

Zapatista Women Occupy Radio Station to Demand Respect for Women, End to Military Occupation

by Wendy Courtemanche

Amid an intensification of the military presence surrounding their communities, 8000 Zapatista women and their supporters gathered in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas on March 8 to celebrate International Women's Day. They traveled from the remote corners of the state, some braving a 12-hour journey through a region dominated by soldiers and military checkpoints, in order to make their voices heard.

Two hundred marchers peacefully occupied the government radio station in order to send out their message, calling for respect for women and an end to the military occupation of their communities, during a one-hour broadcast. An indigenous woman from the jungle explained to her radio listeners, "Many of us do not know how to read or write, and for this reason we have come so you all can listen to us. We want you all to know that we will not get accustomed to the militarization." The march culminated in the Plaza of the Cathedral, where the women included in their demands the liberation of the jailed UNAM students in Mexico City—students who have marched together with the Zapatistas in their common struggle for democracy.

In 1994 the Mayan people of Chiapas, Mexico said "Enough!" to 500 years of exploitation, poverty, and repression. The Mexican government's response to the Zapatista demand for justice and dignity has been to send tens of thousands of soldiers (one-third of the entire Mexican army) to the region, one of the poorest in Mexico. These soldiers, aided by police and paramilitaries, have created a climate of violence and intimidation, and are increasingly responsible for the destruction of forests and the contamination of lakes and rivers throughout the countryside. U.S. military assistance to Mexico, including training of soldiers in the infamous School of the Americas and sales of weapons and equipment, has risen dramatically during this same time period.

This "low intensity warfare" has a tremendous negative effect on the daily lives of indigenous women in Chiapas. Due to the Army's presence, which has brought drugs, prostitution, and threats of rape and harassment into their communities, women (and men) are often afraid to leave their villages. They are unable to gather firewood, tend



Mayan women have found their own ways of organizing to oppose '500 years of exploitation, poverty, and repression.'

their crops, bathe or wash clothes in the river, or leave to sell their weavings or to seek medical attention. Thousands, displaced by the violence, are living in inadequate, temporary shelters and suffer from high rates of physical and stress-related disorders. This region has the highest rate of infant mortality in Mexico, with 67% of the population suffering from malnutrition.

In the face of this harsh and repressive situation, women are taking a stand and speaking out. Traditionally one of the most marginalized sectors of society, indigenous women found in the Zapatista uprising "a spark, a waking call" which led them to see that they deserved respect as persons. They began to celebrate March 8 after the Zapatista uprising, and they have re-named it International Revolutionary Women's Day. Part of their inspiration has come from the Zapatista Revolutionary Law of Women, which promotes the right to participate in community decisions, to obtain education and health care, and to choose how many children they want to have. It also gives them the right to choose their marriage partner and to be free from physical abuse.

These are radical concepts for women who traditionally have been sold into mar-

riage before the age of 15, "like property" one of them says, and denied an education or a voice in their own futures. Now indigenous women are openly organizing themselves. They are major participants in protests against the military occupation, often as the front line in face-to-face confrontations with soldiers. They are forming cooperatives for their weavings and actively seeking ways to improve their economic situation. They now believe that they have the right to speak and be heard, and to participate in the construction of a just society for themselves and their children.

The Zapatista movement has become a stimulus for social change and democracy, both within Mexico and in other parts of the world. Their struggle, and especially the strength and determination of these Mayan women, has inspired many others to join together and say "Basta! Enough!" International support is extremely important for them in making their voices heard and their cause known. You can help by asking your legislators to support the current U.S. congressional initiatives promoting peace and human rights in Chiapas.

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Indigenous women in the Zapatista communities have been looking to break through traditional barriers to gender equality.

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For more information, contact the Cloud Forest Initiative website at <www.cloudforest-mexico.org> or call 651-592-4143 to request one of their newsletters.

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