



CHAPTER THREE

seeds of rebellion

We had begun to celebrate March 8 [International Women's Day], and the first day the women arrived, they wanted to dance. Even if there was mud, even if they were barefoot, it didn't matter, they wanted to dance. . . . Even if they had to walk for several hours, they were happy. They were away from their communities for a little while, and they were reflecting and sharing with other women.

—ESMERALDA, the former nun who has worked with indigenous villages in Chiapas since the mid-1970s¹

Describing women leaving their villages for the first time, Esmeralda captured the spirit of joy and awakening that characterized the years leading up to the Zapatista uprising. The EZLN was operating in secrecy, but for these women there was a sense of expansiveness in their lives as new possibilities opened before them. "It was an amazing time period," recalled María del Carmen Martínez, a Dominican nun from Spain who has been in Chiapas since 1982. "There was a

great deal of strength and hope in the Church, as well as in the organizations, because something new was coming.”

A diversity of organizing flourished as the Zapatista movement gathered momentum. As Zapatista women learned about their rights for the first time—many of them through the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas—their horizons began to broaden. When they protested against alcohol abuse and its impact on their families and communities, they discovered and flexed their political muscle. When they collected their concerns and proposals into the Women’s Revolutionary Law, they articulated a series of gender-based demands for the Zapatista movement. In each area they embarked upon, they began to establish their place in the new society they were helping to build.

“God Wants Liberation”

During a Zapatista women’s gathering in Morelia in 2001, participants described the different periods of women’s organizing within the EZLN. The women insisted, however, that there was an important chapter in this history that preceded the Zapatista movement. “We first began to organize as women within the diocese,” they said.²

Ernestina is just one example of the many women who began their political work with the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas and went on to become Zapatista leaders. A Tzeltal woman with a sturdy build, Ernestina has eight children and more than a dozen grandchildren. She has organized with women in the Morelia region for decades, and women throughout that region look to her as a moral authority. Now in her sixties, she is one of the only women of her generation who knows how to read, having learned while working with the church. “I began to read the *palabra de Dios* [word of God] when I was still a young woman, still living with my father,” she said during an interview. “My father was a catechist. He worked as a catechist for many years.³ He sent me to San Cristóbal for three years to study the *palabra de Dios*.”⁴

Sitting in her kitchen, Ernestina would make tortillas as she told me stories about her life. Leaning forward occasionally to flip

the tortillas, she became especially animated whenever she talked about the *palabra de Dios*. “We learned many things from reading the Bible,” she said. “It’s all in there: how to organize, how they did it, that they had to endure hunger as well, just like us. And like the soldiers are harassing us now, well, that happened to them too, until Moses freed his people. The soldiers were watching to see where he would go. His people were behind him and he opened a path in the water with his staff. His people, the Israelites, crossed in the middle of the water. We read about that in the Bible.”

Working with the diocese was a key building block for Ernestina and many other Zapatista women. It had a lasting impact on their personal and political development, and the Catholic Church as an institution was critical in creating opportunities for women to step into new roles. Reflecting on the years before they joined the EZLN, Zapatista women from the Morelia region described how their lives began to change when representatives of the Catholic Church told them that their voices should be heard and their opinions valued.

One of the nuns saw that women were not participating and she began to invite us to their meetings with the catechists. She talked to the catechists and they began to invite their wives. This nun began to get to know the women and encouraged us to participate. She would say to us, “Go on, pick up the Bible, read what it says with a woman’s heart. See the Virgin Mary as an example.”

The nuns invited us to a meeting in Altamirano. That’s when they began to form women’s groups in the different communities. Eighty women from twenty-four communities showed up, and in that meeting, one or two local coordinators were chosen from each community. Their job was to form a women’s group, support and encourage the other women, and organize cooperatives. We also chose regional coordinators.

The local coordinators for CODIMUJ [Comisión Diocesana de Mujeres, Women’s Commission of the Diocese] organized women’s groups in each community.⁵ We reflected on our situation as women and the day-to-day life in our villages. In

the women's groups we got together every Friday or Saturday. We always looked for passages in the Old and New Testament that talk about women's contributions, and that's how we were able to reach out to other women.

The women in the communities were very happy, because we had never had the political consciousness to address how much women suffer, how mistreated women are. We never had the freedom to go out and participate, but with CODIMU we began to have that freedom, and we began to reflect on and preach the *palabra de Dios*.

