



Women and Change in Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution

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Abstract

The election of President Hugo Chávez on December 6, 1998 was of great significance for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela as his victory signalled the end of Venezuela's legacy of exclusionary politics, to be replaced with a participatory and protagonistic democracy of the Bolivarian Revolution and twenty-first century socialism. The revolution, especially through the non-androcentric and inclusionary constitution of 1999, along with the creation of *misiones* (missions or social programmes), has thus created spaces for poor and working class Venezuelans – and in particular, women – to exercise a new sense of citizenship, rights, inclusion and newly politicised social roles. In this way, the revolution has largely benefitted poor and working class women and in return the revolution has been sustained.

The use of feminism as a popular tool of the state has also allowed for not only the creation of this new Bolivarian state but these have also greatly impacted the process of change for Venezuelan women and especially in the relationships of poorer women with the Bolivarian state, Chávez and what appears to be a polarised feminist movement. As such, certain contradictions exist thereby challenging the transformative potential of the revolution on the lives of poorer women.

Keywords: Bolivarian revolution; Chávez; feminism; Venezuela; women.

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Introduction

This article, part of a larger study, examines how poor and working class women were regarded in the political, economic and social processes of the late President Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian revolution and twenty-first century socialism in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. By interrogating the relationships among the Bolivarian state, President Chávez, the feminist movement and poorer women, the following paper is an analysis of the process of change in the lives of women as guided by these aforementioned relationships. This is essential given what appeared to be the institutionalisation of the interests of poor and working class women within the country's enabling legal framework, policies, state institutions and programmes. Furthermore, in the words of Chowdhury (2008, 11), President Chávez, through such institutionalisation, nurtured women as a constituency. Additionally, the use of feminism as a popular tool of the state had increased support of Chávez and the revolution particularly among poorer women.

Therefore an analysis of the lives of poorer women during the time of Chávez and the revolution is guided by an understanding that "gender affects and is affected by revolutionary processes in many ways" (Moghadam 1997, 133-134) and furthermore by Barriteau's (1998) theorising of gender relations. Barriteau (1998, 190) reminds:

We fail to view economic or political relations between women and men and the state, or women and the state as also relations of gender. Instead discussions of gender are often confined to the private sphere. This reflects a deep seated desire to view relations of gender as outside the scope of state's relations with its citizens.

Such an understanding therefore necessitates an analysis of gender and gender relations and how President Chávez, through a revolutionary process which has championed the cause of the poor and the previously excluded, had also

sought to construct and reconstruct masculinities and femininities, and therefore gender relations, so as to place poor and working class women as central to the Bolivarian revolution. An understanding of the political history of Venezuela prior to the election of President Chávez is also of extreme importance. It must be understood that the Venezuelan people were eager for a new politics, given years of exclusionary politics coupled with the periods of oil boom and oil bust and the period of *Puntofijismo* - a consolidation of political hegemony by major political parties after the signing of the Pact of Punto Fijo on October 31, 1958 - which relied heavily on oil revenues and furthered the country's unequal distribution of wealth - leading to the election of President Chávez in 1998.

The election of Chávez on December 6, 1998 thus signalled a new emergence of left-leaning leaders in Latin America. During his first term in office, he called for constitutional reform and through wide support in a referendum election which was held on July 25, 1999, a new constitution was adopted in December 1999 replacing the country's 1961 constitution. Chavez was re-elected on July 30, 2000 - the first election under the new constitution - and on December 3, 2006 he announced that those parties which had supported him would unite to form one single party - *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV, United Socialist Party of Venezuela). Chávez would then be re-elected again in 2012, although to a lessening popular vote.

It can be argued that the Bolivarian revolution started in 1999 with the adoption of a new constitution, which, among other things, renamed the nation-state the *Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela* in honour of the great Latin American revolutionary hero Simon Bolívar and also enshrined pivotal rights for Venezuelan women; however, it would be six years into his presidency until Chávez declared his socialist programme for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Thus at the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2005, President Chávez explained that this socialism is "a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything" (Soto 2005). Termed 'twenty-first century socialism,' according to Chávez it is based on

solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty and equality (Wilpert 2007, 5). It was stressed as a real alternative to state socialism, and more importantly, neo-liberalism due to its promotion of protagonistic and participatory democracy, and a less state-centered political and economic development model which privileges cooperativism, collective property and social equality. As such, the ideals of twenty-first century socialism quickly gained momentum as part of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.

