Women as Workers: The Experience of the Puerto Rican Woman in the 1930's

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Recently, there has been a surge of interest in the application of the social history approach to Caribbean historiography. However, the study of Puerto Rican history from the social history point of view has been virtually non-existent. Social scientists have directed their attention primarily to the study of institutions and organizations, and the central role of their leaders, rather than to the people who belonged to those organizations and their relationships within the group (García 1970; Quintero 1971). One of the most neglected areas of research has been the study of the roles that women have played in Puerto Rican society. There is an absence of titles from a historical, anthropological, or even psychological perspective which focus on women as their major concern. Only a few studies, mainly in anthropology, mention indirectly the status of women; however, the scope of these studies has been restricted to portraying women predominantly within the family setting and usually only as enacting the mother-housewife role.

The present study was begun within the context of the limitations of the available studies, which generalize about women without studying their actual status in society or the particular cultural understandings within which they have to act. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role that women played in the socioeconomic transformation undergone by Puerto Rican society as reflected particularly in the events of the decade of the 1930's. The emphasis of the study is on the participa-

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tion of women as workers, including women’s role in politics, since by then politics was one of the main concerns of the workers.

The decade of the 1930’s in Latin America and in the United States has been described as a time of distress and of constant unrest for labor, which saw the emergence of new groups and labor alignments (Rama 1962; Ginzberg and Berman 1963; Bernstein 1960, 1970). Puerto Rico was not an exception. During those years Puerto Rican workers suffered from prolonged unemployment, extremely low wages, and deteriorating working conditions (Governor of Puerto Rico 1933: 6). These problems were not simply a product of the world economic depression; they had existed in Puerto Rico from the beginning of the century, although certainly they were aggravated by the grim economic conditions of the decade. In this panorama of economic distress, what was the status of the Puerto Rican woman?

The 1935 Census of Puerto Rico showed that 16.1 percent of all women in Puerto Rico were “gainfully occupied,” and that 26.3 percent (134,371) of all women fifteen years old and over were employed (Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration [PRRA] 1938: 57,60). The gradual increase in the number of women who entered the labor force was a significant factor in altering the position of women in Puerto Rican society, since it also gave women access to other fields of social action, such as party politics and social protest movements in which they later made significant contributions. However, the above-mentioned figures were not equally divided among the various occupations and industries in Puerto Rico, but were clustered in three fields: (1) the needlework industry; (2) the tobacco industry; and (3) domestic services.1 In view of the economic importance of the needlework and tobacco industries in the economy of Puerto Rico during the 1930’s, women’s participation in these two occupations is given particular consideration in this paper.

A broad spectrum of problems converged on the island at the onset of 1930, creating unemployment and a sense of hopelessness for Puerto Rican workers. Many of these problems had their roots in the socioeconomic structures established during the Spanish regime. More difficulties ensued with changes introduced into the island’s living patterns by the American occupation in 1898. With the American occupation the island’s economy veered toward intensive commercial agriculture, thus

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1 In the 1935 Census (PRRA 1938) the following percentages of women per occupation are given: agriculture 7.3 percent (10,451 persons); cigar and tobacco factories 7.8 percent (10,770); clothing and embroidering shops 13.8 percent (17,986); home needlework and embroidering 35.8 percent (49,714); domestic and personal services 22.7 percent (31,462).
weakening the prevailing subsistence agricultural structure and making the people more dependent upon imported foods and goods. Four major economic changes took place in Puerto Rico during this period: unprecedented growth of the sugar industry, development of the tobacco-growing industry, rise of needlework as an industry of economic value, and the decline of the coffee industry from its previously privileged position (Steward 1956:63).

Two of these changes — the development of the tobacco-growing industry and the rise of the needlework industry — had a considerable effect on the status of women in the island, because they helped to incorporate large numbers of women as workers. Previously women had participated indirectly in agricultural activities, such as sugar and coffee production, but since they did not participate directly in the actual production or elaboration of the products, their role was less important than that of the male workers. For example, women in the sugar cane fields kept small stores, took care of animals and were responsible for the preparation of foodstuffs for sale on payday (Mintz 1956:371), but usually they did not work in the sugar cane fields as cane cutters or directly in the sugar factories. In coffee cultivation many times women had to help in the management of the operation or sometimes complemented the family income with their work elsewhere; however, the major responsibility for the farm often lay on the husband’s shoulders. By contrast, in both the tobacco processing and the needlework industries women constituted a significant portion of the labor force and were directly responsible for the elaboration of the end products. Thus they had the opportunity to participate actively, together with male workers, in the labor struggles of the time.