At the beginning it was very difficult, because many women didn't know that we have rights. When we were out doing this work of organizing with other women, people said we were looking for a new husband and that we were abandoning our children. It's not easy for a woman to walk from one meeting to another, carrying her children, and that's why there weren't very many women [doing this work]. But when we started working with CODIMU, we began to see that women have the right to participate too. The women in each village decided to make tortillas for the women's coordinators, so their children could stay at home while they were away. The older women helped us a great deal. They took care of our children so we could travel.

In 1987, we were still just beginning. By 1988, we began to see some changes. In 1988, when we began holding gatherings and forming women's groups, our situation began to change. We sang a lot of songs in CODIMU. We sang one song in front of the men because the men were very sexist and didn't understand that women should have rights too.⁶

The Catholic Church has a complex history in Latin America. It played an integral role in the Spanish conquest and the subjugation of indigenous peoples. On the other hand, elements of the church dedicated to liberation theology have stood on the side of social justice throughout the Americas.⁷ The contradictory role of the church in Chiapas dates back to the sixteenth century when Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, who

had convinced the Spanish Crown to decree the New Laws protecting the indigenous peoples of the Americas from the worst depredations of the Spanish conquistadors, was appointed the first bishop of Chiapas.

Under the guidance of Samuel Ruiz, who was bishop from 1960 until 2000, the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas translated the *habla* into Mayan languages and told members of the church to speak up against injustice. Thousands of indigenous men and women were recruited not only in the catechism, but were taught to read and write and encouraged to analyze their social, political, and economic reality. Many indigenous deacons and catechists trained by the diocese went on to become militants and leaders of the EZLN.⁸

When I interviewed María del Carmen Martínez, the Dominican nun from Spain, she described Ruiz's empathy with the indigenous communities: "When he arrived here and began to see the situation of marginalization, he was very moved—by people's living conditions, the poverty, and women's lives. I remember phrases of his, that when he would see the women barefoot, walking in the mud, how much it impacted him, how it made his heart ache."⁹ Bishop Ruiz won the trust and loyalty of the indigenous and campesino population of Chiapas, who affectionately call him *Tatic*, "beloved father" in Tzeltal. His death in 2011 was deeply mourned.

A Tzeltal woman who collaborated with the diocese in the 1980s and went on to work at the Centro de Derechos de la Mujer de Chiapas (Center for Women's Rights in Chiapas) described Bishop Ruiz's emphasis on women's participation:

Don Samuel used to speak to us about the Bible. He would tell us that we are all equal, that we should value our rights, and that nobody should be discriminated against, because we all have the right to participate, to speak up. Back then women did not participate. But Don Samuel said, "No, I want women to participate too." He used to say that men and women, all human beings, that nobody should be left out, and that everybody should participate—young people, children, men, women, and elders. Everybody has a place within the church. That was very important to him.¹⁰



Bishop Samuel Ruiz holding mass in a remote Tzeltal village in the mid-90s. (Photograph by Jurta Meier-Wiedenbach.)

In the 1960s, Ruiz directed his pastoral staff to work specifically with women. The Catholic Church's moral weight in the indigenous communities was critical in opening space for women. Even with the backing of the church, however, it was a difficult task. "We went from village to village, knocking on doors," said a nun who worked with the diocese in the 1980s and 1990s. "We spoke to women when they came to the parish office or the chapel. We always asked for permission from the men and tried to convince them to let the women come to a meeting. It was not easy."¹¹

A woman who participated in CODIMU described this same time period from her perspective: "Sometimes they would let us go because the nuns asked permission, but then when we got home, our husband or father would be waiting for us with a stick. It was painful, but the Bible gave us strength and as women we began to support each other."¹²

And, according to Sister Martínez, "The obstacles were very intense during that time. I knew several men—churchmen—who beat their wives 'because she wanted to be the boss' or 'because she

wanted to wear the pants in the family.' If one man was a little more sympathetic, all the others in the community assembly insulted him. 'You let yourself be bossed around!' 'You're a manna's boy!' My god, it was terrible, and this happened within the church as well."¹³

In the 1970s, the pastoral staff organized women's meetings to study the Bible. "We met once a week and we read texts [from the Bible]," said one of the nuns. "The women would ask us questions about what we had read and we would respond. For years, they took notes and carried their notebooks around with them."¹⁴ Over the next few decades, this work would expand to include the formation of women's economic cooperatives and regional women's gatherings.

