

## **Venezuela's Gender Related MDGs Could Be Within Reach**

### **A Progressive Constitution Fighting for Women's Empowerment**

With the election of Hugo Chávez as president in 1998, Venezuela set out on a path of radical social change. Wielding what he terms “socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” Chávez has taken great strides in tackling poverty and social exclusion, while simultaneously promoting the equality and empowerment of women. One of Chávez' first acts as president was to draft a new constitution in line with his vision for the country. Thousands of women were encouraged to organize, draft demands for the constitution, and to promote the candidacy of feminists to the Constitutional Assembly. The result has often been referred to as the “non-sexist Magna-Carta,”<sup>1</sup> and effectively guarantees social, economic, and political rights to all citizens. The document was written with the knowledge that “language is not neutral or innocent, that it transmits the ideology of society, and that a machista language perpetuates a machista culture.”<sup>2</sup> With this in mind the creators made sure that all parts of the document were linguistically gender inclusive, effectively dismantling any semblance of inherent power dynamics. This new constitution entitles women to full citizenship under Venezuelan law, and addresses sexual harassment, discrimination, and domestic violence. It guarantees full equality between the sexes in the work place, and rather progressively states that “family relationships are based on equality of rights,” stressing “reciprocal respect among family

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<sup>1</sup> *Women and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution*

<sup>2</sup> *Women and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution*

members,”<sup>3</sup> in an effort to promote equality within the home as well. Perhaps most indicative of its commitment to equality is article 88, which “recognizes work at home as an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth,” entitling “housewives” to social security.<sup>4</sup>

### **Venezuela’s Commitment to Meeting the MDGs**

Meeting the Millennium Development Goals seems like it should be well within reach for a country which stresses social equality. Venezuela’s main vehicle for combating poverty and social exclusion comes in the form of *Misiones*, or Missions. Financed exclusively by oil revenues, these programs aim to promote healthcare and education, distribute food, create employment, and address a wide range of other social inequities. In late 2007, a confident Chávez stated that he was “sure that by 2015 we are going to meet these goals. I would even go so far as to say, responsibly, that we will surpass some of these indicators.”<sup>5</sup> Well it is undeniable that major efforts have been made towards this goal, outside analysts note that government statistics are not always reliable.<sup>6</sup> It has also been noted that “although the *misiones* were introduced [in 2001], there are no published impact assessments,”<sup>7</sup> hampering efforts to quantify change in relation to the MDGs.

### **Assessment of Progress**

I intend to outline the measures taken by the Venezuelan State, as well as domestic and international NGOs, in their efforts to achieve the MDGs by 2015. Specifically, I will be examining the goals that relate to gender. I will also analyze how

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<sup>3</sup> Venezuelan Constitution: Chapter V, Article 75

<sup>4</sup> Venezuelan Constitution: Chapter V, Article 88

<sup>5</sup> *Venezuela on Track to Meet UN Millennium Goals*

<sup>6</sup> *VENEZUELA: Poverty Stats Also Politicised*

<sup>7</sup> OneWorld Venezuela Guide

effective programs and policies have been in helping Venezuela to achieve these goals, while maintaining an emphasis on gendered solutions. Lastly, using statistics from the state, as well as outside entities, I will hypothesize about the likelihood of the MDGs being met by 2015.

### **Goal #1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger**

The main tenets of this goal are to halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 per day, and to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by the year 2015. Chávez' *Misiones* programs seek to alleviate poverty in a number of ways; providing subsidized food through fixed price *Mercals* (grocery markets,) establishing soup kitchens for the poorest of the poor, and offering employment training opportunities. Poverty affects women disproportionately, and the "feminization of poverty" is no new concept. Nearly 70 percent of the world's poor are women, who often "lack resources either to stave off poverty in the first place, or to climb out of poverty."<sup>8</sup> Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez recognizes this, and has adopted an approach which accounts for "the severity and complexity of the feminization of poverty and [makes] a concerted effort to implement holistic policies towards this sector of the population."<sup>9</sup> This is most readily apparent through the state run bank *Banmujer*. Describing itself as a "social development bank,"<sup>10</sup> *Banmujer* offers both financial as well as social aid. It offers low-interest micro credit loans to groups of between five and ten women. Promoters from the bank pay weekly visits to the 149 most impoverished and densely populated communities, in order to bring the services of the bank to under-privileged women.<sup>11</sup> Not

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<sup>8</sup> Seager, *Penguin Atlas of Women on the World*, Page 88

<sup>9</sup> *The Bolivarian Response to the Feminization of Poverty in Venezuela*

<sup>10</sup> *The Bolivarian Response to the Feminization of Poverty in Venezuela*

<sup>11</sup> *The Bolivarian Response to the Feminization of Poverty in Venezuela*

only does the bank help fight women's poverty through monetary means, but it offers non-financial services as well. Monthly workshops are held free of charge, which are designed to empower women, both politically and socially, further augmenting their rise from poverty.

