



CHAPTER FOUR

land and freedom

The Zapatistas love a good party, and they celebrate significant dates throughout the year. My favorite of these community festivities was always the commemoration of the EZLN's land takeovers, which is celebrated in the Garrucha canyon on September 9. It is especially meaningful to the villages that live and farm on occupied land. In 2001, I spent September 9 in a village called San Rafael, named for a Zapatista who was killed in the uprising. Zapatistas in the Garrucha canyon suffered higher casualties than other regions because of the heavy combat in Ocosingo, and each village built on occupied land in this region was named after one of the rebels who died in the fighting.

I arrived in San Rafael around midday. Much of the party was like any other community celebration. Throughout the day, shouts from the soccer tournament filled the air. In the afternoon, community cooks ladled bowls of chicken stew from a large cauldron to everyone present. At night, shy teenagers dressed in their best clothes danced to the pop tunes of a hired band, unperturbed by the rain, or the mud stirred up by their moving feet. But the reason for this particular celebration was clearly on people's minds. When I first arrived, I stopped to visit Roberta, a slender Tzeltal woman in her late forties,

and I listened to her reminisce about what it was like when this same land used to be a finca. Her black hair swung in a long braid down her back as she moved around her small kitchen. She wiped her thin hands on her apron and served two steaming cups of coffee before sitting down to talk. She gazed out the window at the surrounding valley as she recalled this history:

When the big landowners were still here, we couldn't walk around freely. We couldn't bathe or fish in the river because of the landowner's threats. There was no freedom. Back then, we were all corralled up in the hills. We planted up there on the mountainside, but nothing grew. We would look down at the fertile land in the valley, but it was only rich people down there and they had their cattle and their horses on the land. We wanted to work down there in the fertile land too. We would think to ourselves, "When are we going to have that land?" but we didn't know if it would ever happen.¹

Roberta told me that the men in her family had trudged down the hillside every day to work on the finca, but were only paid fifty cents a day for their sweat and labor. The women had to wake up at two in the morning and work all day making tortillas for the patron and his family, and if they didn't do their work fast enough, they were beaten.

While we talked, Roberta's husband Mario walked into the kitchen and joined the conversation. He said that his father had been one of the managers of the finca, and was therefore spared the worst of this mistreatment, but the last straw for him was when he was told they would have to work from six in the morning until six in the evening, Monday through Saturday, and half a day on Sunday. He stopped working on the finca, joined the EZLN, and began actively organizing with other indigenous peasants. Mario's father had passed away that year, but Mario, Roberta, and the rest of their family live on the land he fought for.

Their descriptions reminded me of similar stories I had heard from other Zapatista women. Veronica, for example, is a young Tzeltal woman from Santo Domingo, a Zapatista region in northern Chiapas.

She remembered her father harvesting coffee on a vast plantation. "They measured how much coffee he had picked in a big box and the work was very poorly paid," she had told me. "When I was a girl, I would pick coffee too. They gave you a ticket for the work you did but they didn't pay you right away. The ticket said how much you were owed and if you lost the ticket, they didn't pay you, you just had to go back to work. If my mother or father got sick and couldn't work, the patron would yell at them and say ugly things to them. It was like slavery."²

Roberta also explained why, in the Garrucha canyon, they celebrate the land occupations on September 9. "In 1994, all the landowners left, all the fincas were abandoned, and it became 'the conflict zone,'" she said. "Until September 9, 1997, we were just taking care of the land."³ She said that, after the uprising, no one was sure what would happen next—if the landowners would put up a fight to get their land back, or if the Mexican army would invade the occupied land to drive the Zapatistas out. So the Zapatistas quietly planted their corn and beans on this abandoned but fertile land and bided their time. In 1997, they decided the moment was right. In September of that year, the EZLN organized a march of 1,111 Zapatistas to Mexico City. The public attention focused on the Zapatista mobilization provided cover for the EZLN in Chiapas. "When the 1,111 Zapatistas left for Mexico City, we began to form new villages. Each person looked for land they liked. When the 1,111 Zapatistas arrived in Mexico City, we were already in our positions."⁴

As the sun began to set, Roberta and I strolled to the center of town for the cultural program, another mainstay of Zapatista parties. We sat with other community members facing the basketball court, which doubled as a stage for this event. We all stood up for the Zapatista anthem, and then settled back down onto the grass. Several children read poems and a woman member of the CCRI read a message from the EZLN's military leaders encouraging the support base to remain strong in its resistance. The highlight of the night was a reenactment of the land takeover. One group of actors represented the Zapatistas and another group played the government supporters who claimed to have legal title to the land. The actor playing the leader of the government supporters had the audience in stitches every time he pretended

to take a swig of hard liquor or told outrageous lies to his followers. The next scene depicted the Mexican troops who had been called in to chase the Zapatistas off the land. The Zapatistas confronted them peacefully and all ended well. The grand finale featured the Zapatista actors erecting the first houses of the new village.

