
Female Aggression among the Zapotec of Oaxaca, Mexico

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- I. INTRODUCTION
- II. DEFENSE OF THE COMMUNITY
- III. POLITICAL VIOLENCE
- IV. AGGRESSION DURING THE REVOLUTION
- V. INTERPERSONAL HOMICIDES
- VI. PHYSICAL AGGRESSION
- VII. APPEAL TO AUTHORITIES
- VIII. PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN
- IX. VERBAL AGGRESSION
- X. INDIRECT AGGRESSION: GOSSIP AND WITCHCRAFT
- XI. CHILDREN'S AGGRESSION
- XII. DISCUSSION
- REFERENCES

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on physical and verbal, direct and indirect aggression of Zapotec women. I compare female aggression with male aggression in an attempt to provide a balanced overview of aggressive behavior in Zapotec culture. The data suggest that Zapotec women make greater use of indirect aggression and are less reliant on direct, physical aggression than men. Many aspects of Zapotec women's aggression are typical of female aggression in other cultures.

The Zapotec are the largest indigenous group in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, numbering over 300,000, and they inhabit the central Valley of Oaxaca, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and parts of the mountainous (*Sierra*) regions of the state (Fry, in press). In all regions, the Zapotec are primarily town-dwelling peasant farmers. A typical Zapotec community has a Catholic church, a central plaza, local governmental buildings, a primary school, perhaps a health clinic, and probably several

small dry goods stores. The majority of Zapotec practice subsistence and cash agriculture with some animal husbandry, the primary subsistence crops being maize, beans, and squash (Fry, in press).

The Zapotec world view includes a cast of supernaturals: witches, male and female devils, images of Christ, and animal guardians. Illness may be attributed to improper religious conduct, soul loss, envy, anger, the evil eye, fright sickness, and witchcraft (Kearney, 1972; O'Neill, 1975).

In this chapter, I draw upon the anthropological literature on the Zapotec as well as my own ethnographic and ethological research in two Valley of Oaxaca communities, San Andrés and La Paz.¹ I wish to emphasize that considerable variation exists in custom and behavior among the Zapotec people. For example, regarding levels of aggression, some Zapotec communities are very peaceful while others are more violent. Historical, social structural, and psychocultural variables probably interrelate in accounting for this pronounced variability in violence (Fry, 1986, 1988).

II. Defense of the Community

Defending the community is a male concern (Dennis, 1987, p. 35). Periodically, *tumultos*, or brawls, may erupt over contested tracts of land ". . . when crowds of men are massed along the border (during a land survey, for instance); insults begin to be exchanged, rocks are thrown and soon a small battle rages" (Dennis, 1973, p. 421). Some intercommunity land disputes, with alternating periods of peace and violence, have lasted for centuries (Dennis, 1973; 1987).

On occasion, Zapotec men also have protected their community from bandits and cattle rustlers. In one altercation early in this century, the men of San Andrés fought off a band of cattle rustlers. Informants report that upon a prearranged signal (the ringing of the Church bell), the townspeople, armed mostly with clubs and *machetes*, attacked the better-armed thieves, killing most of the 10- to 20-member bandit gang, but suffering high casualties in the process.

III. Political Violence

Some Zapotec communities, but by no means all, have histories of factionalism and/or political bossism which contribute to violence. Ugalde (1973) discusses how the Valley Zapotec community, Díaz Ordaz, was divided into two political factions in the 1920s and 1930s. "In 1935 the fight reached a climax with the killing

¹San Andrés and La Paz are pseudonyms, used to protect the privacy of individuals in these communities. The data reported in this chapter were collected in 1981 - 1983, 1986, and 1991.

of several leaders of each group; afterward the *cacique* [political boss] went into exile" (Ugalde, 1973, pp. 128-129). Kearney (1972, p. 3) reports that the Sierra Zapotec town of Ixtepeji was under the control of a series of political strong-men through the 1800s who ruled "with severity."

