

A Historical Analysis of U.S. Imperialism on Women in Puerto Rico

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Abstract: This paper examines how US imperialism has historically affected the reproductive rights of women in Puerto Rico. As a commonwealth of the US, Puerto Rico has been the subject of considerable domination through programs of population control and as a testing lab for forms of birth control. I argue that the US support for the sterilization of women and the experimental testing of contraceptives during the 20th century has made a large contribution towards the consolidation of American control over the island. In other words, US imperialism required not only the physical invasion of land but also the invasion of Puerto Rican women's bodies.

Keywords:

History, Puerto Rico, Sterilization, Population Control, Colonialism, Industrialization, Imperialism, Eugenics, Patriarchy

Colonialism takes a large toll on the land and people being controlled by the outside power. United States imperialism has historically had a significant impact on the people in Puerto Rico, but this imperialism has disproportionately affected women. Since Puerto Rico has been a territory of the US for over a century, the US has been able to exercise a certain amount of power over its government and its people not seen in many other parts of the world, especially today. Imperialism is a factor of globalization and it is commonly understood that women and girls bear the brunt of this process. Imperialism dehumanizes the population it is controlling which has led the US to take advantage of the most disadvantaged group of the population, women. Since Puerto Rico is not a state, its people are not protected by the constitution in the same way that citizens living on the mainland are, which has allowed the US to exploit the island and its people for over a century. I argue that US support for the sterilization of women and the experimental testing of contraceptives has made a large contribution towards the consolidation of American control over the island. In other words, US imperialism required not only the physical invasion of land but also the invasion of Puerto Rican women's bodies.

Overview of the Island

Puerto Rico is Caribbean island located in the northeast Caribbean Sea and it is currently one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The island has been subject to the cruelties of globalization for over five centuries since Christopher Columbus landed on the island and claimed it for Spain in 1493. This then led to four centuries of continuous Spanish rule that lasted until 1898. Its native inhabitants were the Taino people who were often enslaved by the Spanish for mining gold and silver. The Taino people ended up being almost entirely eradicated within a century by foreign diseases such as smallpox, along with slavery and their violent slaughter by

the Spanish. During the 16th century the Spanish began importing slaves to the island from Africa to generate a bigger workforce to grow cash crops, since the indigenous population had depleted so rapidly. This was done until 1873 when slavery was abolished on the island. This mix of indigenous, Spanish and African heritage makes Puerto Rico a racially diverse island. Among other things, the Spanish brought Catholicism which took a firm hold on the island that has lasted centuries. Currently around 75 percent of the population remains Catholic, proving the religion still has remained extremely popular over the centuries. This is a very interesting point to keep in mind since this paper is discussing reproductive rights, and the Catholic Church has historically had taken a very strong stance against birth control and other reproductive rights.

In July of 1898 amidst the Spanish-American War, the US invaded Puerto Rico and claimed the island for themselves. Then through the Treaty of Paris, which went into effect in 1899, the US officially acquired Puerto Rico, along with Cuba, Guam and the Philippines, following the end of the war. There is a bitter irony in the fact that the United States justified their involvement in the Spanish-American War by saying they were fighting the colonialism imposed by Spain, but then have continued this same colonialism when they acquired the island and have been doing so for over a century. The Spanish-American War came just one year after Spain had decided to grant Puerto Rico self rule in 1897. This conflict essentially ended Spain's overseas empire and put the United States on the map as a new imperial power with control over foreign territories, since prior to 1898 all of the United States' conquered territories were on the North American continent. The US was interested in acquiring outside territories in order to gain con-

trol of commercial markets¹. What makes the US empire so unique is that they pursued this dream of an empire without creating any formal colonies. This is because it would be hypocritical for a country like the United States which was born out of the overthrow of their colonial rulers, to start to create colonies of their own. But even though there was no creation of formal colonies, does not mean that places like Puerto Rico did not suffer the same fate as other colonized peoples.

Once the United States had obtained control of the island they immediately made an effort to “Americanize” its people, which was an effort by the United States political and educational institutions on the island to make Puerto Ricans more like Anglo-Americans. The United States also had immediate concerns with overpopulation and poverty. But by the end of the 19th century, Puerto Rico had already gone through various impositions and dominations that caused unequal and unjust economic and social structures and produced the political inferiority of the islander under the rule of the Spanish². So the Puerto Rico that the United States acquired in 1898 was already not a perfect place and there were many obvious and already existing inequalities and other issues that were a result of Spanish rule. So when the Americans arrived in Puerto Rico, they were met with an already subjugated people and a society that was already racist, hierarchical, and colonial in nature, making it easier to exploit for the benefit of the US.

A lot of the impact that the US has had on Puerto Rican has been deemed positive by Americans in the self-serving belief that the US was doing Puerto Ricans a large favor, a com-

¹ Caban, Pedro A, *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898-1932*, (Westview Press, 1999), 15.

