CHAPTER TWO

the courage to organize

Miguel Hidalgo is a Zapatista autonomous municipality that lies east of San Cristóbal. Unlike some Zapatista regions that are isolated jungle communities, it is close to several cities and because of this, it was common for young women from this area to leave their villages to look for work in the city. Paula is one such woman. As a result, she speaks Spanish as fluently as Tzeltal, her native language. She was twenty years old in 1994, when the Zapatista uprising took place, and she has been active in the movement since then. I met her in her role as a regional coordinator.

On a sunny day in 2006, she had walked from her village to the center of Miguel Hidalgo to meet with me, and I recognized her confident gait from afar as she rounded the bend. She had brought the youngest of her four children with her that day, and he played on the dirt floor as we talked. Paula began by recalling why she had decided to leave home to work as a maid in a stranger's home.

> I saw that we had nothing. It's not like it is now; we're a little better off now. Back then, we didn't have shoes and there

was no money for clothes. So I told my father, "Papa, I want to go look for work, because I see how other girls look when they come back. I want shoes and decent clothes too."

"Where are you going to go? You're not going to feel at home."

"I have to try, I'm going to go," I said, and I went. But I never got used to it because living in the countryside is very different from living in the city. In the *kaxlanes'* house, everything is different.

The first time, I went to Teopisca. My boss didn't care if I had shoes or not. But then one time, I remember a friend said to me: "Go get yourself a pair of shoes, even if it's just a pair of plastic sandals." And I did. I saved up a few cents my boss had given me and I got myself a pair of plastic sandals.

I only stayed in Teopisca for a month and then I returned home because I couldn't get used to it. If you work as a servant, you have to obey. Whether you want to or not, you have to do whatever they say. "That's what I'm paying you for," they'd say. But we barely had any clothes and we never had enough food at home, so I went back again. Even though we practically killed ourselves working in the fields, the frost came and our whole crop died. But in the house of the *kaxlanes*, we would eat a little bit of soup, rice, or different kinds of food.

After that, I spent five years working, but that was in San Cristóbal. I went to Mexico City too. I was supporting my father because we didn't have a real house. When it rained, we could hear the water leaking in. "I have to go," I realized. "I'm an adult now and I have to help my father." That's how I saw it. There were two of us, my younger sister and me. My sister went too, she went to Mexico City. I went later and earned nine hundred pesos each month. We sent money home to my father to build a house, but it was up to us. We were on our own.

Later on, we returned back home, when the struggle was just beginning. My father came to get us, but I didn't want to go. He said to me, "Daughter, we have to go home."

"Why?" I asked him. "I'm fine here."

"You have to come home. There's a problem. There's going to be a war," he said.

"I don't want to go. How are you going to win a war if you don't know anything? We don't even have weapons to defend ourselves." I still remember saying that to my father.

"There are a lot of compañeros and they're already organized."

"No," I said. "I'm fine here. If you want to do this, that's fine. But I don't want to get involved."

My father returned home. He came back a second time, but it wasn't until the third time that I listened to him, that I understood what he was saying.

"I want to learn a little bit," I told him. "If I don't go anywhere, I won't learn anything. If I'm just at home I'm going to be ignorant my whole life."

"Yes, my daughter, I understand," he said. "But now there is something we can do about it. It's not right that the rich are always on top and we have to spend our whole lives like this." I began to understand what my father said, that we were suffering, that we were oppressed by the government. He explained many things to me, about our living conditions and why I had to leave home to look for work.

"I think my father is right," I said to myself. And that's why I returned home. I finally realized that there is an organization and it's doing something good for our people. So I went back home and joined. That was 1992. I was in the EZLN for a year before [the uprising in] 1994.[1]

After a decade of clandestine organizing, the Zapatista communities had reached a point of no return. They were dying anyway, they say, from hunger and curable diseases—so they were willing to risk a quick death from a bullet for the chance of a better future for their children. And having spent years participating in peaceful social movements, they had come to the conclusion that there was no alternative but armed struggle. After an extensive consultation with the Zapatista communities, the EZLN had decided to go to war.

The EZLN's First Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle begins with "HOY DECIMOS ¡BASTA!" (Today we say, "Enough!"). Stating, "We are a product of five hundred years of struggle," the EZLN made its case for going to war with the Mexican government, asked for the support of the Mexican population, and laid out eleven demands: work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace.[2] The uprising would quickly transform the EZLN into one of the most well-known social movements in the world and one that would inspire an extraordinary level of solidarity from national and international civil society.

