

Peasants Identify their Feminine Perspective

Abundant natural resources, numerous immigrants, many municipalities, the richest cultural diversity in the country, a long historical tradition of struggle: this is Oaxaca. Located in the southern part of Mexico, it is one of the poorest states in the national territory. Its inhabitants, who have populated a rough geographical terrain and have confronted processes of domination for almost five centuries, are spread out over seven regions in more than 3,500 villages and some fifteen cities.

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In this predominantly rural context, peasant men and women have had to invent various forms of economic, social and cultural resistance in order to survive and build a less unjust future.

How have they done it? This is a long and complex history. This essay attempts to cover a recent incipient process: the independent organization of peasant women in Oaxaca.

Ten years ago, when there was still a debate about the stereotypes of "crazy feminists", "militant women in the political struggle" and "double duty militants", it was just about impossible to think about the existence of something that is common in today's world: the women's movement in Latin America.

Different factors have encouraged the development and growth of this movement: the deep economic, social and political crises that our countries have suf-

fered; the influence of the "developed world" and its support for women of poor nations; the permanent search for a better life and even for life itself.

This movement has organized women who are struggling to transform their society in distinct ways and on different fronts. These women come from different places in the social structure, have different political ideas and confront different living conditions both in the city and the countryside. The societies they live in are characterized to a great extent by social inequality based on class and also on gender.

There is no doubt that women have always participated in political, social, economic and cultural life. What are we referring to then, when we say that the participation of women has been modified or broadened? We are implying that political participation (of women and men) has been and is to this day based on relations of class as well as gender. Women have been excluded from participation in political leadership and in decision making processes for reasons of gender.

Peasant women form part of different organizations and also have a certain participation in them. Their voices, problems and proposals are heard through their sons, husbands and distant male relatives, especially in the rural-indigenous context. Their voices are heard from the framework of daily life -that is, outside of the formal and political institutions. L. Stephen reiterates this in saying that "in indigenous societies, women are used to operating in a generalized political sphere... their abilities are related to such factors as knowing how to listen, how to build consensus as well as using persuasive attitudes with the women closest to them....".

Thus, this concept which sounds so contradictory is what we are going to analyze. How can women be excluded and be participating at the same time? We will also examine changes which occur when women organize themselves in groups, committees and commissions.

Recent processes of organization of peasant women show that we must reconsider the meaning of "political". It is much more complex than traditionally thought, and is not limited to voting, being in political parties, etc. Women's participation is oriented to the transformation of society through many different actions.

"Political Women, Don't Associate with Them"

Few organizational experiences of Oaxacan peasant women have been

documented. But we know about some of these experiences due to the relative or absolute success that women have had in obtaining their demands and by the importance of women in the composition and in determining the objectives of peasant organizations. One example of this is the Isthmus Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students (COCEI) in the southern area of Juchitán and Tehuantepec, where the presence of Zapotec women has been decisive in attaining electoral triumphs.

We mentioned that the present crisis is an element that has influenced the formation of an important women's movement. In the Mexican countryside, however, participation of peasant women in different groups and struggles is not a new phenomenon. Invariably women have been the support for school committees, community stores and cooperatives, religious groups and festivity commissions in villages, etc.

What is new about women's present participation is the phenomenon that arises when groups and organizations begin a reflection about what it means to be a peasant woman. Here it is important to point out that not all groups have the same relation with state and federal governments. They neither conceive the need for change from the same viewpoint nor do they all call themselves by the same name.

The First Encounter of Peasant Women's Organizations was the first time indigenous peasant women in Oaxaca were called together to exchange points of view. Among other things it helped women identify and later discuss the urgent need to break the isolation of independent peasant groups and organizations (the isolation is due to the scarce or non-existent information that these groups have about each other).

"It's not a Bed of Roses"

After almost six months of preparation by women from three peasant organizations (the Upper Mixtec Region Cooperative, the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus and the Union of Yalaltepec Women) and with many problems and high expectations, the First Encounter of Women from Peasant Organizations of Oaxaca was held in April, 1988. One hundred and twenty indigenous peasant women from 40 different groups and independent organizations attended the encounter.

The first objective of "Exchanging experiences about participation and organization of women in peasant organizations..." was developed through general questions such as: "Why are we fighting?" and "What activities has our

Women's productive projects search for support. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagen-latina.





Rural conditions for women have not changed in many years. Photo from INAH Archive.

Women's participation is oriented to the transformation of society through multiple and varied actions

group carried out?" There were also discussions in seven round tables on the women's experiences in relation to the following themes:

- 1) food supplies and savings accounts;
- 2) corn mills and the production and sale of *totopos* (large corn patties);
- 3) farming projects (chicken farms, pig raising, honey and coffee production, vegetable gardens, etc.)
- 4) handicrafts;
- 5) health concerns;
- 6) problems concerning municipal governments;
- 7) advisors who work with peasants.

