

Hacia una genealogía de la lucha de las zapatistas: La lucha como mujeres zapatistas que somos I. Comandanta Miriam

Good evening *compañeros* and *compañeras*.

I also have the chance to talk to you a bit about what the situation was for women prior to 1994.

Women suffered through a very sad situation since the arrival of the conquistadors. They stole our land and took our language, our culture. This is how the domination of *caciquismo* [local despotism] and landowners came into being alongside a triple exploitation, humiliation, discrimination, marginalization, mistreatment, and inequality.

The fucking bosses had us as if they were our owners; they sent us to do all the work on the haciendas, without caring if we had children, husbands, or if we were sick. They never asked if we were sick; if we didn't make it to work, they sent their servant or slave to leave the corn in front of the kitchen so that we would make tortillas for them.

Much time passed like this, with us working in the bosses' house. We ground the salt because the salt then was not the same as it is now, now it comes finely ground. The salt we used before came in large balls, and we women had to grind it. Women also ground the salt for the livestock, and shelled coffee when it was coffee harvest time. If we started at 6 in the morning, we finished at 5 in the evening. Women had to keep preparing the bags of coffee throughout the whole day.

This is how the women worked. Women were mistreated in their work, carrying water and all of that and paid miserably; they were only given a little handful of salt or a handful of ground coffee, that was the payment given to the women.

Years passed and women suffered like this. And when our babies cried and we nursed them, we were yelled at, made fun of, insulted physically; they said that we didn't know anything, that we were useless, that we were a bother to them. They didn't respect us and they used us as if we were objects.

They did whatever they wanted to a woman; they chose the pretty women or the pretty girls as their lovers, and left children all over the place; they didn't care that the women suffered, they treated them like animals, with their children growing up without a father.

They sold us as if we were commodities during the *acasillamiento*^[1]; there was never rest for us women.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the *acasillamiento*. *Acasillamiento* refers to when people go to the haciendas or ranches with their families and stay there and work for the boss. The men were the ones who did the work of planting coffee, cleaning the coffee fields, harvesting the coffee, clearing the pastures, planting the grass, all this work, taking care of the corn and bean fields. The men did this work for the boss. Apart from this, there is another thing I could tell you about the *acasillamiento*, which are the *mozos* or slaves there, men and women who are always going to live on the hacienda. Those men or women that are slaves or *mozos*, who live at the hacienda, are men and women that sometimes don't have family. For example, a family comes just to work on the hacienda, and sometimes the dad and mom get sick and die and the

children are orphaned. The boss takes these children and raises them on the hacienda. And what do these children do? It's not like the bosses adopt them as an adoptive child, but rather as a slave. Those children grow and this is the work they are given: if the boss has a pet, or pets, such as a dog, a monkey, or some kind of animal, the boss has the *mozo* take care of it, care for the animal. Wherever the monkey goes, that's where the child is; they have to take care of it, bathe it, clean where it sleeps. That's how it works.

Later, when the boss has a party—because before the priests would come to the large haciendas of the bosses and baptize their children, or for a birthday, or to perform a marriage ceremony for his daughters—and afterwards they would have parties and tell the *mozos* to guard the door. They would have the *mozo* watch the door while they were celebrating with their colleagues and friends. The *mozo* guards the door, he can't let even a dog come into where they are partying, and he has to be there all day, for as long as the boss's party keeps going.

And the women slaves were the ones who made the food, washed the dishes, and took care of the boss's son, or the children of the boss's friends.

That is how the people on the haciendas lived, and they didn't get to eat what was eaten at the gatherings; they had to drink *pozol*^[ii] if there was *pozol*, eat beans if there were beans. That was all they ate, meanwhile the boss ate the good stuff, but with his friends.

Later, when the boss wanted to go to the city, from his hacienda to a city that is, say, a 6-day walk, the *mozo* would go along. If the boss had children—sometimes the children are disabled—the *mozo* had to carry the boss's child to the city. And if the boss's wife came to the hacienda, the *mozo* goes again and carries the child back again.

And when they harvested coffee, in any harvest on the hacienda, the *mozo* had to be tending to the mules. I don't know if you know about horses, but the *mozo* had to saddle and unsaddle the boss's horse, herd the cattle, and take the loads to the city where the boss lives. If he lives in Comitán the *mozo* had to go all the way to Comitán. He had to leave the hacienda and go as the mule-driver. This is how many enslaved men and women suffered during that time.

