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Yo era muy arriesgada:
A Historical Overview of the Work Experiences
of Puerto Rican Women in Chicago

MAURA I. TORO-MORN

Abstract

This paper examines the work experiences of Puerto Rican women in Chicago from the 1950s to the 1990s. It aims to show the historical links in the labor market experiences of Puerto Rican women workers in Chicago and Puerto Rico, two sites linked by capitalism, patriarchy, and migration. Puerto Ricans migrated to Chicago as part of an organized recruitment effort to provide cheap labor for the expanding industrial and service sectors of the economy. The first large group of Puerto Rican women workers that migrated to Chicago were recruited to resolve the shortage of domestic workers that existed in the city in the 1950s. Census data reveal important shifts in the occupational profile of Puerto Rican migrants in the city. Interview data reveal that Puerto Rican women encountered a range of problems as workers, as women, and as people of color. Puerto Rican women also struggled with their roles and mothers and workers. Although the economic landscape of the city has changed much in the last fifty years, in the 1990s Puerto Rican workers continued to provide cheap labor to what remains of the industrial sector, to the ever-expanding service sector, and to the new sectors of the economy created in the context of global restructuring. In the 1980s and 1990s, educated Puerto Ricans joined working class families in the migration to the city, attracted by the promise of good-paying jobs in these newly developing sectors of the economy.

Introduction

After I got to Chicago my husband didn't want me to work, but I wanted to work. I wanted to work because you can meet people, learn new things, and one can also leave the house for a while. I saw all the women in the family, his sisters and cousins, working and earning some money, and I wanted to work too. They were used to tell me that I should be working. But I had four children, and who was going to take care of them? (Rita, 72 years old, Puerto Rican migrant in Chicago).

When I started working at Zenith I started welding. I lied to them, I told them that I knew how to do it but I didn't...The lady next to me was Italian. I told her I really needed this job, that I had three kids. I told her that I was really interested in learning how to do the job, if she showed me I could learn faster. Within six months I was line inspector, within another six months I was spot checker, and within another six months I was quality control operator. (Nellie, 52 years old, Puerto Rican migrant in Chicago).

These quotes, taken from interviews I conducted in the city of Chicago, show how working class Puerto Rican women struggled to balance work and family responsibilities and suggest some of the strategies women used to secure employment in the city. The quotes also hint at the racialized and gendered labor market that Puerto Rican women encountered as they entered Chicago's labor force. Although Puerto Ricans have lived in the city of Chicago for over half a century, very little is known about the work experiences of Puerto Rican women. This paper aims to fill this gap by offering a historical overview of the work experiences of Puerto Rican women in Chicago.

The U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico transformed (and continues to transform) the work and migration experiences of Puerto Rican men and women (Meléndez and Meléndez 1993). Historically, Puerto Rican women became part of a labor force that since the United States occupation has shifted from island to mainland to meet the needs of an expanding capitalist and patriarchal system (Ortiz 1996). In Puerto Rico, feminist scholars have documented that Puerto Rican women were integrated into a gender-segregated market closely related to the needs of the U.S. colonial capitalism (Acevedo 1990; Baerga 1993; Ortiz 1996). Research conducted in Puerto Rican communities in the Northeast shows that, as in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican migrant women were a source of cheap labor for New York City's needle and garment trades (Ortiz 1996). Puerto Rican women migrants in the Northeast were also subject to gender and racial discrimination at work and were excluded from participating in labor unions (Ortiz 1996; Whalen 1998).

Researchers have also documented how the impact of economic restructuring in the Middle Atlantic states has led to widespread job loss, poverty, and a rise in female-headed households (Colon-Warren 1996; Daponte 1996). Clearly, an impressive body of work indicates that Puerto Rican women workers in the Island and mainland communities are important economic and social actors. The evidence is a necessary corrective to the gender biases that have plagued studies of the Puerto Rican experience. Nevertheless, more work is needed to document how race, class, and gender have shaped the migration and labor market experiences of Puerto Rican workers in the United States.

This paper focuses on work experiences of Puerto Rican women in Chicago. As a global city, Chicago boomed in the post-World War II period, experienced a period of contraction and deindustrialization from the late 1960s through the 1980s, and more recently has become an important player in the global economy as a center of trade, finance, and technological development (Abu-Lughod 1999). Throughout these economic cycles, the city has consistently used its colonial ties to draw workers from Puerto Rico to meet its labor needs.

The first large group of Puerto Rican women workers that migrated to Chicago were recruited to resolve the shortage of domestic workers that existed in the city in the 1950s (Toro-Morn 1999). Gender ideology figured prominently in the migration of Puerto Rican women as domestic workers. In Puerto Rico, the government campaigned to move low-skilled single women to the United States as a way to deal with the unemployment and population problems in the Island. Government officials rationalized the migration of young single women as domestic workers by subscribing to the ideology that Puerto Rican women were inherently suited for domestic work. In Chicago, employers relied on racial stereotypes to pay women salaries that were significantly lower than the going rate for domestic work and made women work long hours without days off. Some contract workers broke their contracts and sought employment in the booming industrial sector, which was also in need of low-skilled labor. These early migrants provided information and resources to other Puerto Rican men and women about employment opportunities in Chicago. As a result, since the 1950s Chicago has become a viable destination for Puerto Ricans migrating to the United States in search of work opportunities.

In the second part of this paper, I analyze interviews with Puerto Rican women in Chicago. These interviews reveal that some women struggled with the decision to enter salaried work, whereas for others it was a clear extension of their roles as mothers and heads of households. As in Puerto Rico, in Chicago women turned to other women for both support and information about job availability. When contacts failed, Puerto Rican women turned to established agencies and other sources in their search for employment. The data reveal that, for mothers, outside employment was a temporary solution meant to support their families in the city and those left behind in the Island. As the city's industrial employment declined, some working mothers abandoned waged work, while others used it as a way to get more education and move into better paying occupations or self employment.

