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Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional
Don’t Forsake Us!
Zapatista Women in ’94
1994

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Don’t Forsake Us!

Zapatista Women in ’94

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

1994

Good evening comrades.

Today, Tuesday March 8, 1994. Dear *compañeros* and *compañeras*, subcomandantes, captains and lieutenants, and insurgent soldiers of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation: today is a very special day for the women of Mexico and the world.

It was a March 8, just like this one when the women who worked in the factories of Chicago went on strike. They were seamstresses. On the 8th of March they went on strike to raise their wages because they saw they were being poorly paid and remained in slavery. That is why woman is very important to the revolutionary struggle. We, as women, can do the same work that men can. We can take up arms, not just to be housewives. We have the right to participate in armed struggle as proletarian women.

That is why we are here, men and women: to wage war for our country, Mexico. We rise up in arms for it, in order to realize the eleven points needed to have our people in the future. That's why we don't retrocede but go forward to what we want. The war for a just and dignified peace.

Men and women in the countryside, in the city: Forward Comrades.

Live for the Nation or Die for Liberty.

Comrade Hortensia's Speech, March 8 1994

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more than ever we have to fight together so that someday we may be free. We will get this sooner or later, but we will triumph.

Forward, until we have reached all we demand.

That's all I have to say.

Dear compañeros and compañeras,

Here are gathered to celebrate March 8, International Women's Day.

Good, comrades. Just as those women who have given their lives to defend their rights, like those women who made their rights and work in the factory have meaning. And that's why they decided to rise up to fight, not like us today, but recognized worldwide.

That's why I invite all the *compañeros* in the fields and the city to join our struggle, our demands. Women are the most exploited. Most don't even know how to read or write, because they want to humiliate us. *Compañeras* of the country over: in order to end this we have to use weapons together with the *compañeros*, to make them understand that woman can also struggle and fight with weapon in hand.

I invite you all to join us in everything we ask for as Zapatistas. We have to achieve it fighting until victory or death. There is no other path, they have left us no other path than to take up arms. Because this is the only way they will answer. Our struggle is necessary for our peoples and our country to be free, not just for women, but for the whole world that has always lived in humiliation. We continue ahead with our struggle until our demands are fulfilled: bread, democracy, peace, independence, liberty, housing, and justice, because this doesn't exist for us, the poor.

That's why we live deceived. For the same reason why don't know how to read, often without knowing what the bosses say; even when they berate us we think that we are being spoken nicely to. This is why it's convenient for us to not know how to read or write, because it's easier for them to fuck us over.

We are tired of it, we don't want to live like animals, nor to have some one always ordering us what to do or not do. Today

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Captain Irma's Speech, March 8 1994

Captain Luis Miguel

…Well not the women, because they don't take them into account, but they must take them into account, because they truly can grasp a weapon as well. In our ranks there are women and children. This is how they grab a gun, the women too really. Anything the men do, the women can do as well.

It's just that, right now, almost all of us in different places, we have a different conception, male chauvinism, where we tell our men that, yes, they can do whatever they want, right? In other words, that women have no say in the matter really; because the conception is like that really, a wealthy one really, a bourgeois conception. So we, as the Zapatista Army, we give them a say in it; as to the soldiers, we have women in it. There were women that, yes, they went to the fight on January 1st, really. They fought the soldiers; the difference in fighting with a soldier from the federal army —if a comrade from the Zapatista Army goes to fight the federal army— is that one is a man and the other a woman, that's the difference then. And it feels different, and that's why we say that we give women a say, for sure.

The money raised from the this first volume are going to the benefit of Compañera M. Mother,
Social Warrior, Multiply Employed, Indigenous.

The best way to understand the path of the women who struggle is through their own words. These brief texts, interviews and declarations of the women of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation in the first months of the armed uprising of 1994 showcase the situation of indigenous women in Mexican territory, and are a mirror of the dignity that has kept the Zapatista struggle alive despite male chauvinism, racism and capitalism.

This edition was part of a mutual aid initiative to redistribute the funds of the circulating texts and "Independent" editions among the struggles' female protagonists

Words From Comandanta Ramona and Major Ana María

And are you prepared to embark in this long war as well?

Yes, we'll see where it takes us.

Are you afraid?

No, I am not afraid, because I know that is what's going to happen. If we have to die at least it'll be doing something for the people, not die because of sickness or some disease just like that, but to die for the people, to save the people, defending it.