IV. Aggression during the Revolution

Some Zapotec communities, such as San Andrés and La Paz, were relatively unaffected by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), in comparison to others, such as Ixtepeji in the *Sierra*, which became enmeshed in the struggle. Tamayo (1956, quoted in Kearney, 1972, p. 32) writes: "Eight hundred Ixtepejanos were captured and the town burned. The victorious troops with an absurd rage and cruelty then burned down several other towns."

Standing as an anomaly to Zapotec women's nonparticipation in territorial and political violence are the deeds of Angela Jimenez, daughter of an Isthmus Zapotec mother, and a Spanish father. In 1911, when she was 15, the Mexican federal troops, *federales*, searched the Jimenez home for rebels. An officer attempted to rape Jimenez' sister. Grabbing the officer's gun, the sister reportedly killed him and then committed suicide (Salas, 1990, p. 71). "With this incident vividly imprinted in her mind, Jimenez joined her father in the Sierra Madre, vowing to become a soldier who killed *federales*. Jimenez disguised herself as a man and started calling herself 'Angel'" (Salas, 1990, p. 71). She served as a flag bearer, explosives expert, spy, and soldier during the revolution. Twice captured by *federales*, she escaped execution on both occasions by changing from her male disguise into female garb and passing by the sentries.

In summary, it is Zapotec men, not women, who protect their community from outside threats, such as during *tumultos*, and who may also participate in violent political quarrels within their community. The women tend not to take part in political aggression, but we see an occasional exception such as Angela Jimenez.

V. Interpersonal Homicides

When I asked two Zapotec women from La Paz whether a quarrel is more dangerous between men or between women, both answered, "Between men." I asked them why. One responded, "Because men are the ones that kill" (fieldnotes, January, 1991).

Taylor (1986) examined the archival records of two Catholic parishes in the Valley Zapotec region and found evidence of 107 homicides for the years 1700-1870. Information on the sex of assailants was usually missing, but 97 (91 %) of the victims were males. Kappel (1978) investigated homicides in one Valley

Zapotec community by searching the civil death register for crimes and then interviewing persons familiar with the cases. For the 100-year-period 1870-1970, both the victims and assailant could be identified with certainty in 55 of 81 homicides. All 55 killers were men, and 48 (87%) of the victims were men (Kappel 1978).

Notable is the rarity of female killers among the Zapotec. Parsons (1936, p. 395), however, recounts the gossip that a Valley woman from Mitla may have arranged for her son-in-law to kill her brother in a feud over land inheritance. Whether or not this woman was behind her brother's death (and Parsons reports that this is an open question), the fact that some people believed that she was responsible is noteworthy in this examination of female aggression, as is the assumption that she had the actual murder committed by a male accomplice.

Several reasons for Zapotec homicides can be cited. Jealousy and disputes over women are a recurring theme (Fry, 1986, 1988; Kappel, 1978; Parsons, 1936, p. 442; Ugalde, 1973, p. 129; also cf. O'Neill, 1975). I found most recent homicides in San Andrés to be over women (Fry, 1986). Zapotec homicides may also result from quarrels over land or water rights (Fry, 1986, 1988; Selby, 1974, p. 64), avenging the death of a family member (Fry, 1986; Kappel, 1978; Ugalde, 1973, p. 129), drunken altercations (Kappel, 1978; Kearney, 1972, p. 104; O'Neill, 1981; Parsons, 1936, p. 403), or some combination of such factors, including, at times, political feuds as mentioned above (cf. Parsons, 1936, p. 160; Ugalde, 1973). Regarding cases with female victims, Selby (1974, pp. 64-66) reports that a man killed a woman neighbor out of fear of her witchcraft, and O'Neill (1975) reports an alleged murder of a wife by her husband for reasons unknown.

In summary, the most frequent pattern of Zapotec interpersonal homicide occurs when a male kills another male, frequently due to jealousy over a woman, although other factors also contribute to homicides. Zapotec women are rarely if ever homicidal, although Kappel (1978) and Selby (1974, p. 54) mention that they may occasionally practice infanticide by neglecting an unwanted infant.

