



REVOLUTIONIZING WOMEN'S ROLES IN VENEZUELA

"as head of state... I will always support women's movements, to seek balance in Venezuela and thus contribute to the balance in the world."

Since 1999, the government of President Hugo Chávez has established key legal and institutional guarantees for women's rights in Venezuela. These new measures are placing Venezuela at the vanguard of global struggles to promote gender equality.

Perhaps even more importantly, the active participation of women in political and economic processes has been prioritized as a key part of the broader movement for social justice that is Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution.

Though this transformation is still incomplete, it has already made impressive strides. An example of the commitment to gender equality

at the official level was the creation of a new Ministry for Women's Issues on March 8th, 2008. Meanwhile, in their daily lives, Venezuelan women particularly in low-income communities are increasingly empowered through state-funded initiatives in micro-lending, food provision, and nutrition, as well as programs in daycare, health, education, and other areas.

LEGAL STRIDES FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is the product of a Constituent Assembly which allowed diverse sectors of society to participate in the drafting of new laws, including women and other minority groups.

Nora Castañeda, now the President of the Women's Bank of Venezuela (*Banmujer*), recalls: "We were invited to submit proposals and we did. The women's movement and the Indigenous movement picketed every day for four months while the Constitutional Assembly was sitting, and we got what we wanted. The members of the Assembly, women and men, recognized the historic importance of our struggle."^[1]



The 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela



Article 21: All persons are equal before the law, and consequently: No discrimination based on race, sex, creed or social standing shall be permitted.

Article 76: The State guarantees overall assistance and protection for motherhood, in general, from the moment of conception, throughout pregnancy, delivery and the puerperal period, and guarantees full family planning services based on ethical and scientific values.

Article 88: The state guarantees the equality and equitable treatment of men and women in the exercise of the right to work. The state recognizes work at home as an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and health. Housewives are entitled to Social Security in accordance with the law.

Because of the participation of women's rights advocates in the development of the 1999 Constitution, the charter is now among the most progressive in the Western Hemisphere on gender issues. Significantly, it was composed with the use of non-sexist language so as not to make assumptions when referring to the gender of citizens or holders of political office – i.e. instead of "he," and "his," it reads "he or she" and "his and her."

Venezuela's 1999 Constitution states that all persons are entitled to full citizenship rights and prohibits gender discrimination. In terms of economic rights, the Constitution guarantees full equality between men and women in employment, and is unique among Latin American legal codes in recognizing housework as an economically productive activity for which housewives are owed social security benefits. In doing so, the law demonstrates a powerful recognition of the historical debt owed to women by society.^[2]

Several other pieces of federal legislation were designed to protect women. The 1999 Law on Violence Against Women and Families addresses issues of sexual harassment and domestic violence. The 2000 Law for the Protection of Children is also relevant in this regard. Additionally, under the 2001 Law on Land and Agricultural Development, women were made more able to support their families through provisions allowing them to qualify as heads of household, spearhead agricultural projects, and hold preferential property rights. President Chávez also opened all branches of the armed forces to women, removing legal limits to a

woman's ability to develop a career in the military in Venezuela.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

In a particularly dramatic transformation of Venezuela's political demography, 4 out of 5 branches of government are now headed by women – in fact, all but the executive office: women hold the top posts in the National Assembly, Supreme Court, National Electoral Council, and the Human Rights Office. The head of the Venezuelan National Assembly, Cilia Flores, is pictured at left with President Chávez.



On the whole, Women's participation in government in Venezuela has increased significantly in recent years. A new study by International IDEA finds that 18.6% of seats in Venezuela's National Assembly are held by women, giving that country the 8th highest level of women's participation in congress in Latin America, just above the regional average and surpassing many nations including Chile, Brazil, and Colombia. Back in 1997, before President Chávez was elected, only 5.9% of Venezuela's members of congress were women, the 3rd lowest rate in the region. This means that the rate of women in congress in Venezuela has more than tripled in the last decade.^[3] In local government, the numbers also illustrate definite shifts, but indicate that more progress is needed. Women account for 8.3% of all governors in Venezuela – the 3rd-highest rate in the region.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN LOCAL POLITICS

One reason for optimism is that local-level politics in Venezuela are being transformed by new forms of participation such as communal councils, and women are quickly assuming positions of leadership in that process.



The system of communal councils was set up in 2001 to channel popular participation by citizens in local and national political life. These groups give communities the opportunity to identify and address local needs through the model of “popular power,” which is considered the 5th motor of the Bolivarian Process in Venezuela and is guided by the constitutional Law of Popular Participation. As of August 2007, some 25,000 Communal Councils existed, and total membership was around 2.2 million.

