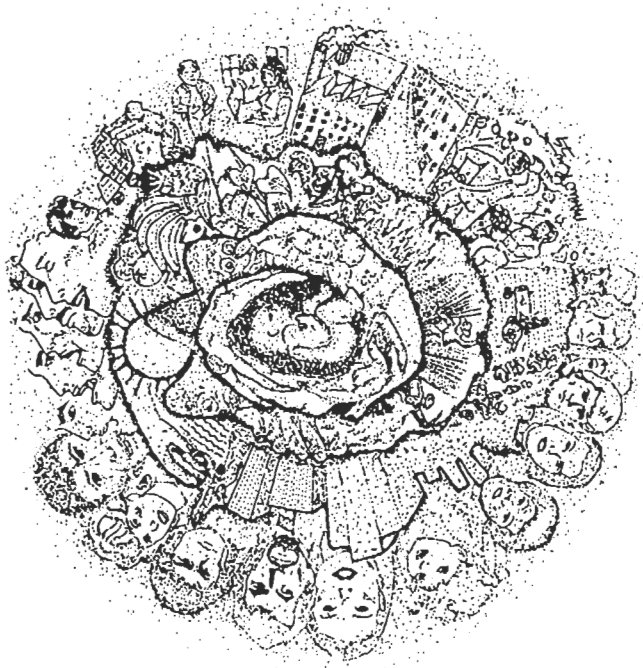


*To future generations
of Puerto Ricans in the United States*



Mr. Mario Rivera is a co-founder of the Taller Puerto Rico in Philadelphia, PA. He was one of the early artists and print-makers of Philadelphia and was responsible for pioneering many efforts in art and culture.

Historical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Survival in the U.S.

Clara E. Rodríguez
Virginia Sánchez Korrol

EDITORS



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Contents

Preface to the 1996 Edition	vii
Preface to the 1980 Edition	xvii
The Puerto Rican Struggle to Survive in the United States by Clara E. Rodríguez, Virginia Sánchez Korrol and José Oscar Alers	1
Social Science and the Puerto Rican Community	11
by José Hernández	
Puerto Ricans: Between Black and White	23
by Clara E. Rodríguez	
Economic Survival in New York City	37
by Clara E. Rodríguez	
Survival of Puerto Rican Women in New York Before World War II	55
by Virginia Sánchez Korrol	
Work and Family: The Recent Struggle of Puerto Rican Females	69
by Rosemary Santana Cooney and Alice Colón	
Latin Music: The Perseverance of a Culture	87
by Max Salazar	
Symbolic Unity: The Puerto Rican Day Parade	97
by Rosa Estades	
The Political Behavior of New York Puerto Ricans: Assimilation or Survival?	107
by Dale C. Nelson	
The Struggle for Local Political Control	131
by Luis Fuentes	
Puerto Rican Barrio Politics in the United States	143
by Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán	
Puerto Rican Struggles in the Catholic Church	153
by Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo	
Puerto Rican Spiritualism: Survival of the Spirit	167
by Franklyn D. Sánchez	
Bibliography	181

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Survival of Puerto Rican Women in New York Before World War II

Introduction

This seminal essay delineates the role of women in creating and expanding the community at a critical juncture in the historical evolution of the Puerto Rican diaspora. As underpaid workers in the informal economy, childcare providers and administrators of in-house room and board enterprises, they bolstered familial survival and extended kinship bonds. In subsequent work, Sánchez Korrol continues to document the history of Puerto Rican women in a number of different arenas: as community organizers; in religious vocations; at the forefront of the bilingual education movement; and in positions of leadership.

As women's roles in the home and community undergo redefinition, so too are they beginning to garner well-deserved recognition in the literature for their prior leadership and participation in founding influential community institutions and organizations. Included among these are the Puerto Rican Forum, the Puerto Rican Family Institute, ASPIRA, the Puerto Rican Educators Association, as well as the establishment of bilingual education programs in the public schools and university-based departments and programs in Puerto Rican Studies.

Without doubt, the research on Puerto Rican women as key factors in creating, defining and maintaining community, whether within the context of family, workforce participation, as teachers and other professionals, in popular education programs, as community activists, or as politicians continues at an even pace. The ten-year period from 1981 to 1992 witnessed the writing of some thirty dissertations that focused on Puerto Rican women. The work of scholars Edna Acosta Belén

(1979), Altagracia Ortiz (ND), Rina Benmayor (1987; 1992), and a host of other researchers have bestowed agency and illuminating insights that serve to empower women and lay to rest stereotypical notions about the roles enacted by *Puertorriqueñas*. Their studies highlight issues of class, race, language and identity, an affirmation of cultural citizenship and the migration experience.

