

## Puerto Rican Women and Community: The case study of the Puerto Rican Women in New York

Ms. MIYAKE, Yoshiko

プエルトリコからの移民が多いニューヨークにおいては、プエルトリコ女性たちが地域活動において重要な役割を果たしてきた。バイリンガル教育の要望や地域の貧困対策など、マイノリティが都市部で抱える問題の解決策を模索する運動のなかで、プエルトリコ女性たちは指導的役割を果たしてきている。移民当初の世代の政治活動は主にプエルトリコの政治的地位に関する問題が主テーマであったが、アメリカ本土生まれのプエルトリコ人が増加するにつれ、女性たちが指導性を発揮した、マイノリティが直面する生活上の問題が具体的テーマとして浮上していった。それは、女性たちの生活改善への努力が、新たな政治課題を提供していく重要な役割を担ったことを意味する。

### 1. Introduction

National identity has been treated in the discussion of Puerto Rican society. This issue is important because national identity and concept of nation are changing in globalization. I have interviewed investigators and women activists in the Northeastern US where many Puerto Ricans are living for this research.

This year, a woman who is a community activist, having worked for long time in Spanish Harlem in New York City, told me that for her it was important to insist on the independence of Puerto Rico personally, but for the community in general, they were not interested in the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. According to her, in New York, Puerto Ricans need to have national identity because US society is composed of various ethnic groups that have distinct origins and ethnic pride, so the Puerto Ricans also need to have their origin and pride like other groups. In her view, Puerto Rican national identity is necessary for survival in US society and not for the independence of Puerto Rico.

Her statement to me is so clear and it was the first time I had heard that idea expressed. There are debates about US colonialism among scholars but this is different. Her opinion comes from analyzing her experiences in the community. It is one of my new findings and it appears to be a significant development in my research. In other words, from her statement, I see the crucial relation between national identity and Puerto Rican political issues. There are many women leaders in the Puerto Rican community. They know the historical context and the necessity of community better than anyone. Having pride as Puerto Ricans is not for the power struggle but their necessary to survive in the US where they live now. It is a specific political issue changing their established political polemics. In this paper I will discuss the role of these women who are changing politics through community activities.

### 2. Main research question

Some Puerto Rican scholars argue that the Puerto Rican women's movement is invisible socially in US society and Puerto Rican society. However, it does not indicate directly whether they play an important role or not in Puerto Rican society. What role do they play? Is it true that their influence has not been large in US politics on the national stage or in politics? I suppose that they are invisible as a group, however, they have been playing an important role in the community and offering a new point of view in politics after all.

The purpose of my research has been to investigate how the main political issue of Puerto Rico's colonial status affects feminism in Puerto Rico and among Puerto Ricans in the US stateside, as well as how feminism has changed

with that influence. Also I would like to show how Puerto Rican contemporary feminism affects the political structure of established parties and national identity. In particular, I would like to examine how national identity has been treated in the discussion of feminism after the 1980s. At this time, criticism against the political status quo had spread and the notion of a Puerto Rican "nation" was being considered as just one of various opinions. I suppose that the research about community activists in New York would also add the new point of view to this argument.

At the same time, I will analyze how Puerto Ricans have contributed to US society, especially in the discourse of the multiculturalism that is dominant and has an element of contradiction to unite the states.

### 3. Review of previous research on Puerto Rican women

Regarding major works on Puerto Rican women, we already have some important publications. Yamila Azize-Vargas has written about the women's labor movement and suffrage in Puerto Rico, indicating the importance of the labor movement for the suffrage movement<sup>1)</sup>. Also María De Fátima and Barceló Miller wrote about the suffrage movement<sup>2)</sup>.

In the time of the suffrage movement, among intellectual women, Ana Roqué, the famous leader of the suffrage movement, published the first magazines and newspapers for women<sup>3)</sup>. From the labor movement, Luisa Capetillo, who claimed women's rights in the labor movement and published her thinking, was outstanding<sup>4)</sup>.