Studies of the communal councils are still in their infancy. However, a recent study of low-income communities in Venezuela by U.S. Sociologist Sujatha Fernandes concluded that: “barrio women in Chávez's Venezuela... have sought to take the initiative at the local level to make decisions regarding their community and the implementation of local programs. ... these women are agents who are building new spaces of democratic community participation.”^[4]

BANMUJER: CREATING A ‘CARING ECONOMY’

In addition to making strides in local and national politics, women in Venezuela are also quickly achieving unprecedented levels of economic empowerment under the administration of President Chávez. The 1999 Constitution set out important legal measures, including a provision that makes women who work at home eligible for social security benefits. Institutions supporting women's full participation in the economy have also been key to this process; for example, *Banmujer*, the Women's Development Bank of Venezuela.

The only national financial institution of its kind in the world, *Banmujer* gives small, low-interest loans to women in order to help them form business ventures. The chief goals of the bank are to create employment and reduce poverty among women, and to encourage women's

participation in the economic and social transformations that are taking place as part of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. *Banmujer* was established in honor of International Women's Day on March 8, 2001, and disbursed its first micro-credit loans in September of 2001. On the fifth anniversary of that first loan, President Chavez announced another investment in *Banmujer* of about \$65 million U.S. dollars.^[5] As of late 2007, nearly 2 million women had benefited from the bank's loans as well as its training programs and counseling services.



Nora Castañeda, President of *Banmujer*, said in an interview with the *Guardian*: "We are creating an economy at the service of human beings instead of human beings at the service of the economy."^[6]

She has toured the U.S. and Europe to describe the Venezuelan success story. The bank's achievements are explained in part by the fact that it was designed in consultation with poor Venezuelans in both rural and urban areas, and specifically tailored to meet their needs.

Castañeda explained: "*Since 70 per cent of Venezuelans living in poverty are women, we decided to target them. Banmujer tries to create a level playing field by empowering these women not just economically, but also politically and socially. It's a social development bank that assesses the viability of projects, and provides training in citizenship, organization, leadership, education, health and self-esteem as well as personal development. We are not building a bank – we are building a different way of life.*"^[7]

“MOTHERS OF THE BARRIO”: SOCIAL MISSIONS IN VENEZUELA

The economic and social needs of women are also being met by a set of development programs called “social missions” that began operating in 2003 using revenues from Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA. There are now over 2 dozen social missions operating on a national scale, including a nutrition and food distribution program, another that sponsors adult literacy and education, and a third and very successful campaign to provide universal healthcare through a network of free clinics primarily in economically depressed areas. Because poverty in Venezuela affects women the most, the social programs are having their greatest impact among women and female-headed households. They have helped to raise the standard of living significantly, contributing to a 27.6% drop in poverty rates in Venezuela since the missions began in 2003.^[8]

One of the newest social missions, the “Mothers of the Barrio” Mission, was launched in March of 2006 to provide a monthly stipend to poor women with children who lack full-time employment. This is also based on Article 88 of the Constitution recognizing women's work in the home as an economically productive activity. By August of 2006, “Mothers of the Barrio” was providing some 200,000 women with stipends averaging around \$176 per month, or 60-80% of the current minimum wage. The funds are allotted according to need, and rotate so that more beneficiaries may be covered.^[9]

REVOLUTIONIZING WOMEN'S ROLES

For women in Venezuela, the first decade of the 21st century has already brought many long-awaited advancements in the areas of law, politics, and the economy. At a local level as well as an administrative one, women's roles are truly undergoing a profound transformation.

This transformation is, of course, an ongoing one. What has become clear thus far is that, under President Chávez, the government of Venezuela has become dedicated to helping women assume and sustain active roles in the process of their own empowerment, and that the peaceful and democratic Bolivarian Revolution will not – and cannot – exclude or proceed without them.

[1] "The Revolution has a Woman's Face," by Global Women's Strike, *The Venezuela Reader: The Building of a People's Democracy*, Olivia Burlingame Gombri, ed., Washington, DC: Epica, 2005.

[2] "Women and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution," by Sarah Wagner, *Venezuelanalysis*, January 15, 2005. <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/877>

[3] "30 Years of Democracy: Riding the Wave? Women's Political Participation in Latin America," International IDEA, February 29, 2008. http://www.idea.int/publications/30_years_of_democracy/index.cfm

[4] "Barrio Women and Popular Politics in Chávez's Venezuela," by Sujatha Fernandes, *Latin American Politics and Society*, Fall 2007 http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4000/is_200710/ai_n21033374

[5] "Celebrating Five Years of the Women's Bank," By Coral Wynter and Jim McIlroy, *Green Left Weekly* #686, Oct. 11, 2006. <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2006/686/35614>

[6] "The bank that likes to say yes – if you're a woman," by Diane Taylor, *Guardian*, March 24, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2005/mar/24/accounts.venezuela>

[7] "Interview with Nora Castañeda from the Venezuelan Women's Development Bank," *New Internationalist* #381, August 2005. http://www.newint.org/columns/makingwaves/2005/08/01/nora_castaneda/

[8] "Update: The Venezuelan Economy in the Chavez Years," Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2008. <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/cepr%20report.htm>

[9] Gregory Wilpert, *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power: The History and Policies of the Chávez Government*, NY: Verso, 2008.

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