

**Feminists Weaving Together Theory And Praxis: Participatory Democracy
in the Bolivarian Revolution**

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

I attended the Boston social forum in the summer of 2004 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 participant in the Women's Tribunal 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 small 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 spent two weeks in Venezuela, as a participant observer.

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. Through the 70s-and early 90s I was part of the Guatemala committee in Boston working to support the Guatemala refugees. In 1994 I became an *acompanante* accompanying Guatemalan refugees back to their homeland after 13 years in camps in Chiapis, Mexico.(1) 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." Becoming a delegate to the world social forum in January of 2006 was a continuation of my life-long activism.(1) My curiosity about the non-violent Bolivarian revolution made the Caracas forum my choice.

Boston Delegation

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 from 13 grassroots activist, educational organizations whose clientele were women of all ages and ethnicities, immigrants and the international aid organizations: Global Exchange and Grassroots International and the American Friends Service Organization. The proposal detailed the basis for grassroots international cooperation for social change together with Latin American 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 last fifth day of the forum., a military airport. The panel was mainly attended by North Americans as it was scheduled in an out of the way location. Thus the major objective of sharing with Latin Americans didn't happen. It was however realized the following day in a more spontaneous forum with Venezuelans in the Plaza Bolivar at the conclusion of our delegation's stay on Saturday, January 28th.

The VI Social Forum: *Un Otro Mundo Es Posible* (Another World Is Possible)

The VI world social forum in Caracas was a lively amalgam of theory and praxis. For the past 5 years delegations and individuals from around the world gathered beginning in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This year there was a new polycentric model of meetings in Caracas, Mali and Pakistan. Six major themes are listed on the Caracas World Social Forum website. I will highlight the feminist sub-themes:

1.struggles for social emancipation—“**struggles against patriarchy and against all forms of domination and violence**”2.the struggles for human rights and people’s rights and resistance against neo-liberalism. 3.struggles for access, redistribution and protection of resources including “**sexual rights, reproductive rights and the decriminalization of abortion**”, 4.diversities including **sexual diversity and gender identities**. 5.labor and **gender inequalities**, and 6.rights to communication to strengthen citizenship and democratic participation. An example is “social-cultural movements as people’s resistance.” (WSF Website J.06)

Interwomen throughout the workshops and forums were cultural presentations about the Bolivarian revolution of Venezuela’s president Hugo Chavez. It is based on the ideas and ideals of Simon Bolivar. The Bolivarian revolution has a bold vision, not only for Venezuela, but for all of Latin America and the Caribbean. It aspires to reignite Bolivar’s vision of a united region, one that could rival the United States and the European union.(2)

The forum officially began with an anti-imperialist popular march of some 15,000 participants including all the world’s nationalities. Feminism, anti-war and condemnation of neo-liberal ideology were major themes.

The Boston delegation marched carrying our large red-banner with the words, “*Gracias Por El Petroleo,*” 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. Thousands of Venezuelans cheered us as we passed by. We also carried banners demanding the US to bring our sons home from Iraq; a message that was strongly supported by all forum participants. One of our delegates’ highlights was a spontaneous anti-war demonstration in the Plaza Bolivar near the working class neighborhood where we were staying in Caracas. More than 100 Venezuelans old and young spontaneously joined together with us chanting and singing in condemning the Iraq war and US imperialism. The Mayor’s Office provided us with a good sound system and Venezuelan revolutionary recorded music. Our delegation presented the Mayor of Caracas with a proclamation of solidarity in the name of the American people. (insert of photo of Boston delegation of women carrying banner)

Empowering of Feminists Worldwide

The connections between feminist theory and praxis were exemplified in many of the forum sessions organized by women’s group. One of these sessions was on “*La Corte Internacional de Mujeres*”(the International Court of Women.) Feminist women from five continents testified to human rights violations they experienced to a diverse large audience of mostly women. The participants claimed these injustices were products of

patriarchal violence, genocide and neoliberal policies. The coordinator, Corinne Kumar from India quoted from Audre Lorde that the “masters 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 and they became social change agents in their communities.

