

# ***Barrio Women and Popular Politics in Chávez's Venezuela***

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## ABSTRACT

Since President Hugo Chávez came to power in Venezuela in 1998, ordinary women from the barrios, or shantytowns, of Caracas have become more engaged in grassroots politics; but most of the community leaders still are men. Chávez's programs are controlled by male-dominated bureaucracies, and many women activists still look to the president himself as the main source of direction. Nevertheless, this article argues, women's increasing local activism has created forms of popular participation that challenge gender roles, collectivize private tasks, and create alternatives to male-centric politics. Women's experiences of shared struggle from previous decades, along with their use of democratic methods of popular control, help prevent the state from appropriating women's labor. But these spaces coexist with more vertical, populist notions of politics characteristic of official sectors of Chavismo. Understanding such gendered dimensions of popular participation is crucial to analyzing urban social movements.

Since leftist president Hugo Chávez came to power in Venezuela in 1998, ordinary women from the barrios, or shantytowns, of Caracas have become more engaged in politics at the grassroots level. Given the use of images of black and poor women in Chávez's television campaigns; his creation of programs such as Barrio Adentro and Misión Ribas, related to concerns that affect women, such as health and education; and the general politicization of the population in this movement, it is not surprising that women from the barrios have become major protagonists in the current urban social movements in Venezuela. Most of the community leaders in the barrios, however, continue to be men. Chávez's programs are controlled by male-dominated bureaucracies. Indeed, many women activists still look to the president himself as the main source of direction and inspiration. What is the outcome of women's increasing political participation, which was, and continues to be, generated under male-directed and -initiated campaigns from above? What possibilities exist for poor women mobilized in the framework of state-managed programs in a revolutionary-populist state?

This study argues that the ability of barrio women in Caracas to build local "spaces" of political participation partly outside of state control has increased their power of negotiation in state-sponsored pro-

grams, such as soup kitchens. Despite male leadership and authority, the growing presence of women in local assemblies, committees, and communal kitchens has created forms of popular participation that challenge gender roles, collectivize private tasks, and create alternatives to male-centric politics. Women's experiences of shared struggle from previous decades, along with their use of democratic methods of popular control, such as local assemblies, help to prevent the state's appropriation of women's labor for its own ends. But these spaces of popular participation exist in dynamic tension with more vertical, populist notions of politics that are characteristic of official sectors of Chavismo.

Understanding the gendered dimensions of popular participation is crucial to an analysis of the nature of urban social movements, especially how these movements differ from traditional forms of political participation, such as political parties and trade unions. Such an analysis is particularly important, given the recent upsurge of popular participation in the barrios since Chávez assumed the presidency. Although women play a key role in these social movements, most scholars have failed to incorporate gender into their analysis or to look at the specific gains made by women through their participation.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by scholars of popular women's activism and those looking at gender politics in revolutionary and populist states, this study seeks to develop a specific analysis of barrio women's activism in Chávez's Venezuela, which can also shed light on debates about popular women's organizing in general. It begins with an overview of these various literatures, provides background to the Chávez government, and traces the rise in barrio women's participation since Chávez came to power in 1998. It then looks at experiences of local organizing in a popular sector of Caracas known as the Carretera Negra of La Vega.

The analysis is based on eight months of field research conducted in three parishes of Caracas: San Agustín, 23 de Enero, and La Vega, between January 2004 and February 2006. The study comprises individual and collective interviews with women activists, observations of local committee meetings and assemblies, and documents produced by the various community organizations. Residence in a popular barrio for the eight months, moreover, allowed time to get to know the women and to accompany them to various official events and meetings.

## **URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, WOMEN'S ACTIVISM, AND POPULISM**

Urban social movements in Latin America have generated a large literature, some of which has addressed the predominant role of poor women in these movements. Surprisingly little literature, however,

focuses on the gendered aspects of popular participation in Venezuela. The literature on urban popular movements in Venezuela tends to represent popular subjects as androgynous (Ramos Rollon 1995; López-Maya et al. 1999; Grohmann 1996; Ellner 2005).

The scholarship on Venezuelan women's movement politics has provided crucial insights about women's challenge to unequal gender relations, and a few of these accounts look historically at the intersections between class and gender in popular women's organizing. For instance, Elisabeth Friedman (2000, 173) describes the emergence of Popular Women's Circles (*Círculos Femeninos Populares*) in the barrios of Caracas in the 1970s, which sought to "address the effects of discriminatory gender relations within the context of popular women's daily lives." But most accounts of gender politics in contemporary Venezuela have not addressed the daily struggles of women in popular classes. Some scholars, such as Cathy Rakowski (2003, 400), see popular and working-class women organized in Chavista groupings as "new to feminism and women's rights"; most of them "have no understanding of the history of women's struggle in Venezuela" and "reject feminism as antifamily."

Certainly, there are differences between those women who have become newly politicized under Chávez and those with longer-term political involvement. But this literature does not give a sense of what kinds of gender-based struggles popular women have engaged in under Chávez or their relationship to the history of the women's movement and feminism. This article will suggest that popular women's organizing contains its own unique history, struggles, and trajectories, which cannot be reduced to the history of feminism in Venezuela.

One dominant approach in studying the activism of women in popular sectors in Latin America emphasizes the practical versus the strategic needs of these women. On the basis of her work on the Nicaraguan revolution during the 1980s, Maxine Molyneux suggests that we look at poorer women's participation in terms of "practical gender interests," which include daily struggles over food, shelter, and health, in comparison to "strategic gender interests," which "entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality" (1986, 284). Various scholars have drawn on this distinction to show how the struggles of women in popular classes may differ from those of middle- and upper-class women, and that struggles for practical needs can lead to a growing consciousness and questioning of gender hierarchy (Rodríguez 1994; Massolo 1999; Safa 1990; Barrig 1989; Caldeira 1990; Díaz Barriga 1998). Likewise, the experiences of popular women's organizing in Caracas demonstrate how involvement in everyday political organizing has brought about changes in how these women view themselves and their place in the world. But while barrio women may come to challenge cer-

tain aspects of gender subordination, they generally do not adopt a feminist outlook, as the term has been traditionally defined. Moreover, they do not always express their reasons for becoming active in terms of economic or practical interests.

Scholars have argued that the distinction between “practical” and “strategic” gender interests incorrectly assumes that women’s daily struggles for basic goods and services are prepolitical in themselves and do not represent a challenge to patriarchy or established gender relations (Lind 1992; Westwood and Radcliffe 1993); that the distinction indirectly reinforces women’s structural position by assuming a public-private dichotomy (Stephen 1997, 12); and as Molyneux herself has clarified in later work, that popular women’s organizations may combine “practical” and “strategic” interests in their daily organizing experiences (2001, 155). This study tries to build on the contributions of these scholars. It follows Amy Lind’s suggestion that rather than creating false barriers between “practical” and “strategic” gender interests, we need to focus on “how poor women negotiate power, construct collective identities, and develop critical perspectives on the world in which they live—all factors that challenge dominant gender representations” (1992, 137). As Lind argues in her book on Ecuadorian women’s popular organizing, poor women did not organize explicitly to confront gender relations but “to improve the gendered conditions of their daily lives,” something quite distinct (2005, 96).