The History of Land Struggle and the EZLN

For indigenous, peasant, and rural peoples, land and territory are more than work and food. They are also culture, community, history, ancestors, future dreams, life, and mother. But for two centuries, the capitalist system has demoralized, expelled the peasants and indigenous people, changed the face of the Earth, dehumanized her.

—ANDRÉS AUBRY*

Land is of profound importance to the Zapatistas, most of whom are subsistence farmers, and as we have seen, unequal land distribution has fomented revolt throughout Mexican history. The largest indigenous rebellion in Chiapas during the colonial period broke out in 1712 in the Tzeltal municipality of Cancuc in the highlands of Chiapas, and would spread to many other towns and villages before being violently suppressed. In the late nineteenth century, the dispossession of indigenous communities sparked the 1869 "Caste War" in the Tzotzil municipality of Chamula, which ended with the massacre of the rebels.

The vastly unequal distribution of land during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz helped spark the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Leaders such as Francisco I. Madero, Pancho Villa, and Emiliano Zapata rebelled against Díaz, and he was overthrown in 1911. But Madero, the new president, was soon replaced by the aspiring dictator Victoriano Huerta, and the Mexican Revolution developed into a protracted civil war that lasted until 1920. The precursor to what later

became the PRI, the political party that would hold power for the next seven decades, was formed in the late 1920s. Rosa Isabel Urbina Zepeda, known to her friends and family as Doña Rosita, is the daughter of Erasto Urbina, who, as a member of the progressive Cárdenas administration in the late 1930s, advocated tirelessly for land reform and indigenous rights. (Doña is the female equivalent of don.) Doña Rosita, who lives in San Cristóbal and has witnessed the unfolding of the Zapatista movement, sees historical continuity between it and her father's work.

My father fought hard for justice and for the well-being of indigenous people. Maybe it was because when he was a child, he lived on a finca where his mother had gone to work. His mother died on that finca and they threw her body away. Back then, they didn't bury indigenous people. Since she was an Indian, well, they just threw her body into the yard. Since the climate was so hot, bodies start to decompose right away and that attracts the vultures. At four in the morning the workers went off to the fields, like every other day on the coffee plantations, and my father stayed there, watching his mother's body thrown aside and eaten by vultures. I don't know why she died. I assume she was very weak because when they went to work on the fincas, women had to prepare food for everyone else and they had to start working at three in the morning but they were given very little to eat. My father was seven years old when he saw his mother die like that.

Erasto Urbina spoke Tzeltal and Tzotzil and had contacts in indigenous regions throughout Chiapas; he was thus able to support the government's efforts to break up the fincas and redistribute land into ejidos. As the director of the new Department of Indian Protection, he worked with the indigenous communities of Chiapas to implement land distribution. Doña Rosita continued:

He returned to the same finca where his mother had died and created the first Indigenous Workers' Union, in the same

yard where they had thrown his mother's body. They created it on December 25, 1936. That union was formed by uniting thousands of indigenous people. The [indigenous peasants] had to be present in order to form the union, but to leave the fincas where they worked was quite a feat because they weren't allowed to leave. Their ears were cut off if they tried to flee. More than five hundred indigenous people died to form that union, but it was necessary because it was the only way to stop all the terrible things that were happening.

The reforms could only be carried out by someone on the inside. There is something in Chiapas called "the Chiapanecan family." The Chiapanecan family is made up of descendants of the Spanish who came here with the conquest. They are from the Zepeda, González, and Larranzar families. They have a monopoly on all the government posts in Chiapas and they don't allow anyone in outside of the Chiapanecan family. One of the main reasons they hated my father was because he slipped past them. He was the first indigenous person to take action from within the government, and they were very upset about that. But they couldn't get rid of him because he was one of the president's people.

Doña Rosita also reflected on the ongoing nature of the fight for land and freedom in Chiapas. "The struggle never stopped," she said. "When was the Zapatista movement born? It was not in 1994. They began to prepare many years earlier and there have been many people—many, many people. One day I was at an event with the *compas* and some of the *comandantes* asked me, 'Who was Don Erasto Urbina to you?' 'My father,' I answered. 'Come stand by our side,' they said. Because the *comandantes*, the oldest ones, they are the ones who knew my father, who worked closely with him."

