



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

## *Fact Sheet:* **The Revolution has a Woman's Face**

### **Facts & Numbers**

- Four out of the five Branches of Government are headed by women.
- Women's representation in the National Assembly increased from 10% to 16.5%.
- The "State Ministry for Women's Affairs" was created in 2008 and only one year later President Chavez proposed for it to become the "Ministry of Popular Power for Women and Gender Equality", which implies a more comprehensive financial and organizational structure with new responsibilities and more room to act.
- 56,447 cases related to violence against women have been handled by the Public Prosecution Service within the last 2 years.
- "Gender Sensitive Budgeting" on a ministerial level was introduced in 2008.
- Two million women benefited from the services of the National Women's Development Bank.
- Venezuela's Constitution is the first one in Latin America to consider housework as an economically productive activity.
- 70 % of students in Venezuela's Social Missions are women.
- Female participation in Communal Councils averages 80% to 90%.
- In 2008's regional elections, 50 % of all obtainable political positions went to women.
- Venezuela has South America's smallest wage gap based on gender and the third smallest in the Western Hemisphere.
- Women's participation in the workforce has increased by 20 % over the past ten years.

Women have been at the forefront of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution since the Chavez government took office in 1999. The National Defender of Women's Rights, noted in 2005 that, "**In this revolution women have participated extraordinarily ... It has empowered them ... [it] has woken women up and feminism is reaching the popular sectors. Now all women know they have the right to participate**".<sup>1</sup>

This year Venezuelans (and non-Venezuelans) celebrate the **10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolivarian Revolution**; an important date for Venezuelan women as the last ten years have brought major positive changes in terms of their rights and their socio-economic and

political protagonism. Unfortunately, it has not always been that way. In fact researchers argue that democracy used to be a "gender-exclusive phenomenon" in Venezuela and women were strongly disadvantaged by penal, civil, and labor laws.<sup>2</sup> Much has changed in Venezuela since 1999. The Chavez government has taken key legal and institutional measures to guarantee gender equality and to promote the active participation of women in political, social and economic processes.

### **Legal Advancements**

One of the first tasks carried out by Hugo Chavez in his role as President of the Republic



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

was to call for an assembly in order to create a constitution that should be the result of the participation of all sectors of society and therefore reflect the real interests of the people. Thousands of women, including, feminists, housewives, professionals, and members of various civil society organizations educated and organized each other in order to draft demands for the constitution and to promote the candidacy of feminists to the constitutional assembly. With the approval of the new constitution in December 1999, Venezuelan women achieved an unprecedented victory, and a “constitution that is a model for the world for justice and equality”.<sup>3</sup> Importantly it was composed with the use of non-sexist language and is **often referred to as the Non-Sexist Magna-Carta**.<sup>4</sup>

The constitution makes clear that all persons are entitled to full citizenship, and it prohibits discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. In addition to guaranteeing full equality among men and women in employment, it is **the first constitution in Latin America that recognises housework as an economically productive activity**, entitling houseworkers to social security and other benefits. (Article 88).<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the constitution, a number of federal laws were designed within the last ten years, to make sure women’s rights are respected. The **1999 Law on Equal Opportunities for Women** addresses the equal and indiscriminate participation of women in all sectors of society. The **2007 Organic Law for Women to a Life free**

**from Violence** addresses sexual harassment and domestic violence and has been “hailed as a positive step” by Amnesty International<sup>6</sup>. The **2000 Law for the Protection of Children** is also important in this context. Moreover, thanks to the **2001 Law on Land and Agricultural Development**; women are now in a better position to support their families through provisions allowing them to qualify as heads of household, to lead agricultural projects, and to hold preferential property rights. Furthermore, the Chavez government opened all branches of the armed forces to women and made sure that women can fully develop their professional career within the military, if they desire to

*“ without the Venezuelan women there would be no authentic revolution.”*  
*President Chavez*

do so.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the new **Organic Law for Gender Equality** has been approved by the National Assembly in the first round and aims at guaranteeing equal rights for women and men as foreseen in the Venezuelan Constitution and the international treaties and conventions ratified by the Bolivarian Republic.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, this law also includes an important section on partnerships between persons of equal sexes.<sup>9</sup>

However, what is most important about these laws is the fact that they are not just “nice words on paper”, but that they are very much enforced. For example, on March 12 this year, the Public Prosecution Service reported that 56,447 cases have been handled related to violence against women within the last 2 years. Furthermore, Venezuela counts now on 60 prosecution offices specialized on gender violence and 10 more of those are planned for the year 2009. The Prosecutor’s Office has organized a series of classes to train personnel to appropriately deal with denunciations related to gender violence.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the National Women’s Institute has launched a



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

campaign to sensitize the public about domestic violence against women.

