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La operación: Coerced Sterilization of Puerto Rican Women in the 20th Century and the Complexity of Free Choice

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Department of History

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ABSTRACT

When Puerto Rico was colonized by the United States in 1898, the economic and living conditions were already dire. As jobs became scarce, starvation was common, and disease ran rampant on the island. The colonial and federal governments were looking for a way to fix the problems in Puerto Rico. The problem to them seemed obvious: overpopulation. Puerto Rico was a small island, with a population growing at a rate faster than the land could keep up with. An immediate solution was an increase in migration to the mainland, and a long-term solution was to lower the birth rate through family planning programs. The most popular form of contraception on the island eventually became sterilization, which was promoted and subsidized by the United States government through Puerto Rican public health institutions. In 1965, it was estimated that one-third of Puerto Rican women of child-bearing age had been sterilized, a rate ten times higher than that of white women.

This thesis examines the ways that Puerto Rican women's fertility was discussed over time, primarily in the United States, and the ways in which these discussions influenced their decisions regarding their reproductive health. In the post-World War II period and through the 1960s, the Puerto Rican population in the United States grew exponentially due to the mass labor migration, creating large Puerto Rican communities in large American cities which led to an increase in negative stereotypes. The government wanted to improve the public image of Puerto Ricans, as they were an important source of cheap labor for American corporations. The media began portraying Puerto Rican migrants as hard workers who should be accepted into the United States, causing Americans to view Puerto Ricans as valuable only because of the labor they provided. Puerto Rican women were expected to go to work to provide for their family, which meant that they could no longer have large families. Many Puerto Rican women at this time

chose to be sterilized either before they left for the mainland, or shortly after arriving, so that they would be better able to enter the workforce. Sterilization on the island was also seen as the most effective way to slow population growth, ultimately leading to an improvement in the Puerto Rican economy, so it was discussed favorably in the American media.

The conversation surrounding Puerto Rican fertility shifted in the 1970s, away from the economic benefit it provided and toward viewing it as a women's issue of reproductive freedom. Various activist groups in the United States and Puerto Rico exposed the coercion used to get Puerto Rican women to consent to sterilization, including not informing them of other contraceptive options or not fully informing them of the permanence of the operation. The Puerto Rican independence movement especially fought against sterilization, calling it a genocidal campaign by the United States. The opinions of Puerto Rican women who were most likely to choose sterilization, namely poor, uneducated women who lived in dangerous neighborhoods, were not put at the forefront of these arguments. Despite legislation that passed stricter guidelines of what was considered informed consent from a patient seeking sterilization, and improved community education about reproductive health, many women continued to seek sterilization through the twentieth century and even today.

Looking at articles from popular American publications at the time revealed the way that average Americans felt about Puerto Rican sterilization, which could be compared to publications from activist newsletters released at the same time. Personal testimonies from Puerto Rican women who chose sterilization reveal how the way others spoke about sterilization and Puerto Rican fertility was different from the way the women themselves viewed sterilization. Their stories also show how the circumstances women were forced to live in influenced their reproductive choices.

Introduction

Until recently, Puerto Rico had the highest rate of sterilization in the world. Now only surpassed by Panama, sterilization is an important part of Puerto Rican women's history in the 20th century. In 1965, it was estimated that 1 of 3 married women were sterilized, and by 1986 that number had jumped to 46% of married Puerto Rican women.¹ Sterilization as a form of contraception gained popularity globally towards the end of the 20th century, but nowhere else saw the exponential rise in sterilization rates like Puerto Rico.² This was not just a trend on the island, but among Puerto Rican women living in the United States as well.³ Choosing sterilization as a form of birth control eventually became cultural, with many women citing family members and friends who had been sterilized as their reason for choosing the operation.⁴ Ultimately, a multitude of factors influenced why sterilization became so prominent in Puerto Rico, with many being related to American colonial presence on the island.

Contraception became an important topic of conversation in Puerto Rico in the 1920s as ways to improve living conditions became an issue of importance. Puerto Rico became a United States colony in 1898, when Spain ceded the territory after the end of the Spanish-American War.⁵ For years, Puerto Rico had mainly an agricultural economy that was meant to suit local needs, with only a few larger plantations participating in international trade.⁶ However, the 19th century saw a change in the Puerto Rican economy to being export based, with coffee as their

¹ Charles Warren, "Contraceptive Sterilization in Puerto Rico," *Demography* 23, no. 3 (1986): 353.

² Warren, "Contraceptive Sterilization in Puerto Rico," *Demography* 23, no. 3 (1986): 353.

³ Darrel Enck-Wanzer, Iris Morales, and Denise Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 166.

⁴ Iris Lopez, *Matters of Choice* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 4.

⁵ Annette Ramirez de Arellano and Conrad Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico* (United States: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 3.

⁶ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and Contraception*, 5.

main export and sugar a distant second.⁷ As the island changed more to exporting goods, smaller *haciendas* were at a disadvantage compared to the larger ones that already had experience with producing crops for trade. Smaller plantations also relied on antiquated equipment, slowing down their output, or they had to have their crops processed by refineries which charged them a percentage of their profit.⁸ The overseas market only allowed a small percentage of the population to do well and become affluent, and created stark divisions between social classes in Puerto Rican society.⁹

The economic situation only worsened after Puerto Rico became a United States colony. The United States imposed new trade regulations, which increased Puerto Rican access to the mainland market but also cut down on their access to the European market. The United States also imposed quotas on crop production, which allowed mainland corporations to monopolize certain industries.¹⁰ In 1899, a hurricane wiped out most of the island's coffee crop, which it was never able to recover. Rather, American sugar corporations saw the opportunity to develop the sugar cane plantations and develop a sugar-based economy.¹¹ Powerful American sugar corporations were able to centralize most of the development; 36% of cultivated land was owned by only 1.2% of farms, which caused many of the small *haciendas* to be knocked out of sugar production. Now, farmers that had originally farmed for their families and local communities on their own land had to become wage earners on larger plantations.¹² The development of a new working class strengthened the class differences that already existed.

⁷ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 5.

⁸ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 6.

⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 6.

¹⁰ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 12.

¹¹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 12.

¹² Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 12.

The collapse of the sugar market in the 1920s had a devastating effect on the Puerto Rican economy, as it had become so dependent on the export. Unemployment spread and average income across the island dropped, leading to widespread hunger.¹³ This was only contributing further to already poor living conditions. Most families relied on contaminated water supplies, meaning that waterborne illnesses were a leading cause of death on the island.¹⁴ Tuberculosis was also rampant and led to many deaths, as well as malaria which was slightly less common. Mortality rates were high, especially among newborns. It was estimated that 1 in 4 infants died within their first year of life.¹⁵ Aside from health concerns, there was also a lack of education on the island, with less than one-fifth of the population being literate.¹⁶ Because of this, Americans viewed Puerto Ricans as “dirty, ignorant, and lazy,” and that the characteristics of the general population were “ignorance, poverty, and helplessness.”¹⁷

By the 1920s, conditions on the island were worse than ever and the United States knew that it was a problem that needed to be addressed, changing their prior practice of a “policy of no policy.”¹⁸ It was determined that the main issue to be addressed was overpopulation. Researchers on the mainland argued that the island only had limited resources, and the population was growing at a rate that the island could not sustain.¹⁹ Population control then became a priority of Puerto Rican policy.

In 1917, the Jones Act was passed which made all Puerto Ricans citizens of the United States, and also established a form of self-government on the island.²⁰ This was significant to

¹³ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 13.

¹⁴ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 7.

¹⁵ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 8.

¹⁶ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 7.

¹⁷ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 7, 13.

¹⁸ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 3.

¹⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 17.

²⁰ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 9.

fixing the population problem in a few ways. First, by making Puerto Ricans United States citizens, emigration to the mainland became easier and was encouraged by the government. There was not enough work on the island for all of the people who needed jobs, as plenty of displaced farmers needed work. They were encouraged to go to the United States to look for work, which also provided a new labor force for jobs on the mainland.²¹ This was one part of the plan to aid in the overpopulation problem, by removing as many unemployed men from the island as possible to stop draining resources. Emigration to the United States became extremely common; between the 1940s-1950s, nearly one million Puerto Ricans emigrated to the United States.²²

Emigration was only a temporary fix, however. The main strategy to control population size was through family planning and simply reducing the number of babies born. Malthusianism and eugenics both drove population control efforts in underdeveloped nations in the early 20th century, and Puerto Rico was no exception. Malthusianism is the belief that overpopulation causes poverty, and that population growth needed to be checked before it grew beyond what the Earth could provide for. Neo-Malthusianism combined this theory with eugenics, believing that poorer populations were inherently inferior to wealthier populations, and therefore should be the groups that should reproduce less.²³ Neo-Malthusianism was adopted by many Americans and Puerto Ricans in power, and shaped the family planning measures that were to come.

The first family planning clinic opened in 1925 and was founded by the League for the Control of Natalty. Founded by Puerto Rican doctors, such as Dr. José Lanauze Rolon, the focus of this organization was to provide family planning advice and information to working class

²¹ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 7.

²² Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 7.

²³ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 4.

women. The goal was not only population control, but also to improve conditions for the working class by also promoting a minimum wage and more education.²⁴ Facing extreme opposition by the Catholic Church, which maintained a large presence in Puerto Rico, and a lack of funds, the League for the Control of Natality was forced to shut down in 1928.²⁵ At the same time, in 1925 the Birth Control League of Puerto Rico established the first birth control clinic in San Juan, which likely provided clinical services to women as well as family planning advice. This clinic was shut down two years later, for the same reasons.²⁶ These clinics were limited in their impact due to restrictions by the Comstock Laws, federal legislation that prohibited transporting “obscene, lewd, and lascivious” materials. This included birth control.²⁷ Without the ability to widely distribute contraception or family planning materials, these clinics were unable to have the widespread impact on reproduction that they had hoped.

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a commission to Puerto Rico to determine the best strategy for sending aid to Puerto Rico as part of his New Deal. The commission wrote a report that came to be known as the Chardón Plan. The plan stated that while emigration might be part of the solution to solving the employment problem, it would only be a temporary fix unless population growth slowed to match the rate of emigration.²⁸ Therefore, despite opposition from the Catholic Church, the report recommended funding birth control programs on the island. In 1935, the first United States government funded birth control clinic opened in association with the School of Tropical Medicine.²⁹ Between 1935-1936, between fifty-three to sixty-seven maternal health centers were set up under United States government programs, and

²⁴ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 11.

²⁵ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 11.

²⁶ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 11.

²⁷ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 19.

²⁸ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 35.

²⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 39.

over 10,000 women received birth control services.³⁰ These women likely received either diaphragms or condoms, but there are not clear records, as birth control was still illegal in Puerto Rico at this time.³¹ By 1936, Catholic opposition to the Maternal Health clinics grew so much that the criticism eventually reached mainland Catholics. Out of fear of losing his Catholic base in an election year, Roosevelt removed government funding from all birth control clinics in Puerto Rico.³²

All of the discussion about population control in Puerto Rico, however, made the island very desirable for private entities looking to test contraceptive devices. The first was Clarence Gamble, physician and heir to Proctor and Gamble fortune. In 1936, Gamble established the Maternal and Child Health Association, hiring many of the same people who worked in the federally funded clinics.³³ Gamble decided to try a new method of distributing contraception, arguing that it would be more effective to bring birth control to the women instead of having them come to a clinic. This strategy would reach more women.³⁴ He was particularly focused on reaching poor women and focused the door-to-door effort in rural areas.³⁵ Because he was focused on limiting reproduction of the lower class, he also felt that the types of contraception that should be handed out should be changed due to their intelligence levels. Gamble felt that working class women were not intelligent enough to understand how to use diaphragms as contraception, and instead should be given easier products like spermicidal creams and foams.³⁶

³⁰Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 14.

³¹Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 14.

³² Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 43.

³³ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 102.

