



Gender Awareness across Generations

The colonial history of Puerto Rico and the history of birth control on the island have influenced the lives of three generations of women in my study. Despite individual variations, each generation shares certain common orientations that stem from the intersection of their gender, race, age, and class, and are influenced by the era in which they grew up, as well as the sociopolitical environment. Thus, before I move on to the stories of individual families, I would like to consider the common experiences faced by the women of each generation.

My study focuses on Puerto Rican women living in New York City, whom I will term, for heuristic purposes, the first, second, and third generations. These are the mothers, daughters, and granddaughters in the households I followed for twenty-five years. The mothers (first generation) were born 1914–1922. The daughters (second generation) were born 1934–1952. The granddaughters (third generation) were born 1959–1981. The first generation of women share experiences of emigrating from agrarian communities in Puerto Rico to industrial New York City in search of work. Women in the second generation were mostly born in New York. They lived through an era of rapid social change as the city shifted from an industrial to a service economy, and the civil rights movement and the second wave of feminism challenged Americans to think about race and gender in new ways. The third generation women grew up in a postindustrial and post-civil rights city, facing gentrification and the challenges of a new economic and social structure.

My main concern in this chapter is to consider the impact of these significant social, economic, and political changes on women's gender awareness. The choices women make (or do not make) about reproduction, fertility control, and parenting are linked with their understanding of themselves as women,

and with their larger understanding of gender roles and values, as well as their social circumstances.

TRADITION AND IMMIGRATION

The women I have termed “first generation” grew up in preindustrial, agricultural Puerto Rico, where they were raised in wooden shacks with no running water or electricity. Their stories of life on the island were generally stories of poverty. When they were children, they were so poor that they only had one pair of shoes. To preserve them they only wore them during school and in church. Doña Rosario explained, “We went to school barefooted and put our shoes on only when we were in school. We had one pair of shoes, which we wore on Sundays to go to church. When the service was over, we would take off our shoes at the church door. Everyone took his or her shoes off, even the elders.”

At the time the first generation women were growing up, in the 1920s and 1930s, Puerto Rico was undergoing economic changes under a colonial regime. The island underwent a transition from subsistence to a monocrop economy that resulted in widespread displacement and impoverishment of the rural population. Additionally, because these working-class women grew up with such few amenities and work was so labor intensive, physically they worked harder than any subsequent generation of Puerto Rican women. The combination of hard work, poor living conditions, and tropical island diseases adversely affected their health and the health of their children. Doña Rosario explained, “I was born in Puerto Rico in 1917. There was no electric light, and to cook we had to fetch water from the river. We had to cook with firewood. We went to the hills to find the wood and cut it down. The wash had to be done in the river. We would get up at five in the morning and sometimes we would not go to bed till twelve at night.”

In Puerto Rican agricultural society, children had economic value. Children played an important role in domestic labor and agricultural production. Because domestic work was so labor intensive, women needed help around the house and young girls often filled the role of surrogate mother. Depending on their age, girls were required to help with the household chores and care for the younger children. Doña Rosario continued,

When I was growing up children worked plenty. After going to school kids came home to work: to plant bananas, yams, and cut firewood. We pressed clothes with huge irons heated by coal; we cooked with firewood and washed clothes in the river. When I was growing up we had two small houses. We lived in one and rented the other to sugar cane cutters who worked in a nearby sugar plantation. My parents always had ten to fifteen men living in

that house. For a small fee we washed their clothing and cooked for them. They lived with us during the week and went home on weekends.

We washed in the river from Monday through Wednesday. Sometimes we got up at four in the morning and washed from 7 to 11. Then we went home to cook and then returned to the river. By three we went back to cook again. I started to do chores like this when I was twelve years old. Before I was twelve, I helped but my sisters were in charge. Since I am the youngest I was the one with the fewest chores. While my sister cooked, I would look for firewood and help with the wash and ironing. When I was growing up children earned their keep. Everyone was more responsible then.

Because their parents needed their labor, children only went to school until the first or second grade. Doña Rosario explained,

I have three years of schooling. In those days parents did not send their children to school because they had to work. At that time we lived on a farm and there were all kinds of animals, and we had to plant everything, even the rice.

When I was five years old my father said everyone in this house is going to work. I cried and pleaded with my father to let me stay in school, and I would do all of my chores because I wanted to go to school, but he said no, and when he said no, the answer was no.

Young girls not only performed adult household chores but also, between 1900 and 1920, at the height of the needlework industry in Puerto Rico, worked for wages at home, sewing alongside their mothers and mothers. For example, by the age of nine or ten, young girls had already started working in the needlework industry, embroidering handkerchiefs and sewing gloves at home piecemeal. In doña Rosario's words, "We sewed handkerchiefs and gloves at home. They paid a penny for each handkerchief. I began to sew when I was seven years old. We used a gas lamp for light. Often there was so much smoke we had to swallow it. Sometimes we stayed up all night sewing. At times I sewed five-dozen handkerchiefs in one night."

Large families are common in agricultural societies, and women of this generation tended to have large families.¹ For example, by the age of fifteen or sixteen, most of the women were mothers. By the time they were twenty-five or twenty-six years old, these poor and often malnourished women sometimes had as many as nine or ten consecutive pregnancies. Puerto Ricans also had many children because they knew that they would not all survive. In the 1940s, the infant mortality rate in Puerto Rico was 72.4 infant deaths per thousand (Vazquez-Calzada 1988, 235) as compared to 47.0 per thousand in the United States (Linder and Grove 1943).

Doña Caridad's mother was a midwife in the early part of the twentieth century, and she vividly recalls the wretched conditions poor women lived and gave birth in:

My mother was a midwife. She took out the rotted kids from poor women's bellies. She also frequently positioned the babies in women's bellies before they gave birth. If she could not position them correctly she sent the woman to see a doctor, if there was one available. My mother helped these women, and these *barrio* (small town) women paid more attention to what my mother said than to the doctors.