President Chávez's Bolivarian revolution and the endogenous development which it promotes put forth a political, economic and social development process which seeks to empower the Venezuelan people through their communities and existing capacities and resources. Wilpert (2007, 69) however admits that while it is "developing in the right direction," there exist certain "internal contradictions" with regard to Chávez's economic and development policy. The Bolivarian state operates within an essentially capitalist global economy especially through its export of petroleum. In this way, it is able to fund the revolution's social programmes.

Also, in aiming to create *una economía social*¹ through the promotion of cooperatives, micro-enterprises and micro-credit programmes and further wealth re-distribution policies and social programmes or *misiones*, poor and working class women have figured greatly in the development process. Within a region with the worst income distribution in the world, differential salaries for men and women in the informal sector and historically high poverty rates of between 50 and 54 percent for female-headed households in Venezuela (Paredes 2005, 19; UN 2010, 161), women's interests have been institutionalised as a means to combat such issues and also to lift women out of poverty. Further, on January 30, 2009 at the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil, on speaking about his socialist vision, President Chávez announced "true socialism is feminist" (Osava 2009), and in so doing, feminism became a popular tool of the Bolivarian state thereby further including women into the processes of the revolution. The Bolivarian revolution under Chávez therefore presents a moment not only for examining

the process of change in the lives of poorer women, but also the new opportunities which have been made available by the revolution and twenty-first century socialism.

Theoretical Perspective

The question as to the processes of change in the lives of women in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela under President Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution is intrinsically a study of power relations and the inherent gender relations which exist. Moghadam (1997, 135) reminds that “[a]s revolutions entail constructions of national identity, reorganizations of production, and reformulations of (social) reproduction, class, ethnicity, and [especially] gender all figure prominently”. As such, this research advances a theoretical analysis of the gendered nature of the Bolivarian revolution given the context of a masculine, “feminist” political leader, a masculinist state and a gender system organised by patriarchy and which therefore privileges masculinity. Barriteau (2003, 5) theorises that “power relations underwrite and complicate all relations of gender.” Thus, because feminist epistemology mediates and constitutes how power relations are negotiated, it then becomes crucial that this study is planted firmly in feminist theorising. In taking a feminist epistemological and methodological approach, feminist theorising is at the core of this study.

Methodological Approach

This article speaks to some of the findings of a larger qualitative research project on gender and the Bolivarian revolution in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela under President Chávez for which the following research methods were used. A mixed methods qualitative approach comprised of textual and discourse analysis, in-depth and semi-structured interviews and participant and non-participant

observation. Field research was conducted during four visits to Venezuela between April 2010 and December 2012. Research was situated in two cities: Caracas - the capital and largest city in Venezuela and Mérida in Mérida State, the principal city of the Venezuelan Andes. A total of seventy interviews were conducted with women in both cities. The selection of interviewees or research participants was done through purposive and convenience sampling. Given that the main research question enquires into the lives of poorer women, the sampling was "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly" (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003, 713). The voices of poor and working class women are thus privileged and the selection of interviewees or research participants was guided by the March 2008 socioeconomic stratification data provided by *Datanálisis*. Quantitative data from *BanMujer*; *Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Venezuela* (INE, National Statistical Office of Venezuela); *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* (CEM, Centre for Women Studies); and the UN Women field office in Caracas were also utilised. It must be noted, however, that not all the data was disaggregated by sex.

Twenty-First Century Socialism – Gains for Women

"True socialism is feminist." These were the words stated by President Chávez on January 30, 2009 at the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. Speaking on his vision of twenty-first century socialism for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, President Chávez sought to emphasise the importance of gender and women's rights in the success of his socialist agenda. However, in determining how poorer women fare in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela given the political, economic and social policies and other reforms which seek to address the inequality and poverty that many marginalised Venezuelans faced before Chávez was elected, I examined the following programmes of the Bolivarian revolution and twenty-first century socialism and their impact on especially poorer women: constitutional reform; cooperatives and micro-credit programmes; and *misiones* or social missions.

Constitutional Reform

In December 1999, the new Bolivarian Constitution was approved in a national vote by an overwhelming majority - 71.78 percent of voters. Several articles in the constitution provide pivotal women's rights provisions. Article 21 for example states:

All persons are equal before the law, and, consequently:

1. No discrimination based on race, sex, creed or social standing shall be permitted, nor, in general, any discrimination with the intent or effect of nullifying or encroaching upon the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on equal terms, of the rights and liberties of every individual.

