Mothers of the Revolution: *Barrio* women's social activism and agency in the Bolivarian Process

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Abstract

This thesis examines women's participation in community-based organizing within the *barrios* (slums) of Caracas, Venezuela specifically in regards to their involvement as *voceras* (spokeswomen) for local water management committees entitled the *mesas técnicas de agua* (MTAs or technical water committees) in the popular parish of Antímano. Through the Bolivarian Process—a state-led effort to promote participatory democracy within Venezuela that emphasizes the importance of women's involvement in citizen-led development strategies—the *voceras* have engaged in a number of social programs that tackle salient problems in their respective communities. Moreover, their *struggle* for water services—in addition to their participation in other forms of social activism—provides a clear illustration of how women relate to the discourse of "revolutionary motherhood" as their motivation for community-based organizing. This thesis will argue that while this process has been an empowering experience that has allowed the *voceras* to develop political consciousness and agency in an ongoing dialogue with the state, it has also resulted in myriad challenges and gendered consequences including the creation of a triple burden of labour.

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I am very lucky to have had such a broad network of individuals who have helped me through the writing process. Firstly, I am indebted to the *voceras*, community activists, and staff of Hidrocapital who contributed their stories and experiences to this study. Transnational feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty highlights the methodological importance of building cross-border solidarity as a way of "envisioning change and social justice work across...lines of demarcation and division" (2003, p. 2). An introduction to friends, family and colleagues by the *voceras* was commonly followed by a proud explanation that I was there in order to document their stories and participation in the Bolivarian Process, and in doing so was taking valuable information back to Canada to make their struggles known to others in the spirit of solidarity. Thank you for sharing your challenges and successes with me as your Canadian *compañera*.

Secondly, my deepest gratitude goes to the cohort of colleagues and friends who I have had the pleasure of meeting through this graduate program. You have seen me through moments of elation and frustration, and have always offered your unconditional support. To my fellow research partners: thank you for all of the laughs and academic insight that guided me through field work, conferences, and multiple iterations of this paper and associated works.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"Women are everywhere to be seen in this messy, problematic, beautiful and very joyful revolution."

Tamara Pearson, "Venezuela, Chávez, and the Women's Revolution"[1]

"The women of Venezuela have especially embraced the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela, not because they are 'followers' but because actually, they have become protagonists of a social, economic and, cultural revolution that has transformed Venezuela and the region."

Maria Paez Victor, "Why Do Venezuelan Women Vote for Chávez?"[2]

As night falls in Antímano, a *parroquia*[3] or parish within the *barrios* (slums) of Caracas, Venezuela, a dozen women and men have gathered in a small classroom during a *consejo comunitario de agua* (community water council) meeting to discuss how they will address water issues in their neighborhoods and homes. The classroom is located in the Modulo de Carapita, a community centre in the Carapita sector of Antímano, which is aptly nicknamed *Victoria Socialista* (Socialist Victory). It is a multi-use facility that is used for various community meetings, and also for a variety of extra-curricular activities including karate classes and music lessons for children. At the time of the research, it served as a shelter for local residents colloquially referred to as *damnificados* who have lost their homes due to flooding and landslides in the area. Some women have brought their children to the community water council meeting and openly voice their concerns about contaminated drinking water, which may have been caused by a broken sewer pipe, to the community promoter known as the *comunitaria*—a liaison who works for the municipal water utility Hidrocapital. Meanwhile, the *voceras*[4]—spokeswomen for

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[1] *Venezuelanalysis.* March 26, 2013. Retrieved from http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/8377.
[2] *Counterpunch.* April 24, 2012. Retrieved from http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/04/24/why-do-venezuelan-women-vote-for-Chávez/.
[3] *Parroquias* are a geographic area established by the 1936 Organic Law of the Federal District of Caracas dating back to 1501 when the Spanish crown separated the city into "ecclesiastical territories" known as "parishes", that were controlled by priests (Fernandes, 2010a, p. 43).
[4] The term *vocero* can be roughly translated into "spokesperson" in English. The majority of these individuals are women, and thus they are typically *voceras*. The collective, participatory governance

community water committees known as the *mesas técnicas de agua* (MTAs or technical water committees)—make animated motivational speeches to the attendees to encourage citizen involvement in community engagement meetings such as this one.

These grassroots initiatives are not uncommon in contemporary Venezuela. The MTAs are one of several working groups that fall under umbrella community management organizations known as *consejos comunales*, or community councils[5] (see *Appendices F* and *G* for organograms depicting the structure of the MTAs and community councils). The community councils are made up of elected representatives, and they represent up to 400 households within self-defined residential communities known as "sectors" that are subsumed within the larger parishes like Antímano, which is made up of approximately 178 sectors. They receive funding from various levels of government in order to organize and implement projects that meet the needs of their communities. At present, the community councils are in the process of being amalgamated into larger *comuna* (commune) structures.[6]

The community councils that originated in the *barrios* have become part of a state-led effort to decentralize decision-making, create participatory democracy, promote *poder popular* (popular or the people's power)[7], and deepen " 21st Century Socialism" in the establishment of a communal state; a process initialized by former president Hugo Chávez that is known as the "Bolivarian Process" or *El Proceso* (The Process) as it is

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structure promoted within the Bolivarian Process is predicated on a horizontal style of leadership. As such, these individuals are elected through a community voting process to participate in the various working groups, and advocate for their respective community's concerns.

[5] The communal councils are public community governance venues that were implemented in April, 2006 through the Law of Communal Councils (Ley de los Consejos Comunales). Today, there are approximately thirty thousand nationwide (McCarthy, 2009, p. 16). In a communal council there are "different thematic working groups—energy, telecommunications, land tenure, health, recreation, water, garbage, etc—based on the articulated needs of the population" (p. 15).

[6] Throughout the thesis these structures will often be referred to more generally as "community organizations" in order to encompass the diversity of these community-based entities and women's participation within their various incarnations.

[7] Azzellini (2010) describes the concept of "people's power" as the "capacity of the marginalized and the oppressed to change power relations through processes of organization, training and coordination in order to govern their own lives" (p. 22).

known locally (Azzellini, 2010). When Chávez passed away on March 5th 2013, Nicolás Maduro, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, assumed the powers and responsibilities of the president. A special election was then held on April 14th 2013 where Maduro was formally elected to move the agenda of the Bolivarian Process forward in Venezuela. This model of participatory democracy that drives the revolution in Venezuela hinges largely on women's involvement.

Historically, women were most often excluded from traditional male spheres of politics. This factor, combined with the centrality of women to the life of the *barrio* and the socially-constructed gender roles that assign domestic and reproductive tasks to women have resulted in the resoundingly female presence within community organizations throughout the *barrios* (Fernandes, 2007; Pearson, 2013). Allen, Dávila and Hofmann (2006) state that women's leadership in community-based organizations has been responsible for substantial achievements, and that their participation has "created a change in the way the peri-urban poor perceive their reality, creating a positive attitude towards new forms of social inclusion and hope for improvements in livelihoods" (p. 77). During her study of women's organizing within community soup kitchens in Caracas, Fernandes (2007) observed that despite the strong presence of male leadership and imposition of authority "from above", an increase in women's involvement in community level programs "has created forms of popular participation that challenge gender roles", as women are able to organize and "collectivize private tasks" (p. 98).

The vast majority of the women who are the central protagonists of the story told here are mothers and grandmothers from various socio-economic backgrounds, although the youngest aspiring *vocera*[8] who was interviewed for this study, Luz Darianis, was only 16 years old. As this study seeks to show, these community-driven strategies have opened spaces for women to actively participate in political debates, thus engaging in a radical redefinition of citizenship. Through this "bottom-up" approach to development, women are empowered to tackle the provision of essential services such as education, housing,

[8] At the time of research, Luz was waiting to be elected as a *vocera* in the community elections.

and water and sanitation to benefit not only themselves, but also their families and communities. Moreover, in Latin America there is an extensive history of women's organizing, which has been termed the "politicization of motherhood" or "revolutionary motherhood" in the context of Venezuela (Jaquette, 1994).

As Jaquette (1994) argues, women's organizing within participatory development initiatives empowers them to bring issues from the "private" realm into the "public" eyes of their communities:

> When women join organizations, they are radicalized in at least two important ways: They begin to see the connections between their immediate concerns and broader political issues, and they are forced to confront directly the sex role biases that have long barred women from entering the public sphere (p. 226).

Through their participation in community-led initiatives and by utilizing their subject position as mothers women are able to radicalize and politicize issues pertaining to their daily survival, or what the late Bina Srinivasan called "survival strategies" (as cited in Eisenstein, 2009, p. 215). As such, they have been able to "merge their practical and strategic perspectives in their understanding of what they are doing and in their political demands. Women find a voice inside and outside the home" (Jaquette, p. 226).

This study will examine the successes and drawbacks that women encounter through their participation in community-based organizing that both challenge and reinforce dominate gender-biased assumptions based on dualistic categories that compartmentalize women's interests through their socially-constructed roles as (re)producers within public/private spheres. More specifically, this study will explore women's engagement with the discourse of revolutionary motherhood and the ways in which this concept has enabled and problematized their involvement in community organizing.

Thus, this study will address the following primary research question: How is the concept of "revolutionary motherhood" expressed in women's organizing in the *mesas*

técnicas de agua in Caracas, and what are the possibilities and limits of such an identification? In order to gain a broader understanding of the varying implications of women's social activism and organizing in the *barrios* of Antímano I also pose a secondary research question that is specified in the form of two sub-questions: How has women's participation in community-based organizing a) impacted and/or enhanced their lives in the *barrios*; and b) been influenced and/or affected by "mobilization from above" and the mainstreaming of women's issues within the Bolivarian Process? The following sections will outline the context and rationale for the case study in more detail.

Research Context

This study is based on fieldwork conducted during the fall and winter of 2012 in several sectors of the popular parish of Antímano in Caracas, Venezuela. The fieldwork was supported in part by Dr. Susan Spronk's SSHRC-funded comparative research project entitled "Water, Power and Citizenship" which examines and contrasts citizen participation in the co-production of water services in Bolivia and Venezuela. Additionally, Dr. Spronk's research contributes to the broader Municipal Services Project, an international research project funded by the International Development Research Centre (Canada), which examines alternatives to privatization in the health, water and electricity sectors in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

There are several reasons why Caracas, Venezuela, and Antímano in particular, were chosen as the location for this study. Venezuela possesses a rich and extensive history of community organizing, and provides an excellent example of the mainstreaming of gender issues and the mobilization of women's activism both from "above" and "below". Women have been, and continue to be a centrifugal force in ensuring the survival of their communities, most notably during some of the direst periods in Venezuelan history such as the period following the implementation of structural adjustment policies during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Women's "survival strategies" included participation in neighbourhood-based organizations, which established mechanisms to address conditions of poverty within their communities that

had worsened as a result of the removal of social security nets and essential social welfare programs. The prioritization of women's needs and interests has permeated throughout the Bolivarian Process, which as mentioned previously entails the transfer of *poder popular* (popular power) to the people of Venezuela as fundamental to the state-led vision of an alternative, community-led governance structure. Women have also been the primary beneficiaries of the social programs that were implemented during this process by the Bolivarian government, which sought to rectify a multitude of deficiencies in the *barrios* including the provision of education, health and housing services (Pearson, 2013).

Consequently, many women living in the *barrios* have found that their relationship vis-à-vis the state has significantly enhanced their ability to negotiate collectively with the state by enhancing their demand-making capacity. In fact, during the attempted *coup d'état* in April 2002 "the role of poor women…[was] crucial", as Chávez was eventually brought back to power only days later "through massive street organizing" the majority of which was led by women from the *barrios* (Eisenstein, 2009, p. 224). This relationship between women's activism and the Bolivarian government provides an excellent example of the synergistic relationship that has developed between the state and women organizing at the grassroots level. As such, *barrio* women's participation in the Bolivarian Process cannot be easily categorized as either a state-led or as part of a broader autonomous "women's movement". Indeed, Fernandes (2007) argues that women's engagement at the community level has allowed women to build "local 'spaces' of political participation partly outside of state control [that] has increased their power of negotiation in state-sponsored programs" such as the MTAs (pp. 97-98). These gendered dynamics of mobilization emanating from "above" and "below" in Venezuela make for a unique study of the ways in which women engage in community-based organizing (Azzellini, 2010; McMillan, Spronk and Caswell, 2014).

The parish of Antímano has been characterized as the poorest parish in Caracas (Goldfrank, 2011, p. 113). It encompasses a geographic area that climbs the steep hillsides of the valley of Caracas in the West of the Libertador municipality with a population of approximately 130,000 (see *Appendix A* for a map of Antímano, Caracas).

In Antímano, women head approximately 40 per cent of all households in the area.[9] The implications of pervasive unemployment that has resulted in high levels of poverty is further complicated by the fact that daily life in the *barrios* is marked by violent crime. Due to these multivalent issues, Antímano presents a striking case study with which to examine women's organizing and participation in the Bolivarian Process as the proverbial "glue" that holds their communities and households together.

In addition, Antímano has an extensive history of activism and citizen involvement in community organizing. Antímano is also the site of one of the first MTAs established nationwide. The MTAs are the first and longest standing example of building *la gerencia comunitaria* (the community management program) advocated by the Chávez administration as the engine of the Bolivarian Process (McCarthy, 2009, p. 3). Furthermore, women dominate the MTAs as they make up about 75 percent of all MTA participants (Allen, et al., 2006; Lacabana, 2008; McCarthy, 2012).[10] The focus of this study will be on women's community organizing in Antímano more broadly, as women typically participate in multiple local organizations covering a range of community development topics simultaneously. However, women's involvement as participants in the MTAs will be employed as a case study in order to illustrate and exemplify the successes and drawbacks of community-based organizing for women through the lens of "revolutionary motherhood" as it pertains to their struggle for accessible water and sanitation services in their communities.

Women involved in the MTAs, and in community organizing as a whole, are able to exercise their agency as planners and decision-makers, which may enable them to challenge the dichotomous separation of the public/private spheres. Moreover, the MTAs may give women the space to strategize around quotidian issues connected to their socially-constructed roles and responsibilities as mothers, thus offering them the opportunity to challenge gendered notions that circumscribe women's interests as

[9] Censo 2011, *Instituto Nacional de Estadistica*.
[10] Interview with Victor Díaz, Hidrocapital Community Coordinator and Community Promoter for Antímano, December 4, 2012.

political actors while also engaging in the larger process of state-building. In this manner, women may be able to mobilize in order to attain essential services such as water and sanitation as organizers and activists in a deliberate negotiation of existing power structures that enables them to connect these interests to the broader political agenda. Ramírez (2007) documented advances in women's political organizing by recording women's testimonials in Las Brisas del Paraíso de la Cota 905, a *barrio* in the southeast of Caracas. Ramírez reports that women described their reasons for participating in the MTAs as a family custom or tradition, and that they felt inspiration from their mothers to fight for the betterment of their communities. This study will attempt to explore similar aspects of women's organizing within the context of Antímano.

This study seeks to contribute to the existing research on the gendered implications of participatory community development initiatives and social movements in Latin America, and also address the lacuna in the literature concerning these topics. Fernandes (2007) explains that 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" (p. 98). Many authors have discussed the concept of "revolutionary motherhood" concerning women's involvement in community organizing as intimately connected to the family as the site of political activity throughout Latin American history (Eisenstein, 2009; Fernandez and Angeles, 2009; Jaquette, 1994; Sassen, 2009).

In addition, several authors have examined women's participation in the Bolivarian Process (Friedman, 2000; Medina, 2007; Rakowski, 2003) and a selection of others have explored community-based organizations as radical participatory development projects (Fernandes, 2010b; Fernandes, 2007; McCarthy, 2009; Ramirez, 2007), but most have not incorporated a gendered analysis that focuses on women's contributions. Moreover, the few authors who do attribute the "success" of community-based organizations such as the MTAs to women's participation in these groups do not provide an in-depth analysis of women's experiences to determine the potential consequences or outcomes of "their determined and decisive participation in these

organisations" (Allen, et al., 2006, p. 77). Thus, this study will enhance the existing body of knowledge of women's participation in community organizing in the Bolivarian Process, and will bring a more critical understanding of the topic by examining the tensions that arise as a side-effect of the empowering potential of women's participation in these community-based organizations.

The thesis is organized as follows. *Chapter Two* will outline the theoretical framework and methodological tools used in the collection and analysis of the data. *Chapter Three* will examine and compare the history of women's organizing in Venezuela to a selection of other Latin American countries including Nicaragua and Cuba, which have experienced similar revolutionary processes. *Chapter Four* will introduce the case study as well as the *voceras* of the *mesas técnicas de agua*, and will explore the gendered dynamics and possibilities for women as participants in the community development model in Antímano. *Chapter Five* will present the challenges of community-based organizing and the limitations of "revolutionary motherhood" in an examination of the *voceras* involvement in the Bolivarian Process. Finally, *Chapter Six* will summarize the findings of the study and will indicate areas of consideration for future research.

Chapter Two: Research Design

This chapter will outline the research design used within the study. *Part One* of the chapter will explore how scholars have understood women's organizing and activism at the community level in Venezuela. *Part Two* will illustrate the qualitative research methods that were employed to collect and analyze the data borrowing from feminist and constructivist grounded theory methodological approaches.

Part One: Theoretical Framework

The first half of this chapter examines a series of theoretical concepts to give a fulsome depiction of women's activism and community organizing in Latin America. The literary concepts of "revolutionary motherhood", and related topics such as "practical gender needs" and "strategic gender interests" will be situated historically as they pertain to women's revolutionary organizing, and participation in Latin American social movements. These concepts will then be contextualized using literature that both supports and critiques women's participation in community development as a vehicle for empowerment, along with an overview of "Third World" feminist literature, in order to examine the implications of women's involvement in participatory development strategies. Finally, "Social Reproduction Feminism" will be introduced to critique the consequences of women's community-based organizing.

This study will predominately focus on how women's experiences of social organizing in Antímano are influenced by the existing gender and class relations within their communities. However, I recognize that the incorporation of the feminist analytical lens of intersectionality[11] would have greatly assisted in exploring women's positionalities from the perspective of race and ethnicity, as these dynamics also greatly influence how women experience poverty and contribute to community development

[11] The theoretical concept "intersectionality" was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" to describe the impacts of discrimination on individuals with marginalized and intersecting positionalities of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age and color.

projects. Based on these intersecting subjectivities women in Antímano are implicated within intricate networks of power that influence their (in)ability to access essential services in their communities, and affect their capacity to organize on an everyday basis (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari, 1996). Moreover, race and other forms of identity-based politics do not receive as much attention within the Bolivarian Process as the topic of collective class struggle, and as such were not as prevalent in *barrio* politics (Fernandes, 2010a; Ramírez, 2009). Examples from other Latin American countries with left-leaning revolutionary governments demonstrate similar trends where class-based issues take priority, while other issues such as 'women's interests' are seen as secondary to overcoming capitalism. As will be discussed further in subsequent chapters, gender issues are typically emphasized as a means of mobilizing the masses, or in this case women's participation in the revolution (Disney, 2008; Eisenstein, 2009).

The subject of race was by no means invisible and there were several instances where the topic surfaced during the course of fieldwork. The Venezuelan population is racially diverse and markedly divided along class lines. The majority of *barrio* residents identify as "mixed race", while many upper-to-middle class residents of the urban center identify as "white".[12] During a gender workshop[13] in Antímano the facilitator, Lilibeth, addressed the selection of women present of various ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds as a "perfect mix of ethnicities".[14] Racial terms are often used flippantly as nicknames even if the individual is light-skinned. At this juncture, it is important to reflect on my own positionality concerning the question of race. During my time in Antímano local women occasionally ironically called me *negra* even though I am of white European descent (a term of endearment meaning "black girl"). These interactions served to enhance my understanding of the local racialized discourse while making me

[12] Censo 2011, *Instituto Nacional de Estadistica*.

[13] These gender workshops were part of a series entitled "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" (Women, History and Struggle). They were held in several *barrio* communities in Caracas, and were funded by the municipal government in an effort to educate local women on how to apply a socialist feminist lens to their community work. In Antímano the facilitator, Lilibeth, had the participants discuss a variety of topics that pertained to gender discrimination and inequality within their organizations, families and communities.

[14] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.

more aware of my positionality. Given my background and position as an outsider to their community it is plausible that the *voceras* and other research participants also did not feel comfortable discussing issues of race or ethnicity as openly with me as they would with their friends, colleagues or a researcher of colour.[15]

As such, this study will endeavour to emphasize how the two most culturally prominent positionalities within *barrio* politics interact—gender and class—to identify how women's experiences are affected and shaped by these defining social relations. It is important to note that not all marginalized positionalities and perspectives can reveal fundamental truths about global inequities. However, as Mohanty (2003) argues: "within a tightly integrated capitalist system, the particular standpoint of poor indigenous and Third World/South women provides the most inclusive viewing of systemic power" (p. 231). As such, a place-based approach that illustrates women's lived realities in the *barrios* through their own words is an effective manner of emphasizing women's contributions to community development.

Participatory development and the politicization of motherhood:

It is essential to examine the various perspectives of "participatory" community development as they relate to the Venezuelan context. Cornwall (2003) explains that the Gender and Development (GAD) agenda emphasized the necessity of involving women as equal participants in all aspects of development planning processes as a way of making programming more gender equitable. Accordingly, many organizations, including leading international institutions such as the World Bank, have devoted substantial attention to women's involvement in development projects in the Global South where women's

[15] Sujatha Fernandes (2010a) observed while conducting ethnographic research in the *barrios* that she was able to pass through these communities with little difficulty given her racial background. She comments: "My brown skin helped me blend in to the poorer urban communities where I lived; I was often taken for a Venezuelan person from the barrios. I could move from one barrio to the next with ease" (p. 32). Where Fernandes was able to conduct research within some of the more insular and violent *barrios* such as 23 de Enero, it would have been much more difficult for me to do so given my ethnic heritage and more recognizable appearance as an "outsider".

participation in community development is marketed as a vehicle for their empowerment (Agarwal, 2009).

Kabeer (1999) posits that women's empowerment can be measured by examining two key dimensions. The first dimension of empowerment is "the *ability to make choices*" which entails "a *process of change*" (pp. 436-437). Kabeer argues that this dimension of empowerment can be measured via women's abilities to exercise choice concerning resources, a term which encompasses "material…human and social resources" (p. 437). Complementarily, the second dimension she describes as related to agency, which includes the "ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (p. 438).

At the community level there is evidence that participatory, citizen-driven development initiatives have been very beneficial for women for a number of reasons. In the context of Latin America, Barrig (1994) explains that throughout history state-supported, community-led organizations that provide urban services has been an empowering experience for many women. She argues: "Research shows that positive benefits accrue to the members of these organizations because of their internal democratic organization and because they have created space for female solidarity" (p. 165). Furthermore, Barrig contends that through their involvement in these organizations, women can "acquire new skills learning to manage the budgets of the communal kitchens and to share responsibilities, which bring an awareness of solidarity. They learn to speak, to share, to be responsible for others—to 'grow'" (p. 168).

Feminist theorists such as Reiger (2000) claim that women's involvement in community activism is allowing them to carve out "a new form of politics, constructing public issues from 'private' experiences'" (p. 310). This type of social development suggests "possibilities for reimagining or reconceiving ideas about citizenship", which she describes as social practices that bolster people's effectual participation in their social life and political community (p. 310). Yuval-Davis (2007) describes this redefined and inclusive vision of citizenship as a type of "differentiated citizenship". She argues for the inclusion of an intersectional lens where citizens can be seen as "multi-layered" thus de-

homogenizing the unitary notion of citizenship to include individuals who identify according to their various raced, classed and gendered positionalities (p. 572).

While the goal of promoting women's empowerment through participatory development is a laudable goal, Kabeer (1999) cautions that in reality these approaches can result in overly simplified portrayals of women's subjectivity. She explains that one of these "empowerment models" associated with instrumentalist gender advocacy work can be described as the "'virtuous model' of the empowered woman" that endows women "with various traits which form the basis of policy advocacy on their behalf: altruism and dedication to the collective family welfare…manifested in their willingness to take on unpaid community work" (p. 459). As such, these projects can be problematic, as they may not be sensitive to power differentials both within the community, and between the participants themselves.

Indeed, a number of scholars argue that these schemes utilize a top-down, neo-liberal approach to decentralizing control, which may only add "another burden to women" exacerbating gendered divisions of labour (Elmhirst and Resurreccion, 2008, p. 13). Others have rejected this normative "add women and stir" approach by arguing that it does not consider how women's positionalities are shaped and affected by the surrounding social and political environment in which they exist (Cleaver, 1999; Kabeer, 1999; Leach, Mearns and Scoones, 1999). Concerning water governance, Cleaver (1999) notes that the inclusion of women in management roles on water committees and associations is unquestionably seen to "represent a form of female emancipation, representing women's assertion and control over their lives as well as conveniently ensuring the sustainability of facilities" (p. 598). However, in reality this "one size fits all" approach to participatory development may in fact emphasize "instrumentality rather than empowerment" (Cleaver, p. 598).

Moreover, by promoting de-contextualized Western conceptions of gender equality and empowerment these schemes may risk "prescribing the process of empowerment" rather than enhancing "women's capacity for self-determination" so that

they may define empowerment on their own terms (Kabeer, 1999, p. 462). This strategy may result in a lack of attention to women's actual needs "on the ground". Indeed, Cornwall (2003) argues for the central importance of context: when designing gender-sensitive strategies for development it is crucial to listen to the needs of women at the community level rather than simply adopting pre-conceived 'feminist principles,' such as the disruption of existing gender binaries. Cornwall explains that in the Global South often the real "needs" that women profess are instead "connected with fulfilling their [socially-constructed] duties as wives and mothers" (p. 1330). This last point is particularly salient as it relates to many women's motivations for community organizing throughout Latin America.

There is an extensive history of women's social and political activism motivated by their relationship with and responsibilities to their families and communities (Reiger, 2000). Sassen (2009) explains that historically, Latin American women have chosen the state as the primary public arena of confrontation where women have employed collective action as a means of challenging the government concerning the provision of services. Examples include the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*) in Argentina where women took to the streets to protest the disappearance of their children at the hands of a corrupt dictatorship. Additionally, thousands of women organized against oppressive authoritarian regimes in El Salvador, Chile, and in Nicaragua where they were referred to as the *Madres Sufridas* (Suffering Mothers) (Disney, 2008; Friedman, 2000; Sassen, 2009).

