
Mexico: Women suffer the effects of market opening doubly

Chiapas, in southern Mexico, is home to peasants, mestizos and indigenous Tzontal, Tzontzil, Chole, Zoque and Tojolabal peoples. There, bananas, cacao, sugar cane, and rice are planted. Each family has its own agricultural plot, where they plant maize and beans for subsistence. These communities, like many others in Central America, feel that "we were born among flowers and in the warmth of the 'temascales' (sweat lodge); from the time we were toddlers we learnt to walk up the mountain and to keep water among the stones; we prayed to the hills and we had feasts with the sky," --as expressed in the final declaration of the Second Biological and Cultural Diversity Week held in 2002-- but now commercialization and depredation have reached what for them is their mother --the earth-- and their home --the forests. For them, the forest is life. It is a sacred place. The forest is where they get their fire and their water, their seeds, medicines and the material to build their houses.

Large-scale logging eats up the forest and dams either drown it or dry it up, wounding to death the community populations. Behind this are the companies that see the forest as a timber resource to be exploited to obtain large sums of money that they do not share. They see the rivers as an energy resource to profit from, flooding whatever is in their way. The communities are left as orphans of the forest, with nothing in exchange. In Chiapas, abundant electric energy is generated but it does not reach local communities because the services are too expensive.

Women, responsible for seeking and providing water, suffer from these depredations twice over. The streams where they used to find abundant water for consumption and domestic use are drying up. However, they must continue to find water to cook and to do the washing. In some cases the communities organize themselves to seek together a well or a spring from which they install long hoses to reach the village. But in other places women have to walk to the woods and streams or rivers that are increasingly distant, carrying their pitcher or their amphora to bring back water.

Market opening and free trade have reached Chiapas on the heels of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This has implied a change in the societies' economic life, which had previously relied mostly on exchange. Now money has become essential, markets are flooded with subsidised products from the North and the communities must practically give away their crops. "There is no fair price," states Maria Angelina, from San Cristobal de las Casas. "Peasants have been paid up to two pesos a kilo for coffee when in the cities, processed coffee costs forty."

Emigration is just a step away, and usually it is the man who leaves. When this happens the women are left in charge of looking after the plot and the children, of doing the housework and providing water and firewood and, very often, of obtaining money to cover other needs when the men do not come back, a frequent situation. There are cases in which, through collective organization with groups working with women, they have developed projects for poultry raising, vegetable growing and handicrafts for sale. This happens in a social context in which women have traditionally been in inferior conditions vis-à-vis men: they do not have any power of decision, they cannot study, they have no right to land, and they must not go out because they are destined to do the housework.

On the other hand, the danger of total breaking up of the communities hangs over them, in the form

of the Puebla Panama Plan (PPP) with its mega-projects for highways and dams crossing the whole of Central America, further increasing the process of acculturation and family disintegration. Propaganda encouraging them to change their traditional corn plantations for oil palm is advancing, leaving the communities tied to markets they do not regulate. The maquilas --factories based on imported inputs used for the production of goods for export under unsafe, precarious and badly paid working conditions-- are just another consequence of the PPP. In San Cristobal de las Casas one has already been installed, where the workers are mostly women, nearly all indigenous.

But women do not remain passive. They have become aware of their social function and have taken on their responsibilities. For this reason, they have participated in the Third Biological and Cultural Diversity week held from 17 to 20 July in La Esperanza, Intibuca, Honduras. Here they have made their voices of denunciation and demand heard, sometimes with humour and irony. They are winning a place that they must take to make another world possible.

Article based on information from: interview with Maria Angelina Miranda, Diocesan Women's Coordinator (Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres - CODIMUJ), e-mail: codimuj@yahoo.com.mx