² Garcia, Gervasio Luis, *I Am the Other: Puerto Rico in the Eyes of North Americans, 1898*, 2000, 55

mon idea among imperial powers who have acquired foreign territories. Since the passage of the Jones Act in 1917, Puerto Ricans are by law citizens of the United States. Because of their status they can move freely to and from the mainland. Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory, but they are not a state. This means that they have no vote in the US Congress and they have a non-voting member of the House called a Resident Commissioner. All of this means that even as US citizens they still have little to no political representation and no vote in US federal elections. It was not even until 1948 that Puerto Ricans were allowed to elect their own governor. Any of the laws that get passed in Puerto Rico can be overturned in the United States by Congress and any federal laws on the mainland are also in effect on the island. In 1952 the United States Congress approved a Puerto Rican constitution which made Puerto Rico an autonomous commonwealth, which it remains today. United States military and economic policy in Puerto Rico could not be enforced without social stability, which required, among other things, demographic control, including sterilization.

Overpopulation and Sterilization

Once the US gained control of the island there were immediate concerns from the US government and private population control organizations with overpopulation that they believed had led to distressing social and economic conditions. There was a widespread belief in the US, and in other Western countries, that the reason for poor economic conditions was overpopulation. The idea was that high birth rates would continue to increase and cause a lower standard of living, which would continue to happen unless an effective population control program was put into place. The reality was that the poor economic conditions were most likely due to imperialist exploitation over centuries. The opposition to this theory of overpopulation

believed in the processes of education, urbanization and industrialization as a more natural way to bring down levels of fertility and thus the birth rate³. Supporters of state-led population control felt that using education as a solution to reducing birth rates would take too long. In Puerto Rico, many thought that the key to the island's success and how to pull the people out of poverty was to start having smaller families. The theory that overpopulation causes poverty puts a lot of the blame on women since they are identified with motherhood. People on the mainland often blamed excessive sexuality among Puerto Ricans as the reason for the poverty of the whole island, which had been a common thought among Anglo-Americans at that time towards people of color. The Governor of Puerto Rico from 1929 to 1933, James Beverley, said in 1930, "I have always believed that some method of restricting the birth rate among the lower and more ignorant elements of the population is the only salvation for the island"⁴. This argument for solving poverty through a form of "birth control" was not specific to Puerto Rico and was actually very common around the world in the beginning of the 20th century. Sterilization has been used as the most favorable and effective form of fertility control as a response to Western concerns about population explosions in developing countries⁵.

In 1963 Kurt W Back, a professor of sociology at Duke University, published an article in the National Council on Family Relations journal titled, "A Model of Family Planning Experiments: The Lessons of the Puerto Rican and Jamaican Studies". In this article Back

³ Stycos, J Mayone. "Family Planning: Reform and Revolution". Family Planning Perspectives. 1971. 49.

⁴ Briggs, Laura, *Reproducing Empire*, (University of California Press, 2002), 45.

⁵Lopez, Iris. "Puerto Rican Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom". Rutgers University Press. 2008. xiii

discusses the reasons why the islands in the Caribbean, specifically Puerto Rico, were a good place to study family planning. Although he is writing about this topic later on in the 1960's, these are the same ideas we can see from the beginning of the 20th century and up until the 1970's. Back says that fertility control has turned into a really big problem in Puerto Rico and he says that fertility rates can be seen as the outcome of the individual behavior of women⁶. This is extremely problematic as it puts all of the blame on women even though they may not necessarily not want to have such large families. Back says that the "problem of a successful population control program is to manipulate the social structure so that it will support an individual influence program for family planning, which in turn will affect the society through population control"⁷. He then follows this up by saying that a program like this can be put into place with some kind of power, such as the government or some type of political agency.

Sterilization is an extreme form of birth control because it is permanent, meaning you are no longer able to produce children. The most popular surgical procedure was tubal ligation, in which they block or cut the fallopian tubes which prevents sperm from reaching the egg. This procedure is often referred to as "tying the tubes". This euphemism regularly lead many women to believe that the procedure could be undone. Sterilization is so common in Puerto Rico that the people there just refer to it as "la operacion". Almost every woman on the island can say that many of the women in their families have had the operation, even if they have not had it themselves. The fact that sterilization was originally used as a type of population control is often disguised and minimized in the terminology used now by referring to it as "birth control". This is

⁶ Back, Kurt W. "A Model of Family Planning Experiments: The Lessons of the Puerto Rican and Jamaican Studies". National Council on Family Relations. 1963. 14.

⁷Ibid. 18.

because the medical procedure being talked about in this paper was not birth control since it was used to advance the desires of the state and the imperial power. Few people have gone so far as to counter the relationship between low income women's socially oppressed conditions, gender subordination, a lack of access to birth control and decent healthcare, and the increasing use of permanent methods of fertility control, specifically tubal ligation as a primary form of fertility control⁸. This is especially true in the context of Puerto Rico where many people have been unwilling to admit that population control programs which were pushed on poor women of color, were done for the benefit of the state and not the benefit of Puerto Ricans like was advertised.