In many aspects these examples of the politicization of motherhood in Latin America provide parallels to the Venezuelan case, which will be explored further in *Chapter Three*. In her analysis of women's organizing in Venezuela Friedman (2000) posits that "[o]ne clear thread runs through the development of women's gender interests…the centrality of motherhood—and more generally, women's association with private life-—to their political practice" (p. 45). In the *barrio* of Trapichito in the city of Valencia, Medina (2007) documented similar examples where women aligned their motivation for community activism with their maternal obligations to their children, and

the community as a whole. Scholars have described this phenomenon in Venezuela as "revolutionary motherhood" (Espina and Rakowski, 2010; Fernandes, 2010a; 2010b), and it is seen as a critical motivational factor that has mobilized women's participation in the Bolivarian Process.

By and large, former president Chávez' approach to galvanizing women's participation was through the use of maternalist language and rhetoric. On several occasions Chávez referred to himself as the "favoured son of revolutionary women", as he regularly invoked the concept of revolutionary motherhood to describe women as the driving force behind the Bolivarian Process (as cited in Espina and Rakowski, 2010, p. 195). His famous speech on International Women's Day in 2003 where thousands of women gathered to hear him speak in Caracas demonstrates this influential conceptualization of the importance of women's participation in the Bolivarian Process: "Long live woman! [T]he revolution is a woman…Venezuelan women are the soul and essence of the revolutionary process…[of] this great and grand task of constructing, of making, of giving birth to a new country" (p. 194). Chávez would also often appeal to women's "practical" concerns, as he would "[tell] them about policies he had introduced to provide cheaper food for the Venezuelan family" (p. 195). In this manner, Chávez evoked women's sensibilities as mothers, leaders, and change-makers in their communities.

Fernandes (2010a) notes that this language has resonated strongly amongst *barrio* women:

> The aspect of nurturance and maternal caring specifically arises in women's accounts about their participation under the government of Hugo Chávez…[L]ike the Sandinista maternal ideal of Madres Sufridas in Nicaragua notions of revolutionary motherhood are also used in Venezuela to appeal to barrio women, a construction that both reinforces traditional roles and creates the groundwork for new possible roles and identities to emerge (p. 105).

In this way, *barrio* women in Venezuela have engaged with the discourse of revolutionary motherhood through what they perceive as a "call to action" from the president. This discursive structure has allowed *barrio* women to become politicized while relating their roles and responsibilities in the home to their community-based organizing efforts.

For many *barrio* women in Venezuela their interest in community organizing stems from their needs for essential services such as the provision of drinking water to sustain themselves and their families:

> [W]omen's maternal role extends from family and community to their protection and defense of the president …understood in relation to constructions of women as nurturers and carers in Bolivarian ideology…Various scholars have found that women use discourses of nurturance and their maternal role to frame their participation and construct a sense of collective identity (Fernandes, 2010a, p. 105).

As such, Fernandes argues that the political catalyst of women's community-based organizing flows from "*lo cotidiano*" (everyday) needs as they relate to their identities as maternal nurturers for their families and communities.

Nevertheless, the darker side of the romanticization and idealization of motherhood in Latin America is also apparent, as it constructs an impracticable ideal of womanhood and femininity. Lind (2005) explains that in Latin America women experience an "elevated status as 'mothers'—a status ascribed to them through religious, cultural, and political discourses of motherhood and family, sometimes described as '*marianismo*'", which she explains as the female equivalent of *machismo*[16] based on the

[16] "*Machismo*" is a patriarchal social norm based on a discourse of hegemonic masculinity. As it is described by Gutman (2013), *machismo* "maintains a man's superiority and dominance over women, granting him the right to do as he pleases within and outside the family home and the authority to restrict the freedom of his wife, sisters, and daughters" (para. 1). Not all men living in Antímano display a *machista* attitude. Instead, *machismo* should be contextualized as a systemic concept where "male as norm" is perpetuated in *barrio* community politics. Moreover, men also face discrimination, and are impacted by a

iconography of the Virgin Mary who is an "impossible role model to follow" (pp. 102-103). In the case of Venezuela, Friedman argues that women's attitudes seem to be influenced by the concept of *marianismo*, as they seem to "have no alternative but to accept their partners' irresponsible behavior because they have limited access to economic resources" (2000, p. 47).

Molyneux associates *machista* behaviour with the growing number of female-headed households in Latin America. She defines *machismo* as "a value system underpinned by widespread internal migration under which men had relations with several women and left them to raise children" (as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 146). This is particularly relevant in the context of Antímano where women are primarily responsible for the wellbeing of their family members, many with little access to services and resources. Consequently, in response to the detrimental effects of *machismo*, *marianismo* edicts that a woman is to be expected to struggle in silence while fulfilling her socially-constructed "motherly" and "wifely" duties by providing for her family, often alone, and without complaint. Moreover, she is encumbered with the social reproduction of not only her family, but also her entire community. Thus, while it is important to understand women's motivations for activism in the *barrios* through the lens of revolutionary motherhood, it is also crucial to consider how this concept may in fact reify or leave unaltered problematic gender stereotypes and the division of labour.

Jaquette (1994) states that when women participate "as mothers, not as citizens in their own right, they reinforce traditional gender roles in societies where male-female distinctions are already well-entrenched" (p. 225). In Nicaragua, the revolutionary government incorporated a maternalist discourse into their political strategy to recruit and mobilize mothers in support of the revolutionary war effort (Disney, 2008). Disney argues that while state support for women's issues did in fact increase women's participation in "the public worlds of work, government, and society", this approach still failed to "eliminate the cultural underpinnings of patriarchal notions…in terms of

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capitalist form of *machismo* where they too are marginalized due to their race, class, and geographical location.

reproductive labour and gender violence in the home" (p. 147). Similarly, in Cuba, Fernandez and Angeles (2009) found that despite women's advancement and significant presence in community organizing "traditional roles of women have persisted and stereotypical distinction between males and females remain strong" as a consequence of the valorization of motherhood (p. 86). The authors explain that gender role expectations and the "idealization of women as mothers and homemakers, perpetuate the gendered divisions of labour, leadership roles, and resource access and use (Jaramillo, as cited in Fernandez and Angeles, 2009, p. 81).

Furthermore, in Venezuela as part of a "post-adjustment economic recovery program" following structural adjustment the Caldera administration proposed the institution of *Programas de solidaridad social*—social policies that created "a network of community based family organizations, from which would emanate various interventions in the sphere of social reproduction, from the home to healthcare" (Dalla Costa, 1999, pp. 100-103). These policies focused on the family unit, and emphasized women's roles as mothers thus firmly solidifying their position within the community development process. Similar to the cases of Nicaragua and Cuba *barrio* women were mobilized in mass numbers to participate in the reconstruction process. However, Dalla Costa argues that these initiatives effectively "frustrated women's aspiration to have a presence at the decision making level, instead of being confined to a mobilization from below…[where] they have always been encouraged to intervene because of their recognized effectiveness in this area" (pp. 105-106). These issues make apparent the potential drawbacks of women's organizing under a maternalist rubric. The following section will examine these concepts in more detail.

"Third World" Feminism, practical gender needs and strategic gender interests

In her seminal article on women's participation in the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, Molyneux (1985) coined the terms "practical" and "strategic gender interests" to describe women's motivations for organizing at the community level to overthrow the

repressive Somoza dictatorship (1936-1974). Molyneux explains that "*practical* gender interests" correspond to an "immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality" (p. 232). Strategic gender interests on the other hand "may develop by virtue of [women's or men's] social positioning through gender attributes" emerging from an "analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements", which may lead to women's emancipation or gender equality (pp. 232-233).

Many of the issues that motivate women to organize at the community level can be seen as an attempt to meet their practical gender interests for clean water, housing and education among a variety of other essential services. Molyneux (1985) argues that women may find it easier to meet practical gender interests in the future if their strategic gender interests are addressed first, as the gender relations that constrain women's abilities to access or control resources and basic services can be challenged and deconstructed via the "politicization of these practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests" (p. 234). Moreover, Disney (2008) notes that it is useful to term these categories "practical gender *needs* and strategic gender *interests*", as interests can be inherently described as strategic, and needs inherently described as practical, "but both are intrinsically linked" (p. 34).

However, these terms have been widely criticized by numerous feminist scholars including Molyneux herself as setting up a false hierarchy (Berger, 2006; Molyneux, 2006; Wieringa, 1994), which 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" (Fernandes, 2007, p. 100). When conceived as a dichotomy, this distinction also risks homogenizing women's interests as dictated by their gender by making assumptions about their innate desires to build solidarity concerning their collective interests *as women*. Additionally, a profoundly gendered and class-based hierarchy is solidified when women's practical gender needs and strategic gender interests are characterized as mutually exclusive, as it is seen as necessary to fulfill the

former before the latter can be realized. In Caracas the interests of women living in the *barrios* are likely to be much different than those of women living in upper-to-middle class areas of the urban center.

Consequently, where "Western" feminism has emphasized that the struggle against patriarchy is central to feminist praxis, some feminist scholars worried that Molyneux's analysis privileged "strategic feminist interests over women's practical needs-based interests" (Berger, 2006, p. 9). Following the emergence of second-wave feminism during the 1970s in areas of North America and Europe, and in particular the United States, the slogan "the personal is political" was popularized in an attempt to politicize "the market/family and the state/family aspects of the public/private divide… to increase public attention to, and regulation of, social relations of sites that affect women, in the hopes of eliminating women's inequality" (Boyd, 1997, p. 10). As seen through this lens, women's organizing through their subject position as mothers and around their basic needs may not be personified as presenting a challenge to the public/private divide, hegemonic masculinity (i.e. *machismo*), or to inequitable gendered divisions of labour. This perspective reinforces the dichotomization of these concepts deviating from the lived realities experienced by women "on the ground" in Latin America, and in various other countries throughout the Global South.

Disney (2008) explains that as feminism has evolved in various countries around the world scholars from the Global South have questioned the relevance of the application of this Western feminist approach, identifying it as "a bourgeois ideology of the First World that privileges gender oppression and struggles against patriarchy at the expense of oppressions based on race, class, and nationality" (p. 26). In order to challenge these biases and assumptions a new school of thought originated in the Global South in the late 1980s-early 1990s pioneered by scholars such as Mohanty (1984) originally defined as "Third World feminism". Mohanty (1991) describes the average "Third World woman" as she is portrayed in Western feminist scholarship. She leads "an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic,

family-orientated, victimized, etc.)" (p. 56). To confront these damaging stereotypes an alternative anti-racist, postcolonial, transnational feminist theoretical viewpoint emerged endeavouring to do away with the concept of "the Third World woman as object" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 59). This alternative feminist perspective not only challenged mainstream discursive constructions of the "Third World woman", but also focused on the "intersection of gender, race, and class-based oppressions in specific, local, and historical contexts" (Disney, p. 27).

Within this body of feminist scholarship attention is placed on women's "plural or collective consciousness". Mohanty (1991) describes these concepts in the context of Latin America:

> [T]he idea of plural or collective consciousness is evident in some of the revolutionary testimonials of Latin American women, speaking from within rather than for their communities…Their primary purpose is to document and record the history of popular struggles, foreground experimental and historical 'truth' which has been erased or rewritten in hegemonic, elite, or imperialist history, and bear witness in order to change oppressive state rule. Thus testimonials do not focus on the unfolding of a singular woman's consciousness…rather, their strategy is to speak from within a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and political change (p. 81).

This concept of plural or collective consciousness is powerful, as it deviates from liberal Western feminist thought, which focuses largely on individual experiences of gender-based oppression. Similarly, other feminist scholars have also adopted the concept of a collective identity to address their own political struggles as feminists and women of colour (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000).

Thus, this innovative feminist perspective informed by women's experiences in the Global South and racialized women in the Global North has enabled a re-conceptualization of women's activism and organizing vis-à-vis the political platform that the politicization of motherhood can provide (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). "Third World" feminism has put forth a powerful realist and materialist feminist argument that a "women's position should therefore be based on the realities of their lives rather than on a generalized assumption that they are oppressed" (Mosedale, 2005, p. 245). In Venezuela, women's activism in the *barrios* is chiefly motivated by their identification with the discourse of revolutionary motherhood allowing them to engage in a collective struggle.

For example, numerous authors have noted how these needs and interests have started to combine and overlap with one another where "traditionally female" or "reproductive" tasks that may be classified as "practical" in nature have become part of a much broader political agenda (Disney, 2008; Eisenstein, 2009). In Nicaragua, Disney describes women's political activism concerning both practical and strategic issues including "economic opportunities, health and wellness, reproductive and sexual rights, and violence against women" (p. 32). In this manner, women are empowered to mobilize by exercising their agency as activists in a deliberate negotiation of existing power structures, thus allowing them to connect their interests to the overarching political agenda. Indeed, Disney questions: "[W]hy can't women's organizing around women's daily survival issues be an example of feminist agency? Are poor urban and rural women who are organizing around 'practical' economic issues necessarily *not* exercising feminist agency?" (p. 37)

Consequently, applying a critical lens that is informed by the body of anti-racist, postcolonial and transnational feminist scholarship is fundamental to fully understanding women's activism, and to grasping the complexities of revolutionary motherhood. In the context of Venezuela, Fernandes explains that it is critical to focus on "how poor women negotiate power, construct collective identities, and develop critical perspectives on the world in which they live", challenging dominant gender representations while also improving the gendered conditions of their daily lives (Lind, as cited in Fernandes, 2007,

p. 100). Nevertheless, while "activist mothering" provides a platform of political engagement for many women in Venezuela, there are also consequences stemming from community-based organizing such as the preservation of the inequitable gender division of labour, which may entrench rather than transform unequal gender relations. These tensions will be explored further in the following section.

Social Reproduction Feminism

As indicated above, much of the community activism that women in Antímano engage in stems from their "motherwork" responsibilities. Udel (2001) explains that for racialized women the concept of "motherwork" typically involves tackling practical gender needs in support of "the physical survival of children and community" in an attempt to confront what Collins calls the "'dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity'" (as cited in Udel, 2001, p. 50). Furthermore, feminist authors such as Brenner attempt to problematize and highlight the inequitable division of labour that stems from women's motherwork or "social reproduction" activities. Brenner (2000) defines social reproduction as:

> [T]he activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life on a daily basis and intergenerationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work—mental, physical and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined means for maintaining consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed (pp. 61-62).

While liberal feminism argues for the emancipatory potential of women's participation in the waged labour economy there is little consideration for the gendered division of labour and women's involvement in social reproduction, especially the implications for impoverished women of color who cannot afford childcare. By taking a socialist feminist

approach Brenner illuminates these tensions through an examination of the social reproduction of families and communities. In doing so, Brenner challenges the social construction of women's "domestic" roles and responsibilities, and the gendered division of (re)productive labour.

Social reproductive work is decidedly gendered as it is connected to private and public forms of power that ascribe socially-constructed gender roles to women including the "biological reproduction, reproduction of labor power, and social practices connected to caring, socialization and the fulfillment of human needs" (Bakker, as cited in Bakker and Gill, 2003, p. 4) resulting in the reinforcement of a discriminatory and inequitable gendered division of labour. As a result, women are seen as entirely responsible for the "biological daily and generational reproduction of labor power and communities, and identities" (Jaquette, as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 26). As such, it is useful to examine social reproduction in the context of women's participation in community activism, as there are several drawbacks to women's organizing including incurring what is known locally in Venezuela as a *triple jornada* or "triple burden" of labour. It is imperative to take into consideration the ways in which women's "double burden" of labour concerning their (re)productive responsibilities is aggravated by the addition of community-based organizing (Jaquette, 1994).

Fundamentally, Social Reproduction Feminism examines the gendering of social reproduction to determine how "various institutions (such as the state, the market, the family/household and the third sector) interact and balance power so that the work involved in the daily and generational production and maintenance of people is completed" (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006, p. 3). Bakker and Gill (2003) explain that community-led development initiatives in the Global South are often based upon what can be described as "'the feminization of survival'" (Sassen, as cited in Bakker and Gill, 2003, p. 11). These development initiatives are gendered and classed where in many situations poor women are the ones tasked with sustaining poverty alleviation schemes in their communities through the donation of their unpaid labour.

As a result, women's participation in community organizing, political associations and women's groups only expands the double burden workday (Jaquette, as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 26). The gendered nature of community organizing assigns women the immense task of alleviating the conditions of poverty that impact their communities placing the responsibility for development squarely on the shoulders of one of the most marginalized groups. Thus, women are responsible for "reproductive" tasks such as ensuring the family has water, as well as "productive" tasks where they may be either the sole breadwinners for their families or may supplement the family's income by working in the formal or informal sector. Community organizing is added onto this ever-expanding litany of tasks creating a triple workday. Furthermore, Bakker and Gill (2003) argue that under the austerity programs demanded by neoliberal policies many poor women are already caught in a pincer movement—where economic pressures make it impossible for women to not take paid labour while caring and unpaid household duties may increase along with community organizing responsibilities.

In Antímano these economic pressures are very apparent where unemployment rates are high, and women may take on paid labour alongside their household duties to support their families. Balancing these duties becomes increasingly difficult, especially for single mothers. In this way, by conceptualizing labour from a gendered standpoint, one is able to train an analytic lens on "the 'survival strategies' [and not just the formal paid labour] of those whose lives are the grist for the globalization mill" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 49). A feminist theoretical framework that incorporates social reproduction feminism is an appropriate way to examine how women experience the gendered division of labour within their homes and communities in Antímano.

Part Two- Methodological Framework

As mentioned at the outset of the chapter, the methodological framework of this study draws from feminist and constructivist grounded theory research methods entailing

the collection of qualitative data with a focus on women's lived realities. Buch and Staller (2007) state that a feminist approach to research is typically "focused on women's lives, activities, and experiences" and uses a "feminist theoretical lens and/or pays particular attention to interplays between gender and other forms of power and difference" (p. 190). The tools used during the data collection process include: journaling, participant observation, conducting a sample household survey, and unstructured/semi-structured individual and group interviews with community activists, *voceras*, and various MTA participants. The data was analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory method.[17]

This study involved the triangulation of the data, theory and methodology where mixed methods were used to collect and analyze various sources of qualitative data in order to increase the validity of the study and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. Triangulation can be described as "a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2005, p. 454). This approach acknowledges that the researcher is interested in the "diversity of perception" including the "multiple realities within which people live…[triangulation] helps to identify different realities" (p. 454). The following sections will expand upon the methodological framework, and the mixed methods that were used in the study.

Whose voices, whose stories: Conducting feminist research

Incorporating a feminist approach into the research was crucial to maintaining a consistent reevaluation of the power hierarchies that were present in the field (Wolf, 1996, p. 10). In order to remain self-reflexive, I chronicled my observations in a field journal and reflected upon my role as a researcher throughout the fieldwork. These reflections and observations influenced the data collection and analysis process, and helped to frame the overall research design. This study employs a feminist, place-based, qualitative

[17] This study has used a constructivist grounded theory method as a guideline to inform the methodology and subsequent analysis of the data. However, it does not ascribe to a strict grounded theory approach, which suggests that theory emerge from the data in a purely inductive and empiricist fashion. Rather, I used a more dialectical method in which in my reading of the data was informed by feminist theoretical concepts, which in turn, were enhanced by the data in order to analyze and categorize the findings.

approach to data collection with a focus on the articulation of women's lived experiences in community-based advocacy and organizing in Antímano through their own words. As such, a case study approach with a focus on the lives of a select few participants—primarily a small group of eight *voceras* who are long-time political activists and organizers in their community—was essential to grounding and geographically contextualizing the lives and experiences of these *voceras* within Antímano. In this manner, beginning from the experiential and using a place-based analysis is a method of guarding "against false universalizations—against assuming the category 'woman'…represents all women" in a manner that links individual experiences to the larger societal network (Ferguson, 2008, p. 47). Furthermore, this study will take into account women's multiple subjectivities as participants and activists in community organizing as circumscribed by their gendered and class-based social locations.

While women are involved in every facet of community-based organizing, their voices are not always as salient as their male counterparts. In his analysis of citizen engagement in the Antímano community councils McCarthy (2009) describes these participatory processes in great detail. Yet remarkably only men were interviewed for the study. Women's voices are thus absent from the narrative even though they make up the majority of the participants in community development. When entering the field I was originally discouraged as I found it much more difficult to conduct formal one-on-one interviews with local women than with men. This may be due to the fact that it is more common for men to work in paid positions of authority as community promoters or coordinators,[18] which often requires that they are comfortable speaking in a formal interview setting. As Fernandes (2010a) also found in her research in the *barrios* of San Agustin. 23 de Enero, and La Vega in Caracas, women may be less comfortable in formal interview settings, or more unwilling than men to speak on behalf of the collective.

[18] Fernandez and Angeles (2009) documented similar observations in community organizing in Cuba where "gender hierarchies are present. The director of the [community organization], a paid position, is male. More females than males work as unpaid volunteers" (p. 86). In Venezuela there are many women who hold various upper-level positions of power within political parties and government institutions as recently documented by Ciccariello-Maher (2013). However, at the community level, typically women occupy the unpaid, voluntary positions while men work in paid positions as coordinators and directors.

During community meetings and events in Antímano it was common for men to openly pontificate on the benefits of citizen participation in the Bolivarian Process in group settings much more often than their *compañeras*. Additionally, over time spent in the field I observed women's *triple jornada* or "triple burden" workday where community-based organizing is added onto an ever-expanding litany of responsibilities both within, and outside of the home. As such, women typically have less time to devote to interviewing or any other tasks aside from their already extremely demanding workload, and daily commitments to their families and communities.

Given all of these complications, a critical feminist analysis is crucial to revealing the gendered dynamics and complexities present in the field, as there are a multitude of reasons why women's voices do not feature as prominently in many accounts of community organizing. Thus, this study attempts to illuminate and address these complex gender relations—the silences and the struggles—within women's activism and community organizing in Antímano. As such, it is of paramount importance that women's contributions to community organizing are prominently featured, as their participation is vital to the ongoing community-led development process in Venezuela.

Building relationships and defining co-researchers

As indicated in *Chapter One* this study is based on fieldwork performed over several weeks during the fall and winter of 2012 in several sectors of the popular parish of Antímano in Caracas, Venezuela. I acknowledge the limitations of this "quick and dirty" approach to research, which does not necessarily allow for extensive immersion within the community. However, as part of a research team with Rebecca McMillan a fellow graduate student and Dr. Spronk, I was able to spend a shorter amount of time in the field as relationships to key informants were already secured. As such, I was able to start building upon the relationships of trust that had been established by the research team. At the outset of the fieldwork initial contact was made with the local water utility Hidrocapital, which enabled the team to attend several community water council

meetings in Antímano where fundamental relationships to several key *voceras* were established. These *voceras* acted as "key informants" (Willis, 2006) as they were well connected to the community, and were the most active in community organizations and events. As such, they aided in expanding the existing research network.

The relationships that were cultivated with the *voceras* were extremely useful as they took it upon themselves to extend invitations to community meetings and events in Antímano and around Caracas (see *Appendix C* for a list of the interviews conducted and events attended). This enabled the collection of a broad range of data as a participant observer. A feminist methodological approach emphasizes learning from women's lived experiences in an inter-subjective exchange between researcher and "co-researcher", or the individuals with which one interacts during the data collection process (Ishtar, 2005). To ensure the prioritization and preservation of this dialectical relationship between researcher and co-researcher I accepted all invitations to meetings and workshops in the community, and was encouraged by the *voceras* and attendees to participate in order to show support for their local development efforts. During these events I made my presence and intentions as a researcher known, and was flattered and humbled by how warmly and graciously the *voceras* and other participants welcomed me as a friend and *compañera* ("companion" or a popular term for "friend").

Research methods

In conjunction with Rebecca McMillan I piloted a sample survey of thirteen households in Antímano. I hired a *vocera* to bolster local research capacity who assisted in distributing the survey. The survey was conducted in the sectors of El Carmen and Santa Ana. These sectors were selected according to their contrasting geographic locations as the former is in closer proximity to the urban core with more reliable service delivery, while the latter is located at a higher elevation and faces greater impediments to service delivery. The survey was twenty-four questions in length and gathered general demographic data with a focus on water and sanitation issues (see *Appendix E* for a copy of the survey guide in Spanish). The primary objective of the survey was to assess viable

research approaches for the wider research project. While the survey did not produce a notable amount of quantitative data due to its small sample size, it was useful however in gaining insight into the levels of participation of local residents in community organizations such as the MTAs.

Several interviews were conducted during the data collection period and interview participants were selected using a "snowball sampling" method (Bernard, 2006) with a focus on the experiences of the eight key *voceras* as previously indicated (see *Appendix C* for a full list of the interviews conducted). Interviews were conducted with three of these *voceras* (Sulay, Florencia and Carmen) in both formal and informal formats, and group interviews were conducted with all eight *voceras* on two separate occasions. Informal conversations with these women were also recorded through notes and included in the data set.

Interviews with other community activists and participants in the community organizations of Antímano were also conducted to better illustrate *barrio* life and the range of community development activities that the *voceras* are involved in. A formal interview was conducted with a more senor *vocera* (Elizabeth) who is also the head of her community's *comuna* in order to more fully comprehend the pressures that many of these women face as decision-makers at various levels of the community governance structure. A formal interview was also conducted with a community coordinator (Lilibeth) who facilitated the series of gender workshops that took place in Antimano to gain a different perspective on women's work in the *barrios*, as the facilitator was well educated and from a middle-class background. This interview also provided insight into the struggles that these women experience from a feminist viewpoint.

Formal group and individual interviews were also conducted with several Hidrocapital staff to provide context to their work on water and sanitation in Antímano with a particular focus on the role of the community coordinator (Victor) and his connection to the eight key *voceras* given his longstanding working relationship with these women. Finally, notes taken from informal conversations with a variety of

community participants and activists at various events pertaining to the Bolivarian Process were also reflected upon and incorporated where applicable within this study (see *Appendix C* for a list of the events attended).

I am cognizant that there are drawbacks to using a snowball sampling method, as it may not produce a representative sample of the overall population of community activists in the *barrios* of Venezuela. However, the participants in this study embody a diverse range of individuals involved in community development, as they represent a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, ages and levels of experience in community organizing. In addition, the literature suggests that data saturation at the meta-theme level is reached within a minimum of six to a maximum of twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).[19] Furthermore, this method is preferable as Antímano is a challenging location to conduct research. The relative levels of poverty, crime and insecurity make the *barrios* a difficult place to collect data, and therefore establishing relationships to locals who were capable of expanding the sampling framework was foundational to the data collection process.