Regarding the feminism of second wave, Ana Irma Lassén and Alice Colén-Warren have analyzed the women's movement after the 1970s in Puerto Rico in some articles and a book<sup>5)</sup>. They discuss the achievement of women's empowerment in Puerto Rican society.

Also in the US stateside, Gina Pérez researched the identity of Puerto Rican women in Chicago<sup>6)</sup>. Arlene Dávila has written a book about Spanish Harlem in New York focusing on the community's history, and Rina Benmayor and others have explored Puerto Rican women in community making their oral history<sup>7)</sup>. But no one has directly discussed stateside Puerto Rican feminism.

Although there are some important works on Puerto Rican women, there is yet no comprehensive work covering Puerto Rican women on both the island and in the U.S. stateside. Therefore my research would provide a good stimulus to both Puerto Rican studies and American studies.

### 4. Puerto Ricanness in the community in New York

On researching the Puerto Rican women's movement influence on politics, it is significant to research the women in the community in the US stateside. In the summer of 2004, I interviewed some women community leaders in New York. It was made clear to me that these women were involved in community political activity. Some told me that they were not so concerned about the Puerto Rican colonial issue although they have a strong national identity. There are, however, some people who believe that all problems are caused by US colonization of Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, in general, in the US stateside, it looks like Puerto Rican national identity works as pride in their ethnic group and not for the island colonial issues, as a community leader said above. In the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political polemics of Puerto Ricans addressed the political status of the island for the first generation of Puerto Rican's migrants. However, nowadays, more than half of Puerto Ricans in the US stateside were born there. It is natural that their attention goes to problems where they live.

One woman told me about the young generation's defiance of discrimination. Through the experience of discrimination in New York, some young people intentionally show their Puerto Ricanness through T-shirts with the Puerto Rican flag and so on. Her son is one of them. She explained to me that it is his dare to the others who call him Puerto Rican. However, for her it is not Puerto Ricanness but defiance of discrimination for him because he has never been to Puerto Rico nor does he speak Spanish well. This episode is also an interesting example of Puerto

Ricanness and the young generation's new identity. I will keep interviewing and researching carefully the community political activities to prove my hypothesis that Puerto Rican community is offering new point of view on national identity. After all, I have found a new concept in the general community that contrasts with the traditional debate about the island's colonial issue. It means that the island's established colonial issue have to be rethought in accordance with changing realities of the Puerto Rican society and actually it has been doing.

##### 5. Necessity of records on the community movement

Until now, I have not found sufficient works about community activities and much less about the women's role. If I mention some writings about the Puerto Rican community activities, I cite the book, *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, by editors, Torres, Andres, and Velazquez, Jose E<sup>8)</sup>. There, Puerto Ricans who were involved the civil right movement in the New York, share their experiences, and call for the necessity of records their experiences. And yet, there are not sufficient comprehensive works about them. One of the reasons is that those activists are not so visible as a group of Puerto Ricans, because they are working with other Latin people and their problems correspond to those of other minority groups too. Sometimes I hear that they have to collaborate with other minority groups to resolve their problems to survive against the overwhelming majority's power.

On the other hand, it has been pointed out that there is a division between the community and the academic world. I noticed during the summer research in New York the division between academic people and the community activists. I heard that community activists were complaining about what academic people do and looked askance at them. It caused me to reflect about my research and community people and their situation.

At the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of Puerto Rican's Studies Association<sup>9)</sup>, the relation between academic role and community happened to be discussed. They insisted the importance of the community for research and of research for the community. It was closely related to my research. The conference discussion also helped me on my research.