In the last part of the paper, I turn to census data to further document and analyze the changing occupational profile of Puerto Ricans in the city. The U.S. Census of Population confirms that in the 1960s and 1970s, most Puerto Rican workers were laborers concentrated in the industrial sector of the city. In the 1980s, in keeping with changes in the global economy, many factories closed their operations to relocate to more profitable places in the Caribbean and Central America. Ironically, industries closed their operations in Chicago to open plants in Puerto Rico, thus further cementing the links between Chicago and Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican families in Chicago were hit hard by lay-offs, unemployment, and plant closings. Many families were not able to recover economically and slipped into poverty, a problem that hit the Puerto Rican community hard in the 1980s.

Although the political economy of the city has changed much in the last forty years, in the 1990s Puerto Rican workers continued to provide cheap labor to what remained of the industrial sector, to the ever-expanding service sector, and to the new sectors of the economy created in the context of global restructuring. In the 1980s and 1990s,

educated Puerto Ricans joined working class families in the migration to the city, attracted by the promise of good paying jobs in these newly developing sectors of the economy, thus strengthening the class and gendered links that have historically tied Puerto Rico and Chicago.

Colonialism, Gender, and Work: A Historical Overview

Puerto Rican women's work experiences have been shaped by the demands of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Acosta-Belen 1986; Acevedo 1990; Alicea 1997; Ortiz 1998; Matos Rodríguez and Delgado 1998). The colonization of Puerto Rico first by Spain and then by the United States had a profound impact on the lives and work experiences of Puerto Rican women. While under Spanish control, Puerto Rican women's contributions to the economy varied by race and class (Amott and Matthaei 1991: 260). For example, enslaved black women worked in the fields, planting and harvesting coffee, sugar, and other products (Ortiz 1996). Enslaved women also worked as household servants, cooking, caring for children, and sewing, washing, and ironing clothes. After 1872, free black women, as well as other racially mixed women, worked as *jornaleras* (wageworkers), or domestic workers, or sold home-prepared foods and candies or working in the fields for agricultural hacendados (Ortiz 1996). In fact, in San Juan a shortage of domestic workers led to a *crisis de brazos*, a term colonial authorities gave to the shortage of domestic workers and the general labor market situation shortly after the abolition of slavery (Matos Rodríguez 1998). One way they sought to alleviate the shortage of workers was through the proliferation of public and semiprivate beneficence institutions (*casas de beneficencias*). According to Matos Rodríguez (1998:73),

In San Juan, beneficence establishments were oriented toward recruiting, training, and placing domestic workers. The city's elite women played an important role in creating and administering these institutions, which helped to guarantee their privileged lifestyle and kept them in charge within the public sphere of the domestic staff they supervised in the private sphere of home.

But regardless of their attempts to control and secure labor, women domestic workers fought to improve their working conditions, thus bringing them into direct conflict with colonial authorities, political officials, and employers. Unfortunately, domestic workers were not protected by the law; consequently, their concerns were left unresolved.

In 1898, the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico drastically transformed the economic role of women (Acevedo 1990, 1993; Baerga 1995). The low wages and high unemployment that men experienced, forced Puerto Rican women out of subsistence production (Amott and Matthaei 1991). As a consequence, Puerto Rican women workers became integrated into a sex-segregated labor market that was closely related to the needs of U.S. colonial capitalism (Ortiz 1996). The kinds of work women performed changed with the needs of the new colonial power. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, women worked at tobacco stripping, home needlework, and straw-hat making, work that can be seen as an extension of their reproductive roles in the home. At this time, the share of women employed in domestic service fell from 78 percent in 1899 to 28 percent in 1930 (Amott and Matthaei 1991).

Puerto Rican feminist scholars have documented the relevance of the needlework industry to the entrance of Puerto Rican women into salaried work (see, for example, Azize 1985, 1987; Baerga 1995). In the tobacco industry, for example, women worked as

leaf strippers, sorters, and packers, work that required excruciatingly long hours, was poorly paid, and was dangerous. Needlework was also very exploitative, and wages never rose above survival level (Ortiz 1996). Women needleworkers and tobacco workers organized several unions and participated in labor strikes to challenge women's exploitation in both occupations (Ortiz 1996). When New Deal legislation threatened to wipe out the home needlework industry because it allegedly did not adhere to U.S. standards, female needleworkers challenged island trade unionists and fought for their right to do home work in the context of their social role as homemakers (Boris 1996). Home needleworkers, according to Boris (1996:48), defended their work as the only means by which they could provide their families with food. In other words, it was precisely their roles as home makers that women workers used to demand higher wages and better working conditions. In the end, New Deal legislation upgraded standards for needlewomen workers on paper, but it failed them by not honoring their desire to hold on to the home as their workplace.

On the other side of the class spectrum, the small class of landowners, professionals, and business families were also affected by the economic changes introduced by the new colonial power. Many landowning families lost their land and moved to the cities. Daughters in these families were encouraged to pursue education and professional work, leading to the rise of a small class of professional women. Most women went into the teaching profession, radically altering the gender composition of teaching. In 1899, 70 percent of most teachers in the Island were men. By 1930, 75 percent of teachers were women.