Given the women's competing responsibilities I also found it extremely difficult to arrange face-to-face interviews with many of them as they typically juggled a triple-workday on a regular basis with very little downtime, and the sample size was ultimately impacted by these external factors. As such, these eight women served as overview informants as they possess a wealth of information as longtime activists and organizers. They were able to impart wisdom gathered from their own lived experiences on the past, present and future of the Bolivarian Process as a whole.

Individual and group interviews followed either an unstructured format where informal conversations were recorded through field notes during community meetings and events, or a semi-structured format where interviews were formally arranged and

[19] This evidence is based on a study of qualitative data from sixty interviews with women from West Africa that was intended to document data saturation and variability using a thematic analysis. They discovered that data saturation occurs within the first twelve interviews, but that basic metathemes were observable within as few as six (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).

audio-recorded. Informal conversations were at times preferable for the *voceras* as they were often more comfortable and open to this interview format. Group interviews were arranged for similar reasons, as women were typically more responsive when speaking as part of a collective. The interviews were conducted in Spanish ranging from half an hour up to three hours in length, but were on average approximately an hour and a half. Interview guides were used outlining a series of broad, open-ended questions pertaining to the participants' background and experiences with community organizing in Antímano with a focus on the *vocera's* contributions to community development through their participation in the MTAs (see *Appendix D* for the interview guide). All participants were read the consent form, and were assured of the confidentiality of the study. Consent to be interviewed was obtained orally, and was audio-recorded before each interview. Participants were able to withhold comment from any question asked.

In the context of the study, the term "gender" should not be seen as homologous with "women," as both women and men are "engaged in a constant struggle of negotiating the different interests with which they are faced" (Wieringa, 1994, p. 835). Emphasis was placed on selecting women for interviewing as this study seeks to highlight their experiences with community organizing. Nevertheless, women in Antímano participate in community activism alongside their male comrades, and the majority of men are therefore conscious of the subsequent marginalization of their fellow *compañeras* (Fernandes, 2007). Thus, men's interactions with women participants indubitably shaped the analysis and discussion.

Following the conclusion of the data collection period the *voceras* requested a report of the findings, which was readily agreed to. As a feminist researcher, the ability to "give back" in a way that benefits the community is essential to maintaining an equitable equilibrium with the co-researchers or research participants. The *voceras* appreciate having documentation that summarizes their work and role in the Bolivarian Process for information sharing purposes. As such, Rebecca and I prepared a research summary that has since been translated into Spanish, which will hopefully be useful for them (see *Appendix J*). Electronic copies of the summary will be sent to key research contacts at

Hidrocapital, and Professor Spronk will be presenting and distributing paper copies of the summary during her next visit to the field.

Data analysis

All field notes and interviews were transcribed. The interviews were transcribed by a Venezuelan contact to preserve the nuances of the local dialect. The data was then coded and analyzed borrowing from a constructivist grounded theory approach. The constructivist method posited by Charmaz uses grounded theory's basic guidelines as tools for analysis, but assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, and recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed (as cited in Allen, 2011, p. 29). Charmaz (2006) argues for the applicability of this methodology, and its possible contributions to social justice research (p. 30). Thus, this method is complimentary to the feminist, place-based approach of the study with a focus on women's lived experiences. The data coding process gives the researcher "analytical scaffolding" with which to apply their theory (Charmaz, 2005, p. 517). The coding process typically consists of two general phases. The initial phase requires the coding of segments of data using detailed names or phrases, and the second phase involves the synthesis and organization of smaller segments of data into larger categories (p. 46). However, this study required a three-stage approach to data coding and analysis.

The first stage entailed an initial review of all of the data including field notes, journal entries, survey responses, photographs, memorabilia and other print sources collected from the field, and finally the interview transcriptions. Charmaz (2006) explains that this stage of coding can induce "you to wrestle with your participants' interpretive frames of reference, which may not be your own. Taking a reflexive stance toward challenges…may result in questioning one's perspectives and practices" (p. 68). The second stage involved a more detailed process of coding all of the electronic data line-by-line. The focused codes that were generated were then examined through the feminist theoretical lenses outlined below to determine which codes best represented what was

occurring in the data, and to raise them to conceptual categories for developing the analytic framework (p. 91).

Charmaz (2006) demonstrates the importance of tying focused codes back to the broader theoretical framework as reflecting on theoretical concepts will help to explicate whether the data indicates if "class, race, gender, or age issues…need analytical attention" (p. 68). Finally, the third stage required the extracting, synthesizing and inputting of the coded data into a spreadsheet containing several conceptual categories. These categories were based on overarching themes that were identified within the coded data that helped to answer and explain the research questions posited in this study.

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter has outlined the methodological and theoretical frameworks used within the study. The feminist methods used for data collection and analysis correspond to the theoretical concepts explored within this chapter, which locate women's lived experiences of community activism in Antímano within the larger historical narrative of women's activism in Latin America. In reference to the primary research question, this study will endeavour to explore how the concept of revolutionary motherhood is expressed in the MTAs in Antímano to identify both the possibilities and limits of this particular subject position. *Chapter Three* will trace the history of the women's movement in Venezuela, and will provide a comparison to women's movements within a selection of Latin American countries with similar historical contexts.

Chapter Three: Historical Background

This chapter will provide a historical overview of the women's movement in Venezuela to provide background to the current state of gender and popular politics in Antímano. First, the chapter will describe the history of the women's organizing in Latin America and will incorporate and contextualize the theoretical terms introduced in the previous chapter. Second, the history of the women's movement and the introduction of second-wave feminism from North America and Europe will be explored. Finally, women's role in the Bolivarian Process will be examined comparatively with the revolutionary regimes and women's movements in Cuba and Nicaragua, as these countries share a number of historical similarities with Venezuela. Moreover, in both cases the state has encouraged women's participation in revolutionary organizing, and has incorporated gender issues into their respective political agendas as a means of advancing their interests. By offering this historical overview and comparative analysis this chapter will effectively situate the women's movement in Venezuela within the broader regional context.

The women's movement in Latin America

The 1960s, 70s, and 80s were a time of great transformation in Latin America especially where women's rights were concerned. During this time, McMichael notes: "18 out of 21 countries in Latin America…were run by authoritarian governments that borrowed heavily from international banks, leaving a legacy of illegitimate debt" (McMichael, as cited in Spronk, Crespo and Olivera, 2014, p. 422). As many economies became increasingly tied to the world market, and as structural adjustment incited crises throughout the region, a variety of social movements emerged to address the disparities that had developed including the growing income gap between the rich and poor (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). In this period of societal upheaval women mobilized and became extensively involved in popular political struggles "as a response to the economic policies and political repression of the authoritarian, bureaucratism or military dictatorial regimes" (Lebon, 2010, p. 6).

The interconnections between women, motherhood, and political participation in Latin America can be analyzed through two historical developments: the rise of second wave feminism which was typically associated with the middle-to-upper-class, and the establishment and ongoing activities of the mother's groups and neighbourhood organizations, which typically targeted lower-class women and the urban poor (González-Rivera and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 23). These collectives included "women's human rights groups, such as the Argentinean Madres y Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo…and poor women's neighbourhood organizations, originally focused on basic needs such as housing and food", which appeared in response to the numerous challenges present at the time in Latin America and spread quickly throughout the region (Lebon, 2010, p. 7). In addition, another group of women that gained notoriety during this period due to their direct involvement in the various revolutionary struggles, and which largely spearheaded the foundation of national women's organizations, were the women who fought as guerrilla combatants.

In response to the actions of repressive military dictatorships one of the first and most prominent types of women's organizing that emerged during these decades was the establishment of the aforementioned "mother's groups", which was also known as an expression of "militant motherhood" (Alvarez, as cited in Friedman, 2000, p. 48). Using public and political displays of outrage they "left the comfort of their homes, taking their pain to the streets, police stations, military camps, and public squares to confront…patriarchal, authoritarian governments" (Maier, 2010, p. 32). By entering into the political sphere and bringing "mothers' and housewives' perspectives to political action" these women were seen as "redefining politics and the concept of the political actor" (Alvarez, as cited in Friedman, 2000, p. 48). Moreover, they exposed the inherent contradictions between "state discourse and state actions" as authoritarian military regimes "extolled the virtues of nurturing motherhood and women's vital role in the care of their families…[while simultaneously disappearing] loved family members" (Lebon, 2010, pp. 6-7).

As illustrated in *Figure 1*, an alternative manner through which women mobilized to defend themselves and their families was as active combatants for the insurgency forces in an effort to counter "state brutality…the prohibition of alternative socio-political agency, and the edification of traditional gender values, roles, and representations as a personal demonstration of patriotism" (Maier, 2010, p. 31). Their actions enabled them to transgress gender norms and, similar to the mother's groups, they "won the right to be heard to varying degrees" as they utilized this newfound space to "influence their national constitutional processes, to set in place national women's machineries (national-level state institutions for women's rights) and to experiment with innovative models" (p. 9). As such, women's rights became inseparable from "the broader question of the quality and character of democratic rule" (Molyneux, as cited in Maier, 2010, p. 31).

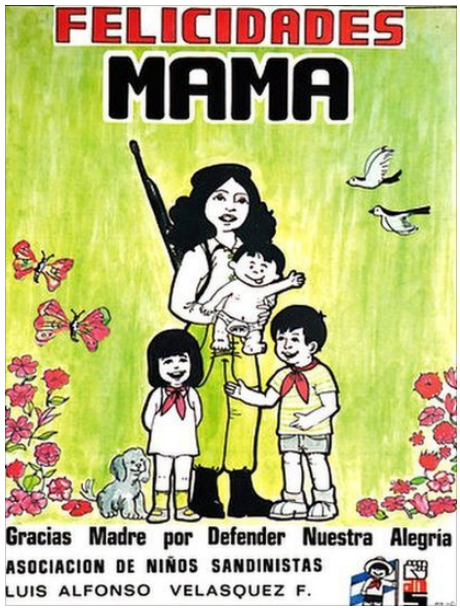


Figure 1: "Thank you mother for defending our happiness"- image from the Nicaraguan revolution

Another mode of women's organizing that flourished during this time was the marked increase in women's participation in local community-based organizations the aim of which was to respond to the state's inability to address the massive gap in service provision for poor urban communities.[20] During the 1960s and 70s, the number of

[20] Following their establishment during the early waves of rural to urban migration in the 1940s informal settlements in many urban centers of Latin America had rarely ever received state assistance. Subsequently,

marginal settlements multiplied and became more demographically concentrated "creating extensive urban ghetto areas with countless structural and day-to-day necessities to resolve" (Maier, 2010, p. 34). As a result, the "self-help" approach became increasingly commonplace. Women's activities within these organizations ranged from running soup kitchens to leading advocacy campaigns depending on the needs of the community.

During the 1980s a series of economic crises reverberated throughout the region, which were later followed by the imposition of detrimental structural adjustment arrangements causing massive cutbacks to the already meagre provision of essential services. Thus, the survival strategies enacted by lower-class women to cushion the socio-economic blow exposed a plethora of "issues that had been marginal to traditional politics" (Barrig, 1994, pp. 154-155). Through their participation in these organizations women built solidarity, learned new skills, and "recover[ed] the ability to speak, which is very significant because silence is one of the most evident forms of women's oppression" (p. 167). Consequently, women's political participation and mobilization during the mid-to-late twentieth century was crucial to sustaining and ensuring the livelihoods of many communities throughout Latin America. Moreover, the politicization of their interests allowed women to voice their concerns, thus illuminating and countering gendered inequities. Women activists during this period were also shaped by the advent of Western feminism in Latin America, which greatly influenced the vast majority of women's groups and organizations in way or another.

The introduction of "Western" feminism: Defining the "feminine" and the "feminist"

Since the introduction of feminist thought from North America and Europe, Latin American feminists have continually defined their interests as distinct and separate from that of "Western" feminists. As described by Friedman (2000), early Latin American feminists faced a very different economic and cultural climate than Western feminists,

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community-based organizations originally sprung up "in response to the clamor for better living conditions" (Maier, 2010, p. 34).

which was heavily influenced by traditional gender relations promulgated by the Catholic Church (p. 48). Many women saw "English style" feminists such as the US suffragists as antagonistic and thought that Western feminism personified women as men's competitors (p. 48). Latin American feminists on the other hand preferred to see themselves as allies, as they stressed their maternal values and cooperation with men (p. 48). They saw the feminine and the womanly—" the ability to bear and raise children, to nurture a family" —as something to be celebrated (Miller, as cited in González-Rivera and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 23).

Another unique feature of Latin American feminism that was particularly evident during the second wave was the "high degree of class consciousness" and emphasis on class struggle, which eventually became "integral to theory and practice" (González-Rivera and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 14). Lebon (2010) contends that feminist activists in socialist regimes came to recognize that "gender issues cannot be subordinated to class issues", as they saw "how strongly class inequalities also shape women's experiences of gender subordination" (pp. 8-9). Consequently, González-Rivera and Kampwirth explain that the "feminist movement" and the "women's movement" were not wholly synonymous, as the class-based interests expressed within these movements addressed topics that were distinct from one another. While mothers groups in opposition to state violence, and community organizations that demanded water and sanitation services were predominately made up of women, their activities concerned "issues that were not directly related to gender equality" (pp. 14-15). Thus, a bifurcation occurred within Latin American feminism where activists differentiated between what they described as "feminist organizations", and "feminine" or "women's organizations". González-Rivera and Kampwirth argue that this division arose according to "activism in defense of strategic gender interests" and "in defense of practical gender interests" (p. 15).

Advocates of feminism and the feminist movement—primarily upper-to-middle class activists and academics throughout the region—embraced a feminist perspective that analyzed strategic gender interests in an attempt to "challenge inequalities between men and women" (González-Rivera and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 15). Maier (2010) explains

that this agenda was heavily influenced by Western feminism, and it prioritized "the deconstruction of the sociocultural production of body-identity, rejecting sexual, socioeconomic and political restrictions that disciplined a subordinate and docile female body" (p. 27). On the other hand, participants of the women's movement—generally poorer women—were more inclined to organize in defense of their "feminine" or practical gender interests, "often as women but not always" (Lebon, 2010, p. 6). Moreover, these women often "anchored their participation to the traditional roles that historically reproduced patriarchal gender orders" (Maier, 2010, p. 27).

As such, Maier contends that the activities and interests of many women involved in the women's movement in Latin America conflicted with the priorities put forth by those involved in the feminist movement: "For some, the feminism that sprung up in Latin America at the beginning of the seventies was an exotic and luxurious import, far removed from the needs and interests of the majority of women of a region with almost half of its population living in poverty" (2010, p. 27). Nevertheless, Lebon (2010) argues that most scholars have agreed that this dichotomization of interests as "feminine" or "feminist" has "outgrown its usefulness and recognize that it is often difficult to disentangle the strategic from the practical" (p. 6). The following section will examine these phenomena within three comparable geopolitical regions: Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba.

An overview of the women's movement in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua

The history of the women's movement in Venezuela is rich and diverse, as women have been and continue to be, indispensible to the continued survival of their communities. Moreover, a number of women are widely renowned for their historical contributions, as an essential aspect of the national political strategy is the emphasis that is placed on memorializing revolutionary figures. One of the most famous historical characters who has garnered a cult following, and is part of a group known as "Las Tres

Potencias" ("The Three Powerful Ones")[21] is María Lionza—a legendary central deity who is head of one of the most prominent indigenous religions in Venezuela.

Public recognition of the contributions of revolutionary women is also a prominent feature of the broader women's movement in Venezuela. As a result, many women in the *barrios* celebrate the legacy of these national heroines. The gender workshop in Antímano highlighted the contributions of several iconic women who are symbolic of the wide spectrum of ethnicities that make up the Venezuelan population including Amerindian, Afro-Caribbean and *mestizo.*

Community organizations in the *barrios* are often named after many of these cultural figures to honour their place in Venezuelan history. For example, in Antímano lead *vocera* Elizabeth López remarked on the significance of her community naming their commune *Juana Ramírez: La Avanzadora* (Juana Ramirez: The Advancer) after the wife of Guaicaipuro—a *criada* or mixed-race revolutionary heroine who played an important role in the Venezuelan War of Independence. She comments: "We chose 'Juana Ramírez' because she was a very heroic woman who was always encouraging to others in the war. She has a great history".[22] As such, women are prominently portrayed as the drivers of revolutionary progress and change in Venezuela.

Another influential female figure who features prominently in Venezuelan folklore is Manuela Sáenz (known colloquially as Manuelita), who is considered the "Liberator of the Liberator"—Simon Bolivar[23] himself (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, p. 144). Ciccariello-Maher argues that the veneration of powerful women like Manuelita exemplifies a deviation from the concept of *marianismo*. While *marianismo* cannot be dismissed entirely as it entails qualities such as self-sacrifice, which is represented by the

[21] The other two figures are Guaicaipuro—a famous indigenous chief who fought against the Spanish, and Negro Primero—a freed African slave who fought alongside Simon Bolivar in the Venezuelan War of Independence.
[22] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.
[23] Simon Bolivar, a military leader born in Caracas known as *El Libertador* (The Liberator), is an extremely important figure in Venezuelan and Latin American history as he played a key role in securing Latin America's independence from the Spanish Empire.

many selfless acts that such heroines have demonstrated throughout history, the situation is complex. Indeed, Ciccariello-Maher explains that the image of Manuelita as Bolivar's lover may connote a dependent position for women, but that it also exemplifies the intricate balancing act "that is embodied in the relationship between women's movements and the Bolivarian Revolution", as many women are caught in the oscillation between "dependent savior and autonomous political actor" (p. 148).

This dichotomy is also reflected in the evolution of women's agency and activism as political actors within Nicaragua and Cuba—two countries that underwent revolutions in 1979 and 1959 respectively. Similar to the case of Venezuela, socio-political instability in Nicaragua and Cuba "influenced [the] feminist prioritization of the antidictadorial struggle" (Maier, 2010, p. 31). Women also took full advantage of these transitional periods, however, to make substantive advances for women's rights both autonomously from and with the support of the newly formed revolutionary state. The subsequent sections will examine women's participation in the Venezuelan, Nicaraguan and Cuban revolutions, and the birth of the women's movement in these countries.

State feminism and mobilization "from above"

In all three countries the women's movement gained substantial momentum following periods of armed struggle in the 1960s and 70s. Women's role in the Sandinista revolution that eventually overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua is well known, as it has been estimated that roughly "30 percent of the combatants (and significant numbers of guerrilla leaders) were women" (Kampwirth, 2002, p. 79). Similarly, women's participation in the Cuban revolution is renowned, as Espín, Santos, and Ferrer (2012) state: "At every point in the struggle, women were part of the vanguard and its leadership" (p. 33). During the Betancourt dictatorship in Venezuela women helped the insurgency in various capacities including their involvement in the newly formed political party *Movimiento Izquierda Revolutionaria* (Revolutionary Left Movement or MIR). This period of institution building allowed women to greatly influence the state structure. Women in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela played an important role in institutionalizing

measures and promoting a vision of state feminism that sought to address gender inequality.

In Nicaragua, Blandón (2002) notes that in the early years of the revolution, "the Sandinista-affiliated national women's organization, *Asociacion de Mujeres Nicaraguenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza* (AMNLAE) played an important role in challenging traditional authority" and pushing the state to tackle gender discrimination (p. 112). In the years following the Sandinista revolution women became increasingly involved in "popular organizations" including student groups, unions and women's groups as they "took on the task of reconstructing the country" (p. 112). Later in the 1980s *Secretarias de la Mujer* or Women's Secretariats were founded in the major labour unions as women continued to enter the formal labour market (p. 113). These achievements helped to pave the way for further advances including ten new articles in the 1987 Constitution that made specific mention of women's rights in comparison with the 1974 Constitution, which had made none (p. 114). Moreover, "couples in common law marriages (which are more common than legal marriages among Nicaragua's poor majority) were protected from discrimination, and no-fault divorce was permitted" (p. 114).

The prioritization of women's issues within the Cuban revolution is also well known. In the first few months of the revolution of 1959 "forged in the heat of popular mobilizations…what became the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) grew out of women's determination to participate in the revolution- not the other way around" (Espín, et al., 2012, p. 28). Since the founding of this state-sanctioned women's bureau the FMC has been the primary advocate for women's interests in Cuba (Fernandes, 2005). A commitment to gender equality and greater focus on women's issues from within the revolutionary government resulted in dramatic improvements to women's livelihoods throughout the country. In 1965 abortion was decriminalized (CEPED, 2007, para. 3), and further changes included "an increase in female employment and education, declining rates of poverty, and a reduction in other social problems, such as prostitution and illiteracy" (Fernandes, 2005, p. 438). The government also provides "generous

maternity leaves and free day care", and similar to Nicaragua, was one of the first to "grant women in consensual unions and their children equal legal recognition as women in legal marriage" in Latin America (Safa, 2010, pp. 65).

In Venezuela, women's participation in the political sphere in the 1990s led to a number of changes that were later institutionalized to an even greater extent under the Chávez administration. In 1999 the National Women's Ministry, the *Instituto Nacional de la Mujer* (Inamujer) was founded. Current president of Inamujer, and Minister of State for women's affairs María Leon, claims that "the revolution has 'woken women up' and empowered them" (Espina and Rakowski, 2010, pp. 180-181). In addition, the women's bank, Banmujer, was created to "develop public policies with a gender perspective to make women's poverty visible and seek solutions" (as cited in Espina and Rakowski, 2010, p. 192).

Additional institutional mechanisms for addressing gender inequality in Venezuela include tribunals that were established to deal with violent crimes against women, as well as the expansion of the legal framework to encompass 18 different types of violence against women including "mediatic" violence (Pearson, 2013).[24] One of the most important achievements was the ratification of the 1999 Constitution. It uses gender-neutral and non-sexist language and includes the world renowned "Article 88", which acknowledges the social function of motherhood by recognizing housework as a viable economic contribution where women are eligible for social security benefits and pensions.

There have been notable political figureheads in all three countries whose influence has shaped the development of state feminism, and the women's movement as a whole. Following his election in 1979 president Daniel Ortega came into conflict with Nicaraguan feminists on several occasions. The goals of the revolutionary party—the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* or FSLN—for women's emancipation were

[24] "Mediatic" violence describes degrading or sexist symbolic imagery of women perpetuated within the media.

"consistently framed in terms of enhancing women's ability to carry out their traditional roles effectively, what some scholars have called an agenda of feminine interests over feminist interests, or practical gender interests over strategic interests" (Kampwirth, 2002, p. 164).

While Nicaraguan women made noteworthy progress, in part due to the championing of women's rights and engagement with women's issues within *Sandinismo*,[25] some authors claim that an overwhelming focus on motherhood is problematic as it can divert focus away from tackling the patriarchal "attitudes and customs that perpetuate women's subordination within both the home and the larger society" (Urdang, as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 50).[26] Angela Rosa Acevedo, an activist and member of the FSLN, explains: "We didn't fight against those ideas that are at the base of these inequalities…Motherhood is the principal vision of women, along with control of woman's freedom through the social- women for others not for themselves" (as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 132).

Consequently, Disney (2008) argues that the Sandinistas "never adopted a revolutionary understanding of power relationships outside the realm of class and imperialism", which could lend itself to a critical examination of the need for power sharing in the domestic sphere (p. 80). The discourse of women's emancipation and liberation was seen as synonymous with the "achievement of the *socialist* revolution", and the "mobilization of women in defense and production…was required to accomplish it" (p. 54). However, the productivist focus on women's integration into the revolutionary cause via their labour led to a corresponding increase in their workload, as there was no dialogue concerning the inequitable gendered division of labour, or what women's liberation might necessitate. As such, Disney claims that the "women in the parties and

[25] A term used to describe the political ideologue of the Sandinista party.
[26] An example of the Sandinista government's emphasis on motherhood includes the creation of the organization "Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs" by the national women's organization, the AMNLAE, to provide support to mothers whose sons had been killed by Somoza's National Guard in the war, and to mobilize mothers in support of the revolutionary war effort (Disney, 2008).

the women's organizations…struggled with verticalism and patriarchal political cultures within the theory and practice of revolutionary society" (p. 83).

In Cuba, the revolutionary leadership that came to power "maintained that liberation from sexual oppression was to be found through women's participation in the workplace" (Bengelsdorf, as cited in Fernandes, 2005, p. 438). Former president Fidel Castro and the revolutionary party used Communist rhetoric claiming that under capitalism the majority of women are "doubly exploited or doubly humiliated" as workers, and as working women within their own class (as cited in Espín, et al., 2012, p. 32). By engaging in the working-class movement in post-revolutionary Cuba women could "participate actively and effectively in the economic, political, cultural and social life of the country" (Espín, et al., 2012, p. 199).

Substantial advances for women's rights were facilitated by the Cuban revolution. Nonetheless, there were a host of issues that followed. Smith and Padula claim that the FMC, the government-established women's bureau, proceeded "on the basis that the revolution had ended patriarchy and that women were free to embrace their new role in society" (as cited in Fernandes, 2005, p. 438). However, as Espín, et al. (2012) explain, some authors have argued the FMC actually "bolstered women's oppression rather than advancing women's liberation" by reinforcing traditional female stereotypes such as teaching them "how to make clothes for themselves and their families" (p. 31). Moreover, while the Family Code introduced in 1975 included two articles indicating that both partners were to share household chores, state-based women's organizations did not push for a discussion concerning the redistribution of domestic labour (Sarmiento, 2010). As such, women routinely carried the burden of "the second shift" in Cuba as the division of labour remained unchallenged (ONE, as cited in Sarmiento, p. 79).

Although the women's movement made important gains preceding Chávez's election, women's distinctive relationship with the former president helped the movement to flourish, which resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of fundamental advances

for women's rights in Venezuela.[27] Chávez openly declared himself a feminist on several occasions, and repeatedly claimed that women's work is essential to achieving social change in Venezuela (Pearson, 2013). Indeed, many women claim that they had experienced "a 'calling' of the president" and have responded through their involvement in political advocacy work in their communities (Fernandes, 2010a). Women also now occupy upper-level positions in government and play important roles in creating social programs, which were facilitated by state organizations and were directed towards poor women throughout the country.

