



**Contesting Victimhood:
Indigenous Women and Violence in Chiapas, Mexico**

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Contesting Victimhood: Indigenous Women and Violence in Chiapas, Mexico

Indigenous women in Chiapas, Mexico have been central participants in the various resistance movements that have sought to reclaim land, establish indigenous autonomy and demand recognition from the Mexican government. Women led troops and participated in the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and thousands more make up the Zapatista support bases. Ending violence against women has been a key issue for organized indigenous women. Despite the fact that these women have played such an integral role in the fight for their autonomy, both as indigenous people and as women, and, in doing so, have violated cultural, national and gender norms, indigenous women continue to be portrayed by the state as passive victims (Newdick, 2005).

Newdick (2005) argues that the Mexican state and dominant cultural rhetoric cast indigenous women's lack of autonomy and their experiences of male violence as the result of uncivilized norms in a fixed and unchanging culture. This kind of a conceptualization has significant implications. This paper demonstrates how the practice of casting violence against indigenous women as a cultural problem, rather than as a structural one, serves to bolster opposition to the possibility of indigenous autonomy, feeds the rationale behind the militarization of Chiapas and limits the definition of violence against women, shifting attention away from the pervasive structural and state-sponsored violence these women experience. Most importantly, this paper argues that the cultural explanation of violence against

indigenous women undermines the right and the ability of indigenous women to both retain and reconstruct their own cultural values and traditions. In order to do this, I begin by giving the struggle for indigenous autonomy a historical and political context. I then explore women's political organizing specifically around violence and rights, touching on their participation in the Zapatista movement. From there I will examine the ways in which women's struggle to end violence against women has been co-opted by Mexican authorities as a strategy to bolster the opposition to indigenous autonomy and I will explore the ways in which this strategy has contributed to increased violence in indigenous women's lives.

Indigenous peoples around the world have suffered systematic exploitation, discrimination and expropriation of their ancestral land. According to the human rights organization, MADRE, such systematic abuse has left indigenous people among the poorest and most marginalized in the world (<http://www.madre.org>). In the state of Chiapas, Mexico, indigenous peoples make up one-third of the population. While Chiapas is one of Mexico's richest states in terms of natural resources, it has the country's highest poverty rate (Millán-Moncayo, 2006). Indigenous people make up the poorest of Chiapas' poor. They have systematically been denied access to health care, proper sanitation, education and potable water (Hernandez Castillo, 2001). Chiapas has the highest rate of maternal mortality and over half of the indigenous population suffers from malnutrition. The life expectancy in indigenous communities is forty-four years, while the national average is

seventy years, and the principal causes of death among indigenous adults are preventable diseases (Freyermuth-Enciso, 2001; Millán-Moncayo, 2006).

It is around these issues of land, education, health and commerce that members of indigenous communities began to organize and defend their rights in the late 1970's and early eighties. In the mid-eighties, Mexico signed NAFTA, formally consolidating their commitment to neoliberal policy, and subsequently, conditions for the rural poor in Chiapas worsened (Speed, Hernandez-Castillo & Stephen, 2006). Indigenous organizing and resistance intensified and culminated in the uprising led by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) on January 1st, 1994- the day that NAFTA took effect.

Since the uprising, the Mexican government has militarized the state of Chiapas and has engaged in a low-intensity war against the indigenous people. Currently, there are approximately 60,000 federal military troops and at least thirty paramilitary groups in the state and as a result of direct state-sponsored violence or the threat of such violence, over 21,000 indigenous people have been displaced from their homes and live in fear for their lives (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001a).

Stephen, Speed and Hernandez-Castillo (2006) name the public appearance of the EZLN in 1994 as a catalyst in the political organization of women in Chiapas. Millán-Moncayo (2006) writes,

There is a "frontier" between indigenous women who remain in their communities and those who have joined the rebels (*insurgentas*). The

experience of command, the undifferentiated work of men and women, and the control of their own individual sexuality are three practical dimensions of the redefinition of gender (p. 82).