VI. Physical Aggression

Burbank (1987) points out that when discussing whether males are *more* or *less* aggressive than females, we should specify whether more or less refers to frequency or intensity. For the Zapotec, women are *less* physically aggressive than men in *both* senses. Chinas's (1973, pp. 100-101) observation for the Isthmus Zapotec is relevant: "Violence is an expected male behavior pattern, especially dangerous when the man is intoxicated. Anger is an emotion which is always thought to be perilously close to the surface in the male personality, an emotion which can suddenly flare into violent acts. Women too are capable of anger, but a woman's anger is seen as less apt to result in violence and less threatening to community solidarity, since it is most often confined to the private domain."

My own observations in San Andrés and La Paz also indicate that women's physical aggression is both less intense and less frequent than men's aggression (also cf. Sumner, 1978). Especially in San Andrés, I witnessed men punching, kicking, and forcefully grappling with each other on various occasions (Fry, 1986, 1988, 1990). By contrast, I observed only two physical exchanges between adult women. The following passage describes one instance of female fighting which occurred at a San Andrés wedding celebration, and also mentions differences in intensity compared to male fighting:

Two women started having a fight. They screamed at each other, pushed and pulled at the other's arms and bodies, and tried to slap. Slaps were usually blocked. At one point, one woman put her arm around the neck of the other woman in that familiar San Andrés hold. One woman seemed to be more defensive than the other. . . The more aggressive orange bloused woman was about 45 years old, as was her opponent.

. . . It took three women to drag "Orange Blouse" away from the other woman into the shaded area, and this took a couple of minutes of struggling. After about five minutes, "Orange Blouse" emerged from the shaded area, and headed right for the other woman to continue the fight. Again they wrestled, again they were separated. The women slapped and pushed, and pulled each other's arms. [Earlier, when two men] . . . had been fighting, they beat and punched each other as well as wrestled. At one point, one of the two women pushed the other in the breasts, hard—one hand for each breast. . . . [Two men,] each about 25 years, emerged from the house, exchanging a few punches, beats, and words. They separated on their own—maybe 30 seconds was all they fought. The dancing started up and one man, Eusebio, asked "Orange Blouse" to dance. She danced, then attacked her opponent, then danced some more. Her opponent. . . between fights simply talked with other women by the door to the house" (fieldnotes, April, 1982; cf. Fry, 1986, pp. 337-343).

The second fight between women which I personally observed took place on an extremely crowded bus on a hot and dusty afternoon as people were returning from the market *plaza*.

Two women "slapped each other in the face and on the head while verbalizing the whole time in Zapotec. After maybe three slaps each, the smaller one (from San Andrés) tried to prevent the other one (larger/taller/older from San Juan) from slapping her by holding her arms at the wrists. She then moved away. . ." (fieldnotes, October, 1981).

Parsons (1936, p. 160) describes the only incident of physical fighting among Zapotec women I found in the literature.

"One day two market women, sisters, got into a fight—or rather, one woman, envious of the amount her sister was selling, assaulted her. She clutched at her hair and shook her so hard that her money fell out of the front of her dress. As she stooped to pick it up the aggressor threw a stone at her."

Sumner (1978) mentions that Zapotec women fight over men. When I queried as to why women fight, a San Andrés woman responded: "If the husband talks with another woman, the woman is jealous." I asked her if a woman would hit her rival. "Yes," she replied. A man from San Andrés explained that men fight over women and also women fight over men, "but with their hands only. Yes, the women fight, they slap each other!" [He laughs] (fieldnotes, January, 1991).

Burbank (1987) found that cross-culturally, women were more likely to use a weapon against a man than against a woman and concludes it is likely that "women perceive that their male targets are bigger, stronger, and more capable of aggressive retaliation. . ." (p. 91). An event I was told about is in line with this interpretation. "The [frequently beaten] wife was always returning to her parents house which is across the road from Roberto's house. One time the 'bad man' came over and threatened to kill his mother-in-law. She went and got her own rifle and he ran away from the house" (fieldnotes, August, 1986).

