

## **Puerto Rico: Feminism and Feminist Studies**

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A Hispanic Caribbean, racially mixed colony; a colonial U. S. jurisdiction, with greater poverty and inequality than the federal states; and at the crossroads between the North and Latin America, Puerto Rico is an interesting arena to explore the particular intersections of gender, class, race, sexuality and nationality that have characterized recent trends in women's mobilization and have been brought forth by the latest feminist post-structural, postmodern, and postcolonial theorizing. Taking the broadest possible definition of feminist outlooks, in this presentation I explore some of the shared political, social, economic and cultural matrices that have been the context for feminist organizing and studies in Puerto Rico since the 1970s and discuss some of the main contributions of social science analyses that have questioned women's unequal status in Puerto Rico, and the extent to which we have advanced in the analyses of such intersections.

Without being massive or the only factor in changing women's status, recent feminist groups emerging since the second wave of feminist organizing in the 1970s have brought to the forefront of public discussion issues such as sexism in education and the media, discrimination, women's health and reproductive rights, and even violence against women earlier than in other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Among other measures, a ban on sex discrimination in the Puerto Rican Constitution in the 1950s, still pending in the United States at that level, was followed in the 1970s and thereafter by laws against employment discrimination, reforms in family law equalizing marital partners, laws against sexual harassment and domestic violence, and the creation of the Commission for Women's Affairs, presently called the Office of the Women's Advocate (Alegría Ortega 2003; Colón Warren 2002). The legalization of abortion, achieved through the *Roe v. Wade* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, also received the support of the then budding Puerto Rican feminist groups (Colón et al. 1999; Crespo Kebler 2001b).

Sharing reformist or more leftist visions, but also in the context of continuing poverty and social conflict, feminist mobilizations on the Island usually have incorporated issues of class and concerns for national development, social change and structural transformation. High levels of joblessness and poverty—even if not as visible as in other Latin American countries—have also been a continuing and defining characteristic of Puerto Rican society since the beginning of U.S. intervention, so that gender discrimination

in the labor market and the situation of broad sectors of working-class and poorer women have been on the agenda of feminist organizing. It was not until the 1990s, however that there was a broader questioning of differences among women in feminist struggles, with emerging organizations around particular interests of race, ethnicity, and sexualities. These included groups of Black women such as Unión de Mujeres Puertorriqueñas Negras and the Grupo de Identidad de la Mujer Negra, Centro de Apoyo a la Mujer Dominicana, and a parallel movement for sexual rights incorporating homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and transsexuals, all of whom have become more militant (Laboy Llorens 2003; Rivera Lassén 2001).

I argue that the political, cultural, and social matrices in Puerto Rico have led to the silencing of race and racism and of topics regarding sexuality, delaying women's organizing and also feminist studies around these issues. The response to a strong Catholic tradition and the power the clergy, despite the prevailing separation of Church and State, has been to ignore controversial issues, unless forced to an open discussion. Since the 1990s, open debates have been impelled whenever the most conservative groups have promoted measures that would undermine women's access to abortion or restrain demands to end discriminatory legislation against gay, lesbian, transsexual, or transgendered persons.

On the other hand, the particular exclusions suffered by Black women and the ways in which racism is enmeshed with gender subordination had also been virtually ignored in feminist organizing. The functioning of race and racism in Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, includes mechanisms of denial, while also celebrating the racial mixture of our population. The dichotomous racialization that is imposed by dominant (white) sectors in the United States on African Americans, as well as on colonized populations and "unassimilated" migrants (Briggs 2002; Santiago-Valles 1999a, 1999b), contrasts with the hierarchy of racial mixture in Puerto Rico. On the Island, race ranges along a continuum from white to Black, running through a variety of categories related to the presence of particular phenotypical traits, such as mulatto, trigueño (lighter skinned or as a euphemism for Black), or grifo (tight, curly hair), through which racial identification is evaded while maintaining white as superior (Jorge 1986). In this context of racial mixture and denial of racism, race has only recently become a more salient issue of general social mobilization and among feminists on the Island, even though many come from poorer origins and are phenotypically mulatto or Black. As in feminist organizing, race and sexualities are only more recently growing as a body of work, and the analyses of differences and intersections must be further developed.