I'll never forget the sight of those poor women with their newborn babies on the floor. In that era the beds were hard like a rock, for those lucky enough to have a bed. We put rags on these hard mattresses, and that is where these poor souls, who had just given birth, rested. That is why a law should be passed that women should not have more children. Because the fathers would make these babies and then abandon the women, and the children had nothing to eat, and look at the situation they would come to. Children had nothing to eat. Nothing. Everything was a disaster.

I was a young girl when my mother assisted other women in giving birth. She would say to me: "bring me whatever old clothing we have to lay so and so on the floor because she is such a poor soul she has no bed. I brought her whatever clothing I could find and some chicken broth as well. We raised chickens at home and part of my job was to make and bring my mother soup.

One other reason women in this generation had large families was because they did not have access to temporary methods of birth control. Because most women in this generation were born in the early part of the twentieth century, several were in their early twenties in 1937, the year when sterilization became legal. Until that year, birth control was illegal under the Comstock law in Puerto Rico and the United States. Even after the Comstock law was repealed in 1937, access to contraceptives for many poor women was minimal, either because poor women could not afford them, they lived too far away from the health clinics and public transportation was not available, or the Catholic Church frequently forced these clinics to close.²

Not only did women give birth under difficult conditions and take full responsibility for the domestic work and the children, but poor women often did men's work as well. For example, doña Rosario took over her first husband's job when he fell sick and died so that her family could survive.

My first husband worked in the cane fields. I married him when I was fifteen and had five children with him. (I had my children every two years. They

were born in 1934, 1936, 1938, 1940, and 1944.) He died of tuberculosis when I was 24. I was both the woman and the man of the house. Many women worked like men to earn a few dollars. Many of them picked coffee, cut sugar cane, and spread fertilizer. I even plowed with oxen and sowed rice and pigeon peas. I also packed sugar cane and the cane flower. I had to carry the cane on my shoulders to the place where the oxen cart picked it up.

Some women from the first generation expressed resignation about having as many children as "God" gave them. Other women, like doña Rosario, opted for, accepted, and actively sought *la operación* after going through one pregnancy after another and finding that she could not feed the children she already had. She confessed to me that when she was eight months pregnant, she tried to abort by picking up a huge basin of water.

In addition to the hardships of motherhood, poor health, and poverty these women confronted daily, they also had to deal with the inequities of the patriarchal family. For example, many of the women also had to accept their husbands' infidelity and sometimes violent behavior. In that era, sexual double standards were accepted as the norm. A significant number of men had extramarital affairs and children with other women. Even though women did not like it, and resisted it, they had to accommodate and tolerate such behavior because they could not afford to raise their children by themselves. For example, although doña Rosario worked hard, she found she could not survive with her children on the meager income she earned. Before she migrated she tried to leave her second husband, but she went back to him because her family would not support her:

I met my second husband Victor two years after my first husband died. We had a problematic relationship because he drank, was a womanizer, and a gambler. At that time I was twenty-six years old. I had five children with him. The children were almost born one right after the other [*the children were born in 1945, 1946, 1948, 1949, and 1950*]. During my last pregnancy I had twins. They died one week apart from cholera.

I left him twice. The first time I moved in with his mother and the second time with my sister. When I moved in with his mother she gave us a small corner of a room because that's all the space she had. We slept on the floor. When I moved in with my sister, I had to take care of my kids, and her six stepchildren. I washed, cooked, and cleaned around the clock. I couldn't keep up with the workload. I had to do everything because my sister had to take care of other things. It was easier to live with my husband than take care of twelve kids every day. The workload finally forced me to go back to my husband.

Although doña Rosario and don Victor had a problematic relationship, she claims he also worked hard and supported her and their children, at least while they were in Puerto Rico. In order to do so he migrated to the U.S. mainland to work in migrant camps, or "farms" as they referred to them. According to doña Rosario,

Victor supported the children and me; to provide for us he had to go work in camps in the United States. In Puerto Rico he worked in the sugar cane fields. He ground the sugar cane and separated the juice from the fiber. He took the sugar cane pulp to the laboratory. When he left for the United States for several months he had to cook his own meals. He did not like that.

He left every two or three months. When the cane work disappeared the government started to give him social security. He built this house. It used to be made of wood, now it is made of cement. Afterwards the government brought food stamps to Puerto Rico. When the kids were young I used to receive a supplement for them; they gave us flour and milk.

Like women, men were also subjected to the gendered nature of work on the sugar plantations. According to don Victor, men's lives were hard in that era, too. Prior to the industrialization of Puerto Rico, the only jobs available to poor men were the backbreaking cutting and packing of sugar cane in the fields or the arduous task of picking coffee and tobacco leaves in the center of the island for pennies a day. That is, if they were lucky enough to find a job. Because the sugar cane crop took six months to plant and another six months to mature, the men who worked in the fields were unemployed for six months out of the year. In order to survive the so-called "dead season," they migrated to the interior of the island to pick coffee beans or tobacco. If they were not able to find work there, they had no choice but to migrate to other parts of the Caribbean, or temporarily move to the U.S. mainland as migrant workers. Don Victor explains,

I studied till the second grade and started to work in the sugar cane when I was fourteen years old. I also spread fertilizer for six months of the year, and cut weeds with my machete and did various other things. I rose at five in the morning and was out in the field at seven A.M. We worked till four in the evening. We worked nine hours a day every day, Monday to Saturday. On Saturday we only worked half a day. We ate lunch and rested from twelve to one. The most I earned was from seven to ten dollars a week.

From the ages of fourteen to nineteen I worked as a *pinche*, who is the guy who goes to town, picks up lunch and puts it in a canteen for the men working in the field. When I was nineteen I started to chop cane. We'd work in the hot sun till we dropped.

