



INTRODUCTION

## the EZLN through the eyes of women

*After visiting us several times, they began to explain the struggle: what they were fighting for and whom they were fighting against. They told us there was a word we could use to show our respect for each other, and that word was compañeros or compañeras. Saying it meant that we were going to struggle together for our freedom.*

—ARACELI and MARIBEL, Zapatista women  
from the La Realidad region<sup>1</sup>

In the 1980s, outsiders dressed as doctors or teachers arrived in Araceli and Maribel's jungle community and began asking the peasants why they were paid such low prices when they sold their coffee or corn. These outsiders talked about the fundamental injustices between rich and poor, and about the mistreatment their indigenous community had endured for more than five hundred years. They said that women had rights too. Villagers like Araceli and Maribel took a

risk and joined "the organization." They attended secret meetings at night and recruited their neighbors. Some left home to live in the mountains and become insurgents—joining a scrappy indigenous army that was growing in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

On January 1, 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN) captured the world's imagination when it rose up to demand justice and democracy—taking on the Mexican government and global capitalism itself. The EZLN is named after Emiliano Zapata, a hero of the Mexican Revolution, and it took up his rallying cry of *tierra y libertad* (land and freedom). From its formation in 1983 until the 1994 uprising, the EZLN was a clandestine organization. Since that brief armed insurrection, the EZLN has become known primarily for its peaceful mobilizations, dialogue with civil society, and structures of political, economic, and cultural autonomy. During the decade leading up to and the decade after the uprising, women from the indigenous Mayan villages that belong to the EZLN experienced dramatic transformations in their lives, their communities, and their level of political participation and leadership.

People around the world have been inspired by images of Zapatista women: Major Ana María wearing a black ski mask and brown uniform, leading indigenous troops during the uprising; Comandanta Ramona standing next to Subcomandante Marcos during peace negotiations with the Mexican government, the top of her head barely reaching his shoulder; Comandanta Ester, draped in a white shawl with embroidered flowers, addressing the Mexican Congress to demand respect for indigenous rights and culture. The dignity with which these women carried themselves, set against a backdrop of centuries of racism and exploitation, embodies what the Zapatista movement has come to represent—the resistance of the marginalized and the forgotten against the powerful. Peasants turned warriors, mothers turned revolutionary leaders—dozens, hundreds, thousands of Zapatista women gather, tiny and dark-skinned, with red bandannas covering their faces and masking their individual identities, long black braids hanging down their backs, their fists in the air. They have marched, they have organized, and they have planted seeds—both real and symbolic. They have stood up

to the Mexican army and to their own husbands. They have changed their own lives and they have changed the world around them.

From the civil rights movement in the United States to the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, from the campaign against apartheid in South Africa to the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, women have fought side by side with men for their people's freedom. Women have been important actors and made invaluable contributions to grassroots social movements and national liberation struggles all over the world. Many of these, while not women's movements per se, have created new opportunities for women and catalyzed changes in their lives. At the same time, women almost invariably face discrimination within their own organizations, and have often had to fight for women's rights to be included in the vision of a just society. This dual and interdependent relationship between women's liberation and social revolution illustrates that popular struggles cannot achieve collective liberation for all people without addressing patriarchy and, likewise, women's freedom cannot be disentangled from racial, economic, and social justice.

The indigenous communities that make up the EZLN have historically confronted extreme inequality: economic, because of the legacy of colonialism and the concentration of land and wealth in Chiapas; political, because of their exclusion from state, national, and local decision making; and social, because of racism against indigenous people and the lack of basic services such as health care, education, electricity, and potable water. Women have also faced gender-based discrimination. In the words of Comandanta Ester, from a speech she gave in Mexico City's central plaza in 2001, "We are oppressed three times over, because we are poor, because we are indigenous, and because we are women."<sup>2</sup> This history of marginalization serves as a backdrop for the striking changes that have taken place in Zapatista territory.

Today, the Zapatista movement has a presence throughout eastern Chiapas, with most of the EZLN's support base living in rural indigenous villages. The Zapatista support base refers to the civilians—individuals and communities—who belong to the EZLN. The Mexican newspaper *El Universal* reports the Zapatista support base to be approximately 250,000 people, representing about 22 percent of the indigenous population of Chiapas.<sup>3</sup>

Zapatista territory is not “liberated territory” in the traditional sense that a guerrilla army has complete control over a certain area. The Mexican military has an intense presence throughout the region, and within Zapatista territory there are Zapatista and non-Zapatista villages, and some that are divided between the two. There are clear boundaries of Zapatista territory, however, and this is meaningful because in this small corner of the world, the Zapatistas are experimenting with self-government that functions independently from the existing state and federal system, alternative education and health care infrastructure, and an economic system based on cooperation, solidarity, and relationships of equality.

A small Zapatista village might have a dozen families, whereas larger villages have a hundred families or more. Zapatista communities are organized into autonomous municipalities, which function as something like counties. Each autonomous municipality is made up of anywhere from a dozen to a hundred villages. The EZLN has drawn its own geographical lines, corresponding to where its support base resides and often defined by geography: all the villages along a particular canyon, for example.