In the 1950s, the implementation of Operation Bootstrap intensified the need for women's labor. Ironically, although Operation Bootstrap was designed to improve the employment opportunities of men, the kinds of industry it attracted to the island (i.e., export-oriented manufacturing) resulted in a strong demand for women workers (Rios 1990; Safa 1995). As a result, the proportion of women in the labor force increased from 23.4 to 36.5 percent (Rios 1990:323). According to Rios (1993:98), "The disproportionate presence of women in Puerto Rico's manufacturing sector is not an aberration or a chance occurrence but an inherent feature of a development strategy that has been part of the World War II restructuring of the world economy." Alongside the rising employment of women, surplus laborers (mostly men) were absorbed into the U.S. labor market via migration. More than half of the all the jobs created in Puerto Rico between 1960 and 1980 went to women. Younger, more educated Puerto Rican women workers went into better-paying white collar jobs in the government, while older, less educated women went into the declining manufacturing industries and low-paying jobs (Acevedo 1990). Although women were working more and have made important economic contributions to their families, the rising cost of living and declining wages made the economic situation of Puerto Rican working families precarious.

Carmen Pérez Herranz (1996) documents that women workers in the manufacturing sector faced an extremely rigid and gender-segregated working environment in Puerto Rico. She conducted interviews in the three different factories and found that jobs as supervisors and plant managers went mostly to men. She found that there was a great deal of paternalism between women workers and managers. The organization of work was shaped by social conventions that came from outside the workplace. More specifically, kinship relations were the fundamental source of relationships that developed among the workers. Puerto Rican women workers rarely carried out tasks that called for leadership roles, and many did not resort to union organizing as a way to resolve problems related to work. Pérez-Herranz (1996) concluded that women had internalized the submissive position historically associated with females in Puerto Rican society.

Helen Safa's (1995) work has also explored the impact of Puerto Rican women's work on the gender division of labor and gender relations between men and women. In her earlier path-breaking work, she documented that women's industrial employment did not alter the gender division of labor and that men were reluctant to accept women's work outside the home (Safa 1980). Using interviews conducted in the 1980s, Safa found that although some things had changed, others stayed the same for Puerto Rican women workers. For example, she found that men were more likely to accept women's work outside the home and did not consider it a threat to their authority because they realized that it was impossible to live on single wage (Safa 1995:86). She also found that, with respect to the gender division of labor women workers continued to be responsible for housework, child care, and most of the work associated with children in their families. Pérez-Herranz (1996) also found similar results and suggests that "women's continued celebration of motherhood and family life, therefore, may be a way of subconsciously refusing to see their own subordination" (1996:155). She adds that "maintaining this traditional ideology in modern Puerto Rico has provided these women with much-needed space in which to experience greater gratification and more control over their lives" (1996:155). Safa (1995) adds that the patriarchal gender ideologies found in labor unions, the government, and political parties also contribute to maintain women's subordination. This problem has also been found in among white collar workers (see, for example, Casey 1996).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Puerto Rico lost to Mexico and other Caribbean countries its comparative advantage as a source of cheap labor, thus leading to rising unemployment and underemployment. Between 1970 and 1985, the overall unemployment rate in Puerto Rico almost doubled to 21 percent (Amott and Matthei 1991:277). Men and women were affected differently by these shifts. Although men experienced losses in their share of employment, they seemed to have gained in their share of total employment because of the growth of employment in the public sector. But in general, increasing unemployment and declining employment opportunities pushed Puerto Rican families to become dependent on federal welfare programs for survival. Others have resorted to the informal sector, also known as *chiripeo*, as a way to survive (Amott and Matthei 1991). There is a gender dimension to *chiripeo*, as both men and women engage in this kind of work; however, men's *chiripeo* includes fruit and vegetable vending, among a range of other activities, whereas women's work include domestic work, and jewelry making, among other characteristic activities.

In summary, in the second half of the twentieth century the movement of capital and the production process--twin elements in the restructuring of the world economy--transformed less developed economies or colonial outposts, such as Puerto Rico into sites of manufacturing activities (Rios 1993). Alongside the movement of capital and production, migration flows have also emerged as an important characteristic of the new international division of labor. Puerto Rico offers a textbook case of the connections between the movement of capital and migration flows and the gendered nature of these processes. Indeed, since the U.S. colonization of the Island, Puerto Ricans have been recruited to meet labor shortages in booming industrial cities in the North East and the Midwest.

Colonialism, Migration, and Work: The Chicago Experience The Domestic Workers

Although the exact number of Puerto Rican women recruited to do domestic work in Chicago is not known, in 1946 the island newspaper *El Mundo* reported that over 100

women had signed contracts to work as domestics,¹ while a local Chicago paper reported the arrival of 150 domestic workers. Other reports placed the number of Puerto Rican domestics in Chicago close to 300. In the late 1940s and 1950s, a host of government agencies in the Island, at the federal, and city level, orchestrated the recruitment and deployment of workers. On the Island, the Department of Labor and the Office of the Governor were most involved, as suggested by official government documents and correspondence. In the United States, there were several agencies involved. At the Federal level, there was the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, the arm of the federal government that attended to all matters concerning Puerto Rico. In addition, the Department of Labor and the Women's Bureau in Washington, and its representative in Chicago, provided information about working conditions in Chicago and worked with government agencies on the Island. But the major recruitment effort was done by a private employment agency, Castle, Barton and Associates, with offices in Miami, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago; and in two locations in Puerto Rico, San Juan and Ponce.

Typically, the recruitment process proceeded as follows: private citizens in Chicago contacted the agency, filled out a contract request for a domestic worker and paid \$210.00 for each employee's transportation as well as a service fee to the employment agency. By signing the contract request, potential employers also agreed to sign a blank employment contract to be delivered to the Department of Labor in Puerto Rico for the signature of the domestic servant and approval of the Commissioner of Labor. In a chart attached to the employer contract, the employer described the desired age, height, weight, and sex of the prospective servant and type of services needed from the domestic worker. Another way employers sought to hire domestic workers was by making informal requests to the U.S. government. For example, a prospective employer in Washington, D.C. wrote in a letter to the Department of the Interior, with the following request: "Boy, how I would like to get a good couple without children, if possible—the man to do yard and furnace work and drive my car and the woman to do the cooking."