Regarding physical altercations between spouses, on three occasions I witnessed husbands beating their wives with sticks (Fry, 1986). On several other occasions, men struck or threatened to strike women. I never saw a wife physically attacking her husband, but one woman from San Andrés relates how she hit her husband of some 27 years with a stick to wake him up. She said that she was mad at him because he drank *mescal* the night before, came home late, and was still asleep in the morning when there was work to be done. I asked her, in general, who hits other people more—men, women, or is there no difference? She responded that the men hit more, and her husband agreed. Later when I asked her which sex was more rowdy or mischievous, she responded that the men were (again her husband agreed), and she added, "the men come home from drinking and give the wives a hit even though they are asleep!" (fieldnotes, January, 1991).

Sumner (1978, p. 6) observes for a Valley town that "women do not often attack men physically, while men do occasionally beat their wives." A 65-yearold San Andrés man told me: "The men hit the women more, because the women get out of line. And later, they obey the men. But when I get very mad. . . well, the men, when they get very mad, they grab a stick and they hit them, but only two or three blows"² (fieldnotes, January, 1991). Also relevant to this discussion of the relative intensity and frequency of physical aggression is O'Neill and O'Neill's (1977) research on Zapotec dreaming. Their findings show that Zapotec men dream about physical aggression more than the women.

Thus Zapotec women do on occasion physically attack other persons of either sex (cf. Parsons, 1936, p. 160). In comparison to male aggression, however,

²The verbatim quotation in Spanish reads: "Los hombres pegan más a las mujeres. Porque las mujeres están poco en orden, sí, están poco en orden a los hombres. Y luego obedece hombres. Pero yo cuando ya, ya cuando yo se enojo mucho . . . pues, los hombres, cuando ya se enojan mucha, agarran una bara y los pegan, pero dos o tres barazos, y allí no más."

such events occur relatively infrequently and tend not to inflict the same degree of pain or injury as male attacks. The men punch, kick, and grapple, while the women slap, push, and pull. While informants view female physical aggression as most typically resulting from jealousy over a male, such fighting (as well as verbal aggression, malicious gossip, and witchcraft, to be discussed shortly) may have other causes such as feuding over inheritance, envy of others, revenge, or self-defense.

VII. Appeal to Authorities

One recourse for a beaten wife, rather than fighting back, is to file a complaint with the community authorities. In one instance, a young San Andres husband had hit his wife on the head hard enough to cause an obvious, swollen lump. The woman's parents accompanied her to court and in large part spoke on her behalf. The husband explained he was very intoxicated and that he was sorry he had hit her so hard. The authorities lectured and fined the young husband. An interesting question is whether women utilize the local authorities more often than men.

VIII. Physical Punishment of Children

Both Zapotec men and women have been observed physically punishing children, sometimes severely (cf. Fry, 1986; Kearney, 1972, p. 62, 73; Parsons, 1936, p. 87), although some parents avoid using physical punishments (cf. Fry, 1986). Mild physical corrections, for example a slap or a rap with the knuckles, were always delivered by women in La Paz and usually (79% of the time) administered by women in San Andrés. More severe beatings with sticks were never observed in La Paz, but were administered by women in San Andrés in seven out of the eleven episodes personally witnessed (Fry, 1986). In San Andrés, one woman picked up her son by the ears; another mother lobbed a grapefruit-sized rock at her daughter (Fry, 1986). The observation that women, more often than men, punish children may simply reflect the women's more frequent association with the children, although administering discipline also may be perceived as a female duty.

IX. Verbal Aggression

In both incidences of physical aggression witnessed between Zapotec women, verbal attacks were part and parcel of the exchanges. Women may on occasion scold their husbands, adult sons, and daughters, and they may also argue with other

persons of either sex. Selby (1974, pp. 64-66) notes a case of a woman threatening her neighbor with illness through witchcraft. It is difficult to conclude whether women verbally argue and insult more or less than men. Two La Paz informants told me that women and men insult others to about the same degree. In any case, it is commonly held that quarrels and arguments among men are more dangerous due to their greater likelihood of escalating to violence (cf. Chinas, 1973; Kearney, 1972).