In spite of these hard-fought gains, however, it is often said that the Mexican Revolution never reached Chiapas. Reforms were slow and unevenly implemented, and political and economic power remained in the hands of the large landowners. Over the next several decades,

the Mexican state used land reform—or the promise of it—to co-opt one peasant organization after another, ensuring loyalty to the PRI in many parts of rural Chiapas and successfully preventing large-scale upheaval for much of the twentieth century, in spite of widespread poverty and discrimination against the indigenous population. Once the party of the Mexican Revolution, over time the PRI's promises of agrarian reform became increasingly hollow.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of a number of peasant organizations demanding land reform, organizing agricultural workers into labor unions, and making credit available to small farmers.⁶ These organizations were important predecessors of the EZLN and some of them would later feed into the Zapatistas' organizing efforts. Zapatista women from the Morelia region, for example, explained that before the EZLN was formed in 1983, many community members were part of Quipitc Ta Lecubesel, which would later merge with other ejido unions to form Unión de Uniones. "We joined Unión de Uniones," they said, "because we had no land, and because the government had never taken us into consideration. It began with the older catechists. It was all men back then. There were no women catechists [in this area]."⁷ They explained that women recognized the importance of the struggle for land and some of them wanted to be involved, but they were not readily accepted into the ranks of these organizations. "Women began to hear information from Unión de Uniones, but we still didn't participate directly," they said. "All the delegates were men. There was only one woman who they asked to be the secretary because she could read and write a little."⁸

Esmeralda, who first arrived in Chiapas as a young nun in the 1970s and has worked with indigenous communities there ever since then, described the conflict over land in the northern part of the state and how the dynamics in that region led to a growing militancy within the movement for land reform:

The municipality of Sabanilla was always very beaten down.

In those years, from 1976 to 1979, there was a great deal of repression from the landowners. In fact, when we arrived at one of the plantations in Sabanilla, there were soldiers

guarding the land. Because at that time the peasants were fighting hard for the land and they had organized CIOAC. In the whole northern zone, Sabanilla, Simojovel, Huitupán, there was a lot of conflict over the land and a lot of repression as a result. In the end, the people, well, they realized they needed a different type of organization.⁹

By the 1970s, the PRI, once the party of land reform, had developed into an entrenched ruling party, plagued by corruption and staunchly defending the status quo. Petitions for land were often met with silence or violent repression from the government. Landowners responded with violence as well, forming private armies known as *guardias blancas* (white guards) which patrolled their lands, terrorizing indigenous communities and assassinating leaders of peasant movements.

In 1992, to pave the way for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Mexican government changed Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, allowing ejidos to be divided into individual parcels and sold, and bringing to a close an era of agrarian reform in Mexico. Many point to this moment as the last straw for the indigenous communities that joined the EZLN. Their decision to turn toward armed struggle was in response to violent repression and the need for self-defense, but also the desperation felt by many indigenous peasants after spending years soliciting land from the government. During the September 9 celebration in San Rafael, Roberta explained:

The government never used to take us seriously. We sent many petitions [for land] to Tuxtla, to Mexico City. Before, when the large landowners were still around, we were in an organization called ARIC-Unión de Uniones.¹⁰ Their slogan was "a good ejido," and they said we were all going to get land from the government. But eventually we got worn down and saw that it was a waste of time. We each gave money to send our ARIC delegates to Tuxtla and to Mexico City to solicit land from the government, but there was never any progress. For years and years, and there were no results. The leaders ended up selling out to the government. We protested and shouted and all the

government did was buy off our leaders. That history is very sad. The government never listened to us when we spoke with soft words. They didn't listen to us until we used other words."¹¹

Zapatista Land Occupations

After the uprising they asked who didn't have land and who wanted to go occupy the land. Many of us put our names down. I wanted to go because we only had half a hectare and the corn wouldn't grow there anyway. We worked hard but the corn never grew. My husband wasn't convinced we should go but I told him, "Why are we fighting if we're not going to occupy the land?" My husband didn't want to go because there were so many soldiers there, but I told him, "If you don't want to, I'm going by myself." We decided to do it and in 1995 we began living on occupied land. There was a site that hadn't been claimed yet and, thank God, we're still here.