2. The law shall guarantee legal and administrative conditions such as to make equality before the law real and effective manner; shall adopt affirmative measures for the benefit of any group that is discriminated against, marginalized or vulnerable; shall protect in particular those persons who, because of any of the aforementioned circumstances, are in a manifestly weak position; and shall punish those who abuse or mistreat such persons.

The Venezuelan constitution is also unique in its recognition of women's reproductive work in the household. Article 88 states:

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 wealth. Housewives are entitled to Social Security in accordance with law.

Misión Madres del Barrio provides poor mothers with a monthly stipend which is equivalent to 80 percent of the minimum wage. Article 75 makes provisions for the "protection to the mother, father or other person acting as head of a household." Also, Article 76 states:

...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...

Motherhood is thus protected from the point of conception and in this way, pre-natal care is guaranteed according to Wilpert (2003). It must be noted, however, that in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, abortion is only legal if it is necessary to preserve the life of the mother. In cases such as rape, incest, economic reasons, the preservation of the mother's mental state or birth defects of the fetus, abortion is illegal as provided in the Criminal Code of June 2, 1964. Conversely, "...the Code of Medical Ethics of 1971 authorizes an abortion to be performed for 'therapeutic purposes,' although it does not define what therapeutic purposes are."²

Cooperatives and Microcredit Programmes

Cooperatives and micro-credit programmes go hand in hand. Harnecker (2005) explains that in 1998 there were only 762 cooperatives in Venezuela. However, by August 2005, the *Superintendencia Nacional de Cooperativas* (National Superintendence of Cooperatives- SUNACCOOP) had registered a total of 83,769 cooperatives. Wilpert (2007, 77-78) also states that the number of people in cooperatives has also increased - from approximately 200,000 in 1998 to over one million in 2005 (78).³ Cooperatives have thus been able to promote employment in Venezuela with over 16 percent of formally employed

Venezuelans being employed in a cooperative. The success of cooperatives is due mostly to their promotion and protection by the state and the constitution. While data on cooperatives is not sex-disaggregated, Domínguez (2007) argues, “here again, women have been the chief beneficiaries, because cooperatives provide a flexible source of employment and income, thereby creating the conditions for women’s financial autonomy.”

Misiones

Upon his election, President Chávez also introduced *misiones* – poverty alleviation social programmes which also provide social services to Venezuela’s poor and marginalised. Hawkins et al. (2011) describes these social missions, which are financed through the country’s oil revenues, as “one of the largest social funds implemented in Latin America over the past two decades” and “they thus represent a crucial component of the government’s goal to create ‘socialism of the twenty-first century’” (190).

Some of the more popular *misiones* deal with the issue of illiteracy and lack of access to education in the Venezuelan state. With the goal of eradicating illiteracy, *Misión Robinson* (literacy training) was founded on May 30, 2003 and decreed in July 2003 and *Misión Robinson II* (remedial primary education) was founded on October 28, 2003. As a result of these missions and according to the Venezuela Information Office, *Misión Robinson I* and *II* have resulted in an estimated 1.5 million Venezuelans becoming literate. Similarly, *Misión Ribas* was founded on November 17, 2003. This social programme provides remedial secondary education to citizens and it has resulted in 450,500 adults completing remedial high school. Notably, in 2005 the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela declared that the country was free from illiteracy (Márquez, 2006).

Misión Sucre was created on July 10, 2003 with the aim of decentralising university education. Administered by the Ministry of Higher Education, *Misión*

Sucre offers monthly need-based scholarships for attendance to a small number of universities. Also, with regard to job training, *Misión Ché Guevara* has resulted in 670,000 citizens receiving job training and business skills, forming 10,000 cooperative businesses.

According to Wilpert (2007, 142) however, one of the most important anti-poverty programmes is *Misión Mercal*. 'Mercal' or *Mercado de Alimentos* (Food Market) was created on April, 22, 2003. The main objective of the *Misión Mercal* is "to contribute substantially to improving the nutritional status, health and quality of life of the Venezuelan population."⁴ Thus, by providing food to the poor at a government-subsidised price through government-owned supermarkets which are placed under the Ministry of Nutrition, the programme has been able to increase the amount of food sold. With food being sold at a 25-50 percent discounted price, it was estimated that as of mid-2005 *Misión Mercal* provided food to 43 percent of the Venezuelan population (Wilpert 2007, 142).