From the 1950's to the 1970's many sterilization procedures were done in hospitals, both private and public which were both heavily funded by the United States government, where women would most likely have the procedures performed after giving birth. A Puerto Rican physician in 1947 said that "since the baby furnishes an obvious reason for the hospital visit, no further explanation need be supplied to curious neighbors and the privacy is greater than for those visiting a birth control clinic"⁹. When women are in the midst of giving labor they are in a weakened state and may make decisions that they would not make otherwise. There was also a common belief among physicians that contraception methods such as the pill were too difficult for poor Puerto Rican women to comprehend so postpartum sterilization was the most practical and simple solution. This belief is both racist and sexist in that it devalues the intelligence of women of color simply because they were lower class and not white. Puerto Rican physicians also supported sterilization for health reasons and were able to put forward the argument that it

⁸ Ibid. xiii.

⁹ Mass, Bonnie. "Puerto Rico: A Case Study of Population Control". Sage Publications Inc. 1977, 69.

was the fault of social and economic ills that caused the poor health of people on the island. These physicians used the great prevalence of dietary deficiencies and diseases like hookworm and malaria among the poor in Puerto Rico as an excuse to control population growth¹⁰. American concern for the population growth in Puerto Rico increased in the 1950's which led to the opening of new private birth control clinics that provided subsidized or free of cost sterilization procedures, which were set up under the title of "La Association Puertorriquena el Bienestar de la Familia"¹¹. By the 1950's the Department of Health, to whom 80 percent of the population went to for medical services, and by the Family Planning Association indicate that there were around 7,000 sterilizations annually, with about two-thirds of them being performed on females¹². In a report released by the Committee for Puerto Rican Decolonization, they give the account of a pre-medical student in Puerto Rico in the 1950's who says that in the hospitals they were working in, sterilization was a strict policy. As part of her medical training she was told that any woman who came into the hospital to deliver a baby and already had two or more children must be sterilized through tubal ligation after they gave birth. This was a standard procedure. This is obvious when we look at statistics from 1949 that say 17.8 percent of all hospital deliveries were followed by sterilization. That statistic may not even be completely accurate because not all sterilizations can be accounted for.

The US government started putting official policies in place on the island with cooperation from local authorities to curb rapid population growth at the turn of the 20th century.

¹⁰ Ibid, 69

¹¹ Ibid, 72

¹²Thimmesch, Nick. "Puerto Rico and Birth Control". *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 1968. 256

Throughout the time that these policies were in place, the Ministry of Health hid their massive sterilization program by promoting a humanitarian facade which pretended to be concerned with women's rights. In 1907 the United States put in place a public policy in Puerto Rico that gave the state the right to sterilize people without their permission or their knowledge. This program was officially codified in 1937 as Puerto Rico Law 116 and the main method of reproductive control used was sterilization. This program of sterilization was designed by the Eugenics Board, an American organization, and funded by the United States government along with contributions from different private parties. Since abortion was illegal on the island until the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, sterilization was one of the few options women were presented with up until the 1970's. They were also not educated about or presented with alternative options of safe and legal forms of contraception. The outreach for these programs was usually done by public health workers who would often travel door to door to promote sterilization as a safe and state subsidized way to prevent pregnancy.

Sterilization is a complicated subject because the word is most often associated with a violation of reproductive rights. Not all women who have been sterilized in Puerto Rico had the procedure done without their knowledge, but many did. Sterilization abuse happens when a person, most likely a woman, is sterilized without their knowledge or consent or when a person is targeted for sterilization because of their gender, race or class¹³. This abuse is a direct violation of fundamental human rights in that it does not allow a person the choice to have the amount of children that they wish. But while sterilization abuse is very real and a large concern of this

¹³Lopez, Iris. "Puerto Rican Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom". Rutgers University Press. 2008. xii.

essay, we need to keep in mind that not all women sterilized in Puerto Rico are victims of coercive sterilization. *La Operacion* was a documentary released in 1982 and directed by Ana Maria Garcia, that looks at how the United States instituted sterilization policies in Puerto Rico. In the film the women interviewed talk about how sterilization in this context is not a form of birth control, but it was population control. Birth control is an individual right where you're given information pertaining to it and given different ways to go about using birth control. Sterilization in this context is population control, and not birth control, because it is a social policy that was put in place with the purpose of ensuring that certain people do not have children or have very few children. The women interviewed in the film all say that they were not informed on what the operation actually was, but were simply told that it would make them stop having so many children. No one, not even the doctors, ever told them that there were other options available if they may want to have more children in the future. Women were often not even told that sterilization was a permanent and irreversible solution. There were women in the film that said they were glad they had gotten the operation done because they could not afford to have any more children due to their socioeconomic conditions, yet they were not aware that there may have been other options. One woman in the film even recounted her story of how a year after she was sterilized she still managed to get pregnant and it almost killed her¹⁴. Many of the women interviewed in the film also mentioned that they did not like the way the birth control pill made them feel when it had become available on the market in the 1960's, so they turned to sterilization, thinking it was their only other viable option.

¹⁴ Garcia, Ana Maria, *La Operación*, 1982.