If there are fruit tree orchards inside the hacienda and one of them climbed up to pick some fruit, the bosses wouldn't let them. They got them down by whipping them, I don't know if you know how the lash works; they would hit them with it. They can't pick fruit without the boss's permission because the entire harvest was to be taken to the city. This is how the men and women suffered.

After so much suffering by women and the exploitation during the *acasillamiento*, the men started realizing how their women were being mistreated. Some thought it better to leave the hacienda. One by one they started leaving and taking refuge in the mountains because these hill lands were not claimed by the plantation owners. So they took refuge there. They thought it better to leave so that the women would not continue to suffer on the hacienda.

After awhile in the mountains—and many spent a long time there—they realized that it was better to join together and form a community, and that's how they came to live

that way. They got together, talked, and formed a community where they could live. That is how they formed the community.

But again, once they were living in the communities, those ideas that came from the boss or the *acasillado* were brought in. It's as if the men drug these bad ideas along with them and applied them inside the house. They acted like the little boss of the house. It's not true that the women were liberated then, because the men became the little bosses of the house.

And once again the women stayed at home as if it was a jail. Women didn't go out; they were shut in their houses once again.

When girls are born, we are not welcomed into the world because we are women; when a little girl was born, it is as if we were not loved. But if a boy was born, the men celebrated and were content because they are men. They brought this bad custom from the bosses. That's how it was for a long time. When girls were born they acted as if women were useless, and if a boy was born, as if they could do all of the work. But one good thing they did was that they did not lose the memory of how to form a community; they began to name community representatives and hold meetings and gatherings together. It was good that this idea was not lost, it wasn't taken away and it came to life again. The bosses and the conquest wanted to make this culture disappear, but the bosses were wrong, because the people could still form their community.

Another thing is that the man gives the orders in the house and the women obey what he says. And if he tells you that you're going to get married, you have get married. He's not going to ask you if you want to get married to the man who came to ask for your hand; your father already accepted the liquor they offered, he drank it already and this obligates you to go with this man that you do not love.

This is how we came to suffer once again with our husbands because they told us that women are only useful in the kitchen, or to take care of their husbands, or to take care of the children. The men didn't hold their children; they didn't support the women. They only gave you the child, and then who cares how the child is raised. And—I'm going to talk about how it really was for years—we women often say that a baby was born every year, every year and a half, growing up like a little staircase, every year or year and a half there is another one. But the father didn't care if his wife was suffering because she had to carry firewood, plant the cornfield, clean the house, sweep, take care of the animals, wash the clothes, take care of the children, change the diapers, and all of that. All of that was women's work.

This is why we say that we suffered triple exploitation as women. Women had to be awake and in the kitchen at 3 or 4 in the morning, depending on how much time the men needed to get to their fields. The women had to get up early to make *pozol*, coffee, and breakfast for the men. The men go to work, and when they come back in the afternoon they want the water for their bath to have been carried up to the house already and be ready for them to bathe. The men bathe and then leave the house to walk around, to play, and the women are once again stuck at home the whole day, until the night—around this time right now—the women are still awake; they don't go to sleep until 8.

So we were really suffering. The men didn't care if you were sick, or how you felt, they didn't ask—that's just how it was. That is how women really lived; we're not lying because that is how we lived.

When you would go to church or a ceremonial center for a festival, and women did go sometimes, you had to lower your head. You couldn't raise your head, you had to walk with your head bowed, without turning to the sides, and covering your head with the *rebozo* [shawl] like this, so that just your face shows.

A lot of time went by like this, during which men dragged along these bad ideas, these bad learnings. That is how it happened, *compañeros*. As if we were nothing. As if only the men could be authorities, only the men could go into the street and participate.

There was no school. Later on in some communities there was school, but we didn't go because we were women; they didn't let us go to school because if we went they'd say that we only went to school to find a husband. And that it was better to learn to work in the kitchen because if we were indeed going to have a husband, we needed to learn how to take care of him.

And when our husband hit us, when he insulted us, we couldn't complain. If we asked for help from the other institutions of the bad government they were much worse because they defended the men, and said the men are right; and so we remained silent, humiliated, and embarrassed at being women.

We didn't have the right to come to meetings to participate, and they said that we were stupid, useless, and that we weren't worth anything. They left us at home. We did not have freedom.