However, Hawkins et al. (2011, 196) state in their study on *Misión Mercal*, that while customers could purchase as many products as needed, there was rationing for certain products such as milk and meat or other products which could be resold at black market prices. For these products which are usually high in demand, long lines of customers persist and these products are sold on a first-come, first-served basis. As of 2006 however, there were over 209 nationwide supermarkets, 32 *Supermercado* stores, 870 cooperative-owned locales and 12,000 *Mercalitos* or street markets.

On March 6, 2006 President Chávez introduced the *Misión Madres del Barrio* or Mothers of the Barrio. Officially called *Misión Madres del Barrio Josefa Joachina Sánchez* – named after a heroine of the Venezuelan War of Independence who is celebrated as the embroiderer of the first flag of Venezuela – this *misión* offers aid to mothers and female heads of households who live in extreme poverty. In

unveiling the programme, President Chávez stated: “with this mission, we want to give a hand to mothers who are in need, and homemakers without a fixed income” (Baribeau 2006). As such, poor women who have children and no form of income are given a monthly stipend which is equivalent to 80 percent of the minimum wage. (The maximum amount of financial allocation is 960 Bolivares.) Based on Article 88 of the constitution, women's activity in the home is recognised as an economic activity and as such, the programme has been expanded from 100,000 women from its inception to 200,000 women in August 2006 in “selected...neighbourhood communities according to needs-based criteria” (Wilpert, 2007, 143).

In terms of healthcare, *Misión Barrio Adentro* provides free healthcare to the Venezuelan people. Clinics, which now include treatment and state-of-the-art diagnostic centres, can be found throughout Venezuela and especially in the *barrios*. It has thus been reported that at the end of 2005, over 160 million visits had been made since 2003, including 3.7 million optometry visits and 14.5 million dental care visits (Hawkins et al. 2011, 96). *Misión Barrio Adentro* however, has now been extended to include what is now known as *Misión Barrio Adentro I* (primary healthcare inclusive of dentists); *Misión Barrio Adentro II* (secondary or second-level care inclusive of hospitalisation and surgery and comprises of popular clinics, diagnosis and advanced technology centres and rehabilitation facilities); *Misión Barrio Adentro III* (third-level care in general hospitals, that is, care for major illnesses and specialist care); and *Misión Barrio Adentro IV* (fourth-level care such as the treatment of high-risk and high-cost medical-surgical diseases and comprises highly specialised teaching hospitals) (Alvarado et al. 2008, 103-104).

Some of the other *misiones* which have been created by President Chávez are as follows: *Misión Miranda* which allowed for the creation of a citizen military reserve; *Misión Guacaipuro* which deals with communal land titles and other human rights as they pertain to indigenous groups; *Misión Identidad* provides national identification cards to Venezuelan citizens as well as keeps a record of

those who have been provided with services by the *misiones*; *Misión Habitat* provides housing; *Misión Piar* serves and provides assistance to miners; *Misión Zamora* seeks to redistribute land and bring about land reform; *Misión Cultura* promotes culture and the arts; *Negra Hipólita* – named after the wet nurse of Simón Bolívar – offers assistance to the indigent and differently-abled population; *Misión Ciencia* promotes scientific research; and *Misión Arbol* provides and promotes environmental education (see Hawkins et al. 2011, 190; Lopez-Maya and Lander 2011, 71).

Consejos Comunales

The Law of Communal Councils (2006) states that *consejos comunales* “represent the means through which the organised masses can take over the direct administration of policies and projects that are created in response to the needs and aspirations of the communities, in the construction of a fair and just society.” *Consejos Comunales* are thus “instances of participation, articulation, and integration between various community organizations, social groups, and citizens” where members “directly manage public policy and projects oriented toward responding to the needs and aspirations of communities in the constructions of a society of equity and social justice” (Article 2, Law of Community Councils). Power is therefore vested in the people in their local communities. Every five-person committee which is elected by the *consejo communal* is empowered by Article 11 of the Law of Communal Councils to oversee “programs and projects for public investment budgeted and executed by the national, regional or municipal government.” The *consejos comunales* thus provide a powerful check on the municipal, regional and most importantly national government (Ciccariello-Maher 2007). As such, “communal councils are inspiring many Venezuelans to exert their right and duty to participate in local decision-making” (*Journal of the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy Online*, 2011), especially for women in the barrios. Fernandes (2007) thus states that barrio women of Venezuela “have sought to take the initiative at the local level to make decisions regarding their community and the

implementation of local programs.” In this way, “these women are agents who are building new spaces of democratic community participation” (122).