### Theoretical Developments in Intersectionality: Gender, Nation, Class, Race, and Sexuality

In diverse ways, however, research throughout the 1990s has provided the framework to consider gender as contested, shifting, discursive relationships, mutually constituted through the struggles and resistance of diverse groups of men and women immersed in other social positions/identities.

First, moving beyond the documentation of women's presence in history, recent studies have come to question the androcentric visions or essentialist notions in social analyses, such as the idea of a homogeneous gender, class or national identity. These have

shown differences and conflicts among women based on class and race, but also how men and women's interests differed within classes and in discussions of national culture.

Second, Suárez Findlay's work (1999) suggests that it is important to show not only how gender definitions vary across social categories but also how other social hierarchies are gendered and hegemonic definitions are mutually constituted in relation to each other. Even when taking on modernizing projects of social reform presumed to benefit working-class and poorer women, upper-class women simultaneously reinforced their privileged position when their own definition of respectability was built in reference to the "less respectable" lower classes, on whom they imposed their own class/racial codes of femininity, hygiene and mothering, and social stratification (Suárez Findlay 1999).

Third, it is also important to recognize that these hegemonic visions are contested and shifting—to recognize the struggles of subordinate groups and to note how even dominant codes may be redefined and used by the subordinate groups on their own terms. For example, upper-class suffragists redefined modernizing men's positive valuing of motherhood to defend their right to a broader social and political participation (Barceló Miller 2000; Suárez Findlay 1999), while working-class women used it to defend their need and, therefore, right to work (Baerga 1999, 2000; Barceló Miller 2000).

Fourth, researchers have recognized that mobilization does occur, although perhaps halfheartedly (Barceló Miller 1998), among members of groups subjected to the same, if also different and contradictory, axes of oppression—be it gender, nation, class, or race. To the extent that gender is the basis of inequality, for example, it also has been the basis for women's collective action when their common interests have been identified as more important than their conflicts and differences. Examples are the struggle for suffrage early in the twentieth century or the coalitions against violence toward women and for reproductive rights in the 1980s (Crespo Kebler 2001b; Rivera Lassén 2001).

Sharing in the cultural silencing of these issues, however, studies on sexuality and sexual rights until recently have been relatively limited, although analyses of the construction of female bodies and the possibilities for women's resistance have become part of poststructuralist discussions (Figueroa Sarriera 1994, 1999; Vale 2003). Studies have mainly focused on the particular conflicts and dilemmas lived by lesbian women in relation to feminist and gay organizing (Rivera Lassén and Crespo Kebler 2001).

As already mentioned, race rarely has been incorporated explicitly in people's subjective definitions, academic discourses, or, for that matter, many documents. Since the early twentieth century, this denial of race and racism has been a way of solidifying what was discussed as a homogeneous Puerto Rican identity, existing in opposition to the United States culture, while simultaneously reproducing racial hierarchies. Obliterating race is also really an avoidance of an identification with Blackness, that not only covers up racist practices, but ignores or folklorizes Black identity and culture in what remains a white definition of Puerto Ricanness. Racial definitions and divisions in Puerto Rico, therefore, have been ignored, obscured, or distorted in much of the academic work in Puerto Rico throughout the twentieth century, especially in terms of gender relations and the situation of Black women.

Among the notable exceptions since the early 1980s are Ramos Rosado's (2003) pioneering discussions of Black women's depictions in Puerto Rican literature and the analyses of sexism and racism in language by Picó and Alegría (1983). Jorge (1986) analyzed how the gradations in Puerto Rican racial categories and the possibilities to "mejorar la raza" (improve the race), have allowed for a person's whitening in Puerto Rican society through intermarriage, as well as through socioeconomic mobility, but are less likely particularly for women who are most evidently phenotypically Black. Research published in the 2000s has also shown how gendered beauty canons intersect with race among black girls and women who suffer from rejection and discrimination due to their physical traits, as Blackness is displaced to those deemed darker even in the most intimate family relations (Franco Ortiz and Ortiz Torres, 2004; Franco Ortiz and Quiñones Hernández, 2005). Suarez Findlay (1999) discusses how such class, race and gender categories are mutually constituted, based not only on phenotypical traits but on behavior, as women's respectability or "acting Black" became integral components of class/ racial divisions in Puerto Rico.