As night fell on December 31, 1993, the armed forces of the EZLN had begun to gather. It was an army made up almost entirely of indigenous people, and about a third of the soldiers were women. Their faces were covered with ski masks or bandannas—an image that would become internationally recognized as a symbol of the Zapatista rebellion. Some of them were insurgents, well armed and properly trained in the mountains of Chiapas. Most of them were milicianos—civilian members of the EZLN's reserve army who lived in Zapatista villages and received periodic military training. Unlike the insurgents, most of the milicianos were poorly armed.

As dawn broke on New Year's Day, Zapatista troops occupied seven towns throughout the eastern half of Chiapas, including San Cristóbal de las Casas, a quaint colonial city nestled in the misty highlands of Chiapas and a major tourist destination. Several of the occupations were nonviolent, but there was combat in the towns of Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, and Altamirano, as well as Rancho Nuevo, a large military base several miles outside of San Cristóbal.

The takeover of San Cristóbal—the most public aspect of the uprising—was carried out under the military command of a woman, Major Ana María. In an interview several weeks after the uprising, she described this historic moment with some detachment.

> We voted to go to war and then we began to prepare the tactics. I have to go into combat first, before my compañeros, because I am the leader and I have to set the example. I command a large unit with many, many milicianos, a thousand or more.

> Within this unit we were divided into smaller units, and each unit also has its own commander. Each commander receives instructions. They are told where to attack and everything, and each one knows what they have to do. In the takeover of San Cristóbal, some people put up checkpoints and barricades to reinforce the roads in and out of the city. Each unit completed its mission. Others took over the municipal palace.[3]

The Zapatistas occupied San Cristóbal for less than forty-eight hours. They stayed long enough to read their declaration of war from the balcony of the municipal palace and to make national and international headlines, but slipped away in time to escape the full brunt of the Mexican military. The occupation of Ocosingo, a smaller city a few hours north of San Cristóbal, was another story. The Zapatistas fought hard to take the municipal palace but, after failing to demolish a key bridge to the north, they found themselves trapped in the center of town when Mexican troops from Villahermosa barreled in and surrounded them. The EZLN lost an estimated fifty soldiers and dozens, if not hundreds, of civilians were killed by the Mexican army.[4] An image of five young Zapatista men, all executed with a bullet to the back of the head and lying facedown in the marketplace with their hands tied behind their backs, caused a collective shudder to go down the spine of the Mexican populace. In an interview with a journalist, Isidora, a Zapatista insurgent, described being in Ocosingo in the midst of the bloodiest fighting.

> The soldiers arrived in Ocosingo on the afternoon of January 2. We were positioned in the market and Major Mario informed us that the soldiers were on their way. Captain Benito, who lost an eye that day, told us not to abandon our positions until we received instructions from our commander. More than twenty trucks of soldiers arrived. We began to shoot. I was in the front line and I had forty milicianos under my command. They told us that Captain Benito and Captain Elisa were wounded. So I was left there alone, with no one in charge, and I had to maintain control of my troops.

> At nine o'clock at night, we were all wounded. At that point, I didn't know what to do. I had also gotten shrapnel from grenades in my back and my wrist and I'd been hit by a bullet in the foot. But at least I could drag myself, even though I couldn't walk. And I had to drag all the wounded out of there somehow. I told myself, "As long as I'm alive, I'm not going to leave them here. If they stay they'll be killed." More than thirty of the wounded managed to get out; some of us could still walk. [Where I was] in the market, only the dead were left behind. There weren't many, maybe four people. Some civilians also died because the soldiers shot in all directions without taking aim. There were so many of them and there were very few of us because the majority of our forces had already retreated. There were only about ten insurgents and the rest were milicianos. The milicianos did not have good weapons, some of them had twenty-two caliber rifles and others had wooden shotguns.
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> At two in the morning, we hid in a field to get off the road. The sun came up and I didn't know what to do or where the rest of our compañeros were. I couldn't move because my wounds had swollen up. I thought I was going to die. But the other compas found us and took us to safety.[5]

Although Isidora downplays her role in her own account, Subcomandante Marcos, the EZLN's military leader and spokesperson, commended her bravery in a communiqué published a few years later.

> Isidora goes into Ocosingo as a buck private on the first day of January. And as a buck private Isidora leaves Ocosingo in flames, after spending hours rescuing her unit, made up entirely of men, forty of whom were wounded. She has mortar fragments in her arms and legs. When Isidora arrives at the nursing unit and hands over the wounded, she asks for a bit of water and gets up again. "Where are you going?" they ask her as they try to treat her bleeding wounds which paint her face and redden her uniform. "To get the others," answers Isidora as she reloads her weapon. They try to stop her and cannot; the buck private Isidora has said she must return to Ocosingo to rescue other compañeros from the music of death, sung by mortars and grenades. They have to take her prisoner in order to stop her.[6]

Lucia is a Tzotzil woman originally from the municipality of Huixtán in the highlands of Chiapas. She and her family live near Ocosingo on land that used to be a large cattle ranch and was taken over by the Zapatistas in 1994. Now a comandanta, she was a young Zapatista soldier in 1994.