INAMUJER and MinMujer

In addition to constitutional provisions specific to women, on October 25, 1999, President Chávez created *Instituto Nacional de la Mujer* (INAMUJER – National Institute for Women) by a presidential mandate in accordance with the Law of Equal Opportunities for Women (Wagner 2005). Women’s rights activist María León was appointed as the director and INAMUJER has been successful in promoting anti-domestic violence legislation and has organised educational campaigns on sexual and reproductive rights. INAMUJER has also set up a free telephone hotline for domestic violence victims in addition to shelters for women who are victims of domestic abuse – *Casas de Abrigo* (Wagner 2005). INAMUJER, and by extension the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, has recognised that the perpetuation of domestic violence is not only a form of discrimination against women, but it is also an issue which impedes the country’s political, economic and social development. In addition, on March 16, 2007 *Ley Orgánica sobre el Derecho de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* (Organic Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence) was passed by the government of Venezuela thereby repealing the 1998 *Ley sobre la Violencia contra la Mujer y la Familia* (Law on Violence against Women and the Family).

On March 8, 2008 President Chávez appointed León to head a new Women’s Affairs Ministry – an extension of INAMUJER. A year later on March 9, 2009, President Chávez during his weekly radio talk show *Aló Presidente* announced: “the Ministry of Women’s Affairs will become a ministry with a budget...what’s more, it occurs to me that it should be called the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality, since these are two distinct and complementary things” (Suggett 2009).

The new Ministry for Women was thus renamed *El Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Mujer y la Igualdad de Género* (MinMujer – Ministry of Popular Power for Women and Gender Equality).

BanMujer

Abbreviated *BanMujer*, *Banco de la Mujer* or the Women's Bank was launched by President Chávez on March 8, 2001 – International Women's Day. The late economist Nora Castañeda was placed at the helm of the bank. A prominent women's right activist and lecturer at Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) for over thirty-three years, Castañeda believed in *BanMujer* giving power to poor women. *BanMujer* issues micro-credit loans to small groups of women – normally five to nine women who may be all family members – to enable them to start up small-scale businesses or micro-enterprises such as bakeries, hair salons and cooperative farms etc. Such activities fall under the 'financial services' aspect of the bank. *BanMujer* also offers non-financial services such as training and technical support to women who have received micro credits and who have started business.

Women's Interests, Feminism and State Power

A relationship between women's emancipation and the creation of a socialist state is thus seen in the Venezuelan context. At the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil on January 30, 2009, President Chávez declared: "now I have declared myself to be feminist. I am a feminist. And I also say, I think, with all respect, I think that a true socialist has to be feminist...if not, there is something missing, there is something missing." In this way, President Chávez thus intimated that without feminism, the socialist project would not succeed. He brought together the struggles against class oppression by socialists, and against women's

oppression by feminists and married them into a popular feminism of twenty-first century socialism which works to meet the goals of the Bolivarian state. In light of such grand statements and the inclusion of women in policies and programmes, there thus exists what appears to be a resurgence of women's political participation and organising in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. This calls into question two important issues regarding feminism and women's organising in the Bolivarian state.

First, given the existence of a socialist feminist women's movement now operating within the scope of twenty-first century socialism, Professor Jessie Blanco (2007) has asked the question: is our socialism feminist? Such a question is further made relevant given what seems to be a polarisation in the movement – one caused by twenty-first century socialism with respect to the privileging of the struggle against capitalism, over the struggle against patriarchy and vice versa. The polarisation is thus an ideological one which has allowed for great discussion and debate by politicians, academics and stalwarts of the women's movement alike.

Second, Fernandes (2007), looking at the history of barrio women's organising beginning especially in the 1970's, concludes that the political organising of barrio women began long before the Bolivarian revolution began and in this way, the revolution itself was not the crucial element which pushed women to organise. She therefore looks at the start of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela as a point of "resurgence" of women's political organising and activism. In this way, Fernandes (2007, 122) posits that barrio women created their own local spaces for organising and activism – often in association with state organisations and institutions while still identifying with the policies of, and in support of, President Chávez.