This study seeks to locate popular women’s organizing in Caracas within the complexities of a revolutionary-populist system, where women’s local participation is both nationally valorized and initiated from above. Following Kenneth Roberts (2003, 35), this study defines populism as “a form of personalistic leadership that mobilize[s] diverse popular constituencies behind statist, nationalistic and redistributive development models.” It qualifies this definition, however, by noting that the concept of populism cannot describe all aspects of Venezuelan politics under Chávez; it is one privileged element of political discourse and culture that interacts among other elements (Burbano de Lara 1998, 24).

Gender politics in Chávez’s Venezuela is distinct from the postrevolutionary contexts of Cuba, China, and Nicaragua, where political leaders created state women’s agencies in order to promote women’s interests and rights within a broader project of state building (Molyneux 2000; Howell 1998; Chun 2001; Craske 1999). Popular women participated en masse in organizations such as the Federation of Cuban Women, the All-China Women’s Federation, and the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. These organizations provided some scope for addressing gender inequalities, but women’s interests were often secondary to greater political goals, such as national unity and development. Looking at Cuba and Nicaragua, Nikki Craske

suggests that rather than becoming subsumed into the state, women need to maintain an independent women's movement in order to "provide alternative agendas and strategies, which in turn maintain pressure on the regime" (1999, 140). The experiences of barrio women in Chávez's Venezuela, however, do not fit neatly into the categories of either mass women's organizations or independent women's movements as defined in this literature.

Barrio women in Venezuela are not organized within mass women's organizations. Women in the Chávez administration created a new National Institute for Women, known as INAMujer, which was established by presidential decree in 2000. INAMujer's predecessors were the National Women's Council (CONAMU), created in 1992, and the Presidential Women's Advisory Commission (COFEAPRE), established in 1974 (Friedman 2000). INAMujer works together with barrio women, but this organization does not have a mass membership like its counterparts in Cuba and Nicaragua. INAMujer presides over such women's groups as the Bolivarian Forces (*Fuerzas Bolivarianas*) and the Meeting Points (*Puntos de Encuentro*), but to date neither of these organizations has succeeded in incorporating barrio women to a significant degree. Nor have barrio women formed autonomous women's movements like Women for Dignity and Life (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida*) in the revolutionary context of El Salvador or the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. The *Círculos Femeninos* of the 1970s were not an autonomous social movement; they were linked to a Christian non-governmental organization known as the Popular Action Service Center (*Centro al Servicio de Acción Popular*, CESAP).

Instead of forming either mass organizations or independent movements, barrio women in Venezuela work in the context of local community organizations, some of which have long histories. Yet while these women tend to work in local spaces and engage in struggles outside of the state, they still strongly identify with government-directed programs and leaders such as Chávez. How can we conceptualize this kind of political activism? As argued elsewhere, we need alternatives to dichotomous classifications of state feminism and independent movements (Fernandes 2006). That earlier article draws on the distinctions made by various scholars between "independent movements," which set their own goals; "associational linkages," where autonomous groups choose to work with other political organizations; and "directed mobilization," where authority and initiative come from outside (Randall 1998; Molyneux 1998). Like the activists of the Cuban feminist organization Magín (described in Fernandes 2006), barrio women in Venezuela also work in association with official institutions and programs while maintaining a degree of autonomy through their local organizing work in domestic and community spaces. But at the same time, barrio women

are always vulnerable to directed mobilization from above and the institutionalization of their struggles, which Lind (2005, 90) argues may lead to increased work responsibilities without changes in women's conditions of life.

In addition to the practical consequences of women's involvement in state-managed programs, this study seeks to explore the role of discourse, self-esteem, and nurturance in women's mobilization under a populist system. Lola Luna has described the impact of populist discourse on women's movements in Latin America. On the one hand, she suggests that the populist regimes of Perón in Argentina, Cárdenas in Mexico, and Vargas in Brazil developed a maternalist ideology that sought to maintain reproductive control over women, to utilize their capacities as social agents of development, and to exploit their economic productivity (Luna 1995, 252). On the other hand, the contradictions of this maternalist ideology, and the new social order that it represented, opened possibilities for women to construct new subjectivities in response to their political exclusion (Luna 1995, 254). This schema needs to be retooled for an analysis of contemporary populism, where maternalist ideology is no longer rooted in developmentalist concerns of labor discipline, particularly given changing regimes of labor and capital. But women's emerging activism does need to be understood in relation to what Magdalena Valdivieso (2004) has called "the foundational imaginary of heroism," latent in much of Chávez's political rhetoric, as well as to ideological constructions of women as nurturers and carers. Like the Sandinista maternal ideal of *madres sufridas* that Lorraine Bayard de Volo (2001, 121) discusses for Nicaragua, notions of revolutionary motherhood are also used in Venezuela to appeal to barrio women, a construction that both reinforces older roles and creates the groundwork for new possible roles and identities to emerge.

## HISTORIES OF GENDER AND POLITICS

Barrio women's activism under Chávez must be situated in the history of women's organizing in Venezuela and also in the history of grassroots community movements in the barrios. In the early phase of the women's movement in Venezuela, in the 1940s, it was mainly middle-class women who mobilized in support of civil and economic demands (Friedman 2000, 6). But during the struggle against the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in the 1950s, women from a range of social strata engaged in politics. Veteran feminist activist Argelia Laya recalls defending her rights as a woman in the base committees (*comités de base*) of the Communist Youth in the barrios: "I never accepted that they assigned me secondary roles or they discriminated against me. I always protested it" (cited in Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 226).

Cross-party and cross-class organizing was facilitated by the creation of a Women's Committee (*Comité Femenino*). But following the transition to democracy in 1958, women were demobilized. Terry Karl (1987) refers to Venezuelan democracy after 1958 as a "pacted democracy," because fundamental issues, including a development model based on foreign capital and state intervention in processes of union bargaining, were decided before they could be opened to public debate through elections. According to Friedman (1998), women's united activism was seen as a threat to this pacted democracy, which sought to exclude the Community Party and independent social actors. The Women's Committee was converted into the National Women's Union and then disbanded, in 1961 (Friedman 2000, 128). Women of different classes were excluded from participation during the posttransition period, as they faced gender bias in the dominant parties and their own organizations were closed down.

Women were involved in the guerrilla struggles of the 1960s, which arose to contest the conditions of pacted democracy. Given the male-dominated structures of guerrilla organizations, however, women did not often play a primary role alongside men. It was not until the 1970s that women would again engage in grassroots activism. During this period, women began to organize autonomously in response to their exclusion from political life. As Friedman (2000, 163) shows, this new phase in women's organizing was often divided by issues of class, as middle-class women organized in the feminist movement and lower-class women in local community organizations.