The contracts signed by the prospective female employees were much more detailed concerning both employer and employee responsibilities than those signed by the prospective employer. The employee contract was designed by the Department of Labor of the government of Puerto Rico. It provided for the signatures of the representative of the employment agency, the employer, employee, and by the Commissioner of Labor in Puerto Rico. Contracts stipulated the duration of employment to be one year. The employer agreed to "furnish suitable living quarters and with food and meals" during the entire term of the contract and to provide uniforms if necessary. In addition, potential workers were entitled to one day off per week worked. There was no set amount for the salary as stipulated by the contract; rather, employers were required to sign a blank contract. Of course, the lengthier part of the contract stipulated the employee responsibilities. Female domestic workers were hired to serve as cooks, maids, clothes washers, nursemaids, and for general housework. They were expected to move with their employer if necessary, to be "clean and neat" at all times, and to refrain from using the employer's residence for entertaining. Transportation from San Juan to Chicago was initially paid by the employer, with small amounts deducted from the employee's monthly check as reimbursement. Employers also deducted from wages an additional \$100.00 for the transportation back to Puerto Rico since it was assumed that workers would return after the expiration of their contracts. A total of \$18.33 was deducted monthly to cover this transportation cost.

As expected, given the terms and conditions of the contract, correspondence sent from San Juan to Washington, D.C. shows that there were many problems related to the exploitation of contract workers from Puerto Rico. Some problems were serious enough to be brought to the attention of the Women's Bureau, in Washington D.C., which issued a report entitled "Statement on Puerto Rican Household Workers" on February 7, 1947. The report confirmed that approximately 400 Puerto Rican women and girls had been brought to Chicago. It stated that the workers felt they were exploited through long working hours and low wages. Women were asked to work up to fifteen hours a day and were denied any days off. Others reported that they were only allowed five hours of free time on their day off. The wages they received were significantly lower than the prevailing wages for United States citizens doing similar work. As mentioned previously, in the 1950s in Chicago the average domestic worker earned \$80.00 a month for a 50-hour week. Additional hours would be only by agreement and were not to exceed 60 in a week. After all the deductions taken from these women's salary, Puerto Rican domestic workers received half (\$41.67) of what the average worker was paid. This situation clearly led to dissatisfaction among the Puerto Rican women; consequently, some failed to honor their contracts. Regardless of the problems encountered, the "Chicago experiment"—as the migration of domestic workers to Chicago was known to government officials—was cited by officials as an example of the potential that such projects had for alleviating the island's population and unemployment problems as well as the shortage of domestic workers in the United States (Toro-Morn 1999).

The migration of Puerto Rican women as domestic workers is important because it links Puerto Rico and Chicago in distinctively gendered ways (Toro-Morn 1999). First, there is the government campaign to move low-skilled single women to the United States as a way to deal with the unemployment and population problems in the Island. Government officials rationalized the migration of young single women as domestic workers by subscribing to the ideology that Puerto Rican women were inherently suited for domestic work. In addition, employers accepted a cult of domesticity that elevated the status of women as mothers and homemakers, yet they made demands on domestics that hindered them from carrying out these responsibilities in their own households. In moving to Chicago as domestic workers, the productive and reproductive spheres of women's work not only intersected in the migration process, but, more important, linked Puerto Rico and Chicago in distinctively gendered ways. The migration of the domestics is also important because it led to the migration of other working class families, a topic I address in the remainder of this paper. Finally, the hiring of Puerto Rican women as domestic workers needs to be seen within the larger history of contract labor to the United States; how the United States had relied on Puerto Ricans as a source of cheap labor also requires attention.

Working Class Women Workers: Life Stories

In this section, I turn to the interview data to examine the work experiences of Puerto Rican women in Chicago. Given the high rates of women's industrial employment in the Island, it is not surprising to find that prior to moving to Chicago, most of the women I interviewed had worked in the manufacturing sector of the Island and other mainland communities. For example, before she moved to Chicago, Luz worked in a silk factory in Arecibo, Puerto Rico; Alicia worked in an apparel factory; and Teresa and Alicia reported that they had worked as domestics. Even those who migrated from New York City reported working in factories while on the East Coast: Carmen and Rosita both worked in apparel factories before they moved to Chicago. In the 1950's,

New York City's labor market offered women plenty of employment opportunities in the industrial sector. Nellie explained how she moved from one factory to another,

I lied. I told my employers I was 21 years old. I started working in a candy factory in New Jersey. Every once in a while they would ask me for my papers but I told them that I had forgotten them. I used to tell them that my papers were lost somewhere in Puerto Rico. One day I let slip to another Puerto Rican girl that I was underage and they fired me. After that I worked in all kinds of places. I worked in a factory that made custom jewelry. The work was very stimulating [said in a sarcastic tone].

Once in Chicago, it was clear that life in the city for these newly arrived immigrants was not easy. As one informant put it, "In those days one pay check was like nothing. We put together both paychecks, and there were times when we had very little, next to nothing left. By that time there were other relatives living with us, and there were lots of mouths to feed." Working-class Puerto Rican families in Chicago responded to their dire economic circumstances by sending every working age member in the household out to work (Padilla 1987). Josefa describes the demands of industrial employment on women and the relative ease with which women were able to come in and out of work:

Shortly after I got here from Puerto Rico I started working. I started working in a steel factory. We made some car parts.... Men did part of the work and threw it our way and we cleaned it. At the beginning, I cut my hands. They paid me 85 cents an hour. I worked 40 hours a week and sometimes we had to work Saturdays. In that company I worked for 3 or 4 years.... After that I worked in another factory. I stopped working there because I started losing weight and feeling ill. After that I went to General Electric.