NGOs have also traditionally played a role in helping ease poverty within Venezuela. Unfortunately there has been a lot of recent tension between the Chávez administration and NGOs. Súmate, an NGO based in Venezuela, backed a referendum in 2004 which sought to recall president Chávez. The money for this campaign was largely financed by the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. NGO which receives most of its funding from the U.S. Congress.<sup>12</sup> Currently the Chávez administration is pushing a law through congress that would "give the government discretionary power to restrict the work of some NGOs or eliminate them."<sup>13</sup> As a result NGO activity, especially from international sources, is fairly limited at the moment.

Whether or not Venezuela is going to meet the first goal by 2015 is a contested topic. The Venezuelan Minister of Education is claiming that it has already been met, "if the [first] goal for 2015 is to reduce it by half, at this moment we are at 7.8 percent, down from 21 percent."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately these numbers were never clarified. In context it is clear that the Minister is talking about the first goal, but he never explicitly says what the percentages are in reference to. Furthermore, he claims the percentage has decreased, but doesn't give a date for the baseline number of 21%. The official UN site for the MDG indicators has no available data for 2000, 2001, or 2002, but show that from 2003 to 2006 the number of people living on below \$1 per day has dropped significantly from 18.4% to

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<sup>12</sup> *Heritage Foundation & Venezuela's International Cooperation Law*

<sup>13</sup> *NGOs Warn of Restrictions in Pending Venezuelan Law*

<sup>14</sup> *Venezuela on Track to Meet Millennium Goals*

3.5%,<sup>15</sup> and this seems to loosely corroborate the Minister's statement. One must keep in mind though that these numbers are self reported by the government, and as discussed previously government statistics are not always reliable. The MDG monitor<sup>16</sup> claims that there is not enough data to judge whether or not Venezuela will meet the goal by 2015. Venezuela's GDP grew by 8% last year, and it is expected to have sustained growth in the years to follow. With profits rolling in from oil dollars, and as long as social welfare continues to be a priority for the Chávez regime, then I see no reason why this goal could not be met by 2015.

### **Goal #2: Achieve Universal Primary Education**

### **And Goal #3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women**

The second goal hopes to ensure that by 2015, all children are required to complete a full course of primary schooling. The third works to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education, and to eliminate gender disparities in the number of people employed in the non-agricultural sector, and in the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament. Since these two goals both deal somewhat with education, I have decided to analyze them simultaneously, tackling education first and gender disparities second.

### **Education**

Venezuelans take their education seriously. This is evinced in articles 102 and 103 of their new constitution which state, "Education is a human right and a fundamental social duty; it is democratic, free of charge, and obligatory," and "Every person has a right to a full, ongoing, and high-quality education under conditions and circumstances of

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<sup>15</sup> <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.mdgmonitor.org/country\\_progress.cfm?c=VEN&cd=862](http://www.mdgmonitor.org/country_progress.cfm?c=VEN&cd=862)

equality... education offered at State institutions is free of charge up to the undergraduate university level.” Education is a critical ingredient for empowerment to take place, and by addressing it as a right of *every person*, Venezuela shows its commitment to the task. Since the inception of the new constitution, the percentage of the national budget dedicated to education has grown from 3% to 7.1%,<sup>17</sup> pre-school was made universal and free, over 650 new schools have been built and thousands have been remodeled. Enrollment fees were abrogated and three free meals a day were provided in all schools. Perhaps the most influential educational reform has been *Misión Robinson*, a nationwide illiteracy campaign of a truly ambitious level. The government realized that if they wanted to make substantial holistic change it would have to be brought about by the people themselves. A massive PR campaign was launched emphasizing the importance of literacy, and stressing that being illiterate was nothing to be ashamed of. Public opinion was successfully changed, and enrollment rates soared. Working closely with *Banmujer* and other women’s groups throughout Venezuela ensured that enrollment rates for women were the highest of all. As of the most recent data, over 67%<sup>18</sup> of graduates from *Misión Robinson* are female. To date, the program has taught over 1.4 million<sup>19</sup> Venezuelans to read and write. Another interesting fact about the *Misión Robinson* program is that it makes use of a Cuban-Venezuelan bilateral trade agreement in which 53,000 barrels of oil are shipped to Cuba daily at a reduced price, and thousands of professionals, (including teachers,) are sent to work in Venezuela.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Venezuela: Illiteracy Free Territory*

<sup>18</sup> *Venezuela: Illiteracy Free Territory*

<sup>19</sup> *Venezuela: Illiteracy Free Territory*

<sup>20</sup> *Venezuela: Illiteracy Free Territory*

I was unable to find any information on international or domestic NGOs at work on education within Venezuela. It is possible that this is a reflection of the tensions mentioned earlier between the government and NGOs, but it is more probable that work in this area is just not currently needed in Venezuela.

