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PRESENTATION BY VENEZUELA**

**BOLIVARIAN ALTERNATIVE FOR THE AMERICAS (ALBA):
HOW IT IS IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN**

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BOLIVARIAN ALTERNATIVE FOR THE AMERICAS (ALBA):

HOW IT IS IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests:

Studies carried out by international public bodies and specialized organizations show that exclusion and poverty are the lot of millions of human beings on Planet Earth, who lack sufficient drinking water, are unable to exercise their fundamental rights—whether it be the right to education, food, work, lodging or life itself—and are not treated with dignity or respect. Worse yet is the situation of thousands of people who are literally destitute, scavenging in the garbage for something to eat and sleeping on the streets in big cities, including those of developed countries. Even in countries of the world and the Americas where government authorities show concern and have the will to tackle this scourge that affects women, men, children, teenagers and seniors, there remain cultural and political discrimination factors, exploitation and disparity with respect to access to goods and services, which only aggravate the problem. It is estimated that about two million people currently live in extreme poverty, over 70% of whom are women—hence the expression “feminization of poverty”. To ensure a future for humankind, new and effective means must be found to solve the problem of poverty that afflicts people world-wide.

Situation of Women in the Americas

Women and children—both girls and boys—from Southern countries are those who suffer the most from exclusion.

- 85 million Latin Americans have no income of their own, and the majority of the poor in Latin America are women (Source: ECLAC).
- It is imperative that women have access to assets: land, loans and microcredit, human capital (training) and social capital (organization and social protection).
- Gender disparity and poverty are closely linked.
- Households headed by women are the poorest, representing over 28% of households in Latin America, and there is a strong upward trend. At least half of the women who head up their family are more than 50 years old and are particularly vulnerable; of those aged 60 years and over, 40% are widows, while married women or women who are common-law partners represent 38% of the total. The older women are, the higher is the proportion of them that head households.
- The rural-urban migration mainly involves young women seeking better opportunities.
- The highest illiteracy rates among 15- to 24-year-olds are recorded among indigenous women.
- It is not my intention to provide data on sexual health and reproduction at this time since Elsa Rojas Hernández, Member of the National Assembly of the People’s Power of Cuba and chair of COPA’s Standing Committee on Health and Social Protection, will be giving a presentation on this subject. She has a knack for setting out the diagnoses, progress and proposals in this field of vital importance for the quality of life

and the development of nations, a field in which Cuba is on the leading edge of progress and has shown great solidarity with other nations, allowing them to benefit from its knowledge and the results of its work.

The data presented above speak eloquently of the social exclusion and vulnerability of women, who represent over half of the world population.

International Conferences

Major progress has been made in protecting women's fundamental rights through international conferences as well as international treaties and agreements. These include the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1999).

- I would like to point out that the first of the **Millennium Development Goals** is the eradication of hunger and extreme poverty, with the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women being the third.

ALBA: INTEGRATION BASED ON SOLIDARITY BETWEEN PEOPLES

With a view to promoting the adoption of humanistic integration policies based on solidarity between the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, the government of the **Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has put forward the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALBA)** as an integration proposal to fight poverty and social exclusion and further the interests of the Latin American peoples. The proposal was presented by President Hugo Chávez in 2001, and Cuba signed on immediately and has been associated with it ever since.

- ALBA's essential aim is the establishment of strategic alliances and economic and commercial instruments with a view to fair and sustainable regional development, taking into consideration the distinctive features of each country and focusing on the natural links between states (history, geography and culture, among others).
- It also aims to create mechanisms to facilitate co-operation between the countries of the continent and offset the asymmetry existing between them.
- The proposal turns on the creation of compensatory funds to correct the disparities that place weaker countries at a disadvantage in the face of the great powers. Accordingly, it gives priority to Latin American integration and a negotiation process based on sub-regional blocks that have formed strategic alliances and are able to present joint proposals.
- The proposal encourages endogenous development of nations and regions for the purpose of eradicating poverty and social exclusion, remedying social inequalities and continually improving the quality of life of ordinary citizens.
- It prioritizes progressive development and respect for the fundamental rights of all people, especially women and children.

- It attaches overriding importance to the grouping of people in co-operation networks and organizations, the pooling of knowledge, and participation and decision-making for the common good.

Bolivia, Cuba, the Commonwealth of Dominica, Nicaragua and Venezuela are members of ALBA and, in 2007, the Caribbean states of Antigua and Barbuda and of St. Vincent and the Grenadines subscribed to its Memorandum of Understanding.