³⁴ Johanna Schoen, *Choice & Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (United States: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 205.

³⁵ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 103.

³⁶ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 102.

Gamble felt that a lower efficacy rate was worth it if the likelihood that people would use the product increased, which he felt was the case when it came to spermicidal products over diaphragms.³⁷

Puerto Rican women were not able to choose what contraception they were given when they went to or were visited by clinics, rather they were given whatever product that clinic was testing at the time.³⁸ After years of being given ineffective methods of birth control, Puerto Rican women eventually became desperate for more reliable forms of contraception. This was one of the reasons why women were eager to take part in trials for the oral contraception pill when they began in 1956.³⁹ Puerto Rico was chosen as the location for birth control pill testing as the island was still struggling with overpopulation, and Margaret Sanger, who sparked the development of the pill, envisioned that the pill would be used in the future as a means of population control.⁴⁰

Despite women's willingness to take part in the trial, not all women who participated were fond of taking the pill. Many women were confused by the daily regimen or were afraid that the pill would stop being effective if they made a mistake. Others thought they could stop taking it when their husbands were not around or chose to skip days to get relief from serious side effects. After the first fourteen months of testing, 55% of the initial subjects dropped from the trials.⁴¹ Women were concerned about taking or using ineffective methods of contraception, as they did not want to risk any unwanted pregnancies.⁴² The confusion surrounding the birth control pill, as well as the emphasis by private birth control clinics on less effective contraceptive

³⁷ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 103.

³⁸ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 206.

³⁹ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 209.

⁴⁰ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 208.

⁴¹ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 209.

⁴² Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 207.

products, caused women to seek out sterilization, which they knew was a reliable form of birth control.

Once sterilization was legalized in Puerto Rico in 1937, it eventually became the most popular form of contraception on the island. While sterilization was originally only available at private hospitals, and therefore only accessible to the wealthy, eventually public hospitals began performing the procedure as well. Between 1945 and 1946, the number of sterilizations per year doubled to 1,000.⁴³ Sterilization was still most accessible to wealthy women, however, until 1957 when sterilizations began being subsidized.⁴⁴ This made sterilization the most affordable and accessible form of reliable contraception for poor women.

After sterilization became federally funded, the already high sterilization rate only continued to grow in Puerto Rico. Historians have evaluated multiple different factors that might have contributed to why sterilization became so prominent in Puerto Rico. The first is economic influence, specifically the introduction of capitalism to the island. Annette Ramirez de Arellano and Conrad Seipp's *Colonialism, Catholicism, and Contraception: A History of Birth Control in Puerto Rico* discusses the impact that American capitalism had on the Puerto Rican economy. As mentioned earlier, forcing the Puerto Rican economy to switch from a local subsistence economy to benefit large American corporations was detrimental. The island became dependent on a single crop, sugar cane, so when that market crashed the Puerto Rican economy crashed with it. Additionally, the expansion of American corporations caused families to lose their land and jobs, causing a massive unemployment problem.⁴⁵ Without work, families were suffering from starvation and could not afford to care for their children. This is one of the reasons Puerto Rican

⁴³ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 136.

⁴⁴ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 142.

⁴⁵ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 7.

women became interested in contraception, so that they would stop having children that they could not support.

Laura Briggs also discusses the impact of capitalism on the Puerto Rican economy in her book *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. She argues that attributing Puerto Rico's problems to overpopulation ignored the true cause of the issue, which was capitalism. The problem was not that people were having too many children and did not have enough resources, but rather that too few of the population held too much of the available resources.⁴⁶ As Arellano and Seipp wrote, the introduction of American corporations and an export-based economy exacerbated already strong class differences in Puerto Rico, making an already small affluent group even wealthier.⁴⁷ Sociologists who studied conditions in Puerto Rico in the 20th century focused not on the effects capitalism had on society and ways to fix them, like adjusting land and wealth distribution, but rather focused solely on the importance of population control measures. As Briggs wrote, when studying Puerto Rico, the question of "why some sectors of society had more resources than others" was no longer asked, and instead the question became "why do some families have more children than they can support?".⁴⁸ Scholars like Arellano, Seipp, and Briggs have argued that the implementation of capitalism through American imperialism was one of the factors that led to high sterilization rates in Puerto Rico as it created more pronounced class differences, and left lower class women with such little resources they could not support their families. Desperate for effective birth control measures to avoid unwanted pregnancies, they turned to sterilization because it was by far the most effective.

⁴⁶ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 121.

⁴⁷ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 6.

⁴⁸ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 21.

Historians have also written about capitalism in terms of how it changed Puerto Rican culture. Arellano and Seipp discuss how the majority of emigrants to the mainland searching for work were men, leaving behind families.⁴⁹ The mid-20th century also saw more women entering the workforce, being employed in factories and spending less time in the home.⁵⁰ Both of these changes in traditional Puerto Rican family structure caused women to want fewer children. Women had less time to take care of large families when they spent more time at work, causing the ideal family size in Puerto Rico to shrink to around two children.⁵¹

Another important factor that historians have studied was the role of the Catholic Church and Catholicism in women's decision to be sterilized. Catholicism had a large presence in Puerto Rico, especially among working class families that tended to be more traditional.⁵² Considering that family planning programs were typically targeted towards working class families, opposition from the Catholic Church was a factor that clinics had to deal with. Arellano and Seipp write a lot about Catholic opposition to any form of contraception, and how the Church attempted to turn the general population against family planning efforts by the United States. The Church said that the United States was attempting genocide against Puerto Rican people, which did change the minds of some Puerto Rican women.⁵³ Schoen touches on this topic as well, writing that 25 women dropped out of the birth control pill trials after it was published that the trial was run by "sterilizers" with a neo-Malthusian campaign.⁵⁴

Scholars have written that the influence of Catholicism in Puerto Rican culture probably led to women preferring sterilization over other forms of birth control. Although birth control

⁴⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 17.

⁵⁰ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 143.

⁵¹ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 215.

⁵² Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 7.

⁵³ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 139.

⁵⁴ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 211.

was seen as a sin, women were told that sterilization would be more acceptable because it was done only once. A sin committed only once, as compared to everyday like the pill or other forms of contraception, would be easier to forgive.⁵⁵ The faith of Puerto Rican women was sometimes exploited so that they would consent to sterilization, which is one of the themes scholars bring up when discussing sterilization abuse in Puerto Rico.

Along with religious factors, the eugenic component to family planning programs in Puerto Rico has caused scholars to examine whether sterilization abuse did occur. Briggs writes about the role of eugenics in Puerto Rican family planning, discussing how lower-class families were targeted for population control as they were considered inferior and less intelligent.⁵⁶ Joanne Schoen talks about eugenic influence on sterilization campaigns in her book *Choice and Coercion*. She discusses the support that Puerto Rican birth control efforts received from Margaret Sanger and American Planned Parenthood, which were known to have eugenic intentions. Margaret Sanger wrote that she saw the birth control pill being important in controlling populations in “slums, jungles, and among the most ignorant people”, and considered Puerto Rico to be the perfect place to test the theory.⁵⁷ The establishment of the eugenic board in 1937 is also evidence of intention to slow reproduction in unwanted groups of people.

Sterilization was not only prominent among Puerto Rican women living on the island but was also just as common as Puerto Rican women living on the mainland. Iris Lopez examines this in her book *Matters of Choice*, which studies Puerto Rican women living in New York City. Lopez explains how different factors of life in the United States influenced women’s decisions to be sterilized, like the need for Puerto Rican women to find work when they migrated to the

⁵⁵ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 120.

⁵⁶ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 75.

⁵⁷ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 208.

mainland. Other factors included violent neighborhoods and high crime rates in heavily Puerto Rican parts of New York City, which made women want to be sterilized to raise fewer children in such dangerous circumstances. Puerto Rican migrants living in the United States were uniquely influenced by the way Americans thought of and treated Puerto Ricans. *Matters of Choice* looks at the way the Puerto Rican experience in New York changed over time, and in turn how women's choices regarding sterilization changed as well.

Many historians have looked at evidence of eugenic intentions and likely coercion of Puerto Rican women as evidence that similar sterilization abuse that happened in the United States also occurred in Puerto Rico. Feminist groups on the mainland, like the Puerto Rican group the Young Lords, called for the U.S. to pull out of Puerto Rico, saying that women would not have reproductive freedom until they were free of colonial influence.⁵⁸ Jennifer Nelson discusses the Puerto Rican independence movement in relation to reproductive health, and the goals of the Young Lords, in her article "Abortions Under Community Control". The Young Lords argued that Puerto Rican women should be able to have as many children as they desire, and that the only reason that they are opting to be sterilized is because they do not have the financial means to grow their families. The Young Lords blame this on capitalism and believe that if they had the resources Puerto Rican women would have as many children as possible.⁵⁹

However, the topic of female sterilization is more complex than that. Both Joanna Schoen and Laura Briggs discuss this in their books. To compare sterilization in Puerto Rico directly to the abuse that occurred on the mainland is not a fair comparison, because it eliminates the point of view of the Puerto Rican women themselves. On the mainland, women of color and women

⁵⁸ Jennifer A. Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control: Feminism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Reproduction Among New York City's Young Lords," *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 1 (2001): 3.

⁵⁹ Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control," 4.

from other “undesirable” groups were sterilized without their consent as part of a eugenic campaign, but this was not the case in Puerto Rico. The majority of sterilizations done in Puerto Rico were voluntary, with women citing various different reasons for the procedure such as economic, health, or personal convenience reasons.⁶⁰ And even of the women who eventually regretted having the procedure, very few reported that felt forced or misinformed into making the decision.⁶¹

Additionally, while mainland feminists might have promoted anti-sterilization, Laura Briggs writes that the anti-sterilization campaign on the island was actually extremely anti-feminist. The Catholic Church was heavily involved in fighting against sterilization, not to empower the women but as a way of taking away their agency to choose for their own body.⁶² Briggs also writes that only focusing on the colonial elements that encouraged sterilization erases the fact that Puerto Rican women wanted effective birth control and made the choice that was best for themselves.⁶³ To argue that women were only sterilized because a colonial power coerced them turns Puerto Rican women into victims, without taking into account their own personal agency.

Sterilization became a cultural choice for Puerto Rican women over time, so much so that it is still a common procedure among Puerto Ricans even today. To fully understand why exactly Puerto Rican women specifically were so attracted to the procedure is complicated. To simply look at women’s perspectives and changing culture would not fully encompass the role that the United States played in promoting the procedure and withholding information. But also, to only focus on the role that American colonization played in promoting sterilization does not

⁶⁰ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 214.

⁶¹ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 215.

⁶² Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 140.

⁶³ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 161.

emphasize enough how important Puerto Rican women themselves were in choosing and spreading sterilization.

Iris Lopez examines Puerto Rican women's agency when making choices about sterilization in *Matters of Choice*, by asking the question of how much of a choice did they really have? By interviewing multiple generations of Puerto Rican women, Lopez writes that most Puerto Rican women voluntarily were sterilized and made the choice to be sterilized because it was the best choice for them at the time. However, Lopez also argues that the circumstances that Puerto Rican women found themselves in left them with very few options. Additionally, many Puerto Rican women were not fully educated on the procedure or their other contraceptive options before choosing sterilization. Lopez examines the problems with viewing sterilization among Puerto Rican women in a binary of either agency or victimization, because both extremes are not fully representative of the reality of the issue.⁶⁴ Puerto Rican women were agents of their own reproductive choices, but at the same time were victims of oppressive systems that placed them into the circumstances that led them to make the choices that they did.

In order to look further into the topic of choice, and the circumstances that led Puerto Rican women to choose sterilization with the frequency that they did, it is important to look at contextual information to see what conditions and circumstances Puerto Rican women were living in over time. This thesis focuses mainly on Puerto Rican migrants living in the mainland, and the way that they were impacted by the American opinion and discussion on Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican fertility.⁶⁵ By looking at newspaper articles from popular publications, it is possible to examine the ways in which Americans viewed Puerto Ricans, and the space that they

⁶⁴ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, xvii.