There was no health care. Even where there were clinics and hospitals that belonged to the bad government, they wouldn't see us because we didn't know how to speak Spanish. And sometimes we had to return to our homes, and many women and children died of curable diseases; we weren't worth anything to them, and they discriminated against us because we were indigenous. They said that we were just dirty barefoot indians, and we couldn't enter the clinics or hospitals. They wouldn't let us, they only took care of people with money.

All this we suffered in our own flesh. We never had the opportunity to say what we felt for many years, because of the teachings of the conquistadores and the bad governments.

That is all, *compañeros*. Another *compa* will continue.

[i] Indicates the time period in which the *caciques*, or local land bosses, held great expanses of land and had almost total power over the indigenous workers in a kind of indebted servitude.

[ii] *Pozol* is a drink made from ground maize mixed with water and often consumed in the Mexican countryside as a midmorning or midday meal.

La lucha como mujeres zapatistas que somos II. Comandanta Rosalinda

Good evening *compañeros* and *compañeras*, brothers and sisters.

What *compañera* Comandanta Miriam just explained is all true. We were poorly treated, humiliated, and unappreciated because we never knew that yes, we did have the right to organize, to participate, to do all types of work; this is because no one had given us an explanation of how we could organize to get out of this exploitation. At that time we were all in the dark, we didn't know anything. But during the time of clandestinity, there came a day when some *compañeras* were recruited, and they went on to recruit other *compañeras* village by village.

Then came the time to name a *compañera* to be the local authority for each community. They named me as a local authority of my community. That is when I started going to meetings in order to bring more information back to the community. Later on we held meetings with the *compañeras* in the village to explain to them how the collective work could be organized, and to also to explain to them that it's necessary to have *compañeras* who are insurgents and *milicianas*.ⁱ

If the fathers and mothers understood, they sent their daughters to be *milicianas*, to be insurgents. And these *compañeras* did the work with incredible gusto because they already understood what exploitation in the bad system was. This is how the *compañeras*' participation began.

Of course, this was not easy at all, but little by little we came to understand, and in this way we moved forward until 94 when we came out into the public light, when we couldn't stand the mistreatment from those capitalist fuckers. There we saw that it was true that we did have courage and strength just like the men, because we could face off with the enemy, without fear of anyone. This is why we are ready for anything the bad capitalist system tries to throw at us.

Later, I went on to be a regional authority. The regional authority is responsible for holding regional meetings with the *compañeras* who are local authorities; for taking information to the people, for organizing the *compañeras* in how to do work in the community. We also went to visit the communities to organize more local authorities, and to help the other *compañeras* understand that it was necessary for women to participate. This is how we started participating

Little by little we lost our fear and embarrassment, because we now understood that we had the right to participate in all areas of work. We came to understand that making a revolution required both women and men.

That's all, *compañeros*, *compañeras*.

ⁱ Member of the EZLN's civilian militia or reserves.

La lucha como mujeres zapatistas que somos III. Comandanta Dalia

Good evening *compañeros* and *compañeras*, brothers and sisters.

I'm going to explain a little bit of what *compañera* Comandanta Rosalinda said.

Just as she explained, it is now my turn to talk about how we become authorities.

From 1994 on, we knew that we had rights as women. That was when we woke up.

This is how little by little we grew to understand the work of the *compañeras*.

In the communities, in the regions, we began the practice of organizing ourselves to fight for the good of the community, without having to have an education to do so.

In 1994, we realized that as women, as mothers and fathers, we had the courage to send our husbands, our sons, our daughters to fight, and we knew well that to confront

the enemy is not easy and one can come back alive or dead. But we never dwelled on those things. We were clear that the women had the responsibility to raise whomever of our sons and daughters were left. This is when we understood that we thought the same way as the *compañeros*.

To be a *suplenta* [the second or substitute to an authority position], first one has to do the work, to give talks about the struggle. We came to see that there were more responsibilities for doing that work. There are meetings in the regions, municipalities, and zones. There are frequent visits to the communities to better organize the *compañeras* and *compañeros* in the collective work to sustain the resistance throughout the lands we recovered in 1994, which had been taken away from us by the large landowners. Since the time of clandestinity, we were doing collective work, and also giving talks in each community, to men, women, boys and girls, so that they could understand the struggle.

This was so our children didn't grow up with these bad ideas; we don't let them learn these bad ideas from the capitalist system.

