

# Story of a Puerto Rican Woman

by Jenny Quinn

*International Women's Day is a time to build solidarity between all working people in the struggle for equality for women. As North Americans it is particularly important that we build solidarity with the struggle of Puerto Rican women. Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. It is in our name that the Puerto Rican people are oppressed. What does colonialism mean for Puerto Rican women? Why do growing numbers of Puerto Rican women raise the demand for independence for their country? The case of Antonia Marin, a housekeeper in a large San Juan hotel, goes a long way towards providing answers to these questions.*

Antonia was born in 1938, the fourth child of a sugar refinery worker and a needle-trades piece worker. Antonia's mother and sisters worked at home sewing pockets for men's pants -- something which Antonia helped with from the time she could remember. When she was fifteen, her father died, and she left school to work full-time with her mother and sisters.

They made about 14 cents an hour for their work. Since the cost of living in Puerto Rico is much higher than in the US, it isn't hard to imagine why the family applied for food stamps when Operation Bootstrap got going in the '50's. Operation Bootstrap was a program promoted by the US government to attract corporations to invest in Puerto Rico. The unemployed and underemployed could get food stamps, the giant corporations which invested got ten to 25 year "tax holidays" -- this meant the companies got both cheap labor and extra profits from taxes they didn't have to pay.

But Antonia's life was affected much more by Bootstrap than she realized at the time. A new garment factory opened up near her home -- a factory that was owned by a big US company based in New Jersey which moved operations to Puerto Rico in the late '50's to avoid the union and the state taxes it faced at its home base. She got a job there making 25 cents an hour. It seemed like a lot at first, after 14 cents, but she soon realized that she still couldn't really help her family onto its feet.

At 25 she married Jorge Ortiz, a young man who was working on a construction crew building luxury apartments financed by the Chase Manhattan Bank. When most

Puerto Ricans were living in substandard housing, with thousands live in shanty towns, it seemed odd that economic help from the US should build housing for the "new commercial and manufacturing elite". As usual, average Puerto Ricans just had to wait and be satisfied that there were a few more jobs. But Antonia was glad Jorge had a job, and they decided to start a family while their luck held out.

Antonia's health had been giving her trouble -- the cotton lint and poor ventilation, the bad light and the discomfort of sitting at a sewing machine all day seemed to make her pregnancy and birth more difficult. When she gave birth to her daughter, she was glad to have a few months at home. But she was never re-hired. Her foreman told her right out that there were plenty of single young women who wouldn't have the absenteeism that mothers do, and she could look for a job elsewhere. So she and Jorge decided to have another child -- first a family, and then she would look for work.

## STERILIZATION NO ACCIDENT

It was only after trying for a long time that Antonia finally went to a doctor and found out that she, like many other Puerto Rican women, had been sterilized without her knowledge after giving birth. He even showed her the consent form which she had signed while coming out from under anaesthesia. To this day, she doesn't remember signing, but she does remember that the signature looked nothing like her own.

Jorge lost his job when the apartments were done, and picked up another one on road construction for the government. He was away from home most of the time, Antonia couldn't find work, and she worried about money all the time. Even though Jorge didn't blame her, something went out of their marriage when they learned that there could be no more children. They separated, and Antonia moved back in with her mother. She got rehired at the garment factory for a year, but then it closed down and moved to the Dominican Republic where wages are even lower than in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico in the '60's was experiencing a "construction and tourism boom" -- over 2,000 companies decided to take advantage of the tax breaks and cheap labor. That is where Jorge's jobs had come from, and Antonia soon found another



which had been brought in. She became a maid in a new hotel. As she was told when she got the job, she was one of the lucky ones. Because despite the "boom" unemployment among women was higher than ever, with only 24% of Puerto Rican women in the workforce. The new jobs in luxury hotels and related tourist industry added only 1% to the number employed.

Not long after Antonia got her job at the hotel, she began to have health problems related to her sterilization operation. She walked to the bus every day looking at posters urging women to have themselves sterilized, knowing now that what had happened to her was not something isolated or accidental. By 1968, over 33% of the women of Puerto Rico had been sterilized.

Many others were victims of cancer due to birth control pill experimentation in Puerto Rico. Before the pill was used in the US, Puerto Rican women were used as guinea pigs to test its safety on human beings. The dosages were extremely high and, in many cases, the pills proved unsafe. Antonia's older sister had been one of those experimented on, and she had developed serious blood clots in her legs.

After the experiment was over, the pill was no longer available from family planning clinics for free. The only free form of birth control then was sterilization, and many women, like Antonia, were operated on without their knowledge. Others accepted the operation, with the knowledge that in many cases having a child would make it impossible to get a job. No jobs for more than 40% of the eligible population, fear of having children, forced sterilization -- what else would it take to make a people sick of living under colonial rule? Seeing your sons killed in a war you have nothing to do with -- and this is just what happened.

Like Blacks and Chicanos, Puerto Ricans were part of the cannon fodder of the Vietnam war. Antonia's nephew came back with only one leg -- a guarantee that he would be almost unable to find work. But he had also learned something from this experience. He saw Vietnam, like Puerto Rico a country with a history of colonial rule, fighting for its independence against enormous odds. He came to see that he, as a victim of colonialism, was fighting on the wrong side. Now he became an activist for the independence of Puerto Rico. He had lost his leg fighting in a war that made no sense to him, and he came back ready to fight for what did.

## WHY INDEPENDENCE?

As he learned more about Puerto Rico's relationship to the US, pieces began to fall into place for many members of his family. Antonia learned that every job she or her husband had held was tied up with loan speculation by the Rockefellers and that many other big banks and investment firms played with the Puerto Rican economy like it was a game of cards.

She learned that the profit taken out of Puerto Rico in the last ten years had been higher than all the profits from US investment in western Europe. She learned that the Puerto Rican government agencies which built the roads and the electrical system were so in debt to US banks, like the Rockefeller's Chase Manhattan, that the present Puerto Rican governor cannot afford to do anything without talking to the bankers. All the development of Puerto Rico was so that it could have a "healthy investment climate" -- and the people could still go hungry.

This year in Puerto Rico, Antonia, who has never in her life thought of herself as "political" will celebrate International Women's Day with other men and women who believe in independence for Puerto Rico. At the age of forty, she says she thinks "I am just waking up".

"Looking at my daughter, who is old enough to work now, old enough soon to think about a family, I think, what will it take to give her something more than I had? And now all I can tell you is that to me, independence is what it will take to make Puerto Rico work for Puerto Ricans, and not some US businessman".

Antonia has suffered from the fruits of colonialism -- her body, her marriage, her self-respect, and her family have all been attacked for the single purpose of extracting more profits. Colonialism is a more severe form of capitalist exploitation, but what Antonia experiences is not that far removed from either her Puerto Rican sisters in the US, or many of the Black, Chicana, and other poor and minority women.

Sterilization of poor Black women is on the rise here, unemployment for women still so high they don't even measure the people who are permanently unemployed. And just as in Puerto Rico, union representation for women workers is dismally low. The colonial status of Puerto Rico means that independence from the US is the first step, but it is the system of capitalism itself, and its rule over Puerto Rico which must be broken. This can pave the way for real construction of a Puerto Rico for Puerto Ricans.