Would you like to say some more words, lieutenant Elena?

Not really, I appreciate you being here and doing us the favor of publishing everything we say, or what you witness here. That is, that you don't believe everything the government says, or think that this is all a lie, that of us being Guatemalan of from other countries. It's not like that, we, the Chiapanecos, are Mexican.

antibiotics and other healthcare material, analgesic for the pain. That's what we utilize here.

Do you believe in EZLN's triumph?

Of course, that's what we believe.

And when EZLN wins, what will you do?

Well, I'll keep on being a nurse, but somewhere here, in a clinic or a hospital to attend more wounded, the population really, all who need it.

Are you religious?

Yes, I'm Catholic.

And do you talk to the wounded? Do you raise their morale [*faith*] as well? What do you tell them?

Yes, we tell them everything: how it used to be and how life is today and what's coming later. We feel as if we're brethren, like a family really, even if we didn't know each other or knew where each was from. We understand now that here we are all like a family, like brothers, more than brothers.

Do you think it'll be a long war?

Of course I do, it will be long, our country is big, Mexico is big.

Another concern that indigenous women have is the free choice of partners.

"The dowry custom still exists, the girl is never taken into account, she is sold off (in this region, the average price of nuptial dowry is two thousand pesos). The idea of having a boyfriend doesn't exist; it is sin."

Ana María, Infantry Major: "Don't Forsake Us!" is the desperate plea of the women of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation so that their hopes of being heard within and without their communities may not die. "We ask all women to fight alongside us" is what Comandanta Ramona and Major Ana María say in Tzotzil and Spanish. Their call to Mexican women is not one to take up arms, but rather so that, within their spaces, they may support the changes proposed by the Revolutionary Law of Women, as well as their extensive list over equality, justice, health, education and housing. That night, the penultimate they would spend at the Cathedral, they arrived through the back of the altar, accompanied by Subcomandante Marcos.

He, dressed in his unmistakable military uniform. Some steps behind, the only two women of a group of the 19 delegates of the Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee. "I'll leave them with you so that you can speak to them about anything you wish," he said in a joking tone as he bid his farewell to the group of five female reporters and two photographers intent on interviewing the women of the Zapatista Army. Ramona's wide and sharp eyes revealed weariness. The black wool skirt, the beautifully embroidered loom-woven blouse, and her short stature contrasted with Ana María's gray *ruana* and sturdy frame. Alongside

them, Comandante Javier remained behind (to translate Ramona's Tzotzil's words into Spanish). The words of the Comandanta, even if in Tzotzil, flow smoothly from her indigenous heart.

> I left my community in search of work because of necessity itself, there was no longer anything to live off of. When I arrived someplace else I began to learn that it wasn't the same situation as that of women in the countryside. I learned there to understand and gain conscience of the differences, that's how I learned of the organization (EZLN), and that it was also necessary to organize women.

Within EZLN women's participation in key. Ramona belongs to the political group that works in the communities; Ana María is part of the approximately 30% of female combatants/insurgents who voluntarily refuse to form a family in order to engage in armed struggle.

"I am an insurgent. I've dedicated my entire life and time to the cause," affirms Ana María, a 26 year old Infantry Major who, when speaking of displacement and suffering endured, furrows her brows in sadness, the only sign of expression able to be seen beneath her balaclava. "It's a long story," she says,

> Ever since I was eight years old I took part in peaceful struggles, in marches, in meetings. My family was one that fought, that always organized in order to have a dignified life, but that never achieved it through that route. We were in an organization —won't say which— with other persons, with other peoples. We would go there, the children too, and that's how we went began to learn that we weren't going to achieve anything through peaceful struggle. It had been like that for years and years. My family, before I was even born,

> are strikes, there's everything really, but nothing is resolved like that with just words. That's why we believed that there would be a war, because we now lived like this: with guns, not with words.

You have military training too? You know how to pick up a rifle, how to fire it?

> Of course I do, I know how to fire it.

Where did you end up stationed on January 1st? Where were you assigned?

> I had to be here, with all the other health service *compañeras*. We had to be here to wait for the wounded. Yes, because we couldn't all go together, some, some of the health service *compañeras* went with them and we stayed here in wait. Yes, because if we had all gone together there wouldn't be a chance to attend while giving first aid in the line of fire, and nothing more would be administrated hereby.

