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“Otro Mundo Es Posible”: Women Power In the VI Caracas World Social Forum and the Bolivarian Revolution

By Renée Kasinsky¹

Abstract

This is an insider's account of the participation of a Boston delegate at the World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela in January 2006. She relates the stories of women who attended the WSF and those women who through their leadership in their communities create a new world order based on the major themes of the WSF. The health and welfare missions created by the Bolivarian revolution of Hugo Chávez are testimony to the theme of the forum that through the process of participatory democracy “*Otro Mundo Es Posible*”.

Keywords: VI World Social Forum/Caracas, Feminism, participatory democracy

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The author wishes to acknowledge the hundreds of Venezuelans who generously took the time to share their stories and fill me with inspiration and awe. I also wish to thank my partners with the Boston delegation to the World Social Forum in Caracas who shared information and were inspiring in their own right.

A major feminist contribution has been the practice of informing theory by one's own experiences. Analyzing others' experiences likewise has led to new theories and practices. Experiments in participatory democracy have been major contributions of the New Left and feminist movements. The emergence of the World Social Forum in 2001 and new mass social movements, especially in Latin America have served as inspiration for proponents of democracy around the world.

In the first part of this paper I offer an analysis of my experience as a participant in the Boston Social Forum (2004) and Caracas World Social Forum (2006). I argue that the choice of Caracas as a location for the VI WSF and the Venezuelan context gave a political and social shape to this WSF that was unique and cannot be ignored. For this reason, in the second part of this paper I highlight how some of the major feminist themes of the Caracas World Social Forum have been conceptually shaped as well as carried out in practice by women leaders throughout their communities in Venezuela. The Venezuelan women not only believe the overall theme of the World Social Forum that “another world is possible,” they are bringing it to fruition.

From the Boston Social Forum to the VI World Social Forum in Caracas

I attended the Boston Social Forum in the summer of 2004, just before the Democratic Convention began. At that time I had little idea of its origins and its significance both to myself and to the world. I went as a curious observer and became a

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participant in the Women's Tribunal on Violence Against Violence sponsored by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and other women's groups. Four of us shared our stories about violence with a limited audience. Later that evening the "wise women" who listened issued their verdict: violence against women was a systemic occurrence which was largely unacknowledged and treated in our society as personal wrongs. As a faculty member at University of Massachusetts I had taught about gender violence. Now I was an insider telling my own story, integrating theory and praxis.

When I heard there would be a VI World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela two years later in January of 2006 I signed up to be part of a self-appointed Boston delegation. I have a particular interest in Latin cultures and have traveled and lived in this part of the world. In 1961 I spent three weeks with an Antioch student group observing the early stages of the Cuban revolution. Thirty-seven years later in 1998 I returned to Cuba with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) as a delegate to the "Encuentro Internacional de Solidaridad Entre Mujeres." Through the 1970s and into the early 1990s I was part of the Guatemala committee in Boston working to support the Guatemalan refugees. In 1994 I became an *acompañante* accompanying Guatemalan refugees back to their homeland after 13 years in camps in Chiapis, Mexico.² Becoming a delegate to the WSF was a continuation of my life-long activism. My curiosity about the non-violent Bolivarian revolution made the Caracas Social Forum my first choice. I spent two weeks in Venezuela, as a participant observer.

The VI Caracas World Social Forum: *Otro Mundo Es Posible*

The first World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001. It was conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum that brought together global business and political leaders every year since 1971. In 2006 there was a new polycentric model of meetings held in three cities on three different continents: Bamako, the capital of Mali; Caracas, the capital of Venezuela; and Karachi, a major financial center in the south of Pakistan.

The WSF is an annual meeting of representatives of civil society from all over the world. It has an explicit structure that characterizes itself as an "open space" model of the meeting of peoples from civil society that has excluded leaders of governments. It prides itself on its participatory character with multiple global voices of large trans-local movements. It has no political agenda in terms of embracing particular political parties.