Like similar groups elsewhere in Latin America, Venezuela's feminist groups sought to establish independence from party politics, and were often informed by a socialist perspective. Their efforts continued into the 1980s with a campaign to reform the Civil Code led by a professional women's organization, the Venezuelan Federation of Female Lawyers (FEVA). The campaign sought equal rights for wives and husbands regarding property and divorce, and equal rights for children born out of wedlock (Friedman 2000, 176). The success of the reform, passed by Congress in July 1982, was due to the coalition building and broad tactics applied by the women. Some of the reform provisions did affect poor women, many of whom had children out of wedlock; and women from the *Círculos Femeninos* helped create links with popular women (Friedman 2000, 186). But as Friedman notes, "Most of the reform provisions reflected a middle- or upper-class perspective—for example, because poor women rarely got married, they would not benefit from a changed divorce law, and their partners usually did not have property to share or inheritance to leave" (2000, 186).

These class biases were also reflected in later campaigns, such as the campaign to reform the labor law. Because most of the reform lead-

ers were elite women who relied on domestic labor, the rights of domestic workers were not included in the campaign (Friedman 2000, 194). Thus, while efforts in women's organizing did affect poor women somewhat, they were focused more on the demands of educated, professional women.

Popular women's organizing in the early 1970s emerged with the formation of the *Círculos Femeninos*. The *Círculos Femeninos* sought to address the specific problems of poor women; they rejected interference by political parties; and they sought to build a decentralized and non-hierarchical movement (Friedman 2000, 169–71). The aims of these groups were closely linked to problems in the barrio, such as health, education, jobs, and facilities (García Guadilla 1993, 76). But the *círculos* were part of CESAP, a large, male-dominated NGO, which prevented the poor women from taking up more radical feminist demands. As the women started to participate in coalitions with feminist groups during the 1980s, however, they began to question the male leadership of CESAP and the gender division of labor in the organization (García Guadilla 1993, 77). The *Círculos Femeninos* were an important initiative in support of popular women, but the organization relied on outside facilitators to "train" women, and its dependence on outside funding reduced its autonomy and spontaneity as a women's organization.

At the same time, barrio women had begun to engage in organic forms of community activism jointly with the men in the barrio. One of the most important campaigns in which women participated in the early 1970s was the struggle against urban remodeling. Christian Democratic president Rafael Caldera (1969–74) promoted a housing program known as "The New San Agustín," which proposed to eliminate the *ranchos* (small dwellings) and to build houses in the lower and middle ranges of the hills, while the higher hills would become public gardens, uniting the Botanical Gardens and the Parque los Caobos. The residents of San Agustín del Sur formed a Committee Against Displacement (*Comité Contra los Desalojos*), which proved that the price being paid for each square of land was not that indicated by the Municipal Office of Urban Planning. Carlos Andrés Pérez, from Acción Democrática, came to power in 1974, and in his Fifth Plan of the Nation he continued his predecessor's project of urban remodeling and displacement of barrio residents (Baptista and Marchionda 1992). In response, the movement of community resistance grew stronger and spread to other parishes, such as La Vega, El Valle, and La Pastora, where residents also formed Committees Against Displacement to challenge the government policy.

In San Agustín, the campaign against displacement was linked to broader community issues through the movement El Afinque de Marín, started by the Grupo Madera in 1977. The original Grupo Madera was a radical cultural movement that was concerned with building solidarity and



unity among barrio residents. Most members of the group perished in a tragic accident on the Orinoco River while touring the country in 1980.

According to one of the surviving members, Nelly Ramos, Grupo Madera wanted to “forge an ideological consciousness . . . above all, to give incentive to all the participants to define their corresponding role as the protagonists of a cultural response that was emerging in the heart of the community” (2004, 176). Like the women in the Black Power movement in the United States, the women of Grupo Madera sought to revive a sense of black pride and dignity. One of the members, Alejandra Ramos, reinterpreted the poem *El negro Lorenzo*, by Venezuelan poet Miguel Otero Silva, in a song known as *Ritual*, or *La negra Lorenza*. While Otero Silva’s *negro* is the slave of all, Ramos’s *negra* is slave to men as well. This reworking of the poem points to how race, gender, and class oppression intersect, and to the attempts to overcome this oppression: “Black woman, slave of all, I am no one’s slave.”

With their natural Afro hairstyles and African clothing, the black women of Grupo Madera launched a struggle of cultural resistance, what the song refers to as *rebelde el pelo*, or rebellion of hair. Grupo Madera reclaimed black subjectivity and revindicated black culture as the basis of an autochthonous culture.

The 1970s were a decade of community-based activism in many parishes and barrios across Caracas. Large numbers of barrio women mobilized during the protests and hunger strikes led by worker priests (*curas obreros*), such as Francisco Wuytack and José Antonio Angós. Wuytack was based in the barrio Carmen, in the parish of La Vega. When he arrived there in 1966, he noticed the poor condition of the local schools, which did not have adequate facilities above the third grade. When he asked if the children could attend the private Colegio San José de Tarbes in the neighboring middle-class enclave of Paraiso, he was told that he was a dreamer (Wuytack 2005).

Wuytack went several times to the school with the children and their mothers, who were accused of being a disturbance. Wuytack and the women stayed outside the school, singing hymns and chanting, but several of the women were taken to prison and beaten (Wuytack 2005). The activities helped the women of the community to organize and to become aware of the injustices they faced, compared with the urbanization of Paraiso.

In 1976, a major landslide occurred in the Los Canjilones sector of La Vega, trapping and killing several barrio residents. Hermelinda Machado, another resident, recalls that the women of the barrio launched large protests against the government for its failure to carry out rescue efforts (cited in Villá 2004). Together with Father Angós, they organized a hunger strike to protest the proposed relocation of the surviving barrio residents (Herrera de Weishaar et al. 1977, 168). The

worker priests played an important role in facilitating women's protest and community activism in La Vega during this time.

In the parish of 23 de Enero, women had also begun to participate in sports, cultural, and community-based organizations during the 1970s. The residents of public housing engaged in protest actions similar to those carried on in other barrios. On December 23, 1981, to protest the buildings' severe state of disrepair, residents engaged in hijackings of public and private vehicles, demanding that the government address the problems. Four weeks later, the government agreed to fix the elevators and the open sewers and to provide electric cables, telephone service, and regular garbage collection (Contreras 2000, 54–56).