Relatives and friends were very important to the process of finding work. Relatives helped by providing information about availability of jobs, actually taking the person to the job, helping by translating, and in some cases even making arrangements with managers for newcomers. Working-class working mothers reported that finding a job in the 1950s was very easy. Rosita, for example, comments:

I went to work in a clothing factory. I remember there was a street, like a corridor, where there were all kinds of manufacturing industries. From there I went to work to the second floor of Damen and Milwaukee, also another factory. My sister was with me then. We made blouses.

To help her with the language problem, Teresa asked a male friend of the family to take her to a factory where she knew they were hiring. On another instance, her husband accompanied her to find a job. Nellie's husband had some friends who told them that Zenith was hiring. Sometimes friends were not reliable. Rita remembers that

I had many arrangements with a female friend that was going to take me to this factory where they were recruiting. She was going to help me with the questions and the translations. But she did not show up.

So I had to do it by myself. I told them that I was looking for work. They took me into the office and asked my name and some questions about whether I was married, whether I had any children. I answered all their questions. I did not think I could, but I did. And they sent me to work immediately.

The first time Lupe was working a job she received her sister helped her. Several years later, when she was looking for work again, she met a man in church who was working in a community organization.

I approached him and told him that I was looking for a job and I asked if he knew of any openings. He told me that Centro was going to open a food program. He told me go and talk to Rev. Pérez. I went, and they interviewed me, they trained me, and here I am.

Once in Chicago, the tendency was to rely less on relatives for subsequent jobs. Some, like Marisa, reported relying on classified ads of local newspapers. Community organizations played also an important role in helping working class women find work. Daniela, an early migrant, was in church one day when the priest announced that they were hiring temporary workers in the post office. The priest took her and others to the site and saw that they were all hired. Victoria also found a job through her church.

My pastor had just received some money from the city to start some social programs, and he offered me a job. He gave me that first opportunity. Since my mother lived in a little house behind the church I used to leave the children with her. It was there where I learned to become more independent.

In Chicago, the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, an organization developed to regulate, oversee, and manage Puerto Rican migration to the United States, was another major community organization that helped working-class women find jobs. Luz, who migrated to Chicago in the 1950s, remembers that she went to the Chicago office looking for a job. As Puerto Ricans began to disperse throughout the United States, Julia learned about a job opening in Milwaukee while visiting the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in Chicago. The Chicago office of the Government of Puerto Rico opened in 1949 and was then a major force in promoting the migration of Puerto Ricans to Chicago (Pérez 2000). By the 1950s, the agency was also an important institution to help promote the integration of Puerto Rican migrants to the city. Aware of the racial politics that shaped the New York Puerto Rican experience, the agency sought to promote an image of Puerto Ricans as family-oriented, hardworking people.

The local press, deeply committed to the postwar cult of domesticity, found the Puerto Rican story of hardworking men and strong families a compelling one. For over a decade, local newspapers hailed the Puerto Ricans as “examples of good citizens” and a “model minority.” Race and gender figured prominently in the agency’s desire to promote Puerto Ricans as a model minority and in the city’s short-lived embrace of Puerto Ricans as newcomers. As Pérez (2000:13) states, “Media portrayals of hardworking Puerto Rican families also assured city residents that they were not black... yet it also betrayed black claims of entrenched racism and racist social policy that rendered black

Chicagoans poor and segregated in the city's bursting ghettos. Similarly, with respect to gender, the incorporation of Puerto Rican women as workers betrayed dominant postwar ideology of domesticity." Puerto Rican women were in what Pérez (2000:15) calls an "ambiguous ideological space...[l]ike other poor and minority women, they were expected to work; but they were also upheld as the ideal of family and female virtue."

In keeping with a postwar gender ideology (Pérez 2000), working class migrant women viewed employment as a temporary necessity and felt mostly responsible for the care of their families. One of the women I interviewed, Carmen, worked in a clothing factory in New York. When she came to Chicago, she stopped working for a while because her husband pressured her to dedicate her time to raising the children. Alicia did factory work for two years before her daughter was born, and then continued to work first in factories until her second pregnancy, when she quit work for good. Luz also worked for over six years, but eventually she stopped working and dedicated herself to raising her children. But even when they stopped working, Puerto Rican mothers relied on other income-producing activities. Luz worked doing miscellaneous seamstress work in the neighborhood, while Teresa took care of the children in her building as an income-producing activity.

For those that worked for longer periods of time, balancing work and family responsibilities was very difficult. Josefa worked the evening shift in one of Chicago's candy companies and eventually quit her job when the family opened a local grocery store. Josefa explains, "It was very hard work. I had to take care of the house, the children, and the store. Since my husband never learned how to drive I had to learn to drive. I had to go to the warehouse, do the book keeping, everything. In the store, I had to do everything." Torruellas, Benmayor, and Juarbe (1996) also found strong commitment to family and staying at home among working-class and poor Puerto Rican working mothers in New York. They found that working women were reluctant to subordinate their roles as mothers and caretakers by taking unstable, minimum-wage jobs (1996:191). In the context of declining opportunities in the region, some women in their study were forced to go on public assistance as a means to take care of their homes and raise their children. Torruellas et al. (1996) note that welfare "exact[ed] a heavy price of indignity for rather than receiving recognition and validation for prioritizing family, the education of their children, and, indeed of themselves, these women were socially stigmatized as 'unworthy'" (1996:196). But, women found a way to assert their *dignidad* (dignity) by constructing accounts of themselves and their experiences in a vernacular of claims to welfare entitlements, civic rights, and human worth.

In Chicago, I found that women took great pride in the work they did within the confines of the home and found ways to exert their own independence, control, and authority. For example, Rita's husband did not want her to work, but she wanted to work because "you can meet people, learn new things, and one can also leave the house for a while." Eventually, Rita started working secretly, or as she put it, *a la escondida* (in hiding). Rita's efforts in keeping her work secret shows how inventive women can be. Here is a description of how she managed to keep her work secret.

