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Abstract: This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico from 2005-2007 and explores the experiences of Zapatista women during the period of autonomy. Despite the early attention paid by the Zapatista movement to gender inequality, a gap remains between discourse and lived experiences. I have identified women's participation within this gap as a process I am calling gendered autonomy, a sociological concept through which we can understand women's work in autonomy building.

### ***The First Shots***

Dawn was yet to break the thick, cold fog that spent the night draped over the vast and rugged mountains of Chiapas. Down in town, New Year's Eve partygoers finally slept. Among them were the business elite and government officials who spent the night indulging in champagne and caviar as they celebrated the signing of NAFTA, the trade agreement that TV commercials claimed would "bring Mexico into the first world." Meanwhile, the poorest of Mexico's poor, the indigenous men and women of Chiapas, did not sleep. In the dark, early hours of January 1, 1994, thousands of indigenous peasants began the long and quiet march from their forgotten communities in the mountains and jungles to the main cities and towns of Chiapas. Their faces covered by bandanas and ski masks, armed with AK-47s, fake wooden rifles and a powerful declaration of war, the Zapatistas "fired the first shots of a rebellion consciously aimed at the new world order"(Kopkind 1994: 1). A third of these soldiers were women.

In a desperate attempt to maintain an image of a stable democratic nation prepared to welcome the foreign investment called for by NAFTA, the Mexican

government sent over one-fifth of its military to Chiapas, but failed to render the indigenous guerrillas invisible once again. Twelve days of fighting between the Mexican federal army and the Zapatista army, the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), ended in a ceasefire, and by virtually all accounts it was the Zapatistas who ultimately succeeded, as they unexpectedly drew the world's attention towards the roots of their rebellion. They would later be touted for everything from their use of the internet to their claims for autonomy, but perhaps one of the most celebrated aspects of the movement has been the movement's attention to the plight of indigenous women. This paper explores the ways in which women have participated in Zapatista processes and how in the gap between discourse and practice, they are creating their own experiences of autonomy.

### ***Zapatista Power and Gender Justice***

“The first EZLN uprising was in March of 1993, and was headed by the Zapatista women. There were no losses, and they won” (Subcomandante Marcos in a press release to *La Jornada* 1996, <http://www.bibliotecas.tv/chiapas/ene94/26ene94.html>).

The EZLN's recognition of the experiences of injustice and repression suffered by indigenous women was made known on the morning of the Zapatista uprising, with the release of the second official Zapatista declaration entitled “The Revolutionary Women's Law”. This law was revealed in the first EZLN publication, *El Despertador Mexicano*, which was distributed in all the towns and municipalities seized by the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico on January 1, 1994. The law outlines ten demands regarding women's rights to participate in all roles of revolutionary struggle, to work and receive a just salary, to decide the number of children they bear, to participate and hold offices in community affairs, to primary consideration in the healthcare of themselves

and their children, to receive all levels of education, to choose who and if they marry, to not be abused, and to receive all the rights and duties of Revolutionary Laws and Regulations. This law sought to respond to the myriad problems experienced by indigenous women in Chiapas: some of the highest maternal mortality rates in the Western World, rivaling those of Sub-Saharan Africa, malnutrition, illness and domestic violence affects more women than there are statistics to show, and while 50.1% of women in Chiapas are illiterate, in many municipalities this number is over 70% (INEGI 2000). This Revolutionary Women's Law clearly distinguished the EZLN as "the first guerrilla movement in Latin America to advocate and prioritize gender demands within their own political agenda" (Hernandez 2008:3), and it still remains the only.

While the Zapatista movement has all but faded from the international spotlight (a phenomenon in of itself relevant to discussions of power and justice in the world system), indigenous autonomy as practiced by the Zapatistas offers an important opportunity to consider women's experiences with community based development couched in anticapitalist, antistaxist, antiracist discourse. As with most social movements, the gap between the rhetoric and reality is wide, and I find the places in between quite interesting. In learning about Zapatista women's experiences in the age of autonomy, I came to see some of the overlooked processes by which the egalitarian and revolutionary agenda proposed by the EZLN is being brought to life not through Zapatista structures or discourse, but through the collective actions of Zapatista women working outside of said structures and discourse. While I was initially disheartened to see Zapatista autonomous governing bodies and practices dominated by men, I also learned that despite serious contradictions and limitations, Zapatista women are bridging the gap between Zapatista

rhetoric and reality through their active participation in the creation of what I see as *gendered autonomy*.