The transformation of the Puerto Rican economy during the first decades of the twentieth century generally altered the living and working patterns of the workers and encouraged the organization of a labor movement. A major change in the Puerto Rican labor scene during the twentieth century was the emergence and development of a strong trade union movement. Groups of workers throughout the island, organized either in formal unions or in sociedades de estudio [study groups], had emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and eventually joined to establish a national federation in 1899, Federación Libre de Trabajadores de Puerto Rico (FLT). Since its beginning the Puerto Rican movement demanded government’s recognition of labor organizations and of the

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2 The Annual report of the Puerto Rico Department of Labor in 1940–1941 shows that in 36 sugar factories inspected the labor force was 12,687 males and 22 women.
collective bargaining principle, the adoption of a shorter workday, higher wages, and universal suffrage (Pagán 1959: 59–60). In addition, convinced of the need for swift political action to redress the prevailing social inequalities, this same group of workers founded the Socialist Party. Although the Federation and the Party were separate organizations, their local and national leaderships often coincided, and the ideals of one group complemented those of the other. Both organizations supported the woman worker’s right to work and at least on paper advocated equality. In a book published by the Federación Libre de Trabajadores for the purpose of instructing the workers in trade unionism, Santiago Iglesias, the FLT’s president, summarized the policies of the organization regarding women workers:

...that the labor leaders should make every possible effort to organize all the workers of both sexes, of all trades and professions, and especially farm workers. We should organize the women in all the areas of industry in which they are employed. We should organize the office employees as well as the women working in the telegraph, the typists, the clerks, the seamstresses as well as the cooks and maids (Iglesias 1914:6).

Even more interesting than the official views on women’s participation in the labor movement were the ideas expressed by a rank-and-file member of that movement. Juan S. Marcano, a shoemaker (zapatero) succinctly expressed the Socialist Party’s cry in its initial days for better conditions for the woman worker:

Women in Puerto Rico and in the rest of the world have yet to occupy the place they deserve as equal human beings. It is sad to see women walking to the workshops and factories — to those traps of exploitation and misery — in which they leave the best of their lives, their youth,... in which they suffer from being constantly at the working tables until gradually tuberculosis takes a hold of their lives. The conditions at the workshops are intolerable... places without ventilation in which our fellow women workers have to spend from 8 to 9 hours in daily imprisonment... and all of this for the wealth of a few rich owners. But this has to be stopped. The woman worker is our fellow companion in misery and deprivation — it is impossible that she continues to be shamefully exploited... The Socialist Party will end this situation... (Marcano 1919: 66–67).

Regardless of this support for women’s rights, few women ever occupied top leadership positions in either the FLT or the Socialist Party. Nevertheless, given the precarious state of affairs, the Socialist Party and the labor federation became useful channels through which women, as rank and file, fought for their causes. Consequently, although women workers did not have the same access as men to the high policy-making positions of the labor federation, they participated actively in its initial
stages of organization. Tomasa Yupart, for example, a representative of the Union of Tobacco Strippers of Juncos, was among the delegates to the Sixth Congress of the FLT in 1910 which drafted the federation’s constitution. Juana Colón, a planchadora y lavandera [a woman who washed and pressed clothes for a small fee] who later became a tobacco worker, organized protests and strikes against the American tobacco corporations in Comerio, a town in the tobacco producing area of Puerto Rico.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Luisa Capetillo also became a national figure among Puerto Rican workers. She participated prominently in the labor campaigns of the Federación Libre de Trabajadores throughout the island, demanding both improvement of the workers’ living conditions and recognition of women’s rights. In her book *Mi opinión sobre las libertades, derechos y deberes de la mujer* (1911), she described a campaign trip around the island in which she exhorted the workers to join efforts against capitalism:

Fellow workers, you are in a state of slavery worse than the one of ancient times. Aren’t you eager to abandon it? Don’t forget that in your hands you have the redemption you need so badly. Peasants... your slavery is far from gone. Before, your master owned you and deprived you of your will — today he frees you but leaves you without means to exercise your will (Capetillo 1911:23).

With impassioned oratory she described the abuses against the workers in general, and demanded a new role for the woman worker.

