

Decolonizing Feminism: the Indigenous Women's Movement in Mexico

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Feminism conjures up a promise to resist the various forms of oppression women face, but feminism's capacity to fulfill this promise has been undermined by its failure to deal with the difference that race and ethnicity and class make for gender.

In Mexico, a certain hegemonic feminism often reproduces the relationship that C. Mohanty speaks of when describing the links between First and Third World feminist discourse. She argues that Western feminist discourse has produced a "...composite, singular Third World woman who is a 'powerless' victim of male dominance and patriarchal oppression" (Mohanty, 1983.)

Urban feminist analysis has given rise to a hegemony which has often defined indigenous feminism as the 'other': exotic, strangely rooted in 'culture' and powerless if not non-existent (Jaidopolu, 2000.)

My purpose here is not only to approach the 'other woman', the 'indigenous other,' but also to revisit the dominant discourse (often feminist) that portrays the indigenous women as passive, submissive, subject and bound to inevitable patriarchal oppressions springing from their cultural background. One example could be Xochitl Galvez when she expressed that in her own village, women are considered to be "buenas solo para el metate y el petate" (good only for grinding corn and for the straw mat.) An 'indigenous woman' appointed to be representative, at the highest governmental level possible, for indigenous affairs by the president of Mexico. She is a perfect example of an 'indigenous woman' who has - in this case - internalized the dominant gaze on her own background.

Feminisms in Mexico are often submerged in practices that follow quite mimetically international feminist theories and priorities. We are inserted into the dominant global international feminist discourse, and a certain sort of feminist movement in Mexico is derivative of the US movement. The pressure of intellectual and activist trends, and the resources to continue with concrete activism, are allocated by agencies that define priorities and targets. Often, they have little to do with the context of indigenous women's feminist practices.

"The NGOization and transnationalization of the Latin American feminist field appeared to have led increasing numbers of feminists to privilege some spaces of feminist politics, such as the state and the international policy arenas,... " affirms Sonia Alvarez (Alvarez, E.S., Dagnino, E., Escobar, A., eds, 1998, p. 315.)

When approaching, interpreting, evaluating and/or impinging on the indigenous women's movement, urban and other elite (socially advantaged) feminists have to face the challenge of deconstructing a three-tiered structure of bias:

- the gendered assumptions the feminist imported into the indigenous women's situation;
- the attitudes of male superiority in the indigenous group that are selectively communicated to her;
- the interpretation of asymmetrical gender relationships in that community (pueblo) as analogous to those in her own context.

Initial Feminism in Mexico

In Mexico, the women's movement has emerged as a response to the characteristics of the larger social

reality. The life of Mexican women is inscribed within a history that is the product of diverse interactions, intersections, and fusions between the indigenous Mesoamerican traditions and the Spanish conquerors and colonizers.

For feminists and early social activists, the indigenous past was simultaneously created and manipulated by the State and was the crude reality and ignorance of large impoverished sectors of Mexican society. When feminism emerged in Mexico, this was the landscape of the indigenous part of our Mexican ancestry.

The Mexican women's Movement has had to struggle with the oppressive Catholic double moral that has impinged on the lives of Mexican women and their relationships to their men: in sexuality, family, work, social, and political contexts. Meanwhile, the indigenous ancestry has largely been kept 'invisible' within the movement just as it has been in the larger social arena. Until the Zapatista uprising (January 1994,) ethnic demands were hardly present in Mexican social movements. Racism and ethnic discrimination have shaped a socio-economic background where poverty is often related to the physical and cultural signs of belonging to one of the 62 indigenous groups living in our territory.

In the early 1970's, the emerging Mexican feminism focused on women's rights, borrowing much from the western feminist movement's demands (Lugo, 1985, p. 445; Morgan, 1985, p. 443.) This movement demystified the patriarchal double moral in relation to sexuality, asking for access to abortion rights, and debunking feminine stereotypes by which a woman's identity was made exclusively dependent on having a husband and being a mother (Marcos, S., 1975.) Small consciousness-raising groups allowed new critical demands to be expressed and articulated (Morgan, 1985, p. 443.) As a consequence, many women started writing, as well as getting involved in theatre, movies, and political activities (Lugo, 1985, p. 445.) Most of the women who committed themselves to the opposition parties of the left were middle class (Neft and Levine, 1997, p. 354.)

In 1976, the feminist groups started to work in co-ordination with each other and formed the *Coalición de Mujeres Feministas*. This helped the feminist movement to be more clearly defined as a social force. Three demands contributed to unify the perspectives prevailing within the different feminist groups (Lugo, 1985, p. 446.) These were:

1. Voluntary maternity (*maternidad voluntaria*), including the right to sexual education, to the use of contraceptives, and to abortion on demand.
2. Struggle against sexual violence.
3. Lesbian (and gay) rights.

In accordance with these demands, the first law project on voluntary maternity was elaborated and presented in 1976 (Morgan, 1985, p. 441.) In 1977, the first assistance centre for women victims of rape and sexual violence was created (Neft & Levine, 1997, p. 362.) During these early years, the first feminist publications, like *FEM* and *La Revuelta*, started to appear (Morgan, 1985, p. 443.) Radio programmes on women's issues from a feminist perspective were initiated in 1980. The feminist movement, which had started and grown mainly in Mexico City, spread out to more states of the Mexican Republic (Lugo, 1985, pp. 445-446.)

In 1979, the *Frente Nacional por la Liberación y los Derechos de las Mujeres (FNALIDM)* was founded. For the first time in the history of Mexican feminism, the association pulled together women with very diverse perspectives, not necessarily feminists (Lugo, 1985, p. 445; Marcos, 1999, pp 432.) Among them were: members of the *Unión Nacional de Mujeres*, women linked to the *International Democratic Federation of Women*, activists from left parties, elite women from the *P.R.I.* (governing party), members of lesbian groups, mothers of the disappeared and of political prisoners (*las madres*), trade unionists and factory workers, organised urban poor, and peasants.

The main goal of the FNALIDM was to create a political force whose cohesion depended implicitly on the universality of women's oppression. It was not until years later that the issue of differences among women was more explicitly elaborated, which allowed the construction and diversification of feminisms. (Chabram-Dernersesian, 1992, p. 88; Lugo, 1985, pp. 445-446.)

This pluralistic collaboration acquired momentum during the eighties (Neft & Levine, 1997, p. 354.) Women of the poor urban sectors, factory workers, and trade unionists, peasants, and rural migrants living in shanty towns started to coordinate their demands with those of the feminist movement (Lugo, 1985, p. 445; Momsen, 1991, pp. 41, 101.) A larger women's movement began to take shape.

Difficult negotiations marked those years, as the priorities of women living in precarious conditions did not seem to be coincident with those of middle class women. However, many of the latter were themselves of leftist affiliation (Miller, 1986, p. 336) and gradually, some of them could start to share the priorities of the poorer women. In the end, the filtering of the properly feminist demands against 'machismo' (patriarchal societal rule which seemed to imply that men had all the rights and women all the duties) started to be a significant issue also for trade unionists, peasants, and urban poor women, who absorbed these debates in their political agendas.

Since then, the main issue within the Mexican feminist movement has been how to coordinate the rights of the dispossessed with specific women's rights. The Mexican feminist groups can all be placed somewhere in the continuum from giving priorities only to the rights of women irrespective of class, race, and ethnic issues, and, on the other hand, of privileging the rights of the disadvantaged irrespective of the rights of women (Lugo, 1985, pp. 445-446, Marcos, 1999, pp. 432.)

According to some perspectives in contemporary feminism, neither one nor the other pole should predominate (hooks, bell, 1984; Marcos, S., 1994.) This is what the 'positionality theory' advocates. The intersections between gender, class, and ethnic demands are not static. Consequently, urges and priorities are themselves in permanent flux.

From the 1990 on, we are witnessing the paradoxical appearance of two contradictory phenomena. Much of the thrust of the new social movements drives to a recognition and reappraisal of one of Mexico's 'forgotten' identities: the indigenous (Marcos, 1999, pp 432.)

