

# Challenges to economic fundamentalism: Venezuelan Women and the “Bolivarian Revolution”

By Reihana Mohideen



**Neoliberalism,** political-religious fundamentalisms and militarisation represent major challenges for the international feminist movement today. These phenomena are inter-dependent and feed off each other. The economic power of neoliberal globalisation cannot exist without extra-economic military force. Boundless domination of a global economy requires boundless military force and military action without end. This drives the

phenomena of militarisms today. The “war against terrorism” is the war propaganda to justify military intervention against non-compliant governments in the South, as well as the quashing of peoples’ resistance at home and abroad.

Neoliberal globalisation is not only universal, but it is universally applied in form and content: subservient states carrying out the economic and ideological dictates of the dominant states through global institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and the WTO—privatisation; economic liberalisation; the dogma of the free market. This universal fundamentalism of neoliberal globalisation suffocates and stamps out any alternative solutions and paths, leaving social tsunamis in its wake—one child dying every three seconds. The lack of a viable progressive alternative is also partly responsible for the rise in religious-political fundamentalisms.

Challenges to this economic fundamentalism of neoliberal globalisation are everywhere and women

are in the front lines. Latin America has been described as the "Continent that might defeat Uncle Sam." Women are at the heart of these struggles, in peoples' upsurge against neoliberal globalisation.

In the barrios in Venezuela, women are empowering the process of revolutionary transformation taking place under the government of President Hugo Chavez, a left-wing former paratrooper, who was unexpectedly elected president in 1998. The Chavez government has made a commitment to change the social realities for the poor and the dispossessed through the Bolivarian Revolution.

The new Bolivarian Constitution is unique in that it recognises housework as productive labour that adds value to the economy. Under Article 88 of the constitution, housewives are guaranteed a pension. This was a result of a campaign by women in Venezuela who picketed the Constituent Assembly everyday when the constitution was being finalised putting forward this and other demands. By allotting economic privileges to work that was previously unrecognised as having economic value, Venezuela is breaking down patriarchal societal norms and capitalist ideology which only sees value in profit-producing enterprises.

For decades Venezuela's elite had bled the country's wealth, above all its oil export revenue (Venezuela is the world's 5th largest oil exporter, mainly to the US), leaving 80% of the population impoverished, at least 70% of which are women. As a consequence, poor women have been among Chavez's strongest supporters. In April 2002, when the

capitalist elite, acting with US support, carried out a military coup against Chavez, women from the poorest neighbourhoods of Caracas were the first to mobilise demanding the return of their elected president. Filling the streets, the working-class poor, supported by the army's rank-and-file, defeated the coup-plotters, enabling Chavez's return to power.

It has also been poor women who have most benefited from the Chavez government's new education and health campaigns, funded by the state-owned oil industry, which accounts for 30% of the country's GDP and 50% of government revenues. The government's anti-poverty programs have resulted in an additional 1.5 million children in school getting three free meals a day, at least 1 million illiterate adults learning to read and write, 1.5 million more people with access to safe drinking water, 10,000 Cuban doctors providing free health care in the poorest communities, food subsidies (or food vouchers) for pregnant women before and after birth. Significantly, 2 million hectares of land have been distributed to small farmers, with women heads of household (60% of households) being prioritised for land distribution.

Nora Castaneda, the president of the women's development bank, *Banmujer*, says, "We are building an economy at the service of human beings, not human beings at the service of the economy. And since 70% of the world's poor are women, women must be central to economic change to eliminate poverty." Created on International Women's Day, 2001, *Banmujer* is based on developing cooperation among women. Credits, with

government-subsidised interest rates, can only be obtained if women get together to work out a project which is both viable and demanded by the local community. But *Banmujer* is no ordinary bank or microfinance institution. It also provides free counselling on issues such as sexual and reproductive rights, political participation, and empowerment. It also teaches women how to combat domestic violence.

participation in management. Very quickly the economy is being taken over by workers, who are increasingly making the key economic decisions and the economic system is steadily being dismantled in a process that is described as “moving away from capitalism.”

As in the case of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, today no movement can effectively struggle against fundamentalism of any form, without a feminist perspective. Women around the world are involved in unprecedented numbers in all progressive arenas of struggle. Many of these women don't describe themselves as feminists, but they are politically active and large numbers are influenced by the basic aims and visions of the women's movements. This is because feminism has made a significant and permanent imprint on progressive thought and praxis.

The women of the Bolivarian Revolution challenges us to make our feminism relevant to the needs and demands of the masses of women who are making a difference. They challenge us to become more militant, informing the feminist movement/s that have become too tame and even reactionary in some parts. This also requires the women's movements, especially its militant wing, to form the broadest possible anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist alliances, with social and political movements that are supported by millions of women. Militant feminism, to be relevant, must speak and act on the major issues of the day. ■

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On their own, these changes will not turn around gender inequalities and women's oppression. What makes Venezuela different is the political involvement of huge numbers of women, and the fact that social change in Venezuela is being driven by a process of self-organisation of the poor and the marginalised. The participation and leadership of women, for example, is key to carrying out agrarian reform in Venezuela. Women are the majority in the land, water and health committees that sort out how the millions who built homes on squatted land can be given legal titles, how water supplies and health care services are to be improved.

Women workers are involved in the process of taking over factories that have been closed down or threatened with closure. Furthermore, economic incentives have been handed out to industry that allows greater worker