What what tools, what medicine do you, the Zapatistas Army, count on to attend to your wounded?

> We count on gauze, all kinds of material really: solutions, equipment. And rather, what we use here with the wounded are antibiotics, because some wounded arrived very infected already and we had to look for

began to learn. And they would demand a lot of us to learn and give out medicine. We have a dictionary where we see what to take, all the dosages of the most basic medicine we use. And that's how I learned bit by bit, and when we went on long marches, well, a six or seven hour one, in one day, that's when they were needed most.

Did you imagine you would be doing this six years back?

Yes, in fact they would tell us, they said this is what was going to happen. We prepared. Then they said that the war, well, that it was coming. We waited to face the war, each prepared for their mission: infantry, health services, weaponry, technical radio, everything. That's what they explained to us, really, what it would take, the war-wounded.

And did you patiently live with this education that you were given? What did you spend it?

Well I spent it well, with my comrades.

Waiting for the war or waiting for things to improve and there be no war?

No, because we were waiting for the war, because we ourselves knew, of the many years that all Mexicans have fought for, that, well, it hasn't improved. There

had been fighting. I arrived [to EZLN] very young; I was fourteen years old when I joined the fight. At first we were just two women out of the eight or ten who started the movement. Many women have joined EZLN without telling their families.

When I left home and found out that there was an armed struggle I took a decision and said to myself, "I will also take up arms!", because one of my brothers was already a member; but my parents, most of my family knew nothing. So I fled from home and went in search of my comrades in order to be able to join as well, and I spent many years learning and participating in it without my family finding out. This has happened in many places, within many families.

There, my brother and I learned how to read and speak in Spanish. They then taught us battle and political tactics in order to be able to speak to the people and explain our cause to them. We asked for land and the government would not give it, so we began the takeovers and repression was their reply.

So we said, "If they will not grant them willingly then we will take them by force," and we started arming ourselves.

The women began joining because they saw our presence in the army; then the women in the towns began teaching their daughters, sisters, granddaughters, telling them, "it's best to grab a weapon, it's better to fight."

This is what Ana María —who was charged with the command of the occupation of San Cristóbal de las Casas City on the morning of the first of January— said vehemently.

EZLN's Invisible Protagonists

That year's first morning, women were the invisible protagonists of the events that transcended the nation's borders. At the time no one knew —and for 66 days thereafter, many ignored— that one of them was responsible for the taking of Chiapa's second-most important city, an operation that EZLN considered a success due its the lack of registered fatalities. Sitting before the journalists of three of Mexico's newspapers and one from Spain, Ana María explained how the attack on the city, founded by the colonizer Diego de Mazariegos, was readied,

> The first thing we did was to vote whether we would go to war or not. After the decision was made, the attack was organized with the support of upper command. Then we organized the military tactics to be taken (regarding the six municipal capitals), and who would take what. Then, well, since I led a unit, I knew that I had to go ahead of my comrades. I am in charge and had to set the example.
>
> Because we were many we organized ourselves into units and each had their leader. I had in my charge a huge unit that had many militiamen, over a thousand. This great unit is divided into small units, and each has a leader as well. Each of these leaders is instructed, they are told what they are to do, how to attack. Each insurgent knows how to position themselves and what they must do, and the leaders are checking them making sure they are complying with it. When we attacked

> the same being at home than being here, I wouldn't have learned the same things.

When this happened, how old were you?

> That was eight years ago, when I was home. I've been here in the army for eight years.

And were you always working in health?

> Not really, no; they taught me to read and write for two years. As I learned to read and write and speak Spanish well, they put in health service and they taught me how to heal small wounds.

Who taught you?

> There used to be a *compañera* who would teach us.

Is the *compañera* alive?

> Yes, she's alive, she lives on the other side. She would give us lessons… well, I didn't know how to read or write so she made me practice, the techniques on how to heal, really.

Could you tell us a bit about your story, your work?

> The truth, what I've learned then. Fist they taught us how to heal, to heal small wounds. In the marches, the insurgent comrade's feet get messed up. That's how I

Nurse Second Lieutenant Elena,

I joined the ranks of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation because I also saw the entire situation I live under in my household, with my family, right?