More recently, scholars based in Puerto Rico and others from U.S. communities have begun to create regional and intellectual spaces where collaborative efforts and comparative perspectives may be fostered in the research. Their work attempts to erase the boundaries between the island and mainland experience, bridging the geographic halves that comprise the experiential totality of Puerto Rican women's reality. Through professional associations like the Puerto Rican Studies Association, women scholars have succeeded in organizing working groups that will ultimately expand the research agenda to include comparative studies on Puerto Rican and other Latinas.

SURVIVAL OF PUERTO RICAN WOMEN IN NEW YORK BEFORE WORLD WAR II

by Virginia Sánchez Korrol

The first Puerto Rican settlements of consequence in New York did not materialize until the 1920's. Along with other Hispanic immigrants, Puerto Ricans lived in Manhattan's Chelsea section from 15th to 25th Street, with another concentration around 116th Street in Harlem. Other communities flourished around the Navy Yard and Borough Hall sections of Brooklyn. Women held a special place in these early settlements, often providing links between the island and the New York enclaves. Pivotal factors in retaining ethnicity through the transmission of language and culture within familial settings, women also functioned as part of an information network. Referred to as "the family intelligence service," this network acclimated incoming migrants to the intricacies of the receiving society (Senior and Watkins, 1966; Smith, 1976). Over the factory sewing machines or on apartment-house stoops, in the *bodegas* or in the privacy of their own homes, women exchanged information on housing, jobs, folk remedies, the best places to shop, their churches and their children's schools. What has usually been characterized as idle female chatter essentially provided the tools for handling the unfamiliar situation.

Although some Puerto Rican women in the early New York settlements participated in community groups and volunteer organizations, many preferred being young mothers who cherished the Hispanic family traditions which dictated women's place within the home. But others, faced with the economic realities of the predominantly poor *colonias*, found ways to combine child-raising with

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gainful employment.

An analysis of the 1925 New York State Census revealed that out of 7,322 Hispanic individuals living in Manhattan's 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th Assembly Districts in Harlem, 48 percent were female. These districts were generally accepted as representing heavy Hispanic concentrations and provide a substantive profile of the Hispanic community (New York State Manuscript Census, 1925). Based on census information, 75 oral interviews with working-class women who lived in New York City during the pre-World-War-II years, and other sources, Puerto Rican females in New York emerged not as stereotypical Latins relegated to second-class status bound by children, church and home, but as active, vibrant women determined to keep family life intact while shouldering their share of financial burdens. This paper focuses on the integration of Puerto Rican women into the economic networks of New York City and the enterprises which they adopted to avoid conflicts with their traditional view of family life.

Housewives and children comprised the bulk of the female population in the four Assembly Districts previously cited: 42 percent of the females living in that area listed their occupation as "housewife" in the census, 29 percent were female children and students and the remaining 29 percent worked outside the home. The group listed as "housewives and children" had spent a comparatively short period in the New York settlements: 45 percent had been in the United States less than three years. Furthermore, 79 percent of the female population in the four districts were under 35 years of age. All of this presents a picture of the woman migrant of the mid-1920's as someone fairly young who did not work outside the home and who had not been in New York for any length of time (New York State Manuscript Census, 1925).¹

The role of Puerto Rican women in New York communities during the 1920's and 1930's was an extension of the role they played in their island society. During the early periods women were expected to stay at home caring for husband and children, but the term "housewife" was open to interpretation when applied to Puerto Rican women. While they basically thought of themselves as women of the home (*mujeres de la casa*), many engaged in activities designed to supplement family incomes, and various home-centered economic ventures emerged in response to their economic needs.

Piecework

One of the major forms of home enterprise for women was piecework, which included making lampshades, hats, artificial flowers and jewelry, as well as embroidering, crocheting and sewing. Piecework was essentially the same as had been practiced in Puerto Rico and enjoyed popularity among early migrants, who were familiar with its advantages. In Puerto Rico, where by the 1920's women constituted close to 25 percent of the work force, they had become essential to this type of industry as early as 1910.² Nurtured in a tradition of quality needlecrafts for generations, Puerto Rican women almost always possessed skills in sewing and crocheting. In fact, these skills were taught in Puerto Rican schools in the primary grades. One interviewee recalls attending a sewing school operated by two women in the neighborhood where she learned embroidery and lace working before her tenth birthday. Another told of her experiences in the factories of Mayaguez, where she learned the trade and skills she brought to the factories of New York.

