

*La Vocera and the Struggle for Liberation:
Indigenous Women Heard in Theory, Not in Practice*

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Abstract: In 2014, Mexican voters approved a ballot for electoral reform that allowed independent candidates to run for office for the first time in the nation's 204-year history. The only prerequisite for the presidential ballot was to gain the political backing of 1% of the country's eligible voters by collecting the signatures of roughly 865,000 people eligible to vote. The *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* had long refused to engage in institutional politics, but the electoral reform presented an opportunity to reveal systemic inequities and disenfranchisement in rural communities while breaking colonial gender norms, challenging the long-standing notion of what a woman's place should be in the political sphere. However, doing so risked legitimizing the colonial government, endangering organization members, and wasting resources. They created the *Congreso Nacional Indígena* to further explore the possibility of nominating a figurehead for the presidential ballot. During such discussion, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, a traditional Nahuatl healer from Southern Jalisco, emerged as a key figure. This case examines the possible implications of a female nomination from a movement that avoids labeling itself a feminist cause, instead incorporating principles of Indigenous gender complementarity, inherently different from the strict Western binary.

Introduction: Existence, Resistance and Reform

While there is a long history of Indigenous resistance in Mexico, the Zapatista uprising of 1994 spotlighted Indigenous human rights on the international stage. After exposing the inherent contradictions between the Mexican constitution and treatment of Indigenous communities, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN entered negotiations with Mexico's government, but the state's dismissal of Zapatista demands resulted in the EZLN's renouncement of institutional politics. There was no place for them in the national government, so they created their own regional systems called *Juntos de Buen Gobierno* (Good Governance Councils) (Honig-Parnass 2019, p. 9).

The exclusion of minority groups, not just Indigenous groups, was apparent in the system of presidential nominations, as political parties held a monopoly on candidate registration (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación 2014, p. 18). If a person's ideals didn't align with that of the centrist *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), right leaning *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party) or left leaning *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (Party of the Democratic Revolution), they could not propose a candidate that aligned with their ideals. While this system disenfranchised voters throughout Mexico, it especially impacted Indigenous people whose oppression is institutionalized by the very parties in power, reinforcing Zapatista refusal to participate in an unjust system.

This practice continued for decades but was called into question in 2014, as Mexican voters approved a referendum on electoral reform (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación 2014, p. 18). The most significant revision was an end to party monopolization on presidential nominees. Independent candidates could run so long as they completed the four stages required by the *Instituto Nacional Electoral*, INE (National Electorate Institute). In the first and second stages, the INE issued a call to the prospective independent candidates to complete the required application and documentation before they were considered. Thirdly, the applicant needed to secure the backing of at least 1% of registered voters, which at the time was 866,593 signatures. Notably, they were not allowed to spread propaganda or campaign materials on radio or TV and needed to rely on assemblies, protests, and other forms of public meetings. Finally, the prospective candidate had to present their request for registration to the INE which would recognize them as an independent candidate on the official presidential ballot if their requirements were verified (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación 2014, p. 18).

For the first time, the Zapatistas had the opportunity to put forth a candidate that embodied their values, but would doing so contradict decades of autonomous governance? As the Zapatistas faced an internal struggle to re-engage with institutional politics, there was simultaneous discourse regarding women's roles in the Zapatista Movement. The Zapatista's goal was liberation, yet problems that specifically impact women tended to be overlooked in the greater fight for equality (Miller 2021, n.p.) Women play an integral part in the Zapatista cause, and many have dedicated themselves to the movement. As the EZLN grappled with this internal struggle, they took note of one woman stood out for her devotion and integrity: María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, warmly known as Marichuy. Born on December 23, 1963, in Tuxpan, Jalisco in a poverty-stricken, Indigenous Nahua community, Marichuy saw the important role women and traditional medicine played in her community (Guillén 2017, n.p.).¹ The EZLN recognized Marichuy as a healer, and Mexico needed healing.

Indigenous Oppression

Like the rest of the Americas, what is now the modern nation-state of Mexico was first inhabited by Indigenous groups. This changed with European colonization under Spanish rule, beginning in the early sixteenth century, during which disease, violent conflict, and exploitation decimated Indigenous populations (Ragsdale et al 2019, p. 501). Post-independence, circa 1810, Indigenous people continued to face discrimination and abuse as the colonial systems of White, wealthy elites continued, although the aristocratic elite were born in Mexico rather than the Spanish motherland. Today, a majority of Mexico's population are *Mestizos*, individuals of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry.

Although estimates generally put the *Mestizo* population of Mexico around 60%, data ranges from between 40% and 90% (Griffin and Cline 2025, n.p.; Salazar-Flores et al. 2010, p. 401). The classification is not one strictly tied to race or ethnicity as many Mexicans who have mixed ancestry may phenotypically present as either White or Indigenous, leading them to associate with their salient identity rather than as mixed race. While many assume the concept of *Mestizaje* embraces Indigenous heritage through recognition, it is rooted in colonialism and tied to Indigenous erasure. Post Mexican independence in the nineteenth century, *Mestizaje* formed as “the formation of the “civic nation-state”—made up of a territory, a population, and republican

¹ In 1987 Marichuy's mother lost mobility from the waist down. After three years of ineffective, specialized treatment, they turned to traditional healers. After three months, she could walk again. Marichuy then dedicated her life to protecting and teaching traditional herbal medicine and founded the Calli Techolhuacateca Tochan Health House to help sick community members in 1995.

state institutions—and the formation of the "ethnic nation-state," that is, the national identity-based community” emerged (Gall 2021, n.p.). Since this identity was based on mixed ancestry, the narrative was characterized as non-racist, but in reality, it aimed to erase Indigenous peoples in favor of a homogenous Mexican identity.