The history of the Puerto Rican association that also was reviewed at the conference was interesting too. Puerto Rican Studies was established as result of the Civil Rights movements in the 60's, then in the 70's and 80's it expanded to all universities, then in the 90's, the reduction of the budget of the university prompted a crisis in Puerto Ricans Studies, but at the same time, the Puerto Rican Association was established and research was developed. However, now they have come to the point of rethinking again their origin and rethinking their aims. I also heard from another conference member that, when the movements started; women supported the movement. Some complained that the Center for Puerto Rican Studies has not been considering enough about the community, although the Center for Puerto Rican Studies were trying to connect their academic activities with the community, because, once, the community's activism established a Puerto Rican Studies Program at the university. Those opinions also reinforced my hypothesis that the Puerto Rican community's movement took an important role in reforms and women created a new paradigm.

That is to say, as the pioneer migrants, they played a crucial role in New York and influenced later immigrants on bilingual education rights, ethnic studies establishment and so on. In those sense, they would be researched more and be recorded as one occurrence of important history.

##### 6. Pioneer migrants in New York

The Civil Rights movement started as a black movement then became a women's movement and war protest movement. Though they were not visible, there were Puerto Ricans there with African-Americans and other minorities. Nowadays, with the increase of the Hispanic population, Puerto Ricans who are close to African-Americans work with other Latinos. The struggle has continued in the form of educating community people to leave poverty and to have success in life. Among the pioneering community leaders were Puerto Rican women in New York City,

such as Antonia Pantoja, Evelina Lopez Antonetty or Helen Rodriguez-Trias. Evelina Lopez Antonetty organized the United Bronx Parents, Inc., characterized "as an organization of parents and local businesses advocating for improved education for children in The South Bronx public schools. Bilingual education, minority hiring, parent training, decentralization and community control of local schools were some of the issues for which United Bronx Parents, Inc. organized a community response and advocated for more inclusive policies<sup>10)</sup>". Antonia Pantoja organized the ASPIRA "to address the exceedingly high drop-out rate and low educational attainment of Puerto Rican youth. They were convinced that the only way to free the Puerto Rican community from poverty and to promote its full development, was by focusing on the education of young people, and developing their leadership potential, self esteem and pride in their cultural heritage<sup>11)</sup>" Helen Rodriguez-Trias fought for reproductive rights and free choice of sterilization. "Through her efforts to support abortion rights, abolish enforced sterilization, and provide neonatal care to underserved people, Helen Rodriguez-Trias expanded the range of public health services for women and children in minority and low-income populations in the United States, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East<sup>12)</sup>". They and other women struggled for their rights. Also there are many Puerto Rican women who migrated to look for a better new life. How do those experiences carry over to the people?

I attended the Conference for Black and Minority Women in New York City<sup>13)</sup>. Its description of flyer was: "the School of Public Affairs Alumni Association is proud to kick off its first forum entitled Women of Color Success and Succession, moderated by Luis Alvarez, President of the National Urban Fellows program at Baruch College School of Public Affairs. Mr. Alvarez will moderate a discussion and questions related to the roles that women of color have played in the nonprofit sector in New York City". The panelists talked about their experience of having succeeded at their jobs. One panelist, Digna Sanchez, MA, President and Executive Director, Learning Leaders, said that she went the volunteer school of Antonia Pantoja and there she learned the importance of education. According to her statement, the new minority leaders have grown up from their activity in the community. Like her, the president of Puerto Rican Association of Community Affairs Yolanda Sanchez has worked for Antonia's organization, ASPIRA, and other community leaders also grew up through scholarship of ASPIRA and so on. At this point, the Puerto Rican migrants as the pioneers are taking an important role in the community development. In this way, Puerto Ricans are expanding and establishing their space in New York and women are taking an important part, because many women took action there.

The community's movements where women took leadership, such as getting bilingual education, eliminating poverty or improving the availability of good jobs, was crucial in the process of Puerto Rican migrants adaptation to the US society. I suppose that it is not by accident that women took leadership on those issues. From the early stage of migrants, the colonial issue of the island has been a main political polemic of the Puerto Rican community. There have been the movements that promoted Puerto Rico's independence in the Puerto Rican community where it was not an actual problem to survive there but it was felt that they were second class citizens in the US. However, because of the poor situation of Puerto Rican people, women started to concentrate to resolve their problems in the community. Here we can see that by keeping their language and culture, Puerto Ricans, originally led by supporters of independence, are adapting to the multicultural U.S. society. Their existence in the U.S. affects the society, and they have brought a new point of view to the political issues in the community. In that sense, the women's activities offered new perspectives on politics too.