The choice to hold the WSF in Caracas, Venezuela was not an arbitrary one. Despite the fact that the WSF has always claimed independence from all governments, heads of state or political parties, the V WSF "Hemisphere Committee" held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2005 had selected Venezuela as the next host and had invited President

² The Antioch College delegation to Cuba were guests of the Institute of Agrarian Reform and were given an old *guagua* (bus) to tour the island and see for ourselves how Cubans were revolutionizing their lives. In the summer of 1962 with the American Friends Service Committee I worked with Guatemalan Indians in Paticia, Guatemala. In Boston for more than a decade in the 1980s together with others from the Guatemala Committee we supported the Guatemalan refugees. In 1994 I was able more directly to provide that support. I became an *acompañante* with the Witness for Peace group working with the UN Commission of Refugees to accompany Guatemalan refugees living in camps in Chiapis, Mexico back to Nenton, Guatemala. Their strong spirit forging ahead to create a new community "*Nueva Esperanza*" ("New Hope") in the face of many unknowns and hardships was a most humbling experience.

Hugo Chavez to address the Forum. He was the only foreign head of state to visit the Forum and made a commitment to accept the invitation to host the 2006 WSF. The organizers considered Venezuela an ally of anti-imperialist popular forces in Latin America (Dujisin 2006).

Compared to Porto Alegre, Caracas is a more typically third world city, one marked by a sharp divide between rich and poor. The plush urban malls frequented by the elites and middle class are in sharp relief to the squalid but vibrant shantytowns or ranchos rising on the mountains surrounding the city. A highly efficient underground mass transit system coexists with clogged surface roads and high rates of violent crime. Delegates to the 2006 WSF were not only influenced by its physical setting. The more highly politicized Venezuelan environment gave many of the Forum events a political focus. The Bolivarian revolutionary models were ever present and the *Chavistas* provided a lively spirited environment whose trappings were seen everywhere.

Chavista soldiers were ubiquitous with their trademark red berets of the Chavez non-violent revolution. The attachment of the masses to President Hugo Chávez was evident by their chanting and strong rapport when he appeared at the closing gathering of the Forum. The omnipresent vendors in the secondary economy supplied a mass production of Chávez T-shirts, clocks and *Chavecito* dolls. The Chávez government went all out to support the WSF from the beginning. They provided student volunteers to greet and provide registration materials to delegates at the airport, free buses from the airport to downtown Caracas, an exemption from foreign airport taxes exiting from Caracas and free rides on the subway for those with a WSF delegate badge. The youth who were camped out by the thousands in a tenting area were the recipients of free lunches and souvenirs with WSF logos.

However there were no claims that there had been an effort on the part of the Chávez government to set the Forum agenda or determine its content according to Forum organizers. As in previous forums, the Caracas Forum attempted to open up social and political space for all those participants in social movements. In addition, the delegates also got a clear taste of the ever-present opposition. There were venomous articles daily against Chávez in the established press and on the majority of television channels. There were anti-Chávez scrawls on the walls in the wealthy neighborhoods in Caracas.

There were over 80,000 participants that registered for the Caracas Forum, most of whom were part of organized delegations. Venezuelans had the largest number of delegations, followed by Columbia and the USA. One of the largest North-American NGO's, Global Exchange, had over 200 delegates. There were thousands of individual delegates, mostly from North America that came outside a delegation.

Much of the organizing for the VI WSF was done via the web. Organizations signed up for registration and sessions on the inter-net. Two 9" x 11" booklets of over 50 pages containing more than 2,000 individual sessions were distributed. Brazil organized more than 500 sessions, followed by Venezuela with 400, Columbia with 200 and the USA with 100 sessions. The sessions and other events connected to the Forum occurred in different locations throughout Caracas over a 6 day period. It was a lively amalgam of workshops, panels and hands-on demonstrations.

In addition to panels and workshops there were international cultural presentations interwoven throughout the large public spaces. Music, dancing, arts and crafts assaulted all the senses. There were spontaneous demonstrations and meetings.

Activists held interactive sessions and displayed their written materials in tents. Feminist groups held sessions in tents of their respective countries. For example, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom held panels on water rights and women's human rights.