On one hand, the Mexican population’s embrace of Indigenous identity demonstrates a tie to the country’s pre-Columbian past and legitimizes land claims. However, Indigenous people who retain their original beliefs and customs are similarly characterized as a thing of the past, simply an aspect of *Mestizaje* as opposed to having their own unique cultural value (Gall 2021, n.p.). This notion of Indigenous people as historic has translated into cultural dissonance within contemporary Mexican society. In national folklore, Indigenous people are revered founders of the country, but in the present, they are deemed uncivilized, with negative portrayals of their moral and mental condition, and a consistent association with low socio-economic status. From not only a cultural, but governmental perspective, the permanence of Indigenous communities were seen as, “a factor of backwardness” so it was “vitaly important to transform this segment of the population into citizen-individuals through education, the transformation of their economic base (communal property), and interbreeding with European migration” (Gall 2021, n.p.). Even in efforts to establish a united cultural identity, Indigenous people in Mexico have been intentionally disregarded and their population consistently underreported.

Indigenous Conceptions of Gender

Prior to colonial contact, many Indigenous societies practiced a more nuanced form of gender differentiation, recognizing a system of complementarity that viewed gender as a spectrum, at times including third genders. For example, in the Andean highlands, the Kichwa people practice complementary duality, known as *Yanantin* (Pillalaza 2022, n.p.). To understand this duality is to understand the existence of two equal energies, male and female, which naturally coexist not only in humans, but in all entities with energy including animals, plants and mountains. They also recognize a third gender, *kari-warmi*, and acknowledge that gender and associated gender roles are not cleanly separated (Pillalaza 2022, n.p.). Although the Kichwa’s practices are not applicable to all Indigenous communities, they are an example of how Indigenous conceptualizations of gender are radically different from the traditional Western binary of male and female. While this specific Indigenous community resides in Bolivia, similar concepts are present in Mexico’s Indigenous communities and found throughout the teachings of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*. For example, Zapatistas have adopted terms like “*otroa* (other), *ciudadonas* (citizens) and *niñoa* (children)” in their speeches and documents to “recognize, remake and decenter (explode) conventional gender identities” (Marcos 2021, n.p.). This is a break from traditional Spanish where each word is gendered as either feminine or masculine, conforming to a strict two gender worldview. Through language change, Zapatistas “conceived [gender] as the fluidity between opposites as complementary, asymmetric, mobile and mutually constitutive” (Marcos 2021, n.p.). The deconstruction of the gender binary in everyday life is a common theme that extends into the political sphere.

Systems of complementarity shifted towards the modern patriarchy through contact zones where Indigenous cultures encountered colonial ideas that produced “specific forms of discrimination along racial, ethnic, and gendered lines” (Villagrana et al. 2023, p. 707). Systems such as Catholic missions and *haciendas* (plantations) were “spaces of imperial intervention that brought social, cultural and structural change on unequal terms” (Villagrana et al. 2023, p. 707). This was a result of societal disruption in Indigenous Latin America because of invasion, trade,

and migration that led to the modern nation-state of Mexico. As governments became more centralized, “a new ‘public’ sphere emerged, along with its counterpart, the private space of ‘proper womanhood’ which became attached to connotations of inferiority” (Villagrana et al. 2023, p. 708). Thus, the modern state is one where women, *Mestiza* and Indigenous alike, are devalued. While there are attempts on behalf of Indigenous organizations to resist the coloniality of gender, the case of Maria de Jesus Patricio Martinez, calls into question the success of such practices.

Establishment of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

As a result of centuries of oppression, Indigenous peoples from Chiapas founded the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* in 1983. The roots of the EZLN are in Indigenous organizing and Catholic liberation theology, the belief that religious faith should be practiced, not simply taught, by aiding the poor and oppressed through involvement in political affairs as well as resisting socioeconomic structures that cause social inequities (Britannica 1998, n.p). Consequently, the group is dedicated to protecting Indigenous ways of life and resisting capitalist regimes by building a non-hierarchical, horizontal political and social system, which has included militant action (Honig-Parnass 2019, p. 3).

On January 1, 1994, several thousand Indigenous people organized as the EZLN took up arms and seized control of government offices and occupied thousands of acres of private land, taking control of San Cristobal de las Casas, a major town in Chiapas. During this time, Indigenous communities across the country joined the rebellion, voicing their support for the EZLN and declaring themselves autonomous from the Mexican government. Consequently, violence broke out in the nearby states of Guerrero, Veracruz, Puebla, and Oaxaca (Britannica 2010, n.p.). While President Salinas attempted to quell the rebellion, it took 12 days of confrontation during which more than 300 people died, before Salinas to agree to a ceasefire. Subcomandante Marcos, a leader of the EZLN, clarified the aim of the uprising as “breaking the deliberate silencing regarding the Global South which had been unheard, ignored”; there would never again be a Mexico without Indigenous people (Honig-Parnass 2019, p.3).