⁶⁵ Note: While I would have been interested in also focusing more on the perspectives of Puerto Rican women and the circumstances they found themselves in on the island, doing research during the COVID-19 pandemic limited my ability to access certain sources that I had hoped to.

were expected to take in American society. As time went on, these newspapers also showed the opinions that Americans held in regard to Puerto Rican fertility and sterilization. Publications from American feminist and other activist groups also show the way that outside groups discussed Puerto Rican fertility, and the ways in which these groups fought for Puerto Rican women's reproductive rights. These sources can be compared to interviews with Puerto Rican women, who share their own perspectives on why they chose to be sterilized, to examine the ways in which they both made their own choices and were also placed into extremely difficult circumstances.

Chapter 1: 1940s-1950s

Post-World War II Mass Migration

When population control measures were initially implemented in Puerto Rico in the 1920s, mainland America had little reason to be involved in the discourse surrounding Puerto Rican fertility. Despite Puerto Rico becoming a colony of the United States in 1898, Americans had little relationship with the island through the beginning of the 20th century. In 1940, *The Washington Post* said that in terms of the “average American’s interest in and understanding of the island’s problems... Puerto Rico might almost as well be located on Mars.”⁶⁶ In spite of Puerto Rico’s close geographic proximity to the mainland, the average American had no reason to think about Puerto Rico or the problems that the island was facing as it did not interfere with American life. The “Puerto Rican problems” were far removed from the mainland and isolated to the island. That is until the mid-1940s, when multiple new policies were put into place to help the Puerto Rican economy that was continuing to worsen. This period saw an increase in migration to the mainland and more American business on the island, which augmented the presence of Puerto Rico in American society.

The post-war period saw a significant increase in Puerto Rican migration to the mainland for a variety of reasons. Economic decline on the island was one of the driving factors. The island economy was still reliant on the sugar cane market and had not really diversified to other crops or industries. The sugar industry continued to decline, however, after the initial crash in the 1920s, causing the Puerto Rican economy to be even worse by the 1940s.⁶⁷ The economic conditions were made even worse by the ever-growing population on the island, as the initial

⁶⁶ “Puerto Rican Problems,” *The Washington Post*, March 8, 1940.

⁶⁷ Edgardo Melendez, *Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 96.

attempts to promote family planning on the island were unsuccessful. Puerto Rico was already struggling with having enough resources for their population, which was only exacerbated with an economic decline and an increase in people to provide for. In 1949, it was estimated that the island economy could only feasibly support 1,500,000 people, and the current Puerto Rican population was already 2,100,000.⁶⁸

Additionally, wages on the island were extremely low, with the average weekly income being \$14.82 in the late 1940s.⁶⁹ By comparison, the average weekly income in the United States in 1949 was \$73.81.⁷⁰ Low wages were paired with extremely high prices on the island as well. As the population had outgrown what the island itself could support, most food had to be shipped in from the mainland, making costs on the island even higher than New York City itself.⁷¹ Supporting a family became especially hard, and living conditions stayed poor for most Puerto Ricans. Many Puerto Ricans also found it difficult to find a job, as the workforce was continuously getting larger, but the number of available jobs were not.⁷² This left many looking to migrate to the mainland for work.

The desire to migrate was building for years, but it was not until 1945 that the mass migration started. During World War II, transportation to the mainland was limited because of increased air travel restrictions and the allocation of most air travel resources towards the war effort. However, once the war ended in 1945 there were a surplus of pilots and aircrafts available for commercial flights, which caused airfare to decrease significantly.⁷³ Air travel was instrumental in the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland, as it was the only way for

⁶⁸ Charles Grutzner, "City Puerto Ricans: Complex Problems," *New York Times*, October 3, 1949.

⁶⁹ Grutzner, "City Puerto Ricans: Complex Problems," *New York Times*, October 3, 1949.

⁷⁰ "Income of Families and Persons in the United States: 1949", *U.S. Census Bureau*, February 18, 1951.

⁷¹ Grutzner, "City Puerto Ricans: Complex Problems," *New York Times*, October 3, 1949.

⁷² Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 96.

⁷³ Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 96.

Puerto Ricans to travel to the mainland aside from ocean transportation. Unlike citizens who lived on the mainland, Puerto Ricans did not have the option to take low-cost modes of transportation like buses or trains to travel for work. The governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Muñoz Marín, pointed out that “there ain’t no buses running from the Bronx to Mayaguez.”⁷⁴ The Puerto Rican government argued that it was their right as citizens of the United States for Puerto Ricans to have access to affordable air travel to get to the mainland for work.⁷⁵ The increase in low-cost airline options made it possible for thousands of Puerto Ricans to migrate to the mainland for work, which was not available to them before.

Both the Puerto Rican and United States governments promoted migration to the mainland, mainly through labor contracts. The Puerto Rican government officially endorsed migration as the best way to fix the population problem in the 1940s, likely to avoid backlash from the Catholic Church if they had chosen to focus on birth control as their priority.⁷⁶ The United States was experiencing a labor shortage on the mainland during the war and looked to the labor surplus on the island to fill the open spots. Most men were contracted to either work in factories or agriculture, while women were contracted to work in domestic services.⁷⁷

Operation Bootstrap and Americans in Puerto Rico

In addition to the increase in migration bringing more Puerto Ricans to the mainland, there was also an increase in Americans going to Puerto Rico. Considering that the Puerto Rican economy was continuing to decline, population control was not going to be enough to fix the problem. This inspired the 1947 initiative by the Puerto Rican government known as Operation

⁷⁴ Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 97.

⁷⁵ Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 97.

⁷⁶ Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 52.

⁷⁷ Gina M. Perez, “An Upbeat West Side Story: Puerto Ricans and Postwar Racial Politics in Chicago,” *Centro Journal* 8, no. 2 (2001): 48.

Bootstrap. The goal of Operation Bootstrap was to modernize and diversify the Puerto Rican economy. It focused on switching to an export-based economy, focusing on the American market rather than the smaller internal market. Additionally, there was a push to industrialize the island and move away from an agricultural economy, in order to create more jobs and quickly.

However, the most important part of Operation Bootstrap was likely the economic relationship that it established with the United States. In order to fund the industrialization of the island, foreign investment would be necessary. So, Puerto Rico offered tax exemptions to any American corporations that came to Puerto Rico. The tax exemptions made establishing business in Puerto Rico even more attractive, along with the abundant availability of cheap labor on the island.⁷⁸

Operation Bootstrap essentially combined the Puerto Rican economy with the American economy, creating a continuous flow of labor and goods.⁷⁹

By the late 1940s, Puerto Rico became much more significant on the mainland. The establishment of American businesses on the island meant that the improvement of the Puerto Rican economy was now of more importance to the United States than ever before. Additionally, the increased migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland meant that there was a higher population of Puerto Ricans living in America, which caused Americans to become more aware of Puerto Rico and the problems that the island was facing. These changes in the late 1940s brought mainland America closer to Puerto Rico, and therefore made Americans talk about issues on the island they would not have before, such as the importance of controlling Puerto Rican fertility and sterilization.

⁷⁸ Juan Ruiz Toro, "Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap," Brown University Library.

⁷⁹ Toro, "Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap," Brown University Library.

Spanish Harlem and the Perception of Puerto Ricans in New York

One way in which the increased Puerto Rican presence on the mainland influenced opinions on Puerto Rican fertility was that negative stereotypes were formed and reinforced. This especially happened in New York City. Before more flights became available to Puerto Rican migrants, most flights landed in New York City and so many migrants chose to stay there. Once enough migrants relocated to New York, eventually more decided to go there as well because of the draw of a community.⁸⁰ They settled in an area of the city that came to be called Spanish Harlem.⁸¹ Spanish Harlem was a small neighborhood in New York, and so as more migrants moved there the area became overcrowded. Overcrowding led to poverty, violence, health concerns, and other negative conditions that caught the attention of other New Yorkers. This eventually culminated in a 1947 media campaign in which New York City newspapers started publishing articles about the “Puerto Rican problem” that the city was facing.⁸²

These articles greatly exaggerated the number of Puerto Ricans who were coming to New York, scaring the readers with the scale of their “problem”. By 1947, most New York newspapers were claiming that the Puerto Rican population in the city was around 350,000.⁸³ This number was backed by the Puerto Rican government.⁸⁴ Yet other newspaper sources claimed that there were already 600,000 Puerto Ricans living in the city.⁸⁵ There was also no consensus among journalists about how many new migrants were arriving in the city and how quickly. One article published in the *New York Times* in January of 1947 estimated that 1,500

⁸⁰ Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 37.

⁸¹ Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans: Complex Problems,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1949.

⁸² Melendez, *Sponsored Migration*, 56.

⁸³ Edward Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb Migration,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1947.

⁸⁴ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

⁸⁵ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

new migrants were arriving in New York every week.⁸⁶ Yet another *New York Times* article published in February of 1947 claimed that 2,500 new Puerto Rican migrants settled in New York each month.⁸⁷ While it is not exactly clear why journalists exaggerated the numbers so much⁸⁸, nevertheless these exaggerations caused a panic among New Yorkers.

The thought of more Puerto Ricans moving to New York, and at a faster rate, was likely concerning to Americans because many only had negative impressions of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Although many Americans did not know much about Puerto Rico prior to the mass migration, what they did think was that Puerto Ricans were dirty, lazy, and happy to live in poverty.⁸⁹ In 1947, the *New York Times* described the island of Puerto Rico as a “destitute territory” that migrants had to flee.⁹⁰ These stereotypes of how Puerto Ricans lived were only reinforced by the conditions that migrants were forced to live in when they reached the mainland. Antoinette Cannon, who became secretary of the Interim Committee on Puerto Rican Americans, said that Puerto Ricans were “fleeing from one evil into the jaws of another evil.”⁹¹ Puerto Rican settlements in East Harlem were so overcrowded, that the *New York Times* writes that “sleeping bags [were] at premium.”⁹² According to the Union Settlement Association in East Harlem, there was one four-bedroom apartment in which twenty-three Puerto Ricans were living. There was also a nearby two-and-one-half bedroom apartment that was housing fifteen Puerto Ricans, and also acted as a homeschool for ten children.⁹³

⁸⁶ “Aid Planned Here for Puerto Ricans,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1947.

⁸⁷ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

⁸⁸ “Governor of Puerto Rico Planning Study by Columbia of Migration,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1947.

⁸⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 7, 13.

⁹⁰ “Aid Planned Here for Puerto Ricans,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1947.

⁹¹ Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb migration,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1947.

⁹² “Aid Planned Here for Puerto Ricans,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1947.

⁹³ “Aid Planned Here for Puerto Ricans,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1947.

Due to the overcrowding, living conditions in Puerto Rican settlements were poor. The streets in East Harlem were covered with garbage and dirt, despite cleaning crews being sent. In reality, there were few trash receptacles to be used, which contributed to the problem.⁹⁴ However, this added to the stereotype that Puerto Ricans lived in filth. Their buildings were also usually filled with cockroaches and vermin, despite the fact that they kept their apartments clean. This was usually due to neglect by the landlords, who took advantage of poor Puerto Rican workers who needed housing.⁹⁵

Adding to the stereotype that Puerto Ricans were dirty, diseases were also common in these overcrowded neighborhoods. Puerto Rican migrants were particularly blamed for bringing tuberculosis with them when they arrived in the country. When New York was experiencing an increased number of tuberculosis cases in the late 1940s, the *New York Times* published an article blaming the outbreak on the fact that “too many physically unfit migrants” were coming from Puerto Rico.⁹⁶ The island did in fact have a high rate of tuberculosis, with a tuberculosis death rate of 180 of 100,000, in comparison to New York’s 38.4 of 100,000.⁹⁷ Even those migrants that did arrive in New York without tuberculosis were more likely to catch it because of their overcrowded living situation. This led to the tuberculosis death rate of New York Puerto Ricans being two to three times higher than the average New Yorker.⁹⁸ Puerto Ricans were also known for being infected with venereal diseases, which were also prominent on the island. Both venereal disease and tuberculosis clinics were then established by the city in heavily Puerto Rican areas to try and combat the spread of these diseases.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Charles Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1949.