The North American feminist peace group, Code Pink is well known for their integration of praxis with theory. Their forum session highlighted their creation of a peace culture and their personal witness against the Iraq war. The two major speakers were Cindy Sheehan and Medea Benjamin who was part of Global Exchange and was a founder of Code Pink. Her book, *Stop the Next War Now* outlines the new feminist strategies of her organization.

Another diverse female delegation was the **Global Women’s Strike for Peace**. It included women from all over the world: India, Uganda, Guyana, UK and the US. They were 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. They 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. In Article 88 of the Constitution it

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 (Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela)

Article 75 of the Constitution in an attempt to alleviate the long, double workday of most women declares that: “family relations are based in equality of rights and duties, in solidarity, in mutual comprehension and in reciprocal respect.”(Constitution : 1999)

The GWSP had earlier been visiting the grassroots projects that are the foundation of the Bolivarian Revolution. It included visiting medical clinics, land committees, food program houses and educational mission. Nicola Marcos from Guyana commented that “Women are the ones that are leading the projects. They are always there and they are always the majority.”

The largest number of delegations of women participating in the 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 many other sessions throughout the Forum. Indigenous women together with men also held their own demonstration in the main Plaza and leading to the Park where many youths set up their tents and created their own youthful community. They wanted to

create consciousness specifically around their struggles to maintain their livelihoods in unpolluted healthy environments.(3)(Marielena, an indigenous women I met concluded our conversation, “Think of me when you breathe fresh air and hear the birds sing.”

Participatory Democracy in the Bolivarian Revolution: *Las Misiones*

My most memorable moments of were witnessing how impoverished Venezuelan women are becoming empowered in their communities. For the first time in their lives they are participating in shaping their futures and that of their children. Tours arranged through the Mayor’s office in Caracas enabled our delegation to visit various poor barrios in the southern part of Caracas in the communities of El Coche, El Valle and La Vega. As I wondered around the barrio with its narrow callejones (small streets) and steep stairs 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. The young girls were using the Mac-Draw program, drawing 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 that “it used to be my family’s private house but now with Chavez 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.” People in this community were part of the rebellion at the bridge that was one of the turning points in the Venezuelan revolution. The 2nd floor of the house that used to be private bedrooms had been turned into a schoolroom. Maria now spent 4 hours a day teaching schoolchildren gratis. Their courageous actions have been memorialized and made into a DVD by *CalleY Media*. (4)

Another evening I visited a Caracas barrio with an older Afro-Venezuelan family and their friends. Andrea, a physically disabled woman detailed how in the past she was excluded from the work force and didn’t have a chance to finish her education. She explained to a group of North Americans that the government now paid for her to complete her high school education and she was now beginning to teach young people. She no longer feels scorned and her life had become meaningful.

These social changes were made possible by the Chavez government beginning in 2003. They were part of multiple new campaigns spanning education, health and welfare referred to as *Los Misiones*. The social rationale for these missions is explained by President Chavez :

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 (Chavez Frias, Hugo: 2004, 15)

The missions are being used to accomplish rapid social change involving greater equity and access to resources for Venezuelans' poorest citizens, who account for over 65% of Venezuela's 24 million inhabitants. (Boudin, C :2006, 15) Through these missions the theory of participatory democracy is being put into and practice in the daily lives of the people.

Educational Missions: Robinson, Ribas, & Sucre

. 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. A banner hung across the street near the forum read, "Hugo Chavez Dignifica a Los Excluidos." (Give dignity to the Excluded Mision NegroHipolita.) President Chavez's speeches were always chocked full of history and economic lessons. Visiting Science Museum off the main plaza in Caracas, the second floor was devoted to an exposition entitled, "*Yo Decido*" (I decide) It was 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 that "Venezuelans are getting their 4 acres and a mule and more." It said 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 Chavez.