Bishop Ruiz invited nuns from other parts of Mexico to come to Chiapas, many of whom would help develop the church's work with women. Esmeralda, the woman who went to Chiapas as a young nun in the 1970s, has spent more than three decades working with the indigenous villages of Chiapas. She described getting the work with women off the ground.

We spent the first six months visiting all the villages, to see people's living conditions and the work of the church: how it was going, whether there were catechists or not. But one of the tasks we set out for ourselves—this was in 1979—was to understand women's situation. Because in those years, there was a great deal of marginalization, you know? If the men were living a difficult situation, for women it was much, much worse. I look at women's conditions now and it's very different, completely distinct.

At the end of those six months, we held a meeting with the catechists to develop a work plan, but there were no women present. So we proposed a work plan that included classes for the catechists, pastoral visits, and everything that had to do with the sacrament, but we also decided to organize with women and begin to reflect on the Bible. Back then, we didn't have a gender analysis or anything, we just wanted to create in women a sense of their own worth as people. We used biblical texts to begin this discussion.¹⁵

While the EZLN and the Diocese of San Cristóbal are quite different institutions, they have long had overlapping membership and some common objectives. Sister Martínez shared her memories of working in Chiapas during the EZLN's early years.

I believe that we are all part of one great project, which seeks the true liberation of our people. From our perspective as Christians, God does not want marginalization, God does not want oppression, God does not want some people to have power over others. God wants liberation. That is our belief, our faith: that we are all equal, that we are all children of God. But the work of the church was not just the work of the diocese. It was interrelated—not explicitly—but it was interrelated with the social movements.

The diocese had moved from a theory of dependence to one of self-organization—in other words, understanding that poor people are poor because another sector of the population is accumulating wealth. And that's where the EZLN comes in. In the region where I was, we were the people's confidants, and we didn't know what was going to happen, but they told us, "Another organization is beginning."

People say that the church supported zapatismo, but they are parallel processes in which each institution contributes—making mistakes, each with its own imperfections—but contributing what it can. In the region where I was working, the pastoral staff, we discovered that something new was happening—people who were honest, trustworthy, and wise—and, well, we took note.

I remember seeing people's notebooks—on one side of the paper they had one thing and on the other side, the other. I remember those details. And it's not that we consciously or in some very specific way had said, "We're going to support this," but we were supporting each other and we were mutually nourishing each other. Over time, our vision changed, and our tools changed a little bit as well. We were still talking about liberation, we were still doing

consciousness-raising work. We used the same terms, but the concepts were evolving.

For me, 1985 was a significant year. It was the moment... it was as if, from then on, things were different. I remember, for example, there is a practice we call "courses for catechists," which are carried out in all the villages. We train the representatives and the representatives take the information back and it gets passed on from one person to another. So anyway, I remember that we held the Encuentro del Llamado [Gathering of the Called]. There were many people in that workshop who went on to another organization, another level. And even today, there are people in the EZLN who remember that course and say to us, "You were the ones who did the Encuentro del Llamado."

These are strong people—people who have resisted. It gives me great satisfaction as a Christian woman to see people who in those years worked with the Bible, who continue to do the same work but from another point of view, with the same values of justice and equality. We continue to dream, and people continue to dream, about those values. It was in 1985, from my perspective, that something really began to happen, and that the work with women began to gain greater traction.¹⁵

Some women in these rural, indigenous villages began working with CODIMU first and took what they learned with them when they joined the EZLN. Others worked with both organizations simultaneously and saw the work as one and the same. For example Ernestina, who learned to read and write while working with the church, said:

I was working with the organization [the EZLN] and with the palabra de Dios, but after three or four years I realized I couldn't continue doing both. I would go to a meeting for the palabra de Dios, go back home, and then have a meeting for the organization. I chose la lucha [the struggle] because

it's the same thing, really. It's the same path. I found the path of struggle by reading the Bible and I haven't chosen a different path. God always helps us and if we understand the palabra de Dios, we can do well in the struggle.¹⁷