This is how the work of the *compañeras* and their participation as Zapatistas kept advancing in all types of work and in any responsibility given to them by the community. In this way, the *compañeras* came to recognize their rights, that we do have this freedom, the freedom to give opinions, to analyze, to discuss, to plan, on any topic, and in that way the *compañeros* also understood the rights of women. The first courage the *compañeras* showed was to permit their spouses and daughters to be in the struggle. Secondly, they gave their husbands this freedom, because we saw what the men were doing, and that as women we could also do that; we have that courage.

We also have words to offer, ideas to analyze, ways to look at problems. Even though it was very difficult for us, we made the effort. Even though the *compañero* men were bastards before, we knew how to get them to understand; there are a few that still act like little jerks sometimes, but now it's not all of them.

But the majority now understand. The *compañeras* don't just let it go, they don't remain humiliated like before, and like *compañera* Comandanta Miriam said, now the women bring their complaints to the civilian authorities, such as the *agentas* or *comisariadas* [local autonomous authorities]. In each community we have *agentas* and *comisariadas*, and if it can't be resolved by the *agentas* and *comisariadas*, it goes to the municipal authorities. They are able to resolve things according to the rules and agreements we have in each community.

But don't think that all of the *compañeras* complain because they are scared of their spouses; rather, it is important to know these things and talk between *compañeras*. Whenever we have meetings people begin to talk, and we *compañeras* have to investigate. That is, we have to figure out how to fix things ourselves, because amongst ourselves we have a lot of patience, not like the men who don't have patience.

So we saw that yes, we could do the work, and now we take the time and space to participate, and to train another generation, even if we make errors in the process. But if we make mistakes, we fix them ourselves. In this way, we are making our struggle, and we continue organizing; we have a lot of patience as women, which is why we

move from local authorities, regional authorities, *candidata, suplenta*, to becoming part of the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee [CCRI].

To better organize the *compañeras* and to help the youth understand more, we have to orient, convince, to be a kind of matchmaker and infect them, not with illness but with good ideas. It's not a bad idea to help them understand that they shouldn't live exploited by the capitalist system; this is what we are doing, and the young people are already organizing. And it's just like you see here, present with us are these two *compañeritas*, young *compañeras*. Their names are Selena and Lizbeth; they are going to be our future authorities, fruits of their generation.

We are doing this in steps, steps without an end; that is why we are here as the CCRI with the Sixth Commission. Thanks to the organization, we have learned to read a little bit, to write a little bit, to speak a bit of Spanish. Before we didn't know how to speak even one word in Spanish. This is why we are not going to stop organizing as women in this capitalist system, because there is still sadness, pain, imprisonment, and rape. Just as the mothers of the missing 43 do not stop organizing.

This is why we are sharing with you brothers and sisters of the national and international Sixth. Thanks to our Zapatista organization, we Zapatista women are now taken into account; we men and women organize together because of the bad capitalist system.

We want change in everything, in the entire world, for the whole country. But if we don't organize ourselves, and if we don't fight against the capitalist system, it will continue until it finishes us all off; there will never be a change.

We need to be fighting at 100%, men and women. To have a new society where the people rule. We as Zapatista women are not going to stop fighting, even as the bad government kills us, because the bad governments are always persecuting us.

I'm sorry *compañeros* and *compañeras*, brothers and sisters, I don't know how to speak Spanish very well. Since I don't know it well, I hope you've heard what I said. That's all.

Thank you.

La lucha como mujeres zapatistas que somos IV. Base de Apoyo Lizbeth

Words of Compañera Lizbeth, Zapatista base of support

Good evening *compañeros* and *compañeras*, brothers and sisters.

We are going to explain a little bit of how we have been living and doing our autonomous work after the 1994 armed uprising.

We as Zapatista youth today, we are no longer familiar with the overseer, with the landowner, with the hacienda boss, much less with El Amate [a prison in Chiapas]; we do not know what it is to go to the official municipal presidents so that they can resolve our problems. Thanks to the EZLN organization, we now have our own authorities in each community, we have our municipal authorities, and our *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* [Good Government Councils], and they resolve whatever type of problem that might arise for a *compañera* or *compañero*, for both Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas.

We now have freedom and rights as women, to have opinions, discuss, and analyze, which is not how it was before, as the other *compañera* said.

The problem we still have is that we are shy about participating or explaining how we are working, but we *compañeras* are in fact doing the work.

Also, we women are already participating in all types of work, such as in the area of health, doing ultrasounds, laboratory work, pap smears, colposcopies, dentistry, and clinic work. We also participate in what we call the three areas, which includes midwifery, bone-setting, and medicinal plants.

