

## OUR MOTHER'S STRUGGLE HAS SHOWN US THE WAY

The late 1940s began the period of mass migration from Puerto Rico to the United States under "Operation Bootstrap." Many women who came found work as sewing machine operators in garment factories in New York City, where pay and working conditions were often poor. The women played an important role in the effort to unionize the factories and win better conditions for workers.

Manufacturers, however, soon found it more profitable to move their factories overseas, where they could take advantage of even cheaper, non-union labor. After 20 or 30 years of work, many Puerto Rican women lost their jobs when factories "ran away."

A group of women, some of them the daughters and granddaughters of garment workers, decided to find out more about this part of their community's history. Working with the Oral History Task Force of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, they interviewed former garment workers. From these interviews they produced a radio documentary, "Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura." They explain:

*This program is about our mothers and grandmothers, the thousands of Puerto Rican women who spent their working lives as seamstresses in the garment factories of New York City. These are some of their stories, that we at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College have been collecting. This is an effort to document and explain our history, to ourselves, to our own communities, and to those who may want to share our lives.*

*My mother is an embroiderer. She does such beautiful, intricate work. She's been doing that for 20 years now, ever since she came to this country. She raised me and my three sisters all by herself. And she doesn't speak English, to this day.*

*My grandmother learned to sew in Puerto Rico when she was a little girl, sewing and embroidering fancy lingerie for an American company. Then she came to New York in the twenties, and she was a pionera, and she spent all her life in a garment factory.*

*We came to New York in 1948. My father drove a cab, and my mother worked in a garment factory for 30 years. Just last Christmas she was laid off permanently. And now she has to find a job, at the minimum wage. That's a hard life, and it's happening to a lot of our parents.*

When Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States in 1898, American clothing manufacturers didn't waste much time. By 1915, they had set up a whole needlework industry on the island. There they could escape from the unions and make bigger profits by using the labor of women and children.

Lucila Padrón is now in her seventies. She clearly remembers what her childhood was like.

*It was awful. I was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico. That's where I was raised and went to school. I started doing needlework when I was a little girl, in order to help my parents, because we were poor. After the housework and school, instead of playing, we had to sew. It was a sacrifice.*

Lucila and her sisters started working at home. Local contractors would distribute bundles of fabric already cut and ready to be sewn to women all across the island. The women would return the finished

products beautifully sewn and embroidered, all by hand. Then the work was shipped to New York and sold in exclusive department stores like Wanamaker's or B. Altman's.

*Our work was really something to see. It was all done by hand—no machines. Tracing, embroidering, assembling, all of it by hand. And do you know what they paid us? For all that intricate work? Later on, when I came to New York, I saw the clothes we made selling in Wanamaker's on 14th Street. Here, those robes or dresses sold for \$100 or more. There, they used to pay us for one of those dresses, with all that embroidery—three dollars. So, to earn ten or twelve dollars a week, we had to work day and night.*

Lucila was a teenager when she came to New York in 1927. She wanted to continue her education, but instead she had to support herself and then her own family.

*When I came to New York, I had a hard time at first, because I couldn't find a sewing job. I used to walk back and forth, across Manhattan, from shop to shop, from one end of the island to the other, until I finally found a job as a seamstress . . . I worked in garment factories for 30 years, working so I could get where I am now and give my children an education. And I'm very proud of that.*

Like Lucila, many of our grandparents migrated to New York during these early years looking for work. Some had been driven off the land by American sugar monopolies. Cigarmakers, carpenters and other skilled workers came too.

By 1930 there were over 50,000 Puerto Ricans in the United States. Men, women and entire families came. The journey took five days by boat and most people settled in East Harlem, or along the Brooklyn waterfront.

Luisa López came as a child in 1923 on the steamship *Coamo*. My mother and father came to get us at the boat, and when I came into the apartment I found my brother at a machine, sewing. What was he doing?

*Coffee bags. Everybody used to help my mother; that machine was going on all day long. I was sewing, my sister was sewing, my brother was sewing, everybody to help out.*

Sewing meant economic survival for many Puerto Rican families. During the Depression, Luisa and her sister went to work in garment factories. Puerto Rican women were the newcomers, competing for jobs with Italian and Jewish women.

