

Puerto Rican Women's History

New Perspectives

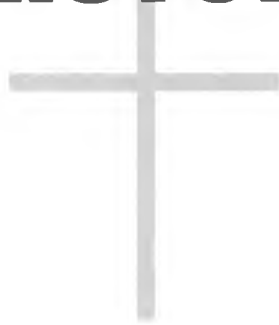
Edited by

**Felix Matos-Rodriguez and
Linda Delgado**

Perspectives on Latin America and the Caribbean



**PUERTO RICAN
WOMEN'S
HISTORY**



Perspectives on Latin America and the Caribbean

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PUERTO RICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY
NEW PERSPECTIVES

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez and Linda C. Delgado



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EDITORS

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and Linda C. Delgado

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To the five generations of Puertorriqueñas in my life: Julia, Selina, Bev,
my beautiful Danielle, and granddaughter Brittany.
Linda C. Delgado

To Liliana Arabia, because I should have done this some fifteen years ago.
Félix V. Matos Rodríguez

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**PUERTO RICAN
WOMEN'S
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Introduction

The essays collected in this anthology reflect some of the new trends in historical writing regarding Puerto Rican women on the Island and in the United States. After pioneering breakthroughs in the 1970s and 1980s, it has been in the current decade that the field of Puerto Rican women's history proper has come of age. The essays collected here show not only the ongoing interest in this field but also new areas of scholarly attention and "older" ones that are being revisited.

In the 1970s Puerto Rican historians began to wonder how the stories that made up different aspects of the Island's history would change if they were told from the perspective of women. More and more, the history of the Puerto Rican people includes the perspective of women. This has led to a revisiting and re-evaluation of many of the Island's traditional historical narratives, from the nature of Taino society in pre-Columbian times to the structure and dynamics of the labor migration into the United States in the twentieth century. More and more, too, gender and cultural studies have provoked the question of whether such a thing as a women's perspective exists, and whether it can be easily identified.¹

This anthology does not pretend to cover all areas or to include all the colleagues who are working in the field of Puerto Rican women's history. We wanted to include work that exemplified new research being done on neglected topics, such as prostitution and urban slavery, and in already established ones, such as the women's suffrage movement and the participation of women in the cigar-making industry. The lack of attention to certain areas and the geographical imbalance among the essays reflect more the nature of the field itself than the editors' interests and professional networks. With only one exception, all the contributors are historians. The editors also decided to keep the focus of the anthology in history, not because no excellent scholarly work is being currently

produced in other fields such as anthropology, cultural studies, literature, psychology, and sociology, but in order to highlight the scattered historical work being produced in the United States and on the Island. It is the hope of all the contributors that the anthology will serve as a point of departure for further historical and interdisciplinary work in the fields of women's and gender studies.

The anthology opens with two historiographical essays by Félix V. Matos Rodríguez and Altagracia Ortiz. Matos Rodríguez's piece discusses the development of Puerto Rican women's history in the last three decades. It provides a brief account of the main contributions to the field, from its origins under the shadows of the *nueva historia* on the Island and Puerto Rican studies in the United States, to the recent surge in historical monographs in the 1990s. The essay argues that although much has been accomplished in terms of including women as protagonists in Puerto Rico's history, much remains to be done, particularly in terms of empirical research. Matos Rodríguez's historiographical essay also serves to contextualize the essays included in this anthology. Ortiz's essay, although more thematically focused, presents a chronological survey of the approaches used in various academic disciplines—anthropology, sociology, economics, and history—to discuss twentieth-century Puerto Rican women workers. She uses the transformations in Puerto Rico's colonial economy to show the historical development of scholarly approaches to Puerto Rican women as workers. Drawing from the literature in both Puerto Rico and the United States, Ortiz documents the interconnected nature of capitalism, colonialism, and migration and the effects of these forces upon women.

There has been little research about the lives of women or about the development of gender subjectivities in Puerto Rico between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Chapter 3, Félix V. Matos Rodríguez illustrates the role that urban slavery, particularly female domestic workers, played in the debates regarding the abolition of slavery during the second half of the nineteenth century. He shows the importance of female domestics in the urban economy of San Juan. Furthermore, the essay documents how both sides of the abolitionist debate manipulated the images of urban domestic slaves in pursuing their agendas. Finally, the essay concludes by arguing that many of the beneficent institutions created in San Juan during the second half of the nineteenth century were, in part, attempts by the elite to guarantee abundant, cheap, and docile domestic laborers at a time when the end of slavery seemed near.