Thus, even though women's political participation and mobilisation increased under President Chávez, the idea of *sin feminismo no hay socialismo*⁵ has

created ideological differences which then has allowed for debates about the improvement of women's lives. The political discursive space has indeed shifted under the Bolivarian revolution and twenty-first century socialism, as it now includes the language and understandings of feminism and women's empowerment. In this way, poorer women's understandings of feminism and how it is able to improve their lives has multiple meanings. Therefore, while some feminists may argue that the state's feminism is no feminism at all because it may not be transformative in the lives of poor and working class women, for poorer women feminism means being able to buy food, or being able to see a doctor free of charge or being able to send one's children to school. This feminism, as championed by the state, is equated with the Bolivarian revolution and twenty-first century socialism; therefore, for many women who have benefitted from twenty-first century socialism through satisfied needs and changed lives, there is indeed no feminism without socialism and vice versa. This new knowledge and discursive space has created new political subjectivities. In this way, the female consciousness and the feminist consciousness are very distinct as women's political participation and mobilisation around twenty-first century socialism is not exclusively tied to the feminism as espoused by the woman's movement, but instead to that of the state on the basis of practical needs being met.

Sustainability and Transformation of the Revolution

Through the creation of social programmes and furthermore, women's inclusion in political, social and economic policies and programmes, new political and gendered subjectivities have been created and fostered among women. However, such political and gendered subjectivities and a corresponding revolutionary consciousness still operate within what Blanco (2007) would describe as an "androcentric and heteronormative world." The question is then whether the Bolivarian revolution is truly transformative for men and women and

gender relations. Furthermore, is the Bolivarian revolution truly transformative for the Venezuelan people and if so, is it sustainable?

The power of sustaining the Bolivarian revolution lies with the Venezuelan people. The Bolivarian revolution has created a revolutionary consciousness. According to Cudjoe (1984, 49), such a consciousness “implies an awareness that the social behaviour of an individual is the direct result of the manner in which the state is organised and the values the state promulgates through its collective behaviour.” In this way, the relationships among poorer women, President Chávez, the Bolivarian state, and the feminist movement all construct the Bolivarian revolution, but also this new consciousness especially among the poor. This revolutionary consciousness and words such as ‘revolution,’ ‘rights’ and ‘citizenship’ have now formed part of the everyday language. For the poorer woman, her revolutionary consciousness is more than a heightened awareness that life has improved under President Chávez. Though this assessment plays a big role in it, this consciousness is a transformation of self – an ideological one – as she, unlike her pre-Bolivarian revolution self, understands the power she wields not only as a woman and mother, but also as a citizen of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, with rights granted in the constitution through government policies, programmes and institutions.

After the death of Chávez in 2013, President Nicolás Maduro has not only inherited the revolution, but also the economic woes which plague Venezuela. Issues such as inflation, food security and shortages and crime had emerged as major election issues. They have, therefore, not only aided in a lessening support of the revolution but also in the culmination of violent opposition protests and continued strong international anti-Chávez support. However, while a critical and revolutionary consciousness is essential, political life must be one of stability if the revolution is to not only survive but also be deemed credible. The gains of the revolution, especially for poorer women, are therefore made invisible given the economic instability in the nation, and the contradictions are further amplified by the Opposition.

However, given such a test for Maduro and the revolution, Rangel (2014) maintains that “the fact that there’s been better service to the poor, with numerous social investments, and that today these people, including the elderly, live better than 10 or 15 years ago explains why the popular neighborhoods have not joined the middle class protests, neither the peaceful majority of them and much less the violent factions.” Thus, after many years of political, social and economic exclusion, the Bolivarian Revolution has benefitted especially poorer women, and even in the midst of economic and political instability, for some, their support remains steadfast.

¹ Translated as: a social economy.

² See: www.un.org/esa/population/publications/abortion/doc/venezuela.doc

³ This figure obtains for cooperatives which were registered with SUNACCOOP upon creation.

⁴ See: Fundación José María Bengoa Para La Alimentación Y Nutrición’s information on Mission Mercal. http://www.fundacionbengoa.org/i_foro_alimentacion_nutricion_informacion/mision_mercal.asp

⁵ Translated as ‘without feminism, there is no socialism.’

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