We lived in a very poor household, as you can see here. So, I also saw that money, which we all get through work, well, it didn't suffice for food, for clothes and medicine, for all needed at home. We didn't have enough, even though we worked here in the fields. I worked in the field, I would go with my family, we tended to the *milpa*, to everything really, all that my dad tended to.

I later found out. And, besides the fact that I, when I was at home, did not know how to read or write in Spanish at all. My dad, my mom, they wouldn't let me go out because I wouldn't know where to go. When I began to see the comrades, who explained politics — everything, everything they came to say—, I thought, "Well, this is good for us"; and, well, that's when I began thinking that if I stayed home like before, knowing nothing and without learning how to read and write, everything would stay the same. I thought it was best to leave home. And, what's more, if they taught me at home all that we are taught at the beginning, it's not

San Cristóbal, some were tasked with setting up roadblocks and others with the ambush in case the Federal Army arrived, San Cristóbal's entrances and exits were reinforced; others had to attack the municipal building. Each unit had a mission to fulfill, that's how it was organized. The leadership coordinated everything.

What about the clashes had in Rancho Nuevo and Ocosingo? Did the women take part in those?

Yes, for example, when the Cereso (prison) prisoners were liberated, those who opened the prison doors were women. A prisoner said that he saw a group of women with earrings, and that it seemed odd to him that there were combatants with earrings and necklaces in the attack. There were groups of women, they would go to all the uprisings and each had a task to do. Each is given a mission they fulfill it.

The Infantry Major points out the differences between militiawomen and the female insurgents in the military group,

Both are combatants, but the militiawomen live in their towns, they receive training and fight when they have to. Us, the female insurgents, we live in the encampments and spread out in order to go the towns and teach politics and educate.

Among the curious and the vigilant, some EZLN delegates approach at times to listen to the interview. The two women, with their faces covered, have their backs to the Virgen de El Rayo. Flowers wither at her feet, evidence of the absence of faithful worship in

the last ten days that the sanctuary has been closed for. The newswoman of the Spanish newspaper, *El Mundo,* asks about the opportunities female insurgents have in forming a family. Ana María, who displays a gold wedding band in her right hand, replies,

> To marry or get together, one has to ask upper command's permission, and they are the ones who say yes or no, but we cannot have children because we must not put a child's life in danger. There is family planning among female insurgents but there are many who have had children and who have had to leave them behind with her parents in order to not abandon the fight.

And what was woman's mission in these communities?

> That's something we've had to talk about because there are many things to be done in the communities. Ever since [EZLN's] work began underway, it's been important for women to take part in security. At the home, the town, there are bases. We have a communication network, so women's work is to check its security; for example, they send out an alarm if there are soldiers coming in or if there is some sort of danger. We are not all necessarily combatants.
>
> When we attack the cities, the housewives stayed behind taking care of the community, the kids, and it was the young women who went out to fight. Many women wanted to come but they were married and had kids and were not allowed; and the fight is not just with arms, the task of women in the towns is to organize in order to be able to realize the collective labor of studying and learning something from books.

Insurgent Soldier Isadora Says,

> Well, I say that women can do the work and that they should keep on ahead as they wish. If they want to take arms in hand or, support the Zapatista Army however they wish, because there's no obligation. What ever they hold, then, is what they need to do.

What is the relation between the men and the women in the Zapatista Army?

Well, the men and women get along within the Zapatista Army. There is democracy here, there is fairness, well there's everything there, everything's there. Well, it's not the same as being in the town, that sets men apart, that sets women apart. Not there, there we all lived together, with the men, and do the same labor. The work is split evenly, and you can't do whatever you want, the man always commands. That is why I was tired of doing things, I was tired of doing those things, but when I arrived at the Army, well this changed, the thing changed, and well, it wasn't the same. That is what we look for now. Because, as peasant woman, the government does not acknowledge us. The woman is always… well she's always downtrodden, the man always has to… he's always the one who gives commands; but, well, we see now that what the government says is not true. Women can also do the jobs, they can also take charge, they can also direct just as a man does; that's why we are fighting for women to be able to also do those jobs.

They also help out EZLN because they instruct their children, brothers and in-laws and secure food for them in the mountains. That is their labor; to make *tostadas*, *pinole*, *pozol*, and leafy greens. They have vegetable gardens where they cultivate vegetables and send them to the encampments. The grandmothers take charge of caring for the children of the working women.

Did the women make the uniforms?