As barrio residents united around shared community goals, they created new spaces of activism outside of the organized leftist groups that had predominated in the previous decade of urban guerrilla struggle, as well as the political parties and their cells in the barrios. Popular women played an important role in these community organizations and struggles, but unlike the middle-class feminists, they had less access to the political arena (García Guadilla 1993, 84). As Machado says, "We had voice, but we were not heard" (cited in Villá 2004).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Venezuelan women faced a new series of challenges during the country's economic and political crisis. On February 18, 1983, known as Black Friday, the currency collapsed, leading to a period of hyperinflation and economic stagnation (Levine 1998; Silva Michelena 1999). As a response to rising interest rates, the government of Herrera Campíns initiated a set of controls over the economy to prevent the massive flight of private capital (Silva Michelena 1999, 92). When Pérez returned to office in 1989, he announced the adoption of a "neoliberal package" consisting of austerity measures, such as dismantling government subsidies to local industries, deregulating prices, and reducing social spending.

The initial price increases associated with these measures led to massive popular riots on February 27, 1989 (the *Caracazo*), which induced the government to implement some social policies for an interim period. The neoliberal package was revived in April 1996, in consultation with the International Monetary Fund, as a program of macroeconomic stabilization known as Agenda Venezuela (Silva Michelena 1999, 103). Although Agenda Venezuela succeeded in stabilizing the economy to some degree, it also contributed to the increase in marginality, poverty, and unemployment. Between 1984 and 1995, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line rose from 36 percent to 66 percent, and the portion of those in extreme poverty tripled from 11 percent to 36 percent (Roberts 2004, 59). In December 1997, there were 3 million homes in poverty and more than 1.6 million homes in situations of extreme poverty (Silva Michelena 1999, 95).

The growth in poverty was related to a number of factors, including the large-scale loss of employment, higher prices and reduced purchasing power due to inflation, and reduced government spending on social programs. There were major cuts in social spending, including cuts of over 40 percent in education, 70 percent in housing and 37 percent in health care (Roberts 2004, 59). These conditions most strongly affected the poorest 40 percent of the population, leading to growing urban segregation.

In the context of growing urban poverty and declining services, women created their own alternative organizations and survival networks to confront the crisis. In 1992, the *Círculos Femeninos* split from their parent organization, CESAP, and began to organize more autonomously. At the same time, more funding became available from international donors and agencies for women's organizations constituted as NGOs. The Coordinating Committee of Women's NGOs (*Coordinadora de Organizaciones No-Gubernamentales de Mujeres*, CONG), founded in the 1980s, received international support and financing during the preparations for the U.N. World Conferences on Women in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 (Friedman 1999).

Many theorists have noted the paradoxes of international donor funding for women's organizations (Alvarez 1999; Schild 1998; Lind 1997, 2005). In a context of privatization and cutbacks in social welfare, women in NGOs often find themselves providing the services that used to be the responsibility of the state. In Venezuela, international foundations, such as UNICEF and the National Fund for Infant Attention (*Fondo Nacional de Atención a la Infancia*, FONAIN), provided funding for day care centers (*bogares de cuidado diario*) in 1987, with the aim of establishing 42,000 centers by 1993. This program, which involved large numbers of women as "carer mothers," was a continuation of programs established during the first Pérez administration (Delgado Arria 1995, 62). The *Círculos Femeninos* were also incorporated into the World Bank-funded Social Fund (*Fondo Social*), in charge of more than 14 compensatory programs.<sup>1</sup>

While providing some relief for women in a context of economic crisis, these programs also served to institutionalize women's struggles for survival (Lind 2005, 89). This often meant an increased workload for poorer women and a lower likelihood that the conditions of structural adjustment policies would be challenged.

## **CHÁVEZ AND THE RESURGENCE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION**

While the events of the *Caracazo* came in the context of a growing crisis, they also helped to spark the re-emergence of urban social move-

ments in the barrios. In the early 1990s, the community movement Macarao and Its People (*Macarao y su Gente*) emerged in the parish of Macarao (Grohmann 1996). After a series of protests and organizing efforts in the parish 23 de Enero, barrio residents formed the Coordinadora Simón Bolívar in 1993.

Compared to the petitioning, lobbying, and negotiation favored by the middle-class neighborhood movements, urban social movements in the barrios pursued more radical protest tactics, such as hijackings of public vehicles and community takeovers of public spaces (Ramos Rollon 1995). Coinciding with growing activism in the barrios was the emergence of a clandestine radical grouping in the military known as the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR-200), which was led by Chávez (López-Maya 2004). The coup attempt by this group in February 1992 was crushed, but Chávez asked to be allowed to speak on television to advise insurgents in other cities to surrender peacefully (Gott 2000, 70).

In his appearance, Chávez said, "For now, the objectives that we had set ourselves have not been achieved in the capital." The phrase "For now," or *Por ahora*, became the rallying cry of diverse sectors that were frustrated with the orientation of the mainstream parties and were looking for alternatives. According to Margarita López-Maya et al. (1999, 205), Chávez was a powerful counterimage, perceived as capable of unifying social movements and opposing neoliberalism. Following the unsuccessful February coup attempt, Chávez was imprisoned in military jail, and in November of the same year his fellow officers launched a second coup attempt, which was also unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, the coup attempts and Chávez's ultimate attainment of office in 1998 have been important catalysts in the politicization and growing participation of broader sectors of society, including women, in new spheres of popular action. Women organized to elect women-friendly candidates to the new Constituent Assembly that Chávez convened in 1999, and lobbied to include articles pertaining to sexual and reproductive rights in the drafting of the new constitution, approved by referendum the same year (Rakowski 2003; Castillo and Salvatierra 2000; Muñoz 2000). In July 2000, Chávez again stood for election under the new constitution and was re-elected for a six-year term. On April 11, 2002, there was a brief, opposition-led coup against Chávez, who was brought back to power two days later as a result of massive popular protests, mainly involving women from the popular classes. Popular women mobilized again during the recall referendum in May 2004. This vote was called by the opposition to determine whether Chávez should be recalled from office. Women played a major role in campaigns to register and mobilize people to vote, and they staffed voter registration centers in the barrios, ultimately leading to Chávez's success in the referendum.

Figure 1. Today, I Am a Housewife. Tomorrow,  
a Business Administrator



Photo by the author.

Long-term feminists have occupied important positions in the Chávez government and in the state women's agency, INAMujer. Some women have been involved in the Chavismo movement, which includes Chávez's party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR); mass organizations, such as the Francisco Miranda Front; and the National Union of Workers. But Chavista organizations tend to be hierarchically organized and male-dominated, along the lines of traditional political parties and unions. For this reason, rather than joining Chavista organizations, many barrio women have become involved in the parallel social revolution, known as the *proceso*. José Roberto Duque (2004) defines the *proceso* as a parallel and underground movement that defends the Chávez government but follows its own trajectory, independent of central government directives. Many women participating in the *proceso* do not identify themselves as Chavista. They may participate in Chávez's programs, such as soup kitchens, land committees, and the missions, and they may even look to Chávez for leadership and direction. But they have sources of identity that come from their barrio or parish and that form the basis of alternative social and community networks.

