



INDIGENOUS WOMEN OF MEXICO 10 YEARS LATER

(Mexico) The following was written by the Union of Yalalteca Women in Oaxaca and sent to SAIC by Juana Vasquez.

Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca and of Mexico have struggled to maintain a certain degree of community self-determination. This gives us dignity as men and women and protect us from the usurpation of our territories, and gives us the possibility to control our own destinies.

None can deny that, in almost 500 years of exploitation and constant oppression, that which is unique to indigenous communities has been almost erased and buried forever. This has happened not only in Oaxaca, but in all the Americas. Nevertheless, our enemies have failed. As we near the end of the 20th century, we Indian people are regaining the strength and courage to defend and reclaim our dignity and identity.

In Mexico, we indigenous women are still suffering the consequences of 500 years of colonialism, of economic exploitation, cultural domination, marginalization and social discrimination. We are confronting a strong power structure, maintained by men who hunger for gold, and who transform their will into laws, which makes justice into a business. As a consequence of this, many of our women and children are the victims when we are deprived of our rights to own land, the use of our forests and mines, our indigenous systems of justice, education, health and communication.

We indigenous women have survived due to the strong, sacred tradition which is our heritage passed on from our ancestors. The Zapoteca women of Yalalag have a system known as El Tequio, the center of all community traditions, in which women, men, children and the elderly participate... Unfortunately, politicians have institutionalized the Tequio as a strategy to impose government

programs and regulations on indigenous communities.

Zapoteca women of Yalalag are not indifferent to all these problems. We are involved in the enduring task of searching for solutions. We have woven our own history and continue weaving it, impregnated by great ideals which are nurtured by life's daily events and with strong effort and sacrifice.

The incorporation of Yalalteca women into the political struggle was significant. We have been participating quietly and humbly. On December 24, 1980, for the first time in the history of our community, more than 400 women began to consciously and vociferously participate in the struggle for community self-determination. We formed our own system of defense: The Union of Yalalteca Women.

On December 31, 1981, the union participated in occupying the Municipal Palace, in order to pressure the government into fulfilling certain promises to our communities.

In 1981, the union participated actively in political negotiations. In our first mass mobilization, most of our people journeyed first to the city of Oaxaca and then on to Mexico City. This helped us to overcome our fear of the authorities. It was at this time that we realized that we were facing not only local leaders, but also the official party, corrupt politicians and others in government. We recognized that we have to fight against many enemies.

In order to consolidate the process of democratic struggle, one of our first actions was to take control of our schools. Education in indigenous towns is linked to productive work. We introduced programs to study our language, culture and traditional production in order to become more self-sufficient. We became more conscious of our own history. For these purposes we created a Community

After ten years, we have democratically elected municipal authorities, the community of Yalalag is achieving its goals, and we are all participating.

After examining these long and hard struggles the Yalalteca women have endured, we know that indigenous women can contribute greatly to transform the economic, political, religious and cultural conditions of our society. This is our contribution to our future generations.

We have reflected upon our situation and have concluded that as women we are living in a very important period in history because we have begun to re-evaluate our indigenous cultures and reclaim our rights to preserve and develop them. In Oaxaca, with the spiritual strength of *Centeotl* (the Corn Goddess), and of our ancestors we are re-evaluating indigenous philosophy.

We understand and share feelings with other communities of the world which are struggling for popular freedom and women's liberation.

Sadly, life for women in Oaxaca and Mexico is hard, bitter and tragic, but this does not mean that we indigenous peoples have lost the struggle. In fact, in the last 500 years, we have lost many battles, however we are privileged in that the roots of our community traditions go very deep and are sprouting. It is this spiritual strength which helps men and women to search for our true liberation.

We are concerned that certain Indian leaders, involved with organizations at the international level are not adequately representing our communities. We indigenous women must avoid supporting representatives which are based on personal interest. We propose overhauling these international organizations so that they be of use to our indigenous communities.

To conclude, we indigenous women have a long and difficult road to follow, it is a rough path because we are immersed in alien economic and political structures.

*For the respect to self-determination of indigenous peoples,
For the dignity of indigenous women,
For the solidarity of indigenous women all over the world.*

Juana Vasquez Vasquez of the Union of Yalalteca Women, Oaxaca, Mexico.



Indigenous Women of El Salvador Demand Respect for Human Rights and the Mother Earth

(El Salvador) *The following was presented by Rosa Leticia Caceres, the representative from the National Association of Indigenous People of El Salvador (ANIS) to the First South and Central American Indian Women's Gathering in Peru.*

We, the indigenous peoples, are suffering most from the lack of justice in our land. Not only is there a failure in the administration of justice, but we are also threatened with guns and with beatings. We believe human rights abuses signify the gnawing away of our rights as established in the Constitution, since these rights are violated day after day, not only by the army and the government but also by others who limit our ability to defend our most sacred individual rights. We continue to demand that the government and the FMLN observe the rights of each and every one of us and respect the rights of indigenous peoples as human beings.

We, the Nahuat, Lenca and Mayan indigenous peoples, demand respect from the army, the government and all other sectors of our society since we are the ones who nurture and cultivate the earth; we work the land with our own hands, and as women, we are the ones who carry our products to the markets to be sold.

The social problems we confront today began for Indian people in 1492, with the Spanish invasion. They came to divide us, to rob us of our culture and our beliefs; they created borders when they had no right to do so because the land belongs to us, the Indians, now and forever. They divided us and imposed their own habits and life-styles.

It is the indigenous people who carry the burden of the economic crisis that our country is experiencing. We know that all aid has been spent on bullets and ammunition and that a large part of the national budget is invested in the armed forces instead of being directed towards helping the poorest of the poor - namely, the indigenous people of the country.

We are also concerned by the increase in the price of basic grains and other general goods as a result of the devaluation of our currency.

We are struggling for the respect, conservation and protection of natural resources. This arises from an attitude of respect for nature such as that which we, the indigenous peoples, hold. Instead of destroying nature, we respect it.

The year 1492 for us marks the beginning of our persecution as Indians, the beginning of the invasion of our culture and of our Mother Earth. In response, we say: an end to the repression against the indigenous people of El Salvador! 500 years of death represent 500 years of resistance, and today we, the indigenous peoples, are here with greater presence and strength.