In the streets of Mexico, recently, the voices of hundreds of thousands of urban supporters of the Zapatistas proclaimed "*todos somos indios*" (we are all Indians). In spite of its accuracy, it was surprising to hear this moto in a country where racism and ethnic discrimination have permeated all social strata, including the social justice and the feminist movements. (Monsivais, 1994, p. 1.) This impulse towards particularities and ethnic cultural rights, a "*novedad historica*" as Monsivais called it, a "historical novelty" (Monsivais idem, p. 2) counterbalances the internationalization (globalization) of the women's movement.

Globalization is influencing the way the women's movement is evolving: its politics are no longer strictly local or regional. With the series of international United Nations meetings on Population and Development that started in Cairo and followed with the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, the Mexican feminist movement has been facing the interconnectedness with women's movements the world over. It has had to internationalize its strategies and negotiate its priorities. Needless to say this has opened a new breach between the elite feminists that travel, consult, interact and negotiate with the international feminist voices (that are frequently from the 'North'), and the grassroots poor and/or indigenous women. Further, This globalization of feminist practices appears to have led an increasing number of feminists to exclusively privilege spaces other than those that "promote cultural transformation through local grassroot oriented organizing and mobilizational activities." (Alvarez, 1998, p. 315.)

A Part but Apart: The Indigenous Women's Movement

In spite of considerations from some feminists that there is no such thing as an indigenous women's feminism, other feminist voices have claimed the existence of a feminist perspective in the indigenous women's demands. (Lovera, S., 1999; Lagarde, M., 2000; Hernandez, A., 2000). As Grewal and Kaplan reflect in their introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994), "...feminism comes in many forms -- sometimes as a hegemonic western formation and sometimes as a threat to western hegemony as well as to national and regional patriarchies" (p. 22.)

How can I claim it is feminism that I am speaking of when speaking of the indigenous women's movement? In 1994, when Zapatismo in southern Chiapas became visible (for a fresh and interesting rendering of the first years of Zapatismo read Katzenberger, E., ed., 1995), one striking characteristic was evident. Approximately 30 percent of them were women. The women were not only in the 'support communities' in the traditional women's roles. The women were insurgents ('*soldado*' in the words of some of them, see Las Alzadas, op. cit.). They were in the Central Commanding Committee (Comite Central Revolucionario Indigena, CCRI). They were 'comandantas', like the very visible Ramona. They were also, not only insurgents but commanding the military forces ('capitanas'), like Ana María in charge of taking over militarily San Cristobal de las Casas.

Besides this presence, the first bulletin ever published included the Revolutionary Women's Law (Marcos, S., 1994.) The first 'revolution' (*alzamiento*), says Sub-Comandante Marcos, took place in March 1993 within the still clandestine Zapatista forces (Las Alzadas, op. cit., p. 60). The men within the guerrilla had to accept the specific gendered demands of their women. They were their wives, sisters, companion fighters, mothers, and commanding women within the guerrilla movement. In the words of Ramona "*Muchas resistencias tuvimos que vencer para venir. Les da miedo nuestra rebeldia. Por eso en el EZLN nos organizamos para aprobar la ley revolucionaria de mujeres*" (Marcos, 1997.) "We had to overcome many resistances to our participation, this is why we, the women, got organized to approve the Revolutionary women's law."

The indigenous women's law (*Ley revolucionaria de mujeres*), accepted by consensus at that meeting, stipulated clearly the rights of women to same education, same salary for same job, opportunities to participate and lead political assemblies and right to inherit and own the land. It advocated punishment for any sort of violence against women, right to choose if, when, and how many children to have, and to choose their partners and not to be forced to marry (Las Alzadas, op. cit., p. 59-60.)

As is often the case, these advances and demands inherited results of previous indigenous and peasant women's struggles. In Chiapas, where Zapatismo emerged, there were years of an indigenous movement claiming their rights as Indians: cultural and economic rights. Specially crucial was the Indigenous Congress in

1974 that could coordinate in a significant manner the many scattered rebellions of the previous years concerning economic, political, and cultural 'indigenous' rights. Women participants could start maturing their leadership abilities. At this particular congress, the women took over the 'logistics' of the meeting and thus were 'invisible' as such. They did not participate in decision making or addressing the issues publicly (Hernandez, R. A., "Distintas maneras de ser mujer...", 1994, ms.) but they were indispensable. Several other previous experiences that continue until today are related to artisan and agricultural cooperatives where indigenous women have frequently taken the lead.

In the words of French sociologist Alain Touraine, Director of the Institut d'Études Supérieures en Sciences Sociales of Paris, the indigenous movements in the Americas are "...the transformational force more visible in the continent" (Gil Olmos, November 6, 2000, p. 7.) According to Yvon Le Bot, renowned French sociologist specialized in the study of social movements in Latin America, "...they are claiming both respect for a cultural identity and democratic rights for all Mexicans" (Gil Olmos, March

26, 2000, p. 3.) They are the most relevant social actors of today. As Yvon Le Bot emphasizes, one of their relevances and "what makes them extraordinarily 'modern' is the changes they claim to make in the hierarchical system of their communities and in the place of women against the exclusive masculine power." (Gil Olmos, March 2000, p. 3.) "The indigenous peoples," he continues, "do not accept any more the image that was imposed on them from the exterior, they want to create their own identity, they do not want to be objects in the museums. It is not a question of reviving the past, it is a live culture, the only way to survive is to try to reinvent themselves to recreate a new identity, while maintaining their difference" (Olmos, March 2000, p. 3.)

Closely interlinked with the larger indigenous movement, the women's movement started to create a presence of their own within the Zapatista uprising and later in the multiple indigenous organizations that sprung up all around the country.

The indigenous women: beyond Zapatismo

'*Feministas infiltradas*' was a rumor within the Third National Indigenous Congress (CNI) in Nurió, Michoacan (March 3, 2001). At this congress, although some of the men insisted on the 'infiltration' of feminists, the reality was that the indigenous women were claiming their rights as women themselves (Hernandez, 2001.)

The Congreso Nacional Indígena or CNI – a network of indigenous political organizations - is the largest and most active of the multiple indigenous organizations that have developed in these last years. The CNI and the Zapatistas share many political demands and strategies. Zapatismo is inclusive of several ethnic groups, mainly Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Chol, and Mam. These groups have a common Mayan (Mesoamerican) ancestry and are close to each other in worldviews, rituals, symbols, and language (Lopez Austin, 1984; Kirchhoff, 1986 [1968].) As to the CNI, it includes a larger variety of ethnic groups. To name a few of the 47 ethnic groups¹ (Gargallo, F., 2001) represented in the Congress: Purepechas, Amuzgos, Mixes, Mixtecos, Zapotecos, Nahuas, Raramuris, Ñañus, Huicholes.

Beyond this plurality, and emerging as a new configuration, CNI activists call themselves "*indios*" or "*indígenas*." It is well known that each ethnic group defines itself by difference to other ethnic groups and beyond that to the mestizo population in larger Mexico. Nevertheless, as a new outcome of the last years' political upheavals, this new configuration has emerged with which they actively identify².

This recovery process has created a new collective subject that struggles to follow the lead of the Zapatistas in their 'horizontal' strategies of decision making (public assemblies where everyone participates) and of incorporating the voices and rights of the women.

The women within this organization had long been subsumed under the indigenous movement demands. However, in 1997, the group of women within the CNI created a new women's organization: La Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas with representatives of 26 ethnic groups in the country (del Valle, 2000.) This organization was founded at the closing of the First National Congress of Indigenous Women, a gathering of more than 560 indigenous women from all regions of the country, to which they invited a handful of non-indigenous women. From then on, a new awareness of the originality and autonomy of these women's discourse began to spread throughout Mexico. A discourse in which politics rejoins poetics (Marcos, 1997.) These were the hidden and invisible women whose identity had been construed as muted and passive! Ramona, spokeswoman of the National Liberation Zapatista Front (EZLN) had said: "...pues, 'sta bien, compañeras, venimos varias pueblos indígenas pobres para saber como caminar juntas. El zapatismo no sería lo mismo sin sus mujeres rebeldes y nuevas. Luchemos juntos lo que queremos, porque si hay muchas divisiones no se puede." ("We are coming from many different indigenous groups to learn how to walk together. The Zapatista movement would be different without its rebellious and renovated women. Let's not divide our struggles, because it will not be possible." (Marcos, 1997.)