⁹⁵ Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1949.

⁹⁶ “Puerto Rico and T.B.,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1949.

⁹⁷ “Puerto Rico and T.B.,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1949.

⁹⁸ Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1949.

⁹⁹ Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1949.

The prominence of venereal diseases did not solely contribute to the stereotype that Puerto Ricans were dirty and sickly, but also supported the hyper-sexualization of Puerto Ricans, especially Puerto Rican women. The high rate of venereal disease on the island was correlated to the prevalence of prostitution on the island at the turn of the 20th century. Puerto Rican women were then believed to have “loose morals” and be more inclined to take part in prostitution.¹⁰⁰ Hyper-sexualization also led to the belief that all Puerto Rican women had a lot of children and raised large families. The overcrowding of Puerto Rican communities only strengthened these assumptions.

Crafting a New Image of Puerto Ricans

Seeing the discrimination that migrants were facing in New York, the Puerto Rican government attempted to intervene. Governor Jesus T. Pinero of Puerto Rico announced that the government was looking to discourage migrants from going to New York, as he recognized that the mass migration there was causing issues in terms of health and housing.¹⁰¹ Rather, the government was looking for ways to encourage migrants to spread out and move to other places on the mainland. A lot of Puerto Rican migrants were sent to Chicago in 1947 through labor contracts, and also to Utah to work in copper mines.¹⁰² Still, New York promised a community of Puerto Ricans that new migrants could rely on for support. The Puerto Rican government needed to be able to provide resources for migrants who chose to go to less populated areas.¹⁰³ For example, Puerto Rican migrants were criticized for not learning English in New York¹⁰⁴, and so the Puerto Rican government began offering scholarships for migrants to take language

¹⁰⁰ Laura Briggs, “*La Vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels: Migration, Social Science, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Welfare Queen,” *Centro Journal* 14, no. 1 (2002): 82.

¹⁰¹ Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb migration,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1947.

¹⁰² “Governor of Puerto Rico Planning Study by Columbia of Migration,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1947.

¹⁰³ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

¹⁰⁴ Grutzner, “City Puerto Ricans Found Ill-Housed,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1949.

classes.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, vocational classes were offered on the island so that Puerto Ricans could acquire new skills before migrating, in order to be “[assets] to communities to which they migrate.”¹⁰⁶ These methods eventually did work. In 1950, 85% of migrants were settling in New York, and by 1957 only 65% chose to stay in New York.¹⁰⁷

In addition to these efforts, Pinero then contacted Columbia University to conduct a study on Puerto Rican migration to New York City, the problems the mass migration was causing the city, and a solution to the problem.¹⁰⁸ Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld, head of Columbia’s Applied Sociology, agreed to take on the project that cost Puerto Rico between \$30,000-\$35,000.¹⁰⁹ The study was focused on Harlem and the Bronx, looking at the conditions that migrants were living in once they arrived in New York City. The study also collaborated with the New York Department of Welfare, to determine how many migrants were reliant on relief.¹¹⁰ Through the Columbia study, certain ideas about Puerto Ricans were disproven. Namely, the belief that Puerto Ricans were lazy and came to the mainland just for welfare. Rather, the Department of Welfare reported that in 1947, only 8% of migrants applied for relief.¹¹¹ As a whole, instead of being dependent on welfare migrants were determined to be “industrious, hard-working, and willing.”¹¹²

After seeing the discrimination that migrants faced in New York, the government made an effort to try and change the image of Puerto Ricans on the mainland. The narrative that

¹⁰⁵ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

¹⁰⁶ “Governor of Puerto Rico Planning Study by Columbia of Migration,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1947.

¹⁰⁷ Malvina Lindsay, “U.S. Life Gets Dash of Puerto Ricanism,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, April 25, 1957.

¹⁰⁸ “Governor of Puerto Rico Planning Study by Columbia of Migration,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1947.

¹⁰⁹ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

¹¹⁰ “Columbia Accepts Puerto Rico Study,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1947.

¹¹¹ Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb migration,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1947.

¹¹² Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb migration,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1947.

migrants were hard workers became a crucial part of this plan. In 1949, the Migration Division Office of the United States government began directing Puerto Rican labor contracts to the Midwest. Although their job was primarily to aid migrants in settling into their new roles, the Migration Division also took it upon themselves to start putting out media campaigns profiling the Puerto Rican migrant.¹¹³ Using local radio stations and print media, the Migration Division sponsored advertisements and articles that demonstrated how hard-working Puerto Rican migrants were, and how willing they were to assimilate to American culture.¹¹⁴ Despite the fact that information coming from the Migration Division should have been meant for migrants, between 60-70% of the material from their office was in English, meant for an American audience.¹¹⁵

In the mid 1950s, the Department of Labor estimated that there were between 5,000-20,000 migrants living in Chicago, and that as many as 200 migrants were arriving in Chicago per day.¹¹⁶ However, Puerto Ricans in Chicago did experience less racism than Puerto Ricans did in New York, according to pastors who had worked in both New York and Chicago Puerto Rican communities.¹¹⁷ While they believe it is likely due to the fact that there were just fewer Puerto Ricans there,¹¹⁸ Chicago also did more to aid Puerto Rican migrants in integrating themselves in the city, unlike New York. Aid centers were established by local missionary groups in heavily Puerto Rican areas of the city, which were used to help new migrants adjust to the new culture that migrants found themselves in. The centers also taught migrants their legal rights and how to find better housing in the city, which also helped migrants avoid the housing stereotypes that

¹¹³ Perez, "An Upbeat West Side Story," 49.

¹¹⁴ Perez, "An Upbeat West Side Story," 49.

¹¹⁵ Perez, "An Upbeat West Side Story," 50.

¹¹⁶ "Puerto Rican Influx Brings New Inquiry," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 3, 1954.

¹¹⁷ Suzanne Avery, "Center Helps Puerto Ricans," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1957.

¹¹⁸ Avery, "Center Helps Puerto Ricans," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1957.

started in New York.¹¹⁹ Even the pastors who ran the center justified why Puerto Rican migrants should be welcomed into society by referencing their work ethic, saying that they came to Chicago with “tremendous vitality,” and that “having a regular job ‘is a wonderful thing to them.’”¹²⁰ Even with the aid centers and media campaigns to promote Puerto Rican migrants as hard workers, many in Chicago still feared that the influx of migrants would put a strain on public aid resources.¹²¹

Puerto Ricans as a Labor Source

By improving the image of Puerto Ricans through promoting them as hard workers who did not need welfare, the United States showed exactly what purpose migrants had on the mainland. Puerto Ricans acted as a labor source for the United States and were important in that they could provide economic benefit. All of the character traits of migrants that were praised by the United States had to do with work ethic and productivity, and what they could contribute to the American economy. In the 1950s, as a defense against lingering stereotypes against Puerto Ricans calling them violent and lazy, the *New York Times* countered this by highlighting the contribution migrants made to the economy. “85 to 95 percent of [migrants] [were] reported to be completely self-supporting, and who are said to earn some \$575 million a year and to pay \$90 million a year in taxes.”¹²² Puerto Ricans were portrayed as the “model immigrant” due to their work ethic and drive to find employment, and so Americans were told to respect them. Their worth solely as laborers was even further demonstrated by the fact that unemployed Puerto Ricans were swiftly deported.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Avery, “Center Helps Puerto Ricans,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1957.

¹²⁰ Avery, “Center Helps Puerto Ricans,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1957.

¹²¹ “Puerto Rican Influx Brings New Inquiry,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 3, 1954.

¹²² “The ‘Puerto Rican’ Problem,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1959.

¹²³ Perez, “An Upbeat West Side Story,” 54.

It was important to both the United States and Puerto Rico for the image of Puerto Rican migrants to improve among Americans. For the Puerto Rican government, the reasoning was two-fold. First, they did not want to keep sending migrants to live in horrible conditions and face discrimination. This was not only bad for the migrants themselves, but also reflected poorly on the island itself if negative stereotypes continued to be reinforced. Additionally, Puerto Rico needed migration to continue to ease the stress of overpopulation. If Americans continued to think negatively about Puerto Rican migrants and saw them as a problem, the island could have been asked to stop sending so many laborers to the mainland. At this point in the 1950s, the government could not fully back contraceptive programs as a way to fix overpopulation and saw migration programs as the best option. The United States also knew that American perception of Puerto Ricans needed to improve, because the contract labor migration programs were not going to stop. American industries only continued to contract labor through the Labor and Migration Division, despite the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem.”¹²⁴ Especially because of the integration of Puerto Rican and American industry through Operation Bootstrap, Puerto Rico was a huge source of cheap labor for the United States that could not be given up.

Sterilization on the Island

During this time period, there was also a massive increase in the number of sterilizations performed in Puerto Rico. Sterilization was legalized in 1937, when the Comstock Laws were repealed in both Puerto Rico and the United States and were replaced with new legislation. This new legislation called for the creation of a Eugenic Board, that could determine if sterilization of certain people was required under certain conditions. It also legalized physicians being able to distribute and perform contraceptive measures on married individuals, for health reasons.¹²⁵ This

¹²⁴ Ranzal, “Puerto Rico Seeks to Curb Migration,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1947.

¹²⁵ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 12.

one legislative act was significant because it officially legalized the use of sterilization as a eugenic tool, but it also legalized sterilization for “health reasons”, or contraception.¹²⁶

Sterilization procedures originally were only offered in private hospitals. It is believed that Presbyterian Hospital in San Juan was the first to begin offering the procedure.¹²⁷ Presbyterian Hospital was located in an affluent residential neighborhood, and the procedure gained a reputation of being respectable and prestigious.¹²⁸ In 1943, Castañer General Hospital opened, becoming the second hospital on the island that could perform sterilizations. This hospital was staffed mainly by U.S. physicians, and began promoting sterilization to the women they saw in place of less effective contraceptive methods.¹²⁹

Initially, sterilization was only performed in private hospitals, and so only wealthy women were able to afford the procedure. Hospitals had strict requirements that had to be met in order to qualify for the operation, and they tried to keep the procedures from gaining too much publicity, as they did not want to face public opposition from the church. However, in 1945 the bishop of Ponce published an article in *El Mundo*, a popular Puerto Rican magazine, attacking the Castañer hospital, claiming that it had sterilized “all the men and women in the vicinity”.¹³⁰ This claim was untrue, as up to this point the hospital had only sterilized 250 women out of the 17,000-person population the hospital served.¹³¹ The article was widely distributed, and soon women came flocking to the Castañer hospital asking for the procedure. Castañer became a

¹²⁶ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 149.

¹²⁷ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 135.

¹²⁸ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 135.

¹²⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 135.

¹³⁰ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 135.

¹³¹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 135.

mecca for women seeking *la operación*, the colloquial term for sterilization. In its first four years, the hospital performed almost 400 postpartum sterilizations.¹³²

After seeing the success of sterilization programs in private hospitals, district hospitals funded by the Puerto Rican Department of Health started their own initiatives to promote sterilization. Between 1944 and 1946, the number of sterilizations performed at public hospitals doubled to nearly 1,000 operations a year.¹³³ As the popularity of sterilization grew, the requirements for the procedure became more relaxed. Up until 1945, it was estimated that the average age of women who had the procedure was 32 and had an average of 6 children.¹³⁴ Eventually, the policy relaxed to require women to have three living children.¹³⁵ Relaxing the requirements for sterilization meant that more women could qualify and have the surgery, and also contributed to smaller family sizes. There were still disparities between social classes, however, as private hospitals were most likely to have the most relaxed criteria for qualifying for sterilization, so wealthier women had an easier time getting the procedure as they could afford private care.¹³⁶ Additionally, it is important to note that these public hospitals were still located in urban areas, while the majority of the population lived in rural areas. So, despite the expansion of sterilization programs beyond private hospitals, poor rural women still were at a disadvantage of having the procedure done, and wealthier women who lived in urban centers were more likely to have *la operación*.¹³⁷ Thus, the overall impact on the fertility rate of the island was negligible, as the majority of the population was not impacted.¹³⁸

¹³² Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 136.