There was also cross-pollination resulting from women belonging to both organizations. "In CODIMUJ," said Sister Martínez, "there were Zapatista women and women who belonged to OCEZ. Back then, you know, there was a little bit of everything. And the women in CODIMUJ were strengthened because we had good tools. . . . So women would go back to those other spaces stronger, more serene, and more demanding as well."¹⁸

The EZLN and the diocese employed similar strategies in their work with women: creating spaces for women to have a voice, advocating for women's right to participate, teaching women to read and write, forming women's cooperatives, and organizing women's regional gatherings. Sometimes this work was done in coordination. A group of Zapatista women in the Morelia region who are also CODIMUJ coordinators explained that they had committed to working with both the church and the EZLN. Each month they would get together in San Cristóbal to talk about how the work was going: the women's cooperatives, the visits to the communities, and what other projects the women wanted to organize. "We were involved with CODIMUJ and also la lucha and we visited the communities on behalf of both," they said. "We even went to the *prista* communities, but we had the Bible with us and we were there to reflect on the palabra de Dios with the women, so that gave us strength."¹⁹ (*Pristas* are members of the PRI. Zapatistas often use the term *prista* for all government supporters, or anyone who is not a Zapatista or Zapatista sympathizer.)

During the 1970s and 1980s, the diocese and the FLN (and later the EZLN) at times engaged in direct collaboration. Kept under wraps at the time, this relationship is now well documented.²⁰ Some of the strongest leadership from Zapatista women emerged in regions where the EZLN and CODIMUJ both had a strong presence. In areas where the diocese and the EZLN collaborated specifically to organize and empower women, women's participation is notably higher even today.

The Evil of Alcohol

Before, when the men used to drink, there was no money. The men could always find money for alcohol, but they didn't worry about whether or not there was any food to eat in the house. It was the women who suffered. Our children didn't have anything to eat and we had to find a way to scrape together some money for food. All the men used to drink, not just some of them. You could say it was their custom. Women couldn't go out because there were always drunks in the streets. Sometimes when a man came home, he wanted to fight and if you said, "Why did you come home drunk?" he would hit you even harder. The women would flee from their houses. The men would do one thing when they were drunk and then feel bad afterward, but it was too late, the woman had already been beaten. Sometimes the men hit their children as well, and when the children saw their father coming home drunk they would go running out of the house.

—ERNESTINA²¹

Beginning with the European conquest of the Americas, alcohol was used, often deliberately, to keep indigenous communities disorganized and weak. "The landowner never paid us with money," said Ernestina. "Not even one cent. On the contrary, he would gather our husbands and sons and tell them he was going to pay them. He paid them, yes—but with alcohol. Once they were drunk, the men asked for more liquor and we ended up even deeper in debt."²² This practice continued through recent decades on the fincas where indigenous laborers worked.

In the decade before the Zapatista uprising, organizing against alcohol was one of the first ways that women fought to improve their living conditions. "When women began organizing," said a group of Zapatista women during a women's gathering in Morelia, "it was because we were suffering so much with our husbands. We saw many women being abused and beaten by their husbands, and we had to do something about that situation."²³ Ernestina and her compañera

Micaela were on the forefront of this effort in the Morelia region. They spent years working together as women's regional coordinators, often walking from village to village to meet with groups of women. Ernestina, fifteen years older than Micaela, eventually stepped down to care for her ailing husband. Micaela went on to become a *comandanta*. "In the organization, women's lives began to change and we are not as oppressed," said Micaela. "Women's lives have changed because the men don't drink anymore. Before, when the men drank, being abused was part of women's lives, but not anymore."²⁴

In the 1980s and early 1990s, representatives of the Catholic diocese and the EZLN both sought to address problems caused by alcohol in the indigenous communities. "Our consciousness about alcohol came from both sides," said Ernestina, "from the organization and from the *palabra de Dios*."²⁵ Having been involved with both, Ernestina was familiar with each organization's efforts to reduce alcohol consumption. She explained that, as a clandestine organization, the EZLN was concerned about discipline and preventing a breach in security—especially leading up to the 1994 uprising. The church, on the other hand, wanted to change cultural practices and promote community cohesion. For women, however, it was primarily a struggle against domestic violence and for the well-being of their families.