The states that have joined ALBA have entered into numerous agreements in the fields of health, education, sports, culture, the economy, finance and food production. In the field of energy, ALBA member states have signed various co-operation agreements that aim to ensure overall human development and a high level of wellness with the least possible contamination and waste of non-renewable resources. The exploitation of other energy sources is also being considered, including water power, wind power, solar energy and so on. Major national projects involving gas, oil, orimulsion, electric power and food production are already underway, with distinctly positive results for regional development. Similarly, international co-operation in connection with the implementation of social programs directly benefits the states that are parties to ALBA and is an inspiration to other countries of the Americas and the Caribbean.

The Milagro Mission and the Robinson Mission have come to the assistance of the poorest people of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela and various Caribbean countries via interventions by Cuban and Venezuelan personnel and the supply by Venezuela, at no charge, of energy, transportation equipment and infrastructures. The economic development of some of these countries was given a boost through sustained investment in the social sector, for instance in social production enterprises, co-operatives, micro-enterprises, and small and medium-sized businesses seeking social added-value, which can only singularly benefit women, who participate in greater numbers than men in the different programs.

Education and health: Agreements were signed that have had considerable impact on literacy, basic and higher education, and health, by facilitating recognition of the diplomas issued by the educational institutions of the five member states. The agreements have been instrumental in providing a more complete education for all, thereby reducing poverty, remedying inequalities, and guaranteeing an ever-improved quality of life.

- Worthy of note are the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM), inaugurated in April 2007, which has already received more than 365 students from the four corners of Latin America, including an estimated 250 women, as well as the Southern University and the Latin American and Caribbean School of Public Policy. The latter was created to promote new ethical values and solidarity.

The “Yo si puedo” (Yes I Can) literacy program set up jointly by Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela, and in which Nicaragua has expressed a desire to participate, has already produced amazing results:

- Within two years, 1,500,000 Venezuelans learned to read and write, with the result that in 2005, UNESCO declared Venezuela an illiteracy-free territory. Venezuela is the second Latin American country, after Cuba, to hold this honour. The Centre for Women's Studies reports that to date, 65% of those benefiting from the literacy program in Venezuela are women. These data are of great interest in light of the fact that **according to a study conducted by UNESCO in 180 countries, two thirds of the world's illiterates are women.**
- With the help of the Cuban people involved in the literacy program, over 64,000 Hondurans were taught to read and write, 7,000 people were trained as teachers and 3,000 communities were organized. Once again, women benefited the most from this initiative.
- Bolivia was ranked third among Latin American countries with respect to progress in literacy, thanks to the efforts of the national literacy program. In this country which used to include 1.2 million illiterates mainly in the countryside, 823,000 have participated in the program and 73% of these continue to do so: in other words, 600,000 people have already learned to read and write. It is noteworthy that **80%** of the 823,000 people targeted **are women** from rural areas or the suburbs and over 95% are indigenous—figures that speak eloquently of the magnitude of the social impact such a program has (source: UNESCO).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Chile and Argentina are free of illiteracy, and Bolivia will soon be part of this group, an achievement which of course concerns a large number of women.

The field of health: In less than four years, over 1,300,000 individuals from 28 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have received health care through the **International Milagro Mission**, to which the Cuban people have made an important contribution. The lodging, transportation and meal expenses of both patient and escort are borne by the state, so there is no discrimination of any kind.

In Venezuela, in 2008 alone, 5,500 operations were performed on as many patients to restore their vision. Over 3,000 Hondurans recovered their sight after having an operation in our country. **A regional public health plan based on the Milagro Mission is being developed.**

The economy and finance: The Peoples' Trade Treaty, signed in April 2007, has proved an effective means of combating poverty, exclusion and inequalities. Its signatories are considering restructuring the Bank of the South in order to include a special section at the service of the social economy and financed by a **solidarity fund promoting the Bolivarian Alternative for Women**, with the goal of slowing the feminization of poverty in the region.

According to the UNDP, two thirds of women's work **is not** remunerated and many women are forced to do three days' worth of work every day to support themselves. This is why ALBA attaches such importance to granting loans and microcredit to women so they can operate enterprises, including micro-enterprises. It is estimated that 53,544,885 people will benefit from the creation of the ALBA Bank, which will make possible projects in various areas, including the environment, health, education, food production, finance,

energy and fair trade. When the Commonwealth of Dominica joins ALBA as a full-fledged member, the estimated number of beneficiaries will rise to 53,614,163, which will surely also have an impact on the personal development of women.