However, activists warn that advances for the women's movement in Venezuela are in many cases "still equality on paper only", as there is still more work to be done to fully address gender-based discrimination (Rakowski, 2003, p. 399). In an attempt to implement Article 88, the Chávez government created a social program entitled *Madres del Barrio* (Mothers of the Slum). The program sought to financially support women by giving them a modest stipend to participate in capacity-building programs, as living wage and benefits for housewives were protected in the constitution. However, the program has only been capable of reaching a small percentage of the population who are low-income single mothers. At present, for budgetary reasons it is only able to "provide a temporary salary to 300,000 poor homemakers (and it is unlikely that even this figure was ever reached in practice)" (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, p. 158). This example provides evidence that often it may be financially or politically unfeasible to fully implement gender reforms, even those enshrined by law.

Subsequently, while women in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba have made significant accomplishments vis-à-vis state feminism, they have also continued to encounter obstacles to achieving progress on certain issues. There have been limits to the institutionalization of gender reform, and as a result, feminist activists have pursued

[27] Many of the gender reform laws have roots dating back to the 1940s with legislation created in the 1990s. However, the majority of these reforms were not fully realized until after Chávez's election in 1999.

alternate avenues to address the "woman question"[28] including the foundation of autonomous feminist movements and organizations.

Grassroots organizing and mobilization "from below"

Despite their extensive contributions to revolutionary causes in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, women's participation did not allow them to make as many gains for women's rights and gender equity as had been anticipated. Indeed, Lebon (2010) argues that women's activism was often promoted "by raising…unrealistic expectations about the capacity of revolutionary states to eradicate sexism" (p. 7). Often the focus was largely on addressing class struggle first and foremost pushing issues of gender inequality to the backburner. As indicated by Disney (2008): "[I]n cases where the interests of the women may differ from the interests of the revolution, the class struggle reigns supreme over the struggle against machismo" (p. 65).

Blandón (2002), a feminist activist who participated in the Sandinista revolution, argues that the view of many women in Nicaragua was that the interests of the FSLN were promoted "over their own interests in challenging gender inequality" (p. 113). Similarly, Nora Castañeda, former guerrilla and now president of Banmujer, recounts the status of women at the time of the struggle against the Betancourt dictatorship in Venezuela: "[W]omen's rights were completely absent, and we weren't fighting for the human rights of women, but instead as a support for all the movements fighting for the transformation of society" (as cited in Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, p. 39). Consequently, encouraged in part by the burgeoning transnational feminist network in Latin America, the women's movement in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba took on new forms as activists began to establish autonomous feminist organizations to further the gender agenda. Craske suggests that to avoid "becoming subsumed into the state" the development of an independent women's movement is crucial to providing "alternative

[28] Disney (2008) explains that the woman question, which questions the fundamental role of women in society has "occupied a central role in the theories and practices of socialism in a way that it has not in liberal democratic discourse, where the commitment toward individual rights has been seen as the path to fight for the rights of any particular identity category, such as women and racial minorities" (p. 54).

agendas and strategies, which in turn maintain pressure on the regime" (as cited in Fernandes, 2007, p. 204).

During the 1980s—an important period of democratic transition in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba—activists who ascribed to the term "feminist" were at odds in a debate that questioned whether to work within or without the party system (Lebon, 2010, p. 8). This debate "opposed *politicas* (women involved in party politics also known as "party women") to *feministas* (in favour of autonomous feminist organizing without allegiance to party politics)" (p. 8). Lebon argues that this debate was also influenced by what activists referred to as the "General and the Specific", where *politicas* endeavoured to advance women's and their respective party's interests under the assumption that the eradication of class inequalities (the general) would lead to the erasure of women's oppression (the specific) (p. 9). *Feministas* on the other hand believed that women's oppression should not be secondary to other demands for change, and should be considered equally important (pp. 8-9).

According to the struggles and tensions between Nicaraguan feminists and the Sandinista party, "some women began to seek autonomy from the FSLN over the course of the 1980s", which resulted at the close of the decade in the emergence of a few independent women's organizations (Kampwirth, 2002, p. 113). Kampwirth explains that by the mid-1990s, "the autonomous feminist movement in Nicaragua was the most prominent one in Central America—and one of the most significant in Latin America as a whole" (p. 113). Advances for gender equity undoubtedly could not only be attributed to the influence of state feminism, as the lobbying efforts of autonomous organizations played an essential role. Well-known advocacy groups included the PIE (*Partido de la Izquierda Erotica*), an autonomous feminist organization, which "succeeded in promoting gender equality as a constitutional value" (Blandón, 2002, p. 114).

In Cuba, feminists were fairly vulnerable to state intervention in the women's movement making autonomy difficult to obtain (Fernandes, 2005). Fernandes examines this phenomenon through her portrayal of a small organization entitled *Magín* (Image),

which was established outside of the national women's bureau- the FMC. However, she argues that *Magín* was successful to some extent, as the activists "created a space for autonomous feminist organizing within Cuban society by drawing on their institutional contacts and working in alliance with official channels and institutions" (p. 434). Nonetheless, autonomous feminist organizations remained considerably scarcer in Cuba than in Nicaragua and Venezuela due in part to the political hegemony of the Cuban government (Fernandes, 2005).

In Venezuela an autonomous women's movement has grown over the years leading to a large number of advancements for women's rights. Indeed, the vast majority of gender reforms "often are credited mistakenly to Chávez alone", when in actuality a plethora of women's organizations played crucial roles (Espina and Rakowski, 2010, p. 181). However, the women's movement was not always harmonious, as the dichotomous relationship between the *feministas* and the *politicas* began to form during the early years. In an interview with Castañeda, Ciccariello-Maher (2013) explains that at the time of the struggle to be a feminist meant to "approach revolutionary work in an unacceptably one-sided fashion that seemed incompatible with both her principles and background" (p. 129). Castañeda is from the parish 23 de Enero, and she believed that feminist doctrine could not fully address the real needs of her community. Castañeda felt that feminists were only "contributing to ideological diversionism" as they remained on the level of the struggle between genders. As a party woman who would likely be identified by *feministas* as a *política*, she argues that what was most important during the guerrilla war of which she was part "was the class struggle" (p. 129).

To some extent both the party women and the "feminist feminists" agreed that the "class struggle and the gender struggle should move forward and be developed jointly" (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, p. 148). The collective evolution of the interests of these two groups is evidenced in part by the popularity of new forms of women's organizing including the "consciousness-raising groups" known as the *Círculos Femeninos Populares* (CFPs or Popular Women's Circles). Although the CFPs were not entirely autonomous organizations, these groups opened up a critical discussion of women's and

gender issues, as they brought together "small numbers of women to explore their gender condition, embodying a methodology of collective scrutiny, interlocution, and accountability among peers" (Maier, 2010, p. 29). However, the opinion of the "hard-line feminists" was that these groups "weren't avowedly 'feminist'" as their religious underpinnings impeded the discussion of certain issues including abortion rights, as abortion is still criminalized in Venezuela with the exception of when the life of the pregnant woman is threatened (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, pp. 149-150).

Furthermore, these groups helped to give rise to an important development within the women's movement—the emergence of "popular feminism", which refers to "the gender-perspective interpretation of low-income women's needs, interests, and demands" (Maier, 2010, p. 41). Maier describes the emergence of popular feminism where "middle-class feminists worked with women from popular organizations to specify the components of a gender-class perspective" (p. 41). She explains:

> At that time popular feminism evoked two distinct images: one referring to middle-class feminists linked to those grassroots movements and the other referring to the women from those movements who participated in gender-oriented activities. Over the years the impact of changing gender representatives and discourses on women's gender awareness has resulted in more women in grassroots movements with gender consciousness and demands. This has redefined popular feminism as exclusively referring to the gender rights-based vision and agency of those women activists (p. 41).

Thus, over time the needs and interests of middle-class feminists, and women involved in grassroots organizing began to merge, opening up new dialogues for the contestation of *machismo* reflected in the everyday experience of *barrio* life in Venezuela.

Women's community activism in the *barrios*

The subsequent emergence of popular feminism contributed to a new expression of feminist activism rooted in a gender-class outlook that opened "possibilities of strategically reimagining a new working-class, feminist critical mass that integrates the viewpoint and priorities of diverse female collective actors" (Maier, 2010, p. 39). As such, women's dedication to grassroots organizing and addressing issues at the local level is well established in Venezuela, as well as in Nicaragua and Cuba.

Following the end of the Nicaraguan civil war women came together from both sides of the conflict to form mother's committees, such as the "Mothers of the Resistance" group based in Waslala, to demand basic services from the state such as water, electricity, housing and transportation (Cupples, 2004). The efforts of community development groups such as these have been crucial to improving living conditions in the *barrios*, as their programming has founded a number of important initiatives targeting marginalized populations that have been greatly affected by the war such as women and children. Some of these initiatives include "a revolving credit fund…art classes for street children, and training courses for women with disabilities in beauty therapy, floristry, bakery, and dressmaking" (p. 13).

In Cuba, women have also been involved in a great many community development programs. In urban areas such as Cayo Hueso, women's participation has been critical to the success of "regeneration" programs such as the *Taller de Transformación Integral de Cayo Hueso* (TTICH), a local planning body based in Havana, Cuba (Fernandez and Angeles, 2009). In Cayo Hueso women have collectively organized to address "pressing physical problems in the territory, namely housing, the shortage of potable water and the lack of recreational areas for children, youth, and the general population" (p. 84). As such, women are actively integrated into the local decision-making and planning processes that influence their daily lives (p. 85).

As in the case of Nicaragua and Cuba, a large number of women living in the popular sectors of Venezuela are extensively involved in community organizing. Indeed, within the *barrios* of Caracas women are extensively involved in, and have benefitted greatly from the abovementioned *Misiones Bolivarianas* (Bolivarian Missions). Funded through oil profits from the national petroleum company Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. or PDVSA, these anti-poverty programs have played an important role in the state-institutionalized poverty reduction strategy. The missions encompass a vast number of initiatives including land redistribution, and subsidized food, education, housing and healthcare programs. Furthermore, Fernandes (2007) notes that many of these poverty alleviation programs are driven by women themselves, as at any given time women play a plethora of essential roles as coordinators and participants in the missions, as well as in a variety of other community organizations and women's groups (Fernandes, 2007).

Moreover, the experiences of *barrio* women in Venezuela "do not fit neatly into the categories of either mass women's organizations or independent women's movements as defined in this literature" (Fernandes, 2010b, p. 204). While the national women's organizations created under Chávez were established primarily for the use and benefit of poorer women living in the *barrio*, many *barrio* women are not formally organized within these organizations, as they preferred to engage within local organizations at the level of the community, some of which have very long histories (Fernandes, 2010b). Thus, the participation of *barrio* women in Venezuelan community development projects illustrates an alternative depiction of women's organizing within the array of state-directed and autonomous women's movements in Venezuela.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief history of women's organizing and feminist activism as it has evolved throughout the region. A brief historical survey suggests that women have used a multiplicity of organizing techniques in Latin American, as they organized in organizations ranging from "formally autonomous feminist organizations, [to] women's secretariats in the political parties and unions…[and] neighborhood

improvement associations" (Guzman, as cited in González-Rivera and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 20). This chapter has also reflected upon the multitude of successes and challenges experienced by activists specifically within the revolutionary contexts of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba.

While the women's movements in these countries have accomplished a great deal for women's rights there remains much unfinished business, such as the inequitable, gendered division of labour, which has been a significant barrier blocking women's full and inclusive participation in many aspects of political life. Other obstacles include conditions of poverty and poor living conditions, inequitable access to paid employment opportunities, gendered forms of violence, and a lack of reproductive rights, among others.

In Venezuela, the visibility that *barrio* women have garnered through their participation in political life has been greatly enhanced by the Bolivarian government. These women provide an alternative vision of women's activism as they engage in community organizing as autonomous actors focused on grassroots issues, and as state actors through their continued support for government-sponsored initiatives. The following chapters will introduce the case study of Antímano, and will illustrate how these women have been instrumental to the survival and betterment of their communities. The presentation of the findings and analysis in the subsequent chapters will attempt to illustrate women's engagement with the discourse of revolutionary motherhood, and to elucidate the successes and challenges the *voceras* have encountered through their determined participation in community development.

Chapter Four:
Struggling for services: Women and community-led development in Antímano

The following chapters will present and analyze the findings of the field research conducted in and around the *barrio* of Antímano in Caracas, Venezuela. As such, *Chapters Four* and *Five* will explore the secondary and sub-research questions: How has women's participation in community-based organizing a) impacted and/or enhanced their lives in the *barrios*; and b) been influenced and/or affected by "mobilization from above" and the mainstreaming of women's issues within the Bolivarian Process? As such, these chapters will examine women's perceptions of their participation in community development and the Bolivarian Process as a whole. More specifically, *Chapter Four* will focus on the possibilities of women's identification with the discourse of revolutionary motherhood by examining the experiences of the eight key overview informants in community activism, the *voceras* of the *mesas técnicas de agua* (MTAs), based on observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in the field. Their testimonials will be supplemented by interviews with several other activists and organizers who are also involved in community organizing, and who have worked alongside the *voceras*.

Historical shifts and community activism

Significant changes took place in Latin America following the take-off of industrial development in the 1920s and 30s including the transformation of the metropolitan landscape with the settling of the *barrios*, and the evolution of the family unit into smaller nuclear familial structures (Maier, 2010). Extensive industrialization prompted peasant families to move to the city in droves in search of work, which was followed by the frenzied construction of entire communities of informal settlements (Bruce, 2009). The early settlers worked tirelessly to break ground and piece together "rudimentary, fragile homes…[beginning] the long process of environmentally, socially, and legally colonizing these spatial configurations that would soon come to be known as the symbol of Latin American poverty" (Maier, p. 34). In the years following the massive rural-to-urban migration the organizational forms of family life were also drastically altered where "the old peasant family began to disintegrate," and families of up to 13 or

more children gradually devolved into smaller, nuclear families (Bruce, 2009, p. 28). This transformation occasioned the growth of a large number of female-headed households throughout the *barrios* of Latin America.

In Caracas these changes resulted in the creation of *barrio* neighbourhoods such as Antímano. With a burgeoning population and widespread poverty (see *Appendix B* for population statistics), the parish of Antímano is located in the west of Caracas, and is markedly distinguishable from the upper-to-middle class neighborhoods of the urban center.



Figure 2: Ranchos in *Antímano* (foreground) with downtown Caracas in the background.

As previously discussed, the establishment of Antímano is similar to that of other *barrios* in Latin America where in the early 1930s waves of rural-urban migration resulted in the construction of informal residences known as *ranchos* that gradually came to encircle the city center (Bruce, 2009, pp. 24-25). This period of *barrio* settlement was marked by racialized violence as class-based exclusion intensified. Police raids ensued, and *ranchos* were forcibly torn down forcing residents to build their homes at night (p. 25).

In 1973 a global oil crisis—which represented a boom for the oil-producing state of Venezuela—sparked another mass exodus from the countryside as *campesino* (peasant) families abandoned their agricultural plots in search of work within Caracas' industrialized urban core (p. 24). This influx of new residents caused a building boom

and the expansion of *barrio* neighbourhoods like Antímano. As the dreams of presidents Rafael Caldera and eventually Carlos Andres Pérez to establish Venezuela as a first world country were ultimately disturbed by the "the ring of…shanty-towns that sprang up to surround [Caracas], both physically and eventually politically", discrimination towards *barrio* residents deepened (Bruce, 2009, p. 24). With each passing decade these informal settlements multiplied creating "extensive urban ghetto areas" that were accompanied by "countless structural and day-to-day necessities to resolve" (Maier, 2010, p. 34). Following, in the late 1980s and early 90s, the introduction of neoliberal structural adjustment policies continued to shape *barrio* life as factories closed and jobs disappeared (Bruce, p. 28). This period of economic restructuring also resulted in the "disintegration of family life and the increase of violence in and out of the home" (Dalla Costa, 1999, p. 99).

Life in contemporary Antímano continues to be a struggle for many residents as these historical shifts have culminated in soaring poverty levels and socio-economic insecurity throughout the parish. Correspondingly high levels of unemployment and poverty are also exacerbated by the prevalence of criminal activity in the area. As Bruce (2009) illustrates: "many parts of Antímano parish are no-go areas for non-resident males, as local drug gangs fight to mark out and defend 'their' territory" (p. 29). Unemployment continues to be a persistent issue and the majority of the population is employed within the informal economy evinced by the ramshackle stands and tables selling everything from coffee to cellphone chargers that cluster around the Metro stops bordering the highway at the base of Antímano. Moreover, speculation about drug and alcohol abuse, suspicious deaths, and feelings of personal or familial insecurity are often expressed in casual conversation during community meetings.

Given the legacy of state neglect in the *barrio*, Antímano has a long-standing history of community activism as people have sought collective solutions to their own development problems. For many years, in the hopes that the settlements would eventually go away on their own, the state blatantly ignored the pressing need for appropriate infrastructure for the growing communities. As a result, community members

mobilized to address the lacunae in service provision and built staircases, drains and other essential infrastructure using their own resources. A multitude of examples of this enduring "self-help" approach, which have been ingrained within the political and social fabric of the parish since its founding, are readily apparent in Antímano. Jeeps decorated with Chávez memorabilia and religious mementos tear up and down the steep paths comprising a makeshift public (yet privatized) transportation system that enables residents who live in the upper areas of the *barrio* to ascend the vertical hillside. Handmade street lights constructed from plastic bowls and containers strung with Christmas lights dot the narrow paved walkways that serve as roads lined with drainage ditches for periods when monsoon rains and flooding occur that often cause *deslaves* or landslides.[29]

Nevertheless, in more recent years the success of the Bolivarian Missions have produced a substantial decline in poverty and extreme poverty rates by 18.4 and 12.3 per cent respectively between 2002 and 2005, which is arguably the "second sharpest decline in the continent" (Ellner, as cited in McMillan, Spronk and Caswell, 2014, p. 6). Furthermore, the percentage of Venezuelans living below the poverty line fell from 49.4 per cent in 1999 to 27.6 per cent in 2008, and inequality rates have been reduced by as much as 18 per cent in the same period (Grugel and Riggirozzi, as cited in McMillan, Spronk and Caswell, 2014, pp. 6-7). While these achievements in poverty alleviation are significant, they would not have been possible without the steadfast commitment of women. In Antímano, women are often involved as participants and as *voceras* in many different community organizations, and often comprise the majority of volunteers in organizations that address household needs, such as water and sanitation.

[29] Residents have a tenuous relationship with local weather patterns as they casually refer to the possibility of being caught in a landslide. Often, when heavy rains are forecasted community members will refuse to *bajar* or descend the steep hillside to attend meetings in the event that they may not be able to return to their homes.

The *voceras* of the *mesas técnicas de agua*

Examples of women's ingenuity, hard work and dedication are discernible within every level of communal organizing from the technical working groups up to the central commune structure. In a unique convergence of mobilization both from above and below women have sought to improve the livelihoods of their families and communities by making visible the invisible in a conscious articulation of the issues that impact *barrio* life. By harnessing member engagement, along with financial resources and political support provided by the state, women have been able to take full advantage of the community-led development model that is central to the Bolivarian Process particularly through their participation in local organizations such as the *mesas técnicas de agua.*

Although there have been notable advances in expanding access to formal water and sanitation services in Venezuela, numerous households within the *barrios* of Caracas still lack reliable water service provision, and many of these households are either female-headed or young nuclear families with few support networks (Allen, et. al, 2006; Lacabana, 2008).[30] Motivated by the need for socio-economic development in their communities women such as the *voceras* of the *mesas técnicas de agua* (MTAs) act as spokespeople for their respective technical working groups, and advocate for the provision of necessary services such as water and sanitation.

The MTAs have been extremely successful in addressing the needs of water users throughout Antímano and rectifying existing gaps in service provision. Historically, water and sanitation quality in the *barrios* has been poor and service delivery has been erratic at best.[31] As of 2011, the MTAs have implemented over 1,500 community-managed infrastructure projects that have made the provision of water services more

[30] Also observed while conducting pilot survey in Antímano, November 18, 2012.

[31] According to Santiago Arconada—a resident of Antímano who was tasked with heading Hidrocapital's first Community Management Office that acts as a direct line of communication between the MTAs, the communities and the utility (McCarthy, 2009, p. 11)—before the MTAs were implemented in 1993 there was a veritable water crisis where water was only available to residents every couple of months, and sewerage ran freely in the streets (Interview with Santiago Arconada, August 24, 2012).

accessible and reliable. The *barrios*, and Antímano in particular, are situated at such high altitudes that service delivery is incredibly difficult. The average neighbourhood is located at 800-1000m above sea level, which is typically above its principal water reservoir (McCarthy, 2009). Therefore, water has to be pumped to the communities and often there is inadequate pressure to pump water to all sectors simultaneously resulting in periodic service. The MTAs have helped to regularize service delivery by connecting local residents with the municipal water utility Hidrocapital in a dialectical "bottom-up" approach to community planning, and residents are better informed of when water will arrive to their pumps. [32]

In addition, the MTAs have installed, replaced, and repaired water and sewerage pipes where necessary, and they have assisted during crisis periods when torrential rains have caused widespread flooding and landslides that have impeded access to a safe water supply. In the past, Arconada (2005) explains that the MTAs helped residents to obtain water when they "were dying of thirst with water up to their knees" during the Vargas landslide and the collapse of the El Guapo River Dam (p. 193). The MTAs have played a crucial role in coordinating the delivery of water tanks to households in need, and in planning community events on topics such as water conservation.

The MTAs have also rendered visible the residents of Antímano as new citizens or formal subjects who are determining the terms of water service delivery to their communities. To establish an MTA a mapping process is required that identifies existing gaps in service provision. This self-mapping process is symbolic of formalizing the *barrios,* thus allowing residents to establish their political priorities. Santiago Arconada recounts under previous administrations where Antímano—currently home to over 150,000 people—did not even appear on a city map of Caracas. The mapping process also enables residents to build collective memory and formally establish the history of the community.[33]

[32] Interview with Hidrocapital community promoters, August 28, 2012. Community promoters are utility staff who act as community liaisons between the MTAs and the company.
[33] Interview with Santiago Arconada, August 24, 2012.

Women, and the *voceras* more specifically, have played a central role as the main protagonists in the MTAs. Although no formal register exists, Victor Díaz, who acts as the Community Coordinator for Hidrocapital, and the *comunitaria* or Community Promoter for Antímano, stated that women have always been both directly and indirectly involved in the MTAs, and he estimates that they have consistently constituted up to eighty to ninety per cent of all MTA participants in Antímano.[34] Moreover, a number of the eight *voceras* that were interviewed for this study have been active in their roles since the first MTA was established in Antímano in the early 1990s.[35] Through information shared with the community promoter and engineers, the *voceras* are able to jointly determine an appropriate water delivery schedule.[36] The *voceras* have also been instrumental to the planning and coordination of MTA activities, among a plethora of other social development initiatives, given their expert knowledge of their neighbourhoods and of the needs of the community as a whole.[37]

Viewing Antímano through the eyes of the *voceras* demonstrates how crucial women's involvement and knowledge are to the MTAs, and to community development more generally. While walking through the streets of Antímano the women point out various exposed tubes and pipes that direct *aguas grises* (waste water) and *aguas blancas* (drinking water) to and from the homes. They are able to narrate the complex histories of the installation of important infrastructure such as retaining walls, stairways and drainage ditches, and can recount the details of who was involved in their construction, how much they cost and when they were completed. It is abundantly clear that the *voceras* have

[34] Interview with Victor Díaz, December 4, 2012.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Interview with Hidrocapital community promoters, August 28, 2012. According to the promoters, in some areas community members change the valves, but in Antímano the utility works with communities to regularize their water provision schedule, and is highly dependent on the cooperation of local residents, as the system of valves in each community is quite complex and feedback is crucial to make the utility aware of when water is arriving to different areas.
[37] As McCarthy (2009) explains, the term "technical" was deliberately added to the MTAs to highlight the fact that the community members themselves were meant to be the experts in determining their needs for water and sanitation services. Local residents explain the inner workings of their complex and often piecemeal water and sanitation systems to engineers and Hidrocapital representatives, and are not reticent to share their opinions that may contradict engineering proposals.

been thoroughly involved in every aspect of the community development project planning process in their respective sectors.

Women and water: Fighting the gap in service provision

In Antímano, the fight for accessible water services has largely been defined by ongoing class struggle that visibly separates the *barrios* from the urban core. At base, conflicts over water provision in Caracas are about conflicts over resources. In middle-to-upper class areas of Caracas water features and fountains abound, but in the more elevated sections of Antímano water often only arrives once a month for a few days at a time.[38] Lilibeth Sira, a community activist and workshop facilitator, explicates that women who organize within the MTAs of Antímano do so out of struggle for daily needs.[39] She explains that in her neighbourhood of San Pedro, which can be described as "middle class", people do not organize as residents "have everything". She argues that residents in these areas do still have needs, but that many "do not realize it, because their basic necessities are covered. They do not have to fight for a bucket of water, there they have water everyday".[40]

In the years pre-dating the MTAs Hidrocapital tended to serve higher income areas before the middle-to-lower income areas, which resulted in massive protests on nearly a daily basis in Caracas (Arconada, 2005; Cariola and Lacabana, n.d). Many of the *voceras* remember these days vividly. Anastasia Sambrano relates her decision to participate in the MTAs as a *vocera* to the struggles that she experienced at that time. She recalls how with other governments in power before the establishment of the MTAs:

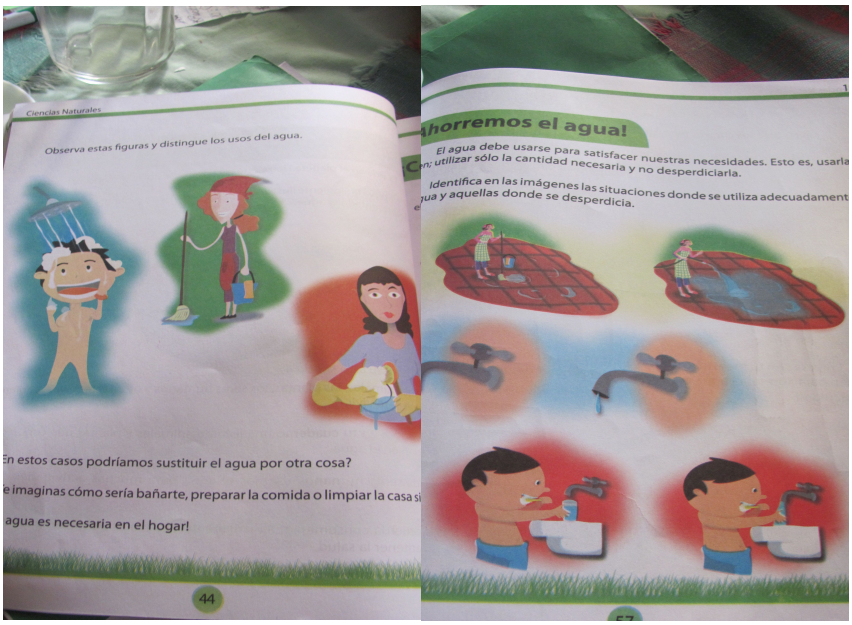
> We had to barricade the streets so that they would give us water. We had to strike because the water wouldn't come for two to three months at a time. Sometimes we would have to buy water

[38] Field observations from the Santa Ana sector during the pilot survey conducted in Antímano, November 18, 2012.
[39] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[40] Ibid.