At the same time, living in the U.S. stateside as U.S. citizens, their experience caused diversity of their identity and it has been affecting their community's politics. I have been documenting these experiences by interviewing women in communities and researching oral histories, papers, books, articles, and newspapers.

## 7. Influence of civil rights movement

I interviewed many women community leaders: Esperanza Martell, who started the Latin Women's Collective and who is one of the pioneers of the Latin women's movements in the 80s; Lillian Jimenez, who is making a video of Antonia Pantoja as member of Latin Media Educational Center; Blanca Vazquez, who has explored Puerto Rican women in community making their oral history; Alice Cardona, who worked for the community and who is a member of National Conference of Puerto Rican Women; Belen Denis, who is a community activist organizing votes for election in the Bronx since the 1950s; and Lorraine Montenegro, who is Evelina Lopez Antonetty's daughter and the president of United Bronx Parents, Inc. There are many women who have struggled for a better life and are playing significant role and acting as leaders in the community. They have appeared from their livelihood.

However, at the same time, it is too good an opportunity to miss describing the influence of the current of that time on them. Dr. Iris Lopez, who struggled at the Young Lords and now organized youth educational group "Palante", spoke at the Marxist School of New York Brecht Forum, in the summer of 2004. She said that "in the midst of the African American civil rights struggle, protests to end the Vietnam War and the women's movement for equality, young Latinos and Latinas organized the Young Lords in the 1960's and 70's as a militant voice demanding social, economic and political justice for Puerto Ricans, Latino/as and all poor people" (cited from its flyer), showing her documentary movie of 1996. Iris Morales also talked to me about her experiences, in addition, at the interview. She was one of key leaders at the Young Lords and struggled as a militant activist against poverty and racism. Although she has learned many things from them, at the same time, she has suffered going through experiences in as much as the organization had stepped the wrong way, as did plenty of other proactive groups, such as obligating the activists to organize the group in Puerto Rico or in other towns without respect local political situation. However, she says that she has found her way through those struggles.

What she told me was one example. The influence of the US social movement on them was decisive. They grew up and were empowered through the Civil Rights Movement and at the same time, they made up their empowerment, at the beginning, with Black Movement, then with other Latinos. Just not they grew up through Civil Rights Movement but also they added Latina perspective to the US society. Also, with their different circumstances and concerns, they are a new addition to the Puerto Rican national identity.

## 8. Relation to the previous and other researchs

I have investigated that in Puerto Rico, women offered a new perspective, rethinking how the established parties serve actual people's problems. In Puerto Rico, women started to keep their distance from the divisive political issue of the island's status as a US territory when they united to address women's issues. This has caused the established parties to rethink their politics and also has accelerated the argument objectively about the island's political status.

Adding the research, as I mentioned above, Puerto Rican women in the US stateside also are offering new perspectives against the established politics in the Puerto Rican community and US society through community activities.

Also I did research in Chicago in September 2002 on the Puerto Rican women there and I interviewed several people, both researchers and activists, hearing their opinions and analysis of the situation of Puerto Rican women. There were two interesting indications. One was that there was no discussion about national identity among the Puerto Rican women, and the other was that they don't have a strong feminist movement in their community in Chicago. One professor who is active in educating the young Puerto Rican generation explained to me that in Chicago there were strong influences of the group in favor of independence. When they disappeared because of a clamp down being convicted of political activity for them, the community activity also stayed stagnant.

Here, we see the background factor of established political polemics. The common assumption that being in favor of independence is proof of being an intellectual still remains and there is a strong connection between established political activity and community activity. Nevertheless, that is not so simple. Probably, the research on what is happening in Chicago between community and political group will help us to understand the phenomenon about their relation well.