Another neglected aspect of women's history in Puerto Rico has been the regulation and prosecution of prostitution. The chapter by José Flores Ramos attempts to fill a historiographical void in the literature by documenting how Puerto Rico's colonial status influenced the regulation of prostitution in San Juan during the early decades of the twentieth century.² He illustrates how U.S. officials continued the legacy of Spanish colonialism and tolerated prostitution in the city until the outbreak of World War I. This war accentuated Puerto Rico's role as a military garrison and thus moved colonial authorities to crack down on

prostitution, alluding to medical, health, and moral issues. Although some working-class sectors resisted some of the most punitive aspects of the new anti-prostitution policies, Flores Ramos shows how other sectors, like the Protestant churches, took advantage of the opportunity to advance what they considered as an Americanization agenda.

Often, the history of those Puerto Ricans who have migrated to the United States is treated as separate from the core of Puerto Rican history books or courses. This trend has been fought particularly by Puerto Rican women's studies scholars, who have attempted in their writings and in their professional endeavors to look at the history of the Puerto Rican diaspora as an integral part of the Island's historical process. This anthology follows in that tradition as the essays by Linda Delgado, Altigracia Ortiz, and Carmen Whalen show.

Whalen's chapter calls for the inclusion of the varied types of work performed by women in the concept of labor migration often used to explain the Puerto Rican exodus to the United States. Using oral histories from women in Philadelphia, she explores the competing narratives of women's work as understood by the women migrants themselves, Puerto Rican governmental authorities, and U.S. work and welfare agencies. She shows, for example, how what is popularly conceived of as "community work" or volunteerism was included by the Puerto Rican women migrants in their broad definitions of work or labor. Whalen asserts that, contrary to the common wisdom around Puerto Rican migration, women did not come to the United States to follow their husbands and boyfriends, but to work.

Delgado's essay is another example of how the Puerto Rican migratory experience changes if analyzed through the prism of gender. Her work on Rufa Concepción Fernández, nicknamed Concha by her friends, is taken from her doctoral dissertation research. Concha married Jesús Colón, a well-known Puerto Rican community activist. Delgado's chapter analyzes the implications that come from considering other types of sources in doing research about Puerto Rican women in the United States. These women leave behind stories, letters, poems, and dreams—not mountains of legal papers—from which researchers must piece together their stories about their role in the migration experience. Concha was the link that kept Colón grounded in the values of his homeland while he navigated through the barriers of Jim Crow America and fought to create a space for the Puerto Rican worker. Delgado illustrates how the personal letters between Concha and Jesús Colón reflect the concepts of transmigration and transnationalism as proposed by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton.³

The way in which gender relations shaped and were shaped by socioeconomic conditions in Puerto Rico is explored in Chapter 5 by Juan Baldrich. Baldrich documents the consequences of the incorporation of women into the cigar-making industry on the Island after the U.S. invasion. The industry, according to Baldrich, was transformed as the craft of cigar-making was decomposed by

mechanization and by the feminization of the industry. His essay demonstrates how although sexual segregation of work remained a constant during the first three decades of the twentieth century, wage differentials were not permanent. As cigar-making became more mechanized, women began to receive higher salaries than male artisans who still produced cigars in the traditional way.

The political situation in Puerto Rico during the first half of the twentieth century is the subject of several essays in this collection. Previous historical references to women and politics have tended to overemphasize the exceptional: the suffragist campaign; the first woman mayor, legislator, or senator; special government units dealing with women's problems. The essays by María Barceló Miller, Gladys Jiménez-Muñoz, Félix Muñoz-Mas, and Mary Frances Gallart show how events associated exclusively with women's issues are fundamentally linked to the larger political and economic processes and structures in Puerto Rico. These essays demonstrate how a gendered perspective of Puerto Rico's political history can bring new and fresh perspectives to topics—such as labor union politics; the industrialization and modernization ideology of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD); and the relationship between the Creole elite, political party leaders, and colonial administrators, for example—that have drawn considerable scholarly attention in the past.