**Women as political protagonists**

Huge achievements have been made in terms of female *political* participation in the last ten years. By 2009, four out of five branches of the Venezuelan government are headed by women: The National Assembly (Legislative), the Supreme Court (Judicial), the Republican Moral Council (Citizen), and the National Electoral Council (Electoral).

However, women are also extremely active in local politics and especially in “Communal Councils”, best described as elected neighborhood-based councils that take part in local politics and execute development projects geared toward improving the socio-economic situation of their communities.<sup>11</sup> Female participation in these spaces averages 80 % to 90%.<sup>12</sup> As explained by the Venezuela Information Office: “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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 ... 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."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, female postulations for regional political positions have strongly increased as well, thanks to a new regulation introduced by the National Electoral Council in last November’s regional elections. This new regulation, which is based on article 57 of the Organic Law for Gender Equality (still awaiting its final approval from the National Assembly), dictates that fifty percent of the postulates need to be women. The election

results speak for themselves: **In 2008’s regional elections, 50 % of all obtainable political positions went to women, while in 2004 this number equaled only 10 %.**<sup>14</sup>



**President Chavez and the Minister for Women and Gender Equality, Maria Leon**

Another important step for women in politics was the creation of the **State Ministry for Women’s Affairs** in 2008, headed by a lifelong activist for women’s rights, Maria Leon. The National Women’s Institute (Inamujer), which grew out of the 1999 law on equal opportunities for women and was set up to ensure the implementation of gender related legislation, is now brought under the roof of the Ministry



## Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

together with the mission “Madres del Barrio” and the financial institution “Banmujer”. In April 2009, the State Ministry for Women’s Affairs became the “**Ministry of Popular Power for Women and Gender Equality**” by presidential decrees no. 6,663 and no. 6,665. This implies having a more comprehensive financial and organizational structure with new responsibilities and more room to act.<sup>15</sup> Maria Leon continues to be the head of the new Ministry.

While the number of female ministers has generally increased within the last years, progress is still needed in that area. By 2009, eight ministries are spearheaded by women. For example, the Indigenous Peoples Ministry is led by Nicia Maldonado, an indigenous woman from the Amazon region, heading a team of seven viceministers, of whom three are women as well.

### ***Women and Venezuela’s Social Missions***

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At the heart of the government’s campaign against poverty and social exclusion are the country’s social missions, best described as “state-sponsored grassroots oriented development programs, addressing pressing needs in various fields of human development such as education, health, culture, food security, job training and housing”.<sup>16</sup> Since 2003, more than two dozen of these missions have been created and they “have made special efforts to incorporate women, especially in the educational projects, including bringing them into the universities in larger numbers — 70 % of new students at that level are now women.”<sup>17</sup> Studies have shown that the missions have contributed to a 9.9 % decrease in the poverty rate since 2003, amounting to 33.4 % in 2008, as compared to 50,5 % in 1998.<sup>18</sup>

***Mothers of the Barrio*** is one of these missions that focuses particularly on women and has three important objectives: fighting unintended pregnancies in girls, offering aid to mothers who live in extreme poverty, and lowering drug use among young people. In fact President Chavez made clear that “With this mission, we want to give a hand to mothers who are in need and homemakers without a fixed income”.<sup>19</sup> By 2006, the mission provided some 200.000 women with stipends averaging \$ 176 per month, or 60 – 80 % of the minimum wage. The funds are allotted according to need and they rotate, so that more beneficiaries can be covered.<sup>20</sup> This mission collaborates also with other ones, such as Barrio Adentro (health services), Robinson, Ribas and Sucre (educational missions), Negra Hipolita (Afro-Venezuelans) or Guaicaipuro (Indigenous Peoples) in order to secure that women’s needs are being taken care of comprehensively.

On International Women’s Day 2009, Minister Leon announced that during the year 2008 projects to strengthen the nuclear family and to prevent teenage pregnancy were established in 9 Venezuelan states, forming 14,560 educators and 8 centers that teach young girls about issues related to early pregnancies.

### ***National Women’s Development Bank***

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The Woman’s Development Bank (Banmujer) is a microfinance institution set up in 2001 and geared especially towards the support of women in the area of economic development. **Being the only national financial institution of its kind in the world**, Banmujer gives small, low-interest credits to women, which allows them to develop their own business projects. As of late 2007, approximately 2



## Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

million<sup>21</sup> women had benefited from the bank's loans and its training programs and more than 260.000 jobs<sup>22</sup> have been created thanks to these business initiatives. The credits average between £180 and £365 and are subsidized by the government, which allows the bank to charge interest as low as one percent.<sup>23</sup>

Nora Castaneda, the President of Banmujer made clear that the objective of the institution would be to **“create a caring economy at the service of human beings”**.<sup>24</sup> Part of the programme's success is its design, which makes sure to help develop sustainable businesses. Castañeda explains, “If we just gave them money the women would continue to be poor, but ... with debts.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the bank offers additional courses and services that aim at supporting women in the creation of businesses that provide them with a long-term source of income. It does so for example, by sending its staff to rural communities to assist women who live in far away regions, having financial or other problems that hinder them in reaching urban centers. Castaneda questioned: “How can the poorest indigenous women in the state of Amazonas, the southernmost state in the country, come here, if they are so poor, to ask for a credit?”<sup>26</sup>