We are also working in education as *formadoras* [teacher trainers] and coordinators, and education *promotoras* [like a teacher, literally “promoter”].

We have women broadcasters and members of the *Tercios Compas* [*Zapatista* media team].

We participate in *compañera* collectives, in women’s gatherings, and youth gatherings.

We are also participating as municipal authorities, which includes many different kinds of work, and we women do these tasks. We are also working in the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* as local authorities, and as board members for the *compañeras*’ businesses.

In different autonomous work areas, we are already participating alongside our *compañeros*. Although we as young women don’t know how to govern yet, we are named to be community authorities because they see that we know how to read and write a little bit, and then we learn the rest through doing the work.

In the majority of the work that we carry out we are all young women, and we can tell you clearly that this work is hard, it is not easy. But if we have the courage to struggle, we can do these tasks where the people rule and the government obeys.

Now, men and women practice this form of struggle and of government every single day. We now see this as our culture.

That is all I wanted to say, *compañeros* and *compañeras*.

La lucha como mujeres zapatistas que somos V. Escucha Selena.

Words of Compañera Selena, *Listener*,¹

Good evening *compañeros* and *compañeras* of the Sixth.

Good evening brothers and sisters.

Good evening to everyone in general.

The topic that I will be explaining to you, actually I will read it to you, is the same topic the other *compañera* presented on, but with more information about the youth, both *Zapatistas* and non-*Zapatistas*.

We as *Zapatista* youth are facing a low intensity war that the bad government and the bad capitalists wage against us. They put ideas into our heads about modern life, like cellphones, clothes, and shoes; they put these bad ideas into our heads through TV, through soap operas, soccer games, and commercials, so that we as youth will be distracted and not think about how to organize our struggle.

But we *Zapatista* youth have not often fallen for this, because despite these attempts when we do buy clothes they are not the stylish ones; we buy the kind of clothes the poor wear, which as you can see is how we are dressed right now. We also buy shoes, but they are just a whatever kind of shoe, like the poor use; we don’t buy the kind with the pointy heels. If we were to use that kind of shoe, well where we live there is a lot of mud, and if we young women wear these shoes we’re going to get stuck, and

we're going to have to use our hand to get the shoe out. We also don't buy those leather boots because the same thing can happen, they can come unglued in the mud because they are not strong enough; yes, of course we buy boots, but they are work boots, the kind that resist the mud, we don't buy shoes that don't resist.

And we also buy cellphones, but we know how to use them like Zapatistas, for something useful. We also have TV, but we use it to listen to the news, not to distract ourselves.

We did buy these things, but first we had to sweat and work the mother earth to be able to buy what we wanted.

On the other hand, youth who are not Zapatistas are those who most often fall for the tricks of the bad government, because believe it or not, those poor-poor youth abandon their families, their community, and they go to work in the United States, to Playa del Carmen, or to other countries, just to be able to buy that cellphone, that pair of pants, shirt, or stylish shoe. They leave because they don't want to work the earth, because they are lazy. Why do we say they are poor-poor? Because they are poor like us; but they are also poor thinkers because they leave their communities and when they come back they bring bad ideas with them, other ways of living. They come back with ideas to assault or rob others, to consume and plant marijuana; and when they get back to their houses they say they do not want to work with the machete because they're no longer used to it; that it would be better to go back again to where they were, that they no longer want to drink *pozol*,ⁱⁱ they say they don't even know what *pozol* is anymore, even though they grew up with *pozol*, with beans. They pretend, in those places where they go, that they aren't familiar with the food of the poor; they pretend to be children of rich folk, but this is a lie; they are poor like us.

On the other hand, we Zapatistas are poor, but rich in thinking. Why? Because even though we have shoes and clothes and cellphones, we don't change our thinking or our way of life, because to us as Zapatista youth it doesn't matter to us how we are dressed, or what kinds of things we have. What's important to us is that the work we do is for the good of the community. That is what we Zapatistas want, and it's what we want for the whole world: that there not be rulers, that there not be exploiters, that we as indigenous people are not exploited.

I'm not sure if you understood what I read.

Well, that was all the words I wanted to share with you, hopefully they are useful to you.

ⁱ The Zapatistas use the Spanish "*Escucha*," meaning listener, to refer to an assigned position or responsibility, often given to young people, to go and listen at a meeting, gathering, or event and report back to others in the Zapatista communities who were not in attendance.

ⁱⁱ A drink made from ground maize mixed with water and often consumed in the Mexican countryside as a midmorning or midday meal