The End of State Negotiations and Beginning of CNI

In 1995, Ernesto Zedillo assumed the presidency and officially broke the ceasefire, launching a military offensive against the EZLN in February, issuing arrest warrants for key figures of the movement. The move was deeply unpopular on a civilian, legislative and international level, forcing Zedillo to resume negotiations in 1996. Representatives from the federal government and EZLN signed the San Andres Accords, which involved key Zapatista victories, including a land reform program, Indigenous autonomy, and cultural rights. Despite agreement from officials of both parties, Zedillo rejected the accords (Britannica 2010, n.p.). Meanwhile, Zapatista communities and civilians remained under attack, the victims of a covert war. In order to unite Indigenous communities from across the country and engage in political dialogue, they created a parallel body, the *Congreso Nacional Indígena*, CNI (National Indigenous Congress) for official decision-making purposes (Honig-Parnass 2019, p. 11). On January 3, 1996 over 500 representatives from 35 Indigenous communities across Mexico met at the *Foro Nacional Especial de Derechos y Cultura Indígenas* (Special National Forum on Indigenous Rights) to establish the *Congreso Nacional Indígena* (CNI) (Guillén 2017, n.p.). One of these groups, the Nahuas of Tuxpan, Jalisco elected 31-year-old María de Jesús Patricio Martínez to represent her community. Initially, she thought only her community was invited to attend, but upon arriving at

the Zapatista forum, she felt a sense of solidarity with other groups as they described their battles with poverty, environmental destruction, and state sanctioned violence:

That's similar to what's happening to us.' I felt like it was my space, a place to talk with people with similar problems, all thirsting for justice [...] I felt it was important to continue participating: I had found what I had been searching for. From then on, I thought that only if the people are united can we change anything. (English Translation of Maria de Jesus Patricio Martinez as cited by Guillén 2017, n.p.).

The support of Patricio-Martinez and other representatives was crucial, as the Zapatistas did not want a large governmental body that spoke for the people without their consent. On October 12, 1996, the forum re-convened, and after establishing majority community support, the CNI officially became the decision-making body associated with the EZLN. The CNI does not operate as a top-down hierarchical structure, but rather as an anti-capitalist nationwide struggle from below and to the left to govern the country and its peoples (What is the CNI 2018, n.p.). The CNI has the most decision-making authority when the general assembly gathers together in congress, making choices collectively through their seven principles (See Appendix A). They developed their own system of government, the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Governance Councils) and on January 1, 2003 decided to “abandon the politics of demands, and with it, all contact with the state” (Honig-Parnass 2019, p. 9). The Mexican government does not recognize these systems, but the EZLN does not need the validation of a colonial government. The *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* are a horizontal system of self-government built by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people that continues to govern them today (Honig-Parnass 2019, p. 9).

Little Faith

Like many non-Indigenous citizens, the Zapatistas condemn the long pattern of government corruption and failure to address long-standing problems, which has led to widespread dissatisfaction with the current political state. Only 6% of citizens are satisfied with how democracy is working (Wike et al. 2017, n.p.) and “about 90.5% of Mexicans living in Urban areas have the perception that corruption exists frequently within political parties” (INEGI 2017, n.p.). This perceived corruption is another factor as to why the Zapatistas refused to engage in institutional politics. The EZLN released a statement declaring “We don't seek to administer power, we want to dismantle it from the cracks we know we are capable of” (Newsweek 2017, n.p.), but nominating someone for the highest office in Mexico could be interpreted as searching for the very power they claim to subvert.

Equal in Name, not in Practice

As an anti-capitalist cause, the Zapatistas fight for equality but avoid identifying their cause as a feminist one. In keeping with Indigenous conceptualizations of gender, their goal is to uplift all marginalized groups and change the traditional system of patriarchal domination, which harms all people (Miller 2021, n.p.). In the 1970s, contemporary Indigenous organizing efforts began, of which the EZLN would develop from. During this time, gender issues were not prioritized, and female comrades were often sidelined to supporting roles rather than leaders (Gomes and Benzaquen 2018, p. 200).

For example, land rights is a particularly important aspect of the Zapatista cause, but the organization does not consider the disparate impact of the issue on Indigenous women. Indigenous

women are less likely to own land, due to patriarchal tradition coupled with the overall lack of access for all Indigenous people to land rights. Consequently, it is difficult for them to survive in their home communities (Gomes and Benzaquen 2018, p. 201). In order to achieve social mobility, many must leave their home to work in urban areas, often in the domestic sphere. By focusing on challenges faced by all Indigenous people, the EZLN has neglected issues that specifically impact women, continuing the cycle of marginalization. Such issues can be concealed by the larger Indigenous movement where Indigenous women have difficulty expressing their specific needs relative to the needs of all Indigenous people (Gomes and Benzaquen 2018, p. 201).