Luisa Capetillo developed the idea that a woman who had to work outside the home and at the same time take care of the house chores could continue to develop fully as a human being. In her writings she deplored the inequalities of an economic system which favored the rich people. “The home of the rich woman is never touched by these problems,” explained Luisa Capetillo (1911:24), because the rich woman either did not have to work outside her home or if she used some of her spare time in work or social activities she had another woman to take care of the house, to such an extent that even the children were reared by others. Perhaps Capetillo’s most important contribution is that she went beyond the feminist point of view of defending women’s rights; she also criticized some of the abuses that other women, frequently because of their social class, committed against women workers. During those years the woman worker had to deal not only with a multitude of inequalities, but also with the day-to-day confrontation with employers, at times female, who exploited her.

The living and working conditions described by Luisa Capetillo in
1911 did not improve very much during the following decades. Unemployment and underemployment, seasonal work, and low wages increased during the 1920’s, and by 1930 the workers were rapidly losing their faith in the Socialist Party and the FLT. A series of alliances with the conservative and bourgeois political parties gradually made the Socialist Party and FLT leadership an instrument of the large industrial and economic interests, leaving the workers without genuine representation.

By 1933 Puerto Rico was in the midst of economic chaos. Sixty-five percent of the population was reported unemployed. The Socialist Party, which had gained access to the government of Puerto Rico through its participation in a coalition which won the 1932 elections, tried to keep a balance between the demands of the workers and the wishes of its conservative partner in the coalition, the Union Republican Party. Paradoxically, the Union Republican was a party directed by rich people who owned much of the industrial and business capital of the island. The workers had hoped that with the Socialist Party and FLT leadership now in government, as well as with the implementation of the United States New Deal measures, rapid changes would come. But neither the Socialist Party’s performance in government nor the application of the New Deal programs and controls brought changes in the life of the workers. On the contrary, unemployment increased from 20 percent in 1932 to 29 percent in 1934, wages decreased, and the cost of living almost doubled. Thus strikes proliferated and tensions mounted. In August 1933 the situation in Puerto Rico became explosive. Strikes began in various tobacco factories and in the needlework industry, and, in both, women played a major role.

Until the mid-1920’s the tobacco workers, especially in the cigar factories, constituted the core of the Puerto Rican labor movement. In the late 1920’s, with the decreasing importance of the tobacco industry, workers from other economic segments partially replaced the tabaqueros [tobacco workers] as the leaders of the organized labor movement in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, the tobacco-processing workers continued to constitute a militant labor group. During 1932 the workers of La Colec-

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3 During the first decades of the United States regime in Puerto Rico, the production of tobacco experienced a noticeable boost. Free entrance into the American market, in addition to large investments of American capital, especially in the purchase of the processed product, and the development of new techniques of cultivation and manufacturing, increased the production of tobacco. Until 1927 the rate of increase in the production of tobacco was greater than that of sugar. Increases in the United States tariff, the mechanization and increased popularity of cigarettes, and the deleterious effects of hurricanes made the tobacco industry decline rapidly after 1927.
tiva, the factory of the Puerto Rican American Tobacco Company, constantly strove for improvements in their working standards. They protested against the tobacco company that brought American workers who did not speak Spanish and required the Puerto Rican workers to use that language. By 1933 unrest in the tobacco industry had intensified. Tobacco production was declining rapidly. Several factories had closed, and unemployment in the tobacco industry mounted as the manufacturers forced the remaining workers to work longer hours to compensate for the losses. Then came the strikes of August 1933. The tobacco strippers led the strike movement in the tobacco-producing area located in the center of island.

In Caguas four thousand workers, mostly women, went on strike to protest against malpractices in the weighing of tobacco for stripping. Irregularities in weighing methods became an extremely important issue for the tobacco workers, since even when the employers argued that they paid the workers by the hour, wages really depended on daily work loads. These women had to work in “factories” that were small rooms without ventilation or any sanitary conditions, which frequently bred tuberculosis and other diseases. Prudencio Rivera Martínez, the Labor Commissioner, who was also a leader of the Socialist Party and the FLT, explained that the strike had not come as a surprise to the government, because working conditions in the tobacco industry had been steadily deteriorating. Rivera Martínez particularly deplored the working conditions of the women employed in this industry.