I came to Lyons, New York, to work in 1951 because I could not find work in Puerto Rico. When a man has a family he has to do something. Even though I emigrated there to work, I had to pay my own airfare. They took it right out of my salary. I lived in a camp with about four hundred other men. I would get up at dawn and work all day picking string beans, peaches, and apples. They gave us a bed and food. We went back to the barracks in the evening; they served us a hot meal. We took a shower and went to sleep so that we could start the same routine all over the next day. I got paid next to nothing and the work conditions were difficult. Most of the men were totally frustrated.

I also migrated to a place near Philadelphia in 1952 to pick string beans, apples, peaches, and gladiolas. They paid us one dollar an hour and provided us with food and a bed. I spent five months on the farm and I didn't wait around for winter.

When I returned to Puerto Rico I worked as a carpenter's assistant. I would bring him water. I was his apprentice until I learned the trade. I never wanted to return to work in the farms in the United States. I was an apprentice for six months until I learned enough to find work on my own. Afterwards I helped build houses, doing whatever they needed me to do. In Puerto Rico it was easier to earn a living than in New York. There I was in my own home. In my home I ate the food I liked. My health suffered in the United States. I developed ulcers and a hernia.

In the 1940s, thousands of Puerto Ricans migrated to the east coast of the United States in search of work. Entire families migrated to the United States. Doña Rosario said, "I left Puerto Rico because the situation was so bad that when it rained we would all get wet because our roof was full of holes. Sometimes we might find a *pana* (breadfruit) but other times there wasn't even that." Like other women in her situation, doña Rosario was resolved not to live in dire poverty any longer. So, when she saw other men migrating to the United States she took action. First, she convinced her husband to go to Florida ahead of her, and while he was gone she clandestinely arranged to get sterilized without his permission. She wanted to get sterilized before she joined him because she feared getting pregnant again and not being able to work. During that era corrupt politicians running for mayor in small towns unofficially provided free sterilization in exchange for a vote. This reveals that by the late 1950s la operación had become so widespread that resourceful women like doña Rosario learned to navigate the system to get their needs met.³

As the counterpart story to this, in New York City I spoke to a few Puerto Rican women living in Brooklyn who told me that in the 1950s they returned to Puerto Rico to get sterilized there because la operación was not yet legal in

the United States. According to these women, they did this because they needed to work, they could not afford to have more children, and they could not get sterilized in New York. In Puerto Rico they understood the politics of how to obtain a cheap or free operation. Doña Rosario's story highlights the active role some women played in getting sterilized.

Like doña Rosario and don Victor, between the 1940s and 1950s thousands of other Puerto Ricans eagerly migrated to New York City in search of work. A large number of Puerto Rican women were motivated to get sterilized before they migrated so that they could work in New York. This is partially exemplified by the fact that 50 percent of the ninety-six sterilized women interviewed for the survey of this study were sterilized in Puerto Rico before they migrated. The other half was sterilized in New York. In fact, Puerto Ricans were predisposed to having smaller families even before they migrated to New York in the 1950s. With the onset of industrialization in Puerto Rico in the 1940s—the building of hospitals, roads, schools, and the implementation of in-door plumbing and electricity—the birth rate on the island dropped as infant mortality declined and the rate of tubal ligation increased.

Essentially, Puerto Rican women subscribed to the middle-class ideology that small families were a symbol of upward mobility. This image is corroborated by one of the women in the classic documentary *La Operación* (1977). In her words, "We would tell each other the belief that the only way to succeed was to have a smaller family" ("Nosotros nos hacíamos la propaganda unos a los otros que para triunfar se tenía que tener menos familia"). Puerto Rican women figured out other strategies to enable them to work when they migrated to the United States. For example, a few women in this study came up with the innovative idea of bringing a younger woman with them when they migrated so that she could babysit for their children while they worked. Another widespread plan was to temporarily leave their small children in Puerto Rico with their parents and other family members until they found an apartment, a job, and someone to babysit for the children. As one of the women in this study stated,

When you are going to migrate, you either have to find somebody to take care of your children or take them with you. In that regard it's harder here [New York] than in Puerto Rico. And mothers usually want and need to work. How can a woman work when she has more than two or three kids? I know women who work with four kids and I don't know how they do it. There must be someone from the family who takes care of the kids because a stranger isn't going to do it. In order to work with four kids the child care must cost very little; otherwise, you spend all of your money on the babysitter. Sometimes there is a day care center but the majority of times there is not.

Most of the women in the second generation were either born or raised in New York City and have lived there at least since they were two or three years old. In contrast to the first generation, they grew up in a diverse metropolis where they had basic amenities such as housing with running water, electricity, and indoor plumbing. They also had access to public education and health services. However, the women of the second generation and their children continued to experience racism, urban poverty, and rapid changes in New York City's economy.

In the 1940s and 1950s, almost one million Puerto Ricans migrated to New York City and a booming postwar economy. During this time the manufacturing industry in New York was thriving. Blue-collar workers were in demand, and Puerto Rican women found a niche in manufacturing, particularly in the garment industry (Ortiz 1996; Sanchez-Korral 1994; Silvestrini-Pachecho 1986). Puerto Rican women were skilled seamstresses who had either learned to sew from their mothers and grandmothers, who had worked in the needlework industry in Puerto Rico during the early part of the twentieth century, or from the manufacturing industry that developed in Puerto Rico in the 1940s. In the 1950s Puerto Rican women had the highest rate of labor force participation of any other group (Ortiz 1996).

In the 1950s, New York City was going through radical structural changes (Rodriguez 1989; Sanchez-Korral 1994). The restructuring of the city's economy was linked to major economic and global shifts that became apparent in the United States after World War II. Across the nation, the automation of industry began a process of transformation that developed into a new information and technological era. In New York City a series of bridges and highways were built to connect the different boroughs and facilitate industrial production. The mechanization of agriculture in the south and west also displaced African Americans from their jobs and created the impetus for migration to the industrial north. Furthermore, while Puerto Ricans and African Americans were moving into New York, a white flight was taking place from Manhattan to the suburbs (Rodriguez 1991).