Even though the EZLN struggles to address the concerns of Indigenous women in practice, there is at the very least a recognition of the dissonance between fighting for equality for historically oppressed Indigenous communities while overlooking the challenges of historically oppressed women. In an attempt to reconcile these ideas, the general command of the EZLN, the *Comité Indígena Revolucionario Clandestino*, (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee), adopted 10 laws in consultation with Indigenous women highlighting the right to bodily autonomy in relation to the revolutionary struggle, labor, reproduction, education, health, and matrimony, amongst other things (Marcos 2014, n.p.; See Appendix B). The law's goal is to focus on and enshrine women's rights into the Zapatista cause. Its creation predates the 1994 rebellion and is a key tenant of Zapatista resistance, but one constantly at odds with Mexico's patriarchal and capitalist society. There is an active struggle to incorporate these values within the Zapatista community considering the patriarchal influences that still impact the organization.

Despite the critique of Zapatista disregard for women's issues, members see the goals of the organization as "a call for the unity of the struggles of those below, materialized in the figure of the indigenous people, who did not necessarily have their agendas unified by liberal feminism" (Patricio Martínez in Gomes and Benzaquen 2018, p. 200). The Zapatista Movement is not one defined by feminism but concerned with gender equality. The EZLN is inherently struggling against the patriarchy which is ingrained in capitalism. They do so through the construction of new gender relations rooted in Indigenous conceptions of gender complementarity. Consequently, scholarship regarding Indigenous feminism in Mexico considers the Zapatista uprising to be a "particular way of defending women's rights that had not existed in Mexico until then, combining ethnic and gender identity." (Curiel 2007, n.p; Hernández-Castillo 2001; Millán 1996). Furthermore, the organization began to center women at the end of the 1990s as women joining the EZLN actively subverted traditional gender roles by leaving the private, domestic sphere of femineity for the public sphere of masculinity (Rovira 1997, n.p.). The importance of deconstructing these traditional and oppressive gender norms is noted by founding members of the CNI like Marichuy. She cites the wisdom and strength of Indigenous women resulting from the lived experience of the two entangled identities, as imperative to strengthening the Zapatista cause, "Without the participation of women there would be a large gap. It is very important that we walk together, because that's the way the Indigenous communities are; they are not just men, it's all of us. And to work with civil society. It is time to unify all these forces so that we achieve the integral construction of all our peoples. (It Is the Time of the People: María de Jesús Patricio Martínez 2017, n.p.) While Zapatistas would not designate this shift in participation a feminist action, the move towards gender equality is clearly reflected in EZLN leadership.

Decision to Nominate: Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't

Since January 2003, when the Zapatistas formally ended relations with the Mexican government, the organization actively avoided participating and therefore legitimizing the

representative democracy of the colonial Mexican state (Honig-Parnass 2019, p. 9). With the electoral reform of 2014, the EZLN was conflicted as to whether they should overturn this decade-long practice.

The electoral reform presented an outlet for Indigenous voices on an official national level for the first time. Despite this opportunity, there were many systemic barriers that made an Indigenous president unrealistic. Any efforts for an Indigenous person to become a presidential nominee would be purely symbolic (Tucker 2017, n.p.). On one hand a presidential candidate could bring Indigenous struggles to the forefront of national politics, on the other, the CNI risked legitimizing the very government that oppressed Indigenous people, depleting organizational resources, not to mention the lack of a unifying figurehead (Guillén 2017, n.p.). In addition to weighing the benefits and drawbacks of a nomination, the CNI would still have to find a spokesperson for people to rally around.

For Consideration: A System Designed for Failure

Despite attempts to eradicate Native peoples, Indigenous groups have persisted and resisted leading to organizations like the EZLN. Figures from 2015 show 25.7 million Mexicans self-identified as Indigenous, roughly 21.5% of the country's total population (Indigenous Peoples in Mexico 2024, n.p.). Such communities are largely concentrated in the Southern states of Oaxaca, Yucatán and Chiapas, where 25% to 65% of the population identifies as Indigenous (Schmal 2019, n.p.). Unfortunately, Indigenous communities continue to face layers of oppression with many being in isolated rural locations, leading to poor socioeconomic conditions, low levels of formal education, and lack of access to healthcare. Those who dream of social mobility are forced to leave their communities for larger cities where they face discrimination based on language, dress, appearance and other cultural manifestations (Indigenous Peoples in Mexico 2024, n.p.).

For example, in the Zapatista headquarters of Chiapas, 27.2% of the state's 1.1 million people identify as Indigenous (Godelmann 2014, p. 2). Half of the Indigenous population in the state reports no income at all and another 42% make less than 5 USD a day while 70% suffer from high levels of malnutrition (International Service for Peace ND, n.p.). The Zapatistas recognize such injustices as results of systemic failures that neglect rural communities. Conditions of high marginalization and extreme poverty reflect a system built on the exclusion of Indigenous people and is made to hinder political participation (Global Americans 2017, n.p.). The EZLN knew electing an Indigenous candidate was not possible in a system meant to marginalize them, but a candidate could bring such continuous and severe marginalization into view of the public's eye.