Participants talked about common problems and needs such as the presence of local bosses (*caciques*), the lack of markets for their goods and the high prices of raw materials, the scarcity or complete lack of institutional support and the political conditioning imposed in order to obtain credits (for instance, if one is not a member of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party). Other issues

discussed included lack of training for working and administering their projects, scarce economic resources for their activities, the high cost of living and the general lack of resources such as medicines, doctors, education, transportation, etc., and the confrontation with corrupt officials.

Some of the round tables were held in two or even three different languages since half of the participants were indigenous women and the organizers stated "that no one should be left without voice". This promoted a profound discussion on the second day about the second theme-objective of the event: "the problems we confront as organized women".

Though the different problems of the peasant women are intertwined, we can group them under three main headings: those that are tied in with their families, those that refer to their organization and those that are relative to their community and region.

a) In relation to the family.

The most common problem is that of the husbands, fathers and even male relatives such as brothers, grandfathers and uncles who do not let the women participate or who do not like the women to do this. Their principal arguments are that women have obligations at home and that when women leave the home, "who knows if they're going to go with another man (for the married women) or "they're going to loose their virginity out there" (for single women).

Males constitute the principal obstacle for organization since without their "permission" it is almost impossible for women to unite. The peasant women stated that it is difficult to convince the men because they normally consider that "we aren't worth anything" or that "we have no right to an opinion." However, the women also said that once they were organized, the men eventually recognized the benefits of their struggles, since normally the women's demands are directed to satisfying family or community needs.

The women also discussed problems they have in organizing themselves because they are responsible for child care, household chores and certain farming, handicraft and commercial jobs.

The majority of the women were clear about the need for changes in this area by "convincing husbands and fathers" to join the struggle and to help with the housework and child care. On the other hand a small minority stated that although

"the men don't like it" women should organize themselves and confront the family problems that this may bring about.

b) In Relation to Organizations

Different problems were analyzed in relation to organizations involving peasant women. Women in mixed organizations discussed such thorns as "in the meetings the men don't listen to us", "we don't have an education", and "we're afraid to speak". They centered on the lack of experience in political participation and also on the problem that women's points of view have little weight in internal decision making in these mixed groups.

However, when the women narrated their experiences one could frequently hear "but we're tougher and bolder than men" and "we're more responsible in the commissions".

In groups made up exclusively by women, participants referred to gossip, "envies" and to lack of understanding and/or solidarity among friends. They also talked about the conflicts that sometimes arise among women leaders and the masses. Another common problem the participants mentioned was the fact that sometimes there are persons —men and women —who have individual interests and not community ones.

Solutions put forward included the need to learn more and have more training. Another solution was that of women demonstrating that they too are capable of working on initiatives and organizational proposals and are capable of fighting.

c) In Relation to Community and Region.

The difficulties most mentioned in this category are similar to those discussed above but are specifically related to the different conceptions and practices concerning the woman's place in the community and in groups. These vary according to ethnic group, region, age, and legal status of the participants.

For some women the principal problem is related to their lack of participation in community assemblies. Other women thought it was absurd to think they had to participate in such meetings. Some stated that the males in their villages treated women with a lot of respect while others said that this was not their experience.

Finally the women talked about the differences when local authorities (presidents, municipal officials, etc.) were or were not in agreement with women's groups, their activities and their ideas. They also commented on having to con-

front internal community divisions due to religious reasons.

After two tiring days of work (the majority of the women were not used to sitting for so long to talk and exchange ideas ("because we usually only sit when our work forces us to sit down, for example when we remove the grain from the corn cobs"), the women worked on conclusions and agreements for future organization.

The women agreed that they must have regional coordination to continue the process of educational exchange among peasant women's groups. They must have meetings to discuss which demands are the most important ones, what are the possible common solutions, and to look for sources of financing for their projects. They must have training in politics and administration. The groups must be strengthened by inviting more women to join them. Finally the women must talk with people in their community and organization about the encounter.

But, who are these organized peasant women and what happens to them when they return to their communities? What happens to these women who have decided that "we have the right to defend ourselves and demand our rights?"

"We who have fought so much..."

The majority of women came from different groups or organizations with different activities:

1) In the Isthmus area, women who embroider huipiles (blouses), those who make totopos (a corn food), those who have farms and vegetable gardens and those who struggle to have honest authorities and representatives;

2) In the Mixtec area, women fight for better food in their communities and have food cooperatives as well as community corn mills, while others continuously confront corrupt organizations and fight with local leaders who destroy community forests.

3) In the Cañada area women work in fruit production while others organize saving accounts.

4) In the Coastal area, women are beginning to organize community stores and have begun to "realize the value" of the indigenous woman.

5) In the Southern Mountain area, women work in community health and are learning "analysis of reality" to organize their villages around different issues.

6) In the Mountain area, women work with handicraft groups and participate in municipal struggles.