FROM AN INDUSTRIAL TO A SERVICE ECONOMY

By the early 1960s, New York City's economy underwent a transition from an industrial to a service economy, and the manufacturing industry left New York in search of cheaper labor and bigger profits. From 1960 to 1980 in New York City there was a total loss in all jobs from 946.8 thousand to 498.7 thousand (Sassen 1988; Waldinger 1996). Although it was difficult for Puerto Ricans in New York to make ends meet in the manufacturing industry when jobs were

plentiful, their situation became more precarious as jobs became scarce. Puerto Ricans lost thousands of jobs, and as the last immigrants hired, they were the first fired. Puerto Rican women were disproportionately concentrated in the manufacturing sector, even throughout this period of economic change. In 1978, 31 percent of Puerto Rican women were employed as blue-collar workers in contrast to 14 percent of all U.S. women (Morgan 1981; Ortiz 1996; Rosemary and Colón-Warren 1996).⁴

In sum, the exodus of the manufacturing industry from New York led to the decline of blue-collar jobs, massive unemployment, the rise of female-headed households, the feminization of poverty for poor women of all ethnic/racial groups, and an increase in enrollment in entitlement programs such as Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC). As the economy in New York shifted, the civil rights movement swept the country. The black and feminist movements were challenging the status quo and traditional gender roles as politicians were scrambling for explanations and solutions for poverty. In the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant explanation for poverty and social inequality shifted from genetic determinism to cultural reductionism. For example, in the 1960s policy makers and social scientists in the United States developed deficiency models that accentuated the weaknesses of the poor, ignored their strengths, and blamed their poverty on individual failure, their families, and their culture. Daniel Moynihan published the first explanation for poverty in his article "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which appeared in *The Moynihan Report* (1965). Despite the fact that Patrick Moynihan looked at the structural forces that led to inequality and argued that the family organization of African Americans was an adaptation to environmental conditions, Moynihan still concluded that the causes of poverty for black Americans were the matriarchal family that emasculated black men, sexual promiscuity that led to illegitimate children, and welfare dependency (Briggs 2002; Piven and Cloward 1979, 338; Roberts 1997, 16).

Oscar Lewis (1966), the anthropologist who coined the phrase "the culture of poverty," contended only a short time later in his bestseller *La Vida* that the cause of Puerto Rican poverty was the female-headed household; the inability to save, plan, or defer gratification; and sexual promiscuity. He based his ethnography on a dysfunctional family with a history of prostitution and mental illness who lived in Puerto Rico's most notorious slum, known as La Perla. According to Lewis, by the time children turned six or seven, they were so warped by the culture of poverty that even if offered social opportunities they would not be able to take advantage of them. A la Moynihan, the culture of poverty thesis ignores the strengths of the poor and the social causes of poverty. Rather, it assumes pathology. Moynihan and Lewis blamed poverty on the female-headed matriarchal household, and even though they did not

ignore how this family organization was an adaptation to persistent poverty and social marginalization, this distinction was lost on the lay public. Despite Lewis's disclaimer that the culture of poverty only applied to a subculture of socially marginalized individuals such as prostitutes, alcoholics, and drug addicts, a number of academics, policy makers, government officials, and the lay public assumed all poor racialized minorities were part of the culture of poverty (Briggs 2002, Sanchez-Korral 2005; Rodriguez 2005).

The culture of poverty thesis was popularized in the 1960s and 1970s and took on a life of its own. This occurred because the culture of poverty thesis provided a conservative solution that placed the burden of change on the family rather than on society (Leacock 1971; Valentine 1968; Chase 1980). Consequently, despite the fact that Moynihan and Lewis considered social structural inequities and took into account historical forces, the outcome of their analysis was not as they had intended. The culture of poverty thesis pathologized the poor and blamed their culture and family organization for their poverty. As Leith Mullings so aptly stated, this is "old wine in new bottles" (Mullings 1978).

With the deindustrialization of the United States between the 1960s and 1970s, Solinger observed that the lay public's hostility toward racial minority women increased as the welfare rolls grew (Solinger 2001). By the 1980s the pendulum had swung full circle and the United States soon entered a political period of neoconservative social and economic structures under Ronald Reagan. This social climate inspired the popular—and very politicized—stereotype of the welfare queen. The origin of the term arose under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, when he perpetuated the myth that a large number of African Americans on welfare tricked taxpayers out of their hard-earned money to buy beer for themselves instead of milk for their hungry children (Briggs 2002). The insidious image of the welfare queen, whom Reagan portrayed as bad mothers because of their alleged neglect of their children, dehumanized poor minority women and created outright public hostility toward them. The stigmatized image of African Americans taking advantage of the welfare system was generalized to all racialized minorities, especially Puerto Rican women. In other words, it was easier for populist politicians to blame poverty on women and individual family failure than to talk about the deindustrialization of urban America—corporate greed, social inequities, and institutional racism—because that would have shifted societal responsibility to the government.

The identities and gender awareness of the second generation of women in this study were shaped by this period of economic and social change. I recall many conversations with the women in this study when they expressed indignation about the stereotype that all Puerto Ricans had children to get on welfare. By the late 1980s William Julius Wilson revitalized the culture of poverty

thesis in his underclass model, which, once again, blamed the poor's poverty on their family structure and culture (Wilson 1987).