—COMANDANTA LUCIA, who was a militiana in 1994.¹²

In the aftermath of the 1994 uprising, Zapatistas took land distribution into their own hands. Taken by surprise and unused to having their monopoly on power challenged, many landowners fled, leaving their land unoccupied and vulnerable. The ranch that Comandanta Lucia and her husband occupied together with other indigenous peasants, for example, is on the outskirts of Ocosingo. It was renamed Primero de Enero (January 1) to commemorate the date of the uprising. According to the Zapatistas who live there, what used to be a single cattle ranch now supports more than five hundred families. The Zapatistas took over other large tracts of land throughout eastern Chiapas. Exact figures are difficult to pin down, but data from the Mexican government suggests that in the first six months of 1994, the EZLN occupied approximately sixty thousand hectares (148,263 acres) in the conflict zone.¹³ In 1994, the conflict zone was considered to include the official municipalities of Altamirano,

Ocosingo, and Las Margaritas, which correspond to the Zapatista regions of Morelia, La Garrucha and La Realidad, respectively. Years later, the Mexican government recognized that the Zapatistas occupied up to 250,000 hectares (617,763 acres) of land.¹⁴

A number of other campesino organizations took advantage of the political opening and occupied land throughout Chiapas. Mexican governmental agencies estimate over 1,700 land takeovers (in and outside the conflict zone) between 1994 and 1998.¹⁵ Various sources indicate that the total amount of land occupied lies somewhere between five hundred thousand and seven hundred thousand hectares (1,235,527 to 1,729,738 acres).¹⁶

In some parts of the conflict zone, the preexisting geography was practically erased overnight. In the municipality of Altamirano, for example, almost 85 percent of the surface area was invaded.¹⁷ Jorge Santiago Santiago, former director of the nongovernmental organization Desarrollo Económico y Social de los Mexicanos Indígenas (Social and Economic Development of Indigenous Mexicans, DESMI)

A sign in Zapatista territory reads: "Reclaimed land, under the control of the EZLN support base." (Photograph by Hillary Klein.)

★ TIERRA RECUPERADA ★
BAJO CONTROL DE LAS
BASES DE APOYO DEL
EZLN

remembered his response to the land takeovers. "I was surprised to see how in some regions, like in the area of Altamirano, the ranchos were all dismantled," he said. "In Ocosingo, not all the ranchos were gone but they were greatly impacted. And in areas like Teopisca, they did away with the last fincas."¹⁸ Ranchos are privately held farms generally dedicated to the production of cash crops or raising cattle. Ranchos can be small or large, but unlike fincas, relied mainly on seasonal wage labor. The occupations, in addition to providing the indigenous communities with much-needed land, represented a kind of reckoning with these former finqueros and a profound shift in the historic power dynamics in Chiapas.

The amount of land occupied by the Zapatistas, however, varies greatly from region to region. Much of the reclaimed land is concentrated in the Morelia and Garrucha canyons. Deep in the jungle, in the highlands, and in the northern zone, there were not many fincas or large ranchos that could be taken over and redistributed. In some cases, Zapatistas moved from one region to another to occupy land, like Comandanta Lucia, who moved from the highlands to the outskirts of Ocosingo. In other cases, the reclaimed land provided economic opportunity for a younger generation, like a group of young Zapatistas from the ejido Morelia, who formed a new community close to Morelia called Siete de Enero. There was not enough reclaimed land for all the Zapatistas, however, so in the regions where fewer land takeovers took place, many Zapatistas remained on their ejidos or rancherías and continued to farm the same land.

During a collective interview in the autonomous municipality of Olga Isabel, Zapatista women described what it was like to occupy the land. "After some days went by, we saw that the ranchos were abandoned," they said. "The men held a meeting to organize land takeovers because that land belonged to our ancestors."¹⁹ Whole families often arrived together to establish a new village. "When we took over the land," explained Consuela, a Zapatista woman from Santo Domingo, "each family took a spot where they were going to live and then they began to work, planting in the fields and building the houses."²⁰

Almost overnight, makeshift settlements appeared in what had been the region's most productive fields. Shocked cattle ranchers

and coffee planters watched the invasions from afar. Some of them intervened to recuperate their livestock, and many of them threatened violence, but in the end, most of them cooperated with government programs to purchase the land and distribute it to the peasants. Men usually played a primary role in the initial occupation of the land but women would play a key role later in defending their villages from forced evictions. Women's participation also varied from place to place. According to the women from Olga Isabel, for example, "The women were not part of the land takeovers because we thought only the men needed land, that we didn't need land because we are women. The women stayed behind."²¹ Whereas Consuela, who is from Santo Domingo, said, "We heard that there were going to be land takeovers and we all joined the organization [the EZLN] so we could occupy the land. The women took over the land too. We suffered side by side with the men. We want to work on the land too, that's why we reclaimed the land."²²