Piecework ranked among the earliest job experiences of many Puerto Rican women in New York City. Some engaged in this form of employment because there were young children at home who needed their mother's care; others combined it with factory work, especially during the Depression. Still others turned to it when faced with dependent families, language barriers or simply the notion that women belonged in the home. Pura Belpré, writer and folklorist, recalls that Puerto Rican women sold their needlework from door to door during the thirties. One woman, Doña María, ran a household in *El Barrio* which included four children, elderly grandparents and a husband. Her major responsibilities, while the children were little and her husband worked in the cigar industry, lay in the home. There she made lampshades and other piecework items for several years, but as soon as her children were old enough she began working in a local factory, eventually becoming plant forelady.³

While salaries in general averaged about 21 dollars a week or less for Spanish-surnamed individuals before the Depression, salaries for piecework remained very low throughout the interwar years. During the thirties, furthermore, most Puerto Ricans who were employed earned wages below W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) and Home Relief Bureau levels, and women were usually paid even less

(Chenault, 1970:69-88; Rubenstein, 1956). Piecework was considered among the lowest-paying occupations. Moreover, increasing restrictions placed on piecework by the New York State Department of Labor and the minimum-wage laws of the period failed to control the growing numbers of illegal business ventures. Employers paid little heed to minimum-wage requirements, especially since few Puerto Ricans knew their rights in this area (Chenault, 1970:76).

Few women complained about either the work or their low wages as pieceworkers. Perhaps because they failed to view their skills as valuable or because home work offered many advantages not readily available to those who worked outside the home, Puerto Rican pieceworkers seldom saw themselves as victims of exploitation. One interviewee emphasized the degree of independence possible when one was able to work at one's own pace. Doña Julia remembers:

At that time (1937) I started to hem handkerchiefs in the house, while I awaited the birth of my first baby, to earn extra money. My husband worked for the W.P.A. three weeks out of every month earning 15 dollars a week. A Mexican lady had a small factory on Eighth Avenue and either me or my husband would go there to pick up packages of handkerchiefs once a week. I would work a little in the morning and at night. The rest of the time was devoted to housework, cooking and cleaning and that sort of thing. Later on, my time went to the baby.⁴

Although believed to have declined considerably by the thirties, home work continued well into the fifties, according to the women interviewed. Piecework in Puerto Rican households provided a setting for social interaction similar to the North American custom of holding quilting bees or sewing circles. Young and old, grandmothers, aunts, mothers and children all participated in this work process, transmitting needlecraft traditions from one generation to another in an almost exclusively feminine world. Moreover, working together in the home stimulated informational exchanges among adults while allowing children a glimpse into the adult work world. In spite of the tediousness and continued low pay, piecework continued to enjoy popularity among Puerto Rican women specifically because it enabled them to work in the home and supplement family income. It also often served as a training ground for those who would eventually work outside the home.

Childcare

As Puerto Ricans entrenched themselves in the various *colonias* throughout the city, other income-producing opportunities emerged, enabling home-bound women to secure supplementary or, in some cases, primary incomes for their families. Minding children and taking in lodgers represented two such opportunities. Although some women in New York could rely on the ready availability of grandmothers, aunts or godmothers to look after their families while they worked, others were forced to leave their children behind with relatives in Puerto Rico while they sought to secure a New York livelihood. For the most part, childcare responsibilities in the early communities remained within familial configurations whenever possible, with the care of the young often relegated to unemployed household members. But the average Puerto Rican household in New York City prior to the Second World War consisted of a nuclear family unit—father, mother and children, with lodgers (often males).

If, as the census of 1925 suggested, the bulk of the Puerto Rican residences in South Central Harlem fell into the categories of simple or nuclear family households, then the extended family, which had traditionally allowed women the freedom to work outside the home in Puerto Rico, was virtually non-existent in New York. Census figures revealed that nuclear families or simple families with lodgers outnumbered extended families, extended families with lodgers and multi-family dwellings during the twenties and thirties (New York State Manuscript Census, 1925). Therefore, in the relative absence of an extended or multi-family situation, coupled with limited bilingual-bicultural daycare institutions, another system for reliable childcare became essential for Puerto Ricans.

Childcare tasks previously undertaken by relatives defaulted to friends and acquaintances outside the kinship network who provided the services in exchange for a set fee. A grass-roots system of daycare was born from the merger of working mothers, who could ill afford to lose job security or union benefits, and women who remained at home for any number of reasons. Working Puerto Rican mothers left their children in the care of friends or relatives; the arrangement basically consisted of bringing the child, food and additional clothing to the mother-substitute and collecting him after work.