In the EZLN, women learn to read and write, to speak freely and with confidence and they are able to earn their place in the military structure. In an interview, Captain Laura, who coordinates one hundred and fifty militia members, describes how she rose to her position,

We earn our rank according to our experience in the mountains, our capacity to work, and how we handle our responsibility. Your superior observes your progress, starts to give you people to lead and command. That is how I rose, I got some people, they saw I did well, and gave me rank (Proceso magazine in Millán-Moncayo, 2006, p. 84).

Among the set of laws made public by the Zapatistas on the day of their 1994 uprising, was the Women's Revolutionary Law. The law was drawn up in consultation with a number of indigenous women's organizations. Demands include the right to decide the number of children to have, the right to freely choose their romantic partner, the right to education, the right to live free of violence and the demand that rape and attempted rape be severely punished (*Women's Revolutionary Law* in Stephen, Speed & Hernandez-Castillo, 2006). This law has been enormously symbolic for organizing women and has served to challenge norms and traditions related to gender. However, the extent to which this law has actually served to change gender relations in communities outside the Zapatista support bases has

been limited (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001b).

Another important document that is the result of women's organizing comes out of a workshop attended by fifty women from the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal and Mam ethnic groups in May of 1994. The purpose of the encounter was to reflect on and discuss women's rights in indigenous traditions, looking specifically at violence against women and to make their voices heard (*Women's Rights in Our Traditions and Customs* in Stephen, Speed & Hernandez-Castillo, 2006).

The resulting document identifies many customs in need of transformation in order to grant women's right to live free of violence. In traditional indigenous communities, women are not allowed to inherit or buy land or to receive any form of financial credit. In some communities, women are not allowed to work and in most others, women work for far less pay than do men. Frequently, women work as domestic workers for Ladino families and are exploited financially, often offered one wage and paid another.

Women generally do not have the ability to decide how many children to bear or when to bear them. The women involved in the elaboration of this document state that women suffer greatly to feed and raise their children and that having children severely limits the ways in which they can participate in leadership roles in the community and collaborate in political organizing. The right to be educated and to hold leadership positions is also identified as an area of tradition in need of change. Women want to participate in

community decision-making, municipal politics and health care work in order to influence change for indigenous women and the rest of their people.

Women identify the need to be able to choose their own romantic partners and discuss the likelihood of domestic violence in forced, unwanted marriages. The women call for harsh punishments for rape, whether the rapist is a stranger, father or husband. The document condemns all instances of violence against women and expresses the need for serious consequences and the possibility of a separation where violence does occur within a marriage. Traditionally, hierarchies in indigenous culture are understood as educational (Millán-Moncayo, 2006). As such, domestic violence is viewed as a man exercising his right to "educate" his wife, daughter or sister. However, while it is commonly believed that there are circumstances that warrant the physical punishment of a woman by her husband, brother or father, a person who can teach without resorting to yelling or hitting is highly respected in indigenous culture (Millán-Moncayo, 2006).

Indigenous women have continued to organize and find ways of making their voices heard. On March 8th, 2000, a group of women seized a radio station in San Cristóbal de las Casas and spoke throughout the entire day about the situation of indigenous women, the impact of state-sponsored violence in their lives and women's rights (Zylberberg-Panebianco, 2006). While the women's resistance has led to varying levels of change in gender relations across different indigenous communities, it is now more common to find indigenous women in their twenties

who have chosen to remain single so that they may participate in political organizing and who will eventually choose their own romantic partners. It is more common to find relationships where men are sharing women's traditional duties, freeing up time for them to participate in community leadership and organizing (Zylberberg-Panebianco, 2006). There is also increased awareness about violence against women and an increased likelihood that cases of domestic violence will be taken before the community and punished (Millán-Moncayo, 2006).