The exploitation of these poor women has become inconceivable. They have to strip more tobacco for twenty-five cents than what they stripped before for the same amount of money. During these weeks we have seen long caravans of these women who walk daily long distances... from other towns... to come to earn a quarter.... For sometime now we have been suggesting to the employers that some temporary measure must be adopted to improve these conditions, while a final agreement is negotiated regarding the codes of the Industrial Recovery Act (Unión Obrera, 3 August 1933).

Seasonal work was another problem for the working woman. Different from the plants in San Juan, in which the machines were operated throughout most of the year, the factories in the center of the island employed women as tobacco stemmers for only three or four months at most. While for an average week of 36.9 hours in a cigar factory the average earnings were $7.57, in the tobacco stemmeries the earnings averaged $2.29 for a 44-hour week (Manning 1934:26). Despite the intensity of the tobacco workers’ protest, the strike ended without gaining much for the workers. They were forced to settle the strike for a nominal increase.
in wages, an increase which ironically they did not receive because the employers violated the collective agreements.

Strikes also erupted during 1933 in the needlework industry, which had gained importance after the First World War. Contractors and operators in the New York area began sending material to the island to be embroidered by Puerto Rican women, the finished pieces being then returned to the United States to be sold in retail stores. Puerto Rican women working in this industry were grievously exploited. During the 1930's the industry operated in Puerto Rico through a series of agents and subagents who contracted workers, mainly women. The principal corporation remained in the United States and very seldom had direct contact with the workers. Instead it developed a series of talleres [factories] that received the materials and acted as intermediaries between the corporation and the workers. Many times the talleristas [factory owners] were Puerto Ricans, some of whom were women with enough money to establish and manage a factory. A limited number of persons worked in these factories since most of the work was done in the home.

In order to distribute the loads to the homeworkers, the talleristas contracted agents and subagents who had direct contact with the workers at their homes and who checked that the work was done. The agents and subagents not only earned a commission from the contractors, but they also kept a part of the already low wages of the workers. Caroline Manning, in her report on *The Employment of women in Puerto Rico* said that sometimes the agent kept “very little of the amount paid per dozen for the outside work, sometimes as little as 10 percent, but on the other hand a few retained as much as 40 or 50 percent” (1934:8). Manning found that the average amount that the agents retained was approximately 22 percent. If the profits of the subagents are added to the profits of the agents the conclusion is that the homeworkers ended up earning just a few cents a day.

Wages in the needlework trades varied considerably. Workers were not paid by the hour but by bundles of work, and these bundles differed greatly in the number of pieces, types of work, and total amount of work required on the various garments. In 1933 an investigation conducted by the Department of Labor found that 19 percent of the women earned less than 25 cents per bundle, 23 percent earned between 25 cents to 50 cents per bundle, and 27 percent earned between 50 cents and a dollar. Two other factors have to be considered regarding wages. Frequently it took from two to five days, and sometimes a week, to complete the work in these bundles, thus making the above-mentioned wages the entire week’s pay. The critical economic situation of the needleworkers was also based
on the fact that although more than one member of the family usually worked to complete the load, employers paid only to the workers whom they had contracted directly; therefore, they actually paid only one worker when in fact the work was done by two or three persons. These working conditions were aggravated by unfair practices that included payment in groceries instead of cash, delays in supplying work, delays in payment, and retention by the agent of wage increases.

Confronted with low wages and soaring costs of living, the workers’ position became untenable. Only one avenue was left: the strike. In Mayaguez, the largest city in the western part of the island and the center of the needlework industry, the strikes turned into violent riots at the end of August 1933, as the strikers, mostly women, clashed with strikebreakers and police. On August 30, 1933, the needleworkers declared a strike in Mayaguez to demand higher wages for the woman worker: “[the workers]... have not accepted the wages paid by those that have become rich at the expense of the unfortunate proletariat who spent his life working day and night ... to earn two dollars a week” (Unión Obrera, 31 August 1933). The employers’ response was to summon the police to protect their property. The toll from the confrontation was two dead (a woman and a three-year-old girl) and at least seventy wounded, mostly women. The chief of the police argued that the use of guns was necessary due to the “violent and disorderly attitude of the strikers, who stoned both property and the police and also stoned Representative Arce-lay’s workshop.... We have had to use rifles and with great efforts have somewhat controlled the situation” (El Mundo, 30 August 1933).