In the 1970s New York City underwent a profound fiscal crisis. Services suffered throughout the city, unemployment soared, the economy stagnated, and the more affluent abandoned the city for the suburbs. The neighborhood where the women in this study lived became more marginalized. For example, by the 1970s Bushwick was characterized by abandonment and eviction, and much of it was in a state of neglect. Landlords invested little money on repairs (Cohen 1982, 1983); therefore, many of these tenements were in a poor state of disrepair and without heat and hot water in the winter. Fire, whether accidental or deliberate, was a major cause of the housing crisis. As one fireman put it, "Once these tenements fall into neglect, the final blow comes in the form of a fire frequently set by landlords eager to collect on the fire insurance."⁵ According to a housing report prepared by the City of New York, between June 1977 and 1983 close to half of the tenements in this area were destroyed by fire (New York City, Department of City Planning 1981, 211).

By the time the third generation came of age in the twenty-first century, the neighborhood where they had grown up had changed in some significant ways. By the mid-1980s the economy of New York City was recovering as the financial services industry and other postindustrial economic sectors grew, and once again Manhattan became a fashionable and desirable place to live. Space was quickly becoming a premium and real estate prices were rising precipitously as prosperous white professionals began to move into the city. At this time landlords started to convert apartments into condominiums and co-ops. In order to make space for the upcoming generations of young urban professionals who could afford to pay the higher rents, the poor were slowly evicted from the neighborhoods they had lived in for generations. This process, known as gentrification, started in Manhattan and later spread to the outer boroughs. It did not happen overnight nor did it take place evenly across entire neighborhoods. In fact it has taken twenty-five years for the neighborhood I did fieldwork in to start showing visible signs of change.

Like Manhattan, the rents in the outer boroughs such as Brooklyn have continued to escalate at an alarming rate for its poor residents. New York City in general has become one of the most expensive cities in the United States. In the neighborhood in which I worked (and grew up), old abandoned factories were converted into condominiums. As the remaining vestiges of New York City's industrial infrastructure are being swept away, this neighborhood is shaped by the local refraction of complex social and economic processes that are taking place nationally and globally.

By 2005 the value of real estate had changed significantly in this neighborhood. Not only had the price of real estate risen, but the demographic makeup

of the neighborhood had changed as well. This neighborhood changed from a predominantly Puerto Rican one to a Mexican and Ecuadorian locale. But higher rents have not necessarily meant better housing. As the super of one tenement told me, even though the neighborhood has improved and landlords charge higher rents, who has that benefited?

Although the third generation women in my study have seen their neighborhoods transformed as New York City has developed a vigorous postindustrial economy, they, along with the city's working-class and minority populations, have seldom been the beneficiaries of that economy. The cost of living in New York has soared while higher levels of education are now required to compete in the market. And, Puerto Ricans continue to have one of the highest high school attrition and unemployment rates in the city (Rivera-Batiz and Santiago 1996). This is especially problematic in an information-based economy where an education is the only vehicle of upward mobility for most working-class communities.

SHIFTING GENDER ROLES

The lives of the pioneer Puerto Rican men and women who migrated to New York City were difficult, and the environment in which they raised their children was frequently harsh. With the demise of the manufacturing industry in New York City, Puerto Rican men and women struggled to stay employed. They also struggled with changing gender awareness.

One of the most significant changes Puerto Rican women have experienced in New York is the change in the traditional patriarchal family. The women in the first generation struggled with marital conflict and survival as access to jobs and resources diminished in New York. These struggles led to separation and divorce and changes within the family organization for many Puerto Rican families. For example, between 1970 and 1990, the rate of female-headed households with children eighteen years or younger increased for all women. According to the 1970 census, the rate of female-headed households for families of all ethnicities and races was 17.2 percent. In 1980, it climbed to 27.8 percent, and in 1990 it reached 30.1 percent. Comparing these percentages by ethnic/racial groups, in 1970 the rate of female-headed households for white households was 11.9 percent; for black households it was 34.5 percent; and for Hispanic households it was 18.0 percent. By 1980, these rates had risen considerably. For white households it was 40.8 percent; for black households it was 67.6 percent; and for Hispanic households it was 48.7 percent. In 1990, the rate of female-headed households for white households increased to 40.4 percent. It was 73.0 percent for black households and 45.7 percent for Hispanic households (Kasarda 1993, 271). The primary role women play in the family is reflected in the popular

saying developed among Puerto Ricans. Changes in family organization are reflected in the saying that developed from the collective wisdom of the first generation Puerto Rican women: *madre una, padre cien* (any man can father a child, but there is only one mother). Therefore, given the rate of Hispanic female-headed households, this saying reflects the important role that many mothers play in their children's lives as their primary support system. For this reason, after most of the women in the second generation married they chose to continue to live in close proximity to their mothers.

The restructuring of New York City's economy and changes within family organization slowly led to some changes within traditional gender roles. Myriad forces shaped the changing gender awareness of Puerto Rican women in New York, particularly the civil rights and women's liberation movements, and most of the women of the younger generations were exposed to new and radical ideas about feminism and racial equality to some degree.

Puerto Rican men and women have been portrayed in the literature through dualistic concepts of *machismo* and *marianismo*. In the same way the binary model fails to capture the nuances of Puerto Rican women's reproductive experiences, this dualism fails to do justice to the complexity of women's lives. According to *marianismo*, women are defined as dependent, passive, asexual, martyrs, and morally superior to men (Gil and Vasquez 1996; Stevens 1973). In contrast, Puerto Rican men have been depicted as authoritarian, self-centered, sexually aggressive, and mired in rigid gender roles. Puerto Rican men and women are more complex than these prototypes. Like Western women, Puerto Rican women have traditionally been socialized to be good mothers, wives, and daughters, to be nurturers, to conform to traditional gender roles, to repress their discontent, and to sacrifice themselves for others. Puerto Rican men have been socialized to be good providers and enjoy male privilege. However, with few exceptions, I did not find any individual in this study that embodied the absolute prototype of *machismo* and *marianismo* (Bidegain 1989; Ehlers 1992). I found that changes in gender roles did not occur in linear fashion. For example, women's behaviors varied both within and across generations. This defied the expectation that the older generation was always more traditional than the younger generation or that the younger generation was more liberated. What I did find was that men and women share a range of conventional and unconventional behaviors. For example, some of the women in the first generation like doña Rosario were traditional but fiercely proactive and independent. For many women, their independence was born in Puerto Rico out of economic need and cultivated in New York as they adapted to the other harsh realities of a city in transition. Some scholars argue that *marianismo* cannot be analyzed in a vacuum, that women's gender roles must be grounded in the choices they make according to their economic conditions (Ehlers Bachrach 1991). I believe

a combination of factors such as traditional expectations, self-esteem and self-awareness, and economic conditions shape and influence gender roles.

