

Venezuela: Women After the Referendum

Tuesday 29 January 2008, by [CASTELLANOS Aline](#) (Date first published: December 2007).

With the national referendum proposed by President Hugo Chávez over, rejected by a narrow margin of barely 200,000 votes, Venezuela has been converted into two worlds: one that cries and another that at the same time celebrates.

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The quiet election day, followed by a tense night, has been left behind, giving way to joy on one side and sorrow on the other.

The so-called antichavistas (opponents of Chávez) celebrated their first victory after a string of 12 electoral defeats since Chávez assumed power. What did they win? They blocked a reform that proposed to deepen the model which is called here Bolivarian Socialism. And the opponents defended, on the other hand, the Constitution that in 1999 they had forcefully rejected when they bid to stop it and lost in that year's referendum.

The "really reds" (*rojos-rojitos*, *chavistas* or Chávez supporters) met up in the public squares and principally around Miraflores, the presidential residence and seat of government, to await the results of the contest, but after the announcement by the National Electoral Council they remained silent.

After that initial impact, women and men came together again in the streets to share their frustration and to analyze what had happened. In this typically Caribbean country, long faces don't last long. The conversations changed into a public discussion whenever anyone made a remark about the referendum. They talked about how it had failed, had been lost, and, above all, about what to do.

Women in the Bolivarian Process

The women of the Bolivarian process—mostly from the barrios, urban neighborhoods of extreme poverty that make up about 70 percent of Caracas—have been characterized by their highly active role in grassroots organizations. They make their own interpretation of the process that has taken place, specifically for them, and of the meaning of the rejection of the proposed reforms of the Venezuelan Constitution.

"Has the possibility of deepening the process that guarantees our power, the power of the people been lost for now? Asks a woman of the barrio, a mulatto, with a self-confident voice that leaves a silence after it.

Irine, with died blond hair and red fingernail polish, adds, "We have to work to end the corruption in the government, to consolidate the political education of every woman and man. We have to make sure that everyone understands that this is what we the poor people need and want."

"This revolutionary process has opened wide the doors to improve the lives of the people and of course of women," asserts Cecilia, a young, single mother and street vendor. "Does the fact that the 'No's' won mean that the possibility of continuing to transform this society which has been so polarized in the last few years as been stopped? On the one hand, the rich who take away all of the petroleum profits, and on the other hand the rest of the people living in the barrios without services, with the government failing to attend to their most urgent needs of health and education to start with," she says.

The stories of life since the beginning of the Bolivarian process are discussed. "I could never have studied at the university, nor have had my son in a public school," says Sheila, a communications student, single mother, who was before denied entrance to the Central University of Venezuela (UCV).

While a public university, this institution of higher learning, found room, slowly, for the middle class and upper middle class, while the poor and the very poor remained excluded.

"The admissions procedures meant that the majority of us could not get in, and we were never going to have access to a university," Sheila explains. "With Chávez, the Bolivarian University of Venezuela was created, and now many people like me have access to university education."

The policy of opening the media to the community has created hundreds of public radio and television stations. "We woman have been getting involved in the community media," says Yanahir, a young teacher and announcer on a community radio station. The women of the barrios and the kids have access to these stations, and that's something new, only a few years old."

The Women Who Abstained

For the women who abstained, on the other hand, one of the reasons for their decision can be found in "the amounts of money that have gone into the garbage can or into the pockets of opportunists who have enriched themselves with our wealth," says Yussy, a university student.

They also question the voting procedure. "They didn't allow the people to vote on each item, so that each one could have voted 'Yes' or 'No' on each article that was going to be reformed. Voting 'Yes' or 'No' to teach item isn't right," says Yosanna, owner of a diner in the center of Caracas. "I won't vote that way. I don't want them to give me all in one block things I agree with and things I don't. Better that I abstain."

A large group of 'No' voters could be found in the student population. Students who voted no argued the lack of freedom of expression and Chávez's desire to centralize power.

"I don't want a country in which it's the president who tells us what to do, how to think, who imposes his views on the entire population," said one student. "Freedom of expression is basic in any country in order for it to be democratic. I said no to the reform so that Venezuela wouldn't be without freedom of expression," said a second. "I definitely don't want to continue living in the chaos that Venezuela has now, in the midst of violence and fear. Young people here want to live in peace, not to go back to violence," said a third. The three preferred to withhold their names.

Those who Voted 'Yes'

For the women who voted 'Yes,' on the other hand, the changes are "many and undeniable." They have to do with access to basic social services such as health, education and child care; to economic resources; to the means of communication; to a network of social programs, legal reforms, and new government institutions such as the National Institute of Women or the Mothers of the Barrio Mission. The latter is a program charged with caring for those who live in extreme poverty, almost all of them single mothers.

But they also talk about problems that still have to be solved, about the mistakes of the Bolivarian process, about things that remain to be done. "The reforms that were proposed would definitely strengthen the power of the people, the popular power, and that meant that we were close to the society that we want, a Bolivarian socialist Project," says Adriana, a member of the leadership of the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front.

"Didn't the proposed reforms open the debate over things of concern to women, over equity as such? This is being taken up in other places such as the Communal Councils (community self-government organizations) and in the Venezuelan Unified Socialist Party (PSUV); this is something that I think has to be pushed strongly, and we have failed to," she says.

"If it is possible to organize a campaign to put on hundreds of walls announcements about the Americas Cup soccer match, shouldn't it be possible to organize a campaign on sexuality or on violence against women?" asks a kindergarten teacher.

"If the Bolivarian process is the best thing we have, the best we have had in Venezuela, women have to win all of our rights too, so that this revolution can be complete. And that's what we're going to do from here on," says Cecilia.

And she concludes, "Because we have so far given a clear example of democracy, we have to keep our spirits up and continue constructing the revolution on the basis of diversity and love."

P.S.

* Caracas, December 2007 - Special from SEMlac. Translation by Dan Labotz.