Technological Barriers

Aside from social, economic, and cultural discrimination on a macro level, marginalized groups also faced systemic disenfranchisement. For a candidate to make it onto the presidential ballot, they had to garner approximately 900,000 signatures of support. The only way to do so was through an app, administered by the National Electoral Institute, that functioned with specific mobile devices and adequate internet connection which most Indigenous Mexicans could not afford (Corona 2018, n.p.). According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, in rural areas, 47.7% of the population had Internet access, 19% of households had an Internet connection, 19.3% owned a computer or tablet, and 77.3% owned a mobile phone (IWGIA 2021, n.p.). These levels were even lower in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero, Zapatista strongholds, which have the lowest national levels on the Information and Communication Technologies Development Index (IWGIA 2021, n.p.). While theoretically, voters had the right to

nominate an independent candidate, in reality, they did not have access to the necessary resources to do so. The electoral reform was made to diversify the options for presidential candidates but demonstrated the lack of state consideration for historically excluded communities and instead continued to perpetuate marginalization among rural Indigenous communities.

A Symbolic Act

The EZLN and CNI recognize the detrimental effects of capitalism on all peoples, as poverty and disenfranchisement is common but not exclusive to Indigenous peoples. Although recentering issues faced by Native communities are important, so is building connections to those pushed to the outskirts of society. In doing so, “the solidarity created in this national effort should prove to be more relevant than the possible fruits of an electoral victory” (Gomes and Benzaquen 2018, p. 203). A presidential campaign could contribute to spreading the philosophy that Indigenous communities do not need permission to think freely, democratically and for themselves. A part of this Indigenous future for all promotes gender equality, and while again, the organizations do not label themselves feminist, there is a conscious effort to reconstruct gender norms in a new Mexican society. Consequently, if there was to be an EZLN candidate, it was imperative the presidential nominee be a woman. Choosing a spokesperson, *La Vocera*, would be intentional, a resolution that women have built both inside the CNI and outside (Hector et al. 2018, p. 44). Working towards liberation using Indigenous conceptualizations of gender means creating new male-female relations. Electing a female candidate would transform theory into action, as an Indigenous woman materialized the struggle for liberation with a focus on the revolutionary movement of women (Hector et al. 2018, p. 47).

Who could be La Vocera?

Another factor of consideration for the CNI as they grappled with the question of presidential nomination was who their candidate would be. Who could people rally around to truly lead? Women generally are an integral part of the Zapatista cause, and many have dedicated themselves to the movement, but one woman stood out for her devotion and integrity: María de Jesús Patricio Martínez. After the CNI was created, Marichuy played an active role in maintaining CNI meetings in the Central Pacific Region. While simultaneously leading the *Calli Tecolhuacateca Tochan* Health Center, she built community in the region, even when the EZLN itself ceased to participate, and other regional branches of the CNI failed to function regularly. Marichuy continued to combat machismo and work towards reconstructing male-female relations in the organization. Due to these efforts, she was one of few speakers chosen to represent Indigenous woman of Mexico at the *Marcha del color de la tierra* (March of the Color of the Earth) in 2001. This procession organized by the EZLN demanded Congress to consider constitutional reforms on Indigenous rights and culture (Navarro 2021, n.p.). She addressed Congress on March 29, 2001, in which she “denounced the violence of the capitalist and patriarchal system that was imposing silence on communities, as well as forcing them to refuse to make decisions about their lives and their own bodies” (Morla 2018, n.p.). In presenting a unified effort in addressing issues of capitalism and patriarchy, she postulated that the struggle for liberation was the responsibility of both men and women.

Among her many admirable attributes, Marichuy also stood out for her integrity regarding her ethical and political decisions, characteristics the EZLN took note of. In 2000, the current President, Vicente Fox, called for the creation of a National Council for the Development of Indigenous People under the national government (not the autonomous *Congreso Nacional*

Indígena, CNI) to advise the presidency regarding the issues of Indigenous peoples. The President's proposal was brought to the CNI, and some favored a Wixarika member to become an employee of the organization. Marichuy moved to debate the organizations' options, reasoning Indigenous people could not be properly included in an oppressive system dependent on Indigenous exploitation. As the debate carried on, she refused government co-optation of Indigenous voices, but some members chose to leave the CNI instead of accepting public positions (Guillén 2017, n.p.). Throughout this, Marichuy stayed loyal to the organization, continuing to serve through the seven pillars of the CNI in which she did not speak for the people, but they spoke through her.

So it Begins

In May of 2017, CNI representatives would take part in the *Consejo Indígena de Gobierno*, CIG (Indigenous Governing Council) to find an independent candidate to represent the CNI and civil society.² In this space, members decided to rally against the colonial system by nominating their own independent candidate, a woman to be *La Vocera*.

An indigenous woman who speaks her mother tongue, she will be the person to be registered before the National Electoral Institute. She will be who carries the voice of the Indigenous Governing Council to the whole country, to the whole world. She will be who carries the voice of the peoples of the CNI and civil society. She will be us. (Indigenous Governing Council 2017, n.p.)

In nominating a candidate, the CNI was not validating Mexico's republic, but defying the very nature of representative democracy in selecting a conduit for the organization. It was crucial the nominee be a woman to reconstruct new gender relations where women could equally participate in the fight for liberation. Nominating a man would only continue the colonial patriarchy by centering male authority. Instead, people would rally around *La Vocera* in a way that centered Indigenous women, who were often neglected in Mexican society and the Zapatista Movement. She would be more than an individual, rather a part of a much greater whole.