The essays by Barceló Miller and Jiménez-Muñoz do more than just provide new insights into the campaigns of early-twentieth-century Puerto Rican women to obtain the right to vote. First, they show the political and discursive linkages of the suffragist movement with other early-twentieth-century campaigns such as the drive for U.S. citizenship, higher levels of local political autonomy, the temperance movement, and the “Americanization” campaign promoted by colonial officials and groups such as the Protestant churches in Puerto Rico. Second, the essays document the links that several women's groups in Puerto Rico had with U.S. and international organizations such as the Women's National Party and the International League of Women Voters. Finally, the works by Barceló Miller and Jiménez-Muñoz show that the different political parties in the 1920s and 1930s were concerned about the power of female voters and the potential impact that a massive mobilization of women would have in what was a very volatile and competitive political arena.

Within the local scholarship of the suffragists and of women's movements, the contributions by Barceló Miller and Jiménez-Muñoz open new paths to understanding these movements. Jiménez-Muñoz places her emphasis on the ambivalent language and images employed during the debate on granting literate, and subsequently all, women the right to vote. Her essay shows the willingness of U.S. officials and genteel Creoles to create a sense of otherness based on race, class, and gender. This otherness was embodied in two figures: prostitutes and working-class women of allegedly loose morals. These two figures were used by those opposed to granting women the right to vote.

Barceló Miller's essay underscores the fundamental class divisions that

marked the suffragist movement in Puerto Rico and argues against previous interpretations, which had depicted working-class feminists as the vanguard of the suffragist movement.⁴ Elite suffragists used their class and political connections to obtain voting rights for literate women only in 1929. Barceló Miller shows how the struggle to vote was just one among the many mechanisms working-class women considered in their fight against oppression. These working-class feminists also manipulated the “cult of domesticity”—a principal weapon in the ideological and rhetorical arsenal of the bourgeois feminists and suffragists—to advance their claims for better wages and working conditions that would ultimately advance the economic well-being of their entire families.

The traditional wisdom about the marginal importance of women in the creation and development of the PPD and its colonial-industrial-nationalistic ideology is challenged by the essays of Muñiz-Mas and Gallart. Muñiz-Mas gives historical depth to many recent sociological, anthropological, and political studies regarding the connection between Puerto Rican women and the PPD’s industrialization campaign.⁵ He pursues the question of how the PPD and the colonial state helped to construct gendered subjectivities in Puerto Rico between the 1940s and 1950s. The PPD’s reforms, according to Muñiz-Mas, were based on and reinforced gender divisions in Puerto Rican society that identified women as mothers and wives, even when growing numbers of women were participating in light manufacture, garment, or domestic work. He uses the records from the Women’s Bureau, formed by the Labor Department in 1945, to document the fact that the PPD’s modernization agenda was gender-biased. Muñiz-Mas also comments on the work of some of the female social workers attached to the Women’s Bureau. This is one of the earlier instances in the historical literature to the work performed by these new female professionals.

Gallart’s essay is a significant contribution to the history of internal democracy among Puerto Rico’s political parties. By telling the story of how a group of women from the town of Guayama played a pivotal role in forcing a reluctant PPD to adopt and adhere to internal primaries, Gallart shows how women’s incursion into the political realm was not a self-serving one focused exclusively on advancing women’s issues. The approval of a primary law in 1956 by the local colonial legislature was an important step toward democratizing the entire political system in Puerto Rico. Obviously, Obdulia Velázquez de Lorenzo and her followers were interested in making sure that she would be re-elected as mayor of Guayama, and that was only part of the motivation behind their struggle in favor of a primary law. Also, party primaries were seen by these women as a way of advancing women’s political gains as any kind of democratizing effort would weaken the tight control that party leaders—almost all exclusively male—had over the political process and the naming of candidates for elected and appointed public office.

History, in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, is undergoing a moment of profound epistemological and theoretical introspection. Women’s history and gender stud-

ies have been an important component in the transformation of the discipline of history over the last three decades and will undoubtedly continue to play a fundamental role in shaping the field in years to come.

Notes

1. See, for a general perspective, Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 15–92. For a localized discussion see Nydza Correa de Jesús et al., “Las mujeres son, son, son. . . Implosión y recomposición de la categoría,” in Heidi Figueroa-Sarriera et al., eds., *Más allá de la bella (in)diferencia: Revisión post-feminista y otras escrituras posibles* (San Juan: Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas, 1994), 33–50.

2. For an analysis of the prosecution of prostitutes in Ponce, see Eileen Findlay’s “Domination, Decency and Desire: The Politics of Sexuality in Ponce, Puerto Rico, 1870–1920” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995), 168–287, 421–507.

3. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, “Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration,” in *The Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (1972): 1–24.

4. See, for example, Yamila Azize Vargas’s “The Roots of Puerto Rican Feminism: The Struggle for Universal Suffrage,” *Radical America* 23, no. 1 (1989): 71–79.

5. See the essays by Luz del Alba Acevedo and María del Carmen Baerga in Baerga, ed., *Género y trabajo: La industria de la aguja en Puerto Rico y el Caribe Hispánico* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1993); Lydia Milagros González García, *Una puntada en el tiempo: La industria de la aguja en Puerto Rico (1900–1920)* (Río Piedras and Santo Domingo: CEREP and CIPAF, 1990); Carmen A. Pérez Herranz, “The Impact of a Development Program on Working Women in the Garment Industry: A Study of Women and Production in Puerto Rico” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1990); and Palmira N. Ríos González, “Women and Industrialization in Puerto Rico: Gender Division of Labor and the Demand for Female Labor in the Manufacturing Sector, 1950–1980” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990).

1

Women's History in Puerto Rican Historiography: The Last Thirty Years

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez

In 1972, journalist Federico Ribes Tovar acknowledged in his introduction to *La mujer puertorriqueña*—one of the first books solely dedicated to providing a historical account of the contributions and experiences of Puerto Rican women—that “history, in general, tells us little or nothing regarding women.”¹ Twenty-five years later, historians can only claim a mixed record in their attempts to learn more about the history of Puerto Rican women. In some areas, like the role women played in early-twentieth-century labor organizations or the suffragist movement, there has been significant and important new research and findings. Unfortunately, however, we do not know much more about women’s history in Puerto Rico today than we did twenty-five years ago.

The purpose of this essay is to provide a historiographical review of the women’s history literature in Puerto Rico and in Puerto Rican communities in the United States since 1970. While it is undeniable that more attention has been given in scholarly circles to the historical roles women have played in Puerto Rico, there have been few attempts to review this literature in a comprehensive way.² As new related research areas emerge, such as the history of sexuality or lesbian studies, for example, it is important to see how the historical writing about women in Puerto Rico has evolved, what have been its most significant contributions and its most salient disappointments, and what are the new challenges and areas of inquiry for future research.

As academic disciplines go, history in Puerto Rico lags significantly behind

most social sciences and humanities in the attention given to women's issues. The problem seems endemic to the discipline in the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe as well.³ This might be related to the women's studies interest in solving public policy problems—discrimination, unequal pay, or domestic violence, for example—and the need to turn to the social sciences for answers. It is precisely because of this social science emphasis that more historically grounded work is needed regarding Puerto Rican women. Most social science or literary studies related to women have been done with little or no historical context. Many times women's roles have been ahistorically analyzed, making for very poor scholarship. Still, there seems to be increasing interest in studying woman-related topics among Puerto Rican historians in the last decade.

Although there is substantial controversy about what constitutes the field or the discipline of women's studies, few would argue that one of its most important defining elements is its interdisciplinary nature.⁴ If some of the earlier tasks of women's studies were to “fill in the gaps” of knowledge about women, to identify and correct male biases in the epistemological construction of academic disciplines, and to redress power relations in the definition of knowledge and practice, it was logical that the canonical boundaries of disciplinary studies needed to be crossed. Still, while recognizing that a purely discipline-based perspective might not do justice to the richness of the field, I will concentrate this essay almost exclusively on works published by historians or on works that are historically oriented. I believe that this narrower focus will facilitate tracing the development of historical writing about Puerto Rican women and pointing to new directions for future research. Since this is a first attempt at providing an overview of the historical literature about Puerto Rican women, I have decided to use a chronological format on this essay. I am aware that several other approaches, such as a thematic one, could have been employed also. Yet, since I am trying to provide the most comprehensive coverage possible, I have decided to keep the range as inclusive as possible. I hope that more focused thematic studies follow this essay.