¹³³ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 136.

¹³⁴ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 136.

¹³⁵ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 137.

¹³⁶ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 214.

¹³⁷ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 215.

¹³⁸ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 139.

Sterilization began to have a larger impact when lower income women were given access to the procedure. In 1957, the Family Planning Association in Puerto Rico received a grant from Planned Parenthood to begin subsidizing sterilization procedures for low-income men and women. By 1965, 8,000 women and 3,000 men were sterilized through this program.¹³⁹ Procedures stopped being subsidized in 1966, but by that point nearly one-third of Puerto Rican women had been sterilized.¹⁴⁰ At this time there was also a reverse in migratory patterns, and many Puerto Ricans were moving back to the island from the mainland.¹⁴¹ The influx of more workers paired with an economic recession caused the Puerto Rican government to strengthen their efforts in population control.¹⁴² Especially sterilization, which was in high demand, extremely effective, and permanent. Federally funded birth control clinics started providing sterilization operations, as well as other forms of contraception. To make sterilization more accessible, the federally funded sterilization programs removed the strict requirements so that more women could get elective sterilizations.¹⁴³

Impact on Puerto Rican Women

The emphasis on labor and entering the workforce among Puerto Rican migrants placed women in an interesting position. Traditionally, women on the island would stay home to take care of the house and the children, while the men would go to work to make money for the family.¹⁴⁴ This is why at the beginning of the mass migration to the mainland for work, the majority of migrants were men seeking jobs, leaving the women behind to take care of the family. However, as more women began to migrate to the mainland as well, they were expected

¹³⁹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 142.

¹⁴⁰ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 143.

¹⁴¹ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 159.

¹⁴² Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 159.

¹⁴³ Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*, 215.

¹⁴⁴ Avery, "Center Helps Puerto Ricans," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1957.

to find work as well. Many Puerto Rican women were hired for domestic work, as American housewives were looking for help to take care of their houses after World War II.¹⁴⁵ Agencies started up in major cities around the country to contract Puerto Rican women to come to the United States for domestic labor contracts, especially because Puerto Ricans were United States citizens which avoided any immigration problems.¹⁴⁶ Seeing the potential of the domestic labor industry as a way to get jobs for women on the mainland, the Puerto Rican government established training schools for women who were looking to go to the mainland for work. These schools taught basic English, domestic skills, and how to use American appliances.¹⁴⁷

This was a large cultural shift for Puerto Rican women, to go from only working in their own home, to having to leave the home to work. Men no longer were the only breadwinners of the family, and so in some ways they lost the authority they usually held over the family.¹⁴⁸ However, the responsibility of raising the children was still up to the woman. This left Puerto Rican women in a difficult position, as they were expected to raise children but also enter the workforce. For this reason, many women wanted to limit the number of children that they had so that it was easier for them to enter the workforce. One Puerto Rican woman said that in New York, compared to the island, “usually want and need to work. How can a woman work when she has more than two or three kids?”¹⁴⁹ Migration forced women to consider how many children they could take care of, and it was one of the main reasons why women opted to be sterilized. A survey of women who migrated to New York between the 1940s and 1950s showed that half opted to be sterilized before leaving for New York, and the other half were sterilized once they

¹⁴⁵ “Puerto Ricans Train for U.S. Domestic Jobs,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 8, 1947.

¹⁴⁶ “Puerto Ricans Train for U.S. Domestic Jobs,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 8, 1947.

¹⁴⁷ “Puerto Ricans Train for U.S. Domestic Jobs,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 8, 1947.

¹⁴⁸ Avery, “Center Helps Puerto Ricans,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1957.

¹⁴⁹ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 27.

arrived.¹⁵⁰ Some women would even return to Puerto Rico for the procedure, because it was more accessible on the island than it was in New York.¹⁵¹

The expectation for women to enter the workforce and leave the home, especially for migrant women in the United States, was really influential in the choices that Puerto Rican women made about their fertility. Migrant women in particular were held to an extreme double standard. On the one hand, they were living in 1950s America when women were expected to be housewives and raise children. Yet at the same time, they were also Puerto Rican and were expected to be hard workers and not rely on aid or welfare. This placed a lot of pressure for women to enter the workforce, not even including the economic pressure of needing to work to support their families. Economic conditions already made women more inclined to want less children, as they could often not afford to have many children. Additionally, because having less children made a family more likely to succeed, Puerto Ricans viewed smaller families as signs of upward mobility.¹⁵² For these reasons, Puerto Rican women actively sought out sterilization to control how many children they had. The changing role of the Puerto Rican woman both in the family and also in the workforce at this time had a very large impact on the reproductive choices that Puerto Rican women made.

¹⁵⁰ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 27.

¹⁵¹ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 26.

¹⁵² Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 27.

Chapter 2: 1970s-1980s

Sterilization Abuse on the Mainland

Sterilization was not only used in Puerto Rico as a method of population control, but in the mainland United States as well. For decades, involuntary sterilization was practiced in the United States among groups that were deemed “unfit” to have children. Indiana was the first state to pass legislation allowing for involuntary sterilizations in cases deemed necessary by the government in 1907.¹⁵³ The law targeted those with mental disabilities, mental illness, and in some cases epileptics and “sexual deviants.”¹⁵⁴ Rooted in eugenics, the hope was that by limiting the ability of the “feeble-minded” to reproduce, eventually the “unsavory tendencies could be weeded out of the population.”¹⁵⁵ The initial desire to limit reproduction by those with mental retardation came from an economic argument, that those who were mentally impaired were a drain on U.S. resources and a burden to care for. Harry Hamilton Laughlin, a leader of the United States eugenics movement, said that “approximately 10 percent of our population, primarily through inherent defect and weakness, are an economic and moral burden on the 90 percent and a constant source of danger to the national and racial life.”¹⁵⁶ Other states, like California, were motivated to pass sterilization legislation because of the increase in immigration of “racially inferior” groups, like Chinese and Mexican immigrants.¹⁵⁷ By 1913, sixteen state legislatures passed involuntary sterilization bills, and 12 became laws.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Fred P. Graham, “The Law: Sterilization or Jail,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1966.

¹⁵⁴ Graham, “The Law: Sterilization or Jail,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1966.

¹⁵⁵ Graham, “The Law: Sterilization or Jail,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1966.

¹⁵⁶ Philip R. Reilly, “Involuntary Sterilization in the United States: A Surgical Solution,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 62, no.2 (1987): 155.

¹⁵⁷ Reilly, “Involuntary Sterilization in the United States,” 156.

¹⁵⁸ Reilly, “Involuntary Sterilization in the United States,” 155.

In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* made eugenic sterilization far more prominent in the United States. Up until this point, despite being legal forced sterilization was only used sporadically.¹⁵⁹ However, in 1924 Carrie Buck, a teenage mother, was admitted into Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded.¹⁶⁰ Buck's mother was also in the asylum as well. The board of the asylum petitioned to sterilize Buck, citing a Virginia sterilization law that had passed a few months earlier. In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the sterilization law, and approved Buck's sterilization.¹⁶¹ Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote the decision for the case, said that "three generations of imbeciles are enough."¹⁶² This court case set the precedent for the legality of eugenic sterilization, and in the decade following 20 states passed eugenic sterilization laws.¹⁶³

For decades following, states were able to perform sterilizations on groups deemed unfit to reproduce. Sterilization was also frequently used as a punishment for criminals. For example, in 1966 a woman Nancy Soria Hernandez was arrested for being present around narcotics. At the time she was twenty-one years old and had two young children. The judge gave her the option to either serve a ninety-day jail sentence or be sterilized. He claimed that Mrs. Hernandez was incapable of raising children because she was of "limited intelligence" and lived a "dissolute life."¹⁶⁴ The practice of sterilization in place of jail time went beyond what was ruled upon in *Buck v. Bell*, as now the state was not just determining who was fit to have children based on their mental capabilities, but also on how the state viewed their moral character.

¹⁵⁹ Victoria Nourse, "When eugenics became law: Victoria Nourse reviews a study on a historic US misuse of biology, the case of Buck V. Bell." *Nature* 530, no. 7591 (2016): 418.

¹⁶⁰ Nourse, "When eugenics became law," 418.

¹⁶¹ Nourse, "When eugenics became law," 418.

¹⁶² Nourse, "When eugenics became law," 418.

¹⁶³ Graham, "The Law: Sterilization or Jail," *New York Times*, May 22, 1966.

¹⁶⁴ Graham, "The Law: Sterilization or Jail," *New York Times*, May 22, 1966.

The problem of forced sterilization in the United States really came to public attention in 1973, after two young Black girls in Alabama were sterilized. Minnie and Mary Alice Relf were fourteen and twelve years old when they were sterilized in Montgomery, Alabama. The doctors had gotten permission from the girls' mother, who was illiterate and was told the young girls would only be receiving anti-fertility shots.¹⁶⁵ An investigation was launched into their sterilization, and the Office of Economic Opportunity cut off all federal funding that had gone towards forced sterilization.¹⁶⁶ Safeguards were also put into place at this point to try and protect minors, requiring that women had to be twenty-one years old to undergo the procedure.¹⁶⁷ These regulations also stipulated that women could not be sterilized if they could not legally give consent themselves, except in certain circumstances.¹⁶⁸ If a woman was under the age of twenty-one, or deemed unable to consent, she would have to go before a committee who would approve the sterilization.¹⁶⁹ However, these regulations were only effective in protecting women if hospitals were compliant, which many were not.¹⁷⁰

Once this investigation in Alabama was made public, Americans became aware of the presence of forced sterilization in their own country. The *Los Angeles Times* published an article in 1973 titled "Forced Sterility: Can it Happen Here?", focusing on the scandal in Alabama. Immediately after the Alabama scandal was discovered, a poll taken in Los Angeles showed that a majority of the people interviewed believed that the forced sterilization that had taken place in

¹⁶⁵ "O.E.O. Cuts Off Funds in Sterilization of Girls." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jun 29, 1973.

¹⁶⁶ "O.E.O. Cuts Off Funds in Sterilization of Girls." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jun 29, 1973.

¹⁶⁷ "Regulations Set on Sterilization: Safeguards Being Issue for Federally Funded Projects." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 21, 1973.

¹⁶⁸ "Regulations Set on Sterilization: Safeguards Being Issue for Federally Funded Projects." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 21, 1973.

¹⁶⁹ "Regulations Set on Sterilization: Safeguards Being Issue for Federally Funded Projects." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 21, 1973.

¹⁷⁰ "Sterilization by Intimidation." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 04, 1974.

Alabama could not happen in Los Angeles.¹⁷¹ Despite decades of forced sterilizations against the mentally ill, minorities, and the poor, most Americans were unaware that this was occurring.

One physician from Los Angeles, Dr. Bernard Rosenfeld, reported about the sterilization abuse that he saw while working at Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center. While sterilization there was not forced, Dr. Rosenfeld says that many women were “pushed” towards sterilization.¹⁷² Dr. Rosenfeld said that because the hospital was so large, it was loosely regulated which allowed doctors to pressure women into procedures. These women were usually poor and uneducated, and some doctors would get their consent for sterilization while they were in the middle of childbirth.¹⁷³ Many women who gave consent to be sterilized were not actually informed about what the procedure actually meant. Two women who had consented to tubal ligation were told that they were only being temporarily sterilized.¹⁷⁴ In addition to misinforming women about the permanence of sterilization, doctors would also withhold information about other forms of birth control. Many women who consented to sterilization as a form of contraception were not educated on options like the pill, diaphragms, or intrauterine devices (IUDs).¹⁷⁵ Many of the women also barely spoke English, so even if they were provided with all of the information they could not properly understand.¹⁷⁶ Dr. Rosenfeld said that even worse than misinforming the patient, some doctors had the attitude that the “doctor knows best” and would

¹⁷¹ Jean Douglas Murphy, "Forced Sterility: Can it Happen here?: Forced Sterility Question," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Jul 29, 1973.