The EZLN’s approximately forty autonomous municipalities are organized into five regions, which the Zapatistas call “zones.” Each region or zone is commonly referred to by the name of the five villages that house the *Caracoles* (previously called *Aguascalientes*), the seat of each regional autonomous government. Morelia, La Garrucha, and La Realidad are in the canyons that run eastward to the Lacandon Jungle, and correspond roughly to the official municipalities of Altamirano, Ocosingo, and Las Margaritas, respectively. Oventic is in the central highlands of Chiapas, near the colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, and Roberto Barrios is in the northern zone, near the Mayan ruins of Palenque.

January 2014 marked the twentieth anniversary of the Zapatista uprising and thirty years since the EZLN’s formation as an underground organization. Over the past three decades, the impact of the Zapatista movement can be seen at the local, national, and international level. Land takeovers carried out after the 1994 uprising—where large ranches were occupied by the Zapatistas and reapportioned to landless peasants—impacted the distribution of wealth in eastern Chiapas and continue to affect living conditions for those Zapatista

communities farming on reclaimed land. Most Zapatista villages are still poor, but have experienced some concrete material improvements. The Zapatista construction of indigenous autonomy has meant that rural villages in Chiapas have gained access to rudimentary health care and education, which they were previously denied. They exercise self-determination through autonomous village and regional governments, and generate resources back into their communities through economic cooperatives that organize the production of goods.

At the national level, the EZLN signed the San Andrés Accords with the Mexican government in 1996, which recognized indigenous rights and promised indigenous autonomy. The Zapatista movement arguably helped bring an end to seventy years of one-party rule in Mexico when the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), which had monopolized state power since the Mexican Revolution, lost the presidential elections in 2000. And, through its national mobilizations and dialogue with other sectors of the population, the EZLN is also credited with the strengthening of Mexican civil society.

Around the world, the Zapatistas catalyzed a wave of solidarity that inspired a generation of young activists to organize for social justice in their own contexts. The repercussions of the Zapatista movement at the international level may be difficult to measure, but should not be underestimated. International gatherings organized by the EZLN fostered the burgeoning global justice movement. Events inspired or influenced by the Zapatistas include the World Social Forum, an annual global forum for grassroots activists and organizations, and demonstrations against global capitalism, such as the protests in Seattle in 1999 against the World Trade Organization. Evo Morales, a Socialist and the first indigenous president of Bolivia, has often referred to the Zapatistas in his speeches and writings.<sup>4</sup> Antiwar activists in San Francisco, trying to stop the second Gulf War in 2003, cited the Zapatistas as an inspiration.<sup>5</sup> With its ideological critique of neoliberalism and its internal emphasis on participatory democracy, the EZLN was also a precursor to the Occupy and “We Are the 99 Percent” movements that emerged almost two decades after the Zapatista uprising. Perhaps most importantly, the EZLN offered one answer to the question of what the next wave of liberation struggles might look like after the end of the Cold War.

While the EZLN is rightfully known for these contributions, there is another, often less celebrated piece of the story. Women's leadership within the organization is one of the most compelling aspects of the Zapatista movement. Zapatista women have served as insurgents, political leaders, healers, educators, and key agents in autonomous economic development. Women's participation in the EZLN has helped shape the Zapatista movement which has, in turn, opened new spaces for women and led to dramatic changes in their lives. A woman who was abused as a teenager at the hands of a husband chosen by her father would later join a caravan of thousands of Zapatistas marching on Mexico City to demand indigenous rights. Along the way, she would meet with other Mexican women and urge them to fight for their liberation as she had. *Compañeras* documents these changes through the voices of women who lived them.



As a twenty-three-year-old living in San Francisco in 1997, I already had a strong interest in women's empowerment and revolutionary movements. I had gone to Nicaragua to conduct firsthand research about the women's movement that grew out of the Sandinista Revolution. When funding for my job as a domestic violence counselor dried up, I decided to visit Chiapas, where a few friends were living and working in Zapatista communities. Intending to stay for only a few months, I went to the villages of Roberto Barrios as a human rights observer and Diez de Abril as a volunteer with a project that installed potable-water systems in Zapatista villages. After spending time in Zapatista communities, it was clear to me that this movement was grappling seriously with the question of women's rights and participation, and equally clear that Zapatista women were key actors in this process. Fascinated by what was unfolding before my eyes, I decided to stay. Although I did not know this until later, the time I spent in Chiapas, from 1997 until 2003, were some of the Zapatista movement's most dynamic years, and many of the remarkable transformations described in this book were largely concentrated in that time period.

During those six years, I worked with women's projects in rural indigenous villages that belong to the EZLN. Collaborating closely with Zapatista authorities from the Morelia and Garrucha regions, a

colleague and I developed a project called *Mujer y Colectivismo* (Women and Collectivism) to support women's economic cooperatives, women's organizing at the regional level, and women's participation in the Zapatista movement. The project included leadership development, facilitating training workshops, developing popular education materials, helping with regional women's gatherings, and setting up revolving loan funds to form new women's cooperatives.