Since the day of the uprising, Zapatista men have been internationally vocal (and celebrated) in their claims for universal rights and privileges as Mexican citizens and indigenous peoples, but Zapatista women have struggled to remind their compañeros, and the world, that the same egalitarian discourse of human rights extends to indigenous women. In their increased rejections of forced marriage, spousal and child abuse, alcoholism, and male limitations on female participation in various activities, Zapatista women are often accused of “trying to change the indigenous way of life.” Some women respond that they are not changing indigenous ways but reclaiming traditional values that have been forgotten, like the notion of gender complementarity. When they are accused of being co-opted by first world, mestiza, urban, white, western or any other kind of non-indigenous feminism, many remind each other and their male counterparts that the rights they are fighting for are rights they have always had. According to Christine Eber’s extensive fieldwork in Chiapas, many indigenous elders in the highlands, men and women alike, say that “relations between spouses should mirror the complementary, reciprocal, and respectful relations that exist between the Earth and other spiritual beings” (1999: 8). However, as both Eber’s work and my own reveal, “despite continued belief in the ‘rightness’ of a way of life based on the reciprocity with spiritual beings [and] gender complementarity ... the reality of life in Chiapas often collides with these ideas” (Eber 1999: 8). While I have seen some of the contradictions between what Eber calls a belief in a way of life and a reality of life, I would suggest viewing the relationship between rhetoric and reality in the lives of indigenous women of Chiapas as a chasm

rather than a collision. Though it is wide and deep, it is being bridged by women who are rejecting traditions they find oppressive and reclaiming traditions they find empowering.

As was explained by a group of indigenous women in their notes from the workshop titled *The Rights of Women in Our Customs and Traditions*, “When it is not the will of a woman to get married, there is quarreling and the man more easily harasses the woman” (workshop organized in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, May 19-20, 1994). I have spoken with many indigenous men and women about the tradition in indigenous communities by which young women are forced to marry a partner, usually of their father’s choosing, against their will. In most cases the father is courted by the suitor often with gifts of alcohol, the rampant consumption of which is directly linked to alarming rates of spousal and child abuse in indigenous communities. I have even heard it referred to as “the indigenous custom of beating one’s wife,” and when a woman I know was in the hospital suffering life-threatening damages to her internal organs from being abused by her alcoholic husband, she says she was referred to by the mestizo hospital staff never by her name, but only as “another indigenous woman dying from being beaten”. In some of the most extreme cases of forced or arranged marriages I have heard of firsthand, girls as young as twelve have been kidnapped from their family homes by the boy or man who wants to marry them and taken to another community. While many girls have tried to escape such arranged marriages and the rapes that usually accompany them by running away, most must marry, usually against their will.

In autonomous Zapatista communities, however, forced marriage or the “bride petition” as anthropologists refer to it, (Eber and Kovic 2004; Rus et al 2003) is

becoming less and less common. Community members claim that there are now many women who have married men of their own choosing. In theory, Zapatista women are legally protected in their decision to reject suitors and choose mates by the seventh demand of The Women's Revolutionary Law which states that "Women have the right to select their partner and are not to be forced to marry" (Appendix 1). However, given the limited enforcement and knowledge of the law, changes in marital arrangements would be better attributed to another source. Analysis of other Latin American revolutions suggests that shifts in marital and childbearing traditions are often supported during the period of guerrilla organizing, a time during which pregnancy is discouraged and marriages are likely not carried out in the ways they historically were- given the demands of guerrilla life, limited resources and increased female autonomy due to their status as soldiers. Whether or not these changes spill over into the revolutionary period often depends on the culture into which the movement emerges, as well as the collective efforts of women. Given the unprecedented levels of female participation in the EZLN period of guerrilla organizing, there are more female former guerrillas living in Chiapas than in other regions of revolution, and their experiences of and visions for post-guerrilla life are undoubtedly shaping their communities.

It was evident in my conversations with Zapatista women that not only are they undoing the tradition of forced marriage, marriage as a tradition may be changing altogether, as I have met many women in Zapatista communities who have chosen to remain single well into their twenties, a marked shift from virtually universal rates of marriage amongst even teenaged women in other indigenous communities. A conversation with a young woman working at a Zapatista cooperative turned to the

question of marriage, first her asking me if I was married and then me asking her. She was 21, which she said used to be considered old for marriage in her community, but she said that she knows she is young and that she would wait “as long as she had to,” maybe not marrying ever.

Zapatista women who have not been forced to marry and have exercised their right to choose their own marital partner are likely to experience different power relations in their homes than women who have not. This was highlighted during my discussions with Martha Chinin Santiago, president of one of the largest associations of indigenous women’s cooperatives in Chiapas. Martha’s experiences as a Tzetzal<sup>1</sup> woman who has worked to organize hundreds of indigenous women weavers over a period of nearly thirty years have given her insight into many aspects of women weavers’ lives, including marriage. Martha cites changes in marital traditions as one of the most transformative experiences for indigenous women, as the way in which a woman is married has far reaching impacts on virtually all other areas of her life. She says over the years she has invited hundreds and hundreds of women weavers to participate in weaving cooperatives, many of whom have declined saying only “I cannot. My husband will not give me permission.”