The major themes were listed on the Caracas World Social Forum website. The overall theme was that "Otro Mundo Es Posible." The first stream was devoted to major structural issues such as economic globalization, militarism and war and the newer issues of caste, race and patriarchy. The second stream was the relationship of the forum to these issues and the effects they have on our lives. The feminist themes highlighted were:

- struggles for social emancipation—"*struggles against patriarchy and against all forms of domination and violence*"
- *struggles for human rights and people's rights* and resistance against neo-liberalism.
- struggles for access, redistribution and protection of resources *including "sexual rights, reproductive rights and the decriminalization of abortion"*
- *labor and gender inequalities*
- rights to communication to strengthen citizenship and democratic participation. An example is "social-cultural movements as people's resistance."
- diversities including *sexual diversity and gender identities* (WSF Website January 2006)

The social forum officially began with an anti-imperialist popular march of some 15,000 participants including all the world's nationalities. The major themes of challenging militarism and war and the neo-liberal policies were seen in many different languages on banners of the delegates. Venezuela before Chávez was part of the neo-liberal market which was controlled by policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the multi-national corporations (Golinger 2005).³ While these policies created the highest rate of growth in North America, they gave rise to the sharpest increase of economic inequality on record in Venezuela and South and Central America. The social consequences were devastating with regard to poverty, malnutrition, health care and education.

Boston Delegation

The Boston delegation marched in the opening march carrying our large red-banner with the words, "*Gracias Por El Petróleo.*" We were thanking the Venezuelans for their generous contributions of low priced heating oil to Boston and other large American cities as well as native reservations in the Northeast. The Chávez government had bought the oil company, the PDVSA, which previously had benefited a few corporate leaders and multi-nationals and now was serving the Venezuelan people (Boudin

³ Documents obtained by the free lance journalist in Venezuela, Eva Golinger provided evidence that the U.S. controlled IMF, World Bank and multi-national corporations are continuing their efforts to promote the termination of the Chavez presidency.

2005:76).⁴ Thousands of Venezuelans cheered us as we passed by. We also carried banners demanding the U.S. government bring our troops home from Iraq; a message that was strongly supported by all forum participants.

The Boston delegation was a group of 51 diverse individuals representing many different social change organizations in the Boston area. More than half were feminists of all generations. We carried a composite proposal that integrated individual proposals prepared by thirteen grassroots activist groups, educational organizations whose clientele were women of all ages and ethnicities, immigrants and the international organizations International Action Center, Grassroots International, and the American Friends Service Committee. The proposal detailed the basis for grassroots international cooperation for social change together with Latin Americans and others. One concept was to strengthen locally through regional actions and forums in order to act globally. We handed out 1500 copies of our proposal and presented it on the fifth and last day of the Forum at the military airport site. Our major objective of sharing with Latin Americans at our panel did not occur, as the attendees were mostly North Americans. This sharing was, however, realized the following day in a spontaneous demonstration at the conclusion of our delegation's stay on Saturday, January 28th.

The Boston delegation's spontaneous, anti-war demonstration took place in Plaza Bolivar, near the working class neighborhood where we were staying in Caracas. A Venezuelan member of our delegation borrowed a good sound system from the nearby Mayor's office when it became a large gathering. More than 100 Venezuelans, old and young, spontaneously joined together with us chanting and singing in condemning the Iraq war and U.S. imperialism. Our delegation presented the Mayor of Caracas with a proclamation of solidarity in the name of the American people. It was the highlight of our participation around the WSF.



Members of Boston Delegation at the Forum's opening march.
--photo by author

Three Boston women of color were invited to be present as special guests at the closing cultural presentations where President Chávez spoke to the forum. In addition to the delegates present, a large majority of the 15,000 people in the audience were *Chavistas* who enthusiastically supported their leader. Chávez spoke of the many changes his government has initiated in their seven years in power. He repeated his oft-spoken words, "Our revolution depends upon the women . . . Women are the midwives of this new world." (Chávez speech to the VI WSF Caracas Jan 27, 2006)

⁴ In December 2001, President Chávez using his constitutional authority issued 49 laws that restructured Venezuela's oil industry. See C. Boudin, 2006.

President Chávez's main contribution to the forum was in challenging it to address the question of power and to have an agenda for action. Chávez said, "We must have a strategy of 'counter-power.' We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into space of power at the local, national and regional levels" (TNI www.tni.org 10/17/06).