Now or Never

At CIG in 2017, when it came time to select *La Vocera*, Marichuy's integrity stood out to the CNI. While there were several councilors with the potential to become the spokesperson, the CNI coordinator and EZLN itself proposed Maria de Jesus Patricio-Martinez. Their reasoning was obvious: she devoted her life to healing others, preserving Indigenous ways of life in the process, during which she helped found the CNI and kept it operational through her efforts in the Central Pacific region. Across the country, both Indigenous and *Mestizo* people supported her, and she had the full confidence of the EZLN. Her nomination was accepted by 848 delegates from the Indigenous communities present. The Zapatista commanders summarized their confidence in her nomination: "Comrade Marichuy does not sell out, does not give in, and does not surrender" (Guillén 2017, n.p.).

On October 7, 2017, *La Vocera* filed out registrations as a candidate of the CNI with the National Electoral Institute (INE) in order to run in the 2018 Mexican presidential election. Her

² To establish CIG, representatives first met at the fifth session of the CNI in October of 2016. With maximum decision-making capabilities, members deliberated on a proposal to create CIG. The measure was approved in December of 2016 with the support of 523 communities from across 25 states in Mexico. In May 2017 each CNI representative would serve as a member of CIG. Each community was represented by one councilman and one councilwoman, each elected by their own communities' customs.

campaign began the same month after she announced she would not accept any funding from the INE based on principle (María de Jesús Patricio Martínez 2021, n.p.).

Campaign Trail

After the national electoral authorities recognized CIG's nomination of Marichuy to run for president as an independent, they had 120 days—approximately four months—to collect 1% of the country's registered voters (Corona 2018, n.p.). To kick off the campaign, the CNI started in their base of support, with Marichuy touring the five caracoles, autonomous EZLN support bases (María de Jesús Patricio Martínez 2021, n.p.). Despite CNI's role as Marichuy's sponsoring organization, the campaign focus was not only on Indigenous issues, but on challenges that plague the entire country as the Zapatista cause is an anti-capitalist struggle for social justice. Thus, the campaign mentioned fighting for marginalized groups, including peasants, workers, employees, traders, and Native peoples. Rooted in the struggle for equality, the campaign's guiding principles would be "autonomy, self-management, freedom, justice and democracy" (Gomes and Benzaquen 2018, p. 202). In targeting these underrepresented groups, CNI wanted to confront the troubling realities of everyday life. Of the many campaign concerns, the main ones were land dispossession, environmental pollution, and human rights violations, "We see it as a strategy on the part of the power to destroy the community, to achieve that dispossession". (It Is the Time of the People: Maria de Jesús Patricio Martínez 2017, n.p.). As *La Vocera*, the very embodiment of CNI principles, Marichuy stressed the importance of unity in addressing these issues that are all interconnected.

Breaking the Binary: Where Indigenous Women Ought to Be

As anticipated by the CNI, Marichuy and her team faced a variety of challenges, exposing cultural racism and systemic inequities over the course of the campaign. Throughout her months collecting signatures, *La Vocera* was subject to racist online ridicule and criticism from fellow nominees. The subject of such mockery was largely focused on the prominent Mexican stereotype that Indigenous women, *Indias* (Indians) are poor, uneducated domestic workers, who work as maids for wealthy, light skinned Mexican families. Racist and prejudiced statements about Marichuy began to flood the internet: "That Marichuy looks like the one who cleans my house" ([@elsuciodam] 2017, n.p), "I would vote for Marichuy. It seems she has experience cleaning up Mexico" ([@abogadodeldia] 2017, n.p.), "Who is Marichuy and why isn't she making pozole?" ([@0111001] 2017, n.p.). Within Mexican culture, there is a thinly veiled aversion to Indigenous people which inherently characterizes them as less than the dominant *Mestizo* population. While all Indigenous people are looked down upon, there is strong derogatory sentiment especially towards women, who are often expected to dedicate their lives to supporting their employer's family. Those who typically work for these wealthy households live far from their own families and subordinate their needs to their employers, performing cleaning, housework, and childcare while their labor rights in terms of schedules, wages and contracts are consistently violated (Marini 2018, p. 76.).

The discrimination Marichuy faced was not solely based on the fact that she was a woman, but rather an Indigenous woman, as it is not possible to separate the two identities. Again, while women's issues have at times gotten lost in the Zapatista Movement, when the organization adopted the 10 Women's Revolutionary Laws, it recognized this double oppression and has since worked towards tearing it down. The CNI knew their candidate would encounter this double stigma but chose *La Vocera* in order to center women and create new gender relations. The need for such

reconstruction is continuously seen as critics attacked Marichuy's Indigeneity in a broad sense, alluding to the "improper" nature of all Natives: "Can you imagine Marichuy in the presidency? We could walk around all over Mexico in huaraches and sweatpants. She's beautiful" ([@Manenzio_] 2017, n.p). There is a widespread conception of Indigenous Mexicans being "uncivilized" and a part of the country's pre-colonial past. Such statements reinforce this stereotype, characterizing them as unable to dress appropriately in a way that matches the "correct" standards of Mexican society (Marini 2018, p. 84). This cultural racism was not just expressed by anonymous users on the internet, but also openly by the leaders of Mexico's political parties.