### Gender Sensitive Budgeting

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Microfinance initiatives for women are not the only financial incentives to guarantee socio-economic gender equality in Venezuela. In May 2005 President Hugo Chávez issued instructions for gender equality to be taken into account in public budgeting, "with the aim of ensuring that government policies and programmes equally benefit women, men, boys and girls."<sup>27</sup> This means that issues like road construction or the building of schools

are now joined by priorities like teen pregnancy or domestic violence prevention.

Furthermore, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) found that women in Venezuela enjoy more equal pay than those in other South American countries. Venezuela has the continent's smallest wage gap based on gender, and the third smallest wage gap in the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, women's participation in the workforce has risen by 20% over the past ten years.<sup>28</sup>

As comes out clearly from these pages, women **are at the forefront of Bolivarian politics**. They have been a focal point of governmental and grassroots programmes. But more importantly than anything else, this process has empowered women to assume active roles in the making of this new Venezuela; a Venezuela that aims for social justice and an inclusive environment for all groups of society.

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For more information visit:

[www.venezlon.co.uk](http://www.venezlon.co.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/877>

<sup>2</sup> Venezuelanalysis, “Women and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution”

<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/877>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The Guardian, “The Price of Divorce”, July 23, 2009

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/journalismcompetition/price-of-divorce>

<sup>7</sup> Venezuela Information Office, “Revolutionizing Women's Roles in Venezuela”,

<http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Revolutionizing%20Women's%20Roles%20in%20Venezuela.htm>



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the UK and Ireland

<sup>8</sup> Aporrea, “Se incrementa la presencia femenina para cargos de elección en Venezuela”, January 25, 2009, <http://www.aporrea.org/poderpopular/n127658.html>

<sup>9</sup> Aporrea.org, “Ley de Equidad de Género dará derechos legales a las parejas homosexuales”, March 22, 2009, <http://www.aporrea.org/ddhh/n131288.html>

<sup>10</sup> Aporrea.org, “Ministerio Público ha dictado 56 mil 447 actos conclusivos en materia de violencia de Género”, 12.03.2009, retrieved 17.03.2009, [www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n130539.html](http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n130539.html)

<sup>11</sup> Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington D.C., “Ten Years of Revolution”, <<http://www.embavenez-us.org/?pagina=http://www.embavenez-us.org/year10rev.php&titulo=10%20years%20of%20R evolution>>

<sup>12</sup> Australia Venezuela Solidarity Network, “Building Popular Power in the Venezuelan Town of Carora”, April 2007, <http://www.venezuelasolidarity.org/?q=node/201>

<sup>13</sup> Venezuela Information Office, “Revolutionizing Women’s Roles in Venezuela”, <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Revolutionizing%20Women's%20Roles%20in%20Venezuela.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Aporrea, “Se incrementa la presencia femenina para cargos de elección en Venezuela”, January 25, 2009, <http://www.aporrea.org/poderpopular/n127658.html>

<sup>15</sup> ABN, Ministerio de la Mujer tendrá Cartera y Nueva Denominación, retrieved March 13, 2009, <http://www.abn.info.ve/noticia.php?articulo=172727&lee=4>

<sup>16</sup> Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington D.C., “Social Justice in Venezuela”, <http://www.embavenez-us.org/factsheet/socialjustice.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Venezuelanalysis, “Women propel Venezuela’s Revolution forward”, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/1912>

<sup>18</sup> Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington D.C., “Ten Years of Revolution”, <<http://www.embavenez-us.org/?pagina=http://www.embavenez-us.org/year10rev.php&titulo=10%20years%20of%20R evolution>>

<sup>19</sup> Venezuelanalysis, “Venezuela announces new mission: Mothers of the Barrio”, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/1672>

<sup>20</sup> Venezuela Information Office, “Revolutionizing Women’s Roles in Venezuela”, <http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Revolutionizing%20Women's%20Roles%20in%20Venezuela.htm>

[nizing%20Women's%20Roles%20in%20Venezuela.htm](http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Revolutionizing%20Women's%20Roles%20in%20Venezuela.htm)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “The Women’s Development Bank in Venezuela: “Creating a Caring Economy”, <http://www.coha.org/2008/07/the-women%E2%80%99s-development-bank-in-venezuela-creating-a-caring-economy/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Venezuelanalysis, “Budgets in Venezuela take on a Woman’s Face”, November 2008, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/3939>

<sup>28</sup> Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington D.C., “Ten of the Most Significant Human Rights Advances”, <http://www.embavenez-us.org/factsheet/ddhhtop10english.pdf>