Women and Historical Writing: 1900–1960s

Until the early 1960s, there was no such thing as women's studies or women's history in Puerto Rico. Prior to that decade historians and other intellectuals had included women in their narratives mostly to address what were considered “feminine” topics, such as family, fashion, domesticity, and religion. Sporadically, several books had appeared dealing with woman-related issues, such as Gabriel Ferrer's *La mujer en Puerto Rico: Sus necesidades presentes y los medios más fáciles y adecuados para mejorar su porvenir* (1881), or biographies of notable women such as Angela Negrón Muñoz's *Mujeres de Puerto Rico: Desde el primer siglo de colonización hasta el primer tercio del siglo XX* (1935).⁵ Most of these books, however, were not part of a systematic inquiry into

the history of women in Puerto Rico. María F. Barceló Miller has done a succinct analysis of the treatment given to women by Puerto Rican historiographical schools prior to the 1960s.⁶ She has characterized the historical writing about women generated in the early decades of the twentieth century as paternalistic and elitist. Women played a secondary and marginal role in the Island's past, usually as shadows of men, who were the real protagonists of history. Barceló Miller also shows that the dominant historical vision emerging after the 1930s—particularly that of leading authors such as Tomás Blanco and Antonio S. Pedreira—was clearly anti-feminist.⁷ The gains of the early-twentieth-century feminists and suffragists alarmed patriarchal writers such as Blanco and Pedreira.

It is important to remember that although authors such as Salvador Brau, Blanco, and Pedreira represented the boundaries of dominant historical and humanistic disquisition in the first four decades of the twentieth century, there were other contesting voices in the historiographical discourse. One such voice, for instance, was writer, feminist, and labor leader Luisa Capetillo. Her writings advocating women's and workers' rights in Puerto Rico have been recently described by literary critic Julio Ramos as a "hybrid discourse."⁸ The hybrid nature of Capetillo's writing—a combination of academic and plebeian oral discourses written in various literary genres such as letters, essays, autobiography, and poetry—was a challenge to more nationalistic, essentialist, and exclusivist discourses engaged in by the majority of Puerto Rican writers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Capetillo's writings, according to Ramos, were an attempt to open an alternative space, one with fresh representational strategies and new social agents, including among them, of course, women. Unfortunately, the influence of Capetillo and other writers like her did not make a substantial mark on the dominant writers of the first half of the twentieth century, and their historiographical contributions have only recently begun to be reassessed by contemporary historians.

The so-called "Generación del '40"—responsible for most of the historical writing produced in the 1950s and 60s—neglected women as historical subjects worthy of research and attention. It was this generation, with scholars such as Arturo Morales Carrión, Aída Caro Costas, Isabel Gutiérrez del Arroyo, and Luis Díaz Soler, among others, that provided Puerto Rico with its first cohort of professional historians. Paralleling developments occurring at the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture and other cultural and intellectual institutions, this generation of historians was responsible for shaping, organizing, and constructing much of the historical infrastructure—archives, journals, documentary and bibliographic collections, and research centers—which exists in the Island today. It is with and against this infrastructure—the legacy of a delayed positivist heritage and of institutionalizing cultural nationalism—that many of the historians researching women's issues have had to work with since the 1970s.

The historians of the Generación del '40 focused much of their research on institutions, political parties, diplomacy, legal issues, and patriotic figures.⁹

Given these research interests, it is not surprising that women and marginalized groups did not stand much of a chance of being treated as worthy or interesting historical agents unless, of course, they proved to be extraordinary in some way. As part of the ideological backbone of the ruling Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), many of the historians of the Generación del '40 emphasized the nineteenth-century liberal ideology that generated a short-lived autonomous political relationship with Spain months prior to the United States' invasion in 1898. For these scholars, particularly Morales Carrión, there was a historical link between those nineteenth-century liberals and the current leadership—himself included—of the pro-Commonwealth-status PPD. Yet even historians committed to Puerto Rico's political independence shared a theoretical and methodological vision, which privileged institutional, political, and patriotic history.

For the historians of the Generación del '40, women did not represent a coherent group for analysis or research. One finds scant references to women in their works, and these references are usually present in one of two forms: either in chapters or sections dealing with local customs, dress, religiosity, or marriage, or in reference to extraordinary women or pioneers, such as the early-nineteenth-century pro-independence activist María Barbudo, or the poetess Lola Rodríguez de Tió. Due to their rigid adherence to documentary materials, these historians reproduced what are now some of the best-known clichés regarding pre-twentieth-century women, such as the great skill of women horse riders and the amusing portrayal of women smoking cigars.¹⁰ In essence, this generation of historians, ground-breakers and pioneers in many aspects of historical inquiry and endeavor, passed on a legacy of depicting Puerto Rican women as either passive, caricaturesque, or exceptional.