Another factor in this conversation is the Catholic Church. As previously mentioned, Puerto Rico is predominantly Catholic and has been for centuries. The Catholic Church has vocally been against birth control and the use of contraceptives. When the groundbreaking League for Birth Control was founded on the island in the city of Ponce in 1925, it barely lasted a year before the Catholic Church was able to have it shut down. Just a few years later in 1932 a similar league was founded that only lasted two years before the church got that one shut down too. In 1937 when birth control was legalized on the island, the church was extremely vocal about its opposition, which they continued to be throughout the 20th century. The church would often give warnings to local officials, like mayors, and to the general public¹⁵. They would also organize Catholic physicians in opposition to birth control and went as far as to even have Bishops issue pastoral letters about their resistance¹⁶. Puerto Rico, like the rest of the world, was severely hit by the depression. As part of a relief effort program during the crisis, the government began opening birth control clinics in urban centers, with the first opening in 1934 in San Juan. The clinic was fairly successful and within the next two years dozens more opened on the island. But in 1936, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had all the clinics closed over fear of Catholic opposition in the US and not wanting to lose Catholic voters¹⁷.

The church's strong opposition to the birth control pill in the mid 20th century may have even caused an increase in sterilizations on the island. Although the church did not wholly

¹⁵ Thimmesch, Nick. "Puerto Rico and Birth Control". *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 1968. 257.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 258.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 255.

approve of permanent sterilization, they viewed it as a more morally acceptable option over taking oral contraceptives. The church viewed taking oral contraceptives as a continual sin because the pill is being taken every single day. Permanent sterilization on the other hand was a one time sin that could be confessed once and all would be forgiven. So in an indirect way, the Catholic Church constructed an environment where religious Puerto Rican women were more willing to give up their right to motherhood forever, over having to sin every day if they made the choice to rely on the birth control pill. Throughout most of the 20th century and still today, there has been a battle between feminists on the island and the church over women's ability access to reproductive healthcare. But we have seen the church's harsh sentiments against birth control lessening in recent years which has opened a lot more options concerning reproductive rights for highly religious women in Puerto Rico.

Involuntary permanent sterilization denies a woman her right to parenthood. Not every woman in Puerto Rico was forced into or unknowingly permanently sterilized, but it is important to note that Puerto Rico has the highest rate of contraceptive sterilization in the world. Other countries such as Bangladesh also had state-led sterilization programs, but the rates seen in Puerto Rico were unprecedented and like nowhere else in the world. By 1949 about 18 percent of all deliveries in hospitals were followed by the mother being sterilized, that is seven percent of all of the deliveries in Puerto Rico that year¹⁸. By the 1970's somewhere around one third of all women in Puerto Rico of childbearing age were sterilized. At this time many American policy makers pushed the idea that the federal government should be making sure some form of birth

¹⁸ Presser, Harriet B, *Sterilization and Fertility Decline in Puerto Rico* (Institute of International Studies: University of California, Berkley, 1973), 29

control was being used by Puerto Ricans on the island even if force was necessary¹⁹. But by the end of the 1970's and early 1980's there was a lot of contestation on the mainland and by activists on the island that caused the government to halt its sterilization policies but it generated a sense of distrust towards the US government that lingers today.

Birth Control Trials

The first large scale human trial of the birth control pill was conducted in Puerto Rico by an American drug company from the 1950's to the mid 1960's on approximately 1,500 women. This test generated a lot of controversy on and off the island. Puerto Rico was chosen for many reasons including that it was geographically close to the US mainland, there were no laws specifically outlawing birth control, and there were many concerns about overpopulation on the island which the director of the experiments was especially interested in. Puerto Rico was also chosen because when the drug company had previously tried to conduct the experiment in the US, there had been too much outrage over using Anglo-American women as test subjects with an experimental drug. The women involved in the trial voluntarily agreed to take the pill but were not told that it was not yet a FDA approved drug and were not aware that they were experimental subjects. The doctors involved in this study had no idea what effects the pill would have on the test subjects. The pill that the subjects were given contained twenty times the amount of estrogen that is now deemed safe in the pill we take today. The majority of the women in the trial also did not speak English, many were illiterate and the vast majority were living in government

¹⁹ Briggs, Laura, *Reproducing Empire*, (University of California Press, 2002), 77.

sponsored housing projects. All of these factors mean that the subjects used in these trials were from a vulnerable population, combined with the fact that they are already a colonized and subjugated people.

In the previously discussed film, *La Operación*, they interview some of the women involved in the trial. The women said that nurses went around knocking on doors promoting the opportunity to try a new treatment that would help them avoid pregnancy and were lead to believe that the pill was already FDA approved. The women interviewed in the documentary had absolutely no idea that no other human beings in the world had taken those pills and they were brought to tears with the realization that they had essentially been guinea pigs and lab rats²⁰. Most of the women who took the pill said they did not like it because of the side effects it gave them. These side effects were similar to those experienced today such as nausea, mood swings and headaches, but they were amplified dramatically because the dosage used in the trials was much higher than what is considered safe today. Four women taking part in the trial ended up dying from what is now assumed to have been blood clots caused by the excessive doses of estrogen that the pills contained. The women who passed away never had autopsies performed on their bodies and their deaths were not reported in the United States because the doctors and drug companies involved in the trial did not want any evidence of it possibly being linked to the new pill. A few years after the world's first human birth control pill drug trial, there was also a testing of a contraceptive foam done on women in Puerto Rico living in low income areas. Many of the women involved in any of these trials were quick to agree to them because they were free and they were not presented with other options.