Since he left to work very early I found someone to take care of my smallest child, and send the other to school. My work hours were from 9:00 to 3:30, so by the time my husband got home I had everything done. I had the house clean, the children were cleaned and had eaten, and I was all put together. My husband did not like it when I was not put together.

Rita eventually told her husband and as she anticipated, he prohibited her to continue working. Rita was not defeated. Instead, with the money she had earned, she purchased a sewing machine and was able to continue to contribute economically to the family's budget by sewing her children's clothes and doing work for other women in the neighborhood. Rita's case illustrates that, in addition to the family's economic needs, other important considerations entered into a woman's decision to work. Availability of childcare and/or a flexible work schedule that would allow for the fulfillment of her domestic responsibilities were factors women took into consideration as they explored the possibility of waged work.

Finally, in addition to the productive and reproductive work women did to support their families in Chicago, Puerto Rican women were also responsible for maintaining family ties across national boundaries, an issue that has been documented by Marixsa Alicea's groundbreaking work in "A chambered nautilus': The contradictory nature of Puerto Rican women's role in the social construction of a transnational community" (1997). Women carried an unfair share of the subsistence work that supported their families over time, taking on additional responsibilities such as arranging family gatherings and reunions, and hosting relatives in an effort to maintain families and provide a sense of continuity across generations. Alicea (1997) concludes that migration does not dismantle patriarchal domination in any significant way. Instead, "new demands are being placed on women and the subsistence work they are still expected to undertake" (1997:622).

The migration of working-class families to the city continued to link Chicago and Puerto Rico in deeply gendered ways. Working class migration to the city in the 1950s and 1960s was shaped by a political economy in Puerto Rico that rendered husbands unemployable (Toro-Morn 1995). Working-class men and women migrated to the city out of their deeply felt gendered responsibilities as fathers, husbands, mothers, and providers of their families. Indeed, such characteristics went well with the dominant postwar gender ideology and cult of domesticity prevalent in the city at the time (Pérez 2000). Working-class men and women entered a labor market that was segregated along race and gender lines. Salaries were low, and living expenses were high. Thus the stresses of the migration process and living in Chicago created new pressures and demands on Puerto Rican families. Families devised different strategies to deal with the new economic burdens of living in Chicago. One such strategy was the temporary employment of women. Although some working-class women did not have a strong attachment to working outside the home, their reproductive work not only helped maintained their families, but was frequently a source of other income-producing activities. Finally, contrary to the popularly held notion that migration brings a change in the gender ideology and gender division of labor, Puerto Rican women confronted new family and work demands that further exacerbated the unequal gender division of labor and recreated patriarchy in Chicago (Alicea 1997; Pérez 2000; Toro-Morn 1985).

Leaving Industrial Employment:

Occupational Mobility and Women Entrepreneurs

Among the women I interviewed, there were a group of women who did not identify themselves as *mujeres de la casa* or had a strong attachment to industrial employment. In fact, they all considered industrial employment as temporary and aspired to move up the occupational ladder via more education or through self-employment. Iris, for example, described herself as follows: *[e]so sí, que yo era muy arriesgada* (I took my chances).

I worked in that factory for a year, and when they closed the factory I told myself this is my opportunity to go back to school. I didn't like working in the factory. I suffered a lot. I told myself that I could not work in a factory for the rest of my life, that I needed to find something better. I went to school at Wabansia College in Aurora. There I took English and secretarial classes. I was going to get sharp and get myself a better job.

Eventually, Iris was able to find work more in keeping with her new training as an administrative assistant. At the time of the interview she had been in that position for nine years.

Like Iris, Laura balanced work in a factory while taking English classes in the evenings. After she was done with her language school, she entered a local cosmetology school and with a Puerto Rican friend opened up a beauty salon in 1970. Within a year her partner had returned to Puerto Rico, and Laura had bought her out. When I interviewed her in the late 1980s, she still owned her own salon, but she complained that "there is too much competition."

Asuncion and Nellie also used industrial employment as a resource toward self-employment. In Asuncion's words:

I have always like to work, wherever I worked I was more diligent than my bosses. I was always liked by my bosses. I took the initiative, I was a leader. But I always thought that I wanted to be my own boss. One day I was offered a place on 1430 Milwaukee Avenue. Since I have always liked sewing, first there was a little of everything, but mostly sewing. Later on it grew.

At the time of the interview, Asuncion had now a thriving bridal shop business in the community. Nellie, had also worked in the industrial sector before she was able to open her own business. At the time of the interview, Nellie owned a Puerto Rican restaurant in the community. She told me that the restaurant was not her first attempt with self-employment. Prior to that she owned a cleaners. She was able to take advantage of a small business loan which was being offered as part of a citywide Affirmative Action program. She remembered the application because, she said,

we lied and told them that we had a lot of experience with clothing and they loaned me \$30,000.00. With that money I opened a boutique cleaners. Within four or five months we had to renew our insurance, and no one wanted to insure us because we were in a bad neighborhood.

As she struggled to get insurance, a car ran into the business and destroyed everything. According to Nellie, things were very hard, and she went bankrupt. Then she sued the Chicago Police Department, as police had been chasing a car when it crashed into her store, for damages. When the case was settled, the money she received, allowed her to make the down payment for her current business. Yet this current venture has not been problem free either. According to Nellie, "We have had our ups and downs. We had to close it for a while because we did not have funds. Then, my mother died. We opened again in 1986. We take from Peter to pay Paul."