Changing gender roles not only stemmed from society at large but were also based on the radical changes that were taking place in the second generation women's own homes as their parents struggled to adapt to their new lives. Many of the second generation developed a higher level of gender awareness from watching their mothers suffer in troubled marriages they could not afford to leave or change. As Sonia noted, "While I was growing up, I watched my mother suffer in silence—I swore to myself I would never be like my mother." However, even though some first generation women were conventional and served as the transmitters of cultural traditions (Toro-Morn 2005, 141), many were unconventional in other ways. For example, some were single parents because they had divorced their husbands and raised their children alone. Nancy (second generation) expressed, "I had a kick-ass mother. Yeah, she was traditional when it came to things like cooking and cleaning and making Daddy feel good, but when he crossed her he was out of the house in a minute. It got to the point where she only let him come back to visit when she felt like it."

Even though the majority of the women in the second generation remarried, a large number of them were divorced themselves because they were less inclined than their mothers to stay in an unhappy marriage. Lourdes and her husband broke up because she felt she could not pull her life together when she was with him. Despite the hardships she went through, she had a strong support system in a woman who lived in her building that was a surrogate mother to her. Lourdes explains, "Sometimes women are better off alone than with a man ('Mejor sola que mal acompañada'). After we were separated two of my neighbors babysat for the children while I worked and went to school at night. I couldn't have gone to school without their help."

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

Most parents in the first generation were protective of their children, male and female. Some parents were so strict they literally did not allow their children to go anywhere other than to school and church unless accompanied by a parent or sibling. Parents were in part overprotective because they feared for the safety of their children in this new environment, especially for the chastity of their daughters. These young women and men struggled with their parents over issues such as dating, curfews, privacy, and normative gender role expectations. Even though parents were protective of their sons, they were more protective of their daughters. Like their mothers, second generation daughters were socialized into traditional gender roles and were expected to be virgins and to live at

home until they married. Relatively speaking, most of these second generation women had a little more individual freedom than their mothers, who in some cases were not allowed to leave their house without their husband's permission in Puerto Rico. This was especially true if their parents led traditional lives in small towns on the island.

In the early twentieth century Puerto Rican adolescent girls and boys were not allowed to be alone. Therefore, normative practices in North American culture such as dating and socializing with male friends were not acceptable to most second generation immigrant parents. Consequently, if young women wanted to go to a party, their parents might compromise by having her take a younger sibling with them as a chaperone. Young men and women had strict curfews. Lourdes's account reflects the cultural differences between the immigrant parents and their children that created intergenerational clashes: "When I was 18 years old I was absolutely mortified when my mother told me that if I did not take my younger brother to the party with me I could not go. No one else took a younger brother or sister to a party. I felt like a prisoner when I was growing up. Even though I knew they meant well, I felt suffocated by my parents' overprotectiveness and felt miserable most of my life. That is why I married my husband, to get out of my mother's house the first opportunity I had."

PUERTO RICAN WOMEN'S WAYS OF KNOWING

But even in the midst of this intergenerational conflict, women of the first generation began to see different possibilities for their daughters. One of the colloquial phrases women developed out of their collective wisdom and experiences and repeated to their children, especially to their daughters, was "mírate en este espejo." When women say this to their daughters, they mean, look into the mirror of my life and do not make the same mistakes that I did. They want their daughters to go to school so that they will be more independent and have more options than they did. As Sonia reflects, "I learned a lot about how not to live my life from my mother. Whenever she thought I was making the wrong life choices when I was growing up, she would look at me with that sad and wise expression and say, 'Mírate en este espejo [look in this mirror] and don't make the foolish mistakes I made.' That saying has always stayed with me because my mother suffered a lot in life because she hung in there blindly with my father when she should have left that marriage a long time ago."

Other sayings that first generation and a few second generation women shared with me when they began their stories were, "my life has been a veil of tears" (*mi vida es un paño de lágrimas*) and "I have shed tears of blood"

(lágrimas de sangre). Both of these phrases express the level of sorrow some of the women in this study experienced.

The women in the third generation were also familiar with the traditional folk saying, “estudia por si tu marido te sale sin verguenza” (study in case your husband turns out to have no shame) (Crespo 2000). Although each generation has added their own twist to the saying, the meaning is essentially the same. Both warn that a woman should take care of herself in whatever way is necessary so that she can be independent and/or not live with regrets in the future.

The women in the first and second generations wanted their daughters to marry and have a family, but they also wanted them to study so they could have more opportunities than they had. They wanted their sons to do well, too. Although women did not develop a particular saying for boys, according to Frankie, his mother always told him, “Study so you don’t end up like me.”

THE MEN—TRADITION AND TRANSITION

According to some of the women in the second generation, many of the men of their age cohort were as sexist as their fathers. Some of the men of this generation did not want their wives to work outside of the home. In some cases these women were trapped in the double shift syndrome, fully responsible for the children and domestic work while also earning income outside the home. In other cases, even some of the men who did not work and therefore could not fulfill their traditional male role as the provider of the family still refused to help with childcare and domestic work.