We will review later some of the feminist difficulties with this new indigenous women's discourse as well as the misreadings of it. Both seem to have to do with the subaltern position of Indian women and their rootedness in ancestral Mesoamerican beliefs and practices. Paraphrasing Ch. Talpade, we could say that their material and historical heterogeneities are often discursively colonized by urban feminists. (Mohanty, 1991.)

The National Political Arena

Both organizations, the Zapatistas and the CNI have managed repeatedly to attract the political national attention during these last years. Some events merit special attention for the theme that concerns us here. The EZLN's Consulta Nacional por la Paz y la Democracia of August-September 1995 is one of them. It reenacted a favored Zapatista strategy of "local decisions to large issues." It convoked all the citizens of Mexico to a referendum concerning indigenous rights within the Mexican state. Large sectors of the population helped operationalize this massive national consultation, many citizens responded to the questions. In a Mexico where hardly anything was possible without the acquiescence of the governmental institutions, it was, nevertheless, run entirely on their margins. The Consulta Nacional asked six fundamental questions to Mexico's citizens, all concerned with the indigenous's rights and their inclusion in Mexican society and politics. The last question, the 6th, read: "Should we warrant the presence and participation of women in all the posts of representation and responsibility within the democratic processes in Mexico, as much in civil organizations as in parties, in legislation, and in government?" (Cazes, 1995.) Of the

collected responses, 93% were affirmative, 4 % negative and they were 3% of abstentions. The most important point at issue is that, by including such a question, the EZLN manifested the Zapatistas' (men's and women's) effort to inscribe the rights of women on their agenda and, by doing so, to counteract the strong atavic currents of male supremacy in the Mexican society at large.

In March 2000, the EZLN called the nation to another referendum, the Consulta nacional por los derechos de las mujeres. It was specific on the rights of women in Mexico.

The 'consulta' has been crucial for developing and advancing the need to participate in national decision making for a society that was used to non-involvement . And, once again, the rights of women were at the center.

Zapatistas from Southern Mexico were sent to every city, township and village where the referendum was held to be witness of it and to assist its organizers. Following a Mayan custom, they all came in couples, en parejas, so that there was exactly the same number of women as of men. Once again, a breath of fresh air was blowing from the South! It was specially relevant to the issues that political feminists were trying to get across within their political parties with quotas of a minimum percentage of women to be elected to participate in the leading positions. The reception of these women and men, their addresses, their initiative in favor of the rights of women had a lasting national impact. Though the consulta was not allowed to take place in some states, (Olivera, 2000), in the majority of the states, 94 to 98% of the women responded affirmatively to the question about the recognition of their rights. Only 2 to 4 % thought that it was not necessary. As for men, only 6 to 8 % defended their 'privileges' against the rights of women. The important issue here is the strategic positioning of Zapatismo to generate a wide citizen consensus.

The third instance of a huge national mobilization I want to review here is the momentous Marcha Zapatista toward Mexico City of February-March 2001. The main objective of this march was to gather popular support for the approval of a constitutional amendment (Ley Cocopa) that would recognize the rights and values of the indigenous peoples within the national boundaries. These included rights to their culture (usos y costumbres), to their citizenship-in-difference, to their territories and their resources. The law project was a call to transform our legislative system so that it better reflect and

include the plurality of peoples that constitutes Mexico.

The representatives of the EZLN in this otherwise called Marcha por la dignidad included four comandantas (female commanders): Yolanda, Fidelia, Esther, and Susana. Taking turns to address the hundreds of thousands that gathered to greet and welcome them, they were heard with respectful attention and their discourses were always striking. Their words were full of ancestral references as well as of demands of change in the discriminatory practices towards women. What they want is both the nation's respect for their indigenous custom and their custom's respect for their aspiration as indigenous and as women.

Never before (nor after) in Mexico was there such a spontaneous, massive, non-party aligned congregation of citizens as the one that received the Zapatistas. Governments - the states' as well as the Federation's - felt threatened by such popular support. Besides the meetings in townships and cities (33 of them), carefully prepared by the Comité Central Revolucionario Indígena, the Zapatista caravana was often asked to stop in this or that village and to improvise a rally. Hundreds of people could even stand in the middle of the road to oblige the Zapatistas to make a stop in their place. People wanted to see them, to express their support saying them that they understood and subscribed their struggle. Here is an instance of how Zapatista women spoke to the enormous gatherings that greeted them everywhere on their way to Mexico City:

"Vamos al Distrito Federal a exigir nuestros derechos junto con otros hermanos y hermanas," ("We are going to Mexico City to demand our rights with our other sisters and brothers,") said Fidelia. *"La Ley sobre derechos de los indígenas que hicieron los de la COCOPA³ de por si nos reconoce como mujeres, porque como mujeres de por si tenemos más penas, pero igual somos valientes. Yo como mujer me siento muy orgullosa de ser como soy. Yo espero que me voy a encontrar con otras mujeres que tienen mi pensamiento y con otras que tienen otro pensamiento. Pensamos que esto esta bien porque así se hace una idea más buena y más grande y nos da mas fuerza para seguir luchando por nuestros derechos como indígenas y como mujeres."* ("The Cocopa law recognizes our rights as women because as women we have more sufferings, but all the same we are brave. I, as a woman, feel very proud of being as I am... I hope that I will find other women that have my frame of mind and others that have a different thought. We think this is good because in that way an idea grows and gets better and gives us strenght to continue struggling for our rights as indigenous and as women."(Perfil de la Jornada, February 17 2001.)

"Ser mujeres indígenas es un orgullo. Ser mujeres indígenas representa que tenemos pensamiento, que tenemos dignidad pero también es difícil, muy difícil, porque hay sufrimientos y discriminaciones y hay pobreza. Por eso queremos que se nos reconozca en las leyes de la constitución y que nos respeten nuestra dignidad, como en la ley Cocopas," said Susana. ("Being an indigenous woman is a pride, being indigenous women means that we have thought, that we have dignity, but it is difficult, very difficult, because there is suffering, discrimination and poverty. This is why we want that the constitutional law takes us into consideration, as the Cocopa law does (Perfil de la Jornada, February 17 2001.)

"Vamos a difundir nuestras palabras como zapatistas y vamos a defender nuestros derechos como mujeres y como indígenas. Como mujeres indígenas no vamos a dejar de luchar mientras no seamos reconocidas en la Constitucion y no seamos tratados como animales," said Yolanda. ("We came to spread our word as Zapatistas and we are going to defend our rights as women and as indigenous peoples. As indigenous women, we are not stopping our struggle until we are subjects in our Constitution and we are no longer treated as animals." (Perfil de la Jornada, February 17 2001.)

"Voy a ir con mis compañeros y compañeras a platicar con el Congreso de la Unión. Voy como mujer y como indígena, porque es necesaria esta movilización para que los legisladores nos escuchen y porque

es necesaria la recuperación de la dignidad. Nosotras somos mexicanas, hablamos nuestra lengua, tenemos nuestra vestimenta, nuestra medicina, nuestra forma de rezar y también nuestra forma de bailar. Nosotros como indígenas hombres y mujeres tenemos nuestro modo de trabajar y de respetar a nuestros ancianos, así como nos enseñaron nuestros abuelos. Desde el tiempo de nuestros abuelos nos enseñaron a resistir y a organizarnos. No por ser indígenas y por hablar nuestra lengua y por ser morenas nos tienen que despreciar, no por eso ni por nada. Ser indígena es un orgullo muy grande," affirmed Esther. ("I am going with my compañeros y compañeras to talk to Congress, I am coming as a woman and as indigenous. It is necessary that we mobilize so that legislators listen to us so we recover our dignity. We speak our language, we have our custom, our medicine, our form of praying and our form of dancing. We have our way of respecting our elders, that our grandmothers and grandfathers taught us. They also taught us to resist and to get organized. Not because we are indigenous, and for speaking our language, and for being dark-skinned, can we be looked down. Being indian is a great pride" (Perfil de la Jornada, February 17.)