Yes, everything is done within EZLN; we have sewing workshops, tailor workshops; women also took part in making parts of weapons, making bombs for defense. The townswomen, even if they aren't combatants or militants, can do any of this tasks.

And do the men also do the work of women such as cooking, the dishes, taking care of the children?

Everything is equal inside EZLN. No differences exist here; some days it's the men's turn to prepare the food, the next it is the women's, and the following, they do it together. If the man has to do the laundry, he'll do it.

But this is easy to say, that of men doing the laundry while the women make bombs. We're talking about indigenous communities where the differences between the sexes is quite strong.

In the communities we organize, that's how the labor is done. Of course, inside the comrades' house there is

a bit of inequality, but, very little! Male comrades no longer mistreat women as much, they help them care for the child. Before becoming organized, when heading to the *milpa*, the man would get on his horse and the woman would be behind, carrying the child. The man can still come back, mounted on the beast, and the woman with firewood on her back and the child on her breast. The comrade can speak more on this (she's referring to Comandate Javier, who's translating Comandanta Ramona's Tzotzil's words into Spanish).

At Ana María's request, Comandante Javier details with emotion,

> When I was little, we had a custom we learned from my grandparents and my father's grandparents. Given that indigenous society is a sorrowful one for women, as has been mentioned, these sorrows are not taken into account. Truly! Many of us men, we did not feel the reality of the situation, of society. It wasn't as it is now, gaining conscience faced with struggle. It used to be that woman's participation was not taken into account. Many women would get up at two or three in the morning to make breakfast, and when the morning came they would head out with the men; they would be mounted on horse and the women would be running behind, carrying the child. When they reached the workplace, they would share the labor equally; be it harvesting coffee, be it harvesting the *milpa*; but when they got back home they would take on another job: cooking. Many men, not having conscience of the choice, demanded and waited for the food to be ready, but the poor women —truly!— carrying a wailing child, and making tortillas, sweeping the house although it was late at night, would still

Why did you decide to join the Zapatista Army?

> Well, I joined it because, well, I saw how the people lived. So I set out how to solve this problem, since I didn't know that there were *compañeras* in the mountains. But when I was told that yes, there is a group of insurgent comrades fighting for the people, then, well, there came the day when the insurgent comrades descended down the mountain, that was when they explained what they wanted, what they fought for. So I decided to also join there and then, because I was… a bad bitch, might as well say it. Then I talked with an insurgent comrade. I asked him if I would be accepted there, and he told me I would. So I went off to the mountain to prepare. My family, well, they also assented to my joining, and that was how I joined the Zapatista Army.

Did you ask your family's permission to be part of the Zapatistas, to join the Zapatistas?

> Of course I did. Well, I first asked my family whether they could send me there or if I could go there. My family, well, yeah, since they also understand, and because comrades came to explain what they fought for; my family understood that what they said is true. SO, when I said I wanted to join them, well, my family agreed and they send me and I've been here ever since.

Captain Elisa Says,

Well, I, my work in the town, well it's always been the kitchen, it's always been like that.

And the kitchen looks delicious, by the way.

Delicious? It's just *tortiar*, that's the work as is, because we have nothing else to do, because, well, the people have nothing. They don't eat, they eat almost nothing other than *toritillas*, other than *pozol*. That was my job when I was at home.

Are you married?

No. Well… why lie? I am.

And is your partner also a Zapatista soldier?

Yes they are, they are also a Zapatista.

And are you still in love with him?

I don't know, I wouldn't be able to tell you that.

go to do the laundry because she hadn't had a chance to do so during the day…

The journalists and photographers who initially listened to Ramona's and Ana María's testimonies have dispersed within the talk's first hour. The insurgents' eyes reflect a tiredness, and the cold grows in intensity within the millinery church.

"It's less cold here than in my community," says Ramona.

Irrespective of her stature, she has gained the respect of the communities in which she does political work with women, but it wasn't easy for her. She, just as Ana María and many others, demanded that men to respect their right to organize, as well as their right to be part of the military body. Ramona seems to not feel the cold. With arms comfortably crossed over her lap, she tries to make the journalists understand that wakening of the indigenous people of the Altos de Chiapas.

Women managed to understand that their participation is important in order to change this ill situation, so they take part even though they are not all taking direct participation in the armed struggle. There is no other way to find justice —which is women's interest.