In regards to meeting the education aspects of goals two and three, Venezuela is well on its way. As of 2007, 94% of all children were enrolled in primary school, growing significantly from 89.5% in 2000, with girls having a slight majority. Literacy rates as of 2007 stand at 98% and 98.8% for men and women between 15 and 24 years of age respectively.<sup>21</sup> The MDG monitor says that Venezuela is on track, and likely to meet goal #2 by 2015.<sup>22</sup>

### **Gender Disparity in Work and Politics**

The second half of goal #3 deals with promoting gender equality in politics as well as the workforce. In general the government has worked hard to ensure that constitutionally, women are seen as equal to men in all ways. As well as recognizing the value of domestic work, Article 88 of the Venezuelan constitution “guarantees the equality and equitable treatment of men and women in the exercise of the right to work.” As discussed previously, *Banmujer*’s micro loan programs have sought to fund new businesses for women. Additionally, the bank puts on administrative training clinics for women wishing to further their careers. Also of interest to note is that *Banmujer* employs an all female staff.

Being a Latin American country, Venezuelan society still holds a predominately machismo attitude. Gendered violence is exceedingly prevalent in Venezuela. Upwards

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<sup>21</sup> MDG Goals Indicator <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> MDG Monitor [http://www.mdgmonitor.org/country\\_progress.cfm?c=VEN&cd=862](http://www.mdgmonitor.org/country_progress.cfm?c=VEN&cd=862)

of 70%<sup>23</sup> of all women in Venezuela suffer from some sort of gendered violence, an alarming rate given that the constitution is so pro gender equality. As long as attitudes exist which condone violence towards women, the general populace will continue to see women as inferior to men and this will be reflected in gender disparities in the professional world. To combat this problem a nationwide PR campaign has been implemented to help change views on domestic violence. The “Count to Three” campaign is the combined project of NGOs, the state Institute for Women, United Nations agencies in Venezuela and Fondo Común, a private bank. It is a series of advertisements on radio and TV which aim to hold men accountable for their actions and appeal to them to “stop, think about their families, and count to three”<sup>24</sup> before acquiescing to violence. To coincide with this campaign, the state enacted the Organic Law on the Right of Women to Be Free from Violence, which dictates the right of women to:” a) life; b) protection of the dignity and physical, psychological, sexual, and legal integrity of victims; c) equality between men and women; d) protection of women who are particularly vulnerable to violence; and e) information and counseling for victims.”<sup>25</sup> The law also stipulated the obligations of various governing agencies and institutions in providing the infrastructure and training necessary to make this happen, as well as setting forth punishments for violations of each of the above mentioned rights.

In regards to meeting the non-educational aspects of MDG #3, while Venezuela has made progressive constitutional changes, they still have a ways to go. Though more women than men are making it through the educational system, this is not reflected in equal access to the job market, or equal pay. Women seeking jobs have faced

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<sup>23</sup> *Venezuela Has a Woman's Face*

<sup>24</sup> *Venezuela: Anti-domestic Violence Campaign Targets Men.*

<sup>25</sup> UNFPA Global Population Policy Update: Venezuela Enacts Law on Violence Against Women



discrimination, with 23% having spent at least the last 2 years looking for employment.<sup>26</sup> Venezuela has very generous maternity leave laws, which leads to workforce disparity as “the employers would rather have a male worker, who won't take that leave.”<sup>27</sup> This has further disempowered women as they are forced to turn to the informal sector to find employment, which oftentimes consists of prostitution or other dangerous jobs. The overall percentage of women working for wages in the non-agricultural sector has only risen by 1.6% since 2000, leaving the total at 41.4%.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, though article 88 may place economic value on domestic work, in reality it “is rarely if ever viewed as productive labor.”<sup>29</sup> Political gains haven't fared much better. While Human Development Reports show that the number of women holding parliamentary seats has increased by 10% from 2003 to 2007,<sup>30</sup> the total number of seats held remains a paltry 18.6%.<sup>31</sup> It is of worth to note that women's grassroots organizations wield a decent amount of power in the larger cities such as Caracas, and that over half of all *Chavistas* are women.<sup>32</sup> Lastly, many laws and constitutional rights, including the Organic Law on the Right of Women to Live Free from Violence, have not been implemented properly. Amnesty International has stated that the government has failed to “fulfill their obligations,” and that by the end of 2007, “there were still no shelters in most of the country and insufficient training had been put in place to enable police officers to implement the law effectively.”<sup>33</sup> Still, progress is being made on all fronts, even if it is