In their faltering Spanish - a second or third language for them - they came across as strong women who struggle with the state as Indians and with customary patriarchal norms as women. Indigenous women have been more defiant than the available literature would lead us to believe.

"The large peace marches," says Yvon Le Bot, "are one of the preferred political actions of the indigenous movements. It sets them apart from the guerrilla tactics and inscribes them in the strategies of Gandhi or Martin Luther King. No hint of "ethnonationalism" in them! The indigenous ask to be recognized as equal and different within a nation reconstructed on a pluricultural basis" (Le Bot, La Jornada, March, 15, 2001, p. 19).

Defending the law in Congress

With this experience in the background, the next step was to present the law project, the iniciativa de ley, in the legislators' tribune. After many failed negotiations, rebuttals of the indigenous' claim to address the nation's representatives and a fierce resistance to their prospective appearance in both chambers, there was finally a last minute agreement: they would be allowed to speak to the Deputies but not to the Senators. Of course all of this was preceded by massive rallies on the streets of Mexico City to support their appearance in the Deputies' Chamber (La Jornada, Marzo 12-22, 2001).

A group of feminists which had been respectfully supporting the indigenous women's movement organized a forum: 'De la ley revolucionaria de las mujeres Zapatistas a la ley de la COCOPA'. (For a full account of the forum, see Cuadernos Feministas, vol. 3, no 15, 2001). At the closing of this meeting, a 'plural commission' was formed (Rojas, 2001). Two indigenous women, a Purepecha and an Amuzga from the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas, and two non-indigenous feminists were elected to brief Congress on the benefits of the law from the indigenous women's perspective.

This commission also participated in citizenship information forums. They briefed Congressmen and Congresswomen repeatedly during weeks on the benefits of this law for indigenous women, and on the importance for a plural state, like Mexico should be, to accept it. "Queremos un mundo donde caben muchos mundos": We want a world in which many worlds can fit.

Meanwhile, the most debated issue in the media was whether Sub-comandante Marcos should be allowed to address the plenum of the Congress. Who else would represent appropriately the Zapatista uprising? Who would have the words and the courage to step up and speak to the highest legislative authority in the country? There was a lot of expectation, a lot of suppositions. The EZLN was silent regarding its representatives. The CNI had already disclosed theirs: María de Jesús Patricio and Juan Chavez.

A campaign of denigration of the COCOPA law project raged in the media, orchestrated by the system's

intellectuals and amplified by TV programs, newspapers and periodicals that made a sport of criticizing the "indigenous law.". Politicians and intellectuals known for their male chauvinism now came up with a new argument: the indigenous people's revindication of their culture was derided as 'usocostumbrismo' (customary-law-ism) and would as such hamper women's rights! (see Federico Reyes Heróles' exploit in his TV apparition on Canal 11, Marzo 22, 2001; see also Viqueira 2001.) They were using women - once again - as an excuse for their reactionnary political positions!

We Come to Ask for Justice, not Crumbs

The 28th March, at about 10:00 am, a crowd of barefoot Indians, dressed in multicolored garments, wearing hats of different forms and sizes, adorned with ribbons, carrying packets in old plastic bags, entered meekly but triumphantly the parliament house through its main entrance. The wards and the doorkeepers could not believe their eyes. Many invited non-indigenous lawyers, professors, politicians and supporters accompanied the indigenous retinue. But, where was Marcos? Everyone was looking for him, but he was nowhere.

Minutes later, as the session started, a small figure moved up to take the tribune. She was dressed in white with embroidered flowers. Remindful of the countenance recommended to women and men in the traditional discourses of ilamatlatolli and huehuetlatolli (Marcos, 1991), she bore herself with indigenous composure, small steps and head covered with a ski mask. Her eyes blinked when she started speaking. It was Comandanta Esther. "Here I am. I am a woman and an Indian, and through my voice speaks the

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional ." A rumor of surprise raised from the assembly. How dares she - she a woman and an Indian, she so desperately poor - take this stance? The assistance was flabbergasted. She started shyly, almost faintly. But as her voice progressively raised, her strength came through her words. She made clear that she was there as a commander, that she - along with the other CCRI (Comite Central Revolucionario Indígena) members - gives orders to Sub-Comandante Marcos. He is in charge of the armed forces and as such subject to the decisions of the Central Committee.

Those who heard her could recognize in her speech stylistic resources that reminded us of pre-hispanic poetry. Among them were an "indigenous" syntax in Spanish, certain use of parallelisms and of diphrasing (León-Portilla, 1969.) The influences of the indigenous language were present in the choice of words, the non-matching singulars and plurals, the use of metaphors, and the rythmic repetition of words (Marcos, 1997.) Especially conspicuous was her use of the word heart in a context where it did not refer to feelings. Heart in her discourse referred to reason, to history, to truth. (Perfil de la Jornada, March 29, 2001, IV). All of these characteristics revealed the influence of her Mayan ancestry and cosmovision upon her language.

This is not the place to conduct an extended and in-depth analysis of the Mayan cosmological references she echoed. Her words, "*la palabra verdadera*": "the true word", resounded under the Parliament's dome. Six times she was interrupted by roaring applause. In synthesis, she commented on the importance of the law project for the indigenous peoples. She outlined their destitute situation. Then she spoke of the women's situation, the indigenous and the non-indigenous.

"Es la ley de ahora la que permite que nos marginen y nos humillen. Por eso nosotras nos decidimos a organizar para luchar como mujer zapatista." ("It is today's existing law that permits our humiliation and destitution. This is why we got organized to change this situation as Zapatista women.) *"Quiero explicarles la situación de la mujer indígena que vivimos en nuestras comunidades, hoy que según esto, esta garantizado en la Constitución el respeto a la mujer"* (Perfil de la Jornada, 29 de Marzo, p III.) ("I want to explain the situation of indigenous women as we live it in our communities, today when it is supposed we are guaranteed respect by our constitution ...Besides being women, we are indigenous and as such we are not recognized. Yes, the existing law gives us certain rights, but only as women and

even that is not satisfactory.")

Then, Comandanta Esther went on to speak of the situation of Indian women under 'traditional' customary rules and of the double discrimination suffered by indigenous women, mentioning many instances where this custom is unjust to them. "*...que somos niñas, piensan que no valemos nosotras como mujer nos golpea también... (las mujeres) cargan su agua de dos a tres horas de camino con cantaro y cargando a su hijo*" (Perfil de la Jornada, 29 de Marzo, p III.) (they treat us "... as girls they think we are not valuable, as women we are beaten...also women have to carry water walking two to three hours holding a vessel and a child in their arms.")

"No les cuento todo esto para que nos tengan lástima o nos vengan a salvar de esos abusos. Nosotras hemos luchado por cambiar eso y lo seguiremos haciendo." ("I am not telling you all this so you have pity on us. We have struggled to change this and will continue doing it.")

Her discourse proved all those intellectuals removed from the daily life of the indigenous people wrong. Culture is not monolithic, culture is not static. Both fallacies must be debunked if we want to pay respect to the indigenous world. In accordance with the multiple indigenous voices heard these last years, she insisted that she wants both to transform and to preserve her culture.

"Queremos que sea reconocida nuestra forma de vestir, de hablar, de gobernar, de organizar, de rezar, de curar, nuestra forma de trabajar en colectivos, de respetar la tierra y de entender la vida, que es la naturaleza que somos parte de ella." ("We want recognition for our ways of dressing, of talking, of governing, of organizing, of praying, of working collectively, of respecting earth, of understanding nature as something which we are part of.") (Perfil de La Jornada, March 29, 2001, p. IV).