Women who opened their home to care for children found this a worthwhile economic venture, often increasing family earnings.

During the twenties and thirties women paid two or three dollars weekly per child for daycare, but by 1948 fees paid in private homes ranged between 10 and 12 dollars per week, adding further to an already cumbersome financial burden. Almost all of the women interviewed placed their children in the homes of either friends or relatives at some time during their working lives, and this system continued to offer more advantages than established institutions. Doña Celina came to New York on the eve of the Second World War with her infant daughter, whom she left in her sister's care while she worked in a local factory. Five years later, the births of a son and daughter curtailed outside employment but permitted Doña Celina the opportunity to mind neighborhood children. This practice continued for 35 years. Without a husband and on public assistance during hard times, she nevertheless managed to raise her own three children on the unpredictable earnings from piecework, selling her own handicrafts and caring for other people's children.

Lodgers

As childcare provided supplementary income and strengthened bonds among New York Puerto Ricans, so did taking in lodgers. Census enumerations often designated Puerto Rican women as heads of households composed primarily of lodgers. Within the lodger groups many migrants sought accommodations in the homes of friends, relatives or hometown acquaintances, but married couples or family units also boarded with one another. Lodgers often came from the same hometown as the head of the household. Through friends and relatives, migrants quickly discovered where they could obtain lodgings, often before coming to New York. In some cases multi-family or extended family dwellings were classified as households with lodgers, since the census takers listed but one household head. In reality, several families shared living space and expenses equally. Doña Julia, for instance, recalls sharing an apartment with her husband and baby and her brother and his family during the Depression.

Sharing households either as lodgers or as heads of households

with lodgers appeared to be a common experience among the women interviewed. Almost without exception those women who migrated from Puerto Rico lived in New York residences as lodgers while those who were born in New York related tales of woe regarding the not infrequent, unannounced arrival of some relative or hometown acquaintance. One woman stated, "We never knew when we left for school in the morning if our bedrooms would still be ours in the evening. Sleeping arrangements were in constant flux depending on how many people lived with us at any given time." As early as 1925, a full 24 percent of the 7,322 Spanish-surnamed inhabitants of South Central Harlem were classified as lodgers. Of these, males outnumbered females almost two to one. A plurality of this population, about 34 percent, was in the 15 to 25 age group, with a significant 26 percent grouped into the 26 through 35 age bracket (New York State Manuscript Census, 1925). The lodger group, therefore, was in its most productive work years, often single, and represented the future household heads of the Puerto Rican communities. One interviewee, Doña Rosa, was perhaps typical of most of the women lodgers of the period. She commented:

I came to live in my step-sister's house in 1926, when I was about 20 years old. Quite a few of my cousins were already there with wives and children — all living in my step-sister's house on 116th Street and Park Avenue. The household consisted of about 15 people and each suitable bedroom was assigned to several of us. Most of us worked, except for my step-sister, who had youngsters, and her sister, who did all the cooking and cleaning for all of us. I started to work right away but never got used to the dirt and winter darkness of the city. I earned about 15 dollars weekly and paid six or seven dollars for my room out of that even though I hardly ever ate at the house. On my days off, I'd go visit other relatives in the city and usually ate with them.⁵

It was not unusual for women migrants to make the ocean crossing alone, since they were met, for the most part, by relatives who had either invited them to come or were prepared to assume responsibility for them once they arrived. Doña Clara, an interviewee who arrived almost a decade after Doña Rosa, recalls little change in the customs and practices of lodgers. Her experiences were similar to many others travelling the same road.

My brother sent for me, as he had been in New York several years,

and we both lived with a cousin on 144th Street. New York didn't really seem too oppressive to me, perhaps because I arrived during the summer months and people socialized outdoors all of the time. Afterwards, I moved into the home of friends from my home town of Cabo Rojo and when my brother married, I was invited to live with them. I stayed in his home until I myself married. Then I moved to the West Side.⁶

Doña Perfecta, an early settler whose home was considered a New York stepping-stone by her brothers and sisters, believed lodgers played an important role in the survival of the early communities. In her opinion, they were valuable to the continuity of various communities because they kept open the networks of communication between the island and the New York enclaves. They also contributed to the support of the household, enabling women in particular, who carried the burden of providing room and board, to add to the family's income. Through ritual kinship (*compadrazgo*), lodgers expanded the familial system at a time when the Puerto Rican communities were most vulnerable both in size and in perpetuating their values and traditions.