At the same time, however, for many indigenous women, domestic violence begins or intensifies when a woman starts participating in some form of political organizing (Freyermuth-Franciso, 2001; Hernandez-Castillo, 2001b). Often, a woman's increased absence from the home, which inevitably occurs when she becomes involved in any form of community or political organization, is interpreted as deceit and infidelity (Millán-Moncayo, 2006). Hernandez-Castillo (2006) relates the case of Rosa Gomez who participated along with her husband in the Indigenous Council of Agrarian Workers and Campesinos. After the Zapatista uprising, Rosa was introduced to new spaces in which she and her compañeras could discuss women's rights and Rosa started participating in this newly emerging movement. Despite her husband's understanding of the demands of community organizing, Rosa's need to attend regular meetings elicited suspicion and jealousy and he began abusing her. Rosa sought support from local organizations and the legal system,

but nobody listened. She was killed by her husband in 1995.

According to Stephen et al. (2006), many women also experience symbolic violence from their communities as a result for violating their traditional gender norms. Some women experience explicit rejection from their community and find themselves isolated. Others may be the subjects of rumours. Rumours often support a husband's suspicion of infidelity and thus may fuel violence in the home. Even young, single women may find themselves the subject of rumours accusing them of leaving their communities to become prostitutes (Millán-Moncayo, 2006).

Despite the fact that indigenous women are so actively engaged in political movements and despite their participation in demonstrations, in marches and in armed combat and despite their obvious violation of norms and stereotypes regarding gender, ethnicity and class, indigenous women continue to be portrayed in dominant cultural rhetoric as passive victims of their own culture. This rhetoric locates the problem of violence against indigenous women within what is perceived as a fixed and intractable culture (Newdick, 2005). The logical conclusion of such rhetoric is that in order to be free of violence, indigenous women must abandon their 'uncivilized' culture and assimilate into the modern, 'civilized' culture that exists beyond the boundaries of their own. As an extension of this line of thinking, the struggle of indigenous women to gain equality and live lives free of violence has been conveniently co-opted by the Mexican state and used as a way of

strengthening opposition to the prospect of indigenous autonomy.

Newdick (2005) states that the Mexican government has frequently offered up indigenous women's victimization as a reason to oppose indigenous autonomy and that this idea is reflected in everyday political commentary. She presents the following excerpt from an online discussion by a group called Critical-Active Mexico as an example of the now commonplace cultural rhetoric:

If these laws get approved, by law there will be two kinds of Mexicans, the majority, like you and me, and the indigenous, who will have their autonomous territories, where they'll rule themselves according to the laws of their traditional norms and customs [usos y costumbres]. Look, with these usos y costumbres, there are lots of pueblos that violate universal human rights- like selling women, selling daughters into marriage, not letting girls study, zero democracy- machocracy (Portales in Newdick, 2005, p.85).

Indigenous culture has been blamed for women's victimization, even where the state has been directly implicated in the attacks. After the massacre at Acteal on December 22, 1997, in which 32 women and 13 men were slaughtered by state-sponsored paramilitaries, the Mexican government sought anthropologists who would link the attack to patterns of traditional indigenous behaviour (Newdick, 2005). In April of 2001, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) held the Mexican military responsible for the violation of human rights and the torture of three indigenous Tseltal sisters who were repeatedly raped in front of their mother by military personnel during an illegal interrogation and detention. The final IACHR report cited the Tseltal women's

lack of knowledge of the Spanish language and the stigma of rape that subsequently forced them to abandon their community as factors that compounded their victimization and requiring extended compensation. Newdick (2005) argues that even though the IACHR may be advocating on behalf of the Tseltal women, such a conceptualization of the harm done to these women nonetheless locates that harm within their cultures, rather than drawing attention to the role of the state. She argues that in this case, it was not the monolingualism of the women that compounded the harm done to them, but the failure of the state to comply with its mandate to provide adequate services to all citizens, regardless of linguistic ability. Newdick adds that subsequent interviews with the three Tseltal women and their lawyer clarify that the women left their communities because of fear of military retaliation and not because of any stigma or rejection by their culture.