Of the four indigenous representatives to address Mexico's Congress that day, two were women. The second woman to address Congress that day was María de Jesús Patricio, "Marichuy", in representation of the the CNI. In her speech, "Marichuy" expressed firmly and repeatedly that it is not only in the indigenous communities that women are not respected in their rights. Applauses came from the floor.

"...que si los usos y costumbres lesionan a las mujeres indígenas en los pueblos en las comunidades, pensamos que es un problema no solamente de los pueblos indígenas, no es de ahí, es de toda la sociedad civil también. Dicen que si se aprueba esta iniciativa de la Cocopa, va a lesionar a las mujeres. Nosotras decimos que no." With rhetorical talent, "oral" eloquence, she started to list the positive "*usos y costumbres*", like collective collaboration for communal tasks, political representation as service to the community and not as means of acquiring power and wealth, respect for the wiseness of the elders, and decision making by consensus among others. Then she mentioned some of the influences of the hegemonic legal system that surrounds them and that have impacted negatively the place of indigenous women.

"No es nuestra costumbre que ante las instituciones y documentos aparezca el nombre del varón, y no el de la mujer, sino que ha sido por disposición de las propias leyes que exigen el nombre de un jefe de familia, que exigen personalizar el derecho, que exigen individualizar la propiedad o posesión al igual que lo anterior, en donde las mujeres somos tomadas en cuenta con diferentes niveles de participación" (Triple Jornada, 2 de Abril 2001.) ("...it is not in our custom that in the documents and institutions a man's name has to appear. It is not our custom, but the dominant law that requires a man – the "chief of the family" - to sign in the property titles. It is the dominant law that requires to personalize rights, to individualize property and land tenure and it is in this same law that takes women into consideration with different levels of participation, lower than those of men.")

"It is the contemporary law that discriminates us as women, not the COCOPA law." insist both comandanta Esther y María de Jesús Patricio.

With this precision, she was referring to something that several researchers have noted in their writings:

"...feminist writing has only just begun to analyze the more interesting problem of how the state inscribes gender difference into the political process in such a way that women are debarred - at least under present state forms-from becoming full political persons" (Moore, 1988, p. 150.)

According to Magdalena León y Carmen D. Deere, in the development projects in Latin America, "... [r]ural women were perceived only as housewives who were responsible for the domestic realm. The state resources directed toward them focused solely on their roles of wife and mother. ...Programs for agricultural technical assistance and access to credit were directed overwhelmingly toward rural men. Thus, rural extension services reproduced the socially constructed — and idealized — gender division of labor in which men were the agriculturalists and women the housewives." (quoted in Stephen, Lynn, 1997, p. 270.) Similar attitudes and situations of hegemonic central power induce the ownership of the land to be in the hands of men exclusively.

Marichuy was thus referring to the state-enhanced social construction of a structure of patriarchal privileges within the indigenous and peasant world. However, as much as Mexican peasant society has become more patriarchal, it might not be so in the same manner as in the hegemonic, urban society. In the confrontation, the patriarchal styles of the dominator were imposed on the dominated. Hence the creation, fortification and stratification of patriarchal privileges in a world where they were not originally at home. This is a complex issue and one that requires further elaboration. At the moment, it is sufficient to know that historical research into early colonial times has unearthed a wealth of *titulos de propiedad* (land property documents) and inheritance documents where there is ample evidence that women held titles of land property in their own names. (Karttunen 1986; Lockhart 1980; Kellog 1988). It seems that Spanish colonial law and the application of contemporary Mexican law in peasant and indigenous communities have in common the denial of land tenancy rights to women.

But María de Jesús Patricio did not only challenge the application of the law. She was equally critical of certain feminist positions, as exemplified in her use of the family concept:

"Así pues la mujer ha venido participando desde la misma familia, porque en los pueblos indígenas no es hombre y mujer sino que son familias enteras. Y ahí la mujer participa desde la toma de decisiones; cuando el marido va a una asamblea comunitaria o a una asamblea ejidal, en conjuntar ideas y llevarlas a la asamblea. Pero ya la participación del varón ya va ahí también la participación de la mujer, pero no solamente, como les decía, es exclusivamente hombre-mujer, sino que es de familia." (Perfil de la Jornada. March 29 2001, p. VII.) ("Women have been participating from within the family, because in indigenous villages, it is not men nor woman, it is the entire family. And women there participates in decision making, getting the ideas together. When the man goes to a communal assembly, in the man's participation goes also the woman's participation. But as I told you, it is not only man-woman but the whole family.")

As questionable as this might seem from a feminist perspective, it might be of use to revise some of the ancient Mesoamerican concepts. Both the family and the man-woman couple formed a unity. The concept of the individual was not prevalent (Lopez Austin 1984.) Besides, a pervasive concept of duality still nurtures the vision of most ethnic communities in contemporary Mexico.

Was Marichuy referring to this? Most probably, she was trying to get across a concept of collective subjectivity, of feminine-masculine duality that requires a whole epistemological decodification. (Marcos 1998.)

This is an example of the parallel discourses that are fracturing the hegemony of a certain dominant, urban, feminist discourse, as it is challenged by those "indigenous feminists" whose life is a juggling between multiple and contradictory identities, some traditional, some beginning to emerge.

Yet Marichuy was also very articulate on the positive aspects of the indigenous communities. She is

probably very influenced by the recent writings of indigenous thinkers like Floriberto Diaz, Sofia Robles and Adelfo Regino (2001.)

"Why do you always mention the 'bad' customs?" she asked. "In our indigenous communities, we have good customs too." Part of her presentation was dedicated to the enunciation of the 'good customs'. "*Por ejemplo, los usos y costumbres positivos son el tequio y la ayuda mutua, cuando se reunen y juntos dan su tiempo para trabajar faenas.*" ("For example, one positive custom is that of tequio (collective voluntary work) and of mutual help. In tequio, men get together and give their work to build the houses of everyone in the community.")

"*Otra de las buenas costumbres es buscar tomar decisiones por consenso. ...ahí dicen nuestro abuelos: 'ahí tiene que es el 99% más el 9', ¿verdad?, o sea, que es el total: tiene que haber consenso más que votación.*" ("Other good custom is to take decisions by consensus. Our grandparents say "There has to be 99% plus 9'. It has to be the total. It is not voting, it is achieving consensus.")

"*También otra de las costumbres positivas es buscar hacer justicia reparando el daño antes que castigando al culpable.*" ("Also a positive custom is to do justice by retribution and not by punishing the guilty.") To take advantage of the wisdom of the elders is another good custom. The elders have a privileged place. Political representation is a service, not a privilege. It is a duty, you do not get paid. The whole community is overseeing what you do. This is the true word the word of our peoples, of our ancestors. (Perfil de la Jornada, March 29, 2001, p. VII.)

A few days before, the 8th of March, at a rally for women's rights, comandanta Esther had addressed the massive audience saying : "*Creo que vamos a lograr el cambio como nosotras queremos. Sí se va a lograr, porque veo que muchas mujeres se estan organizando, nosotras las invitamos también y así más fuerza vamos a tener, entre todas lo vamos a lograr.*" ("Hablan las mujeres Zapatistas: 8 de Marzo, día internacional de la mujer (Memoria, April 2001, p. 39.) ("We are going to achieve the change we want. Yes, we are going to achieve it because I see many women getting organized. We invited them and like this we are going to be stronger and all together we will succeed."

Situating reflections

As I re-read what I have just written, I realize it is not a history. It is my history. I have been a part of the movement as I have recounted it. I was one of the non-indigenous women elected to the plural commission. I discussed and briefed several senators and congressmen and women on the urgency of accepting the law. This account is part of myself in such a way that it should not be read as an 'objective' narrative. It was even difficult to gather the references. What for? It is my life, my personal experience, I lived through all of this. Do I need to prove it is true? My own movement, my errors, my dilemmas, my commitments, the issues I firmly believe in are part of it.

In accordance with recent theorizing, it is important to situate your knowledge. I feel that in everything I have written, there I am. No need to say it explicitly.