Débora and Claudia are from an autonomous municipality called Che Guevara, and they described how their village was founded on reclaimed land. Débora is much older than Claudia and is a regional coordinator. She has practiced midwifery for decades and has ten children of her own. She is also frequently called upon for her knowledge of medicinal plants. Claudia, despite her young age, had already been a women's representative in her community for several years. I sat and talked with the two of them early one evening. After spending most of the day working in the milpa (cornfield), they had come home, fed their families, and then bathed. Claudia's hair was still wet and glistened in the light of the setting sun. Her hands moved through the air excitedly as she spoke. Débora barely stirred, her back straight and her calloused hands folded quietly in her lap. "We made an agreement," said Débora, "everyone who came to live here—because we knew this land had been taken away from our ancestors and we had the opportunity to make it ours again. This land was paid for with the blood of our fallen compañeros in January 1994. We decided to occupy this land in March 1994. Our authorities said that those of us who did not have any land should live on the land we were going to reclaim."²³

"When we arrived here," added Claudia, "we hung up a piece of plastic sheet as a roof and then little by little we started building our houses. We prepared our food in the open air, sometimes in the rain."²⁴ Claudia and Débora's village is called Moisés Gandhi. It is named after the two milicianos from that region, Moisés and Gandhi, who were killed in the uprising. (Moisés and Gandhi were their chosen pseudonyms; these two men had named themselves after Moses and Gandhi, respectively.)

In some areas, the Zapatistas began settling on the land almost immediately and dozens of new communities were formed practically overnight. In other areas, like in the Garrucha canyon, the Zapatistas began to farm the land but did not establish new villages right away. Over the next few years, the EZLN redistributed land to thousands of landless peasants. Zapatista Agrarian Commissions were formed to oversee the distribution. In 2001, Heriberto, a member of the Agrarian Commission in the Garrucha region, explained the commission's role and what progress they had made at that time. I interviewed Heriberto because there were no women on the Agrarian Commission. "According to our records," he told me, "almost all the land in this region is now occupied. We have an agreement—fifty people per rancho on reclaimed land—but it also depends on how many hectares and the quality of the land. What we're doing now is complementing. In other words, if there are already fifteen families living there, depending on the quantity of land, we'll send another ten or fifteen. You could say we're filling in the gaps."²⁵

At the local and regional level, the land takeovers were one of the Zapatista movement's most significant and concrete achievements. "Now we're working on this land, thanks to the struggle, which lifted the blindfold from our eyes," said Roberta. "Now we harvest corn and beans. We can plant anything we want and Mother Earth gives us everything. We can raise pigs or plant chili peppers. It's an important step forward because now we have our own land."²⁶

Subsistence farming is always precarious—a whole season's crops can be wiped out by too much rain, or too little. But Zapatista villages on occupied territory generally have sufficient, and much more fertile, farmland. As a result, these communities tend to have a much higher level of economic and food security than the ejidos

or the small plots of rocky, mountainous land where the indigenous peasants used to live and work. Roberta and Lucia both have family members who still live in land-poor villages. Every year those villages confront the *tiempo de hambre* (hunger months)—the time of year when their corn from the previous season is gone and they have not yet harvested the next crop. Roberta and Lucia, on the other hand, often have a surplus and they, like many other Zapatista families who live on occupied land, use this surplus to support their family members who are still struggling to get by.

The reclaimed land has been an important resource for the Zapatista movement. It has improved living conditions in many Zapatista communities. It has allowed the Zapatistas to exercise control over their own lives after centuries of exploitation and submission. And it has provided a territorial base and an economic foundation for the Zapatista project of indigenous autonomy.

Resisting Privatization of the Land

The land belongs to those who work it. Everybody has the right to land. It doesn't come from a government document—it's for all humanity. If you ask, "What is that Zapatista fighting for?" it's for land, but for everyone. We didn't rise up in arms only for ourselves. We're fighting for everybody to have land. That's why we want [non-Zapatista peasants] to understand what we're doing. We don't want problems with other organizations over the land, much less a war among campesinos, but these problems start with the government.

—HERIBERTO²⁷

After an armed uprising and a wave of land occupations throughout Chiapas, the Mexican government became concerned about the state's lack of governability. The first few months of 1994 were tense and uncertain, and many Zapatista communities faced the threat of displacement from the Mexican armed forces. "The landowners

wanted the soldiers to come and kick us out," said Consuelo, a Zapatista woman from Santo Domingo, "because they said they were the owners of the land, and that the land does not belong to the peasants. The Seguridad Pública [state police] patrolled the area and passed by three or four times a day. But we weren't afraid, and we didn't leave."²⁸ Rumors were flying and villagers who had lived with decades of violent repression had good reason to believe the threats. "We heard that the landowner, since he has money, that he was going to pay the soldiers or the police to come and kill us," said the women from Olga Isabel.²⁹

Débora and Claudia, after explaining how their village of Moisés Gandhi was first established, described how they defended it from eviction. In 1995, they said, the Mexican army set up a military base on the highway a few hundred yards away from the new village. Its presence was designed to intimidate the villagers and scare them off the occupied land. The soldiers entered the community, but rarely had any direct confrontations with the villagers because the Zapatistas' strategy was to leave when the soldiers made their brief incursions into the village, and then come back again when the soldiers were gone.