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

On February 4th the Chavez government celebrated their 7 years of being in power-Venezuelans from all over the country by the hundred thousands by bus into Caracas. Big banners read "4F *Dignidad, Soberania* (pride) *y Integracion*. "There was a sea of tens of thousands of mostly women with hats and shirts bearing, *Mision 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.

Mission Robinson's main mission was to combat illiteracy. According to the head of the Institute of Youth they launched a "*campana de alfabetizacion*" After two years declared that they have eradicated illiteracy (UNESCO, October 2005) (5) They mobilized 50,000 students studying education into the community, running more than 300,000 classes with the slogan, "*Yo Si Puedo*" (I can do it!) The government used TV, mass media videos and materials donated by the government of Cuba. Robinson II was organized by popular demand so that the graduates could complete their primary education through the 6th grade. Mission Ribas began for those Venezuelans who wanted to work toward completing their high school education regardless of their age. I visited an elementary school serving 650 children in the town of Capaya, where the local folks claim Simon Bolivar as their own claiming his birth place. Ten teachers greeted us describing their regional and national curriculum. Both Mission Robinson and Mission Ribas operate in this community and they teach the children about their rights in the Bolivarian constitution. In addition the Mission Sucre, according to the teachers helps resolve conflicts and community problems.

Back in Caracas a few days later I was listening to President Hugo Chavez speak to over two million citizens all over the country in celebration of 7 years 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 *Mision 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 Chavez University in Caracas, and I don't have to pay tuition." Her boyfriend, who came from a working class family was also attending university 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.(6)

Barrio Adentro (Health Mission)

"*Barrio Adentro*."(In the Neighborhood) is aimed at providing primary and preventive health care in the poor and working class neighborhoods in Venezuela. The yurt-like stone structure identifies the clinic where Venezuelan and Cuban doctors live in the communities in which they serve and provide free healthcare. The clinics can be found throughout urban and rural areas using both traditional and alternative medicine treatments. About 20,000 Cuban doctors have worked with local people to establish and staff these clinics. In addition, thousands of Venezuelans have recovered their eyesight through surgery provided in Cuba. Rosa, a twenty-seven year old Cuban doctor worked in Birongo in the Barlovento region to the east of Caracas. She related, "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."

(insert photo of Venezuelan nurses and Cuban doctors in El Valle)

Mission Vuelvan Caras (About Face-return to the countryside)

After the forum I went together with a group of North Americans from Global Exchange to explore the Afro-Venezuelan communities near the Caribbean coast in the state of Miranda, the north central part of Venezuela. The works of mission *Vuelvan Caras* are evident everywhere. It was founded in January of 2004 to return productivity to the countryside and forms the grassroots part of the government's endogenous development program. Under *Vuelvan Caras* the government promoted the creation of cooperatives. Throughout the state of Miranda we visited various cooperatives. About 6,000 cacao producers are in the communities of Barlovento. The local people are being given the opportunity to develop new skills in the production of chocolate.

We arrived around lunch time at a cooperative cacao growing community, "Mango de Ocoita." On the way to the community was a statute of Guillermo Rivas, a liberator of the slaves. The women 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 a marmelade, liquor and chocolate.

They 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. The female engineer explained to our group 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 a day.

Mision Mercal

Mission Mercal addresses the most basic problem of the poor—hunger. According to Juana, “The food kitchen is an an integral part of all of the other Missions. 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 Mercal also directly deliver the educational message. For example, found on the packaging of basic flour is inscribed a cartoon from Robinson’s educational mission as well as the relevant quote from the Bolivarian Constitution for the right to an education. Mission 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)

Mision Miranda

I found out about Mission Miranda accidentally on the way up a hiking trail in the National Park Avila National Park, a big mountain at the north of Caracas. On foot to hike the trails I met Lucy, a Lebanese immigrant 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 mission Miranda that now includes new work in state and community projects relating to the larger social welfare of Venezuelans. Throughout my visit to the Barlovento communities I also witnessed the military reserves at work contributing to various social community projects, constructing new cooperative buildings and clearing the land.