In 1985, Ernestina helped coordinate a march against alcohol abuse, organized jointly by the Zapatistas and CODIMU. The march was in the town of Altamirano, which is a two-hour walk down a dirt road from the village of Morelia, and which serves as the municipal seat for the surrounding municipality of Altamirano. Women from the Morelia region described the march: "We marched with banners and we went to the town hall to pressure them to enact a dry law. There were about 250 women from different communities. We yelled and shouted. The local government of Altamirano did pass a dry law but the men did not respect it."²⁶

A non-Zapatista woman who participated in CODIMU shared her memories of the same event: "I remember, in 1985 we said, 'What are we going to do for the Virgin?' We decided to organize a fight against alcohol. We wrote lyrics to the tune of *Viva Maria!* We made

a pilgrimage from each neighborhood and there were more than five hundred women. Some people [in Altamirano] were frightened and afterward they even wanted to kick out the nuns because they said they were stirring up the women."²⁷

Women faced a backlash at home too. "Many women were beaten up after that march," said the women from Morelia. "The men didn't understand what the women were doing out there protesting, and why they weren't at home making tortillas. We think the men wanted to humble us because we had rebelled. Most of the men drank, and it wasn't possible to get rid of alcohol [at that time]. The number of men who drank went down, but then it went back up again."²⁸

Several years after the march in Altamirano, the EZLN's leadership proposed a ban on alcohol in all Zapatista communities. The women from Morelia remembered:

Even though the *palabra de Dios* preached against alcohol, and things started to change a little bit, there was a bigger change when we joined the organization [the EZLN]. The women understood right away that alcohol is bad. But it made the men angry at first, even though they belonged to the organization. It wasn't easy for men to see that alcohol is bad. They thought it was a good thing, and drinking has always been the custom. But little by little they began to understand why alcohol is so harmful.

When the proposed Zapatista law to ban alcohol was presented and we discussed it in each community, women spoke up. We said that alcohol creates many problems. The men who drank did not like women voicing an opinion about alcohol. They didn't want us to say anything. But we were very clear about the problems caused by alcohol. That's why the law was approved, because so many women in so many villages didn't want the men to be drinking.²⁹

In the Zapatista decision-making structure, each community considers this type of proposal before an organization-wide decision is made. Each community reaches its own decision, the local representatives

take that decision back to the regional assemblies, and once it is clear that there is broad support for a proposal, it becomes Zapatista law.

Agustina is an older Tzeltal woman from the Zapatista community of La Garrucha. A village of more than a hundred families, La Garrucha is also one of the five centers of Zapatista territory. Having no front teeth has never stopped Agustina from laughing freely, and she brings her irreverent sense of humor to even the most difficult situations. She can also be very serious, however, and since the men in her family have a history of being hard drinkers, she was pensive as she recalled women's efforts to discourage men from drinking.

We talked about it in a meeting of the whole community. Everyone gave their opinion. The women said it would be a big improvement if the men stopped drinking because before, when men drank a lot, it was like the money they were using to buy liquor was stolen. They were stealing it from their own wives, because that twenty or thirty pesos would have been spent on salt or soap or shoes for the children. They would spend all the money and then come home and hit us. The men had to respect what the women were saying. They couldn't deny it because they all knew what the women were saying was true.³⁰

A member of the autonomous council from La Garrucha shared his memories of this moment with me as well. He said they discussed the idea the same way they discuss any important community issue—by dividing into small groups so everyone would have a chance to share their opinion before returning to the community-wide assembly to see if people supported the proposal or not. He admitted that some men certainly wanted to continue drinking, but that the arguments to ban alcohol were so compelling that everyone agreed. In 1992, the Zapatista support base agreed to the ban, with women's vocal support for the proposal proving critical to overcoming men's initial resistance.

Many men, however, continued to drink after the agreement to ban alcohol was first reached. In 1994, because of the Zapatista uprising, the question was revisited and the agreement reiterated.

After they reached the agreement a second time, it was more widely respected. The community of La Garrucha established checkpoints to prevent alcohol from being brought into the region. They searched all vehicles, and if anyone had alcohol with them, they had to pour it out. The Zapatistas maintained these checkpoints for several years, before and after 1994.

The EZLN's leaders initially wanted to prohibit alcohol to protect their clandestine organization and plans for the uprising. Women's forceful opposition to alcohol facilitated the passage of this Zapatista law, but also changed the terms of the debate. In the years since the 1994 uprising, the ban on alcohol has become much more grounded in the health and well-being of the entire community.