Débora: Staying here meant we had to defend this land. Those of us who occupied the land knew we had to be very determined and that it was going to be hard, because someone might try to kick us off the land at any moment. We had to pay attention, day and night. We had to be very careful. We took turns keeping watch. I didn't want them to show up when I was asleep.

Claudia: When we came to this village, we began to build our houses and then the soldiers kicked us out. We were afraid, and we went back to the villages where we had lived before. We started coming back little by little. At first, just for a little while, for a day, then for a week, then for a month.

Débora: When we left, we took all our things: our chickens, our tables, everything, because we didn't want the soldiers to take our belongings. But our houses were still here. We

stepped to one side, because we were afraid, but we didn't leave altogether. We weren't going to abandon this community. We resisted the soldiers' pressure.

Claudia: Some people didn't want to come back because the soldiers scared them. "Why are we going back there if the soldiers are there?" they said. [The soldiers] said they were going to kick us off the land and burn down our houses. But we forced ourselves to come back, and that's how we held onto this land.

Débora: The people who stayed, stayed. Some other people who left, left. Back then, many of the women were pregnant or sick, and even still they did their work of defending this village. [The soldiers] can't kick us out now because it's our right to be here and we will defend this land so that our children don't have to suffer the way we did.³⁰

Moisés Gandhi is now a thriving community of around a hundred indigenous families. The seat of its autonomous municipality, it has a regional school and health clinic. Brightly colored murals decorate the auditorium in the center of the village, right next to the basketball court with "EZLN" painted on the basketball hoops.

The Mexican government employed other strategies as well, in an attempt to contain the social upheaval rippling through Chiapas. To pacify the landed class, the government paid landowners for property seized by the Zapatistas.³¹ It also gave legal title to the land to non-Zapatista peasant organizations, in an effort to wrest control of it away from the Zapatistas. Outside of Zapatista territory, where other peasant organizations had occupied land, the government offered to resettle them elsewhere.

The first groups of peasants willing to negotiate with the government's Agrarian Commission were members of organizations with a progovernment stance, like the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (National Peasant Confederation, CNC), which has close ties to the PRI. In some cases, the groups benefiting from the government's land redistribution had not even carried out the original land

occupations. Later on, more independent organizations, including ones that were sympathetic to the EZLN, signed agreements with the government after being threatened with forced eviction. This caused deep divisions between the groups that chose to negotiate with the government and those that did not—tensions which the government would later exacerbate and exploit. "In 1995 and 1996, many organizations collaborated with the government's Agrarian Commission," said Heriberto, "and the government began to give out title to the land where the [Zapatista] support base had settled. The government comes here to fool people, telling them that they have title to this land. That created all the problems that now we have to try and solve. But it's the government that started the problem. [The government] gives our documents to the land so they'll go fight with the Zapatistas."³²

The EZLN has demonstrated no interest in government title to its land because it rejects the very notion of land as private property. It has maintained that the land reclaimed in 1994 should be held collectively, and is not opposed to sharing it with other organizations. "Whoever wants to work on the land can do so," Heriberto continued. "We just have some guidelines about working on the reclaimed land. We want autonomy. We want the land we reclaimed from rich people to be worked collectively. We also ask for a contribution to support the families of those who died in 1994."

The CNC, one of the progovernment groups that received legal title to Zapatista land, has since then engaged in violent conflict with the Zapatistas. Heriberto explained:

There's a community where we have a serious problem right now [in 2001]. There's a group of Zapatistas and a group of CNCistas [members of the CNC] living in the same village. The CNCistas want to evict the Zapatistas and they began to pick fights with the Zapatistas. We have to find a way to resolve this, because it's a serious problem. We began a dialogue with the CNCistas. We invited people from the human rights groups and we listened to arguments from both sides. We came to a good agreement. We don't want a conflict—that's

why we said, "You stay over there and we'll stay over here." Each group on its own side, because we can't throw them off the land, but we won't let them kick us out either. That's how we try to resolve a problem when two groups are both already settled on the land. But they didn't respect the agreement and they don't want to dialogue anymore. As soon as they had signed the agreement, they began looking for excuses, making things up, and they burned down the Zapatistas' homes.

