

Jennifer Megargell, Women in Venezuela

Evaluation of Field Work

The best way to understand how Venezuela is making democracy work is through first hand experience. Throughout the two weeks I spent in Venezuela, I was able to see how Chávez's presidentialism is granting women the right to actively participate in their country. Also, Chávez has given these women so many opportunities at having a better life. There were two main encounters that allowed me to see this.

While in Montecarmelo, I found the MONCAR kitchen to be a very enlightening experience. MONCAR is a women's cooperative in the very small town of Montecarmelo. I had two opportunities to listen to a woman named Gaudy speak about their cooperative. Gaudy is an older woman that has spent her life in this town. Beginning in 1994 eight women began this business. The woman began working out of kitchens until they were able to restore a building in order to do their work. MONCAR preserves a variety of different foods, including, tomato sauce, peaches, and milk. This cooperative is successfully working and giving these women a chance to do something productive with their lives. Gaudy has had the chance to travel many different places because the cooperative has won awards for its success.

The best learning experience was my home stay while I was in Venezuela. Although, I was only with my family for two nights I had to opportunity to ask them many questions.... My family told me about how much their lives had changed since Chávez has come to power. The grandmother, who is the head of the household, was able to get glasses finally for free at a clinic directly across the street from their home. Without the free services that this clinic-part of the Barrio Adentro program-offered she

said she would have spent the rest of her life dealing with her poor eye sight. Now she is able to read or do anything without any problems at all. Her two daughters also lived in this house with their children. They are single mothers who never even had the chance to graduate high school. Through Chávez's program for free education both women are expected to finish their high school education in 2008. The women then plan to take advantage of the free college education programs to become nurses. They told me that even when Chávez first came to power they had never dreamed that they would have this opportunity. Also, both women are working to start a cooperative that would include a restaurant with traditional Venezuelan food for tourists that come through their small town. All three of these women expressed to me how much they feel a part of their country now. They do not like how United States and other countries criticize their leader and the new Venezuelan style of governing. Chávez has given them hope. They continue to support everything he does and believe that he is really the answer for improving everyone's lives within the country. These women could have never even thought about starting a restaurant; however, now all of these dreams certainly are a reality.

Conclusion

Civil society and a strong leader have paved the path towards numerous opportunities for women. I focused on people in Montecarmelo because it is such a small town. I would not be nearly as amazed at what I saw had it only been in a city. They are all now able to function within their country as active members. All of the women can engage in activities pertinent to their lives. Civil society is flourishing-it is seen in the very small example of the MONCAR kitchen. There are numerous cooperatives

throughout the country such as this one that are giving people hope and increasing their standard of living. President Chávez has made this possible for the people of Venezuela. It's frightening to think of the control he has and no one can predict what will happen in the future. For now the democracy is working.