I have always had a great respect and admiration for the indigenous worlds of Mexico. I am not Indian, but I want to understand them deeply. I do not want to convince them of my own views, neither do I want to be one of them. I wish we could respect each other. But I know that to understand deeply where they stand and why they speak and think and act like they do is not easy. There are many barriers. The main one is the definition of indigenous cultures by hegemonic thought (political and economic) and the narratives derived from it. The feminist movement willy-nilly reproduces this hegemonic distortion. As to me, coming from the feminist movement, I have been seduced into an epistemological journey by the urge to initiate a "dialogic" conversation with this "other."

I wish to relate to them "...not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interactions, interlocking, understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations

of power" knowing that "subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other." (Pratt, 1992.)

In feminism's early days, I fared in parallel discourses: one concerning the indigenous world, another concerning my feminist practices. For a long time, both discourses did not touch each other. However, they gradually became connected. The intersections between them - those privileged moments of reinterpretation and insight - have been flashing through my mind. This is so, particularly since 1994, with the endearing appearance of an indigenous resistance nurtured by symbolic references to Mesoamerican traditions. And this resistance or guerrilla had an abundance of women militants, and they had a revolutionary women's law. It was like a dream come true.

During all my years as a leftist, I silenced my admiration for those elements of the 'indigenous ideological superstructure' that were deemed to disappear. But I was ambiguously tied to the left because I also firmly believed in social and structural justice too. Now, as a feminist and leftist, I can share my indigenous commitments within the indigenous women's movement. No need to clarify the subject of my interests.

The reference, indigenous woman did not exist a few years ago. Now it is the token of a collective subjectivity, of a social actor that has been created by the women themselves through their social (and may I say feminist?) practices. As a workshop leader and consultant to indigenous women from several ethnic groups of Mexico and sometimes from other countries of the Americas, I have witnessed their ties and their collective identification. They live and feel them. They feel they are a subject of rights easily detachable from us the "non-indigenous." (to borrow their term). It does not matter whether there is a theory to match with this or how contested it could be in academic circles.

My own crisscrossing (positioning) from activist to scholar, from feminism to indigenous struggles, has taught me that what we live in concrete practices has to be fed back into theory. And while theory gets re-visited, we act, period. It does not need to be fully coherent. And who is looking for rational linear coherence? We the scholars. Activists reassemble multiple and contradictory alliances, identities, commitments. Indigenous (Mesoamerican) 'coherence' - if it exists - has a very different constitution, is epistemologically 'other'.

Disencounters with the hegemonic feminist discourse

In her address - with other well known intellectuals - at a meeting in front of the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, where the Zapatistas were lodged while in the capital, Elena Poniatowska read a discourse that seems very pertinent for what I am trying to convey. She is renowned for espousing without fears all the social justice cases. She is a deep analyst of Mexican socio-political realities and she is also a writer who is committed to her art. Speaking of the unconscious manner in which the Mexican larger society misinterprets and distorts the indigenous worlds, she goes on to say that to learn about them: "there had been the short stories of Rosario Castellanos, the work of scholars like Alfredo Lopez Austin and Miguel León-Portilla, and the work of C. Lenkersdorf. And then she added: "Pasmados, les hicimos caso a medias." ("Struck by what they said, we only took them half seriously.") (Perfil de la Jornada, March 13, 2001, p. II). She who speaks here is a woman who has been specially supportive with all of the social justice issues in Mexico. She has written eloquently criticizing all sorts of oppressions. And she confesses her lack of attention! It is a very different sort of consciousness to align oneself with the poor and dispossessed

indigenous and another to delve into their own worldview, understand their construction of self and others, their way of perceiving the body and reproduction. It is a very different sort of understanding to be able to respect and understand their symbolic references connected to daily and religious life. These are two moments of involvement and two levels of understanding. You can have one without the other. Often women working with indigenous women can be placed somewhere in a continuum between paying attention only to material injustices and class oppressions, and on the other hand, striving to

understand the symbolic, religious, cosmological universe where those women have a place and where they live. If you do not do the latter, you risk acting as 'neo-colonialist' or intrusive. You start pushing for a change without respecting their own process of change. You need to change them to adapt them to your own conceptions of what freedom, justice and rights are.

I will review here some of the instances of the above mentioned that I have witnessed - and perhaps collaborated unwillingly with - in the relation between feminists and indigenous women activists.

Parity or Equality?

Inheritors of a philosophical ancestry where women and men are conceived as inseparable pair, indigenous women often claim la paridad. "Queremos caminar parejo hombres y mujeres," said an old wise woman. (Palomo 2000, p. 450). In their own search for the expression that suits their cosmological background they settled on la paridad: parity. "Queremos caminar a la par que ellos" or "aprendiendo a caminar juntos". Learning to walk together.

When feminist groups arrived in Chiapas after the EZLN irrupted on the national scene, the indigenous women were hearing consistently the term equality. Equality as demanded by those helpful women that came to support their process, did not make sense to them. Within the Mesoamerican cosmovision, there is

nowhere a concept of equality. The whole cosmos is conceived of elements that balance against each other - through their differences - and thus create an equilibrium (Lopez Austin 1984). This balance was permanently shifting (Marcos 1998.) Equality rang like a static issue. Something that did not move. Likewise, we are not equal. No two beings are equal. With the concept of duality (Marcos 1998; Lopez Austin 1984) anchored into their daily lives and rituals, equality did not make sense. Until today, those of us closely related to the indigenous movement have understood that *caminar parejo* is the metaphor they grasp and work with towards a just relationship with their men. Lenkersdorf (1999) mentions that "*estamos parejos*" means "*somos colectividad*," we are a collectivity.

I still remember that one of my feminist friends, a very committed participant in dialogues with indigenous women, asked me a bit surprised "...you are agreeing with me in the use of the word *paridad*? OK, then we can work together." She was letting me know all the dissensions she had had within her feminist allegiances. Finally, demanding parity between men and women, demanding "to walk together, side by side, men and women" is taking the indigenous women far in the defense of their rights as women!

"Sigamos en la lucha hombres y mujeres. Vamos juntos, de la mano-- Aqui no podemos tener una postura feminista radical. Nuestra realidad indigena es otra." (Perez Diaz 2001, p.6.) "Let's continue our struggle men and women together. We go hand in hand. Here we can not have a radical feminist position. Our indigenous reality is other."

Tomasa Sandoval, a Purepecha from the State of Michoacan, adds a practical edge to it when she explains "...no nos favorece mucho hacer foros sólo de mujeres, porque cuando escuchan nuestra voz, se van reeducando." ("... it does us no favor to congregate only among women, because when the men hear our voices, they begin to be reeducated.")

Our Mother Earth

Frequently, we hear the indigenous peoples' demand on their land, their earth, their territories. It seems that this demand is the central claim of all the indigenous peoples the world over.. "The survival of native peoples is inextricably linked to land" (in Smith, A. "Native Health and Sovereignty Symposium", Political Environments,n6,Fall 1998).

But what does demands on earth and of land mean? When we work with indigenous women, there are

multiple meanings that can be read in their relationship to earth. The symbolism of earth ties women to it as incarnations of this mother they reproduce. Comandanta Esther, recently addressing Congress expressed it in the following way: "*Queremos que sea reconocida nuestra forma de respetar la tierra y de entender la vida, que es la naturaleza que somos parte de ella.*" ("We want our way of respecting earth and understanding life to be recognized; that is nature and we are part of it," see above.) In her idiosyncratic Spanish, a very complex concept of earth came through. First, earth is a persona. Some contemporary studies on "more than human" beings that inhabit the worldviews of the indigenous peoples in the Americas give background to this interpretation. (see Morrison 2000 and Appfel 2001)

At the National Congress of Indigenous Peoples in the city of Nurió, Michoacan, an indigenous woman spoke like this "*Todavía nuestro río, nuestro árbol, nuestra tierra, están como están. ..todavía están vivas.*" (Vera 2001, p. 4.) Earth is alive, we must respect her as we respect other beings.

In much of the Mesoamerican mythology, the earth appears as a sacred place. (Marcos 1995). She is a bountiful deity. It is also a place where danger and evil could befall the humans who inhabited it. Earth is also a slippery perilous place (Burckhart 1989.) It is conceived within the classic duality evil-good. As a supernatural being she could harm or benefit depending on your deeds.