> As a miliciana, I was sent to Huixtán for the uprising. The milicianos and insurgents were in Huixtán together. I left my two children with my mother because I didn't know if I would return or not. I also stepped down from my position as a local representative. We were in Huixtán for five days and we took over the town hall. The municipal president was afraid and he fled. By the time we got there, there was no one even defending it. There were a lot of insurgents and we were happy to see them when they arrived. There were many women insurgents and women captains. Some people were sent to Rancho Nuevo but I stayed in Huixtán. I made food for the other milicianos. When the government started bombing Rancho Nuevo, a compañero who had been wounded walked all the way back to Huixtán. He had a bullet in his foot and another in his back. There were health promoters to treat the wounded, and I helped take care of them as well. When our commander saw that they were going to start bombing Huixtán, we retreated quickly.[7]

Civilian women in Zapatista villages also played important roles, as radio operators, for example, or as nurses to help the wounded. Paula, the woman from Miguel Hidalgo who worked as a servant before joining the EZLN, remembers vividly what happened in her village in January 1994.

They told us the war was going to begin. We were prepared—not with weapons, radios, or anything like that. But we were ready. It's not like it is now, with everyone organized into an autonomous municipality. In the region where I live, there were only a few communities in the EZLN back then, five or six villages.

On the last day of December they told us it was going to begin the next day. "Are you ready, compañeros?" they asked. At midnight on January 1 they headed out, but not with real weapons. All they had were sticks and machetes. Those of us who stayed behind, we were afraid of what was going to happen.

We heard there were women who went too. From my village, it was all men. They told us if there were any women milicianas they could go too, but there weren't any. There were women milicianas from other communities around here. Not me, I was too afraid! I thought to myself, "If there are women who want to go to war, they should go." I felt like I couldn't do it, that my body was too weak. The women who went were the ones who felt capable.

On January 1, nothing happened. We had blocked the highways by cutting down trees and putting them in the road so the soldiers could not get past. The young women went to keep watch by the highway to make sure the soldiers weren't coming. We stayed by the highway for three days. It was only the young women, not the women with children—there were six of us. Since all the men had gone to war, it was only women that day.

On January 3, we heard the bombs explode. It was two o'clock in the afternoon when we heard them. They exploded near Rancho Nuevo but we could hear them all the way here. We were waiting anxiously. The women with children had gone to hide in the mountains, with the elderly.[8]

What Paula and her neighbors heard that afternoon was the Mexican military firing rockets into the hills around San Cristóbal. In an effort to flush out the rebel troops, civilian communities were indiscriminately hit as well. Paula continued:

When we heard the bombs, we started to think that all our compañeros must have died. The men who had gone were all our family members. "They're probably dead," said my grandfather. They were his sons. We were so worried! Every morning and every evening we prayed, asking God not to let anything happen to the milicianos.

A week went by and they came home. Since the path to where I live is very straight, we could see them in the distance. "Those are our compañeros," said my grandfather. "I'm going to bring them some pozol. I'm sure they're starving." They were very tired, the poor things. Their lips were black from the heat and thirst. We asked them, "How was it? What happened?" They began to tell us how they fought at Rancho Nuevo, about the bombs dropping and what they did. None of them were left behind—they all made it back safely. Some people died, but from other municipalities. That's what happened on January 1.

Women Join the Ranks of the EZLN

When I joined the EZLN it was mostly because of the poverty, because of the needs of our people. And also to do as my father wished. He cried because I would not listen to reason. He saw that I had the mestizos' ideas in my head. My father felt very sad about this. Once I was back at home, my ideas started changing, politically, because the compañeros talked to us about many things, like how we were treated as servants.

—Paula[9]

Chiapas was part of Guatemala until 1824, and it took Mexico's federal government many decades to fully integrate Chiapas and other distant states. Throughout the twentieth century, Chiapas continued to function as an internal colony in many ways, with its natural resources extracted and sent to central and northern Mexico.