It is clear from these two examples how the location of indigenous women's victimization within culture serves to shift attention away from structural and state-sponsored violence. What is particularly concerning is that this practice simultaneously serves to feed the rationale behind increasing law enforcement and the militarization of Chiapas. Newdick (2005) draws upon research by Visweswaran to demonstrate how this cultural explanation for violence against women has influenced military, international funding and trade policies in other parts of the world, stating that the effects of which "may exacerbate the very conditions of violence against women that development and human rights policies seek to sanction" (p. 78). This is

precisely the effect of increased militarization and law-enforcement in Chiapas.

Human rights organizations have characterized the situation in Chiapas as a low-intensity war (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001a). This term was developed during the Vietnam War to describe an irregular armed conflict where the people affected by the warfare experience immediate danger to their lives, but which is a subtle and indirect war for the armed forces (Zylberberg-Panebianco, 2006). In addition to the physical harm resulting from this kind of warfare, this military strategy has a profound psychological effect.

There is a wealth of research demonstrating how this warfare and its effects on indigenous communities operate in highly gendered ways. Some of the violence targets women indirectly, while other forms very explicitly victimize and operate on the bodies of women.

First, let's take a look at the violence that indirectly targets women. When homes and crops are destroyed in the frequent raids by militia groups, the burden to reconstruct often falls on women (Garza, Ruiz, Hernandez-Castillo, Figueroa & Olivera, 2001). The military frequently sets up camp close to a community's water source. That source may then be polluted by the wastewater from the camp (Zylberberg-Panebianco, 2006). This not only forces women, who traditionally bear the responsibility for fetching basic resources, to walk further in order to avoid military harassment and violence or to locate a new source, but also ensures increased scarcity of water for

the community (Zylberberg-Panebianco, 2006). Where there is an unequal distribution of household resources, such as food and water, the scarcity of such resources will also more severely impact women. Most severely impacted will be pregnant women, for whom childbearing is already extremely precarious. Communities are frequently forced to flee their homes, either through direct violence or through the threat of violence and women are often forced to give birth while in hiding and the rate of infection and maternal mortality in these cases is high (Garza et al., 2001). Additionally, it is the women who are left with the responsibility of caring for children who are orphaned at birth or after a massacre. Garza et al. (2001) report that some women care for up to eight orphans in addition to their own children.

The most obvious forms of state-sponsored violence against indigenous women are those that specifically target and subjugate women. Research on gender and militarized zones has found that women's bodies tend to become the site for political subjugation and that rape is used to demonstrate power and domination over the enemy (Eber, 2001). There have been numerous accounts of military rape in Chiapas and in 2004, Amnesty International reported that this practice had not decreased (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001b; Newdick, 2005). The rapes often occur when women are detained on suspicion of being Zapatista supporters. Their detentions are not recorded and no charges are filed (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001b). According Speed et al. (2006) there has been an increase in demand and supply of prostitution in indigenous communities due to the increased

military presence and little attention has been paid to this effect of militarization. As we know from a wealth of research on violence and the sex trade (e.g. Dworkin, 1993), women working within this industry in any part of the world are particularly vulnerable to violence and especially unlikely to be believed or receive fair trials. In the case of indigenous women working in the sex trade in a militarized zone, the power disparity is enormous. It is not difficult to conceive of how easily violence against these women would be ignored.

Women were specific targets of the Acteal massacre. Both women and men were gunned down in this attack, but paramilitaries returned later to force sticks into women's vaginas and slice off their breasts. Micaela, eleven years old at the time of the attack, managed to escape after hiding under the dead bodies of her mother and little brother and sister. From the hills she watched as the uniformed paramilitaries returned and sliced open the bodies of pregnant women, playing catch with the fetuses, tossing them from machete to machete. Micaela was among the witnesses who heard the attackers calling "we have to get rid of the seed" (Garza et al., 2001). This phrase and the mutilation of pregnant women's bodies are illustrative of how the idea of women as transmitters of culture is one of the ideologies that draws women's bodies into warfare.