Feminists Speak "Truth to Power" at WSF

The connections between feminist theory and praxis were exemplified in many of the social forum sessions organized by women's groups. Every day there were at least 4 or 5 sessions on feminist themes. Some of the major sessions held were on: sexual diversity, indigenous women confront globalization, the "International tribunal: against patriarchal violence of neoliberalism" and "women's movements change the world."

The largest number of female organized delegations participating in the Caracas forum were from Venezuela. *El Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* (Center for Women's Studies) hosted a feminist meeting at the outset of the Forum at the Central University of Venezuela in the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences (FSM newspaper January 24 2006). They also held numerous other sessions throughout the WSF. Indigenous Venezuelan women together with men held their own separate demonstration in the main plaza leading to the central park.⁵ At this park site many international and Venezuelan youths set up their tents and created their own youthful community with their own agendas and informal meetings. The youth in solidarity with the indigenous peoples wanted to create consciousness specifically around their struggles to maintain unpolluted healthy environments.

A common theme of many of the Venezuelan women participating in the forum was extolling the ongoing Bolivarian revolution within their urban and rural communities. The Bolivarian revolution has a bold vision based on the ideas and ideals of Simón Bolívar, not only for Venezuela, but for all of Latin America and the Caribbean. It aspires to re-ignite Bolívar's vision of a united region, one that could rival the United States and the European Union.⁶

One of the large sessions with translation was on "*La Corte Internacional de Mujeres*" (the International Women's Tribunal Against the Patriarchal Violence of Neo-Liberalism). The organizations responsible for the tribunal included El Taller International, a NGO, headed by Corinne Kumar, who is also a founding member of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council, the Intellectuals' Network in Defense of

⁵ Large groups of indigenous people have participated in the world social forum. In Caracas, they were the largest visible group to hold a demonstration, indicating that they are not 100% behind the Chávez government. In the small alternative forum held simultaneously in Caracas they enunciated a more critical view of the Chávez revolution. In a DVD entitled, "Our Oil and Other Tales" indigenous peoples were vocal against a petro-chemical industry that had destroyed their fishing livelihood and given them many illnesses. They have not opted out but are working with the government through the Mission Guaircaipuro to have their voices heard and taken into account.

⁶ Presently Venezuela has 200,000 *brigadistas* that have been sent to Bolivia to give testimony of their international interest to export their missions to other South American countries. The U.S. government during the Chávez regime has had an uneasy oppositional relation based on these fears. It is well documented that the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) with the knowledge and complicity of the CIA financed the 2002 coup in Venezuela. See *The Chávez Code* by Eva Gollinger.

Humanity, Hemispheric Encounters against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the World March of Women and the Latin American Network of Women Transforming the Economy.

Feminist women from five continents testified to human rights violations they experienced ranging from social exclusion to state terrorism to femicide. The participants claimed these injustices were products of patriarchal violence, genocide and neo-liberal policies. The coordinator, Corinne Kumar quoted Audre Lorde, saying that the "master's tools can never dismantle master's house." She called for new narratives and stories using a new language that recounts the truth of our history from the margins and restores women's dignity. She recited words from a Palestinian poet, "We are the dancers and the dance." The importance of creating a new community based on our connectedness was a common theme.

Women from India, Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina, South Africa, Peru and the USA told stories of their struggles as oppressed women in their communities. They described the sexual trafficking of women's bodies, assassinations, disappearances, and other violations and abuses of human rights. Their common theme was how their struggles against their oppression empowered them as actors in their own lives. These women became social change agents in their communities.

The Federación de Mujeres Cuban (FMC) together with the Federación Democrática Internacional de Mujeres (FDIM) was "Women, Community and Participation Experiences to Improve the Life of All."

Presenters at other such panels took it upon themselves to organize translation. This was the case for a workshop organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF in the U.S., and LIMPAL in Central and South America) on using United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This drew about 30 participants from Venezuela, the U.S., Canada, Syria, and Costa Rica. Panelists from the U.S., Columbia, and El Salvador spoke about their experiences with resolution 1325 in their respective country and then participants worked in small, single language groups to develop strategies around specific articles from the resolution (Fults 2006).