### 9. Vieques women and national identity

In the island Vieques of Puerto Rico, women opposed the US base there and contamination of the bombing. Since then, the US military has withdrawn its base from the island. Now they are negotiating over responsibility for the mineral contamination of base.

The struggle of Vieques has an interesting aspect with respect to politics. First, the Vieques movement against the US base was a cross-border and international one. People unified widely beyond the border. Second, the US stateside's and Puerto Rico's Puerto Ricans got together and people from the whole world came to consolidate in struggle. Also, various political groups, including the three main Puerto Rican parties struggled together for the first time in the history. However, I heard at one panel of 4th International Congress of the Puerto Rican Studies Association<sup>14)</sup> that one audience had claimed in the panel that the political parties and intellectuals were analyzing the US colonialism issue without including women and thus they had little understanding of the different viewpoints of women. She told me after the panel that there were women leaders who were statehooders in Vieques and there women were organizing the movement, actually, but the men were ignoring those women. This means that the Vieques movement showed new aspects regarding politics in getting together widely dispersed people; however, women see a different aspect on the movement.

In September of 2004, I have interviewed some leaders of anti-US base and environmental movement in Vieques. They emphasized the movement was a wide spread anti-base movement and at the same time a local people's movement. The leader who has established the Vieques' women's organization through the Vieques movement told me that she had recognized the necessity of that organization to change their community through their point of view. We can see emergence new political phenomenon there.

However, I could not reach the source of that phenomenon. Recently, some political groups in Vieques have been excluded because of the dominant tendency of the political group that is in favor of independence. I was told this in an interview in Puerto Rico. Also another person suggested that although there was a wide movement on Vieques, there is discrimination by the Puerto Ricans toward the Vieques' people, exploiting them by keeping the US compensation for the base, and so on. Thus, it was not simple struggle. It needs deeper investigation. However, there in Vieques there is also the phenomenon that women are offering a new political scene through community activities. It would be interesting to compare the case of New York and Chicago.

### 10. Conclusion

In Puerto Rico, women offered a new perspective, rethinking how the established parties serve actual people's problems. Meanwhile, in the US stateside, women have started to concentrate on resolving their problems, such as getting bilingual education, eliminating poverty or improving the availability of good jobs, especially in New York. Those solution have brought a new point of view to the political issues in the community. In that sense, the women's activities offered new perspectives on politics too. At the same time, living in the U.S. stateside as U.S. civilians, their experience caused diversity of their identity and it has been affecting their community's politics. Thus, we can say that Puerto Rican women play an important role through community activities proposing a challenge of new paradigm.

Thus, this research contribute to more deeply understanding multicultural US society and how it is changing due to the increasing number of minority members. It also show a glimpse of women is empowerment that is an important and particular factor in U.S. society. The multicultural aspect and minority women's empowerment are also particular elements not just to understand U.S. society but also the whole globalizing and postcolonial world.

Both on the island and in the mainland U.S., Puerto Ricans are creating a new paradigm in politics. Their movement is growing rapidly in the group of minorities in sovereign nations and in feminism on the outskirts of a sovereign nation. We can recognize the case of Puerto Rican women as one of post colonial feminism.