Intimidation has become a common occurrence in areas with tension over the land. In addition to burning down homes, patterns of violence include threats of forced displacement, crop destruction, kidnappings, and shots fired into the air.

Dismantling the ejido system and privatizing the land is part of the government's neoliberal strategy throughout Mexico. The Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos (Program for Certification of Ejidal Rights, PROCEDE), for example, was created in 1993. PROCEDE is a government program that converts ejidos from communally held land into individually owned parcels, which can then be bought and sold or used as collateral for loans. Peasants who use it as collateral and cannot pay back their loans then lose their parcel of land; this created a wave of predatory lending. "We know they're plundering the wealth from our country," said a Zapatista woman from the Roberto Barrios region at the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering. "Through their capitalist projects, they're privatizing the land, the mountain springs and the waterfalls, medicinal plants, oil, and the mines. They want to hand over our country's riches and our sovereignty. Privatizing the land means we will have to compete on the free market with large companies, but not only that. We will also be expelled from our land by industrialization in order to provide cheap labor for the maquilas [sweatshops]."³³

In Chiapas, government efforts to privatize the land are aimed specifically at taking away one of the EZLN's most important resources: its land and territory. This includes land the Zapatistas have occupied since 1994 as well as ejidos in Zapatista regions. Paramilitary groups—many

of them armed and funded by the government—have played an increasingly violent role in land disputes and have acted in conjunction with government programs like PROCEDE to forcibly displace the Zapatistas. Other social welfare programs, including agricultural subsidies and government assistance to poor women in rural areas, have been used to create or exacerbate divisions between government supporters who receive these benefits and the Zapatistas, who do not.

Zapatista men and women have organized protests and other actions against the privatization of land and to confront paramilitary groups. "The government sends its people so we'll fight among ourselves as campesinos," said a Zapatista woman from the Garrucha region. "But it won't be so easy for them to trick us or kick us off our land. This land is being farmed by campesinos now and we will continue to work here."³⁴

Women are just as committed as men to defending the land, sometimes even more so. "Some indigenous men sell their land without realizing it has a negative impact on all of us," said a Zapatista woman from the Roberto Barrios region, referring to the fact that ejidatarios (members of an ejido) are usually all men, and have the power to decide whether or not to dismantle an ejido. "This affects women especially because we don't own the land or have legal title to it, but we make use of it. We work on the land collectively, and it's the source of life for all of us. If, someday, our compañeros decided to sell the land, what would we do? It's clear that these capitalist projects to privatize the land are one of the worst attacks on our indigenous rights and culture, and we must continue to strengthen our struggle."³⁵

Women and Land Rights

Celeste was one of the women widowed by the 1994 uprising. She is the mother of four children, the youngest of whom never met his father because Celeste was pregnant with him when his father, a Zapatista militiano, died in combat. Celeste lives on an ejido, in the same house where she lived with her husband, but because she is not an ejidataria, neither she nor her children have access to land there. The EZLN provides the

widows of 1994 with some economic support but, according to Celeste, it was never enough to sustain her family. While her children were growing up, Celeste worked as a seamstress to support them.

For the Zapatistas, collective stewardship of the land is a cornerstone of their rights as indigenous people. Because it is such a profound part of their culture, identity, and economic livelihood, land is as significant to indigenous women as it is to men. "Women work on the land too, but we don't have rights to the land," said a Zapatista woman from the Oventic region at the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering.³⁶

Zapatista women are not alone in being denied equal land rights in Mexico. Gender inequality in land distribution was legally established by the Mexican state and continues to be standard practice throughout rural Mexico. The 1920 Ejido Law granted ejido rights to the male head of household, and women were not granted equal rights to ejido membership until 1971.³⁷ In practice, most ejidatarios continue to be men and, in most of rural Mexico, land is either inherited by the oldest son or divided among the male children.³⁸ The argument is that a woman will marry and live with her husband, and therefore not need land of her own. Even by this logic, many women are excluded, such as those who are unmarried or widowed.

Unlike in many other areas of women's rights, however, the EZLN has not taken a clear, public, or proactive stand to define women's agrarian rights. What's more, the EZLN's distribution of its reclaimed land reinforced historically unequal land rights. The land occupied by the EZLN in the wake of the 1994 uprising is communally held, but much of it was divided into parcels where each family plants and harvests. This land it is not privately owned, but control of the individual plots of land was given, for the most part, to Zapatista men. For example, there is a new community on occupied land near the ejido where Celeste lives. When the property was occupied, parcels of reclaimed land there were set aside for Celeste's two sons, who were children at the time, but not for her two daughters. Her oldest son, who is now an adult with children of his own, lives in that nearby village and farms on reclaimed land. It will be difficult or impossible for Celeste's daughters, meanwhile, to acquire land of their own.