New groupings of women have entered into community work through the social programs introduced by the Chávez government. One of the programs introduced by Chávez is a college-level work-study program known as Misión Ribas. Promotional billboards for the program, placed strategically in subways and at central intersections in the barrios, appeal specifically to women. Figure 1 shows a young mestiza

Figure 2. Today, I Am a Domestic Worker. Tomorrow, a Social Worker



Photo by the author.

woman, Ana Guerrero, standing in front of her small house, or *rancho*. The caption says that while today she is a housewife, tomorrow she will be a business administrator. Figures 2 and 3 show black and indigenous women, who are moving out of their traditional roles of domestic workers and craftspersons to become social workers and doctors. The presence of black and mestiza women on billboards is a radical departure from standard commercial advertisements—such as the ads for Polar beer dotting the city landscape—which present highly sexualized portraits of women in skimpy bikinis, with European features and long, flowing blond hair. The representation of barrio women as future business administrators, social workers, and doctors is also a dramatic change from conventional representations and class expectations.

In addition to the educational programs, which range from work-study programs like Misión Ribas to literacy programs (Misión Robinson) and university courses (Misión Sucre), Chávez has encouraged barrio residents to create a range of committees and cooperative organizations. By an executive decree in 2002, Chávez provided the basis for Urban Land Committees (*Comités de Tierra*) in order to rationalize land tenancy through surveys, distribution of land deeds, and development of property belonging to the community (Ellner 2005, 24). Because most dwellings in the barrios were constructed through a process of mass occupations as people moved to Caracas from the countryside, few homeowners possess the deeds or titles to their land. By March 2005, more than 4,000 Urban Land Committees in the urban centers of Venezuela had distributed about 170,000 property titles (Botía 2005).

Figure 3. Today I Am a Craftsperson. Tomorrow, a Doctor



Photo by the author.

Through the program Barrio Adentro, Chávez has created a series of health clinics in the barrios, staffed by some 12,000 Cuban doctors (Ellner 2005, 23). In March 2005, there were more than 5,000 Health Committees (*Comités de Salud*), which were created to supervise and assist with the Barrio Adentro program (Botía 2005). Another initiative introduced by the Chávez government is the soup kitchens (*casas alimentarias*), where needy children and single mothers from the barrios receive one free meal a day. In 2004, 4,052 soup kitchens were established in Venezuela (Wagner 2005). In 2001, the government also created a women's lending agency, known as the Woman's Bank (*Banco de la Mujer*), to make financial services available to poorer women (Castañeda 2004, 27).

Not surprisingly, the participants in these programs and committees overwhelmingly have been women.<sup>2</sup> As many scholars have noted, the centrality of women to the life of the barrio (Martín Barbero 1993, 198), gender roles that assign domestic and reproductive tasks to women (Rodríguez 1994, 34), and women's exclusion from traditional male spheres of politics, such as parties and trade unions (Caldeira 1990), have bolstered their participation in such domestic, community-related concerns. Women themselves reaffirmed these points when asked about the reasons for their participation. In June 2004, a group of women from San Agustín were going door to door to carry out a census of the resi-

dents of the *ranchos* in the upper reaches of the barrio Hornos de Cal and others for the purpose of conducting new social programs. One of the women, Clara Brinson, said that women were mobilizing in the social programs because “we women are the ones who almost always have to carry the burden of housework, we are the ones who most feel the weight of this work. Men, by nature, are used to coming home on Fridays, having their beer. . . .” It is this awareness of domestic responsibility that encourages some women to become central actors in community and social work.

Other women, however, pointed to the importance of Chávez as a catalyst for the mass involvement of women in popular politics. Carmen Teresa Barrios, an activist from the Carretera Negra of La Vega, pointed to the April 2002 coup against Chávez and the role of women in bringing him back to power.

For me this comes since Chávez. I am 40-something years old, and never in my life have I cared about what was happening in my country, and I'm saying my country, but also my Carretera where I live. . . . It's like I am fulfilled. This work fulfills me. I want to be involved in everything, I want to participate in everything, I really feel that someone needs me and I can do it. . . . That's why I say, it was Chávez who awoke the woman. He gave us importance, value. . . . I studied, but I never felt interested to participate or do other things, to care about people other than myself. . . . It was this voice that told us we could do it, that if we are united we can achieve something. I was one of those people who never thought about taking to the streets, like I did on April 11th, when they overthrew our president. I said, “My God, is this what you feel when you fight for what is yours?” I went all the way to Maracay in a car, I took a flag, and I said to the others, “My God, what am I doing?” I didn't recognize myself. . . . This was all asleep within me and because of this man, his calling, his way of being, or I don't know what, I got involved in this thing. . . . And then I wanted to face the president himself, and tell him how things should be, you may want to do it this way, but I don't agree, that we should do it in this other way in order to achieve what we aim to do. That's why I tell you, it was an awakening, a calling, and he made us women go out into the streets, he made us realize that as women we can also struggle, we can do it and be involved. (Barrios 2005)

Carmen Teresa's narrative contains several layers. There is the story of an awakening of almost biblical proportions: the president has “called them” and these women have responded. As Richard Gott (2000, 146) argues, Chávez often appeals to a highly religious population with his rhetoric, like an evangelical preacher, invoking love and redemption; his millenarian notion of a new start after the evils of the past; and his campaign posters featuring portraits not dissimilar to evangelical pictures of



Christ. Carmen Teresa's narrative reflects this kind of popular religious discourse, which is appropriated by Chavismo. Yet there is also an awareness that Carmen Teresa knows best her "Carretera," as she refers to her barrio, and if she does not agree with the president, she can tell him the right way to do things. This latter aspect disrupts our ability to read the narrative as a populist manipulation of women's agency, because Carmen Teresa is expressing an initiative to decide what is best for her community, rather than waiting for orders from above. This aspect is especially important. Carmen Teresa's narrative further expresses the importance that poor women activists feel as a result of Chávez's emphasis on the protagonism of the poorer classes as a motive force for change in society.

Another notable aspect of Carmen Teresa's narrative, and one found in other narratives as well, is the quality of nurturance: "I really feel that someone needs me and I can do it." Many women's narratives strongly brought out these emotive aspects of community participation, which also go beyond the more economy-focused explanations of "practical needs" prevalent in the literature. This aspect of nurturance and maternal caring is not only common to the new Chávez-motivated activists. Susana Rodríguez, a leftist militant for more than 20 years in the parish of 23 de Enero, notes,

Women are always at the forefront, and I think this has to do with maternity, with this necessity to look after and protect. To look after the fatherland, to look after the barrio, to look after friends, to look after the husband, to look after the president. It is a feeling that is generated among us women. (Rodríguez 2005)

Veteran women activists, as well as newer ones, used tropes of motherhood as a way of describing their involvement in politics. Various scholars have also found that women use discourses of nurturance and their maternal role to frame their participation and construct a sense of collective identity (Morgen 1988; Bayard de Volo 2001; Lind 2005; James 2000). But as Lynn Stephen (1997) argues, rather than understanding women's participation in terms of essentialized or uniform identities of motherhood, we need to look at the internal contradictions and differences being negotiated among women. While for some barrio women, their history of local community organizing is at the center of their approach to politics, for others it is their maternal feelings toward the president, and for others some combination of these factors.

