

JANUARY 05, 2006

## Beauty obsession unites divided Venezuela

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December 30, 2005

CARACAS, Venezuela -- For Yohana Bernal, the decision to have her breasts enlarged was an easy one. After all, most of her friends had already done it, and the 22-year-old felt that being small-breasted in Venezuela carried a bigger stigma than plastic surgery.

"I see it as something normal. It's like putting highlights in your hair," said the petite brunette.

In Venezuela, beauty isn't necessarily something you're born with - it's a pursuit that has evolved into an industry, a national obsession, a staple of daily life.

Beauty salons and spas outnumber drugstores in Caracas telephone listings; women unabashedly apply full makeup in packed subways; teenagers are known to get breast jobs as their traditional "quinceanera" coming-of-age gift at age 15; Venezuelans consistently place among the finalists in the Miss Universe pageant.

Men are doing it too, going for the metrosexual look that entails waxings, liposuction, bicep and pectoral implants.

President Hugo Chavez, an admirer of Fidel Castro's Cuba, says his country is undergoing a socialist "revolution," and though the gap between rich and poor may be wide, beauty-driven consumption is rampant at all income levels.

Chavez himself reminisces fondly about attending past pageants. But when his televised speech to the United Nations interrupted the September 2005 Miss Venezuela broadcast for 15 minutes, hundreds of angry viewers in Caracas protested by banging on pots from their windows, blowing whistles and even firing guns into the air.

In 2004, the Venezuelan beauty products and toiletries market was worth \$1.1 billion, according to Euromonitor International, a London-based research firm. Per capita, that makes Venezuelans among Latin America's biggest spenders on cosmetics, forking out about a third more than Argentines and 43 percent more than Colombians - though less than American and French women who enjoy higher incomes.

As in the United States, beauty contestants are getting younger and younger. For 5-year-old Jaiberlyn Sanchez, December's "Little Model of Venezuela" contest was her third this year. She and her classmates at Caracas' Garbo & Class modeling school practice dancing in heels that would topple most grown women. They are trained in diction, manners and strutting on catwalks.

Alba Achique, the school's founder, denies the girls are learning to value appearance over intellect, saying beauty is a career asset like any other.

"Here, we prepare them for life," Achique said. "This place is a talent machine."

The success of a lucky few feed the hopes of thousands. Veruska Ramirez, nicknamed "Cinderella," was abandoned as a child and grew up poor cleaning houses before becoming Miss Venezuela 1997 and embarking on a modeling career. Former Miss Universe Irene Saez became a mayor and later a presidential contender, losing to Chavez in 1998.

The annual Miss Venezuela pageant is the year's most watched program and a source of national pride. Venezuelans proudly point out that their country, the world's fifth-largest oil exporter, is known abroad for three things: oil, baseball stars and beauty queens.

Venezuela has won four Miss Universe, five Miss World and four Miss International crowns - in total, more than any other country. Miss Venezuela made the Miss Universe pageant's 10 finalists for an uninterrupted 20-year span until 2003.

A few Venezuelans criticize the fixation on physical appearance as frivolous in a country where more than half live in poverty. But most don't see it that way.

The no-pain, no-gain quest for beauty often means going under the knife.

"Today, at least in Venezuela, almost every woman wants to have surgery," claims Dr. Isaias Bello, a plastic surgeon, saying many from poor backgrounds save up for an operation. He and some colleagues are urging banks to provide financing for surgery.

The Venezuelan Plastic Surgery Society does not collect statistics, but every year thousands of people from around the country, and from the Caribbean, North America and Europe, come for cosmetic surgery.

Trying to build a career as a folk singer, Bernal recalls she would often look longingly at more well-endowed women. One after another, most of her friends underwent the same operation.

The surgery, like any, carried risks: infection, implant rejection, scar tissue and more. But she was told it would not affect sexual relations or her ability to breast-feed.

The doctor made two cuts and inserted a silicone sac on each side.

Bernal came out of the operation deathly pale, whispering that it felt like "something inside was going to explode." But the pain soon subsided, and she feels more attractive.

"I don't regret it at all," she said. "I would do it again."