²⁰ Garcia, Ana Maria, *La Operación*, 1982.

The complicated side of people pushing the use of contraceptives on low income women and families in the first half of the 20th century is that many of these people were also supporters of eugenics. At the turn of the 20th century the ideological framework for population control and eugenic thought were being formally established. Eugenics are a set of beliefs that aim to improve the genetic makeup of a population through selective and controlled reproduction. This school of thought was influenced by the thoughts of Social Darwinists from the 19th century whose ideas were tainted with racist and elitist bias. These ideas originated mostly in the United States but spread around the world as well and were seen in places like Nazi Germany. These ideological frameworks typically called for sterilization as the solution to weeding out the undesirable members of society. They tended to be people convicted of crimes, or committed to institutions for mental health problems or prostitutes. In the beginning these frameworks tended to use more blatant racist reasoning but after WWII the mainstream rhetoric dropped the racial categorizations they had used in the past. There were many supporters of eugenics both on the island and the mainland that held similar beliefs to those that believe overpopulation generates poverty and needs to be treated with population control. Advocates of eugenics believed that in order for Puerto Rico to advance, they needed to eliminate undesirable elements of the population.

The island of Puerto Rico was exploited and used as a case study to show how birth control can be used through capitalist social engineering with racist and eugenic ends. This situation is a perfect example of the promotion of white, hegemonic feminism because white women on the mainland continue to push freedom from reproduction even when it is coercive²¹.

²¹ Briggs, Laura, *Reproducing Empire*, (University of California Press, 2002),151.

This includes women such as Margaret Sanger. Sanger is often viewed as one of the feminist icons of the 20th century because she was a radical birth control activist in the US when the use of contraceptives were at the time illegal. Margaret Sanger, the founder of the birth control clinics in the US that eventually became Planned Parenthood, was a large supporter of these trials and providing a large chunk of the funding while working in cooperation with the drug companies in charge of the trials. Sanger strongly supported the idea that lower class women needed to be presented with reproductive options so their lives would not be destroyed by having too many children. In the 1950's she even advocated the use of contraceptives on women in Puerto Rico even if it had to be done by force. This belief manifested in an ugly truth: Sanger pushed these beliefs disproportionately on women of color, including Puerto Rican women. Unfortunately Margaret Sanger was also pro-eugenics and was involved in the experimental trials done on the women in Puerto Rico.

These drug trials exemplify the systematic inferiorization of women through colonial, racial and gendered structures. It also shows how the exploitation of poor women of color's reproduction and sexuality assisted the growth of neoliberal expansion in Puerto Rico, which will be talked about later in the paper. These drug trials can be compared to the Tuskegee experiments which were conducted in the US on hundreds of non-consenting black males, to study the natural course of syphilis from the 1930's to the 1970's. The birth control trials and the history of sterilization also show how Puerto Rico became a laboratory of the United States for developing birth control technology. In the 1960's when the FDA began marketing the birth control pill to white women as a symbol of independence and liberation, very few people were aware that poor women of color had been tested on unknowingly for years in order to get the pill put on the

market on the mainland. So the birth control pill that is so commonly used today and seen as a source of freedom, has a dark and unknown history that too few people are aware of. The government pushed the propaganda in schools and the media that small families would live more prosperous lives, which lead many women to believe that in order to achieve that life they needed to be sterilized because it was the only option they had been presented with²². Small families were equated to social progress²³.

Industrialization, Capitalism and Operation Bootstraps

A large reason for the poverty in Puerto Rico at the beginning of the 20th century was the fault not of overpopulation but of centuries of Spanish and US imperialism. When the US occupied Puerto Rico they destroyed a fairly diversified agricultural sector and transformed the island into a substitute source for sugar to be supplied to the US ²⁴. By the 1930's around 13 percent of the land in Puerto Rico was owned by American owned sugar companies. This forced a large number of Puerto Rican farmers off their land and into urban areas where they were unable to find work, generating higher unemployment rates and the strong persistence of poverty. This poverty, caused by colonialism and the exploitation that comes with it, prompted the US to intervene and pass laws that would stop women from having so many children to lower the rate of population growth because of their belief that overpopulation was the root of poverty. The

²²Garcia, Ana Maria, *La Operación*, 1982.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Lubek, Scott, The Puerto Rican Socialist Party, Economic Research Group of the Secretariat of Information and Propaganda. "The Economic Importance of Puerto Rico for the United States". Latin American Perspectives. 1976. 47.

unconstrained use of Puerto Rico's natural resources for the profit of North American interests resulted in unbalanced development²⁵. This shows how population control has been one of the cornerstones of the growth of the Puerto Rican economy. There is a large and critical connection, according to the state and imperial power, between the reproductive rights of Puerto Rican women and the island's economic well being, in the minds of US officials. The vast majority of countries that used to be colonies up until relatively recently have had trouble developing and keeping up with more modernized countries that were once the imperial powers. This is because colonialism and imperialism of the 19th century strips the country under foreign control of its resources while ensuring its inability to progress. Clearly left out from the defense of an official population control policy was the economic situation of a colonized economy based on the removal of resources which increasingly turned Puerto Rico's working population into a negligible and surplus labor force.