The labor newspaper Unión Obrera reported the strike as a “Masacre a indefensas mujeres [massacre of defenseless women].” The newspaper explained that the only crime the workers committed was to demand higher wages to avoid starvation since by their work they enrich others. Based on the 31 August events, Unión Obrera predicted even more violent labor struggles in which men and women would join efforts in an attempt to improve their day-to-day living conditions: “Mayaguez’s proletariat struggles have been baptized with blood and this is a sign of future actions.... Comrades of Mayaguez, fight on within the laws ... but if those in charge of executing the law are the first to act unlawfully then each of you should take your own guarantees” (Unión Obrera, 31 August 1933).

Mobilization for the strike provided a favorable climate for the organization of the workers in the needlework trade centers. The FLT reported that in 1933 more than 75 percent of the factory and shop workers had been organized and that a campaign to organize homeworkers was in progress.
By 1934 the FLT had already organized nine unions comprised exclusively of homeworkers, with approximately three thousand members. In its annual report to the American Federation of Labor (1934) the Puerto Rican federation stated that the strikes stirred great unrest among Puerto Rican workers and that the courage of the striking women facilitated the unionization of many others.

The workers in Mayaguez, mostly women... made a most courageous protest against unbearable conditions through a general strike. This gradually affected the entire industry. Through the cooperation and mediation of the Commissioner of Labor, who took charge of the situation at the request of Governor Gore, an agreement was secured by which the workers received an increase in wages ranging from 15 to 25 cents... As a result of the strike, unions have been organized in the greater number of the needle trade centers (A.F. of L. 1934:170-171).

Women's participation in the needlework strikes of August 1933 raised their level of awareness and increased their collaboration with other social movements. The strikes provided an opportunity for organization. After these initial days women realized that they needed labor unions responsive to their social problems and thus began organizing their own labor groups. They also participated actively in consumer protests and protests of unemployed workers. Unemployment had been one of the major problems in Puerto Rico from the beginning of the century; however, during the 1930's it grew in geometric proportions. Tired of unfulfilled promises from the Puerto Rican government, from the United States government, and even from the organized labor movement, the unemployed workers around the island began a campaign to demand more job opportunities; and in these movements women again played an active role. Women's participation in the unemployed workers' movements is significant because in part it contradicts the commonly-held notion that Puerto Ricans, and especially Puerto Rican women, like to live on welfare and to depend on state assistance. In these protests the workers' cry was unequivocal: "we don't want relief, we want work" (El Mundo, 24 November 1934). Ironically, for the government it was easier to provide relief than a decent way to earn a living. The workers' protests fell once again on deaf ears.

One of the most important outbursts of discontent from the unemployed workers took place in Mayaguez in November 1934. Approximately six thousand persons participated in the protests, one third of whom were unemployed women who had lost their jobs in the needlework industry after the NIRA codes were approved. Protesting against the government's failure to keep its promises, the workers rejected the state's relief aid and demanded work (El Mundo, 17 July 1934). In a letter
to the mayor of Mayaguez the workers described the city’s state of poverty and pointed to the thousands of workers who needed work in order to escape starvation. The president of the Unemployed Women Workers Association also explained to Governor Blanton Winship the conditions of the needleworkers who were being evicted from their houses because they could not pay the rents. Again the government chose to disregard the women workers’ pleas.

Women’s militancy kept growing at a steady pace, in spite of the fact that many of their protests ended in defeat. One of the controversies in which women participated most actively during the 1930’s was the debate over the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The act, passed by the United States Congress on 25 June 1938, primarily affected the needlework industry in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican industrialists and commercial interests vigorously opposed the inclusion of Puerto Rico in the act, particularly objecting to its minimum wage provisions. The Puerto Rican government readily supported them and soon the then Governor of the island, Blanton Winship, went to Washington in an attempt to persuade federal public officials of the disadvantages of a strict application of the law in Puerto Rico. In contrast to the government’s position, the workers demanded immediate enforcement of the FLSA on the island. On 23 October 1938, the Unión de Trabajadores de la Aguja [Union of Needleworkers] held a meeting in San Juan, in which delegations of needleworkers from all over the island supported the application of the minimum wage to the needlework industry. By January 1939, there was a rapid increase in the protests of the workers, mostly women, against the industrialists’ maneuvers which were backed by Puerto Rican government officials.