In any conversation with women about changes that have taken place in the context of the Zapatista movement, the dry law is one of the first subjects that comes up. According to Zapatista women from the Morelia region, now that they're in the EZLN and alcohol is prohibited in Zapatista communities, the men do not drink as much. "Women have seen a big change," they said. "Now when men go to the city, they have a little money to spend and they'll bring something back, even if it's just a pair of shoes for the children or a little bit of food."³¹

"Women are much happier now," said Ernestina. "We can go to community celebrations and enjoy ourselves. It's not like before, when we were too scared to go because people at the party were drunk. The men don't hit the women as much now and there's more freedom. Things are more peaceful now and it works because we are in resistance."³²

Because these types of changes never take place overnight, however, and because the Mexican government lost an important weapon of counterinsurgency when the Zapatista communities banned alcohol, this story did not end in 1994. "The government always wants the campesinos to be fighting among themselves," said Ernestina, "and they try to buy men off with money. They send for the men who they know drink a lot, and sometimes they even come all the way out here to sell alcohol. The government is always trying to get us to drink alcohol."³³

So women kept up their efforts against alcohol abuse after 1994. "We organized other marches later," Ernestina continued. "In 1996, we organized a protest against alcoholism, prostitution, and drug

addiction, because the soldiers brought prostitutes with them and the young men also started to smoke marijuana. The march in Altamirano was all women. We marched three different times. Once we broke the windows where they sell beer and poured the beer into the street."

The Zapatista communities also have additional enforcement mechanisms now that the dry law exists within the autonomous justice system. "Some people still drink," said Agustina, "but they hide, and if someone sees them drinking, they can go to jail."³⁴ And, according to Ernestina, "We have agreements about the punishment if someone is drunk. The first time, they go to jail for seventy-two hours and pay a fine of thirty pesos. The second or third time they go to jail for seventy-two hours and they have to work a hectare of pasture for the benefit of the community."³⁵

Above-Ground Organizing

In the years leading up to the uprising, the Zapatistas wanted a way to organize openly and to advance their goals without exposing the political-military element of their clandestine organization. In 1991, the EZLN formed the Alianza Nacional Campesina Independiente Emiliano Zapata (Emiliano Zapata National Independent Peasant Alliance, ANCLIEZ). From the outside, ANCLIEZ looked like one of the many other campesino organizations that defended peasants' rights and advocated for land reform. However, the leaders of the organization were members of the EZLN. The EZLN also created the Asociación Mexicana de Mujeres Asociación Civil (Mexican Women's Association, AMMAC) specifically to organize women. The Zapatistas involved at the grassroots level knew perfectly well that these were front organizations for the EZLN. Others, however, joined these groups without knowing this. AMMAC, for example, included mestiza women from the cities as well as indigenous women from rural Chiapas.

Zapatista women from the Morelia region explained that many women were recruited into AMMAC to do political work. Two women from each community were chosen as delegates to organize other women. "We began to organize and we never stopped," they

said. "Later on, we went to organize women in other municipalities in other regions, like Huixtán, Tumbalá, and Ocosingo. AMMAC grew to become a large women's organization."³⁶

These above-ground organizations gave the EZLN a vehicle to take part in public actions before 1994. "Under the name of these organizations, ANCLIEZ and AMMAC," said the women from Morelia, "we organized a protest in San Cristóbal in 1992 to demand that the government respect indigenous peoples." This protest took place on October 12, to celebrate five hundred years of indigenous resistance since the "discovery" of the Americas in 1492. More than ten thousand people joined the mobilization, and a leader of AMMAC spoke at the rally in the town square. "She stood up there and gave a speech about how women are oppressed by the rich and the powerful, and that women have rights too," they remembered proudly.

ANCLIEZ and AMMAC were not the only organizations present that day. The march was organized by the Frente de Organizaciones Sociales de Chiapas (Front of Social Organizations of Chiapas, FOSCH), composed of a number of peasant and indigenous organizations from throughout the state.³⁷ ANCLIEZ and AMMAC, however, represented the largest and most militant bloc, and were the ones who toppled the statue of Diego de Mazariegos—a Spanish conquistador who is credited with the conquest of Chiapas. "We destroyed the statue of Diego de Mazariegos," the women laughed. "It fell over and broke, which was what we wanted." For the Zapatistas, Mazariegos symbolized the history of brutality inflicted on indigenous people. The statue was erected in the 1970s as a gesture of defiance on the part of San Cristóbal's elite toward the newly emergent indigenous campesino movement, in much the same spirit that Southern states in the United States incorporated symbols of the Confederacy into their flags in response to the civil rights movement. The marchers bound the statue in ropes and dragged it through the streets of San Cristóbal, in a symbolic reenactment of what Spanish conquistadors once did to rebellious indigenous subjects.