> cisterns and carry them. There was no control; they [Hidrocapital] would give us water whenever they felt like it.[41]

As such, the *voceras'* involvement in community activism within the MTAs provides an appropriate lens through which to examine the articulation of women's practical and strategic needs for water services.

As indicated by Bennett, Dávila-Poblete, and Rico (2008), in many parts of Latin America women are largely responsible for the procurement of water for productive and domestic uses. In Antímano it is also common for women to be tasked with quotidian water-related responsibilities. Colourful, government-mandated textbooks illustrated with cartoons for children in grade school contain lengthy sections on environmental sustainability and the importance of water conservation in an effort to promote environmental awareness amongst younger generations. The characters in these sections prominently feature women performing domestic, water-related tasks, as illustrated in *Figures 2* and *3* below.



Figures 2 and 3: Images from a children's school textbook about water use and conservation.

Moreover, the majority of domestic chores that are typically carried out by women also

[41] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.

require a consistent and quality water supply. Lilibeth comments on women's water work in the *barrios*:

> The *mesas técnicas de agua* formed to resolve water and livelihood-related issues. Who is in charge of all daily chores? The woman. She is the one who gets water for the house, for the businesses, and to bathe the children. And who is waiting for the water to arrive at the home? The woman. The water arrives in some sectors at dawn and she has to get up to fill containers of water. And who is going to organize to ensure that the water arrives every day? She is. It is the women who require the water to arrive on time. Men do not. Women are obliged to fill the water containers so that the men can bathe, and so that they can make their food[42]

Thus, the *voceras'* motivation for their participation in community organizations such as the MTAs flows directly from their experiences living, working and raising families in the *barrio*. Indeed, when asked why so many women participated in the MTAs Carmen Rojas, a longtime *vocera,* claims: "because we clean and we cook".[43]

Florencia Gutiérrez, a self-identified "revolutionary grandmother" and *vocera* of her community's MTA in Santa Ana, has been a foundational member since its inception. She explains that she became involved in the MTAs after "seeing the necessity that we had in the sector, we saw the negligence, the difficulties, and the waste water that ran freely everywhere".[44] She describes what her neighborhood looked like when she first moved to Antímano from the *campo* (countryside) in 1974 to start her family. As a young mother in Santa Ana, one of the more elevated sectors of Antímano, she explains that often they would go two to three months without water: "We had to search for water below and carry it back on our heads. We packed lunches and brought washbasins of

[42] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[43] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[44] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.

clothing to wash in the lower part of the *barrio* with our children".[45] Even now in Florencia's community water only arrives to their taps approximately every twenty-one days, and often it does not arrive as scheduled.[46]

Similarly Sulay Morales, a seasoned *vocera* from the sector La Cauchera, has been involved in the MTAs since the 1990s. She originally became involved "for the necessities that were needed in La Cauchera. Water only came every thirty to thirty-five days, and sometimes only every sixty days".[47] Sulay explains that during the early 1990s before the MTAs existed she had to get up at three in the morning to run a hose from the community water tank to her house whenever the water arrived. At one point a sewer pipe broke causing a nearby church to flood, and school children were unable to attend their classes as the building was completely inundated with wastewater. Consequently, Sulay explicates: "To improve potable water services. This was the priority that made me participate in the MTAs—to improve potable water services".[48] As such, it is readily apparent that many women have been incentivized to participate in the MTAs to secure dependable water supplies for themselves, their families and their communities.

While women's water work is crucial for sustaining livelihoods in the *barrios*, results from the survey conducted in several sectors of Antímano demonstrated that obtaining and storing water is not solely a female responsibility. The pilot survey conducted in several sectors of Antímano demonstrated that in some homes water tanks were filled automatically when water arrives at the taps.[49] In other households in which water had to be collected from shared or public taps often both male and female family members shared the responsibility. In one home in the sector of El Carmen the husband was usually the one who was sent to purchase and transport water in large receptacles

[45] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.
[46] For a period of time while in the field water supply to Florencia Gutiérrez's community of Santa Ana was delayed and residents went approximately twenty-four days without water. During this time, Florencia's participation was critical to addressing the situation on behalf of the community as she sought out information at community water council meetings from the engineer Romer Malave and the community promoter Victor Díaz.
[47] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Field observations from pilot survey conducted in Antímano, November 18, 2012.

from the store for drinking and cooking.[50] In another home in Santa Ana, the teenage son helped his mother to fill water containers when the water arrived.[51] Nevertheless, the burden of household chores and responsibilities often falls on the shoulders of women, many of which require a readily available water supply.

Improving livelihoods and building capacity

Before the establishment of the MTAs, communities rarely knew when water would arrive. Often it would come in the middle of the night, which meant that someone in the family had to get up to fill the water tanks or receptacles. [52] Sulay explains: "First you had to buy a tank and bring it to the sector, and then you had to wake up and go to a designated location at three in the morning to fill it. Sometimes it would be the afternoon and you would still be there waiting for the water to arrive".[53] Due to the unreliability of the water schedule on occasion residents would completely miss the opportunity to fill their tanks which would mean that the household would be without water for up to two to three months at a time (McCarthy, 2010). The most important contribution that the MTAs have made to improving the lives of women is easing this burden, as the water cycle has become more predictable, and the government has funded the purchase and distribution of water tanks for a number of households in Antímano.[54] As Sulay notes: "With the new pipes we were able to improve the water service, *gracias a dios* [thank god]. Now the water arrives every eight days. We have water for eight days and then eight days without water. But eight days is good because we have tanks, and with the water in the tanks we supply ourselves for the eight days".[55]

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[50] Field observations from pilot survey conducted in Antímano, November 18, 2012.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012. This was also observed by Lacabana and Cariola (2005).
[53] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[54] However, it is important to note that there are still many areas of Antímano and the *barrios* in general that still do not have regular service provision, or regularly experience interruptions in their water service. There are also a number of households that do not have water tanks, and that still use whichever receptacles are available to store water. This was observed in the Santa Ana sector during the pilot survey, November 18, 2012.
[55] Informal discussion with 6 Antímano MTA *voceras*, October 2, 2012.

The MTAs are considered the longest standing representation of *la gerencia communitaria*, the community management program that is at the heart of the Bolivarian Process. In the early 1990s the MTAs served as the sole platform for community organizing for *voceras* such as Nancy de la Rosa, as they pre-dated the establishment of many of the committees that were later established in her community. As such, they have introduced a number of the *voceras* to a lifelong career in community organizing. However, some *voceras* had been involved in other forms of community organizing before joining the MTAs. Carmen for instance had been a leader in her community's *comité de tierra urbana* (urban land committee) before becoming a *vocera* for the MTAs. Additionally, the MTAs have also exposed several of the *voceras* to new areas and expressions of community activism within Antímano.[56]

The *voceras* recognize that their work both within and outside of the MTAs addresses an array of livelihood issues that plague local residents, many of which are interrelated. Carmen explains that her community's land committee, which she describes as an earlier incarnation of *la gerencia comunitaria*, has attempted to redistribute supplementary property titles to landless residents, and has done so using a number of methods including the proposal of a reform to the existing laws concerning land distribution and titling.

Apart from addressing housing insecurity, the land committee in Carmen's community in conjunction with Inamujer and Banmujer has been successful in establishing its own health committee, a women's discussion group, a soup kitchen and a club for the elderly, amongst numerous other initiatives.[57] The committee had also created a women's network, which was effective in creating home-based micro-enterprises where women have been able to generate an income as seamstresses.[58] Given the multi-faceted nature of their programming, Carmen explains that her community's

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[57] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[58] The creation of micro-enterprises such as these represents a noteworthy achievement, as other initiatives such as the *Madres del Barrio* have not been able to reach a significant number of women in need.

land committee is "doing integral work, it is a revolution, within the larger revolution (the Bolivarian Process)".[59]

Consequently, women's devotion to the success of the Bolivarian Process, and commitment to improving the livelihoods of community members is evident throughout Antímano. As summarized by Lilibeth:

> Women have always participated in the revolution. Each program brings with it the experience of community organizing. Water issues have been resolved because the MTAs were created. Housing issues were resolved because the Venezuelan housing committees were created. Health issues are the reason why the health committees exist. And who is in charge of all of these daily chores? The woman, because these are family issues.[60]

The *voceras* are extremely cognizant of the continued existence of everyday disparities in the *barrios* despite past and ongoing efforts to address them, and their leadership is unmistakably vital both to community development, and to the overarching Bolivarian Process.

Protagonismo* and *"la gerencia comunitaria"

Women's participation in the MTAs and other organizations, which is often defined as *protagonismo* in reference to their roles as protagonists in the Bolivarian Process, has given them a range of community development skills. To establish an MTA the *voceras* are required to lead the other members in a three-step mapping process which includes: conducting a community *censo* (census), drawing a *croquis* (blueprint) and finally conducting a *diagnostico* (diagnosis) that analyzes which water issues need addressing (McCarthy, 2009, pp. 12-13). The *voceras* knowledge of the community and

[59] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[60] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.

oversight during these project-planning processes is crucial to the successful completion of these exercises.

The *voceras* are also able to access professional development opportunities through the MTAs. Several spoke to their experiences attending *encuentros* or discussion groups where they were able to contribute to national policies vis-à-vis their understanding of the service provision models in their communities, while obtaining training on how different service delivery systems work. Many had also attended capacity-building workshops where they were educated on themes such as community organizing and financial management. Carmen speaks fondly of a Latin American exchange opportunity that she had participated in through her community's land committee where members were able to partake in an international forum for knowledge exchange with activists from other countries, and with several heads of state including Chávez and the president of Ecuador Rafael Correa. Additionally, through their community activism, the *voceras* have been able to expand their legal knowledge. The importance placed on legal literacy is pervasive throughout Antímano, and *voceras* such as Florencia often say that power resides in one's ability to understand the rule of law and how it can be applied.[61]

Women's involvement in these organizations has empowered them to become leaders in their communities. Elizabeth exhibits this quality in abundance as she describes her experience rallying the community during former president Chávez's re-election campaign: "The presidential elections demonstrated to us that we are strong *chama* [a colloquial term for "gal"], really. I was like Joan of Arc, other here, over there, I was involved everywhere. They told me that there was very little abstention in the *comuna*, very little. We mobilized and we secured the vote".[62] The substantial emphasis that the current administration has placed on women as leaders and facilitators of these

[61] This point was indicated by Florencia Gutiérrez during an interview, and was also observed on several occasions during community meetings and events where copies of the constitution would be distributed or brought by participants. These legal documents are readily purchasable at street stalls that sell everything from magazines to cell phone credit.
[62] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.

participatory development initiatives has empowered women, and greatly aided their organizing efforts within the *barrios*. Several of the *voceras* commonly identified as "*luchadoras*" (fighters) using adjectives that denoted powerful imagery as they described themselves as female warriors in the ongoing struggle for reliable service provision. As such, women's participation in community organizing in Antímano has potentially "lead to greater self-esteem and recognition…of their rights" while producing "changes in [their] self-definition" (Safa, 1990, p. 363).

Furthermore, the *voceras* often identified the crucial role that they play within community organizations such as the MTAs, as not only a matter of rectifying past and existing state failures in service provision, but also as a way of highlighting water as a human right that should be available to all. Carmen notes that she has always had a steady supply of water to her home, but that her participation in the MTAs and in other community organizations was an expression of her desire to be a part of the overarching political project: "I understand socialism to be in everything. If I have water, you also should have water. Water should not be denied to anybody because it is a part of life, to deny water is to deny life. It is humanism, it is more than sharing because to me socialism generates the structural changes that are needed within a country".[63] This reasoning is also an expression of the *voceras'* commitment to nurturing *conciencia* or "consciousness" in their communities, a concept that will be discussed later on in the chapter.

The *voceras* evidently wield a certain amount of influence and control concerning project planning and approval, and see the possession of leadership capabilities such as conflict management and organizational skills as an integral element of their positions. As Sulay demonstrates: "One needs to learn to be really tolerant to begin to learn to understand people, and make people understand why things are the way they are. It is difficult to come to an agreement".[64] Observing both Sulay (a more senior *vocera*), and Elizabeth (a lead *vocera* for her *comuna*) in negotiations and planning discussions with male contractors and construction workers provided further insight into the relative

[63] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[64] Informal discussion with 6 Antímano MTA *voceras*, October 2, 2012.

degree of power that these women are able to exercise within the community development process.[65]

The *voceras*' involvement in community activism has also enabled them to develop political consciousness and agency in an ongoing dialogue with the state. Nancy aptly illustrates this point as she claims: "Now there is more participation in the MTAs because the government has included us, because we participate in an organization to bring benefits to the community".[66] Where previously the*y* would have had to take to the streets to gain a response from the government, as the leaders of community development the *voceras* are able to utilize formal channels in a conscientious politicization of their everyday needs for services such as water and sanitation. This formalization process has impacted women's lives and radically shaped their community activism, as demonstrated by Anastacia: "Since the formation of the MTAs we do not have to barricade the streets. We do not have to strike or set things on fire".[67] In this way, these women are "moving their domestic concerns into the public arena" as they are "redefining the meaning associated with domesticity to include participation and struggle rather than obedience and passivity" (Safa, 1990, p. 362).

Perhaps the most obvious and commonly cited benefit that the *voceras* receive as a result of their community organizing endeavours is the social capital that they gain through their participation in local committees. Moser defines social capital as "the norms, trust and reciprocity networks that facilitate mutual beneficial cooperation in a community" (as cited in Schusterman and Hardoy, 1997, p. 92). For the *voceras*, having a strong network and reserve of social capital is extremely important, as they are able to

[65] Observed during an informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012, and from field observations during a weekly *comuna* meeting at *Juana Ramirez* on November 22, 2012. These observations revealed that women like Sulay and Elizabeth do indeed possess a certain amount of control within the project management process given their established positions as more senior *voceras* within their communities (and in the case of Elizabeth as a lead *vocera*). Nevertheless, on multiple occasions both women commented on the power struggles that they regularly experienced with state representatives, construction unions and fellow committee members concerning project approvals, funding and development.

[66] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.

[67] Ibid. Additionally, this comment accurately depicts a Venezuelan protest where burning barricades of tires or other items are typically used during street demonstrations.

collectivize tasks with the other *voceras* to aid their large workloads and competing responsibilities.[68] This social capital is also expressed by the *voceras* as the solidarity that they feel amongst their fellow *compañeros* and *compañeras* in the spirit of establishing "21st Century Socialism" in Venezuela, as demonstrated by Carmen: "What we have achieved within the community is the elevation of solidarity".[69]

Cohesion amongst the *voceras* has also allowed them to provide each other with encouragement and fortitude in times of need. These expressions of solidarity have afforded them protection as illustrated by Carmen when members of her community's land committee criticized her for not being a native Venezuelan: "The committee members said, 'Why does this Peruvian have to get involved in this?' But my *compañeras* came to my defense. They said, 'Even though she is Peruvian she is doing what no other Venezuelan has done here'. They started to accompany and protect me".[70] The *voceras* have also been able to construct a knowledge-sharing network that facilitates capacity-building and information exchange. Both Nancy and Anastacia commented on the leadership and assistance that Sulay had given them during their time in the MTAs.[71] Anastasia notes: "*Señora* Sulay has motivated us [the *voceras*]. It is always her that brings us together, because of her perseverance".[72] The fostering of this culture of solidarity amongst women leaders has enhanced the capacity of the *voceras*, and has enriched their overall experience within these community organizations.

Revolutionary motherhood and the state

As aforementioned, there is a strong tradition of "activist mothering" in Venezuela regarding women's participation in political organizing and community-based

[68] Examples of work sharing were observed during community events such as Christmas parties and fairs where the *voceras* came together to help one another with food preparation or planning activities.
[69] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[70] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[71] Sulay was also observed on several occasions dispensing advice to other *voceras* concerning the process that was required to set up an MTA, or the paperwork that was necessary to apply for government funding for a community project.
[72] Ibid.

development. Indeed, when asked about the source of her motivation as an activist, Florencia states: "If you are a mother, you are everything. It strengthens you to address the same needs of the community".[73] The exaltation of motherhood is customary in the *barrios* where the mother figure is seen to provide stability, strength and endurance in the face of adversity. Women are normally described by community activists as "hard working" and as capable of "driving and directing the people," particularly by the male community activists.[74] Victor indicates that it is important for women to have control in community organizations such as the MTAs because "it is natural, when they assume this role—as mothers and as *voceras*. To be a mother is a natural gift that is given to women".[75]

In Venezuela, the virtues epitomized by the discourse of revolutionary motherhood, as it was invoked by Chávez within the Bolivarian Process, are often the impetuses for women's determined participation in *barrio* organizing (Fernandes, 2010a). Accordingly, when the *voceras* were questioned about their motivation for their involvement in community organizations such as the MTAs often their rationale stemmed from their identification with the social mission of the Bolivarian Process as championed by the former president, in combination with their needs and interests as mothers and grandmothers.[76]

In Antímano, Florencia claims that "women take a bigger interest in the problems of the community. As parents, we also see how the community is affected through the children. We are looking for a way out with this Revolution".[77] Indeed, Fernandez and Angeles reason that the adulation and politicization of motherhood have seen women becoming more involved in "revolutionary actions for political change to benefit their families and communities" (2009, p. 81). As such, the majority of the *voceras* strongly

[73] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.
[74] Informal discussion with male community organizers at the first congress for the *Red Nacional de Comuneros*, December 3, 2012.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[77] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.

identified with what could be described as more "traditional" gender roles as *amas de casa* (housewives), and with what Udel (2001) describes as "motherwork" as being intimately connected to the community work that they perform. As explained by Sulay: "We are housewives. Basically we are the ones who are interested in bettering the problems of the community, and we are the ones who are involved in all of these organizations".[78] This perspective is so ubiquitous that it is often posited as an unquestionable fact that women are best placed to address these quotidian issues within their communities.

Many of the *voceras* feel that this discourse in accordance with what they often describe as almost a personal relationship to the former president had significantly enhanced their collective bargaining power and political presence. Throughout his presidency Chávez stated that the country "needs revolutionary mothers to advance social change" (Espina and Rakowsi, 2010, p. 194), as illustrated by Florencia: "Like *el presidente* says, the revolution has the face of a woman".[79] Anastacia comments that Chávez "was the one who taught us and opened our minds". [80] As observed by Fernandes (2010a), it is common for *chavista*[81] women to take a mothering approach with the former president, which was also observed in Antímano when the *voceras* worried openly about Chávez's health when he had taken ill.[82]

Many women activists expressed that the former president's election in 1999 inspired and encouraged their participation in the Bolivarian Process by calling upon their strength and ability to organize within their communities. Elizabeth states that in the past she had always been a person who went "from my home, to my job, to my university. Chávez won and the Bolivarian Process started to grow in the *barrio*. That was when I

[78] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] A colloquial term used to describe Chávez supporters. Antímano has a large proportion of Chávez supporters, and was the parish that garnered the highest number of votes to secure him the presidency in the October 7th, 2012 election.
[82] Observed during the interview with Carmen Rojas, and at a weekly *comuna* meeting at *Juana Ramirez.*

started to participate".[83] She recalls the moment when Chávez announced: "Efficiency or nothing!" which compelled her to action.[84] Similarly, Anastacia remembers what she describes as the "calling" of the president: "he said '*Por ahora*' ['For now'],[85] and that was when the women were uplifted into the struggle. We will continue fighting because we cannot lose this. We have to defend this for our children, for our grandchildren, for the world, for peace, and for love".[86]

The Bolivarian government has arguably been quite successful in investing resources and prioritizing issues that affect women across class barriers. Several of the *voceras* expressed their beliefs that the situation of women has improved dramatically through the Bolivarian Process. Sulay explains that since the beginning of the Process there are now more women working in government, and that on average a larger number of women are now receiving a good salary.[87] *Voceras* like Florencia believe that women now have more "liberty" as they now can take advantage of social assistance programming in order to take better care of their children "without needing the father, because many women are abandoned, and they are father and mother at the same time".[88] Furthermore, Sulay states that the government has been very effective in tackling and publicizing problems that are typically relegated to the "private" sphere such as domestic violence, where women are now greatly encouraged to *denunciar* or report their abusers to the authorities.[89]

For many women in the *barrios* Chávez had also inspired a dialogue about feminism. Nancy demonstrates this point when asked why the majority of participants in the MTAs are women: "Because the president said that he is a 'feminist', because he sees

[83] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.
[84] Ibid.
[85] "*Por ahora*" was a famous speech given by Chávez that introduced him to the Venezuelan public following the *coup d'état* that he lead against the Perez government in 1992.
[86] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[87] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.
[88] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.
[89] As indicated by Sulay during an informal interview, and observed on several occasions during political events and community meetings where gender-based violence was highlighted as a topic for discussion by men and women alike.

that women have more, how do you say…more force. We are everywhere struggling, fighting. On the other hand men sometimes avoid confrontation and will not fight, but we are involved from within, from the base. The one who taught us that was Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías".[90] The centrality of women's issues within the Bolivarian Process has consequently exposed women such as the *voceras* to varying feminist perspectives through their activist work. Florencia claims that during his time in office Chávez had prompted a discussion about gender discrimination when she explains that in the past women had experienced "many humiliations because we were not aware of our rights".[91] She argues that now "the president has given rise to women so that they can be dignified".[92]

Overall, the politicization of women's community work within the Bolivarian Process is framed as the source of their empowerment. In a recorded dialogue between Carmen and President Chávez in an episode of *Aló Presidente*,[93] Carmen explains that the vast majority of those labouring in the community on different projects and programs are women.[94] Chávez confirms her statement and explains that in countries that are less fortunate than Venezuela, women are not afforded the same opportunity to contribute to a revolutionary cause. Chávez's rhetoric appealed to women in the *barrios* where their participation is personified as their emancipation, as they are now able to "work with different representations of the state" in shaping the future of their country.[95] Thus, through the framework of revolutionary motherhood—the importance of which is underscored by the state in numerous facets of the Bolivarian Process—the *voceras* are able to collectively organize around mutual interests in an expression of political activism that "embraces [them] as mothers and mobilizes them to make demands as mothers" (Fernandez and Angeles, 2009, p. 81).

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[90] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[91] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.
[92] Ibid.
[93] "*Aló Presidente*" was an unscripted TV show hosted by Chávez. It was broadcast every Sunday on state television and featured him interviewing different guests and visiting different areas of the country promoting the vision of "21st Century Socialism" and the Bolivarian Process. In this episode, Chávez had visited Antímano for the opening of a community center that had been built by residents with state funds.
[94] Observed during interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[95] Ibid.

Addressing the "*falta de conciencia*" through community activism

Much of the *voceras'* work focuses on the cultivation of a greater degree of what is known locally as *conciencia* or "consciousness" amongst community members. This concept is not exclusively related to other concepts such as class or feminist consciousness, but is a distinct form of political consciousness-raising in Venezuela that is developed through citizen engagement with local incarnations of participatory democracy, and which has become the cornerstone of the Bolivarian Process. Harnecker (2009) explains that this concept can be further described as a type of "collective consciousness" where through the practice of genuine democratic decision-making participants may undergo a moral self-transformation that nurtures within them a sense of community" (pp. 5-6). Florencia once explained that the generation of *conciencia* requires that significant emphasis be placed on the concept of *convivencia* or "living together" within *barrio* communities.[96]

In his description of *barrio* culture Ciccariello-Maher (2013) explains that shared needs in the collective struggle for services in areas like Antímano "gave rise to a sort of *barrio* consciousness" (p. 226). Furthermore, he argues that the genesis of this collective consciousness or *conciencia* has encouraged the growth of political consciousness and spontaneous organizational capacity amongst the people of the *barrios* (p. 226). An essential aspect of the discourse of revolutionary motherhood is the vital role that the *voceras* play in shaping "21st Century Socialism" in their communities, and addressing what they describe as the *falta de conciencia* or lack of the aforesaid consciousness in their communities. It was often mentioned by the *voceras* that the residents of Antímano are accustomed to having their needs provided for entirely by the state without having to contribute as part of a larger collective. Consequently, politicizing community members from the "ground up" and encouraging their participation in committees such as the MTAs is key to spreading *conciencia*.

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[96] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.

According to the MTA *voceras* a noteworthy example of the *falta de conciencia* in Antímano is the general lack of awareness concerning water usage and sustainability. The *voceras* gestured at storm drains where people had thrown garbage or cement into the storm water channels, or explained that some households were regularly *botando* (wasting) water by leaving their taps running even after they have collected their supply. In affirmation with the other *voceras*, Sulay explains:

> People don't have *conciencia*. Yes, they waste water! And it has nothing to do with the level of education. For example, I didn't study like that either, right Florencia? We only have basic education, but we have a level of *conciencia*. For example, I see where the people are throwing cement into the pipes. I know that that ruins the pipes because it blocks them, it gets stuck. But these people, where do they have *conciencia*? In their feet? They are people without *conciencia*.[97]

This passage demonstrates the importance that the *voceras* place on mutual respect and consciousness concerning the treatment of communal infrastructure and natural resources, as they are accustomed to working tirelessly to secure these services for the benefit of the entire community.