In the Mexican countryside, peasant women have been the support for school committees, community stores and cooperatives, religious groups and festivity commissions in villages

The most common problem is that of the husbands, fathers and even male relatives who do not let women participate

7) In the Central Valleys, young people work in health projects.

8) In Tuxtepec, women continue their struggle to obtain basic foodstuffs and work in farming cooperatives.

Almost all are indigenous peasant women, predominantly adults with married sons and daughters and some single son and daughters, who have decided to confront their problems collectively. This is due to the worsening crisis and to increasing deterioration in food consumption. There is a rise of malnutrition and a general fall in the standard of living.

Not all participants of the Encounter have continued in the movement. Of all the groups and organizations present in the first meeting, one third are no longer in contact. However, new women and groups have joined the movement. A year and a half after the first Encounter we can see two principal successes. One has been the maintaining of at least a minimum coordination among the majority of the participants. The other has been a type of organizational process which the women call "becoming aware" and "learning" by continuing to meet together to discuss various themes.

"We Want to Understand Our Rights"

In the meeting entitled "Workshop on Human Rights and Women's Rights", held

in July, 1989, participants discussed the question: "What does it mean to be a woman?" The majority of peasant women have never had an opportunity to reflect on this, even though they have participated for a number of years in women's groups (for example, in groups running community corn mills). We heard the following questions:

"Why is there always a problem when a female is born? When a woman is born she doesn't deserve the celebration that includes the feast of the hen. On the other hand the male is always given his worth from the time of his birth. What do we do wrong?" (In the Mixtec region a hen is slaughtered for festivities when a male is born in a peasant family.)

"Being a women means having children", "it means we have no right to own property", "it means doing household chores", "it means being a servant", "it means contending with everything in daily life to survive".

The diversity of replies shows what daily life means for peasant women from a certain region. It tells about the space they occupy as well as their work and role in the family and community. Forty women from ages 13 to 60 from 11 villages near the place of the meeting (Tlaxiaco) joined the workshop.

They went to "learn about our worth as women", "to not be slaves", "to understand ourselves", and "to listen to advice and see our errors and correct them". In other words, these women wanted arms with which to fight and get ahead, "even though we are women".

Other regional encounters and workshops held since that first Encounter have gained space for women little by little. There has been coordination of women's peasant groups on community and regional levels. Women have had the chance to find a space for discussion and learning where they have gotten to know each other as well as their work experiences, their rights and future possibilities.

Moreover, a minority of women have begun to untie the contradiction that we mentioned in the beginning: to be excluded and yet to participate at the same time. This means that they have begun to occupy places that previously were forbidden to women (for example, in certain commissions of the organizations).

They have begun to influence the decision making process that rules their lives, their families, their communities and their organizations.

The groups defend their "independent" character, not only because they are not working within Government structures or

As in the very Revolution.
Photo from INAH Archive





Women participate in productive processes. What about in politics? Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina.

with the official party—the PRI— but because in one way or another they are clear about "not being a part of those who harm and oppress us".

Conclusions

In the organization of peasant women, one of the fundamental characteristics is that their participation is not only a concern on a personal level but is also related to their families and their communities. When they attend a meeting or encounter or are acting as negotiators we can talk about a political event in the sense that we originally mentioned in the beginning of this paper.

In this sense I agree with the idea of L. Arizpe and C. Botey in their article about

peasant women and agrarian reform in Mexico. They mention three roles of rural women in light of the agrarian crisis. They talk about the peasant female as: a) a member of a peasant family, b) a worker and c) a woman. One of the things that this experience has shown us is that organized peasant women are becoming more and more conscious of this triple role.

There are differences in the demands of the communities and organizations where the women work because everything depends on the specific context of each group. The different forms of struggle are related to the different groups that they have to confront and participate in. These include school committees, leadership of cooperatives, women's commissions of organizations. Here the women have been in a relationship of subordination because of gender.

However, one important characteristic of the recent process of coordination and organization, is the opening of new spaces of learning and struggle for peasant women. This has permitted them to forge paths previously unknown, where they can begin to claim a new place as women.

In this sense we can conclude that the tactics used by the independent peasant women of Oaxaca tell us of a long and complex process of organization. Little by little women have made their presence felt. Though this is still an incipient process it is nonetheless significant. In other words, without going against the patriarchal system that oppresses them, women have participated in groups that are working on immediate survival needs. They are working in spaces that do not openly confront the system since generally these are spaces that are socially and culturally "acceptable" or "tolerable". At the same time, women have begun a process of consciousness raising about their condition as women.

In this sense, the organized peasant women are not only presenting their demands of class but are also identifying the way in which the relations of gender are structured. Tactics vary and are not based on continuous confrontation with men. This would be going against their very culture.

Women peasants are fighting for their demands and also for those of men (which are those of the communities and/or the organizations) and they are doing this even when men "don't let them". ■