¹⁷² Robert Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁷³ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁷⁴ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁷⁵ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁷⁶ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

make choices for their patients.¹⁷⁷ Some physicians would lie to their patients and tell them that after having a certain number of children, they needed to have a hysterectomy.¹⁷⁸

Doctors were usually motivated by their own personal beliefs to push certain women towards sterilization. Rosenfeld said that many physicians had strong beliefs about overpopulation and had their own ideas of what the appropriate family size should be and would recommend sterilization once a woman had had that many children.¹⁷⁹ Others would specifically target poor women, limiting the number of children they could have in order to limit the number of children that would be on welfare. This economic reasoning was one of the reasons why women of color were targeted more than white women for sterilization. In the 1960s, Black and Latina women became known as “welfare queens”, bad mothers who relied on welfare to take care of their children.¹⁸⁰ Many Americans felt resentment against people who relied on welfare, and Rosenfeld said that doctors were no different. A physician from North Carolina who was interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* said that “a doctor who just got his income tax back and realized it all went to welfare and unemployment was more likely to push [sterilization] harder.”¹⁸¹ Poor women were also coerced into consenting to sterilization, because they were made to believe that if they refused, they would lose benefits, like child support and welfare.¹⁸²

While these women were not necessarily “forced” into sterilization, they certainly were influenced, encouraged, and likely felt intimidated into consenting. This was especially true of uneducated women who spoke little English who were given limited information, and likely trusted their doctors. After the report about USC Medical Center was released, the federal

¹⁷⁷ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁷⁸ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁷⁹ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁸⁰ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 29.

¹⁸¹ Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' into Sterilization," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 02, 1974.

¹⁸² "Sterilization by Intimidation." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Dec 04, 1974.

government released even more regulations regarding the amount of information that women needed in order to give an informed consent.¹⁸³

Americans Made Aware of Puerto Rican Sterilization Abuse

After the Relf case and all of the other information about coerced sterilization came out in 1973 and 1974, the issue of sterilization abuse against poor and minority women became an important topic of the American women's rights movement. Reproductive rights were already an important topic for women, especially with the passing of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. The Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) was founded in 1974 by Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias, a Puerto Rican physician. The CESA recognized that for decades, Americans had been taught that overpopulation was the cause for many of the world's problems, such as poverty, increased crime, poor healthcare, and overcrowding. The only way to solve these problems, according to the United States government, is through population control programs and of these sterilizations were the most effective.¹⁸⁴ CESA saw the increase in sterilizations in the United States as problematic, as the number of sterilizations performed tripled between 1970 and 1975, and these procedures were largely done on Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, and working-class women.¹⁸⁵

CESA pointed to Puerto Rico as the most prominent example of the United States promoting population control programs for their own benefit. At the time that CESA was formed, one-third of Puerto Rican women had been sterilized.¹⁸⁶ CESA found the case of Puerto Rico particularly concerning, because there was a fear that the scale of sterilization abuse that had happened on the island could happen to other minority women on mainland. Sterilization programs funded by the United States and Puerto Rican governments were so successful in

¹⁸³ "Sterilization by Intimidation." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Dec 04, 1974.

¹⁸⁴ "CESA Statement of Purpose", 1975.

¹⁸⁵ "CESA Statement of Purpose", 1975

¹⁸⁶ "CESA Statement of Purpose", 1975

carrying out sterilizations across the island, that the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare said that, “it is possible that we may see sterilization become as important in family planning in the fifty states as it already is in Puerto Rico.”¹⁸⁷ Additionally, New York City was under the same region as Puerto Rico for health services from the Department of Health, so it was very possible for New York City to experience the same widespread sterilization abuse that was prominent in Puerto Rico.¹⁸⁸ The high population of Puerto Ricans living in New York City only increased the likelihood that sterilization abuse could increase in New York, similar to the island.

In order to prevent the further spread of sterilization abuse in the United States, CESA began distributing pamphlets and information in an effort to educate Americans about sterilization abuse. Many of the informational documents that they sent out used Puerto Rico as an example of how bad sterilization abuse could become if it went unchecked and no changes were made by the government. Prior to this point, sterilization of Puerto Rican women had not been discussed much by Americans.

Puerto Rican Independence on the Island

Other activist groups began fighting against Puerto Rican sterilization, particularly within the Puerto Rican independence movement. On the island, the Puerto Rican Independence movement became stronger after a coalition of five political parties formed the *independentista* movement. These parties included the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), Puerto Rican Unity Party (PUP), Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), the Authentic Sovereignty Party, and the Socialist League.¹⁸⁹ Independence was not very popular on the island, with only 5% of Puerto

¹⁸⁷ “CESA Statement of Purpose”, 1975

¹⁸⁸ “CESA Statement of Purpose”, 1975

¹⁸⁹ Ruth Gruber, “There Are Few Independentistas In Puerto Rico, But-,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1972.

Ricans supporting independence from the United States in 1972.¹⁹⁰ This is because the independence movement was largely centered around Puerto Rico's largest university, University of Puerto Rico San Juan, and the leaders of the movement were all well-educated lawyers. Many of the leaders of the movement were also educated abroad, usually in the United States or the United Kingdom. For example, Ruben Berrios, President of the PIP, attended Georgetown University, Yale Law School, and Oxford Graduate Law School.¹⁹¹

Overall, the independence movement on the island was led by middle to upper-class members of society, who were well-educated and had had experiences abroad. The movement did, however, have trouble reaching rural and uneducated Puerto Ricans, for a multitude of reasons. First, rural Puerto Ricans had less political awareness than those who lived in an urban setting and received more education. But also, many Puerto Ricans relied on the relationship with the United States for social mobility and to support their families. In the 1970s, unemployment on the island was as high as 30%, and finding jobs on the island was extremely difficult.¹⁹² Therefore, Puerto Ricans relied on being able to migrate to the United States to find work and were unlikely to want to give up that opportunity by removing Puerto Rico's status as an American Commonwealth.¹⁹³

Despite the lack of support by poor, rural Puerto Ricans, the independence movement largely fought for the working-class when arguing why the United States should pull out of Puerto Rico, especially because many *independentistas* followed Marxist ideologies. Ruben Berrios' argued against the belief that American intervention was necessary to help and maintain the economy on the island. Many Puerto Ricans felt that investments by American companies

¹⁹⁰ Gruber, "There Are Few Independentistas In Puerto Rico, But-," *New York Times*, May 21, 1972.

¹⁹¹ Gruber, "There Are Few Independentistas In Puerto Rico, But-," *New York Times*, May 21, 1972.

¹⁹² "Sterilization Abuse: A Task for the Women's Movement," CESA, 1977.

¹⁹³ Gruber, "There Are Few Independentistas In Puerto Rico, But-," *New York Times*, May 21, 1972.

had saved the economy, and that without American business the economy would get worse. Berrios argued that the only result that came from American investment on the island was the exploitation of workers who were desperate for employment. How can Puerto Rico be seen as saved, Berrios asked, if one-third of the population had an annual income of less than \$300?¹⁹⁴

Juan Mari Bras, Secretary General of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, was another *independentista* who felt that American investment was not benefitting Puerto Rico. Despite the maintained presence of American corporations, the Puerto Rican economy continued to worsen rather than improve. Consumer prices on the island increased by 23.7% over the year of 1973-1974, compared to the rise in prices by 5.5% the year before.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, the Puerto Rican economy had a negative growth of 2% that year for the first time in twenty years.¹⁹⁶ However, American industries were continuing to profit more on the island than on the mainland. Electrical machinery plants were profiting 31.6% on the island compared to 3.9% on the mainland.¹⁹⁷ The only reason that those companies were doing well is because they were able to exploit cheap labor as a colonial power, while leaving the Puerto Rican people to struggle with worsening economic conditions.

The independence movement was not only gaining prominence on the island in the 1970s, but also gained more international attention as well. Mari Bras and Berrios presented to a special committee on colonialism at the United Nations in 1974, asking that the United Nations

¹⁹⁴ Gruber, "There Are Few Independentistas In Puerto Rico, But-," *New York Times*, May 21, 1972.

¹⁹⁵ Peter Kihss, "A Puerto Rican Sees 'Genocide': Socialist Party Leader is Heard by U.N. Panel," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1974.

¹⁹⁶ Kihss, "A Puerto Rican Sees 'Genocide': Socialist Party Leader is Heard by U.N. Panel," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1974.

¹⁹⁷ Kihss, "A Puerto Rican Sees 'Genocide': Socialist Party Leader is Heard by U.N. Panel," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1974.

condemn the United States' "genocidal plans" against Puerto Ricans.¹⁹⁸ Mari Bras pointed to American funded sterilization programs led to the sterilization of 200,000 Puerto Rican women as evidence of an American imperialist plan to wipe out the population on the island. This, paired with plans for nearly one million more Puerto Ricans to migrate to the mainland over the next ten years, Mari Bras claimed was all part of a plan to replace Puerto Ricans with foreigners.¹⁹⁹ The United Nations General Assembly had already agreed to monitor the rights of Puerto Ricans the year before, gathering data on economic and social conditions. However, the United States argued that the special committee on colonialism should not vote on the issue, as Puerto Rico was a Commonwealth and therefore self-governing.²⁰⁰ This plea to the special committee brought more international attention to the problem of female sterilization in relation to the Puerto Rican independence movement.

There were no prominent female leaders of the Puerto Rican independence movement, as the movement was predominantly led by well-educated, usually economically successful men. Women's voices and opinions were not at the forefront of the liberation movement, at least not on the island. While the *independentistas* may have fought against sterilization of Puerto Rican women, they did not really fight for the rights of women, or for what the women wanted. Puerto Rican women, particularly poor women, strongly favored and sought out sterilization as contraception. Rather, sterilization became a symbol of American colonialism in Puerto Rico, and women's fertility was just used as an example of why Puerto Rico needed to be liberated. The independence movement viewed sterilization as an attack on Puerto Ricans as a whole,

¹⁹⁸ Kihss, "A Puerto Rican Sees 'Genocide': Socialist Party Leader is Heard by U.N. Panel," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1974.

¹⁹⁹ Kihss, "A Puerto Rican Sees 'Genocide': Socialist Party Leader is Heard by U.N. Panel," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1974.

²⁰⁰ Kihss, "A Puerto Rican Sees 'Genocide': Socialist Party Leader is Heard by U.N. Panel," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1974.

painting it as an attempt to wipe out all Puerto Ricans. For this reason, they argued, sterilization needed to stop in order to maintain the Puerto Rican race and culture. However, this ignored the actual desires of the women whose fertility and reproductive choices were being debated. The fact that the *independentistas* were fighting against sterilization, despite its popularity among women on the island, mirrors the fact that they were fighting for independence despite the majority of Puerto Ricans wanting to maintain Commonwealth status. The leaders of the movement often spoke for certain groups, such as women and the poor, claiming to know what was best for them, rather than fighting for what these groups really wanted. The treatment of sterilization by the *independentistas* showed the women's reproductive rights were not of true importance to the movement, as their desires were not taken into account.