A number of other community organizers emphasized that building *conciencia* is perhaps the *voceras'* most important responsibility as social activists in the Bolivarian Process. As demonstrated by Sulay in the comment above the *voceras* see their "education" and the consciousness that they have gained through their participation in community development projects as originating from their lived experiences as political activists. In her years as an activist, Carmen states: "The women have gained consciousness".[98] Many of the *voceras* believe that the development of *conciencia* begins within the familial structure, as evidenced by Carmen: "For me the formation of *conciencia* comes from below, from the family, because if the family does not have a

[97] Informal discussion with 6 Antímano MTA *voceras*, October 2, 2012.
[98] Observed during the interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.

good relationship…We say that the family unit is the political and social cell, this is what we are developing".[99]

The water company has organized various initiatives to promote local awareness of water use and sustainability in Antímano such as the program entitled "*El Agua en Nuestras Vidas*" (The Water in Our Lives). This educational workshop led by Hidrocapital and organized in large part by the *voceras* was created for children, and was intended to encourage consciousness concerning household water usage from an early age. Anselmo Rodriguez, Community Liaison for the Ministry of Popular Power for the Environment, argued that this program was "vitally important experience" for the community.[100] Nevertheless, these educational programs are markedly classed, that is, they tend to be directed to poor residents rather than wealthy residents. Substantial inequalities exist within Caracas where middle-to-upper class families live in homes with water in abundance in the form of fountains and swimming pools, yet these programs are directed towards *barrio* residents who have a very limited water supply, and who are lectured on water conservation. The uptake of these programs by residents in areas like Antímano can therefore be seen as part of the larger process of building consciousness concerning respect for the environment and the overall community, but not necessarily the inequality of access to water resources.

As such, the *voceras* see intergenerational knowledge sharing and the nurturing of *conciencia* within all spheres of daily life as key to the social and political development of their community. Armed with the many tools that they have developed through their experiences in community organizing, and accompanied by their expansive understanding of the social landscape of the *barrio*, the *voceras* engage in political awareness and consciousness-raising activities as part of an ongoing dialogue with the state concerning the local requirements for reliable service provision. Nonetheless, this exposure to political activism has come at a price, as these women have taken on a triple burden of labour through their involvement in community activism. The following

[99] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[100] Interview with Anselmo Rodriguez, September 6, 2012.

chapter will provide an analysis and discussion of the findings presented here to respond to the central and sub-research questions posited in this study.

Chapter Five:
Gendering the revolution: The challenges of women's community-based organizing

This chapter will analyze and discuss the findings from *Chapter Four* to elucidate how the *voceras'* participation in community organizing and the mainstreaming of women's issues within the Bolivarian Process have impacted their daily lives. As mentioned at the outset of this study while there have been significant achievements associated with women's community organizing, there have also been a number of challenges. By reflecting on the central research question, *Chapter Five* will endeavor to uncover the limits of women's association with the concept of revolutionary motherhood in their community activist work.

Desde arriba y abajo: Contradictions and tensions within the Bolivarian Process

In Venezuela the political conjuncture and mainstreaming of women's issues within the Bolivarian Process has enabled and empowered women in enumerable ways. Yet there is still a substantial class bias. Women in wealthier areas of the urban center do not have to participate in community organizations to have access to reliable services such as water on a daily basis, while women in poorer areas of the city are compelled to do so. Moreover, there are aspects of the Bolivarian Process that have proved to be continually challenging for women particularly those involved in community-based organizing in the *barrios*.

The top-down/bottom-up process of ideological and political transformation in Venezuela is riddled with tensions and contradictions as autonomous groups seek out space within this radical experiment in participatory democracy. Azzellini (2010) argues that while "this two-track approach has been able to uphold and deepen the process of social transformation in Venezuela" it is also extremely complex, as it "encompasses both state-centric and anti-systemic currents", which have resulted in competing interests and conflicts between autonomous civil society groups and the state (p. 9). These complexities exist alongside issues of corruption, paternalism and excessive

bureaucratization. Indeed, community activists in Antímano regularly complained of issues of *burocratismo* or overly bureaucratic processes that they were forced to navigate to secure state funding, which regularly slowed or even stalled community projects. Elizabeth and Carmen made numerous comments concerning essential infrastructural projects that were either never realized or took years to complete due to complications associated with *burocratismo*.[101]

Moreover, the onerous and lengthy procedures required for the registration of community councils and submission of projects may inevitably fall into the hands of women; many of whom are illiterate,[102] lacking the necessary technical expertise, or are already overworked in their positions as community coordinators and participants. While several of the *voceras* interviewed for this study had significant community organizing experience, received technical training, and had built a network with other *voceras* to support their community work, not all women were in an equally advantageous position.[103] Furthermore, problems of clientelism and co-option by the state continually plague the community movement as evidenced by Sulay: "The idea behind the organizations is to bring more benefits to the community, but for the government it is to have more allies".[104]

Sulay is quite vocal in her criticism of the state where she believes corruption is impinging upon the work of the *voceras* and the progress made in Antímano, particularly in the neighbourhoods at higher elevation, many of which still lack access to regular service provision. In offering her critiques she claims that she has been labeled an

[101] Mentioned during an interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012 and with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.
[102] On a few occasions during community meetings my fellow research partner Rebecca was asked to be a secretary, as those present were uncomfortable keeping meeting minutes.
[103] This inequality amongst the *voceras* was evidenced during an informal interview with Sulay Morales on November 11, 2012. A more junior *vocera* approached Sulay at her home in a state of confusion asking for her assistance, as she was attempting to submit an unwieldy stack of government paperwork on behalf of her community committee.
[104] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.

escualido[105] by fellow community organizers, yet says that she will not "stay quiet".[106] Indeed, adversarial reactions to criticism of the Bolivarian Process by *chavista* supporters were observed during a debate on the Government's Strategic Plan (*Plan Socialista*, 2013-2019). The facilitator blatantly ignored Sulay's comments that pointed out a number of inefficiencies in the current system.[107] Despite this attempt to silence criticism as being "non-revolutionary", Sulay explains that cooperation with the state is important for the execution of vital community projects such as the repair and instalment of water and sanitation infrastructure, as she reasons: "You can't plug a burst pipe with your finger".[108]

Carmen openly supports the transfer of decision-making power to the communities, stating: "No one is just going to give us popular power. We need to take it ourselves".[109] The empowerment of *barrio* residents and construction of popular power are key elements of the current administration's plan to deepen the Bolivarian Process. However, Venezuela is still a capitalist state, and this rhetoric can arguably be seen as radical in talk and not in politics (Denis, 2006). Denis argues: "Chávez's talk may be in advance of the consciousness of the masses, but this means nothing while the masses do not have an autonomous organisation of their own" (para. 20). As such, strengthening and constructing "an autonomous politics" is vital to the generation of real change within the *barrios* (para. 23).

Thus, there is an ongoing debate between institutional and community actors where conflicting interests and priorities may hinder community organizations from building autonomy vis-à-vis the state. This debate is reflected in the relationship between

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[105] *Escualido* is a derogatory term given to those who support the opposition meaning "squalid ones". Sulay explains that this term is sometimes used by other *chavistas* as an insult to those who are critical of the government and/or the Bolivarian Process.
[106] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.
[107] Observed during a public consultation on the Government's Strategic Plan (*Plan Socialista*, 2013-2019) in Parque Miranda, Caracas on November 17, 2012. A series of debates were held where community members were asked to offer their opinions on the presidential re-election platform.
[108] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.
[109] Observed at a community water council meeting in Carapita, Antímano at the Modulo de Carapita on October 11, 2012.

Victor as a representative of the municipal water utility and the *voceras*. An extremely busy man, on a number of occasions Victor missed community water council meetings when he got "stuck in traffic" or was otherwise occupied around the office. However, Victor felt that his inability to attend gave the *voceras* an opportunity to host the meetings themselves in an expression of popular power, and that this should occur regardless of his presence. Florencia would agree with Victor that his absence gave them an opportunity to exercise their autonomy as an organization.

Conversely, Sulay often disagreed with this rationalization. For Sulay his absence spoke volumes, as she saw this as an example of Hidrocapital trying to off-load the work of a paid employee onto community volunteers—the *voceras*. She maintains: "Why should we do Victor's work? Even if we are '*poder popular*', why should we do this if they are paying him a salary?"[110] She feels that the role of the *comunitaria* represents the fundamental link between residents and the municipal water utility, as she explains that the "importance of the MTA is that during community water council meetings we can articulate directly with the institution, and present the problems that we have endured".[111]

The community councils play a key role in supporting the autonomous organization of *barrio* residents. Azzellini (2010) explicates that the "basis for a future Venezuelan socialism will emerge from…[these] structures which cooperate and converge at a higher level so as to transcend the bourgeois State and replace it with a Communal State" (p. 22). Elizabeth underscores the importance of the communal governance structure within the *barrios*:

> I feel despair and believe that we still have not yet arrived when I look up and all I see are *ranchos*. We must centralize and strengthen ourselves within the *comuna.* In my *comuna*, for example, there are only a few of us who participate. However, this will not keep me quiet, and I will not stay calm.[112]

[110] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.

While these entities play an important role in the socio-political transformation of the *barrios* they are also afflicted with a host of problems that have left many of the *voceras* feeling disillusioned.

The *voceras* regularly remarked on instances of favouritism and above all issues of power hording where other *voceras/os* refused to work collaboratively, and would seek personal rather than collective gain.[113] These power struggles have resulted in many of the *voceras* being divested of decision-making power, particularly if they are unable to obtain control of important documentation such as the registration papers required for the community council. Sulay comments:

> At times, I can't really improve the wellbeing of the community because the institutions ask me for the *registro del consejo comunal* [community council registration], but I don't have it because the other members won't give me the registration papers. That is the real tragedy. We are all *voceras* for the community councils, but they won't give them to me. I work, and I work tooth and nail".[114]

These struggles are also visible at the inter-governmental level where the *voceras* are given de facto control over the project management process, but are not given control over certain resources that are necessary to more fully devolve decision-making power to themselves as representatives of their communities. For example, Carmen comments on the need for a "communal bank" so that the *voceras* can have more control over project expenditures.[115]

The *voceras* regularly encounter numerous challenges in their work, as exemplified by Sulay: "I really love the *mesas técnicas de agua*, *verdad* [really], but it isn't easy. We get along really well, we converse, we discuss, but it isn't easy. Community

[113] Observed during informal and formal interviews with the *voceras* on October 2 and November 22, 2012.
[114] Informal discussion with 6 Antímano MTA *voceras*, October 2, 2012.
[115] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.

work is really difficult".[116] Carmen echoes these sentiments as she describes the difficulties that she has experienced as a community activist:

> Above all the work that we have developed is very, very difficult. It takes dedication and much sacrifice. I can speak of my *compañeras* because there are more women than men working here. I tell you, it is very positive but very long, very long, and I do not have the patience. It is social work that is very difficult, with difficult people.[117]

These challenges and power struggles are markedly gendered. As Fernandes (2007) argues, "barrio women are always vulnerable to directed mobilization from above and the institutionalization of their struggle [which] may lead to increased work responsibilities without changes in women's conditions of life" (p. 102). While women's participation in the socio-political development of their communities has increased, by and large socially-constructed gender roles have gone relatively unchallenged, particularly concerning women's contributions to social reproduction and the gender division of community labour.

Chavismo and the perpetuation of *machismo* within the *barrios*

There are women in every aspect of the Bolivarian Process, as demonstrated by Lilibeth: "Women are in everything. There is no space in the Process where there is not a woman *working*".[118] The success of many of these community-based projects depends on a constant supply of voluntary labor contributed almost entirely by women. To appreciate the nuances of the "feminized base of community struggle" in Venezuela and to determine whether the discourse of revolutionary motherhood is truly "revolutionary" and in what terms, it is important to more fully explore the paradoxical symbolism of women within *chavista* discourse (also known as *chavismo*), and how this symbolism is enacted in the *barrios* (Espina and Rakowski, 2010; Motta, 2013).

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[116] Informal discussion with 6 Antímano MTA *voceras*, October 2, 2012.
[117] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[118] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012; emphasis added by author.

As mentioned, during his time in office Chávez publically endorsed feminist socialism, and was quoted as saying: "I am convinced that an authentic socialist also ought to be an authentic feminist" (Rantala, as cited in Motta, 2013, pp. 45-46). This imagery that describes "popular feminists…who are urged to organize to defend their rights" can arguably be seen as contradictory in juxtaposition with the common stereotype of the *chavista* "self-sacrificing mother who defends and nurtures her 'children'…[and] gives birth to a new Venezuela" (Espina and Rakowski, 2010, p. 197). Women's organizing in Venezuela is further complicated by the fact that there is "general confusion and disagreements surrounding claims to 'feminism' as an ideological project and to women's rights as a political project" within the Bolivarian Process (Rakowski and Espina, 2010, p. 268). Furthermore, amongst *barrio* women there is a tendency to "reject discourse that sounds feminist, even a women's rights discourse, in favor of a class-based discourse" (Espina and Rakowski, 2010, p. 196).

Barrio women have benefited greatly from the aforementioned state-led poverty alleviation programs such as the Boliviarian Missions that assist poor women in their everyday activities through the decommodification of education and health services, provision of employment training, and subsidization of foodstuffs and childcare. These women-focused programmatic efforts are revolutionary in their own right, and although they have aided women with their social reproductive tasks in their communities, they have not yet led to a significant destabilization of the inequitable gender division of labour in the *barrios*. Espina and Rakowski (2010) argue that ironically both the Bolivarian Missions and the revolutionary discourse of motherhood may in fact "reinforce women's traditional gender roles and their unpaid labor" (p. 197).

Machista gender norms personify *barrio* women as exhibiting specific gendered characteristics including being "more responsible" than men. Regarding the MTAs, Victor validates this notion as he praises the efforts of the *voceras*. He claims that the high number of women participants and successful MTA projects demonstrates that

"women are even more responsible than men".[119] Comments like these risk contributing to the reification of traditional gender roles concerning women's social organizing and the unequal allocation of community labour in Antímano.

Florencia comments that overall in Antímano, "women take a bigger interest in the problems of the community".[120] This is often the case as the community work of women like the *voceras* is commonly seen as an extension of their domestic and caregiving responsibilities in the home, as demonstrated by Sulay when asked about the feminization of the MTAs: "It is because we do everything. We look after children, look after homes, look after husbands, we look after everything and we do community work as well".[121] The social reproduction of their communities is portrayed as inherently connected to their involvement in the social reproduction of their families via the replication of their "care work" activities in the public sphere. This has resulted in women taking on the bulk of the responsibility for community labour.

The absolution of men from social reproduction and the responsibilization of women stems from the maintenance of social norms attributed to *marianismo* and *machismo.* The former dictates that women must be selfless perfect mothers "taking care of myriad household duties, rearing her children, and looking after her male partner—or accepting his absence with long-suffering patience" (Friedman, 2000, p. 46), while the latter enables men to act without repercussions thus freeing them from having to "exercise…democracy within the home" (Disney, 2008, p. 138). The reiteration of these gender tropes steeped in *machismo* is evident throughout the *barrios*, and they have greatly contributed to the continued instability and inequality of gender relations in Antímano. For example, during the gender workshop in Antímano the participants were asked to identify different types of violence. The women read a scenario where a man violently drags his wife away from a party after coming home from work to an empty house. They were then asked if his reaction was justified, and many believed that it was.

[119] Interview with Victor Díaz, December 4, 2012.
[120] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[121] Ibid.

A few of the participants reasoned that the woman should not have left without asking her husband's permission.

Evidence of the cultural preservation of *machismo* was observed in the *voceras'* conversations with one another concerning the larger community. As mentioned, the *voceras* are given the responsibility of promoting *conciencia* within their communities. Often the women would speak about the *malandros* or criminals in their neighbourhoods who perpetrated murders and other serious crimes. These individuals, who were often personified as young men, were said to be acting without *conciencia,* which was typically attributed to bad parenting. This interpretation assumedly holds women as accountable for the rampant insecurity and criminal activity in their communities while men are able to act with impunity, as they are often deemed largely absent from the home and family structure.[122]

Consequently, manifestations of *machismo* are not only internalized by local women, but are also entirely embedded within *barrio* life. As a result, women are reified as the exclusive caretakers and decision-makers, while men are rendered disinterested or irresponsible. During the gender workshop in Antímano Lilibeth explained to the women attendees that they needed to stop thinking of their children as being "alone" when their fathers were taking care of them.[123] As such, these attitudes have, in many ways, seemingly absolved men from contributing equally to social reproduction in their homes and in their communities.

These gender norms were revealed through various interactions with the *voceras* and other female participants in the community development process in Antímano. During a discussion concerning the differences between "productive", "reproductive" and "communal" labour at the gender workshop several women proudly proclaim that they are the *luchadoras* of the revolution. In the same breath, they comment that the

[122] See *Chapter Two* (p. 28) for a more extensive explanation by Molyneux (2003) who correlates the tendency of men to be absent parents with the larger cultural phenomenon of *machismo*.
[123] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.

participation of men in their communities is "visibly lacking" or that they are "lazy" and "avoid responsibility".[124] Examples such as these aptly illustrate and reflect the realities of *machismo* and the gender division of labour in Antímano where it is seen as socially acceptable and even expected for women to be sole hard-working contributors to the Bolivarian Process.[125]

Without a concurrent increase in men's participation in social reproduction activities within the home or community development process, one of the biggest challenges that women face in community organizing is their increased workload. In her experience as an activist, Carmen explains how this dynamic has been expressed in terms of community organizing: "We are like a beehive. The queen bee is the one who dominates the hive, and then there is the *zángano* [drone].[126]That is what is taught during training on the participation of women in the Process, that men always want to go ahead. In any case, they are always squashing us, in every aspect".[127]

Examining and exposing the *triple jornada*

Motta (2013) contends that in Venezuela the "articulation of the female revolutionary is often embedded in a traditional framing of women's subjectivity" (p. 46). *Barrio* women are celebrated for their "revolutionary" contributions to the Bolivarian Process and to furthering the class struggle, yet they are simultaneously reified within their socially-constructed roles as selfless mothers who are assumedly capable of contributing endless hours of volunteer service, which Espina and Rakowski argue has effectively "subsidized the state's responsibility for public services" (2010, p. 197). Similarly, in Cuba, Fernandez and Angeles (2009) found that despite women's advancement and significant presence in community organizing "traditional roles of

[124] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.
[125] Informal discussion with male community organizers at the first congress for the *Red Nacional de Comuneros*, December 3, 2012.
[126] A drone is a male bee, but also translates in Spanish to "lazy oaf" or "idler". In this sense it serves a dual purpose.
[127] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.

women have persisted and stereotypical distinction between males and females remain strong" as a consequence of the valorization of motherhood (p. 86). The authors explain that gender role expectations and the "idealization of women as mothers and homemakers, perpetuate the gendered divisions of labour, leadership roles, and resource access and use (Jaramillo, as cited in Fernandez and Angeles, 2009, p. 81).

In Cuba, women involved in community development also strongly identify with the conception of revolutionary motherhood, yet Fernandez and Angeles (2009) note the following concerning women's triple burden of labor as community organizers:

> [I]ncreasing female labor force participation rates show that women in Cuba have been incorporated more fully into the workforce and have to do community work on top of their reproductive and productive tasks. Furthermore, women have significantly higher participation rates in community development work than men, even among seniors…'You can see for yourself…it is the women that come to the Circulo de Abuelos [seniors' group], and the men are retired, they have no excuse' (Leader of Casa Comunitaria San José, female, p. 85).

This example from the community of Cayo Hueso demonstrates similar trends within the context of Antímano where women such as the *voceras*—many of whom are seniors themselves—are continually held responsible for with the bulk of social reproduction within their homes and communities, effectively burdening them with additional labor.

Similarly, while tremendous gains were experienced in Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution for women's political representation and empowerment, cultural patriarchies have "seriously limited women's emancipation in the reproductive sphere of home and family" (Disney, 2008, p. 141). Disney explains that ideological campaigns in Nicaragua have sought to "encourage female opportunity and equality" by involving more women in decision-making bodies, yet these changes have not been accompanied by corresponding "material changes in the sexual division of labor" (p. 141).

Women are seen as primarily responsible for ensuring community member participation in the community development process. As a lead *vocera* for her *comuna* Elizabeth explains: "We are responsible for who we are as a *comuna.* We have taken on all of the *comités*,[128] and we cannot continue to accept that people are not acting on their needs. It is necessary to do the community work".[129] In instances where the community development model is functioning poorly the *voceras* may inevitably take on a larger workload, as they are not only personally invested in the outcome but are also seen as responsible for the successes and failures of community projects.[130]

Elizabeth reflects on her burden of labour as she is often one of the few attendees at the *comuna* meetings that she holds on a weekly basis: "It is like my time is not worth anything. I go to the meetings because I like to find solutions to things. You can wear yourself out, and there comes a moment when you have to rebel".[131] Carmen explains that in her experience women participating in the Bolivarian Process in Antímano are undeniably subjected to the greatest burden of community labor: "When the president comes back to Antímano I will tell him that the majority, seventy-five per cent, of those working to build the sector are women, and that it is the women who get the worst of it".[132]

Whether they are taking on additional labour due to the disinterest of fellow members in the community development process, or tackling the umpteen number of quotidian tasks assigned to them as *voceras*, often the biggest challenge that these women face is the never-ending workload that they are presented with known as the *triple jornada* or

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[128] This comment refers to the process of amalgamation mentioned in *Chapter One* where the smaller *comités* that encompass the working groups such as the MTAs are being subsumed under the larger *comunas.*

[129] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.

[130] There have been occurrences where the *voceras* were treated as scapegoats and blamed unreasonably for project failures. When a construction company stole funds allocated to a community sanitation project Nancy was blamed for the incident by her *consejo comunal* even though the other committee members did not involve her in the project decision-making process (Informal discussion with 6 Antímano MTA *voceras*, October 2, 2012).

[131] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.

[132] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.

triple workday. Lilibeth defines the *triple jornada* as it had been discussed by gender workshop attendees:

> Nowadays the woman is involved in everything. This is called a triple workday: working, then tending to the home, and also tending to the community, because the topic of community concerns having a better quality of life for their children and for themselves. For example, the women say: 'Look at María, she gets up at 4 in the morning and the poor thing goes to bed at 2 in the morning. How horrible, look at poor María!' But they know that that is how it is because they live it.[133]

Lilibeth notes that this triple burden workday can cause a number of issues for women. She gives the example of one woman who needed to visit a gynaecologist, but who had to travel from the *barrio* to the *centro* (downtown) for her appointment in between transporting her child to and from school. She reveals that she has met a number of women who confessed that they have never had a gynaecological exam, as they rarely had time for an appointment in addition to their other responsibilities.

Similarly, Medina (2007) notes in her study of community-based organizing in the Urbanización Popular Trapichito in the city of Valencia that the women were over-burdened with activities, and that this could lead to the long-term deterioration of their physical and/or mental health. Thus, while the MTA *voceras* expressed pride and gratitude in being able to contribute to the betterment of their communities, several of the women made reference to the all-consuming nature of social organizing, as their duties as spokeswomen were added onto their growing list of everyday responsibilities.

Sulay reflects on her *triple jornada* as she concedes that over the years there have been a significant number of improvements to her community, but that she has "worked like a *burra* [donkey]. It's been a struggle all the way".[134] Elizabeth further illustrates the personal struggles that she has experienced in juggling competing priorities as a lead

[133] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[134] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.

vocera, mother, homemaker, and caretaker for her elderly parents. During an interview, she states: "When you go home your work is done. When I go home, I sit and think of where we are, and where we are going. It isn't easy to assume the responsibility as the coordinator of a *comuna*".[135]

Consequently, many of the *voceras* emphasized that having "solidarity" within the family and the communal structure was important for them to be able to carry out their tasks as *voceras*. Florencia often expressed her gratitude for her husband who she claimed was very supportive of her involvement in the MTAs, and who helped her to leave an abusive partner in the past.[136] In her study Medina (2007) argues that familial support has played a large role in determining the success of women's involvement in community organizing, as unsupportive families can be a large source of stress for women participants.

However, not all of the *voceras* had been entirely supported in their organizing endeavours. Sulay, who is now separated from her spouse, claims that she would not be as readily able to participate in the MTAs if they were still together. She explains that if she were still with her partner she would be out at meetings worrying about getting home to cook and clean the house in preparation for his return home from work.[137] Accordingly, assumptions concerning the "elasticity" of women's time serve to worsen the already inequitable gender division of labour that remains unchallenged in many homes and neighborhoods throughout the *barrios*.

"Women's work": Gendering participation in the Bolivarian Process

Consequently, the rise in the number of women participants in the Bolivarian Process has not been accompanied by a congruent rise in men's participation in social reproduction to help ease the workload that many women shoulder in the *barrios*. The

[135] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.
[136] Interview with Florencia Gutiérrez, December 6, 2012.
[137] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.

normalization and perpetuation of *machista* gender norms within the public/community sphere, and the gendering of tasks and activities further complicate this phenomenon. Elizabeth exemplifies this point as she states: "The majority of participants in committees are women. There are men but very few, as the majority are involved in either construction or sport. They are involved in construction because they are strong, and sport for the activity".[138] Similarly, when asked about the overwhelming majority of female *voceras* and participants within the MTAs, Victor comments: "Because they always tend to the things in the home".[139] In her study, Medina (2007) explains that there is often a *machista* attitude that is directed towards certain types of community labour. She explains that certain tasks are personified as "women's work" and that there is a tendency by men to look disdainfully upon, and even ridicule these community activities. As such, men and women's abilities are typified within certain community organizations according to normative conceptions of their gender.

Additionally, many women take on the majority of what are deemed to be more traditionally "domestic" tasks within the community development process. Lilibeth describes women's vital contributions to the success of the medical mission *Barrio Adentro* where the government funded the installation of clinics staffed by visiting Cuban doctors. Women took on the responsibility of housing and hosting the doctors as if they were a part of their own families: "Aside from giving them a home, they gave them food, and apart from food they generally took care of them. And who did this work? Women. A *compañero* would not have done that".[140] Lilibeth explains that rather than taking on these tasks during the program, the local men would "flirt with the women doctors" or even sexually-assault them.[141] Thus, these problematic gender stereotypes become naturalized according to the perpetuation of certain traditional gender norms concerning men's and women's participation within the Bolivarian Process.

[138] Interview with Elizabeth López, December 13, 2012.
[139] Interview with Victor Díaz, December 4, 2012.
[140] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[141] Ibid.