The supply of energy: As an energy superpower, Venezuela has put the supply of energy, especially oil-based energy, to work for the unity and development of the peoples of America by helping its neediest citizens and thus combating poverty. The Venezuela Heating Oil Program, launched in November 2005 to supply subsidized fuel to poor areas of the United States during the winter, is a good example of such help.

- Every day, over 125,000 barrels of oil are sent to 13 countries on highly preferential terms.

Petro America, an energy integration project for Latin America and the Caribbean, Petro Alba and Petro Alimentos are undertakings that finance social, economic, food production and oil supply programs at preferential prices.

A climate of economic, social and cultural co-operation between nation-states, or between the governments and the people, in America, the Caribbean and U.S. communities has been created through the diplomacy of the peoples, with very positive results.

With the co-operation of Cuba and Venezuela, remarkable progress has been made in the region within the framework of the Strategic Plan for Culture and Sports: the Latin American and Caribbean Sports University was established in the hope of introducing 1,400 new techniques into the various communities involved. As a result, our athletes obtained exceptional results in terms of ranking and participation in high-level and Olympic sports activities.

Food security: To illustrate the vital importance of this objective, a treaty was entered into for the implementation of co-operation programs regarding food self-sufficiency and security in order to guarantee investment in food production and marketing, with due regard for each country's capacity.

The process of collectivizing land tenure has been accelerated, the fight against the latifundia has been intensified and social and environmental protection measures have been adopted. Various projects to guarantee the right of all people to adequate food are underway in a bid to fight child malnutrition. According to recent data, in Latin America approximately 36% of children under two years of age are at high food risk. In rural areas, this proportion is above 46%.

We all have an obligation to seek solutions to the problem of world hunger. According to studies conducted on this subject, women and children are most at risk of dying of hunger. Legislative bills that aim to protect peasants and the rural population grant land ownership to those who work the land and organize according to a community model, which affords them a guarantee of social protection and ensures better management of the food distribution chain.

WOMEN IN THE FRAMEWORK OF ALBA

The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas program grants paramount importance to women's fundamental rights. To this end, through the organization and awareness-raising of women, ALBA has been instrumental in establishing spaces where ways can be sought to improve the status of women:

- Mobilizing women's organizations from various countries in support of ALBA, which has facilitated the organization of discussion forums in the region in order to find ways of improving the situation of women and of indigenous groups or groups of African descent.
- Creating the **Latin American and Caribbean Women's Institute**, which goals are as follows: to design policies to ensure gender equality in the educational and legislative fields and in crime prevention and repression in order to counter and eradicate gender-based violence, to establish legal and political equality; to publicize and defend human rights; and to identify, explain and underscore the key role women play in the fight for empowerment and independence.
- **Venezuela is a case in point**, for this is where a data bank on heroines and the Order of Heroines of the Motherland were created.
- Promoting the socialization of domestic work and its added value so as to heighten social awareness of this issue and fight against and remedy conditions that impose a double workload on women. In recognizing the added value of domestic work, Venezuela allocated hundreds of thousands of pensions to women living in poverty and undertook to create a social security system for them.
- **Policy concerning women's access to credit:** Through various financial firms, countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have obtained loans and microcredit as well as support and consulting services in order to promote the development of productive market activities that enable women to provide for themselves and their family units under better conditions (BanMujer or Women's Development Bank). It is appropriate to mention here the organization and empowerment of **indigenous women** in hundreds of social production co-operatives. At the beginning, the women's spouses put up some resistance, but once they recognized the economic benefits of the activity and its advantages for the communities, they tended to be more tolerant. **The women who took part say these initiatives fostered their personal development, allowing them to discover new options, contribute to their household's wellness and have higher self-esteem.** The indigenous households who benefited from the policy number in the hundreds of thousands.

By passing the Land Law and a series of other legislative measures, **Venezuela** has undertaken to develop the agricultural sector by granting peasant and indigenous women and female agricultural workers ownership of the land, credit for its development, support, technical advice, and health and social security protection. The figures concerning BanMujer speak volumes. Through humanitarian missions, it was possible to achieve a higher level of participation and development, which, on average, benefits women in a proportion **of over 65%** in all fields in which government programs apply, and in a proportion **of over 70% in the field of higher education.** The Madres Del Barrio (Mothers of the Neighbourhood) mission benefits a high percentage of the population

living in poverty. A whole list of figures could be cited in this respect, but I have preferred to focus on the fundamental aspects that have a determining impact in the countries of the region that have joined ALBA.