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<sup>26</sup> *Venezuela Has A Woman's Face*

<sup>27</sup> *Gender in Venezuela*

<sup>28</sup> MDG Goals Indicator <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>

<sup>29</sup> *Venezuela Has A Woman's Face*

<sup>30</sup> *Chavez, Women's Rights, and Dodgy Statistics*

<sup>31</sup> MDG Goals Indicator <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>

<sup>32</sup> *Revolutionizing Women's Roles in Venezuela*

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International Report 2009: Venezuela

less than expected. The MDG Monitor has ranked Venezuela as on track, and likely to succeed by 2015.

### **Goal #5: Improve Maternal Health**

This goal seeks to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters before 2015, as well as providing universal access to reproductive health. This is also the last MDG which is significantly related to gender within Venezuela.

Article 83 of the Venezuelan constitution states that “health is a fundamental social right and the responsibility of the State, which shall guarantee it as part of the right to life.”<sup>34</sup> This mandate has been taken pretty seriously, and *Misión* health programs have spread across the country. The same bilateral Cuban-Venezuelan trade agreement which provides teachers for the Robinson program secured the shipment of over 20,000 Cuban doctors and dentists to the country as part of *Misión Barrio Adentro* (Inside the Neighborhood.) These doctors provide free healthcare to Venezuelans near their homes in the country's poorest communities, “many of whom had never seen a doctor before.”<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the program provides for the training of Venezuelan medical students in integral community medicine in Cuba. Yet another article in the constitution gives women the right to decide responsibly how many children they wish to have, and entitles them “to access to the information and means necessary to exercise this right.”<sup>36</sup> This ensures that all women have a right to state funded birth control options.

A number of domestic NGOs are working within the country in conjunction with *Barrio Adentro* to ensure that women know how to use the free government services.

Additionally, the international NGO UNICEF has an office within the country dedicated

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<sup>34</sup> Venezuelan Constitution: Chapter V, Article 83

<sup>35</sup> OneWorld Venezuela Guide

<sup>36</sup> Venezuelan Constitution: Chapter V, Article 76

to the broad concept of “Promoting Basic Education and Gender Equality,” of which an integral part of their program is promoting “values and human rights for... women... including sexual and reproductive rights.”<sup>37</sup> Specifics of what this program actually does were not able to be located.

Since its inception in 2003, Barrio Adentro has registered over 185.7 million visits and saved over 25,000 lives.<sup>38</sup> More doctors in more clinics reaching into poverty stricken areas should mean a higher rate of professionally attended births, as well as better access to reproductive health care. Unfortunately there is no conclusive data to back this up. The UN MDG Indicators show a single statistic of 57 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2005, without data from any previous years to use as a baseline for comparison. Additionally, there has been no data collected on the unmet need for family planning after 1998, when it stood at 18.9%. It is possible that significant gains have been made in both these areas; after all, the Venezuelan Secretary of Education has claimed that “we are improving and we can say without a doubt that we are going to meet the goals.”<sup>39</sup> If Venezuela has the data to back up these assertions, they haven’t reliably shared it with the world. Still, the UN MDG Monitor says that this goal is “possible to achieve if some changes are made,” which is still incredibly vague. Even if this goal was achieved by or before 2015, there is a growing concern about the unsustainability inherent within the system. Current practices depend on the availability of Cuban doctors, eventually there will need to be a phasing in of local staff, of which Venezuelans do not have enough of.

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<sup>37</sup> Country Programme Document for Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

<sup>38</sup> *Chavez Announces Major New Health Care Project for Venezuela*

<sup>39</sup> *Venezuela on Track to Meet UN Millennium Goals*

## **Conclusions**

Venezuela has an outwardly very progressive constitution, and this should help to ensure equality as it relates to the MDGs. The Mission programs, as well as a number of progressive laws and PR campaigns aimed at dismantling gender roles and discrimination have the potential to make holistic, discursive change. If these institutions continue to be upheld in complete, Venezuela has a very good chance of achieving these gender related MDGs. There are however a number of criticisms about the accuracy and availability of statistics, which would need to be addressed before the accomplishment of these goals can be speculated on conclusively.

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