Furthermore, these norms are also enacted through the gender relations between participants. In many of the meetings that I attended, men would often assert their dominance by pontificating and monopolizing the conversation, while most women participants sit in silence. This was usually not the case with the MTA *voceras*, as the majority of them are quite outspoken, and they would openly challenge the views of male participants. However, more often than not men would lead the conversation, particularly during community debates.[142] Lilibeth argue: "The problem isn't who is the worker within the construction of the new society because it continues to be women. We are assuming everything *desde la base*.[143] But who is it whose ideas are represented, who is signing the policy, who is the one making the decisions".[144]

When gender workshop attendees were required to list the tasks that both men and women undertook within their committees, the results were consistent across the various discussion groups. Women made up the bulk of the participants in local committees and organizations, and in the case where there was one male participant he was typically a coordinator or facilitator.[145] Lilibeth lectured to the attendees that this was a result of the reproduction of normative gender roles in public spaces. She exclaimed: "If a woman can budget for a full family on minimum wage, why can't she budget for a project?"[146]

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[142] This dynamic was observed on multiple occasions, but one particular example took place during a series of national debates that were held preceding former president Chávez's re-election concerning his political platform that was known as the Government's Strategic Plan (*Plan Socialista*, 2013-2019). At one such debate held at the *Juana Ramirez* commune the participants were broken into small groups, and one Antímano community activist and participant José dominated almost the entire conversation. The only time he was visibly silent was when the item on gender and women's rights was introduced, at which point Florencia interjected and gave her opinion on the matter.

[143] *Desde la base* meaning "from or "the base" refers to community labour. The "base" is a colloquial term for the popular sector, and refers to community-based organizing in the *barrios.* It also refers to the "base" of the Bolivarian Process.

[144] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.

[145] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012. While this gender discrepancy concerning women's and men's positions of power within their respective committees was apparent in many committees, it is important to note that this is not true of every committee. As demonstrated, *voceras* such as Elizabeth hold significant decision-making power as a lead *vocera*. Nevertheless, this trend appeared to be consistent throughout the *barrios* according to the testimonials of various women participants involved in community organizing.

[146] Ibid.

Often women are personified as merely "the helpers", as they take on organizational roles and responsibilities at the community level that are required to bring programs and projects to fruition, while men are often represented in upper-level positions as managers and decision-makers. This has resulted in men's "possession" of certain knowledge concerning the project completion cycle. Lilibeth enacts an exchange between a husband and wife involved in a community project: "Her husband will be in agreement. He will help to construct the pipes…men are involved in infrastructural projects, because it is men who know the infrastructure".[147]

In this way, women are portrayed as lacking the same calibre of knowledge possessed by men despite their extensive experience in community organizing. This gendering of knowledge is due to the fact that women's community contributions not equally recognized as "work" where the work that men perform as paid employees in the formal economy takes precedence over women's unpaid labor. Sulay illustrates these gender norms as they pertain to men's participation in the MTAs: "The men participate very little—first because they work, and second because they do not want to assume the responsibilities".[148]

According to the gender workshop attendees men's participation is lacking at committee meetings because they "don't have the time to attend" as they are "busy working", or due to the fact that it is voluntary, unpaid labour.[149] The attendees also agreed that men generally tended to take on heavier work or paid jobs such as construction and repairs on water infrastructure rather than attend meetings, which were primarily dominated by women volunteers.[150] This subjugation of women's knowledge and experience, and refusal to equally recognize their participation in community organizing as "work" has been problematic in myriad ways, particularly as it relates to

[147] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[148] Group interview with 5 Antímano MTA *voceras*, November 22, 2012.
[149] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.
[150] Ibid.

paid versus unpaid labor where men are highly concentrated in the former category, and women in the latter. [151]

This dynamic was especially salient concerning the relationship between the *voceras* and Victor. Sulay believes that it is unfair that the *voceras* do so much work without being compensated, and that they deserve an incentive for their labor as their work is just as demanding and time-consuming. She was also often visibly frustrated when Victor as a paid representative of Hidrocapital did not show up to community meetings when the *voceras* had taken time out of their evenings to make the journey down the *barrio* hillside to attend. Although she has a wealth of experience, Sulay explains that she has tried to obtain paid employment from Hidrocapital as a community promoter like Victor but has been unable to do so. She asserts: "I am doing a *trabajo* social".[152] In her view, she was already completing the tasks of a promoter in her community in her voluntary capacity as a *vocera*.

For others, this is a worthwhile and rewarding experience as shown by Carmen: "Everything is voluntary. What you gain is that your community is well, and that the people are receiving services and enjoying them. That is what you gain".[153] Although Carmen is optimistic about women's contribution of voluntary labor in the interest of community-led development, she is also forthcoming in her belief that this process has resulted in the exploitation of the *voceras*' intellectual property: "There is a lack of *conciencia* of our contributions—Sulay, Nancy, Rosita—if we are working on a project and other members present it and never say that it was the work of *las fulanas* [a colloquial term for "women"] of the *mesa técnica de agua*, that is a problem. We are always working, and this is our intellectual exploitation. We are always below and they are always above".[154]

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[151] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.
[152] Informal interview with Sulay Morales, November 11, 2012.
[153] Interview with Carmen Rojas, December 11, 2012.
[154] Ibid.

Countering stigmas or reinforcing stereotypes?

Consequently, while political organizing and engagement for daily necessities through the discourse of revolutionary motherhood has given women a platform and a voice; it has also had stark repercussions on the future possibility of transforming gender relations. As such, Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF) is particularly useful to determine how "structures of power…shape symbolic and material representations of gender relations", and how the social reproduction work of the *voceras* has been impacted by these gender relations (Bakker and Gill, 2003, p. 32). Moreover, SRF helps to illuminate how women's work in the home is rendered as "residual subsistence labour, expanding or contracting as much as possible to offset the impact of market forces, state practices, or changing family circumstances" (p. 38).

By employing this theoretical perspective it becomes apparent that the *voceras'* activities in the private sphere are indeed seen as an externality distinct from their community labour in the public sphere, and that their time in both "is assumed to be infinitely elastic" (Razavi, 2002, p. 9). The institutional sites of social reproduction are numerous, and include not only markets, states and families, but also "voluntary…and activist organizations [that] agitate for changes to existing…contributions to social reproduction" (Bakker and Gill, 2003, p. 38). Through the perspective of SRF, Bakker and Gill (2003) explain that the capitalist market-based system "depends on the unpaid labour of women to supplement the economy and to ensure that the current neo-liberal paradigm can continue" (p. 33).

While the Bolivarian Process has presented itself as an alternative to capitalism it has not yet completely adopted "21st Century Socialism". In fact, authors such as Fernandes (2010a) argue that Venezuela can be considered a "hybrid post-neoliberal state" (p. 22). Thus, it could be said that the dependence on women's social reproduction labour that according to theorists such as Pat and Hugh Armstrong (1983) is symptomatic of the capitalist system has been replicated within the current community development model,

particularly as it pertains to women's participation in community organizing, and the preservation of the gender division of labor.

Even if Venezuela were to undergo a more comprehensive socialist shift the inequitable burden of labor may remain unchallenged as demonstrated by several of the case studies presented in this study, particularly in countries such as Cuba or Nicaragua that have undergone similar revolutionary periods. Feminist scholars have noted that this is often the case with socialist states in transition, or with revolutionary parties where gender issues are not prioritized with the same urgency as class struggle. Similarly within the Zapatista movement, Eisenstein (2009) explains that women's issues tended to "come behind demands placed on the state; patriarchy, in other words, will once again be dealt with only after capitalism and racism…[This resulted in] indigenous women [being deprived of] 'the right to rest'" (p. 204).

In a number of countries that have undergone political transitions where women have organized and become politically active in revolutionary activities, patriarchal culture and the unequal division of labour has still remained largely intact. Aguilar notes that women's social organizing was widespread in the Philippines. However, it did not present a significant challenge to the patriarchal structure:

> It wasn't that women were ignored or were not considered important for the revolution, because they could be found in organizations of various kinds…It was also not that the platform for national liberation failed to articulate a position on women, because it did. But…women's oppression was conceptualized almost exclusively along productivist lines so that male chauvinism…could easily escape scrutiny or criticism and, therefore, correction or redress (as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 204).

This example is analogous to the Bolivarian Process where the state has expressly advocated for women's incorporation within the revolution, and further, has implemented programs to address a number of the issues that impact women's lives. Yet *machismo* continues to be pervasive within the *barrios*.

Disney argues that without a thorough analysis of the "gender division of labour and women's primary participation in reproductive labour", women's emancipation will be extremely limited within these revolutionary processes (2008, p. 54). In Antímano, women's community organizing is often focused on quotidian issues that stem from class-based inequalities such as a lack of access to essential services. Yet the overt focus on class struggle may have obscured the imperative for a transformation of gendered hierarchies, as exemplified by Lilibeth: "We do nothing for women. If we do have an activity for the *compañeras* of the *mesa de agua* water is the excuse".[155] This may lead to the continued bifurcation of the "public" and "private" spheres causing the reification of traditional gender norms where women's interests are bound exclusively to their "reproductive" needs for daily necessities such as water.

Nevertheless, rather than conforming to a strict public/private dichotomy, *the voceras' barrio* activism addresses issues of "class…economics…violence, culture, ideology and materiality in the productive and reproductive spheres of life", and the development of their political consciousness through their community organizing on a variety of issues from access to child care, freedom from gender-based violence, to access to water embodies what Stephen calls a "holistic, integrationist approach" to community activism (as cited in Disney, 2008, p. 32). As such, it is beneficial to highlight the interplay amongst these categories where women's participation in community activism and identification with revolutionary motherhood occurs along a continuum rather than within a binary structure.

The Bolivarian Process has effectively pushed women and women's issues to the forefront of the political agenda. Nonetheless, at present many of the constitutional and programmatic efforts that seek to promote socialist and feminist values have not been overly successful in challenging and exposing the inequitable gender division of labour at the grassroots level. Upon reflection of the innovative nature of the state's gender-

[155] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.

progressive legislature Lilibeth reasons: "People have still not been empowered by these laws. It is already an advance that they exist, but the task for those active in *poder popular* is to actually implement them. People need to be conscious that they exist and start to apply them".[156]

Consequently, women-focused activities are observably lacking at the community level in Antímano.[157] At the gender workshop Lilibeth asked the attendees if they had ever been invited to an event in their community that was solely intended for women. There was general confusion about the question, and Florencia began to give the example of an event organized by the MTAs concerning familial water usage that focused on women and children. Visibly frustrated, Lilibeth interrupted explaining that this event was directed towards the family and was therefore not women-specific. At this juncture, Lilibeth noted: "We do many things, but not only for the benefit of women".[158] She explained that women need *reconocimiento* (recognition) for their work both in the revolution, and in the home. Many of the women nodded in agreement, and commented to her afterward that the workshop was the first event they had ever attended that was organized exclusively for the benefit of women. This observation is indicative of the popular conflation of biological and sociological roles within community programming, as "women and children" are presented as a holistic category within the family unit, resulting in the erasure of women's issues and interests within community fora.

Although these gender workshops are part of a pilot project that was limited to a handful of host communities, they are still representative of a broader recognition that a lacuna exists concerning accessible gender training and gender consciousness-raising

[156] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[157] This is not to say that there are no groups that are either women-specific, or that hold events directed towards women. As indicated previously Carmen's land committee has a women's group. However, the observation in Antímano was such that most women who were involved in community organizing participated in working groups such as the MTAs more so than any others, and that these working groups lacked explicit gender programming.
[158] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.

activities in the *barrios*. Indeed, María Leon, a long-time activist and advocate for women's rights, claims:

> Women lack understanding of what gender consciousness is…They have doubts because they see it as a feminist, academic concept…We have gender experts, we plan with gender in mind, research with gender in mind…but the masses have not assumed it…We have to deal with thousands of years of culture, customs, language…Our consciousness of women's rights is advancing, but not as quickly as we want'" (as cited in Espina and Rakowski, 2010, p. 196).

Making information relatable and available was a very important aspect of the programming, as *barrio* women may not readily relate to feminism apart from their exposure to the mainstreaming of feminist concepts within *chavismo*. Lilibeth notes that the workshops "do not try to bring experts who propose grand theories in respect to gender, but are instead situated in the community. They propose realistic situations and do not use abstract concepts".[159]

In creating and facilitating these workshops with *barrio* women's lived realities in mind, Lilibeth speaks to the response of one participant who came to understand how government policies could be applied to her past experiences of gendered violence. The participant did not realize that women's rights to their property and a life free of domestic violence were protected within the constitution:

> She said: 'Look professor yesterday I was reading this little book[160] that you told me about and I discovered that there is a thing called patrimonial violence. I had a husband who I distanced myself from, and I did not know I could report him'. Of course she escaped from her house. She left all of her things and never reclaimed them. She said: 'Of course this was my

[159] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.
[160] Reference to a print copy of the constitution, which Lilibeth brought to the workshops for the women to read.

> *patrimonio* [property], if I had known that then I would have demanded it professor'.[161]

In this way, these workshops focus on understanding and exposing the everyday challenges that *barrio* women face in all aspects of their lives, as they covered a plethora of issues ranging from domestic violence to the sexism that women encounter through their community activism.

Overall, Lilibeth notes that the feedback generated by the participants was tremendously positive:

> When you say to the women: 'Look, we are going to do this to ensure that the men in the house will help us with the housework'. They all took note, because they want their spouses to help them. The women said: 'I realized after the workshops that I have to put my child to bed and speak to my spouse because his attitude is not good'. This is already an achievement, for us it is a victory.[162]

Subsequently, *barrio* women are being made aware of the inequitable division of labor through innovative consciousness-raising initiatives such as these. These workshops allow dedicated gender activists like Lilibeth to make gender-progressive legislature more applicable, and build upon the state's commitment to enhancing the presence of socialist feminism within the broader political project in a manner that is relevant to women like the *voceras*. As such, these initiatives can effectively employ a gender-focused combination of the top-down bottom-up strategies for social change that are indicative of the Bolivarian Process.

[161] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.
[162] Ibid.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Bolivarian Process has successfully opened spaces for radical activism and progressive change within Venezuela. This profound experiment in participatory democracy has drastically decreased poverty rates and has improved the livelihoods of millions of people. Those who have benefited most from these reforms are the residents of the *barrio* communities that encircle the urban center of Caracas. For the first time, citizens of these communities are being recognized as active protagonists and decision-makers through a unique convergence of top-down and bottom-up community development strategies in an effort to build *poder popular* or popular power. This two-pronged approach to community development entails the management and direction of state resources by the residents themselves through committees such as the *mesas técnicas de agua* or MTAs. The beneficiaries that have been the most active within the MTAs, and have been crucial to their success in improving water services in these low-income neighborhoods, are a group of dedicated and passionate spokeswomen or *voceras*.

Women's lives in the *barrio* of Antímano have been greatly impacted by the unreliable service provision of dubious quality. In order to address this problem the *voceras* have organized collectively with the help of the state in their capacities as mothers, grandmothers and community activists to strategize and politicize these issues within groups such as the MTAs. These community-led initiatives have given the *voceras* better access to public services thus improving the overall quality of life within the *barrios*. The *voceras'* struggle to advocate for a safe and accessible water supply—in addition to their involvement in other forms of community activism—provides a clear illustration of how women are empowered to actively engage in community-based organizing in the *barrios* of Venezuela, which has allowed them to increase their awareness and agency as political actors.

However, the movement to deepen "21st Century Socialism" in Venezuela and build popular power is not without complications. Denis (2006) argues that former president Chávez's "revolutionary" reforms can often be described as pure rhetoric, as he

claims: “There is a class struggle in Venezuela, but not a revolution that has triumphed. A revolution is possible in Venezuela, but it is only a possibility” (para. 25). His main critique is that Venezuela is still a corrupt and capitalist state, and what is required for revolutionary change is more unified, autonomous, revolutionary organizing that is separate from the party organizations that have formed and proliferated from within the state apparatus (Denis, 2006).

Consequently, there is significant tension that exists between institutional actors, and autonomous groups that vie for space and a voice within the Process. Similarly, tensions exist within the Venezuelan women’s movement where autonomous feminists did not necessarily identify with the ideals propagated by state feminists who deemed Chávez to be the *de facto* leader of women. Nonetheless, the Bolivarian government has been extremely successful in mainstreaming women’s issues throughout the Bolivarian Process, and in implementing policies and programs that have greatly assisted women’s reproductive work, especially women living in the *barrios*.

Moreover, *barrio* women’s view of women’s liberation and empowerment is slightly different than the autonomous and state feminists identified above. Scholars have determined that many *barrio* women may in fact reject feminism as “antifamily” while preferring to engage with class-based politics and community organizations through a discourse that embraces motherhood (Rakowski, 2003). In Venezuela, this maternalist discourse has been described as a form of “revolutionary motherhood”—a concept that was greatly valorized by Chávez himself—which calls on women’s “natural” virtues as self-sacrificing mothers, and their strength as revolutionary fighters, to support the Bolivarian Process. Various incarnations of this concept, which is also known as “activist mothering” or the “politicization of motherhood” have been identified throughout Latin American history, and have similarly made significant impacts on poor women involved in revolutionary struggles in countries such as Nicaragua and Cuba.

In Antímano, many of the *voceras* who are active in community-based organizing readily identify with the concept of revolutionary motherhood. Their organizing efforts to

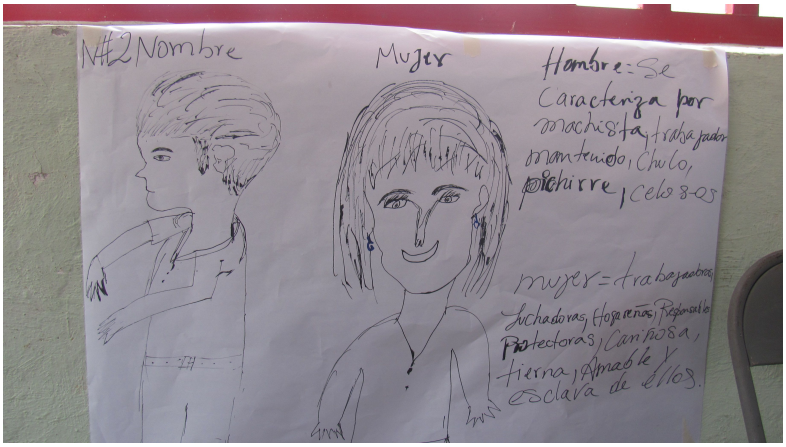
better the lives of themselves and their families have allowed them to develop "new forms of revolutionary subjectivity" while dramatically influencing the socio-political life of their communities (Motta, 2013, p. 36). Moreover, their involvement in community organizing in the *barrios* has been identified as an alternative to "male-centric politics" in Venezuela (Fernandes, 2007, p. 98).

Nevertheless, their voluntary contributions to the social reproduction of *barrio* life have resulted in the generation of a triple burden of labour known as a *triple jornada*. As evidenced by Eisenstein (2009), without the interrogation of the inequitable division of labour within community-based organizing any gender asymmetry could "remain naturalized, accepted as the normal state of affairs, and continue to place women in a materially and psychologically disadvantaged position" (p. 204). Accordingly, the theoretical framework of Social Reproduction Feminism was applied to this study as a lens with which to critique the overburdening of women due to their multiple and competing responsibilities as community activists in Antímano.

Community facilitators like Lilibeth understand the importance of spreading awareness of gender injustice and its effects on women including the tripling of their burden of labour. Progressive state programming like the gender workshops mentioned in this study may equip *barrio* participants, and women in particular, to better assess and hopefully challenge the inequitable gender division of labour that undergirds the community development model in its entirety.

Fortunately, the development of a grassroots gender consciousness—the likes of which María Leon had indicated was lacking in the *barrios*—is indeed growing within Antímano. During a gender workshop exercise the attendees were asked to congregate in small groups and draw an illustration depicting the archetypal qualities of the ideal socialist man and woman.[163]

[163] Field observations from gender workshop "*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*" in community council "*La Avanzadora*", sector De Pano, Antímano, November 4, 2012.



Figures 4: Illustration from the workshop depicting a stereotypical Venezuelan man and woman.

Many of the women reiterated typical gender stereotypes where the woman was personified as "tender", "caring", "friendly" and a "slave to others", whereas the man was characterized as a "*machista*", "jealous", "drunk" and "lazy". However, under Florencia's direction, her group drew the man and woman with positive matching attributes where both were depicted as equal partners in the revolution.

In response to the central research question, the concept of revolutionary motherhood has provided women like the *voceras* with a "collective action frame" with which they can demand to be "recognized as full participants in the public world", while transforming their domestic roles from "private nurturance…to collective, public protest" (Safa, 1990, p. 355). On the other hand, the *voceras* ascription to revolutionary motherhood and the overdependence on their labour to fuel the engine of community development in the *barrios* has resulted in their reification as the sole "caretakers" of their communities. Dalla Costa (1999) contends that the policies and programs of the Bolivarian government have actually strengthened "women's subordination, by asking them to perform reproductive functions at the collective level, and promote new forms of social activism, this time under the guide of 'integrated social development'" (p. 109).

Consequently, great achievements have been made, yet considerable challenges have also arisen that may continue to complicate their path toward social development as women, and as community activists. Thus, highlighting the contributions of the *voceras* and other women participants involved in community organizing is crucial, as it brings to

light the "multiplicity of lines of domination but also potential axes of resistance" concerning women's engagement in the Bolivarian Process (Motta, 2013, p. 49).

Future areas of research stemming from this study could entail a return to the field to conduct additional interviews. First, it would be beneficial to interview the participants of the gender workshops to gauge their reactions. Questions could be framed to determine whether the participants feel that these learning opportunities made a difference in their community activism, or if they feel that they are better able to identify gender discrimination in various aspects of their lives as a result. If possible, it would be interesting to interview the spouses or family members of the participants to assess whether the participants' attitudes towards the allocation of social reproduction work at home and in their communities had changed.

Second, conducting a follow up interview with Lilibeth would also be of interest. Lilibeth indicated that the gender justice advocacy collective that spearheaded the workshop series intended to distil the participants' reactions and results into a multimedia project with the intention of making socialist feminism more comprehensible and recognizable to a broader audience. It would be interesting to see if this project had transpired, and how it had been received by the general public.

Third, conducting a second round of interviews with the *voceras* would help shed light on whether more activities like the gender workshops had taken place in their communities, and would hopefully also reveal whether the participant-driven development model in Antímano had changed or waivered following the death of Chávez, as the political environment has been quite charged since his passing.

In regards to educating women through workshops and other gender-focused programming Lilibeth passionately states: "Because it is never be too late to be free, it is never be too late to be a free woman".[164] The Bolivarian Process—for all of its

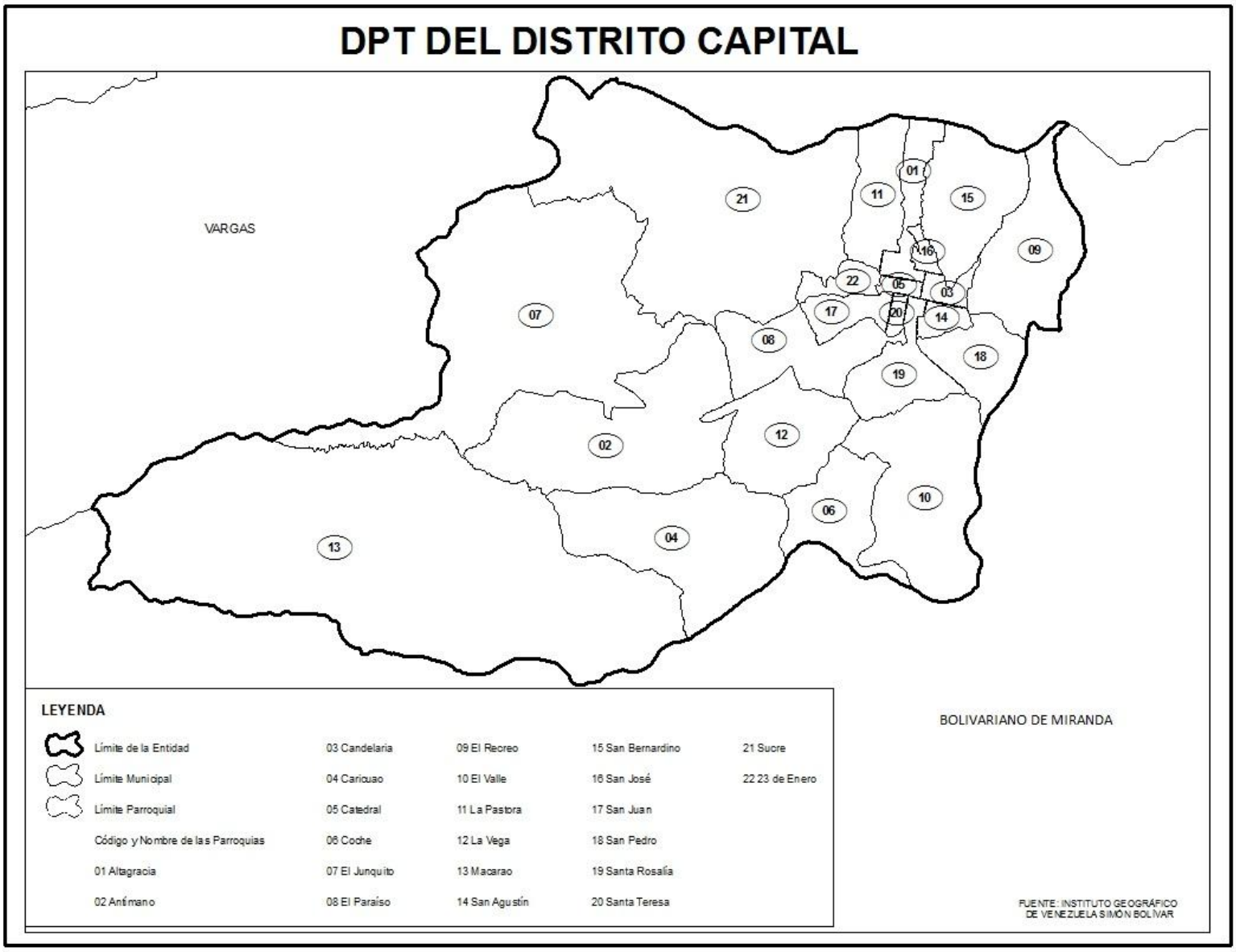
[164] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.

shortcomings and contradictions—is ultimately still a work in progress. Reflecting on her time spent living in Cuba, Lilibeth comments: "This revolution is only twelve years old. The Cubans have had fifty years of revolution and they are much more *machista* than us".[165] As such, the fight for gender equality in Venezuela has made substantial gains, yet it may require many more years of struggle.

My intention in writing this thesis and in pursuing this field of study is to reveal how women's agency, and their abilities to organize around access to services in their communities are impacted by sexism and classism. Moreover, the findings of this study will contribute an integral gender perspective to the broader research project of which they are part. Understanding women's lived experiences of these hierarchical relations and power struggles from a gendered standpoint can help to ensure that these obstacles are addressed through progressive policies and collective action to achieve gender justice in Venezuela.