The sexual division of labor is not a merely American concept but more of a Western patriarchal one that began in Puerto Rico with the arrival of the Spanish. When the United States invaded and occupied Puerto Rico in 1898, 91 percent of all employed women were either domestic servants, seamstresses, laundresses or cooks on haciendas²⁶. Women were already stuck in specific areas of employment that were deemed socially acceptable as women's work. When the United States came into Puerto Rico they expanded this sexual division of labor by offering more jobs to women, but only low level, poorly paid and poorly regulated jobs. The introduction of American-style capitalism in Puerto Rico as the dominant mode of production rapidly

Ibid. 53.

²⁶ Acosta-Belen, Edna, *The Puerto Rican Woman*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), 10

increased the inclusion of women into the labor force, but on an unequal and sexist basis²⁷. An American demographer said in the 1940's while studying the island that, "we found in 1935, a tremendous unemployment rate and depression with several hundred thousand people out of work and we went to work and initiated projects that greatly diminished unemployment, but we were confronted with the fact that while we were putting people to work, the population growth was out-stripping all our effects"²⁸. Women began to join the work force in large numbers especially in the 1950's due to the increase in work from the rapid industrialization that created a lot of light industry. This was due to American companies building factories on the island, especially for textiles, that were made to specifically employ women because they would work for much less pay than the men on the island. All of this was a part of Operation Bootstraps.

Most American policymakers believed that by bringing North American institutions and investments to the unindustrialized parts of the world, they would be bringing enlightenment²⁹. This was done in Puerto Rico through Operation Bootstraps, which was a series of projects put forward by the US government to develop and industrialize the Puerto Rican economy. This operation started in the late 1940's and ended in the early 1970's and moved Puerto Rico away from a primarily agricultural society where the economy relied heavily on the production of sugarcane and other cash crops. The US government ruling in Puerto Rico encouraged the influx of American companies to open factories on the island by guaranteeing cheap labor, access to American markets and by offering tax exemptions. After World War II, the European textile

²⁷ Ibid. 8.

²⁸ Mass, Bonnie. "Puerto Rico: A Case Study of Population Control". Sage Publications Inc. 1977, 68

²⁹ Garcia, Gervasio Luis, *I Am the Other: Puerto Rico in the Eyes of North Americans, 1898, 2000*, 46

industries were decimated so many needlework and garment factories began to open up in Puerto Rico and other developing countries where the labor was considerably cheaper. Manufacturing jobs increased from 9.1 percent in 1930 to 20.7 percent in 1950 and then to 25.5 percent 1960. By 1960 women were beating men five to one as employees in factories. Demographers made the argument that poor Puerto Rican women who had few positive economic choices, wanted domestic conditions that would allow them to take advantage of employment in the new burgeoning service sector. They believed that these women were in search of white collar jobs which were going to be an eventual product of Operation Bootstraps. This industrial labor was predominantly done by women who were eager to join the formal labor sector. By the 1960's Operation Bootstraps was being called an economic miracle by the US but its success could not last forever.

By the 1970's there were increasingly high rates of inflation and record rates of unemployment. Over half of the island's population started to receive food stamps and around one third of all of the factories built as a product of Operation Bootstraps moved to countries where they could get even cheaper labor than in Puerto Rico. In the midst of this economic turmoil, in 1974 the government released a report encouraging the need for the reduction of the island's birth rate. Within the next two years over 24,000 more women were sterilized³⁰. In a New York Times article published in 1976 talking about the Puerto Rican government trying to halt the rate of population growth, it says that the government run sterilization clinics were working at

³⁰ Garcia, Ana Maria, La Operacion, 1982.

maximum capacity with sterilizing over 1,000 people a month³¹. It is not a coincidence that sterilization in Puerto Rico was at its peak during the 1970's when there was an economic crisis on the island and the mainland. Evidence shows that in 1975 there was an obvious escalation of the mass sterilization program that was going on in large private hospitals. There was also an increase in these sterilizations that were being offered in smaller clinics that were located in more rural and destitute areas.

Since aiming to curb population growth was an actual social policy promoted by the government, the government was always looking for new ways to reach the parts of the population that they wanted these policies to go towards. It is apparent that there was a systematic outreach of contraception campaigns into Puerto Rico's welfare programs, factories, unions, social service agencies and women's clubs. Family planning clinics began to open up in the factories where women made up the majority of the workforce, such as in the textile and needlework factories that came to the island as part of Operation Bootstraps. It was not difficult for American drug companies to convince the factories to put these clinics on their premises because they promoted more productive and lucrative workers. The companies would not have to pay for maternity benefits, the fees while the pregnant employee is in the hospital, or maternity leave. By opening these clinics they were ensuring the productivity of these women and making sure they stay in the workforce. There was also an idea supported by many Americans that if family programs were going to be effective, they should be able to speed up economic development, and that the establishment of these programs should coincide with the first signs of economic development³².