## **DAILY LIFE AND POPULAR ORGANIZING**

A look at the intersection of everyday life and popular organizing, what Elizabeth Jelin (1987, 11) refers to as *lo cotidiano*, or the everyday, can

help to give greater depth to the daily experience of popular organizing. The focus here is the activists in the Carretera Negra barrio.

Carretera Negra (Black Highway) consists of a line of houses located along a stretch of highway, as indicated by its name, and along three smaller lanes, Oriente, 24 de Julio, and Justicia, situated in the broader parish of La Vega, on the west side of Caracas. Its residents total about 140 families. It is a close-knit community with a long history of organizing tied to the parish. One of the main community leaders, Freddy Mendoza, came to Caracas as a child. From a young age, he was involved in community activism with others, such as Edgar "El Gordo" Pérez, from the sector Las Casitas. These leaders came of age during the struggles of the 1970s, when Carretera Negra residents participated in the protests and hunger strikes for education, employment, and basic services. In the 1980s, they banded together with residents from other sectors to demand the removal of a local cement factory that was contaminating the area, to protest the building of a prison in the barrio, and to protect large green areas of the neighborhood from being taken over for other government projects. Through this process, the activists developed a community newspaper, organized cultural and sporting events for members of the community, and built a sense of collectivity.

Many women of the Carretera Negra, such as Carmen Pérez, Freddy's wife, were also involved in these struggles. Through this experience and the history of democratic participation in the sector, which involves decisionmaking by popular assembly, the activists have been able to retain a sense of their individual identity as they participate in the *proceso*. Stephen (1997, 138) has argued that it is in "cohesive neighborhoods with a history of shared struggle" that collective strategies such as communal kitchens may find fertile ground. Moreover, she argues, women who have participated alongside men in these struggles are also more likely to be valued for their independent contributions (1997, 138).

Stephen's observations are borne out in the context of the Carretera Negra, where women activists took the lead in implementing programs such as Barrio Adentro and the communal kitchens. The women of the Carretera Negra first formed their Health Committee in July 2003, when a Cuban doctor was sent to the barrio. The women found a house to use as the clinic; they looked for equipment, chairs, and beds; and they found the doctor a residence in the barrio. They organized meetings between the Cuban doctor and the community, they took health censuses, and they visited families to explain the idea of the popular clinics. In September 2003, the women started an Urban Land Committee consisting of 21 people who took censuses of families and began to distribute land titles, giving titles to 98 families by June 2004. In September 2004, the community activists set up a soup kitchen, which was functioning by October.

The soup kitchen premises are rooms in the house of barrio resident Osvaldo Mendoza, a police officer, who had never before participated in community work. Osvaldo stated, "I was never a neighbor (*vecino*) who was very involved with the community because of my work . . . but seeing the necessities of our communities, what I've seen as a police officer, the necessities you see in the streets, I offered my house when this opportunity came" (Mendoza 2006). Osvaldo and his family worked together with the women of the community to set up the kitchen, and he is involved in its activities, unloading materials from the trucks, serving the children, and carrying out surveys in the barrio. He is often the only man present in community assemblies, which tend to be dominated by women. According to Osvaldo, people even joke about his presence as a man: "In the meetings we have a joke, a game that when they speak of *ellas* (the women) or *nosotras* (us women), I'm included. The women make fun of me: 'well, the señora Osvalda. . .'" The jokes reveal the gendered nature of community work; like domestic chores, it is still assumed to be women's work. But the participation of men in community work is also changing perspectives about domestic responsibility. As Osvaldo said, "I don't feel bad because this is women's work, no, this is also men's work" (Mendoza 2006). The participation of men in the soup kitchen signals to other men that cooking and domestic work should be shared responsibilities.

Two popular assemblies held in the homes and meeting spaces of the Carretera Negra provide observations on women's roles in community activism. The first is a general assembly held January 27, 2005, which brought together activists from various barrios in La Vega. The second took place June 22, 2005, and it convened the activists of the barrio to discuss the progress of the soup kitchen.<sup>3</sup> These assemblies and the discussions people conducted illustrate the possibilities and limitations of popular organizing for creating new forms of gender relations and popular politics. Combining these observations with other scholarship on soup kitchens in Lima, Peru (Mujica 1992), it seems that collective experiences such as popular assemblies and soup kitchens, while not explicitly feminist enterprises, are important in challenging a gendered division of labor and perceptions of women's role in politics (Mujica 1992; Lind 1997).

The first assembly was particularly notable because it was an example of the kinds of discussions that have begun to lead to the challenging of gender hierarchies and male dominance in popular organizing. In January 2005, the assembly was convened in resident Zaida's living room, a large room with windows overlooking the hills of the parish. More than 30 people filled the room and spilled out into the adjoining rooms of her *ranchito*. Those present were mainly women, and as the night went on, people came and left the room. Various topics were dis-

cussed, including the relationship between the community and institutions, the local council elections scheduled for August, and activities the community was organizing.

Freddy Mendoza introduced the topic of women's participation and gender issues. His wife, Carmen, responded, "We women participate more because the majority of us are unemployed. We are in the home, and our husbands, whoever they are, are out there working, so we collaborate with each other, we are aware of the problems that exist in the community." Carmen Teresa disagreed with her, saying that it's only because of Chávez that women have begun to participate: "For me, all of this comes from Chávez." Lina agreed with her: "Chávez has opened my eyes and won me over. I began to get involved in the cooperative, in the community." "El Gordo" Edgar put forward his point of view:

We have always had a strong presence of women in all the revolutionary movements of this parish, but they have been discriminated by history that is based in the macro and not in daily life [*cotidianidad*]. . . . Carmen Teresa had her political awakening with the discourse of Chávez, the fall of the government, the coup. By contrast, I have strong memories of women participating, in fact, I think that the women are fighters and the men are a hindrance. My mother arrived here in the year 1964, because these barrios up in Las Casitas were built by people from the communities and they put down the pipes for water to reach there. It was the women, together with the children, who carried up the pipes. The men arrived at 5 in the evening from work, and they worked on the pipes till 10 at night. This is what I remember of here in Caracas, where women had a very important role. We also have to have another discussion when we talk about gender, without falling into economism. I am black and I define myself as black. . . . I think we have to fight these battles together.

As a long-term community activist, El Gordo thus dates his political awakening as before Chávez, with roots in a longer historical struggle over race and class. Freddy summarized the discussion.