X. Indirect Aggression: Gossip and Witchcraft

With consistency, fieldworkers have emphasized how the Zapotec perceive their social world as rife with hostility (Chinas, 1973; Kappel, 1978; Kearney, 1972; Parsons, 1936; Selby, 1974; Sumner, 1978). Of the *Sierra Ixtepejanos*, Kearney (1972, p. 44) writes, "the individual is essentially alone in a hostile world in which nothing is secure," and among the Isthmus Zapotec, Chinas observes, "the universe is perceived as filled with threats and dangers." They fear, for instance, illness, ghosts, being alone, envy, anger, thieves, burglars, bats, and witches (Chinas, 1973, p. 80).

Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) and Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Peltonen (1988) present evidence that Finnish school girls use indirect forms of aggression, such as gossip and manipulation of social relationships, more often than their male counterparts. With indirect aggression, the identity of the aggressor may never become known to the victim, and physical strength is not a prerequisite for an effective attack. Two types of indirect aggression familiar to the Zapotec are malicious gossip and witchcraft, and these forms of aggression are sometimes interrelated. Zapotec women appear to employ these kinds of indirect aggression more regularly than men.

One of Sumner's (1978) informants explained that when people engage in malicious gossip, "all sorts of heavy things float to the surface, things which should remain at the bottom, should not be stirred up . . . it's like a can of lard, if you tip it over, it will spread, slowly, but it will spread and spread." Although men certainly gossip, my impression is that Zapotec women do so to a greater degree. In reference to land disputes, Dennis (1987, p. 23) notes a concern about women saying too much: "Women are sometimes said to be unable to keep such secrets." Recently I asked several people from La Paz and San Andrés what they thought regarding gossip by men and women. A man I questioned said that it depended on one's personality, but three women emphatically nominated their own sex as gossiping more than men. One woman from La Paz explained, "The women gossip more. And that's why they don't go out. When a woman comes by, soon the whole town knows!" (fieldnotes, January, 1991). Supporting the Zapotec image

of women as gossipers is their belief in the "supernatural evil gossiper," the *wana bieha*. "The *wana bieha* is more evil hearted than the witch and more so than the person who picks fights, or lies, or is abnormal. Her awesome malignity derives from the fact she is a talebearer about sexual infidelities. She has supernatural powers to ensure that her gossip is always believed. . ." (Selby, 1974, pp. 79-80). The *wana bieha* is a woman's role. Her evil gossip about sexual relations creates conflict and undermines social relationships; this can be a very potent form of indirect aggression.

The Zapotec also believe that witches can cause misfortune, illness, and death (e.g., Parsons, 1936, p. 118, 138). While witches can be of either sex (Selby, 1974), in the Isthmus "women are thought to be witches more often than are men. . ." (Chinas, 1973, p. 84). In agreement with this observation, in La Paz informants expressed concern over two witches in their town, both of whom were women. I have no information on the sexes of witches in San Andres, but for a nearby town, Sumner (1978) speaks of witches using only female pronouns (also cf. Parsons, 1936, pp. 131-141). At least tentatively it would seem that women are more often perceived as practicing this form of indirect aggression than are men. It is interesting that while nearly everyone fears witchcraft, hardly anyone views themselves as a witch, although others may (Selby, 1974).

XI. Children's Aggression

One question on a 50-item questionnaire administered to men in San Andrés and La Paz asked: Who fights more, boys, girls, or do they both fight the same? Girls were perceived to fight either the same as or less than boys by all but 1 respondent out of 45. In San Andrés, 50% (14) said boys and girls fight equally and 50% (14) thought boys fight more. In La Paz, 65% (11) answered that boys and girls fight equally, 29% (5) said boys fight more, and 6% (1) thought girls fight more.

In an ethological study of children's aggression, I observed 3- to 8-year-old children, 24 from San Andrés and 24 from La Paz, using focal individual sampling procedures (cf. Fry, 1986, 1988). For overall rates and durations of play and serious aggression, these Zapotec children do not exhibit significant sex differences. However, interesting patterns are apparent in the gender composition of the dyads. Recently I used binomial tests to evaluate the null hypotheses that (1) boys initiate play and serious aggression equally toward female and male partners, and (2) girls also initiate play and serious aggression equally toward partners of either sex (Fry, 1990). Results presented in Table 1 show that both girls and boys tend to choose same-sexed play partners significantly more often than opposite-sexed play partners. The least frequent of the four pairings was for a male to choose a female play partner.