The North American feminist peace group, Code Pink, which is well known for its bold political actions against the Iraq war, was a visible presence in Caracas. Cindy Sheehan and Medea Benjamin each gave major speeches highlighting the creation of a peace culture and their personal witness against the war. Benjamin, a founder of both Global Exchange and Code Pink promoted the book, *Stop the Next War Now*, which outlines new feminist strategies developed by her organizations. Cindy Sheehan appeared on President Chávez's weekly television show and on the platform with him at the conclusion of the forum.

Another diverse and visible female delegation was the Global Women's Strike for Peace (GWSP). Their contingent included women from all over the world: India, Uganda, Guyana, UK, and the U.S. The delegation was formed to win economic and social recognition for non-wage work based on caring for others. During the Forum they held lively interactive workshops. Over the past few years they have built many relationships with grassroots communities in Venezuela. The delegates commented that the Venezuelan constitution grants full citizenship to women, full equality in employment between men and women, and deals with discrimination, sexual harassment and domestic

violence against women. Their organization's newspaper, which was freely distributed at the Forum, focused on Article 88 of the Venezuelan Constitution which "recognizes housework as an economically productive activity...The State recognizes work in the home as an economic activity that creates added values and produces social welfare and wealth. Housewives are entitled to Social Security" (1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela). In an attempt to alleviate or at least acknowledge the long, double workday of most women, Article 75 of this same constitution declares that: "family relations are based in equality of rights and duties, in solidarity, in mutual comprehension and in reciprocal respect."

Prior to the WSF the GWSP visited the grassroots projects that are the foundation of the Bolivarian revolution. Their visits included medical clinics, land committees, food program houses and educational missions. Nicola Marcos, a GWSP affiliate from Guyana commented, "Women are the ones that are leading the projects. They are always there and they are always the majority." At the conclusion of the WSF, I joined the Global Exchange delegation for a week to experience the Venezuelan countryside.

Many Venezuelan women I met at the WSF were actively involved in their local communities as participants in what are referred to as *Misiones* by the government. These women believe that "another world is possible." They are part of its creation through their work in the Missions. They inspired me to look more closely at the ongoing participation and leadership of these women within their communities.

Empowered Venezuelan Women Create "Otro Mundo"

My most memorable moments of Venezuela were spent witnessing how Venezuelan women are creating "another world." and are empowering themselves in the process. For the first time in their lives, poor Venezuelan women are participating in shaping their futures and those of their children. During the WSF, the Mayor's office in Caracas had arranged tours of some of the urban missions. This enabled members of our Boston delegation to visit various poor barrios in the Petare area of southern Caracas in the communities of El Coche, El Valle and La Vega. As I wandered around the barrio with its narrow *callejones* and steep stairs, I found it was teeming with life: women gathering to talk, men gathering separately teasing, children playing ball. A middle-age single woman assured me that "it's safe here all hours of the day and night."

In the barrio of La Vega we visited an *Info-Centro*. A twenty-one year old woman was the coordinator of the operation that consisted of people of all ages coming to the center and learning how to operate the ten Dell computers installed there. The young girls were using the Mac-Draw program to create pictures, while the young boys were looking up car specifications on the Internet. Within the community's common space was the *comedor popular*. Maria explained, "it used to be my family's private house but now with Chávez it has been converted to a community kitchen that is open to the community. People come to socialize, to resolve community problems and to play music." On the 2nd floor of the house that used to be private, bedrooms had been turned into a schoolroom. Maria now spends four hours a day teaching schoolchildren *gratis*. People in this community were part of the rebellion at the bridge that was one of the turning points in

the Bolivarian revolution. Their courageous actions have been memorialized and made into a DVD.⁷

Another evening I went with a Global Exchange group to a Caracas barrio and visited with an older Afro-Venezuelan family and their friends. One of these, Andrea, a physically disabled woman detailed how in the past she had been excluded from the work force and did not have a chance to finish her education. She explained that the government was now paying for her to complete her high school education and how she was beginning to teach young people. She no longer feels scorned and her life has become meaningful.