This was the case with Jorge. I interviewed him when he was forty-one years old and divorced. Jorge was born and raised in New York with his mother and four sisters. He dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and started working at an early age to help his mother support the household. He acquired some work experience by doing construction work with his uncle, but work was not consistently available. In his words:

My dad left before I was born and I am the only son of five children, so basically my mother spoiled me rotten. When I was growing my aunts and uncles said to me only sissies cry. I was told I was the man of the house, so I had to be strong and protect the family. It was hard growing up male because my girlfriends and family had so many expectations of me.

My mother, she cooked, cleaned, and basically did everything for my sisters and me. She’s still cooking, cleaning, ironing, and taking care of me. Since she never taught me to do anything around the house, I thought it was a woman’s job to cook, clean, and take care of the kids. When I got married,

I expected my wife to do the same thing. I worked whenever I could find a gig, but these jobs were scarce. Sometimes I spent a lot of time at home. After I got married my wife complained I didn’t do enough around the house. She was tired and irritable when she came home and complained she was too tired to come home and start cooking dinner and picking up around the apartment. After two years we split up, because even though I helped her it was too much for me that she expected me to cook and clean as well.

While sexism still prevails among a large sector of Puerto Rican men, some of the younger men are different. For example, as Lizzie, a third generation granddaughter, recalls, “I’m really proud of my brothers. All guys are not bums. Look at my brothers, how responsible and sweet they are with their wives and child. I hope one day I can meet someone nice like them, but if I don’t I’ll be okay, ’cause I’ll have my career and like my mom, I’ll always be able to take care of myself and help my family.”

Although a few of the sons and daughters in the youngest generation completed high school and went to college, like Jorge, a large number of them dropped out of high school to help support their families. The high school dropout rate for Puerto Rican men was higher than it was for Puerto Rican women (Rivera-Batiz and Santiago 1996). As a consequence, the men of this generation suffered higher rates of unemployment than their female counterparts. For example, in the 1990s the labor force participation rates among Puerto Rican women rose, while it declined for men. In 1990 Puerto Rican women had a labor force participation rate of 43.3 percent, which rose to 47.6 percent by 1999. Among Puerto Rican men, however, the labor force participation rate dropped from 67.4 percent to 63.7 percent during the same period (Rivera-Batiz and Santiago 1996, 120–121).

CHANGES IN EDUCATION AND FERTILITY

In contrast to the first generation, their daughters’ generation had higher levels of education (although lower levels than their peers) and more access to health care and birth control. For example, while the majority of women in the first generation only had a second or third grade educational level, most of their daughters graduated from high school, and a few continued on to higher education. Evelyn recalls, “The day I received my high school diploma was the proudest day of my life. I was the first one in my family who graduated from high school. My parents were so proud of me too, especially my mom, who always stressed the importance of an education.”

The women in the second generation also had access to health care—which meant they had their babies in hospitals instead of at home with midwives—

and they also had access to birth control. Perhaps the greatest difference I found between the women in the first and second generations was that most of the older women did not have access to temporary methods of birth control when they were in their youth. This meant that the only method they had for controlling their fertility was sterilization. Now, it is also important to note that even though the women in the second generation had access to contraceptives, they also had problems with them. First, like other women, they experienced nausea, bloating, or other physical side effects with the pill, or their bodies rejected the intrauterine device (IUD). Second, they had limited knowledge of how to use these contraceptives effectively. Third, many of their husbands and boyfriends thought that birth control was a woman's responsibility. This situation became a major source of gender conflict because at least some of the women, who were born or raised in New York, had different ideas about sexuality, marriage, and domestic life than the men. As Nancy expressed, "My old man thinks that birth control is my responsibility because if I get pregnant I'm the one that's going to have it and primarily take care of the baby. That pisses me off 'cause he has a good time making the baby too. Why can't he wear a rubber?! I'm sick to death of always being in charge of everything—that is why some women like me got sterilized!"

The women in the second generation desired smaller families, and as a rule they had fewer children and did not have the children consecutively. For example, the women in the second generation had a median of three to four children as compared to the ten or eleven children common in the previous generation. Like their mothers, many second generation women still adhered to the patriarchal value of wanting a son before they were sterilized. A popular saying Puerto Rican women developed to indicate they are sterilized is "Cerramos la factoría" (We closed down the factory). They usually say this with a wink and a chuckle. Doña Rosario observed, "When women say they closed down the factory, we mean we are not going to have any more babies, or we have had all of the children that we want."

Interestingly, the women of the second generation frequently opted for sterilization as their primary method of birth control, even though they had greater access to temporary methods than their mothers did. There are a number of factors that contributed to the continued popularity of la operación: it was culturally familiar; the daughters desired fewer children than their mothers; it was difficult to support a large family in the economy; they suffered negative side effects from temporary methods of birth control; they became pregnant while using birth control; a large number of their female relatives and friends had been operated on and they recommended la operación to one another; and they took a pragmatic stance about the church telling them what to do with respect to birth control and la operación.

LATINAS AND SEXUALITY

Because Latinas were raised to repress their sexuality, many of the women in the first generation and even in the second generation were uncomfortable talking about sex. This was reflected in the fact that women frequently asked me to educate their children about birth control. Even though they came of age in the era of the women's liberation movement, they also grew up in the 1950s when "good girls" were virgins. In fact, the family's honor was tied up in its daughters' chaste status. This was Gladys's experience as she was growing up in Brooklyn.

My generation never talked about sex when we were growing up, especially to our mothers. No one ever taught us anything about birth control either. As a young girl, I was naive about my body. Like many girls of my generation, I did not know what to expect even when I started to menstruate. I was traumatized when I got my period. I thought I had cut myself and I was bleeding to death. I told my mother. She said, "Tu eres señorita" [You're a woman now]. I didn't know what that meant; for me everything was new. Later on when I started to have sex, I had to hide my birth control pills from my mother's roving eyes. The day she found them and accused me of being a ho (whore) my world fell apart because I was a good and decent woman and wanted to live up to my mother's image.