It is important to continue analyzing the racial categories on the Island (and with regard to Puerto Ricans in general) considering that they are constituted both by U.S. racializing practices and by internal racial codes and relations. Such analyses should consider the particular conditions, relations and practices that are created by the different gradations of Blackness, and identify the particular weight and meaning of color and racial categorizations in the Puerto Rican social hierarchy in relation to class and gender definitions.

The following sections discuss the most salient themes in research on Puerto Rican women, including women's employment and poverty, family relations and violence, and sexual and reproductive rights, noting both advances and the need for further work on the aforementioned parameters.

### Economic Development, Women's Work, and Poverty

Historical studies have shown how the gendered definitions of women as household and remunerated workers in Puerto Rico have been historically imposed through conflicts between men and women, between men and capitalism that demanded female labor, and even between women in diverse class and familial and employment positions. The position of women as low-paid workers should be researched as it has been shaped in different historical moments and for women of diverse socioeconomic strata and in diverse family and life cycle positions (Acevedo 1993; Baerga 1993b). Studies illustrate how late twentieth century economic strategies simultaneously have propelled the economic participation and advancement of some white-collar women, even if they are all in lower ranked professional jobs and administrative assistance or sales positions, while also increasing their distance from other women who are in lower ranked occupations or are displaced from work by industrial flight and the move to technologically advanced production (Colón Warren 1998). Race and gender have also been enmeshed in these processes of labor supply and demand and the constitution of particular job spheres, not only in domestic work, but . Merino Falú (1996) has highlighted the role of Black and mulatto women in domestic work but responding to the increasing demand for teachers at

the turn of the century (Merino Falú, 1996,2005). Still, as discussed by Ríos González (2005), Black women remain discriminated against in the labor market even with similar education and in similar occupations.

As continuing job losses and precarious labor restrain economic prospects particularly for less educated women, future analyses should be directed at exploring the intersections of gender, race, class, family status, the social construction of sexualities, and other characteristics in the constitution of the particular sectors of the labor market, and how they may have shifted during different industrial strategies, including the move to technologically advanced and service industries. It would also be important to study these intersections in the processes of job displacement, considering which particular groups have been most affected and how they differ in resources for adjusting to unemployment.

### Family Relations and Violence against Women

Women's advances in education and employment and the related challenges to dominant gender roles and definitions, such as have taken place in Puerto Rico, can lead to more equitable intimate partner and family relations, especially among higher status couples, but also to increasing family conflict until more fully democratic patterns are accepted. Marital tensions, including domestic violence, have been explained as expressions of prevailing gender hierarchies, with authors analyzing the forms of domination, structures and norms that provide for such victimization predominantly against women (Silva Bonilla et al. 1990; Vicente 1999). Research has also shown the importance of class, race and other social contexts in shaping the propensity of marital conflict, men's violence in domestic relations and for women's resistance to it. Safa (1995) contextualized this by suggesting that when men's employment declines and men's authority is undermined, women's employment may allow them to leave what they deem as undesirable relations. According to Muñoz Vázquez and Fernández Bauzó (1988), economic instability may intensify such marital conflict, particularly if lower strata men, with less access to other forms of power, resort to more authoritarian behavior. Lower-class women may be more likely to resort to confrontational responses (López Garriga 1980) or, having fewer resources, may be more vulnerable to violence (Silva Bonilla et al. 1990).

As indicated by Valle Ferrer (2002) we must do more research incorporating ethnicity, national origin, race, class, sexual orientation, or other categories that make the axes of oppression and violence more complex among women. In particular, recent investigations have shown the need to analyze unequal power in these conflictive relations without comparing them to heterosexual gender definitions (Toro Alfonso and Rodríguez 2005).

### Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

The various studies on reproductive health and rights allow us to consider how shifting definitions of femininity are intertwined with national, class, and racial definitions. Population policies have indeed been immersed in the economic structures that have been part of prevailing colonial relations, with their gendered class and racial overtones

promoting birth control as part of middle class values. Since the beginning of the birth control movement in Puerto Rico in the 1920s and 1930s, nationalist sectors, including some feminists, without necessarily rejecting birth control, have considered population control as an imperialist, class based imposition, while using a definition of Puerto Rican culture that depicted Puerto Rican women as victims of a coercive sterilization abuse (Briggs 2002; Colón et al. 1999; Crespo Kebler 2001a, 2001b).

Even while denouncing the repressive class, national and gender base of population control policies, since the 1980s, critical feminist analyses have demanded the advancement of women's options for fertility regulation as part of their sexual and reproductive rights. In this respect, analysts have reinterpreted the high rates of sterilization in Puerto Rico as active responses to the conditions in which women undertake reproductive decisions, using neo-Malthusian policies on their own terms (Crespo Kebler 2001a, 2001b; Lugo Ortiz 1999). Transcending dichotomous interpretations of sterilization as either abusive or freely chosen, López (1998) has interpreted such active responses as elements of resistance that must still focus on the constraints that gender oppression and poverty impose on reproductive freedom. Other research indicated that attitudes towards abortion vary with interpretations of motherhood, that are related, among other factors, to women's class based aspirations of fulfilling additional roles and expectations for their children (Colón et al 1999). Further analyses of abortion should be undertaken in relation to the diverse women's reproductive options, constraints and patterns throughout their life cycle, including the meaning they attribute to childbearing and motherhood. Such research should help break down the silence and illegitimacy that constrain its practice in Puerto Rico. A broader definition of reproductive rights therefore suggests that it is important to continue investigation on the conditions that define sexual practices and childbearing patterns among Puerto Rican women of diverse social and racial categories, enabling and constraining their reproductive options.

### **SOME AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Political participation and access to the highest levels of decision making remain among the strongest knots of gender inequality. Analyses by Gallart (1998) and by Muñoz Vázquez (1996) have recognized women's increasing participation in political parties as well as labor and social movements, and how these have been a means of introducing their particular interests and styles in leadership and activism. Miranda's (1994) and Alegría Ortega's (2000) research has documented how stereotypes and gender roles still hinder women's involvement and leadership in electoral politics and social movements. Continuing study of the conditions constraining and enabling the political participation and social mobilization of diverse groups of women is on the agenda.

Finally, while homogenizing views of nationality need to be questioned, it is still true that Puerto Rican women are immersed in a situation of national subordination that, in some instances, may have advanced their struggles, but that also imposes the United States' policies as limits (Colón et al. 1999; Fernós, 2003; Alegría Ortega, 1998-99). Discussions of the lives of Puerto Rican women require that we continue analyses of nationality in the context of colonial relations, and of our relations with other countries in a globalizing world.

Complicating the discussion of nationality issues, economic and social globalization have placed Puerto Rican women on the Island in a relationship with those in the United States, as well as in a Latin American and Caribbean context. There is need to continue analyses of the continuities and ruptures, similarities and differences, and the mutual influences between Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the Diaspora. The increasing contacts will force researchers to continue addressing issues such as hybridism, borders, and transnational families, communities, and identities, which have been much more common in migration literature in the United States.

Intensified globalization will also impel the consideration of Latin America and the Caribbean as still another identity and subject position. The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) and the organization of women and activists from the South, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), are but two of the transnational groups in which Puerto Rican feminists have participated. Publications on Puerto Rican women in relation to the rest of the Caribbean have begun relatively recently and most remain national in focus (Baerga 1993a; Colón and Fabián 1995; Colón and Reddock, 2004; Hernández Angueira 1995; Quiñones 2000; Safa 1995). Future research should call for comparisons among nations, as well as to the analysis of the connections and hierarchies among them that affect the lives of diverse women in our countries, as well as provide for the continuing advancement of women's organizing as a regional and international movement.

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