Chiapas is rich in resources such as land, oil, natural gas, and water, yet it is one of the poorest states in Mexico. It produces more than half of Mexico's hydroelectric power, but in 1990, a few years before the Zapatista uprising, almost half its population did not have electricity.[10] More than a decade after the uprising, over two-thirds of its population still had no access to clean drinking water.[11] Chiapas has one of the largest indigenous populations in Mexico, and some of the highest rates of malnutrition, maternal mortality, and illiteracy. All these indicators of marginalization are highest in eastern Chiapas, where the indigenous population is most concentrated.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Lacandon Jungle became an escape valve for tension that was mounting over land. Population growth created additional pressure for agrarian reform and much of the less fertile land had already been redistributed. Many of the fincas had replaced labor-intensive agricultural crops with coffee or cattle production, meaning there was less demand for peasant labor. The government began encouraging desperate, land-poor Tzeltal and Tzotzil peasants from the highlands region to settle the rainforest in eastern Chiapas, offering them land that had been expropriated by a series of presidential decrees. These isolated communities in the jungle—farming on barely arable land, far from any city, with few roads and practically no public services—would later become the heart of the Zapatista support base.

While the story of the Zapatista rebellion begins with five hundred years of indigenous resistance and includes the legacy of the Mexican Revolution, the more recent roots of the Zapatista movement lie in the second half of the twentieth century. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of social unrest and burgeoning social movements around the world, and Mexico was no exception. In 1974, the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas organized the Indigenous Congress, which brought together over a thousand Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, and Chol delegates; this is often pointed to as a pivotal moment when indigenous groups began to voice their own solutions to the problems they faced. In the years immediately after the Indigenous Congress, a number of mass indigenous campesino organizations were formed in Chiapas. Members of several Maoist organizations moved to Chiapas and the diocese initially encouraged them. Members of two Maoist organizations, Unión del Pueblo (Union of the People) and Línea Proletaria (Proletarian Line), moved into indigenous communities where they helped build organizations like Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel (United for Our Improvement, in Tzeltal) and other unions of ejidos that would merge in 1980 to form the largest independent campesino organization in Chiapas, Unión de Uniones (Union of Unions). Two other primary independent campesino organizations were the Organización Campesina Emiliano Zapata (Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization, OCEZ) and the Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (Independent Center for Agricultural Workers, CIOAC), affiliated with the Mexican Communist Party.

The Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Forces, FLN), a political-military organization that was formed in 1969 in the northern Mexican city of Monterrey, began to recruit indigenous members in parts of northern Chiapas in the late 1970s. Young indigenous men and women entered the FLN's urban safe houses and received political and military training. On November 17, 1983, several of these young, indigenous recruits and some older mestizo members of the FLN established a guerrilla encampment in the Lacandon Jungle and thus founded the EZLN. "At first there were only two women in the EZLN," said Major Ana María. "It was still very small. Little by little more people began to join us. People in the communities became more politically conscious and understood that it was necessary to take up arms, and they came to join the ranks of the EZLN. And so it grew and grew until at some point we realized that we were very strong and it was the people in the communities who decided that it was time to fight."[12]

Regional, national, and international events precipitated the EZLN's rise. In 1982, Mexico declared that it would no longer be able to pay its international loans. The ensuing debt crisis ushered in strict neoliberal policies, undercutting welfare programs that had kept many people afloat. That same year, General Absalón Castellanos Domínguez—a military general and a member of the landowning elite in Chiapas—became governor of Chiapas. Known

for his brutality, Castellanos presided over a dramatic increase in state repression and paramilitary violence against popular movements.

The struggle for land also contributed to the formation of the EZLN in 1983 and its rapid growth during the late 1980s and early 1990s. "We joined the EZLN because we didn't have land," said a group of Zapatista women during a regional women's gathering in Morelia. "Since we didn't have our own land, we had to do whatever the patrón told us. We saw how our people were suffering."[13] Major Ana María explained another reason for the EZLN's momentum during this time period.

> I participated in peaceful struggles since I was a little girl. My family was always organizing and struggling to have a life of dignity, but we never got anywhere. We were in an organization together with other communities and we went on many marches. The children would go on the marches together with their parents. At the age of eight years old I began to participate in political struggles, but I also began to see that we weren't going to accomplish anything with peaceful movements. Our people realized this years later. We had no option but to organize an armed struggle.[14]

Those first members of the EZLN set to work recruiting indigenous men and women into its insurgent army, and organizing villages into its civilian support base. Over the next ten years, the EZLN grew from a small band of insurgents into a political-military organization with a well-structured peasant army and an extensive civilian base with a presence throughout eastern Chiapas. At the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering, Gabriela, a Zapatista insurgent, explained: "When they recruited us, they told us how we could get involved and what the commitments and sacrifices were of each level of participation. The first step was to become a member of the support base. From there, some people became milicianos and others went straight to the mountains to train as insurgents."[15] Insurgents are full-time members of the Zapatista army who live and

train in a guerrilla camp. When Zapatistas talk about "going to the mountains," they refer to the decision to become an insurgent.