*I was working in a shop called Elfran's Dress Company, in El Barrio, on 104th Street. The Italian girls, they wanted to sit down, and the rest of the girls refused to work, because they didn't want to work with Puerto Ricans. When I saw that, I went to the union, and I spoke to the manager, and I told him what had happened. This manager over here was Italian, he was an old-time socialist, the most wonderful person you ever came to know. His name was Joe Piscatello. He called everybody to the union. And I explained to him, "You know, I'm more an American citizen than some of these people are, that don't even know how to speak English." He gave them hell! He gave them hell! So we all went back to work.*

By 1937, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union had more than 2,000 Puerto Rican members. Ironically, just a few years later in the early forties, Luisa lost her union job, in a way that forecast what would happen to thousands of garment workers in the seventies and eighties.

*His name was Mr. Cohen. And he opened up five shops in Puerto Rico, that's how come I lost my job. We belonged to the union over here, he had to pay us higher wages. While in Puerto Rico at that time, he could pay fifteen and twenty cents an hour.*

After World War Two, U.S. manufacturers were offered big tax breaks to set up factories in Puerto Rico. This was part of Operation Bootstrap, the plan to industrialize the island. But these new factories, many of them garment and light industry, never provided enough jobs. So although industry was busy relocating to the island, by the end of the sixties close to a million Puerto Ricans had migrated to New York.

This was our mothers' generation. Our parents settled with family or friends, in furnished rooms or tenement apartments, in East Harlem, the Lower East Side, or the South Bronx . . .

In the 1950s, the garment industry in New York was booming. Puerto Rican women were hired by the thousands as sewing machine operators, one of the lowest paying jobs in the trade. Although many of our mothers were already experienced needleworkers, by this time the garment industry no longer needed such fine skills. Clothing production was changing. Seamstresses used to make whole garments, but now, women were sewing only sections, in assembly-line fashion.

*Section work is sewing zippers, or collars. When I first came to this country, I was sewing the whole garment. But later, I found section work. Because working sections, you can make a lot more money. And I was fast.*

Section work allowed New York garment manufacturers to increase production. And this new, cheap labor pool meant they could also increase their profits. Thousands of Puerto Rican and black women became low-paid, unskilled section workers—easily exploited, and easily replaced. Because wages were so low, women like María Rodríguez often brought home extra work, even though home work was illegal.

The boss let me take bundles home, and I used to do it at night. I'd work two hours, three hours to make a little more money. And some times weekends I used to take it, and Victor used to help me. I'd teach my husband how to do it, so he used to help me to do the bundles also.

So then, I'd make about \$35, sometimes \$38.

Many women, like Dolores Juarbe, found themselves working in sweatshops—small, nonunion operations in firetrap buildings which violated minimum wage laws, paid no overtime, sick leave, or vacation.

*There was not any union there. In that shop you had to sew, as fast as you could. And everyone smoked. The shop was in a basement. Once in a while the fire department would pay a little visit. The boss told us to stop smoking, that the fire department was on the way. The alerter heard that they were coming, you know, she used to pay them off. So then, they could knock real loud on the door: bam bam bam! And all the cigarettes would disappear.*

Not only were our mothers subjected to these poor working conditions, some even had to fight off the boss.

*I did not like the boss. The boss could not keep his hands off the girls. He was always walking in and touching them and squeezing them. So one day, he came to me, and like he tried to feel me up, and I told him, "Listen," I said. "I don't like you. I don't like this job, I don't like the way you treat the girls. So you can keep it!" I got ready to leave. "Oh, don't go, don't go." "Oh, no," I said. "You are a pig!"*

Many Puerto Rican women looked for union shops where they expected to get protection, benefits and higher wages. During the fifties, labor unions were stepping up their organizing, and many of our mothers and grandmothers led that effort. Some became union chairladies and organizers, and sometimes the chairlady had the power to stop the shop.

Eva Monge remembers how she shut down her housecoat factory to support a dressmakers' strike.

*The dresses were going on strike. The boss right away stopped the housecoats and gave us dresses. The first day, I said: "All right, but . . ." I noticed that the strike kept on. So, on the second day I said, "Mrs. Corey, every girl on this shop is going to finish the bundle that they're doing. They're not going to make no more dresses." You know, that boss went to the dressing room and she cried! But it was from anger. She knew that she was wrong—she was breaking the strike.*

By the 1960s Puerto Rican women made up over 25 percent of New York sewing machine operators. The rank and file of the garment unions was now overwhelmingly Puerto Rican and Black. But despite their numbers and their histories of activism, few Black or Puerto Rican women find themselves in positions of power. For decades, the top union leaders have been conservative white men.