A proposal for an expanded Women's Revolutionary Law states that "women have the right to have, inherit, and work on the land." The EZLN has acknowledged it as a point for discussion. But women's right to land has not been staunchly defended by Zapatista authorities in the way that their equal right to political participation has, for example. Since there is no organization-wide agreement, each family or community decides how to pass land on from one generation to the next, and women's agrarian rights vary from place to place, even from family to family. Isabel, the military leader who joined the EZLN when she was fourteen and spent almost twenty years in the insurgent army, reflected on this question.

I think it depends on each culture. For example, maybe in the Tzotzil culture, it's the custom for the father or the head of the family to take women into consideration in land distribution, and he respects her rights in the inheritance. I knew one family that took the women into consideration and they distributed the small amount of land they had—I'm not sure if they had eight children altogether but, anyway—they divided it in eight pieces and each of them received the same amount. My grandmother, who lives in the Altamirano region, she did the same thing. Since her husband had passed away, and they had a large plot of land, she divided it equally between her sons and daughters, and now each of them can use it to build a house there or do whatever they want with it.

But there are other places, for example, in my village, where the women don't have agrarian rights. Only men have those rights. There's still plenty of land. Before, each person might have gotten twenty hectares of land and now each person might only get five. But within those five hectares, if the father has eight children, he will divide it between his three sons without giving anything to his daughters.³⁹

During a collective interview in the autonomous municipality of Olga Isabel, several women compared their experiences:

Ruth: In my family, my parents had four sons and two daughters. The land was not distributed to the women—because there wasn't enough—only to the men. My parents felt bad, but there wasn't enough. They said their sons needed land where they would live with their wives but the daughters didn't, because they would go live with their husbands. My father said that if there had been more land, he would have distributed it to all of us.

Teresa: Our parents did not distribute land to us. If there's enough land, it's no problem, but there is hardly ever enough land.

Marisa: Women get land too if the father or grandfather has enough land, and if he wants to divide it that way. Each family decides how to distribute its own land. If they have a lot of land, they distribute it to the daughters too. But the majority does not do this. If there are several sons, then they don't give any land to the daughters.⁴⁰

Ruth, Teresa, and Marisa concurred that when there is sufficient land, many families in their region would distribute it to the daughters as well as the sons. Although shy of equal land rights for women, this does represent a shift from the past, when fathers would likely not have considered leaving land to their daughters at all.

The EZLN has taken the position that land should be held collectively, but communal ownership of the land and women's agrarian rights need not be mutually exclusive—men and women could have equal access to parcels within collectively held land, for example. Some Zapatista women participated in the original land occupations and many more of them have defended their communities against attempts by the Mexican armed forces and paramilitary groups to displace them. If it had not been for the women of Moisés Gandhi, for example, there's a good chance the villagers would have been driven off their land. Women work on the land side by side with men and, as indigenous women, the land is just as meaningful to them.

Land rights are also linked to economic autonomy for women. "Economic relationships are the basis for everything," said Subcomandante Marcos in a media interview in 2007, "and we cannot talk about women's liberation as long as women are economically dependent on men."⁴¹ And yet, without equal access to land, it is essentially impossible for women to be economically independent from their husbands or other male relatives. Without her own land, for example, it is very difficult for a woman to leave an abusive relationship.

The autonomous justice system has taken steps to address this. "And when does a woman have agrarian rights?" posed Isabel. "There are specific instances. For example, when a woman divorces her husband but it was the husband who was at fault. Then the children stay with the woman and she has the right to the land, not the man. The man has to leave and figure out where to go."⁴²

Zapatista women are also becoming more vocal about their right to land. Teresa, who did not inherit land from her own parents, went on to say, "I have a daughter who is married, and now we know that women have rights. We know that we have to divide the land equally. Even though she's married, she needs land too. Otherwise, how will she eat? It's her right."⁴³

During the same collective interview in Olga Isabel, another woman insisted, "Men and women are equal and should have equal rights. Single women should receive their share of the land. If a woman is not married and is not going to marry, she has the same right as men to the land. Women can do all the same work as men in the fields." A clear statement from the EZLN about women's agrarian rights would facilitate more decisive changes, and it is a glaring omission from the movement's overall platform on women's rights, but it seems that Zapatista women will continue to fight for their equal right to land, with or without institutional backing from the EZLN.

Next page: Zapatista women from Yakchpic prepare to protect their community from an attack by the Mexican army. (Photograph by Pedro Valterra/Cuartoscuro.)