What do you teach the women in the communities?

"Everything that deals with struggle", answers Ana María.

The first thing we learn upon arriving the encampment is to read and write, if one doesn't know how to already; if one doesn't know how to speak, they are taught a bit of Spanish so that they can speak and read books; they are taught how to work the sewing machine, to describe or craft weapon parts; they are

taught battle tactics; we read books on politics. We study Mexico's history, that's what we study most, that and books about struggle in other countries.

How old are the ones joining?

Right now we have many girls and boys in the militia; there are rowdy children of eight or nine years old, they see an insurgent and go and caress the weapon and say, "I also want one, I want to be an insurgent", and play at it. For example, a little while ago I went into a community and asked the children about Zapata and they told me that he was a revolutionary who fought for the land and who did a lot for the peasants. They also attend the meetings and many are bothered because we tell them that they cannot play with guns until they grow up.

So we have to accept them; but of course we don't take them into battles, but many become stubborn and say, "I wanna go", hence why there were some of them here, when we came to attack San Cristóbal.

Do you hold workshops regarding reproductive and sexual health for the teenagers?

Yes, and this work is done in many communities, it is the labor of the health service *compañeras*. We are divided by services: Health, Weapons, Administration, Management; and this is across all of the communities, more so within the combatants because that's how they are organized.

Interviews with Zapatista Soldiers, 1994

Do you fear that the hope for change will die out?

> No, we don't hold that fear, because we will do everything we can to achieve it and believe that we have huge support from the Mexican people. We have this hope of getting to change the situation but if we don't achieve it (perhaps we'll die or be murdered) we will keep on fighting until we are heard and taken into account.

Excited, Ana María tells that since EZLN began, it's celebrated March 8, International Women's Day. So tomorrow they'll have a festival in their communities and the men will be in charge of preparing the food.

"Although," she says jokingly, "their seasoning is not very good."

Finally, the interview is over; Subcomandante Marco's meeting with other members of the press also concludes. To the journalists' surprise, when Comandanta Ramona bids farewell, in Spanish, her worry of not mastering this language to her liking is manifest: "I will study so that next time I may be able to reply better," she says, and the balaclava cannot hide her broad smile. Later, she disappears with the group. Minutes prior, in Tzotzil, she had insisted, "Our hope is that someday our situation may change, for us women to be treated with respect, justice, and democracy."

Abortion and Land for Women,Demands Absent in the List of Demands

It was on the last day that the EZLN's 34 demands came to be known. The week prior Subcomandante Marcos had highlighted to the press that those of the women were broader. Of the list, they took up twenty-ninth place, and highlight that they are "a petition made to indigenous women." The first of the twelve in the document refers to establishing gynecological clinics. Among the collection of demands, the ones that standout are those that will alleviate the tiresome domestic work: constructing kindergartens, kitchens and mess halls for the children of the communities, installing mills for the *nixtamal* and *tortillerias* (the women dedicate an average of three to five hours a day grinding up corn and making tortillas). They also seek to create and establish small enterprises with technical counseling, such as farms for raising chickens, rabbits, sheep, and pigs. They also request the raw material and the machinery to set up bakeries and workshops, as well as shipping and market for the just sale of their products. Faced with their marginalized education, they request schools for teaching women technical skills. These demands, given to the government, were the result of the inquiry Ramona undertook among indigenous communities.

Outwardly, indigenous women request technical and educational aid; while inwardly [within EZLN and the community], their demands are: to have a say in the decision-making; to freely choose their partners; to not be beaten by either family members

or strangers; to be allowed to decide the number of children they can bear and care for; and the right and priority in diet and healthcare.

Two women from the CCRI that took part in the peace talks remember how "The Revolutionary Law of Women" was born a year ago.

> We were allowed to take part in the assemblies and in the studies but there was not law of women. That's why we protested and that's how the law of women was born. All of us women decided on it and presented it at an all-community assembly. Men and women voted it in. There were no problems. Throughout the process, the opinions of the townswomen were requested. We, the female insurgents, helped write it,

retold Ana María.

> The reproductive health of indigenous women is the most highlighted topic both in the aforementioned law and in the petitions handed to the government. In spite of the high percentage of maternal mortality in Chiapas, above all in the indigenous communities (for every hundred thousand children born, 117 women die in that state; it is the third index in the nation), and as to abortions under risky conditions (one in every five women in the rural parts on the country, of childbearing age, has had an abortion), the women of EZLN did not discuss this last practice.