Begun in 2003, the Missions were part of multiple new campaigns spanning education, health and welfare referred to as *Los Misiones*. The social rationale for these missions corresponds to a major feminist theme of the WSF. In the words of President Chávez:

These social missions represent the core strategic offensive to gradually reduce poverty by empowering the poor. This is their challenge: to remedy ancient ills and simultaneously create the structural conditions for a new society in which all its members have equal rights and duties-in contrast with the kind of society offered by neoliberalism, where the poor are reflected in the statistics, not as citizens, but as excluded individuals.
(Chávez 2006, 15)

The missions are being used to accomplish rapid social change involving greater equity and access to resources for Venezuela's poorest citizens, who account for over 65% of the country's twenty-four million inhabitants (Boudin 2006,15). Through public ownership, revenue generated by the country's oil industry is no longer totally funding foreign elite interests. The oil money is now serving the people through the missions. Through these missions the theory of participatory democracy is being put into practice in the daily lives of the people. Women are leading these new educational missions.

Education Everywhere

Education was not just something that happened in the formal classroom. It was occurring everywhere I looked. It was in the form of banners on the street such as the one hanging across a street near the WSF main site which read "*Hugo Chávez Dignifica a Los Excluidos*" (Misión Negra Hipólita). President Chávez's speeches were always chocked full of history and economic lessons. The Science Museum off the main plaza in Caracas devoted the second floor to an exposition entitled, "*Yo Decido*," a multi-media presentation regarding the prevention of pregnancy in adolescents including information about AIDS. Another exhibit was entitled "Eyewitness to a Revolution." Its theme was

⁷ On February 27 and 28th of 1989 massive protests were mounted against the neo-liberal policies shutting down Caracas. The military was called in to restore order leading to several thousand civilian deaths. For the next three years there were an average of 4.5 protests per day. (see Boudin, for timeline of events). The actions of the people in La Vega marked a turning point in the struggle; see "Calle Y Media," a DVD made locally by people involved.

that “Venezuelans are getting their 4 acres and a mule and more.” The display stated that after the 2002 coup it was the grassroots, primarily women, who came down from the mountains by the thousands and demanded the return of Chávez.

During the week of the WSF the main Plaza Bolívar which reached more than 15 large city blocks, became an educational expo for all Venezuelans as well as Forum visitors. All major departments of the government gave away free books and pamphlets and had visual displays explaining their functions and services.

On February 4, 2006, the Chávez government celebrated seven years of being in power. Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans came from all over the country by bus into Caracas. Big banners read “4F *Dignidad, Soberanía y Integración*. “There was a sea of tens of thousands of mostly women with hats and shirts bearing *Misión Robinson*. Books handed out by the Ministry of Education and Culture explained that the educational missions were founded in 2003 as part of a broad policy of social inclusion and participatory democracy at all levels of society.

Misión Robinson's main goal is to combat illiteracy. According to the female head of the Institute of Youth they launched a “*campana de alfabetización*”. After two years they declared that they had eradicated illiteracy (UNESCO, October 2005).⁸ They mobilized 50,000 students studying education into the community, running more than 300,000 classes with the slogan, “*Yo Sí Puedo*”(I can do it!). The government used television, mass media videos, and materials donated by the government of Cuba. *Robinson II* was



Women from *Misión Robinson* at Feb. 4 rally.
--Photo by author

organized by popular demand so that the graduates could complete their primary education through the 6th grade. *Misión Ribas* began for those Venezuelans who wanted to work toward completing their high school education regardless of their age.

After the WSF I went with North American Global Exchange delegates to the Afro-Venezuelan communities near the Caribbean coast east of Caracas, the Barlovento region in the state of Miranda. The majority of us were feminists from the sixties, and we met with many women community leaders, visiting them in their rural communities. The Venezuelan women shared with us their struggles against domination and male violence.

On my tour of the Barlovento region, I visited an elementary school serving 650 children in the town of Capaya, where the local folks claim Simón Bolívar as their own, insisting his birth place was here. Ten women teachers greeted us describing their regional and national curriculum. Both *Misión Robinson* and *Misión Ribas* operate in this community and they teach the children about their rights in the Bolivarian constitution. In addition, the *Misión Sucre* helps resolve conflicts and community problems according to the teachers.

⁸ In 2003 illiteracy was above 6% and involved 1,250,000 people. In addition there were two million adults who had never finished primary school. After two years of *Misión Robinson*, in October of 2005, illiteracy was below 1%. UNESCO's standard of literacy is below 3%, according to UNESCO sociologist Maria Luisa Jauregui (Ministerio de Comunicación e Información 2006).