"Some women told us that if we hadn't been there, other women would not have joined," said Major Ana María. "Because of our participation, they saw that women can do this too, and more women began to join. The women in the villages began to tell their daughters, sisters, or granddaughters, 'Pick up a gun and go fight.'"[16] Although many of its early political leaders were men, the EZLN was under a woman's command for much of the 1980s. Comandanta Elisa (María Gloria Benavides Guevara) joined the FLN in the 1970s and was the commander of the EZLN's forces for several years during the 1980s before returning to Mexico City to continue working with the FLN.

The EZLN has long insisted on equality within its own ranks and that women could participate at all levels of the struggle. "That has always been present within the EZLN," said Esmeralda, a mestiza woman from Mexico City who has been working with indigenous villages in Chiapas since 1976. "And there have been some very courageous women. Some of them are still here, others are not. But this was an important contribution made by the organization."[17] Men and women organizers within the EZLN—insurgents, political leaders, and local and regional authorities—conveyed this message repeatedly during visits to Zapatista communities, meetings, and assemblies.

Comandanta Sandra, a Tzotzil woman from the Morelia region, was one of the women who helped build the Zapatista movement in the years before 1994. "Our struggle was clandestine when it first began," she said at the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering. "It was not easy. We couldn't organize, but then again we could. We organized family by family, village by village, neighborhood by neighborhood—depending on the geography of each region. We had to organize clandestinely, but we were not afraid. We had to walk from village to village to talk to different people and find others who felt the same pain as us, and the same courage to organize."[18]

While the EZLN was still an underground organization, recruitment had to be done with caution, and security measures were of the utmost importance. As soon as Paula moved back home from Mexico

City and joined the EZLN, she began to participate in this covert organizing. "It was very difficult to be in the organization back then," she said. "It's not like it is now that it's in the open. When we first joined, we had our meetings in another village, hidden in a house where nobody lived, or we would go up into the hills to have our meetings there."[19]

Araceli and Maribel, Zapatista women from the region of La Realidad, stood side by side at the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering and together described this process.

> Some unfamiliar people began to arrive in our village. They came to our village as if they were teachers or doctors and said they were there to see what was happening in our communities. But one day they began talking to us about the price of our products. They asked what was happening with our working conditions and why there was poverty and what caused it. They asked us how long we were going to put up with living like this. That made us think, "Why hasn't anyone ever asked us this before?" Of course they didn't talk to everyone all at once. It was one or two people at first. In other words, not everyone found out about the struggle at the same time. It was little by little. They began talking to us about exploitation, about poverty and inequality, why there are rich and poor. We learned about all this, and then they asked us if we were willing to fight.
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> They also told us that the struggle is for everyone—men and women—and that all you needed was consciousness and a willingness to fight. Later they told us that there are men and women in the mountains, that there is an army that will fight for the people and it's called the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. They told us that this is not just a political struggle, that it's an armed struggle as well. We had to learn to defend ourselves both politically and militarily to prepare ourselves for a war against those who exploit us. We know there are repressive forces and that's why we had to learn to defend ourselves.

> They asked us to be very careful. They told us not to tell anyone what they were going to tell us, not even our families, and that we had to keep it a secret because it could put our lives in danger. We said yes, we would keep it a secret. They taught us many different ways to hide what we were doing. For example, when we had meetings, we would leave our village as if we were going fishing, going to collect firewood, or going to work in the cornfield. We disguised what we were doing so other people who saw us coming and going would not find out. We went to the mountains to hear political talks in one of the military camps. We walked up steep hillsides so no one would see us. Sometimes we went in the middle of the night, very slowly and silently so the dogs wouldn't bark at us and so people who didn't know anything about the organization wouldn't hear us. The men and women insurgents came down from their camps to talk to us.
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> The compañeros taught us a thousand different ways to be careful about security. For example, when we were going to have a meeting, they would make a sign—they would wear a red shirt, or white, brown, or black. That would tell us where the meeting was going to be. Sometimes they would tell us that we had to pay our debts, and depending on the quantity, everything was a symbol, a way for us to cover our tracks and keep our struggle from being detected. When the insurgents came down to our villages, sometimes during the day and sometimes at night, we would give the women insurgents our clothes to wear, so nobody would suspect them. Later they asked us to have someone keep guard in case anyone was coming and might see us.
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> That's how we began to see that women could do the work of the organization too. We learned these new ways to protect our security. We learned to keep watch when the compañeros went out at night and we also began to learn to use weapons. The women insurgents trained us alongside the men and we saw that we were capable of resisting. It was a lot of sacrifice, but we did all the work.[20]

Women were not always included in those early days of organizing, however. One of the regional Zapatista coordinators, a woman who is now treated with great respect, explained to me how, twenty-five years ago, women were still excluded from political life.

