

Two Watershed Encounters for Indigenous Women in Mexico

The National ANIPA Women's Conference and National Indigenous Forum recently held in Mexico constitute two examples of how Indigenous women's participation is increasingly crucial for a global Indian identity.

By Maya Santamaria

The high level of participation of Indigenous women in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has inspired and encouraged other Indigenous women to take part in the civilian struggle in Mexico. Recognizing their importance as the base of their culture and the givers of life, a fundamental role which is given little value in society, Indigenous women from many different regions of Mexico have decided to raise their voices after 503 years of silence in order to rescue their dignity and defend the rights of Indian peoples.

The need to analyze and understand the particular situation of Indigenous women has caused them to make spaces for themselves where they can discuss their problems, needs, and interests. During the closing of the last year and the opening of the new, two encounters of Indigenous women were held in the highlands of Chiapas: the working table on "Situation, Rights and Culture of Indigenous Women" in the dialogues between the EZLN and the Government, the National ANIPA Women's Conference.

Women and the Peace Dialogues

With the will to dialogue with the government about their demands as

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Indian women, 19 invited guests and twelve advisors from Indian communities and women's organizations throughout Mexico participated in the Working Table #1 of the Peace Dialogues, "Indigenous Rights and Culture," between the EZLN and the Government in San Andrés Sacam Ch'en, Chiapas.

The women who participated as representatives of their communities and organizations in the dialogues, among them Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Chinanteca, Chol, Mixteca, and Nahuatl women, prepared their list of demands despite language and cultural barriers. Through the two phases of their work, from October 18th to the 30th of November, they drafted an elaborate document which signaled the triple discrimination that they suffer as Indigenous people, as women, and as the poor when it comes to health, education, nutrition, housing, and recreation.

The EZLN's female delegation demanded, among other things, that Convention 169 of the International Workers Organization (OIT), and other international pacts signed by Mexico, be made legally effective, and that they be translated to all of the Indian languages for distribution to the communities. Convention 169 of the OIT is one of the principal legal tools that Indian peoples have to defend their rights to self-determination, and the basis of the claim to Autonomy of Indian peoples. They demanded that based on these accords, the necessary reforms be made to the Federal Constitution, so that it include the free exercise of the autonomy of Indian peoples. "We women manifest

that the autonomy of the *pueblos indios* is the path towards the initiation of a new relationship amongst ourselves, with the Mexican state, with other Mexicans, and between men and women... Within this framework of autonomy, we Indigenous women demand our full participation, and that no internal or external condition impede it."

The document also demands a renegotiation of NAFTA and the reform of article 27 to its original revolutionary spirit, which stated that the territories of Indian peoples are "inalienable, not negotiable, and indispensable," and which was altered against the will of most Mexicans for the purpose of passing NAFTA. Among their demands was also the right of women to own and inherit land, the redistribution of land based on the criteria of sustainability, access to alternative technology, increased and improved educational, cultural, health, production, labor, and social welfare services, as well as the end of the PRI-dominated (Institutional Revolutionary Party) State, and the transition towards a true democracy.

The process of actually putting together their ancestral demands in a joint document representing Indigenous women in Mexico proved an invaluable experience. Among other things, it provided a venue for the new relationships and organization between Indian leaders through the leadership of the EZLN. The government commission (COCOPA), in contrast, did not ratify the women's document and did not present the least intention of negotiating a fundamental change. It stated that it would not consider the discussion of concepts such as "autonomy," "religion,"

"self-determination," or "new constitution."

National ANIPA Women's Conference

The first women's encounter of the National Plural Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA) was held in San Cristóbal de las Casas from December 7-8, 1995. Two hundred and sixty representatives of 65 Indian and women's organizations from 30 Indian nations and 13 states of the Mexican republic gathered in Chiapas to "speak our word, talk about our rights, uses and customs, and discuss the proposal of autonomy for our communities, within a vision of gender."

The national Women's Conference came at the culmination of a series of women's workshops and regional conferences galvanized by the Zapatista uprising that have sought to provide spaces of reflection and discussion about the issues confronting Indian women. In addition, many women feel the urgency to further organize and cry out against the military presence in their communities—not just in Chiapas, but across Indigenous regions in Mexico—and what this presence means for their families and their communities.

Invited by the Organizing Commission of the ANIPA and the women's organizations in Chiapas such as K'inál Ansetik, J'pas Joloviletik, and the women's commission of CONPAZ, the participants of the encounter discussed the legal initiative that is in progress for the creation of Autonomous Pluri-ethnic Regions (RAP). Many of the women involved in the autonomy initiative have expressed that the proposal does not include the autonomy of women within their society, nor their desire to have specific rights as women, and that they have not been taken into consideration during the creation of the proposal.

In the two days of discussion the women took the time to talk about the political and social situation in their villages, communities, and homes. They



Photo: María Sarameña

Women of San Andrés Sacamch'en de los Pobres before the first dialogues.

analyzed their lives as children, as mothers, and as wives. They gave a new name to their struggle, that of "autonomy," and made the concept theirs, one that they could now take back to their communities and share with other women.

In attempts to do away with the societal factors that oppress them as Indigenous women, the participants discussed their rights, which they translated into Spanish as "customs." They expressed their desire to do away with all the "bad customs" and nourish the "good customs" in their society. "There are customs that can be counterproductive or contrary to the dignity or liberty of women," said Juliana Gómez, Mixteca and representative of the Editorial Center of Indigenous Literature in Oaxaca. Juliana considered it important to recognize that "sometimes, we women are the ones transmitting bad customs with the education we give our children," and that "the change should begin with the education of women."

The amendments proposed by the women for the initiative to form autonomous regions were drafted into a document and presented to the general council of the Autonomous Pluri-ethnic regions during the forth reunion of the ANIPA, which took place on the same grounds for the three days immediately

following the women's ANIPA conference. Many of the women delegates stayed for the general assembly, making this the highest attendance of women at an ANIPA meeting. During the ANIPA meeting, they asserted that, "Autonomy is a set of attitudes and forms of resistance for the preservation of our customs, languages, and traditions, and to reject the resources the government gives us, because many times they divide us."

The women at the conference also reviewed a document written by the EZLN's advisors and guests in San Andrés, which was approved by the ANIPA. The initiative for Autonomy and the women's proposal were then to be presented at the National Indigenous Forum which had been convoked by the EZLN.

The proposals and demands made by the women who worked and participated in these encounters will ultimately be sent to the Congress and Senate for legislation on Women's Rights. It is important to recognize that these spaces where women have, as an option to war and for the construction of peace, debated their problems concerning their culture and rights signal an important change in the political process in Mexico; namely, that the process of democratization can no longer occur without their true liberation as women. ♡