Women and the *Nueva Historia*

Local and international developments in the 1960s and 1970s had transformative effects in Puerto Rican historiography. On the Island, the “new historians” altered the way history was written, analyzed and studied. In the United States, particularly in New York City, the field of Puerto Rican Studies was born out of the struggles of students and community activists tired of being marginalized by U.S. educational institutions.¹¹ Several institutions—such as the Center for Puerto Rican Studies in New York City and the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña (Center for Studies of the Puerto Rican Reality, CEREP) in Río Piedras—and individuals—César Andreu Iglesias, Frank Bonilla, and Ángel Quintero Rivera, for example—played key roles creating links between the new historians and the practitioners of Puerto Rican Studies. However, even when there was some collaboration and cross-influencing between scholars and institutions in the United States and on the Island, closer institutional connections and dissemination of research findings had to wait until the 1980s.

The origins and agendas of the *nueva historia* have been the subject of much scrutiny lately.¹² The historical work produced between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, which marked the peak of productivity and influence of the new history, saw a fundamental shift in methodology, theoretical approaches, and thematic concerns. The paradigms that had guided the works of the Generación del '40 were rejected by the new generation of historians. In general, the new historians were interested in documenting the life of oppressed and marginalized people in Puerto Rico, such as peasants, slaves, and workers. To achieve this, the *nueva historia* dug into new and often untapped primary sources, such as notary and trial records, tax data, and hacienda records. New historians also moved away from relying on the humanities as a source for theoretical and methodological insights and looked for models in the social sciences. Furthermore, for most new historians economics and material conditions became central explanatory phenomena. In many ways, Puerto Rican scholars were responding to and engaging the changing political and scholarly currents emerging from the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Finally, the *nueva historia* wanted to reach audiences beyond the scholarly community and, as a result, was concerned with disseminating the results of historical research in the broadest possible way.

Women were among the neglected and marginalized groups that the new historians were supposed to incorporate into the mainstream. Yet for most of the better-known figures of the *nueva historia* movement, such as Gervasio García, Fernando Picó, Ángel Quintero Rivera, Blanca Silvestrini, and Guillermo Baralt, women were not a central concern, although they did include important sections in their respective studies regarding women cigar-workers, mothers and daughters of *jornaleros*, and rebellious female slaves, among others.¹³ Some of these authors, like Picó and Silvestrini, published essays focusing exclusively on women's history.¹⁴ Although some authors have been critical of the lack of attention that many new historians paid to women's history, it is important to acknowledge the extremely influential task performed by many of the new historians as teachers and mentors of younger scholars who later did groundbreaking work in women's history. Given the difficult odds, lack of resources, and often disheartening working conditions faced by Puerto Rican scholars both on the Island and in the United States, publishing is not always easy. Therefore, in pursuing any kind of historiographical study about Puerto Rico it is crucial to accentuate the importance of teaching and mentoring in shaping emerging methodological and thematic currents.

Most of the works that specifically addressed women's history topics in the 1970s tended to be short essays. Many essays were the result of work in progress, which latter evolved into full-length monographs. Others were the result of conferences, usually sponsored by CEREP, different university-affiliated programs, or a government agency such as the Comisión para el Mejoramiento de los Derechos de la Mujer (Commission for the Improvement of Women's Rights). The lectures given in 1975 by anthropologist Jalil Sued-Badillo, for

example, regarding women in Taino society—as part of a CEREP-sponsored Women’s History Week series—later formed the basis for his book *La mujer indígena y su sociedad*.¹⁵

Some of the most influential essays were the ones by Marcia Rivera Quintero, Isabel Picó, Blanca Silvestrini, Edna Acosta-Belén, and Norma Valle Ferrer, incorporated into the anthology *The Puerto Rican Woman* (1979). This anthology—a slightly modified version of which was immediately published in Spanish—became one of the standard scholarly references in the field of Puerto Rican women’s studies in the 1980s. Of the eleven essays included in the first edition, the three by Rivera Quintero, Isabel Picó, and Valle Ferrer were clearly of a historical nature, even when none of the authors was a historian.¹⁶ Like the field of women’s studies, the anthology was interdisciplinary in its composition, although the importance given to historical questions was to be expected since an important goal of the anthology was “to present primary source material that would provide an overview of the Puerto Rican woman within the various historical, socioeconomic, and cultural processes that have taken place in Puerto Rican society.”¹⁷ The essays collected in the anthology provided not only an overview of the contributions and the situation of women in several areas of Puerto Rican society, but also indicated the main thematic and historiographical trends in the young field of women’s studies in the late 1970s.