> They invited my husband to join the EZLN first. When he began attending the meetings, he didn't tell me right away where he was going. But he knows me and he knows who I am, so he began telling me about the organization and I liked everything I heard. He explained how we're oppressed by the powerful. That peasants work hard but we sell our products and our labor at a very low price. That the rich don't work because they take advantage of our labor. He explained many things about the organization and that we need to support each other as brothers and sisters. For example, if someone gets hurt, we can bring them firewood. Early on they named another woman and me as representatives of the organization, but it didn't work, probably because there weren't any other women participating yet. They never invited us to the meetings; we were given that responsibility in name only.[21]

Once the EZLN had recruited a strong enough core group in any given community, the initial recruits—usually men—began inviting their family members and other villagers to join the organization, and it was common for large numbers of people to join the EZLN all together. For example, María, the regional coordinator from Miguel Hidalgo who described past experiences of domestic abuse, explained: "When the women joined the organization, there were about sixty of us, almost half the village. There were a lot of us."[22]

Eva is also from Miguel Hidalgo. Deeply religious, she chose "Eva" as her nombre de lucha after the biblical Eve. She was fifty-nine when I interviewed her in 2006, and was seen as something of a matriarch in her community. Her five adult sons all have leadership roles in the EZLN. They were already young men when she joined the EZLN almost two decades ago.

> My sons joined the EZLN first. They joined because of the injustices they had seen. One of my sons was put in jail, and that made me so angry, I wanted to join the organization as well. Since my sons joined first, they were the ones who came to us and said, "Look, this struggle is just. They're telling us to organize and reclaim our rights, because the government is always screwing us over. You can try and try, asking, pleading—for a school, for example—and they won't do anything. They just give us the runaround. They have never done anything for us." Our sons asked us to think about it. There was no obligation, they just told us to think about it. That's how we joined the organization.[23]

Amelia, one of Eva's daughters-in-law, was particularly motivated by the EZLN's stance on women's rights. "They told us that women were going to be taken into consideration," she said. "Of all the reasons they gave us, that was the one that convinced me—that women would no longer be mistreated. Because before, women had no freedom; we were under our husbands' control. We felt that the EZLN began to open our eyes."[24]

Las Insurgentas

Isabel was one of the first women to join the EZLN. In 1984, when she was fourteen years old, she left home to join the rebel army. During the uprising ten years later, Isabel led a battalion of troops as a captain. She stayed in the Zapatista army for another ten years after that and stepped down in 2003, having spent almost two decades of her life as a Zapatista soldier and military leader. When I first met Isabel, she was still a military commander and quite an intimidating figure. Exuding a tremendous air of authority, she did not smile often or talk much. She was fairer skinned than most Zapatista women and she wore her straight black hair shoulder-length and loose. When I interviewed Isabel in 2008, she still wore pants and boots, and she still carried herself with the same air of authority, but she smiled more readily and spoke more openly.

A Zapatista woman insurgent stands guard at a meeting in La Realidad in 1999. (Photograph by Mariana Mora.)

I was about eight or nine years old when I really began to think about my surroundings. I was already doing all a mother's work within my family. I began doing that work when I was very young because my mother is a peasant woman and she works in the fields. Since I'm the oldest daughter, well, in our villages, a lot of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the oldest daughter. I was looking after my younger brothers and sisters, cleaning the house, and taking care of the animals.

Around this time, I also began to realize that I wanted to learn more. I did very well in school with the government teacher. Everything he taught us awoke something in me, even though there were many things I didn't understand. I learned to read and write—just a little bit, not very well. But even as I began to develop more consciousness, and

the sense that I wanted to better myself as a person, I had responsibilities in my family, and I had to work in the fields. I had to balance all three of these things.

I had to grow up very quickly because of the situation we lived in, the poverty, the lack of education. It was useful to study, but I felt the pressure of all the work I had to do and I couldn't be in school all day. My teacher told me that I was ahead, so I didn't have to be in class all day. "I'll put you in the higher-level class, and then you won't have to spend as many hours at school," he said. That way, I could spend more time working in the fields. Since we were the oldest, my brother and I had to plant corn or collect firewood or clear the weeds from the cornfield, far from our house. We would come home and then still go to school. I wanted to be with my teacher, to learn everything he could teach me, but there wasn't much time for that. I had to assume more responsibility at home and take care of my younger siblings.