³¹ Puerto Rico Aims to Cut Birth Rate, New York Times, 1976. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/11/04/archives/puerto-rico-aims-to-cut-birth-rate-free-sterilization-program-is.html>

³²Stycos, J Mayone. "Family Planning: Reform and Revolution". Family Planning Perspectives. 1971. 50.

At this time in history the dominant thought was that the denial of motherhood was a more effective way of incorporating women into the workforce than providing affordable childcare³³. This kind of thought is unfortunately still seen today on the island and on the mainland.

Women's sexuality, reproduction and their physical labor are all connected. This is evident when you look at the codification of laws for sterilization once women's labor became the sole source of income for thousands of Puerto Rican families. Fertility rates also decrease at a rate relative to the degree that wives are employed³⁴. The American corporations that had built factories on the island had a vested interest in ensuring the availability of an able workforce that would not have to constantly be taking time off to have more children. Many factories preferred to employ women who had already been sterilized. By employing these women in the textile factories they may have brought more women into the workforce and outside the home, but they also furthered the sexual division of labor that had begun under Spanish rule. This simply caused women to be more exploited, now just as official wage earners.

Since those born in Puerto Rico are also citizens of the United States due to the Jones Act, there has been a large flow of migration back and forth from the island to the mainland. But Puerto Ricans were immigrating to the United States even under Spanish rule, so there has been a long history of Puerto Ricans living in the United States. Puerto Ricans mainly came first as contract laborers to farm on the mainland but then as the US industrialized after World War II and in the 1950's with the explosion of industrial jobs on the mainland. This phenomenon is re-

³³ *Forced Sterilization in Puerto Rico*, 2008, <https://stanford.edu/group/womenscourage/cgi-bin/blogs/familyplanning/2008/10/23/forced-sterilization-in-puerto-rico/>

³⁴ Scott, Joseph W. "Sources of Social Change in Communist, Family, and Fertility in a Puerto Rican Town". *American Journal of Sociology*. 1967. 522.

ferred to as “The Great Migration”. Many Puerto Rican families jumped on the opportunity to move to the mainland to try to improve their lives for themselves and to escape the poverty on the island. The US government openly urged Puerto Ricans to move to the mainland because they saw it as a remedy to two problems. Firstly, Puerto Ricans could work in the low paying industrial jobs that many white Americans were not willing to do. Secondly, by having a large number of Puerto Ricans move off the island, they would be reducing the population that they considered too high. Most Puerto Ricans moved to large cities, especially New York City, which has the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the country. Puerto Ricans make up the second largest Latinx population in the United States, with well over five million inhabitants. Just because Puerto Ricans are United States citizens does not mean that when they come to the mainland they do not face the same kinds of challenges as other immigrants, such as language and culture. At this time Puerto Ricans in the US have one of the highest incarceration and poverty rates among all minority groups residing in the country.

Puerto Rican women living in the US have also been sterilized at much higher rates than other groups. Sterilization has not only been seen in developing countries. There were many states in the US, such as California, that created laws that gave the government the right to sterilize those they deemed unfit to reproduce. These laws were aimed at people who were labeled as “mentally insane”, “feebleminded” and “dependent”³⁵. Sterilization and coercive use of contraceptives have historically been pushed on women of color in the US, including Puerto Ricans, as a way to prevent abusive dependency on the welfare system. This logic is based off the same

³⁵Krase, Kathryn. “History of Forced Sterilization and Current U.S. Abuses”. *Our Bodies Our Selves*. October 1 2014. <https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book-excerpts/health-article/forced-sterilization/>

ideas as supporters of eugenics and those who believed overpopulation was the cause of poverty. California has historically had a large Latinx population and a dark history of sterilizing poor women, especially of color, without their consent while they are in hospitals, prisons, or mental institutions. Many of those sterilized have even been minors. Latinx women have constantly been targeted and discriminated against based on derogatory stereotypes, such as welfare abusers, hyper sexual beings and bad mothers.

Nationalism and Resistance

Puerto Rican women have always been active in going against the rule of the US. The Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico has been a revolutionary and pro-independence group on the island that has been active since the 1920's. Women participated heavily in the organization, which displays the crossing of feminism and activism against imperial rule. In 1948 a "Gag Law" was passed in Puerto Rico which criminalized outright protest and opposition to US control of the island. It allowed police to arrest party members and other opposition groups, and give them extensive prison sentences, many of which were women. The independence movement on and off the island argued that the policies of abusive sterilization were a federal policy of genocide³⁶. There was also a lot of contention within the movement in the second half of the 20th century over men in the movement not approving of women using any forms of birth control. This is because they believed that it was the women's national duty to produce more children to expand the ranks of the movement, and they specifically wanted the women to give birth to strong nationalist sons. But there has also been a lot of struggle within the nationalist movement between men and women about beliefs on birth control.