Rivera Quintero’s essay deals with the role women played in the transition from a precapitalist into a capitalist mode of production in the early twentieth century. The debate regarding identifying Puerto Rico’s dominant mode of production—particularly whether the nineteenth century was precapitalist, feudal, or something else—was a pressing one for historians and social scientists in the 1970s.¹⁸ Rivera Quintero is critical of that debate because it ignored the significant participation of women in the labor force and because it neglected the unequal and sexist way in which thousands of women were incorporated into the labor force in the early decades of the twentieth century. The final section of her essay explores the structural trends in labor force participation and occupational and wage differentials by sex since the 1930s. To explain the ongoing discrimination, labor segregation by sex, and low rates of participation in some sectors of the economy, Rivera Quintero looked at the roots of this problem in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The anthology’s essay by Isabel Picó is also concerned with discovering the historical roots of women’s inequality, particularly in the political realm. Picó explains the different kinds of jobs available to women between 1900 and 1930 and documents the class divisions of the early suffragist movements in Puerto Rico. For Picó, “the seed bed of the suffrage movement that developed in Puerto Rico was the increase in respectable jobs open to women of the upper and middle classes.”¹⁹ It was this class difference, Picó believes, that prompted upper-class feminists to dismiss female working-class concerns, and ultimately made gaining the right for literate women to vote in 1932 an ineffective vehicle

to transform sexual inequities in Puerto Rico. This failure, according to the author, was ultimately responsible for the isolation of the feminist movement after the 1930s.

The theme of the origins and development of women's and feminist movements in Puerto Rico is further explored in Valle Ferrer's essay. The author argues that feminist organizations in Puerto Rico, as in other parts of the world, were a result of the industrial revolution—in Puerto Rico's case, of the industrialization phase that started in the 1940s–50s—which forced women out of their homes and into the public waged-labor force.²⁰ Valle Ferrer then proceeds to trace the genealogy of the both proletarian and petit-bourgeois (suffragist) feminisms from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1970s. The essay concludes with a critique of socialist or left-oriented parties that relegate the emancipation of women to a secondary position in their efforts to transform Puerto Rican society.

Taken together, the essays by Valle Ferrer, Rivera Quintero, and Isabel Picó represent an attempt to rescue the history of women—working-class women foremost—in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This historical exercise was placed at the service of strategizing on how to transform the reality of discrimination and oppression faced by Puerto Rican women in the 1970s. The work of these authors, plus that of Silvestrini and Acosta Belén (added to the anthology's second edition in 1986), was very influential in the subsequent scholarship and became a key departure point for those writing about women's history in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Another important monograph published in the late 1970s was Yamila Azize's *La mujer en la lucha* (1979). The book documents the first three decades of feminist struggles in the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the condition of women workers. Azize's work follows the earlier lead of scholars like Rivera Quintero, Silvestrini, Valle Ferrer, and Isabel Picó, who wrote about turn-of-the-century working-class women, the growth and development of the feminist movement, the suffragist struggle, and exceptional leaders such as Luisa Capetillo. Although Azize's work rides the 1970s wave of growing interest in women's history, she cautions that her work is a reaction against copying foreign models of feminism and against applying facile solutions to the problems affecting Puerto Rican women without any kind of historical context.²¹ Azize sees her research as a tool to help contemporary feminists strategize about how to strive for a more egalitarian and just Puerto Rico.

Azize claims there were two main feminist strands in early-twentieth-century Puerto Rico: workers' feminism and suffragist feminism. Both emerged as responses to the incorporation of women into the Island's workforce, particularly as cigar-workers, garment industry workers, or domestics. For Azize, working-class feminists supported a broader and more emancipatory agenda of women's rights, as opposed to suffragist feminists, whose goals were more narrowly centered on obtaining the right to vote.²² Azize also believes that working-class feminists were more successful in changing sexist attitudes among their male

peers given the latter's support for "free love" and usage of terms like *compañera* and *camarada*. Suffragist feminists faced bitter opposition from their male counterparts, particularly those in politics, who opposed giving women voting rights.²³ Although more recent studies of the suffragist movement and the participation of women in the needlework industry have nuanced and contradicted some of the polarities established by Azize in her work, her book was an important contribution to the study of early-twentieth-century feminism and working-class women.