Table 1
Partner Choice for Play Aggression: Sex Composition of Dyad

		Number of episodes		<i>z</i>	2-tailed <i>p</i>
Sex of initiator		Sex of recipient			
Male	373 (51.3%)	Male	266 (36.6%)	8.23	<i>p</i> < .00001
		Female	107 (14.7%)		
Female	353 (48.6%)	Male	122 (16.8%)	5.80	<i>p</i> < .0001
		Female	231 (31.8%)		

Regarding serious aggression, girls initiated with other girls 93% of the time, significantly more often than with boys (Table 2). However, it was not significantly more likely for boys to initiate serious aggression with boys (54%), as opposed to girls (46%).

XII. Discussion

Cross-culturally, women are less likely than men to commit homicide (Daly and Wilson, 1988, pp. 137-161 and references therein), and this generality applies to the Zapotec. In comparison to the men, Zapotec women are less often physically aggressive, and their attacks, which usually consist of slapping, pulling, and pushing their opponent, are less severe and usually noninjurious. Sex differences are less apparent regarding verbal aggression, although additional information is needed on this topic.

The distinction proposed by Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) and Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Peltonen (1988) between direct and indirect aggression is applicable to the Zapotec. Zapotec women are perceived as using indirect forms of aggression (gossip and witchcraft) more often than the physically more aggressive men. The *wana bieha* is a woman. In the Zapotec belief system, a woman can draw on supernatural forces to attack rivals and seek revenge, as in the explanation for a young man's illness: "After the young man had left his first wife, for a younger woman, he was walking along one night when he was beckoned to by somebody he took to be his former wife. He followed the women. . . [a supernatural spirit], who led him off to a ravine and left him. Then he fell ill" (Parsons 1936, p. 139).

Table 2
Partner Choice for Serious Aggression: Sex Composition of Dyads

		Number of episodes			
Sex of initiator		Sex of recipient		<i>z</i>	2-tailed <i>p</i>
Male	50 (62.6%)	Male	27 (33.8%)	.57	<i>p</i> = .28
		Female	23 (28.8%)		
Female	30 (37.5%)	Male	2 (2.5%)	4.74	<i>p</i> < .00001
		Female	28 (35.0%)		

Burbank (1987) found that women attack other women in 91% of 137 societies where information was reported on female aggression, but that they attacked men in only 54% of these societies. Other women appear to be the targets of Zapotec women's physical attacks more often than men, although Zapotec women attack opponents of either sex, physically, verbally, and indirectly. It seems likely that women in Zapotec culture fear the consequences of physically attacking men who are stronger and perceived as more capable of violence; women are well aware that men beat their wives and are "the ones who kill." The data on aggressive initiations among children in San Andrés and La Paz show a similar pattern wherein girls hardly ever aggressively attacked boys—only 7% of the time. It would be interesting to assess the degree to which the different sexes are the targets of Zapotec women's and girls' *indirect* aggression.

Schuster (1983) argues that much female-female aggression in Zambia is over men, who represent important resources to women. Burbank's (1987, p. 93) findings support the interpretation that much female aggression cross-culturally "is largely a form of female competition, often over matters of direct relevance to life and livelihood." Given the division of labor in Zapotec society, women and men fill complementary economic roles within marriage. In terms of economic well-being, a man is a valuable resource to his wife. Informants in San Andrés maintain that the reason women physically fight is over men. Thus Schuster's (1983) and Burbank's (1987) conclusions regarding competition may be relevant to at least some altercations among Zapotec women. However, the fact that Zapotec men fight over women more regularly and more severely, sometimes killing rivals, than women fight over men is in accordance with the evolutionary principles of sexual selection for male-male competition and parental investment theory (cf. Symons, 1979). In any case, it is clear that Zapotec women do act aggressively, although their ferocity and aggressive tactics differ from those used by males.

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