Iris, Asuncion, and Nellie represent a pattern found in many Puerto Rican migrant communities, but largely ignored by most social scientists: the example of the migrant

woman entrepreneur. As shown, self-employment came with its own problems. Women business owners were vulnerable to discrimination, racism, and sexism. As Nellie’s case illustrates, women were also vulnerable to the ever-present threat of bankruptcy, problem that could push these entrepreneurs into destitution overnight. In addition, there were the economic risks of running a successful business in communities frequently deemed “unstable” or “dangerous.” But, despite such problems, these enterprising women represent an important chapter in the history of Chicago’s Puerto Rican community as they helped develop a viable business sector, an important marker of a successful ethnic enclave. In the race/ethnic literature, Cubans and Asians are known for their entrepreneurship activities, and often Puerto Ricans and Mexicans business activities are dismissed because it is argued that they are most likely to be living under the poverty level. Although the collective story of Puerto Rican women workers in the United States has been a tragic tale of declining labor market opportunities, discrimination, and lack of human capital, these stories are important because they suggest how women managed to break through insurmountable odds to become self-employed and make a difference in their communities. In the last section of this paper, I turn to census data to further document the changes in the occupation profile of Puerto Rican women workers from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Changing Occupational Profile of Puerto Rican Women Workers in Chicago: 1960–1990

Although Puerto Ricans had lived in the city for several years prior to the 1960 U.S. Census of Population, the U.S. Census did not collect any information about Puerto Ricans before 1960.

Percent Distribution of Employed Puerto Rican Women by Major Occupational Group in Chicago: 1960–1990				
Occupation	1960	1970	1980	1990
White Collar	12.9	25.1	48.1	63.6
Professional and Technical	2.5	3.2	7.4	14.0
Managers and Administrators (except farm)	.4	.8	3.2	7.8
Clerical and Kindred	8.1	18.4	30.1	32.6
Sales and Kindred	1.9	2.7	7.4	9.2
Blue-Collar Workers	67.9	67.0	40.7	25.3
Craftsmen, Foremen and Kindred	2.5	3.5	4.0	4.3
Operatives and Kindred	63.0	62.0	29.2	17.0
Laborers (except farm)	2.4	1.5	7.5	4.0
Service Workers	7.7	7.8	11.2	12.5
Private Household	1.0	.1	.4	.5
Other Services	6.7	7.7	10.8	12.0
Farm Workers	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Farmers and Farm Managers	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Farm Laborers and Foremen	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Not Reported	11.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	99.9	99.9	100.0	100.0

Sources: U.S. Census of Population, Subject Report: Puerto Ricans in the Continental United States (1960).
 U.S. Census of Population, Subject Report: Puerto Ricans in the Continental United States (1970).
 U.S. Census of Population, Illinois (1980).
 U.S. Census of Population, Illinois (1990).

Table 1 reveals important trends in the collective work experiences of Puerto Rican women workers in Chicago. As the interviews with working class women have shown, in 1960 the largest source of employment for Puerto Rican women in Chicago was factory work (63.0), followed by clerical (8.1) and other service work (7.7). A significant decline in

the number of women employed in blue-collar jobs took place between 1960 and 1990, an indicator of the broader changes in the political economy of the city. Chicago responded to the changes in the global economy by closing factories, relocating, and restructuring. As Betancourt, Cordova, and Torres (1993:124-125) document, “Out-migration of mass manufacturing and economic restructuring produced large deskilling of workers as old processes were replaced or firms moved out. Masses of workers became unemployed overnight. Other economic changes called for a work force with higher levels of basic education and English language skills.” Puerto Ricans workers in Chicago were hit hard by these changes. When plants closed, some workers moved on to other mostly low-end jobs in the service industry; they worked as maids, cleaners in hotels, security guards, messengers, maintenance workers (Betancour, Cordova, and Torres 1993). This locked Puerto Ricans in the bottom of Chicago’s labor market. Those who did not make the transition to other low-paying jobs in the service sector slipped into poverty. Amott and Matthaei (1991) report that this is a pattern found throughout the United States. At the national level, structural shifts in job opportunities meant job and income loss, and an increase in poverty rates. The authors have also found that women adjusted to the loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector by moving into other areas such as service and sales.

The other side of the economic restructuring can be found in the progress made by Puerto Rican women in the white collar sector. Table I shows the number of women employed in white collar jobs increased from 12.9 percent in 1960 to 63.6 percent in 1990. In particular, the number employed as clerical workers increased from 8.1 percent in 1960 to 32.6 percent in 1990. In this respect, as shown earlier in this paper, some Puerto Rican women have been able to take advantage of the jobs in the white collar sector, but most of the changes have taken place in sectors that do not pay well, such as clerical work, and that do not offer much opportunity for advancement. In addition, lack of educational opportunities and discrimination continue to prevent women’s movement into higher-paying, higher status jobs (Amott and Matthaei 1991).

The growth in the number of Puerto Rican women employed in the white collar sector is connected to the migration of middle class and educated Puerto Ricans to the city, a movement that started in the 1980s. In the late 1980s and 1990s, as the city’s economic landscape changed, the city began to attract middle-class and educated Puerto Ricans to work in the service sector and in newly developed sectors of the economy. For example, the Puerto Rican Planning Board in San Juan estimates that in the 1990s, about 5,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to Chicago yearly to find jobs in high-tech fields, education, and health care. In my own work, I found that a large segment of the families that migrated to the city in the 1980s were educated women lured by employment and educational opportunities in the city (Toro-Morn 1995). More recently, the *Chicago Tribune* has confirmed that the migration of educated Puerto Ricans to Chicago continues unabated. For example, Marisol Inesta-Miro and her husband John Lopez-Haage came to Chicago with their three children when they were recruited by Lucent Technologies in Naperville. (Marisol described her situation to a *Chicago Tribune* reporter as follows: “There were not too many opportunities back in Puerto Rico.... A lot of our friends—doctors and artists—also have moved to the States.”) So Marisol and her family relocated from Puerto Rico to the Chicago suburb Naperville, a pattern that has always fostered a great deal of resentment and tensions between barrio residents and middle-class migrants.