The women from Morelia described the tension at the march due to the police presence, and remembered thinking that their leaders might be detained. "But there were so many of us, men and women, that we

defended ourselves and they couldn't do anything. We were already preparing for the uprising of 1994." This 1992 march is often referred to as the first public appearance of the EZLN and was considered a practice run for the 1994 occupation of San Cristóbal. As plans for the Zapatista uprising crystallized in early 1993, the EZLN dissolved ANCLIEZ and AMMAC. Since their primary function had been to provide the Zapatistas with a space for open political engagement, their existence was no longer necessary once the EZLN was a publicly known entity.

The EZLN's First Uprising

The intensive political education and organizing carried out by Zapatista women in the years before the uprising culminated in the Women's Revolutionary Law, a document that captured women's desire for equality and soon became a guiding framework for women's rights. Isabel, the Zapatista captain who joined the EZLN when she was fourteen, was one of the insurgent women who participated in this process.

We began to organize talks, not only with the women but with the whole community. There was a lot of work to do. First we had to explain the reason for an organization like this—in other words, educate and raise people's consciousness. But we always spoke to women about their rights and how to turn their right to participate into a reality when their husband or father still doesn't understand or doesn't see any reason to live life differently from how we're living it now. I think that was hard for men. [Laughs] It was a big change, you know? To set aside what your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents had taught you about what it means to be a woman.

So yes, we began to have problems with the men. We told women they had rights and we analyzed with them how to make their rights into a reality. There are some men who can accept this and other men who ask themselves, "Will this change impact me? Will it change things for my wife or my daughter?" As we were doing this political, educational

work, we entered a time period when women had begun to understand, to be more conscious and to make decisions, to participate more actively in the meetings, and that was how the Women's Revolutionary Law came to be.

But first we had to go through a long period when we—working as political representatives . . . we had to walk long distances with very little to eat, walk some more, talk some more, sacrifice . . . And back then, the organization was not public, so we had to move under the cover of darkness, in the rain. It was not easy!

We gave women space to talk, to express their feelings and how they wanted to change all this: life in the family, with their husbands, with their children. That was where the ideas came from: if things are this bad, we asked ourselves, why not change it? Change men's ideas as well and find a way, as an organization, to turn these ideas into a law. And that's how the Women's Revolutionary Law was born: talking, venting, analyzing. It's not something from outside—it came from our own ideas, our experiences in our families and communities, with our parents, our husbands, our children.³⁸

Isabel and the other women insurgents did not write this law. They attended meetings to help translate and coordinate, to gather ideas and demands from women throughout Zapatista territory. Each Zapatista region wrote a draft of the law and the drafts were then compiled and sent back to each region to be reviewed—and then compiled again. In 1993, the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, CCRDI), the EZLN's highest body of political leadership, passed the Women's Revolutionary Law. It was made public in 1994, soon after the Zapatista uprising. In a letter published in *La Jornada* in 1994, Subcomandante Marcos described the law's passage:

In March 1993, the compañeros debated about what would later be the "Revolutionary Laws." Susana had been in charge of going around to dozens of communities to speak with

groups of women and put together, from their thoughts, the "Women's Law." When the CCRI got together to vote on the laws, each one of the commissions got up: Justice, Agrarian Reform, War Taxes, Rights and Obligations of People in Struggle, and Women. Susana had to read the proposals that she had gathered from the ideas of thousands of indigenous women. She started to read and, as she read on, the assembly of the CCRI became more and more restless. You could hear murmurs and comments. In Chol, Tzotzil, Tojolobal, Mam, Zoque, and Spanish, the comments jumped from one side to the other. Susana, undisturbed, kept charging forward against everything and everyone: "We don't want to be forced into marriage with someone we don't want. We want to have the number of children we want and can care for. We want the right to hold positions of authority in the community. We want the right to speak up and for our opinions to be respected. We want the right to study and even be drivers."