Back in Caracas a few days later I was listening to President Hugo Chávez speak to over two million citizens all over the country as part of the seven year anniversary celebration of the Bolivarian revolution. Margarita, a 26 year-old woman, was standing next to me responding to the President with cheers and admiration. Margarita explained that she was part of *Misión Sucre*, which is providing her with a college education: "I wasn't able to go to university because my family couldn't afford it. But now I am studying journalism at Chávez University in Caracas, and I don't have to pay tuition." Her boyfriend, who came from a working class family was also attending college for free and studying communications at another university. At the street rally many booklets were made available describing the Venezuelan experience. There was one on the arrival of the indigenous, another on the world of the cooperatives, and another on citizen participation as well as specific ones on the various missions.⁹

Barrio Adentro, Neighborhood Health Missions

Barrio Adentro is aimed at providing primary and preventive health care in the poor and working class neighborhoods in Venezuela. The two-story brick hexagonal structure identified the clinic in urban areas where Venezuelan and Cuban doctors provide free healthcare and where they live. The clinics found throughout urban and rural areas use both traditional and alternative medical treatments. About 20,000 Cuban doctors are working together with local people to establish and staff these clinics. In addition, thousands of Venezuelans have recovered their eyesight through surgery



Cuban doctor with Venezuelan medical staff.
--photo by author

provided in Cuba. Rosa, a twenty-seven year old female Cuban doctor from Havana had worked in Birongo in the Barlovento region for 27 months. She told us, "I come from a poor family of five children; Cuba paid for my education and now I'm repaying my debt. When they asked for volunteers, I didn't think twice."

Access to good health care is one of the most important struggles for human rights. There were multiple sessions in the Forum documenting these struggles by Cuban women. These Cuban health providers are

working together with Venezuelan communities to make this right a reality.

The development of new cooperatives comes under the umbrella of yet another mission, *Vuelvan Caras*. While in the Barlovento communities our delegation met with many women community leaders working in these cooperatives.

Misión Vuelvan Caras (About Face—Return to the Countryside)

The works of *Misión Vuelvan Caras* were evident everywhere. It was founded in January of 2004 to return productivity to the countryside. This mission forms the

⁹ These booklets, made available to participants in the World Social Forum, are from the *Biblioteca básica temática*: "El Legado Indígena" by Gustavo Pereir, "El Mundo De Las Cooperativas" by Julio Rafael Silva Sanchez, and "La Participación Ciudadana" by Andres Mejia.

grassroots part of the government's endogenous development program. Under *Vuelvan Caras* the government promoted various cooperatives throughout the state of Miranda. About 6,000 cacao producers are in the communities of Barlovento. The mission provides people with the job training to develop new skills in the production of chocolate.

Our delegation arrived around lunchtime at a cooperative cocoa growing community, "*Mango de Ocoita*." On the way to the community was a statue of Guillermo Rivas, a liberator of the slaves. The women of the community fixed us a hearty meal with fish from the local river and provided home grown vegetables. But the product they were most proud of was their cacao that they had made into marmalade, liquor and chocolate.

These women are in the earlier stages of learning how to market new chocolate through their cooperative. In the nearby agricultural community of Birongo there are many cooperatives including a chocolate factory. A female engineer explained that the chocolate used to be processed in their houses. They received training from the chocolate masters in Switzerland and have now formed a civil association. From seeds they process 80 kilos of chocolate a day.

The food kitchen is an integral part of all of the other Missions previously discussed. It is referred to as "*Misión Mercal*."

Misión Mercal

Misión Mercal addresses the most basic problem of the poor—hunger. Most of the active members are Venezuelan women. According to Juana, "If there are children or parents who receive food and have never learned to read and write they are integrated into the educational missions. If there are unemployed people who lack certain skills, they are integrated into *Vuelvan Caras*, the mission that provides job training to establish cooperatives." The food products of *Misión Mercal* also directly deliver the educational message. For example, the packaging of basic flour is inscribed with a cartoon taken from *Misión Robinson's* educational mission as well as the article from the Bolivarian Constitution relevant to the right to an education. *Misión Mercal's* focus is on maintaining an affordable supply of food for consumers by maintaining major distributions in stores and cooperatives in poor areas. They distribute food to 40% of the country. The long-term objective is to create less dependence on food imports (Boudin, Gonzalez & Rumbos 2006, 175).