Marcos, the EZLN poetic subcommander, expresses it this way:

"Y estos indígenas vienen a decir que la tierra es la madre, es la depositaria de la cultura, que ahí vive la historia y que ahí viven los muertos." ("These indigenous peoples come to say that this earth is the mother, she is the cultural matrix, in it lives history and in it live the dead.") (Marcos, Subcomandante 2001, p.30.)

The veneration that earth elicits from the indigenous women is seldom taken into consideration by activists. It is usually reduced to right to ownership of the land, or rights to inherit it. Translated as if it meant only a commodity. It is in today's world, where you can own a piece of land, that indigenous women want a piece of land or to inherit it. In a society that has deprived the indigenous populations of the right to collective ownership of it, it is understandable and indispensable. We must support their claims.

My query here is to develop a wider scope for interpreting the indigenous women's claims on earth. Earth for them is much more than a piece of land to exploit for agricultural or other purposes. Let's not translate their demands reducing them. I have seen this consistently in almost each workshop or meeting I have attended. The indigenous women demanding right to earth as a place of origins, as a sacred space, and this being translated as a mere claim to own a piece of land.

Interconnectedness of beings

In the words of Comandanta Esther, earth is life, is nature, and we are all part of it. This simple phrase refers to the interconnectedness of all beings in the Mesoamerican cosmos (Lopez Austin 1984), as difficult as this might be to understand. No beings are separated from the rest of beings. Everything is interconnected. This basic principle has been found consistently within indigenous medical systems (Lopez Austin, 1984b). It is also present in the first historical primary sources.

This creates also a very particular form of collectivity of humans. The collectivity is tied within in a very intense way. There is hardly any individuation (Klor de Alva 1988).

The world was not out there, established outside of and apart from them. It was within them and even "through" them. The I can not be abstracted from its surroundings. The permeability of the entire "material" world defines an order of existence characterized by continuous transit between the material and the immaterial, the inside and the outside (Marcos 1998.) This, of course, has a great impact on the gender perspective of the demands and how they are interpreted within indigenous communities.

According to Carlos Lenkersdorf (Millán 1998,) there is an intersubjective relationship with nature. "Our mother earth, the one that supports us and gives us sustenance is the first among the many things that fill up nature and that are included in the pronoun 'we'." Lopez Austin (1998 c) writes: "... there are many non-western elements, coherent, systematic, that are common within the large diversity of the indigenous peoples." Lenkersdorf interprets an expression of the Tojolabal language (a Mayan tongue of Chiapas): "*Lajan, lajan aytik*" that can mean "*estamos parejos*," meaning "we are all subjects." According to him, this expresses the "intersubjectivity" basic to Tojolabal culture⁴. This also brings us back to the preferred term of the indigenous women. Their insistence on parity (*caminar parejos, la paridad*) and not on 'equality' means that they are drawing from their common heritage alternative concepts for gender equity that fit better within their cosmovision.

A Criticism of "*mandar obedeciendo*": a feminist misunderstanding?

"Leading we obey" I have heard criticisms on this phrase that has become a classic in Zapatista discourse and practices. They come from dear feminist colleagues with whom I share a lot of commitments (Lagarde 2001.) But what does this phrase really mean? From which cultural influences was it coined? Carlos Lenkersdorf says that, of course, you should not say it was created by the Zapatistas. This phrase has been part of the common language expressions of the Tojolabal Mayan indians in Chiapas. It was part of the Tojolabal-Español-Tojolabal dictionary composed during the 1970-80 decade. And of course the phrase pre-dates this dictionary. According to Lenkersdorf, this phrase is an example of the way the Zapatistas incorporated Mayan expressions - especially ancient wisdom sayings of the Tojolabal group - into the national political debate.

But, to come back to the expression "*mandar obedeciendo*", (leading we obey) does it really imply that one commands over another, or that one subjects another, as its critics denounce? Lenkersdorf continues decoding the deep meaning of this phrase. (Cecena 1999.) The translation from the original phrase in the Mayan language is: "Our authorities receive orders." The collective communal "we" is the one that gives orders. This "we" is the ultimate authority. Another level of meaning is "...in the community it is we who control our authorities." Governing, in Tojolabal, means "work": those who govern are "those who work." Sometimes, the phrase changes slightly and it literally means: "...the authorities-workers of the community." Everyone has a function in this communitary "we." It is a horizontal collectivity but not everyone has the same function. Those who govern are not in a superior level to that of the governed. They work like everyone else. They are executors of the decisions of the communitary "we". There are presidents of the chapels, catequists, the municipal representatives. Everyone has her /his specific task, under the control of the communitary "we" which is the supreme authority.

Martha Sanchez, an ethnic Amuzga (from an indigenous group of the State of Oaxaca,) expresses a difficulty in her struggles for the rights of women: "*Lo difícil es que estamos ligadas a esa cuestión de la colectividad, de una organización, hasta de un pueblo y ¿como manejar estos temas?* (Cuadernos Feministas June 2001, p. 32.) (What is difficult is that we are linked to that issue of collectivity, of an organization, even of a village and to how to deal with the issues.)

As we see, the concept of *mandar* (command) is a totally different concept in these communities . This collective "we" as maximum authority may give the authority to some people to speak in its name. The problem, Lenkersdorf says, is that the (Mexican) dominant society, fully ignorant of the ways of the Mayans, mistakes these spokespersons for leaders. These are no leaders, they are only the spokespersons chosen by the communitary "we."

If the known spokespersons do not talk , it does not mean that the communitary "we" is silent. And we can think of examples. In the seven years since Zapatismo irrupted in the national scene, we have listened to different spokespersons. Ramona was for a certain period the one chosen. Ana Maria was

also visible for a time, then came Comandante Trini besides innumerable other women who appear and disappear of the public scene. Now we hear comandanta Fidelia, Yolanda. One would think that with the acceptance each of them has gathered, they should continue appearing, leading, directing. But this is not the origin of their presence. At Mexico's Congress, we heard two women that had not previously caught our attention: Comandanta Esther and María de Jesús Patricio. The communitary "we" elects its spokeswomen. Esther in her presentation in front of the legislators expressed it this way:

"Nosotros somos los comandantes, los que mandamos en común, los que mandamos obedeciendo a nuestros pueblos" (Perfil de la Jornada 2001) ("We are the commanders, those that command communally, those that command obeying our peoples.")

Thinking With Our Heart

If there is a word that is central in the indigenous women's demands it is corazón, 'heart'. The heart (teyolia according to Lopez Austin (1984a,)) is the see of the highest intellectual activities. Memory and reason reside in it. The heart is not a reference to feelings and love. It is the origins of life.

A classical ethnography of the highland Maya in Chiapas, *Perils of the Soul*, by Calixta Guiteras-Holmes (1961) is very clear on what the heart meant to the peoples of the region. The heart has all wisdom, is the seat of memory, and knowledge, "through it perception takes place." (Guiteras-Holmes 1961, p. 246-247.)

In the First National Indigenous Women's Congress in Oaxaca in 1997, the some five hundred indigneous women echoed each other: "*Grabar en nuestros corazones*", imprint in our hearts. They were keeping in this see of memory all what they were learning about their rights as women and as indigenous. Ramona wandered around and participated in each of the working groups. (Marcos Oct.-Dec. 1997.)

In 1995, Comandante Ramona had sent a message from the CCRI, Comandancia General del Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. "I am speaking to the Mexican people, to the women of Mexico, to everyone in our country." At the closing of her message, she said: "I want that all women arise and that they saw in their hearts the need to get organized to be able to construct the free and just Mexico we all dream." Evidently that the heart is the see of work and organization. Feelings and emotions only, do not do the organizing. (Ramona 1995). One of the main characteristics of the arts in Tojolabal, says Lenkersdorf (1996, p. 166) is that it "manifests that which the heart thinks." In this again the heart - and not the head - is referred to as the see of thinking.