The needleworkers were alone in their struggle. Neither the Federación Libre de Trabajadores nor the Socialist Party backed their demands. Although seemingly paradoxical, the position of the official labor organization was to be expected in view of their desire to please their partner, the Union Republican Party, in the government coalition. The Union Republicans, representing the big economic interests, supported the industrialists’ position. The Socialist Party, out of its concern to retain control of government, failed to challenge its partner’s policy and sided with the industrialists. For example, instead of presenting a strong case for the enforcement of the law in Puerto Rico, Labor Commissioner Prudencio Rivera Martínez, an active leader of both the FLT and Socialist Party, went on record expressing his reservations about the act. His position was closer to that of the industrialists than to the workers when he claimed that “industry has a right to operate nor-
mally without delays ... and organized labor has the duty to respond to the industrialists on the same basis" (*El Mundo*, 18 June 1938). At a conference with United Press, Rivera Martínez explained that the needlework employers could not pay the minimum wages, mainly for three reasons: (1) the unfair competition of Chinese and Belgian cheap labor; (2) the excessive earnings of the intermediaries who contracted with the operators and the workers; and (3) the high costs of packing and transportation. However, Rivera Martínez ironically failed to describe the oppressive living conditions of the needleworkers, such as their average wage of 2 to 5 cents an hour.

Tired of depending on Governor Winship's and the FLT's "defense" of the workers, various labor groups sought help from United States Congressman Vito Marcantonio, who had been defending in the United State House of Representatives a viewpoint contrary to that supported by Puerto Rican officials. Consequently, when Representative Mary T. Norton presented a bill to amend the FLSA, thus making special provisions for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, Congressman Marcantonio was the only one who supported the workers' point of view in Congress. Even Puerto Rico's official representative to Congress, Santiago Iglesias, himself a labor leader and founder of the Socialist Party, remained silent and did not oppose the conspiracy against the Puerto Rican workers.

Congressman Marcantonio began his defense of the Puerto Rican workers by disclosing Governor Winship's personal involvement with industry. Subsequently he exposed the abuses to which homeworkers were subjected.

These chisellers from New York ... brought their work to Puerto Rico. Then they gave the work to a contractor. Then the contractor gave it to a subcontractor, ... and it goes all the way down the line ... each of them receiving a profit from the toil of poor women and children. The poor woman at home receives the following pay: She gets as low as 3 to 5 cents a dozen for hand-rolled handkerchiefs of the best types. They retail for $3 a dozen in Macy's in New York. This means they are paid from 8 to 15 cents a day, and no more ...

(*Congressional Record* 1939: 5466).

As in the case of previous strikes and protests, the workers were the losers. An amendment was passed in the United States Congress excluding Puerto Rico from the minimum wage provision of the FLSA. The women workers of Puerto Rico would remain in misery, earning a few cents for a day's work. Meanwhile the industrialists, government, and the "party of the workers" had their day. By this time the workers had learned a bitter lesson: they could not rely on labor leaders and govern-
ment officials to help them in their struggles. The road was paved for increased rank-and-file militancy and for the indictment of those leaders who had betrayed the workers by joining in a conspiracy of silence.

During the 1930's the participation of Puerto Rican women workers in labor struggles was instrumental in exposing the weaknesses of the leaders of organized labor. By their efforts the Puerto Rican women workers had begun a new chapter in the social history of Puerto Rico. They succeeded in showing that the workers could challenge the leaders of their own movements, hence disproving the myth that the workers were only what their leaders were. In spite of defeats, they repeatedly fought the alliance of industry and government, and they struggled to teach government a lesson — they wanted work, not welfare. These years were a time of growing awareness for Puerto Rican women; their participation in the labor force was a major stride in the road towards their consciência para la libertad.

Women's work and their participation in the economy of Puerto Rico certainly facilitated their engagement in political and social struggles on the island. Gradually, women also became active in the pro-independence movement and in other political activities. Nevertheless, in few cases did they become the actual major leaders of either the political movements or the labor organizations. Unfortunately, in the late 1940's and 1950's, with the takeover of the Puerto Rican unions by American labor organizations, women had a smaller chance to become the leaders and organizers of the workers in Puerto Rico; by then even the Puerto Rican man had to yield to the power of international labor organizations. Discrimination against women in the new industrial structure established in Puerto Rico after the 1940's has continued to increase; recently, however, a new awareness of the inferior position of women in today's industries is slowly developing. Women's struggles in the 1930's are being rediscovered and increasingly seen as the ideological backbone for today's action movements.

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