happened that they think that if they let their daughters leave home then instead of going to our assigned work, we are going to do other things, things that will later get our parents into problems, and they will have to take responsibility for fixing our problems as women. This is sometimes what our parents or our husbands think, for those who are already married, this is what is sometimes going through their minds.

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Compañeros and compañeras, good afternoon to all of you present here today. My name is **Andrea**, from the pueblo of San Manuel, municipality Francisco Gómez of Caracol III "La Garrucha." We come as representatives of the compañeras of the zone of Garrucha, to share what we are able to; we don't bring very many words, as the great majority of us speak Tzeltal.

I am going to start with what we know about how the compañeras suffered before 94. There were many humiliations, mistreatments, and rapes, but the government didn't care about this, its work was to destroy us as women. They didn't care if a woman was sick or asking for help, none of that mattered to them.

But we as women, today, we can't let that happen to us now, we must go forward. In those days we suffered, as the other compañeras have commented. In those days when there were so many humiliations, what did the bad government and the landowners do? They didn't concern themselves with the compañeras.

What did the landowners do? They had the compañeros in peonage, and the compañeras had to get up very early to work and then the poor women had to continue working alongside the men. There was much slavery, but compañeros we don't want this anymore, that is why we began to participate, as compañeras. In those days we didn't participate, they had us as if we were blind, mute. What we want now is for our autonomy to function, for women to participate, to not stay behind. We will continue to go forward so that the bad government can see that we will not let them exploit us as they did our ancestors. We don't want that anymore.

It wasn't until the year 94 that we knew about the Women's Law. It is so good, compañeros, that this law existed, that we have been able to participate. From that year forward, there have been mobilizations where the compañeras have participated, for example, in the National Referendum women participated. I was present at that time, I was 14 years old and I was there for the National Referendum. I didn't know very well how to participate or to speak, but I did what I could compañeras.

Women have struggled, have demonstrated their capacity for struggle, and the government now realizes that women won't give up either, they will keep going. And now, as I said, we want our autonomy to function. Now that we have rights as women, what we are going to do is build, do our work; it is now our obligation, as they say, to keep going.

So a question for those of us who are present here, maybe for one of the compañeras that follows me: do you know who made the Revolutionary Law? If someone wants to answer they can, because someone fought for this law and defended us. Who was it that fought for us compañeras? It was Comandanta Ramona, she made this effort for us. She didn't know how to read or write, nor did she speak Spanish. So why don't we, compañeras, make this same effort? She, who already made this effort, is our example. She is the example that we are going to follow going forward in our work, to demonstrate what we know in our organization.

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*It is my job to represent the compañeras who are going to participate on the subject of women, there are 5 compañeras who are going to participate. Good afternoon to everyone. My name is **Claudia** and I come from the Caracol IV of Morelia. I am one of the bases of support from the pueblo Alemania, region Independencia, autonomous municipality "17 de Noviembre". I am going to read a short introduction before entering our sub-themes. I am going to read the text, because if I just say it, being up here in front, I'm going to forget what I want to say.*

Before, a long time ago, we suffered mistreatment, discrimination, and inequality in the home and in the community. We always suffered, they told us that we were mere objects, that we weren't good for anything, because that is what our grandmothers had taught us. They only taught us to work in the house, in the field, to take care of the children and the animals, and to serve our husbands.

We did not have the opportunity to go to school, that's why we do not know how to read or write, much less speak Spanish. They told us that women do not have the right to participate or to complain. We didn't know how to defend ourselves, nor did we know what rights were. That's how our grandmothers were educated by their bosses who were the ranchers.

Some of us still today have this idea that we must only work in the house, because that suffering has continued to imprison us in that idea even now, But after December of 1994, the autonomous municipalities were formed and there is where we began to participate, to learn how to do this work,

thanks to our organization which gave us a space for our participation as compañeras, but also thanks to our compañeros, to our parents who began to understand that we have a right to do this kind of work.

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Compañera Ana. It is our turn again, the Zona Norte, the participants who are going to speak on the themes that we analyzed in our Caracol are here. I am going to begin with an introduction.

Many years ago there was equality between men and women, because there wasn't one who was more important than the other. Inequality began little by little with the division of labor, when the men became those who went to the field to cultivate food, went hunting to complement our food supply, and women stayed in the house to do domestic work, as well as the weaving and spinning of clothes and the making of kitchen utensils like pots, glasses, clay plates. Later another division of work arose when some people began to work in livestock. Cattle began to serve as a form of money, they were used as exchange. With time this activity became the most important, even more so when the bourgeoisie arose, who dedicated themselves to buying and selling in order to accumulate profits. All of this work was done by men, and that is why it is men who rule the family, because only the man earned money for family expenses, and the work of women was not recognized as important. That's why women were viewed as less, weak, incapable of work.

That was the custom, the way of life the Spanish brought when they came to conquer our peoples, as we said before, it was the friars who educated and instructed us in their customs and knowledges. From that point on they taught us that women had to serve men and pay attention to their orders, that women must cover their heads with a veil when they go to church, and that a woman shouldn't let her gaze wander just anywhere, she must keep her head down. It was believed that it was women who make men sin, and that is why the church did not permit women to go to school, much less occupy cargos.

We as indigenous peoples adopted as a culture the way that the Spanish treated their women, that is why inequality between men and women arose in our communities and continues to this day. These are examples:

Women were not allowed to go to school, and if a young girl left to study somewhere she was looked upon badly by the people in the communities. Little girls weren't allowed to play with little boys, or to touch their toys. The only work women were to do was in the kitchen and raising children. Young single women did not have the freedom even to walk around the community or in the city, they had to be shut up in their house, and when they got married they were exchanged for alcohol or other goods without even giving their word as to if they were in agreement or not, because they did not have the right to choose their spouse. Once they were married they could not go anywhere alone or talk to other people, especially men. Women were mistreated by their husbands and there was no concern of justice, these mistreatments happened mostly when men were drinking. Women had to live their whole lives like that, in suffering and abuse.

Another thing that mothers did was instruct their daughters how to serve food to their brothers, so that later on they would live well with their husband and not be mistreated. It was believed that the reason for mistreatment was that the woman did not learn to serve her husband and do everything he said.

But our grandfathers and grandmothers also had good customs that we continue to practice today. They did not worry much when someone was sick, because they knew medicinal plants and they knew how to take care of their health. They didn't worry about lack of money because they cultivated everything they needed to feed themselves. That's why women were strong, they were workers, they made their own clothes, calhidra [lime], and even though they didn't know their rights, they could go

forward.

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(To be continued...)

I testify.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos.

Mexico, February 2013.

Watch and listen to the videos that accompany this text:

As this is about women, here Violeta Parra sings “[Arauco tiene una pena.](#)” 50 years after this voice, the Mapuche People continue to resist and transform this shame into rage.

Audios and Images from the gathering “[La Comandanta Ramona and the Zapatistas,](#)” celebrated in Zapatistas lands in December of 2007. In one part, our compañera Comandanta Susana remembers Comandanta Ramona, deceased in January of 2006.

[Message from the Zapatista compañeras to the compañeras of the world,](#) in December of 2006. At minute 2:22 the compañera says, “We don’t need a professional to come tell us how we should live.”