Martha says that this is a less common response in Zapatista communities where more and more women have partners they wanted to marry, or they haven’t married at all. In the cases of “freely” married women, Martha claims they express a different negotiating ability with their partners than women who were forced to marry. This is not

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<sup>1</sup> Tzetzal is the most widely spoken Indigenous language in all of Chiapas and is also used to refer to the ethnic affiliation of its speakers.

to say that Zapatista women do not face the same cultural gender norms that associate women with the home and discourage female participation in public political, economic, and social activities, because they clearly do. But it is to say that these women are often able to interact differently with their partners as they begin to address these issues because these women are likely to have begun their marital relations on more (though not entirely) equal terms. It seems to follow that marrying a partner by mutual choice would likely allow for more conversations about what is expected from the other. For example, Martha told me that Zapatista women who do not already participate in weaving cooperatives but intend to are likely to tell their (potential) husbands this while they are still courting. She says that the women who have navigated this with their male partners beforehand are the married women who enter the cooperative experience with the most freedom and confidence.

Similarly, Zapatista women are more likely than their non-Zapatista counterparts to know something about collective work and feel supported in their commitment to it by their fellow community members, as now the structure of autonomous Zapatista communities depends on it. The women's responses to my question highlighted how valued collective work is in autonomous communities, particularly in the case of the work of women:

It is the women who work collectively to care for the animals, to make and sell their weavings. It is the women who are organizing into more and more cooperatives, with many members. They are learning what it means to work collectively, and though it is hard sometimes, they are learning little by little. And in this way they continue the struggle, the women in our communities continue to resist.



Without any government aid and ever decreasing international support, the community of *Oventic* works collectively to run a large clinic (where I have seen complicated surgeries performed), a primary and secondary school, (with a university ready to break ground) a horticulture and animal cooperative, a coffee cooperative, a leather cooperative and two weaving cooperatives.

My discussions with Martha led me to realize just how central the experience of working in a women's cooperative is to the process of *gendered autonomy* and the women's empowerment that accompanies it. Weaving is a tradition that has been actively chosen by many Zapatista women, as indigenous women who are establishing their right to choose to embrace the traditions they appreciate and reject those they do not. This is expressed by Maria, a Tzotzil<sup>2</sup> mother of seven who told to me, "I want to be able to pass on the ways of our ancestors, like weaving and our language, to my daughters. But also, I should be able to live as a woman in the twenty-first century".

While weaving itself is a deeply rooted and gendered indigenous tradition that women of this region have participated in for centuries, weaving as an economic practice does not however share the same long history, as women have only recently<sup>3</sup> introduced their products into the market for sale. And as this economic and cultural tradition continues to develop, so too are the ways in which women are creating it. In most cases, women who are selling their goods are doing so either as individual ambulatory vendors in larger towns, in unregulated artisan marketplaces set up in the same towns, or in women's weaving cooperatives in town and/or in their communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Tzotzil is the most commonly spoken Indigenous language of the highlands and is also used to refer to the ethnic affiliation of its speakers.

<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested to me by many local women, including Martha, that the mass selling of women's woven goods began to become common practice in Chiapas in the early eighties.

To help me better understand the experience of working in a weaving cooperative, Martha encouraged me to notice the differences between the working practices of weavers who work in organized cooperatives as compared to those who sell their goods in the streets or marketplace. My observations of the women who work in the streets and marketplaces revealed that these women are inherently in competition with one another, as the woman who offers her goods at a lower price will likely garner the sale over the women who have set their prices higher. I have repeatedly seen this competition played out in a situation in which one woman is attempting to make a sale, say to a group of tourists, and just as she has reached agreement with them on a price for her items, another woman approaches and offers to sell the same merchandise for less. In this way, these women are working in an environment in which every woman is out for herself and selling becomes a race to the bottom of an unfixing pricing system. This sharply contrasts with the experience in cooperatives where women are not competing with one another and instead, their economic successes depend on and are shared by the group, who determine and protect fair prices for their products based on informed knowledge about the economic value of their labor. I have seen what happens at the end of the day when a woman who sells in the street or the market has not yet made a sale and she has yet to buy the tortillas for her children before dinner: she will often sell one of her goods, say a hand-woven blouse, for less than it cost her to buy the materials with which she made it out of desperation for cash. These women who sell independently do not always know how to determine the value of their goods, and they may find themselves trapped in a cycle of losing money instead of making a profit, unlike women in cooperatives who

learn to set prices based on costs of materials and labor time, and have the strength of collective work to ensure the prices they ask are the prices that are paid.