When I was invited to join the organization, I said to myself, "It's better for me to leave my teacher behind. I want to learn more, to move forward, but . . ." There's always a "but," right? You have to leave everything behind—your family, your work, community life, everything. You are taken out of that environment, away from all that. I was fourteen years old. I wanted to better myself as a person, but it was very painful. It was hard to leave all that behind. I accepted this change because I had seen the suffering of all the women around me: my mother, my sisters, my aunts, my grandmothers. I saw how unfair their lives were. So I thought to myself, "Why not now? At fourteen years old, why not commit myself to doing something for this organization called the EZLN?"

First I lived in the city for a while, in clandestine houses. I lived that way for a year. When I left my village, I went to the city. I dedicated myself to studying and learning. Why do these injustices exist? Why are there rich people and poor people? And what do we need to learn? My compañeros showed me, they taught me, they educated me. I felt that I

was beginning a new life, outside of the community, away from my family. But I found the strength because I had experienced so many injustices and the lack of opportunities within our communities and within our family life.

When I began to participate within the organization and I began a new type of education, that's when I was able to put the sadness aside, the pain of my community and my family, and I began to train and prepare myself to be responsible for all these revolutionary ideas. It was not easy to take on that responsibility. First, you have to live a clandestine life and that life closes you off in many ways. There are a lot of security measures—for you, for the space, for the other people, all that. I'm not going to talk about what the security measures were, but . . .

It also depended on each one of us—how much we invested into developing our own revolutionary sensibilities. What helped me the most in living this life was to read books about other revolutionaries. The ones I liked the most were books about the Vietnam War. There are many stories of young combatants, people from villages like ours, who participated in something similar. And since I was living through a similar historical moment and at the same time in my life, those stories were very useful for me. We were the ones who had to train and prepare ourselves so that others could have a better life.

After a year of participating and studying with the compañeros, I had to make another decision: whether to stay in the city and continue studying and learning about organizing and politics, or go to the mountains. The EZLN had not been around for very long at that point, only about a year. It was founded in 1983 and I joined in 1984. I spent 1984 in the city and in 1985 I went to the mountains. And a new type of education—all over again! [*laughs*] But this time it was less about studying and more about learning to use weapons and the responsibility that accompanies that commitment. What came next were all the political-military lessons. That's where I landed, and I knew that's where I wanted to be and to spend my life. I began to participate, not only as a woman but also as a combatant.[25]

The generation of young women who joined the military ranks of the EZLN in the 1980s catalyzed an extraordinary shift in themselves, their communities, and the Zapatista movement. Esmeralda, the mestiza woman originally from Mexico City, was sent to the northern zone of Chiapas as a young nun in 1976. Although she decided to leave the order soon thereafter, she has been working with indigenous communities in Chiapas ever since. In the late 1970s and 1980s, she did pastoral work in some of the indigenous villages where the EZLN found its early recruits. "Many of those first women decided to become insurgents," she told me during an interview in 2007. "A number of women left their villages in those years, and at a very young age. Many of them said they wanted to learn more. Learn more and prepare to fight for their people. Those were the two ideas that motivated them. For other women, a compañera who went to the mountains inspired a great deal of respect and admiration."[26]

While the day-to-day life of an insurgent requires intense commitment and discipline, going to the mountains also represented great freedom for some women. "In our villages, the houses are very small and I had many younger brothers and sisters," recalled Irma, a captain in the Zapatista army, during an interview with a journalist. "They were going to marry me off without telling me anything about it. When I found out, I preferred to leave rather than staying. I didn't want to marry that man; I was still very young."[27]

The chance to do something different held a particular appeal for women because their opportunities were so limited and the gendered division of labor was so strict. As insurgents, they had opportunities for education as well as personal and political development. According to Gabriela, a Zapatista insurgent who spoke at the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering:

> When we joined the EZLN, we had to leave our families, our homes, everything. Being with the other insurgents, our way of life changed. All the things we never learned at home, we learn in the mountains. If we don't know how to read and write or speak Spanish, the other compañeros teach us. And as an insurgent it's our obligation to learn many things.

> They train us how to use weapons. We also learn about politics, military strategy, and culture. As a soldier of the people, we have to be well trained and prepared for anything.[28]

While the EZLN was still a clandestine organization, Zapatista villages supported the insurgents. Araceli and Maribel, Zapatista women from the region of La Realidad, explained:

> We sent them products we harvested: squash, yucca, bananas, and sweet potatoes. We also bought them things like sugar and salt. We shared our food with them; whatever we ate is what the insurgents ate. When we sent them food, we would gather it together first. Then we would choose someone to walk to the insurgent camp, or sometimes they would meet us halfway. We took good care of our compañeros, the men and women insurgents. We never forgot about them. We also organized to sew uniforms for them, for the insurgents as well as the milicianos. Those sewing collectives were one of the first ways that we began to organize as women.[29]

Women insurgents, in turn, would come down from the mountains and meet with women in the villages. Isabel described to me how she conducted these visits.

