

# Mazahuan Women Members of the Zapatista Movement for the Defence of Water

## A Testimony

VERÓNICA VÁZQUEZ GARCÍA AND DIANA LAHOZ GÓMEZ

*Cet essai explore les complications inhérentes au travail de recherche universitaire alors qu'on étudie une communauté locale. L'auteure remarque que les enquêtes sur le terrain et la recherche universitaire sont connexes et que les deux côtés sont affectés.. L'auteure ajoute que celles qui s'engagent dans ces enquêtes dans le Tiers-monde en travaillant chez elles s'engagent dans un travail transnational*

*Este artículo analiza la lucha de mujeres Mazahuas en contra de la privatización del agua. Dichas mujeres viven en la región que abastece de agua a la ciudad de México pero carecen de ella. El artículo resalta los factores de etnia, clase, género y región que determinan el acceso al agua.*

If the twentieth century has been defined by social historians as the fight for land, the twenty-first century could end up being defined as the fight for water (Barlow and Clarke). According to a recent United Nations report, international conflicts that we have witnessed recently related to oil could be overshadowed by a future fight for water (Wong-Gonzales). However, the conflicts arising from a lack of water are both international (due to the flow of water crossing borders) and domestic issues.

In Mexico, it is common for rural and/or Indigenous areas to provide

water to cities, making this a possible source of conflict (Peña; Paré and Robles). In 2004, Mazahuan women formed the Women's Zapatista Movement for the Defence of Water (EZMDA). The organization's main objective was stopping the pillage and deterioration of the River Balsas' Basin, since it is the source of 21 percent of the total water feeding Mexico City. Mexico City is a typical example of (negative) development. The urban sprawl that began taking place in the mid-twentieth century brought with it many problems, one of which is the creation of water reserves for human and industrial use. Currently, the city depends on its own reserves for 70 percent of fresh water; with an extraction rate that is 50 percent to 80 percent faster than the regeneration rate. The other third of the water is brought from up to a height of 2300 metres above sea level from the Lerma (nine percent) and Cutzamala (20.9 percent) systems (are these rivers? (Jacobo and Saborio). Water has been brought into Mexico City from the Lerma system since 1951, however, it was not until 1971 that the river began to be a source of water consumption (for humans?). In the 1980s, water consumption was divided equally between Mexico City and the local area. This extraction of water has progressively caused the drying

up of the basin, and the sinking of Mexico City (Vargas).

A second source of water is found in the basin of the River Balsas that forms part of the Cutzamala<sup>1</sup> system that came into function in 1982. The project consists of three finished phases, with a fourth one to be implemented to meet the increasing daily demand. Some 19,000 litres per second are extracted, travelling 170 kilometres (Fernandez). There are seven affected municipalities: *Temascaltepec, Villa Victoria, Villa de Allende, Valle de Bravo, Donato Guerra, Ixtapan del Oro y Santo Tomás de los Plátanos*, much of this area is populated by Indigenous Mahuazan people (see map). Water extraction from the River Balsas had contaminated streams; destroyed flora and fauna; caused the flooding agricultural lands due to the inadequate use of hydro-electrical projects; significantly decreased the flow of spring water; resulted in deforestation, soil contamination, and erosion. Moreover, some lands have been expropriated by the government in order to carry out a number of other water projects, and others have been taken by powerful landowners. Within the affected region, internal migration, low agricultural productivity, and lack of drinking water have become serious issues. This is the arena in which EZMDA performs its work.

## The Women's Zapatista Movement for the Defence of Water

Mazahuan women, like women from many other parts of the world, face gender discrimination. Maria Cruz Paz, of EZMDA states that “Our governments have never paid attention to us. I don't know if it is because we are poor, or Indigenous, or because we are ... women” (qtd. in Jarquin). Mazahuan women are responsible for the preparation of meals, laundry, cleaning care for and feeding of livestock, and dividing drinking water from bathing water, which has to be gathered and stored. As Iris Crisostomo states, “We are the ones that go out to wash and to gather and carry water” (qtd. in González 2004a). Rosalia Crisostomo concurs: “We are the ones that wash, and at the same time, the ones, along with our children, that carry the water” (qtd. in González 2004a).

Some women walk back and forth for over two hours to gather and store water (González 2004b). Catalina Marin and Ofelia Lorenzo wash their clothes in the same pond, and on their way home carry (by donkey) two containers with 25 liters of water in each to make the family's daily meals. Those that do not have access to a donkey place a plank across their shoulders with a container of water at each end (Fernandez). Women can walk up to four kilometers to find water:

...Having water nearby is of no use. It is of no use to see the dam nearby our homes as we still have to walk four kilometers with our buckets in one hand, the child on our backs, and the laundry in the other (Maria Cruz Paz qtd. in Jarquin).