Together these missions and others I have not observed (7) have mobilized tens of millions of Venezuelans to become partners with various government agencies and infuse them with new energy and local creative initiatives funded by the government. For example the PDVSA(Venezuela’s oil company) Venezuela’s most powerful state-owned company has helped finance the most costly missions such as *Barrio Adentro*, Mission *Vuelvas Caras*, and Mission *Mercal*.(Boudin,C 2005:76)

The profound impact of these missions can be seen especially in the impoverished barrios, both in the cities and in the rural settlements. Women have been an important part of all of these missions and have undertaken critical leadership roles to better the education, health and welfare of their families and communities. The Venezuelan women I met at the world social forum and in their local communities have inspired and convinced me that another world is in the making. A world that puts human rights and human needs first, 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) Perhaps he is referring to a non-violent revolution that values process and participation.

Nora Castenedas, founder of Banmujer told participants at a workshop organized by the Global Women Strike, “Gender equality is a reality here. In the new South

America, we are trying to build another world, because human kind is in danger. The world social forums have begun a true dialogue addressing the dangers we all face. The Venezuelan women together with men have begun to create a new reality; one in which theory and practice have become interwoven in the creation of a participatory democracy. The health and welfare missions have played a big role in integrating citizens into the decision-making processes. Previously excluded Venezuelans have begun to carve out lives anew with hope for their new futures.

NOTES

1. 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 *acompanante* 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.
2. Presently Venezuela has 200,000 *brigadistas* that have been sent to Bolivia giving testimony of their international interest to export their missions to other South American countries. The U.S. government during the Chavez 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 has financed the 2002 in Venezuela. See *The Chavez Code* by Eva Gollinger.
3. Large groups of indigenous people have participated in the Social Forum. In Caracas they were the largest visible group that held a demonstration indicating that they are not 100% behind the Chavez government. In the small alternative forum held simultaneously in Caracas they enunciated a more critical view of the Chavez revolution. In a DVD entitled, "Our Oil and Other Tales" indigenous peoples were vocal against a petrochemical industry that had destroyed their fishing livelihood and given them many illnesses. They haven't opted out but are working with the government through the Mission Guaircaipuro to have their voices heard and taken into account.
4. On February 27 and 28th of 1989 massive protest were mounted against the neoliberal policies shutting down Caracas. The military was called in to restore order leading to several thousand civilian deaths. For the next three years there was an average of 4.5 protests per day for the next three years. (Boudin, C :see timeline) The actions of the people in the video marked a turning point in the struggle.
5. In 2003 illiteracy was above 6% and involved 1,250,000 people. In addition there were two million adults that had never finished primary school. After two years of Mission Robinson in October of 2005 "we eradicated illiteracy" according to the head of the Youth Institute. It is now below 1% UNESCO's standard of literacy is "below 3%."
6. These booklets made available to participants in the world social world are from the *Biblioteca basica tematica*: " *El Legado Indigena*" by Gustavo Pereir, " *El Mundo De Las Cooperativas*" by Julio Rafael Silva Sanchez, and " *La Participacion Ciudadana*" by Andres Mejia
7. There are additional Missions I had indirect contact with that also mobilize specific populations that support specific social programs. **Mission 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) **Mission Habitat** supports the creation of a safe, stable environment for all Venezuelans that that eliminates dangerous ranchos with no public services as well as the creation of new housing.(Boudin,2006:70-71)

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

Abstract

This is an insider's account of the participation of a Boston delegate at the World Social Forum in Caracas in January 2006. She relates the stories of the women who through their participation and leadership in their communities live weave together the theory and practice of feminism. The health and welfare missions created by the Bolivarian revolution of Hugo Chavez are testimony to the theme of the forum that through the process of participatory democracy "*Otro Mundo Es Posible*" Another World Is Possible.

Keywords: VI World Social Forum/Caracas
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