Why do you believe you haven't been interviewed?

> I don't know, we don't understand it, perhaps they are more interested in learning more about national topics.

Are the demands of the Zapatista women not national?

> Yes, of course. But I don't know why we haven't been interviewed. We've spoken with very few, and very little has been said about the women in the media.

Do you have a comment or request for the media?

> What we are saying is to spread this struggle so that many women take up the example and do something in other places, not to come here where we are. Even if you don't take up arms, fight in some manner and support us, other women can rise up to fight. We know that our struggle is not only for women but, equally, for men and women; but we also request the same thing that Subcomandante did to the media when he said, "don't abandon us." We ask for more help for democracy because here is where things are stuck, and where it is hardest; it's at national level, and also where women come in because they make up part of society.

Combatant Reproaches to the Media

Two hours after the interview began, only three reporters, the Spaniard among them, kept on talking to the tired Zapatistas. Some meters away, Subcomandante Marcos could be seen departing with other journalists. The group's loud laughter resounds throughout the old cathedral. Ramona's intense gaze captivates one of the reporters. When she realizes she's being watched, her eyes change from a serious expression to a humorous one. Through the balaclava's slit, Ramona smiles with her eyes. The diocese urge to conclude the interview. There are still many things to ask, many things to say, put at past midnight, tiredness grows and a farewell seems inevitable. So the last questions are made.

Do you think that the media have given sufficient coverage to your demands as indigenous women?

> No, not much has been put out for the same reason that they haven't interviewed us.

Ramona, you went to the communities and talked to the women, didn't the matter of abortion come up?

> No, no…

Why?

Both women meet their gaze and it's Major Ana María who answered:

> It didn't occur to them… it's just that there's a belief among the indigenous communities that abortion shouldn't exist.

However, women have died due to bad abortions.

> Yes, of course! There's young women who've gone through that.

Would it be about touching on tradition?

> Well, I don't know…

Ana María turns her face to look at Javier with an expression pleading for help.

> …you, comrade, what do you think about that belief, the one in the towns…
>
> -Well, that situation hasn't been settled. In those same towns there is a tradition on how to attend women.

But that tradition risks the life and health of the women.

> Often, they do have (risks) because there are no doctors to attend to them. But the women have their own customs on how women should be attended to.

When insisted on answering whether indigenous women would reach for to a clinic to safely obtain an abortion —in case there were ever such a service— Ana María interrupts Javier to say,

> When we speak of having a tradition, this doesn't mean to continue with the same. But in many communities, women are punished if they don't report having been pregnant and getting an abortion. Because this happens often, the girl will go to the midwife or a healer and asks for an abortion out of fear that her family will mistreat her and punish her. In the communities I am familiar with, they are handed a fine or they grab the man who impregnated her and jail him for a couple days, or they tell him to pay for the woman's medical attention.

Regarding contraceptive, the Infantry Major clears things up,

> That doesn't exist, it is unknown in every community, and pregnancies rarely happen because the parents take great care so that their daughters don't get pregnant; due to the same fear the girls have to their parents, they can't speak to any man. If they end up getting pregnant, many of then keep the children because it is difficult to get an abortion, and if they get one, many die and no one finds out.

Another of concern that indigenous women have is to freely choose their partners. Ana María —nominated and elected by the female insurgents to take part in the peace talks— comments,

> The dowry custom still exists, the girl is never taken into account, she is sold off (in this region, the average price of nuptial dowry is two thousand pesos). The idea of having a boyfriend doesn't exist; it is sin.

A point missing in the women's demands is the right to own land. In spite of Ramona and Ana María recognizing that this was vital for survival and that in the fight to obtain it, men and women both take part in that, no thought was given to include widows and indigenous women without a companion in the repatriation of land. Ana María points out that,

> This is everybody's demand, and if there is something special about women —in the list of requests— it is because there are things the men don't think of that we might need; in this case, there is the demand for a special school to educate women where they might improve themselves and study, even if they are already adults.

However, Ramona gives greater value to land possession.

> Although we don't have the right to hold land in the agrarian law, we women feel it is very important because when there is no land, hunger arrives, misery, it is why many children die of malnutrition. That's why the women also have a right to the land, so that there be food, because there is no other way to survive.