In addition, as the community matured, second-and third-generation Puerto Ricans have entered the labor market, thus adding a new chapter to the history of Puerto Rican workers in the city of Chicago. This new generation of workers continues to solidify the transnational labor links that exist between Chicago and Puerto Rico.

Conclusion

In broad strokes, the historical continuities in the work experiences of Puerto Rican women in the Island, Chicago, and other mainland communities are striking. Underscoring the connections between colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, Puerto Rican women have been a source of cheap labor in Puerto Rico, Chicago, New York, and other mainland communities for several decades. In Puerto Rico, women were incorporated into a class-and gender-segregated labor market to meet the demands of U.S. capitalism. Through migration, the U.S. economy has secured a supply of cheap labor to meet its changing labor needs for the last century. Whether in Chicago or New York, working-class and educated Puerto Rican women have been recruited to meet labor needs in the domestic market, in the manufacturing sector, and now in an ever-expanding service and other newly developed sectors of the economy. As Zsembik and Peek (1994:538) state, “The deepening global economic crisis foreordains Puerto Rican women’s and men’s continued dependence on industrial capital’s need for women’s cheap labor, maintaining women as a last colony.”

Yet interestingly the distinctive configurations of race, class, and gender dynamics in Chicago lend a unique flavor to the Chicago Puerto Rican experience one that deserves to be highlighted. As Rios (1993) states, “Gender segregated employment patterns are shaped as much by economics as by political, social, and cultural constraints.” The migration of domestic workers to Chicago shows how a gender and race ideology was used to manage the recruitment and deployment of women as domestic workers to Chicago. The pressure exerted by government officials, the inducements by private agencies who profited from the “business” of bringing women to the United States, and the women’s own personal and economic problems worked to pressure Puerto Rican women to venture to Chicago. Although what we know little about what happened to these women when they got to Chicago, the fact that domestic work has always relied on the work of immigrants and women of color raises questions about the intersection of race and gender in the lives of the domestic workers. Ironically, at the turn of the twenty-first century, domestic work continues to be an occupation of racial/ethnic women, and Chicago continues to attract its share of the world’s domestic worker market. Today, immigrants from Latin America have joined the ranks of Puerto Rican domestics in Chicago.

The interviews with Puerto Rican women workers offer also a great of insight about the racial and gender dimensions of women’s work experiences. News about employment opportunities in Chicago spread throughout the island and other mainland communities, leading to a massive migration in the 1950s and 1960s. As Rita’s opening quote suggests, in Chicago Puerto Rican women eagerly contributed to the family’s economy by working outside the home for wages or by engaging in income-producing activities within the realm of the home. For working women, balancing home and work proved a difficult challenge, and many gave in to their husband’s desire to stay at home. Thus, another important way that working-class Puerto Rican women contributed to their household economy was through the frequently invisible reproductive work that supported their families. Finally, in this article, I also sought to highlight the work of the women small-business entrepreneurs, a topic rarely addressed in the social science literature about the Puerto Rican experience. Clearly, more work needs to be done to further document the work experiences of women small-business entrepreneurs. In general, this research needs to place Puerto Rican migrant women’s experiences within a larger body of work that explores the intersection of race, class, and gender. It must attempt to move the analysis of women’s experiences in general, and

Puerto Rican women's experiences in particular, beyond the additive model that looks at race, class, and gender as separate systems of oppression.

Clearly, this article has only begun to explore the work experiences of Puerto Rican women in the city of Chicago. Much more work remains to be done to fully document the Puerto Rican women's experiences with industrial employment, unemployment, discrimination, and other problems facing women workers. As I have shown, an important gap exists in our work histories with respect to the community-based businesses. We need more work to document how families have managed to open and own grocery stores, bodegas, beauty parlors, restaurants, and other family-owned businesses. In particular, we need to pay attention to the gendered aspects of this kind of work. Similarly, we also need to examine the work experiences of Puerto Rican women in the white collar sector. How does race, class and gender interact to shape the career aspirations of educated women workers? What are some of the strategies that women have used to deal with occupational problems? How has women's continued commitment to their work outside the home impacted the gender division of labor? Have second- and third-generation Puerto Rican women followed in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers? How have affirmative action and other equal opportunity programs affected their experiences in the labor market? Finally, new research also needs to be attentive to the class differences in women's work experiences.

b

NOTES

¹ In October, 1946, *El Mundo* reported that an employment agency (Castle, Barton, and Associates) had hired a number of airplanes to transport more than 100 female Puerto Rican domestic workers to the United States.

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Yo era muy arriesgada: a historical overview of the work experiences of puerto rican women in Chicago. Save to Library. by maura toro-morn. We found that Puerto Ricans and whites that expected to attain a bachelor's degree or more and that reached a higher level of math are significantly more likely to enroll in four-year and two-year colleges or universities. Puerto Ricans and whites with higher standardized test scores are more likely to enroll in Save to Library. Download. Puerto Rican women's work experiences in Chicago varied by social class. Working-class women found themselves employed in industrial, clerical, and service sector work (Toro-Morn 2001). In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a slight increase in the number of Puerto Rican women employed in white collar jobs, which can be attributed to the number of professional and educated women migrating from the island at the time. Puerto Rican and Mexican Women in Chicago: A Gendered Analysis of the 2008 Recession. Chapter. Full-text available. 1996. Puerto Rican women workers in the Twentieth Century: A historical appraisal of the literature. In Puerto Rican women's history: New perspectives, ed. Félix Matos Rodríguez and Linda C. Delgado, 38-61.