For example, Francisco Garate, a politician of the conservative *Partido de Acción Nacional* and representative of the *Instituto Nacional Electoral* commented on the possibility of an Indigenous Presidential nominee. He argued it was absurd and unnecessary to have an Indigenous candidate "since Mexico was no longer a kingdom in the era of the Aztec wars of domination" (Marini 2018, p.85). Once again, stereotypes of Indigenous subservience and antiquity are perpetuated by the cultural acceptance of racism towards Indigenous peoples. Additionally, Garate played into the common practice of downplaying the country's Indigenous population, saying it "amounts to less than 1%, implying that it has no national relevance" (Marini 2018, p. 85). While such discrimination might be expected from conservative, right wing parties, there was also a lack of support and similar discrimination from the institutional left.

Causes like Indigenous rights are typically championed progressive parties, but in the case of Marichuy, the MORENA party of the left continued to disseminate cultural racism. The EZLN and Marichuy were subject to online ridicule by progressive activists and MORENA supporters. For one, they continued to perpetuate discriminatory discourse towards Indigenous people as "uncivilized" reframing the Zapatista cause as an unwillingness to adapt to proper Mexican society (Marini 2018, p.77). Such is seen in the dissent of Paco Taibo II, who boasts a long career in social activism and support for citizen dissent. He emphasized that he "finds Marichuy extraordinarily sympathetic" (Marini 2018, p. 86). Despite supporting citizen dissent, he actively dismisses Marichuy's role as a politician because of her status as an Indigenous woman, one who could never really qualify as a leader, even though the entire purpose of the EZLN and CNI is being anti-capitalist, resisting the status quo of the contemporary Mexican state.

Additionally, leftist supporters actively dismiss the goal of "bringing the voice of all Mexican citizens into the public and political sphere without discrimination" (Marini 2018, p. 86) by rejecting her nomination as a ploy to split the progressive vote. Again, Taibo II condemned Marichuy's candidacy as "purely symbolic," arguing that "the possibility of causing an electoral rupture in the moderate left—even if by less than 2% of the vote—was pointless" (Taibo II 2018 as cited by Marini 2018, p. 86). Such opposition is a fundamental misinterpretation of the CNI's goal in nominating Marichuy for president. The objective was not to have an Indigenous president to reinforce institutional oppression, but to bring attention to the issues plaguing the most marginalized people and simultaneously construct new gender relations by rallying around an Indigenous woman. This misunderstanding is also indicative of a much deeper negligence towards Indigenous communities. Supporters of the institutional left criticized the CNI, arguing an electoral rupture was not worth bringing about an Indigenous candidate and the organization weathered accusations of wanting to split the vote, in turn playing into the right-wing agenda. In this scenario, the CNI is expected to give up their values in order to do what's best for the "greater good" of Mexico. The institutional left perpetuates a pattern of neglecting Indigenous voices in favor of a greater Mexican public. This only highlights how liberal parties do not truly care about the issues of the most marginalized and why the CNI decided to nominate Marichuy in the first place.

In addition to the systemic barriers the CNI campaign faced, *La Vocera* herself was in physical danger, highlighting Mexico's racism, misogyny, political corruption and lack of safety. On January 21, 2018, an unidentified gunman held up a press van that was following her caravan in Michoacan. Then a month later, a highway accident on the roads of Baja California left one team member dead and Marichuy with a fractured arm just days before the deadline for signatures (Corona 2018, n.p.).

Conclusion: Never Again a Mexico Without Us

Indigenous people have long been and continue to be victims of state sanctioned violence and oppression. Colonial systems of oppression contribute to poverty, voter disenfranchisement, and gender inequity. To bring attention to these problems, the CNI and EZLN nominated Maria de Jesus Patricio as the first female Indigenous presidential candidate in Mexico. Doing so broke the organization's long-standing tradition of refusal to engage with institutional politics. Was this nomination worth it, especially considering the physical violence that came from it? Did doing so validate the colonial government that had oppressed Indigenous people for so long? Marichuy and the CNI knew she would not win, but she took steps to create a new society in which men and women participate in the struggle for liberation. Did ideas of Indigenous gender complementarity translate to greater Mexican society, or reinforce ideas of female subservience? For Marichuy and her supporters, the goal is not to win the battle, but rather that a battle was fought. The CNI did not want to erase Mexico's dark history of oppression but rather leave a legacy of resistance and protest for generations to come, an inspiration for those who would continue the construction of new gender relations.

Epilogue: ¿Que Paso?