We have seen how casting violence against women as a cultural problem limits the definition of violence to interpersonal violence. This focus on interpersonal violence obscures the reality and the complexity of the structural and state-sponsored violence

faced by indigenous women. To date, Mexican authorities have not followed the recommendations put forth by the IACHR, military rapes go unpunished, weapons used in the Acteal massacre continue to be in the possession of paramilitaries, homes and crops continue to be destroyed and thousands of indigenous people continue to be displaced (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001a; Newdick, 2005; Speed et al., 2006).

In addition to influencing increased militarization in Chiapas, the co-opting of women's struggle to end violence also creates significant tension between the fight for indigenous women's autonomy as women and the fight for the autonomy of their broader communities. Belausteguigoitia (2004) states that indigenous men often allude to indigenous women's fight for autonomy as a betrayal to the 'real' and 'legitimate' fight against racism. Hernandez-Castillo (2001b) states that women who call for the reconstruction of democracy, starting within the home and community, may be regarded as "destabilizing factors" in the fight for indigenous autonomy. According to Hernandez-Castillo, the official indigenous movement operates under a "tradition/modernity" dichotomy. This dichotomy dictates that one can choose to preserve their traditions and stay the same or change through modernization. Belausteguigoitia (2004) discusses how the myth of 'La Malinche' is evoked in the state's appropriation of indigenous women's victimization and in the accusation that indigenous women fighting for women's rights are betraying the true cause of the indigenous people. La Malinche was an indigenous woman who served as the first and main translator of the Spanish

conqueror, Cortés. For the Mexican nation, she is the principal character in the story that tells the origin of Mexico's national identity, one of mestizaje. Mestizaje refers to the notion of a homogenous "Mexican" population; a perfect blending of Spanish and Indian into a single mestizo race (Castillo, Stephen & Speed, 2006). For many indigenous people she is seen as a traitor and has come to embody the notion of women's inherent capacity for betrayal (Belausteguioitia, 2004).

The organizing of indigenous women who demand the right to retain and redefine their traditional culture significantly challenges both the notion of mestizaje and the tradition/modernity dichotomy. In the words of one indigenous woman, "...many of the ancient things are worth rescuing, but bad habits must also be changed" (Hernandez-Castillo, 2001b, p. 128). In the document resulting from the Women's Rights in our Traditions and Customs encounter, women write,

Both as indigenous people and as women, we demand respect for ourselves and for all our rights. We want our customs to be respected, those customs that the community deems are good for women, men, and children alike. We want to take part in the making of laws that take women and indigenous people into account, and which respect our rights (*Women's Rights in our Traditions and Customs* in Stephen et al., 2006).

Their ability to this, however, is effectively undermined by the cultural explanation of violence against indigenous women and the tension it creates between struggles for autonomy.

Indigenous women in Chiapas have been at the forefront of the movements for

indigenous autonomy- as military leaders in the uprising, as leaders of demonstrations, in confronting military blockades and in carving out spaces for the organization of women around violence and their rights. They have violated norms and stereotypes at all levels, often at the expense of their own physical safety and sometimes even at the expense of their own lives. Their demand to both protect and redefine indigenous tradition challenges those fighting for autonomy who subscribe to the tradition/modernity dichotomy. The tension between these struggles is exacerbated by an official rhetoric that appropriates the victimization of indigenous women as its darling cause, locating the root of the problem within the culture. This co-opting allows the state to increase support for the militarization of Chiapas, which results in an enormous increase of state-sponsored violence against women while conveniently diverting attention from these forms of violence and redirecting it towards a culture put forth as uncivilized and unchanging.

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