There are some key points. First, that it's not just now that women are participating to address the problems of the community. We are talking about an experiences of 30-something years that we have lived through. . . . Recently we protested INOS [National Institute of Sanitary Works] so that they would resolve our water issues, and 90 percent of the people protesting were women with their children. . . . I think that this is a natural attitude women have because they are permanently in the community and this produces a sensibility toward problems faced by the community. Meanwhile, the husband is occupied with his work, exploitation, he leaves at 6 in the morning and returns at 8 at night to ask for food and watch television. He doesn't have this same kind of sensibility, and on weekends he

just restricts the time of women, because of jealousy, because of machismo, for a range of factors.

The discussion seemed to center on the historical and contemporary role of women in the barrios, with Carmen, Freddy, and El Gordo suggesting that women play an important role in community activism because the barrio is the location of their daily lives and work. Carmen Teresa and Lina, who have become politicized much more recently, point out that large numbers of women have become involved in politics only since Chávez came to power. While for Carmen Teresa and Lina, their involvement in politics is more dependent on Chávez's charismatic leadership, El Gordo seeks to build local and independent leadership.

The government has many problems; we are trying to construct something here, from ourselves, together. It's our only possibility. It might happen that the United States wants to come here and intervene, but they're not going to stop our *proceso*, because our *proceso* didn't begin with Chávez and it won't end with Chávez.

In their discussions, both the long-term and the newer activists articulate and negotiate these questions of autonomy versus dependency and the relationship of their movements to the government.

Freddy then reoriented the discussion to address questions of machismo and how it affects women's participation.

And in this revolutionary process today, I find it strange that we have not addressed issues of machismo. I think that in this moment we are living, we have to think about how we as males can help, for example, in the work of the home so that women can have time to participate and become leaders. . . . For example, José Luis cooks, and I'm sure his food has more flavor than his wife's cooking. He doesn't lose his manhood because she drinks a cold beer. . . . That is, share the work of the home and work together with your *compañera*. . . . Manhood is not about never cooking, washing the dishes, or washing your own clothes; it is a conception of power. And if we are in this revolution, we have to break with the structures of power that are being generated in the home. These are structures of domination of men over women.

José Luis, another resident, responded,

Yes, to be a real man is to assume responsibility. . . . To assume the kind of responsibilities that Venezuelan women do is difficult. There in the hills [he pointed out the window] we have a number of *ranchos*, and the majority of women living there are single women who work, attend to their children, and carry the responsibility of the home. . . . Really, here the woman is relegated to a second-class status, women are very mistreated by their families.

The initiation of this discussion by men and not women is partly related to the structures of male privilege themselves, which have enabled men to contemplate these questions and promote new lines of thinking. Yet the involvement of these men alongside their *compañeras* in community work has opened their eyes to these gender differences and made them more sensitive to questions of male privilege.

Carlos, a representative of the mayor's office, had been invited to the assembly to listen to the community's perspective. Since Juan Barreto, a Chavista mayor, was elected in November 2004, community leaders had been trying to make connections with the mayor's office for the community to gain access to funding and civic projects. But Carlos's perspective provided a strong contrast to that of José Luis, Freddy, and El Gordo. Carlos dominated the discussion, whereas José Luis, Freddy, and El Gordo held back so that others could speak. When women were invited to respond to particular points, Carlos interjected with his opinion. Following José Luis's incisive comment about the problems faced by single women in the barrios, Carlos responded, "I don't want to change the subject, but I can add the anecdote that they say in the home, when there are no men, women urinate standing up." This kind of crude joke, combined with Carlos's domineering presence, provided an alternative pole to the kind of awareness and self-criticism that the male community activists present were trying to encourage.

At the second assembly, five months later, the women of the Carretera had begun to take a much more proactive role. This assembly was convened to discuss the progress of the soup kitchen. The process of organizing the soup kitchen had been a positive experience for the women. As with the popular clinic, they had taken the initiative in repainting the rooms, stocking the necessary cookware, and carrying out a census in the barrio to determine the needy families who were eligible for meals. Every day, a government truck arrived with supplies, and Osvaldo was usually on hand to help the women unload these, but all the work of preparing the food was done by the women.

While the women activists' participation in the soup kitchen does not overtly challenge traditional gender roles, it is bringing about other changes, as Helen Safa (1990, 361) has argued in another context: "the collectivization of private tasks, such as food preparation and child care, is transforming women's roles, even though they are not undertaken as conscious challenges to gender subordination." Food preparation is increasingly seen as a job, performed mostly by women, that should be assumed by the community and not by individual women. The basis of the soup kitchen is women's voluntary participation and the networks of mutual support that have existed for many years in the barrio.

The assembly was scheduled for 3 P.M., but because the *vecinas* all live close to one another, they just called to each other and knocked on

each others' doors as they made their way to the soup kitchen premises. In the soup kitchen, they sat on wooden chairs, mostly borrowed from neighbors. There was a total of 25 people, 22 women and 3 men. The soup kitchen is run by 5 women, who work full-time, five days a week, to provide lunch to up to 150 people daily.

The women began the assembly by raising concerns about the amount of work involved in maintaining the soup kitchen. One of the cooks, Gladys, recounted that the women must begin the work the evening before, washing and soaking the beans, cleaning the rice, cutting the chicken, and generally preparing the food. At 1:30 P.M., the children come for lunch, and they must be served and attended to. Afterward, the women spend several hours cleaning up. Gladys said that because the women are not being paid, they must simultaneously attend to the needs of their own families. The problem raised by Gladys is akin to what Caroline Moser (1986) has referred to as a "triple burden," which includes productive work, reproductive work, and community managing work.

Some scholars have noted how women's labor has been appropriated under populist governments, such as those of Alberto Fujimori in Peru or Sixto Durán-Ballén in Ecuador, as a means of providing essential services to households as the neoliberal state retreats from this role (Barrig 1996; Lind 2005; Paley 2001). This devolving of responsibility for welfare services was characteristic of the day care centers and World Bank-funded women's projects under previous administrations of Herrera Campins and Pérez in Venezuela. Social policy under Chávez is guided by contradictory principles that retain some aspects of this neoliberal approach to decentralization of service provision, shifting responsibility to poorer sectors. At the same time, state-sponsored programs under Chávez constitute part of a range of social welfare strategies that aim to channel funds toward social development and away from a neoliberal market model.

In contrast to the "privatization of the struggle for daily survival" (Lind 1997, 1208), moreover, the women's use of popular assemblies is a means for exercising democratic control over the soup kitchens and thinking through collective solutions to the dilemma of a double or triple work load. The soup kitchen assembly in Carretera Negra was called for precisely this reason. Various people proposed recruiting extra people to help with the work so that it would not fall only on the five women, and others suggested gathering donations in the community to pay the women a small wage.

Another resident, Judy, then raised a problem related to the food ingredients delivered by the government. While the kitchen received fixed menus from the government, often the ingredients did not match the menus. Just as mothers are accustomed to employing creative strate-

gies to stretch the family income and resolve problems (Safa 1990, 357), so, too, in the soup kitchen, the women had to invent new recipes in order to stretch the scarce food that came from the government. If the spaghetti did not arrive, they might need to make tuna croquettes for lunch instead.