February 19, 2018 was the deadline to acquire the 866,593 signatures needed for a position on the presidential ballot. After months of campaigning and crowdfunding, the CNI secured 267,954 valid signatures, falling short by about 600,00 signatures (Corona 2018, n.p.). Three independent candidates succeeded in making it onto the presidential ballot, but the highest polling candidate, Margarita Zavala, dropped out of the race on May 16, stating that election was impossible given the vast difference in resources provided to party-backed candidates (Corona 2018, n.p.). Subsequently, Andres Manuel Lopez-Obrador won the election in a landslide victory by more than 30 percentage points when compared to the next closest candidate, the widest margin since 1982, before Mexico became a full democracy (Perez and Cordoba 2018, n.p.). As a founder of the new progressive MORENA party, this election proved an enormous victory for the intuitional left as Lopez-Obrador's win marks a break from the country's three-party system of the centrist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Even in her nomination defeat, Marichuy continued to embody honesty and the ethics of the *Congreso Nacional Indígena*. Margarita Zavala had a signature invalidation rate of 45%; Jaime Rodriguez, governor of Nuevo Leon had a rate of 58%, while eight out of ten signatures in support of Senator Armando Rios Piter were invalidated due to forgery. Election officials invalidated a mere 5% of Marichuy's signatures on the grounds of inconsistency (Corona 2018, n.p.). The final stops of her campaign were in the states of Nuevo Leon and Coahuila, where she was welcomed by mostly non-Indigenous supporters: teachers, university students, social anthropologists, activists, and feminist groups (Corona 2018, n.p.). The goal of her nomination was not to make it into the presidential ballot but rather to reconstruct gender relations and create a space where all

Mexicans could participate politically. Such is evident in her words after the February 19 deadline passed, “Vote or don’t vote, but organize amongst yourselves” (Patricio Martinez as cited by Corona 2018, n.p.). Today, Maria de Jesus Patricio is 63 years old and stands by her word, continuing to organize with the *Congresa Nacional Indígena* from the bottom and to the left for a greater Mexico. *La Vocera* speaks for many and many speak through her, so “[i]f fighting for life means being against the laws, then so be it. We shall fight that way” (Patricio Martinez as cited by Corona 2018, n.p.). While the CNI’s nomination was unsuccessful in securing an Indigenous female candidate on the ballot, there is valor in the struggle for equality and respect. Even in the face of defeat, the steps taken to enact change are invaluable for future progress.

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Appendix

Appendix A: *Los Siete Principales del Congreso Nacional Indígena* (The Seven Principles of the National Indigenous Congress)

1. Servir y no servirse. (To serve, not serve oneself.)
 2. Construir y no destruir. (To build, not destroy.)
 3. Representar y no suplantar. (To represent, not supplant.)
 4. Convencer y no vencer. (To convince, not defeat.)
 5. Obedecer y no mandar. (To obey, not command.)
 6. Bajar y no subir. (To go from below, not from above.)
 7. Proponer y no imponer. (To propose, not impose.)
- (What is the CNI 2018, n.p) Translation provided by CNI website

Appendix B: *Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres* (Women's Revolutionary Laws)

En su justa lucha por la liberación de nuestro pueblo, el EZLN incorpora a las mujeres en la lucha revolucionaria sin importar su raza, credo, color o filiación política, con el único requisito de hacer suyas las demandas del pueblo explotado y su compromiso a cumplir y hacer cumplir las leyes y reglamentos de la revolución. Además, tomando en cuenta la situación de la mujer trabajadora en México, se incorporan sus justas demandas de igualdad y justicia en la siguiente LEY REVOLUCIONARIA DE MUJERES:

Primero.- Las mujeres, sin importar su raza, credo, color o filiación política, tienen derecho a participar en la lucha revolucionaria en el lugar y grado que su voluntad y capacidad determinen. (Women have the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in the place and at the level that their capacity and will dictates, without any discrimination based on race, creed, color, or political affiliation.)

Segundo.- Las mujeres tienen derecho a trabajar y recibir un salario justo. (Women have the right to work and to receive a just salary.)

Tercero.- Las mujeres tienen derecho a decidir el número de hijos que pueden tener y cuidar. (Women have the right to decide how many children they will have and take care of.)

Cuarto.- Las mujeres tienen derecho a participar en los asuntos de la comunidad y tener cargo si son elegidas libre y democráticamente. (Women have the right to participate in community affairs and hold positions of authority if they are freely and democratically elected.)

Quinto.- Las mujeres y sus hijos tienen derecho a ATENCION PRIMARIA en su salud y alimentación. (Women have the right to primary care with regard to their health and nutrition.)

Sexto.- Las mujeres tienen derecho a la educación. (Women have the right to education.)

Séptimo.- Las mujeres tienen derecho a elegir su pareja y a no ser obligadas por la fuerza a contraer matrimonio. (Women have the right to choose their partners and not be forced to marry.)

Octavo.- Ninguna mujer podrá ser golpeada o maltratada físicamente ni por familiares ni por extraños. Los delitos de intento de violación o violación serán castigados severamente. (No woman will be beaten or physically mistreated by either family members or strangers. The crimes of rape and attempted rape will be severely punished.)

Noveno.- Las mujeres podrán ocupar cargos de dirección en la organización y tener grados militares en las fuerzas armadas revolucionarias. (Women can occupy positions of authority in the organization and earn military rank in the revolutionary armed forces.)

Décimo.- Las mujeres tendrán todos los derechos y obligaciones que señala las leyes y reglamentos revolucionarios. (Women have all the rights and obligations set out by the revolutionary laws and regulations.)

(El Despertador Mexicano, Órgano Informativo del EZLN, México, No.1, Dec1993.) English translation by Schools for Chiapas, 2014.