³⁶ Briggs, Laura, *Reproducing Empire*, (University of California Press), 2002

Puerto Rican women on and off the island have not been complacent in their situation as people under American control. There was not a large scale women's movement on the island until the second half of the 20th century so a lot of the women organizing against coercive sterilization and the other injustices forced on them by the US were done by women involved in the independence movement. One of the most notable women in the fight against abusive sterilization in Puerto Rico was Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias who was a founding member of the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, which was founded in the mid 1970's . She said, "women make choices based on alternatives, and there haven't been any alternatives in Puerto Rico"³⁷. But since the 1970's feminists in Puerto Rico and the US have elaborated their understanding on women's health and rights that allows for the critique of the abusive implementation of population control programs but also defends women's access to all safe forms of contraception. There is still a need for greater complexity in understanding the struggle of Puerto Rican women concerning their fight for reproductive rights. This is all an extremely difficult history to grapple with and all of this is still being debated today.

The Current State

Fast forward forty years or so and we have Hurricane Maria and Irma which tore through Puerto Rico in late 2017 and destroyed much of the island. Unfortunately the rebuilding process and emergency phase following a natural disaster such as Maria often overlooks the unique needs of women and other vulnerable members of the population such as children, the elderly and disabled persons. Specifically concerning women, this disaster has affected their access to

³⁷Krase, Kathryn. "History of Forced Sterilization and Current U.S. Abuses". *Our Bodies Our Selves*. October 1 2014. <https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/book-excerpts/health-article/forced-sterilization/>

reproductive and sexual health care. Many of the buildings where public clinics for women's health care services were once provided, were destroyed by the storm. Since women's health care is not considered a top priority in comparison to reopening schools and hospitals, it has taken a much longer time to rebuild these facilities. This is not an unusual circumstance in Puerto Rico. Around the world when natural disasters strike gender equalities are exacerbated. They have less access to reproductive health care, as we saw before, they have an increased exposure to domestic and sexual violence, and their caregiving responsibilities increase which directly affects their access to recovery resources.

At the current moment abortion is legal in Puerto Rico, and has been since 1973 because of *Roe v. Wade*, but with the stipulation that only if it is performed by a physician in order to protect the life or health of the pregnant woman. There is a criminal abortion statute that forbids performing an abortion for any reason other than protecting the health of the mother³⁸. But just last year in 2018 the Puerto Rican Senate introduced a bill called the "Law for the Protection of Women and Preservation of Life", to ban abortion after 20 weeks, except in the case of a medical emergency. The bill also called for consent from parents or legal guardians for any minors seeking an abortion. Any doctor that violated this law would get 15 years in prison. So even today there are still constant attacks on women's reproductive rights on the island.

When the US gained control of Puerto Rico in 1899, they inherited an island that was already myriad in issues. The island was steeped in poverty but the steps in population control taken by the United States to try and battle this poverty did absolutely nothing but place the blame on Puerto Rican women's sexuality and forced them to give up their right to motherhood. US

³⁸ Center for Reproductive Rights. "The Legal Right to Abortion in Puerto Rico: Fact Sheet". 2009.

imperialism affected Puerto Rican women's physical bodies on such a large scale that has not been seen in many other places. The United States invasion and subsequent conquest of Puerto Rico in 1898 was driven by economic and military motivations and has resulted in the United States consistently maintaining close to complete control over the development of Puerto Rico. Many of the choices made by the American government concerning Puerto Rico have been made for the exclusive benefit of North American capital.

Puerto Rico is still stuck in poverty today, which clearly demonstrates that overpopulation was never the real problem. The concept that overpopulation leads to poverty was nothing but an excuse to push American agendas based on eugenics. Furthermore, the US has allowed and even supported American corporations to use Puerto Rico as a testing ground for experiments on women's reproduction which is a direct attack on women's bodily autonomy. To this day the government of Puerto Rico denies that sterilization was ever an official government policy but the history shows us that this is just plain untrue. The birth control pill is the most common form of contraception used today and we often view it as a form of women's liberation, but few people are aware of the violation of Puerto Rican women's rights that it took to get the pill approved for use in the US. Lastly, this direct attack on women's right to reproduction is entwined with the introduction of neoliberalism and industrialization on the island because it has reinforced the sexual division of labor. In recent decades Puerto Rico has made a lot of progress in gaining more autonomy from the US.

Conclusion

A lot of the information discussed in this paper has been contested such as whether or not Puerto Rican women had been voluntarily sterilized. It is important to note that the reason this

subject is so interesting and complicated is because women in Puerto Rico were being presented with a contraceptive option that they thought would help them take their lives back and give them reproductive freedom. But in actuality it was often a colonial tool for population control because the freedom to reproduce cannot be coerced by state intervention. The sterilization of Puerto Rican women and the exploitation of their reproductive rights is still incredibly understudied in academia. There is also a real lack of academic scholarship on the effects imperialism in Puerto Rico, and any other place for that matter, has specifically had on women. The extensive exploitation of Puerto Rican women's reproductive rights through population policy has largely been kept quiet by history and it is time that changed. Puerto Rican women have been subjects of constant social, economic and sexual exploitation and have been used as a means towards the advancement of imperialistic interests, just like other women around the world who have been subjected imperial domination.

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