Puerto Rican Independence on the Mainland and the Young Lords

The Puerto Rican independence movement had also gained traction on the mainland as well, despite how unpopular it was on the island. On October 27, 1974, the weekend before the special committee hearing, Puerto Rican nationalists set off five bombs in Manhattan, mostly around the financial district and Rockefeller center, targeting "imperialist banks."²⁰¹ Just a few days later, 20,000 people gathered at Madison Square Garden to rally for Puerto Rican independence.²⁰² Prominent activists such as Angela Davis and Jane Fonda spoke at the rally along with Juan Mari Bras, who refused to condemn that bombings.²⁰³ One speaker at the rally, a television newsman Geraldo Rivera, spoke to the crowd about how he had changed his mind about Puerto Rican independence, and had at one point felt that Puerto Rico was better off as a Commonwealth because of the economic benefits. However, he said, he realized "that certain

²⁰¹ Will Lissner, "Terrorists Here Set Off 5 Bombs at Business Sites," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 27, 1974.

²⁰² Peter Kihss, "20,000 Rally Here for Puerto Rican Independence," *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1974.

²⁰³ Kihss, "20,000 Rally Here for Puerto Rican Independence," *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1974.

things were more important or equally important as the economy- [their] souls, [their] pride as a community. Now [he believed] that to protect [their] identity as Puerto Ricans, [they had] to enter the family of nations.”²⁰⁴ Nationalists believed the same as Mari Bras, that the United States was trying to wipe out the island of Puerto Rico and with it their culture. The only way to preserve the Puerto Rican way of life was to be rid of American presence and influence and become a nation themselves.

The Young Lords were a particularly prominent Puerto Rican nationalist group in the United States in the late 1960s-1970s. Officially formed in Chicago in 1969, The Young Lords Party started as a street gang in 1959.²⁰⁵ However, after recognizing the needs of their community, they became a social club that raised money to aid their community, and later became politicized.²⁰⁶ They eventually became a Party, allying themselves with a separate Puerto Rican nationalist group in New York to create a national network in 1969.²⁰⁷ The Young Lords were not only a Puerto Rican nationalist group, they also were a feminist group fighting for the liberation of Puerto Rican women. One of the thirteen points of their platform was to get rid of *machismo* and male chauvinism, as it was the main source of oppression against women.²⁰⁸ The Young Lords emphasized the importance of men fighting alongside women in their struggle for economic and social equality.²⁰⁹ One of the biggest critiques that the Young Lords had of the *independentista* movement on the island is that it was heavily influenced by *machismo*, and there were very few women with positions of power.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ Kihss, “20,000 Rally Here for Puerto Rican Independence,” *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1974.

²⁰⁵ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 27.

²⁰⁶ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 27.

²⁰⁷ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 19.

²⁰⁸ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 12.

²⁰⁹ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 12.

²¹⁰ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 148.

Compared to the leaders of the independence movement on the island, the Young Lords had many more women in leadership positions. Two such women were Iris Morales and Denise Oliver-Velez, who joined the organization at the very beginning. When Morales and Oliver-Velez first joined, the leadership was all men. They “helped to change that and to create an organization of young women and men.”²¹¹ Originally, female members of the Young Lords were expected to do secretarial work as the men asserted their masculinity and dominance, which the women attributed to the *machismo* attitude that was very common in Latin culture. This led to a lot of in-fighting, preventing the Young Lords from being able to achieve the goals set on their platform. Eventually, the organization added a plank to their platform which called for equality for women.²¹² Women were then given leadership roles and were really influential in shaping the Young Lords Organization as it grew to a national level. For example, women Oliver-Velez and Gloria Cruz held seats on the six-person Central Committee, the organization’s governing board, and many other women held regional leadership positions.²¹³ A year and a half after forming, women made up 40% of the membership of the organization.²¹⁴

The presence of female leadership certainly impacted the Young Lords’ platform in regard to feminist issues and gender equality. In fact, the Young Lords were the first multiracial nationalist organization that “made an explicitly feminist position central to their political ideology.”²¹⁵ Many of the powerful women in the Young Lords were also members of other feminist organizations, and so they ensured that women’s issues were an important part of what the Young Lords were fighting for. Reproductive rights were an extremely important part of the

²¹¹ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, ix.

²¹² Judy Klemesrud, “Young Women Find a Place in High Command of Young Lords,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1970.

²¹³ Klemesrud, “Young Women Find a Place in High Command of Young Lords,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1970.

²¹⁴ Klemesrud, “Young Women Find a Place in High Command of Young Lords,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1970.

²¹⁵ Nelson, “Abortions Under Community Control,” 158.

platform, with the Party fighting to ensure safe contraception and abortion to women. This made the Young Lords different from other nationalist groups at the time, such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. These groups were opposed to abortion and reproductive control in general, as they felt that women should be having more children to increase the number of people of color in the country, and therefore increasing their political power.²¹⁶ The Young Lords viewed the individual rights of women as an extremely important part of their platform and did not view women's fertility as a way to move their movement forward, like other nationalist groups or the *independentistas*.

Sterilization became an important topic to the Young Lords as they fought for women's reproductive freedom. Similar to Mari Bras, the Young Lords believed that the birth control programs pushed by the United States was genocide, and sterilization in particular. Puerto Ricans were an important source of labor for the United States and the island's population was also the fourth largest consumer of American goods.²¹⁷ Puerto Rico was clearly important to the United States, and the easiest way for the United States to maintain control of the island was to limit its population size.²¹⁸ Young Lords also viewed sterilization to be a result of capitalist oppression. Many women chose to be sterilized because they could not afford to raise a large family. The Young Lords wanted women to be freed from the capitalist system so that they could be free to have as many children as they desired, without the limitation of financial resources.²¹⁹ The presence of capitalism in Puerto Rico contributed to the oppression of women, as "capitalism

²¹⁶ Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control," 158.

²¹⁷ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 165.

²¹⁸ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 166.

²¹⁹ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 173.

finds it necessary to control the woman's body to control population size. The choice of motherhood is being taken out of the mother's hands."²²⁰

While believing that mass sterilization was part of a genocidal imperialist plan on behalf of the United States in order to maintain control of the Puerto Rican economy, the Young Lords also saw the importance of women having reproductive freedom.²²¹ . They believed in "community control" of reproductive procedures and resources, and not letting colonial powers be in charge.²²² The YLP said that "if fertility control measures fell into the wrong hands, they could become dangerously coercive, even genocidal."²²³ They believed that all women should be able to choose how many children they wanted to have and should not be forced to have more or less than they desired. This happened through forced sterilization, but also through a lack of access to safe abortions.

Access to abortions was extremely limited on the island until the late 1970s, and even when abortion clinics became more accessible, the cost for the procedure was high.²²⁴ This just continued to further the class differences in terms of reproductive rights, as poor women who had unexpected pregnancies could not afford to have an abortion and were forced to have children that they could not afford.²²⁵ In comparison, sterilizations were subsidized by the government and were therefore cost-free, which only reinforced the likelihood for poor women to opt to be sterilized.²²⁶ Even on the mainland, abortions were dangerous as conditions in the hospitals were poor. Hospitals in New York City were called "butcher shops" by the Young Lords, and

²²⁰ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 172.

²²¹ Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control," 159.

²²² Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control," 165.

²²³ Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control," 165.

²²⁴ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 179.

²²⁵ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 179.

²²⁶ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 179

conditions were seen as little better than when abortions were illegal.²²⁷ Even when women were able to get an abortion, doctors were unlikely to educate them on other forms of contraception to prevent more unwanted pregnancies in the future, possibly leading to needing more abortions in the future.²²⁸

Fight to Achieve Reproductive Freedom

Both coerced sterilization and high-risk abortions could be avoided through better education of other birth control options, as well as providing women with all of the information before they consent to a procedure. Similar to on the mainland, Puerto Rican women on the island were usually not fully informed about how permanent sterilization was. Many women were told that they were having their “tubes tied” when undergoing tubal ligation, without being informed that “tying” means “cutting” and is therefore permanent.²²⁹ Sterilization was also the most accessible form of birth control on the island, as it was free at public health institutions.²³⁰ It’s accessibility alone contributed to the popularity of sterilization among Puerto Rican women. Women were also more likely to choose sterilization because they were unaware of other forms of birth control. Doctors would push sterilization as the best option, so much so that women were not even aware that they had other options for contraception. In one survey of Puerto Rican women at the time, 22% of women knew about *la operación*, sterilization, while only 1% knew about diaphragms and 12% knew about the condom.²³¹ There were also social biases against using diaphragms and condoms, and the birth control pill was known to have negative side effects, so sterilization seemed to be the only viable option.²³² Education about contraception

²²⁷ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 173.

²²⁸ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 179.

²²⁹ Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 173.

²³⁰ Ramirez de Arellano and Seipp, *Colonialism, Catholicism, and, Contraception*, 179.

²³¹ Nelson, “Abortions Under Community Control,” 167.

²³² Nelson, “Abortions Under Community Control,” 167.

was the best way to ensure that women were actually making informed decisions when it came to their fertility control. CESA collaborated with community groups, such as chapters of the Young Lords, to learn the needs of different Puerto Rican communities. By learning the needs and circumstances of different communities, they were able to send out educational material to educate women about the permanence of sterilization, what the procedure was, and other options that they had.²³³

Sterilization abuse of minority women also became a mainstream feminist issue in the 1970s, and mainland feminist groups began fighting for an end to Puerto Rican sterilization. Puerto Rican women were also really involved in these mainland feminist groups, which contributed to the rights of Puerto Rican women being an integral part of the feminist platform at this time. This was evident as Puerto Rican women made up a delegation at the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas. This conference gave women the opportunity to present a plan to solve the issues that they felt impacted women in America. One of the resolutions that the Conference presented was on reproductive freedom. They called for women to have access to all forms of contraception, and to make family planning resources available even to women who could not afford to go to private facilities.²³⁴ Additionally, the resolution "[opposed] involuntary sterilization and [urged] strict compliance by all doctors, medical and family planning facilities with the... minimum April 1974 regulations requiring that consent to sterilization be truly voluntary."²³⁵ The resolution also specified that spousal consent should not be required to be sterilized.²³⁶

²³³ Sterilization Abuse: A Task for the Women's Movement," CESA, 1977.

²³⁴ *American Women on the Move; National Women's Conference* (Washington: National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, 1977), 25.

²³⁵ *American Women on the Move; National Women's Conference*, 26.

²³⁶ *American Women on the Move; National Women's Conference*, 26.

The Women's Conference resolution also made a point to differentiate the experiences of women of color in America compared to white women. While all women in America experienced certain barriers, "institutionalized bias based on race, language, culture... has led to the additional oppression and exclusion of minority women."²³⁷ While white feminists were fighting for complete reproductive freedom for women, including access to abortions and contraception, they also recognized that the same procedures that could provide freedom to white women were being used to oppress women of color. A feminist newsletter *Ain't I a Woman* published an article written by Laura and Pam, two white women, titled "Genocide is Not Survival." Laura and Pam describe how feminists needed to address the issue that the availability of unrestricted abortion and contraception could cause for communities of color. They wrote,

Racism has always allowed white people to gain 'more freedom' at the expense of the rest of the world. Our demand must be analyzed in the light of our acknowledged racism. Abortions and other forms of birth control can continue to be legitimate demands of a group concerned with world liberation only if they are put forward as elective alternatives. Measures have to be found to prevent the possibility of coercion or ways in which they can be used for genocide. These measures must be included in our demands for self-determination.²³⁸

The only way to ensure reproductive freedom for all women as to have options available to everyone, but to also put safeguards in place to prevent the system from using these freedoms as a way to oppress minority women. Education was one way for minority women to make more informed choices, but stricter legislation and compliance was also fought for by anti-sterilization groups.

In 1979, the United States passed new regulations that re-examined what "voluntary consent" really meant. The new legislation required that patients sign a regulated consent form in their preferred language, could not be asked while in childbirth or during an abortion, could not

²³⁷ *American Women on the Move; National Women's Conference*, 20.