Women who weave in cooperatives are empowered by the experience of learning the value of their work and selling their products based on the knowledge of their worth. This empowerment is greatly affected by the often-unfamiliar experience of weaving alongside a group of other women. The group dynamic of indigenous women's weaving cooperatives is phenomenal in the sense that women of different regions, different ages, different religious and political backgrounds, who often speak different languages, all come to meet in a certain space at a certain time to work together. Martha described the hesitation with which many women approach this type of work saying "most often, in the case of adult women, these are weavers who are very accustomed to working on their weavings alone in their homes, or maybe with one other woman from their family." She explained to me that after women overcome the often difficult experience of securing their ability to leave home to work in the cooperative space (providing for childcare, transportation costs, time for completion of other responsibilities), they then confront the initial discomfort of weaving in a new and communal environment.

Martha says "Many women are very shy when they first come to the cooperative. They usually come because another woman has told them of the benefits of working in a cooperative, but it is difficult for them to see these benefits in their first days of weaving for the cooperative". She says that in the beginning many women tell her that they are too nervous or uncomfortable to weave with the others. She says that these women say things to her like: "Martha, I am afraid to make mistakes with the others watching me."

“I don’t know how to weave like she does.” “I do not speak Spanish like the others.” “I am not from the same community as the others.” Martha says that when a new woman joins a cooperative it is an important time for all the women, as it is the group’s responsibility to reassure a newcomer that she is welcome and will learn how to enjoy the work as the others have. This often leads to women sharing their own stories in order to make one another comfortable. Martha says that when a newcomer is hesitant to participate, some of the women who have worked in the cooperative longer will reach out to her, telling her that they too were nervous at first, that they didn’t know Spanish either and learned it with each other. The elders will remind her of what women who worked in cooperatives had to overcome in decades past, telling the stories of those who had to lie to and sneak away from their drunken and abusive husbands, only to face more harassment from men in the streets who knew the women were involved in a cooperative. And the elders will learn the stories of the younger women who have decided not to marry or have married their partners out of love and are able to work with their husbands so they may come to the cooperative with the support of their families and their communities.

***“And They Will Live In The Example of Their Mothers”***

While weaving cooperatives are established to meet a practical economic need, the latent implications of women coming together to work in such a way is a reflection of a newly emerging culture of gender- and of resistance to capitalism and even racism. This process has been obscured by existing literature which seeks to define women’s participation in terms of feminism, a framing which does not always allow for local

context and women's own perceptions of their realities. Similarly, Zapatista women's lived experiences have been overlooked by literature which celebrates Zapatista rhetoric about gender equality without investigating realities in Zapatista communities. Despite official Zapatista declarations of desires for revolutionized roles for women in all societies, a close look at women's roles in Zapatista communities reveals a substantial gap between what the Zapatistas may have intended and what they have actually achieved. As women still do not participate in politics through serving on the rotating governing bodies called Juntas del Buen Gobierno, and because they do not elect one another nor are they elected by their male counterparts, it is evident that community wide leadership and decision making remains a male dominated process. While their absence as leaders in the new governing bodies can be more thoroughly understood through a broader historical analysis of gendered roles in indigenous communities, it is still an absence lamented by men and women alike, which is a reflection of a deep shift in indigenous notions of gender. Though indigenous women of Chiapas have in many ways been locked out of access to education, healthcare and the power and resources to make decisions about their own lives, transformations in marriage and work have opened up space in everyday life for Zapatista women to realize a new role in within their communities and society at large.

While a close look at Zapatista communities reveals some of the failures of EZLN policy and discourse to truly achieve what they themselves called "disruption of at least [the gendered] aspect of the world," an even closer look reveals that the women have certainly begun the disrupting. In a historical moment in which the Mexican government continues to threaten Zapatista communities by supporting paramilitaries and offering

economic incentives to families who leave the movement, the work of Zapatista women has never been more important to their struggle. In their commitment to participation in autonomy despite prevailing machista ideologies, Zapatista women are helping to weave an alternative that stands strong in the face of clientelistic governmental bribes and individualizing neoliberal policies. The Zapatista message carried in the first shots heard round the world echoes true in the women's work, "Another world is possible".

Looking beyond narrow definitions of feminism allows us to see how groups of indigenous women of Chiapas are present and "doing politics" in their autonomous communities. Moving beyond celebratory acceptance of the Zapatistas as an inherently democratic and revolutionary movement allows gendered autonomy to emerge as a lens through which to see Zapatista women as active agents over their own personal destinies, and the destiny of the collective Zapatista movement in the twenty-first century. And so this was explained to me by the Zapatista women themselves:

Zapatista women will continue fighting as long as the 'bad government' isn't resolving the problem of the suffering of the men, women and the children.... Even though we may tire, we will continue fighting until we reach the objectives we desire, because if we stop fighting, the problem from which we suffer now will not be resolved. And the women, they are becoming strong now. They will be an example for the children, and one day, those small children will be grown and they will live in the example of their mothers. And in this way, we as women will continue fighting, "poco a poco," little by little (collective response, Zapatista women).

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