[165] Interview with Lilibeth Sira, December 4, 2012.

Appendix A: Map of Caracas (Antímano- 02)



Appendix B: Official Population Statistics for the Parish of Antímano 2001/2011

Year	2001		Caracas Average		2011		Caracas Average	
Value	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Population by sex								
Total Population:	127,708		1,836,286		131,963		1,943,901	
Men:	62,945		875,540		64,839		935,457	
Women:	64,763		960,746		67,124		1,008,444	
Household-heads by sex								
Total # of households:	28,733		453,528		36,631		545,791	
Male-headed households:	N/A		N/A		21,852	60	301,655	55
Female-Headed Households:	N/A		N/A		14,779	40	244,136	45
Households without access to basic services (# of households)								
# of households without access to basic services	1,268	4	12,814	3	1,281	4	10,666	2
Household poverty measured by Unsatisfied Basic Needs (NBI)								
Households not living in poverty	20,536	71	379,394	84	28,660	80	466,370	88
Households living in poverty	6,392	22	61,176	13	6,137	17	56,121	11
Households living in extreme poverty	1,855	6	12,958	3	1,035	3	7,563	1

Source: National Statistics Institute- 2001/2011 National Population and Housing Census (www.ine.gov.ve)

Appendix C: List of Interviews and Events Attended

Individual Interviews

Santiago Arconada, first Coordinator of Hidrocapital's Community Management Office, August 24, 2012 (Interview conducted by Susan Spronk and Rebecca McMillan)
Arconada currently teaches at the Indigenous University of Venezuela and is an indigenous rights and environmental activist. He served as Hidrocapital's first community coordinator after the creation of the Community Management Office in 1999. He currently lives in Antímano.

Victor Díaz, Coordinator of Hidrocapital's Community Management Office, August 20, 2012 and December 4, 2012
Díaz has worked with Hidrocapital for 13 years. Previously, he was part of the team of reformers in the administration of Caracas mayor Aristóbulo Istúriz (1993-1995) that initially piloted the MTA model. He currently lives in Antímano.

Florencia Gutiérrez, MTA Vocera, Gregorio Acosta La Cruz Communal Council, Santa Ana, Antímano, December 6, 2012
Gutiérrez helped to establish the MTA in her sector in 1999, when community members and Hidrocapital staff launched an initiative to improve water services for 80 households. Since then, she has been active in the MTA as well as in her local communal council and commune. She is also an active supporter of the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* and a graduate of the government-sponsored *Misión Ribas* high school certificate program. Gutiérrez migrated to Antímano in 1974.

Elizabeth López, Lead Vocera for the Juana Ramirez La Avanzadora Commune, Antímano, December 13, 2012
Prior to assuming responsibility for the Juana Ramirez La Avanzadora commune, Elizabeth López was active in the MTA for the Las Barras-Parate Bueno Communal Council in Antímano, spearheading major improvements in wastewater and drainage.

Sulay Morales, MTA Vocera, La Cauchera Communal Council, Copacabana sector, Carapita, Antímano, November 11, 2012 (Informal interview)
Morales became active in her MTA in 1999. She has also been involved in her community's urban land committee, as well as other communal council activities. Morales is a homemaker and a graduate of the *Misión Ribas* high school certificate program. She migrated from Táchira state in the Andean region in 1982.

Anselmo Rodriguez, Community Liaison, Ministry of Popular Power for the Environment, September 6, 2012 (Interview conducted by Rebecca McMillan)
Rodriguez was a community promoter in the Community Management Office under the leadership of Santiago Arconada in the early 2000s. He later went on to be coordinator of the Community Management Office for the Litoral water system in the south of Caracas.

Carmen Rojas, Integral Land Committee of Los Jabillos (Comité de Tierra Integral de los Jabillos), December 11, 2012
Rojas has been a leader in her local urban land committee since its creation in 2013. She is an active MTA participant and is also involved in women's organizing.

Lilibeth Sira, Facilitator for the gender workshop series "Mujeres, Historia y Lucha", December 4, 2012
Sira is a facilitator and feminist activist who is part of a national collective entitled *Patria Joven*, which organizes workshops and training programs for youth, rural and factory workers, and women in collaboration with the Universidad Central. She lives in the parish of San Pedro.

Group Interviews

Group Interview with Hidrocapital Community Promoters, August 28, 2012 (interview conducted by Rebecca McMillan)
In attendance: Dircia García and Gumberto Mendez.

Tour of the Carapita Sector with MTA Voceras from Antímano, October 2, 2012 (Tour and informal group interview conducted by Rebecca McMillan)

In attendance:

- Pedra Escalona, MTA *Vocera*, Simon Rodriguez Communal Council
- Sulay Morales, MTA *Vocera*, La Cauchera Communal Council, Copacabana sector, Carapita
- Florencia Gutiérrez, MTA *Vocera*, Gregorio Acosta La Cruz Communal Council, Santa Ana
- Rosalba Ruiz, MTA *Vocera*, Segundo Despertador Communal Council
- Luz Darianis, MTA Participant, Gregorio Acosta La Cruz Communal Council, Santa Ana
- Nancy de La Rosa, Health Committee/MTA *Vocera*, Luchador del Futuro Communal Council, Libertador-San Onofre sector

Focus Group with MTA voceras from Antímano, November 22, 2012

In attendance:

- Nancy de La Rosa, Health Committee/MTA *Vocera*, Luchador del Futuro Communal Council, Libertador-San Onofre sector
- Sulay Morales, MTA *Vocera*, La Cauchera Communal Council, Copacabana sector, Carapita
- Carmen Rojas, MTA Participant and Community Leader in the Integral Land Commiteee (*Comité de Tierra Integral*), Los Jabillos
- Rosalba Ruiz, MTA *Vocera*, Segundo Despertador Communal Council
- Anastasia Zambrano, MTA Participant, Terrazas Central Communal Council

Major Meetings and Events Attended

- Community Water Council Meetings, Antímano, Caracas: October 11 and 25, November 8 and 22, 2012

- "Women, History, and Struggle" (*Mujeres, Historia y Lucha*), Gender Workshop sponsored by the Government of the Capital District, Antímano, Caracas, October 27-28 and November 4, 2012
- Public consultation on the Government's Strategic Plan (*Plan Socialista*, 2013-2019) sponsored by the Ministry of Popular Power for the Environment, November 17, 2012, Parque Miranda, Caracas
- Meeting of the Juana Ramirez la Avanzadora Commune and public debate on the Government's Strategic Plan (*Plan Socialista*, 2013-2019), Antímano, Caracas, November 22, 2012
- National Conference of the National Network of Communards (*Red Nacional de Comuneros*), Sierra de San Luis, Falcón State, December 1-2, 2012
- Ceremony to Award Certificates to Participants in the *Mujeres, Historia y Lucha Program*, Teatro Principal, Caracas, December 6, 2012
- Christmas Party with Antímano MTA Participants, Caracas, December 7, 2012

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

1. What is your current position and how did you become involved in the MTAs?
2. What have been the major achievements of the MTAs?
3. What have been the major challenges with the MTAs?
4. For you, what does "co-responsibility" mean?
5. What is the significance of the MTAs to the Bolivarian Process and the goal of achieving "socialism of the twenty-first century"?
6. In your opinion, why have advances in sanitation been slower than advances in water?
7. What is the role and significance of the newly created "communes" (*comunas*)?

Appendix E: Survey Guide (Spanish)

Identidad de los entrevistados

Sector:
Consejo comunal:

Nombre entrevistado 1:
Genero:
Estatus marital:
Edad:

Nombre entrevistado 2:
Genero:
Estatus marital:
Edad:

Información demográfica

1. ¿Cuanto tiempo tiene Ud. viviendo en este hogar?

2. ¿Cuántas personas viven en el hogar?

3. ¿Cuál es su ocupación?

Vivienda y tenencia

4. ¿Tiene titulo al terreno donde se encuentra su casa?

5. ¿Usted es propietario de la casa, inquilino u otro?

Servicio de agua

¿Cómo consigue el agua potable? ¿Tienes que hervir el agua del chorro antes de tomarlo? ¿Y el agua para el uso en el hogar (para lavar, etc.)?

¿Con que frecuencia llega el agua del chorro a su hogar? Cuantos días dura?

¿Cómo se abastece el hogar cuando el servicio de agua esta interrumpido?
¿Su hogar tiene tanque? ¿Cuántos días dura el agua de un tanque?

¿Paga Ud. una tarifa por el servicio de agua? ¿Cuanto?

Servicio de aguas servidas y aguas residuales

¿Cómo se deshace de las aguas grises de la casa, por ejemplo del fregadero?

¿Cómo se deshace de las aguas servidas de la casa, ósea las aguas negras (Ej. tubería, pozo séptico, letrina, etc.)?

¿Paga Ud. una tarifa por el servicio de saneamiento (o servicios relacionados)? ¿Cuánto es mensual?

Actividades en el hogar

¿En su hogar quien suele recolectar el agua (Ej. llenar tanques, comprar botellas, etc.)?

Calidad del servicio

¿Ha tenido Ud. problemas con el servicio de agua en los últimos años? ¿Cuáles?

¿Ha tenido Ud. problemas con el servicio de saneamiento en los últimos años? ¿Cuáles?

¿La calidad del servicio de agua y saneamiento ha cambiado en los últimos años? ¿En su opinión que explica los cambios?

¿Su servicio de agua y saneamiento ha sido afectado por las lluvias o un desastre natural (ej. deslave) en los últimos anos? ¿Cómo resolvieron los problemas?

Participación política

¿En el último año ha tratado de resolver algún problema de agua o de aguas servidas en su casa o sector? ¿Cómo/quienes intentaron resolver el problema?

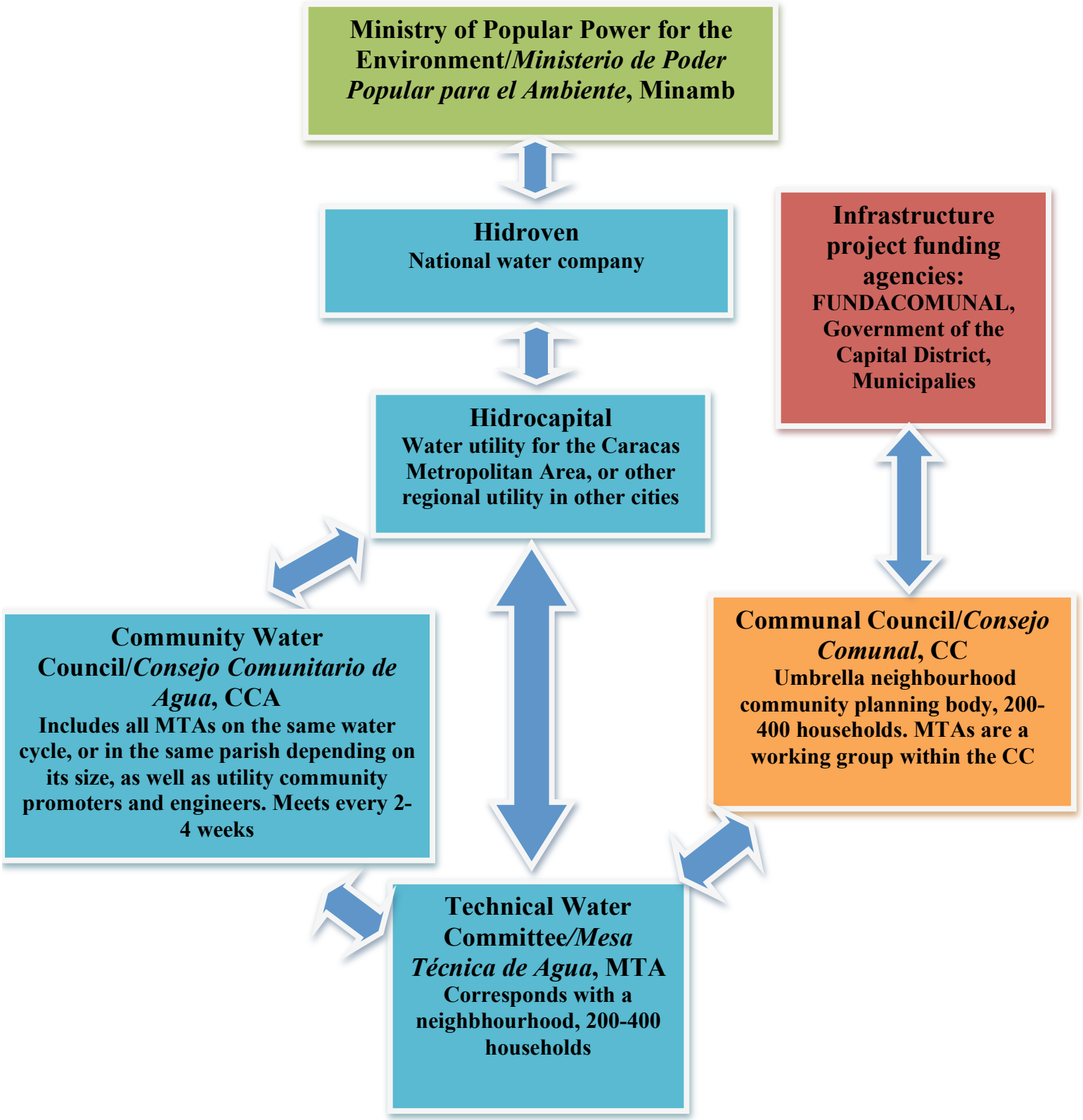
¿Ha asistido Ud. alguna vez a una reunión o actividad relacionada con el agua? ¿Cuál(es)? (Por ejemplo Fiesta del Agua, reunión del consejo comunitario de agua, etc.)

¿Cree Ud. que asistir a estas reuniones y actividades es fácil, difícil o muy difícil? ¿Porque?

¿Cree Ud. que avisar o denunciar un problema ante Hidrocapital es fácil, difícil o muy difícil? ¿Porque?

¿Participa Ud. en algún otra organización o grupo comunitario (Ej. consejo comunal, asociación religiosa o de trabajadores, partido político, etc.)? ¿Cuál?

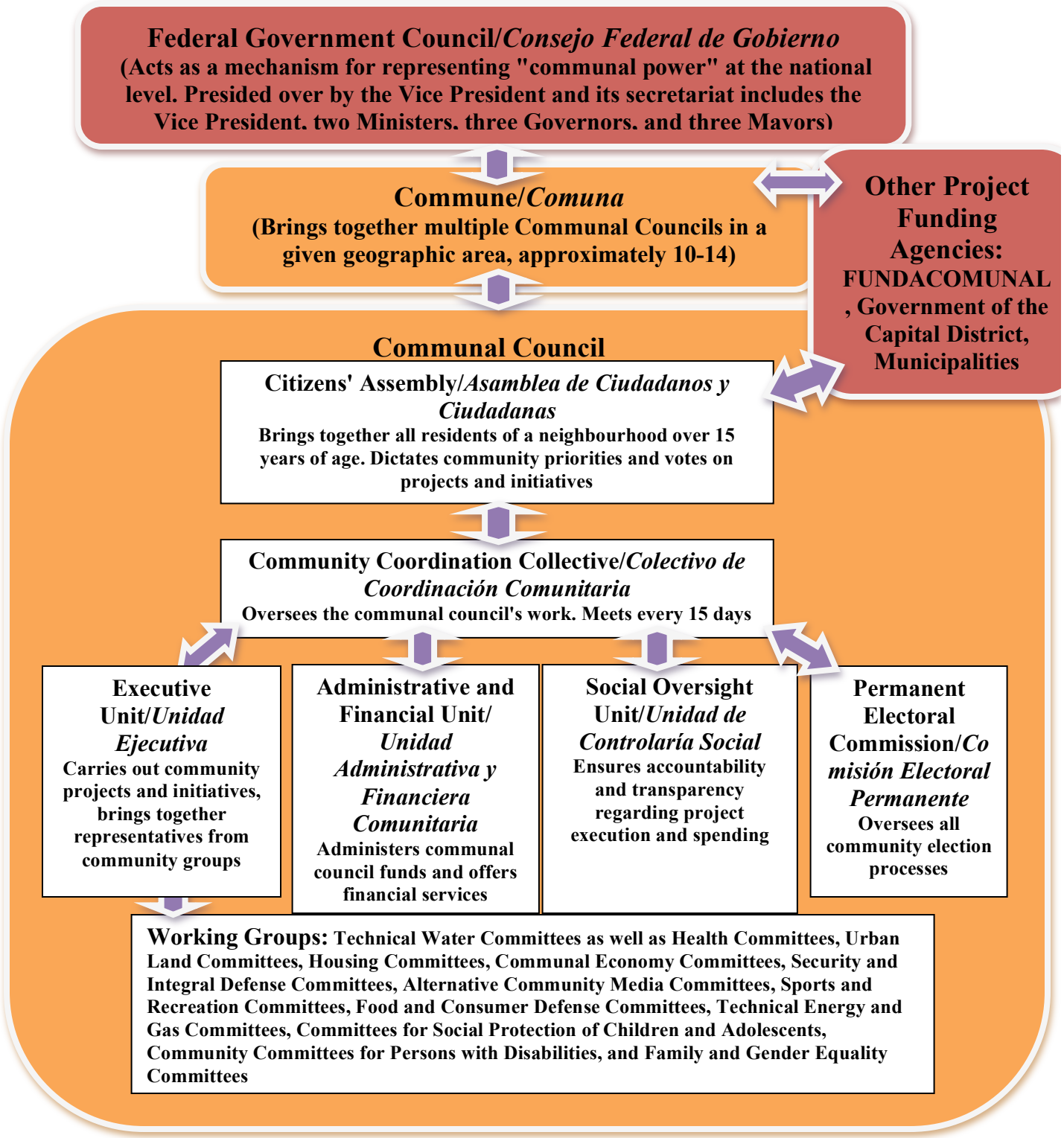
Appendix F: Structure of the Technical Water Committees in Urban Areas*



**Original flowchart created in conjunction with Rebecca McMillan, final graphic reproduced with permission from Rebecca McMillan*

Appendix G: Structure of the Communal Councils*

(Based on Ley Orgánica de los Consejo Comunales, 2006)



** Reproduced with permission from Rebecca McMillan*

Appendix H: Photographs



Figure H1: Antímano, Caracas.



Figure H2: By contrast, the metro station of Altamira—an upper-class neighbourhood in downtown Caracas.



Figure H3: Barrio participants at a community water meeting.



Figure H4: Example of a community water council mapping exercise for a water project in Antímano.



Figure H5: Victor Díaz (Hidrocapital Community Coordinator) and Romer Malave (operations engineer) at a community water council meeting in Antímano.



Figure H6: A selection of Antimano's most active MTA participants: (From Left to Right) Nancy de la Rosa, Rosalba Ruiz, Luz Darianis, Florencia Gutiérrez, Pedra Escalona, Sulay Morales.



Figure H6: Cristina Villamizar, a resident of the Santa Ana sector in Antímano, demonstrates the water containers she uses for storage when her water arrives every 21 days for 3-4 days.



Figure H6: Antímano residents engage in a debate at the Juana Ramirez comuna meeting concerning the Government's Strategic Plan (Plan Socialista, 2013-2019).



Figure H7: Women participate in the "Mujeres, Historia y Lucha" gender workshop in the De Pano sector of Antímano.



Figure H8: Vocera Florencia Gutiérrez at the gender workshop.



Figure H9: Vocera Carmen Rojas proudly displays her many awards for her community activism in her sector Los Jabillos, Antímano.



Figure H10: Basic foodstuffs and homemade products at the Juana Ramirez "socio productivo"—a community-led enterprise that sells subsidized goods to the residents of Elizabeth's sector Las Barras. All proceeds are directed towards local community development projects.



Figure H11: An interview with president of Inamujer, and Minister of State for women's affairs María Leon following the awards ceremony for gender workshop participants.



Figure H12: Christmas compartir party with the voceras and Victor at the Modulo de Carapita, Antímano.

Appendix I: Ethics Certificate

File Number: 08-12-23 **Date (mm/dd/yyyy):** 09/11/2012

Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice

Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

First Name	Last Name	Affiliation	Role
Susan	Spronk	Social Sciences / Others	Supervisor
Calais	Caswell	Social Sciences / Others	Student Researcher

File Number: 08-12-23

Type of Project: Master's Thesis

Title: Género y la gestiòn del agua communal: An exploration of popular women's organizing in Caracas, Venezuela

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
09/11/2012	09/10/2013	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments:
N/A

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http://www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/index.html

Appendix J: Research Summary

University of Ottawa MA Research Summary: The *Mesas Técnicas de Agua* in Caracas, Venezuela

By: Calais Caswell and Rebecca McMillan

Who we are

We are Master's students in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa in the city of Ottawa, Canada. Calais is writing her thesis on women's participation in the *mesas técnicas de agua* (MTAs) and the Bolivarian Process. Rebecca has recently completed her thesis on sanitation politics and the struggle to build popular power (*poder popular*) in Venezuela. Our research is part of a broader study lead by Dr. Susan Spronk, an Associate Professor at the university, which examines citizen participation in water and sanitation service management in Bolivia and Venezuela. Dr. Spronk is also a research associate with the Municipal Services Project (MSP) - an international research network that explores alternative models of public service provision. In an MSP survey of innovative water and sanitation service models the MTAs were identified as an example of "best practice."

We conducted our fieldwork in Venezuela from August-December 2012 with a particular focus on the parish of Antímano, Caracas. We selected Antímano as our case study because current and former Hidrocapital staff indicated that it was home to the longest-running and most successful MTAs. During our time in Caracas we attended *Consejo Comunitario de Agua* meetings, Hidrocapital-sponsored events, and community meetings organized by the local Communal Councils. Through these activities we had the opportunity to spend time with the inspiring *voceras* and community members who make the MTAs a success. This summary will provide a brief historical background on the MTAs in Antímano, followed by a list of the achievements and challenges that the MTAs face, and will conclude with our future plans for the research.

Part 1: History of the struggle for water and sanitation in Antímano

The MTAs emerged from communities' ongoing struggles for more equitable water and sanitation services in Venezuela. Prior to the election of President Hugo Chávez in 1998, Caracas water policy was highly discriminatory. The government prioritized building networks in wealthy areas in the city centre and its wealthy suburbs (*urbanizaciones*), while neglecting the barrios because it viewed them as "invaded". Neglected by the water utility the only way for residents to demand service improvements was to stage highly visible public protests. This water crisis led newly elected left-leaning mayor of Caracas Aristóbulo Istúriz (1993-1996) to seek innovative solutions to the water service challenges.

At a parish meeting in Antímano on March 6, 1993, residents expressed frustration with their water problems. In response, Istúriz proposed that community members form water committees giving rise to the first MTA model. On March 10, 1993, Antímano's first water committee meeting was held with over 100 participants.

Following Chávez's election in 1998 the MTA model was promoted at the national level with the help of influential reformers such as Jacqueline Faría and Santiago Arconada.

Antímano's MTAs are considered to be among the most successful in Venezuela. The parish's *Consejo Comunitario de Agua* meets every two weeks in the *Modulo de Carapita*. While the meetings may attract as many as fifty people, a core group of 10-15 committed community activists (many of whom are *voceros* and *voceras* for their local communal councils) are the central driver of the MTAs' successes. Approximately 80% of Antímano's MTA participants are women.

Part 2: Achievements and ongoing challenges of the MTAs

There have been a number of significant achievements of the MTAs in Antímano the most significant of which has been the regularization of the water distribution cycle through citizen participation in the coordination of service delivery. Community members are the "engine" of this radical grassroots experiment in *poder popular*, and their contributions to making water and sanitation services more accessible and reliable have improved the quality of life for neighborhood residents overall. Additional achievements include:

- Improved information exchange as Antímano residents are able to share their knowledge as water experts during regular meetings with the water utility;
- Development of the relationship between community members and the water utility facilitated by open lines of communication;
- Citizen empowerment particularly for women as female *voceras* have drawn upon their experiences as mothers and *luchadoras* to become leaders in their communities;
- Widespread citizen involvement in the preparation, construction and management of water and sanitation infrastructure;
- Provision of educational tools (i.e. how to conduct the three-step methodology for establishing an MTA including the *censo*, *croquis* and *diagnostico*, project planning, and financial management for water and sanitation projects); and
- Advancement of the communal, participatory spirit of the Bolivarian Process through a "bottom-up" approach to development that aims to ensure that the state is meeting the needs of its citizens.

Despite these impressive achievements, the MTAs face several challenges. In some areas, such as Santa Ana and the El Agodonal sector for example, water services continue to be irregular. Additional challenges include:

- Project funding delays as the water utility is sometimes unable to respond to requests as quickly as both Hidrocapital Community Promoters and community members would like;
- Lengthy, complicated and overly bureaucratic project application processes that require an MTA to approach multiple agencies before securing funding;
- Concern for a lack of transparency and citizen input in some decision-making processes where government officials continue to control budgetary allocations;

- Difficulty in mobilizing community members to take part in MTA meetings and other community work, especially for women who experience the "triple-burden work day" (*triple jornada*)
- Challenges building "consciousness" (*conciencia*) about environmental and socialist values within the broader community (i.e. there is a need for continued awareness raising and better garbage pick-up services as water and sanitation services can become compromised); and
- Advances in sanitation have lagged behind those in water posing potential health risks particularly during rainy periods.

Part 3: Future Research Plans

In addition to our theses, we have presented research findings at several conferences and meetings across Canada, and Dr. Spronk has presented in the United States. We have also published three articles on the MTAs for an international magazine on Latin America and for the University of Ottawa website. The links to the publications are below, although they are only available in English at this time:

Article in *ReVista* magazine:
http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/publications/revistaonline/winter-2013/grandmothers-and-engineers

Article on University of Ottawa website:
http://www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/sites/default/files/public/technicalwaterweb.pdf

We also plan to publish an article in an academic journal (*Water International*) in the coming year. Dr. Susan Spronk anticipates returning to Venezuela to continue work on the project in Fall 2014, while Rebecca has just begun her PhD at the University of Toronto and hopes to return to Venezuela in 2014 to carry out more research. Calais expects to graduate from the University of Ottawa in April 2014 and plans to continue working to advance gender equality.

We would like to express our sincere thanks again for your help with this research project, and for welcoming us in Venezuela.

In solidarity,

Calais Caswell, Rebecca McMillan & Susan Spronk

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