²³⁸ Dunbar, Roxanne. *Ain't I a Woman?* 1, no. 10 (1970): 4.

be threatened with losing welfare or benefits, and had to wait 30 days between giving consent and having the procedure.²³⁹ These regulations addressed many of the ways that physicians were able to coerce low-income patients and patients of color into agreeing to sterilization. These new regulations, paired with increased patient education, was aimed at slowing and hopefully ending the sterilization abuse that was extremely prominent in America, and particularly among communities of color.

Puerto Rican Women's Perspective

Despite efforts to slow sterilization among Puerto Rican women by independence and feminist groups, the prominence of sterilization continued to rise in Puerto Rico even after the 1970s. In 1982, the Puerto Rican Family Planning Association did a survey that showed that while the rate of contraceptive use had remained stable since the 1970s, the proportion of women who were sterilized had actually increased.²⁴⁰ In New York, Puerto Rican women had seven times the sterilization rate of white American women, and twice the sterilization rate of Black women.²⁴¹ The Health Research Council in New York conducted a survey as well at Beth Israel Hospital, which surveyed 100 Puerto Rican female patients, and found that 81 were aware of sterilization as a contraceptive option. Of these 81, 40 already were sterilized or planned to be in the future.²⁴² Why did sterilization continue to be so popular among Puerto Rican women, especially in the United States?

The procedure had become so common among the Puerto Rican community that it became colloquially known as *la operación*. This led to ideas about sterilization being passed

²³⁹R.P. Petchesky, "Reproduction, Ethics, and Public Policy: The Federal Sterilization Regulations," *Hastings Cent Rep* 9, no. 5 (1979): 29.

²⁴⁰ Warren, "Contraceptive Sterilization in Puerto Rico" in *Demography* 23, no. 3 (1986): 353.

²⁴¹ Nelson, "Abortions Under Community Control," 169.

²⁴² M.S. Handler, "Women Give View on Sterilization," *New York Times*, Sep. 1, 1968.

down through generations, as many women would see that their mothers, aunts, cousins, and friends would be sterilized for various reasons. The most common reason that Puerto Rican women cited for being sterilized was economic hardship, and not being able to afford having any more children. Especially women of older generations, who grew up living on the island in worse economic conditions. Doña Hilda Velez, a Puerto Rican woman who had migrated to New York City in 1940, said that women should stop once they had four children, because that was as many as a woman could have before she would struggle too much to support them.²⁴³ “A mother by herself with three, four, or five kids has a hard time. All the money goes into paying the rent and the bills. They are always complaining that they don’t have enough money to buy their children the food and clothing that they need.”²⁴⁴ Economic conditions and poverty clearly influenced the way that many Puerto Rican women viewed having children and limiting family size was one of the easiest ways to save resources. Sterilization was also the most permanent contraceptive option, which could guarantee they would not have unexpected pregnancies that they would not be able to support.

Along with not being able to support children due to poverty, many women wanted to have fewer children because they lived in dangerous, crime-ridden areas. Doña Hilda’s daughter Evelyn was born and raised in Brooklyn, and she chose to be sterilized after two children for this reason. She lived in fear that neighbors would corrupt her children, which made her unwilling to let her children play outside, a fear that was shared by 50% of Puerto Rican women that were surveyed.²⁴⁵ However, her apartment was small and poorly ventilated, making it difficult to keep just her two children indoors.²⁴⁶ Not wanting to bring more children into a dangerous living

²⁴³ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 47.

²⁴⁴ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 47.

²⁴⁵ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 51.

²⁴⁶ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 51

situation was another reason why women opted to be sterilized in New York. There were also concerns that temporary forms of contraception were not effective enough, and many women did not want to even risk an unwanted or unexpected pregnancy. Many women also opted for sterilization after they tried other forms of contraception, like the pill, spermicidal foam, diaphragms, and the IUD, and still had unexpected pregnancies.²⁴⁷ This could have been because they were unreliable forms of birth control, but also because they likely were not shown how to properly use them.²⁴⁸

Another cultural aspect that influenced why so many women in particular were sterilized, and not men, was the prevalence of *machismo* in Puerto Rican culture. Especially with the high rate of men who migrated to the mainland for work in the post-war period, many women were left to raise their children by themselves. This left Puerto Rican women with the expectation that their husbands would leave them to raise the children on their own, which was yet another reason why they wanted to have less children.²⁴⁹ Many men also did not want to be sterilized out of fear that it would emasculate them, and they would no longer be a fully man. By the 1980s, more men were willing to have vasectomies, but still the majority of sterilizations among the Puerto Rican community were on women.²⁵⁰ Additionally, many women pressured to be sterilized because their partners would refuse to wear condoms. Evelyn said that most of the Latino men that she met were not willing to use condoms, as they said that they did not feel good and they felt that birth control was a woman's responsibility.²⁵¹ Some Puerto Rican men even expected women to be sterilized, as Evelyn's boyfriend said, "It's better if [Evelyn] is sterilized. [That]

²⁴⁷ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 105

²⁴⁸ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 105.

²⁴⁹ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 47.

²⁵⁰ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 51.

²⁵¹ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 51.

way [they] don't have to worry about using nothing."²⁵² Puerto Rican women felt pressure to be in charge of contraception in their relationship, and because sterilization had become such a cultural norm that was usually the option that they picked.

Overall, sterilization regret among Puerto Rican women was low. In a survey done in 1988, 21% of respondents showed some regret and 11% were completely dissatisfied.²⁵³ Many women did not experience regret, because they felt that they made the right decision for themselves based on the circumstances that they were in. This trend was seen on the island itself as well, as nearly 83% of families interviewed supported free sterilization programs in 1974.²⁵⁴ A lot of Puerto Ricans both on the island and on the mainland wanted to be sterilized for the reasons listed above and saw access to sterilizations as really important. However, the women who did regret their decision usually pointed to the coercive methods that CESA and the Young Lords wanted to fight against. One woman, Nilda Morales, moved to New York after she was married. She had a "turbulent" relationship with her husband, who she constantly fought with due to his infidelity. Nilda had many miscarriages due to a condition of her uterus, and when she finally was able to get pregnant, she lost the baby because her husband beat her. However, when she went to the hospital and found out she lost her baby, her doctor asked her to sign consent forms for a tubal ligation. He said that he was doing her a favor, because her husband was a bad man, and she did not want to have any more children with him.²⁵⁵ Nilda regretted this decision,

²⁵² Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 53.

²⁵³ Catherine Boring et al. "Sterilization regret among Puerto Rican women." *Fertility and sterility* 49, no. 6 (1988): 973-981.

²⁵⁴ "Puerto Rico Aims to Cut Birth Rate: Free Sterilization Program is Endorsed by 83% on Island, Study Shows," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Nov 04, 1974.

²⁵⁵ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 105.

because she realized that she did want more children and had she been asked at a different time, she likely would have said no to being sterilized.²⁵⁶

During a time when so many groups were advocating for the end of Puerto Rican female sterilization, when Puerto Rican women were seen as victims of genocide by a colonial power, many Puerto Rican women would argue the opposite. In the 1982 documentary *La operación*, one woman who was interviewed made a point to say “nobody forced me.”²⁵⁷ The option to get sterilized seemed to many women as a chance to make the best possible choice for themselves and their families. Despite the fact that Puerto Rican women found themselves in difficult circumstances that forced them to make hard choices about their fertility, they still felt that they practiced agency and made a choice regarding their fertility. They did not view themselves as victims or feel that they had been forced into any choice.

²⁵⁶ Lopez, *Matters of Choice*, 105.

²⁵⁷ A. García and R. Cohen, *La operación*. Cinema Guild. 1982.

Epilogue

Even after the passing of new sterilization legislation, Puerto Rican women continued to choose sterilization at a higher rate throughout the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. This is particularly true on the island. In 2008, Puerto Rico had the second highest sterilization rate in the world, only behind Panama.²⁵⁸ Sterilizations are still predominantly performed on women, although the rate of vasectomies has gone up in recent years. In 2006, it was estimated that 90% of sterilization procedures were performed on women.²⁵⁹ Trends also showed that more women were opting to be sterilized after having their first child.²⁶⁰ Demographer Judith Rodriguez predicts that if Puerto Rican women continue to be sterilized at the rate they are now, up to 80% of Puerto Rican women could be sterilized in the coming years.²⁶¹

Women are choosing to be sterilized today for similar reasons that women did in the 20th century. Children are expensive. An article published in *El Nuevo Día* said that for many, conceiving a child is synonymous with investing and spending large sums of money (“*Concebir, para muchos, es sinónimo de invertir, gastar y desembolsar altas sumas de dinero.*”²⁶²) The cost of living in Puerto Rico is high, with increased fees on electricity, drinking water, and high education costs.²⁶³ The economic strain of raising a family is causing Puerto Rican couples to really consider having children, and if they do severely limiting their family size. Sterilization is still so prominent on the island that newspapers published articles to let women know that due to

²⁵⁸ Marga Parés Arroyo, “Por las nubes la cifra de esterilizaciones,” *El Nuevo Día*, Nov. 14, 2008.

²⁵⁹ Arroyo, “Por las nubes la cifra de esterilizaciones,” *El Nuevo Día*, Nov. 14, 2008.

²⁶⁰ Arroyo, “Por las nubes la cifra de esterilizaciones,” *El Nuevo Día*, Nov. 14, 2008.

²⁶¹ Arroyo, “Por las nubes la cifra de esterilizaciones,” *El Nuevo Día*, Nov. 14, 2008.

²⁶² Jaime Torres Torres, “Merman los embarazos,” *El Nuevo Día*, Feb. 8, 2008.

²⁶³ Torres, “Merman los embarazos,” *El Nuevo Día*, Feb. 8, 2008.

the Affordable Care Act, insurance companies would need to provide coverage for sterilization procedures in 2012.²⁶⁴

Another reason why Puerto Rican women today are more likely to choose sterilization instead of another form of birth control is that contraceptive education is still poor on the island. Without proper education on other family planning options, many women are influenced by what the older women their lives chose, which was commonly sterilization. Yamila Azize is the director of a program called Saludpromujer, which runs through the medical school in San Juan. The goal of Saludpromujer is to educate Puerto Rican women on women's health, including contraceptive options.²⁶⁵ There is a lot of censorship on the island in regard to issues of reproductive health and women's sexuality. Azize said that some women are made to believe that birth control causes abortions, and that abortions drive women crazy.²⁶⁶ Education is still one of the most important ways to provide women with full reproductive freedom, as it is only when they are completely educated on their options can they freely make a choice regarding their reproductive health.

Sterilization is clearly still prominent among Puerto Rican women even to this day, even without the presence of federally funded sterilization campaigns or the coercive practices that took place in American hospitals. While older generations of women experienced coercion that probably caused the initial popularity of sterilization, over time Puerto Rican women began making the decision on their own. However, while their decisions were not influenced by the government or people in authority, they were heavily influenced by the difficult circumstances that they found themselves in. A long history of racism and poverty due to American colonialism

²⁶⁴ Aurora Rivera Arguinzoni, "Cobertura médica para las mujeres," *El Nuevo Día*, Aug. 3, 2011.

²⁶⁵ Arroyo, "Por las nubes la cifra de esterilizaciones," *El Nuevo Día*, Nov. 14, 2008.

²⁶⁶ Arroyo, "Por las nubes la cifra de esterilizaciones," *El Nuevo Día*, Nov. 14, 2008.

contributed to the hardships that many Puerto Rican women faced, both on the mainland and on the island.

This makes discussing Puerto Rican sterilization such a complex topic. On the one hand, mainland feminists were not necessarily correct to consider Puerto Rican women victims of an American genocidal campaign. By doing this, it takes away the agency that women had in making the decisions that they did regarding their reproductive health. To view Puerto Rican women as unable to make their own choices and only as victims, takes away their right to make a choice for themselves. However, their ability to make decisions was also limited by the information that they were given and the role that they were expected to play in society. Puerto Rican women were placed into such a narrow role that influenced their decisions; can their choice really be seen as free will?

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