The years just before and after the 1994 uprising were a formative time for the Zapatista movement, and in Zapatista territory, changes in women's rights and participation took place at an accelerated rate. What made that period in the Zapatista movement unique? What exactly happened during those years, and what can those of us committed to social justice, women's rights, and indigenous struggles learn from it? *Compañeras* is dedicated to answering these questions and allowing Zapatista women, through their stories and testimony, to respond for themselves.

The series of transformations that took place in Zapatista communities was a result of pressure from above and a swell of support from below. The EZLN includes, within one organization, a hierarchical insurgent army alongside a grassroots social movement with broad participation from the civilian population. Both aspects of the Zapatista movement made important contributions to women's empowerment—without pressure from above as well as from below, these changes would not have been possible. While it was the EZLN's military commanders, political authorities, and community leaders who established a framework for women's rights and created new opportunities for women, it was the indigenous women themselves, in the rural villages of Chiapas, who rose up to fill those spaces and change their destiny. When the EZLN began recruiting and organizing in these villages, women there were experiencing an extraordinary level of violence and discrimination. The presence of a radical social movement committed to questioning society's fundamental paradigms, in this context, also paved the way for extraordinary changes in women's lives.

The bulk of the testimony in *Compañeras* is from interviews conducted during the years I lived in Chiapas. Some interviews correspond to specific events. In 1998, for example, the Mexican armed forces invaded many Zapatista villages. Because of the tension and violence, my project with women's cooperatives often took a backseat



to participation in emergency human rights delegations, and several times that year I traveled to villages soon after confrontations with the Mexican army to interview women about what had just happened. I worked closely with many of the women interviewed for this book—I slept in their homes, worked in their cornfields with them, and played with their children—and I believe this relationship facilitated a greater level of openness during the interviews. These women are also leaders of their movement; when they spoke on behalf of their communities, it was because the Zapatistas had chosen them as their spokespersons.

Some names in this book are women's real names, some are *nombres de lucha* (literally meaning "names of struggle," these are pseudonyms that Zapatistas choose for themselves), and some are invented names. Much of the testimony in this book is collective testimony, meaning it was gathered in group interviews or during a women's meeting or assembly. Their collective voice is important to the Zapatistas and it was their decision to conduct many of the interviews this way, with multiple women sitting together to answer questions and share their stories. In smaller group interviews, with four or five women, I often documented what each particular woman had said. For larger group interviews, sometimes with several dozen women, they often asked me to write down what the women said, but without distinguishing which woman had said what. Some collective interviews were conducted in Spanish, but other times the women spoke in Tzeltal, Tzotzil, or Tojolabal, and a translator would capture the discussion for me in Spanish. In those cases, I recorded the translated summary of what all the women were saying as their collective voice.

I also visited more than two dozen villages to collect women's testimony for *Vida nuestra* historical *Libro de historia de la Organización de Mujeres Zapatistas "Compañera Lucha"* (Long Live our History! A History Book of the "Compañera Lucha" Zapatista Women's Organization), a document that has been used primarily for education and organizing within the Zapatista villages.<sup>6</sup> With one of the women coordinators leading the way, we walked for hours from one community to the next. During these visits, I conducted collective interviews with groups of women from each village, as well as individual interviews with local and regional authorities, health and education promoters, and coordinators of the women's cooperatives. Unlike the Zapatista women in more centrally located villages who were accustomed

to being interviewed by journalists, in many of the more isolated communities it was the first time anyone had asked these women to tell their stories. It was a powerful experience for them and for me.

In 2006, Zapatista authorities in the Morelia region gave me permission to use the testimony I had compiled for *Vida nuestra* historical and to do an additional series of interviews, which I conducted in several autonomous municipalities over a period of a few months. I have also included testimony from the Comandanta Ramona Women's Gathering. Held in La Garrucha in 2007, this three-day event was an opportunity for Zapatista women to meet with women from other parts of Mexico and around the world to share their experiences. In 2008 and 2009, I interviewed several non-Zapatista women with key relationships to the Zapatista movement. The later interviews and testimony allow for a degree of reflection on events in previous years and on what had changed since the beginning of the Zapatista movement.

I should be clear that this book is my own work. While all documentation was carried out in consultation with Zapatista authorities, I selected the testimony, organized it into chapters, and included my own voice. The Zapatistas are very careful about who speaks on behalf of the EZLN and the production of knowledge regarding their movement. As an outsider who spent many years working closely with the Zapatista movement, I stand on the border between that internal knowledge production and writing from an external perspective.

The word *compañeras* is how Zapatista women refer to themselves. *Compañeras* is the feminine, plural version of *compañero*, which has no exact translation into English. It lies somewhere between "comrade" and "companion." In a political context, *compañero* generally refers to someone who belongs to a particular organization or movement. For the EZLN, *compañero*, or *compa* for short, is synonymous with "Zapatista." The collective and gendered nature of the word *compañeras* expresses the central fact that while this book captures many individual stories, it ultimately centers on Zapatista women's closely held group identity. Zapatista women, collectively, are the protagonists of this book.

Next page: Women from the autonomous municipality Olga Isabel at a march in San Cristóbal de las Casas. (Photograph by Hilary Klein.)