

Osmel Sousa, president of *Organización Miss Venezuela*, articulates clearly what Venezuelan culture tells its women everyday: “I say that inner beauty does not exist. That’s something that unpretty women invented to justify themselves...the girls don’t have to be completely natural. They have to be beautiful. But where that beauty comes from doesn’t matter” (Chalk and Neuman, 2013). In 2013, 231,742 surgical and 291,388 nonsurgical cosmetic procedures were performed in Venezuela, giving the country a rank of eight worldwide in terms of total aesthetic procedures performed, in comparison to a population size that ranks 46th (Industry Insights, Inc., 2013; Modern Healthcare, 2014).

Venezuela’s history of Miss Universe champions and petroleum investments has produced a culture engrained with prejudice, encouraging women and girls to modify their bodies in order to improve their quality of life. The media features blunt statements about the inferiority of racial minorities while advertising for procedures that promise to alter ethnic characteristics. Acknowledging the complex political, social, economic, and racial factors contributing to this reality, as well as the Venezuelan government’s unsuccessful efforts to combat the problem, I propose a multi-step response that calls for the development of a Ministry of Women, which would instigate a series of policy changes geared toward female empowerment.

Studies indicate that women are internalizing the beauty standards imposed upon them: 16% of women who identified as *blanca* (mostly possessing European features) and 16% who identified as *morena* (medium to dark skinned with straight/wavy hair) expressed a strong desire to have rhinoplasty, while 50% of those who identified as *negro* (medium to dark skin with curly hair) wanted the procedure (Gulbas, 2012). The procedures themselves are invasive and dangerous, often occurring in contaminated

hospitals with supply shortages and uncertified physicians. There is no definitive reason why women are choosing to take such risks, but researchers suggest that a combination of colonialism, restrictive immigration policies that attempted to increase the amount of white people in the region, and European education of Venezuelan doctors (residency programs were not established in Venezuela until the 1960s) are responsible for this reality.

Responses to the issue must be multifaceted, taking into consideration the social determinants of health model in their response to deeply ridden inequities which are central to the unhealthy idealization of western facial features and the supermodel body-type. Class, race, and gender in particular are at the forefront of this topic. Gulbas asserts this by arguing that women see their bodies as “cultural capital” (Gulbas, 2008, p.104). Women of color experience such brutal discrimination that they feel they must change their physical features in order to elevate their social status. Therefore, giving these women an alternative to improving their living standards is vital to combating such widespread feelings of inadequacy.

Government-sponsored programs that seek to empower impoverished women of color have been implemented in Venezuela in the past but are in need of improvement. Under the Chavez administration, for example, *Mision Vuelvan Caras* was established in 2004 to encourage unemployed women to form cooperatives and businesses through tax breaks and credit programs. However, cooperatives developed using these funds were not always successful. A cooperative named MUDEBAR was initially run by about 200 women, but the economic recession has reduced the company to 42 people. Though this particular program was not entirely successful, its mission has played a very significant

role in dealing with the body image crisis. Kathy Davis of the PARIS program describes plastic surgery as a “symptom of oppression and act of empowerment all in one” (Negrin, 2002, p. 24). Therefore, by providing another means for women to feel empowered, plastic surgery would likely become less popular.

My response to the poor body image standards imposed on Venezuelan society focuses on empowerment and women’s rights through the institution of a Ministry of Women, the majority of which would consist of female politicians. After the successful implementation of the Ministry over the course of twenty years, as well as adding it to the constitution and allocating funding for its research and projects, the Venezuelan Ministry should amend its *Mision Vuelvan Caras* so that it includes long term funding for feminist nonprofit organizations in order to ensure their sustainability.

Applicants would apply to *Mision Vuelvan Caras* through the Ministry of Women, which would include a five-person, majority-female application committee. Accepted applicants would be required to undergo a year-long training program that includes non-profit marketing and financing courses. Reforming and designing the new program should take approximately fifteen years. The program and the Ministry would continue to grow and allow for the integration of new programs in response to the success and failures of past strategies. New ideas might include a networking system for organizations to communicate with one another, governmental advisors appointed to counsel the organizations and improved health education programs in public schools.

Feminist organizations should look to the coalition-building model of organizations like *Yōsōng Minuhoe* (Womenlink), a feminist organization in South Korea that teaches girls about the harms of “lookism,” or the obsession with appearances,

through the production of television shows, magazines, and videos. Consultation should be continuous and could potentially be made easier by the networking system. Focus should ultimately be placed on oppressed populations that are vulnerable to Venezuelan beauty standards. Additionally, these nonprofits and the government must collaborate by taking part in discussion panels on scaling-up non-profits in order to yield success. This collaboration should ultimately lead to a reduction in media censorship so that organizations can freely publicize research, programs, etc. Such reform would likely occur within fifty years.

Acknowledging the nature of Venezuela's body image crisis, this proposal seeks to modify existing policy, while slowly integrating new governmental programs by fostering relationships with non-profits. Women of color in Venezuela have been convinced of their inferiority to the point that they feel their only route to success is through dangerous procedures that force them to sacrifice their health and basic living expenses. The problems illustrated in this proposal are ultimately issues of human rights, and must be viewed as such by responders.