- The women's social movements taking part in the 5th ALBA Summit proposed the creation of a women's development bank with a view to increasing the number of women in the production sector.
- In Bolivia, Argentina, Chile and Brazil, aid programs for women, children from indigenous households, and seniors have improved the quality of life of these target populations. Examples of such programs include the Juancito Pinto plan and the FOME Zero (Zero Hunger) plan—initiatives and experiences which ALBA is undertaking to repeat in other member countries.
- **The Social Continental Alliance**, a coalition of networks, organizations and social movements, **represents about 50 million people in the Americas**. It includes a women's committee made up of delegates from the four corners of the continent and aims to promote strategies and proposals in favour of democracy and social justice, the focus being on eliminating gender inequalities. This feminist program to fight for political gender equality was created by the Peoples' Trade Treaty, entered into in Venezuela in April 2007.
- The greatest progress achieved through the ALBA integration process is the **collective awareness** developed by social organizations and networks, thanks in particular to the participation of women from the various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, who, as part of a permanent action program, have adopted the dual objective of entering into agreements and creating spaces for consensus and action in order to fight discrimination, exclusion and violence against women and establish gender equality.
- **About 76.3% of the participants in community holistic medicine training programs are women**, and in the case of community organizations the proportion of women is greater than 78%.
- In the education and culture sectors, the proportion of women participants varies between 60 and 74%. This data is drawn from statistics concerning holistic medicine training programs and higher education and culture programs (Source: CEM UCV, Women's Studies Centre at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2008).
- According to data provided by BanMujer Venezuela, six years after its creation, the program had fostered the overall personal development of Venezuelan women carrying on economic activities in the manufacturing, agricultural, commercial and service sectors, through the injection of nearly 84,000 (83,996) credits, for a total investment of approximately 261 million bolivars. During the first quarter of 2008, an average of 144,000 women benefited from this program, which also provided them with counselling services and personal growth workshops, and, above all, resulted in the creation of new jobs that strengthened the agricultural (30%), manufacturing (37%), commercial (18%) and service (15%) sectors. In 2008 alone, the sociopolitical organization of women was strengthened in various communities through the establishment of social networks, 98% of which were made up of women.

- These figures clearly illustrate the co-operation process that has been established between the states that are ALBA members and between these states and some others that benefit from ALBA through missions and programs focusing on education, culture, health, energy and financial co-operation. By helping to reduce poverty, such co-operation will no doubt have a major impact on the protection and enjoyment of human rights, especially women's rights, in the region in the coming years.

General Conclusions

- ALBA is based on values of complementarity and solidarity, and focuses on the individual.
- Over 1,300,000 Latin Americans have been operated on and have recovered their eyesight through the invaluable contribution of the Cuban and Venezuelan people, who bore the costs of feeding, lodging and transporting the patients and their escorts. It is estimated by default that approximately 50% of the program beneficiaries are women.
- Over 3,250,000 Latin Americans have learned to read and write, and consequently have emerged from the darkness of marginality and exclusion in which they had been condemned to live. The Women's Studies Centre (CEM UCV) estimates that at least 65% of the beneficiaries of this program are women.
- Some 6,693 students have already obtained their diploma in medicine and over 40,000 are currently in training. I might mention that in Venezuela, 76% of those studying in this discipline are women.
- Thanks to Venezuela's support in the area of energy supply, every day 125,000 barrels of oil are sent to 13 countries on highly preferential terms.
- Agreements aimed at granting loans and microcredit in order to encourage women's participation in production sector activities together with the granting of land ownership to groups that had so far been excluded from it are making an impact on people's quality of life.
- **The positive effects of these measures benefit women, men, children and seniors alike. These results are best assessed by considering the quality of life afforded to millions of people and not simply the bare statistical data.**

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to the Executive Committee of COPA's Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas for having agreed to the request I made in 2006 to present this report, on behalf of Venezuela, setting out the main benefits that have resulted from ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, particularly for the region's women. This presentation will surely give the Network a better overall perspective on this issue and enable it to seek consensus on methods for improving women's living conditions, in accordance with its own stated objectives.

Thank you for your attention.

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