#### Notes

- 1) See Azize-Vargaz, Yamila, *la mujer en la lucha*, editorial cultural, Puerto Rico, 1985.
- 2) See De Fátima, María, Miller, Barceló, *La lucha por el sufragio femenino en Puerto Rico 1896-1935*, ediciones huracán, Puerto Rico, 1997.
- 3) See Roqué, Ana, *Luz y sombra*, colección puertorriqueña 3, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Reimpresión 1994, Primera edición, 1903, Segunda edición, 1991.
- 4) See Ramos, Julio, Ed., *Amor y anarquía: Los escritores de Luisa Capetillo*, Ediciones huracán, Puerto Rico, 1992, and Valle Ferrer, Norma, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia de una mujer proscrita*, editorial cultural, Puerto Rico, 1990.
- 5) See Rivera Lassén, Ana Irma, Crespo Kebler, Elizabeth, *Documentos del feminismo en Puerto Rico: Facsímiles de la historia, Volumen 1, 1970-1979*, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico, 2001, and Colón-Warren, Alice, "Investigación y acción feminista en el Puerto Rico contemporáneo: notas desde un punto en su intersección y movimiento temático", *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January - June 1995, Instituto de Estudios del Caribe Facultad de Ciencias Sociales Univ. de Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico, pp.163-196.
- 6) See Pérez, Gina M, *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement, and Puerto Rican Families*, University of California Press, California, USA, 2004.
- 7) See Dávila, Arlene, *Barrio Dreams; Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 2004, and Benmayor, Rina, Juarbe, Ana, Alvarez, Celia, Vázquez, Blanca, *Stories to Live By: Continuity and Change in Three Generations of Puerto Rican Women*, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Working Paper Series, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College of the City University of New York, New York, New York, USA, 1987.
- 8) See Torres, Andres, Velazquez, Jose E., eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, USA, Temple University Press, USA, 1998.
- 9) the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of Puerto Rican's Studies Association, on October, in 2004, at Graduate Center for City University of New York, New York.
- 10) <http://ww.ubpinc.orgistory.htm>, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005.
- 11) <http://ww.aspira.org/about.html>, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005.
- 12) [http://ww.nlm.nih.gov/changingthefaceofmedicine/physicians/biography\\_273.html](http://ww.nlm.nih.gov/changingthefaceofmedicine/physicians/biography_273.html), January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005.
- 13) Event Women of Color in Non Profit Organizations, March 24, 2004, Baruch College, 55 Lexington Avenue Manhattan BUILDING NO. Vertical Campus ROOM NO. 14-220.
- 14) 4th International Congress of the Puerto Rican Studies Association, "¡Bregando!: Negotiating Borders and Boundaries: Puerto Ricans in the Emerging Global Community of the 21st Century", October 26-28, 2000, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA.

References

- 1) Azize-Vargaz, Yamila, *la mujer en la lucha*, editorial cultural, Puerto Rico, 1985.
- 2) Benmayor, Rina, Juarbe, Ana, Alvarez, Celia, Vázquez, Blanca, *Stories to Live By: Continuity and Change in Three Generations of Puerto Rican Women*, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Working Paper Series, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College of the City University of New York, New York, New York, USA, 1987.
- 3) Colón-Warren, Alice, "Investigación y acción feminista en el Puerto Rico contemporáneo: notas desde un punto en su intersección y movimiento temático", *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January - June 1995, Instituto de Estudios del Caribe Facultad de Ciencias Sociales Univ. de Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico, pp.163-196.
- 4) Dávila, Arlene, *Barrio Dreams; Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 2004.
- 5) De Fátima, María, Miller, Barceló, *La lucha por el sufragio femenino en Puerto Rico 1896-1935*, ediciones huracán, Puerto Rico, 1997.
- 6) Pérez, Gina M, *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement, and Puerto Rican Families*, University of California Press, California, USA, 2004.
- 7) Ramos, Julio, Ed., *Amor y anarquía: Los escritores de Luisa Capetillo*, Ediciones huracán, Puerto Rico, 1992,
- 8) Rivera Lassén, Ana Irma, Crespo Kebler, Elizabeth, *Documentos del feminismo en Puerto Rico: Facsímiles de la historia, Volumen 1, 1970-1979*, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico, 2001.
- 9) Roqué, Ana, *Luz y sombra*, colección puertorriqueña 3, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Reimpresión1994, Primera edición, 1903, Segunda edición, 1991.
- 10) Torres, Andres, Velazquez, Jose E., eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, USA, Temple University Press, USA, 1998.
- 11) Valle Ferrer, Norma, *Luisa Capetillo: Historia de una mujer proscrita*, editorial cultural, Puerto Rico, 1990.