Not all women were so reticent with their daughters. Because Gladys was raised so naively, she made sure that she taught her daughter and granddaughter about their bodies when they were old enough to understand. When her granddaughter Samantha was nine years old, she talked to her about her menstruation. "I got her a little book. I told her, 'You read it. If there is anything you don't understand, let me know.' 'I understand everything, Grandma.' By the time my daughter got her period she knew she was prepared for this event. She said to me, 'Mami que fun, I got my period. It happened on my birthday too.' I was on my way out to work. I told her you know what you have to do. You have everything in your room."

Sexual mores have changed radically from the second to the third generation. In fact, Gladys, who took care to instruct her daughter and granddaughter about sex and menstruation, is appalled at what is going on with children in the grammar school where she works. The two biggest health problems Gladys sees are incest and AIDS. According to Gladys, children are having sex even in elementary schools. In her words, "This is a problem because young children don't know what they are doing, and they do not use protection, so they risk pregnancy and AIDS."

Unfortunately, the up-and-coming generations of women also continue to face problems similar to those that confronted previous generations, such

as abusive relationships, a lack of emotional training and limited knowledge about contraceptives, problems with temporary methods of birth control, sexist ideas that relegate the responsibility of birth control exclusively to women, and the ongoing AIDS crisis.

Cultural beliefs about gender roles and sexuality have changed significantly for this generation. They date, socialize with male and female friends, and are able to stay out later than their mothers. Women's experiences with their parents vary according to how recently their parents migrated, as well as by family. In most cases the women in the granddaughters' generation had a lot more personal freedom than their mothers and grandmothers. However, in other cases, as with Jessica, their personal freedom was much more restricted.

During high school I studied hard. I began to date even though it was against my mother's will. What I mean by dating is that I saw my boyfriend at school and spoke to him on the phone, but I was not allowed to go out with him. I felt restrained and left out of the whole teenage process. All the other kids in high school hung out and went out dancing, or went to the movies while I was home watching TV. There were many times in my life when I felt like running away. I hated my mother because she never let me breathe. I knew that her being strict was for my own good, but it was very difficult to accept at the age of fourteen when I should have been treated as a young adult. Because I was never allowed to hang out with my friends, it was very difficult for me to maintain friendships and relationships.

Some parents were strict with their sons, too, because they feared they could get involved with the wrong friends and end up on drugs or dropping out of school. According to one of the men in the grandson's generation:

I know my sister thinks she is the only one who suffered while we were growing up, but she's not the only one. It's no picnic growing up in the heart of Brooklyn. Outside school and home walls all around was crime and a lot of drug use. It was really difficult not to fall prey to either of the two. Many of my friends were smoking by the age of thirteen, some even got into various gangs on the block, such as Bloods and Crips. Many of them did all these things because of peer pressure. My parents kept tabs on where I was and who I was with. I had a curfew, and I needed to constantly ask for permission to do things. Some of the kids called me a fag when I went home early. I felt bad back then and still don't like to be reigned in, but at least now I realize what my parents were trying to protect me from.

A significant intergenerational gap about sex also persisted between the three generations. These young women and men grew up during the AIDS epidemic with contradictory and confusing messages. On the one hand, the

young women were exposed to explicit sex in the media and on the Internet; on the other hand, conservative fundamentalists, whose solution to the teenage pregnancy problem was "just say no," denied them sex education courses in school that would teach them about birth control, STDs, and AIDS. As Millie expresses, "Almost everyone I know knows someone who has HIV or has died of AIDS. My mother and father died of AIDS. This is the hardest experience I've ever gone through. I loved my mom and my dad. What would I tell young women out there today? You need to protect yourself 'cause one slip can kill you. It's really scary out there."

Women's attitudes have also changed with respect to marriage. In the first and second generations, having a child out of wedlock was considered a disgrace and tragedy to the family. Daughters were ostracized from their families and/or sent away to have their child elsewhere. This attitude differed significantly by the twenty-first century because of changes in family organization and changing gender roles within this working-class community. Nowadays the acceptance of women having children out of matrimony is reflected in television programs like *Friends* and *Sex in the City*, but perhaps even more important, young women have seen their mothers and grandmothers struggle with changing social, economic, and cultural circumstances that led many of them to raise families on their own.

Despite changing gender roles, most of the young women in this study idealized marriage and maintained some traditional beliefs, such as that domestic work and child rearing are still women's primary responsibility. The majority of the young women in this study would like to meet the right man for them. However, if he does not come along many of them feel they will raise their children without a man like some of their mothers did.

Younger women also want fewer children than their mothers and grandmothers. Although the women in the third generation are familiar with contraceptives, like their mothers they are not always well educated about them, especially the barrier methods. Therefore, some of them became pregnant accidentally, and like their forebears they decided to have their babies. Their views about abortion vary. Some feel that abortion is morally wrong; others feel it is their right to decide if they want to have an abortion. As Lizzie said, "I'm not telling anybody what to do, because it should be the woman who decides what she wants to do depending on her situation."

In summary, the younger generation has retained a strong Puerto Rican identity. Many have remained in the neighborhood near their families. Family networks are strong and remain essential for the survival and well-being of the family. While many changes have taken place over the three generations, one of the factors that remains the same is women's acceptance and misinformation about la operación. Like their female relatives, the majority of younger

women plan to be sterilized after they achieve their desired family size. Like their mothers and grandmothers they are not fully aware that sterilization is, for the most part, permanent. In addition, because the majority of these young women are not religious, they are not aware and do not care about the church's view of tubal ligation. Like their mothers, they are culturally predisposed to sterilization and continue to consider la operación an important way to control their reproduction.