And she kept going until she was done. At the end there was a weighty silence. The Women's Laws that Susana had just read meant a true revolution for the indigenous communities. The women authorities were still receiving the translation, in their indigenous languages, of what Susana had said. The men looked at each other, nervous, restless. All of a sudden, almost at the same time, the translators finished, and in a single movement, the women authorities began to applaud and talk among themselves. Needless to say, the Women's Laws were approved unanimously.

One of the Tzeltal men commented, "The good thing is that my wife doesn't understand Spanish, because otherwise . . ." A woman insurgent, Tzotzil and with the infantry rank of major, was on top of him: "You're screwed, because we're going to translate it into all the indigenous languages." The compañero looked down. The women authorities were singing, the men were scratching their heads. I, prudently, called a recess. . . .

The EZLN's first uprising was March 1993 and was led by Zapatista women. There were no casualties, and they won.³⁹

The text of the Women's Revolutionary Law, which created such a stir for Zapatista men and women, is as follows:

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

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

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

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

Fourth: Women have the right to participate in community affairs and hold positions of authority if they are freely and democratically elected.

Fifth: Women and their children have the right to primary care in matters of health and nutrition.

Sixth: Women have the right to education.

Seventh: Women have the right to choose their partner, and to not be forced into marriage against their will.

Eighth: No woman shall be beaten or physically mistreated by family members or by strangers. Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.

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

Tenth: Women will have all the rights and obligations elaborated in the Revolutionary Laws and regulations.⁴⁰

The rights laid out in the Women's Revolutionary Law are fairly basic. Given indigenous women's reality in rural Chiapas at the time, however, the Women's Law represented a radical stance and its implementation implied a series of dramatic changes. Once passed, it became an important tool for women to exercise their rights. In an interview with a journalist, Maribel, a Zapatista captain, explained:

The men began seeing changes in terms of women's political preparation. They had problems, since women could defend themselves now. "I'm going to the meeting because I'm going, and because that's the agreement we reached with the rest of the women." Some men were upset. "You? What are you going to do there? Women shouldn't be leaving the house." That was a big conflict at the time. But later, as women began to participate more in the assemblies, they told the men that if they weren't going to allow women to participate, then what was the point of the Revolutionary Laws?

It was strange for some men, because they could no longer beat their wives so easily, and they couldn't force us to marry someone our father wanted us to marry. If the woman doesn't want him, she doesn't want him. Now women can also denounce their husbands. She can tell the authorities, "Look, this is what's happening and I don't want it to be happening to me." Or, "He's been beating me." They can speak up and denounce it. Sometimes they will put the man in jail, or he'll have to work as punishment for having tried to force a woman against her will or because he beat her or they couldn't understand each other. But these conflicts aren't resolved within the family anymore. Now they are resolved in a good way with the authorities.⁴¹

For the Zapatista movement in general, and for women in particular, 1994 represented a watershed moment for many of the changes that transformed public and private life in Zapatista communities. After ten years of training insurgents in the mountains and clandestine organizing in the indigenous communities, the Zapatista uprising lasted only

a few days. But it marked the end of one stage in the movement and the beginning of another. In 2008, Isabel looked back on the years since the Women's Revolutionary Law's passage and commented:

The task we have as Zapatista women is to make sure it is implemented. After 1994, when the Women's Law was shared publicly with women from civil society, we kept doing the work. It never stopped, you know. We kept working and we will keep working with the next generation of children, of young people, to leave behind the ideas, the bad customs of our grandparents.

We made a commitment to fight against injustice, and we knew that men and women united, with the same rights, with the same opportunities within our organization, could unite our forces against the capitalist system. But first we had to change ourselves and understand that there needs to be a revolution between men and women, in our heads and in our hearts. And we're still doing that work today, ever since the declaration of the Women's Revolutionary Law and in the current phase of the autonomous government.

[The Women's Revolutionary Law] was established and became law, but the work didn't end there, because there are still some men who are not familiar with it and others who don't agree, and they won't defend the parts they don't agree with. It has been difficult to put into practice, in the family as well as in the community. But we can say that Zapatista women know what their rights are. They know about the Revolutionary Law. And I believe we're still in that process. We're still turning what was written, what was defended, what was analyzed, into reality.⁴²

Next page: Women tend a cooperative vegetable garden in Morelia. (Photograph by Daco Vasquez.)