The practice of taking in boarders based on the purchase of room, board and domestic services within an established household was not limited to Puerto Rican communities. Black Harlem settlements disclose the existence of enlarged households often containing kin and unmarried lodgers in the census records of 1915 and 1925. Similarly, lodgers resided in Jewish and Italian homes during the same period (Gutman, 1976; Howe, 1976). In general, the census records for East and South Central Harlem households convey a sense of community and mutual support among the many racial/ethnic groups inhabiting these areas, since Puerto Ricans were found living as lodgers in European or South American homes, while the latter occupied similar positions in Puerto Rican homes. However, after the thirties, when large numbers of Puerto Ricans resided in the city, ethnic mixtures within households appear to diminish.

Outside Work

Although most Puerto Rican women wage earners worked in their homes, close to 25 percent of those living in New York City

participated in the labor force as cigar-makers and domestics, as typists and stenographers, in the needletrades industries as operatives and unskilled workers, in the laundries or restaurants and in the fields as agricultural workers. The first reports of female factory or field workers appeared in newspapers or government documents around the turn of the 20th century. Puerto Rican women were part and parcel of the migrant labor force contracted to work in various parts of the Western Hemisphere, in the process establishing communities in which cultural traditions and institutions resembled closely those in their native land.⁷

The decade of the twenties witnessed an increase in the number of Puerto Rican women working in New York factories. Skilled labor predominated in at least two industries traditionally associated with Puerto Ricans — the needletrades and cigar-making. Women were well represented in the cigar industry, not only among skilled and unskilled workers, but as readers in many of the New York factories.⁸

During the same period Spanish-language journals and newspapers vigorously advertised in their classified sections for both skilled and unskilled garment workers. Want ads frequently called for sewing-machine operators and workers in embroidery, crocheting and lace as pieceworkers in the home or in the factory. This advertising attracted the attention of job-seeking women. Of the 3,496 women listed in the four Assembly Districts of South Central Harlem, for example, 17 percent were involved in factory work of some sort, as operatives, dressmakers or seamstresses (New York State Manuscript Census, 1925).

In 1930, the Department of Labor of Puerto Rico established an employment service in response to the growing numbers of migrants living in New York City. This agency functioned also as liaison between the migrant communities and the larger non-Hispanic society, providing a wide range of social services as well as jobs. Located in the midst of the Hispanic community on 116th Street in Manhattan, about 3,600 women obtained job placements through this agency over a six-year period. Approximately 42 percent were employed as domestics, while needle workers, hand sewers and factory workers comprised an almost equal percentage. Of all the Puerto Rican women workers who applied to this agency, roughly 80 percent found work as operatives or in domestic services. Although jobs were at a premium during this period, the agency's activities indicate the type

of work available to Puerto Ricans, which continued to be concentrated in the blue-collar sector (Chenault, 1970: 73-75).

Migration and work by women did not produce major changes in their roles within Puerto Rican society, for the image of dutiful wives, loving mothers and respectful sisters and daughters remained paramount to their way of thinking. Neither did profound changes occur in the work world to which they were committed, since they neither demanded nor were given the opportunity to control strategic resources or educational facilities. Only a handful became factory foreladies or union representatives and fewer still owned their own businesses. In most fields of endeavor decision-making remained male-dominated and organizations continued to be male-oriented. Yet subtle messages were filtering down to younger generations: women were not only mothers and wives; women also worked and were involved.

NOTES

1. An extensive analysis of the 1925 New York State Manuscript Census was undertaken by the History Task Force of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, City University of New York. The author is a member of this task force.
2. See Fernández Cintrón and Quintero Rivera (1974). In addition, Angel Quintero Rivera has written on the role of the Puerto Rican labor force and articles have appeared on this topic in Claridad and several other Puerto Rican newspapers.
3. Interview with Maria Bonilla, New York City, Summer, 1976.
4. Taped interview with Julia Sánchez González, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, Summer, 1977, edited and translated by the author.
5. Taped interview with Rosa Roma, Santurce, Puerto Rico, Summer, 1977, edited and translated by the author.
6. Taped interview with Clara Rodríguez, Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, Summer, 1977, edited and translated by the author.
7. See New York Times, "The Porto Rican exodus," April 4, 1901; and Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, 1976.
8. Readers were individuals hired to read in cigar factories. They would read aloud journals, newspapers, novels, magazines, and books with the purpose of informing and entertaining the workers. This practice was limited

to factories with Spanish-speaking workers. Readers were paid by donations from workers' salaries. For more information see César Andreu Iglesias (1977).

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