Gladys proposed as a solution to this problem that they reject the government-dictated menus and come up with their own weekly menus, as this would give the women more leverage and make them feel more creative with their work. With five cooks, each could have a particular day of the week when they determined the menu, she suggested. For instance, they had been receiving an oversupply of black beans for several weeks, so they would need to start finding creative ways of preparing the beans. The women discussed various options, including letting the diners decide the menu. But they concluded that this would promote the idea of the soup kitchen as a consumer service, when in reality it was intended as a survival strategy to lessen the burden on women in the barrio who were not able to provide their children with nutritious meals. In the daily work of organizing a soup kitchen, the women were engaging in a range of debates that included their leverage and agency in a state-directed program and the meaning of what they were doing in the context of the community.

At one point, Orlando sought to raise an issue. He said that the previous day, militants from the Chavista vanguard youth organization, Frente Francisco de Miranda, had stopped by the soup kitchen and demanded that the community activists put up a banner with the insignia of the Chavista mayor and a name taken from one of the founding heroes, such as Bolívar or Sucre. Orlando was bitter that these Chavista militants should be dictating to the community what it should do when the community had put all the work into constructing and maintaining the kitchen. Freddy responded to Orlando's story with disgust.

Why should we name our soup kitchen after Simón Bolívar or Sucre? It's always the same old heroes of the republic. We have to think with our heads. Until when will we be stuck in the same old schema? Why can't we name the soup kitchen after Benita Mendoza, a working woman here in the barrio, who has raised three kids, been left by three husbands, studied in spite of all the difficulties, and retired to work here as a volunteer?

Gladys agreed with Freddy, saying, "If the militants from the Frente come by here again, tell them to come to the next assembly and put it to the community, because that is who makes decisions in this barrio."

Like Carlos from the mayor's office, the Frente Francisco Miranda represents a machistic conception of politics that marks the official sphere, or *oficialismo*. As Valdivieso (2004, 141) argues, a heroic con-



ception of politics in Chavismo, marked by grand stories of liberation, is taken directly from republican discourse. In their discussions and praxis, by contrast, community activists challenge the current political rhetoric and seek to place barrio women at the center of new liberatory imaginaries. Moreover, Orlando's account evoked similarities to Family Kitchens under the populist government of Fernando Belaúnde in Peru, where, notes Maruja Barrig (1996, 60), the provision of infrastructure and food was given in exchange for support for the governing political party. Through their discussions, the Carretera Negra activists rejected this kind of clientelism because it ran counter to a politics of collective accountability and participation that they were trying to build.

At this point in the assembly, three of the women cooks, Ana, Mercedes, and Judy, left the room and entered the adjoining kitchen to begin preparations for the next day's meal. Gladys stayed in the room. The three men present began discussing questions of financing for the soup kitchen. Gladys noticed that the women were being left out of the conversation, and she called out to them, "Leave your beans [*caraoatas*] and come and join in the discussion." Through her involvement in politics, Gladys was more alert to the gender differences that emerge in the process of popular organizing, and she was readier than the men to point them out.

The women came back into the room, and the activists finished the meeting quickly. Then, surprisingly, all three men entered the kitchen and helped with cleaning the rice, washing the beans, and cutting meat. The point seemed to be understood by those present, that rather than replicating gender divisions in community organizing, with women doing the cooking and men discussing the finances, men and women should have equal participation in all aspects of community organizing. Treating the soup kitchen as a collective responsibility and not as the sole work of the women volunteers had the effect of challenging the notion that cooking is the sole domain of women. Community activism is a space where men and women are attempting jointly to define new perspectives, based in the realities of daily life. Even though men continue to dominate as leaders, through the process of community activism, both men and women are learning to call out instances of gender domination, as women take on positions of leadership and responsibility.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has argued that we must conceptualize the mobilization of poor women in the barrios of Caracas as part of a historical trajectory of community struggle and in terms of their engagement with male community activists and a revolutionary populist state. Barrio women drew on their associational links with a revolutionary-populist president, state

officials, and state-managed programs to build new spaces of community participation. They utilized a maternal-centered notion of responsibility and nurturance as the basis of their political identity. Like the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs in wartime revolutionary Nicaragua, who, according to Bayard de Volo (2001, 214), asserted themselves as active participants in the revolution rather than passive recipients, *barrio* women in Chávez's Venezuela also have sought to take the initiative at the local level to make decisions regarding their community and the implementation of local programs. In contrast to other accounts of *barrio* women, which see them as merely reactive or manipulated by a populist state, this study has argued that these women are agents who are building new spaces of democratic community participation.

Chávez's state-sponsored programs, such as soup kitchens, may perpetuate the appropriation of women's labor and the institutionalization of their struggles for survival, like the day care centers implemented under previous Venezuelan governments and the communal kitchens operating in contexts of neoliberal restructuring in other Latin American countries. But they also differ, in that Chávez has sought to reverse some of the neoliberal austerity measures of previous governments. He has reintroduced the idea of social welfare as the responsibility of the state and has alleviated women's burden through a range of social services, including *Mercal*, *Barrio Adentro*, and the *Misiones*. In parishes such as *La Vega*, moreover, which have a long history of community activism, women have sought to retain community control over the programs through the practices of local assemblies. They view food preparation in soup kitchens as a collective task rather than the responsibility of individual cooks, and therefore they seek collective rather than private solutions to the problems presented. When women's increasing participation occurs in the framework of cohesive community networks, there is much more opportunity to build democratic and sustainable projects.

The space of the *barrio*, as the location of community organizing, is generally more conducive to the participation of women and their developing political awareness than *Chavista* organizations, which tend to operate in a machistic manner. As the example of the visiting municipal official and the militants from the *Frente Francisco Miranda* illustrated, those organizations tend to operate with a much more vertical and clientelistic notion of politics than do the community activists. But even in the community, men still tend to occupy leadership roles, and they even initiated the discussions about gender and *machismo* in the assemblies.

Women from *La Vega* have always been at the forefront of campaigns in the community, and their experiences in earlier struggles guide their current work. But the gendered division of labor that underlies women's participation in community work also restricts them from having time for the kinds of education and reflection that the men of the

community have had available. Whereas men can gather to discuss, read, or attend lectures, women are often at home taking care of the children, cooking, and cleaning. In this context, it is men from the community who have thought more about gender inequality and machismo and who raise these questions in the assembly. This finding points to the ongoing challenges that barrio women face in becoming leaders in their communities, but also the possibilities for community work as a space for generating change in the context of a revolutionary-populist system.

## NOTES

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1. Thanks to Cathy Rakowski for providing this information.
2. Although no data on the percentages of women have been available, from the author's own observations and conversations with others, it is clear that most committees, especially Health Committees, generally consist over 90 percent of women.
3. Quotations in this section were recorded at these community meetings and translated by the author.

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