There were also a few short biographies of exceptional women written in the 1970s. Norma Valle Ferrer prepared her biography of Luisa Capetillo in mimeograph form in the mid-1970s. Later, her book *Luisa Capetillo: Historia de una mujer proscrita* was published in 1990.²⁴ Another woman who attracted biographical attention was San Juan's charismatic mayor, Felisa Rincón de Gautier, affectionately known as Doña Fela. A biography for young readers published in 1972 tells the story of Doña Fela's rise in political life, her open-house policy as mayor of San Juan, and her love for the city's children.²⁵ Doña Fela's politics are described as being based on a life-long commitment to fight poverty and to improve the situation of women in Puerto Rico. On the opposite side of the political spectrum was Lolita Lebrón, famous for being one of the members of the Nationalist Party who attacked the U.S. House of Representatives in 1954. Lebrón is the subject of a short biography by journalist Federico Ribes Tovar in which she is heralded as a martyr of the Puerto Rican independence movement and shown as an example of a courageous and politically committed woman.²⁶

It is not surprising that some of the first essays and monographs about women's history in Puerto Rico emphasized issues such as early-twentieth-century working-class and political history. This was a logical outcome of the dynamism in areas of research in vogue among the new historians and the members of discussion-research groups such as CEREP. It was also connected to the activism and political work of many authors who considered their scholarship a concrete way to provide background and strategic insights into the public policy and political issues facing women in the 1970s. As women's political, governmental, legal, and labor organizations developed in the 1960s and 1970s there was a need to historically contextualize their struggles and to provide a sense of connection with early-twentieth-century feminist organizations.

The colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States also generated its share of influence on the research topics regarding women's history. Many articles and monographs were destined to show the impact of U.S. colonial policies on Puerto Rican women. Perhaps the best examples of this literature are the studies focusing on the birth control experimentation and sterilization of Puerto Rican women that took place from the 1950s to the 1970s.²⁷ Most of this literature demonstrates how Puerto Rico served as a birth control laboratory for U.S. agencies, companies, and scholars due to the lack of sover-

eignty the colonial status provided. In this context, Puerto Rican women were doubly victimized as a result of their status as colonial subjects and as women.

Another important factor in the development of women's history as a field in Puerto Rico has been the influence of U.S. women's studies research and historiography. Obviously, the works regarding Puerto Rican women in the United States have been shaped by the historiographical tendencies in U.S. social, ethnic, and women's history. Yet, the Island's research agenda has also experienced this influence, as the emphasis on the study of women's suffrage indicates. The struggle to secure the right to vote is a major theme in U.S. women's history, and Puerto Rican historians have engaged that literature for comparative perspectives and methodological insights.²⁸ As the field of women's studies in Puerto Rico has developed, comparative and methodological perspectives have also been drawn from European and Latin American scholars.

Women's History and Puerto Rican Studies

The origins of a Puerto Rican Studies field date to the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s by the Puerto Rican community, particularly in New York City, to achieve broader gains in civil, political, economic, and educational rights. Coinciding with those efforts was the need to critique and reformulate a tradition of social science research about the Puerto Rican communities in the United States, which had previously been done mostly by outsiders and had often accentuated the most negative aspects of the communities. Many Puerto Rican academics, particularly second-generation ones born in the United States, began to research the experiences of their own community. Some were doing it from the context of the recently created Puerto Rican Studies departments or programs. These programs "rejected traditional approaches to learning about Puerto Ricans and defined new sources of learning that stemmed from within the Puerto Rican experience."²⁹ Finally, there was a commitment among Puerto Rican Studies teachers, students, and scholars to apply academic knowledge to solving the pressing social problems affecting Puerto Ricans, and the view that academic research needed to be validated by its connection to the needs of the community at large. As such, Puerto Rican Studies shared with the new historians a desire to go beyond academia, not just in the dissemination of research, but also in developing a problem-oriented methodology.

The scholarship about Puerto Ricans in the United States tended to accentuate the negative aspects of their migration. Many U.S. social scientists, particularly those working out of urban environments, also tended to blame Puerto Ricans for many urban problems such as poverty, welfare dependency, gentrification, and drugs. Oscar Lewis's depiction of Puerto Rican families as quintessential representatives of the culture of poverty, and reports like the one by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which argued that Puerto Ricans had no social or cultural institutions of any value in their communities, dominated the literature.³⁰