Gloria Maldonado is a business agent for ILGWU Local 22-89-1. But she is an exception.

*I'm the only woman here. The only woman officer, and the only Hispanic business agent. The manager is Puerto Rican, but I'm the only woman. So I'm Puerto Rican, I'm a woman and I'm Black I've got three affirmative action points (laughs).*

. . . During the fifties and sixties, our mothers' work gave our families some economic stability. But then, things began to change. Over the last 30 years, well over 200,000 garment jobs have left New York City alone. And so operators have dwindled to a bare minimum in factories like Juanita Erazo's, where older, higherpaid workers are the first to go.

*My friend María, she's been working for him for 29 years, just like me. She was the first one he laid off. That's how he discriminates! He gets rid of the one who earns more money, and those are the older and more experienced operators. The boss just spent three weeks in Taiwan, and he came back loaded down. The factory is four stories high, and practically all the floors are filled with that imported work. What he wants to do is turn the factory into a shipping department, and get rid of the operators altogether. Because the work comes already finished, and ready to sell.*

Today, garments are cut in New York, sewn in Taiwan, Korea or

Mexico, finished in Puerto Rico, and sent back to New York for distribution. An operator in Haiti is paid 21 cents an hour, for what in New York costs over \$3.00.

As they learned with the Puerto Rican model in the thirties and again in the fifties, clothing manufacturers find it even more profitable today to set up shops in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Gloria Maldonado describes just how massive this relocation is.

*Some of these countries, they do a lot of needlework. And capital people, they saw the advantage of making good money, at the expense of other people's misery. And at the expense of our people working here. Big firms started going out, and little by little they started expanding, expanding, until before we knew it . . . It used to be maybe two, three garments out of ten that were imported. Now it's five or six out of ten. The shops are not the ones that are running away, it's the manufacturers. For instance, our Joe Namath, you know, big shot Joe Namath, has a line of men's clothes. Where is he getting it done? China. The thing is, that even though they're made there for less money, it's not sold here for less money like years back.*

. . . While manufacturers take their capital abroad, our mothers face widespread layoffs, which often deprives them of their pensions. After years at the machines, many of our mothers suffer back and leg pains, or they are crippled by arthritis.

At the same time, thousands of poor women are migrating to the United States, hoping to escape poverty and often, political repression in their countries. They become cheap labor in factories and sweatshops. Many are undocumented and live in fear of deportation. Juanita Erazo was horrified by a recent immigration raid on her factory in Brooklyn.

*In the factory there are Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Colombians and Haitians. The last time Immigration raided, they took everyone away. They took Puerto Ricans away too. They handcuffed them, they filled two buses up with people. Then, after they left, the boss went looking around, and there were people hiding in boxes!*

As a union official, Gloria Maldonado has seen how all of this has

affected our mothers' generation.

*People are just not making it. The small shops are closing up, and that's where it affects our people, our generation, of Puerto Rican women who are not old enough to retire, but have put in 20, 30 years. They stay with this one little shop because it was like a family. All of a sudden, the man has to close because there is no work . . .*

These are the women who raised us. They were not only our mothers and grandmothers, but our cousins, aunts, neighbors, friends. They went to the factories early in the morning and sat in front of those machines day after day. They confronted the difficulties of migration, poverty, low pay, discrimination, and unstable jobs. In spite of that, they raised us and kept our families together. They fought for our education, organized in the communities and on the job, and they gave us a legacy of struggle.

*My mother's work set the tone in the family, set the tone for hard work and struggle. She never missed a day of work, which used to amaze us. She was there at 8:00 in the morning, she came home at 5, 5:30, by the time she came in from Brooklyn. And what she always said to us was, 'You have to study. You have to study so that you could be a teacher, you could be a nurse.' And we knew what it meant to us, so that we did study. We got somewhere because she worked so hard. Now I know that that's not true for a lot of Puerto Ricans, I know that for the majority of Puerto Ricans, working hard hasn't led to success.*

All these stories are a chapter in our history, which for the most part has yet to be told. Our mothers and grandmothers shared their lives with us, so that we could understand more clearly where we are today. □

Abridged from Radio documentary: "Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura! Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry," produced by Rina Benmayor, Ana Juarbe, Kimberly Safford and Blanca Vázquez Erazo (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, 1985). Program funded in part by National Endowment for the Humanities. Bilingual cassette available.