The government is integrating the military as a part of working together with civil society. Throughout my visit to the Barlovento communities I witnessed the military reserves at work contributing to various social community projects, constructing new cooperative buildings, and clearing the land.

Misión Miranda

Toward the end of my stay, having arrived back in Caracas, I sought refuge in nature. I found out about *Misión Miranda* accidentally on my way up a hiking trail in the Avila National Park, a big mountain at the north of Caracas. En route my thoughts drifted to my lunch encounter with Marielena, an indigenous woman I met at Social Forum in Caracas, where she was part of the indigenous rights demonstration. Her parting words to me had been, "Think of me when you breathe fresh air and hear the birds sing".

On foot I met Lucy, a Lebanese immigrant who was taking the day off from her sewing work and five children to go hiking. She introduced me to her husband, a military

reservist who was working with the Park Service. He explained that his work at the Park Service is part of the *Misión Miranda* that now includes new work in state and community projects.

Together, these missions and others I have not observed have mobilized tens of millions of Venezuelans, the majority being women, to become partners with various government agencies in creating social change.¹⁰

Otro Mundo Es Posible

The profound impact of these missions is most visible in the impoverished barrios, both in the cities and in the rural settlements. The missions have infused the local communities with new energy and creative initiatives. The women I talked with feel that a new world is in the making, a world that begins to put their rights and human needs first. It is a world that is more inclusive and multi-cultural. Chavez once made the pronouncement that the "revolution has the face of a women" (exhibit at the Science Museum in Caracas January 2006). These women own the Bolivarian revolution that values their participation.

Nora Castenedas, founder of *Banmujer*, the woman's bank in Venezuela, told participants at a Forum workshop organized by the GWSP, "Gender equality is a reality here. In the new South America, we are trying to build another world, because human kind is in danger."¹¹ The World Social Forums have begun a dialogue about what that new world should look like. The Caracas WSF has been challenged by the Bolivarian revolutionary agenda to act at the local, regional and national levels to challenge the neoliberal state and take back the power for the people.

The Venezuelan women together with men have begun to exercise that power with the support of their government in their communities. The new Bolivarian constitution and the health, welfare and educational missions have played a major role in integrating citizens into the decision-making processes. Women who have been previously excluded have empowered themselves to demand self-determination to speak in their own voices. With the support of the constitution and the missions women have begun to address the gender power imbalances both within their families and in their communities.

The mission campaigns of health, education, and welfare are becoming an integral part of a new Bolivarian social order. They have mobilized large numbers of Venezuelan women and men into participatory democratic communities. Poor and average Venezuelan women have become leaders with power to create major social changes within their own communities and unprecedented influence over the direction of their

¹⁰ There are additional Missions I had indirect contact with that also mobilize specific populations and that support specific social programs. *Misión Guaicaipuro* focuses on providing social services to the approximately 500,000 indigenous peoples. It also speaks of the government's obligations to provide them with equal rights in a multicultural society (Boudin 2006: 74). *Misión Hábitat* supports the creation of a safe, stable environment for all Venezuelans that eliminates dangerous ranchos with no public services as well as the creation of new housing (Boudin 2006:70-71).

¹¹ Banmajer is the Venezuelan women's development bank that has provided poor women with access to an independent source of credit. The bank has also helped women form non-financial alliances. It has been an important source of empowerment for women.

country.¹² It remains to be seen if these changes will become institutionalized so they endure.¹³ At this historical moment it has inspired members of our Boston delegation to continue our struggle against the neo-liberal order and to create more participatory channels for change in our own communities at home.

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¹² Lopez, Nina. (2005). "Talking of Power," video distributed by Global Women's Strike.

¹³ A number of articles have suggested that there is an ongoing tension between the promise and the reality of the Bolivarian Revolution. One such article examined two contending models of workplace democracy at the Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) at different time periods. Matias Scaglione, "This is what Democracy Looks Like." *Liberty Tree* Spring 2006 Vol. 1, issue 2, pp. 5-7.

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