> There were two other women, both indigenous, who were there with me. It was a very small group. We had to learn everything—politics, culture, everything—so that once we were trained in all these areas, we could share what we had learned with the women in the villages. Once I had learned to participate, to speak up, my compañeros said I was trained and ready to go talk with the other women.
>
> It was not too difficult for me because I'm familiar with the life that these compañeras lead. I lived it in flesh and blood since I was a little girl. I still didn't know very much, but what I had learned I wanted to share and develop with them. I also wanted to take the pain and sadness that I felt when I left my family and my community to be a Zapatista combatant, and try to convert it into something valuable for other people.
>
> The women in the villages asked us many questions. "What is it like? How do men and women treat each other? Do you get married or not? What do you do when you menstruate?" Oh my! A whole series of questions! We had to create the space so they could open up and we would explain it all to them.
>
> They asked us how it was possible to live in the mountains with a group of men. It was hard for them to understand. We felt that way too sometimes, that maybe we were doing something very difficult. But it was easier because we were there for a reason, for something we wanted to defend and something important to us. There was also a lot of compañerismo within the group—among both men and women—and respect, patience perhaps, and love for the work and for each other, especially because we were doing work that was important but also dangerous. We knew that, at any moment, something could happen to any one of us. But in the meantime, we had the space, the time, the ability to do something for our people, and that's very powerful, you know?
>
> The women wanted to know all about our life in the mountains. They had a lot of questions. They asked if we missed our families and our homes. They wanted to learn from us. Many women, after asking all their questions, decided to follow our footsteps and choose the same path we had taken.[30]

When I began working with women in Zapatista communities, hearing about these discussions captured my imagination. Perhaps this was because of my own romantic image of a woman warrior in her military uniform and with a gun slung over her arm, sitting down with women from the villages. In fact, the women insurgents would

not have had their guns with them during those talks and most likely would have worn civilian clothes. But the Zapatista women who told me about meeting women insurgents conveyed a great depth of emotion. Even many years later, their eyes shone and there was an unmistakable excitement in their voices when they recalled those conversations. "Insurgent women came to talk to us about our lives and everything that we experienced as women," remembered a group of Zapatista women during a regional women's gathering in Morelia. "We talked about why women have so much work. They came to teach us what our rights are, that all women have the right to speak up, to participate, to read and write. They helped us study politics and a critique of the government. We learned many things from them."[31]

The female insurgents were living proof of the expansive roles that women could play. Major Ana María explained:

> We learn combat tactics and we do political work in the villages. Within our organization there is respect, especially among the combatants. In the communities there is still that ideology, and women are still abused, but within the ranks of the army there is a great deal of equality. The work that men do, women can do as well. We receive the same training, and we can achieve the same military ranks and level of responsibility. For example, I have the rank of insurgent major. I command a battalion of soldiers, I direct them when we're at war, in combat, and I know I can lead them.[32]

Previously taken for granted notions of gender were called into question by the women insurgents' new roles. "In the villages, women do all the housework. Women make the tortillas and wash the clothes," said Irma, a Zapatista captain. "But here it's different—the men do this work too."[33] In the training camps, the traditional gender roles women had experienced in their villages disappeared almost overnight. "We take turns doing the daily tasks, including chopping firewood and preparing the food," said Gabriela. "We share all those tasks equally between men and women."[34] Since combatants could

not have children with them, child care, which represented a significant portion of women's work in the villages, was not an issue. Women insurgents who did become pregnant either entrusted their children to family members or left the mountains and returned to their communities.

In addition to a more equal division of labor, the act of picking up a weapon and learning self-defense also opened the door for a profound shift in how these women carried themselves and interacted with the world around them. As has often been the case historically for women in liberation movements, participating in armed struggle was an empowering experience.

These changes had a ripple effect in Zapatista communities and on the Zapatista movement itself. As women like Isabel rose through the ranks of the insurgent army, more women began to occupy positions of leadership in the upper echelons of the EZLN. Later on, the insurgents who went back to their communities took what they had learned in the mountains with them. Egalitarian relationships between men and women insurgents translated into more egalitarian relationships in the villages. And as the EZLN stepped into the international spotlight, former women insurgents brought a deeper level of commitment, sharper political skills, and greater leadership capacity to the developing Zapatista communities.

Pages 64 and 65: Zapatista insurgents hiking through the mountains of southeastern Mexico. (Photograph by Paco Vazquez.)

Next page: On International Women's Day, 8 March 2000, Zapatista women march in San Cristóbal de las Casas to demand respect for indigenous women's rights. (Photograph by Tim Russo.)