Let's refer now to Comandanta Esther's address to our Camara de Diputados on March 28 2001. She said: "They (the legislators) have been able to open their space, their ears, and their hearts to a word that has reason on its side." The heart opens itself to reason. In many a feminist meeting, we could be missing the deep implications of the concept, "heart" when the women use it. It is the center of life for them, of reason, of memory. Let's not sentimentalize, colonize, or reduce the references to the heart in their discourse as merely emotional, however lovingly we might translate it. This could unvoluntarily lead us to ethnocentric interpretations. When they get together to organise themselves, they say: "*Se siente fuerte nuestro corazón*", "our heart feels strenghtened" (personal communication.)

The Meanings of Pregnancy and Childbirth

It is in this domain that more of the misinterpretations and fractures between the feminist discourse and the indigenous women's practices manifest themselves. I remember a friend who was complaining because indigenous women consider pregnancy an "illness." How can they think this?, she asked me shocked, pregnancy and childbirth are marvelous natural experiences.

Of course they are valued experiences, very valued in the indigenous women's experiences. Sometimes

we might consider them overvalued. But what is pregnancy for them? Pregnancy, in the studies of several experts in the Mayan area and in the wider Mesoamerican conceptions, is a state of precarity, of instability (Lopez Austin 1984). When an indigenous woman says "*estoy enferma*," it does not mean illness in our sense. It is a transitional phase before she arrives safely with her child in the other shore. Several field studies confirm this. The author of one of them, Laura Carlsen (1999, pp. 45-70) speaks of how secretive is, today, a childbirth for the contemporary Tzotzil Indians of San Juan Chamula Chiapas. It is a ritual full of codified and hidden meanings. It is out of limits for foreigners. It is a highly ritualized event, where many dangers could influence the outcome. In the neighboring township of Zinacantan, Evon Vogt (1969) has reported that the time and place of birth is a carefully kept secret because it is believed that the tonalli might leave the newly born body when subject to undesirable influences. A Zoque indigenous woman, Diana Damián, recently expressed her frustration at the well meaning feminists that were introducing indigenous women to the "reproductive rights" agenda. She told me that these women could not understand what pregnancy meant to them. "Of course, that we know, it is not an illness, but it is a difficult state, a state during which we must be very careful of the menaces to the delivery of the new being." She resented the incomprehension and at the same time the colonizing emphasis of "teaching" the indigenous women what pregnancy and childbirth should mean. The birth of a well balanced new member of the community is a very precious event. It is also a war women go to, like the ancient cihuateteo that became goddesses after dying in first childbirth (Marcos 1989.)

Looking over these few pervasive presences of meanings reproduced anew by the indigenous women of contemporary Mesoamerica, there is one that seems to be at the core: the interconnectedness of everyone and everything in the universe. The intersubjective nature of man and women interconnected with the earth, sky and with plants and planets. How else could we explain Marichuy's explanation that "there is no man and no woman, there is family." We could add that she is probably referring to a larger extended family: the community.

How else can we understand the defense of earth "that gives us life, that is nature that we are" of comandanta Esther facing the legislators? How else to interpret that "mandar obedeciendo" is not an imposition of one over another? That the "we" is also "I"? That communities, as collective subjects, reflect a unity ?

I am reluctant to end this remembrance of only some of the salient issues that crisscross my feminist practices as they are confronted to the indigenous worlds of women. Worlds that are permanently being re-configured, re-signified and re-created by these women. I have only sketched some of the dilemmas and some of the obstacles. I have tried to build a bridge of understanding beyond colonialist practices and ethnocentric perceptions.

The task lies ahead, while we - the feminists - and they - the indigenous women - struggle together to be "intersubjective" and interconnected. Probably the best chance we have of re-creating together "*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*" (a world where many worlds can fit) and our worlds as women join "*a la par*" (in parity) the worlds of men.

"*Solo entre todas sabemos todo.*" "*...la lucha de las mujeres indigenas no esta peleada con la lucha de las mujeres feministas, va de la mano y va a la par porque hay temas que nos atraviesan las vida por ser mujeres*", said Martha Sanchez Nestor, from the Amuzgo group (Sanchez 2001, p. 31.)

NOTES

1 A definition of ethnic group included in the convention n. 169 of the ILO of United Nations establishes that "...indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those groups who have a

continuous history that originates from earlier stages to the presence of the invasion and colonization. Groups that develop in their territories or in a part of it, and consider themselves different to other sectors of the society that are now dominant. These groups are today subaltern sectors and they are decided to preserve, develop, and transmit to the future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity. These characteristics are fundamental to their existential continuity as peoples, in relationship with their own cultural, social institutional and legal systems." In "Movimientos étnicos y legislación internacional", Doc. UN, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1989/33/Add.3 paragraph 4, in Rincones de Coyoacán, n.5, Feb.-Marzo, 1994.)

2 It is not rare, visiting regions of Mexico previously considered non-indigenous, to find people that never before took up the 'indigenous' identity referring to themselves as indígenas. A healthy and understandable process of recovery of pride in self-identity is taking place in a country which had been plagued by a rampant racism that despised everything 'indian' as inferior.

3 *Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación del Congreso de la Unión* : This is a commission of legislative representatives, both senators and Congress people, elected to represent and take decisions in the name of the national government of Mexico in relation to the EZLN demands. The COCOPA law is a constitutional amendment previously negotiated, stated and accepted in the so-called Acuerdos de San Andrés subscribed by a delegation of Federal Government officials and a representation of EZLN. This constitutional amendment would recognize the rights and values of indigenous people within national boundaries. This includes rights to their cultural practices (usos y costumbres), to their citizenship in difference, to their territories and their resources. The law project is a call to transform our constitution so that it better reflect and include the plurality of peoples that constitute Mexico.

What happened to the "indigenous" law or Cocopa Law? In spite of massive support from many sectors of Mexican society and the support of most civil organizations, and the indigenous organizations, the Mexican legislators decided on a counterreform that castrated the law. It came through both chambers (senators and deputies) totally changed. The original law stipulated the rights of indigenous communities to their institutional and normative systems, to autonomy in their territories and in general positioned the indigenous peoples as subjects (collective) of rights. The new changes to the law patronized them and made them objects of paternalistic asistencialism. Needless to say, all the following months there were multiple (impugnaciones legales, materializadas en decenas de amparos y cientos de controversias constitucionales que esperan resolucio de la Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion) Many indigenous groups, like the Congreso Nacional Indigena, La Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indigenas, la Alianza de los Pueblos Indigenas, among many others made declarations and rallyes oposing the new law called the "ley Barttlet-Cevallos," referring to the last names of the two senators that directed the opposition. Even Don Samuel Ruiz - the emeritus bishop of San Cristobal - expressed outrage at the racist and discriminatory practices implied in the new law. (Perez Cardona Sept. 2001, p. 17.)

But the months of upheaval and protest have had results. On the 18th of February 2002, 168 legislators from a plurality of political parties (PRI, PT, PRD, Verde Ecologista), presented again a reform to the counterreform approved last August. Particularly notable was the absence of the PAN, the political party in power that sustains the president of Mexico: Vicente Fox. A plural constituency of civil society groups, intellectuals, and indigenous rights activists were congregated at the Camara de Diputados. Rigoberta Menchu addressed the plenun and assured them that it was an "oportunity both for indigenous peoples as well as for all Mexicans to return to the original Cocopa Law", to correct the error that was done last year passing a counterreform (La Jornada Feb. 19 2002, p. 6.)

4 For a revision of the influence of Tojolabal cosmovision on the Zapatista discourse, see Millán, Margara, "En otras palabras, otros mundos: la modernidad occidental puesta en cuestión", in Chiapas 6, Mexico: Era, 1998, pp. 213-220. She makes an excellent analysis of several of the Zapatista phrases

that have enticed the national and international imaginary, and how they are springing from a Tojolabal, Mayan cosmovision as it is reflected in the language studied by Carlos Lenkesdorf. Some of this phrases are "*mandar obedeciendo*", "*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*", "*todos tenemos corazón*", "*preguntando caminamos*".