This situation motivated Mazahuan women to take action and organize themselves in order to draw public attention to the ongoing water problems. In September 2004, approximately 30 women protested





Previous and above: Demonstrations by Mazahua women members of the Zapatista Movement for the Defence of Water

at an armed camp in *Villa de Al-lende*. It was shortly afterwards that approximately 60 women founded EZMDA and protested at the water purifying plant at *Los Berros*, threatening to stop the flow of water to Mexico City.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the Mazahua women identified themselves with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) (Zapatista National Liberation Army) demonstrates that this group was influential with respect to the demands made by Indigenous people. The words of Iris Crisantomio express this sentiment: “We fight like Emiliano Zapata, for our lands, and also for our dignity” (qtd. in González 2004a). The taking of the water purifying plant by the Mazahuas had effect. The threat of stopping the flow of water to a city of over 20 million people successfully opened negotiations. In October 2004 bargaining began with the National Water Commission (CONAGUA). The demands made by the women were the reparation of damages, the return of appropriated lands, access to water availability, and an integral devel-

opment plan for the region. CONAGUA accepted to provide water to affected communities, as well as pay for damages caused by the Cutzamala system. CONAGUA assumed the responsibility for building public washrooms and waterpools to hold rainwater, potable water in the households, vegetable growers and chicken camps, and the rehabilitation of local systems of irrigation.

Two years later, in 2006, María Cruz Paz and Beatriz Flores, both members of the EZMDA, ensured that international steps were taken “in order to demand our rights” since the “Mexican government ... has lied to us in the past ... [and] it did not uphold its promises” (qtd. in Poy). The case of the Cutzamala system reached the Latin American Tribunal for Water, which in March 2006 declared that the re-routing of water to Mexico City was not a viable option because it infringed upon the rights of the Mazahua people by putting them at risk of losing control of the territory and its natural resources, as well as going against its cultural values. The tribunal recommended that the last phase of the

project at the Cutzamala system be cancelled, that the Mazahua people share in the revenues that come from providing water to Mexico City in order to compensate for the environmental degradation that the project has caused.

On December 2006, Mazahua women once again protested at the plant at *Los Berros* because the commitments made by the federal government in October 2004 had not been met. CONAGUA, on other hand, said that it had “perfectly” fulfilled the commitments made, which according to them amounted to a cost of 44 million pesos, which included payments to the people affected by the 2003 floods, and the building of 733 ecological dry washrooms and rehabilitated roads (Pérez).

The last chapter of this story is yet to be written. As long as the privatization of water keeps occurring in rural and /or Indigenous areas, and (bad) development practices keep dominating and negatively affecting the livelihood of the people that depend on those resources, women, who are among the most affected in the process of displacement will

continue to mobilize every time the full glass of water that they do not have overflows in the cities.

*Verónica Vázquez García is a Professor in Rural Development at the Colegio de Postgraduados en Ciencias Agrícolas, Texcoco, México.*

*Diana Laboz Gómez is a Master's student in Rural Development at the Colegio de Postgraduados en Ciencias Agrícolas.*

<sup>1</sup>The Cutzamala System is a Hydraulic system that has as its main goal the channeling of water to Mexico City. Planned along different phases, this project sends on average 256.7 cubic million liters of water to Mexico City each year.

<sup>2</sup>Fourteen years after the armed movement surprised the country on January 1, 1994, the Zapatista movement has established itself through negotiation, legislative processes, and now through peaceful resistance instead of armed conflict. The war between the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and the Mexican army lasted three weeks. The people that took the streets in protest against military intervention resulted in stopping their advance within the conflict area. The movement continued a war marked by its low intensity due to the overt presence of the police and army in rebel communities. The most brutal manifestation of the low intensity war was the massacre at Actel in December 1997, where 45 Indigenous people died at the hands of paramilitaries. However, and in spite of all the killings that have taken place, it cannot be said that a war similar to those in Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s and currently in Colombia took place. Due to the EZLN's lack of interests in taking-up arms and attempt control of the estate apparatus, some analysts (among them Carlos Fuentes) have called the EZLN "the first postmodern army of the twenty-first century." In the strictest sense, the EZLN

is not an army, or at least it has not fought an enduring war; the same can be said for the EMDZA. The demands from women within the Zapatista movement were the first to be recognized within a larger framework of Indigenous rights such as territorial autonomy (which implies political and administrative control of natural resources), and recognizing Indigenous ways of creating and carrying out justice. The Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law during the 1990s, promulgated by its leaders, was the first to raise awareness of the exigencies of women within their own community, culturally distinct from the rest of Mexican society, and, more importantly, it provides them with a voice of their own (see Lovera and Palomo; Rojas).

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